

Wael B. Hallaq (2018) *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press. Pp. 380; ISBN 978-0-231-18762-6.

Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) had an immediate and lasting impact on how we understand and misunderstand the Orient. To a large extent, its publication overshadowed both his early work in literary criticism and his later publications in politics, culture and music. Primarily a critique of Orientalism as a perspective on and discourse about the Orient in the humanities, Said also wanted to bring into view Orientalism as 'an integral part of European material civilization and culture', insofar as it 'expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles' (1978: 2). The success of the book in part lay not only with its underlying political message, but also in its use of Michel Foucault's theoretical work on discursive practices and power/knowledge. For Said, as Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature, the classics of the western humanist tradition are never innocent, being in some respect reflections of economic exploitation, colonialism, racial hierarchies, and slavery. These colonial assumptions generated a basic set of knowledge claims regarding Oriental stagnation, despotism, cruelty and lasciviousness.

Unsurprisingly, Said's powerful message has not been without its critics. One persistent objection is that, while Said's criticisms were effectively applied to western literature, his knowledge of political and social theory was, more or less, non-existent, or that he had no knowledge regarding how actual anthropologists address 'culture'. Other criticisms of Said have attacked his self-image as an outsider, asking

how could a full professor of comparative literature at Columbia University and one-time Harvard fellow be either outside or marginalized? Such attacks on Said were typically greeted with condemnation and anger. In summarizing the critical debate, Nikki Keddie (2007: 342) observed that there is a tendency in the field of Middle East studies to embrace the word 'Orientalism' as a 'generalized swear-word' to attack people who embraced the 'wrong' position on the Arab-Israeli conflict or to academics who are regarded as too 'conservative'. Despite almost half a century of debate and criticism, Said's *Orientalism* is 'canonical'. Every student of the Orient has at some stage to address his argument.

How does Wael B. Hallaq's book fit into this intellectually and politically highly-charged arena? Clearly, there is open admiration and respect for Said's contribution to the critique of Orientalism in particular and western knowledge in general: 'setting up Said's *Orientalism* for critique finds its reason, rationale, and conviction in the fact that the work's canonicity reflects not only its own power of argument but also its dominating effect on the whole range of discourse on the subject for almost four decades' and 'Said's work ... seems to continue to have a spell over the humanities' (p. 179).

Although I have a range of critical observations to make against Hallaq's intervention, let me start by recognizing that this publication is the most far-reaching and detailed, but sympathetic, critique of *Orientalism* in the entire field. More importantly, Hallaq offers more than just a critique, proposing an alternative to *Orientalism* that attempts to go beyond an author-centered to a paradigm-centered approach to Oriental knowledge. Without regard for the Orientalist paradigm and its underlying causes, Said's critique of various western authors becomes little more than a conventional contribution to intellectual history based on textual analysis. Rather than following a 'horizontal', author-focused critique favored by Said, Hallaq develops a 'vertical', paradigm-focused approach to dig deeper into 'modern knowledge'. As a result, he offers a far-

reaching critique of both traditional methodology and epistemology in the humanities in order to go beyond Said by digging deeper into western imperial history.

Here is a sample of Hallaq's criticisms. He underlines Said's lack of understanding outside the confined sphere of literary studies. Because Said was largely focused on texts, 'the relationship between the text and its actual realization on the colonial ground was passed over in silence' (p. 18). Said was 'a consummate literary critic who lacked, it must be said, any historical sense' (p. 45). Because Said was devoted to texts and representations, the status of actual societies is ambiguous, because, he 'deliberately made it his business not to engage with any question as to what the Orient truly is or was' (p. 56). 'Said's total silence over the law, the single mechanism that made colonialism possible, not only is stunning, to say the least, but also betrays his inability to see what really matters' (p. 106). By contrast, Hallaq offers a penetrating analysis of the impact of western legal institutions and juridical ideas on the Middle East in general and on Islam in particular. For me, Hallaq's observations on legal history and colonialism are the most powerful dimensions of his debate with Orientalism. Finally, Hallaq is a persistent critic of Said's 'one-sided philosophy of secular rationality' (p. 55) in which he 'remained faithful to the Enlightenment notions of secular humanism' (p. 232).

Turning to the actual structure of the book, Hallaq's challenge to modern debates about the Orient and Orientalism and his criticisms of Said occupy the Introduction and Chapters I and II. Chapter III introduces us to René Guénon as 'The Subversive Author' whose *Orient et Occident* (1924; trans. 2001) gets no mention in Said's *Orientalism*. Guénon's work was framed by an implacably negative reaction to European philosophy 'from Leibniz to Schopenhauer' and his 'critique synoptically captures much of the best in recent social theory, Critical Theory and

cultural criticism'. Chapter IV on 'Structural Genocide' is without question the most controversial component of Hallaq's intervention. Chapter V is the concluding discussion, which engages with 'Refashioning Orientalism'.

Hallaq's search for the foundations of Orientalism brings him to the conclusion that the genocidal thrust of western colonialism is the real causal mechanism behind the Occident-Orient divide and that without addressing the actual power structures that give rise to and continually produce Orientalism, cultural criticism of texts in the humanities is seriously limited. Genocide is the real clue to Orientalism as discourse. Thus, Hallaq's principal thesis is that 'colonialism, in all of its variants, is inherently genocidal, and that this genocidal quality is ultimately connected, in the most structural and structured ways, with a thought structure that has defined modern academia and the discursive formations that academia has largely shaped and continues to reproduce. In this picture, Orientalism plays a considerable part, but by no means the most important one' (p. 223). This critique of the genocidal force of western rationality extends to a consideration of the destructive effects on the environment in Chapter V. His concluding discussion opens up new ways of reconstituting the debate by taking note of an obvious fact about Orientalism, namely, 'its explicitly declared professional preoccupation with the Other ... It is through undertaking the challenge of reconstituting the self in meaningful and profound ways that Orientalism can transform its inner thought structures with a view to contributing, however modestly, to pioneering and building a sustainable path for all humanity, *beginning with a due consideration of the Other*' (p. 240, italics in the original). The critique thus requires a total refashioning of our understanding of Enlightenment rationality and its negative consequences, especially its 'noticeable penchant for destructiveness' (p. 233) if we are to find remedies for the world's ecological, social and economic problems.

The reception of *Restating Orientalism* will, in all likelihood, rest, not on his investigation of Said and Guénon, but on his extended treatment of genocide. Hallaq opens his account with a standard reference to Raphael Lemkin's coining of 'genocide', which formed the basic idea of any attempt to destroy a people and its culture. Genocide was subsequently treated as an international crime against humanity. The legal framework has given rise to endless debates about the presence of an actual intention to destroy a people, whether the Jewish Holocaust is the only real example of intentional genocide, and whether cultural genocide should have the same legal status as the physical destruction of a population. Hallaq somewhat avoids these controversies by accepting the arguments of Patrick Wolfe (2006) to deny the paradigmatic status of the Holocaust, to argue that cultural genocide is not 'the real thing', and to promote the idea of structural genocide (p. 214). For the hundreds of aboriginal children, for example, in Australia, forcefully removed from their families to be inducted into white civilization in mainly church schools, where they were frequently subject to sexual abuse, these 'stolen generations' certainly experienced the 'real thing'.

In conclusion, I ask simply whether the West has a monopoly on structural genocide as one feature of the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism. Let me take three controversial examples from Asia. Perhaps the most systematic genocide of a Turkic Muslim population in contemporary history is the treatment of Uighurs by the Chinese state. Uighurs have not been exterminated but they have been dispossessed by an orchestrated influx of Han Chinese settlers – I would call this political domination by demographic means – and they have recently been relocated to gulags for re-education, amounting to a cultural policy of de-Islamization. A similar strategy has been adopted on the Tibetan plateau where ancient Buddhist traditions, sacred sites and institutions have been systematically destroyed and modernized. Another Asian example is the destruction of Muslim Rohingya villages in the Rakhine State, the gang rape of women and the expulsion of thousands to

neighboring societies. The logic here is the creation of a Buddhist sovereign state requiring the expulsion of ethnic minorities who are not recognized as citizens. Are these examples of Oriental Orientalism or the universal unfolding of Hegelian logic in which the Orient had no history via Marx's concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production? Western academics have labored over 'Islamophobia' as a contemporary validation of Said's thesis, following its definition in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust as fear of Muslims, while remaining largely silent about the genocidal logic of state formation in contemporary Asia. The critique of modern knowledge has therefore to extend well beyond the confines of western reason.

References

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