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# Orientalism and the Structure of Identity: A Brief Inquiry into Austro-Hungarian Orientalism

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**Abstract:** This paper's goal is to examine the dynamics of the formation of identity and to show how different identities produce different Orientalisms. Giddens argues self-identity is how an individual perceives themselves based on their biography, and insists self-identity is in successfully keeping a narrative going. According to Woodward identities are oppositional and oftentimes present us with a construction of an 'us/them' dichotomy, and the marking of difference is essential to the formation of identity. Giddens and Woodward might explain Orientalism's self-centric characteristic and its dependence on difference and dichotomy. But Said concentrates on Britain, France and the United States, and does not contemplate nations with differing identities, so I shift attention to Gingrich's Frontier Orientalism which focuses on Central-Eastern Europe, and Austria-Hungary which not only developed an identity different from the Saidian framework, but its unique way of perceiving the Orient gave birth to a distinct kind of Orientalism. Frontier Orientalism functions with the central arrangement of being threatened by a dangerous and evil Oriental; good example to it is its gendered aspect. In contrast to the passive and feminine image of the Saidian Orient, Polish and Hungarian examples can be shown where the Orient appears as a masculine threat.

## Introduction

According to Edward Said's ominous book (1978)<sup>1</sup>, Orientalism is not just the scholarly knowledge about the Orient or the Western way of thinking about it, but a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." It is an instrument of imperialism, colonialism and a means of controlling the Orient. (Said, 1979). It is no longer the produce of interest for the diversity of cultures, but a means of creating a stereotypical, mythical East, "through which European rule could be more readily asserted", as interpreted by John MacKenzie (MacKenzie, 1995; Kluczevska-Wójcik, 2020). As Said has also mentioned, Orientalism is deeply connected to the process of how the West creates its self-identity, how it positions itself in a superior standing above an inferior East (Morley & Robins, 1995; Phillips, 2014). The current paper's goal is to examine the dynamics of the formation of identity on one side, and the connection between different identities and the diversity of Orientalism on the other, in hope of gaining a better understanding of its true nature.

## The "Narrative" of Identity

Self-identity is not something given by the continuity of one's actions, neither is it a distinctive trait, nor is it in one's behaviour or the reaction of others. Self-identity

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition was Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books., but in this paper the first Vintage Books edition of 1979 was used.

has to be routinely created and sustained, as explained by Anthony Giddens (1991). “It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of their biography.” The existence of self-identity is bound up with this biography which the individual ‘supplies’ about herself. So, in this sense a person’s identity is to be found in the capacity, the capability to keep a particular narrative going. At this point Giddens gives his warning, that, if the individual is to maintain regular interaction with others, this biography cannot be wholly fictive. Paul Gilroy (1997) agrees that people create their own identities, but not under circumstances of their choosing. It is created from inherited, incomplete ingredients, that might have been acquired from the past, but are always worked on in the present.

In Pierre Nora’s explanation, memory belongs to a group of living people, thus it is always changing. It is subject to remembering and forgetting, to all kinds of use and manipulation. In contrast history is the always incomplete and problematic reconstruction of what is no longer there; while memory always belongs to the present, history is a representation of the past (Hobsbawm, 1989). Could it not be said that this memory and history are Giddens’ “biography” or Gilroy’s “ingredient”, that belong to a group of people, such as a nation or country. In this consideration, this eternally changing memory possessed by a group of people creating history, can be seen as the “narrative” of a nation. Which means Giddens’ explanation is not only viable in the case of individuals, but groups of people, even ethnicities and nations.

Connecting to this explanation of identity, Stuart Hall has proposed two definitions to identity, and I would like to introduce the second one:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 1990)

It is astonishing, how well Hall ties together Giddens and Nora: identity is not fixated, yet deeply rooted in common experience; it is construction, but not fiction; and most importantly it is about us positioning ourselves, but not creating the environment in which we are positioned. It might be a far stretch, but Eric Hobsbawm’s “invented tradition”, might also have connections to this explanation of a “national narrative” (Farkas, 2013).

Naturally there are slightly different views on identity (e.g.: Abe, 2001), but in summary of the aforementioned, I believe we have established that identity is defined by an internal narrative, which is albeit not wholly fictitious, its goal is not the depiction of reality. It is connected to the vicissitudes of history, memory and current circumstances. All this might explain why Orientalism is much more about the West than it is about the East, how it could be a means of building this internal

narrative, but it does not explain its reliance on dichotomy. Researcher Woodward might be able to give an explanation.

### **The Importance of Difference**

According to Woodward (1997b), identity gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live. Identities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture, creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about identity positions which we might adopt. Identity albeit positions us, is highly reliant on representations which include signifying practices and symbolic systems. Symbolic systems help us define ourselves, our prospects for life, even our desires; thus, systems of representations and discourses create collective and individual identities, by constructing a place from where we can position ourselves, from where we can speak.

In Woodward's (1997b) standing identities are oppositional, and often present us with an "us" and "them" dichotomy, stating that the marking of difference is crucial to the construction of identity positions. To support this theory, she goes back till the very *origo* of this matter; the creation of meaning, citing anthropologist Mary Douglas, according to whom the marking of difference is the basis of culture because things and people are given meaning in culture by being assigned to different positions within a classification system. Intriguing take on the question at hand, but she goes even deeper, to Saussurean linguistic theory and its position that binary oppositions – the most extreme form of marking difference – are essential to the production of meaning, suggesting, that identities are formed in relation to other identities, in relation to what they are not. There are others in fact who support this idea; Stuart Hall (1990) also notes, that without relations of difference, no representation could occur, and Paul Gilroy (1997) also suggests that the formation of every 'we' must leave out or exclude a 'they', that identities depend on the marking of difference. This is where it gets truly fascinating for us. Woodward (1997a) says that the most common form in which this construction appears is in binary oppositions. Therefore, the strong dichotomy present in Orientalism could just be a part of the creation of identity, a part of how we understand ourselves, and others. Symbolic systems of representation guide our self-understanding and are responsible for the reproduction of difference, and the marking of difference creates adaptable identity positions. Is Orientalism not the reproduction of differences? Is it not a symbolic system of representations of an imaginary East? Is it not the definition of self-identity? Here, it is worthy to note Jonathan Rutherford's warning concerning the dangers of binarism. He says: "By assembling the heterogeneous possibilities of meaning within language into fixed dichotomies, binarism reduces the potential of difference into polar opposites" (Rutherford, 1990). It is not unimaginable, that Orientalism has also been the victim of binarism that was born out of these simplifying practices.

Considering everything we have learned in this section, we could say, that the definition of difference is essential to the formation of meaning, and there is a correlation between the marking of difference, representations and symbolic systems, thus, between Orientalism, which relies on representations and the marking

of difference, and the creation of self-identity and our understanding of others. Representations and symbols create identities, and identities create dichotomies based on difference. We might be able to say, that Orientalism is a way these aforementioned processes manifest in a particular cultural environment.

The likes of Giddens and Woodward might explain the self-centric characteristic of Orientalism and its dependence on difference, but intriguingly they might also point towards an underdiscussed aspect of Orientalism; its inevitable, even necessary nature, which is supported by Ruskola (2002). Unfortunately, as interesting – and important – as it is, the further investigation of this conversation is beyond the spectrum of the current paper.

### **Frontier Orientalism**

It became clear that identity is defined by a narrative, based on common experience, that difference is necessary to the creation of meaning and identity. But where do these two things lead us? The fact that identity is defined by a narrative, based on common experience means that a certain group of people's identity comes from how they understand themselves, and how they understand their common history, as we have previously established. And if we look at the other finding, the necessity of difference, it just supports the idea that Orientalism, which is building up, emphasising differences, is a means of making sense of our experiences, of our histories.

Stuart Hall (1990) argues that we always speak from a particular place, time, history and culture. What we say is always in context, it is positioned. Moreover, Yoshihara (2003) points out, that historical and ideological contexts shape Orientalism, differently in different times. Historical and ideological contexts influence both Orientalism's underlying ideology and its cultural manifestations. Rutherford (1990) also states that identity marks the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations within which we live. Edward Said (1979) concentrates on the relation between Britain, France the US and the Middle East, but what shape is Orientalism going to take in the case of a country, with a different historical, ideological and cultural background? This is why I would like to shift attention to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which existed during the age of empires (Hobsbawm, 1989), between 1867 and 1918 (Taylor, 2021), making it a direct comparison to the colonising Western European countries.

“Classical” Saidian Orientalism focuses on Western Europe, but in the case of Central Europe, and mainly Austria-Hungary, Frontier Orientalism is more appropriate (Farkas, 2020). Austria-Hungary's image of the East was “forged in the constant contact with the Orient, both through trade and military confrontation” (Kluczevska-Wójcik, 2020). Memories of the Ottoman-Hungarian wars between the 14th and 16th centuries, the period of 150 years of Ottoman rule in Hungary from 1541 to 1699 (Salamon, 1886), or the battle of Vienna in 1683 (Broucek et al., 1983; Wheatcroft, 2009) could be mentioned as prime examples. This is why André Gingrich developed the concept of Frontier Orientalism to describe Central and Eastern European peoples' perception of the East, who did not have contact with the

Muslim world through colonies but through encounters with Ottoman invaders (Gáfrik, 2020).

The mytho-logic of ‘frontier orientalism’ hence functions with the central mythological arrangement of being threatened or besieged on a nearby, contested, and fluctuating border through which an almost equally matched, dangerous, and therefore ‘evil’ Oriental invades and existentially threatens ‘us’ as well as our women. (Gingrich, 2015)

For the Monarchy, the Orient not only represented a distant and exotic world; it also meant a neighbouring world, close enough to pose a constant threat. Farkas (2020) asserts the region’s peoples had fought this enemy for centuries and this fight played a pivotal role in the shaping of their identity, as “*Antemurale Christianitatis* (Bulwark of Christendom)”, to use her wording.

A good example for the difference between Saidian classical, and Frontier Orientalism is its gendered aspect, a characteristic that Gingrich mentioned himself as cited above, and others have also noted. In contrast to the passive and feminine image of the Orient in Saidian Orientalism, Polish and Hungarian literary works portray a sense of danger caused by this feeling of their primarily masculine identities being threatened by the Orient. Polish author, Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (*Pan Wołodyjowski*, 1888) and *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem*, 1884), or Hungarian authors, Gárdonyi Géza’s *Eclipse of the Crescent Moon* (*Egri csillagok*, 1901) and Makkai Sándor’s *Táltoskirály* (1934) could also be mentioned (Iványi, 2022; Sabatos, 2018; Ostrowska, 2011). In all these works, the Orientals appear as a masculine threat, posing a danger to the Polish and Hungarian women. This analogy can also be exemplified by paintings as well. The first one (see Figure 1.) is famous French orientalist painter, Eugene Delacroix’s (1798–1863) work, called *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. It shows a group of erotic women, a harem, idling in daytime. Although Delacroix’s intention was to create a realistic portrayal, it is quite undeniably reminiscent of the passive and feminine image of the Saidian Orient, which is a depiction of the European male fantasy; aesthetic, exotic, even morally depraved, and above all else passive, lacking any narrative. (Blake, 2016; Benjamin, 1997; Bostock, 1974). In contrast, Hungarian painter, Székely Beralan’s (1835–1910) work *Women of Eger* (see Figure 2.) shows a different picture. A battle; Ottoman soldiers assaulting the Hungarian castle of Eger, in its siege of 1552 (Papp, 2014). Wherein a different narrative appears, where it is ‘we’, the Hungarians, who are the women fighting off the aggressive, male, Oriental invaders. The woman in the centre holding the hand of the male soldier is also a detail worth mentioning, showing the women’s power and equality with the men and the central narrative of Frontier Orientalism, both men and women being threatened by the invaders. Though it is not uncommon to represent a country by a woman, it is different in the sense that the main motif is not the life-giving mother, but the opposition of invader and invaded.

Frontier Orientalism is not only significant in terms of Eastern Europe’s connection to the East, but in terms of its place inside Europe. According to Gáfrik

(2020), “the relationship between the countries of Central Europe<sup>2</sup> and Europe itself is ambiguous.” This region is “a Europe on the margins, on the verge of Europe” as he quotes Tomasz Zarycki. It is a part of Europe, yet at the same time outside of it. Whilst taking it as a precise guide could be misleading, even in Samuel Huntington’s theory of civilizations the region that is now home to the Central-Eastern European countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia is the periphery, and border of Western civilization (Farkas, 2013). The two-dimensional identity of countries like Hungary – being a victim and a producer of Orientalism – has given their Orientalism a peculiar character. The period from the Middle Ages to the mid-nineteenth century brought the phenomenon of self-Orientalisation. Of course, there was no lack in premodern images of the East indifferent from the ones in Western Europe, but romantic images could also be found, largely due to the national revival movement (Gáfrik, 2020); for example, Hungarians saw their origins connected to the Orient (Klein, 2006). Many great orientalist scholars were born out of this endeavour, like Vámbéry Ármin (1832–1913), who embarked on his journey to Asia in 1861, to look for Hungarian people’s Asiatic origins (Vámbéry, 1864). Or Kőrösi Csoma Sándor (1784–1842),



**Figure 1.** Eugène Delacroix (1834). *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (après restauration, 2021) [*Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (after restoration, 2021)]. (Louvre, 2022).

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<sup>2</sup> Here Gáfrik uses the term Central Europe in a bit confusing way. Whilst he deems the region undefined, encompassing different countries when looked from different viewpoints, he concentrates on the territories of present-day Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, to which countries I would rather refer as Eastern Europe, or Central-Eastern Europe. Therefore, in this paper the region will be referred to as Central-Eastern Europe, not Central Europe.



**Figure 2.** Székely Bertalan (1867). *Egri nők* [*Women of Eger*].  
(Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, n.d.).

who explored Asia with the same intentions, wrote the first detailed English-Tibetan dictionary (Kara, 1970; Németh, 1935).<sup>3</sup> And most notably Turanism was born out of these ideas, which insisted the racial unity of the Hungarian, Turkish, and Japanese peoples for example, gaining significant number of supporters in Hungary, extending its reach even to Japan (Farkas, 1993; Levent, 2011).

No doubt, Frontier Orientalism is a prime example of the diversity present in Orientalism and proof of the deep connection between the structure of identity and the “underlying ideologies and cultural manifestations” of orientalising practices.

## Conclusion

There is still a lot we have not talked about, but based on this paper’s findings, both the investigation of identity and Austro-Hungarian Orientalism opens new prospects in the dialogue concerning the question: What is Orientalism? Although more research is inevitably in need, I believe we have confirmed that Orientalism is not just connected to the creation of Western identity; it *is* the creation of Western identity, it *is* the symbolic system of representations, it *is* the narrative. In fact, it can be the instrument of the creation of many identities. And Austro-Hungarian Orientalism is an excellent case study of this diversity present in Orientalism. It is the perfect example, that different identities produce different kinds of Orientalisms.

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<sup>3</sup> The dictionary: Csoma de Kőrös, A. (1834). *Essay Towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English*. Baptist Mission Press, Circular Road.

The current research being nonconclusive it is necessary to continue by diving deeper into Austro-Hungarian Orientalism, focusing on how their identity affected their perception of the East; the centre of further research being the examination of the Orientalism apparent in the historical relations of Austria-Hungary and modern Japan. Though previous research has investigated the different aspects of different Orientalisms, very few attempts have been made to redefine it; and this very particular meeting between East and West might help us unfold previously unknown aspects of Orientalism, and more importantly, alongside with thorough inquiry of the structure of identity, it could lead us to a better understanding of the true nature of Orientalism.

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