

The Intellectual as Exemplar: Identity, Oppositional Politics, and the Ambivalent Legacy of Edward Said

Vinay Lal

The late Edward Said was an intellectual hero. Whatever prerogatives can be claimed on behalf of heroes, and there are many, Said would have insisted that heroes should be viewed whole, warts and all. Said had a relentlessly inquiring mind, and he remained certain, to the end of his life, that the work of the intellectual never ceases. Indeed, the intellectual is, or ought to be, the supreme oppositional figure, writing against the grain, thinking contrapuntally, disturbing the established verities, and comforting the (genuinely) afflicted. Yet, oddly, the near reverence with which he has been viewed, as the numerous obituaries and testimonies subsequent to his death so amply demonstrate, has precluded an engaged reading of Said's own intellectual legacy.

Let us speak first of Said's heroism. Few American academics are public intellectuals; fewer still are those who will dare to adopt principled and controversial positions on politics. Said's unflinching advocacy of the rights of Palestinians rightly won him the admiration of many around the world; it also gained him considerable opprobrium, the sole consequence of which was to embolden him further in his critique of Zionism as much as what, in time, he came to see the self-aggrandizing and opportunistic policies of Yasser Arafat. Though Said was a relentless critic of American foreign policy, which he unhesitatingly deplored as stupid and dangerous on more than

one occasion, he viewed a petty nationalism everywhere as the bane of enlightened politics. When his *Orientalism* burst upon the scene in 1978, some in and outside the Arab world mistakenly began to view him as an advocate of Arab nationalism. But Said himself never mistook his own condemnation of the representational regimes which had rendered the Arab into a caricature for an endorsement of Arab leaders, and he was always forthright in his utter disdain for Arab states which had not only succumbed to authoritarian political tendencies but had resolutely prevented the creation of a climate of feeling and thought which would make possible intellectual work and critical inquiry. In the last decade of his life, as he fought a valiant struggle against leukemia by plunging himself into an endless stream of essays, lectures, and political engagements, Said's criticism of 'failed' Arab states grew more trenchant. If the human rights abuses, political failures, and sheer lapse into intellectual obscurity of the Arab world were not enough, Said detected among far too many Arabs an alarming adherence to "out-moded and discredited ideas", such as the notion that the holocaust was merely a fiction perpetrated by the Elders of Zion.¹

The more arresting part of the narrative of Said's resistance to intellectual and political orthodoxies is his staunch refusal to be drawn into identity politics. Nothing has energized American campuses more than identity politics and everything that has come in its wake, from the emergence of new sub-fields of study and the creation of ethnic studies centers to other forms of institutionalization of competing identities and an awareness of new forms of subjectivity; nothing is so frequently, at the same time, so predictable, so apolitical, and so colossally boring as the self-obsessiveness to which identity politics gave succor. That Arab readers would "use" *Orientalism* as a "means of conflict", as a

call to reassert their identity and not as an invitation to think analytically, was to be expected²; but Said could not have foreseen that *Orientalism* would become one of the principal texts of many aggrieved communities, all painfully aware of how little space they occupied in the dominant narratives of history. There had been talk of “dead white males” well before Said launched *Orientalism*, but the canon wars intensified as various minority histories, whether conceived in categories of gender, class, ethnicity, religious belief, sexual orientation, occupation, or even taste, were brought to the fore.

Though Said had, in *Orientalism*, been concerned principally with the conquest of knowledge wrought by colonialism, and with the epistemological and ontological distinctions between ‘the Orient’ and (a generally implied) ‘Occident’ which were the grounding of Western scholarship on colonized societies, most particularly the Arab world, *Orientalism* came to be read as a general kind of treatise on the politics of representation and on the “evils” of Western scholarship. *Orientalism* was commonly interpreted as offering a number of views, nearly all of which, it is safe to aver, Said would have decisively rejected. Said certainly had little tolerance for the idea that all Western texts are irretrievably contaminated, nor did he abide by the argument that texts exist in ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ forms; much less was he prepared to accept the argument that only Arabs are entitled to interpret their own intellectual traditions (and likewise with Africans, Indians, and so on), or that traditions can be hermetically sealed. While Said was obviously sympathetic to calls that were mounted on behalf of intellectual traditions representing the work of non-western, indigenous, and women writers, he strenuously resisted demands to drop ‘classics’ from university syllabi, much as he saw no merit in sanctimoniously invoking “living non-European nonmales” as necessarily more inspired,

wise, learned or sensitive persons.³ Indeed, one of Said's most enduring legacies has been to show how works that reflect the prevailing consensus in a society constantly betray themselves, and he urged that these texts be read for their gaps, fissures, and dissonances. While he found justifications of imperialism abhorrent, Said rightly thought that only the narrowest conceptions of identity and nationalism informed the outlook of those who would entirely jettison Conrad and Kipling.

One can conceivably point to Said's lifelong and rather exclusive engagement with high culture as a weakness if not dramatic failing in someone who must surely have recognized that the prolific discussions of identity invariably evade notions of distributive justice. The United States, after all, is a country where the poor do not resent the super-rich, and indeed hope that they will one day step into their shoes -- a country where, the directors of the satire "Yes Bush Can" found, signatures proposing tax cuts for the wealthy could easily be collected outside 99-cent stores.⁴ Said had the honesty to admit his aesthetic preference for canonical works of literature and music,⁵ but his comparative indifference to subaltern literatures and popular culture had some relation to the neglect of issues of class and justice in his work. His principled championing of the rights of Palestinians might suggest otherwise, but that enterprise points to other difficulties. Thus, if the state of Israel and Zionists are predisposed towards thinking of *the* Holocaust as the paradigmatic atrocity and evil of modern times, Said embraced the view, if not always explicitly, that Palestinians are the paradigmatic instantiation of victimhood at this juncture of history. Said did not give much thought to the consequences of abiding by this ironic reversal. His critique of identity politics, moreover, never seriously engaged a vast and immensely complex literature, which ranges from folklore to analytic

philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition, on personal, political, and philosophical identity. For all these reasons, though he was a larger-than-life figure, his legacy may be much less enduring than the encomiums lavished upon him would lead us to believe.

¹ E. Said, "Israel-Palestine : a third way", *Le Monde Diplomatique* (September , 1998).

² See Gauri Viswanathan, ed., *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 438.

³ Edward Said, "The Politics of Knowledge", in his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 374.

⁴ See "The Bush Baiters", *The Guardian* (2 November 2004), online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uselections2004/story/0,13918,1341274,00.html> ;

⁵ I have taken up this critique in "The Enigmas of Exile: Reflections on Edward Said", *Emergences* 13, nos. 1-2 (2003), pp. 105-115.