Patrick Porter’s *Military orientalism: eastern war through western eyes* (Hurst & Co, London, 2009) intends to help initiate a wider scholarship focusing on military cultures through the purview of critical studies of orientalism and situated in and through the potent site of war. Although the title itself proclaims such a direction, for me the book becomes lost in anecdotal information and details of military strategy without a critical and persuasive understanding of orientalism. Porter’s definition of orientalism arrives through several caveats, which he proposes as counters to Edwards Said’s decisive work on the subject. Porter argues that cultures at war contain rival and clashing narratives, ‘an ambiguous repertoire of competing ideas that can be selected, instrumentalised, and manipulated’ (15). This position is imprecisely juxtaposed to that of Edward Said’s assessment

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of orientalism as sustaining imperialism. Porter rejects this by claiming, with reference to
John MacKenzie, that

Said’s original hypothesis, that Orientalist scholarship was the handmaiden of
empire, has been strongly challenged ... relationships within imperial culture were
historically unstable and took many forms. And the Orient was not always central to
European consciousness. For Britain over a considerable period, the ‘Other’ to
mobilize against was not primarily the Orient, but France, whether Roman Catholic
or revolutionary, as well as internal ethnic and class ‘Others’. Neither was the nexus
between scholars and imperialism always as simple. (25–26)

Throughout the book, Porter attempts to disorient Edward Said’s more systemic
understanding of orientalism by selecting case studies and examples where orientalist
narratives were disrupted by ‘orientals’ themselves. The argument implied is that this yields a
situation that is too complex to be encased in an imperialist project. Yet the passage quoted
above is one of the very few in which Porter directly tackles Said’s problematic, despite the
claim of the book to rework our understanding of orientalism convincingly through the
particular lens of military studies. In the above passage, we can get a sense of some of the
weaknesses that unfortunately inform this, nonetheless ably written, study. Said would hardly
take issue with the claim that different ‘others’, without geographical links to the East, have
corresponded with other historical periods and geopolitical situations, nor can it really be seen
as a challenge to his exploration of one particular systematic – and still existing – form of
domination.

Porter rightly understands that ‘Orientalism is neither uniform nor necessarily consistent, but
draws strength from its ambivalence, its ability to sustain contradictory ideas and images’
(23). He misplaces the interaction, however, between imperialism and orientalism that is
carried through these contradictions. Porter’s polemic with Said – here somewhat diffused
throughout the text – is that orientalism’s moments of indecisiveness carry through to and
dismantle, to a certain extent, the systematic nature of imperialism. This position suffers from
apparently believing that, when the ideology of orientalism is at its least stereotypical and
simplistic, then its connections to imperialism are decoupled. Surely, it is only reasonable to assume that accurate and balanced perceptions of the ‘other’ are of just as much use, if not more, to imperialistic aims, as dehumanising stereotypes. Furthermore, we cannot treat the dehumanising images and assumptions present in orientalism as if they were always held by westerners in a naive way; indeed these elements of discourse can be used in a variety of ways and distribute a range of empowering and disempowering effects, whilst still being held with differing degrees of irony, distance and knowing self-contradiction.

The fluidity and hybridity of orientalism, Porter claims, emerge most clearly when the ‘other’ militarily disproves the script of their inferiority. Pearl Harbour and Japan’s dominance of the early part of the Pacific War were such moments. One of the cases Porter explores in this book is the changes in the ideas that informed Anglo-American society prior to the Pacific War: Japanese culture framed as uncreative and inferior (49) and inconceivable as a threat to Anglo-American power. The attack on the United States naval base at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii in 1941 disrupted that discourse, to be replaced at times by erratic shifts between dehumanising and a partial humanisation of the ‘other’. In the war years for example Japanese society was framed as inhumane, due to the Japanese incessant commitment, according to western perception, to kamikaze suicide attacks (50). US Vice-Admiral Charles R Brown described these acts as ‘a sight so alien to our western philosophy’ (51). Porter seeks to complicate this idea of western orientalist thinking about Japan by pointing out important exceptions, which for Porter constitute something of rupture, a disorientation of orientalism. Early in the book Porter quotes from a British training pamphlet that described how, in Porter’s terms, the experience of fighting the able Japanese had shifted the western view of them ‘from ape to superman’ (23). My first criticism here is Porter’s unproblematic acceptance of this break as decisive in the history of the western idea of Japan, an acceptance that is no doubt aided by Porter’s failure to examine both the earlier shock to the West when Japan defeated the Russians decades prior, and the American internment of its Japanese residents throughout the Pacific War. Can we say here that Porter incidentally implicates his own argument by framing it in the same light as the military pamphleteer? The West allows the identification of partial humanity on its own terms, at a particular historical moment. Does
this represent the kind of rupture Porter seeks to dramatise, or merely his own ideal of a polite orientalism?

One of the problems the reader faces in encountering this book is trying to decipher whether Porter is challenging orientalism, or offering an understanding of it as homeopathic therapy, whereby the pernicious effects of orientalist underestimation can be replaced by more accurate representations, which would also be of better service to military strategy. War, for Porter, is a site where ‘the dynamic interaction of conflict creates a hybridity of war cultures’ (24) and orientalist structures of thought are destabilised and capable of taking many forms. One gets the persistent sense that the ultimate effect of this book is to guide this flux towards generating better forms of ‘cultural insights’ for strategies in wartime. The orientation towards orientalism that Porter employs, then, would amount to nothing more critical than finding ways to tame its inaccuracies. What this book does show, maybe subconsciously, is that one can be accurate and orientalist at the same time. Whether there are accurate depictions of the ‘other’ or not is irrelevant to the way these depictions are deployed through an apparatus that maintains dominance.