



CRITIQUE OF ORIENTALIST REASON: EDWARD SAID AND THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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Edward Said's *Orientalism* (first edition, 1978) is still provoking the debate on what Orient is (or, better, whether such a thing has ever existed) and on which was - and still is - the role and the responsibility of Western mind¹ in colonizing non-European countries, both militarily and culturally.

Said considers Orientalism as the expression «of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient»². The hidden goal of all Western academic production about Asiatic issue, Said says, is to spread Western influence over

¹ It would be useful to interesting whether or not a Western mind exists, but it is not the object of the paper. On this point, see Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

² E. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 7.



other peoples, and it represents a power that is together political, intellectual, cultural and moral. For this reason, there is a deep and secret alliance between Orientalism and the colonial-minded imperialism, one being the justification and the intellectual support, the other being the factual realization of what has been previously theorized³. These two elements support each other in a *vicious circle of power and knowledge*.

It was the «nexus between knowledge and power» that created the “Oriental” man, «obliterating him as a human being»⁴. Said looks exactly at this peculiar tie that links together knowledge and power, denouncing its violent and ominous outcome. Talking about Sir Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930), a British conservative politician who justified the necessity for British occupation of Egypt, Said finds out that the intellectual foundation of Orientalism is Sir Francis Bacon’s aphorism “knowledge is power”:

Two great themes dominate his remarks: knowledge and power, the Baconian themes. [...] Knowledge to Balfour means surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline – and of course, it means *being able to do that*. Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a “fact” which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even *ontologically stable*. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it” – the Oriental country – since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it⁵.

This theme – knowledge is power – represents the very root of Orientalist reason. Its functioning is the following: «From each detail draw a generalization, and out of every generalization deduce an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament,

³ «To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact» (*ibid.*, p. 40).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.



mentality, custom or type»⁶. In this way, knowledge denies freedom, fixing everything falls under its control into an unchanging and immutable object: in other words, it turns a subject – a person – into an object now available to every manipulation. All this mechanism defines a *dialectic*: «knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control»⁷. What takes shape in all this discourse is the *dominion*.

In an article written in 1985 and entitled *Orientalism Reconsidered*, Said examines «how knowledge that is *non-dominative* and *non-coercive* can be produced in a setting that is deeply inscribed with politics»⁸. He tries to elaborate a «methodological and moral re-consideration of Orientalism»⁹, eventually setting the problem for further analysis. An important point he makes is the suggestion that Orientalism needs to be constructed «less as a positive than as a *critical discipline*»¹⁰: what has to take place within Orientalism is an «epistemological critique»¹¹, «re-conceiving the unitary field ruled hitherto by Orientalism»¹² in order to create a *new epistemological approach*. But «no new projects of knowledge can be constituted unless they fight to remain free of the dominance and professionalized particularism that come with historicist system and reductive, pragmatic, or functionalist theories»¹³.

Such discourse calls to mind the famous *critical theory* originated within the philosophical and sociological speculations of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt critical theory seeks to study social dynamics in order to discover their inner contradictions. The aim of the critical theory is to transform humanity in a conscious actor and,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸ E. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", in *Cultural Critique*, n. 1 (1985), p. 91.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.



moreover, to put an end to social injustice. To do so, Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), the two most important representatives of Frankfurt School, have elaborated a theory to overcome any dogmatic and blind faith, criticizing both Fascism and Communism, towards the independence of judgment of each individual from the society as a whole. The critical theory «does not tend to the simple increase of knowledge, but to the emancipation of man from the relationships that make him a slave»¹⁴. The critical theory, thus, aspires to fight the injustice that is «no longer the mere rule of a class over the others, but rather the *universal dominion* in every historical aspect»¹⁵.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung)* (1947), Adorno and Horkheimer show that the first form of the universal dominion is the will of knowledge: knowledge means subduing what is known, ruling over it and controlling it. « Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. [...] What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings»¹⁶. In other words, the universal dominion, whose native house is the human will of obtaining more and more knowledge, manifests itself in the human dominion over nature and over other men. But eventually «power confronts the individual as the universal, as the reason which informs reality»¹⁷. The subjugated subjects become objects, everybody becoming a possible object and a possible predator, and no one is anymore the subject. The outcome is inhuman.

According to this thought, Orientalism is a distinctive form of the universal dominion inscribed in men. Orientalism «is a statement of

¹⁴ Horkheimer, M., (2014), *Teoria Critica*, Milano-Udine, Mimes, p. 189.

¹⁵ M.A. Falchi Pellegrini, *Horkheimer: la critica del dominio politico* (Firenze: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 2001), p. 117.

¹⁶ M. Horkheimer, Th. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.



power and a claim for relatively absolute authority»¹⁸: it turns Oriental people into mere objects, and it represents a «muscular truth»¹⁹. Said is conscious of the «power of the new scientifically advanced techniques [...] as the anthropological classification»²⁰: «studying, comprehending, understanding, judging [...] are tools for conquest»²¹.

Edward Said's *Orientalism Reconsidered* has many points in common with the Frankfurt critical theory. Many aspects evoke this comparison - and even explicit ones: «I think - Said writes - we must remember the lesson provided by Adorno's negative dialectics, and regard analysis as in the fullest sense being *against* the grain, deconstructive, utopian»²². The mention of Adorno is quite significant. The emancipation of peoples hitherto comprehended by the West should be the aim of a new Orientalism, which has to become, as we have just said, a *critical discipline*.

When one uses categories like "Oriental" and "Western" as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, public policy [...] the result is usually to polarize the distinction - the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Western more Western - and limit the human encounter between different cultures. [...] Because this tendency is right at the center of Orientalist theory, practice, and values found in the West, the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth²³.

It is important to get rid of this hypostatic polarization between Oriental and Western: they are not ontologically stable labels. Hitherto Orientalism has taken for granted these simple descriptions, but now it is the time for being more critical. What Said wants to develop might be called, as he does, a «*decentered consciousness*, not less reflective and critical for being decentered, for the most part non- and in some cases anti-

¹⁸ Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", cit., p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 122.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

²² Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", cit., p. 106.

²³ Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 47.



totalizing and anti-systematic»²⁴. Similarly, Horkheimer e Adorno are two dis-organic intellectuals, far from whatsoever totalizing philosophy or ideology, against both Nazism and Communism, and of course they are anti-Hegelian logic. The Totality and the System tend to cut out the individuals, thus a critical mind should be anti-totalizing and anti-systematic. The Oriental-Western polarity is a typical distinction that doesn't leave anything outside itself, and for this reason it is totalizing - and consequently violent, because humanity cannot be imprisoned in such simple scheme and abstract categories.

The universality that the simple reason wants is based not on freedom but on calculation, and the reduction of the world into an objective form implies not the manifestation of the human subjectivity and the humanization of nature, but rather the abolition of inwardness and the naturalization of man²⁵.

A decentered consciousness could be built starting from the *reconsideration of our standpoint*, asking ourselves, for example, «who writes or studies the Orient, in what institutional or discursive setting, what audience, and with what ends in mind»²⁶. A special attention to the *positionality* is required because an Archimedean point does not exist²⁷, and moreover because «to be a European or an American is by no means an inert fact»²⁸. In fact, «when you truly listen, you listen to understand, not to judge or triumph»²⁹. In other terms, when you truly listen, you don't dominate anything and anyone; when you truly listen, you act against the domain attitude. We have to «understand how we know what we know»³⁰, leading into doubts «the "correctness" of our own position»³¹. «School must educate how to analyze the parameters of our passional

²⁴ Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", cit., pp. 105-106.

²⁵ R. Buttiglione, *Dialettica e nostalgia*, (Milan: Jaca Book, 1978), p. 281.

²⁶ Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", cit., p. 91.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 12.

²⁹ D. Takacs, "How does your positionality bias your epistemology?", in *The New Higher Education Journal*, vol. 27 (2003), p. 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.



statements»³². Furthermore, when you truly listen, your knowledge is no more dominative, but it turns into a “guardian” or “keeper” knowledge, which does not abuse its power, avoiding any prevarications and violations: this is, at least, one of the meanings of Horkheimer’s «longing for the Totally Other», the nostalgia for a humanity that will finally respect the external and the internal nature.

The proposed epistemological reform in the field of Orientalism shares another element with the Frankfurt critical theory, i.e., the *interdisciplinarity*. The members of Frankfurt School have deeply considered the superstructural elements of society, looking at culture, art, studying psychoanalysis, sociology and so on. Said attempts to do so: «My study of Orientalism has convinced me [...] that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together»³³. Only in this way it could be possible to give back to Oriental people their humanity, preventing any reduction to whatsoever ontologically stable factor, avoiding the dehumanizing *reductio ad unum*, and breaking any false totalizing system. And this is possible, Said claims, only overcoming the professionalized particularism: «The specialist argument can work quite effectively to block the larger and, in my opinion, the more intellectually serious perspective»³⁴.

The increasing working specialization, both Max Horkheimer and Edward Said say, does not allow to obtain «an overall image of man»³⁵ and of its world. Similarly, it does not permit to see the humanity of people living in the so-called Orient, often reduced to some rigid categories.

³² U. Eco, “Guerre sante, passione e ragione. Pensieri sparsi sulla superiorità culturale”, in *la Repubblica*, October 5, 2001.

³³ Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁵ M. Horkheimer, *Studi di filosofia della società*, (Milano-Udine: Mimes, 2011), p. 199.



«If this stimulates a new kind of dealing with the Orient, indeed if it eliminates the “Orient” and “Occident” altogether, then we shall have advanced a little in process of what Raymond Williams has called *the “unlearning” of the “inherent dominative mode”*»³⁶.

³⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 31.