Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism

by Ibn Warraq, Prometheus Books, 2007, 500 pp.

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Also under review: *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*, Daniel Martin Varisco, University of Washington Press, 2008, 501 pp.

When the Courtauld Institute in London announced that they would be holding a conference in April 2008 entitled 'Framing the Other: 30 Years After *Orientalism*,' we were once again reminded of the central role Edward Said plays in Western public discourse. The Courtauld's decision to use *Orientalism* as their point of departure in studying Western perceptions of the 'Other' comes at an interesting time as a number of scholars are developing a new body of literature that is highly critical of Said's landmark work. The most recent additions to this literature are Ibn Warraq's *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* and Daniel Martin Varisco's *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*.

As Warraq's title indicates, his book rests on the premise that *Orientalism*, and the intellectual legacy and tendencies it has bolstered, represents an attack on the West and contributes to its inability to defend its values and history. *Defending the West* sets out to provide a corrective to *Orientalism's* depiction of Western intellectual history and its arguments about Western attitudes towards other peoples of the world. Varisco's focus in *Reading Orientalism* is to take stock of the debates that *Orientalism* has spurred and to provide a critique of Said's work with the intention of providing closure to these debates. Whereas Warraq's objective is to remind the West of its virtues and reasons for self-confidence, Varisco's objective is to nudge academia away from the debates on *Orientalism* and to urge scholars to get back to scholarship that rejects the binary-thinking that Said rhetorically opposed but intellectually promoted. [1] Overall, both books share the same hope of diminishing the influence and resilience of Said's *Orientalism*.

Orientalism smears all Orientalists with the same black paint. Its ideological framework includes and gives equal weight to the writings of ignorant travellers, amateur journalists and learned scholars. It advances the view that Western attitudes towards the Orient form a unified discourse with immutable values and

assumptions. According to Said, the major threads of this discourse, which include racism and feelings of superiority, originated in Ancient Greece, emerged more fully in the Enlightenment, and were employed in imperial Britain and France, and today in modern America. The crystallisation of this discourse into a coherent set of ideals came with the growth of the European and American empires which used *Orientalism's* racist themes to justify imperialist aggression and expansionism. No writer could escape the omnipotence of this discourse. Accordingly, *Orientalism* contends that the Western canon is a reflection of the imperialist and colonialist practices of the West and to understand Western attitudes of the Other is to have to appreciate the utmost centrality of this reality. From this point of view Said could then write, in his often-quoted statement, that 'it is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.' [2]

Meticulously, Warraq and Varisco challenge Said's reading of Western attitudes of the 'Other.' Their work shows decisively that Said employed a highly selective and tendentious approach to Orientalist writings. In Defending the West, Warraq describes an entirely different ideological link between ancient Greek writers and modern western intellectuals. As he explains, Said's treatment of Greek intellectual themes rests only on a reading of the play *The Persians*. Its author, Aeschylus, is more commonly recognised as the founder of the tragedy, but in *Orientalism* he is depicted as one of the founding fathers of modern Orientalism. The Persians is of central importance in *Orientalism* because Said depicts it as one of the first attempts to demarcate a sharp distinction between the West and the Orient. This play supposedly sets the tone for more than a millennium of Western perceptions of the Orient. 'There is an analogy,' Said wrote, 'between Aeschylus's orchestra, which contains the Asiatic world as the playwright conceives it, and the learned envelope of Orientalist scholarship, which also will hold in the vast, amorphous Asiatic sprawl for sometimes sympathetic but always dominating scrutiny.' [3] The main point Said wants to advance is that from antiquity Westerners were depicting the Orient as their 'great complementary opposite' and that these Western attitudes of the Orient form an 'internally structured archive' that is built on a 'restricted number of encapsulations: the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation.' [4] Alas, if only understanding Western intellectual history was so simple...

Warraq and Varisco take issue with Said's contentions about the continuity between Ancient Greek writers and their modern European, and American, counterparts.

Warraq writes that Said's understanding of Greek civilisation rests on the reading of one play. Had Said considered the writings of Herodotus, Warraq believes, he 'would have encountered two features that were also characteristic of Western civilisation and that he is at pains to conceal and refuses to admit exist: the seeking after knowledge for its own sake, and the belief in the unity of mankind, or in other words its universalism.' [5] On Said's understanding of Greek Orientalism, Varisco notes that the Greek animosity that was expressed towards Orientals was equally expressed towards the Picts, Celts and Etruscans. He also wonders whether it is correct to understand Ancient Greeks as European and to assume that the Western Orientalist discourse originates there. Said's treatment of Ancient Greek intellectual history, Warraq and Varisco both show, is emblematic of his treatment of the West.

Both works provide a myriad of more modern examples to show that Said's essentialist argument about Western Orientalism does not hold up to close scrutiny. One such example includes Voltaire's writings on the Orient. In Orientalism, Said fails to address these writings namely because they undermine his thesis. In 1742, Voltaire published a scathing attack against Muhammad in his play *Mahomet* but more than a decade later he retracted his hostile views and adopted more favourable views of Islam at the expense of Christianity. Warraq draws attention to a quote by Voltaire who admitted that 'assuredly, I have made [Muhammad] out to be more evil than he was.' [6]

One of Said's more glaring misreadings of Orientalist scholarship comes with his analysis of the French Orientalist Ernest Renan. On Renan, Said makes three basic points about his work: that it was racist, that this racism conformed it to the Orientalist discourse, and that his writings were hugely influential on the discourse of Orientalism. As Said writes, '[Renan] did not really speak as one man to all men but rather as a reflective, specialised voice that took, as he put it in the 1890 preface [of *L'Avenir de la science: Pensees de 1848*], the inequality of races and the necessary domination of the many by the few for granted as an antidemocratic law of nature and society.' [7] Furthermore, Said tells us that Renan's work, complemented by those of the French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy, 'constitute a formidable library against which no one, not even Marx, can rebel and which no one can avoid.' [8]

Amazingly, it was the historian Raymond Schwab – on whose work Said relies for his understanding of French Orientalism – who in fact avoided and barely discussed the work of Renan because he was simply not that important. The work of Maxime Rodinson, Zachary Lockman, Nikki Keddie, and W. Montgomery Watt all attest

to the marginality of Renan's work in the development of Orientalism. Varisco argues that Said not only exaggerates the influence and importance of Renan, but also provides very little in the way of substance on his actual writings: 'We learn little about what Renan actually said about the Orient, or how others responded to what he said....The grasping here does not require extensive reading, for the gist is all we are given to digest.' [9] Warraq argues that Said's depiction of Renan's work is patently false. Like Voltaire, Renan also changed his views and later in his life even wrote that 'it would be ungracious of [Europe] to wish to settle the faith of others. All the while actively pursuing the propagation of her dogma which is civilisation, she ought to leave to the peoples themselves the infinitely delicate task of adjusting their own religious traditions to their new needs.' [10] Warraq also shows that Renan's influence on Orientalism was quite limited particularly because his work was so heavily scrutinized by one of the most important Orientalist scholars, Ignaz Goldziher.

In Orientalism Goldziher's work is barely consulted but is nevertheless pigeonholed. The treatment Goldziher receives from Said is the logical outcome of Orientalism's theoretical premises in which every Western writer who wrote on the Orient is understood in an essentialist way. Even before taking account of Warraq's analysis of Said on Goldziher, it is clear to any close reader of Orientalism that Said's contentions about the work of Goldziher should be viewed suspiciously. Said argues that Goldziher's work was no different from that of other Orientalists and that it fits securely into the racist and imperialist discourse of *Orientalism*. As Said writes, 'The Orientalists - from Renan to Goldziher to Macdonald to von Grunebaum, Gibb, and Bernard Lewis - saw Islam, for example, as a "cultural synthesis" that could be studied apart from the economics, sociology, and politics of the Islamic peoples.' [11] But it is difficult to take this position seriously when we recall that in the introduction of *Orientalism* Said admits to barely researching the work of Goldziher: 'any work that seeks to provide an understanding of academic Orientalism and pays little attention to scholars like Steinthal, Muller, Becker, Goldziher, Brockelmann, Noldeke – to mention only a handful – needs to be reproached, and I freely reproach myself.' [12]

Goldziher, Warraq tells us, is one of the most important Orientalist scholars and his impact on the discipline can not be underestimated. This is the prevailing view among numerous historians, most notably Robert Irwin and Albert Hourani. Defending the West argues that Said is grossly off the mark in not spending as much time on Goldziher as he did Renan and in attributing to him racist and imperialist

views. To bolster this point, Warraq quotes Goldziher explaining a spiritual moment he had in Cairo: 'I became inwardly convinced that I myself was a Muslim. [In Cairo], in the midst of the thousands of the pious, I rubbed my forehead against the floor of the mosque. Never in my life was I more devout, more truly devout, than on that exalted Friday.' To which, Warraq asks: 'Does this sound like Said's Orientalist? Is this why the most important Orientalist of all was given only three lines?' [13]

Another example of Said's misreading of Orientalism is in his treatment of the German historian Johann Gottfried von Herder. As Varisco shows, Said wrongly dismisses Herder as interested solely in understanding the Orient through 'artificial entities' and not through individuals. This approach, Said contends, was typical of all Orientalists. However, Varisco illustrates that Said fails to mention crucial components of Herder's writings on the Orient. For one, Herder 'was a relentless critic of the kind of imperialist propaganda that divided the world into "civilized" and "barbarian" – an approach that, according to Said, would have been inconsistent with that of a 'typical' Orientalist. [14] The list goes on of Western writers and scholars who have been maligned by Said and whose work has been misread to fit his particular theory. Warraq and Varisco's research illustrate *Orientalism's* major flaw in vivid detail.

Said's contentions about the nature of Western thought fail to provide an explanation for why his book has received so much attention and praise in the West. If the Western discourse on the Orient was so powerful and entrenched in culture then our powers of deduction say that *Orientalism* would have been exiled to the dustbin of history and that Said's career would be little more than that of an obscure scholar and political activist.

Clearly, the exact opposite happened. *Orientalism's* success rested on exactly what Said denied in Western thought – powerful intellectual cross-currents that made self-criticism a frequent and potent force. In particular, Warraq points out that one of the major cross-currents in the West that contributed to Said's fame was the intellectual tradition of guilt:

Post-World War II Western intellectuals and leftists were consumed by guilt from the West's colonial past and continuing colonial present, and they wholeheartedly embraced any theory or ideology that voiced or at least seemed to voice the putatively thwarted aspirated of the peoples of the third

world. Orientalism came at the precise time when anti-Western rhetoric was at its most shrill and was already being taught at Western universities, and when third-worldism was at its most popular. [15]

The Western tendency to be overly-self critical, to the point of adopting reductive politics, provided *Orientalism* with the audience it needed. It buttressed an anti-imperialist worldview based entirely on the binary of Western wrongs and non-Western rights. The simplicity of this binary mode of thought was made seemingly more acceptable by Said's sophisticated prose, polysyllabic words and that *Orientalism* gives off the impression of being a rigorously researched book written by a widely-read author. In the end, Said's book did not create these ideological reductive tendencies but rather reinforced them. It is this reinforcement that has led many in the West to understand their own history as unworthy of a robust defense. Warraq's book provides an important and erudite corrective to this type of thinking.

From Warraq's understanding of Said's *Orientalism* come his own political positions. On imperialism Warraq takes great effort to illustrate that Said's understanding of imperialism as an exclusively western practice and an entirely negative phenomenon is misleading and facile. Every civilisation has committed its fair share of crimes and atrocities and to argue that the West is uniquely imperialistic, and inherently so, is to be ignorant of history. A plethora of non-Western cultures have committed brutal, and imperialist, crimes. The Rape of Nanking by the Japanese Imperial Army, the Great Leap Forward policy conducted by Mao Tse-Tung, the genocides committed by Pol Pot, Idi Amin, and Saddam Hussein are just a few examples out of many.

In illustrating the depressing universality of brutality, Warraq discusses slavery and makes two important points. First, he shows that slavery was not just a Western practice. Here some fascinating facts are presented such as the large degree of African complicity in the slave trade and instances when African chiefs petitioned Western leaders to resist pressure to abolish their slave trade industries. Warraq further points out that slavery in the non-Western world has resisted all pressure from western abolitionists. Not only does he quote Ibn Khaldun condoning the slavery of Black Africans but also points out that it was Arab merchants from the seventh-century to the 1920s who forced over 17 million black African slaves across the Saharan desert. [16] Second, Warraq uses slavery to show the progressive outcomes that can stem from Western intellectual thought. The anti-

slavery movement in Britain was a movement rooted in the Enlightenment – the very same era that Said understands as critically important in shaping and forging Orientalist racist attitudes of the Other. Warraq interestingly points out that the African-American abolitionist Fredrick Douglass received his inspiration from the writings of many British anti-slavery intellectuals. [17] It is important to note that the final abolition of the slave trade was brought about by the military manoeuvres of the British Imperial Navy.

Also in his discussion of imperialism, Warraq points out the positives that Western imperialism has had on certain regions of the world. To argue this controversial and widely unpopular case, Warraq focuses on the British rule in India. To be fair, Warraq is not presenting a defense of imperialism since he does write that the drive to dismantle empires was a progressive theme in Western political thought. More accurately, Warraq is defending a nuanced understanding of imperialism that accounts for its regressive and progressive impacts. He writes that it was the British who contributed to the coming of a renaissance in India and 'who restored the unity of India and re-established order.' [18] Of special interest to Warraq is Lord Curzon who, we are told, embodied a progressive understanding of, and compassion for, India that stands in sharp contrast to Said's depiction of imperialists and Orientalists. [19] On a related point, Varisco states that Ghandi used the views of Orientalist scholars to resist British colonial rule. [20] This fact buttresses Warraq's primary political position that despite its numerous, flaws, crimes and errors, there are Western intellectual traditions and practices that are worthy of defense. As he wrote recently in the City Journal: 'The great ideas of the West - rationalism, selfcriticism, the disinterested search for truth, the separation of church and state, the rule of law and equality under the law, freedom of thought and expression, human rights, and liberal democracy - are superior to any others devised by humankind.' [21]

Warraq's political positions stem directly from his reading of Orientalism and he feels no compunction about articulating positions about the West which buck general 'progressive' intellectual trends today. Conversely, when Varisco advances political positions they seem to be at odds with his researched position on Said and *Orientalism*.

As we noted above, Varisco's objective in writing his book is to achieve reconciliation among academics and so move beyond the debates surrounding *Orientalism* in order to improve the study of the humanities. To be successful in this objective,

Varisco believes that he first needs to establish his political credentials. He does so in the two introductory sections of his book.

First, Varisco emphasises who he is not: an Orientalist sympathiser and a neoconservative. In describing his objective, he writes that his book is 'intended as a reading against *Orientalism* but certainly not as a justification for past Orientalism...' [22] This is an odd statement because in one sense he is directing his book against *Orientalism* and its thesis while seemingly conceding Said's integral point about the singular nature of Orientalism. Varisco's inconsistency is that his book convincingly shows that it is difficult to generalise about the entire discipline of Orientalism. In fact, past Orientalism housed both progressive trends worthy of praise and regressive trends worthy of condemnation. In a book that seeks to attack binary modes of thought and 'incomplete genealogies of intellectual history' [23], Varisco's statement strikes this reader as containing a significant measure of incoherence.

Varisco's incoherence is also seen in his analysis of Said's treatment of Golda Meir's infamous statement regarding the existence of a Palestinian people. In an interview with the *Times* in 1969, Meir said:

There were no such thing as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria before the First World War, and then it was a Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.

Said described this sentiment as 'deeply Orientalist.' [24] Varisco opposes this categorisation of Meir's sentiment on the grounds that to define 'any anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian, or anti-Islam statement as Orientalist' is to contribute to an essentialist understanding of Orientalism. [25] Instead Varisco suggests that Meir's sentiment should not fall into the category of Orientalism but should instead be seen as 'Deeply Zionist, yes; offensive to all but staunch partisans.' [26] Yet in opposing Said's essentialism on Orientalism, Varisco seems to adopt an essentialist understanding of Zionism. Ze'ev Jabotinsky, a staunch Zionist partisan amongst others, recognised in his 1923 essay *The Iron Wall* that there were two nations in Palestine. Conversely, *The Economist* recently published an article quoting Hamas Foreign Minister Mahmoud Zahhar (hardly a Zionist) who echoed (without

attribution) the words of Meir: 'We [Palestinians] were never an independent state in history... We were part of an Arab state and an Islamic state.' [27]

Varisco continues to identify himself against the 'Other' when he criticises Martin Kramer's work on Edward Said and writes that 'Kramer's unseemly screed would be laughable were it not for the favourable reception it received from the neocon clique that engineered the wars against Taliban Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.' [28] For a book that includes an extensive scholarly apparatus with hundreds of footnotes, it is surprising that this claim was not backed up by any evidence. Who in this 'neocon clique' gave Kramer's work a favourable reception? More importantly, what is the relationship between Kramer's work on Edward Said, its supposed favourable reception amongst neoconservatives, and the decision to go to war against Afghanistan and Iraq after September 11th? We are not told.

Early in his book, Varisco writes that 'I happen to agree with most of Said's political positions on the real Orient.' [29] The reader is neither told what these positions are nor the reasons why Varisco agrees with them. It is implied that Said's political positions speak for themselves and thereby require no justification. In making this statement it seems lost on Varisco that Said's political positions on the real Orient stem directly from his arguments made in *Orientalism*. How else are we to try to explain Said's perception of the Iranian Revolution as everything but heavily influenced by a political ideology rooted in an particular interpretation of Islam, or his reluctance to accept the validity of Western claims of genocide committed by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds, or the perception of the U.S.-led Oslo Peace Process as a reincarnation of European 'peace treaties' to African chiefs, without referring back to *Orientalism? Orientalism* is the soil in which Said's political positions, without any word of qualification or explanation, is at odds with the devastating critique he provides of *Orientalism*.

Varisco writes that Said's 'unflinching support of humanism in the academic minefields of nihilistic unconstructivism is to be admired.' [30] But Varisco's undermines this point when he points out how Said ignored Oriental voices in *Orientalism*. Varisco writes that 'the impact of indigenous Arab, Persian, and Turkish newspapers and journals in writing back against cultural as well as political imperialism does not even warrant a sentence in Said's polemic.' Further he writes that in *Orientalism* 'there is not even a passing nod to Muslim intellectuals who learned from Western education yet saw through to the core of the prejudice and

intolerance.' [31] Later, he asks why Said has 'so little patience with the "Third World intellectuals" who draw inspiration from the rhetorical power of *Orientalism?*' [32] He also writes that 'whether or not real Orientals can speak or represent themselves, Said does not allow them permission to narrate.' [33] Varisco also lambastes Said for ignoring Europe's persecution of the Jews and argues that this omission is due to Said's wholesale opposition to Zionism and Israeli policies. And finally, he also points out that Said is being 'disturbingly ahistorical to argue that Orientalism is one of the most profound examples of the machinery of cultural domination; it pales in actual historical impact next to the genocide of indigenous populations elsewhere.' [34] These conclusions hardly fit with Varisco's belief that Said expresses an 'unflinching support of humanism...'

Said's ignoring of the Oriental in *Orientalism* is manifested as well in his political positions. In his analysis of the Iranian Revolution, Said systematically failed to consider the ideas and political programme of the Ayatollah Khomeini. During the Gulf War, he made little mention of the plight of the Kuwaitis who were suffering under a brutal occupation as a result of Ba'athist imperialism. He also failed to speak out for the human rights of the Iraqi Kurds who were victims of the most brutal Iraqi state aggression. Instead, Said felt compelled to only speak of human rights abuses committed by America and Israel. This political position is the product of a view which Varisco acknowledges to be central in *Orientalism*: 'The default theory in *Orientalism*, as well as of *Culture and Imperialism*, is that somehow Europe is uniquely imperialist and colonialist; Said is willing to take the binary of the West dominating the East as a given, even if only to deconstruct it rhetorically.' [35] Despite this realisation, Varisco nevertheless believes that Said is 'an impassioned advocate of human rights for all victims of past imperialism and present neo-colonial co-option' [36] – the important words in that sentence being 'all victims.'

Said's intellectual impact is still strong and it is questionable whether the work of Ibn Warraq and Daniel Martin Varisco will dislodge his influence. Warraq's views will be roundly dismissed as 'neo-conservative' and as an apologia for imperialism. Varisco's work will contribute to the belief that while Said was wrong about many things in *Orientalism* his intellectual impact should be understood positively. Varisco foreshadows this approach to Said when he praises Orientalism as a book that 'had to be written' to the extent that 'we can hardly condemn the author for writing it.' [37] Yet Varisco does condemn Said throughout his book; here are a few examples: 'A survey of Said's rhetoric cannot avoid his careless, and at times mischievous, citations of contemporary scholars' [38]; 'it is easy to forget

that Said is writing a history about a subject about which he has only a selective and superficial knowledge' [39]; 'The sheer crassness of what is being quoted [in *Orientalism*] can override a critical caution about what has been left out' [40]; 'In terms of intellectual history, [Said's] interdisciplinary rigor borders on the mortis;' [41] 'I am disturbed when Said subsumes biased and shoddy scholarship under the umbrage-laden umbrella of disciplines which he has no credible experience.' [42]

These examples illustrate the paradox of *Orientalism*. Numerous scholars want to agree with Said's findings even when their research says otherwise. Partha Chaterjee once wrote that *Orientalism* 'talked of things I felt I had known all along but had never found the language to formulate with clarity.' [43] Many, like Chaterjee, feel emotionally and ideologically attached to Said's arguments despite the fact that his arguments lack sufficient evidence or logic. The tendency of Western scholars to agree with Said even when demolishing his thesis supports the continuing relevance of Ibn Warraq's objective in *Defending the West* of not only exposing the flaws of Said's work but also of providing Western values the robust, yet nuanced defense they deserve.

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Notes

- [1] Varisco 2008, p. 303.
- [2] Said 2003, p. 204.
- [3] Said 2003, p. 57.
- [4] Said 2003 p. 58.
- [5] Warraq 2007, p. 33.

- [6] Warraq 2007, p. 36.
- [7] Said 2003, p. 133.
- [8] Said 2003, p. 157.
- [9] Varisco 2008, p. 112.
- [10] Warraq 2007, p. 48.
- [11] Said 2003, p. 105.
- [12] Said 2003, p. 18.
- [13] Said 2003, p. 47.
- [14] Varisco 2008, p. 131.
- [15] Warraq 2007, p. 246.
- [16] Warraq 2007, p. 248.
- [17] Warraq 2007, p. 11.
- [18] Warraq 2007, p. 235.
- [19] Warraq 2007, pp. 238-44.
- [20] Varisco 2008, p. 152.
- [21] Warraq 2008.
- [22] Varisco 2008, p. xii.
- [23] Varisco 2008, p. 303.
- [24] Said 2003, p. 337.
- [25] Varisco 2008, p. 105.
- [26] Varisco 2008, p. 105.
- [27] "A Hamas Hardliner" 2008.
- [28] Varisco 2008, p. xv.
- [29] Varisco 2008, p. xvi.
- [30] Varisco 2008, p. xvi.
- [31] Varisco 2008, p. 148.
- [32] Varisco 2008, p. 287.
- [33] Varisco 2008, p. 141.
- [34] Varisco 2008, p. 137.
- [35] Varisco 2008, p. 137.
- [36] Varisco 2008, p. xii.
- [37] Varisco 2008, p. 5.
- [38] Varisco 2008, p. 101.
- [39] Varisco 2008, p. 138.
- [40] Varisco 2008, p. 233.
- [41] Varisco 2008, p. 277.
- [42] Varisco 2008, p. 281.
- [43] Quoted in Varisco 2008, p. 14.