

Discourse in the Face of Agency: The Orientalist Problematic and Beyond

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Abstract

Edward Said's Orientalist problematic (Orientalism viewed in relation to the societal problems which it establishes and perpetuates) operates successfully in part due to the discourses of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida because their theoretical foundations are placed within appropriate textual boundaries. Yet because discourse cannot inherently be confined, the greatest strengths and structural supports of Said's discourse simultaneously act as his greatest weaknesses. Research into this specific discursive give-and-take relationship not only illuminates the curious play between an agent and his/her discourse, in which both are continually re-inventing each other, but reveals further implications regarding the process by which an "Other" is created and spoken for.

Keywords: Orientalism, Agency, Discourse

1. Edward Said and Orientalism

The book *Orientalism*, published in 1978 by Edward Said, offers a critical, post-colonial perspective on the phenomenon of Orientalism and is historically and personally situated. As just one text within Said's larger scholarly discourse, *Orientalism* is a rich source of material; it operates multi-dimensionally, and reveals the curious relationship between agency (the author) and discourse (his text). In *Orientalism*, Said's principal mission is to reveal the larger problematic (the societal problems perpetuated by the practice of Orientalism), as he sees it (though Said himself preferred not to use the term "problematic"). To illustrate this, Said not only utilizes his life experiences, and historical references, but grounds his argument upon pre-established theoretical perspectives. Said's text thus operates successfully in part due to these discourses, of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (just to name a few), yet these theoretical foundations just as successfully operate *against* Said's position.

Currently Israel and Palestine are exchanging rocket fire, and citizens the world over are demanding a cease fire, the necessity for peace, or the complete "snuffing out" of the Other. The logic of this third option certainly seems simpler: The problematic is part of a causal relationship; identify the source of the problem and remove it. Furthermore, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict requires "the Palestinian", and "the Israeli", (an "us" and a "them") to function successfully; both are necessary and allow for the perpetuation of violence and struggle. It is likely that Said's close relationship with this mutually-dependent conflict (growing up in Palestine and identifying strongly with their cause) influenced him greatly when he conceived of Orientalism: A discourse which is constructed (largely by the West) for the representation of "others" (often those in the East). And here the classical concept of a cultural "other" is born, one which is vast in scope and influence; a mode of relating to the world which strikes often unconsciously.

2. The Problematic

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said takes a historical approach in accumulating the context necessary to outline the problematic. From Said's perspective, the ingredients necessary for an Oriental discourse were (and still are) to a certain extent dependent not only upon agents (who constructed and perpetuated the discourse) but upon time. Operating *through* time, however relatively brief or deep that may be, discursive elements accumulate. On the Orientalist's role Said explains that, "What he [who speaks for the Orient] says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an exteriority and as a moral fact. The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation"¹. This position of the "speaker" exists to speak *for* another and does so quite surreptitiously impervious to the waves of history which flow along side it. Working to instill an exteriority of the Other, and yet simultaneously existing as an exteriority itself, Orientalism represented free of any significant accountability; that is perhaps until Said arrived. As he is tackling not a definable object per se, but a vast network of communications, this discourse is thus elusive and powerful.

Orientalism, and the larger problematic which Edward Said establishes for easier viewing is difficult to grasp, and it is for this reason that Said is weary of its influence. Speaking of this power, in relation to Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, Said writes, "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"². Said is utilizing the term hegemony in much the same way that Gramsci did, in which regardless of the culture, there exists structures or ideas which appear to hold a certain dominance over others. This relationship operates dualistically, hand in hand with value judgements, and thus power dynamics are established and perpetuated. Orientalism as a discourse is thus both independent and a part of cultural hegemony. Precisely because Said fleshed out what may have originally been a "classical" or "traditional" concept of Orientalism into its broader and more dynamic form, the discourse becomes for Said, and for other agents in relation to it, a problematic which warrants serious attention. And so, two things become quite clear: Said's Orientalist problematic is historically situated, and as a discourse it is dynamic and wields tremendous influence and power. This discourse owes much of its stability, and thus validity, to concepts relating to power and knowledge which are established by Michel Foucault.

3. Support and Weaken

In the concluding paragraph of *Orientalism*, Edward Said offers his reader a warning; one should take precaution when entering the realm of Orientalism as well as discourses in general. He states, "If this book has any future use, it will be as a modest contribution to that [the hegemony of Orientalism], and as a warning: that systems of thought like Orientalism, discourses of power, ideological fictions - mind-frog'd - manacles - are all too easily made, applied, and guarded"³. The decisive nature of this statement resides in the implications of its parts. Discourse may firstly be recognized for the manner in which it is composed, but secondly, it must be recognized for the power which it commands. Foucault's thoughts on knowledge provide Said with a fertile framework upon which to plant and grow the larger "Orientalist problematic". Foucault writes, (in response to Friedrich Nietzsche's thoughts on knowledge) "Knowledge must struggle against a world without order, without connectedness, without form, without beauty, without wisdom, without harmony, and without law... between the instincts and knowledge, one finds not a continuity but, rather, a relation of struggle, domination, servitude, settlement"⁴. Whether it is knowledge struggling against a world devoid of order or the world struggling against applied knowledge, relations of domination exist as part of this duality. As the *expression* of one exercising control over another, power is often found to operate wherever the observer/observed duality is in existence. Orientalism as a construct is dependent upon the play between the observer (often in the guise of "the West") and the observed ("the East", "the Other" who is thus necessarily subjected). Said's Orientalism, like Foucault's power, is thus *mobile*, and reveals itself not so much via definition as an entity, but via relationship as a mode, attitude, and endless variety of actions. This is perhaps one reason why it has been so difficult to hold *it* (the Orientalist discourse) accountable. It is that which already *has* been, it is that which *is*, and it is that which *will* be. Aside from Foucault's thoughts on knowledge and power, Said's Orientalist problematic is equally as dependent upon Jacques Derrida's discourse on deconstruction.

While deconstruction is by its very essence not that which can be so easily defined and categorized, some elements

can be isolated and explained in relation to Said's work. One concept in particular which is of interest to both Derrida and Said, is that of "the Other" and the processes by which an Other is singled out and utilized. Derrida explains that:

Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not to dissociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other. I think, from that point of view, separation, disassociation is not an obstacle to society, to community, but the condition⁵.

The condition of society is intrinsically linked to a process of differentiation, and yet this distinction operates in relation to that which is fundamentally unreachable. One reason why Orientalism and the process of "othering" is so problematic is because beyond the moment to moment experiential act of establishing an Other, discursively such a phenomenon operates on all levels, within an infinite variety of spaces. The similarities between Foucault and Derrida's thoughts are evident here too. Both perspectives, regardless of their focus, are reflective of this plurality (which is inherently difficult to define, grasp, and make sense of) common of post-modern/post-structuralist thinking which Said was so keen of. And so, from this perspective, Said's heed to the dire waters of discourse, Oriental or not, is entirely acceptable.

While the words of Foucault and Derrida offer tremendous support for Said, from an alternative perspective, these same words appear to weaken the tenets of his Orientalist problematic. This "alternative perspective" is nothing more than a slightly different colored lens with which the same text is viewed. For this reason the distinction is subtle. To put it another way, as there is no definite boundary between the *point* or *moment* when Foucault and Derrida's text *support* Said's discourse and when they *weaken* it, the above argument depends just as much upon one's leniency; in this case, a brief suspension of belief when it comes to clear-cut differentiation is required. The logical place to start when attempting to view this give-and-take relationship would of course be at the level of the word itself because words, whether spoken or written, are always malleable. But beyond the words themselves and the ways in which they are aligned, this phenomenon rests largely with the agent who's primary function here is *intake* and *interpretation*. It is for these reasons that Said's structural supports function in a two-fold manner; they *support* and *weaken*, just as Said's own discourse (or a single text such as *Orientalism*) exists for itself and yet equally against itself. What seems at first to be a dualistic paradox operates experientially in the same fashion. Upon first glance, Said the individual may be synonymous with a compendium of one-way streets; palestinian, intellectual, author, exile; yet Said himself points out in his book *Representations of the Intellectual* that more often than not, such streets are not what they seem, and in regards to his status as an exile, Said writes, "There is a popular but wholly mistaken assumption that being exiled is to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin"⁶. Said was arguably always living in and out of exile. When he studied in the United States he may have been an exile of Palestine (and thus isolated), but no doubt he may have simultaneously been a *part* of his cultural surroundings at school. He adapted and created that which provided the necessary alternative to being an exile, as anyone would. Parallels start to emerge here, noticeably between the realm of experience and that of discourse; the two are deeply intertwined in the ways in which they operate.

Michel Foucault's discourse exists alongside Said's in the same manner which was outlined above: it provides necessary structural support and yet is itself so incredibly vast in step that it plays two roles simultaneously. For Edward Said, one of the core elements of the problematic is the act of representation, and specifically the manner in which one is represented. Representation is a "process of self-definition (of a people) and the selection of the body and vehicle that represents them," and it is this *selection* which is perhaps most significant⁷. There is a vast difference between representing oneself and being represented by another, and it is no surprise that Said's emphasis in *Orientalism* is on "the East" which has time and time again been represented by "the West". In attempting to understand the Orient, for example, a process of representation is necessarily put into place; a *subject* is identified, examined, analyzed, and interpreted, and this process might occur regardless of *who* is conducting it (be it a native New Yorker or native Palestinian). In order for one to comment on the East, or the West, an object or subject must be made *of* that East or West first (whether consciously or unconsciously); upon this subject the acts of investigation, interpretation, and representation may follow. And this usage of representation is closely linked with Foucault's approach towards power. Foucault explains, "there is no such entity as power, with or without a capital letter, global, massive, or diffused; concentrated or distributed. Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action,"⁸. In the same sense, there is no entity as representation without agents to represent one another (or an agent to represent him/herself). Said is thus highly critical of those agents throughout time who have, however

willingly, engaged with this dynamic. Power and representation are *not* simply reprimandable products of agency, but constructs which operate outside and amongst agents taking on a life of their own. And thus, Said *must* be held equally accountable as he is following the same rules and creating discourse no differently.

Jacques Derrida's discourse on deconstruction and the undefinable nature of *things* is key to Said's Orientalist problematic, but this inability to define simultaneously threatens Said's entire problematic. If this sort of "instability in meaning" is oriented in relation to Said's discourse, then what becomes of the East, the Other, and the Orient? Derrida has a unique perspective on *his* relation to the Other, commenting in an interview that, "It [my relationship to the other] is a relation in which the other remains absolutely transcendent. I cannot reach the other. I cannot know the other from the inside and so on. That is not an obstacle but the condition of love, of friendship, and of war, too"⁹... He makes a few important points here. This transcendence of the Other is largely dependent upon the inability to lay a finite claim upon *it*. Both in theory and in practice, this Other is necessarily unreachable. If one could grasp it, and thus define it, the Other would *be* no longer (the meaning/definition dictates the conceptual existence of the term). And perhaps most importantly, Derrida points out that this is a human condition. Said's Orientalist problematic depends upon an Other (the East) which is defined. Of course this is understandable, because without a specific context, and manageable, defined terms, there would be no problematic and thus likely no discourse. But Said's conceptual imposition is situational, and circumstantial. That is, his usage of the Other, and the East, as concepts within his larger problematic, are bound accordingly how he sees fit. Surely *Orientalism* would struggle to make its point if Said attempted to speak for *all* Others, regardless of their locality. And yet because of the underlying foundations which served as inspiration for Said, this larger question of universal "othering" is raised and left untouched.

Edward Said did what anyone would logically do in order to prove a point: he began with broad theoretical perspectives (i.e., those of power and representation) and worked inward (power and representation applied to Orientalism). Thus his application is specific, relevant, relatable, and persuasive. But this original point of departure always dwells, even if only as a shadow, in the background. The implication is that Said's problematic at its core is *not* limited to the Orient, and not defined by space or time. Processes of power, representation, and "othering", function regardless of the lens used, or the historical scope which they are bound within. Said's Orientalist problematic finds fault principally in Orientalism's failure to "identify with human experience", yet there would be no Orientalism without human experience¹⁰. Perhaps it is the particular *manner* in which Orientalism identifies with human experience which Said takes issue with. Said may warn and heed the raging waters of discourse all he wants, but his actions operate according to the same rules. He too is representing, establishing a position of power, and engaging in the definition of an Other regardless of his motives. And here the curious play between agency and discourse reveals itself ever so slightly: just as discourse is created by the agent, so too does the agent create him/herself accordingly in the face of discourse.

6. References

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