

The concept of orientalism and its importance in the context of global history

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Introduction

Global history takes into consideration the development of societies, people and technology over time regardless of the trappings of borders defining nations with singular narratives. This is imperative as to why Orientalism is relevant in the consideration of Global History. The history of the Middle East is of global importance, the goings on in the region having global ramifications. However, a point that this essay will discuss is that the perceived ' Middle East' is a vaguely defined region based on Eurocentric ideas, grouping nations and people for the convenience of western governments. Consequently, this has led to the vilification of the Arab people over time, as it has been manipulated to suit western narratives and justify their actions which would have otherwise been seen as plainly immoral. As a result, this has smeared the image and esteem of ancient and illustrious cultures, religions and ethnic identities.

Global history is also constantly evolving, being made every day. The creation of Orientalism by past generations reverberates into the present. The resentment bred on both sides of the prejudice is omnipresent in the media, examples and consequences arising daily. This is the striking significance of the question. Orientalism is a process, one which started long ago and now is an inescapable part of western and perhaps global society. It has continued seamlessly from past to present, transcending nations to become an ingrained way of thinking. This is of importance even more so as it is a form of discrimination that remains largely unchallenged, manifesting

itself as manufactured thoughts that western society (largely) mindlessly accepts just as its origins intended.

The Concept of the Middle East and Ignorant Views

Orientalism is based around the concept of the Middle East. The concept however was created by Western powers. The reference to the area of North Africa, Persia and the Arabian Peninsula is a grouping that was and remains to be a convenience for the West. In fact, this was at first more explicit as “over the course of the nineteenth century, Europeans and Americans would increasingly come to see the orient as divided into two distinct units” with the present Middle east being referred to as the “Near East” (Lockman, 2004, p. 66). This blanket term is indicative of how ignorantly the West viewed the region. It had no understanding of the ethnicities and identities which existed within. They saw the people of the region as simply ‘foreign’ without regard for what separated and defined them. This was unfounded and based upon assumption. Ventura writes with reference to Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism that it “disregards concrete historical contexts and produces abstract and even “mythical” images of the “Orientals” and of the “other” in general.

The tendency to generalize and the lack of critical and historical considerations are among the most striking marks of the Orientalist attitude towards the non-western world.” (Ventura, 2017, p. 284). This disregard for a foreign way of life was applied broadly, with the general view being the way of life was ‘uncivilised’. It was seen as undeveloped, judged by western standards. This is something that is even evident in the modern day. With

regard to Montesquieu's account of ' Oriental Despotism' " Irrespective of whether Arab countries include aspects of " modern" states, according to the western representation, they appear fixed in the " sultanistic" past. It is for this reason that – inside this picture – they appear static." (Ventura, 2017, p. 289). Disregard for the Arab way of life is exemplified by Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt. It could be taken as far as to say the French saw their presence as a gift, " bringing science and civilisation to the benighted Orient" (Lockman, 2004, p. 71). This demonstrates why orientalism is so crucial to Global History. Orientalism shaped the image of the Middle East and Arab cultures that we have used to develop our understanding of the region and over time has largely migrated from a perception to accepted fact. Therefore, Orientalism has shaped aspects of Global History.

The First World War and Prejudice against Arab People

Orientalism is also relevant in the creation of the structure of the current Middle East. Orientalism was perhaps at its peak during post World War One negotiations. This is significant to the extent that J. L. Gelvin goes as far as to say that " World War One was the most important political event in the history of the modern Middle East" (Gelvin, 2007, p. 77). This is of great significance in reference to Global History as a war started in the bureaucracy of Europe, could ripple across the globe to change the face and fate of an entire region and its people.

Orientalism views the Arab as uneducated, uncivilised and undeveloped and the effects of this mean that there was no remorse in the division of the

region. The infamous and covert Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 demonstrates this, the British and French (assuming victory) mercilessly carved up the Middle East for their own mandates. Even publicly once the war had ended, at Versailles and San Remo Arab lobbying for independence or even input in their future fell on deaf ears. E. Rogan suggests the reasons for this was that " (Rogan, 2016, p. 40)". Therefore, despite European claims of lack of civilisation in the Middle East, it was in fact the post war powers that stunted development of Arab nations after the war. This is a prime example of Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, in that unfounded prejudice against Arab people has shaped their history (Said, 1978). However, this is not the history of a single nation or moment in time. The effects of Orientalism in post-World War 1 negotiations led to the exclusion of Arab people in having any autonomy in choices that directly affected them. Resultantly changing the shape and reputation of the Middle East on the global stage and consequently Global History.

The Mythification of ‘ Arab Society’

Another way in which Orientalism is relevant in global history is the profoundly negative consequences it has had for the religion of Islam and Arabic ethnic identities. In the present day, a glance at the media and rhetoric in public dialogue could suggest the negative connotations a considerable amount of society hold against Muslims. This is a direct impact of Orientalism. A common perception is that every Arab is a Muslim, and vice versa. This is a huge shortfall in a way of thinking as the reality is far more complex. But how do we judge if people are Arab or Muslim to cast these negative assumptions? One may argue this is largely on appearance in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-concept-of-orientalism-and-its-importance-in-the-context-of-global-history/>

first instance. This is critically flawed due to Orientalism as “ looking Arab, which differs from actually being Arab, has come to stir evaluations of otherness an inferiority” (Schmidt, 2014, p. 172).

The view of Arabs as outsiders has only been exacerbated by Islamic fundamental terrorism in the twenty first century. As with all terrorism this only represents the views of the extremists that carry out attacks but it can undoubtedly be said that Muslims and Arabs in western societies have suffered increasing discrimination as a result. One of the most significant examples of this is the tragic 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda on the World Trade Centre in New York. Following this there was a severe rise in Islamophobia in the United States and President Bush declared a ‘ War on terror’. But this declaration seemingly didn’t just act on terror but on the ideology of Islam itself and how it differs from western societal norms. An example of this is the role of women. As Nyak explains “ After 9/11, the US government, the media and ‘ experts’ collaborated to signify the oppression of Arab/Muslim women as the categorical proof of Islamic terror, and women accordingly became a central point of the war on terror.

Despite US involvement in the regimes of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, the USA suddenly turned the long-term persecution of women in Afghanistan and Iraq into a spectacle for public consumption and justification for military intervention.” (Nyak, 2006, p. 49). Focus on the divisions in way of life in the media and by the government in this case had a detrimental effect for Muslim and Arab communities, worsening existing racism. Again this is mindless grouping of people based on perception - “ Any reduction of this

whole immense mass of history, societies, individuals and realities to “ Arab society” is therefore a mythification.” (Said, 1975, p. 410)This exemplifies the evolution of Orientalism. It shows the unfounded prejudice of the British and French in early colonial times has spread globally to America and into the present day proving itself a prominent effector of Global History.

Justifying Participation in Conflicts

An overwhelming aspect of Orientalism is its use by western governments to justify actions and participation in conflicts. This was evident in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. This declaration promised the support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine by the British, promising away land that was not rightfully theirs to give. By doing this it also contradicted the previous McMahon-Hussein correspondence which promised Palestinian independence. As J. L. Gelvin explains “ This support virtually guaranteed that the Zionist movement would not go the way of hundreds of other nationalist movements that had appeared briefly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then faded into obscurity.” (Gelvin, 2007, p. 78). This shows increased sympathy towards Jewish needs perhaps because they felt more familiar, seeming the safer more obvious group to support and champion. The Palestinian Arabs were perhaps easier to disregard and neglect their needs as they were insistently seen as the ‘ other’, almost inhuman.

Orientalism is based on the ongoing major and minor in the relationship between the West and the Middle East as “ Orientalist images and ideas are linked to a context made of concrete economic and strategic interests and of

power relationships between hegemonic and subaltern cultures” (Ventura, 2017, p. 296). This lowly view of Arab cultures as reason to disregard and interfere, casting judgement has continued to the present day. The Arab Spring beginning in 2010 was hailed as a positive wave in the West, battling ‘ Oriental despotism’. “ The Arab revolts appeared to have been understood by the western public as not only attempts to modernize but also as a kind of “ jump” into the western coordinates and system of values” (Ventura, 2017, p. 290).

This undermined the struggle of the Arab people and automatically assumed all aspects of the revolt to be ‘ good’ without comprehensive understanding of the situation. For many in Europe and America it was seem as a shift towards the long-standing rhetoric that ‘ West is best’. Upon the entry of news of the spring into mainstream media there were “ instant claims [that] western influence shaped much of the discourse (as though Arab people were incapable of having their own revolutions)” (Shihade, et al., 2012). This point demonstrates how Orientalism not only shapes the course of history but alters the lens in which it’s viewed through.

Conclusion

Overall since its conception Orientalism has continued to be relevant in Global History. It has shaped the perception of the ‘ Middle East’ and the area which people regard as thus. It has such a profound affect it has not only shaped the narrative of specific nations and moments in time but even the geography of borders and population demographic of the region. It has also affected Arab and Muslim people as creating an image of inferiority and

'backwardness'. Pigeon holing them as the 'other' and undeveloped in comparison to the West in the context of Global History. Orientalism also has affected the ability of Arab nations and individuals to change the course of history that would have a global affect, such as their exclusion from post-world war 1 negotiations which extensively altered the Middle East.

Therefore, one may conclude that Orientalism is of vast importance in the context of Global History. This is as Orientalism has created an opinion of the Middle East and Arab people that creates a distorted lens through which people all over the globe view the region and its history. This continues to be relevant as it is evident in recent, current and on-going events.

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