

Hegemonic Narratives and the Generative Power of War: Orientalism in Late Modern Wars

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010045>

Received: 17 December 2024; Accepted: 30 December 2024; Published: 30 January 2025

ABSTRACT

This article underscores the need for a closer examination of the intricate relationship between wars and hegemonic narratives like Orientalism. The exploration of this relationship reveals a profound interplay of power/military might, identity, and representation. The study also evinces a significant but understudied impact of war on the construction and deconstruction of dominant narratives and their counter-narratives. So much so that only recently has scholarship begun to address these gaps thanks to the nascent concept of Military Orientalism. Based on these insights, the study of the dialectics between war and hegemonic narratives is exemplified hereafter with Orientalism, a longstanding hegemonic narrative. The aim of this endeavor is to achieve a better understanding of contemporary conflicts and their narratively implications. This article also demonstrates how conflicts catalyze a reevaluation of hegemonic narratives and the ideologies that sustain them. It suggests that insights from the study of Military Orientalism can illuminate these dynamics while accounting for the failures of Western military strategies in the Middle East or the “Orient” writ large. This is especially the case since these strategies are predicated on long-lasting misconceptions that have been conveyed through historical narratives about the “Other.”

Keywords: hegemony, narrative, war, orientalism, representation, identity, military orientalism, other.

INTRODUCTION

War is not merely an armed conflict, it is a defining historical matrix through which power dynamics are established, identities are negotiated and narratives are constructed. The very notion of “war as a vortex” (Barkawi, 2011) suggests that conflicts are not isolated events; rather, they are interconnected phenomena that draw in various actors and factors, creating a swirling effect that impacts both local and global narratives. As wars unfold, so do the narratives surround them. Hence the “generative power of war” which emphasizes war’s formidable capacity to “both disrupt settled narratives and drive their remaking” (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011, p.127).

Indeed, the consequences of wars have historically shaped collective memories, redefined national identities, and set defining balances of power. Armed conflicts do not only determine power dynamics but they also enforce politics of representation. War has the power not only to alter existing perceptions of adversary societies but also to create enduring new tropes while disrupting firmly entrenched ones. As the saying “History is written by the victors” has it, the ultimate goal of any war victors is not so much to conquer/reclaim territories as to impose their master narratives or version of truth about their national/racial superiority or cultural self-righteousness on the vanquished. And the latter are left, as per the Melian Dialogue, with no other option than “to suffer what they must” in terms of both military and epistemic violence.

However, when a powerful military fails, in the face of a presumably weak adversary, to deliver the outcomes predicted by their own narrative, there ensues a sense of crisis. It is a crisis that puts in motion the generative power of war to disrupt established tropes and unsettle existing “certainties,” which had congealed following past victories. As it will be discussed later in this article, the unexpected outcomes of late modern wars, in particular, have challenged prevailing hegemonic narratives, those propagated by the powerful.

The main contention of the present article is that a closer examination of the intricate relationship between wars and hegemonic narratives, such as Orientalism, reveals a profound interplay of power/military might, identity, and representation. The article also evinces a significant but understudied impact of war on the construction and deconstruction of dominant narratives and their counter-narratives. So much so that only recently has scholarship begun to address these gaps thanks to the nascent concept of Military Orientalism. Based on these insights, the study of the dialectics between war and hegemonic narratives is exemplified hereafter with Orientalism, a longstanding historical hegemonic narrative. The aim of this endeavor is to achieve a better understanding of contemporary conflicts and their narratively implications. This article also demonstrates how conflicts catalyze a reevaluation of hegemonic narratives and the ideologies that sustain them. It suggests that insights from the study of Military Orientalism can illuminate these dynamics while accounting for the failures of Western military strategies in the Middle East or the “Orient” writ large. This is especially the case since these strategies are predicated on long-lasting misconceptions that have been conveyed through historical narratives about the “Other.”

WAR AND HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES

War and Orientalism

The Arab-Israeli October War of 1973 had certainly had a catalyzing effect on Said’s interest in the study of Orientalism as evidenced by his article “Shattered Myths” published three years before his magnum opus *Orientalism*. In his article, Said claimed to have detected a change occurring in the “myths of Arab society” as “preserved in the discourse of Orientalism” (p. 89). From his vantage point of a university professor immersed in the American society, he further observed that “for this myth, the October war was a surprise, but not because ‘the Arabs’ fought well, rather because the Arabs, according to the myth, were not supposed to fight at all, and because the war seemed therefore to be a deviation out of context, a violation of a well-established logic” (pp. 89-90). Said’s assertions pointed presciently to the crucial role of wars in crystalizing or debunking existing orientalist tropes and myths depending on their outcomes. War, according to Said, has a special value in uncovering the naturalized orientalist paradigm: “The value of such events as the October war is that they highlight the prevailing system of ideas with which these events form a radical discontinuity” (p.102). The discontinuity, this war, in particular, brought about altered the narrative about the incapacity of Arabs to fight which became well entrenched in the West following the disastrous Arab defeats of 1948 and 1967 against the then fledgling Israeli polity.

The relevance of war as a generator or crystallizer of the myths and tropes that are constitutive of the orientalist discourse and the resulting narratives was underlined by Said in other subsequent powerful statements. In *Orientalism* (1979), for instance, Said stressed the significant military aspect, along other salient dimensions, of Orientalism as a discourse when he affirmed that “without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European [and later American] culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (p.3) (emphasis added). In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a sequel to *Orientalism*, Said evoked again the important relation between war and Orientalism when he described the “struggle over geography” as “complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (p.7). Last but not least, with hindsight, Said forcefully emphasized, for the penultimate time, the importance of this entanglement of Orientalism with war, in the preface he wrote, before his death, for the 2003 edition of *Orientalism*: “Without a well-organized sense that these people over there were not like ‘us’ and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values --the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma as I describe its creation and circulation in this book-- there would have been no war” (p. xv).

Despite its constitutive role for the orientalist discourse as regards the sustaining, the promoting or the discrediting of orientalist worldviews/historical narratives, as intimated by Said, war has, until very recently, hardly come under scrutiny in the scholarship concerned with Orientalism (Barkawi, 2009, p.68). This is all the more perplexing since war represents a crucial determinant in the politics of identity that are at the heart of Orientalism (Barkawi and Stanski, 2012, p.7). Wars are indeed defining and constitutive moments in the development of national identities, ethos, founding myths and narratives. Major wars are turning points in

world history. Depending on their outcomes, new powers rise on the world stage to become regional or global hegemony, while other polities decline and may become enduringly subjected to humiliation, subjugation or simply relegation. Rise and decline of states determine their populations' collective worldviews and outlooks about the place they themselves and others, in contradistinction to them, occupy in the community of nations and in the world at large.

War's Disruptive Consequences for Narrative

War is pivotal to the "politics of representation." It determines the meanings assigned to events, people, and objects in the world (Hodges, 2011, p.134), by allowing the victors to foist their regime of truth upon the vanquished. Wars indeed define the prevailing balance of power. And power, which implies the potential for exercising coercive force, is naturally coupled with knowledge which is constitutive of discourse in the Foucauldian sense. Besides the passion and acrimony unleashed before and during the war, the vanquished also suffer symbolic or epistemic violence as a result of the discursive practices and the representations enshrined forcibly by the victors. In this regard, Vivienne Jabri (2007) maintains that the "practice of violence is always implicated with a politics of representation; discursive practices that are always already violent" (p.149). The symbolic violence deployed through strident warring rhetoric before and during the clash of arms is fully realized and cemented in declarations, treaties, written and customary laws, in Foucault's words, "law is the principal mode of representation of power [balance]" (Power/Knowledge, 1980, p.141). These "legal" texts acquire the status of truth and entrench regional or global orders; the legitimation of which is secured by war or the threat thereof. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) argue "today the legitimation of the global order is based fundamentally on war" (p.90). In other words, wars are, in addition to territorial disputes, a struggle over identities and representations. And it is the winning belligerents who ultimately naturalize their own representations/narrative as "truth" by means of normative discourses which may be upheld by intimidation or coercion if need be. These representations, in turn, serve to legitimize both discursive and real practices. As Michel Foucault (1980) states, "representation should not be understood here as a screen or an illusion, but as a real mode of action" (p.141) and particularly in the case of war and the resulting political orders.

The highlighted lack of attention by academia as to the relationship between war and Orientalism, and by extension any other form of hegemonic historical narrative, is most likely due to the concept of Orientalism being initially and primarily emphasized by Said (2004) as "a kind of intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture" (p.19) (emphasis added). Such a conceptualization is likely to have overshadowed the fact that "Western" intellectual authority as such was basically acquired following a power differential that resulted from major wars and battles at crucial historic junctures. Such crucial confrontations cemented lasting conceptions of the weak Other. This Other further slipped into weakness, backwardness and subordination as a result of established or enforced geopolitical orders where, as per Thucydides' famous saying, "the strong do what they can do and the weak suffer they must."

Even International Relations theorists have paid only scant attention to the problems of perception and misperception in foreign policy and its military expression, war (Gray, 2013, p.1287). Anthropologist Ken Booth was among the very few, in the late seventies, to point to these problems. He asserted in his book, *Strategy and ethnocentrism* (1979) that ethnocentrism, which can here be a posteriori used interchangeably with Orientalism when the adversary is Oriental, is "indeed a pervasive problem in the theory and practice of strategy" (p.13). More than twenty-five years later, in 2006, Ann Mary Heiss (2006) remarked that historians were just beginning to explore the debilitating effect that cultural assumptions embedded in hegemonic narratives have had on diplomatic relations (p.20). Investigating the influence of cultural misconceptions on US relations with the Middle-East, she traced the failure of several early US policies in the region to the Orientalist assumptions that the political leaders entertained at specific historical moments (Ibid.). When politics fail as a result of these distorting assumptions, it is most likely that their "continuations by other means" in the form of war, as per Carl Von Clausewitz's famous aphorism, are prone to fail too. Decision makers, strategists and military personnel in general, as human subjects immersed in their specific cultural and educational narratives, are disposed to misconstrue or misinterpret situations and signs. This is especially the case in the extremely distressing and time sensitive context of war where the prestige of their nation, the lives of their compatriots and their own political or physical survival are at stake. The situation becomes even more

intricate when orientalist stereotypes and misconceptions about the actions and reactions of an enemy already presumed exotic or radically different are at play.

Military Orientalism

It was only after the inconclusive campaigns of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), undertaken under the banner of the Global War on Terror (GWOt), that scholars started to engage, in earnest, in reflections about the counterintuitive failures of overwhelmingly superior military apparatuses. These failures highlighted the inability of Western militaries to conduct or terminate these conflicts by swift victories or at least on favorable terms for them. In this regard, there emerged a consensus among scholars working in this nascent field not only on the fact that “it is a topic whose time has come” (Barkawi and Stanski, 2012, p.1) but that attention to this fledgling research agenda is “long overdue” (Porter, 2012, p.263). These scholars fell back on the insights of Said’s Orientalism to explain how Western misconceptions have a high potential to induce Western civilian and military leaders into implementing ineffective strategies to wage wars in Oriental lands. This is specially the case since the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the contemporary hegemonic narrative about late modern war. Scholars like Taraq Barkawi, Derek Gregory, Patricia Owen and Josef T. Ansorge embraced Orientalism as an explanatory framework of these failures from a post-colonial perspective. They applied the ideas of Said and other post-colonial scholars to denounce these wars as ill-founded and explain the reasons why they are unjust and unwinnable for Western powers, at least on their own terms. Having pioneered research in this regard, Taraq Barkawi (2004) was among the first to point out, in 2004, “a significant and under-remarked military dimension of Orientalism” (p.138). He observed that among both elites and in popular culture, representations of Western military action in the non-European world “overwhelmingly invoke various historical incarnations of ‘humanitarian war,’ wars that seek to liberate and civilize” (Ibid.). Based on this realization Bakawi has conceptualized, as recently as 2006, Military Orientalism. He describes this novel concept as one which: identifies a linkage between Western military strategies in the non-European world and constructions of Western identities. The assumed superiority of the West is placed at risk in battles against supposedly inferior, irrational, weak and uncivilized opponents. When these opponents fail to be defeated as expected, there are cultural as well as political and military consequences (2006, p.109).

In the same vein, Derek Gregory (2004), lamenting the aggressive resurgence of Orientalism on the occasion of the GWOt and its manifestations in the campaigns of Afghanistan and Iraq observed in 2004 that “Orientalism is abroad again, revived, and hideously emboldened” (p.18). For Gregory (2012) and other pioneering scholars, this new field of study “is necessary to expose its [Orientalism’s] reactivations of colonial imaginaries, dispositions and practices” (p.155). Conversely, other scholars who are shorn of post-colonial concerns, namely Patrick Porter (2009), acknowledged that “war is a potent site of Orientalism” (p.2) only to elaborate on the way these insights would allow Western armies to overcome their misperceptions when they are engaged in neo-colonial wars (Porter, 2012, pp. 269-70).

Strategic Implications for Late Modern Wars

The above-mentioned failures of the so-called counter-insurgency campaigns are symptomatic of the mismatch between the narratively expectations and the strategic outcomes of late modern wars. Although late modern wars have been raging in a highly interconnected and technologically advanced world (Griffiths and Redwood, 2024, p.2), they are actually throwbacks of past colonial wars. They are taking place in post-colonial contexts under modern trappings. They highlight a reluctance on the part of former colonial powers to cope with the cognitive dissonance generated by persisting historical master narratives of racial/civilizational supremacy. In a rapidly changing world, the traditional balances of power are slowly evolving in a direction that gives more leeway to the emerging countries of the Global South. Therefore, the inherited narratives and their underlying misconceptions and tropes are experiencing tectonic shifts where wars are and will continue to be the inflecting points of the incipient geostrategic landscape.

Conversely, the emergence of counter-narratives is a significant aspect of how wars are impacting hegemonic discourses and narratives. As these counter-narratives gain traction especially as a result of indigenous resilience, they begin to undermine the dominant narratives, leading to a reevaluation of metropolitan strategies and policies at both the national and international levels. For instance, the U.S. narrative around the

GWoT which was launched in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, drew heavily on Orientalist tropes. These tropes framed predominantly Muslim-majority regions as inherently violent, irrational, and culturally incompatible with Western values. They thereby justified military interventions and broader coercive policies under the guise of combating terrorism. The GWoT narrative has since been contested by alternative narratives emerging from these conflict zones of Afghanistan and Iraq. These counter-narratives highlighted legitimate local grievances that run counter to the orientalist salvation and civilization master narrative underlying these interventions. Similarly, the unprecedented level of support shown to the Palestinian cause following the Israeli atrocities in Gaza after October 7th, 2023 —evident even among circles that have historically been indifferent or hostile— underscores the profound impact of protracted resistance on prevailing hegemonic narratives. Finally, Russia's portrayal of its military actions in Ukraine as a defense against NATO expansionism has served to create an alternative narrative. It is one that has resonated globally with audiences who have long been seeking to validate their own experiences of marginalization and their distrust of perceived Western duplicity. However, it is important to highlight that for counter-narratives to effectively challenge a dominant narrative, it is crucial that resistance/resilience endures against overwhelming firepower, diplomatic cover, and severe sanctions throughout a prolonged conflict. Indeed, only a protracted confrontation can lead progressively to the dislocation of the rhetorical buildup supporting expeditionary campaigns, and eventually to the disruption of the underpinning hegemonic narrative.

CONCLUSION

Based on the significance of representations in shaping global relations and identities, the present article has underscored the need for continued exploration of the interplay between war and master historical Narratives like Orientalism. It has highlighted the necessity to critically examine war through the lens of narrative and the critique of Orientalism, in particular. This is because the latter is the most elaborate scholarly field which has pioneered research on “othering.” It has since inspired other critical endeavors such as Africanism and Primitivism. In this regard, the emerging concept of Military Orientalism not only critiques historical narratives about wars and battles but also emphasizes the urgency of understanding the implications of representations in conflicts even for Western protagonists. As scholars delve deeper into the intersections of war and hegemonic narratives, it becomes clear that confronting these issues is essential for fostering more nuanced approaches to international relations and military engagements. Finally, by acknowledging the colonial legacies of power and representation that shape the contemporary world, scholarship can better engage with the complexities of modern conflicts and work towards a more informed and empathetic global discourse.

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