

## CVSP 204 Lecture on Edward Said, *Orientalism*

Peter Heath

1. Edward Said (1935-2003), University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York from 1963. A Palestinian-American, he was born in Jerusalem in 1935 but educated mainly in Cairo; at age of 15 he went to the U.S., where he finished high school and studied at Princeton and Harvard universities. He is considered one of the leading literary critics of the last quarter of the 20th century; his specialty was initially 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction, especially the novels of Joseph Conrad. With the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, he simultaneously opened a new field in literary criticism (which evolved into what is now known as the post-colonial study of literature), and emerged as a major public intellectual who criticized the innate prejudice and anti-Arabism of US politics, media, and much of the scholarly establishment. He became an eloquent defender of the Palestinian cause and late in life, became equally critical of the anti-democratic and authoritarian rule of Arab leaders. He was also a music critic, a gifted classical pianist, a media star, popular essayist and public speaker.

Main issue is: **Representation of the Other: How is the image of the other created and who controls its formulation?** Examples: Direct self-examination, use of mirror, image created through interaction with and judgments of others. The same analogy applies with different cultures.

### 2. Background: Historical Realities: The Creation of Europe's Self Image

Between 1770 and 1910, Western Europe was transformed from:

a continent of kingdoms and principalities, where monarchs governed subjects, to one of centralized nation states, where elected governments became common

a non-industrialized area governed by mercantile economics to an industrialized capitalist economic super-power

a region whose empires controlled the new world to one whose empires included all of Africa and much of Asia

a cultural whose intellectual foundations were limited to the study of Biblical history, ancient Greek and Roman civilization, and European history to one whose fields of study expanded to archeology, Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, and all other great linguistic and religious/intellectual cultural traditions. This was a major, if one-sided, period of intellectual and economic globalization

*Premise One* of Said's book is that—paradoxically—the more Europeans controlled the "Orient," by means of economic, political, and military power, **and through self-created structures of "objective" knowledge**, the more they fabricated it by creating an "image" of "oriental societies" that posited them to be exotic, sexually permissive, corrupt, and immoral. That is, the "Orient" became the negative mirror image of all of the assumed "virtues" of Europe.

### 3. Background: Said's Theoretical Influences

**A.** The German scholar of comparative literature, Erich Auerbach, author of *Mimesis* (Greek word for "representation"), who, influenced by Kantian and Enlightenment rationalism, posed the question of how texts could be studied to understand the mental landscape and aesthetics of the past through his exploration of the assumed entity called "Western culture."

"He set himself the task of writing a general work based on specific textual analyses in such a way as to layout the principles of Western literary performance in all their variety, richness, and fertility. The aim was a synthesis of Western culture in which the synthesis itself was matched in importance by the very gesture of doing it . . . .

"The discrete particular was thus converted into a highly mediated symbol of the world.historical process." (pp. 258-59) Auerbach's approach to writing literary history was that successive periods consist of an unfolding "drama" of successive representations.

In *Orientalism*, Said takes the same approach except that he deals not with the representation of one's own culture but with the study of how the so-called Self defines itself by contrasting itself by "creating" an essentialized representation of the "other." He too embraces the same Kantian-based humanistic/Enlightenment theory that reality consists of historically created perceptions that can be studied and "corrected" through rational investigation and discussion (this is the basis of his own theory of role of public intellectual)

**B.** The French psychologist Jacques Lacan's theory that identity is formed largely by interaction with the external "mirror-other." For example, Western identity is created by its creation of a negative Oriental "other."

**C.** Marxism :

(1) Karl Marx: Ideology as superstructure. "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Front piece quote). The Marxist premise that the economic base structures influence/control the cultural superstructure (this is never explicitly embraced by Said, but it is an influence)

(2) The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci: "In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is *hegemony*, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far." (p.7)

**D.** Michel Foucault: The premise that modern social organization is based increasingly on the state's impulse to centralize its accumulation of power to control and homogenize individuals, and that "modern reforms" (such as prisons, hospitals and educational systems) are instruments for such control. Hence, scholarly discourses must be seen as a reflection of institutional power. As such, ideas such as "reform" and the "modernism" can easily become conceptual justifications for oppression.

#### 4. What is Orientalism?

1. "The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one. . . anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient-and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist." (p. 2)

2. "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'". (p. 2)

3. "A Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." (p. 3) It is "a British and French cultural enterprise." (p. 4) The Orient was almost a European invention." (p. 1)

**Method:** "My principle methodological devices for studying authority here are what can be called *strategic location*, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about, and *strategic formation*, which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter the culture at large." (p. 20)

"Orientalism is premised upon exteriority." (p.20) The principle product of this exteriority is of course representation." (p. 21)

**The personal dimension.** "Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an "Oriental" as a child growing up in two British colonies." (p. 25)

**Thesis:** Orientalism is not only a field of knowledge; more importantly it is a form of political control and cultural domination based on emphasizing the exoticism of the "other," the ahistoricity of the other's culture, and the ineptitude of the other in comparison with one's own culture. One's cultural strengths are defined by the others' presupposed cultural weaknesses. .

**Question:** How the is it possible to study any "other" at all, whether in cultural or historical terms. If the "other" is all essentialist reduction, is "us" one as well?

"This whole didactic process is neither difficult to understand nor difficult to explain. One ought again to remember that all cultures impose corrections on raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. The problem is not that conversion takes place. It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, as the way they ought to be. To the Westerner, however, the Oriental was always like some part of the West. . . . Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture; in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental." (p. 67) The result is "Orientalism's insensitive schematization of the entire Orient." (p. 68)