

Téma: *Náboženství jako sociální konstrukt*

**In** this brilliant and bold book, Edward Said criticises cultural imperialism and contributes in a major way to the process of decolonisation. Its appearance provides an appropriate occasion to discuss the nature of western scholarship on the Orient, especially the Muslim East, since the eighteenth century, and to analyse the interaction between American hegemony and western scholarship on the Third World. Finally, it offers a timely chance to survey, however briefly, contributions of western liberal scholarship to our understanding of contemporary Iran.

Adopting, and refining, Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemonic culture and Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, Said argues that Orientalism is more than a field of study in the western world. In his view it is a 'corporate institution' (p. 13) encompassing a set of generalisations, structures, relationships, texts, the whole forming a 'discourse', which defines the Orient and Orientals for the West. The function of Orientalism is' ... to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world'. (p. 12)

#### THE ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE

By the nineteenth century, Orientalist discourse had become set, and its stereotypes disseminated throughout western culture: Orientalists had developed a consensus. Since this consensus was congruent with the interests of those in power, Orientalist ideas freely permeated aesthetic, economic, historical and political texts. Orientalism became an integral part of western culture.

Already, by the eighteenth century, certain Orientalists like Abraham - Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron and Sir William Jones had captured contemporary imagination by introducing an exotic new world - the Orient - to the West. The eccentric Anquetil translated into French Avesta texts (the sacred books of Persian Zoroastrianism) and the Upanishads (Hindu Vedic treatises on the nature of man and the universe). His translations jolted old beliefs and revealed to Europe the existence of ancient cosmogonical traditions beyond the Mediterranean basin. Their existence forced the questioning of the Bible's uniqueness and set in motion modern biblical criticism culminating in secular interpretations of religious texts. Jones, on the other hand, was a legal scholar. He founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, and also worked as an official of the British East India Company; he felt absolutely no conflict of interest in serving imperialism and set the pattern which later Orientalists and area studies experts emulated. 'Whereas Anquetil opened large vistas,' Said writes, 'Jones closed them down, codifying, tabulating, comparing.' (p. 77)

The British in India and Napoleon in Egypt, recognising the potential in employing Orientalists like Jones for their empire-building, linked the Orientalist intellectual tradition with outright political domination. Napoleon, after gaining his knowledge of the Orient from careful reading of Orientalist texts, set out to

conquer the East in 1798. He took with him a score of scholars whose product, 23 fat volumes of Egyptology, was meant to restore a region from its present barbarism to its former classical greatness; to instruct (for its own benefit) the Orient in the ways of the modern West; to subordinate or underplay military power in order to aggrandize the project of glorious knowledge acquired in the process of political domination of the Orient; to formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its 'natural' role as an appendage to Europe; to dignify all the knowledge collected during colonial occupation with the title 'contribution to modern learning' when the natives had neither been consulted nor treated as anything except as pretexts for a text whose usefulness was not to the natives; to feel oneself as a European in command, almost at will, of Oriental history, time, and geography; to institute new areas of specialization; to establish new disciplines; to divide, deploy, schematize, tabulate, index, and record everything in sight (and out of sight); to make out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type; and, above all, to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts, to possess (or think one possesses) actuality mainly because nothing in the Orient seems to resist one's powers ... (p.86)

Following the model set by Jones and Napoleon's academicians, nineteenth century Orientalists translated and anthologised texts; compiled dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and developed the field of philology. They compartmentalised knowledge in order to dominate it. They also modernised their fields by secularising their studies, revising their methodology in keeping with new scientific rigour, and restructuring their thought on a new rational basis (p. 122). Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan from France and Edward William Lane of Britain were the most influential of the nineteenth-century Orientalists. Said reviews and assesses their contributions.

Their work made Orientalism effective and congruent with the interests and political concerns of imperialist-oriented rulers. Old stereotypes were retained, but the updating and systematisation of data and analysis enhanced the authority of Orientalist analysis which posited eastern inferiority, western superiority, eastern decadence, western vibrance, etc. In such ways, Orientalism revived, restructured and made more timely, helped prepare the way for further imperial control of the East. Simultaneously Orientalist discourse permeated western culture, providing themes, stereotypes and even texts for figures such as Flaubert, de Nerval, Lamartine, T. E. Lawrence, Burton and Chateaubriand.

## US IMPERIALISM AND THE NEW SCHOOLS OF ORIENTALISM

By 1918 cracks had begun to appear in the structures which supported Orientalism: after the war the victorious English and French faced major crises at home and abroad. The legacy of war, the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of fascism, began to shake confidence in capitalism and bourgeois democracy. Cultural and economic crises further reduced European smugness concerning their received traditions, institutions, values and mores. Orientalism, as part of the hegemonic culture, was on trial. Widespread colonial revolts, from Tunisia to India, added significantly to the indictment. And though England and France took

control of the 'fertile crescent', their new mandates provoked immediate resistance. North of the crescent, the Turks ejected their would-be conquerors. Mass demonstrations in Persia in favour of constitutionalism had prevented the British from establishing a protectorate there, so they turned instead to Reza Khan and helped him consolidate his power and do their bidding. But even the pawn could not be controlled, since British power looked weak from the Persian plateau. Consequently Reza Khan tried to ally Persia with fascist Germany whose ideology closely resembled his own. By 1941 the British sent him packing, but it was already clear that nationalism could threaten imperialism.

These triple strains (expansion of the imperial system, widespread colonial revolts and internal crisis) deeply marked Orientalism in the inter-war period. In the 1920s England and France needed added trained Orientalists to serve in their new Middle East mandates: two of the best of such scholars were the Frenchman Louis Massignon (d. 1962) and the Englishman Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb (d. 1971) whose careers were rooted in ambivalence and doubts about their own culture. This produced a degree of humility in them which their predecessors lacked, and made it possible for them to approach the 'Islamicate' humanely, with openness. Yet the inherited weight of Orientalism, which shaped them fundamentally, twisted their perceptions. Although the interwar years produced startling cultural transformations in other fields of knowledge, Orientalism, feeling the simultaneous strains of expansion and decline, remained wedded to its stodginess and insularity.

Said chose well in singling out Massignon and Gibb to illustrate transformations in Orientalism before and after the Second World War. Their lives reflected two major poles of change - decolonisation and the rise of the American empire<sup>3</sup> - that marked the period. After 1945 European Orientalism declined since, without formal empire, the Orientalist had little except the scholarly function. The shift was therefore to the new US imperium. Massignon and Gibb responded differently to colonialism and decolonisation, but both contributed to shaping the new directions of change. Gibb moved to the United States and helped organise the institutional basis of US cultural imperialism, while Massignon, the maverick, joined the struggle for decolonisation and set the stage for the development of revisionism<sup>4</sup> in French Islamic studies.

Said is one of the rare critics to appreciate fully Massignon's genius and great literary talents. He also admits Massignon's crucial role in Orientalism and acknowledges his seminal connection to the 'French Islamology' revisionist schools represented in the work of Jacques Berque, Maxime Rodinson, Yves Lacoste and Roger Arnaldez (pp. 265-66). But Said stops there, without assessing the long-term significance of Massignon's impact on revisionism.

Massignon, as a convert from atheism to mystical Catholicism, and as a talented poet, brought to his studies and activism the zeal of a convert and the romantic idealism of a poetical mystic. They totally coloured his perceptions of the Islamicate and especially his views of his hero, Mansur al-Hallaj (d. AD 922), the sufi (mystic) martyr on whom he reflected all of his life.

There was also another side to Massignon which Said recognises, but does not fully explore. In his later years, Massignon became an outspoken critic of French colonialism. His gradual political awakening began when he established close contacts with Algerian migrant workers whom he taught in special courses, beginning in the late 1920s and 1930s. These contacts and his intense asceticism raised his social consciousness. Increasingly, he supported anti-colonial causes (such as the rights of Palestinian, Madagascar;<sup>1n</sup> and North African nationalism,

etc.) and militated for social justice. Christian nonviolence led him to stage recurrent fasts in order to protest French colonial policy and violence. He wrote polemics in the popular press; on a few occasions, when he spoke in favour of Algerian independence or participated in demonstrations, the police or pied noir pummeled him.

Said questions his motives (p. 270); they were deeply religious, archaic, pro-Semitic, anti-Aryan and moral, rather than political. Therefore his understanding of events rarely coincided with the analysis of those on whose behalf he militated. But, unquestionably, he hated injustice, could not be corrupted and disdained politicians, imperial administrators and scholars who treated people as objects and pawns.

In negative sense, he perpetuated Orientalism and its prejudices through the quality of his scholarship. He was so good at what he did that, even if one disagreed with his premises, the arguments and the discourse were original. His insights and the wide range of his concerns and knowledge, combined with his personal example of activism in a society where professors were supposed to stay ensconced in their ivory towers or else serve the state, contributed to revisionism in French scholarship about the Orient. And, by standing outside of the Orientalist institutional structures and condemning official apologists who ran them, Massignon demonstrated that they and their institutions could be bypassed or rendered irrelevant by those wishing to gain knowledge of the Orient.

Jacques Berque, one of the leaders of the French cultural decolonisation movement, whom Said praises, acknowledged his debt to Massignon in the 'Foreword' to his ground-breaking book, *The Arabs* (New York, 1964) in the following way

I could never have achieved this interpretation had I not enjoyed the benefit of that of the late Louis Massignon. That admirable sheikh would have recognised where I have followed him, or contradicted him, or both at once. In all these cases, I am completely in his debt. (p. 18)<sup>6</sup>

Said has not recognised the full significance of this revisionism. If he had drawn out of Gramsci's notion of hegemonic culture the rich consequences inherent in the concept, he might have left us with some hope for change. For Gramsci there was a dynamic relationship between culture, politics and mass organisation, and he believed that to overcome bourgeois cultural hegemony, the left had to create mass political institutions which would generate their own ideas and analysis.

In the French school of revisionism, people like Berque, Vincent Monteil, Samir Amin and Abdallah Laroui, a combination of non-marxists, marxists, and marxisant, have developed their analysis within the framework of French and Third World educational and research institutions which have legitimised and encouraged their scholarship. As Gramsci might have predicted, the transformation in French educational institutions since at least May 1968, and the development of new research centres in Africa and the Middle East, coupled with the marked increase in the left's influence and base of support in France and some ex-French colonies has provided a fertile environment in which new schools of thought concerning the Middle East and North Africa have been able to develop and converge with innovating scholarship in sub-Saharan African, Latin American and Asian studies. The French government's quest for bilateral alliances with radical Muslim oil-producing states and their desire to demonstrate their independence of US analysis and policies, has probably made the French ruling

classes amenable to the new trends. In such a setting, new ideas and analysis are emerging as alternatives to classical Orientalism.

Decolonisation and the growth of the left in western Europe is changing the nature of discourse about the Third World. Anglo-Saxon research and writing on the Middle East and North Africa has begun to reflect this new shift. In the US some Middle East scholars have recently formed regional study groups organised as the American Middle East Studies Seminar (AMESS). They are concerned with (1) the involvement of professors in policy 'formulation and implementation'; (2) the sources of funding for Middle East Studies; (3) 'the structure, membership and ideological orientations of' the mainstream professional organisation, the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA); and (4) the narrow ideological and methodological limits of the field. In addition, MERIP Reports, Review of Iranian political economy and history, Review of Middle East Studies and the British journal Khamsill present alternative analysis of the culture and political economy of the Middle East and North Africa. Nevertheless, the mainstream of the American scholarly establishment has largely remained untouched by these developments.

#### MIDDLE EAST SOCIAL STUDIES

As the major post-war imperial power and the major source of neo-colonial control, the US had embarked on a crash programme to train area experts. These were supposed to service and rationalise the new empire and enable the US to compete favourably with the Soviet Union in the cold war. Funds for establishing area studies came from government agencies, foundations, universities, corporations and neo-colonial rulers who benefited from their connections with the US. America's needs were immediate, and the tradition was almost non-existent. But by importing European Orientalists, US Middle East social studies was stamped with the dogmas of Orientalism which Said has summarised as follows

1 (There is an) ... absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior ...

2 abstractions about the Orient ... are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities ...

3 the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically 'objective.'

4 ... the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared ... or to be controlled ... (pp. 300-301)

The 'old world' scholars moved to the new centre of Orientalism. Gibb came to Harvard to head the Center for Middle East Studies. Gustave Von Grunebaum helped establish the equivalent in Los Angeles. More recently, Bernard Lewis joined Princeton's Oriental Studies Program. Much of the US empire was informal, neo-colonial, in flux and therefore did not provide a stable base on which to build programmes; the new scholars were trained to deny the existence of the very empire that they served. Training proved to be superficial and most of the experts turned out to be only reflections of the shadows of the great Orientalists of the past. US Middle East area studies have had all the faults

of classical Orientalism<sup>11</sup> without any of its strengths, i.e. depth, stability and language ability. Lacking the long traditions which developed under the French and British imperial systems, the methods, opinions and sources of funding of the new area specialists are unstable. As arrivistes, they lack consistency and clarity of purpose. Their lack of competency, which Binder, a past-president of MESA, himself underlines<sup>11</sup> adds to their personal insecurity, which in turn reinforces their opportunism.

Many of them are rationalisers and justifiers of US government policies in the Middle East; <sup>12</sup> others cater to the neo-colonial clients of the US in Middle Eastern and North African states; in both cases they reap material rewards, and compete to sell themselves to the highest bidders.

#### US POLITICAL ANALYSIS ON IRAN

Iranian studies illustrates my point. Two of the best known experts who have written the basic works on contemporary Iran, Marvin Zonis of the University of Chicago and James A. Bill of the University of Texas, typify post-war Iranian studies in the US. Their work also reflects the broader trends in US Middle East Social studies. Despite their recognising, as trained students of Iranian politics, the regime's corruption and tyranny, they can still write of royalty in glowing terms. Zonis (1971):

... none of these interviews would have been carried out in the absence of official cooperation and royal assent. His Imperial Majesty, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shahshah, made that available with speed and kingly grace. His willingness to welcome foreign scholars is both courageous and laudable. (1951-3) holds no significance for Binder. As troublesome is his anti-Arab bias when he argues that the early Arab conquerors were 'tormentors' of the Persians. We know that in the complex relations between Persians and Arabs after the Muslim conquest of Iran (Khurasan), their interests often coincided and produced harmony. Binder, however, has injected this anti-Arab bias into the distant past.

Another scholar of Iran is R. M. Savory, Professor at the University of Toronto. In recent years he has authored an Encyclopaedia of Islam article on Iranian history (1973) as well as a 1972 assessment of Iran in the 1960s for MESA's International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). A critical examination of his scholarship will show, however, how he has misled readers by omitting crucial data. For example, the CIA's involvement in the events surrounding Mohammed Mossadegh's ousting as Prime Minister of Iran in 1953 is well known - witness the assessment made by E. A. Bayne, a former US official in Iran:

The Central Intelligence, well equipped with funds, entered the picture in earnest and a plot began to form with General Zahedi as its executive focus ... By mid-summer ... the Shah issued an order dismissing Mossadegh, and appointed Zahedi as Premier. Mossadegh refused to accept the order, and Iran was momentarily without effective government authority. As much to dramatize the constitutional issue as to preserve the person of the monarch - there being no heir - the Shah was advised to leave the country, which he did.

Yet, unbelievably, Savory has completely omitted any mention in his encyclopaedia article of the CIA's by then well-publicised and authenticated involvement in the planning for Mossadegh's overthrow and instead blamed the Tudeh (Iranian Communist) Party for provoking a general's coup. He wrote:

**On 13 August the shah issued a (arman dismissing Musaddik and appointing General Zahidi Prime Minister. Musaddik refused to take cognisance of the (arman, and the shah temporarily left the country. On ... 19 August 1953 Zahidi suppressed the Tudeh mobs over which Musaddik no longer had any control, and succeeded in establishing himself in Tehran.**

**And the editors of this, the leading Orientalist encyclopaedia (Van Donzal, Lewis, Pellat) are, in approving this article, implicated in such a major omission - if only by default.**

**In his 1972 TIMES article, after condemning Mossadegh for being a 'dictator' and a tool of the Tudeh Party, Savory wrote:**

**The Persian monarchy ... in 1953 successfully resisted a far more dangerous threat - subversion by totalitarian forces. The warmth and spontaneity of the Shah's welcome by the people when he returned to Iran on 22 August 1953 seems to have astonished many foreign observers and commentators, but should not have occasioned any surprise to the student of Persian history.**

**And the editor of TIMES, Stanford Shaw, Professor of Ottoman history at the University of California (Los Angeles), not only published Savory's article, but also repeated its biases and claims. Shaw wrote:**

**Dr Savory describes how the opposition to the Shah today, led by a segment of the Persian intelligentsia, particularly Persian students outside the country, is based largely on the same romantic views of contemporary Iran which led Mohammed Mossadiq and others in the Iranian national movement to disrupt reform and so join the opposition led by the great landowners, the ulama, and others who successfully frustrated reform until the Shah himself took the lead in the famous 'white revolution'. Dr Savory points out how the Shah has gained the support of the mass of the people benefiting from his reforms, particularly the peasants, and also the army and the younger civil servants.<sup>26</sup>**

**Neither of them admitted to the heroic struggle of the ulama against the Shah's tyranny; instead they denigrated religious figures in the same way that Binder did in the quotation above. They also failed to mention the participation of the bazaaris in the long struggle that preceded the revolution. Neither did they mention in a positive way the abnegation of the Iranian left in leading an armed struggle against one of the world's most repressive regimes. Rather, Savory viewed their struggle as treason against the 'best of all possible rulers', the Shah of Iran.**

## **OLD ORIENTALISM AND NEW DIRECTIONS**

**This necessarily brief review of American political analysis on Iran typifies the state of Middle Eastern area studies. In comparison to the old Orientalists like Massignon and Gibb, today's area experts have little substance and vision. There are exceptions, but they only prove the general rule. The old timers were products of a clearly-defined imperial age, replete with carefully-drawn structures, lines of authority and institutions. The new products of Third World area studies in North America live in an equally intense imperial age, but one with informal structures and insecure foundations, facing challenges and revolutionary pressures. Their insecurity, opportunism and shallowness reflects the condition of contemporary imperialism.**

**Edward Said has clarified how Orientalists and Middle East area experts have served the empire. It now remains for others working in Middle East studies who agree with his analysis and are distressed by the condition of the field, the**

'discourse', the 'hegemonic culture', to pick up the challenge and do something about it. Said tells us that we need new ways of looking at the Middle East and he calls for the application of class analysis, comparative research and global perspectives to all people living in differentiated states of change. He condemns the tendency to compartmentalize the Middle East as a world apart, in need of different categories of analysis than any other part of the world. One can only agree. There are buried treasures there for the progressive scholar, both north and south. For example, in one of his passing remarks (p. 279) Said suggests 'that the history of Islam might be more intelligible for its resistance, political and non-political, to colonialism'. Using that as an organizing theme one would like to see in future issues of *Race & Class* some discussion on the insurrectionary tradition in modern Islam. The aim would be to examine dynamics with ill the Islamicate that once gave it strength, and may act as the basis for transformation in the future. Historical studies become increasingly important because progressive transformations, if they are to succeed, need to be congruent with inherited traditions. The progressive forces within Islam have always been there. The problem is to flush them out from behind the veil of Orientalist obscurity.