

The concept of orientalism history essay



Orientalism is a theory put forward by the late Edward Said. It is associated with field of post colonialism and the study of the cultures and identities of the Orient and Eastern civilisations by the West. Said's 1979 book Orientalism aimed to expose and explain his theory of the phenomenon of Western dominance over the East. Orientalism was what he described as a form of Western imperialism that the East had been subjected to since Colonial times. Said talks of the earlier Orientalist writers who never seemed to capture the true nature of the Orient. They wrote or painted the stereotypes that had been a custom by others to record. It seemed to Said that this was subconsciously followed by the Orientalists or European colonialists in the Orient who wanted to necessitate knowledge over the conquered peoples in the region. This is what he calls latent Orientalism. According to Said, the discourse of the Orientalists throughout history has often depicted the Eastern world as either a dark, mysterious and threatening place or as an overly romanticised mythical landscape. Said writes:

' thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels and social descriptions concerning the Orient, its people, customs..'

These distinctions and the negative Orientalist discourse that Said refers to are dangerous to Muslims now as the image portrayed is deeply harmful. The main thread of Said's argument in Orientalism is that the otherness of the East depicted by the Orientalists effectively justified imperial ambitions from

the West. His theory of otherness and of the cultural stereotype of the East can be seen in the military occupancy of Arab countries by the West as it is easier to be aggressive if you don't understand your adversary. The essay Orientalism, Misinformation and Islam explains: ' Without a doubt, the foundations of Orientalism are in the maxim, " know thy enemy"' . It could be argued that the contemporary Orientalism that he talks of in the last 50 years is another form of Islamaphobia. Said credits the popular media, films, news, books, articles and images coming from the West for instilling an underlying feeling of superiority and inherent racism (what he calls manifest Orientalism) even nowadays, when depicting the Orient. Kofi Annan (2004) comments on the idea of Islamaphobia: ' when the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry, that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia.' The same could be understood with the perceived need for an Orientalist critique and the notion of Orientalism.

The context surrounding the time that Said wrote Orientalism must be noted when discussing its usefulness in understanding the relations between the West and Middle East. The Arab-Israeli War of 1973 (also known as the Yom Kippur War) was a turning point for Said. He describes how he conceived the idea for Orientalism whilst watching news coverage in America reporting on the unfolding events of the war. He posits that the Arabs were being depicted as less modern than the Israelis and that their methods of fighting were cowardly and backward. Here he demonstrates how the nature of the Western world's patronising understanding of the Arabic world even in

modern warfare was seen to be barbaric and less advanced than that of the enemy.

Therefore it could be argued that Orientalism as a concept is useful into gaining an insight into the Middle East and some of the ways the media seems to portray the Arab world and perhaps why this stereotype is applied.

When looking at current relations between the West and the Middle East an obvious point to consider is the current military occupancy of Iraq and Afghanistan by American and Britain. If Said were alive today its likely he would say that the concept of Orientalism is useful in helping us recognise how and why the decision was made to go to war. It would seem that Blair and Bush's proposal to war was accepted relatively easily and quickly. They spoke of the risk of Weapons of Mass Destruction that they believed to be in Iraq and that needed to be found in order to disarm Saddam Hussein. These weapons were never found and whilst the West claimed to be bringing democracy and to be other throwing a dictatorship, it could be argued that little has been achieved aside from Western dominance in the region. This occupancy it could be argued builds on the foundations neo-imperialism, the need to cure an uncivilised Arab world with Western values by military invasion and ultimately Orientalism.

However it could also be argued that post 9/11 and 7/7 Orientalism as a concept is outdated. For the better part of the Cold War the Western powers were still not particularly involved in the Middle East. Where as prior to this time the West had seemingly looked down on the various conflicts in the region such as the Iran-Iraq war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it was

not of direct relevance to them. This is with the exception of a few oil embargos such as at the end of the Yom Kippur War the Arabs threatened to cut off the oil and still the West was able to look on relatively dispassionately as long as their oil supply wasn't threatened.

The end of Cold War saw Russia fighting Afghanistan. Here America stepped in to support Russia's enemy, by supporting the Taliban. The 2007 film Charlie Wilson's War plays out the story of the way that an American senator carefully and covertly succeeded in arming the Taliban against the Russians. Some have said that this act directly brought down the Berlin wall and thus ended the Cold War. However as quickly as the Taliban defeated the Russians they started to fight the Americans, who they had received economic and military support from. The end of the Cold War saw the growth of Islamic militancy and some hold responsible today the acts of Charlie Wilson. An Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski (who was President Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser in 1979) questions arming the Afghan freedom fighters and what the implications are today for this. When asked, 'do you regret having supported the Islamic fundamentalism, having given arms and advice to future terrorists?', he answered: 'What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?' It would appear that at the time the West was more concerned with the collapse of the Soviet Union and to bring an end to the communist threat. The end of the Cold War saw the end of the balance of power between America and the USSR. This meant that after the Cold War America was able to extend its influence in regions of the world previously

that Russia would have stopped them controlling or that they had their eyes on themselves. However it could be suggested that America did this at the cost of its own security in the long run by arming its later enemies.

Here a crucial point can be made about Said's work. Said claimed that the West never understood the Middle East and regarded it as inferior barbaric nations who were not an immediate threat to Western security. Perhaps the usefulness of Orientalism as a concept is in the way we can now understand why and how the Afghan freedom fighters were willingly armed by the Americans. This is because they were in fact not seen as harmful or threatening to the West, which goes against the line of Orientalism which talks of the demonization of the Muslim world.

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Ultimately one could say that nowadays Orientalism as a concept to understanding current international relations is slightly off point as there is a war going on at the moment between the West and the Middle East and that the threat faced is very real. Other films such as the *The Hurt Locker* highlight the aggression American soldiers face on a day-to-day basis from I. E. D's (Improvised Explosive Devices) on the side of the road. So perhaps the concept of Orientalism is less relevant now than it was when it was written because it seems that the threat from Al Qaeda since 9/11 is existent.