

An Analysis of Knowledge-Power Structure and Orientalism

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Abstract. Influenced by Foucault and Gramsci, Said connects knowledge, power and discourse together. For Said, Orientalism is not a kind of purely objective academic discourse, it is a kind of subjective discourse full of prejudice of Western ideology, philosophy and culture.

Introduction

Said made much contribution to various fields, which made him become a famous person. His well-known and being mostly discussed works is *Orientalism* (1978), which is also the first work of his postcolonial studies. Firstly he introduces the term while focusing on the wide and shapeless scope of Orientalism.

Knowledge-Power Structure

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.” At the beginning of *Orientalism*, Said quotes this from Marx, because of this theoretical basis — relationship of knowledge and power by Foucault. In traditional review, knowledge is the objective reflection for the reality, it is something neutral. By researching knowledge on madness, crime and sex abnormality, Foucault has his own opinions different from the tradition. In his opinion, knowledge is no longer the true reflection of objective reality because of the influence of power, it becomes something non-neutral and powerful. Power exists everywhere, including all kinds of intellectual fields. “On Foucault’s account, the relation of power and knowledge is far closer than in the familiar Baconian engineering model, for which ‘knowledge is power’ means that knowledge is an instrument of power, although the two exist quite independently. Foucault’s point is rather than, at least for the study of human beings, the goals of power and the goals of knowledge cannot be separated; in knowing we control” and in power are something combined, power exists in knowledge, it is the essence of knowledge.

Foucault regards knowledge and power as an integration, which shows knowledge on the surface, in fact power is the essence. For him, power has its own special meaning, power is the base, not the product of superstructure. It spreads in all kinds of social relations, won’t be a specific topic, which exceeds the topic between the governor and the ruled. Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power. This Foucaultian insight informs Edward Said’s foundational work *Orientalism*, which points out the extent to which “knowledge” about “the Orient” as it was produced and circulated in Europe. In his opinion, Oriental knowledge is the same as the knowledge Foucault studies, it is not objective reflection of the true Orient, it is full of power. As Cromer says: “... knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control”. Power reflected in Orientalism is more obvious than in other intellectual fields. “The Orient is viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual. Orientalism then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing.” Orientalists believe erroneously that their Orient studies reflect the true Orient, in fact, their studies could not reflect the true Orient because of power. What is related to discourse theory is Foucault’s power theory. So far as Foucault (as a source of theoretical inspiration) is concerned, it is probably his emphasis on the way power is established in discourse which is most helpful. This kind of theory stresses on the relations between text and history, which is considered to have the same importance as Freudian sex theory. So Foucault himself is called

“power thinker”.

Foucault has described the relations between discourse and power as two sides of a coin in his *Discipline and Punish* (1977) as follows: “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relation.” In Foucault’s opinion, power emerges in the mechanism of discourse, operates in the functioning of discourse, and reflects in all kinds of relationship, even power itself is a kind of relationship. Discourse regulates in the inner and is endowed the inner with order and meaning, that is to say, it is endowed with meaningful power in essence, which could enter into the specified order. Power governs discourse and is governed by discourse at the same time. So Said says “knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world”. The Orient in *Orientalism* is fabricated by the Westerns, is the distortion of the true Orient, which shows that Orientalism is the product of power. So, what determines Orientalism is a kind of powerful knowledge, something of pure academic, it becomes something ideological.

When Foucault endows the feature of power to knowledge, he connects knowledge with discourse. In his works, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punishment* (1975), Foucault explores the ways power and knowledge are connected in the production of subjectivity and identity in terms of “discourse”, i.e., the institutional rules that make possible at a certain time to certain people particular significations, or knowledge, or truth. In fact, Orientalism concerning the relation of knowledge and power from the theory of discourse is the core of Said’s idea. As he says: “... without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post- Enlightenment period”. The relation of knowledge and discourse is closely related to each other. Compared with knowledge, the non-neutral color of discourse is more obvious. Knowledge appears to be objective, neutral, when we refer to discourse, we will think about who is speaking, whom he\ she is talking with, the aim of his\her speaking and so on. So there are power characteristics in discourse. Because of this, Said introduces the theory of discourse to his postcolonial studies, makes Oriental knowledge after the name of ‘Oriental discourse’. He says: “I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism”. Said’s opinion on Oriental discourse is that though the strategy of discourse changed a lot in past two hundred years, in essence, it has not developed, since the central myth of the Orient— Oriental culture is the one being stopped during its development— has no change. He thinks that the return of ideology and methodology helps form certain identities of the West, and that of the East.

Orientalism

It’s Said’s Orientalism that analyses colonized government for Middle East from the point of discourse. At the same time, he lets us know that the Occident’s prejudice to the Orient also develops because of discourse, that is, it is the result of spreading power of colonized rules by discourse. Orientalism is not pure objective academic discourse, it is subjective discourse full of ‘prejudice’ of Western ideology, philosophy and culture. In order to challenge the Occident’s prejudice to the Orient, Said accepts theoretical logic of Foucault, that is, there isn’t any discourse could be fixed forever, each discourse is both the reason and the result; discourse doesn’t only actualize power, but also rouses the resistance to power and gets the result of actualizing resistance. Said applies this theoretical logic to his works. Said continues to analyze Orientalism of its being representation of the Orient. And this representation to some extent could be misrepresentation. For instance, Islam has been fundamentally misrepresented in the West. Said ultimately decides that Orientalism overrides the true Orient and negates its truth. As far as Orientalism is concerned, the Orient cannot speak and it needs to be represented. So Said quotes Marx’s statement twice in *Orientalism*.

Thus the real issue is whether there can be a true representation of anything. There're two kinds of major tradition, one denies such a possibility while the other responds positively to this question. As for the first, Nietzsche believes that true representation is not possible, since the nature of human communication is to distort the fact. On the other hand, the Marxists claim that true statements are possible. Said's position is more intricate. He asserts that the line between representation and misrepresentation is "at best a matter of degree" and that "we must be prepared, to accept the fact that a representation is so complicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the truth, which is itself a representation".

In general, Orientalism is a discourse of misrepresentation. So Said argues against the possibility of true representation, at least in regard to Orientalism. Besides he believes that in the field of Orientalism, it is Europe that becomes the spokesman for the Orient, the Europe brings the Orient into Western ideology and empire, Asia is in silence and narrated. As he says "if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient". For example, from Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian prostitute, we can see a typical of Oriental woman: she never talks about herself, represents her emotion, existence and history, Flaubert is the person who talks about and shows her, he is a Westerner, a male, and a rich man relatively, and these are facts of domination that allow him not only possess Kuchuk Hanem's (Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian courtesan. Said's argument about it is that Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem is not an isolated instance. It stands for the pattern of relative strength between the East and the West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.) body, but also speak instead of herself, and tells his readers why Kuchuk Hanem is a typical of Oriental woman. For Said, the opposition between the good and the bad stands for power relations of the Orient and the Occident and the discourse they use to actualize this kind of relations. In February, 1995, Said published an article about Orientalism, the title is "East isn't East". The former "East" refers to the Orient in Orientalism, or the one in Occidental discourse, the latter "East" is the Asian world existed in history and geography. The aim of writing this article is to oppose to the definitions such as "the East" or "the West", and point out they have no corresponding relations with the nature, they're strange combination between empire and imagination.

Summary

At the end of this book, Said raises how to represent other culture. Finding the answer to this question is not the task of his Orientalism. Said studies Orientalism as a kind of power discourse, following Foucault's idea, Said breaks the concept of traditional culture to make people "be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the sociopolitical role of intellectuals, in the great value of a skeptical critical consciousness", and exposes main problems existed in cultural intercourse between the East and the West, which other scholars, studied colonial problems from politics and economics, overlook. From this, we can see that it is correct to consider *Orientalism* as the sign that postcolonial criticism rose.

References

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