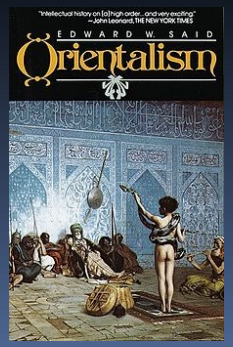
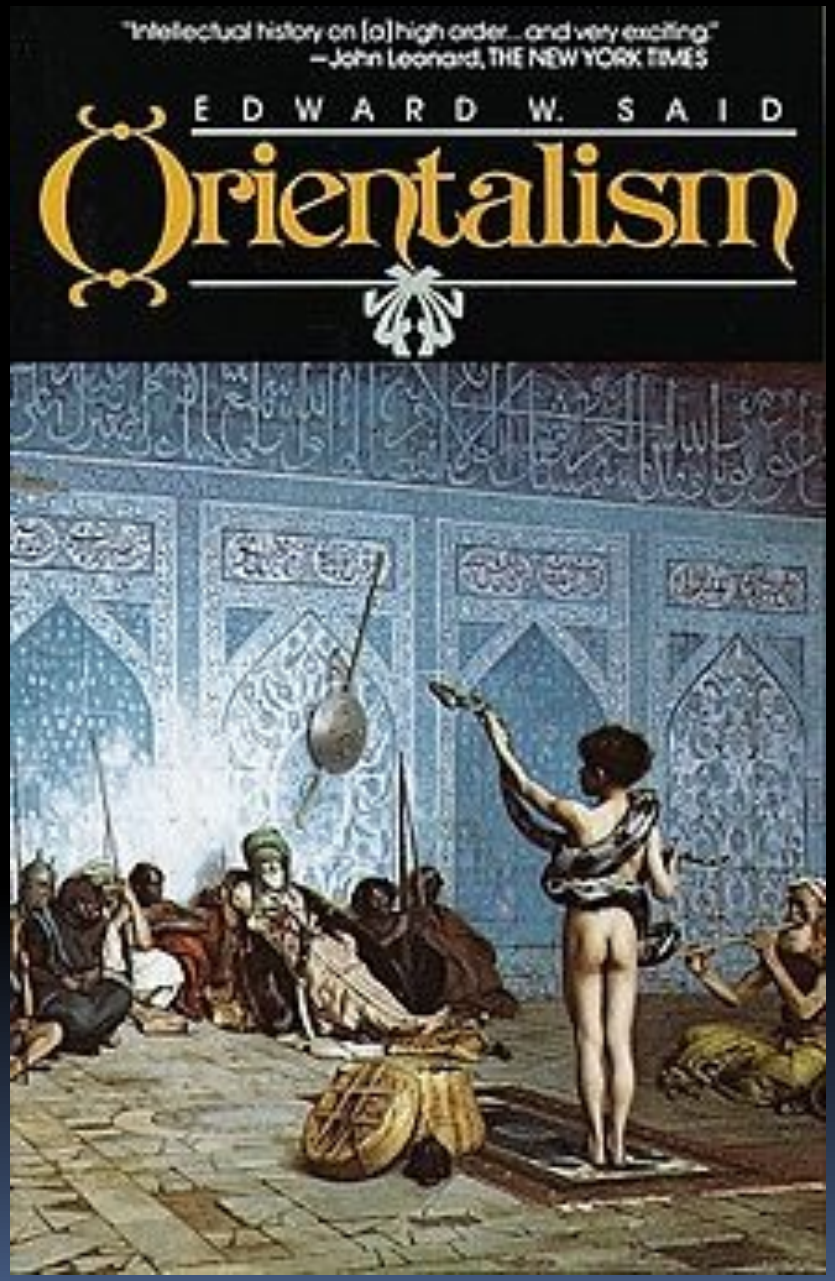
Islam Today

Orientalism – Lecture 1

Interpreting Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* – theories and background

Gary R. Bunt




"Intellectual history on [a] high order... and very exciting."
—John Leonard, THE NEW YORK TIMES
EDWARD W. SAID
Orientalism

The Snake Charmer (1870) by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)

Edward W. Said, 1 November 1935 – 25 September 2003

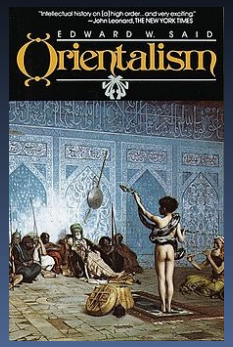
Book structure

Chapters:

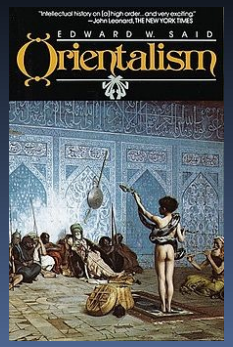
The Scope of Orientalism

Orientalist Structures and Restructures

Orientalism Now



“Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'. Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs 'mind', destiny, and so on.” p.2-3



Definitions

Ontology

- "the set of entities presupposed by a theory "

[Collins English Dictionary]

Epistemology

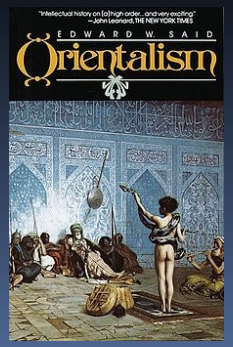
- "theory of knowledge"

[Online Etymology Dictionary]

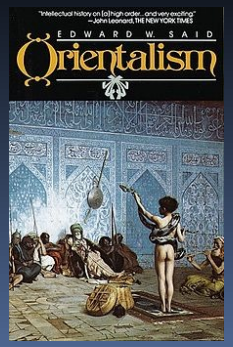
"Epistemology asks the question "How do we know what we know?"

[The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy]

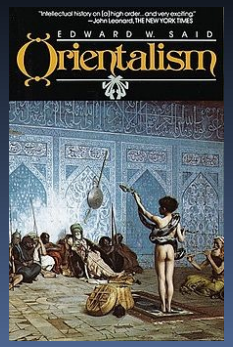
"... Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." p3



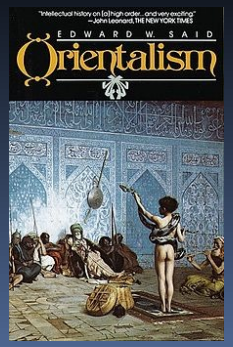
"Orientalism ... is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied - indeed, made truly productive -the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into general culture."



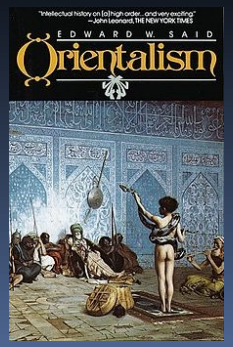
Orientalism "... is... a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts: it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expressed, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with political power... power cultural... power moral ... "



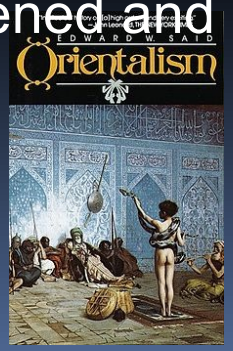
“Orientalism is - and does not simply represent - a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient that it does with ‘our' world.”” p 12



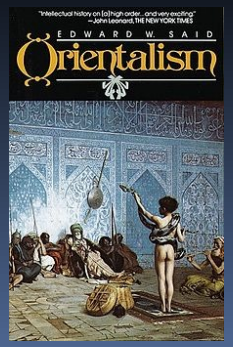
“...the Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks. Where do they come from." P. 40



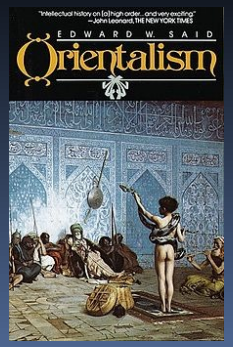
"...Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held... These ideas explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics. But like any set of durable ideas, Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental, European, or Western; in short, Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine. If the essence of Orrientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, then we must be prepared to not show in its development and subsequent history Orientalism deepened and even hardened the distinction." P.41



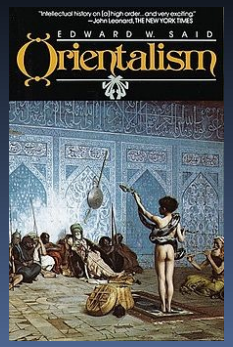
"...Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into 'us (Westerners) and 'they' (Orientalists)." p 45



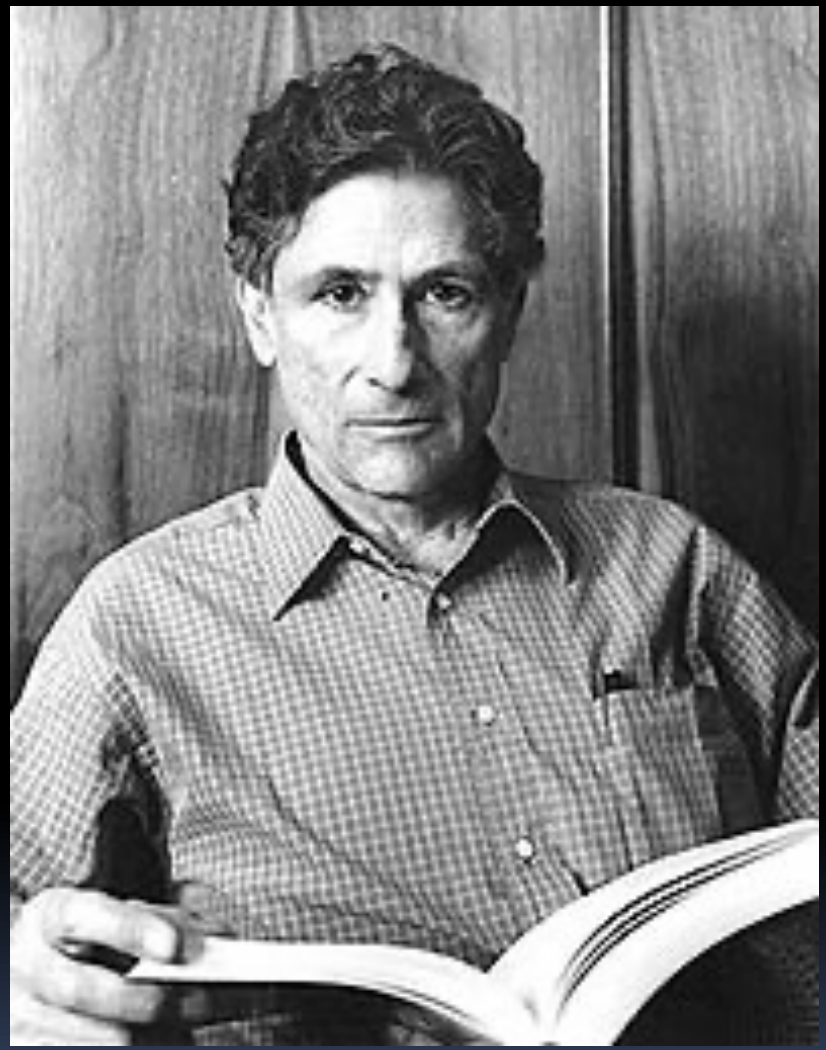
"Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was lined thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or - as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory - taken over. Since the Oriental was a member of a subject race, he had to be subjected; it was that simple." p 207



"From a faintly outlined stereotype as a camel-riding nomad to an accepted caricature as the embodiment of incompetence and easy defeat: that was all the scope given the Arab... Yet after the 1973 war the Arab appeared everywhere as something more menacing. Cartoons depicting an Arab sheik standing behind a gasoline pump turned up consistently. These cartoons however, were clearly ‘Semitic’; their sharply hooked noses, the evil mustachioed leer on their faces, were obvious reminders (to a largely non-Semitic population) that 'Semites' were at the bottom of all ~ troubles, which in this case was principally a gasoline shortage. The transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target was made smoothly, since the figure was essentially the same."



"....the principal dogmas of Orientalism exist in their purest form today in studies of the Arabs and Islam. Let us recapitulate them here: one is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that 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.' A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation wherever possible)."



Edward W. Said, 1 November 1935 – 25 September 2003