

Discuss some of the recurrent themes in western representations of the non-European 'other'.

This essay intends to discuss some of the typical western views, and in many cases, stereotypes, of the non-western world. The essay will focus on two main areas that have often been subject to great prejudice: the 'Oriental' world of the Far East, Near East and South Asia, and the 'Primitive' societies of Africa and to a lesser extent Native America.

The essay will open with a short explanation of how certain words can be used to draw these boundaries, before discussing the specific areas, including some of the problems resulting from these stereotypes and misconceptions, also emphasising the influence of colonialism.

We will then draw on some common grounds between these different forms of representation along with common issues and criticisms.

As the essay comes to an end it will propose a question about the possible future of these representations, before attempting to draw a conclusion on what has been discussed.

Rather than going straight into the different criteria by which western society distinguishes itself from the non-western world, it seems a good starting point to mention some of the actual words used to draw a boundary between 'us' and 'them'. The use of the words 'us' and 'them' are of course examples in themselves. 'Us' seems to imply some sense of unity, a base from which any judgements about the less clearly defined 'them' can be made. While 'us' defines a very specific group of people, 'them' describes all those who are not deemed elite to be part of that 'us'.

By picking apart the title of this essay, we come across three more words used to draw boundaries. It seems surprising that a title consisting of just thirteen words would

contain as much as three cultural defining terms (*Discuss some of the recurring themes in western representations of the 'non-European' 'other'*), but this just acts to emphasise the importance that drawing boundaries has to many people.

The italicised terms range from the seemingly concrete term 'non-European' (However, the accuracy of this term is debatable. Clearly European views and cultures are mirrored by much of those in North America today; indeed much research on 'the other' has come from the USA itself. The obvious response to this is that those people we speak of in the USA are of European origin, but the term does not make this clear), to the extremely abstract 'other'. This term is purposely abstract, as it helps emphasise the idea of mystery associated with foreign worlds. The term 'western' is an interesting one, as in general, it is taken to be a geographical term. However a glance at a globe will make it clear that this is far from the case – there is no true West, and depending from where you are in the world, 'the West' could in purely technical terms be India, Africa or France. Instead the term is used just as another way of distinguishing between the 'us' and 'them' – the West related to power, richness and developed civilisation, the East the opposite.

Orientalism

To begin this brief discussion of oriental representations, we draw from a very unlikely source – a McDonald's television advert¹, advertising their 'Taste the Orient' menu. This particular advert was aired in Germany, and despite being in German, the stereotypes being displayed are still glaringly obvious – the traditional Chinese music being played, along with chanting, a general sense of havoc and disorder, depicted by people rushing around at a train station. Even the font used to display the McDonald's logo is a typically Chinese one, and of course the food – the whole reason for the advertisement; is full of cringe-worthy stereotypes – spring rolls with sweet and sour sauce. Few westerners could deny such ideas as being their initial image of China, and

of the Orient in general. In his text on Orientalism², Edward Said describes the Orient being seen as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1978: 1), but more importantly, prior to that, he points out that the Orient, a presumably eastern concept, was actually a European invention (1978: 1), a point supported by the previously mentioned McDonalds advert! These views all share a sense of an exotic existence, a spell binding world. Such views contrast the drudgery and reality of the western world, and perhaps in this way they can be understood as an escape for westerners to a place they would rather be, somewhere constructed in their own minds, because as Said pointed out, “that Orientalism makes sense depends more on the west than on the Orient” (1978: 22).

Primitivism

Views on the so called ‘primitive’ world are arguably some of the most extreme and racially ignorant (or to put it simply; racist) around. ‘Primitive’ societies are perhaps not as geographically specific as Oriental ones, but generally African and Native American cultures are seen as being of a primitive nature. It is easy to formulate a picture of typically ‘primitive’ man in our minds, as we have all probably learned similar ideas of what it means to be primitive – it is when we apply this stereotype to societies around the world that we face a problem. Sadly, this has been the case for many, many people ever since the first interactions between the culturally different. Nederveen Pieterse quotes Debrunner, in his book ‘White on Black’³;

“The Negro represents natural man in all his wild and untamed nature. If you want to treat and understand him rightly, you must abstract all elements of respect and morality and sensitivity – there is nothing remotely humanized in the Negro’s character... Nothing confirms this judgement more than reports of missionaries.” (1992: 34).

Reading such a paragraph will most likely lead to sheer disgust from the reader, and rightly so. The truth is though that such a view echoes that of many western views of the last several hundred years; that of the backwards, barely human, wild man.

Nederveen Pieterse points out that many of these views are based on 'absences' – something deemed as lacking from these people that are required to make them human. (1992: 35). Some views take the idea even further, believing that certain societies may have provided a 'missing link' between man and ape, as Nederveen Pieterse explains: "Edward Tyson proposed the pygmy, whom he identified with *Homo Sylvestris*, as the missing link." (1992: 40).

He also mirrors Said's view on the representation of Orientalism, stating that "The prehistory of the savage lies in Europe itself." (1992: 30).

Adam Kuper⁴ takes this view one step further by bluntly stating that "The theory of primitive society which does not and never has existed." (1988: 8). Clearly he feels, as with Said, that the idea of primitivism is simply an imaginary view, an invention, of the European mind. The differing reasons for these inventions are perhaps more subtle however, with primitivism more likely related to the opportunity to make a power comparison rather than any views of a mystical land.

A Result of Colonialism?

"Orientalism without colonialism is a theoretical headless beast" (Carol Ann Davis, Breckenridge, Nederveen Pieterse, 1993: 11)⁵

It is not hard to imagine how the process of colonialism in many countries around the world could result in a great number of misjudged and inaccurate representations of other societies – it is obvious this is going to happen. However, what is slightly less obvious is the exact reason for this happening. For the sake of simplicity, we will split reasons into two main categories (although in reality it is much more complex and boundaries are hazy); those of genuine misinterpretations and matters of power.

Genuine misinterpretations are understandable, yet avoidable. There was of course a tendency for westerners arriving in new lands to observe cultures, analyse them against frameworks that had been common in their own country. They could, say,

compare the number of people in a certain African culture who displayed a certain type of behaviour to the amount of people that did so in western societies and seemingly draw a conclusion. James Clifford⁶ explains that problems with such types of research stem from the fact that cultures are not simply scientific objects for study, that; "Culture, and our views of it, are produced historically, and are actively contested." (1986: 18).

Obviously the second category, that of political power, has given rise to the greatest amount of controversy. The idea is simple: if a society are made out to be primitive, backwards, and savage, there is a perceived greater acceptance of using such peoples for the benefit of ourselves – 'you eat each other, which justifies using you as slaves' – cannibalism, of course being a common theme. Michael Taussig⁷ illustrates a specific example of such exploitation in Native America, where "The savagery of the wild Indians was important to the propaganda of the rubber company." (1987: 83). He goes on to explain however that views of these Indians contradicted each other." (1987: 91).

This example is the result of a specific company trying to exploit innocent natives, and of course similar methods are used in a wider context to manage whole nations, as Breckenridge and van der Veer point out from an Oriental perspective: "...not just a way of thinking. It is a way of conceptualizing the landscape of the colonial world that makes it subject to certain kinds of management" (1993: 6).

The former category could be the result of a secondary misinterpretation of people 'back home' in Europe: lies and deception resulting from colonial manipulation would often result in people being bombarded with false views of what had been experienced in foreign lands. These problems of interpretation are highlighted by Gananath Obeyesekere⁸ in his book describing the massive western misinterpretation on the act of cannibalism. (2005: 4).

The general problem of all this for anthropology is, as Peter Forster⁹ makes clear, is that it simply does not take into account the massive influence of this colonial situation. (Talal Asad, 1973: 25).

In response to such a situation, I propose a question. Orientalism, like all western representations of the 'other', has always had a clear emphasis on power and control. With the modern world developing as it is – China fast becoming one of the world's main powers, with India to follow in the future, what effect will this have on western Oriental views? Is it possible that a shift in, or at least an expansion of, power bases would abolish such stereotypes in any way, or is it possible that our views of what the Orient is are so distant from reality that any such change would in fact leave our ill informed views intact?

It seems fitting that an essay that originally intended to focus on the way the West represents the other actually focussed more on the universal criticisms of these representations – this is hardly a coincidence.

What is clear from discussing these different representations of the 'other' we have is that while they may focus on very different locations, and completely different sets of misinterpretations, they all share some very common grounds – both in the way these representations are formed, and more importantly the way these representations are criticized and rejected. Therefore in conclusion, while there will always be different names given to the ways we may represent certain areas around the world, it is likely that there will always be one combined perceived 'other' that an ignorant westerner may apply very similar frameworks to, no matter how different they may actually be.

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