

Orientalism as Praxis

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INTRODUCTION

As an empirical phenomenon, difference is subject to a multiplicity of interpretations. In this paper I argue that the phenomenon of difference cannot be studied, as modern positivism and scientific approach assert, in a value neutral way. Difference, in the case of human agents, requires a special humanistic attitude. Otherwise, the cognitive operation involved would imply a “power differential” which in turn would result in relation of domination and the division into independent and autonomous (the observer) and dependent and subordinate (the observed).

Orientalism, I propose, is an academic and institutional, therefore, socially structured Praxis. This praxis is rooted in two epistemological foundations: the first foundation is the ontological paradigm of positivism of science itself; and, the second, the “socialized self” of the Orientalist—his consciousness—which is one necessarily framed by the “oppositional” attitude.

An oppositional attitude is a state of mind/consciousness similar to the state of the mind of stranger as proposed by Alfred Schutz. The stranger closes his consciousness and his self to the environment of his study and acts like an alien. This very posture is one of attributing to the empirical phenomenon an essence other than the self and therefore making the interpretation a positivistic one.

Furthermore, social scientists are embedded within political structures and the ontological paradigms caused by them. Political divisions into nations and states and the identities associated with them create such paradigms. Social sciences must make a conscious effort to avoid the invisible but constructive grid of the ontological paradigm rooted in the political divisions and differentiation of human being into ethnic and cultural identities.

Orientalism may be a personal attitude or prejudice but as a Praxis it is closely related to the disciplinary structures and discourses of modern social sciences. This point is sociologically observable when one compares Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism with what emerged in Iran in the 1960s as Westoxification or Weststruckness or Euromania. Unlike Orientalism which is a praxis, the notion of Westoxification is not a disciplined and disciplinary study of the West but the diagnosis of a presumed intellectual disease within the Orient itself: the disease of slavish subordination to the Occidental culture and being fascinated with things Western and therefore disenchanting with one’s own Oriental culture and heritage. Orientalism as praxis is a social scientific phenomenon while Euromania is a pathology of the national cultural and political elites.

THE PRAXIS OF ORIENTALISM

“The argument, when reduced to its simplest form, was clear, it was precise, it was easy to grasp. There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means

having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power.”¹

“For Egypt was not just another colony: it was the vindication of Western imperialism; it was, until its annexation by England, an almost academic example of Oriental backwardness; it was to become the triumph of English knowledge and power”²

The main intellectual issue raised by Orientalism, according to Edward Said is:

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say of men into “us” (Westerners) and “they” (Orientals)?³

I do not pretend to have a final answer to this question and will provide Said’s own response about twenty-five years later at the closing of this paper; but I will suggest that our view of “difference” has a close connection to our “attitude” towards the entity we perceive as different.

Webster’s dictionary defines attitude as “the mental position with regard to a fact or state.” Our attitude, as George Herbert Mead argued, is at once an emotional posture and an intellectual state of mind or consciousness. I will suggest that in social sciences, especially those that somehow deal with “power differentials,” the attitude is an oppositional one and therefore it is one that inevitably results in inhumane divisions and hostilities caused by conception of difference in terms of “us” *against* “them” or “them” against “us.” I will further argue that as long as we are dealing with scientific observation and analytical methods and in so far as one is required to avoid the so-called humanistic approaches and confine oneself to the disciplinary rigor and discourse of one’s specialized field in a positivistic fashion, the answer to Edward Said’s question would be negative.

Just consider the attitude of a prominent American political scientist, Samuel Huntington who, in 1993, suggested:

The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.⁴

Huntington’s attitude, in turn, seems to have been shaped and stimulated by Bernard Lewis, a classical example of an Orientalist who has studied the Orient and especially Islam from an oppositional viewpoint. Three years earlier, Lewis had come up with the notion of a clash of civilizations:

It should by now be clear that we are facing a model and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide importance of both.”^{5, 6}

The positive response to Said’s question, on the other hand, would depend on the kind of attitude that would somehow consider coexistence of civilizations, and of nation states, and of nations and nationalities not only as a possibility but an historical fact as prevalent as their conflictive relationships.

George Herbert Mead’s notion of the “attitude” of the self towards the Other is sociologically important because such attitude in turn would elicit the Other’s attitude.⁷ It is argued here that only, and only, an attitude of the self to-

1.Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 36.

2.*Ibid.*, pp. 45.

3.*Ibid.*

4.Huntington S. “The Clash of Civilization,” *Foreign Affairs*. Summer, 1993. pp. 72-3.

5.Lewis B. “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

6.Qureshi E and Michael A. Sells, *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

wards others devoid of “power differential” would acknowledge the difference humanely and would not promote violence. Furthermore, scientific observation, and more importantly, observations framed by the academic disciplines and discourses imply a “power differential” that is, as Michel Foucault demonstrated, rooted in the rationality (or rationalization) of positivist science itself.

The “attitude” of the scholar/scientist is a deconstructive and reconstructive attitude. It is rooted in the desire to understand, and thus control and manipulate and consciously or unconsciously dominate, the object of understanding. Here, by the process of understanding I mean a relation of power, an attitude of the self towards other human beings, whereby as Alfred Schutz argued, the self is deliberately detached and turned into a stranger who observes and records and analyzes the difference *in terms of the validity of self in opposition to other selves*.¹

There does not exist a neutral observer- stranger. The social scientist is a political being and as a political being is a citizen endowed with lenses and grids ranging from linguistic frames of reference to culturally determined points of view to “rational” self-interest. As such and as demonstrated by Jürgen Habermas, he/she is within “dialectically connected” relations of “descriptive,” “postulatory” and “critical”—that is to say, within the grids of difference and domination: of gender or of economic and class or of ethnicity or of nationality/citizenship.

Anthony Giddens writes:

Every description makes reference to standards of evaluation, and involves attitudes which are in need of justification and thus are open to criticism. When it goes beyond the sort of procedures applied in scientific method, criticism becomes the critique of ideology, and seeks to evaluate historically created conditions in the context of historically generated values. It is in this latter, dialectical fashion, that we can discern that science itself helped to create an outlook (positivism) which robs those who practice it of the capability of examining their own activity as ideological, i.e., in relation to the ‘technical-cognitive interests’ which shape it.²

The relation of domination is always a variety of what Hegel (1770-1831), in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, first described as the Master and Slave relation (also translated as lordship and bondage). The essence of this relation is *oppositional*. It is an attitude or a state of mind that finds awareness only in terms of juxtaposition, of them against me, and of *negation*.

In the consciousness of the Master the Slave is perpetually present *in order to enable him to understand himself as the Master and articulate this understanding as the self-knowledge and the self-awareness*: “Since to begin with they are unequal and opposed, and their reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved, they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord (or Master), the other is bondsman (or the Slave).”³

In the consciousness of the Master then the Being of the Slave is completely assimilated/annihilated as a thing that is owned or else as a living creature—an animal—who is not of the same essence as that of the Master. The ontological condition of the Relation determines the essence and the substance of it: as long as one is the dominant and the other is the dominated, the negation is a *sine qua non*. This negation, again as Hegel showed, is always ideational.⁴

It is not accidental that Hegel finds this relation of domination as an ontological condition that even in synthesis or co-mingling of consciousnesses retains its essence; that is to say the essential objectification of the human subject under the knife of analysis, dissection, description, categorization, and reconstruction into some item in the discourse of a discipline. He was first and foremost aware of the “nation state” and the fact that the individual is always a member of a nationally organized, territorially bounded state. The political reality of nation-states—each with dominant modes of consciousness and a historicized self or the spirit of the nation—deprives the Intellect from floating freely upon “facts.”

Sociologically and politically, even the free floating intellectual is embedded within a particular state and thus vis-à-vis aliens or strangers or “they,” he/she is either in the position of domination—if the state is dominant—or subordination—if the state is subordinated. Max Weber who seems to have been deeply influenced by Hegel, then argued that the “fate of our time” is its domination by scientific and rational mode of thought (in his lecture “Science as Vo-

7.Mead G.H. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964, pp.152-64.

1.Schutz A. *Collected Paper*. Volume 2, The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1964. pp. 91-105.

2.Giddens A. *Positivism and Sociology*. London: Heinemann, 1974. pp. 21.

3.Hegel G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 115.

4.Kojeve A. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, James H. Nichols, Jr. translated, New York: Basic Books, 1969, pp. 1-30.

cation”) and one can surmise that what Said calls Orientalism is just the outcome of the way the dominant rationality of the Occident projects other cultures and civilization as the non-rational or irrational.

Domination and subordination are “modes of consciousness” and are necessarily tied to the legal-political structures of the international system whereby human agents have territorially organized themselves into nations and states and empires—if not tribes and clans and various forms of ethnic identities.

Marx’s concept of ideology and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony both reflect this unavoidable predicament: the “hostile and inhumane” way of the division of human reality into different cultures, histories, traditions, societies and races rationalized by some modality of consciousness.

This mode of consciousness, as Michel Foucault in his works, especially *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and Edward Said in *Orientalism*, demonstrate, is rooted in the larger social and political paradigms. In *Archaeology*, Foucault takes discourse and statements associated with them as historical artifacts subject to historically and culturally, therefore politically, determined rules that determine what statements are produced and in what way such production is done.¹

Academic artifacts, gathered and polished and incrementally replicated in papers and books and research reports and diligently saved up in archives and libraries and electronic media and reproduced in order to train and discipline and specialize the uninitiated and the non-specialist are functionally useful intellectual objects. In capitalist and technologically advanced societies they serve to maintain an ontological paradigm that is scarcely, if ever, obvious.

An ontological paradigm is always rooted in the culture and because cultures, as sociological phenomena, are national—if not ethnic—an ontological paradigm is that vague, foundational epistemology implicit in such assertions as “French,” “American,” “European,” etc. The paradigm is not only linguistically constructed—rooting it within a particular culture domain—but it is historically and incrementally construed vis-à-vis the “experience” of Others—the other inferior ethnicities, the other tribes, the other peoples, the other nations.

This so-called experience, in and of itself, is an academic artifact. It is a narrative put together by travelers, ambassadors, intelligence officers, tourists, businessmen, adventure seeking wandering souls, writers in need of publishing exotic or sellable texts, and reworked by the “expert;” that is to say the historian or the anthropologist or the archeologist, etc., who retranslates a selected series of facts, fictions, and personal preferences and seemingly neutral random observations into a coherent picture primarily acceptable to his/her peers in the discipline, within the specialized discourse, in the academia at large.

The element that unifies the disparate amalgam of narratives and preferences and assists the expert in selection, of course, is the ontological paradigm. This paradigm, in so far as it is rooted in the soil of an ethnic or national culture, is political and remains political. By political I mean related to domination. The ontological paradigm manifests itself in the mirror of the other and in doing so, as Hegel argued, necessarily “negates” the other. Such negation is either complete assimilation of the other in the self—annihilation of the other—or else a partial subjugation of the other—that is to say, a kind of mental, or intellectual, reduction of the other into something fitting and compatible and “meaningful” in terms of one’s own superiority.

Here the “Other” is not simply the looking glass mirroring the “self.” It is rather an object, a thing that the self constructs, creates and recreates based on the rational motive, irrational desires, phobias, and ultimately imagination. To illustrate the point further and emphasize the fact that the operational relation of domination has indeed two sides—that is to say the Slave responds to the attitude of the Master by and through negation too—one may use the example of an anti-Western mode of thought that appeared in Iran several decades prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

THE IRANIAN EXPERIENCE

In 1962, about a decade and a half before the publication of *Orientalism*, a prominent Iranian writer published in the form of a book the text of his two independently published essays known as *Gharbzadegi*. The Persian word is translated variously as Westoxification, Weststruckness, Euromania and simply Westernism.^{2,3}

The intellectual history of the Middle East is marked by two opposite modes of consciousness among the elites:

1. Foucault M. *The Archaeology of knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

2. Al-e Ahmad Jalal. *Gharbzadegi*, Tehran: Azad, 1341/1962.

3. Hanson B. The ‘Westoxification’ of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, Al-e Ahmad, and Shari’ati.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 15 (1983), pp.1-23.

first, a period of fascination with the West which continues as long as the West is conceived in *culturally superior* terms; and second, a period of disenchantment with the West which is concomitant with the *return back to Islam and a total rejection of the West as a culture-ideal*.

A generalized mood of anti-Westernism, gradually after the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, the Iraqi Revolution of 1958, the Algerian War of Independence, and the 1967 War took hold in the Middle East. In Iran, as Hamid Enayat noted, “roughly the same process repeated itself, although it started a decade earlier, with the Anglo-American engineered overthrow of M. Mosaddeq’s government in 1953. Whereas during the oil nationalization movement of 1951 nationalism of liberal orientation commanded immense loyalty among the middle classes, even those attached to religious leaders, this was not the case in the period after 1953. As the Iranian national consciousness gradually absorbed the traumatic effects of the failure of Mosaddeq’s ‘middle-of-the-road’ experience in democratic politics, a conviction gained ground among the politicized youth that his fiasco was caused as much by liberalism as by the CIA conspiracies.”¹

Al-e Ahmad borrowed the term from Ahmad Fardid, a philosopher who was deeply influenced by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and the well publicized Spenglerian (1880-1936) idea of the “decline of the West.” Al-e Ahmad, as a former member of the Communist Party of Iran must have been fascinated with the West and its technological prowess. What seems to have led him to the diagnosis of a disease and cultural pathology of the Iranian elites and society and a definitive *return to the most conservative form of Shiism*, in short his disenchantment with the West, was the increasingly intrusive and culturally destructive domination of the U.S.

In his description of the “disease,” Al-e Ahmad “conceptualizes the West as some monolithic whole intent on domination of Iran, differentiating between Western nations only in relation to specific historical events inside Iran” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962: 5). But the West intended and described by Al-e Ahmad is *not* even remotely similar in conception or the manner of description to the East/Orient conceptualized by Edward Said. The Occident, in Al-e Ahmad’s view, is what the Occidentals are saying it is: “developed, industrialized, rich, possessors of raw materials, and exporters of finished products as well as culture.” The East is “underdeveloped, agricultural, poor, producers of raw materials, and consumers of Western products as well as Western culture. Once the West/East was a two-way street of cultural borrowing and exchange, but no longer. With the end of competition between cultures, the East with feelings of servitude, inferiority, backwardness, and obsolescence accepts the Western criteria of doing things” (Al-e Ahmad, 1962: 9).

The toxicity of the West, as one proceeds further with the argument one learns, lies in the hegemony of it in such a way that it seems to the native intellectual—and many others including the Shia clergy and in particular the Ayatollah Khomeini—that it was about to kill the native culture through a complete assimilation of the culture-elites and more importantly transformation of the masses along the lines of the consumer culture of the United States.

“The increasing cultural Westernization of the Pahlavis,” Nikki Keddie observes, “was resented by the popular classes, especially the bazaaris, and by the ulama, whose prestige and positions were attacked. Westernized habits were associated with Western politico-economic domination, and anti-Westernism and anti-regime ideas turned increasingly to the masses’ Shii outlook. In the 1960s thinkers began to discuss defense against Westernization and a returning to Iran’s cultural identity.”²

In other words, the *very success of the modernization policies of the Pahlavi regime* was diagnosed by Al-e Ahmad and by the Muslim Shia majority of the elites, including the Ulama, as *Gharbzadegi*. This observation helps us to further understand the shift in the ontological paradigm of Iranians after 1979 and the forceful and coercive “re-Islamization” of the dominant culture. After Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers overtook the machinery of the state, the hegemony of the West was replaced coercively through the use of apparatuses of modern state and its monopoly of the use of force with Islamic/Shia hegemony.

CONCLUSION

Not only the Islamic Revolution but also the subsequent political developments up to the present demonstrate the impossibility of answering Edward Said’s question. He however answered the question some thirty years after the publication of *Orientalism*:

1. Enayat H. *Modern Islamic Political Thought*. University of Texas Press, 1982, pp. 153.

2. Keddie N. R. *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretative History of Modern Iran*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1981, p.203.

But there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control. It is surely one of the intellectual catastrophes of history that an imperialist war confectioned by a small group of unelected U.S. officials was waged against a devastated Third World dictatorship on thoroughly ideological grounds having to do with world dominance, security control, and scarce resources, but disguised for its true intent, hastened, and reasoned for by Orientalists who betrayed their calling as scholars.¹

In terms discussed, the only solution seems to originate in total rejection of domination—the Master/Slave relation of consciousness—and its substitution with Kantian Categorical Imperative: extension of the self to include all other selves as one's own. Such universalism, of course, can be a *strategy for research and analysis*.

1.Said E. "Orientalism 25 Years Later." *Counterpunch*. August 4, 2003.