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Enough Said: Reflections on Orientalism

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ed. *The Dilemma of Amazonian Development*. Boulder, CO: Westview P. —1990. Intellectual Property Rights and Just Compensation for Indigenous Knowledge: Challenges to Science, Business and International Law. A paper read in the President's Symposium 'Thinking Locally, Acting Globally', Society of Applied Anthropology Meeting, York.

Ribeiro, Darcy 1970. *Os Índios e a Civilização*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira.  
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excellent prices for natural materials, help local peoples add value to those materials and profit from their activities, help them market the products and return a percentage of the profits to the community. On film and television crews that pay generous prices for filming native peoples and return some of the profits.

Perhaps this is utopian, but I believe that consumer education, aided by surveillance by NGOs, can go a long way to make such a system work. Informed consumers have made major differences in production patterns in the past, and can do so in the future. Maybe it is time for a new order of 'consumer democracy', whereby people 'vote' for how the world goes through the way they consume. 'Green Capitalism', as it is sometimes called, may be the only hope we have to stop the vast destruction of peoples and environments due to the rapidly expanding markets of Eastern Europe and Asia.

Professional associations, especially those of anthropologists and ethnobiologists, can, simply by discussing these issues in public meetings and ethics committees, bring to light the ethical need of researchers to change their relationships with their 'subjects'.

A few successful projects guided by anthropologists working with native communities to develop their own natural products, markets and distribution contacts, would go a long way. A few successful projects utilizing native medicinal or edible plants, or cosmetic preparations, that take care to study the social and ecologi-

cal impact of management decisions and work with the communities to determine what 'just compensation' should mean, would be more effective than hundreds of national and international laws.

But nonetheless it is important that our ideals be rooted firmly in international laws that juridically protect the Intellectual Property Rights of native peoples.

### Conclusion

The current devastation of native peoples and the ecological systems that they have conserved, managed and intimately known for millennia require that new and drastic steps be taken to reorient world priorities. All channels and organizations – governmental, non-governmental, professional, business – must work together to reverse the current momentum in loss of cultural, ecological and biological diversity of this planet.

I definitely do not advocate the *imposition* of 'Green Capitalism', or even 'Consumer Democracy', upon native peoples. Each group must have the option to enter into market economies or not – and to what extent and under which circumstances they want to do so, if at all. I only wish to point out that pressures to exploit traditional knowledge are drastically increasing, and that native peoples ought to have at least the option of just compensation for their knowledge. Otherwise, anthropologists and ethnobiologists will – like it or not – come under increasing distrust from native peoples. □

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# Enough Said

## Reflections on Orientalism

MICHAEL RICHARDSON

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In the past decade the question of representation in anthropological discourse has become a central theme, given particular focus by the debate associated with the volume *Writing Culture*<sup>1</sup>. This debate has tended to be limited to the actual process of writing ethnographies, something that has deflected debate away from a more general consideration of the perceptual framework of the ethnographic encounter and the way in which anthropological images are created and sustained.

The more general context of representation has been raised by Edward Said's controversial study *Orientalism*<sup>2</sup>, in which a consideration of how the West has conceptualized the Near East is used for a more general analysis of the way in which representation has been used by European consciousness in relation to its 'Other'. His central concern appears to have been to examine the consequences that follow from what he gives early in the book as a definition of Orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient'<sup>3</sup>. As a Palestinian working within the Western intellectual tradition (he had published two books of literary criticism before *Orientalism* in 1978) he feels a personal stake in these issues, and he writes with a passion and urgency which give to his book some vitality and which have helped it to be widely influential.

Anthropological images of the Orient are largely absent from Said's account. It would, however, be naive to believe that anthropology is, or can be, exempted from the wider implications of his critique. Indeed,

since anthropology is founded on a methodological separation between self and other, it could be said that anthropology would deny its own legitimacy if it were to accept the basis of Said's argument, even though some anthropologists, notably Ronald Inden<sup>4</sup>, have tried to revise their own work to take account of the implications that Said's study raises for anthropology. The success of such endeavours is open to question. It would today, more than a decade after publication of the original work, perhaps be more fruitful to question Said's own methodological assumptions and try to consider the extent to which his critique advances our understanding of the way in which we establish images and representations of other people, thereby enabling us to conceive the relationship between ourselves and the 'Other' in different terms, and to what extent it simply adds one more level of mystification to what is already a difficult terrain to survey. Does his critique do any more, in other words, than address itself to European masochism and guilt?

Said's approach is manifestly idealist. Situating his critique in the realm of ideas divorced from concrete relations of living, he is able to present us with a very convincing argument against the deleterious effects of a particular way of perceiving the Orient. Said insists that such perception was false; it was created in the European mind almost without reference to what the Orient was really like. One of Said's disciples, Christopher Miller, places the issue squarely in these terms: '...perception is determined by Orientalism rather than

Orientalism being determined by perception'<sup>5</sup>. This statement, an idealist statement par excellence, sums up accurately, I believe, the impulse underlying not only Said's own approach, but also those who have followed him. It emphasizes the extent to which the 'real' Orient was irrelevant to the thrust of the movement to create a composite fictional character for the Orient. The images constituting this character were the products of who knows what perversity of mind (and Said shows curiously little interest in understanding *why* such images were created, beyond making a banal equation with imperialism) and are completely devoid of reality: 'The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient. "Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten wedern", as Marx wrote...'<sup>6</sup>. This passage is highly significant in relation to the work as a whole and we will return to consider it in more detail. For now we will look at some of the implications that arise from the apparent 'fictionality' of the Oriental construct.

The problem that arises here is that if such representations are false then there has at least to be the possibility of a representation that is 'true'. Towards the end of the book, Said appears to recognize this problem. He writes: 'I would not have written a book of this sort if I did not believe that there is a scholarship that is not as corrupt, or at least as blind to human reality, as the kind I have been mainly depicting'<sup>7</sup>. He is even able to give us an example: 'the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, whose interest in Islam is discrete and concrete enough to be animated by the specific societies and problems studied and not by the rituals, preconceptions, and doctrines of Orientalism'<sup>8</sup>. Yet, five years later, we find that the work of Geertz has been miraculously transformed into being simply 'standard disciplinary rationalizations and self-congratulatory clichés...'<sup>9</sup>. We are given no indication of what might have caused this extraordinary transformation.

That Said feels under no compunction to justify his change of opinion here is indicative of his methodological approach. As he felt no necessity to explain what it was specifically that made the work of Geertz admirable in the first place so, it appears, he is not called upon to explain a radical change of opinion. In 1978 he had been seeking to place himself within 'Western' discourse, almost in the role of a radical reformer. By 1983, he is clearly seeking to orient his critique differently, seeking to find a place within a 'space' of anti-imperialist studies, in which the work of Geertz does not fit. This much is apparent in his article 'Orientalism Revisited?' in which he plays down the originality of his own study, to place it in a line of anti-colonialist writers who seem to have nothing but this, and the fact that Said approves them, in common<sup>10</sup>. What he is keen to establish is a catch-all critique providing the means to dispose of what he finds objectionable and to praise whatever he approves. This is exactly the power relation that he accuses the Orientalists of constructing in relation to the Orient. Unlike the Orient itself, however, contemporary Orientalists have the power to answer back, and not surprisingly they have not hesitated to do so. Said's pathetic response to some of these counterblasts indicates the weakness of his position, which he is incapable of defending, except by constantly shifting his ground<sup>11</sup>.

The more substantial question raised (or, one could equally argue, hidden) by Said's critique is the nature

of reciprocity between subject and object. In this respect the extent that Said has adequately represented what the Orientalists themselves have said is largely irrelevant. His argument rather stands or falls on his denial of such a reciprocal relationship. Orientalism was imposed upon the Orient: it was a European project, more or less consciously elaborated, in which Orientalists were nothing but passive pawns. Whether or not Orientalist representations were accurate or not thereby becomes somewhat irrelevant.

The problem here is that if reciprocity between subject and object is impossible then, by the same token, the object cannot challenge the subject by developing alternative models. In fact, since the object has no real existence, being only a conceptualization of the subject's mind, it can never be a question of the former acting upon the latter. However, this just will not do, as Said has to recognize in the conclusion to his book, since to leave the matter there would be to freeze the relation in empty space. There could be no way of ever changing it. The only way out of the impasse is for the subject to develop representations of the object that would represent the object more faithfully. Given the extent of Said's critique, however, it is difficult to see how this can ever possibly occur. The best that can be achieved is that the representation should concur with Said's own understanding. But then by what right can Said stand as a representative of the Orient? He is consequently forced into a position the relies on precisely the same discourse that he is criticizing. Whether or not the 'Orientalists' are guilty of the central charge that Said makes against them, of believing that the Orient 'cannot represent itself, it must be represented' (and it cannot be said that he proves his case on this point) it would certainly appear that Said himself believes it; indeed such a belief is inscribed at the heart of his project. Furthermore, his own critique relies on just as much mis-representation of Orientalists as he accuses them of making in their representations of the Orient. In Said's terms, in fact, his own conceptualization of 'Orientalists' is as pure an example of 'Orientalism' as one could wish for!

At this point, a consideration of the relation of reciprocity to representation is called for. We have already noted the use made by Said of Marx's phrase 'they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented'. This phrase is also used as an epigraph to the book and is clearly one of its central themes. Yet if we refer to the context in which Marx himself made this comment, we find that the implications for Marx are radically different from those that Said seeks to establish. Given the importance this phrase has for Said it is perhaps useful here to give the context of Marx's own argument.

Marx was considering not the Orient but the peasantry. He was concerned with understanding a concrete historical context: the failure of the revolution of 1848 and in this specific quotation he was looking at the relation of the peasantry to the Bonapartist party. He wrote: 'Insofar as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, an unrestricted government power that protects them from the other

classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above<sup>12</sup>. If there are implications in this for the Orientalist debate, they are certainly not the ones that Said himself takes up. What will be immediately apparent here is that for Marx this relation is *dynamic*: the peasantry are not acted upon but rather actively seek such representation and use it for their own purposes. The relation between the Bonapartist party and the conservative peasantry is thus reciprocal: they need each other. It goes without saying that the idealist conclusion that Said draws here 'if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job...' would be wholly foreign to Marx. Indeed it reveals a curious naivety on the part of Said as to how people actually perceive images. Does he really believe that anyone actually thinks that images of the Orient are commensurate with what the Orient is actually like? Indeed it is arguable that it is only academic literary critics (whose work is by definition concerned primarily with representation) who would mistake a representation for the thing it represented.

Said would, however, wish to extend such a critique further to dissolve the subject/object relation altogether, something that is not unique to him but is rather a post-modernist stance. It certainly cuts to the heart of the anthropological project, since a relation of self to other is fundamental in anthropology and it is difficult to see how anthropology can possibly take form unless it engages with the complex dialectical relation between distancing and familiarity that the subject/object relation implies. If at its root this relation is unable to entertain the possibility of reciprocity, then anthropology must resign itself to producing images that bear no relation to the object of study. Worse, such images could only function ideologically and involve falsification in a power context.

However, in this context Said fails to justify, or even argue, the presupposition that enables him to establish the monolithic nature of the object of his study: the European subject that has created Orientalism. What is the nature of this subject: Where did it originate? And how and why? Such 'willed, human work' as he calls it can hardly be born from empty space. Given the nature of his critique, it would seem incumbent upon him to at least address these issues. The fact that he does not do so emphasizes even more the 'Orientalist' nature of his own project: Orientalism is a given to be analysed; as such it becomes Said's own 'Other'. Thus, within his own work, the self/other relation remains intact.

Even if we allow for the possibility of the dissolving of the self/other relation, it must still be asked whether this can be done except by means of a tautological sleight of hand. He has certainly not taken on board the philosophical underpinning of this relation, which is contained in Hegel's anthropology and most notably in his treatment of the relation of master and slave<sup>13</sup>, for in Hegel's terms what is fundamental is reciprocity. In fact, it is more than reciprocal, it is symbiotic: the reality of the slave is the master; the reality of the master is the slave. Neither are free agents: each needs the other to complete his relation to the world. But this separation is also necessary for any sort of lucidity; without it undifferentiation and entropy take over. But in Hegel's terms, the differentiation between master and slave is, at root, illusory: it is the interplay of the relation, not its fixity, that is of importance. In Hegel's terms, then, Orientalism could be changed only by the Orient itself acting upon the relation. The Orient would have to recognize itself, something that Said refuses to accept. However, if the relation remains static then Orientalism

will not, indeed cannot, change its ideological character. In this respect a critique such as Said's, acting solely on the form by which the subject master asserts its ascendancy, can change only the form and not the substance of such domination. Indeed it must become subsumed within the dominant subject; it must of necessity become part of the dominating ideology. In this respect Simon Leys was not merely being malicious when he wrote acidly: '*Orientalism* could obviously have been written by no one but a Palestinian scholar with a huge chip on his shoulder and a very dim understanding of the European academic tradition'<sup>14</sup>.

The deleterious consequences that Said's critique can have can be shown by a consideration of Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other*<sup>15</sup>. Fabian takes up Said's critique almost wholesale and tries to apply it directly to the anthropological discipline as a whole. Virtually all of the reservations we have made concerning Said could be applied equally to *Time and the Other*, except that Fabian has made the critique even more vague by focusing not upon a definable group of people that could be called Orientalists but by taking up the question of how a perceptual category (time) and a particular sense (sight) have been utilized ideologically by the West, particularly in anthropology, against its Other.

As with Said there would be much value in such a critique if it focused on the ideological aspects involved in this relation. Unfortunately, again like Said, Fabian displaces the ideological aspects to locate the critique in the methodological categories themselves. This again conflates representation with the essence of what it represents and refuses to countenance the possibility that people are capable of making such a distinction. The weakness is especially evident in his treatment of time. Fabian writes as though historians, for instance, believe that time and history are the same thing, something that only a very naive historian would believe. Historical methodology, indeed, is acutely aware of the fact that history is a construction made *through* time and can never be commensurate with it. But what is curious here is the determination Fabian displays in seeking to establish a duality between an accursed Western idea of linear time and the 'Other's' cyclical concept. In philosophical terms this distinction is not a new one, going back to Vico and before. What is new is the virulent quality that now attaches to linear time itself rather than the perception of it. Yet though people may perceive time in different ways, the fact is that the defining characteristic of time is that it passes. This passing must necessarily occur in a linear way and the procedure ought surely not to be to make a linear/cyclical dichotomy but to understand how linear and cyclical qualities of time respond to each other. In the West it is true that ideologically a conception of the linear time has been established to provide a basis for Western hegemony. Again, however, this needs to be considered in its concrete historical circumstances, not detached from those circumstances and presented as though the concept of linear time itself was responsible for such distortion.

This argument can be developed more forcibly still if we consider Fabian's critique of the visual, which assumes almost apocalyptic proportions; and perhaps we may give an appropriately puritan response: 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out'. Having enumerated what he sees as the evil consequences of a hierarchy of the senses which places vision at the top, he is unable to think outside this framework, but rather emphasizes it so that vision gains an almost Luciferian quality. No matter: like a man confronted on the path by a cobra but prepared against all eventualities, Fabian has a

This is a substantially revised version of an article that appeared originally in French in GRADHIVA 5 (1988) under the title 'Orientalisme et négritude. De la réciprocité en anthropologie'.

1. Clifford, James & George E. Marcus. 1986. *Writing Culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: U. of California P.
2. Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon. This book was published as a Penguin paperback in

- 1985 and has been or will be translated into French, German, Arabic, Dutch, Polish, Turkish, Japanese, Serbo-Croat, Catalan, Portuguese, Iranian, Italian, Spanish and Greek.
3. *Orientalism*, p. 3.
  4. Inden, Robert. 1986. *Orientalist Constructions of India. Modern Asian Studies*. 20(3) p.401/46.
  5. Miller, Christopher. 1985. *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*. Chicago: U. of Chicago P. p.15.
  6. *Orientalism*, p.21.
  7. *ibid.*, p.326.
  8. *ibid.*, p.326.
  9. Said, Edward W. 1985. 'Orientalism Revisited' in *Europe and its Other* (ed. F. Barker) (1985) Colchester: U. of Essex.
  10. see *ibid.*, p. 214/5.
  11. see for example Said's response to Bernard Lewis in the *New York Review of Books* 12 August 1982.
  12. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in Selected Works*, p. 122.
  13. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* p. 111/19 (1977) OUP.
  14. Leys, Simon. 1988. *The Burning Forest*. London: Paladin p.96.
  15. Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How anthropology makes its Object*. New York: Columbia U. P.
  16. Wolf, Eric. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: U. of California P., p.387.
  17. Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* p. 17 (1975) Harmondsworth: Penguin.
  18. Todorov, Tzvetan. 1982. *La Conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre*. Paris: Seuil p.257/8.
  19. *ibid.*, p. 253.
  20. *ibid.*, p. 253.

mongoose in his knapsack in the shape of sound which he invokes for its 'dependable' qualities against the iniquitous vision. Insofar as he places such trust in the sense of hearing, however, it seems strange that he should use the visual form of a book to argue his point: to be consistent with his argument one would have thought he should have issued his critique on audio cassette. What does not seem to occur to Fabian is that the separation of the senses in this way is characteristic of the Cartesian thinking that he is supposedly criticizing. It is not that sight is in some way a hegemonic sense; if it has taken such a form it is because it has been isolated intellectually in Western discourse. In this respect again Fabian simply confounds his own supposed argument and shows how far it is rooted in the very discourse it is purportedly criticizing. Addressing a different, but contiguous, question, Eric Wolf has written: '...instead of assuming transgenerational continuity, institutional stability, and normative consensus, we must treat these as problems. We need to understand such characteristics historically to note the conditions for their emergence, maintenance, and abrogation. Rather than thinking of social alignments as self-determining, moreover, we need – from the start of our enquiries – to visualize them in their multiple external conditions'<sup>16</sup>. This is doubtless too much trouble for someone like Fabian, who prefers to establish spurious oppositions (coevalness vs allochronism; orality vs visualism) that deflect such questions.

Both Said and Fabian are, of course, part of the groundswell of contemporary criticism that takes refuge in the so-called 'post-modern condition', founded in a dubious Nietzschean subjectivism. Said dutifully quotes Nietzsche in defining truth as a 'mobile army of metaphors', but refuses to recognize the problematic that Nietzsche himself recognized in such a definition. How rarely do we hear Nietzsche's own corollary to this statement: 'The falseness of a judgement is to us not an objection to a judgement; it is here perhaps that our language sounds strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding...'<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, Nietzsche recognized that truth and falsehood existed in dialogic relation to each other. If one accepts that truth is nothing but a 'mobile army of metaphors' then one must, as Nietzsche recognized, establish a centring position that enables the relative value of a particular 'lie' to be qualitativized. Both Said and Fabian, in common with post-modernism in general, fall into the trap of all subjectivism and conflate general and specific critiques in a way that de-legitimizes both. The direction of the 'deconstructive' impulse in contemporary criticism is not negation but rather its subversion, to the extent that genuine negation becomes impossible.

In his *La Conquête de l'Amérique*, Tzvetan Todorov has attempted a critique that has some similarities with Said's, but in the opposite direction. He has considered the conquest of Mexico not in the terms we know so well, in which the double violence (Aztec and Spaniard) still has power to shock, but in terms of human sympathy: "'To ignore history", as the adage goes, is to risk repeating it, but it is not through knowing history

that we know what to do. We are both like and not like the Conquistadores; their example is instructive, but we can never be sure that we would *not* behave like them, or that we are not in the process of imitating them as we adapt to new circumstances. But their history can be exemplary for us because it allows us to reflect on ourselves, to discover resemblances: once more the knowledge of self passes through that of the other'<sup>18</sup>. It is surely in this affirmation that anthropology ought to base itself. In considering one of the Conquistadores, Cabeza de Vaca, Todorov notes that he had 'reached equally a neutral point, not because he was indifferent to the two cultures, but because he was able to experience both internally; for him there was no longer a "they" around him. Without becoming an Indian, he had ceased to be completely Spanish'<sup>19</sup>. This flow of an individual between cultures constitutes the ambivalence of the anthropological experience, a relation that is never simple and never easy. But within this relation a dialogue is possible between cultures in which, as Todorov suggests, 'no-one has the last word, where none of the voices reduces the other to a simple object and in which neither takes advantage of his exteriority in relation to the other'<sup>20</sup>. But it is also the reality of the Western conquest that has established the possibility for such dialogue and communication. It is in the recognition of this fact that anthropological knowledge needs to be founded.

For anthropology, the critiques of Said and Fabian bring attention to our need to remain alert to our own social context. In addition to the usually assigned moral requirements towards the society one is studying, one also needs to be aware both of the institutional framework in which one is working and also of one's subservience to one's own culture. This is so no matter how strong the affinity anthropologists may feel with the people studied: if it weren't they would not return to write up their ethnographies. While we need to be aware also of the danger of turning the 'Other' into an ill-defined universal, we need at the same time to be conscious of the contrary danger of relativizing the 'Other' to the extent that the context of the ethnographic encounter in time and space is lost, and both observer and observed are reduced to a common denominator in which it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate one from the other.

In this context the very real problems of representation that undoubtedly need to be addressed are in danger of being subsumed by following the spurious direction in which Said has led the debate. Perception is not determined by Orientalism, or by anything else. It is of course true that our perceptions of the part of the world we have named as the Orient are conditioned by the representations that scholars and artists have established of that part of the world. We need to understand how such representations have functioned in practice and in this respect Said has provided some valuable raw material for a genuine consideration of what he convinces is a specific ideological construction that can be called 'Orientalism'. Such an ideology has determined nothing, however, and it is surely a dangerous illusion to believe that it ever has done.□