

Reorienting Orientalism

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Abstract:

Daniel Martin Varisco's *Reading Orientalism* is the first monograph to analyse systematically the arguments and theses of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. While Varisco acknowledges the importance of *Orientalism* and seconds some of its main theses, he also accuses Said of being overly polemical and reductionist. Since Varisco himself considers all the major secondary literature and, moreover, much of the vast body of literature on the "Orient" either discussed or ignored by Said, this volume is an extremely valuable contribution to scholarship. Despite some shortcomings of style and theory, *Reading Orientalism* is indispensable for scholars and students working with Said's concepts.

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Much has been said and written about Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The strongest reactions include uncritical adulation and ad personam polemics. In between these extremes, hundreds of books, articles and essays take sharper or more differentiated stances, either focusing on a few aspects of the book or giving an overview of the author's work as a whole. But it took almost three decades since the publication of *Orientalism* for a monograph to appear that tries to pull all the criticism together and evaluate the book point-by-point. It was Daniel Martin Varisco, professor of anthropology at Hofstra University (Long Island, NY), who took up this Herculean task.

In *Reading Orientalism* he not only summarises and discusses every central thesis and argument brought forward by Said in and surrounding *Orientalism*, but also takes into account all major secondary literature and – this might be the book's greatest merit – does all this against the background of the large body of literature written on the "Orient", whether discussed or ignored by Said himself. Varisco agrees with Said's claim that there is a bias, a prejudice or – if you will – a discourse among Westerners inclining them to construct an Oriental Other, one who is mystical, irrational, inferior and in need of Western rule. He also seconds Said in saying that this affects not only politicians, novelists and poets, but also writing travellers and scholars, by shaping their representation of people and societies perceived as Oriental.

While he criticises Said for writing as if he were the first to point out this problem (and therefore ignoring writings, both Western and Eastern, which did so decades, even centuries, before *Orientalism*), Varisco also commends the book for being a particularly powerful critique. Mainly due to its rhetorical strength, Said's book garnered far more attention than previous works, thereby making it almost impossible for scholars in the field not to reflect upon.

However, over the course of his book Varisco also makes clear that this rhetorical power goes hand-in-hand with polemics and reductionism. He demonstrates that, from the bulk of Western writing on Islam, Said singled out only those authors, texts and phrases that supported his thesis and ignored contradicting evidence, thereby treating scholarly and literary texts alike as a mere repository for incriminating expression. Only by means of this (rather un-scholarly) selection and manipulation of the material, combined with some lack of attention to historical detail, was Said able to render the very heterogeneous Western representations of "the East" as one single, overwhelmingly imperialistic discourse. Varisco argues that these

flaws in Orientalism are especially grave since its author seemed rather uninterested in acknowledging criticism or correcting his position. What is yet worse is the fact that, as Varisco points out, many (particularly younger) scholars and students seem to accept Said's theses uncritically, which is why he considers Said's polemics to have had a negative impact on the study of the Islamic and Arabic worlds.

Although Varisco's argument is sound and generally convincing, room remains for disagreement. In the first place, not all charges levelled at Said are indeed so compelling, for example the allegation that Said himself essentialises an East-West-Divide, a claim that is reiterated without being sufficiently supported (p. 251-266). However, in a book as rich as Varisco's, these problems and the few minor mistakes – such as Edmund Husserl's sudden transformation into a representative of "French philosophy" (p. 152) – can be excused, and their contrast with the author's attitude simply recognised as such. A more severe fault within the context of postcolonial theory is the fact that Varisco relies almost exclusively on English sources, largely ignoring Arabic responses to Said which have not yet been translated into English.

Another troubling feature of *Reading Orientalism* is its unrestrained effusiveness of style. The table of contents alone contains at least eight puns, four of which make use of Said's name. Word games such as "What is Said (but True?) About Said?" (p. 267), "Saïdo-masochism" (p. 278), and "Disraeli: A Matter of Distaste" (p. 210) crop up on almost every page, and while they are almost certainly designed to make the book a more enjoyable read, their sheer number is more likely to leave readers shaking their heads.

One desideratum remains with respect to theory: while Varisco compellingly demonstrates Said's shortcomings, his own arguments are almost entirely non-theoretical. This is especially curious considering that much of the attraction of Said's book lies in its theoretical implications. On this front, however, Varisco fails to do much more than state the nearly obvious: that Said's eclectic combination of Foucault, Nietzsche, Gramsci and humanism is daring and problematic. The trouble with this lack of theory becomes apparent when Varisco proposes a way out of the binary of Orientalist bias and Said's reductionist critique. His solution is that we should, quite simply, move "beyond the polemic" and "the politics of blame", reflect, instead, on biases, and adopt the tools developed by "sound scholarship" in related fields (p. 300-304). One could hardly object to this proposal, but for a critique of a book with such a strong theoretical stance as *Orientalism*, a more extensive theoretical framing would have been preferable. Varisco himself acknowledges its absence by quoting Robert Young on the second-to-last page: "Instead of objecting to Said and qualifying him by modifying his ideas in certain ways, what needs to be done is to re-theorize colonial discourse as such" (p. 304). The author wishes his book to be read as a mere "prolegomenon to that weighty effort" (p. 304).

In sum, *Reading Orientalism* convincingly argues that Orientalism is both an influential and rhetorically powerful book which makes an important point, albeit in a polemical fashion questionable from a scholarly perspective. Said's influence, therefore, remains ambiguous at best.

Varisco goes quite a distance towards making this case; with an impressive body of 1671 footnotes and over 600 bibliographic entries, his 300-page text is what Orientalism is not: the product of meticulous and balanced scholarship based on expertise in the field. This makes Reading Orientalism an extremely valuable – if not indispensable – contribution to scholarship on Said and to the study of the Islamic world. And although not all the evidence gathered by Varisco is entirely new, it is no overstatement to say that every scholar working with Said's concepts and approaches must (and that every student confronted with his ideas should) consult this book to balance Said's polemic.