

## Communications to the Editor

### The Attack on *Orientalism*

In response to an editorial suggestion, I would like to bring to the attention of readers of the *JAS* a recent development in an academic debate, which, although carried on in terms that make it appear peripheral to their interests, is actually both highly germane and likely to be misinterpreted. The debate raises questions concerning the improper use of academic authority and the nature of intellectual orthodoxy that are immediately relevant to work in any Asian field, and particularly to work done by a Western scholar.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) is a bombshell that never exploded. Despite reviews (e.g., *JAOS* 100, no. 3 [July-Oct. 1980]: 328-31, by Peter Gran) proclaiming its importance and this journal's own attempt to look at the serious issues raised by Said in the broader Asian context for which his work cried out (*JAS* 39, no. 3 [May 1980]: 481-517), a parochial Anglo-American bewilderment with the intellectual terms of his inquiry, combined with a smug reluctance to perceive any need for self-critical scrutiny, led far too many Asianists to abandon Said on the shelf, unread.

The many AAS members who know Said's work only by hearsay, or through exposure to his work on contemporary Middle Eastern politics, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Times Books, 1979) and *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), are particularly likely to be misled by a new series of attacks on him in the *New York Review of Books*, pursued with relative courtesy by Clifford Geertz ("Conjuring with Islam," *NYRB*, May 27, 1982, p. 28) and with bitter hostility by Bernard Lewis ("The Question of Orientalism," *NYRB*, June 24, 1982, pp. 49-56). At a vastly greater length than can be accommodated here, I have documented the astonishing degree to which Lewis attributes meretricious arguments of his own devising to Said, deliberately wrenches Said's words out of context, overlooks the explicit content of *Orientalism* when it fails to suit his purposes, and repeatedly demonstrates his own inability to comprehend Said's purpose in writing. Lewis's assault, despite its claim to magisterial objectivity, is a venomous outburst stimulated by Said's own ferocious criticism of Lewis in the past (e.g., "Arabs, Islam and the Dogmas of the West," *New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 31, 1976, pp. 4-5).

Those of my colleagues who have not read *Orientalism* should not for an instant accept Lewis's dismissal as the scholarly last word, just as they should be aware that criticism of Lewis's conception of the Orient is not limited to Said (see, e.g., Albert H. Hourani's review of the *Cambridge History of Islam in the English Historical Review* 87, no. 343 [April 1972]: 348-57). It is vital that we develop our awareness of the links between scholarly activity and political power, and of the "seductive degradation"

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Note: The May 1980 issue of the *JAS* contained a review symposium on Edward Said's *Orientalism* with an introduction by Robert A. Kapp and

essays by Michael Dalby, David Kopf, and Richard H. Minear (*JAS* 39, no. 3: 481-517).

(*Orientalism*, p. 328) that the former is likely to undergo as a result of contact with the latter—in other words, it is vital that we learn the lesson that *Orientalism* still has to teach.

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### More on *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*

As a rapporteur for the conference that gave rise to *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*, edited by Emily Martin Ahern and Hill Gates, I must protest the narrow and cursory treatment the volume received in the book review section of the November 1982 *JAS* (42, no. 2:119–20). Although the reviewer did accurately pinpoint one of the book's main weaknesses (see below), the review itself had several weaknesses that need to be pointed out to readers of this journal who may be unfamiliar with the book and its background.

First, the review did not fulfill one of the central tasks of a book review, which is to tell the reader what is in the book. Rather, the reviewer highlighted a few pieces that touched on issues relevant to his theoretical preferences and, with one exception, ignored the rest. Second, he presented his preferred approach, "dialectical anthropology," as one that is "prominent in anthropological discussions." This may be true in France, but in most parts of the world neo-Marxist approaches are peripheral to the concerns of the vast majority of anthropologists. Thus, it seems like an inappropriate standard by which to judge the papers in this volume. Finally, the review fails to indicate how the book relates to previous work on Taiwan. As a result, the reader of the review is left unaware of the book's critical role in the self-definition and further development of the field of Taiwanese anthropology. In the few paragraphs available to me, I hope to fill in some of these gaps and to underscore the neglected strengths of the volume.

Briefly, this book and the conference from which it stemmed represent a highly ambitious attempt to summarize and synthesize the major subfields of Taiwan anthropology. Prior to this conference, Taiwan anthropology consisted of a few monographs and many articles scattered in numerous journals. The conference served to *define* and, in so doing, to *create* a field of Taiwan anthropology where it did not previously exist, except perhaps in the minds of some of its practitioners. The five overview papers—on local and regional systems (Lawrence Crissman), ethnicity and social class (Hill Gates), economics and ecology (Burton Pasternak), national, regional, and local politics (Edwin Winckler), and domestic organization (Arthur Wolf)—played a critical role in this process of self-definition. In summarizing the existing studies, they exposed areas of ignorance and, particularly in the fields of politics and ethnicity and social class, began to fill in areas of knowledge that had been largely ignored by anthropologists during the previous twenty years. Finally, in synthesizing the existing literature, the overview papers developed new hypotheses that will serve to guide the next generation of Taiwan scholars. To ignore this is to ignore the main contribution of the book to the advancement of scholarly understanding of Taiwan.

Unfortunately, this contribution was marred somewhat by the late publication of the volume, a weakness that the reviewer generously failed to mention. His silence on