

Orientalism Studies

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OUTBREAK: COVID-19 AND ORIENTALISM

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Edward W. Said's notion of Orientalism has proven not only to be useful but also durable. The global Pandemic of 2020 provides us with still another example of the utility of his groundbreaking, controversial critique of classical Orientalism in a context seemingly far removed from the scope of his original analysis. The fact that COVID-19 originated in Hubei Province, China, however, has incited some ugly, racist reactions, which amount to nothing less than yet another outbreak of Orientalism.

There is a long history in the West of equating Asia with illness and epidemics going back to the Black Death in the 14th century, and that Orientalist tradition has continued down to the present as the current pandemic offers multiple opportunities to fixate on China, the 21st century "sick man of the Orient." Orientalist commentators online and in the media are complaining about unhygienic Chinese eating habits (especially their supposed love of "exotic" wild game including, particularly, bats). They argue that China's dictatorial political system further complicates its lack of hygiene and weakens its ability to deal with epidemics. The Western news media has been carrying stories under sensationalized headlines about the Chinese origins of the virus that reflect just these Orientalist sentiments. Asian Americans and East Asians (people who "look Chinese") living in the West, meanwhile, report numerous personal instances of being openly subjected to fear-inspired prejudice going as far as physical assaults. President Trump's use of the term, "the China virus," has been widely criticized for its racist undertone, which gives credence to the attacks on China whatever his own motivations for using the term might be. Many of those reporting on these racist reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic draw on the notion of Orientalism to put their commentary in context. One commentator, Timothy Brook (2020), uses the term, "outbreak Orientalism," in the title of his posting concerning the ways the West blames China for the pandemic, and other online commentators have picked up on the term. This brand-spanking new term caught my attention as a potential future entry in this website's **Glossary of Orientalisms**.

OUTBREAK ORIENTALISM. It is a catchy term, if not very revealing since, without context, it doesn't tell us what is breaking out. But, in the context of the 2020 pandemic, it works very nicely in two ways. It aptly describes the current global *outbreak* of the CORVID-19 virus, while suggesting yet another *outbreak* of Orientalism, which itself can be compared to a disease of the mind—a cognitive virus that has long infected Western thinking. There are other terms available, as we will see below, but for the moment let's stick with "outbreak Orientalism." What, precisely, is it?

"Outbreak Orientalism" is nothing more or less than an updated reprise of the classical Orientalism so aptly critiqued by Said, which does what ideological Orientalisms have always done: imagine and construct the (Oriental) Other as having an essential, enduring, and largely inferior cultural and social "being" that is radically opposite to that of the (Western) Self. Orientalism is a treasury of reified stereotypes useful for categorizing and "getting a handle on" Asian peoples, notably Arabs and Muslims in classical Orientalism and the Chinese in outbreak Orientalism. It is grounded on the fundamental premise that at the end of the day all Asians are alike. It is about protecting Us (the West) from Them (Orientals) by defining them, containing them cognitively, and keeping them in their place. It is about power and justifies forceful actions when deemed necessary. It is racist. Adam Shatz (2019) reminds us that Orientalism is not a static notion. It changes over time, and one of the recent changes he sees especially in the U. S. is that it is no longer identified with the opinions of so-called experts or rooted in a scholarly body of Orientalist knowledge (a.k.a. "academic Orientalism"), however stereotypical and fanciful. It is a blatant Orientalism that glories in baseless

stereotypes, and disdains hoity-toity, big dome intellectualization. Outbreak Orientalism is that kind of blatant, in-your-face ideology. It is the “Yellow Peril” reborn in the 21st century.

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars of Orientalism have anticipated Brook’s notion of outbreak Orientalism and, again not surprisingly, have coined their own terms for this phenomenon, including “epidemic Orientalism,” “epidemiological Orientalism,” and “pandemic Orientalism.” None of these terms have caught on in scholarly circles and when searched online result in only a small number of hits. But, they provide “outbreak Orientalism” with an academic pedigree that saves it from being simply a whimsical moment of creative wordcraft, which is to say that there is a scholarly body of work that gives it substance. It is not a large body of work, but it is not insubstantial either. We begin with Alexandre White (2018).

EPIDEMIC ORIENTALISM. White puts what we are calling “outbreak Orientalism” into a larger historical context, which he characterizes as “epidemic Orientalism” and traces from the colonial era beginning in the 17th century. Over the centuries, he argues, Europeans learned to see themselves as the “perpetual victims” of Asian-spawned epidemics, which for the West has become its basic model for understanding epidemics as a category. Europeans believed that Asia is always the source (the perpetrator) of epidemics, and the West is always the victim. They also believed that the cause of epidemics is the supposed lack of sanitation in Asia, China specifically. In the 19th century, according to White, European authorities began to put into place a range of active measures designed to keep a close medical eye on its colonies, gauge the risks of epidemics, control colonial sanitary conditions, and medically cordon the West off from the East (as well as the South, we might add). The pattern White discerns is not based on medical science. It is racist, ideological, and dedicated to preserving European power and wealth as well as health. He argues that this fundamental pattern for dealing with international plagues remained in place after the end of the colonial era and remains in place today. The World Health Organization (WHO) has basically taken over the role of monitoring the still unsanitary conditions of Asia, exercising its authority to maintain surveillance over that continent as it implements control and prevention measures basically designed to protect the West.

EPIDEMIOLOGICAL ORIENTALISM

Nükhet Varlik (2017) presents us with a picture similar to that of White, which confirms his findings and adds further texture to them. Varlik recalls the long heritage of nineteenth-century Europe’s perception of the East as being the source of epidemics, a heritage that focused largely in earlier times on “the Turks”. Drawing on their inherited religious prejudices against the infidel and on a later treasury of travel literature, Europeans believed that the epidemics of medieval and early modern times originated in the eastern Mediterranean, which became the geographical and ideological boundary between a vigorous, healthy Western Europe and the crowded, filthy, indifferent East. Europe was civilized and healthy. The Ottomans were uncivilized and sickly. They lacked the laws and governance to maintain a “civilized” healthscape.” In sum, Europeans drew on their longstanding prejudices, going back centuries, to imagine and construct an “epidemiological Orientalism” that explained for them the causes of the epidemics that plagued Europe from time to time. Varlik reminds us that Western academia was an important agent in creating and perpetuating this ideologically based knowledge about the sickly East.

PANDEMIC ORIENTALISM

Belinda Kong (2018) describes the Orientalist rhetoric that greeted the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic, labeling it as revealing a “pandemic Orientalism.” Citing the same history more fully described by White and Varlik, she notes the way in which the long history of Orientalist perceptions of an exotic, despotic China resurfaced at the outbreak of SARS, as did images of the Chinese as the polluted source of “filth and disease.” During the SARS event, the international media published stories replete with stereotypical images reinforcing the link between China and epidemics, as the whole epidemic was blamed on “the Chinese people’s exotic, overindulgent, and transgressive appetites.” They are unhygienic, a threat to global well-being, and “the world’s disease ground-zero.”

White, Varlik, and Kong, taken together, articulate a consistent and cogent history of today's "outbreak Orientalism." It is a history that clearly fits into the larger patterns of classical Orientalist dogma by which the West treats Asians as a category; sees them as having one, shared essential nature; believes They do not change; and sees in Their cultures and societies fundamental defects that make Them a danger especially to the West.

The works of these three scholars also inspire some preliminary reflections of our own. *First*, the notion of outbreak Orientalism serves to remind us that in a very basic way, even taking into account all of the scholarly verbiage directed his way, Said was much more right than wrong. His analysis of the notion of Orientalism is still useful for understanding international responses to the fact that the pandemic started in Wuhan. It still helps us to understand the historical roots of those responses. It still gives us insights into why portions of the media lambast the Chinese and why individuals in the West who "look Chinese" suffer because of the fears and prejudices of their neighbors. The world of the Yellow Peril reborn is precisely the world Said described. This is not to overlook the limits of his work, but it is to say that Said remains useful to understanding some of the most important, impactful events of our time.

Second, the nature of "outbreak Orientalism" forces us to confront one of the most insidious aspects of any Orientalism: it is both premised on and promotes a false, fanciful reality. As day after day we watch our politicians and the public at large wrestle with the pandemic, one of the most painful things we see is how many leaders and their followers reside in an alternative, ideologically-driven reality of denial, false hope, and half measures. Their ill-formed worldview is proving deadly because it allows them to put off doing the painful things that must be done. Critical months are being lost and inadequate measures are being touted as just what the doctor ordered (not) until the brutal reality of an uncaring virus breaks through the false realities of premature hope and almost criminal denial. Orientalism contributes to the power of these false realities. It is itself fanciful, and it encourages the false realities of the viral deniers. It allows them to justify their failures to act expeditiously. Outbreak Orientalism is not just racist and hurtful. The behaviors it encourages are deadly. People who did not need to die are indeed dying. The thing is that the COVID-19 virus is real in a particularly stark way. We can debate worldviews to the end of eternity. We can struggle to define what is "really real" in various aspects of life. But, the virus is a reality immune to and unconcerned with our cognitive struggles to understand the world "as it is." It loves a crowded beach and a pews-filled sanctuary and does not care why people go to beaches or churches in defiance of reality. It simply is.

In an interview published online (Chapin, 2020) in the midst of the 2020 pandemic, clinical psychologist, Steven Taylor, underscores just this point. He argues that people react to pandemics based on their worldviews in ways that are built into our evolutionary heritage. We genetically live in a world of Us versus Them, which equips us with a built-in tendency to switch on xenophobic fears in a way that is virtually biological. He states, "People are tribalistic¹, given the way we evolved as a species. We care for our in-group. From an evolutionary perspective, it was strangers who brought in diseases or threats to our communities. We're seeing an increase in altruism and solidarity [because of the virus], but many of these people pulling together are highly xenophobic." And he continues, "In the context of every pandemic outbreak, there's always an upsurge in xenophobia and racism." Our racism today is directed toward Asians. It is Orientalism, more specifically outbreak Orientalism.

Third, on a less intense level, this preliminary investigation into outbreak Orientalism reminds us how much scholars of Orientalism love to coin their own new terms, ones that don't always work very well. Varlik (2017) offers us, "epidemiological Orientalism," which is just a little long and wordy. It doesn't capture the imagination. White (2018) prefers, "epidemic Orientalism," which is a

¹ As an aside, I vividly recall an international conference some years ago at which a member of a Northeast India tribal group objected passionately to negative uses such as this of the word, "tribal". Living myself in a place, northern Thailand, where the hill tribes are a significant minority and seeing the prejudices often directed toward them, I empathize with his objection. Being "tribal" should not be equated with being xenophobic. We need another word for "in-group-ism".

tad awkward sounding. Yes, “epidemic” can be an adjective, but the truth is it doesn’t sound like one. “Epidemic Orientalism” feels like two nouns jammed up against each other. Kong (also 2018) gives us “pandemic Orientalism,” which is the best of the three. It is precise without being overly pedantic, and those who come across it for the first time can be reasonably sure of its meaning. It is the one that probably should become the standard term, if there ever is to be one standard term. However, I personally still like “outbreak Orientalism.” It is more dynamic, and as I said above it names not only the epidemic, but also describes the viral nature of Orientalism itself as an ideological infestation that breaks out again and again and again. There is, of course, no way of knowing whether or not any of these terms will gain a wider currency or simply languish in un-cited obscurity.

Finally, if other scholars do pick up one of these four terms and it begins to appear “in the literature” with some frequency, it may well inspire scholars explore its implications over a range of related subjects. Outbreak Orientalism, for example, must certainly have gender as well as racial implications. We can also be sure that Asians themselves have or will use some of the Orientalist stereotypes involved in one way or another. Some Asians, for one thing, may well agree about the Chinese being “all alike” and unsanitary. Some Chinese, meanwhile, may find business and marketing opportunities embedded in the stereotypes. More study will be done on how Western academics and other “experts” both trade off of and promote outbreak Orientalisms. There is a body of “pandemic art” to be explored.

I am not yet ready, however, to enter “outbreak Orientalism” into the **Glossary of Orientalisms** found on this website. It is entirely possible that it will end up being just one more entry on my “duds list” of terms that have been proposed by one enterprising scholar or another only to be stoutly ignored by the rest. Be that as it may, Brook’s term still seems to me to be particularly helpful as a description of Orientalist reactions to the reality of the current pandemic—ideological, racist, and fanciful reactions that they are. And, who knows? Maybe, sooner or later, it will make its way into the Glossary. I hope so.

In the meantime, please live in the real world. Be safe. Be well.

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Cross-References in the Glossary of Orientalisms: Blatant Orientalism, Classical Orientalism, Colonial Orientalism, Ideological Orientalism, Orientalist Fantasy, Medical Orientalism, Medieval Orientalism, Oriental Look, and Saidian Orientalism.

Sources: **Timothy Brook**, “Blame China? Outbreak Orientalism, from the Plague to Coronavirus,” 2020. At *The Globe and Mail* (www.theglobeandmail.com), accessed 3/20; **Angelina Chapin**, “Why We Waited So Long to Take the Coronavirus Seriously,” 2020. At Huffpost (www.huffpost.com), accessed 4/20; **Frank S. Hong**, “Orientalism and Asian Diseases,” 2020. At *Critique13/13* (<http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/>) accessed 3/20; **Molly Hurley**, “‘Oriental’ is for Rugs, Not Foreign Policy,” 2020. At *Inkstick* (<https://inkstickmedia.com>), accessed 3/20; **Zeba Khan**, “When Racism Goes Viral: The Coronavirus and Modern Muslim Orientalism,” 2020. At *MM* (<https://muslimmatters.org>), accessed 3/20; **Belinda Kong**, “Totalitarian Ordinarity: The Chinese Epidemic Novel as World Literature.” *Modern Chinese Literature & Culture* 30 (2018); **Edward W. Said**, *Orientalism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); **Adam Shatz**, At *NYR Daily* (www.nybooks.com/daily/), accessed 3/2020; **C. J. Werleman**, “The Racialisation of Coronavirus,” 2020. At *Byline Times* (<https://bylinetimes.com>), accessed 3/20; **Alexandre White**, “Epidemic Orientalism: Social Construction and the Global Management of Infectious Disease” (Ph.D. diss., Boston U., 2018); **Nükhet Varlik**, “‘Oriental Plague’ or Epidemiological Orientalism? Revisiting the Plague Episteme of the Early Modern Mediterranean.” In *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean* (Western Michigan U., 2017); **Brian Y. S. Wong**, “The West Unleashes a New Strain of Racism in the Name of Coronavirus Prevention,” 2020. At *South China Morning Post* (<https://www.scmp.com>), accessed 3/20.