

### Said, Edward

internationally prominent intellectual  
1935– Jerusalem

Edward Said's career has combined distinguished academic achievement with passionate political interventions on behalf of the Palestinian and Arab peoples. In recent years, his work has received increasing attention in the Arab world (as a result of translations of his key books and a series of new publications in Arabic journals and newspapers), but his early reputation was earned in the American academy and public sphere. There he is recognized not only as the leading spokesperson for the Palestinian cause in the United States, but also as one of the figures responsible for the redirection of literary and cultural studies away from narrow academic seclusion and toward an investigation of the *worldliness* of literary and cultural production. This kind of worldliness—a notion most readily identifiable with Said himself—is related to the ways in which authors and texts are actively involved in, rather than insulated from, the making and transformation of the world. For Said, such acts of active involvement are a matter not only of theoretical discussion but of actual practice.

Said was born in 1935 in Jerusalem, the eldest of the five children of Hilda Musa and Wadie Said, who owned a stationery firm in Jerusalem with branches in Cairo and Beirut. With his sisters, the young Edward was raised first in Jerusalem and later in Cairo, where he attended the well-known Victoria College. He completed his secondary education at a boarding school in the United States and then went on to Princeton University for his undergraduate education and to Harvard University for graduate training and a Ph.D. He was

appointed as an assistant professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University in New York, where (apart from guest professorships and fellowships at other major universities) he has remained ever since; he became university professor in 1990. After spending a year of leave in Beirut, he married in 1970; the Saids have two children and live in New York City. In addition to his academic achievements, Said is also an accomplished pianist; he is a music editor at *The Nation* and has written music reviews for a number of other magazines, as well as essays on opera and a study of musical aesthetics.

Said has produced well over a dozen books, but there can be no question that *Orientalism* (1978) marks the most important turning point in his academic and intellectual career. It also marks the point of departure for his political engagement, which takes on new meaning if it is retrospectively framed between *Orientalism* and one of Said's later books, *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994). This is not to understate the importance of his earlier writing, including essays on a variety of literary and political topics as well as his books *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) and *Beginnings* (1975). The latter presents a thoughtful redirection of the familiar literary emphasis on endings to the more complicated and often more interesting question of beginnings and intentionality.

These are issues that Said also addressed in a number of essays on literary and theoretical topics, many of which are compiled in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1982), and which are among the earliest American engagements with the "new wave" of French critical theory, long before the latter had become fashionable in academic circles and had been transformed into a guild of specialized expertise inaccessible and even incomprehensible to outsiders. Much of Said's work can be seen as an attempt to make this kind of theory comprehensible in a worldly dimension, and, moreover, as an attempt to put it to use for the understanding and contestation of worldly situations, rather than merely practicing it for its own sake only in the rarefied atmosphere of the classroom or the pages of the academic journal. For Said, this is above all a question of accessibility and *audience*, which is to say, a question of the "irrelevance" of the closeted academic specialist versus the worldly "relevance"

of the engaged intellectual fighting for the truth in a public sphere dominated by the paid "experts" of corporate and state power.

In all his work, Said's political and intellectual independence is unquestionable. Unlike some of his radical colleagues, he is not willing to dismiss the Western literary and cultural canon, and yet, unlike his conservative colleagues, he is not willing to go on celebrating it in an uncritical sense either. What Edward Said is best known for, however, is not his scholarly accomplishment and often contradictory—but always productive—intellectual mobility and freedom, but his willingness to put his theoretical convictions to practice, no matter what the potential cost to him, and to do so with great moral conviction and unquestionable courage.

**Said and Intellectual Practice** One of the characteristics that Edward Said is best known for is his fierce and uncompromising independence, both within the Palestinian struggle and in terms of his intellectual formation, in the direction of his thought and intellectual career as well as his political activism. His approaches to scholarship and even to reading itself have always been idiosyncratic, drawing on various traditions but ultimately taking on their own unique consistency and identity. The kind of "contrapuntal" approach to texts for which he has become famous—emphasizing contextual circumstances rather than textual details—draws on varied intellectual traditions, from culturalist marxism (most readily identifiable with Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci) to the conservative high-cultural "Great Tradition" scholarship of critics such as Eric Auerbach, R. P. Blackmur, and Matthew Arnold; and from the archaeological "discourse analysis" of Michel Foucault and his followers to the intellectual giants of the third world, including C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, and above all Frantz Fanon. And yet, although Said's approach to culture is indebted to each, it is not easily identifiable with—and certainly not assimilable into—any of these approaches.

By its very nature, Said's oppositional approach to culture, best exemplified in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), is one that also defies any easy encapsulation or containment within a specific academic discipline or area of "expertise." Said's method is always that of the outsider, the amateur, the intellectual in exile—free precisely to make

connections and to highlight issues that would otherwise be unmentioned or even unnoticed by the certified experts of academic knowledge who are trapped by their own institutional commitments as well as the narrow standards to which they are forced to conform. Just as his approach cannot be defined by association with a particular school of thought, it cannot be restricted to a particular discipline or field: it takes the world as the primary "text" for the critic to understand. It resists specialization and professionalization and the narrow confines of academic careerism. The product of someone who prefers the role of the free-thinking amateur to that of the licensed expert, Said's work realizes and short-circuits disciplinary rigidity and conformity in the service of intellectual as well as political freedom.

This is not to say that Said sees no value in specialized knowledge. He has, for example, repeatedly criticized the almost total ignorance of American society and culture and politics in the Arab world (where there are few, if any, institutes of American studies, and no institutes of Israeli studies: in other words, no Arab counterparts to the various American or Israeli institutes dedicated to the study of the Arab world, or to the army of paid Orientalist pseudoexperts who dominate the American media). Said has also expressed astonishment at the way in which the PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION (PLO) could negotiate at Oslo without any specialized legal consultants, without an adequate knowledge of English, without even "a decent map, without any real command of the facts and figures, and without any serious attention to what Israel was all about and what the Palestinian people's interest dictated."

In fact, Said's lack of narrow disciplinary affiliation not only allows him a genuine kind of intellectual as well as political freedom to roam, it also lets him address audiences of various kinds of different contexts, and in fact to *create* audiences and contexts when necessary. Indeed one of the most important and enduring lessons Said has taught is related to the relationship that all of his work ultimately returns to, namely, that between an intellectual and his or her audience, whether it is that of the paid media "expert" and the general public, or that of the restricted traditional scholar and other scholars, or that of the constant oppositional amateur and the world.

It is of course with the latter, the oppositional intellectual, that Said most ardently defines himself. Combining the approaches of Julien Benda and Antonio Gramsci, Said insists that the true intellectual—unlike the paid professional scribe, the member of a career guild, Gramsci's "traditional" intellectual—is always an oppositional intellectual like him. "The intellectual," he argues,

is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than producing them), to be someone who cannot easily be coopted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously.

**Said and Orientalism** It was his 1977 *Orientalism* that marked Said's dramatic departure from a narrowly circumscribed academic audience to an audience with much greater dimensions, spanning not only various academic disciplines but also the world of policymakers and media "experts," as well as the general public in Europe, the United States, and the Arab world. Now available in about thirty languages, *Orientalism* is one of those rare books that inaugurate or signal a new moment in the history of ideas, so much so, in fact, that its main arguments now seem obvious and are more often than not taken for granted in contemporary literary and cultural studies, as well as in other fields of inquiry (anthropology, history, sociology). However, the cult of "expertise" in the service of state power that is the book's primary object of critique persists, and the names of some of the contemporary practitioners of that cult (e.g., Thomas Friedman, Fouad Ajami, Bernard Lewis) are familiar to readers of Said's work as recurring exemplary instances of what he identifies as the degenerate media-celebrity version of such

learned Orientalist scholars as Sir William Jones and Silvestre de Sacy, who, though still committed to imperialist projects, were also devoted to learning and knowledge.

The main argument of *Orientalism* seems (in retrospect) to be not only obvious but actually quite simple: the Orient does not exist as such. Rather, it is brought into being through the representations of scholars, artists, musicians, poets, experts, policymakers—Orientalists—who generate ways of seeing this imagined reality, largely through producing a corresponding set of pictures, categories, histories, documentations, essences, truths, facts, by and through and with reference to which this space and its peoples could be understood, managed, and controlled. Thus the Orient takes on a reality through these textual representations and indeed *becomes* a reality, albeit only insofar as these representations are believed in and are allowed to persist.

It is at this level that Said's argument has often been criticized (by, among others, Sadiq al-Azm), or perhaps misread, as an inevitable story of inter-cultural distortion, and indeed there are elements of this in the book, particularly in its occasional reliance on language opposing "truth" and "untruth" or "reality" and "fiction." However, Said's main thesis is not that *Orientalism* misrepresents a preexisting reality, but rather that it generates a reality of its own; not that it distorts the truth, but rather that it creates its own truths. It is at this level, too, that Said has been criticized for not providing "alternatives" to the discourse of Orientalism as a way to understand the Orient, though this critique seems to be misplaced given that Said's argument is precisely that the Orient does not exist in the first place—and hence it simply *cannot* be more "adequately" or "truthfully" represented, for the representation and the distortion are coextensive, one and the same thing.

A more compelling criticism (produced by, among others, Benita Parry and Homi Bhabha) is that Said, in pursuit of his argument, overgeneralizes and even exaggerates the representing power of Orientalism, as well as its historical scope, in the process not allowing enough room for changes in the discourse of Orientalism; or, for that matter, for counterrepresentations; or for the extent to which these representations are either accepted, contested, or subverted by "Orientals" themselves. And

yet such criticisms need to be seen as continuations of the critical elaboration of Orientalism that Said inaugurated in his ground-breaking study, albeit in directions that he left unmapped and unexplored, though he would return to them in later texts, including *Culture and Imperialism*.

*Said and the Question of Palestine* Said has extended his interest in Orientalism and imperialism to other areas of scholarship and activism. It is no coincidence that most of his work returns to the question of representation, and to the power of representation (as opposed to the powerlessness of nonrepresentation). Said's emphasis has been the capacity or incapacity to represent selves and others. Here of course his involvement with the Palestinian struggle for self-determination (that is, self-representation) has special relevance. His *The Question of Palestine* (1979) begins as a critical examination of the representations of Palestine and Palestinians in both European colonialist and Zionist discourse. Indeed, it is important for Said to situate ZIONISM in the context of European colonialism, from which it emerged and from which it received both material and moral support (money, weapons, but also, as Said demonstrates, a certain political-epistemological indebtedness to the power knowledge of colonial Orientalism).

According to Said, the Palestinian people's resistance to Zionism and Israeli occupation takes the form not only of a guerrilla struggle and mass solidarity with that struggle, and not only of the formation of a national organization (at a certain historical moment, the PLO), but also of the telling of the story of Palestine—asserting a vision and a story of peace and justice that contests the violent and oppressive stories of colonialism, Orientalism, and Zionism. Thus, the struggle is for the Palestinians' capacity to represent themselves not just institutionally but also discursively: "We must stand in the international theater created out of our struggle against Zionism, and there we must diffuse our message dramatically."

Said has certainly played an important role in this self-representation of the Palestinian people in numerous newspaper and magazine articles and countless television appearances, as well as in such works as *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *After the Last Sky* (1985). Elsewhere, too, he has often emphasized the degree to which his work and his Palestinian identity are inseparable, even

to the extent of "speaking for" the Palestinians by offering his own experience as representative—that is, speaking *as* a Palestinian: "My sense of belonging to the Palestinian people, my pride in their heroism, and my pain at their sufferings and defeats are not things people can take away from me: they are certainly more lasting and deeper than crude and opportunistic and the ephemeral desires of leaders. I am a Palestinian who was born in Jerusalem and was forced as a result of the 1948 Catastrophe to live in exile, in the same way as many hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were." Thus, Said's role as Palestinian spokesperson in the United States has been a dual one: explicitly speaking on behalf of the Palestinians, but also simply speaking *as* a Palestinian, and thus constantly bringing the question of Palestine to consciousness in all kinds of audiences (aesthetic, political, scholarly, musical) that are as often as not unconnected with—and might have remained unaware or unconcerned with—the Palestinian experience.

In this sense, Said's engagement with the Palestinian cause has always transcended his direct involvement with national organizations such as the PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL (PNC), of which he was a member from 1977 until 1991. Even within the PNC, Said always insisted on playing the independent role of an exilic intellectual, not attached to any particular faction of the national movement and hence preserving his capacity for critique. Until quite recently, Said's role within the PNC and his relationship to the power structure of the PLO have been understated. Now it is known, for example, that in 1978 he served as an unofficial intermediary between Cyrus Vance, President Carter's secretary of state, and the PLO leadership in Beirut, transmitting an offer for negotiations based on UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS 242 AND 338—an offer from the United States that was far more favorable than what the PLO received in the 1993 Oslo agreements. All of Said's efforts notwithstanding, the offer was rejected out of hand by an uninterested YASIR ARAFAT in the spring of 1979.

Said's most visible presence in the PNC was in 1988, during what may be retrospectively regarded as one of the high points of the national struggle, namely, that year's exuberant INTIFADA-inspired PNC meeting in Algiers. Said played an important

role in the drafting and translation into English of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, based on a two-state solution to the struggle for self-determination. After 1988, however, when it became increasingly clear that the inner leadership of the PLO was proceeding without regard to the PNC and its resolutions and declarations (or, according to Said, to the needs and desires of the great majority of the Palestinian people), and in the buildup to the MADRID PEACE CONFERENCE, 1991, which he felt was taking place on unacceptable terms, Said resigned from the PNC.

Since then, and especially since the "capitulation" represented by the 1993 Oslo agreements, Said has become an increasingly outspoken critic of the so-called peace process and particularly of Arafat and his PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY. In works such as *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994) and *Peace and Its Discontents* (1995), which are both for the most part made up of previously published English- and Arabic-language newspaper and magazine articles, Said has denounced the Oslo-based peace process as total surrender. He argues that "for the first time in the twentieth century an anti-colonial national liberation movement had not only discarded its own considerable achievements but had made an agreement to cooperate with a military occupation before that occupation had ended." Moreover, he insists that it is impossible to argue or act on the flawed premise that these peace agreements with Israel represent a "beginning on which we can build for the future." Although his explicit criticisms of Arafat and the PLO/PA leadership, as well as the changing nature of the Israeli military occupation, are new, Said's position remains as it has been from the beginning, namely, an assertion of a different view of the question of Palestine, one based on seeing the Palestinian struggle as one for true justice and true peace. And Said, as always, argues for this vision from a truly independent standpoint. His memoir, *Out of Place*, was published in 1999.

Saree Makdisi

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Said, Edward. *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. Photographs by Jean Mohr. New York: Pantheon; London: Faber, 1986.
- . *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Reprint of the edition published by Basic Books in 1975.

- . *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf/Random House, 1983.
- . *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- . *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Toronto: Random House, 1978. Runner-up in the criticism category of the National Book Critics Circle Award.
- . *Out of Place*. New York: Knopf, 1999.
- . *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*. Preface by Christopher Hitchens. New York: Vintage, 1995. Published in Britain as *Peace and Its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho, 1993-1995*. London: Vintage, 1995.
- . *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Times Books, 1979.
- . *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.
- "The Text, the World, the Critic." *Bulletin of the Midwestern Modern Language Association* 8, 2 (fall 1975): 1-23.