

Edward said – orientalism essay

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



The analysis of Orientalism, published in 1978, has become a classic in the study of the West's relationship with its others. The depiction of Orientalism, in all its many manifestations, as a 'discourse' has raised a storm of theoretical and methodological argument, but it has given an unparalleled focus and political clarity to the complex range of activities by which Europe gained knowledge of its oriental other.

(Klein, p 269) In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Wadie Said proposed some alternatives to Orientalism. He suggested that producers of knowledge could extricate themselves from Orientalist discourse, and the power relations it constructs, by acknowledging the inextricable "interdependence" of East and West, by recognizing the inescapably "hybrid" nature of all forms of culture, and by developing the ability to think "sympathetically" about "others" rather than just about "us." Only by becoming aware of the progressive "integration" of East and West that imperialism set in motion, Said argued, can the imperialist logic of difference be undermined. (Klein, p 269) Said has this process of discipline, administration, and incarceration in mind when he construes Orientalism as a discourse of power, knowledge, and redemption.

Orientalism cannot be understood without the category discourse, without the systematic discipline that it presupposed, and the distinctive relation between the exercise of power and the production of forms of knowledge (power/knowledge) that it represents. Edward Said argues that the public intellectual must function within institutions, in part, as an exile, as someone whose "place it is publicly to raise tough and challenging questions. In the relationship between knowledge and power, the intellectual must stand as

someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations. ”
Once again, Said is relevant in calling for intellectuals to recognize the importance of “ asking questions, making distinctions, restoring to memory all those things that tend to be overlooked or walked past in the rush to collective judgment and action.

He advocates a skeptical, if ambivalent attitude that in the interest of human freedom and knowledge, a quasi-anarchic attitude toward cultural authority. Said’s idea of culture is qualified by his unwillingness to wholly embrace the contrarian views. (Hart, p26) According to Said, knowledge of its oriental other is a perfect demonstration of the power of ‘ amateurism’ in intellectual work. When this ‘ something’ is a whole region of the world, in which dozens of ethnicities, nationalities and languages are gathered under the spurious category ‘ the Orient’, then the link between that knowledge and the power it confirms becomes profoundly important. (Ashcroft, p 83) To reiterate, Orientalism combines several disciplines: a collection of academic disciplines, anontology, epistemology, and a discourse.

(Said was greatly influenced by the works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and from earlier critics of western Orientalism such as A. L. Tibawi, Anouar Malek-Abdel, Maxime Rodinson, and Richard William Southern) In developing his description of discourse, Said builds his ideas of discipline and power/knowledge. “ By discipline, Foucault means those methods of modern punitive power that establish meticulous control over the body, assuring its constant subjection by imposing a relation of docility utility.

" (Hart, p70) In summary, Said's Orientalism demonstrates how power operates in knowledge: the processes by which the West ' knows' the Orient have been a way of exerting power over it. Orientalism describes the various disciplines, institutions, processes of investigation and styles of thought by which Europeans came to ' know' the ' Orient' over several centuries, and which reached their height during the rise and consolidation of nineteenth-century imperialism. The key to Said's interest in this way of knowing Europe's others is that it effectively demonstrates the link between knowledge and power, for it ' constructs' and dominates Orientals in the process of knowing them. Ashcroft, 2001, p 49) He continues to argue that a long tradition of romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as justification for Europe and America's colonial and imperial ambitions. In Said's view, we cannot really understand the power and pervasiveness of imperialism until we understand the importance of culture.

Culture is the power which changes a colonized people's view of the world without the imperialist needing to resort to military control.

Reference(s)Christina Klein, 2003, Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961 Publisher: University of California Press. Place of Publication: Berkeley, CA. Page Number: 269. William D. Hart, 2000, Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press. Place of Publication: Cambridge, England. Publication Year: 2000.

Page Number: 26. Pal Ahluwalia, Bill Ashcroft, 2001, Edward Said. Publisher: Routledge. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 2001. Page Number: 8.