The Dual Legacy of *Orientalism*

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Introduction

There is little doubt that Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is one of the most influential scholarly works of the past few decades. While it was initially presented by its author as a study of how a particular body of knowledge contributed to the spread of European colonial rule, its influence has extended to just about every domain connected with imperialism, colonial history, race, and political identity. Owing to the very scope of the work that either builds directly on Said’s argument, or is inspired by it, it is not a simple task to assess his legacy. Perhaps the most contentious issue is its impact on the study of the Global South and more specifically, on the field that developed rapidly after Orientalism’s publication, post-colonial studies. In many ways, it is hard to imagine that there could be a direct connection between Said’s profound commitment to humanism, universal rights, secularism and liberalism on the one hand, and postcolonial theory’s quite explicit disavowal of, or at least its skepticism toward, those very tropes. And indeed, his most able interpreters have made a powerful case that the connection is, at best, tenuous. In this essay I will suggest that whatever his own commitments, *Orientalism* prefigured, and hence encouraged, some of the central dogmas of postcolonial studies – indeed, the very ones that cannot withstand scrutiny. And in spite of its very many strengths, its legacy is therefore a dual one – propelling the critique of imperialism into the very heart of the mainstream on the one hand, but also giving strength to intellectual fashions that have undermined the possibility of that very critique.

Orientalism as Cause and Effect

There are two arguments in *Orientalism* about the relation between Western imperialism and that discursive field. The first, and the one that has emerged as a kind of folk conception of the phenomenon, describes Orientalism as a rationalization for colonial rule. Said dates this Orientalism to the 18th Century, with the rise of what is now called the Second British Empire, and continued into the Cold War when the United States displaced Britain as the global hegemon.¹ It was during these centuries that Orientalism flourished as a body of knowledge that not only described and systematized how the East was understood, but did so in a fashion that justified its domination by the West. Hence, if nationalists demanded the right to self-governance by Asians, or criticized the racism of colonial regimes, defenders schooled in Orientalism could retort:

> That Orientals have never understood the meaning of self-government the way ‘we’ do. When Orientals oppose racial discrimination while others practice it, you say ‘they’re all Orientals at bottom’, and class interest, political circumstances and economic factors are totally irrelevant... History, politics, and economics do not matter. Islam is Islam, the Orient is the Orient, and please take all your ideas about a left and a right wing, revolutions, and change back to Disneyland.²

² Orientalism, p. 107.
In other words, the normal grounds of political judgment did not apply to colonial settings, because they presumed that Eastern peoples were motivated by the same needs and goals as those of the West. But this, Orientalism advised, was a fallacy. Asians did not think in terms of self-determination, or class, or their economic interests, etc. To object to colonialism on the grounds that it rode roughshod over these needs, or, more ambitiously, to generate a system of rights based on the presumptive universality of those needs, was to ignore the distinctiveness of Eastern culture. It was based on a category mistake, and indeed, could even be criticized as an insensitivity to their cultural specificity. In so conceptualizing the colonial subject as the quintessential Other, Orientalism absolved imperialism of any wrongdoing, and also thereby stripped demands for self-determination of any moral authority. Said’s argument here is a fairly traditional, materialist explanation for how and why Orientalist ideology came to occupy such a prominent place in European culture in the modern period. Just as any system of domination creates an ideological discourse to justify and naturalize its superordinate position, so too colonialism created a legitimizing discourse of its own. The key here is that the causal arrow runs from imperial domination to the discourse it created – simply put, colonialism created Orientalism.

This is undoubtedly the argument for which Orientalism is best known. But it is also the component of Said’s argument that is the most conventional and familiar. Said was not by any means the first anti-imperialist to describe modern Orientalism as being tied to the colonial project. Or to put it more broadly, he was not the first to show that much of the social scientific and cultural scholarship produced by colonial powers was in fact geared to justifying their rule over Eastern nations. As Said himself noted, albeit somewhat belatedly, his book was preceded by scores of works that made the same argument, from scholars belonging to the post-colonial world. Many, if not most, belonged to the Marxist tradition in some degree of proximity. What set Said’s great book apart, then, was not the argument he made, but the erudition and literary quality that he brought to it. For even while others had made claims that were identical to his, no-one had made them with the same panache, and hence, to the same effect.

But Said also makes another argument, running through the entirety of his great work, that reverses this causal arrow, and takes the argument in an entirely novel direction. On this version, Orientalism was not a consequence of colonialism, but one of its causes – “To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule”, Said avers, “is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact.” In other words, Orientalism was around far before the modern era, and by virtue of its depiction of the East, it created the cultural conditions for the West to embark on its colonial project. That depiction had at its core the urge to categorize, schematize, and exoticize the east, viewing it as mysterious and unchanging, in contrast to the familiar and dynamic West. Hence the West was ordained the center of moral and scientific progress, and the exotic and unchanging East, which was an object to be studied and apprehended, but always alien, always distant.

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Said traces this tendency back to the Classical world, continuing through the medieval period, and culminating in the great works of the Renaissance and after. This implies that Orientalism is not so much a product of circumstances specific to a historical conjuncture, but something embedded deeply in Western culture itself. To push this argument, Said makes a distinction between latent and manifest Orientalism. The latent components are its essential core, its basic moral and conceptual architecture, which have been in place since Homer, and which define it as a discourse. Its manifest elements are what give Orientalism its form in any particular era, and hence the components that undergo change in the course of history. Manifest Orientalism organizes the basic, underlying bits comprising latent Orientalism into a coherent doctrine, and its most coherent incarnation is of course the one synthesized in the modern era.

This distinction enables Said to accommodate the obvious fact that, as a discourse, Orientalism has not remained unchanged across space and time. He readily admits that Western conceptions of the East have undergone innumerable transformations in form and content over the centuries. Still, “whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism”. In other words, the changes have only been in the way Orientalism’s essential principles are expressed, their essence remaining more or less the same across the centuries. Said continues, “the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant [over time]”.

It is not just that latent Orientalism imbricates itself into the pores of Western culture. It is also that, once embedded so securely, it goes beyond simple bias to becoming a practical orientation, – an urge to bring reality in line with its conception of how the world ought to be. To Said, this practical stance has been a defining characteristic of the Orientalist mind-set, from Antiquity to the modern era, in spite of all the changes that it experienced across time. This has enormous consequences for the fate of East-West relations. Said poses the following question -- once the world is carved up analytically the way Orientalism enjoins us to, “can one survive the consequences humanly? [Is there] any way of avoiding the hostility by the division, say, of men into ‘us’ (Westerners) and ‘they’ (Orientals)?” The question is rhetorical, of course, because for Said the answer is obviously in the negative. The hostility bred by latent Orientalism is passed on from one generation to another as a pillar of western culture, always viewing the East as inferior. And as it becomes internalized and fixed as a cultural orientation, the urge to improve the natives, to help them clamber up the civilizational hierarchy, becomes irresistible. It slowly generates a momentum toward a transition from gaining knowledge about the Orient to the more ambitious project of acquiring power over it. Said’s own description of this process is worth quoting:

> Transmitted from one generation to another, it [latent Orientalism] was a part of the culture, as much a language about a part of reality as geometry or physics. Orientalism staked its existence, not upon its openness, its receptivity to the Orient, but rather on its

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5 *Orientalism*, pp. 56-60
6 The distinction is introduced in *Orientalism*, pp. 206. The discussion of the relation between the two and their functions comprises Chapter 3, Part 1, pp. 201-225.
7 Ibid. p. 206.
8 Ibid. p. 45.
internal, repetitious consistency about its constitutive will-to-power over the Orient.\(^9\)

Latent Orientalism came packaged as a will-to-power – this was the practical orientation that it embodied. Hence, the obsessive accumulation of facts, Said suggests, “made Orientalism fatally tend toward the systematic accumulation of human beings and territories”.\(^10\)

Notice that this version of his argument just about completely inverts the first, materialist, one – instead of a system of domination creating its justifying ideology, it is the latter that generates the former: an ideology now creates the power relations that it justifies. One is not sure how far Said wishes to press this point – whether he takes Orientalism to merely be an enabling condition for colonialism’s rise, as against a stronger, more propulsive role. I will consider the merits of both interpretations later in this essay. But it seems clear that, on this second argument, he views Orientalism as in some way responsible for the rise of European colonialism, not just its consequence.

Now this argument, unlike the first, does add considerable novelty to the critique of Orientalism. As Fred Halliday observed in a discussion of the book, critiques of Orientalist constructions had typically been materialist in their approach and grounded in political economy; Said’s originality derived in his formulation of an argument that gave a nod to this older approach, but then veered decisively away from it, offering what was an unmistakably culturalist alternative. Hence, “while much of the other work was framed in broadly Marxist terms and was a universalist critique, Said, eschewing materialist analysis, sought to apply literary critical methodology and to offer an analysis specific to something called 'the Orient’…”.\(^11\) It is to this innovation that we now turn.

### Two Early Critics

Said’s second argument attracted some attention in the early years after Orientalism appeared, most pointedly in Sadik Al-Azm’s biting critique in Khamsin, and then in Aijaz Ahmad’s broadside in his book, In Theory. As Al Azm correctly observed, Said’s second argument was not only in tension with, but fatally undermined, his objective of criticizing Orientalist views of modern history. For to say, as Said did, that Orientalism had been the defining element in the Western constructions of the East, without attributing it to any social or institutional matrix, strongly suggested that Orientalism was in some way part of the enduring cognitive apparatus of the West. It led inexorably to the conclusion, Al Azm suggested, that “Orientalism is not really a thoroughly modern phenomenon … but is the natural product of an ancient and almost irresistible European bent of mind to misrepresent the realities of other cultures, peoples, and their languages, in favour of Occidental self-affirmation”.\(^12\) But if this is what Said was saying, then did it not resurrect the very Orientalism that he disavowed? A defining characteristic of this world-view, after all, was the idea of an ontological chasm separating East and West, which the

\(^9\)Ibid. 222
\(^10\)Ibid. 123. Emphasis added.
\(^12\)Sadik Al Azm, “Orientalism and orientalism in reverse”, Khamsin
fields, categories, and theories emanating from the West could not traverse. The Western mind, in other words, was not capable of apprehending the true nature of Eastern culture. Said’s implantation of Orientalist discourse as an unchanging component of western culture seemed to reinforce this very idea – of the inscrutability of the Orient to Western eyes, from the Greeks to Henry Kissinger.

The same questions about Said’s second argument were raised by Aijaz Ahmad in a landmark assessment of his broader oeuvre, published almost a decade after Al Azm’s review. Ahmad speculated that Said’s second rendering of the connection between Orientalism and colonialism was perhaps attributable to the influence of Foucault, though for Ahmad, it was questionable whether Foucault would have supported the idea of a putative continuity in Western discourse from Homer to Nixon. The critical problem for Ahmad, however, was not Said’s fidelity to Foucault, but the theoretical and political consequences of locating Orientalism in the deep recesses of Western culture, rather than among the consequences of colonialism. Ahmad raised two issues in particular.

First, Said seemed to take the Orientalist mindset to be so pervasive in scope and so powerful in influence, that the possibility of escaping its grip appeared exceedingly remote. Hence, even thinkers known to be fierce critics of British colonialism are blandly assimilated into the rogues’ gallery of European Orientalists. The most prominent figure in this regard is Marx, who Said relegates to this ignominious status with only the flimsiest of explanations. Ahmad’s foregrounding of this issue was surely justified, given the role that Marx and his followers had played in not only criticizing the racism of colonial apologists, but also in their leading role in anti-colonial movements – from Ireland, to India, from Tanzania to his own homeland of Palestine. Ahmad pointed out, again correctly, that the very passages that Said singled out as instances of cultural parochialism could easily be read in a very different vein, as describing, not the superiority of Western culture, but the brutality of colonial rule. In any case, regardless of one’s judgment about Marx, what was at issue here was whether Said could justifiably claim that Orientalism not only stretched back to Classical Greece, but exercised such power as to absorb even its critics.

But Ahmad pointed to a second, equally important implication of the analysis. Said’s argument, and also his vocabulary, pushed strongly toward displacing the traditional interest-based explanations for colonialism, toward one relying on civilizational clashes. Conventional accounts of colonial expansion had typically adverted to the role of interest groups, classes, and state managers as its animating force. For Marxists it had been capitalists, for nationalists it had been “British interests”, for liberals it was overly ambitious political leaders. What all these explanations had in common was the central role that they accorded to material interests as the motivating factor in colonial rule. But if in fact Orientalism as a body of thought propels its believers toward the accumulation of territories, then it is not interests that drive the project, but a deeply rooted cultural disposition – a discourse, to put it in contemporary jargon. As Ahmad concludes:

14 Ibid. pp. 165-167.
This idea of constituting identity through difference points, again, not to the realm of political economy in which colonisation may be seen as a process of capitalist accumulation but to a necessity which arises within discourse and has always been there at the origin of discourse, so that not only is the modern orientalist presumably already there in Dante and Euripides but modern imperialism itself appears to be an _effect_ that arises, as if naturally, from the necessary practices of discourse.

Ahmad is registering his agreement with Al Azm’s judgment that Said has reversed the causal arrow that normally went _from_ colonialism _to_ Orientalism. Naturally this means that the study of this phenomenon moves from the ambit of political economy to cultural history. But it is not just that colonial expansion appears to be an artefact of discourse. The dispositions that it comprises are placed by him, not in a particular region or historical era, but in an undifferentiated entity called “the West”, stretching back two millennia. This is, of course, a classically Orientalist assertion on Said’s part. But it’s implications for the study of colonialism are profound. For colonialism now appears, not as the consequence of developments particular to a certain era, but as an expression of a deeper ontological divide between East and West, a symptom of the cultural orientation of Europe’s inhabitants. We have gone from the culprit being British capitalists, to its being “the West” -- from classes to cultures.

Said never addressed either Al Azm or Ahmad’s criticisms -- a shame because they remain among the most important and devastating engagements with his work to date. In a private exchange with Al Azm, he promised to reply at some length, and indeed to dismantle Al Azm’s entire critique point by point. But he never delivered on that promise, nor did he respond in print to Ahmad’s critique. In the rest of this essay I purpose to build upon those early interventions to push further in the same direction. The crux of what I wish to argue is that Said’s second argument -- that colonialism was a consequence of Orientalism, not its cause – was not only disturbing in its implications, but also that it could not possibly be right, on Said’s own admission. In other words, what Al Azm and Ahmad failed to observe was that _the second argument was contradicted by Said’s own evidence_. Orientalism _could not_ have generated modern colonialism, or even contributed to it in any significant way. Its roots therefore have to be sought in political economy, not in European culture – much as materialists had argued for decades.

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15 In correspondence, he promised Al Azm that he would respond. But to my knowledge he never did. Ahmad’s critique was met with silence by Said, and aggressively _ad hominem_ arguments by his followers.

Culture and Colonialism

Said is correct in his observation that ethnocentric and essentializing depictions of the East were widespread among European observers from the earliest times. The question is what explanatory role such depictions are accorded in the rise of European colonialism. We have seen in the preceding section that Said clearly assigns considerable importance to them in this regard. Just what the causal chain is that connects them to it, and how important they are compared to other factors, is murky. But we can be confident that the role is important, since he never qualifies it, nor feels compelled to embed it in a wider discussion of how it combined with other forces that pushed Britain and France outward in the modern era. The problem with Said’s view is that, on his own description of the content of Orientalism, and his empirical discussion of its relation to other cultures’ own discourses about the West, the argument for its importance as a factor in the advent of modern colonialism breaks down. And by extension, the promotion of culture as a central explanatory factor in the latter process must also be demoted.

The central problem with which Said must contend is that there was nothing unique in the West’s highly parochial understanding of the Orient. The same essentialized and ethnocentric conceptions were typical of Eastern understandings of the West. Hence, the texts we have from Arab, Persian and Indian descriptions of European culture from pre-colonial times are no less parochial in their descriptions of Europe and its people, and no less prone to generalize across time and space. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any description of a culture that can escape the tendency to categorize, to generalize across cases and to schematize in some way or form. The fact that many of the aspects of Western scholarship of the East that Said takes to be Orientalist are in fact found in any instance of cross-cultural observation or scholarship.

Said of course knows this and readily admits to it. Hence, he observes,

One ought again to remember that all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. The problem is not that conversion takes place. It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.17

But this admission raises a fundamental problem for Said’s insistence that Orientalism was in some way responsible for modern imperialism. For if the urge to categorize, essentialize and generalize about other cultures – which Said insists is what Orientalism does -- is common to all cultures, then how can it explain the rise of modern colonialism, which a project specific to particular nations? In other words, if this mindset was common to many cultures, then it cannot have been what generated colonialism, since the latter was particular to a few nations in (mostly) Western Europe.

17 Orientalism, 67.
One way to save Said’s second argument would be to weaken the claim for causal role. As I suggested in the preceding section, because of Said’s ambiguity regarding its status, there are a variety of ways that we could construe his claim. At the very least, we can distinguish between a strong version of it and a weak one:

**Strong version:** Latent Orientalism was sufficient to launch colonialism. On this account, the motivational push coming from cultural essentialism was all that was needed to launch a colonial project. No other preconditions were necessary.

**Weak version:** Latent Orientalism was necessary, but not sufficient to launch colonialism. On this account, the racism associated with latent Orientalism was an indispensable precondition for colonialism, but it needed other factors to also be present—perhaps political and economic ones. But the latter could not have been effective had the Orientalist mindset not been gestating.

The strong version proposes that once the Orientalist mindset was in place, it could, on its own, generate modern colonialism. On this view, no other contributing factor was needed to bring about the result. Hence, it would predict that any country that viewed other cultures through this prism would embark on colonial expansion. Clearly this view is contradicted by the observation that the number of countries with an “Orientalist” mindset (as described above) far exceeded the number that in fact embarked on colonial expansion. So the strong version cannot be sustained.

A second strategy to save Said’s second argument would be to resort to its weak version. The burden here would be to propose that even if latent Orientalism could not, by itself, generate colonialism, it was nonetheless an essential part of the combination of factors that did bring it about. Hence, it was still necessary, even though it wasn’t sufficient, and even though it had to act in tandem with other factors. Thus, it might be that economic interest or political ambitions were also critical in generating the British or French thrust into the Middle East. The search for oil, the desire to find new markets, the need to secure geopolitical advantage by capturing key ports—all these might have been critical motivating factors for the European powers. The weaker argument would be able to accommodate all these into an explanation for the rise of modern imperialism. It would not have to claim that racial prejudice alone was what drove the Europeans outward. But it could still insist that these other factors on their own would not have been sufficient for the outcome. Without the mindset created by the already existing latent Orientalism, the other factors might have remained inert, unable to muster the force needed to launch the project.

This would probably be the commonsensical defense of Said’s argument, and it is certainly the most effective. But while it has a surface appeal, this version also fails for two reasons. The first has to do with the internal structure of the argument. Nobody doubts that factors like economic or political motivation had to play a role in colonialism’s rise. In that sense, the place of the

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broader causal complex is secure. The question is, once the economic motivation is in place, will its proponents also require the psychological orientation generated by Orientalism to undertake the colonial project? It might seem that the answer is an obvious yes, for, it could be claimed, a process as brutal and costly as colonialism could not be undertaken without some moral or ethical justification – not just for the wider public but for its practitioners. Moral agents could not engage in oppressive practices, they could not terrorize other human beings, unless they believed that the endeavor served a higher purpose. And this is what Orientalism provided them, with its claims to civilize and educate the natives. The ethnic and racial domination implied by modern colonialism would thus be perceived by its progenitors as a moral undertaking, not just the naked pursuit of power and profit. This is the sense in which Orientalism might be suggested to be necessary, albeit insufficient, as a causal factor in the expansion of European rule.

But what this argument would overlook is that it is not the rationalizing function of Orientalism that is in question, but the need for it to be already present in European culture at the inception of the imperial project. Thus, materialist arguments could easily allow that an economically motivated project is greatly facilitated by a discourse that rationalizes the project on moral grounds. But they would deny the stronger proposition that, had the discourse not been in place, the project would have stalled or failed to be launched. This is so because, once the economic interest is in place, there is an endogenously generated pressure to create a justifying discourse for the project, even where such a discourse does not already exist. Dominant agents are not impeded by the fact they do not have, ready at hand, a rationalizing ideology. Where it does not exist, they cobble one together. This is, after all, the main function of intellectuals – to serve ruling groups by crafting an ideology that justifies their dominance on moral grounds. So the absence of such a discourse at the project’s inception cannot be deemed an obstacle to its launching.

But this is exactly what is implied in Said’s claim that latent imperialism was in some way responsible for the modern colonial project. For even the weak version of his second argument to succeed, it has to establish that, had British and French elites not had the intellectual resources of Orientalism already available to them, this absence would have been an obstacle to their colonial project. Without this claim, the second argument collapses into a materialist one. If Said were to agree that, even if Orientalism not been available as an academic discipline, even if latent Orientalism had been absent from the scene, its basic elements could have nonetheless been crafted ex nihilo in order to justify colonial rule – then he would be suggesting that latent Orientalism was not in fact a necessary part of the causal complex that brought about colonialism. If it is conceded that colonial elites were capable of generating their own rationalizing discourse, then latent Orientalism fails even as a necessary component of the forces behind colonialism. We are now back to the materialist argument that ruling classes create the ideology needed for their reproduction, and not the other way around.

Hence, Said’s second argument cannot be sustained, even in its weak form. Once it is admitted that essentializing descriptions of other cultures were common across East and West, and once we recognize that other motivations were enough to propel states outward, then it cannot be maintained that the mindset created by these descriptions was in any way responsible for the colonial project. What was in fact responsible was what Marxists and progressive nationalists
had been suggesting for a century prior to the publication of *Orientalism* – the material interests and capacities of particular social formations in the West. It is to Said’s credit that he acknowledges the fact of cross-cultural parochialism – but quite astonishing that he is unaware of how devastating the admission is to his argument. The admission injects a deep and unresolvable contradiction in one of his fundamental claims. Once this part of his book is rejected, as it should be, what remains standing is his first argument – that the basic function of Orientalism was to serve as the justification of colonial rule, as its consequence, not cause.

**Legacy**

Said never addressed the ambiguity in his book regarding the relationship between Orientalist discourse and the colonial project – in chief, the co-presence of two diametrically opposed enunciations of that relationship. But in many ways, that very ambiguity played a role in the easy assimilation of *Orientalism* into the broader shifts underway around the time of its publication. The early 1980’s was when critical intellectuals ceased to be enamored of Marx and Marxist theory, turning to the warm embrace of post-structuralism, and soon thereafter, postcolonial theory. In this context, Said’s incipient culturalism, his nod to the potentially primary role of ideas and discourse in the initiation of colonialism, folded seamlessly into the shifts that were occurring in the scholarly world. His explicit overtures to Foucault, his adoption of some of the latter’s conceptual vocabulary, packaged the book in a fashion that made it easily digestible, even familiar. Substantively, the culturalism of his second argument – which elicited censure from Marxists like Al Azm and Ahmad – barely raised an eyebrow in the wider firmament, because this was the very direction in which critical theory was evolving. Indeed, the reaction from broader circles was directed, not at Said, but at Ahmad, whose important critique of Said was met with a campaign so vicious and personalized that it is jarring to revisit it even a quarter-century later.\(^{19}\)

But the second aspect of Said’s book that ensured its warm reception had to do with his treatment of Marx. Said did not just present his book as a scholarly work on colonial ideology, but as a representative of the *anti-colonial* tradition. It was packaged as a work of critical theory – deeply erudite, intensely scholarly, but never neutral. In this respect, it was intended to be part of the anti-colonial tradition associated with the global Left in the twentieth century. But as he well knew, that tradition had been led by, and associated with, Marxist and socialist theory since the late nineteenth century. Even mainstream nationalists drew on the theories and the political ambitions of the Marxist Left, from India and China to South Africa and Peru. The only political

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currents that were explicitly hostile to that tradition were those associated with conservative nationalists and religious groups. For a century prior to the publication of Orientalism, the progressive critique of colonialism had always orbited around, and drawn upon, Marxism.

Said’s innovation was to be the most significant intellectual who claimed the mantle of radical anti-colonialism, while also denouncing Marx as a purveyor of an alien and highly parochial values and analysis. This was significant in several respects. First and foremost, for the rapidly professionalizing New Left -- now tenured and looking for acceptance in the American academy -- it provided an ideal instrument to distance themselves from Marxist theory while still identifying as radicals. It was now possible to re-invent colonial critique so that it defended the idea of self-determination, while eschewing any association with socialist or Marxist ideas. Indeed, the preferred motif now became to criticize the Marxist legacy as not radical enough – hence to outflank it rhetorically from the Left.

These strategies were neatly exemplified in an influential series of essays on Marxism and colonial critique, by the Indian historian Gyan Prakash. Writing in the early 1990’s, when Said’s influence was well-established, Prakash upheld the banner of anti-colonialism, calling for a root and branch excision of Orientalism from colonial historiography – in which one of the main targets turned out to be Marx and his followers. What was significant here was not just the novelty of turning Marx into a proponent of the “colonial gaze” -- to use a bit of postcolonial jargon; but equally, for Prakash to draw explicitly on Said, on Orientalism, and to drape his argument in that book’s conceptual vocabulary. This strategy was soon just about ubiquitous in all the fields in which Area Studies played any significant role, so that by the second decade of this century, it was taken for granted that the only way in which Marxist theory could have anything to offer in colonial critique was if somehow it could be rid of its Western bias and its putative endorsement of colonialism – for which Said’s work was, and still is, taken to be the remedy.

Secondly, a central implication of Said’s description of Marx as an Orientalist was that the analytical categories associated with him were similarly demoted. It had been common, even typical, in the critical anti-colonial tradition to approach the subject through the prism of political economy -- even if the analyst did not mobilize its categories, the deep and enduring relation between colonial expansion and capitalist motives was at least assumed, if not highlighted. But in a book devoted to the explication of colonial ideology, to the connection between that ideology and the colonial project, Said studiously distances himself from any reference to capitalism. Neither the word, nor even its cognates, even make an appearance in Orientalism, except in reference to others’ works or in irony. The entire issue is presented, and analyzed, through the framework of cultural analysis, in which the thinker who receives a positive endorsement is not Marx, nor Lenin and Luxemburg, who wrote the two most influential analysis of imperialism in the twentieth century – but Foucault.

What made the marginalization of political economy all the more significant was the framework he seemed to offer in its place. At the core of the traditional materialist understanding to

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colonialism was the analysis of capitalism and the wider theory bound up with it – the manner in which class interests shaped imperialism, the relation of laboring classes to it, the question of whether, and how much, they might have benefited to it, the mechanisms by which local elite interests were harnessed to the project, and of course the role of the state. But few of these concerns make their way into Said’s framework. The categories that drive his analysis are civilizational and geographical – East and West, Orient and Occident. Capitalists and workers, peasants and landlords – the normal concepts of political analysis are displaced by the very categories that Said ought to have been anxious to set aside. Rather than interests, what motivates colonialists is the West’s “will to power”, a concept that is connected to interests only semantically, if at all.

The evacuation of materialist categories, the turn to culturalism, the positing of what appears to be a cognitive divide between West and east, the pillorying of Marx as another in a long line of European Orientalists – all these elements in Said’s great work were entirely in line with the evolution of critical scholarship in the era of Reagan and Thatcher. As social theory went from materialist to culturalist, and from culturalist to postcolonial, overtures to Orientalism remained a fixture throughout. And Said, a humanist and lifelong critic of cultural essentialisms, became associated with an intellectual turn that has resurrected the very Orientalist tropes that the spent much if his career trying to undermine. Said was apparently never entirely at ease with this circumstance, as Timothy Brennan has observed. But he did little to overturn it, far less to resist it. For better or worse, he not only tolerated, but presided over his enshrinement as one of the foundational thinkers of the postcolonial turn.

For those who seek a return to the materialist roots of the anti-colonial tradition in scholarship, the dimensions of Said’s great work I have highlighted – his second argument, the essentialism that it entailed, the demotion of political economy, and the positing of an East-West dichotomy – will have to be set aside. This means that one of the tasks is to revive the critical approach endorsed by scholars such as Al Azm and Ahmad, against the mountainous and deplorable calumny to which they have been subjected. Most of all, it will mean placing the question of class and capitalism back at the center of political and historical analysis of colonialism – and also of the postcolonial states that followed in its wake. But this does not by any means entail a rejection of Orientalism itself. The materialist core of Said’s work remains valid, untouched by the infirmities of his “Orientalism-in-reverse”, as Al Azm correctly described his second argument. It still offers an imposing edifice upon which the anti-colonial tradition can build. It is just that this dimension of Said’s great work will have to be embedded in an analytical framework that draws upon, and returns to, those categories that are missing from Orientalism, and which Postcolonial Theory has worked for more than a generation to either bury or forget – back to political economy, for which, even today, Marx remains the indispensable starting point.