

Tobias Hübinette

Orientalism Past and Present

An Introduction to a Postcolonial Critique

The aim of this article is to introduce the term orientalism, its meaning, its history and most important its future. I will start with a definition of the term itself with regard to the scholarly tradition in the West of studying Asian cultures, languages and societies. I will then continue with a recapitulation of the critique on orientalism and the following debate that has been going on since the beginning of the 1960s. After a few notes on the absence of such a debate in peripheral countries like Sweden, I will end the article by trying to pinpoint some aspects of orientalism for the future.

What is orientalism

Orientalism has, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*,¹ been the term used for the subject and the works of the orientalists, scholars versed in the cultures, histories, languages and societies of Asia or the Orient, since the 18th century when the tradition was born. In Germany and in Scandinavia *orientalistik* has been the equivalent term, and this linguistic difference sometimes causes confusion when discussing the matter of orientalism.

The first Asian or oriental language studied in the West was Hebrew, a language which together with Syriac and Chaldean, was known among Christian theologians already in the early Middle Ages.² In the middle of the 13th century, at the time of the Crusades, a second Asian language became necessary to master for the Westerners, Arabic, and from the 15th century the subject had been established at main European universities to facilitate the study of classical Greek and Roman authors through Arab translations.³

However, it was not until the 18th century when Western colonial domination in Asia became more pronounced and obvious, that the study of the various languages

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, London, 1971.

² Beryl Smalley, *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1983.

³ Pierre Martino, *L'Orient dans la littérature française*, Paris, 1906.

spoken on the vast continent began in earnest. Russians were studying different Ugric or Altaic languages in Central and Northern Asia, while the English and the French took on a whole variety of tongues spoken in South and East Asia including Hindu and Chinese, and the Dutch who had founded the first orientalist society in 1781, mapped the languages of South East Asia.⁴ A milestone in the history of orientalism was the Welshman William Jones' discovery in the 1780s that Sanskrit and the ancient European and West Asian languages were related.⁵

In 1873, during the heydays of Western imperialism, the first orientalist congress was held in Paris followed by sixteen others up to World War I, the last being in Vienna in 1912.⁶ The period, for many known as *La belle époque*, is today seen as the golden age of orientalism, the study of Asia and Asians in the West. After World War I, only four conferences have been held, and again in Paris in 1973, the congress changed its name from the International Congress of Orientalists to the International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa, marking a new beginning and a crucial change in international political ontology.

The critique on orientalism

The first criticism on orientalism and the orientalists emerged during the years of decolonisation in the early 1960s, and was mounted by ethnic Asians educated and living in exile in the West. Through this critique and the consequent debate, orientalism as a term was transformed from a fully accepted name of a subject in the humanities to one of the most charged and contested words in modern scholarship making it almost impossible to utilize expressions like "the Orient" and "orientals" without using quotation marks.

The assault on orientalism was launched on three different fronts.⁷ The first critique came from Anouar Abdel-Malek, an Egyptian philosopher at the University of Sorbonne in Paris, with his article "Orientalism in crisis" in 1962.⁸ Abdel-Malek starts by establishing the fact that the emergence of anti-colonial and national liberation movements in Asia after World War II, and the victories achieved by these movements in the form of political independence, has plunged the orientalist profession in a serious crisis. No longer is it natural that the Westerners would rule the planet and enjoy direct control of Asia and the Asians.

The main reason for this crisis is, according to Abdel-Malek, the intimate relationship between the orientalist scholars and the colonial powers, which made

⁴ Vasilli Vladimirovitch Barthold, *La découverte de l'Asie. Histoire de l'orientalisme en Europe et en Russie*, Paris, 1947.

⁵ Rosane Rocher, "British orientalism in the eighteenth century: The dialectics of knowledge and government", in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Orientalism and the colonial predicament*, Philadelphia, 1993, 215-49.

⁶ Including one in Sweden in 1899. See Huub de Jonge, "ICANAS XXXVI" (2002-05-20): <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/24/general/24G9.html>.

⁷ The genealogy of criticism on orientalism is told in Alexander Lyon Macfie (ed.), *Orientalism. A reader*, New York, 2000.

⁸ Anouar Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in crisis", *Diogenes* 44 (Winter 1963), 104-12.

it possible for the first-mentioned to get full access to the material pre-conditions for the subject itself, namely the accumulation and concentration of Asia's treasures in the forms of texts and manuscripts, cultural and artistic artefacts in Western libraries, museums and archives. Abdel-Malek shows that the orientalists viewed Asia and the Asians as objects who were to be defeated, unveiled and ruled over by the Westerners in the name of development and civilization, and that the once golden past of Asia was perceived to have vanished forever for a "decadence that is ineluctable". It was only through the study of Asia's past, that contemporary Asia could be understood, most notably the study of languages and religions, and the scientific works of indigenous Asian scholars were passed over in silence. The Hegelian bias in this view of human progress is indeed striking.

Two years later, the Palestinian historian A.L. Tibawi at the University of London, published the article "English-speaking orientalists", which explicitly criticized the way how orientalists had portrayed Islam and the Arab world.⁹ Tibawi's point of departure is his emphasizing of the almost eternal and deep-seated hostility between the Islamic and the Christian world, an historical fact that explains why the study of Asia and the Asians was initiated in the first place. This heritage of a religious hostility heavily influenced the classical orientalists who formed an alliance with the Christian missionaries and started to evaluate Islam and the Islamic societies in extremely derogatory and scornful terms.

Thus, Tibawi's critique on orientalism is mainly scientific, as the orientalists can be said to have shown a complete misunderstanding of the nature of Islam itself. In 1979, Tibawi published a continuation of his first critique, "A second critique of English-speaking orientalists", where he displayed how contemporary orientalists after the power of the West in Arab countries had eclipsed, driven by their desire to understand Islam as a means of combating the Moslems, caused "colossal failures" among their indoctrinated students and made it impossible for a Western scholar to adopt a fresh point of view of Islam.¹⁰

The third critique on orientalism, both the most influential and the most complete, came in 1978 with the Palestinian literary historian Edward Said at Columbia University in New York. Inspired by post-structuralist, feminist and Marxist theories, Said managed to wage a frontal attack on orientalism as a cumulative and hegemonic discourse in his pioneering work *Orientalism*.¹¹ The Orient is for Said the West's eternal other, and orientalism is a discourse that has survived and been able to reproduce itself for centuries, resulting in catastrophic consequences for the victims, the Asians themselves.

This discourse says that the West stands for rationality and modernity, while the Orient stands for religiousness and tradition, and following the logic of developmental thinking, the West possessed therewith the right to conquer, suppress and rule over Asia. Orientalism is a way of thinking about Asia and Asians as strange, servile, exotic, dark, mysterious, erotic and dangerous, and has helped the West to define itself through this contrasting and dichotomous image. It is important to remember that the relationship between the West and Asia has never been equal,

⁹ A.L. Tibawi, "English-speaking orientalists", *Islamic Quarterly* 8 (1-4 1964), 25-45.

¹⁰ A.L. Tibawi, "A second critique of English-speaking orientalists", *Islamic Quarterly* 23 (1 1979), II-V.

¹¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1978.

as the West conquered, colonized, and exploited the people of Asia. To rationalize the conquest, it defined Asia and the Asians as despotic or stagnant and in need of Christianizing, civilizing or control. Demands for democratization among Asian countries came only after the West had retreated, thereby giving credence to counter-arguments about Western opportunism in international analysis.

After Said, numerous studies have been published on the different orientalisms of the West that various countries and cultures of Asia have suffered.¹² Among many orientalists, Said's book provoked angry and sometimes even hateful responses, while others declared themselves ready for a fundamental change of attitude towards Asia and the Asians, their objects of study.¹³ Said's theory of orientalism has also provided feminists and post-colonial theorists with a general method of understanding the nature of oppression.

The Swedish response

Orientalism has been a serious subject in Sweden since the days of Sven Hedin, Bernhard Karlgren and H.S. Nyberg at the beginning of the 20th century. Orientalism has its academic institutions mainly at the universities of Uppsala, Stockholm, Lund and Gothenburg where the cultures and languages of China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, India and Persia can be studied among others. In spite of this orientalist tradition, the debate on orientalism has never really reached Sweden. Edward Said's book was not translated into Swedish until 1993, and with the misinterpreted title of *Orientalism*, not *Orientalistik* which would have been more fitting.¹⁴

The introductory chapter written by the orientalist Sigrid Kahle established

¹² See for example, Jala Al-i Ahmad, and Hamad Algar (ed.), *Occidentosis: A plague from the West*, Teheran, 1984, Arlif Dirlik, "Chinese history and the question of orientalism", *History and Theory*, 35 (4 1996), 96-118, Madeleine Dobie, *Foreign bodies: Gender, language, and culture in French orientalism*, Stanford, 2002, Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India*, Oxford, 1990, Rana Kabbani, *Europe's myths of Orient: Devise and rule*, London, 1988, Robert D. Kaplan, *The Arabists: The romance of an American elite*, New York, 1993, Richard King, *Orientalism and religion: Postcolonial theory and the "mystic East"*, London, 1999, Zhang Longxi, "The myth of the other: China in the eyes of the West", *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (1 1988), 108-31, Lisa Lowe, *Critical terrains: French and British orientalisms*, Ithaca, 1991, Kamakshi P. Murti, *India: The seductive and seduced "Other" of German orientalism*, London, 2001, B. Neilson, "Inside Shangri-La, outside globalisation: Remapping orientalist visions of Tibet", *Communal/Plural. Journal of Transnational & Cross-Cultural Studies*, 8 (1 2000), 95-112, A.K. Ramakrishnan, "Orientalism, imperialism and Middle East area studies in the United States", *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives*, 16 (3-4 1997), 245-52, Kalpana Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient: Russian orientalism and the colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia*, Bangkok, 1997, Q. S. Tong, "Inventing China: The use of orientalist views on the Chinese language", *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2 (1 2000), 6-20, and John Whittier Treat, *Great mirrors shattered: Homosexuality, orientalism, and Japan*, New York, 1999.

¹³ For examples of the first-mentioned, see Donald P. Little, "Three Arab critiques of orientalism", *Muslim World* 69 (2 1979), 110-31, and Bernhard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford, 1993, and for the second-mentioned, Stuart Scaar, "Orientalism at the service of imperialism", *Race and Class* 21 (1 1979), 67-80, and Ernest J. Wilson III, "Orientalism: A Black perspective", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10 (Winter 1981), 59-69.

¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Stockholm, 1993. Translated by Hans O. Sjöström.

the Swedish response to Said that was to be followed by others – that the Swedish orientalists in various fields had been exceptions. Kahle meant that the Swedish orientalists had not presented the depreciating view of Asia and the Asians that their Western colleagues had done. Kahle spoke for the Arabists and the Iranists, especially her own father H.S. Nyberg,¹⁵ while Joakim Enwall and Mirja Juntunen defended the Central Asianists and the Indologists in their review of Said's book one year later.¹⁶ The same conclusion was reiterated for the Japanologists by Bert Edström in 1996,¹⁷ and for the Sinologists by Kenneth Nyberg in 2001.¹⁸

One easy way of relating to this Swedish response is to agree with today's Swedish orientalists, that their predecessors were free from the worst expressions of orientalism. Another hopefully more constructive way, is to understand this unwillingness to admit that Sweden was a fully integrated part of imperialist Europe with its own colonizers and slave traders,¹⁹ as an expression of Sweden's self image as the great exception from everything which can be stamped as evil and bad. Instead, Sweden is perceived by the Swedes as the world's most democratic country, the world's most anti-racist country, and a paradise for human rights, equality and social justice.

I would at this point like to recommend an excellent and thought provoking study about the fact that Sweden has developed to the most segregated and discriminating country in the West in the treatment of non-White immigrants including Asians. I am here speaking of Alan Pred's study *Even in Sweden. Racisms, racialized spaces, and the popular geographical imagination*.²⁰ Pred, a professor in cultural geography at the University of California, shows in a persuasive way how their self-image has stopped the Swedes from being self-critical and has resulted in a self-righteousness which today is going through a painful process as Sweden has suddenly become the most racist country in the West in terms of racial discrimination and with the most dynamic Neo-Nazi movement in the world.

¹⁵ Sigrid Kahle, "Orientalism i Sverige" [Orientalism in Sweden], in Said (1993), 7-58.

¹⁶ Joakim Enwall and Mirja Juntunen, "Några funderingar kring Edward Sids Orientalism" [Some thoughts on Edward Said's Orientalism], *Orientaliska Studier* 82 1994, 3-8, and Mirja Juntunen, "Indologi och Indienbilden på 1800-talet" [Indology and the image of India during the 19th century], *Orientaliska Studier* 102 2000, 20-34.

¹⁷ Bert Edström, "Japan i svenska geografiläroböcker 1842-1993" [Japan in Swedish geography books 1842-1993], in Bert Edström (ed.), *Öst i Väst* [The East in the West], Stockholm, 1996.

¹⁸ Kenneth Nyberg, *Bilder av Mittens rike. Kontinuitet och förändring i svenska resenärers Kinaskildringar 1749-1912* [Images of the Middle Kingdom. Continuity and change in China descriptions by Swedish travellers 1749-1912], Göteborg, 2001.

¹⁹ K-G Olin, *S:t Barthélemy – den svenska slavön* [S:t Barthélemy – the Swedish slave island], Stockholm, 2002.

²⁰ Alan Pred, *Even in Sweden. Racisms, racialized spaces, and the popular geographical imagination*, Berkeley, 2000.

The future of orientalism

With all this said, what then is the future of orientalism? My own theory is that orientalism in its classical meaning has survived as something which can be called post-orientalism in the geopolitical sphere of security politics, and as so called re-orientalism in its indigenized form of nationalism and fundamentalism in Asia. However, in the scholarly field, orientalism has vanished almost completely in most Western academic institutions, perhaps with the exception of peripheral countries like Sweden, while on the other hand it has managed to survive as popular orientalism, some kind of romanticism in Western popular culture.

The most manifest example of *post-orientalism* whereby the ugly legacy of classical orientalism is showing its power to otherize and dichotomize, is the political theory of Samuel P. Huntington, the so called “clash of civilizations”.²¹ Huntington presupposes that the West, just recently the master of the planet, has begin to retreat as a dominating global power, and that its culture is slowly decaying. The main threat to the West, according to Huntington, comes from the East in the form of a nightmare alliance between the Islamic and Confucian civilizations, and thus the Westerners have to prepare a defence by rearming instead of disarming, by maintaining military bases both in West and East Asia, and by integrating Eastern Europe and Latin America to balance the demographic disadvantage towards the Arabs and the East Asians.

Orientalism has also survived as *re-orientalism* in the forms of fundamentalism and nationalism in the newly independent former colonies of Asia. It is possible to view fundamentalism, especially its Islamic version, as a form of indigenized orientalism whereby the orientalized re-orientalize himself in a manner which can be summed up as: “Yes, we orientals are really religious minded, despotic and cruel by nature.”²² Nationalism as re-orientalism basically works the same way, albeit in a more positive meaning: “Yes, we orientals are really diligent and hardworking.” This type of re-orientalized nationalism seems to be most common in South, East and South East Asia.²³

Since the end of the 1970s, most academic institutions in the West have more or less accepted the critique on classical orientalism and tried to distance themselves from their predecessors. Instead, it is in the form of *popular orientalism* that the discourse has managed to survive in the West as a romantic and colonial nostalgia reproduced in arts, movies and literature.²⁴ This kind of popular orientalism is for example extremely well-represented in commercials here in Sweden.

So finally it is time to ask ourselves - is there a way out of orientalism, and

²¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, London, 1997. It is interesting to notice that this dualistic concept of a race war between the West and the East has its equivalent or maybe even its origin in classical anti-Semitism whereby the eternal struggle between the Aryans and the Jews makes all other non-Aryans or non-Jews un-interesting or even superfluous.

²² Lawrence Davidson, *Islamic fundamentalism*, Westport, 1998.

²³ See for example, Hyung Il Pai and Timothy R. Tangherlini, *Nationalism and the construction of Korean identity*, Berkeley, 1998.

²⁴ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "yellow peril". Race, sex and discursive strategies in Hollywood fiction*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1993.

can we imagine a world beyond orientalism? Well, my personal guess is that orientalism will always exist in one or another form as long as the West has hegemonic power. Orientalism is strongly intertwined with the Western self-image to such an extent that if orientalism goes, then Western world power or even the West itself must also go.²⁵ And isn't that what we are seeing today, a slow but unstoppable power shift from the West towards East Asia with China and Japan in the forefront, maybe also South Asia with India as a leading nation, while the academic world itself is undergoing of a rapid Asianization, giving way to a more or less given higher competence of diaspora Asians in the subjects involved?

²⁵ As Norman Davies has shown in his highly popular, *Europe. A history*, Oxford, 1996, the West was actually created as an entity in opposition to the Moslem East in the 8th and 9th centuries.