

In Defense of Western Civilization

Ibn Warraq's *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* is a remarkable counterbalance to the flaws of Said's classic work. In 1978, Edward Said produced one of the most influential scholarly books of the 20th Century: *Orientalism*. The Palestinian-American literary critic and professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University argued that Western studies and literature were imbued with a fundamentally racist perception of the peoples of the Middle East and Asia. Said insisted Western writers viewed non-Westerners as inferior and regarded Asian and Middle Eastern societies as static. According to the author, these attitudes facilitated Western imperialism during its heyday in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. Until his death in 2003, Said was hailed by his admirers both in the Middle East and in Western universities as a trailblazer.

Ibn Warraq provides an outstanding service by combining many of the best criticisms against Said in one book. Warraq is a bestselling author and a senior research fellow at the Center for Inquiry. He specializes in examining the Koran and has been an outspoken critic of Islam. In his latest book, he attacks Said while also presenting a firm defense of Western ideals.

Warraq insists the primary flaw in *Orientalism* is that Said proceeds from an anti-Western ideology and thus omits much of the evidence that does not buttress his thesis. According to Warraq, Said's analysis is based on the thought of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault. As a result, his writing is esoteric, pretentious, lacks historical context and is often inaccurate.

One of the gravest errors is Said's claim that Western Orientalists laid the groundwork for colonialism. Yet, Warraq points out that the first Chairs for Eastern Studies in British and French universities were established in the 16th and 17th Centuries—that is, several hundred years before Britain and France colonized the Middle East. Furthermore, Said omits a detailed analysis of the seminal work of German Orientalists and of the many Russians, Italians and Jews who produced favorable studies of Islam.

Warraq further demonstrates Said's one-dimensional portrait by highlighting the positive side of the European imperial legacy. In India, for example, British viceroys brought the rule of law, a railway system, an irrigation system to fight famine, an unparalleled civil bureaucracy, education and the ideals of self-rule. Warraq cites the writings of the viceroys to prove that the British certainly did not view Easterners as static and their civilization as unable to evolve: British rulers, in fact, celebrated the giant strides that the people of India made under their governance.

Warraq's book is also of great value to those who want to understand the Western heritage. He contrasts its three cardinal values of rationalism, universalism and self-criticism with Islamic civilization. He thus accuses Said of completely misunderstanding Western civilization—and, ironically, using an Eastern caricature of the West in order to establish his argument.

Warraq presents a biting criticism of Arabic civilization. Following its imperial heyday, Islamic societies ceased being open to their neighbors. Said's analysis perpetuates the self-pity and victimology that characterizes Arabic post-imperial thought. Warraq insists that Said's work

further fuels the Islamic rejection of the West. Warraq maintains that the fundamental problem that affects the contemporary Middle East is not the legacy of European colonialism, nor poverty nor lack of freedom—nor any other environmental or external factor. For Warraq, radical Islamists are dangerous because they are utopian and totalitarian: They seek to impose a worldwide theocracy. And this worldview, according to Warraq, derives from Islam itself.

Warraq is at his most amusing when he turns his critical lens on the dangers plaguing Western society. The greatest threat, he believes, comes from within—especially from liberals who suffer from “pathological niceness.” As a result of the prevalence of liberal ideology, the strengths of Western civilization become weaknesses: Rationalism turns into moral relativism, universalism turns into a paralyzing form of cosmopolitanism, and self-criticism turns into self-hatred.

While it is undeniable that there were racist, narrow and arrogant writings on the East in Europe, there were also many who presented an ambiguous or alternative perspective. Thus, Warraq proves that *Orientalism* cannot hold—and that those who embrace Said’s thesis do so only by ignoring much evidence and by sanctioning the dangerous ideology from which the work derives.

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