Beyond Orientalism?
Another Look at Orientalism in Indonesian and Philippine Studies

Rommel A. Curaming
Department of History,
University of Brunei Darusallam (UBD)

Orientalism…is not just a complicated reworking of theories about imperialism or of ‘culture bias’: Said… uses the production of the ‘knowledge’ called ‘Orientalism’ to raise questions about the production of any knowledge, and the meaning of any interpretation in any scholarly discipline.
Birch (1983, 12)

Edward Said’s Orientalism was a watershed in the development of area studies, the humanities, and the social sciences. Its publication in 1978 set off acrimonious debates across various fields that polarised the community. Over thirty years later, these debates have yet to fully settle. On one extreme side were scholars who seem to have misconstrued the message and/or approach of the book and dismissed it outright, say, as “three hundred pages of twisted, obscure, incoherent, ill-informed and badly written diatribe…” (Ryckman, 1984: 20). On the other end were those who were thoroughly captivated by it and hailed the book as, in the words of Gordon (1989: 93) “almost Koranic in…prestige”. In between are a range of scholars who critically and creatively engaged the book, including the postcolonial theorists such as Spivak and Bhabha who regard Orientalism as a foundational text on the one hand, and on the other, Ahamd (1992) and San Juan (1998; 2000) who damned the book and postcolonial theorising in general.

Outside the Middle Eastern Studies, the response of the Asian Studies community in general was for long no more than lukewarm. In 1980, the Journal of Asian Studies carried a number of articles that reviewed the book. The reviews were mostly dismissive and some of them utterly missed the point. A few years later in 1983-1984, the ASAA Review, the counterpart of Journal of Asian Studies in Australia, published a number of articles that were also mostly scornful of Said’s book. Only a few commentators, such as Grafflin (1984), Birch (1983) and Robison (1983) showed a keen appreciation of Said’s arguments and their radical implications. Grafflin (1984: 30) may have overstated the case when he described the book as a “bomb that never exploded” but he was not far off the mark in claiming that owing to “a parochial Anglo-American bewilderment with the intellectual terms of his (Said’s) inquiry, combined with reluctance to perceive any need for critical scrutiny…(f)ar too many Asianists…abandon Said on the shelf, unread”.

The past two decades saw the mainstreaming of the critique of Orientalism in at least certain sub-fields of Asian Studies. This is particularly true in the field of South Asian studies from where some of the best and clearest articulations of engagement with Said and his ideas emanated. Books such as Imagining India (Inden,
2000) and Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicaments (Breckenridge and Veer, 1993) and articles such as “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World” (Prakash, 1990) are very fine examples, to name but a few. As noted with concern by O’Hanlon and Washbrook (1992: 141), this has “become virtually a paradigm for a new generation of historians and anthropologists” in Indian studies.

The debates may have long been passé in various areas or disciplines—and many scholars have either ignored them right at the outset or have engaged with them but have moved on since then—but in others such as the Philippine and Indonesian Studies the out-in-the-open exchanges belatedly started and have yet to peak, if at all moving. The opening salvo was fired in 1999 when historian Reynaldo Ileto published an article entitled Orientalism in the Study of Philippine Politics that bitterly criticized the alleged American Orientalism in the study of Philippine politics. It created a stir within the community as gleaned from the hostile or bemused reactions it elicited, both published and by word of mouth (Azurin: 2002; Lande, 2002; Sidel, 2002). Simon Philpott’s (2000), Rethinking Indonesia appeared in 2000 serving functionally parallel purpose. Unlike Ileto’s piece, however, the responses to the book’s provocative assertions have been comparatively tame, if not really lukewarm.

There are at least two reasons why the accusations of Orientalism in scholarly practice often generate bitter and defensive responses. First, it goes against the long-cherished belief held by many that good scholarship is at once rigorous and ‘objective’ and is able to resist or transcend the contaminating influences of the political environment. The charge of being an ‘Orientalist’ carries the implication of sloppy scholarship, something that easily offends scholars’ sensibilities. Second, Orientalism has been closely associated with colonial or neo-colonial project and scholars, in their good conscience, simply cannot accept the insinuation that they are privy to any move to jeopardize, control or exploit other people. I hope to show below that these views reflect less than accurate grasp of the nature of Orientalism.

In this essay, I seek to review Ileto’s and Philpott’s critiques of Orientalism in Philippine and Indonesian political studies. I should emphasise that my review of Philpott is focused not on the entire book but only on two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) that articulate his interpretation and appropriation of Orientalism. These critiques are important for a number of reasons. First, they specifically focus on knowledge and scholarship as sites of political battle, thereby expanding the notion of the political in politics studies of the two countries. By adjusting the analytic lenses, they include the analyst and the analytic tools they employ—hitherto assumed to be out of the political equation—among the key variable in political analysis. Second, their deconstructive approach to analysis allows them to cast doubt on a number of canonical views and approaches in the Philippine and Indonesian politics studies, thereby opening up possibilities for new or different lines of inquiries. Third, they did what scholars in other fields have earlier done: explode the myth of innocence that for long the largely empiricist scholarships on the Philippine and Indonesian politics have been cloaked with. Fourth, by foregrounding the postcolonial theoretical and methodological insights long current in other fields, they blow fresh air into the politics studies of Indonesia and the Philippines. Finally, they raise a number of epistemological, methodological and ethical issues that scholars have to confront head on, if not really resolved.
What is the Orientalism that critics like Said, Ileto, Philpott and others have found objectionable? For Said, Orientalism means a number of interrelated things. First, it refers to a form of academic or intellectual discourse through which the ‘Orient’ is constructed in the minds of the Europeans. Second, it refers to system of thought based on “the ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’” (1978:1) whereby the Orient was seen as Europe’s negative ‘Other’. Third, it pertains to the whole enterprise –academic, governmental, societal — that constitute and regulate all perceptions, assumptions, and practices that have to do with the Orient. Fourth, as a form of knowledge, it is driven by power and political interest rather than a detached pursuit of capturing reality.

In varying extent and styles, Ileto’s article and Philpott’s book rehearse these ideas in their critique of the allegedly lingering Orientalist discourses in their respective fields. Both point to academic discourse as the site of Orientalism. Both also take on the supposition that knowledge is power-driven but they differ on the question of whether this means distortion of reality or not. For Ileto it is a distortion and he offers a particular counter-example, which I will discuss below, as a model of a non-Orientalist analysis. For Philpott it does not follow, for he emphasizes more the creative, as opposed to the coercive, aspect of power as a mechanism that sets the condition of possibility for analysis. This effectively renders the question of accuracy of representation moot or immaterial.

Philpott is more emphatic than Ileto on the institutional character of Orientalism as a regulative medium for shaping discourses. Ileto, on the other hand, focuses on the essentializing character of the Orientalist discourse, and underscores much more than Philpott does, the reificatory power of Orientalism in dichotomizing the East and the West. Finally, while both emphasize the persistence of Orientalism in the contemporary academic practice, Ileto ties the phenomenon to the colonial (and neo-colonial) bond between the US and the Philippines. In the absence of comparable link between the US and Indonesia, Philpott explores the post-war political and economic interests of the United States — the Cold War, modernization, development — for the roots or the enabling conditions of the lingering Orientalist discourse.

While Ileto and Philpott both deal with Orientalism, their emphases differ. Ileto talks about Orientalism that is closely tied to colonial relationship between American scholars and their object of analysis, the Filipinos and their politics. What underpin such Orientalism are the feelings of condescension towards the (former) colonial subject and the unspoken sense of superiority that persists among American scholars in the post-colonial period. He is equally emphatic, moreover, of the methodologies that underwrite the whole project, which mask the sinister character of such scholarly undertaking. He argues that contemporary American scholars of Philippine politics continue to follow the line of analysis as well as the patterns of attitude of their colonial predecessors. Such analysis, he avers, is anchored on the essentialist views of politics and culture in the Philippines and such views satisfy perfectly the need to present the Philippines as the backward, irrational ‘Other’ of the progressive and rational US.

Philpott, on the other hand, was more concerned with the methodological rather than attitudinal aspect of Orientalism, although the latter was by no means
totally absent. He argues that “(t)he study of Indonesian politics … is treated as an object of knowledge that precedes the attempts of social science to know it, to elaborate it and to explain it.” It “constitutes the object it putatively describes and establishes the rules under which it is possible to make knowledge claims.” In other words, the discursive parameters set by the confluence of factors outside scholarship set the condition of possibility for the character of political studies about Indonesia being done by the American (and Australian) academic establishment. It thus says as much, if not more, about the US (or American scholarship and political interests) as about Indonesia that is supposedly simply the object of analysis.

From a methodological standpoint, what Ileto did in his article is a good lead to follow. He started with a penetrating analysis of a popularly received (in the US) Pulitzer-prize winning book on the history of Philippine-American relations, Stanley Karnow’s In Our Image (1990). He wonders what makes the book very appealing to the American public. Piece by piece he scrutinized the author’s main arguments and identified the analytic tools he used. The idea was to be able to trace the provenance of such assertions and the tools used for analysis. In so doing, he critically reviewed works that go to as far back as colonial scholarship, thereby drawing the parameter and showing the internal consistency of colonial discourse simmering just beneath American scholarship on Philippine politics covering the period up to mid-1990s. The exposition is neat and at the first glance compelling and the implications revealed are disturbing indeed. All major American scholars (of Philippine politics) are seen to be deeply implicated.

The same thing cannot be said of Philpott’s approach. The problem seems to start at the very conception of his frame of analysis. Rather than demonstrating clearly, he seems to have assumed the existence and the character of the discursive realm within which Indonesian politics discourse allegedly operate. In my view, his approach sees the cart overtaking the horse. Had he done, as Ileto did, a strategic or selective if not really comprehensive review of the literature (something he categorically stated as ‘unnecessary’) on Indonesian politics written by important American scholars, he could have avoided a number of problems. First, he could have shown the intertextual relationship, just like what Ileto has done, among the hegemonic (and other) texts. This is necessary to determine if there is indeed a discernible discursive realm and if there is, the boundaries may be clearly delineated. Second, he could have offered a firm basis for identifying hegemonic texts, thereby not relegating such justification to a little more than a footnote, merely citing people he consulted to help him decide which texts may be considered as hegemonic. Third, he could have not missed some subtle but nonetheless important nuances in the politics studies by American Indonesianist. For instance, his attack on the neglect of the communists/PKI in politics discourse dominated allegedly by Kahin misses Ruth McVey’s works on this area.

His decision to identify at the outset the five hegemonic texts, without demonstrating clearly the ways in which they are hegemonic, and subsequently base on them many of his assertions about the allegedly Orientalist nature of American scholarship on Indonesian politics raises in the mind of the reader questions and doubts about his claims. Without showing the inter-textual relationship among various texts, both hegemonic and not, it proved difficult for Philpott to establish the existence of the discursive realm constitutive of what he claims to be Orientalism in
American politics studies of Indonesia. While his emphasis on extra-scholarship factors—Cold War era, and the interests of the American government and the funding agencies—is no doubt commendable, he hardly succeeded in establishing the connection between the dominant status of these agencies or institution and their supposed influence on the political discourses as may be reflected in the scholarly texts. He merely juxtaposed one with the other and from there he seemed to have assumed that the link was made.

While I endorse Ileto’s approach to discourse analysis, it is not without problems. Foremost of which is the danger of over-reading the texts and imputing meaning and intentions that can hardly be independently verified, even easily disproved. In addition to being speculative, it also tends to be teleological. The fact that an analyst assumes that there is such a coherent formation waiting to be uncovered somehow affects the way he/she treats empirical evidences. A scent of ‘conspiracy theory’ pervades analysis. For all the rejections of meta-narratives by the proponents of posties, with which critics of Orientalism are often associated, what seems to me re-inscribed through the backdoor is the presupposition that beneath every knowledge is a bundle of concealed power and interest connected by invisible nodes to other bundles, and the goal of the analyst is to expose the network, its contents and possible consequences. Question may be raised as to whether we ought to consider such a presupposition an indication of yet another meta-narrative.

There is also a tendency to totalize or over-generalize, the same sin the Said has been faulted both by admirers and detractors. Ileto, for instance, ignored the fact that there are American scholars who do not subscribe to, even were critical of, say, the clientelist framework which in his view formed one of the main pillars of American Orientalism. To note, Kervliet (1995) published an article specifically criticizing the limitations of patron-client relationship as frame of analysis. Ileto’s silence about Kerkvliet’s position cannot but intrigue. His failure to extricate himself from a black and white mode of analyzing the works of American scholars, his choice not to detect the various shades in the spectrum, inadvertently made himself open to the charge of essentialism.

Ileto’s identifying of a specific thread that underpins American scholarship on Philippine politics and links it to a certain attitude tied with colonial project, it seems to me, has all the air of essentialism. He has reified colonial experience and essentialized the colonial bond as the well-spring that can explain the character and perhaps also the intention of American scholarship on Philippine politics. One wonders if this is an avatar of Orientalism or a form of its inverse, Occidentalism. This tendency may have unconsciously, but I believe logically, emerged from the need to prove his point: that there is this coherent and overriding discursive domain called Orientalism within which studies done by American scholars make sense, operate and do performative tasks beyond the purported aim of capturing “reality”.

One can understand why it appears difficult for Ileto to present a more textured, more nuanced treatment of Philippine politics by American scholars. Doing so could cast doubt on the supposed coherence, if not the existence of such a discursive realm. Any crack on the purported wall of Orientalist American scholarship is bound to undermine the forcefulness of his critique. Thus, he was
pressed to retreat to the totalizing, essentialising, reifying mode – the very pitfall he bewails in the works of American scholars he considers as Orientalists.

On the other hand, I wonder if there is really enough space for him to maneuver and avoid such a trap. What happens to Ileto, as described above, is, I suspect, something to be expected in many, if not all, attempts to describe and critique Orientalism, or perhaps any form of widely covering discourses for that matter. I think any effort to pin down a broadly encompassing discourse such as Orientalism will require some form of essentialism, reification, overgeneralization and use of binary logic. Naming a concatenation of a wide array of phenomena and linking them to a certain set of causal agent, such as colonialism, makes it difficult to escape these ‘sins’ attributed to Orientalism. Lest we forget, the very act of analyzing requires the use to tools –language and logic—which may be at its essence essentialist.

Having said that, a caveat is in order. It can not be denied that the form of essentialism with which Orientalism has been closely associated is not totally the same as that inherent in language and logic. The difference however, I submit, is less of substance than of degree and form. The earlier type of essentialism eschews the reductionist and simplified explanation for things on the basis of the supposition that they are “overdetermined”. That is, the multiplicity of factors and the fluidity by which such factors interact preclude the possibility of identifying an essential cause at a particular moment. The latter type of essentialism, on the other hand, is rooted in their function. For language and logic to work, each unit must be assumed to have at least one essential meaning. Otherwise, things would be messy and clear analysis would be impossible. The first operates on the macro level of overall explanation; the latter on the micro-level, in the tools utilised to produce such explanation. Notwithstanding the difference, the extent of overlap is crucial in assessing scholarly pieces, particularly those that deal with the politics of knowledge production such as a critique of Orientalism.

Earlier, I may have created a wrong impression that put Philpott’s approach to discourse analysis as the negative ‘other’ of Ileto’s. A qualification is in order. Whereas Ileto’s acerbic tone and sweeping approach may appeal to audiences given to polemic, Philpott’s sobriety and indirection—which may disappoint as ‘lacking in bite’—carries through the message of the importance of the contexts, the extra-textual, out-of-scholarship, and broader political factors, in discourse formation. If Ileto focused more on the internal dynamics of the Orientalist discourse as they operate inter-textually, Philpott highlights the external, over-arching, subtle factors. In other words, their approaches complement each other. In addition, by looking closely into American Orientalism in the study of Indonesian politics, Philpott has shown clearly that Orientalism is not only confined to countries with colonial bonds, neither is it exclusive to colonial discourse. What Breckenridge and van der Veer (1993, 1) call the “postcolonial predicament”—stemming from the realization by scholars themselves that scholarly practice is complicit in preserving patterns of domination—is precisely what Philpott tries to address in his book.

One thing that Ileto’s critique does, and so does Philpott’s but to a lesser extent, is to reinforce the popular understanding that Orientalism is a particular form of knowledge that ‘Western’ scholars produced about Asia, and which can be avoided or transcended by ‘doing things right’. Ileto singles out Mojares’s article in the edited
volume, The Anarchy of Families “The Dream Goes On and On: Three Generations of the Osmeñas, 1906-1990” as an alternative to what he alleged to be an Orientalist scholarship of the American Philippinists (Mojares, 1994). The reasons for this endorsement are not difficult to accept. On the one hand, Mojares avoids the fairly common tendency to pin down the “nature” of Philippine politics. On the other hand, he steers clear from creating the impression that local politics in Cebu is a microcosm of Philippine politics. Rather than indulge in building typologies, he is careful in highlighting the specificities of Osmeña family’s case. In his words, “The Osmeñas are an interesting case study of power maintenance...because they do not conform to certain stereotypes about political kingpin, or ‘warlords’, in the Philippines.” (Mojares 1994: 312) The portrait that emerges from his analysis is that of a political family that defies easy characterization offered by vocabularies or concepts such as political dynasty, clientelism, neo-patrimonialism, machine politics etc.

Mojares also examines closely the rhetoric of the Osmeñas and demonstrates that there is more to their pronouncements than mere self-serving posturing. For Ileto, a close scrutiny of the rhetoric—one thing the American Philippinists did not usually do and Ileto faults them for—is the key to seeing the nuances in political discourse and practices and to understanding Philippine politics in its own terms. The failure of the American scholars to recognize the importance of rhetoric, so Ileto seems to argue, made them susceptible to viewing Philippine politics as the inferior other of the unspoken ideal, American politics. One indicator of this tendency is the American scholars’ predisposition to concentrate on the negative aspects of Philippine politics—violence, corruption, personality-centeredness, “irrationalism”—and regard these as key defining elements of the Philippine ‘political culture.’

While one can easily concede that Mojares has avoided many pitfalls of what Ileto regards as Orientalist scholarship by American Philippinists, it seems to me that his success is a matter of a degree, not of a kind. Rather than seeing Mojares’s approach as non-Orientalist qua non-Orientalist, it seems more accurate to say that his approach exemplifies a less Orientalist approach to political analysis.

As essentialism is a central feature of Orientalism, the first question to address is whether Mojares inadvertently commits the ’sin’ of essentialism. As earlier mentioned, Mojares consciously sought to avoid the typologies and stereotypes in the conventional analysis of Philippine politics. In his effort to do so, he presents a picture of the Osmeñas as different from others. In his words: ”The Osmeñas are distinctly twentieth-century politicians sired by a system in which power is won by the ballots” (318). It is from “their mastery of the instrumental aspects of electoral power building...(that) they draw their distinctive character as Filipino kingpins (320)... By temperament, the Osmeñas are atypical political patrons: autocratic and brisk in their interpersonal dealings, averse to gladhanding, generally colorless and methodic in their political rhetoric...They have transformed their take-charge, get-things-done manner into a kind of charisma...” (336) In short, much of Mojares’s article seeks to pin down the “nature of Osmeña politics” (318).

Notwithstanding Mojares’s explicitly stated proviso highlighting the contingency of the position that the Osmeñas occupy within the matrix of Philippine politics, his emphasis on their being an atypical Filipino political family is just a short leap away from the making of yet another typology or stereotype of political behavior.
among Philippine political actors. It would not be too far then to regard the “Osmeñas-type behavior” (Osmeña-ism?) as possibly another defining element of Philippine politics, along with the long-standing features captured in the concepts such as clientelism, machine politics, bossism, neo-partrimonialism and political dynasty. I wonder if what Mojares did in effect exemplifies the proposition that one essentialism can be neutralized only by another essentialism.

One other aspect in which Mojares’s analysis reeks of essentialism lies in his claim about pulitika being different from politics, and here he drew from Ileto’s ideas. “There is a gap between elite and popular construction of politics” so Mojares declared. (338) “In the Philippines”, he further notes “pulitika is not politics…Rather it is that field politics largely constructed and dominated by the elite.” (339), While Mojares is quick to emphasize that “(t)he relationship between elite and popular conception of politics is not one of static opposition” (338), his effort to demonstrate the “popular” conception of politics by examining the Cebuano rhetoric (what Ileto suggests as necessary) raises the red flag of essentialism. The crucial point here is not that Mojares’s characterization of popular politics is false. The pertinent question is whether the notion of pulitika as he and Ileto characterize it can capture the complexity, fluidity and the range of variations that are immanent in the ‘popular,’ not to mention its opposite ‘elite politics’. His (and Ileto’s) very act of defining pulitika as different from politics imposes limits on the range of possibilities by which political actors, both the elite and the masses whose existential situation varies enormously depending on material conditions, construe political acts.

While it may be conceded that Mojares’s more acute understanding of Osmeña politics enabled him to provide a more nuanced and fluid treatment than what Sidel, Cullinane and McCoy, whom Ileto critiqued, managed to do, the fact that Mojares cannot but employ the same convention, language and logic of analysis effectively tied him to at least some of the ‘sins’ of Orientalism. This makes me wonder if Michael Birch’s perceptive observation expressed in 1983 was right. That is, “Said…(was using) the production of the ‘knowledge’ called ‘Orientalism’ to raise questions about the production of any knowledge, and the meaning of any interpretation in any scholarly discipline.” (Birch, 1983: 12) In other words, the sins of attributed to Orientalism—essentialism, reification, binary logic, knowledge/knowledge, ‘othering’—may be built in within the logics and methods of scholarly practice.

If this is the case, then it does not matter whether knowledge is about Asia or not; whether it was produced by ‘Western’ scholars or not. At the bottom line, the questions to most pertinent to ask is not whether one’s analysis or narrative is Orientalist, but to what extent, in what ways it may be, and, most importantly, for what purpose it is aimed at.

References


