

## Afterword

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## AFTERWORD

But there is neither East nor West, border, nor  
breed, nor birth

When two strong men stand face to face, though  
they come from the ends of the earth!

R. KIPLING, *The Ballad of East and West*, 1889.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been endlessly reinterpreted and re-used over the past 35 years, all too often in a spirit of violent partisanship which views his text either as a new orthodoxy to be upheld or a heresy to be refuted<sup>1</sup>. Whether genuflecting before *Orientalism* or attacking it, however, it is remarkable how rapidly the field of postcolonial studies which grew out of it has managed to acquire a canon of accepted texts, situations and interpretations. Said's own focus was on British and French imperialism in the Middle East: he offered some theoretical justifications for ignoring Germany and Russia, and for only touching on other regions of Africa and Asia with a much longer and more intensive history of colonisation, but these were never wholly convincing<sup>2</sup>.

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1. For an example of the first tendency see K. Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient*. For all its undoubted merits, R. Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*, which describes *Orientalism* as a "work of malignant charlatanry" (p. 4), misunderstands it as nothing more than an attack on an academic discipline.

2. "Historically and Culturally there is a quantitative as well as a qualitative difference between the Franco-British involvement and – until the period of American ascendancy after World War II – the involvement of every other European and Atlantic power": E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3 *sq.* Said's justification for ignoring Russia reflected common but erroneous beliefs about her imperial *sonderweg*: E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. XXIII, 9.

The real reasons were that his own expertise lay in English and French literature, and that he had strong family and political ties to Egypt and Palestine. As such he chose to write about what he knew best – an entirely legitimate intellectual decision, had he been more open about it, but not one that ought to determine the focus of an entire field, or lead us to assume that there is a “normative” Orientalism that refers only to relations between Britain, France and the Islamic World, with everything else being “marginal”. In the first two decades after Said’s book appeared, scholars applied his ideas extensively to British India and French North Africa, the two most obvious geographical lacunae in his original thesis, as well as to the Balkans, China and South-East Asia<sup>3</sup>.

In the Indian case, Said’s ideas had already been prefigured by the pioneering work of Bernard Cohn on the relationship between power and the construction of elaborate hierarchies and taxonomies of “Colonial Knowledge”, which have an under-explored relationship to High Modernist projects of the kind considered in Elena Simonato’s paper on Soviet alphabet reform<sup>4</sup>. More recently we have seen stimulating discussions of German, Russian, and even Ottoman and Japanese Orientalism<sup>5</sup>. 19th-century German Orientalism was anything but marginal in disciplinary terms, dominating Arabic scholarship in particular, but this clearly had no direct causal and proportional relationship to the extent of German power and control in Asia, something Bernard Lewis pointed out thirty years ago, in an otherwise rather misdirected critique of Said<sup>6</sup>.

In the Russian case the relationship was much more direct, as Russian scholarly and intellectual interest in Asia did increase proportionally as she acquired an Asian empire, and denigrating Orientalist stereotypes

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3. E.g. R. Inden, “Orientalist Constructions of India”; D. Powers, “Orientalism, Colonialism and Legal History”; A. Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism”; M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

4. B. Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia”, “Representing Authority in Victorian India” and “Law and the Colonial State in India”.

5. A. Khalid, N. Knight, M. Todorova, “Ex Tempore – Orientalism”; U. Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism”; S. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*; N. Sudo, *Nanyo-Orientalism*; D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*; V. Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient*.

6. B. Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism”.

of fanaticism and backwardness were widely used by Russian officials as a justification for imperial conquest and rule<sup>7</sup>. Boris Chukhovich's paper in this collection shows that Russian colonial urban planning in Central Asia shared much in common with that of British India or the French Maghreb (the main difference being a reluctance to use explicitly "Oriental" motifs, at least until the Soviet period), while Ekaterina Velmezova reminds us that even the Georgians, who under Stalin formed a key element of the USSR's ruling elite, could be "Orientalised" in some Russian discourses. The case of Elena Petrovna Blavatsky, explored in detail in this volume, crossed the boundaries between Russian and British Orientalism. In some ways the Theosophical Society which she founded does not conform to the Saidian paradigm, viewing the East as the centre of knowledge and the west as marginal – however, the fact that it took a positive rather than a negative view of the East as an unchanging repository of ancient wisdoms, whose superstition was superior to European rationality, does not alter the fact that this dichotomy itself was deeply Orientalising: the viewpoint was the same (West modern and rational, East ancient and spiritual) but the value judgements had been simply reversed (Mohandas Gandhi did something very similar). Nevertheless, as David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Vera Tolz have shown<sup>8</sup>, other aspects of Russian Orientalism are much harder to fit into the Saidian paradigm – the ambivalence that many Russian intellectuals (though not the Russian state) had about their "European" identity, the role played by some Russian scholars in attacking Russian imperialism and deliberately fostering minority nationalism, and the frequently positive engagement with the Orient in Russian literature, which, as Anastasia de La Fortelle's analysis of Viktor Pelevin reminds us, continues to this day. Ingo Strauch's paper in this collection shows clearly enough how in Central Asia German and Russian Orientalism were not marginal to some wider Franco-British project, but central to the study and imagining of the region. Svetlana Gorshenina also shows how the tropes of "classical" orientalism are reproduced in supposedly "marginal" contexts in her analysis of the General Léon de Beylié's travelogue of the Transcaspian railway, showing how it

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7. A. Morrison, "'Applied Orientalism' in British India and Tsarist Turkestan".

8. D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*; V. Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*.

constituted an “echo-chamber” of colonial discourse that had little to do with the actual landscape, people or locations that he visited.

Despite this, the sense that anything outside Said’s original conception remains a marginal phenomenon has persisted, and it is this that the papers collected in this volume have set out to correct<sup>9</sup>. The “Orientalism of the Margins” does more than simply fill in gaps or tell stories that Said and other postcolonial scholars ignored. Firstly, as Nicola Pozza’s study of M. N. Roy and Till Mostowlansky’s paper on the Pamir borderlands indicates, it allows us to re-discover connections between supposedly discrete cultural blocs that have been severed or overlaid by 20th-century boundary-drawing, and to question the nationalist orthodoxies that have replaced colonial discourses. One of the many problems with Orientalism, and with postcolonialism more generally, is its failure to apply the same critical eye to nationalist successor states as it did to the empires that preceded them. Colonial regimes found diversity to be a useful tool that allowed them to retain control, something that often benefited minorities and vulnerable frontier zones. National states, by contrast, frequently seek to eliminate these variations and impose majoritarian homogeneity. Mostowlansky shows that this is equally true for the Pamiris in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan and the inhabitants of Hunza in Pakistani Kashmir, despite their different experiences of British and Soviet rule, and of independence. Further parallels can be drawn with the fate of the Touareg in the postcolonial Sahara, divided between national states<sup>10</sup>.

Beyond this, however, the “Orientalism of the Margins” provides subtler and more flexible models for understanding cultural imperialism than the crude binary opposition between “Self” and “Other”, West and East, proposed by Said. As Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz’s paper on Russian-Buriyat scholarly encounters reminds us, the “Orientalism of Orientals” is a prominent theme when looking at the Ottoman, Japanese or Russian empires, undermining one of Said’s key conceptions, which

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9. This is particularly true in the Russian case – see the critique by Vladimir Bobrovnikov (who attacks the misuse of Said’s ideas in Russia to suggest that the empire was only ever a victim of Orientalist discourse, and never a perpetrator): V. Bobrovnikov, “Pochemu my marginaly?”, and S. Gorshenina, “La marginalité du Turkestan colonial russe est-elle une fatalité ou l’Asie centrale postsoviétique entrera-t-elle dans le champ des *Post-Studies*?”.

10. B. Sèbe, “A Fragmented and Forgotten Decolonization”.

was that the Orientalist must be outside the Orient, with the latter featuring merely as the inert object of study<sup>11</sup>. However, even in supposedly “classical” cases of Orientalism, such as British Indology, recent scholarship has revealed the crucial (and at the time acknowledged) role of Indian scholars in creating and contributing to the discipline, as Philippe Bornet also shows in his paper on Tamil scholarship in South India<sup>12</sup>. What is striking, then, is that very often the critiques of Saidian Orientalism developed through the study of the “margins” turn out to be equally applicable to the “normative” Orientalism of the British and French in the Middle East. As Vera Tolz has shown, and David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye reminds us here, the Russian orientalists Sergei Oldenburg, Viktor Rozen and Wilhelm Barthold produced pioneering attacks on their own discipline, which Said would later unwittingly draw upon through the work of the Egyptian Marxist scholar Anwar Abdel-Malek<sup>13</sup>. However a figure such as Edward Granville Browne, scourge of British and Russian imperialism in Iran, who spent his entire career working in collaboration with Iranian scholars on terms of intellectual equality, is just as problematic for Saidian Orientalism as these three<sup>14</sup>.

Alongside these geographical extensions and variations on the Saidian theme, another key aspect of “marginal” Orientalism (although one that is frequently ignored in Postcolonial scholarship) is that of class. As Aijaz Ahmad pointed out, in what remains one of the most devastating attacks on the postcolonial industry in western academia, whilst Marxism (which Said dismissed as another oppressive product of the European enlightenment)<sup>15</sup> has inspired several successful anti-colonial movements, nobody has yet been emancipated by postcolonialism save a small coterie of academics from middle-class backgrounds in formerly colonised countries<sup>16</sup>. From a Marxist perspective, or even that of the

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11. E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 21, 97; this point is repeated by many postcolonial scholars. See R. Inden, *Imagining India*; N. Dirks, “Foreword” and *Castes of Mind*, p. 306-312; G. Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World”, p. 384.

12. M. Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire and National Culture*, p. 184-192.

13. V. Tolz, “European, National and (Anti-)Imperial”, p. 78-80.

14. G. Nash, *From Empire to Orient*, p. 139-168.

15. E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 153-157.

16. A. Ahmad, “Orientalism and After”.

early Indian "Subaltern Studies" school<sup>17</sup>, they came from privileged groups that had often materially benefited from colonialism, but postcolonialism allowed them to present themselves as victims. This blindness to class distinctions is also reflected in the choice of materials thought to be central to understanding Orientalism, which almost without exception come from the canon of European literature and scholarship. This follows the lead of Said himself, who in both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* focused exclusively on what he called "The Great Cultural Archive", and paid no attention to questions of reception or circulation at a more popular level<sup>18</sup>. Said claimed, for instance, that Flaubert's representations of Oriental women became widely influential, although the episode he was referring to, the novelist's sexual encounter with the prostitute Kuchuk Khanyim ("The little woman") was not even published until the 1960s<sup>19</sup>. Said wrote about Flaubert not because he had played an important or determinant role in 19th-century European representations of the Orient, but because of Flaubert's status as a great 19th-century author. In this Ahmad argued that Said's aim was to write a "dark" version of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, where the golden thread of European civilization and culture which Auerbach traced from Ancient Greece to the 20th century was replaced by Said's "Original Sin" of Orientalism<sup>20</sup>. This explains why "great" literature and academic orientalism served Said's polemical purposes better than popular genres, film or television, all of which would in fact have been better targets for their consistent reproduction of denigrating Orientalist tropes<sup>21</sup>. The challenge of exploring Orientalism in more marginal forms of cultural production has instead been taken up by those who are usually identified (not entirely correctly) as Said's opponents, most notably John Mackenzie, who in a series of pioneering works has mined rich seams of popular theatre, advertising, music-hall songs and cheap fiction to reveal the sheer depth and variety of the imperial presence in British

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17. E.g. D. Arnold, "Rebellious Hillmen"; S. Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma".

18. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. XXIII.

19. E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 6, 186-188; he was using the text in F. Steegmuller (ed.), *Flaubert in Egypt*, a translation drawn from A. Y. Naaman, *Les lettres d'Égypte de Gustave Flaubert*, the first complete edition.

20. A. Ahmad, "Orientalism and After", p. 162-165.

21. R. Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*, p. 285 sq.

popular culture<sup>22</sup>. Finally, we might say that a further form of marginalisation produced by the scholarly response to Said was the neglect of the study of colonised societies in favour of the culture of the colonisers. All too often Postcolonialism's claims to expose the unequal relationships of power inherent in colonialism translated in practice into the deconstruction of texts and images created almost exclusively by white males<sup>23</sup>. As Blain Auer's richly detailed paper on the complex interplay between Persian, Urdu and English-language historiography shows, dialogue was still possible despite imbalances of power. While the East India Company sought to instrumentalise Persianate history-writing for its own purposes, Indian historians retained their own agency and priorities, and both incorporated and rejected English-language historiography. Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Anas Sareen's paper on Geetanjali Shree's *Mai* is also welcome reminder of how much more there is to be achieved by looking beyond the European literary and scholarly canon, noting that the colonized can retain agency by using the language of the colonizers to produce new, hybridized linguistic and cultural forms that create "fertile spaces of freedom".

As Philippe Bornet and Svetlana Gorshenina have noted in their introduction, the exhaustive bibliography of "marginal" orientalisms which they provide demonstrates that there is now "a flowering of new approaches, even if these two cases [India and Russia] do not enter into the categories pre-defined by Said. It would be more judicious to say that the 'marginal' epithet refers to the fact that that Russian and Indian orientalisms remained for a long time outside the field, and because of this fact barely visible, in a 'grey' or 'forgotten' zone". This collection of papers demonstrates that the "Orientalism of the Margins" is indeed in the process of overcoming that epithet, and finding acceptance in the "mainstream" of Anglo-French postcolonial studies. In the longer term, this will hopefully lead to a more discriminating use of Said's original ideas: neither rejecting them wholesale because of the omissions and exceptions that further research has revealed, nor applying them unthinkingly to any and every colonial context, but using them as a toolkit of ideas that can be adapted to different situations.

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22. J. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, p. 18 sq. and *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*.

23. D. Washbrook, "Orients and Occidents".



Ultimately, for all the failings and later abuses of his work, Said exposed a fundamental truth about Orientalism as an epistemological construction that had far more to do with Western self-perceptions than with the “Orient” itself, and he also revealed the degree to which some of the most revered and canonical texts in European culture were shot through with this tendency, or implicated in the power relations of empire. The challenge is to apply this insight more widely and less dogmatically than he did – to see it as contingent on particular historical circumstances, as opposed to an iron law of cultural production, or a form of original sin tainting a monolithic “Occident”.

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