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RECONCEPTUALIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL PROJECT
Beyond the Strictures and Structures of Orientalism

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This essay investigates the possibility of formulating a much needed new direction for postcolonial studies by focusing on a certain thread of argument in Edward Said’s Orientalism, one that suggests that Orientalism is more an account of how the West experienced the Orient than it is a description about a place in the world, viz. the Orient. In this sense, ‘the Orient’ is both a place in the world and an entity that exists only in western experience. Orientalism is not only an experiential discourse but also a way of structuring this experience. The essay suggests that to dispute the truth status of this discourse and its descriptions is to stay within the framework of the colonial experience. Moreover, since Orientalism developed in continuous interaction with and as a part of the growth of social sciences, the latter cannot possibly offer an alternative to Orientalism. Both are expressions of the experience of one culture, the West. To understand the way western culture has described both itself and others is to begin understanding western culture. The challenge of Orientalism, then, is a challenge to understand western culture itself. Consequently, a critique of Orientalism becomes coterminous with the task of creating alternative theories in the domain of the humanities and social sciences.
‘Orient’ and ‘Orientalism’ in Edward Said

The multiple criticisms of Said’s Orientalism are directly proportional to the polysemic nature of that text. There exist many justifiable constructions of the book, including Said’s own interpretation. This essay will not add to this multiplicity. We do however need a certain minimal agreement about the meaning of the core concepts like ‘the Orient’, ‘Orientalism’ and ‘discourse’, and consequently we shall attempt some minimal interpretations.

‘The Orient’: both a place and an idea

In the first place, the word refers to a physical space in the world: ‘The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest colonies’ (Said 1978: 1; emphasis added). Not only was this place colonized it also became a part of the material civilization of Europe: ‘The Orient is an integral part [our emphasis] of the European material civilization’ (Said 1978: 2; emphasis in original).

In the Orientalist discourse, one uses the word ‘Orient’ to mention the Orient. Further, the word ‘Orient’ acquires certain meanings within a particular way of talking about a part of the world. A way of talking about a part of the world is ‘Orientalism’. That is to say, an entity in the world is talked about (or represented) in some particular way (as a mode of discourse). Such a theoretical term is an ‘idea’. This idea has a history; other ideas and imageries surround it to the extent that it is a part of a theory.

Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (Said 1978: 5; emphasis added)

The first part in the above sentence says that both the ‘West’ and the ‘Orient’ are ideas. The ‘it’ in the first sentence refers to the ‘idea of the Orient’. In the second sentence the reference is to the real entities or the physical spaces that the Orient and the West are. Without Orientalism the word ‘Orient’ would have no reference to the Orient (in the world). Further, the reality of the Orient cannot be in the reality that the West is, that is, the Orient cannot be physically present in western culture. Rather, it is present for the West as a reality, i.e. as a culture, and is present in the western culture as an idea (‘the Orient’) as well. This is how we must understand Said’s claim that ‘the
Orient is an integral part of the European culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part as a mode of discourse’ (Said 1978: 2; emphasis added). The claim is not only that western culture spoke about Asian culture but also that both are humanly constructed entities.

‘The Orient’ as an experiential entity

I shall be calling Orientalism [emphasis in the original] a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. (Said 1978: 1; emphasis added)

Three things are of importance here:

1 Orient has a special place in the European western experience, i.e. there is an Orient which is an experiential entity to Europeans. One can speak of the special place of this experiential entity only when we relate it to other experiential entities. These entities are obviously located within the experiential world of Europe.

2 The special place accorded to this experiential entity within the experiential world of Europeans allows them to come to terms with that Orient which is in the world. That is to say, based on the special place the experiential Orient has, Europe ‘comes to terms’ with the Orient in the real world. More simply formulated, Europeans come to terms with the ‘real’ Orient in some way or another by appealing to and making use of their experience.

3 As a consequence, the word ‘Orient’ now also refers to an entity-in-experience.

On the nature of experiential entities

This ‘experiential entity’ appears analogous to the Kantian Welt-für-uns, except that the ‘us’ here picks out the western world. This Kantian distinction (it is of no concern to us who mediate Kant to Said) returns elsewhere in the book: ‘Islam became an image...whose function was not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian’ (Said 1978: 60; emphasis added). In fact, one of the underlying themes in Said’s book is some kind of a Kantian claim about the ‘unknowability’ of the things an sich: the ‘Orient’, the ‘Islam’, the ‘Orientals’ and such like. At the same time, Said does not want to subscribe to its epistemological consequence: ‘To believe that the Orient was created – or, as I call it, ‘Orientalized’– and to believe that such things happen simply as a
necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous’ (Said 1978: 5; emphasis added). The reference to Kantian epistemology is unmistakable here: as human beings, Kant claimed, the world is experienced by us (human beings) within the categorical framework and to seek experience of the ‘real’ world outside such a framework leads reason into contradictions. In this sense, the ‘real’ Orient is present in the imagination only by being ‘Orientalized’. To a Kantian, this would be an inevitable epistemological consequence of our humanness. To Said though, such a claim would be ‘disingenuous’: he wants to suggest that the nexus of power/knowledge mediates such a construction. However, this unresolved tension between subscribing to Kantian epistemology while denying one of its necessary consequences expresses itself in many ways throughout Said’s book. In fact, many criticisms of Said arise from this fact; the most obvious of them is his inability to say what falsity of the Orientalist image really means or what speaking of a ‘false image’ boils down to. Is there some way of making sense of his work without trashing it for being philosophically incoherent?

We believe there is. It would involve our taking the notion of cultural difference seriously without trivializing the concept. Such a difference cannot be understood either as a difference in beliefs or as a difference in practices between members of different cultures. This way of plotting cultural differences expresses the common sense in the western culture: that is to say, our common way of talking about cultural differences (difference in beliefs and practices) is a culturally specific way of talking about them. There is nothing scientific about this common sense; it is merely the currently dominant way of talking about the differences between cultures as one culture, the western culture, experiences this difference. When we look at the issue this way, Orientalism does not express some Kantian epistemic distinction. Instead, Orientalism becomes a culturally specific way of expressing the difference between the Oriente and the Occident. The cultural specificity lies in the manner in which the discourse about the Orient expresses the specificity of the western culture. In short, in the first place, Orientalism becomes a cultural project of the western culture.

**About the Nature of ‘Orientalism’**

**A cultural project**

There are two senses in which the western way of talking about the East is a cultural project. The first sense is an obvious one: ‘to speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in . . . disparate realms’ (Said 1978: 4; emphasis added). However, in what sense is it a cultural project, as against a military or political project? The following citations from Said hint at another sense, a more profound one, in which
Orientalism is a cultural project of the western culture: ‘Orientalism ... has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world’; ‘That Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient. ... Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object’ (Said 1978: 12, 22; emphasis added).

These citations suggest that the way in which the East was made into the Orient, the way in which a ‘discourse’ transformed an Easterner into an Oriental, somehow expresses something typical of the western culture. That is to say, the Orientalist discourse tells us something non-trivial about the culture that produced it, namely, the western culture. In this sense, to study Orientalism is also to study the western culture itself. In other words, the Orient is not just an idea; it is also constructed as a specific kind of entity. Such an entity is an experiential object which belongs to the experiential world of the West. Members of a culture, in our case the western culture, create or construct an experiential world (populated by experiential objects) and talk about both this world and its objects in a systematic way.

**A constrained thought**

As Said says repeatedly, ‘racist’, ‘sexist’ and ‘imperialist’ vocabularies do not transform a way of talking into an ‘Orientalist’ discourse, any more than the use of ‘dichotomizing essentialism’ does. These are not the constituent properties of the discourse but merely its imageries.

Said’s characterization of Orientalism occurs almost en passant. ‘Orientalism ... is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some case control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world’ (Said 1978: 12; emphasis added). Therefore, ‘Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine’ (Said 1978: 42; emphasis added). This means a ‘limited vocabulary and imagery ... impose themselves as a consequence’ (Said 1978: 60). That is to say, the limited vocabulary and imagery of the Orientalist discourse are the consequences of a set of constraints imposed upon western thinking in its attempts to understand a world manifestly different from its own.

It is trivially true that all human thought is subject to constraints and limitations. Such constraining is a conditio sine qua non for human thought: it is constrained by language and by the conceptual resources available to it. That is to say, human thinking is always a particular way of thinking. While Orientalist thinking is also human thinking (because it too is subject to constraints), it is not Orientalist because it is human. Orientalist thought, as a particular way of thinking, is ‘Orientalist’ because it is a particular way of thinking. What constitutes this particular way of thinking? What kind of
constraints and limitations transform human thinking into Orientalist thinking? Said’s remarks are *en passant* here as well:

The Orient and the Oriental, Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or whatever, become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating. (Said 1978: 62)

To the Westerner, however, the Oriental was always *like* some aspect of the West; to some of the German Romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian pantheism. (Said 1978: 67; emphasis in original)

That is to say, in the western descriptions of other cultures, the ‘otherness’ of the latter has disappeared. Better still, ‘non-western’ cultures appear to differ from the West only as pale (or erring) imitations of the great original the latter is. Orientalism is constrained to describe non-western cultures not merely in terms of the western culture. It also effaces the differences between the two while doing so. A limited vocabulary and imagery are the consequences of this constraint. It requires noting that this formulation merely characterizes Orientalism as a constrained thinking of the western culture.

**Orientalism and the Social Sciences**

In the course of generating descriptions of other cultures – whether framed in positive or negative axiological terms – Orientalism made use of a conceptual reservoir. It consisted of ideas and theories about human beings, the nature of languages, the structure of societies, the character of cultures, the nature of religion, the value of history, etc. In its turn, such a constructed discourse had its impact on the evolution of subsequent theorizing about Man and Society. In other words, Orientalist discourse did not evolve in total isolation but in continuous interaction with and as a part of the growth of social sciences. It is not an extraneous and alien growth on the otherwise splendid corpus of social sciences. Instead, it is an inextricable part of social scientific discourse.

One of the problems with the Saidian terminology is its difficulty in making sense of the social sciences. If what Weber wrote about the religions of India and China is Orientalist, ‘Weber’s studies of Protestantism, Judaism, and Buddhism blew him (perhaps unwittingly) into the very territory originally charted and claimed by Orientalism’ (Said 1978: 259), what could we say about his theory on the development of capitalism and the Protestant ethics? If the European writings on ‘Hinduism’ are Orientalist,
what about their histories of Christianity? If we assume that Marx’s claims in *The Grundrisse* about India are squarely in the Orientalist camp, where do his claims about commodities, money and capital belong? Is Freudian psychoanalysis itself Orientalist because using that theory entails that Asian culture is populated by pathological beings afflicted by secondary narcissism?

To these questions, neither Said nor those inspired by him answer directly. Inden (1986, 1990) criticizes the ‘Orientalist constructions of India’ by using Collingwood’s notion of history. Are we to assume that using Collingwood’s concept of history to understand India is non-Orientalist, whereas using a Marxist notion of history to study India is Orientalist? In fact, Dipesh Chakrabarty (1997) thinks that it is impossible for the non-Western cultures to write ‘their’ own histories because of the prevalent meta-conceptions of history. In other words, one needs to know what relation, if any, is there between Orientalism and social sciences.

In Said’s case, it seems as though the existing social sciences are *alternatives* to Orientalism. This stance has to do with the ‘humanistic’ orientation that Said entertains. Knowledge about human beings, he believes, must be both general and specific. ‘General’ in the sense that knowledge about human beings tells us about ‘human beings as such’ and, in doing so, it does not divide them up in arbitrary ways. The distinctions of ‘culture’, ‘language’, ‘nation’, etc., are ‘imaginative’ and not ‘natural facts’. Consequently, a humanistic study (of human beings) is not trapped by these ‘man-made’ distinctions. At the same time, it must also be ‘specific’. That is, it must not lose itself in abstractions or ‘collectives’ but give us knowledge about the flesh-and-blood individuals.

However, there is also his critique of Orientalist discourse. Orientalism, as a *field* of study, stands on its own. It studies the ‘Oriental’: a type, an abstraction, a fictitious creature with some ‘essential properties’ who populates the domain of discourse. Consequently, in so far as Orientalism talks and ‘studies’ this human being *qua* Oriental, it cannot produce knowledge. This ‘Oriental’ is a bi-dimensional figure: he is not the ‘flesh-and-blood’ individual of our human world.

Said notices that Orientalism has borrowed wittingly or unwittingly from the social sciences:

Orientalism borrowed and was frequently informed by ‘strong’ ideas, doctrines, and trends ruling the culture. Thus there was (and is) a linguistic Orient, a Freudian Orient, a Spenglerian Orient, a Darwinian Orient, a racist Orient – and so on. (Said 1978: 22)

He is certain too where the alternatives to Orientalism are likely to come from:
Enough is being done today in the human sciences to provide the contemporary scholar with insights, methods, and ideas that could dispense with racial, ideological, and imperialist stereotypes of the sort provided during the historical ascendancy by Orientalism. (Said 1978: 328)

On the one hand, Orientalism is a massive cultural project, which has a huge impact on the western culture, people and their imagination. People produce/reproduce Orientalist discourse without realizing they are doing so, and without wanting to do so. Furthermore, the Orientalist discourse also creates and reinforces the western ‘self-conception’ and ‘self-representation’.

Yet, on the other hand, if we believe Said, such a discourse has no impact on the growth and development of the social sciences. This enterprise, which is also a cultural project of the West, is completely unaffected by (or even oblivious to) the other cultural project. One cultural enterprise, Orientalism, appears to borrow continuously from the other cultural enterprise, the social scientific discourse. The social sciences, for their part, do not borrow anything from the Orientalist discourse and from the concomitant cultural images about man and society. Not only that. They are also alternatives to the Orientalist discourse. Surely, this suggestion is implausible.

Why is it implausible? The answer is obvious. The existing social sciences, which are primarily western initiatives, make claims about human beings and their society in both the West and the East. Orientalism does not merely put across claims about the non-western cultures but it also creates and reinforces certain ideas about the western man and his society. Therefore, we have two sets of claims about the social and cultural world: one set of claims formulated by Orientalism and the other formulated by the social sciences. Because of their subject matter, these claims cannot be indifferent to each other; either they are compatible or they are not. Because Orientalism borrows from the social sciences, their claims must be compatible. From this, it follows that the claims of Orientalism must also be compatible with the claims of social sciences. If this is the case, the existing social sciences cannot provide us with alternatives to Orientalism; instead, they too must continue the legacy of the Orientalist writings. The images of man and society that the existing social sciences either reinforce or take for granted must be continuous with Orientalism.

**On constructing the Orient**

When the Europeans came to the East (say, India or Egypt) and wrote down their experiences, they were not hallucinating. They did not write about their dreams, nor did they compose stories. Whether of a merchant, a missionary or a bureaucrat, the reports had some kind of a structure. Reflections about such reports at second remove, or reflections on experiences at a later stage
or in a distant way, led to finding a pattern or a structure in these experiences themselves. That structure is the Orient and the discourse about it is the Orientalist discourse.

The previous sentence is not a description of how the pattern or structure was found. It is not as though any one person pored over these reports (though many did), trying out one inductive hypothesis after another (even though a few were formulated), until a satisfactory pattern finally emerged. These reports lent structure to what the Europeans saw. At the same time, they filtered out phenomena that could not be structured in this fashion. Thus, these reports contributed to structuring a European way of seeing and describing phenomena in other cultures. Such texts, which embodied an explanatory structuring of the European experiences, would end up becoming the ‘ethnological data’ or the ‘anthropological fieldwork’ that the social theories would later try to explain.

‘Orientalism’ is how the western culture came to terms with the reality that the East is. That is, ‘Orientalism’ refers not only to the discourse about experience but also to the way of reflecting about and structuring this experience. In this sense, even though Orientalism is a discourse about western cultural experience, it is oblique. It is oblique because it appears to be about other cultures. It is also oblique because the experience is not directly reflected upon. It is western in the sense that it refers to the experiences of the members from a particular culture. Orientalism is the western way of thinking about its experience of non-western cultures. However, it takes the form of an apparent discourse about the Orient.

Elsewhere, Said puts it this way: ‘Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from ordinary historical knowledge’ (Said 1978: 72; emphasis added). Let us look at this contrast between the ‘knowledge’ that paranoia is (i.e. the ideas a paranoid figure believes in) and historical knowledge. In fact, this contrast is more to the point than might appear at first sight: the distinction is drawn between ‘ordinary historical knowledge’ (i.e. knowledge of other peoples and places) and the paranoid ‘knowledge’ (i.e. where the person confuses the experiences he has of other people with the knowledge about them). The paranoid thinks that his beliefs about other people are true descriptions and does not see them as reports about his experience. Not only that: he also stubbornly refuses to accept that his beliefs about other people are reports of his experiences and not descriptions of other people. This is also the case with Orientalism: the Orientalist stubbornly refuses to believe that he is talking about his experiences; instead, he maintains that he is reporting about other people as they are in the world. If this Saidian analogy is accepted, we can make sense of one of the extraordinary epistemological properties of Orientalism:
This information (about the Orient) seemed to be morally neutral and objectively valid; it seemed to have an epistemological status equal to that of historical chronology or geographical location. In its most basic form, then, Oriental material could not really be violated by anyone’s discoveries, nor did it seem ever to be revaluated completely. (Said 1978: 205)

It must be obvious why Orientalism possesses this epistemological property. Because this ‘knowledge’ is a report of a cultural experience, and because no ‘fact’ or ‘discovery’ can ever refute experience, the Orientalist knowledge cannot be refuted. Nevertheless, it appears ‘objectively valid’ and ‘morally neutral’ because one assumes that it is a set of claims about the world instead of seeing it for what it is, viz. a report of experience.

The fact that it is a discourse about the western experience of the Orient implies that people from other cultures cannot directly participate in disputes concerning the nature and place of the ‘Others’ within the western experience. One could reproduce western discussions in, say, the Indian journals and periodicals. However, this would not contribute to the debate. The debate would still be in terms of the western experience of the other, an experience that the non-western people cannot access. The discussion or debate among the western intellectuals pertains to the role and place of the other cultures in their experiential world.

In fact, there is almost something surrealistic about the Asians claiming that ‘Orientalism constructed the Orient imaginatively’. What is incredible is the ease with which Indians seem to take this statement at face value. What is their relationship to this imaginatively constructed Orient? How could they have access to this entity? After all, Orientalist writings formulated claims about the entity that they, the Orientalists, saw. How can the Indians see what the Orientalists saw? Actually, the problem is even more acute. How can the Asians vigorously participate in the debate? How can they discuss with the European intellectuals about Europe’s cultural experience of the East, as though they, the postcolonial intellectuals from the East, are privy to such an experience? How can they even make sense of the claims that the Orientalists make?

One could also summarize this situation in the form of cognitive questions: How do the imagined and imaginary constructions appear to those whose imaginative products they are not? How does the ‘Orient’, the ‘imaginative western construction’, appear to those from the East? If Orientalism is a culturally constrained discourse, does the reception of this discourse (in the East) make it something other than what it is in the West? We propose assigning to these questions the status of a litmus test.
The litmus test
Like all massive and significant social processes (revolutions, fascism, war, etc.), colonization too is complex. It involved not only the colonizing of land and resources, subjugating peoples and their traditions, but also the colonizing of their experience and imagination. When modern Orientalism provided descriptions of other peoples and traditions, the colonized took such portrayals as descriptions of themselves. The picture that the Orientalists provided was true, their diagnosis accurate, the prognosis probable and the therapy certain – these were the experiences (and convictions) of those who were colonized.

The colonial powers looked at and described the colonized. The latter accepted these as true descriptions of themselves. To isolate just one relevant thread, ‘colonial experience’ refers to the conjunction of both the earlier statements. Correspondingly, if it is not mere hot air, ‘postcolonial experience’ indicates at least two things: (1) ‘our’ experience is what we have after (the chronological sense of ‘post’) such a colonial experience; (2) ‘our’ experience is ‘beyond’ (the logical sense of ‘post’) the colonial experience in the sense that this experience includes reflections about the experiences of the colonizer and the colonized. That is to say, modern Orientalism cannot appear to ‘us’ as descriptions (whether contested or not) of ourselves – because that is how they appeared in the colonial experience. Consequently, we suggest that to dispute the truth status of such descriptions, or to decorate them ad nauseam with empirical details, is to remain a colonial subject and to stay within the framework of the colonial experience.

The rationale for this suggestion must be obvious. Firstly, modern Orientalism is how western culture spoke about other cultures (a particular kind of ‘discourse’). Also, it is about how such a way of talking enabled them to go about with people from other cultures: modern Orientalism enabled the West to colonize people from other cultures. Secondly, to both the West and the colonized, Orientalism appeared as a veridical discourse about the world. That is to say, to both the colonized and the colonizers, Orientalism was primarily a description of the colonizer and his culture. Thirdly, colonial experience refers to the experiential world of both the colonizer and the colonized that allowed them to see Oriental discourse as a true description of the colonial world. Fourthly, because of these, both the colonizer and the colonized lived according to these descriptions: the colonized as ‘the Oriental’, and the colonizer as ‘the Occidental’. In this way, Orientalism did not just transform the Easterner into an Oriental; it also, as Said puts it, ‘Orientalized’ the Oriental. Fifthly and finally, this discourse also defines the parameter of how the colonizer and the colonized engage with it: challenging the ‘truth’ of its description, and negotiating a ‘better place’ for the Orient, the experiential entity, within the western experiential world. This is a colonial contestation.
The ‘postcolonial predicament’, to the extent it is a predicament of those coming after colonialism, refers to the continuity between the colonial experience and the experience of those living in today’s world. It is the predicament of not only Edward Said but also of most postcolonial thinkers: they too continue to share the colonial experience. They naively believe that an experiential entity of another culture is accessible to them; they contest the ‘construction’ of the Orient, as though this entity or the discourse about it makes sense to them. Much like the ‘humanists’ in the West, they attempt to provide or negotiate a ‘better place’ for the Orient within the experiential world of the western culture. Equally naively, they think that the social sciences of today will provide them with the required alternative. In this sense, the postcolonial predicament refers to the persistence of colonial consciousness after direct colonization has ended.

The difference between colonial and postcolonial intellectuals would have to lie in the type of questions they ask and the kind of answers they seek. The latter look at Orientalism in ways their predecessors did not and could not. Orientalism (including its modern variant) is the raw material from which they have to construct an understanding of how the Orientalist discourse was possible at all. In very simple terms, the Orientalist discourse should tell us more about western culture than it does about the culture of the Orient.

On Decolonizing the Social Sciences

As we said earlier, ‘Orientalism’ is not only about how Europe experienced the East, but also about the way it gave expression to that experience. In this process, western culture built and elaborated conceptual frameworks using resources available from its own culture. These descriptions helped in Europe’s description and understanding of itself. That is to say, Europe’s description of other cultures is entwined in many untold ways with the way it has experienced the world. To understand the way western culture has described both itself and others is to begin understanding western culture.

The challenge of Orientalism, thus, is a challenge to understand the western culture itself.

Religions in India: an example

Consider the claim that most would give their assent to: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc., are the religions of India. Postcolonial intellectuals would probably add two or three qualifications to this claim. They would probably say that it is not possible to speak of one Hinduism, one Buddhism, one Jainism, and, instead, one should speak about many ‘Hinduisms’, many ‘Buddhisms’, many ‘Jainisms’, and so on. Secondly, they would also raise
questions about who could speak for and about these religions. Thirdly, they are likely to add that the British ‘created’ or ‘constructed’ these religions in India during the colonial period. Actually, the first two qualifications are cognitively uninteresting because one could simply accept that ‘Hinduism’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Jainism’, etc., do not name a unitary phenomenon but that they pick out many different sets of practices and beliefs. One could also dispense with the second qualification by suggesting that we are not after ‘canonical’ descriptions of these phenomena. By far, the most interesting qualification is the third one. Let us look at it closely.

During the colonial period, the British created many things: an education system, a legal system, a bureaucracy, roads and railways. None of these existed in these forms before the British colonized India. Were religions like ‘Hinduism’ etc., also created in this way? Some postcolonial thinkers are inclined to say yes: the British created Hinduism as a religion in India the way they created the Indian Civil Service (ICS). In that case, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the Orientalist writings on Hinduism. Some of them might have made false claims, but we can correct them as more accurate information accumulates. In that case, contemporary writings on Hinduism, etc., whether from the field of Indology or religious studies, would remain continuous with the Orientalist writings on the subject. That is to say, the ‘facts’ that the Orientalists provided become the point of departure for the writings in social sciences. The latter either add to these facts or explain them. This is also the status of the field today: the writings in the humanities and social sciences maintain an unbroken line of continuity with the Orientalist writings on these ‘religions’ in India.

If this is the case, one can hardly understand what the excitement is about either ‘Orientalism’ or ‘postcolonial studies’. Of course, if one adds other items to this creation story, one can blame the western culture as the ‘big bad wolf’: the British created ‘Sati’, the ‘dowry system’, ‘the caste system’, and anything else one feels like. Not only is this exercise in apportioning blame uninteresting, it also transforms the Indians into a bunch of idiots bereft of all reason: the British could do what they wanted with the Indian culture, introduce and create whatever took their fancy, while the people stood around without even wanting to move the thumbs they were sucking upon. To put it in the language of the postcolonial thinkers: such a story deprives the colonial subjects of their agency. The postcolonial writers who tell such stories indeed deprive the colonial subjects of their agency in the name of giving it back to them, or, they discover in the vigorous sucking of their thumbs an expression of ‘resistance’ to colonialism, as Homi Bhabha, for instance, does.

There is, however, another way of looking at the claim of creating these religions in India. Despite the limitations, drawing an analogy could make it more perspicuous. Imagine an extraterrestrial coming to earth and noticing
the following phenomena: grass is green, milk turns sour, birds fly, and some flowers put out a fragrant smell. He is convinced that these phenomena are related to each other and sees hipkapi in them. The presence of hipkapi not only explains what the above phenomena are but also how they are related to each other. To those who doubt the existence of hipkapi, he draws their attention to its visible manifestations: the tigers eating the gazelle, dogs chasing the cats, and the massive size of the elephants. Each of these is a fact, as everyone can see it. However, neither severally nor individually do they tell us anything about hipkapi. When more like him come to earth and reiterate the presence of hipkapi, other conditions permitting, hipkapi not only becomes a synonym for these phenomena but also turns out to be their explanation. Thereafter, to ask what hipkapi is, or even how it explains, is an expression of one’s idiocy: does not everyone see hipkapi, this self-explanatory thing? In this analogy, the extraterrestrial visitor has ‘constructed’ the hipkapi. To him, it is an experiential entity. He talks, as his fellow-beings do, about this experiential entity in a systematic way.

This is what the Europeans did. The puja in the temples, the sandhya-vandanam of the Brahmins, the Sahasranamams, etc., became organic parts of the Indian religion. Purushasukta was the cosmogony of the caste system, and ‘untouchability’ its outward manifestation. Dharma and Adharma were the Sanskrit words for ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and the Indian deities were much like their Greek counterparts. To the missionaries, Indians were idolaters; to the contemporary liberal, they are mere polytheists. In terms of the analogy, the visitors ‘construct’ a hipkapi. To them, it becomes an experiential entity. They talk about this experiential entity in a systematic way.

This would entail suggesting that Europeans created ‘Hinduism’ etc., as their experiential entities. The Orientalists, under this construal, did not describe what exists in the Indian culture. Instead, they created a hipkapi, constructed a pattern and a structure that lent coherence to their cultural experience of India. In such a case, claims about Hinduism become somewhat akin to claims about having visions of Mother Mary at Lourdes. Only ‘somewhat’, because such a vision could be characterized as a hallucination, whereas one cannot say that the West has been ‘hallucinating’ about the Indian religions. All writings on ‘Hinduism’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Jainism’, whether their authors are Indian or western, become suspect because they maintain a line of continuity between Orientalism and their own writings.

Can one tell such a story? It has been told (see Balagangadhara 1994). In this book, the author argues that not only did the West ‘imaginatively’ create Hinduism, but also explains why it was compelled to do so. Its compulsion is rooted in the nature of religion, and the author advances a hypothesis about religion that also explains this compulsion. Consequently, it emerges as an alternative, a competitor theory to those in the marketplace about what
religion is. This hypothesis breaks the ‘structural unity’ that Orientalism has constructed. ‘Hinduism’, ‘Buddhism’, etc., become hipkapis. Consequently, it is possible to investigate which of the ‘facts’ that went into constructing the hipkapi belong together, which do not, and how. One can start probing deeper into one’s own culture, because one’s experience is accessible for reflection. ‘What is Hinduism? What is Buddhism?’ translate themselves as tasks, which require one to account for the facts that appear to lend credibility to the existence of the hipkapi in a non-ad hoc way.

This point is important for us to linger on it longer. It means to suggest that the West (a) created ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’, and (b) did so as religions. It is not the case that they created a monolithic religion instead of recognizing the multiplicity of theories and practices that go under the label ‘Hinduism’.\footnote{For such a post-colonial perspective, see Sugirtharajah (2003).} It is not as though they experienced ‘Hinduism’ as a monolithic entity. The suggestion is that ‘Hinduism’ as a concept (and as an experiential entity) provided the Westerners with a unitary and coherent experience. To the extent it is a concept, it is a construct. It is also a construct because, as an experiential entity, it unifies the western experience. However, this concept has no reference in the world, i.e. there is no ‘Hinduism’ (whether as a religion, or as a multiplicity of religions) in the Indian culture.

As a result, the double qualification of Said makes sense: ‘Hinduism’ is both a false description of the Indian reality and it is an imaginary entity. It is false not because the West gave a false description of the reality (‘Hinduism’ in this case) but because they falsely assumed that their experiential entity was also a real entity in the world. It is imaginary in the sense that it does not have an existence outside the experience of the western culture. The same considerations apply to what Dirks (2001) does regarding the caste system. The notion of such a system unified the British experience of India; they implemented certain political and economic policies based on their experience. However, this experience was not of the caste system. In fact, this experience was of no particular object but the basis of their going-about with the Indians. By creating such a ‘system’ the British lent stability, coherence and unity to their cultural experience. Both the caste system and the Indian religions are constructs in this specific sense.

It is not as though colonialism brought ‘Hinduism’ and ‘the caste system’ into existence. The Europeans spoke about these entities as though they existed. They acted as though these entities were real. However, neither before nor after colonialism do such entities or phenomena exist. They are hipkapis. These entities merely lend structure and stability to the European experience and the Orientalist discourse talks as though they are properties of the Indian culture. In other words, language-use does not characterize the Orientalist discourse. Rather, Orientalism characteristically assumes that ‘the caste system’ and ‘Hinduism’ exist in the Indian culture. The present-day social sciences also assume the same. Consequently, a critique of Orientalism
becomes coterminous with the task of creating alternative theories in the domain of the humanities and social sciences. That is to say, the process of developing a critique of Orientalism also outlines the nature of its grand telos: that of decolonizing the social sciences.

**Social sciences and non-western societies**

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his ‘Post-coloniality and the artifice of history’, formulates the *aporia* confronting us in the following manner:

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers have produced theories embracing the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes, absolute ignorance of the majority of humankind – i.e. those living in non-western cultures. This in itself is not paradoxical, for the more self-conscious of European philosophers have always sought theoretically to justify this stance. The everyday paradox of the third-world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of ‘us’, eminently useful in understanding our societies. What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies, of which they were empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze? (Chakrabarty 1997: 263; emphasis removed)

Prima facie, there is something very peculiar about this claim and these questions. There is supposed to be a paradox, but it is not obvious where it lies. Let us try to provide a justifiable reconstruction of this paradox.

Social science, if it is any kind of science, is knowledge. Its objects are man, society and culture. To the extent it is knowledge, social science cannot claim ignorance about its objects. All of these are facts, under the assumption that ‘knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ have different meanings. In the way we normally use the words, of course, ‘knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ share neither the same extension nor the same meaning. That is, they do not range over the same objects in the same way.

Here are the two facts noticed by Dipesh Chakrabarty: (1) Some social sciences, which study human beings and their societies, are ignorant about aspects of non-western cultures and societies. This statement implies that these social sciences, therefore, cannot be knowledge of those aspects of culture and societies, which they deal with. If knowledge is useful in understanding those cultures and societies, it further follows that these social sciences cannot be useful in that venture. (2) We (say, the Asians) find the very same social sciences useful in understanding all aspects of our societies and cultures. From this statement, it follows that these sciences do embody knowledge.
The first sentence notices the fact that social sciences are ignorant about aspects of our societies and cultures and implies that they cannot be useful. The second notices the fact that they are useful in understanding all aspects of our societies and implies that social sciences do embody knowledge of our societies. The first statement is true. The second statement is also true. It is also true that, under the assumption about knowledge and understanding, the implication of the first statement is the negation of the second. Severally taken, both statements describe our situation. Jointly, however, they cannot both be true and yet they are. That is to say, the conditions under which these facts are true require that ‘knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ share the same extension. Alternatively, knowledge is ignorance if, and only if, knowledge is not ignorance.

Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that this claim is not only paradoxical but also true. It is true because the claim is a (partial) description of our situation, and we realize this to be the case as well. In other words, not only are we committed to the truth of this paradox, but we also realize that the situation that forces us to affirm this truth is our own. We live not merely paradoxically but in the awareness of the paradox as well. Our experience, then, involves these two dimensions and both have to do with the social sciences. If these are the experiences of people from the non-western cultures, what do such experiences tell us about the tasks confronting intellectuals from these cultures?

**Grand telos or fractured goals?**

Some contemporary postcolonial thinkers refuse to recognize the unity of this genre of thinking. They seem to believe that one cannot speak of postcolonial thought either in terms of a unity of purpose or in terms of a unifying set of concerns and questions. One way of making sense of their refusal is to appreciate that there is indeed a disjunction in ‘the Orient’ of Orientalist thinking. There is, firstly, the experiential entity, namely ‘the Orient’. This does not appear to be a singular object; it varies according to the experience of the individual. Criticism of the Orientalist discourse, in such cases, seems oriented towards providing such an experiential entity another place than what someone else accords to it. Contestations about this entity are disputes about the place this entity should occupy within one’s experiential world.

Secondly, however, there is also a discourse about the western cultural experience. It claims to be about the non-western cultures. That is to say, Orientalism presents itself as a veridical discourse about the peoples of the Orient. In this guise, it both appeals to and is sustained by the western social sciences. A critique of this discourse is coterminous with developing an
alternate set of theories in several domains of the social sciences. This task is primarily one for the intellectuals from the erstwhile colonies. After all, they have difficulty in making sense of ‘the Orient’, the experiential entity of the western culture. They have difficulty in recognizing either themselves or their social world in the descriptions that Orientalism and the social sciences provide. Consequently, the onus is on them to come up with alternative descriptions of their cultures and societies.

In other words, the issues are these: does the discourse about the Orient retain the same character in both the East and the West? Are there two sets of postcolonial projects, one for the intellectuals from the West and the other for those from the East? Alternatively, is it the case that the telos of postcolonial thinking, that of decolonizing the social sciences, unites the intellectuals from both the East and the West?

Whatever the answers, one thing appears to be certain. Some of the problems confronting postcolonial thinkers today would find some kind of resolution if one started reflecting on the relationship between the nature of western cultural experience and the way of talking about it. In the process one will be obliged to address the issue of the relationship between the social sciences and Orientalism. Doing so might help us figure out the way ahead and not waste time in arid disputes.

References


