
In Memoriam: Edward W. Said (1935–2003)

Orientalism Once More

Edward Said

In the spring of 1994, I wrote an afterword for *Orientalism* in which, trying to clarify what I believed I had and had not said, I stressed not only the many discussions that had opened up since my book appeared in 1978, but the ways in which a work about representations of ‘the Orient’ lent itself to increasing misrepresentation and misinterpretation. That I find myself feeling more ironic than irritated about that very same thing today is a sign of how much my age has crept up on me, along with the necessary diminutions in expectations and pedagogic zeal which usually frame the road to seniority. The recent death of my two main intellectual, political and personal mentors, Eqbal Ahmad and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (who is one of this work’s dedicatees), has brought sadness and loss, as well as resignation and a certain stubborn will to go on. It isn’t at all a matter of being optimistic, but rather of continuing to have faith in the ongoing and literally unending process of emancipation and enlightenment that, in my opinion, frames and gives direction to the intellectual vocation.

Nevertheless it is still a source of amazement to me that *Orientalism* continues to be discussed and translated all over the world, in thirty-six languages. Thanks to the efforts of my dear friend and colleague Professor Gaby Piterberg, now of UCLA, formerly of Ben Gurion University in Israel, there is a Hebrew version of the book available, which has stimulated considerable discussion and debate among Israeli readers and students. In addition, a Vietnamese translation has appeared under Australian auspices; I hope it’s not immodest to say that an Indochinese intellectual space seems to have opened up for my propositions. In any case, it gives me great pleasure to note as an author who had never dreamed of any such happy fate for his work, that interest in what I have tried to do hasn’t completely died down, particularly in the many different lands of the ‘Orient’ itself.

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In part, of course, that is because the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam have continued to fuel enormous change, struggle, controversy and, as I write these lines, war. As I said many years ago, *Orientalism* is the product of circumstances that are fundamentally, indeed radically fractious. In my memoir *Out of Place* (1999) I described the strange and contradictory worlds in which I grew up, providing for myself and my readers a detailed account of the settings that I think formed me in Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon. But that was only a very personal account that stopped short of all the years of my own political engagement that started after the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, a war in whose continuing aftermath (Israel is still in military occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights) the terms of struggle and the ideas at stake that were crucial for my generation of Arabs and Americans seem to go on. Nevertheless I do want to affirm yet again that my intellectual work generally has really been enabled by my life as a university academic. For all its often noted defects and problems, the American university — and mine, Columbia, in particular — is still one of the few remaining places in the United States where reflection and study can take place in almost a utopian fashion. I have never taught *anything* about the Middle East, being by training and practice a teacher of the mainly European and American humanities, a specialist in modern comparative literature. The university and my pedagogic work with two generations of first-class students and excellent colleagues have made possible the kind of deliberately meditated and analysed studies that my work such as *Orientalism* contains, with its focus on culture, ideas, history and power, rather than Middle Eastern politics *tout court*. That was my notion from the beginning, and it is very evident and a good deal clearer to me today.

Yet, *Orientalism* is very much tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history. I emphasize in it accordingly that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilization of fear, hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance — much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, ‘we’ Westerners on the other — are very large-scale enterprises. *Orientalism*’s first page opens with a 1975 description of the Lebanese Civil War that ended in 1990, but the violence and the ugly shedding of human blood continues up to this minute. We have had the failure of the Oslo peace process, the outbreak of the second intifada, and the awful suffering of the Palestinians on the reinvaded West Bank and Gaza, with Israeli F-16s and Apache helicopters used routinely on defenceless civilians as part of their collective punishment. The suicide bombing phenomenon has appeared with all its hideous damage, none more lurid and apocalyptic of course than the events of September 11 and their aftermath in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. As I write these lines, the illegal and

unsanctioned imperial occupation of Iraq by Britain and the United States proceeds, with resulting physical ravagement and political unrest that is truly awful to contemplate. This is all part of what is supposed to be a clash of civilizations, unending, implacable, irremediable. Nevertheless, I think not.

I wish I could say, however, that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn't. For all kinds of reasons, the situation in Europe seems to be considerably better. In the US, the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters and 'others' has found a fitting correlative in the looting, pillaging and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums. What our leaders and their intellectual lackeys seem incapable of understanding is that history cannot be swept clean like a blackboard, clean so that 'we' might inscribe our own future there and impose our own forms of life for these lesser people to follow. It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar. But this has often happened with the 'Orient', that semi-mythical construct which since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century has been made and re-made countless times by power acting through an expedient form of knowledge to assert that this is the Orient's nature, and we must deal with it accordingly. In the process the uncountable sediments of history, that include innumerable histories and a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures, all these are swept aside or ignored, relegated to the sand heap along with the treasures ground into meaningless fragments that were taken out of Baghdad's libraries and museums. My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and re-written, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that 'our' East, 'our' Orient becomes 'ours' to possess and direct.

I should say again that I have no 'real' Orient to argue for. I do, however, have a very high regard for the powers and gifts of the peoples of that region to struggle on for their vision of what they are and want to be. There has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find like Easter eggs in the living-room. The breathtaking insouciance of jejune publicists who speak in the name of foreign policy and who have no live notion (or any knowledge at all of the language of what real people actually speak) has fabricated an arid landscape ready for American power to construct there an *ersatz* model of free market 'democracy', without even

a trace of doubt that such projects don't exist outside of Swift's *Academy of Lagado*.

What I do argue also is that there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge — if that is what it is — that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion. It is surely one of the intellectual catastrophes of history that an imperialist war conected by a small group of unelected US officials (they've been called chickenhawks, since none of them ever served in the military) was waged against a devastated Third World dictatorship on thoroughly ideological grounds having to do with world dominance, security control, and scarce resources, but disguised for its true intent, hastened, and reasoned for by Orientalists who betrayed their calling as scholars. The major influences on George W. Bush's Pentagon and National Security Council were men such as Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, experts on the Arab and Islamic world who helped the American hawks to think about such preposterous phenomena as the Arab mind and centuries-old Islamic decline which only American power could reverse. Today bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted to them and others by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange Oriental peoples over there who have been such a terrible thorn in 'our' flesh. Accompanying such war-mongering expertise have been the omnipresent CNNs and Foxes of this world, plus myriad numbers of evangelical and right-wing radio hosts, plus innumerable tabloids and even middle-brow journals, all of them re-cycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up 'America' against the foreign devil.

Even with all its terrible failings and its appalling dictator who was partly created by US policy two decades ago, were Iraq to have been the world's largest exporter of bananas or oranges, surely there would have been no war, no hysteria over mysteriously vanished weapons of mass destruction, no transporting of an enormous army, navy and air force 7,000 miles away to destroy a country scarcely known even to the educated American, all in the name of 'freedom'. Without a well-organized sense that these people over there were not like 'us' and didn't appreciate 'our' values — the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma — there would have been no war.

So from the very same directorate of paid professional scholars enlisted by the Dutch conquerors of Malaysia and Indonesia, the British armies of India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, West Africa, the French armies of Indochina and North Africa, came the American advisers to the Pentagon and the

White House, using the same clichés, the same demeaning stereotypes, the same justifications for power and violence (after all, runs the chorus, power is the only language they understand) in this case as in the earlier ones. These people have now been joined in Iraq by a whole army of private contractors and eager entrepreneurs to whom shall be confided every thing from the writing of textbooks and the constitution to the refashioning of Iraqi political life and its oil industry. Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest *mission civilizatrice*.

One specifically American contribution to the discourse of empire is the specialized jargon of policy expertise. You don't need Arabic or Persian or even French to pontificate about how the democracy domino effect is just what the Arab world needs. Combative and woefully ignorant policy experts whose world experience is limited to the Beltway grind out books on 'terrorism' and liberalism, or about Islamic fundamentalism and American foreign policy, or about the end of history, all of it vying for attention and influence quite without regard for truthfulness or reflection or real knowledge. What matters is how efficient and resourceful it sounds, and who might go for it, as it were. The worst aspect of this essentializing stuff is that human suffering in all its density and pain is spirited away. Memory and with it the historical past are effaced as in the common, dismissively contemptuous American phrase, 'you're history'.

Twenty-five years after *Orientalism* was published, questions remain about whether modern imperialism ever ended or whether it has continued in the Orient since Napoleon's entry into Egypt two centuries ago. Arabs and Muslims have been told that victimology and dwelling on the depredations of empire is only a way of evading responsibility in the present. You have failed, you have gone wrong, says the modern Orientalist. This of course is also V. S. Naipaul's contribution to literature, that the victims of empire wail on while their country goes to the dogs. But what a shallow calculation of the imperial intrusion that is, how summarily it scants the immense distortion introduced by the empire into the lives of 'lesser' peoples and 'subject races' generation after generation, how little it wishes to face the long succession of years through which empire continues to work its way in the lives say of Palestinians or Congolese or Algerians or Iraqis. We allow justly that the Holocaust has permanently altered the consciousness of our time: why do we not accord the same epistemological mutation in what imperialism has done, and what Orientalism continues to do? Think of the line that starts with Napoleon, continues with the rise of Oriental studies and the take over of North Africa, and goes on in similar undertakings in

Vietnam, in Egypt, in Palestine and, during the entire twentieth century in the struggle over oil and strategic control in the Gulf, in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan. Then think contrapuntally of the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, through the short period of liberal independence, the era of military coups, of insurgency, civil war, religious fanaticism, irrational struggle and uncompromising brutality against the latest bunch of 'natives'. Each of these phases and eras produces its own distorted knowledge of the other, each its own reductive images, its own disputatious polemics.

My intellectual approach has been to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange. I have called what I try to do 'humanism', a word I continue to use stubbornly despite the scornful dismissal of the term by sophisticated post-modern critics. By humanism I mean first of all attempting to dissolve Blake's mind-forged manacles so as to be able to use one's mind historically and rationally for the purposes of reflective understanding and genuine disclosure. Moreover humanism is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods: strictly speaking therefore, there is no such thing as an isolated humanist.

This is to say that every domain is linked to every other one, and that nothing that goes on in our world has ever been isolated and pure of any outside influence. The disheartening part is that the more the critical study of culture shows us that that is the case, the less influence such a view seems to have, and the more territory reductive polarizations like 'Islam vs. the West' seem to conquer.

For those of us who by force of circumstance actually live the plural-cultural life as it entails Islam and the West, I have long felt that a special intellectual and moral responsibility attaches to what we do as scholars and intellectuals. Certainly I think it is incumbent upon us to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation, and collective passion. This is not to say that we cannot speak about issues of injustice and suffering, but that we need to do so always within a context that is amply situated in history, culture, and socio-economic reality. Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority. I have spent a great deal of my life during the past thirty-five years advocating the rights of the Palestinian people to national self-determination, but I have always tried to do that with full attention paid to the reality of the Jewish people and what they suffered by way of persecution and genocide. The paramount thing is that the struggle for equality in Palestine/Israel should be directed toward a humane goal, that

is, co-existence, and not further suppression and denial. Not accidentally, I indicate that Orientalism and modern anti-Semitism have common roots. Therefore it would seem to be a vital necessity for independent intellectuals always to provide alternative models to the reductively simplifying and confining ones based on mutual hostility that have prevailed in the Middle East and elsewhere for so long.

Let me now speak about a different alternative model that has been extremely important to me in my work. As a humanist whose field is literature, I am old enough to have been trained forty years ago in the field of comparative literature, whose leading ideas go back to Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before that I must mention the supremely creative contribution of Giambattista Vico, the Neopolitan philosopher and philologist whose ideas anticipate and later infiltrate the line of German thinkers I am about to cite. They belong to the era of Herder and Wolf, later to be followed by Goethe, Humboldt, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Gadamer, and finally the great twentieth century Romance philologists Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Ernst Robert Curtius. To young people of the current generation the very idea of philology suggests something impossibly antiquarian and musty, but philology in fact is the most basic and creative of the interpretive arts. It is exemplified for me most admirably in Goethe's interest in Islam generally, and Hafiz in particular, a consuming passion which led to the composition of the *West-östlicher Diwan*, and it inflected Goethe's later ideas about *Weltliteratur*, the study of all the literatures of the world as a symphonic whole which could be apprehended theoretically as having preserved the individuality of each work without losing sight of the whole.

There is a considerable irony to the realization then that as today's globalized world draws together in some of the lamentable ways I have been talking about here, we may be approaching the kind of standardization and homogeneity that Goethe's ideas were specifically formulated to prevent. In an essay published in 1951 entitled 'Philologie der Weltliteratur', Erich Auerbach made exactly that point at the outset of the postwar period which was also the beginning of the Cold War. His great book *Mimesis*, published in Berne in 1946 but written while Auerbach was a wartime exile teaching Romance languages in Istanbul, was meant to be a testament to the diversity and concreteness of the reality represented in Western literature from Homer to Virginia Woolf; but reading the 1951 essay one senses that for Auerbach the great book he wrote was an elegy for a period when people could interpret texts philologically, concretely, sensitively, and intuitively, using erudition and an excellent command of several languages to support the kind of understanding that Goethe advocated for his understanding of Islamic literature.

Positive knowledge of languages and history was necessary, but it was never enough, any more than the mechanical gathering of facts would constitute an adequate method for grasping what an author like Dante,

for example, was all about. The main requirement for the kind of philological understanding Auerbach and his predecessors were talking about and tried to practise was one that sympathetically and subjectively entered into the life of a written text as seen from the perspective of its time and its author (*eingefüllen*). Rather than alienation and hostility to another time and another different culture, philology as applied to *Weltliteratur* involved a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other. And this creative making of a place for works that are otherwise alien and distant is the most important facet of the interpreter's philological mission.

All this was obviously undermined and destroyed in Germany by National Socialism. After the war, Auerbach notes mournfully, the standardization of ideas, and greater and greater specialization of knowledge gradually narrowed the opportunities for the investigative and everlastingly inquiring kind of philological work that he had represented, and, alas, it's an even more depressing fact that since Auerbach's death in 1957 both the idea and practice of humanistic research have shrunk in scope as well as in centrality. The book culture based on archival research as well as general principles of mind that once sustained humanism as a historical discipline have almost disappeared. Instead of reading in the real sense of the word, our students today are often distracted by the fragmented knowledge available on the internet and in the mass media.

Worse yet, education is threatened by nationalist and religious orthodoxies often disseminated by the mass media as they focus ahistorically and sensationally on the distant electronic wars that give viewers the sense of surgical precision, but in fact obscure the terrible suffering and destruction produced by modern 'clean' warfare. In the demonization of an unknown enemy for whom the label 'terrorist' serves the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity of the kind that the post-9/11 period has produced. Speaking both as an American and as an Arab, I must ask my reader not to underestimate the kind of simplified view of the world that a relative handful of Pentagon civilian elites have formulated for US policy in the entire Arab and Islamic worlds, a view in which terror, pre-emptive war, and unilateral regime change — backed up by the most bloated military budget in history — are the main ideas debated endlessly and impoverishingly by a media that assigns itself the role of producing so-called 'experts' who validate the government's general line. I should also note that it is far from a coincidence that General Sharon of Israel, who in 1982 led the invasion of Lebanon killing 17,000 civilians in the process, in order to change the Lebanese government, is now a partner in 'peace' with George W. Bush, and that in the US at least there has been not enough dissent from the dubious thesis that military power alone can change the map of the world.

Reflection, debate, rational argument, moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history have been replaced by abstract ideas that celebrate American or Western exceptionalism, denigrate the relevance of context, and regard other cultures with derisive contempt. Perhaps you will say that I am making too many abrupt transitions between humanistic interpretation on the one hand and foreign policy on the other, and that a modern technological society, which along with unprecedented power possesses the internet and F-16 fighter-jets, must in the end be commanded by formidable technical-policy experts like Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle. Neither man, once the war started in earnest, will do any actual fighting since that will be left to less fortunate men and women. But what has really been lost is a sense of the density and interdependence of human life, which can neither be reduced to a formula nor brushed aside as irrelevant. Even the language of the projected war is dehumanizing in the extreme: 'we'll go in there, take out Saddam, destroy his army with clean surgical strikes, and everyone will think it's great', said a congresswoman on national television. It seems to me entirely significant of the precarious moment we are living through that when Vice President Cheney made his hard-line speech on 26 August 2002 about the imperative to attack Iraq he quoted as his single Middle East 'expert' in support of military intervention against Iraq, an Arab academic who as a paid consultant to the mass media on a nightly basis keeps repeating his hatred of his own people and the renunciation of his background. Moreover he is backed in his efforts by the military and Zionist lobbies in the United States. Such a *trahison des clercs* is a symptom of how genuine humanism can degenerate into jingoism and false patriotism.

That is one side of the global debate. In the Arab and Muslim countries the situation is scarcely better. As Roula Khalaf in an excellent *Financial Times* essay (4 September 2002) argues, the region has slipped into an easy anti-Americanism that shows little understanding of what the US is really like as a society. Because the governments are relatively powerless to affect US policy toward them, they turn their energies to repressing and keeping down their own populations, which results in resentment, anger and helpless imprecations that do nothing to open up societies where secular ideas about human history and development have been overtaken by failure and frustration, as well as by an Islamism built out of rote learning, the obliteration of what are perceived to be other, competitive forms of secular knowledge, and an inability to analyse and exchange ideas within the generally discordant world of modern discourse. The gradual disappearance of the extraordinary tradition of Islamic *ijtihad* has been one of the major cultural disasters of our time, with the result that critical thinking and individual wrestling with the problems of the modern world have simply dropped out of sight. Orthodoxy and dogma rule instead.

This is not to say that the cultural world has simply regressed on one side to a belligerent neo-Orientalism and on the other to blanket rejectionism.

The 2002 United Nations World Summit in Johannesburg, for all its limitations, did in fact reveal a vast area of common global concern whose detailed workings on matters having to do with the environment, famine, the gap between advanced and developing countries, health, human rights, suggest the welcome emergence of a new collective constituency that gives the often facile notion of 'one world' a new urgency. In all this, however, we must admit that no one can possibly know the extraordinarily complex unity of our globalized world, despite the reality that, as I said at the outset, the world does have a real interdependence of parts that leaves no genuine opportunity for isolation.

The point I want to conclude with now is to insist that the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America', 'The West' or 'Islam' and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in effectiveness and mobilizing power. We still have at our disposal the rational interpretive skills that are the legacy of humanistic education not as a sentimental piety enjoining us to return to traditional values or the classics but as the active practice of worldly secular rational discourse. The secular world is the world of history as made by human beings. Human agency is subject to investigation and analysis, which it is the mission of understanding to apprehend, criticize, influence and judge. Above all, critical thought does not submit to state power or to commands to join in the ranks marching against one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time, patient and sceptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.

Humanism is centred upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and approved authority. Texts have to be read as texts that were produced and live on in the historical realm in all sorts of what I have called worldly ways. But this by no means excludes power, illustrated by the insinuations, the imbrications of power into even the most recondite of studies.

Lastly, most important, humanism is the only and I would go so far as saying the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history. We are today abetted by the enormously encouraging democratic field of cyberspace, open to all users in ways undreamt of by earlier generations either of tyrants or of orthodoxies. The world-wide protests before the war began in Iraq would not have been possible were it not for the existence of alternative communities all across the world, informed by alternative information, and keenly aware of the

environmental, human rights, and libertarian impulses that bind us together in this tiny planet. The human, and humanistic, desire for enlightenment and emancipation is not easily deferred, despite the incredible strength of the opposition to it that comes from the Rumsfelds, Bin Ladens, Sharons and Bushes of this world. I would like to believe that my work has had a place in the long and often interrupted road to human freedom.

Edward Wadie Said (1 November 1935 to 25 September 2003), Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University, was the author of innumerable articles and more than twenty books, including *Orientalism* (1978); *Covering Islam* (1980); *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999); and *Power, Politics and Culture* (2001).

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