

# On the Fortieth Anniversary of the Publication of *Orientalism*, by Edward S. Said

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This year marks forty years since the publication of the book *Orientalism* (1978), by Edward S. Said, one of the most outstanding literary and cultural critics in the United States. After the intense debate on the work during recent decades, the reception of *Orientalism* today forms part of the debate on the postcolonial world or how the condition of colonialism must be freed from modernity. Forty years since its release, it is a classic within the academic spheres that advances and prospers thanks to its own mistakes and interpretations. However, at a media level, its theses are still quite unknown and it must be revived to challenge the stereotyped and negative images of Orientalism that still exist.

This year marks forty years since the publication of the book *Orientalism* (1978), by the professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York, Edward S. Said, one of the most outstanding literary and cultural critics in the United States. The book changed the discipline of scholarship on Orientalism and challenged critical thought. But, mainly and in the light of its reception over the last ten years, it has opened a different way of reflecting on post-colonial thought. As we know, *Orientalism* analysed how the Arab and Islamic world (the East) had been constructed in British and French literary and philosophical representations, especially from the 18th to early 20th centuries, and posed questions about its reception. The East was not a lifeless and passive object but a human construct made over

centuries, whose texts and representations created its reality but did not give a voice to its inhabitants. Said called it Orientalism, and he defined it based mainly on two assumptions: the academic discipline he had studied in the East and a way of thinking that ontologically and epistemologically distinguished the West from the East.

*Orientalism* formed part of a cultural tradition that Said never concealed, represented by Giambattista Vico, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, Friedrich Nietzsche and, above all, Michel Foucault. In the representations of the East, the West had projected its power (a thesis that he developed and applied in *Culture and Imperialism*, 1996). Thus, when the images of the others were reproduced, there was no horizontal relation of equality (as François Hartog also showed us in *Le miroir d'Hérodote. Essai*

*sur la représentation de l'autre*) but rather a vertical relation in which the West was located above. Hence, for centuries the East was represented with negative images that continued unchanged and were passed down unchallenged. Since time immemorial, Arabs, Muslims and the people of the East have been fanatical, despotic, barbaric, lazy, ignorant, cruel, violent, tyrannical, incapable of sustaining a democratic government, and so on.

The reception and criticisms of *Orientalism* from 1978 to the present have been many. The most interesting continue to be those by the anthropologist James Clifford, the historian and sociologist Maxime Rodinson and the art historian J. M. Mackenzie. They attribute several things to the work, most notably the fact that Said only focused on the French and British Orientalist reception, that he himself applied in his readings the essentialism he was reporting and that the criticisms came from the field of literature. This latter criticism is curious because the latest and most pertinent revisions of *Orientalism* would come from the field of Comparative Literary Studies, which in the United States were extended to Cultural Studies. In 1985, Said responded to some criticisms in the article "Orientalism reconsidered" and, in 1995, in the epilogue to the reprint.

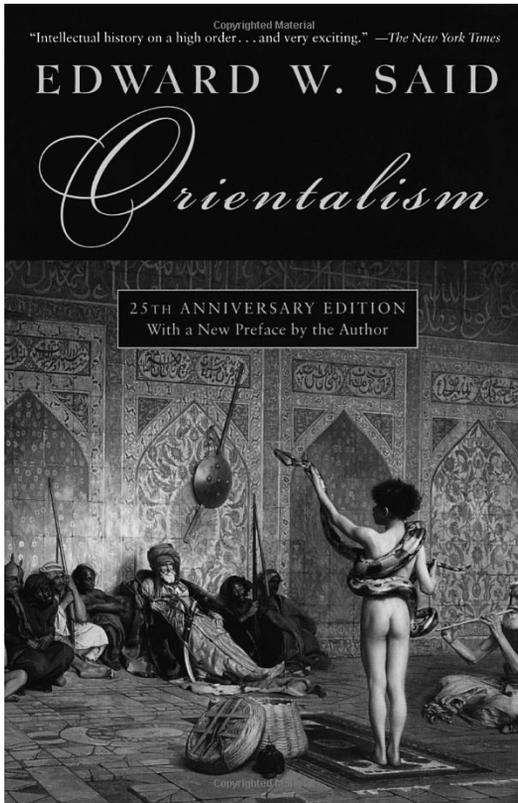
In 2005, Hamid Dabashi, professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and author of *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in a Time of Terror* (2009) organised, with the professor of Literary Criticism and Theory Gayatri Spivak the conference "Subaltern Studies at Large". Said delivered the opening lecture and it was there where two theses were set out based on which *Orientalism* should be interpreted. The world of colonial modernity had been based on European scholarship and the academics had to think in terms almost contrary to the Eurocentric viewpoint applied

in social sciences and humanities. In other words, Orientalism had to make the theses set out by Said its own and question its own method of approach, as argued by the subaltern and postcolonial studies that derived from Said. This challenge is still current and could be summarised in this question: are cultural and postcolonial studies a new form of power?

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Following the latest political and social events, Orientalism must be revised. The so-called Arab uprisings have shaken the imaginary geography of the East. For instance, several Orientalist clichés have been dismantled, such as the incapacity of Arabs and Muslims to defend a democratic system. The West has decentralised its power and new interlocutors have emerged. As scholars of subaltern and postcolonial studies would note, at present we are witnessing a cultural hybridisation that shows the meeting of the centre with the peripheries. However, Arabs and Islam continue to be the result of ignorance and fear, and a new intellectual, secular and media Islamophobia has emerged. Hence, *Orientalism* continues to be a more than necessary reading and its legacies and continuations must be celebrated with epigraphs, such as post-Orientalisms and neo-Orientalisms.

In Spain, *Orientalism* was translated in 1991 in the exemplary collection edited by Juan Goytisolo, Libertarias, with a brief foreword by the writer. It is surprising that, despite the long history of Spanish Orientalism, seemingly there has been no ongoing interest in the



Cover of *Orientalism*, by Edward S. Said.

discipline in our country, because there is no history of it or research project. Orientalism (also called Africanism, Morochism and even Spanish domestic Orient) does not yet have a recent and canonical publication.

In 2011 a major conference on Orientalism was held at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (EHESS) and the *Institute du Monde Arabe* (IMA) in Paris. Under the direction of François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin, the conference proceedings, *Après l'orientalisme. L'Orient créé par l'Orient* (2012), were published. In general terms, the conference endeavoured to analyse the *après-saidisme* in the light of the social sciences, led by sociologists and political experts and, above

all, to set out the conditions for establishing a change and invert the perspective. This was to be based on diversity of histories, local societies and separation of the practices and expressions of Orientalism with the aim of discovering and analysing their interactions. Last year, the anthropologist François Pouillon published a collection of his articles on Orientalism since 1990, *Exotisme et intelligibilité. Itinéraires d'Orient*. In his article "Le retour de l'Orientalisme en Orient" he recalled that things were much more complicated than Said had suggested, although he agreed with his political approach. The scientific and cultural activities of the Orientalist discipline were much more heteroclitic than those set out in *Orientalism* and should be included in the process of reconstruction, in which the political issues should be displaced to the benefit of anthropological mutations.

The latest study on Orientalism is *Restating Orientalism. A Critique of Modern Knowledge* by Wael B. Hallaq, professor of Humanities at Columbia University and specialist in intellectual history. It is an essay that promises to become one of the fundamental texts after post-Orientalism and might be essential reading and the object of discussion in the next few years. Hallaq introduces the study of Orientalism in the debate on modernity. He brilliantly analyses Said's assumptions in detail and expands the scope of the critical discussion about Orientalism to re-examine the epistemological foundations of modern and historical social sciences. *Orientalism* should be studied in a context in which the epistemological foundations can be freed from the awareness of domination and sovereignty. Since Said's foundational work, Orientalism has been for critics the example par excellence of the collaboration of Western intellectuals with oppression. However, should Orientalism advocate the errors of European modernity in exchange for overlooking complicity with

the other academic disciplines? Hallaq widens the criticism to other fields, such as law, philosophy and scientific research or core ideas of academic thought, such as sovereignty or the self. Moreover, he traces colonialism, mass annihilation and the systematic destruction of the natural world, questioning and depicting all the causes that enabled modernity to unite knowledge with power in order to finally theorise a way out of the problems of modernity. In this way, studying *Orientalism* means confronting the forms of violence that have marked modernity and have been justified and reproduced through the academic disciplines. *Restating Orientalism* sets out the depth of the complicity of academia in the modern forms of capitalism, colonialism and hegemonic power because Said's work continues to be a convincing criticism of the modes

of production of knowledge conditioned by colonisation.

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In short, *Orientalism*'s reception today forms part of the debate on the postcolonial world or on how the condition of colonialism should be freed from modernity. Forty years since its publication, it is a classic within academia and prospers thanks to its own mistakes and interpretations. However, at a media level, its theses are still quite unknown and it must be revived to challenge the stereotyped and negative images of *Orientalism* that still exist.