

## Orientalism

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### Glossary

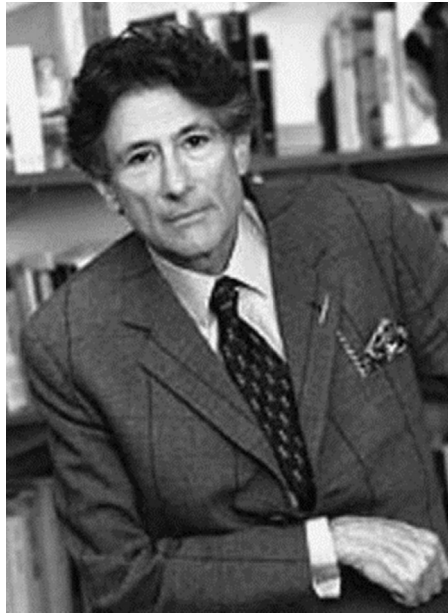
**Linguistic turn** A development in the Western philosophy and humanities emphasizing the role of language for thinking. Starting in the late 1960s, the linguistic turn grew especially strong together with constructivist and discourse analytic approaches from the 1980s onward emphasizing the constructed and discursive character of social and cultural issues, and often stressing the implicit power relations inherent.

**Postcolonial studies** Taking inspiration from post-World War II literature, postcolonial studies give voice to experiences and testimonies following the decolonization of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Postcolonial studies thematizes the specific experience and conditions of living in the former Western colonized regions of the world. Postcolonial studies gained prominence in global academia after the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

Orientalism has three distinct meanings. First, it refers to a specific aesthetic movement, especially in painting and also more generally within the 18th- and 19th-Century artwork, which after the French conquest of Egypt sought inspiration in "Oriental" motives and themes, often using them in highly eclectic and idiosyncratic ways (see Fig. 1). Second, it refers more broadly to the study of countries and regions in "the Orient." During the period of colonial conquest, several European states set up institutions for dealing specifically with the Orient in trade and scientific study and by the 19th Century, "Oriental Studies" was a well-established discipline. Third, Orientalism refers to a particular discourse of knowledge about the Orient produced by the colonial powers of Europe (and North America) from the 19th Century onward. It is a discourse still prevalent in popular understandings of "oriental culture," foreign policy strategies, and interventions directed toward Muslim countries in the Middle East, and, more generally, cultural encounters with people and cultures originating from these countries. This meaning of the concept of Orientalism has been coined by the Palestinian-American intellectual and cultural critic Edward Said (1935–2003; see Fig. 2). Rooted in a poststructuralist approach partly inspired by the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84), Said coined the notion of Orientalism to refer to Eurocentric (and later US) ideas, thoughts, cultural depictions, military reports, and claims to superiority over the Middle East, in particular the Arab/Muslim countries of Northern Africa and the Mediterranean. The concept of the Orient refers to the construction of people and places in the Middle East and North Africa; however, in a broader general parlance as well as within the concept of "Oriental Studies," Central, South, and East Asia are also included. Later works by both Said as well as several authors



**Figure 1** *The Snake Charmer* by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1889) illustrates very well the idiosyncratic, eclectic, and Eurocentric mode of representation that characterized the Oriental movement. The picture, which also was on the front cover of the first edition of Said's book *Orientalism*, in 1978, depicts a young naked boy performing his act with a snake before an emblematic, oriental despot. In depicting this alleged typical oriental scene with all its exotic, seductive, and repulsive connotations, the painting mixes ornamental styles from India, the Ottoman Empire, and Arab culture to produce this particular imaginative geography of an Orient staged, through the intervention of the painter, for the Western colonial subject.



**Figure 2** Edward Said (1935–2003) was born in Jerusalem but grew up with his family in Cairo and at various schools in the United States. Said was already an influential literature critic when he published *Orientalism* in 1978. Throughout his life, Said was active both as a cultural critic and a political activist combining his work as professor of comparative literature at Columbia University with a (often) tense political engagement in the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The two strands of his engagement as both a political activist and an academic provoked claims from the academic conservatives that he was unjustly politicizing in his writings on Orientalism. However, Said himself maintained that it was rather his moral and political obligations to the Palestinian cause that led him to pursue a deeper and broader understanding of the Western culture and its colonial context, for example, in the novels of Joseph Conrad and Jane Austen. Courtesy of Palestinian Academic Society for the study of International Affairs.

engaged in geography, literature, cultural studies, anthropology, development studies, social science, and so on have sought to broaden the concept, applying it to a variety of other historical–geographical contexts and phenomena.

### Background: The Foucauldian Legacy

Orientalism refers to the construction of the Orient by European colonial powers in the 19th Century and onward. As a Western means of dominating and gaining authority over the Orient, Orientalism is, in Said's words, a style of "thought" based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident. Said describes how this style of thought, in literature and academic studies, produced the image of the Orient, for example, the Middle East and Islam, as a threatening, inferior, and underdeveloped "Other." The critical discussion of Orientalism and the distorted view of Islam in which, as Said says, the image of Arabs in the popular mind is that of camel-riding terrorists, arose with the decolonization of the Middle East. Together with the critique of Western hegemony and the stereotypical Eurocentric idea that Europe is superior to its "Others," Abdel-Malek, an Egyptian intellectual, argued that the collapse of colonialism exposed the fallacies of Orientalism. By questioning the central idea of Orientalism, namely, that the Orient and Orientals could be objects of academic study stamped with their timeless otherness, Abdel-Malek was, with a poststructuralist approach, criticizing the essentialist conception of the Orient in Oriental Studies.

The linguistic turn in literature and social science marked the beginning of a new way of understanding the unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Inspired by Michel Foucault's analysis of knowledge and power, and the insight that language makes the world rather than mirroring it, Said suggested that while the Orient is an integral part of European material civilization, Orientalism expresses and represents that aspect culturally and ideologically, as a mode of discourse. Said drew his inspiration from Michel Foucault's notion of how the articulation of words, speech, and images produce discourse. Discourse, according to Foucault, arises through regimes of truth, for example, academic institutions that hold the power and the authority to be able to articulate truth, and the power to internalize this truth in the subject. Echoing Foucault, Said emphasizes that the Orient is not a free subject of action and thought, but rather, a created and imaginary geographical entity constructed in the context of colonialism and Western dominance.

Taking the late 18th Century as a starting point, Said, in a Foucauldian framework of analysis, argued that the Western discursive system of dominance and authority in the unequal relationship between the Orient and the Occident can be understood as a regime of knowledge—a disciplined system of power—that not only describes, teaches, and rules, but also "produces" the Orient. Said's argument is that the complex of ideas, images, representations, and academic writings about the Orient actually "creates," rather than describes, the Orient or, as he suggested, the Orient was "Orientalized"; it was "made" oriental. This view does not mean

that Orientalism is an airy Western fantasy about the Orient, rather a comprehensive archive of diverse texts, theories, practices, and knowledge is produced about the Orient. In the framework of colonialism and Western hegemony, the complex Orient emerged as a suitable subject for study in the academy, anthropology, sociology, economics, biology, and development studies, as well as in linguistic, racial, and historical theses. Said's important point is that Orientalism is not a false knowledge construction, but a power relationship with political implications. Orientalism as discourse was not just an innocent attachment to colonialism; it was politically useful when colonial powers, such as Britain and France, were conquering their colonies. From this constructionist perspective, Said's argument, then, is that Orientalism is a system of knowledge and a configuration of power that actively made colonization possible by legitimizing colonial rule.

Said does not follow Michel Foucault strictly, and it is not always consistent or clear whether Said is taking a constructive or a more realistic ontological position. In at least one sense, Said takes a more humanistic approach to discourse analysis. Unlike Foucault, he believed that the individual writer or text contributed toward the construction of the Orient, especially empirically, in the case of Orientalism. Said, therefore, employs a very close textual reading to reveal the dialectics between the author and the collective cultural apparatus, which, over time, created the powerful idea and image of the Orient.

### Imaginative Geographies of the Orient

The concept of imaginative geography was first introduced by Edward Said in his critical discussion of Orientalism, in 1978. According to Said, the orientalist practices and constructions create a familiar space in our minds which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs." Imaginative geography works by producing contradictions between the East and West, between "us" and "them," both in terms of mentality and territoriality. Inspired by Gaston Bachelard's concept of the poetics of space, Said argues that space is not an objective phenomenon, but is converted into meaning in a poetic process with imaginative and figurative values related to naming and emotions. In the context of imaginative geography, the Orient is an idea which has a history and a tradition of imagery and vocabulary that has established a presence for it in the West.

Said describes how the Orient, as a field of knowledge produced in Europe and America, was represented as a kind of theatrical stage to the distant European audience. This oriental stage was peopled with a range of representative figures or tropes: stereotypical characters such as braggarts, misers, and gluttons, and a whole cultural repertoire of monsters, devils, heroes, terrors, pleasures, and desires. Said's argument is that the staged Orient was imagined as an enclosed space representing the whole of the East, and that it, in a very powerful way, shaped the perception and modes of encounter between the East and West. Imaginative geography became a rigorous system of morality and a disciplined regime of truth, represented and produced through a network of corporate institutions. It was the institutionalized Western knowledge of the Orient that created the background for an almost mythical representation of the Orient, or as Said puts it, a latent Orientalism: a powerful "fantasy" in which the Orient existed as a place isolated from European progress.

Imaginative geography works by dramatizing geographical distance and difference between what is close and what is far away. The artificial lines between the East and West, between "us" and "them," are symbolic, and opposition is fabricated through the reproduction of a double discursive system. The "Other" (Orient) is often imagined in the negative as primitive, barbaric, and wild in contrast to the European self, which is pictured as civilized, advanced, rational, and modern. The Middle East and Islam, in particular, have always represented a trauma in the Western imagination as something that is religious, hysterical, strange, and dangerous. But imaginative geography also has a material foundation in colonialism, imperialism, and the Western interests in the Middle East. It works through spatialization, turning distance into difference, and producing two spaces by drawing a line between two continents. It has real and very visible material consequences. In Derek Gregory's words, "Orientalism produces the effect that it names."

The configuration of power or force that Orientalism imposes on the Orient is, according to Said, a three-way relationship between the Orient, the Orientalist, and the Western consumer. First of all, the Orient is penetrated, converted, and produced as something outside the boundaries of Europe or "our" world. The Orient is orientalized and transformed from a free-floating object into a unity of knowledge. Second, it forces and directs the Western reader to receive and accept the Western-constructed image as being the true Orient. Third, it creates its own kind of truth in oriental studies, in a closed system that operates as learned judgment.

In many ways, imaginative geography and the invention of the Orient stabilized the unity and homogeneity of "the West" by placing Europe in a hegemonic and superior position in which European culture gained in strength and identity by contrasting itself to the Orient as a kind of surrogate or even underground self, as Said puts it. The manufactured self-image of the West as the inverse of the Orient placed Europe in a historical position in which it could imagine itself to be progressive, civilized, and rational (see Table 1).

In *Orientalism*, Said argued that the differences between the West (Occident) and East (Orient) were produced by (rather than producing) a dichotomy; a binary discourse constituting a specific imaginative geography of Western superiority over "The Orient" and its people. Thus, it was the emergence of this binary discourse that made it possible for "the West" to imagine itself as rational, democratic, and mature as opposed to the irrational, despotic, and childlike character of "Orientals."

### Orientalism and Its "Others"

Said's book immediately got widespread attention when it was first published and, together with other work, demonstrating how national and territorial identities were invented and constructed. His book became central for subsequent studies of how

**Table 1** Binaries constituting the Occident versus the Orient

<i>West/occident</i>	<i>East/orient</i>
Positive/presence	Negative/absence
Masculine	Feminine
Rational	Irrational
Democratic	Despotic
Progressive	Timeless

Reproduced from Derek Gregory's entry in *Dictionary of Human Geography*, fourth ed., p. 566.

non-European cultures and territories, such as India and the Caribbean, were constructed and produced by the Western imagination and by the Western colonial, cultural, and scholarly institutions. Said's ideas have also been translated to many other empirical settings to trace how processes of "Othering" and struggles for superiority and exclusion have been part of the internal colonialization of Europe—for example, in tracing the construction of Ireland to English colonial imaginations of Ireland as a colonial backyard for the British Empire. Many of these studies have had a textual orientation focusing predominantly on the discursive construction of places and people, and not so much on the institutionalized power regimes installed and performed through such discourses. An example of the latter is T. Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* which shows how Orientalist discourse was crucial to the colonial regime and its dealing with native inhabitants, organizations, and political struggles in Egypt in detail. Mitchell's work has also, together with Said's notion of imaginative geography, been a key source of inspiration for the work of human geographer Derek Gregory in his interrogations of geographical imaginations and colonial domination.

Within human geography, Derek Gregory has insistently shown how Orientalism still persists in disciplinary practices as well as being deeply embedded both in tourists' perceptions and performances of the Orient (historically as well as contemporary), and more recently, in how the media, popular culture, and politics deal with the Muslim Middle East as part of the "Global War on Terror" launched by the United States after the attacks on New York and Pentagon in 2001. Thus, while Gregory's *Geographical Imagination*, published in 1994, showed the persistence of Orientalism as a regime of knowledge, it continues to inform disciplinary work within geography (and other social sciences). *The Colonial Present*, published in 2004, shows in great detail how Orientalist discourse informs how the peoples of the Middle East are being depicted and represented as potential enemies of the West, and how this discourse choreographs particular performances of distance, hostility, and warfare toward them.

Said's work is often seen as foundational to the group of writings in social and cultural studies often categorized as postcolonial theory. This rather heterogeneous group of writings comprising contributions from authors such as Fanon, Césaire, Spivak, and Bhabha all point to the contingently unstable yet crucial and power-ridden role of identity formation in the relations between Western and non-Western cultures and people. What ties Said to this group of writers is, first and foremost, his insistence that the act of representation is not innocent but always contextual and political. Following this reading, cultural studies of postcolonialism inspired by Said have tended to pay more attention to difference in representation and the construction of identity, for example, by gendering accounts of the Orient by pointing out differences between female travelers to the Orient and Said's male subjects of the colonial apparatus. Similarly, the concept of Orientalism has also been extended to dealing with the "internal" Orientalism at work in many Western societies following immigration flows and the emergence of non-Western diasporas in these countries. Similarly, some writers have pointed to the necessity of extending the focus from textual and representational aspects to the embodied, nonrepresentational, and habitual performances of "practical" Orientalism in everyday life encountered with multiculturalism.

In addition to these writings, other studies have sought to trace out the construction of "the West" within non-Western cultures. These studies of "reverse" Orientalism or Occidentalism clearly draw their inspiration from Said; however, it must be emphasized that, in Said's perspective, Occidentalism and Orientalism cannot be conceived of as standing on an equal footing since it seems to be assumed in, for example, Buruma and Margalit's book *Occidentalism: The West in the Eye of Its Enemies*. Abstracting the processes of representations of an "Other" from the networks of power which shape the colonial context for the production of such imaginative geographies reduces the postcolonial encounter to simply being cultural constructions, rather than elements in power struggles also over economic, political, and military hegemony and control.

## Beyond Orientalism?

Many writers have sought to frame the problematic of Orientalism as a matter of moving "beyond Orientalism." While it is certainly important to reflect on the power relations reproduced through the Orientalist regime of knowledge, in order to move beyond the exercise of colonial power relations in academia, everyday life, and politics, the dismissal of Orientalism should, however, not be premature.

From the outset, Said's notion of Orientalism was welcomed as an important and necessary contribution to the study of Western colonial rule. However, it also gave rise to a number of friendly as well as not-so-friendly critiques. Among the latter was, not surprisingly, the response of the then- (and now)-leading Orientalist Bernard Lewis who was also the main target of Said's own critique of *Orientalism Now*. Lewis and other conservative academics working within the disciplinary traditions of Orientalist studies, by and

large, dismissed Said's work and main points as overtly polemic, not empirical grounded, and based on an eclectic choice of sources neglecting vast parts of oriental studies. More sympathetic academics with a background in oriental studies pointed out that Said's polemics and political engagement seemed to weaken his strictly analytical points. Said's own response to that sort of critique has generally been that they avoid his point and that they exhibit a remarkable unwillingness to discuss the problems of Orientalism in the political or ethical or even epistemological contexts proper to it. Furthermore, he has argued that the points made in *Orientalism* should be read not only as an attack on the Western culture, but rather as a way of facilitating a fuller, more nuanced, interpretation of canonical literary work; a task Said himself embarked on in his essays on *Culture and Imperialism*, published in 1993, which in significant ways generalizes and nuances the analysis of Orientalism begun in his 1978 book. *Culture and Imperialism* includes dense and detailed interpretations of the 19th- and 20th-Century European culture and literature, and in the book, Said shows how Orientalism is not only an important backdrop to cultural works with obvious Orientalist themes, such as Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida*, but is also, in more subtle ways, in play in literary works of European high culture, such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and in the formation of postcolonial literature in the 20th Century. In doing this, he shows how cultural and scientific institutions of Europe continuously reproduce the superiority of "the West" over its colonial hinterlands.

Some critics of Said have pointed to his slightly ambivalent relation to Foucault and poststructuralism, trying to fuse the post-structuralist Foucauldian discourse analysis with a humanist standpoint. Furthermore, it has been argued that Said does not leave much room for the subaltern to speak back, but leaves the voices of the "Other" to be represented by the Western intellectuals, academics, and bureaucrats, and that his focus on products of high culture and textual representations tends to underplay the significance of everyday life. Said's own response to these friendly critics has been, first, to emphasize his humanist standpoint, and the fact that he aims to integrate what he finds useful in Foucault's work into this perspective, and second, to point out that the neglect of everyday practices and "oriental" representations is not a matter of principle but rather empirical focus. In addition to this, the publication of *Culture and Imperialism* surely makes up for the accused neglect of "other" voices in Said's earlier work and demonstrates that the value of the concept of Orientalism precisely lies in acknowledging its persistent imprint on works of culture, everyday life, and politics.

## Orientalism Today

A key idea in *Orientalism* is that this particular regime of knowledge seems persistently to be recycled and reproduced on a multiplicity of scales. Thus, both contemporary and historical studies of tourism and leisure have pointed out how images of the exotic and seductive Orient continually fuel the imagination of the tourists. Moreover, marketing material of the global tourist industry applies the Orientalist mode of representation not only to Said's Middle East "Orient," but also to the Far East, the Caribbean, and so on. More dismal representations of the Orient's imaginative geography can be found in the worldviews underpinning the US-led global war on terror. Thus it has been argued that media coverage and the US (and its allies) politics in the Middle East indicate a continual "colonial present" in contemporary international relations. In 1993, the controversial American political scientist Samuel Huntington revived the idea of a "clash of civilizations" as a potential heir to the tensions of the Cold War. Huntington conceived of these civilizations as clearly (religiously rooted) cultural, organic entities with their own spatiality. Since then, the critique of cultural essentialism in geopolitics (as well as its resurgence emerging from 2015 onward in particular European politics following the so-called refugee crisis caused initially by the US-led bombings in Syria) has been a central topic for both academic discourse and political activism. In his own political practice, Said was highly critical toward contemporary recyclings of the idea of the Orient as an antithetical and internal homogeneous, irrational, and potentially threatening "Other" to the Western civilization. This is also the way Said himself addressed the US politics toward the Middle East following September 11, 2001. Furthermore, Said's argument has been that precisely in emphasizing Muslim virtue and invoking the idea of an Arab-Muslim community political Islam is not challenging the superiority of the West but merely mirroring the basic features of Orientalism: The Orient and the Occident as two internally homogeneous entities standing in dichotomous relation to each other without being able to bridge, bond, or blend. Another perspective on the significance of the concept of Orientalism is found in the work of British sociologist and feminist Sara Ahmed who have emphasized the way Orientalizing practices find their way into the everyday interactions and encounters of bodies and objects. In departing from the Foucauldian legacy "orientalism" in Ahmed's account is tied into a ("queer") phenomenological engagement with how bodies, actions and objects are "oriented" in space; hence normalizing some (e.g., white, masculine, straight) on the expense of others.

## Conclusion

For a cultural critique, Said and his concept of Orientalism has had an enormous impact within social and cultural studies. This impact is particularly due to the light his work puts on the construction of reality rather than the mirroring of it and, following from this, his continuous insistence on the importance of the power relations and institutional bodies that produce our conception of social "reality." In contrast to other proponents of constructionism, Said has insisted that the production of distorted conceptions, such as the ones Said treats in *Orientalism*, is a matter of moral, intellectual, and political choice. Here Said takes a more humanistic stance than most poststructuralists, and instead of limiting his analysis, he consistently attempts to reveal the dialectics between the author and the collective cultural apparatus in his work. Among his most influential notions (not least within the

discipline of geography) has been that of “imaginative geography,” a discursive construct that produces and legitimizes the Western hegemony over “the Orient.” This idea has since been applied to numerous other historical and contemporary settings. While most of Said’s own work on Orientalism and the numerous studies inspired by his work have had a distinctly historical character, more contemporary work on the workings of Orientalism has begun to emerge. Thus, both the US-led war on terror as well as current debates and struggles related to multiculturalism (especially in Europe) have provided room for new encounters in social science and geography with the notion of Orientalism. In this way, the concept of Orientalism as coined by Said in 1978 is, 40 years later, perhaps even more central and urgent in social analysis than ever before.

**See Also:** Discourse Analysis; Humanism and Humanistic Geography; Multiculturalism.

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