Orientalism, as an area of study, has multiple definitions: It is an academic field that seeks to study *the Orient*, as well as a term for a more general interest in all things “Oriental.” However, within geography, it is most frequently employed as a critique of these two definitions. This critique of Orientalism was first extensively developed by the famed Palestinian scholar Edward Said (1935-2003). Orientalism in this context refers to the process by which “the Orient” (the area of the Middle East, as understood by Said) has been represented in particular ways by “the Occident,” or “the West” (generally understood to be Europe and the United States), both historically and in the present day. Orientalism reflects, and works to maintain, the political and cultural power relationships inherent in colonialism and imperialism. Within Orientalism, “the Orient” is characterized as barbaric, primitive, passive, stagnant, and feminine, while “the West” is held in direct contrast, as rational, dynamic, progressive, and masculine. These totalizing representations are not the result of individual representational constructions but can be viewed within a broader, intertextual body of literature and other texts.

This entry begins with a detailed examination of Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). As with most widely discussed ideas, Said’s review of Orientalism has a number of critiques from a diverse community of scholars. These critiques include the combination of Said’s humanism with Foucault’s antihumanism and the problematic methodological result of this combination. Critics have also taken issue with the impossibility of escaping from the very binary that Said highlights within Orientalism, as well as his inattention to gender and sexuality within Orientalist discourse. The entry concludes with a brief synopsis of the ways in which Orientalism has been taken up by geographers within subfields of geography.

**Exploring Orientalism**

Said was influenced by a number of scholars, including Jacques Derrida and Frantz Fanon, but methodologically drew from the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse analysis. Said’s critique of Orientalism used this method to show how the colonization of the Orient had been enabled and justified through Orientalist discourse. While Foucault contended that the individual author was virtually insignificant in creating discursive formations, Said aimed to expose the dialectic between the author and the overarching discursive body. The texts that Said examined were primarily those of high culture from the West (largely art and literature) but united a number of seemingly disparate spheres such as policy, academic knowledge, and popular cultural production. Through his analysis, Said sought to explore the ways in which the Orient was represented as pejorative throughout history and into the modern day. He argued that Orientalism was based on an ontological and epistemological division between the West and the Orient.
Said understood Orientalism to be predicated on the separation between the Self and the Other. This separation relies not only on the assignment of difference to the Other but also a desire for that difference. Representations of the Orient and Orientals were thus shown by Said to reflect European fantasies of the exoticized Other in addition to those representations that portrayed Orientals as unskilled, infantile, and bellicose. All these representations, however, remained inherently essentialist. Using stereotypical depictions, they culturally constructed the Orient as a homogeneous whole, neglecting all nuances present in reality. Because Said saw all writing, thought, and cultural production as political, all texts were political and laced with the prevailing cultural hegemony of the time period. Said's own lifelong political commitment to the cause of the Palestinian people was intimately bound up with his critique of Orientalism.

One of the key ideas of Said's analysis of Orientalism is imaginative geography. Imaginative geography refers to the reconceptualization of actual, physically bounded spaces with emotionally charged definitions that exceed and extend past the realities of those spaces. Through imaginative geographies, the distances between known and unknown spaces can be reduced while at the same time the exotic and mysterious elements of foreign places are intensified. Imaginative geographies reflect the fantasies and desires of those who create them and are inscribed within systems of power. Through these constructions, space not only becomes demarcated as "ours" and "theirs" but also involves the active appropriation of space, a process that was deeply instrumental to the expansion of the colonial state, as well as current imperial projects.

Historically, essentializing representations were produced on both sides of the East/West divide; however, the expansion of European colonialism and the overwhelming assumption of power by the West resulted in the prevalence of institutional Orientalism (as opposed to Occidentalism, or stereotypes of the Western world). Over time, Orientalism moved from being a largely academic subject to being instrumental in policy making and from an alien space to a colonial one. The conception of the Orient and Oriental peoples through biological and environmental determinism resulted in the "scientific" justification of the Oriental as backward, incompetent, uncivilized, and in need of domination and enlightenment by the West. Additionally, Orientalism's masculine worldview helped develop the Orient as static and unproductive while at the same time sensual, exotic, and feminine.

As Orientalism evolved, the Orient became something that Europe needed for its own regeneration. Said contended that the West needed the Orient to define itself in contrast to the Other and that the West gained strength through this continuous (re)definition. The (mis)representations created by Orientalism are noteworthy not because of their accuracy but because they are part of a consistent and purposefully constructed discourse of alterity. Although Said's analysis was textual, he firmly believed that these textual representations had material consequences. Orientalism relies on the inscription of meaning on spaces and places, through poetic processes, which result in the development of a discourse of difference between "us" and "them." Textual production, he argued, produced more texts that could, in time, change reality and therefore create concrete consequences. Fictionality and reality thus help inform and determine one another.

For Said, Orientalism was not simply a historic construction of textual representations but a continuing phenomenon. He argued that Orientalism has not disappeared but has been reworked in a postcolonial world now controlled largely by the United States. In his work, he argued that modern American culture continues to depict the Arab Muslim in particular and essentialist ways that help perpetuate the United States' continued project of domination over the Arab world. Said specifically addressed the Gulf War...
of the early 1990s, and his later work concerned the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001.

While Orientalism has been used and critiqued widely in other fields, it has also been employed extensively in geography. Said was particularly interested in space and place and discussed geography and spatiality throughout his writings. Geographical works on Orientalism are most notably found in the works of Derek Gregory. Said’s work has been foundational to postcolonial studies, and investigations of knowledge/power and colonial and postcolonial states have used the critique of Orientalism as a point of departure. The critique of Orientalism has also been employed to highlight the essentializing nature of some textual representations in geography’s subfields, such as tourism and media studies. As Said noted, however, geography as a discipline was, and in some ways potentially remains, key to the processes of colonial and postcolonial domination by the West. The discipline of Orientalism, as well as Orientalism as a process, depended on the dissemination of knowledge about distant places and peoples by objective “experts.” These “experts,” geographers included, acted as gatekeepers and helped legitimize and enable colonialism. Geographers have more recently acknowledged how the discipline itself, much like the discipline of Orientalism, has been complicit in the construction and maintenance of disparate power dynamics between the colonial state and its colonies.

**Critiques Of Said’s Orientalism**

Said’s *Orientalism* was critiqued for a number of reasons. First, it was argued that Said’s humanism, which is based in a Western Enlightenment tradition of humanism, could not be reconciled with Foucault’s antihumanism. Said’s assignment of agency to the individual author runs counter to the idea that informs it, that is, Foucault’s concept of the capillaries of power. As such, it was argued that Said’s methodology was inherently flawed and that he quit using his Foucauldian methodology when it interfered with his humanism.

Additionally, Said’s critique of Orientalism was criticized for being simplistic. Some critics argued that in exploring the division of the world between the West and the Orient, Said not only documented but also reinforced binaries that were inattentive to more nuanced representations of peoples and places. In this vein, the critique of Orientalism did not provide space from which to break out of this dichotomous worldview. Said himself called for an alternative to Orientalism but did not elaborate on what this might look like. It has also been argued that Said gives insufficient thought to the interchanges of power and the ways in which the seemingly totalizing power held by the colonizer might be contested by the colonized, especially in localized, daily practice.

Said was also criticized for his explicit focus on British and French Orientalisms and his neglect of other Orientalisms (e.g., German and American). He argued that this was justified because the British and French had been the most influential in the production of Orientalist discourses as well as in colonial expansion. Said’s political commitment to Palestine and his interest in Egypt were undoubtedly other key components of his choice of focus on British and French Orientalisms. Other critics contended that Said neglected analysis of texts that disagreed with his thesis of the overwhelmingly dominant discourse of Orientalism. His use of texts from various time periods also led to a critique that the work was transhistorical and therefore ahistorical. His work was viewed by some as elitist in its examination of solely “high culture” and the academic discipline of Orientalism. Said never relinquished his affinity with the Western literary canon that he himself critiqued, and this also remained a point of contention among his critics.

Last, feminist scholars have noted his inattention to the place of gender within the discourse of
Orientalism. While Said does discuss the feminization of the Orient, his attention to gender remained primarily in the metaphorical association of the Orient to femininity. Scholars have sought to deepen and further problematize the dichotomy between the West and the Orient, as well as to investigate the material practices and experiences of gender within Orientalism. Although it is noted that Said did open up space for the expanded exploration of gender and sexuality, it has been argued that these subjects are much more important than he made room for in his analysis. Feminist scholars have also questioned whether Said's regional and, at times, global scale of analysis undermines critiques of local institutions and politics.

**Orientalism's use Within Geographic Subfields**

Said's focus on Orientalism as a phenomenon experienced only by the Middle East has more recently been extended to the former colonies, including Africa, Eastern Asia, and Australia. While much work on Orientalism has been historical in nature, geographers and other scholars continue to critically engage with the theory in a modern context. Within geography, the critique of Orientalism has been used in a number of ways. Said's interest in literature and art has been extended by geographers concerned with other textual production such as travel writing and tourism. Within postcolonial and development geographies, the critique of Orientalism has been used to explore the ways in which essentialist representations help perpetuate relationships of dependency even within a postcolonial context.

**See Also**

Colonialism, Difference, Geographies of, Discourse and Geography, Gregory, Derek, Identity, Geography and, Imperialism, Other/Otherness, Postcolonialism, Race and empire, Race and Racism, Social Darwinism, Subaltern Studies

**Further Readings**


Downey, Victoria S.
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA