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## A window on the world

Western scholars helped justify the war in Iraq, says Edward Said, with their orientalist ideas about the 'Arab mind'. Twenty-five years after the publication of his post-colonial classic, the author of *Orientalism* argues that humanist understanding is now more urgently required than ever before

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Edward Said  
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Nine years ago I wrote an afterword for *Orientalism* which, in trying to clarify what I believed I had and had not said, stressed not only the many discussions that had opened up since my book appeared in 1978, but the ways in which a work about representations of "the orient" lent itself to increasing misinterpretation. That I find myself feeling more ironic than irritated about that very same thing today is a sign of how much my age has crept up on me. The recent deaths of my two main intellectual, political and personal mentors, the writers and activists Eqbal Ahmad and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, has brought

sadness and loss, as well as resignation and a certain stubborn will to go on.

In my memoir *Out of Place* (1999) I described the strange and contradictory worlds in which I grew up, providing for myself and my readers a detailed account of the settings that I think formed me in Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon. But that was a very personal account which stopped short of all the years of my own political engagement that started after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

*Orientalism* is very much a book tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history. Its first page opens with a description of the Lebanese civil war that ended in 1990, but the violence and the ugly shedding of human blood continues up to this minute. We have had the failure of the Oslo peace process, the outbreak of the second intifada, and the awful suffering of the Palestinians on the reinvaded West Bank and Gaza. The suicide bombing phenomenon has appeared with all its hideous damage, none more lurid and apocalyptic of course than the events of September 11 2001 and their aftermath in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. As I write these lines, the illegal occupation of Iraq by Britain and the United States proceeds. Its aftermath is truly awful to contemplate. This is all part of what is supposed to be a clash of civilisations, unending, implacable, irremediable. Nevertheless, I think not.

I wish I could say that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the US has improved, but alas, it really hasn't. For all kinds of reasons, the situation in Europe seems to be considerably better. What American leaders and their intellectual lackeys seem incapable of understanding is that history cannot be swept clean like a blackboard, so that "we" might inscribe our own future there and impose our own forms of life for these lesser people to follow. It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar. But this has often happened with the "orient", that semi-mythical construct which since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the late 18th century has been made and remade countless times. In the process the uncountable sediments of history, a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures, are swept aside or ignored, relegated to the sandheap along with the treasures ground into meaningless fragments that were taken out of Baghdad.

My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, so that "our" east, "our" orient becomes "ours" to possess and direct. And

I have a very high regard for the powers and gifts of the peoples of that region to struggle on for their vision of what they are and want to be. There has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on contemporary Arab and Muslim societies for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find like Easter eggs in the living-room. The breathtaking insouciance of jejune publicists who speak in the name of foreign policy and who have no knowledge at all of the language real people actually speak, has fabricated an arid landscape ready for American power to construct there an ersatz model of free market "democracy".

But there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation. It is surely one of the intellectual catastrophes of history that an imperialist war concocted by a small group of unelected US officials was waged against a devastated third world dictatorship on thoroughly ideological grounds having to do with world dominance, security control and scarce resources, but disguised for its true intent, hastened and reasoned for by orientalists who betrayed their calling as scholars.

The major influences on George W Bush's Pentagon and National Security Council were men such as Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, experts on the Arab and Islamic world who helped the American hawks to think about such preposterous phenomena as the Arab mind and the centuries-old Islamic decline which only American power could reverse. Today bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange oriental peoples. CNN and Fox, plus myriad evangelical and rightwing radio hosts, innumerable tabloids and even middle-brow journals, have recycled the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalisations so as to stir up "America" against the foreign devil.

Without a well-organised sense that the people over there were not like "us" and didn't appreciate "our" values - the very core of traditional orientalist dogma - there would have been no war. The American advisers to the Pentagon and the White House use the same clichés, the same demeaning stereotypes, the same justifications for power and violence (after all, runs the chorus, power is the only language they understand) as the

scholars enlisted by the Dutch conquerors of Malaysia and Indonesia, the British armies of India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, West Africa, the French armies of Indochina and North Africa. These people have now been joined in Iraq by a whole army of private contractors and eager entrepreneurs to whom shall be confided everything from the writing of textbooks and the constitution to the refashioning of Iraqi political life and its oil industry.

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilise, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires.

Twenty-five years after my book's publication, Orientalism once again raises the question of whether modern imperialism ever ended, or whether it has continued in the orient since Napoleon's entry into Egypt two centuries ago. Arabs and Muslims have been told that victimology and dwelling on the depredations of empire are only ways of evading responsibility in the present. You have failed, you have gone wrong, says the modern orientalist. This of course is also VS Naipaul's contribution to literature, that the victims of empire wail on while their country goes to the dogs. But what a shallow calculation of the imperial intrusion that is, how little it wishes to face the long succession of years through which empire continues to work its way in the lives say of Palestinians or Congolese or Algerians or Iraqis.

Think of the line that starts with Napoleon, continues with the rise of oriental studies and the takeover of North Africa, and goes on in similar undertakings in Vietnam, in Egypt, in Palestine and, during the entire 20th century, in the struggle over oil and strategic control in the Gulf, in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan. Then think of the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, through the short period of liberal independence, the era of military coups, of insurgency, civil war, religious fanaticism, irrational struggle and uncompromising brutality against the latest bunch of "natives". Each of these phases and eras produces its own distorted knowledge of the other, each its own reductive images, its own disputatious polemics.

My idea in Orientalism was to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us. I have called what I try to do "humanism", a word I continue to use stubbornly despite the scornful dismissal of the

term by sophisticated postmodern critics. By humanism I mean first of all attempting to dissolve Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" so as to be able to use one's mind historically and rationally for the purposes of reflective understanding. Moreover humanism is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods: strictly speaking therefore, there is no such thing as an isolated humanist.

Thus it is correct to say that every domain is linked, and that nothing that goes on in our world has ever been isolated and pure of any outside influence. We need to speak about issues of injustice and suffering within a context that is amply situated in history, culture, and socio-economic reality. I have spent a great deal of my life during the past 35 years advocating the right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination, but I have always tried to do that with full attention paid to the reality of the Jewish people and what they suffered by way of persecution and genocide. The paramount thing is that the struggle for equality in Palestine/Israel should be directed toward a humane goal, that is, coexistence, and not further suppression and denial.

As a humanist whose field is literature, I am old enough to have been trained 40 years ago in the field of comparative literature, whose leading ideas go back to Germany in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. I must mention too the supremely creative contribution of Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan philosopher and philologist whose ideas anticipate those of German thinkers such as Herder and Wolf, later to be followed by Goethe, Humboldt, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Gadamer, and finally the great 20th-century Romance philologists Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Ernst Robert Curtius.

To young people of the current generation the very idea of philology suggests something impossibly antiquarian and musty, but philology in fact is the most basic and creative of the interpretive arts. It is exemplified for me most admirably in Goethe's interest in Islam generally, and the 14th-century Persian Sufi poet Hafiz in particular, a consuming passion which led to the composition of the *West-östlicher Diwan*, and it inflected Goethe's later ideas about *Weltliteratur*, the study of all the literatures of the world as a symphonic whole which could be apprehended theoretically as having preserved the individuality of each work without losing sight of the whole.

There is a considerable irony to the realisation that as today's globalised world draws together, we may be approaching the kind of standardisation and homogeneity that Goethe's ideas were specifically formulated to prevent. In an essay published in 1951 entitled "Philologie der Weltliteratur", Auerbach made exactly that point. His great book

Mimesis, published in Berne in 1946 but written while Auerbach was a wartime exile teaching Romance languages in Istanbul, was meant to be a testament to the diversity and concreteness of the reality represented in western literature from Homer to Virginia Woolf; but reading the 1951 essay one senses that, for Auerbach, the great book he wrote was an elegy for a period when people could interpret texts philologically, concretely, sensitively, and intuitively, using erudition and an excellent command of several languages to support the kind of understanding that Goethe advocated for his understanding of Islamic literature.

Positive knowledge of languages and history was necessary, but it was never enough, any more than the mechanical gathering of facts would constitute an adequate method for grasping what an author like Dante, for example, was all about. The main requirement for the kind of philological understanding Auerbach and his predecessors were talking about and tried to practise was one that sympathetically and subjectively entered into the life of a written text as seen from the perspective of its time and its author. Rather than alienation and hostility to another time and a different culture, philology as applied to Weltliteratur involved a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign "other". And this creative making of a place for works that are otherwise alien and distant is the most important facet of the interpreter's mission.

All this was obviously undermined and destroyed in Germany by national socialism. After the war, Auerbach notes mournfully, the standardisation of ideas, and greater and greater specialisation of knowledge gradually narrowed the opportunities for the kind of investigative and everlastingly inquiring kind of philological work that he had represented; and, alas, it's an even more depressing fact that since Auerbach's death in 1957 both the idea and practice of humanistic research have shrunk in scope as well as in centrality. Instead of reading in the real sense of the word, our students today are often distracted by the fragmented knowledge available on the internet and in the mass media.

Worse yet, education is threatened by nationalist and religious orthodoxies often disseminated by the media as they focus ahistorically and sensationally on the distant electronic wars that give viewers the sense of surgical precision, but in fact obscure the terrible suffering and destruction produced by modern warfare. In the demonisation of an unknown enemy for whom the label "terrorist" serves the general purpose of keeping

people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity of the kind that the post-September 11 period has produced.

Speaking both as an American and as an Arab I must ask my reader not to underestimate the kind of simplified view of the world that a relative handful of Pentagon civilian elites have formulated for US policy in the entire Arab and Islamic worlds, a view in which terror, pre-emptive war, and unilateral regime change - backed up by the most bloated military budget in history - are the main ideas debated endlessly and impoverishingly by a media that assigns itself the role of producing so-called "experts" who validate the government's general line. Reflection, debate, rational argument and moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history have been replaced by abstract ideas that celebrate American or western exceptionalism, denigrate the relevance of context, and regard other cultures with contempt.

Perhaps you will say that I am making too many abrupt transitions between humanistic interpretation on the one hand and foreign policy on the other, and that a modern technological society which along with unprecedented power possesses the internet and F-16 fighter-jets must in the end be commanded by formidable technical-policy experts like Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle. But what has really been lost is a sense of the density and interdependence of human life, which can neither be reduced to a formula nor brushed aside as irrelevant.

That is one side of the global debate. In the Arab and Muslim countries the situation is scarcely better. As Roula Khalaf has argued, the region has slipped into an easy anti-Americanism that shows little understanding of what the US is really like as a society. Because the governments are relatively powerless to affect US policy toward them, they turn their energies to repressing and keeping down their own populations, with results in resentment, anger and helpless imprecations that do nothing to open up societies where secular ideas about human history and development have been overtaken by failure and frustration, as well as by an Islamism built out of rote learning and the obliteration of what are perceived to be other, competitive forms of secular knowledge. The gradual disappearance of the extraordinary tradition of Islamic *ijtihad* - the process of working out Islamic rules with reference to the Koran - has been one of the major cultural disasters of our time, with the result that critical thinking and individual wrestling with the problems of the modern world have simply dropped out of sight.

This is not to say that the cultural world has simply regressed on one side to a belligerent neo-orientalism and on the other to blanket rejectionism. Last year's United Nations world summit in Johannesburg, for all its limitations, did in fact reveal a vast area of common global concern that suggests the welcome emergence of a new collective constituency and gives the often facile notion of "one world" a new urgency. In all this, however, we must admit that no one can possibly know the extraordinarily complex unity of our globalised world.

The terrible conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics such as "America," "the west" or "Islam" and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed. We still have at our disposal the rational interpretive skills that are the legacy of humanistic education, not as a sentimental piety enjoining us to return to traditional values or the classics but as the active practice of worldly secular rational discourse. The secular world is the world of history as made by human beings. Critical thought does not submit to commands to join in the ranks marching against one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilisations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together. But for that kind of wider perception we need time, patient and sceptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.

Humanism is centred upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and authority. Texts have to be read as texts that were produced and live on in all sorts of what I have called worldly ways. But this by no means excludes power, since on the contrary I have tried to show the insinuations, the imbrications of power into even the most recondite of studies. And lastly, most important, humanism is the only, and I would go as far as to say the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history.

• Adapted from the introduction to a new edition of *Orientalism*, published by Penguin on August 28 at £10.99



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