PART I

COLONIALISMS

Before engaging in any critical analysis, it is important to understand how geographies of the rest of the world were established in European culture prior to and during the colonial period. For instance, what did Europeans believe lay beyond the boundaries of known space before they set out to explore the unknown? This is significant, because people do not see the world entirely as it is, but always through the distortions of cultural values and expectations. Once new places and peoples were discovered, how were they incorporated into existing frameworks of knowing and understanding, and how were these knowledges challenged and changed by exploration? We will consider these issues in Chapter 2, and will discuss the most influential work on this topic, a book that many have argued marked the establishment of postcolonialism as an intellectual approach, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. In Chapter 3 we will see how European knowledges of the rest of the world came to power by looking not only at the rise of academic knowledge of new places and peoples, but also the ways in which these knowledges were popularised through travel accounts, advertising and world fairs. In the final chapter in this section, we will examine how European knowledges were made material in the remaking of colonial landscapes. Here we see things move from the realm of ideas into practices and the very physicality of the landscape, reinforcing the central argument of postcolonialism of the central importance of cultural values and knowledge to the enduring power of colonialism.
And from that other coast of Chaldea, toward the south, is Ethiopia, a great country that stretcheth to the end of Egypt. Ethiopia is departed in two parts principal, and that is in the east part and in the meridional part; the which part meridional is clept Mauritania; and the folk of that country be black enough and more black than in the tother part, and they be clept Moors. In that part is a well, that in the day it is so cold, that no man may drink thereof; and in the night it is so hot, that no man may suffer his hand therein. And beyond that part, toward the south, to pass by the sea Ocean, is a great land and a great country; but men may not dwell there for the fervent burning of the sun, so is it passing hot in that country.

In Ethiopia all the rivers and all the waters be trouble, and they be some deal salt for the great heat that is there. And the folk of that country be lightly drunken and have but little appetite to meat. And they have commonly the flux of the womb. And they live not long. In Ethiopia be many diverse folk; and Ethiope is clept Cusis. In that country be folk that have but one foot, and they go so blyve that it is marvel. And the foot is so large, that it shadoweth all the body against the sun, when they will lie and rest them. In Ethiopia, when the children be young and little, they be all yellow; and, when that they wax of age, that yellowness turneth to be all black. In Ethiopia is the city of Saba, and the land of the which one of the three kings that presented our Lord in Bethlehem, was king of.

John Mandeville, Chapter XVII: ‘Of the land of Job; and of his age. Of the array of men of Chaldea. Of the land where women dwell without company of men. Of the knowledge and virtues of the very diamond’, The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, fourteenth century

A TEXTUALISED WORLD

Although, when travelling beyond the borders of Europe, explorers travelled to new places, this did not mean that these places were entirely unknown to them. There existed knowledge of what was beyond the borders of Europe. These knowledges came from what we can call ‘imagined geographies’ based
on myth and legend – perhaps most famously, the travels of John Mandeville
with which this chapter opened, producing a textualised world rather than
one based on observation and experience. These imagined geographies were
inhabited by imagined others, people who were very different from
Europeans. Indeed, some have argued that it was the existence of these others
beyond the borders of Europe that helped to define Europe itself. Edward Said
famously developed this idea into his thesis of *Orientalism* to argue that the
‘rest’ of the world was necessary in order to define Europe. These imagined
geographies described the world to people, and explained their place within it,
and were thus very significant in shaping how people responded to the world.
Although imagined, these geographies had real consequences for people’s
actions: they were very important to people’s understanding of what they saw
and experienced in their travels. In this chapter we will see how European
understandings and images of the rest of the world emerged.

**IMAGINED OTHERS**

In the Middle Ages, tales and myths of what European travellers would find
beyond known boundaries were common. These imagined others were
regarded as monstrous because they were seen as being a transformation of
the Europeans in one way or another. Friedman has argued in *The Monstrous
Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (1981), that medieval people took ‘known’
geographic locations and filled them with folk knowledge. These locations
were usually just off the map of the experienced world (see Figure 1.1). These
were particularly popularised by the writings of Pliny and Mandeville, who
described monstrous races just outside of known geographic space.

The chief distinction of these races of people from Europeans then lay in
geography. Those who were not European lay ‘outside’ in faraway, semi-
mythological places like India, Ethiopia and Cathay, places whose names
evoked mystery and exoticism for Europeans at the time. They were places
that Europeans had heard of, but had neither visited nor fully understood.

Medieval scholars listed around 50 peoples. Many of them were frighteningly
monstrous but not all. Some were just different in appearance and social
practice from those who looked at them. Friedman argues that this difference
emerges from a shift in one aspect of their being. Many were visual, for
instance:

- **Transformation of body**: these people had huge ears, with their faces on their chest,
  and were giants or pigmies. For example, the *Amyctyrae* had a protruding lower
  lip which could be used like an umbrella to protect themselves from the sun. The
  *Blemmyae*, from the deserts of Libya, were men with faces on their chests.

- **Transformation of Gender**: these tales talked of hairy women, Amazons and
  androgenes.
Other groups of people were identified not by visual differences, but by their difference from European ways of doing things, for example:

- **Transformation of life cycle**: these people were said to rear children just once or to conceive at five years of age.
- **Transformation of social**: such peoples may look ‘normal’ but had transformed social practices, such as the wife-givers who were reportedly an amiable race.
who gave their wives to any travellers who stopped among them. Other common variants involved cannibals.

- **Transformation of needs**: here peoples had entirely different ways of existing. For example, the Astomi, apple-smellers, who lived near the headwaters of the Ganges, were said neither to eat nor drink but existed by smelling roots, flowers and fruits, especially apples. It was claimed that they would die if they smelt a bad odour.

It is clear to see how these peoples worked out as Europe’s ‘other’! The transformation of their physical or social life produced monstrous races as a transformation of the normal order of things, so linking the otherness of non-Europeans to European identity based on normality. Their main characteristic was their **difference** from Europeans. Europeans were always seen as the reference point, Europeans always represented what was right and normal. There were also less bizarrely different peoples. For example, Ethiopians – black men in the mountains of Africa – were understood to have been burnt black because of their close proximity to the sun. Clear empirical evidence (the fact that Europeans could see people with dark skin) seemed to prove the truth of this worldview to the Europeans. The mix of the believable with the incredible made the incredible seem more believable.

The other dominant pre-modern view of Europe’s place in the world similarly reinforced a geography of difference. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle posited a spherical Earth. This was a theoretical belief rather than something based around experience or empirical evidence. The ancient Greeks had not travelled around the world but they believed the sphere to be the most perfect shape, and thus believed the Earth must be spherical. Aristotle argued that the Earth was split into a number of zones (see Figure 1.2). Greece lay in the ‘temperate zone’ in the northern hemisphere. To the north, Aristotle posited the existence of a ‘frigid zone’, and to the south, a ‘torrid zone’ around the equator. The southern hemisphere, he believed, would be a perfect reflection of the north.

The ancient Greeks believed that life was concentrated in the two temperate zones; the frigid and torrid zones were uninhabited because of the extremes of cold and hot that each place faced. There appeared to be some evidence for these beliefs. From African travellers, the ancient Greeks knew of the existence of desert to the south which seemed to prove the increasing heat towards the equator, and, once again, the travellers themselves, with their skins apparently burnt black by the sun, were further ‘evidence’ for Aristotle’s cosmology.

Cosmologies such as these had a hold on the popular imagination for centuries, long after science had developed new understandings. History records that in the early fifteenth century Iberian explorers began to seek a route
around Africa, but were often made to turn back at Cape Bajador where the sea was particularly agitated. While the scientifically educated captains knew this to be a tidal phenomenon, the uneducated crews feared this was the effects of the heat of the torrid zone boiling the water.

It would seem reasonable to assume that with initial travel these monstrous races would disappear. But this did not happen straightforwardly and a belief in the existence of monstrous races persisted. This may have been for two reasons. The first reason was that Europeans had a psychological need to mark their borders with the unknown and different because the demarcation of difference is key to identity (see the box below – we will explore this further later in the chapter). Second, the stories of monstrous races persisted because they did in fact exist! Practices of lip stretching and yoga could seem like distorted bodies to the first travellers; warriors’ use of colourful shields might look – from a distance – like faces on their chests; and non-European languages could sound very alien to travellers. Thus, ironically, initial travel may have reinforced these mythologies. However, once Europeans started to travel more extensively these stories became less convincing. Gradually there was a greater move towards observation and so the location of the monstrous races changed to being always just beyond the horizon of the known world. However, knowledge of the rest of the world has never escaped textual conventions. We do not see the world innocent of the cultural baggage of our upbringing. It is this idea that lies at the heart of the most important explanation of the way in which the west views the rest – Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.
IDENTITY/DIFFERENCE

It is conventional to think of identity as something that unites people who have something in common: a connection to a particular place (national identity), an adherence to the same beliefs (religious identity) or particular attractions (sexual identity). However, identity can be reconsidered as something which is connected to difference. Our national identities are as much about who we are not as who we are (we are not like the team our national football side is playing, we are not like the people just over the border or with whom we are at war). Many theorists suggest that identity is primarily about excluding difference and so it is a process rather than a pre-existent condition. Our identities are formed through the repetition of acts that mark us as different from others, whether these acts are flying flags or waving political banners, listening to particular music, or even wearing particular fashions.

ORIENTALISM

Ship me somewhere east of Suez
Where the best is like the worst
Where there ar’n’t no Ten Commandments an’ a man can raise a thirst

Rudyard Kipling, Mandalay

Edward Said’s 1978 book, Orientalism, has probably been one of the most influential texts in the social sciences and arts in the latter part of the twentieth century. Orientalism is conventionally understood to be the scholarly study of the languages and traditions of the Middle East. However, Said argues that Orientalism is not so innocent a form of knowledge as this. Instead, he redefines Orientalism as the ubiquity of a sense of the division of the world into two spheres in aesthetic production, popular culture, and scholarly, sociological, and historical texts. In other words, he is suggesting that the concept of difference between east and west is a geopolitical difference which is written up throughout the texts of western culture whether through travel writing, political texts, paintings, or in academic discussions. To Said, any or all of the cultures of northern Africa, east to southeast Asia and the South Seas could be encompassed by the western geographical imagination into a singular ‘Orient’.

For Said, Orientalism is an imaginative geography for two reasons. First, Europeans projected a single culture into the space of the ‘Orient’ that was at odds with the diversity of peoples, cultures and environments contained within the space of the Orient, and second, this space was defined by texts and not by people from the Orient itself. These texts preceded experience, so empirical evidence was included but was fitted into the categories that were
already constructed. Travellers saw what they expected to see. For Said, this is particularly important because of the link between this imaginative geography and European power. This imaginative geography was made manifest over space as it was built into colonial policy, into the institutions of governance, and more recently, into the practices of aid and development. The imaginative geography of Orientalism shaped the real geographies practised in the space of the Orient.

IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY – SAID'S ORIENTALISM

… Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious ‘Western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘Oriental’ world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in a direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what ‘we’ do and what ‘they’ cannot do or understand as ‘we’ do). Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.

[...] Our initial description of Orientalism as a learned field now acquires a new concreteness. A field is often an enclosed space. The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. An Orientalist is but a particular specialist in knowledge for which Europe at large is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist. In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John, Mahomet,

(Continued)
and dozens more; settings in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire: between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the authors of the Chanson de Roland and the Poema del Cid drew on the Orient's riches for their productions, in ways that sharpened the outlines of imagery, ideas, and figures populating it. In addition, a great deal of what was considered learned Orientalist scholarship in Europe pressed ideological myths into service, even as knowledge seemed genuinely to be advancing.

Edward Said *Orientalism*, (1978), pp. 12 and 63 (emphasis in the original)

It is important to realise, however, that Said did not consider that Europeans had simply made the Orient up. As he explained, ‘[o]ne ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away’ (Said, 1978: 6). He did not oppose the Orientalists’ images of the world outside of Europe to reality, but instead understood that they were constitutive of reality because of the way in which knowledge and power were related.

Said developed this idea of the interrelationship between power and descriptions of places from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. For Foucault power and knowledge are always and everywhere intertwined. He used the term power/knowledge not to suggest that power equalled knowledge, but to emphasise the fact that power and knowledge are always and everywhere inseparable. This challenged conventional accounts which suggested that knowledge was repressed by power. In the case of Orientalism, power emerged through institutions and practices used to name and describe the Orient. Those resident in the space of the Orient were not allowed to speak for themselves. They were always described by others, and characterised by others. There is then a power of naming. European taxonomies – the ordering and making understandable of the new world they were exploring – simplified the Orient and, by making it known to Europeans, made it possible for them to control it. The best example of this is the use of maps. Europeans drew maps of new lands with boundaries inscribed to identify territories claimed by different nations. The names given to places by indigenous people were ignored, their claims to ownership or rights of access were similarly discarded, and instead European words and meanings were written onto the maps. Once these European maps had been created and accepted, they started to influence the nature of the actual space they represented. Places took on their European names, reflecting European ownership.

Orientalism was made up of a series of discourses that explained the nature of the Orient and Occident, and the relationship between these two
geographical areas. Said argued that it is impossible for people to understand the world except through discourse. He is not suggesting that the world is made up only of our imaginations of it, but that we cannot access the real world except through the cultural structurings of discourse (see the box on discourse on p. xxx).

These discourses were based around a series of binary pairs. At the heart of this, the imaginative geography of Orientalism was a binary geography of the Occident (west) and the Orient (east). However, in western thought, binaries are never different but equal; there is always a hierarchy of values. Thus, Said (1978: 72) insists that Orientals ‘are always symmetrical to, and yet diametrically inferior to, a European equivalent, which is sometimes specified, sometimes not’. Taxonomies of difference in the history of western thought have not allowed the existence of ‘different but equal’. Western knowledge always imposes a value on the binaries which privileges one term over the other. Sometimes the Occidental value is identified and the Orient is shown to deviate from it; at other times, the Occidental value is universalised, it is ‘the’ way of doing something and the Oriental equivalent is simply seen as wrong.

**DISCOURSE**

Discourses define the parameters of what can be known and understood at any point in history and in any place. They can be thought of as a lens through which people interpret the world, which is not unchanging but is temporarily and spatially specific. Discourses do not simply structure knowledge but also what is included as knowledge, such as what are the reasonable questions to ask. For instance, in pre-modern times, religious and mystic discourses dominated understanding. In order to understand an event, people would turn to the Bible or other religious texts, and would look for evidence of God’s hand in the world. Scientific discourse sees truth not via faith in God, but in rigorous scientific practice. Scientists look to texts written by other scientists and the laws generated by previous research. Not only do these discourses have different explanations of how the world works, they also look to very different parts of it to justify their beliefs.

There are a number of different themes – or discourses – through which the Orient is marked as being different from Europe (see Figure 1.3).

1 *Development and time.* This discourse could be articulated in a number of ways. Sometimes the Orient was represented as backward while Europe was developed. Alternatively, the Orient was seen as unchanging while Europe was dynamic, as evidenced through the Enlightenment, the drive of mercantile capitalism, or the Industrial Revolution. Some versions of this discourse insisted that cultures were in different stages of development. This discourse recognised
that the Egyptians and Chinese had great societies before Europe had developed but that these civilisations were now seen to be in decline. Asia and North Africa were represented as old, decrepit, decaying civilisations. Europe was dynamic yet mature, but sub-Saharan Africa was seen as undeveloped and child-like. This version legitimated European intervention, as it was argued that Europe had come to maturity just as old civilisations like Egypt and China were in terminal decline, so that is was the duty of Europeans to rule the ‘immature’ peoples in Africa because they were not sufficiently mature to govern themselves.

2 **Morality.** In the discourse of Orientalism, the Orient was immoral and it was the ‘white man’s burden’, as Rudyard Kipling famously put it, to improve the Orient’s morals. The discourse of morality was invoked in a number of ways. Moral discourses were used a good deal in assessments of other cultures, of religious practices, even in terms of order and hygiene, which were regarded as expressions of morality. It was sometimes also expressed through sexuality, with the Orient often seen as a place of unrestrained sexuality. This was particularly important during the Victorian era in Britain, when there was considerable sexual repression at home. Oriental women were seen as sexually available whereas men were either seen as hypermasculine with a kind of animal sexuality, or were emasculated, impotent in comparison to the power of western culture. Morality was also encoded through discussions of laziness. Orientals were not considered to be so productive as westerners and travellers often noted that during the day they saw native peoples ‘lazing around’ rather than working. This was especially important in the moral sense of the Protestant work ethic, where there was value given to hard work with laziness regarded as immoral.

3 **Rationality.** Orientals were seen as irrational, not accepting of European science and instead turning to animistic beliefs and magic. This notion was particularly important and cross-cuts many other forms of Orientalism, particularly in the eighteenth century onwards where notions of science and reason came to dominate European knowledge, apparently differentiating European views from the ‘backward’ views of people in other parts of the world.

4 **Religion.** Orientalism did not accept Hinduism, Islam and other non-Christian religions as true religions, and instead saw them as myths or beliefs. Thus, Europeans believed that Orientals were not religious and should be converted to Christianity.
Science. This seemed to provide ‘proof’ of western superiority. European science had allowed people to conquer nature (in that the landscape was made productive, minerals were mined from the earth, and science offered explanations of how nature worked), time and space (in the power to travel distances relatively quickly using trains, ships and air travel), and the body (in that medicine was providing power over illness). Africans and others were seen to be living with nature. Indeed, the fact that they had not created cities and settled cultivation meant to Europeans that natives were unable to exploit natural resources and transform nature: they should thus be seen as part of nature rather than separate from it. Neither natives did understand science, and thus were unable to control their environment. Furthermore, the apparent ease with which European diseases killed many indigenous peoples visited through exploration was ‘proof’ of Europeans’ superior knowledge of the body. The relatively small numbers of Europeans who were able to take territory into colonial possession seemed to demonstrate the power of European technology and weapons and the superiority of their knowledge. Thus, this ‘proof’ could be summed up as follows:

- Medicine conquered illness.
- Travel conquered time and space.
- Mining extracted resources from nature.
- Morality controlled natural bodily desires.

More will be said about science in the next chapter, however it is important to note here that scientific discourses were often in conflict with religious discourses. Whereas religious discourses privileged Europeans because of their Christianity, the only true religion, scientific discourses criticised Oriental peoples for their continued reliance on religious beliefs rather than science. Said argues that while the individual discourses comprising Orientalism might be contradictory, the overall structure of the geographical imagination – of the Orient being entirely different from the Occident – remained the same, and therefore reinforced this binary geography of east and west.

Race. This was not a component of Orientalism until the nineteenth century, when the ‘scientific’ category of race was used to explain European domination. Through this discourse measurable biological facts (such as head shape or brain size) were used to explain western superiority. We will consider this in more depth in the next chapter.

**NATURALISING DIFFERENCE**

Even nature was seen as being fundamentally different in the Orient. Consider the following excerpt from Henry Morton Stanley’s (1878) account of his travels in Africa, *Through the Dark Continent*:

(Continued)
On the whole, Nature has flung a robe of verdure of the most fervid tints. She has bidden the mountains lose their streamlets, has commanded the hills and ridges to bloom, filled the valleys with vegetation breathing perfume, for the rocks she has woven garlands of creepers, and the stems of trees she has draped with moss; and sterility she has banished from her domain.

Yet Nature has not produced a soft, velvety, smiling England in the midst of Africa. Far from it. She is here too robust and prolific. Her grasses are coarse, and wound like knives and needles; her reeds are tough and tall as bamboos; her creepers and convolvuli are of cable thickness and length; her thorns are hooks of steel; her trees shoot up to a height of a hundred feet. We find no pleasure in straying in search of wild flowers, and game is left undisturbed, because of the difficulty of moving about, for once the main path is left we find ourselves over head amongst thick, tough, unyielding, lacerating grass.

ORIENTALIST ART

One of the main ways that the Orient was made available to Europeans was through art. The ways in which the lands and peoples beyond Europe were represented in painting are instructive of the ways in which the west viewed the rest. Paintings are interesting because of their broad appeal and the fact that at the time, for the majority of Europeans, paintings were the only insight they had into the Orient. Such paintings often presented incredible detail, convincing viewers of their authenticity through the ‘reality effect’ of lifelike details.

Much of Said’s analysis was based upon the written accounts of travellers, academics and politicians. However, we can see a number of the discourses that Said identified encapsulated not only in written descriptions of places, but also in visual representations of them. Indeed, this was one of the central arguments in Said’s thesis – that Orientalism cuts across different forms of knowledge, whether textual or visual, academic or popular culture. It is through the resonances between the different types of cultural production (the fact that the message about this geographical difference could be found throughout culture) that Orientalism has developed its influence.

Writing about his painting, The Fanatics of Tangier, for the brochure for the 1838 salon, Delacroix stated ‘their enthusiasm excited by prayers and wild cries, they enter into a veritable state of intoxication, and, spreading through the streets, perform a thousand contortions, and even dangerous acts’.

He claimed they reached a state of ecstasy which allowed them to walk on red-hot coals, eat scorpions, lick red-hot irons and walk on sword blades, all apparently without noticing their injuries. This image of impassioned religion, steeped in mysticism and secret rites, stood in stark contrast to the restrained and orderly practices of religion in Europe of the time.
Figure 1.4  *The Fanatics of Tangier*, Delacroix, 1838

Figure 1.5  *Dance of the Almeh*, Gerome, 1863
Many Orientalist pictures represented women revelling in the pleasure of wild and released sensuality which would have been impossible to depict in respectable European women at the time. Paintings focused on the erotic, on excess, and male fantasies played out in sites of languid opulence.

Other paintings focused on historical architecture, perhaps most famously in David Robert’s images of Egypt. Such paintings overwhelmed the viewer with ruined greatness and an implied criticism of the local people for neglecting their own monuments so that architecture falls into decay. The images within such paintings also reflect the decaying civilisations themselves. Some depict European archeologists restoring the great buildings, suggesting that only European knowledge can recognise the value of the past achievements of these great civilisations and what is thus worth preserving.
THINKING ABOUT ORIENTALISM

What do you think Said means by the following?

‘The Orient has helped to define Europe’.
‘Orientalism ... has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world’.
‘The Orient was almost a European invention’.

ORIENTALISM IN THE PRESENT

However, while it is easy to look back at the past distortions of Orientalism, Said’s work insists upon the continuity of Orientalism into the present rather than the complete break that previous accounts had suggested. Orientalism is still with us but in a slightly different form, as there is more differentiation between parts of the world (as we shall see in later chapters). Also, importantly, the west is no longer just Europe, now the United States of America has become more influential in the production of dominant images of the rest of the world, particularly through the power of Hollywood. Think about the nature of characters from ‘the Orient’ in blockbuster movies – can you think of any films where they are the lead heroic characters? If not, what kind of roles do they play (you could look at the Indiana Jones series, the Mummy films, True Lies)?

Postcolonial theorists have also a lot to contribute to discussions about George W Bush’s ‘War on Terror’. While none have shown anything but horror at the acts of Al Qa’ida on September 11th 2001, many have been critical of the nature of the response, which has, once again, created a binary imagined geography that has divided the world into the west and the ‘axis of evil’ to the east.

One of the most influential accounts of the relationship between the west and Islam has been Samuel Huntington’s (1993) ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis, which (in)famously argued that contemporary international relations would reconfigure around cultural conflict, most significantly between the secular-Christian west and the Islamic east, which were seen to be inherently incompatible. The continuation of Orientalist geopolitics is clear in Huntington’s thesis. The events of September 11th seemed to prove the theory, despite various voices, including Said and Huntington himself, which insisted that this was the action of a small group of extremists rather than being representative of Islam more generally. Nevertheless, as Gregory (2004) has highlighted, it is an argument that has been used frequently in media explanations of international relations (see the box below). We will return to contemporary expressions of Orientalism in later chapters.
Consider the extracts below from an article about the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001. Think about the language used (especially the discourse of time), and the extent to which Orientalist themes are drawn upon to characterise a distinct geography of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

*In This War of Civilisations, the West Will Prevail*


Striking quickly, as well as hard, may be a quality of this war deliberately chosen, and with good reason. A harsh, instantaneous attack may be the response most likely to impress the Islamic mind. Surprise has traditionally been a favoured Islamic military method. The use of overwhelming force is, however, alien to the Islamic military tradition. The combination of the two is certainly designed to unsettle America’s current enemy and probably will.

Samuel Huntington, the Harvard political scientist, outlined in a famous article written in the aftermath of the Cold War his vision of the next stage hostilities would take. Rejecting the vision of a New World Order, proposed by President Bush senior, he insisted that mankind had not rid itself of the incubus of violence, but argued that it would take the form of conflict between cultures, in particular between the liberal, secular culture of the West and the religious culture of Islam. Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ was widely discussed, though it was not taken seriously by some. Since September 11 it has been taken very seriously indeed.

[…]

The Oriental tradition, however, had not been eliminated. It reappeared in a variety of guises, particularly in the tactics of evasion and retreat practised by the Vietcong against the United States in the Vietnam war. On September 11, 2001 it returned in an absolutely traditional form. Arabs, appearing suddenly out of empty space like their desert raider ancestors, assaulted the heartlands of Western power, in a terrifying surprise raid and did appalling damage.

President Bush in his speech to his nation and to the Western world yesterday, promised a traditional Western response. He warned that there would be ‘a relentless accumulation of success’. Relentlessness, as opposed to surprise and sensation, is the Western way of warfare. It is deeply injurious to the Oriental style and rhetoric of war-making. Oriental war-makers, today terrorists, expect ambushes and raids to destabilise their opponents, allowing them to win further victories by horrifying outrages at a later stage. Westerners have learned, by harsh experience, that the proper response is not to take fright but to marshal their forces, to launch massive retaliation and to persist relentlessly until the raiders have either been eliminated or so cowed by the violence inflicted that they relapse into inactivity.

News of the first strikes against Afghanistan indicates that a tested Western response to Islamic aggression is now well under way. It is not a crusade. The crusades were an episode localised in time and place, in the religious contest between Christianity and Islam. This war belongs within the much larger spectrum of a far older conflict between settled, creative productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals.
CRITIQUE OF ORIENTALISM

Because of its influence, Orientalism has generated a great deal of critical discussion. There are a large number of papers and edited collections discussing Said’s work, but there are four particularly important issues.

1 Occidentalism. Just as he critiqued Orientalists of reducing a vast and differentiated area to the Orient, so Said reduces all of Europe (and later also North America) to the Occident. Clearly there are differences within the west. For instance, what differences might there be in the geographical imagination of those countries that did not have colonies? What of internal colonies and groups of others within Europe (such as Northern Ireland within the UK, groups of East European Romany travelling people, and those from European empires now living within the west)? Furthermore, there are traditions of ‘Occidentalism’, representations of Europe and its culture from the non-Western world. These are significant issues, but it is important to remember that although the structures of representation are similar, there is one big difference between Orientalism and Occidentalism which is power, i.e. that the west had, and continues to have, the most powerful voice in representing the west and the rest throughout the world. Historically the influence of Orientalist representations of the world has been much greater than that of Occidentalist accounts, a point we will return to at various places in the book.

2 Historical difference. Said focuses on continuities to the detriment of historical change. While we can trace the continued existence of themes from Orientalism into contemporary culture (and this is in fact something we will do throughout this book), clearly some things are different today – we can see this in the way we view the images of the rest of the world which used to be taken for granted – and if Said’s theories are correct, there is no way for accounting for these changes.

3 Gender. Said has been critiqued for an implicit gendering of the Orient as female. Many of the images he used are highly gendered (think of the image in Figure 2.5). Because this is not reflected upon, Said effectively reinforces the patriarchal idea that it is men who are active and capable, and women are passive and unable to represent themselves. As we shall see in a later chapter, feminists have argued that western women travellers to the Orient produced very different accounts because of the power relations they experienced at home. Their positionality challenged the neat binaries that Said’s work depends upon.

4 Retextualisation. Said talks of a textualised Orient, but in his work he does not detextualise it but retexualises it. Following from the Foucaultian literature he draws on, no-one can provide a true representation of reality, all is constructed through discourse. Now the Orientalists’ texts are replaced by Said’s text. While the Orientalist texts aimed to show that the Orient was backward, this has been replaced by Said’s aim of demonstrating the political nature of the Orientalists. The values (whether the Orient or the Occident contains the problem) have changed but the structure of representation (there is a geographical space of Orient and of Occident) remains the same. We still do not know what ‘they’ think themselves as the voices of Oriental people are not included in the book.
Moreover, if all versions of the Orient are textual creations, how are we to argue that today’s version, or Said’s version, is any better or worse than those presented in the nineteenth century by European colonisers and earlier travellers? This is a particularly important critique for us as geographers as one of the tasks that we have traditionally had is to write about different parts of the world. As we shall see, geography as a discipline was very much part of the European colonial enterprise and was caught up in Orientalism. Are we still Orientalists if we seek to write geographies of the Middle East or Asia?

Further reading

On early European views of the rest of the world


The classic text on the way the rest of the world has been represented by the west


For further discussion of Said’s work


Sohat and Stam develop Said’s arguments to a world where the dominant representation comes through US media


On contemporary expressions of Orientalism in international relations (especially concerning the ‘war on terror’)