

Remembering Said

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All of us are the poorer for having lost Edward Said, whose commitment to global justice was as passionate as his commitment to ideas and literature. I didn't always agree with him, but his political and intellectual work opened up new vistas for the study of global relations, past and present, especially for those of us who were simultaneously the products of colonial education, the beneficiaries of the anti-colonial struggle, and the inheritors of a neo-colonial world. The term "postcolonial studies" (which Said's work helped bring into existence) was riven with the contradictions between the present day's rupture from the past and continuities with it—were we indeed inheriting newly liberated worlds, or witnessing the continuation of older inequalities in new and frightening ways? Himself continually accused of a commitment to high Western art, and of insufficient attention to third world resistance and agency, Said remained skeptical of the field that he had supposedly founded. In an interview with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul, and myself in New Delhi, in 1997, he said that he did not belong to that world of postcolonial studies because "I care very much about the structures of dependency and impoverishment that exist, well certainly in this part of the world and my part of the world and in all parts in what is now referred to as the global South."¹

Many of his critics faulted *Orientalism* for suggesting that Western representations of the East had nothing to do with its reality, but for Said, the whole point of indicating a divorce between images and reality was in fact to emphasize the *political nature* of that distance, and the embeddedness of such images in the structures of colonialism. In the same interview, he described postmodernism as a "kind of provincial atavism of a very unappealing sort" whose great problem was to divorce the question of representation from any purchase in the real world—"to say 'well, the media always lies, we know that,' and to say that we know that representations are always just representations. My interest is in the more pernicious forms of these relationships, where actual lives, actual identities, actual political destinies are distorted and destroyed by a process of this sort."

That's why for Said there was no contradiction between his interest in Western classical music and literature on the one hand, and the political world, although

he also valued being one step removed from the political process. "I have," he told us, "become in my late years, I suppose, partly because of my illness and partly because of other things...very involved in a different view which is—you know, Adorno is very important to me now—the idea of trying to maintain a certain kind of tension without resolving it dialectically, as a sort of witness, a testimonial to what is happening . . . that seems to me to be something worth trying." It was this commitment to the idea that intellectuals must bear witness that made Said such a valuable presence in our troubled times. He reminded us that as teachers and students, we need to strive to be more than merely professional—we have a much larger responsibility as intellectuals. The role which Said exemplified is going to become increasingly difficult to play in the coming years, but also increasingly necessary if the university is going to remain a site of intellectual freedom and dissent.

But I have also been re-engaging with Edward Said's work in the last few years as a scholar of early modern Europe. It is especially ironic that Said's *Orientalism* deals with the same geographical spaces that are now being used to "re-orient" perspectives on early modern global relations. Revisionist work on the European Renaissance now routinely opens by criticizing Said for his suggestion that an opposition between the West and the Orient has animated "European imaginative geography" from the Greek times till the present. Such an opposition, it is true, does not accommodate the complicated relations between European Christians and a variety of Eastern (especially Muslim) societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when, instead of dominating the East, Europe feared the mighty Turkish empire, but also desired to trade with it and with other Muslim powers such as Morocco and India. For many post-colonial critics of early modern Europe, we can respond to Dipesh Chakravarty's appeal that we "provincialize Europe" by emphasizing its marginality during this period.

Although sympathetic to, indeed a participant in, these efforts to "re-orient the Renaissance," I am troubled by the fact that talk of early modern Europe's "marginality" on a global scale often results in two reverse over-simplifications. First, it tends to romanticize trade, and to counter-pose it too absolutely to "colonialism," obscuring the complicated but crucial relation-

ship between the two. While sixteenth century European advocates of overseas trade invoked it, as indeed such advocates do now in our era of rampant globalization, as a relation of perfect reciprocity, neither in the sixteenth century, nor today, has global trade been established through mutuality. It was the silver and gold culled from the New World Empires, the African slave trade and the plantations that allowed Europeans to increase their participation in the Asian-dominated global economy, and thus eventually to tilt the relations of power. Such participation, moreover, depended upon European military tactics to disrupt trade between different Asian centers; as one Dutch colonist wrote home in 1614, “Your Honors should know by experience that trade in Asia must be driven and maintained by the protection and favor of your Honors’ own weapons, and that the weapons must be paid for by the profits from the trade; so that we cannot carry on trade without war nor war without trade.”²

Secondly, even when Europe had *not* established uncontested mastery over the East or Africa, attitudes of religious and cultural superiority were repeatedly expressed in its writings about those parts of the world. Hundreds of images, in literary texts, in religious sermons and books, in paintings, in official documents, speak of a revulsion towards, or an anxiety about, blacks and infidels. Of course these are not the sole or only responses to outsiders at that time, but the point is that while Said may have been wrong in projecting a simple “othering” of non-Europeans, especially Muslims, backwards into a pre-colonial past, we cannot conclude that because they had not yet been colonized, Africans or Muslims were *not* viewed as a threat in the early modern period. If, on the one hand, such views need to be differentiated from a nineteenth century Orientalism which rested upon colonial domination, then, on the other hand, it is equally problematic to unhook them entirely from a continuing history of religious and cultural tension and rivalry that can be traced back at least to the Crusades, and that finds repeated expression in re-workings of classical literature.³

Responding to the criticism that *Orientalism* did not acknowledge the variety and heterogeneity of imperialist conception of the Orient, Edward Said argued, in the interview to which I have alluded earlier, that

as Chomsky has shown in . . . his work on syntactic structures . . . you can devise a fantastically complicated structure, endlessly variant, out of a very small number of elements. I think this is the case with Orientalism . . . I think there is a kind of deep structure of Orientalism which is able to multiply and proliferate in all kinds of ways. . . . I think that they all depart from the same premise, that there is a line separating 'us' from 'them'. And it keeps recurring . . . I mean look at this, what's his name, that

Huntington *The Clash Of Civilizations* book . . . it has reemerged and its been there all along, I mean, for hundreds of years. That doesn't mean its the same, you understand, but it can be re-appropriated.

For anyone trying to understand the relationship of racism to colonialism, this is an important point—racism repeats and appropriates certain images and tropes to the point where they take on a trans-historical flavor. Etienne Balibar has suggested that as we are faced with the resurgence of neo-racism (or what he calls “racism without race”), it is particularly useful to go back to the Renaissance with its cultural stereotypes that did not necessarily depend upon a pseudo-biological discourse but were, nevertheless, extremely pernicious.⁴ In suggesting this, Balibar is thinking of contemporary anti-Semitism, but also of the rise of Islamophobia which, since his essay was written, and especially after 9/11, has indeed become a global phenomenon. The language of such Islamophobia invokes the Crusades, freezes the Islamic world in a medieval past, and depends upon the recirculation of a very old repertoire of images, a division between “us” and “them” that does not reflect but seeks to manage a far more complex reality. Of course this division is not static and today it cannot be mapped onto a simple East-West binary as some of the most pernicious articulation of anti-Muslim sentiment is now to be found among Hindu fundamentalists (both in India but also elsewhere).

In the discourses of globalization and the new world order, the idea of cultural difference is either proclaimed to be dead (in the face of the “hybridities” of food, clothing and life-style which are touted as evidence of the global and equitable spread of the fruits of the new economy), or, as is evident in the work of Samuel Huntington, it is posited as the eternal motor of history. Thus contemporary global differences are rewritten as the “clash of civilizations.” As Said points out, Huntington is less an astute analyst of culture than the product of a long intellectual and political history which has repeated binary oppositions between “us” and “them” to the point where they become both the “common sense” of our times and the language of those whom John Berger has called “the new rulers of the world.”⁵ As this language is re-circulated in new forms (such as the “the axis of evil”), Said’s work on both past and contemporary global formations, remains extremely pertinent. Not surprisingly then, it is increasing, under attack, not only from those who oppose his commitment to justice in the Middle East, but also those for whom Said’s legacy needs to be dismantled in order to justify the idea of “new American century.” As the idea of a U.S. empire is increasingly circulated and normalized, its advocates simultaneously appropriate earlier empires, and claim a radical exceptionalism for the U.S. This strategy is exemplified by a recent essay in

The Atlantic Monthly by Robert Kaplan tellingly entitled "Supremacy by Stealth." Kaplan tells us that "the United States is an international society comparable to Rome in the second century A.D. . . . Our military, intelligence, and diplomatic communities must now turn to our Iranian-, Arab-, and other hyphenated Americans. . . . At a time when we desperately need more language specialists, it is shameful that we are seeking out so few of the many native speakers at our disposal."⁶

The terms on which such co-operation (from not just "hyphenated Americans" but all scholars) is now being solicited are becoming daily clearer. Many of us have been recently alerted to a current legislation before the House of Representatives seeking to rewrite the Title VI legislation that has provided federal money to many area studies centers in U.S. universities. At a hearing on June 19, 2003, Stanley Kurtz provided testimony to the House of Representative's Subcommittee on Select Education, claiming that area studies centers are anti-American. Kurtz focused on postcolonial theory and especially Said's *Orientalism* claiming that "Said equated professors who support American foreign policy with the 19th century European intellectuals who propped up racist colonial empires. The core premise of post-colonial theory is that it is immoral for a scholar to put his knowledge of foreign languages and cultures at the service of American power."⁷ Kurtz proposed an oversight board that would link Title VI funding to student training for careers in national security, defense and intelligence agencies, and the Foreign Service.

In fact, one of Said's most valuable achievements in *Orientalism* was not simply to establish the connection between scholarship and state power in the colonial period, but to indicate its afterlife in a "postcolonial" global formation with the U.S. at its epicenter. Today, the destructive, even genocidal histories of modern empires are being whitewashed by obscuring, distorting, ignoring, and directly attacking anti-colonial and post-colonial scholarship. Advocates for U.S. empire directly target both students and teachers—Niall Ferguson suggests that the U.S. must learn from Britain in sending out its best and brightest students on the imperial mission.⁸ Said's work consistently pointed out what is at stake in our choices as teachers, students, and citizens. We will miss him increasingly in the days to come, and the best tribute we can pay to him is to stand by the lessons we learnt from his scholarship and from the example of his own life.

NOTES

¹Interview with Edward Said, *The Book Review* 22:1-2 (1998), 39-44; Reprinted in *Interventions* 1:1 (1998), 81-96.

²Quoted K N Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 87.

³See Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Ox-

ford: Oxford University Press, 2002) for a fuller development of this history.

⁴Etienne Balibar, "Is There a Neo-racism?" in Etienne Balibar and Emmanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London, Verso, 1991), 17-28, esp. 23.

⁵Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Definitions," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 567-90.

⁶Robert D. Kaplan, "Supremacy by Stealth," *The Atlantic Monthly* (July/August 2003), 6.

⁷Quoted from Kurtz's statement found at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/108th/sed/titlevi61903/kurtz.htm>

⁸Niall Ferguson, "The Empire Slinks Back," *The New York Times Magazine* (27 April 2003).