

Cultural Exchange as a Challenge to *Orientalism*

A Presentation by
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I intend to undertake a critical analysis of postcolonial theory and Edward Said's *Orientalism* through the examination of theoretical challenges and case studies that prove that positive cultural encounter that rests on reciprocity, understanding and empathy is possible. Using Said's critical reading and interpretation of literature, history and science as a departing point, as well as my own experience, I argue that cultural exchange has the potential of breaking the enclosed, Western dominated space of the Orient and creating a new, culturally aware, and sensitive community that does not belong to either one of Said's binary categories – Orient/Occident.

Postcolonial theory and its explanation of contemporary power structures of the West vs. the East that have led to the construction and perpetuation of Orientalism, has had an immense impact on academic studies. Emerging as a critique of the Enlightenment, which saw “human reason and rational behavior as the main springs of social progress” (Peet & Hartwick, p.124), the postmodern and postcolonial theories focus on the “socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject, the notion of multiple identities” and view the Enlightenment as the universalization of European power.

Foucault, one of the inspirations for postcolonial thought, argued that the West, and Europe in particular, has dominated the East through the deliberate formation and accumulation of knowledge about the East and has utilized that knowledge to construct a relationship based on European superiority. Foucault argues that modern reason is not a universal humanity category but rather a culturally specific trait to the Europeans. Moreover, the “emancipatory” ideas of the Enlightenment such as autonomy, freedom, and human rights have created a normalizing image of modern people that was believed to be universal and desired by all. This system was devised by rational, organized statements of experts whose discourse defined the postmodern meaning of history – “humanity moving from one form of domination to another.” (Peet & Hartwick, p.129)

Following the tradition of Foucault's theory about knowledge/power discourse, Edward Said studies the relationship of the Occident and the Orient as one “of power, of domination, [and] of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said, p.5). An essential element in producing and sustaining Western power is the Orientalist discourse; discourse refers both to the way language systematically organizes concepts, knowledge, and experience and to the way in which it excludes alternative forms of organizations. The Orient is constructed and exploited by Western strife for domination and informed by a deliberately created body of knowledge that is not concerned with the Orient except as the source for the Orientalist discourse; such knowledge Said refers to as “detailed ignorance.” Orientalist knowledge-power discourse could be summarized by Said's critique of Jones's - a British lawyer, work: “to rule and to learn, then to compare Orient with Occident” (Said, p. 78).

A dogma that the Orientalist scholars have created and used to their benefit is that “the Orient is ...uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that ...describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically objective” (Said, p.301). The desire to explain *how* to understand rather than *understand* creates an image of the timeless Orient, an image outside history which is a concept of the “ideal other” and one hard to challenge.

“The Orient is *watched*, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility always ready for new examples of ...”bizarre jouissance”. The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness.” (Said, p.103)

The notion of the “other” and the inherent inferiority of that category is perpetuated on at least three levels according to Said – Orientalism as an academic sphere of inquiry and even if the Orient does not survive, Orientalism will still exist through the constructed concepts about the Oriental; related to that is the second part

of his argument, that is, Orientalism is a way of thought based on the ongoing separation and highlighted distinctiveness between the East and the West. Said argues that the construction of such a powerful image of the “other” has also strengthened European culture and identity “by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.” (Said, p.3) The Orient is a space against which the West defines itself, as distant, exotic, and dangerous on the one hand, and yet knowable and thus “conquerable” on the other.

The implications of Said’s *Orientalism* suggest that the entrenched division between the East and the West will perpetuate Western dominance. The premise of discontinuous space and distinctiveness will continue informing the body of Oriental scholars and politicians, influence their decisions and research, and deepen the remoteness of the “other”. The implications of the Orientalist discourse create a feeling of inability to ever achieve understanding of individuals or cultures inspired by humanism. Such claims go beyond Said’s categories of West/East; they deny human positive curiosity and empathy by saying that people only seek knowledge in order to dominate and all activities of engagement are informed by Orientalism, therefore acts of domination. In terms of development, Said’s arguments create a sense of helplessness and failure of any developmental program existing in the timeframe of the Orientalism.

Other postcolonial/postmodern theorists have considered the implications of Said’s claims and have used them to deconstruct the academic and developmental Orientalist bias and hopefully, create a more culturally aware scholarship. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have focused on how the concept of discontinuous space (fragmented nation-state and cultural maps) have influenced anthropological research and writing, perpetuating the separation between Western and Eastern cultures. They look at cultural critique – “generating critical questions from one society to probe another” (Gupta) - as one of the widely used academic writing technique failing to account for the postcolonial interconnectedness of the world and discourse perpetuation. According to them, a “dialogic relationship” with an “other” culture that produces a critical viewpoint on “our own culture” assumes an already existing world of distinct cultures and an unproblematic distinction between “our own society” and an “other” society. Also, “once excluded from the privileged domain of “our own society”, the other is subtly nativized – placed in a separate frame of analysis and “spatially” incarcerated” (Gupta).

Arthuro Escobar looks at deconstructing the discourse of development which he saw as colonizing and informed by Western hegemonic aspiration for progress. Escobar saw modern development plans of industrialization and urbanization, acquiring of modern cultural values and reforming “traditional” institutions yet as another essential part of Orientalism and the perpetuation of underdevelopment. He describes three main strategies deployed by developmental discourse: “field of the intervention of power” that is the practice of defining problems as “abnormalities” and treating them with specific intervention (Peet and Hartwick, p.147); “the field of the control of knowledge” through the professionalization of development based on scientific and expert knowledge (Peet and Hartwick, p.147); and the strategy of “institutionalization” of development, creating a legitimate “network of sites that bound people to certain behaviors and rationalities” (Peet and Hartwick, p.147).

Orientalism certainly presents in-depth arguments that have real impact on power structures, culture and cultural constructions as well as development. Although by definition it is described as a discourse that inhibits the ability of cultural understanding and is self-perpetuating, there have been many successful attempts by international and non-governmental organizations to break that model of domination and “targeted” knowledge and to create opportunities for people to meet in ways that foster genuine cultural understanding. I want to focus on cultural exchange programs based on common interest of the exchanged individuals/groups and a framework ensuring a positive interaction to be a way of getting to know the Other. Cultural exchange programmes promote human empowerment, reconciliation and breaks the pattern of institutionalized Orientalist discourse. They also inspire humanitarian activism which is closely related to the efforts of reshaping development policies and moving toward PAR and local knowledge, advocated by both Said and Escobar.

Orientalism has been challenged on a number of levels. From a historical perspective, Orientalism is troubling because of its “dubious epistemological relationship to matters of cause and effect” (Rotter, p.1208). In postmodernist/postcolonial theory, truth is substituted by self-serving representations of realities constructed by the dominant power. Historians, however, are devoted to discovering reasons for why certain events occurred such as the American Revolution. In that sense, the Orientalist discourse argument becomes insufficient by trying to downplay actual events simply because they have happened in the Orientalist framework. Although,

historians ascribe different weight to different reasons, most of whom take into consideration Said's warning of Western bias, still the causes for revolutions are knowable and they cannot be ignored as mere representations or a power structure and an element of a discourse.

Related to this criticism, is another one - based on the "nature" of the Orient. In Orientalism, the Orient is a created entity by the West and a projection of Western values, fears and desires; an entity without identity. In one symposium, Said even asked rhetorically "why Westerners suppose that the 'Orient' wants to be understood correctly? And why do [we] assume that [our] interest in the 'Orient' was reciprocated?" (Rotter, 1210). Such ideas, deny any interest on the part of the "Orient" of a depiction, be it favorable or challenging to the predominant discourse. By abandoning historic, scholarly and personal inquiry and reconciling with the "ultimate unknowability" of the other, Said pushes both the West and the East into nihilism (Rotter, 1210).

The sweeping generalization of Orientalism creates the problem of ambiguity and decreases the sense of trust. According to Braginski, "the Orientalist discourse would have been solved more convincingly by Said had he demonstrated its *specifically colonial* nature (Braginski)". Questions such as: was the Orientalist discourse that different from the discourse in the colonial period about the "dark ages" of medieval Europe, about the uncolonized states i.e. Russia, between two European countries or in the East about the West undermine the reality that Said argues constitutes the colonial and postcolonial power relationships.

The binary opposition of the West vs. the East assumes the existence of regionalized cultures and rests on imperialist and colonialist ideas of purity. *Orientalism* tried to define the "other" in a specific historical period (the modern era); however, this could not be fully applied to today's global community. Such notions are constantly undermined by the mobility of post-modern society i.e. migration, migrant labor, refugees, and fails to account for cultural differences within locality. A consequence of that mobility is the adoption of "alternative" cultural loyalties and the creation of a mass culture and a transnational public sphere where solidarity and identity is independent of space and personal contact and scripts of domination; therefore, cannot be considered either Oriental or Occidental.

In relation to the danger of generalization, Orientalism denies any element of creativity that was generated by industrial capitalism. According to Orientalist logic "anyone who is consciously acting in defiance of the ideas, institutions and practices of his time, considering them to be evil, has to be regarded as their champion, and adducing the modish word "discourse" does not change anything at all" (Braginski). Claiming that the West depends on the Orient for its own definition is the flipside of his argument against Orientalist scholars who produce the Orient through their studies and descriptions. According to those challengers of postcolonial thought, Said could be seen as a creator of an alternative form of colonialism – Occidentalism (despite that Said denies it).

Acknowledging the great contribution of Said's work and sophisticated critique of literature, history and science informed by Western domination, while considering the weaknesses of his arguments, I want to use *Orientalism* as a template for understanding stereotyping and present ways to challenge it. At the end of his book, Said talks about critical thinking and consumption being important to our understanding of the world. After lining arguments about the closed and irreversible nature of the Orient, he leaves a door open for genuine knowledge by saying that it is essential and possible only by a breakthrough of the Orientalist discourse. Said writes: "Orientalism failed to identify with human experience [and] failed also to see [the "Orient"] as a human experience" (Said, p.328). Cultural exchange fosters an encounter that is based on reciprocal interest and first-hand experience that certainly challenges the systemized and controlled knowledge of the Other. Cultural exchange programs raise awareness but also offer an experience beyond Orientalism; experience that Said himself, believes is possible and desired.

"The worldwide hegemony of Orientalism and all it stands for can now be challenged, if we can benefit from the general twenty-century rise to political and historical awareness of so many of the earth's peoples" (Said, p.328).

Cultural exchange programs based on common interest (such as music and writing workshops, species research etc.) undermine the Orientalist “teachable wisdom” by challenging the very process of enculturation in the discourse. Personal experience of the Other at a young age, informed by a program created around enabling positive interaction raise awareness and cultural sensitivity. Such encounters promote informal, “non-regulated” intercultural education that enable the participants to identify with the local peer group, reduces notions of distance, distinctiveness, and “civilizational superiority.” The context of the exchange is premised on “being there” and immersing oneself into an interesting activity with interesting partners, rather than a goal of documenting for the sake of domination. It is a vital tool for development and peace-building because it creates a sense of human and cultural security within a given group as well as promotes respectful attitudes between the interacting groups.

Cultural exchange and youth cultural exchanges in particular, are safeguards against two of Said’s categories responsible for the Orientalist “durability” – “detailed ignorance” and projection of Western desires on the Orient, namely – the exoticising of the Orient. Being in a different country or interacting with different people, foster better understanding of the particulars, therefore challenges the generalizations on which Orientalism is based. On the other hand, such interactions create a sense of familiarity and human connectedness which challenges the exotic distant “other.” Only through undermining the very basis of the Orientalist discourse – expert knowledge and scientific classification/generalization, critical consciousness and transnational solidarity could rise.

Overcoming Orientalism requires experiences based first and foremost, on expression. Sharing and learning is essential to creating a reciprocal relationship that will enable mutual understanding. I believe that the arts are an excellent media for promoting cultural and interpersonal partnership because the exchange of information is motivated by appreciation of the Other as well as expression of oneself. Many non-governmental organizations, have recognized the merits of the arts as a undeniable universal interest of all people and therefore a uniting power; programs include non-professional artistic group exchanges such as choir tours, experimental theater festivals etc. On the topic of artistic education and expression, Martha Nussbaum defends arts school curriculum:

“The arts ... make a vital contribution to citizenship. If people don't cultivate their imaginations when they are quite young, they are likely to be obtuse citizens and empty people when they are older... I think that education in the arts should take a particular form: children need to learn to think well about lives they are in particular danger of not understanding, lives of groups that their own society has either ignored or subordinated”. (Brosnan)

Another aspect, in which cultural exchange challenges as well as gives an alternative to Orientalism, is activism. Genuine interaction and learning from each other during the exchange, inspires humanitarian activism based on understanding, identification with the other and empathy. Such interest in being pro-active and getting involved in social advocacy or on-site work promotes positive development, the kind that Escobar describes in his work.

I, myself, have experienced a professional and personal transformation after taking part in a cultural exchange program bringing together people from the rest of the Balkan countries and the “West” (USA and Britain). The Balkan Youth Reconciliation Seminars Series (BYRSS) was a project I participated right after the Kosovo crisis in 1999. The program was based on cultural exchange as a way of bringing “warring” sides of a recent conflict and their allies together and uniting them through the arts. Discovering each other’s commonalities was a challenging task, especially in a time of identity crises informed by a superiority-inferiority discourse; however, once I connected with people whom I was prejudiced against without even meeting them, I became determined to challenge my “detailed ignorance” by actively undermining the blind notions of the “other” in my own belief system as well as my community. This cultural exchange reshape my life and vision to an extent that I decided to study abroad and start working toward the peace-building cause for the NGO that organized the Seminars. Many of the other participants, did the same – either joined a non-governmental organization (NGO) dealing with conflict resolution through exchange or even started their own online journals and organizations focused on social justice and civil society. The activism was reciprocal in this case, if I may use Said’s oppositional

categories once again – East and West; after the program, the American and British participants became more involved in awareness raising in their own communities, too.

NGOs and other civil society organizations both national and international have used cultural exchange and sharing of information to create transnational social movements that challenge the fragmented reality of the Orientalist East vs. West and their power structure. Humanitarian conference on women, racism, AIDS, conflict resolution, development, debt relief etc. have created international networks among people with similar interest and needs and have nurtured the spur of grassroots organizations. According to Escobar, such trends play a “critical role” in the struggle for democratic societies in Latin America. Social movements, have often “succeeded in translating their agendas into public policies and in expanding the boundaries of institutional politics” and “have struggled to resignify the very meanings ...of citizenship, political representation and participation ...and democracy itself”– therefore enacting a form of “cultural politics” (Lind).

Following postcolonial tradition of deconstructing and questioning, I would like to discuss the argument that cultural exchange might be a cause for a radical cultural relativism and therefore inhibits, rather than enabling the process of creating transnational activist groups and positive development. I believe that cultural isolationism which is an outcome of radical relativist studies could be considered as dangerous and deterministic like cultural imperialism because both of them deny human inclination toward appreciation, compassion and inclusion, as opposed to exclusion. There are two arguments in support of cultural exchange being a means to connecting people without violating or assimilating their cultural identity and against the assumption that pure cultural relativism could undermine those claims.

When we talk about cultural relativism, it is worth noting that such a concept in its purity has become much harder to sustain in the era of high mobility and information sharing. How would one take a culturally relativistic approach to analyze “alternative cultures” such as the feminist culture, or the gay and lesbian culture? Xenophobia has been viewed as a culture in and of itself, as well. In order to get to know the Other, it is important to first recognize the multiplicity of the Other. Cultural exchange enables such understanding through promoting interaction and non-imposed knowledge sharing and gathering.

Local knowledge is the foundation for any successful development program, since development should be a process that caters to the needs of the local society. Cultural exchange promotes development strategies based on *consensus* through fostering a constructive dialogue with those who benefit/not benefit from it and the people who propose the program. In such interaction and immersing in the reality of the local, the development objectives are tailored more accurately to the local needs both by the participating local people as well as by the designers of the programs themselves.

In conclusion, I see cultural exchange as a vital tool for the creation of a vibrant and engaged transnational and Post-Oriental community which is socially active in terms and the Other. Both Said and Escobar, embrace and call for an action and learning that goes beyond the Orientalist discourse and alienation. I believe that cultural exchange enables critical consciousness and positive inquiry and engagement, thus promotes development responsive to local needs rather than guide maps of universal progress and Western domination.

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