

*French Orientalism: Culture, Politics and
the Imagined Other*
Edited by Desmond Hosford and Chong
J. Wojtkowski

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Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* was published nearly thirty-five years ago. Hosford and Wojtkowski's *French Orientalism: Culture, Politics and the Imagined Other* published in 2010 is a testament to the continuing importance of Said's work, and its continuing contentiousness.

Drawing on a number of wide ranging academic contributions, the editors seek to tackle the book's central question: 'what constitutes French Orientalism?' (p.4). The question is so interesting because it confronts the reader with the realisation that much of the material that an English speaker has access to has an inherent Anglophone bias that focuses on the binarised relationship between Britain and the Orient, ignoring, or at least displacing, the role of France. Therefore, a volume that asserts that 'France holds a definitive leading role in the development of Orientalism' (p.4), is a very welcome and intriguing prospect.

At many points this book gives fascinating insights into the French colonial experience and its cultural and psychological legacy. For example, Wojtkowski's contribution, "'Cette France du Sous-sol': Otherness in Karim Dridi's *Khamsa*", examines a film made in

2008 that focuses on a boy of North African decent growing up in a Marseille slum. Wojtkowski suggests that as the action is set in France, rather than the Third World, ‘the role of the [orientalist] gaze is an important one in illuminating a [modern] vision of France’ (p.221), thereby arguing that France’s imperial cultural legacy is fluid, contentious and reversible.

However, the choice of articles, fascinating as they are individually, leaves the reader in doubt as to how the discourse surrounding Orientalism has progressed in the last three decades, and just how the sub-category of French Orientalism demands a re-examination of it. The structure of the book, rather than enabling the reader to grasp and follow a developing argument that defines French Orientalism and then explores its importance, seems to hinder any such understanding. For example, it is unclear why the editors have chosen to structure the volume with sub-categories of ‘Gendering the Orient’, ‘Imagining the Orient’, and ‘Reversing the Gaze’. Though these themes are relevant to further examine Said’s work, the volume states that its aims are to provide the reader with the opportunity to:

[...] apply, question, subvert, and resituate Said’s theories, revealing the continuing evolution and relevance of French Orientalism as a theoretical notion with global stakes and material consequences (p.7-8).

Though the editors suggest that the purpose of the volume is to interrogate what constitutes French Orientalism, French Orientalism soon becomes the fact that underpins the inclusion of the essays, rather than the other way round. Therefore the book, though enabling the reader to ask questions of what the definition and re-

examination of a specific French Orientalism might mean in understanding contemporary fractious discourses between East and West, never really gets to the heart of the argument; focusing rather on peripheral issues that seem to speak to a justification of the book, rather than an interrogation of the subject. This is highlighted by the fact that the introduction explicitly spells out France's opinion of itself in the nineteenth century as 'the civilising force in Europe' and that its mission was to 'wake the Orient' (p.7), thereby clearly demonstrating the importance of reconsidering France and French culture within the framework of Orientalism. However, having done this, rather than exploring that position further, the opening section of the book considers gender within the context of French Orientalism without having defined what that context is.

This is brought into sharp contrast in the introduction when Hosford and Wojtkowski state that 'Said asserts [that] the imperialist science of Orientalism did not fully flourish until the Egyptian Campaign of Napoleon I' (p.4), which clearly marks out that moment as a watershed moment when opinions in Europe about the Orient changed. However in the first essay in the volume, Hosford's 'Cleopatra and the Oriental Menace in Early French Tragedy', the author criticises Said by suggesting that he 'says very little of history or literature from before the turn of the nineteenth century' (p.24). It also postulates that Said's presentation of the 'feminine' East and 'masculine' West is not an appropriate metaphor for the relationship between the regions prior to the Egyptian Campaign. As a result the essay seems to argue against itself, having acknowledged in the first place that Said places 1798 as a key date from which the Orientalist

paradigm developed, and at the same time criticising Said by suggesting that his theory does not map effectively onto the political and cultural realities prior to that date.

That said, there are some significant highlights in the collection. Perhaps the most interesting essay is Claudia Gyss' 'The Roots of Egyptomania from the Renaissance to the Nineteenth Century' which places the Renaissance's rediscovery of the civilisation and culture of Egypt as the forerunner of Orientalism. This essay places the roots of Orientalism firmly in the fifteenth century, and tracks the link between politics, culture and France's growing fascination with Ancient Egypt.

The essay analyses the belief in France during the eighteenth century that it, as the civilising light in Europe, was duty bound to regenerate Egypt; a benevolent benefactor acknowledging the debt it owed to its cultural predecessor, thus justifying Napoleon's invasion as cultural salvation, rather than expansionism. Fascinatingly, this is highlighted in the introduction by the inclusion of a poem by Henri de Bornier (1825-1901), who in 1862 received an award from the Académie Française for a poem marking the construction of the Suez Canal. The poem, and the awarding of the prize, offers a key insight into the national psyche that drove and reinforced French Republican imperialism:

France can keep nothing to herself [...] She runs, she flies to spread light and life to all people: she will even force them, arms in hands, to suffer the weight of the gifts that she makes to them (p.6)

The major success of the collection is to highlight the irony that, in terms of Orientalism, there are two dominant western discourses,

Anglophone and Francophone, that are as ‘other’ to one another as the imagined Orient of the eighteenth century. Though undeniably interesting in its constituent parts, this book is ultimately unsatisfying and suffers, perhaps inevitably for a collection of essays, from the lack of a firm structure that would give urgency to this undoubtedly necessary re-examination and re-aligning of Said’s *Orientalism*.

Bibliography

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

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