

# EDWARD SAID 'S ORIENTALISM IN FRANCE: MISREADING OR MISUNDERSTANDING

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## Introduction

To remind and to analyse the way Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been rejected by a very large part of the French scholars and still is, seems nowadays quite important, because this rejection appears to me as a powerful expression of the way coloniality<sup>2</sup> had in France, and stills maintains, a heavy influence over political and epistemological choices<sup>3</sup>. Colonialism is generally considered as a phenomenon of the past which ended in the sixties, with what is called decolonization, as French President Emmanuel Macron argued, when he visited Algiers in December 2017. For the French historian Benjamin Stora who accompanied and advised the President during this

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  - 2 Of course, I use this concept according to the way it has been introduced by Anibal Quijano (2005), and then became quite common in Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies.
  - 3 A similar analysis can be made, although on a larger scale, as Lewis Gordon did, about what Frantz Fanon wrote on violence. See also Sonia Dayan-herzbrun (2011).

visit, the most important issue now is to reconcile both memories, the Algerian one and the French one. A few months before, I had a public debate on *Orientalism*, with Henry Laurens, professor in College de France and a prominent specialist of the history of Palestine. *Orientalism*, argued Henry Laurens, had quite an interest at a period where colonies still existed. But, he said, that is no more the case. What all those affluent people do tell us is simply: “Move along, there’s nothing to see here”. Actually there is much to be seen, but most of it has been concealed. The light brought by *Orientalism* is still very difficult to face.

When the book was first published, in 1980 the newspaper *Le Monde* published a review written by the well-known journalist Jean-Pierre Peroncel-Hugoz, who had the reputation of being a “specialist of the Arab world”, but never failed in proclaiming his hatred against Islam. The title of the review was: “An auto-da-fe for the orientalists”. And so was how all the “orientalists” in France perceived the book: as if Said, like some Inquisitor, meant to burn all their works. There was such an outcry against the book, that twenty five years passed between the first and the second edition, which was during that time impossible to find in bookshops. Meanwhile Edward Said had died, and his international notoriety had reached a point where it was impossible to behave as if this book has not existed. But nevertheless the mainstream scholars went on and still go on attacking it, or, at least, ignoring it. For example, in October 2011, when writers and historians gathered in Blois, for the well-known “Rencontres de l’Histoire” (Meeting about History) the theme of which this year was precisely Orient, not a word was uttered about Edward Said. When one remembers that so many French writers and scholars are mentioned in *Orientalism*, and above all, that the book has been using some key concepts of Michel Foucault, this silence has to be explained. Indeed, a few years after *Orientalism*, Said (2002) would move away from the Foucauldian theory, as he engaged in thinking about the possibility to go beyond the mere critical moment, and to elaborate counter-discourses, as elements for a culture of resistance.

He switched then to other analytical frameworks worked out by authors from the “East” or from the “South”, like Ibn Khaldun or Frantz Fanon, but reads these theorists also in the light of heterodox Marxists as Georg Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci. French universities were not opened to Edward Said’s theses either. Pierre Bourdieu was the only one to invite him for lectures in the College de France, while he was celebrated in many countries of the world, and even of Europe. University Paris 7 was the only one in France to have the courage, in 2003, a few months before his death, to award him a Doctorate *honoris causa*. The political commitment of Edward Said who has been a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), is not a sufficient justification, despite the French Middle-East policy. One has to connect this

total lack of consideration with the nearly total absence in France, once upon a time an important colonial power, of post-colonial studies.

## Edward Said and the French intellectual world

As mentioned herein above, Said (1994), who read and spoke French fluently, had a wide knowledge of the French thinkers and writers. He borrowed his concept of “Intellectual” from Gramsci, of course, but mainly from Julien Benda and from Sartre. He admired in Sartre the man who opposed his own country on the questions of Algeria and of Vietnam, but has been deeply disappointed by the incapacity of Sartre as well as of Foucault to understand the Palestinian question. Their encounter in Paris, in March 1979, two years after he entered the Palestinian National Council and the year after the publication of *Orientalism* in the States, had been a disaster. He had been invited by *Les Temps Modernes* to attend a seminar on peace in the Middle East in Paris and was so deeply moved that he first thought the cable through which he received the invitation was a joke of some sort. He felt just as it has been an invitation from Cosima and Richard Wagner to come to Bayreuth, or from T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf to spend an afternoon at the offices of the *Dial*. He described this meeting and his disappointment in a very humorous way, in a paper published, in April 2000, in the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram*:

When I arrived, I found a short, mysterious letter from Sartre and Beauvoir waiting for me at the hotel I had booked in the Latin Quarter. “For security reasons”, the message ran, “the meetings will be held at the home of Michel Foucault”. I was duly provided with address, and at ten the next morning I arrived at Foucault’s apartment to find a number of people —but not Sartre— already milling around. No one was ever to explain the mysterious “security reasons” that had forced a change in venue, though as a result a conspiratorial air hung over our proceedings. Beauvoir was already there in her famous turban, lecturing anyone who would listen about her forthcoming trip to Teheran with Kate Millett, where they were planning to demonstrate against the chador; the whole idea struck me as patronising and silly, and although I was eager to hear what Beauvoir had to say, I also realised that she was quite vain and quite beyond arguing with at that moment. Besides, she left an hour or so later (just before Sartre’s arrival) and was never seen again.

At this moment, Sartre was under the influence of Pierre Victor (Benny Levy), then his secretary—who later on settled in Jerusalem—, and so unwilling to criticize the Israeli policy nor receptive to the Palestinian issue<sup>4</sup>.

Sartre's and Foucault's position about the Palestinian question was shared by a large majority of French intellectuals, from the extreme left to the right wing. However there were some notable exceptions, as the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet or Gilles Deleuze. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze even decided to put an end to his friendship with Michel Foucault mainly because of their disagreement on that issue<sup>5</sup>. Yet, for Edward Said, it is the question of Palestine which was definitely at the background of *Orientalism*. He began to work on the book just after the war of 1967, and has quite often described how this war followed by the occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan, and the annexation of East Jerusalem, put an end to what can be called the pre-political part of his life.<sup>6</sup>

He entered the Palestinian National Council, i.e. the legislative body of the PLO, precisely the year previous to the publication of *Orientalism*. Everybody knows the formula attributed to the writer Israel Zangwill: "A land without a people for a people without a land" which has been considered as the motto of the Zionist ideology. When Said shows that one of the main aspects of what he calls orientalism is the blindness towards the inhabitants living in the lands the travellers went through, in search not of other human beings but of themselves, or of some mystical experience, he thought of the invisibility of human beings as individuals, but also, and perhaps mainly, of the invisibility of human beings as forming a political community. The East was considered at that time, and perhaps in some way still now, as some sort of "blank space", inviting to the "glories of exploration", as expressed by Marlow (Joseph Conrad's hero) in the novel *Heart of Darkness*.

Until the signature of the Oslo agreements (1993), the Israeli government, as well as most Israelis, didn't recognize the existence of Palestinians, and even less of a Palestinian people (I mean a political people). They were only designated as Arabs, with all the stereotypes accompanying this denomination, as confirmed by many quotations of Zionist leaders from the beginning of the Zionist movement. For example,

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4 The strong relationship between Claude Lanzmann, (currently the editor of *Les Temps Modernes* and the author of the film *Shoah*) and Simone de Beauvoir is also an important element to understand what could seem a paradox.

5 They also opposed on the question of political violence.

6 "I was not the same person after 1967 The shock that war drove me back to where it had all started, the struggle over Palestine". E. Said (2000, p293).

Chaim Weizmann, later on the first President of the state of Israel, wrote, in 1918, to Lord Balfour, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs with whom he was negotiating within the context of the establishment of a Jewish homeland:

The Arabs, who are superficially clever and quick witted, worship one thing, and one thing only- power and success [...] The British authorities [...] knowing as they do the treacherous nature of the Arabs [...] have to watch carefully and constantly [...] The fairer the English regime tries to be, the more arrogant the Arab becomes [...] The present state of affairs would necessarily tend toward the creation of an Arab Palestine, if there were an Arab people in Palestine. (Said, 2003, p. 306)<sup>7</sup>

This image which has an avatar of the old anti-Semite mythology, is reasserted, the Arab or the Muslim replacing the Jew in the now socially acceptable version of the prejudice.

In his resistance to foreign colonialism the Palestinian was either a stupid savage, or a negligible quantity, morally and even existentially [...] Orientalism governs Israeli policy towards the Arabs throughout... there are good Arabs (the ones who do as they are told) and bad Arabs (who do not, and are therefore terrorists) (Said, 2003, p. 306).

We cannot prevent here comparing this situation with the situation of Algerians before the independence of Algeria. And that is one of the reasons of the deep affiliation between Fanon and Said. Of course there is no question of reading Orientalism just as an archaeology of the discursive and ideological apparatus of the Israeli policy, extended to the whole Middle-East policy of the empires who have been competing for the domination of the East. But the way imperialism and colonialism have been denied in France and still are (Recently, for example, the French government, without any serious opposition, decided to organize state funerals for General Marcel Bigeard who has been the promoter of the systematic use of torture in Algeria, during the war of independence, and never expressed any regret about that) is obviously an important factor to explain why Said, as well as Fanon, had, until now occupied such a tiny place in the French universities.

<sup>7</sup> Many recent comments of the Arab revolutions are along the same lines when arguing, for example, that Islam and democracy, or Islam and feminism, are incompatible, or speaking of “double language” when they face discourses and practices combining both. “Orientalism” is still alive, but as in the tale of Andersen, wears new clothes.

Another very perturbing aspects of Said's analyses is the fact that they don't appertain to "activist" literature and cannot be classified in this well-known and minorised category, in which Fanon is still systematically mainly confined. The way Said conceives the role of the intellectual, according to his own conception, has to play in what he called later "democratic criticism", with his appeal "to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered" (Said, 1994, pp. 43-44) clarifies his claim for coextensivity of aesthetics and politics. Not only, according to the French tradition, has the intellectual to express his political point of view, against the grain and against the powers, as Sartre did, but, because of the wordliness of texts and literary works, he has, as Said once wrote in an interview, "to enforce the location of cultural practices back in the mundane, the quotidian, and the secular" (2002, p. 336).

This notion of wordliness is quite different from the notion of commitment, more familiar to the French way of thinking which maintains the possibility of a separation between art or knowledge and politics. In suggesting how the general liberal consensus that "true" knowledge is fundamentally non political —and conversely that overtly political knowledge is not "true" knowledge— obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is "produced" (Said, 2003, p. 10). Said went beyond the way even Foucault, and orthodox Marxists philosophers or sociologists, have followed. He did not confine his critical study to rare, unknown or not well known texts of the past, as Foucault did in his most important books. He confronted a wide part of the history of the West, going from one field to the other, without saving major figures as Victor Hugo, Marx, or Ernest Renan from the guilt or mistake of colonial prejudices, and finally travelling from one discipline to another, transcending disciplinary boundaries.

That mixture of erudition and of iconoclasm was, at least, extremely disturbing in France, where the taboos of colonization weighted even more than they do to day. Said made explicit what was silent, hidden, implicit, allusive, in the texts he read. It sounded as uncovering the nakedness of the fathers. What the authors of those texts were writing was not a mere product of their social situation, as the basic Marxist theory of ideology would have said. They were involved as historical subjects and as individuals. The relation between the text, the author as a subject, and the complex mode of domination, here colonization of the East (for Said at that period mostly the Arab world) was a dialectic one, in the sense Adorno gave to that notion, as Said will later discover.

## French academics and *Orientalism*

Patronage and strict disciplinary division are French inventions (Clark, 1973). And yet Said did not stop attacking the principle of authority that legitimates patronage, something that would upset most French academics as after having been submitted to authority they could enjoy exercising it. But above all, Said is definitely unclassifiable, since he addresses a variety of texts which have very different status. This point is still not understood. Foucault was certainly himself somewhat atypical: his work has been claimed —as well as rejected— by philosophers, historians or sociologists. But the corpus on which his analysis relies are quite well defined and limited, in spite of their evolution, through the years. That is not the case for the Said. Comparative literature which was supposed to be the academic field of Edward Said is definitely approached in a different way in France —where it is a discipline— and in the States. The same is true for Orientalism which is still considered of the name of an academic discipline. Said's book was then considered —and still is— as focusing on that discipline. And that point can be considered as the first major misunderstanding, as if most of people have been ready to understand only what was already familiar to them.

In fact, Said, quite differently, explains, as we know, that Orient is a product of this very special style of domination, I mean orientalism, at different levels, political, sociological, military, ideological, scientific, or imaginary, all of them elements of one discursive formation which is itself a part of a net of interests in which it is trapped. As a consequence of this point of view, the positivist separation between science and non science, or between science and ideology, inherited from the Comtian —i.e. Auguste Comte—, to which the French academy is so deeply attached, including Marxists like Louis Althusser, or somebody like Pierre Bourdieu, how critical they could have been of the society in which they were living, happens to be undermined. Conservative or leftists, the positivist French thinkers always claimed speaking from the position of science and so-called objectivity. That is a way to understand the huge difficulty in France to genuine criticism and even more to metacriticism, i.e. reflexivity. We, as French scholars, have been taught that some separation has to exist or to be built between the researcher and his object. Even Michel Foucault refused to question his own location and his position of authority<sup>8</sup>, as he developed how knowledge was linked to power.

8 Foucault even happened to be considered as if he was located in the center of the «panopticon» (See François Roustang « La visibilité est un piège » *Les Temps modernes*, mars 1976, XXXIII, no 356, 1567-1579.

Very differently again, and referring to Gramsci, Said displays his personal implication as a so-called “oriental” —in the gaze of the others but also in his own mode of subjectivization— in the process of writing *Orientalism*, as well as *The question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam*, the two other parts of the triptych. In the Preface written in 2003 for *Orientalism*, he will subsume this approach “where every domain is linked to every other one” (Said, 2003, p. XVII) under the category of “humanistic critique”, which he developed in his last works, where he explained that the task of humanism is to break the chains that imprison the mind. Again, I want to stress the fact that this approach is in no way a determinist one, but a dialectical one: imperialism by itself didn’t produce “orientalism”, nor “orientalism” was a result of the discourses generated. That was too puzzling for the French public, too different from the general habits of thinking.

So the answer to the book was silence, with the exception of the corporation of professional “orientalists” who just considered in Said’s book an attack against their field. Henceforth Said will be ostracized. Even leftist authors about whom Said spoke with esteem and respect, as they never hesitated to use different social sciences in their works and were not strictly specialized, and among the first of them Jacques Berque and Maxime Rodinson, will bear a long lasting resentment against him. Anyhow and quite oddly, the first reaction of Rodinson —perhaps the first French and Jewish intellectual to have publicly, in an article in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1967, qualified Israel as a “colonial fact”— has been a positive one. Edward Said had, in *Orientalism*, paid homage to his study, *Islam and capitalism*, in which Rodinson had criticized the “total inaccuracy” (Said, 2003, p. 376) and the essentialism of Max Weber when Islam was in question, and had shown that there was no incompatibility between Islam and capitalism. In return, among some small critical remarks Rodinson agreed that Said’s “a professor whose value was recognized” (Rodinson, 1989, p. 13), analysis was “clever, sagacious, and often relevant”, although it could sometimes pertain to Jdanovism, this theory of the Stalinian period operating a distinction between bourgeois science —and therefore false—, and proletarian science and which still, in the eighties, represented a threat. This first way of reading Said was certainly full of praise, but went back to positivism, as Rodinson points what he calls the “non specialist” with, as a Palestinian of the States, an “over-sensitiveness” to the reactions of the established EuropeoAmericans. Some ten years later, maybe irritated by the international success of Said and no more able to patronize, Rodinson tried to put him back to his place of native.

In the United States also Said’s book has been severely criticized by some “orientalists” who had been quoted in a very negative way in the last chapter of *Orientalism*. All of them belonged to the neo-conservative trend, as Bernard Lewis who once has



been the adviser of Benjamin Netanyahu. The French landscape was quite different. The prominent orientalist, as Jacques Berque and Maxime Rodinson, supported the Palestinian cause. But when they denounced the hurts and harms of colonization, they did it as rightful holders of the knowledge about East. And all on a sudden, they became themselves object of knowledge, for a thinker coming from the East.

## Others and the Other

In his foreword to the French edition of *Orientalism* Tzvetan Todorov who understands so well Said's thought, writes the word "other" only with a small "o", and uses rather the plural "others" Said writes the word "other" only with a small "o", and uses rather the plural "others".<sup>9</sup> The "Other" is nothing but an essentialist construction: the Other can be the Oriental, the Western, the Arab, the Jew, the Muslim, or the Woman. Now Jacques Berque declares in an article precisely about the question of orientalism:

How is it possible to reject the gaze of the Other, when we know that without the Other we would not exist... We exist only by the Other and through the Other. The Other person, the Other culture, as you want" (Berque, 1994, p. 17).

So he claims that orientalism has only be a part of the Western knowledge, and that rejecting it, as he argues Edward Said does, is just the manifestation of some sort of collective laziness, and pertains to the rejection of what is the more valuable in the West, the spirit. We are back to the old Hegelian conception of the Orient.

Here one must have in mind the conviction, still present and active in the French academic world, that a "colonized" —the Other, as they say, towards one can be benevolent or tolerant— can't be the producer of knowledge and meaning, and that he is not allowed to bring colonization to visibility. He, or she, first of all an object, can be only be an informant, or if he/she is really gifted, can implement the French —or European— theory to a specific case. Rodinson, in spite of his critic of a certain

9 «L'histoire du discours sur l'autre est accablante...Ce qu'on lui a refusé avant tout, c'est d'être différent : ni inférieur ni supérieur, mais autre, justement...notre destin est inséparable de celui des autres, et donc aussi du regard que nous portons sur eux et de la place que nous leur réservons » (T. Todorov, in E. Said, *L'Orientalisme*, (Paris, :Editions du Seuil, 1980) 8-9.

orientalism (Rodinson, 1989, p. 132), and after having denounced the essentialism of race, people, ideology, State, and even social class, used the same essentialism against Said. In 1994, he accused him of having, with *Orientalism*, fabricated, a scarecrow, a monster. Said was sent back to the nativeness he was supposed to have tried to escape in a western university and locked in an unavoidable identity. As a Christian Arab, wrote then Rodinson, Said was an “Arab from the East”, without any interest for the Arabs of the West —i. e. Maghreb, North Africa—, and even less for the non Arab Muslim people.

He suggests their problems are the same as the problems of the Arab people, and so he shows a lack of knowledge of the Other which is the same as the lack he reproached to the orientalists’ (Rodinson, 1994).

Here appears another taboo: the “natives” are not able and not allowed to cross imperial boundaries. They have to remain in the compartment where they have been enclosed by the “Western” discourses and the Western practices. With his procedure of crossing the barriers of the imperial East-West division, as did and still do the *Subaltern Studies*, Edward Said has openly transgressed the rules of French academy, as Frantz Fanon did before him. As a retaliatory measure, Rodinson strongly opposed to the French translation of *Culture and Imperialism* by the publisher Editions du Seuil, which had published the translation of *Orientalism*. This new book, of course, contradicted his interpretation, and he would not bear it.

## Back to disciplines

The answer was to deny the existence of orientalism as conceived by Said<sup>10</sup>. Jacques Berque as well as Rodinson claimed that orientalism didn’t exist. “There are only scientific disciplines, defined by their object and their specific problematic, such as sociology, demography, economy, linguistic, anthropology or ethnology “ (Rodinson, 1989, pág.130). They both stressed the superiority of the European gaze over the other “great cultural areas”, particularly in human sciences. How atrocious the brutalities of the “material manifestations —i. e. military, political, economical and

10 A few years later, *Orientalism* was accused to have widely contributed to the symbolical killing of this academic field, (Daniel Rivet « Culture et impérialisme en débat », *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 4/2001 (no48-4), p. 209-215.) which, nevertheless, seems still quite alive, as shown by the commentaries about the Arab revolutions.

technical— of the European hegemony” (Rodinson, 1994), they have to be considered apart from scholarly writings which, according to Rodinson, testify how tremendously ahead, and finally generous, Europe has been. For Jacques Berque, similarly, “The orientalist had taught to the Arab scholars the new methods of studying texts” (Berque, 1994) in a rigorous way. “All that came from Occident and arrived to Arab scholars” (Ibid). According to these conceptions, as all —good— colonized and racialized groups, Arabs could be only receptors and followers of Western modernity.

Neither Rodinson nor Jacques Berque had any notion of the dialectical way of thinking of Said who didn’t disagree with the scientific aspect of some researches made by prominent orientalist like Silvestre de Sacy or Edward Lane, and even admired them, as he deeply admired writers like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens or Joseph Conrad, even if colonialism or imperialism were in some unconscious background of their work. But they all contributed to the organization of an “academic orientalism”, where the knowledge on the East has been “domesticated” for the West, and filtered through specific codes, first of all the disciplinary codes, deeply related to modes of domination.

## What now?

We have often heard that in France, colony has been the hidden reverse of Republic, which is the emblem and the pride of the country. It seems to be still the case. The feeble attempts for example, to remove from the public space —statues, names of streets— some historical characters too obviously related to slave trade or colonization, created a scandal. The national narrative has to be preserved, even if it has not much to do with history. But recent memory has also to be silenced. In 2010, national funerals have been organized for General Bigeard, a “hero” of the main French colonial wars —Indochina, Algeria—, a man who declared that torture was a “necessary chore”, and left his name to a “technique” of torture and elimination: *Crevettes Bigeard*. “Shrimps Bigeard”, as the prisoners (Algerians) were roped in the position of cooked shrimps, their feet cast in concrete, and then thrown in the sea from the top of a plane.

Discursive devices that have been active during the period of the French direct colonization of North Africa are still very vivid: on one hand the assertion of the civilising mission of France, and on the other —orientalist— stigmatisation of Muslims and of Islam. Considering this political background —not to mention many other factors as the support given to the Israeli government regardless to its politics, or the situation in the French Antillas and in French Guiana—, we can understand why there is so

little room not only for a decolonial thought, but even for postcolonial analysis. If we add to that the fact that positivism, with its introduction of “disciplinary decadence” (Gordon, 2007) has been the philosophical axis of that Republic, we can understand why a large part of the French public has been so unable to accept *Orientalism*, and even to discuss the book fairly. Disciplinary divisions seem to be more and more constraining, letting the medias deliver a global interpretation of politics and society, superficial, a-critical, and largely consistent with the discourse of power.

Anyhow, with the arrival of new generations, and mostly with some young or still young activist and scholars coming directly or through their parents or grandparents from formerly colonized regions, are beginning to change, certainly not from the mainstream of the academy, but from the margins. Some tiny signs are there to let us hope that in France we could begin decentring knowledge, and that would be something equivalent to a new Copernican revolution: Seminars and conferences are held, books are published, a few PHD are defended, a chair on Global Souths has been created in Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris, all places where *Orientalism* is celebrated as the book which opened the door to the radical criticism of coloniality, as it highlighted how power, knowledge and culture are interwoven. Thus, beyond criticism, decolonization of knowledge, as we learnt from Frantz Fanon and after that, from Edward Said, is a fundamental political gesture towards human emancipation. This move has to be done.

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