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“Orientalism” Dossier

Orientalism: thirty years on* Introduction

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Abstract

This dossier contains a series of articles inspired by Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Together, the articles in the dossier show the importance of Said's contribution and defend the need to continue working to make it even more important and valid, both in the academic context and in terms of the social diffusion it deserves. With a common thematic thread –the perception of the Other (“the Orient”) from our perspective (“the West”)– these articles shun the conception of East Asia as an independent “discipline” **and treat it, on the contrary, as an object of study that must be tackled with methodological rigour** from specific disciplines: history, philosophy, anthropology and literature. This should facilitate, on one hand, the possibility of putting forward arguments and observations that enrich already existing debates in each discipline by shedding new light on them and, on the other, the social diffusion of these ideas on East Asia beyond limited circles.

Keywords

Orientalism, Said, East Asian Studies, Area Studies

Resum

Aquest dossier aplega un seguit d'articles inspirats en el concepte d'orientalisme d'Edward Said. En conjunt, els articles del dossier demostren la importància de l'aportació de Said i defensen la necessitat de continuar treballant per a fer-la encara més rellevant i vigent, tant dins del context acadèmic com en la difusió social que hi hauria d'estar inevitablement connectada. Amb un fil temàtic comú –la percepció de l'Altre (“l'Orient”) des de la nostra perspectiva (“l'Occident”)– aquests articles defugen

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la concepció de l'Àsia oriental com a «disciplina» independent i la tracten, en canvi, com a objecte d'estudi que cal abordar amb rigor metodològic des de disciplines concretes: història, pensament, antropologia, literatura. Això hauria de facilitar, d'una banda, la possibilitat de projectar arguments i observacions que enriqueixin debats ja existents a cada disciplina aportant-hi una nova llum i, de l'altra, la difusió social d'aquestes idees sobre l'Àsia oriental més enllà de cercles restringits.

Paraules clau

orientalisme, Said, Estudis de l'Àsia Oriental, Estudis d'Àrea

1

If the reader opens *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*, they will immediately come upon the following anecdote, involving the book's author, the American journalist Sheridan Prasso:

In 1990, shortly after I had moved from Chicago to Asia as a news correspondent, I became intrigued by a frequent visitor to my Mid-levels neighbourhood of Hong Kong, a man who shouted in a sing-songy voice the same words over and over as he traversed the winding, hilly streets. I lived in an apartment block in front of a concrete wall holding back the mountainside, and to me this mass of concrete seemed an affront to nature. I knew that the Cantonese people of Hong Kong believe that there are gods everywhere and in everything –in the kitchen, the trees, the water, and the landscape. Could this man be chanting to appease the mountain god who might be angered by this man-made desecration? I wanted to indulge the fantasy that I was witnessing the mystical Asia out the window of my concrete apartment block. I told my Chinese-speaking roommate about the man, and one day as I heard his cries I went running to get her. She stepped onto our small balcony, listened to his chant, and turned to me laughing, "I believe he is collecting scrap metal". I was never able to see Asia in the same way again. (Prasso, 2005, pp. xi-xii)

This journalist's anecdote is likely to have caused an uncomfortable smile in more than one reader: we have all been victims of some similar situation, to a greater or lesser degree. It may seem to us, therefore, that the anecdote exposes the shame of our ignorance. In addition –something that may be even more important– it betrays us and makes obvious the assumptions we start from when we try to understand an Other who is distant from us and quite different. As a result of the representational systems that inevitably surround us in the West, frequently our perception of cultures and societies such as the Chinese, Japanese or Korean is tinged, often unconsciously, by an exotic veil.

In recent decades, globalisation of capitalism has made it such that the presence of these cultures in Catalonia and Spain

is progressively less singular and more visible –not only on paper or on the screen of the press and the media, but also in the daily realities and routines of almost everyone: in schools, neighbourhoods, at work or in the supermarket. Paradoxically, however, this greater presence and familiarity has (still) not banished the majority of myths, stereotypes and beliefs concerning the other –stranger, distant, exotic, incomprehensible– that, as we said, tinges our assumptions and slants our perceptions in a predetermined direction.¹ Thirty years after the publishing of a major work in the humanities and social sciences such as *Orientalism*, by Edward Said (1978), which precisely exposes and denounces these representational mechanisms, the paradox deserves, we believe, a brief review.

2

In *Orientalism*, Said dissects the way in which, from the West, a certain image of the Orient has been constructed that has marked our way of understanding it, representing it and approaching it. By now, the three dimensions, which, according to Said, channel these representations of the Oriental Other are well-known: the academic study that has as its object of analysis the East or the Middle East; a discourse within which East and West are opposite concepts and where one represents the other and performs as such; and the Western style to dominate, restructure and spread its authority over the Orient with the justification that Western culture and values, assumed as opposite to Oriental ones, are superior. Said shows how these dimensions, in an interrelated way, have constructed and continue to construct the concept of the Orient through a process that labels, defines and justifies this geographical area and acts in it. In other words, Said explains to us that our visions of the Orient are nothing more than re-presentations, ideological constructions anchored in a specific perspective –in our case, Eurocentric– and with an inherent agenda.

As the author himself acknowledges, Said's *Orientalism* draws inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault and is fully in keeping with the effervescence of poststructuralism –a group of intellectual movements born around the decade of the 1970s that questioned ideas, concepts and approaches that had been assumed as central or "universal" in theory, knowledge and language. Said's contribution

1. On stereotypes and other questions related to otherness, difference and meaning, see Guarné (2004).



is fully identified with the poststructuralist will to “decentre the universe” and, in the words of Derrida (1966), question “the structurality of the structure”. This is how various movements or branches of poststructuralism construct a critical project meant to undo, contradict or endow with complexity assumptions that had not been placed in doubt until that time. Feminism and gender studies, for example, criticised patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology. Derridian deconstruction, for its part, questioned the centrality and transparency of language, text and meaning *per se*. In the case that concerns us, Said’s contribution made it easier for postcolonial studies to study in depth the multiple implications derived from the historical complicity between Eurocentrism and Western imperialism.

Indeed, Said’s work was not the first to critically reveal these types of mechanisms of colonialism. More than two decades earlier, for example, Frantz Fanon had already published the important *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and, years later, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), in which, from his experience as a psychoanalyst, he made an analysis of the psychological effects of colonialism on the identity of those being colonised.² Said, instead of centring his analysis on the oppressed, focused on the oppressors—and this new angle made his contribution paramount. Aside from generating an important academic debate, there were at least two other main consequences to his work. First, Said’s contribution paved the way for postcolonial criticism in the poststructuralist magma. Following Said’s *Orientalism*, other analyses appeared that were more sophisticated than the Orientalist discourse, including that of Homi Bhabha, as well as more direct criticisms of this same discourse, such as that of Gayatri Spivak—to mention only two of the various representatives of these two tendencies that, together with Said, comprise the so-called *Holy Trinity* of postcolonialism. Second, from an institutional perspective, Said’s work and the debate it engendered helped to develop postcolonial studies as a legitimate academic framework—with the establishment of courses, academic programmes, centres and lines of research, profiles and professional associations and other “technologies of recognition” (Shih, 2004).

It goes without saying that Said’s work has also received numerous criticisms from various sources: both from those who, feeling that they were being directly alluded to as “Orientalists” and in disagreement with Said’s approaches, attack him, offended, from the neighbouring trench (Lewis, 1983), as from those who, immersed in the same poststructuralist paradigm that helped to conceive and disseminate Said’s reflection, question several aspects from the inside (Ahmad, 1992). At any rate, the importance of Said’s contribution to the academic community and to knowledge in humanities and social sciences is, by now, indisputable. Drawing inspiration from defences of postmodern anthropology (Fabian,

2000), we can state that, in a very complex historical moment, Said was capable of raising the correct questions relating to the comparison of cultures, although perhaps he did not provide proper answers—or, maybe, as suggested by Josep Maria Fradera (2004), that he had the merit to lay “the problem of comparison” on the table but was unable to provide a solution.

Thirty years have gone by since the publication of *Orientalism* and we now find ourselves in a very different historical context. From our position, we consider it appropriate to make a couple of observations regarding the validity of Said’s contribution for our social and academic reality. First, the anecdote from Sheridan Prasso with which we began this introduction, or the many similar personal anecdotes that probably came to mind as we read it, suggests that the translation of Said’s ideas beyond the academic world is, still, inadequate. The representation of the Other implicit in diverse contexts and in technologies of generation and circulation of knowledge—the press and the media, cinema and literature, etc.—does not seem to indicate that the critical approaches of Said have spread through the various social spheres and taken root widely or firmly. It is probably not very adventurous to affirm that this situation shows the difficulty in finding bridges or meeting points between the academic world and social diffusion of knowledge—especially in minority academic fields. Second, in the institutional field related to the study of East Asia, the development and the validity of Said’s contributions have not had the same repercussion in the United States—where *Orientalism* was first published and where study and research on East Asia have undergone an important transformation over the past twenty years—as in academic contexts of Catalonia or Spain. Indeed, the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Said’s work coincides with another modest anniversary—in 2008, the official programme in Asian Studies in Catalonia and Spain celebrate their first five years of existence—and it is pertinent, also, to reconsider the validity of Said’s work in our more local academic context.

3

The creation of the degree in East Asian Studies represented a remarkable milestone that, apart from finally bringing to fruition that which a small group of university professors had demanded for years, began to put us on the level of the majority of European countries. The academic and institutional legitimisation made it easier to make a degree available to society that, until that time, had been surprisingly absent from the catalogue of official degrees in Spain and that, without a doubt, was needed for a more rigorous and profound understanding of the global world that surrounds us—a world in which the role of countries such as

2. English translations of the original French: F. Fanon (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press; F. Fanon (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.



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China, Japan or Korea is increasingly visible and important. After five years of existence, however, it is important to also examine some of the dangers derived from the creation of a specific and “isolated” educational field for the study of East Asia.

Taking a closer look at this point it is interesting to return to the first of the dimensions of Orientalism that Said denounced some three decades ago:

The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient –and this applies whether this person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist– either in its specific or general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she says or does is Orientalism. Compared with *Oriental studies* or *Area studies*, it is true that the term *Orientalism* is less preferred by specialists nowadays, both because it is too vague and general and because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism. Nevertheless, books are written and congresses held with “the Orient” as their main focus, with the Orientalist in his new or old guise as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental. (Said, 1978, p.2)

Thirty years on, this description is not totally invalid –especially in terms of East Asian Studies in our country. In order to understand the reasons for this stagnation, it is perhaps worthwhile to go back to the origin of these studies as academic concepts or programmes, which is nothing more than Area Studies. Originating in America during the Cold War, Area Studies were organised into teaching nodes centred on a geographical area that the student was required to tackle from different disciplines: language, history, literature, society, politics, international relations, etc. The aim of these programmes was, originally, to promote the training of specialists in the countries and regions they were interested in strategically, to “get to know” the Other –the enemy on the other side of the Iron Curtain, for example.

Although today the context is certainly another and, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the geopolitical dynamic is very different, present-day Area Studies have inherited several characteristics intrinsic in their origin. Some of these traits are still quite tangible: in America, PhD students who are US citizens and who study languages and cultures “of strategic importance to the country” (such as Arabic or Chinese) can receive government funding through FLAS (Foreign Language and Area Studies) grants, a remnant of the famous Title VI, National Defense Education Act of 1958. However, beyond these more lucrative implications, there are numerous consequences that, from a discursive viewpoint,

are even more important. As a result of this kind of framework and objectives, Area Studies are in keeping with –more or less explicitly– a policy that reinforces differences between cultures, more than one that searches for similarities between a distant culture and one’s own –as denounced by the Swiss sinologist Jean-François Billeter (2006) when he wisely criticises the approach inherent to “star” sinologists like François Jullien who base their success in the West precisely on the strategic accentuation of these differences, without a broad, profound and academically rigorous historicism.

Picking up Said’s contribution again, Rey Chow describes the criticism of theorist Harry Harootunian, who regrets the missed opportunity whereby Area Studies were unable to produce an alternative form of knowledge given the opening that the publication of *Orientalism* provided:

As Harootunian goes on to argue, for all its investment in the study of other languages and other cultures, area studies missed the opportunity, so aptly provided by Said’s criticism of Orientalism, to become the site where a genuinely alternative form of knowledge production might have been possible. (Chow, 2006, p. 41-42)

Thus, the delay in the implantation of an official degree in Asian Studies in Catalonia and Spain has resulted in the fact that, when in America, the birthplace of Area Studies, the problems inherent in them have now been reconsidered, in our academic context we have simply reproduced this same questionable structure. In contrast to America –where the different university departments (Linguistics, History, Comparative Literature, Anthropology, Sociology, Archaeology, etc.) have professors specialising in that discipline as applied to a certain region of East Asia and in which, despite in some cases teaching still being carried out from Area Studies programmes, the approaches are markedly disciplinary–, in an academic context such as ours, there are not enough specialists, from the different university disciplines and departments, with experience in East Asia. There is the risk, then, that the teaching context for East Asian Studies could end up converting a degree into an isolated “discipline”, closed within itself and without interaction with the other spheres of knowledge that should shape it.

It is important to understand my line of argument: I am not trying to negate the validity and the potential of East Asian Studies. On the contrary, I strongly believe that they can be of value as the setting which, taking East Asia or one of its regions as a common object of study, allows for a critical and enriching interdisciplinary dialogue in various directions. From my point of view, however, it is essential that this dialogue be carried out between specialists with solid methodological training in some specific discipline. It is also essential that this dialogue have the predisposition of all parties: on one hand, of the disciplines themselves and the



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mechanisms that articulate them (schools, departments, publishers, professional associations, etc.), where there is still great reluctance to accept an object of study such as East Asia as being serious and legitimate and that are beset by markedly, and more or less concealed, Orientalist prejudices. And, on the other hand, of the many professors who specifically promote Orientalist isolation and the *ghettoisation* of East Asian Studies with various excuses and for diverse reasons –from the very incapacity to maintain this intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue, to the major benefits (of all kinds) that academic isolation may yield. We must, therefore, foster an interdisciplinarity that is both well understood and constructive, without falling into the trap that, as stressed by Néstor García Canclini (2004, pp.122-123) in reference to the case of cultural studies, may end up setting this very interdisciplinarity: it is imperative that research and analysis on East Asia be well-anchored in a discipline of specific knowledge that contributes rigorous methodologies of analysis and that guarantees the circulation of results beyond “Orientalist” circles.

4

Thus, the dossier contains a series of articles inspired, in one way or another, both by Said’s concept of Orientalism and by concerns about the state of East Asian studies in this country. Together they show the importance of Said’s contribution, of the reflection he inspired and, at the same time, defend the need to continue working to make it even more important and valid, both in our academic context and beyond –in the social diffusion that it should inevitably inspire. With a common thematic thread that is in keeping with the reflections we have made throughout this introduction and that may be synthesised as the perception of the Other (“the Orient”) from our perspective (“the West”). The articles in this dossier shun the conception of East Asia as an independent “discipline” and treat it, on the contrary, as an object of study that must be tackled with methodological rigour from specific disciplines –history (David Martínez-Robles), philosophy (Albert Galvany), anthropology (Blai Guarné) and literature (Carles Prado-Fonts)– applied to different geographical areas (China, Japan) and to different periods (from the classical world to contemporary times).

From these markedly disciplinary contributions, the collection of articles puts forward arguments and observations that enrich already existing debates in each discipline by shedding new light on them –that which comes from an object of study that is still not widespread or bestowed great legitimacy in our country, as is the case of East Asia. We also hope that this dossier helps to revitalise

Said’s work so that, in the future, cultures can come together in a more ethically balanced way and that all of us may be more aware of the determining factors that predetermine this coming together. In other words, and returning to anecdote from Sheridan Prasso with which we began this introduction, so that in the future these anecdotes do not cause us such an uncomfortable smile. To revisit *Orientalism*, published thirty years ago, also means to reconsider it, today, for thirty years hence.

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