

PREFACE

In the early 1960s, as an amateur historian interested in the modern history of the Middle East, I was aware of the powerful critiques of orientalism mounted by Anouar Abdel-Malek and A. L. Tibawi. But it was only in the early 1980s, at a conference on a related subject I attended at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, that I became aware of the furore provoked, in orientalist circles, by the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). The comments made on Said's book by the orientalists present at the conference, when the subject was raised during a question and answer session, appeared both sceptical and uneasy. It was evident that in his critique of orientalism Said had struck a raw nerve, and that the orientalists present did not know quite how to respond. Some suggested that Said's book did not warrant the attention it was receiving; others that the furore it had provoked would soon pass. Yet more than twenty years later Said's critique of orientalism continues to provoke great interest, not only in the world of orientalism but also in other related areas, including anthropology, sociology, history, media studies, feminism and the arts. It has been suggested that the continued interest that Said's book provokes is a consequence of its multi-disciplinary appeal. No doubt there is some truth in this suggestion. But I would suggest that the true explanation lies elsewhere, in the fact that the subject, as interpreted by Said, raises the age-old question, never convincingly answered by philosophers, of the nature of perception – that is to say, the relationship between subject and object, 'self' and 'other' and appearance and thing-in-itself.

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