

Edward Said:
The Colonial Spirit in A Globalizing World

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Edward Said's accomplishments are legendary. He was a scholar of unsurpassable erudition, who used his scholarship to try and influence political change. He strove for intellectual impartiality, while infusing all his work with passion. He was at home in comparative literature and literary theory alike. His name will forever be linked with the notions of Orientalism and post-colonialism. Divided, so to speak, in his natal origins—a Christian Palestinian living most of his life in the USA—he constructed his identity as an exile and a cosmopolitan—a marginal man—who could see inside the culture of others. He will forever be an inspiration to anyone working on culture and imperialism, which he indissolubly linked. Though one can glimpse this linkage in his early work, he and it grew together in a deeper and more mature fashion as he moved toward the end of his life.

It is important that I say these things at the beginning of my remarks, though others have said them better and at much greater length. The fact is that I am not a Said scholar as such. Indeed, though I had read *Orientalism* some years ago, it was not until the invitation to this conference¹ that I took the opportunity to read more deeply in his work. Even then, I have merely touched the surface of some of his contribution, as my remarks above show. What follows, therefore, is an inquiry into a few aspects of Said's work that hopefully benefits from a tangential view of his work, perhaps illuminating some sides of him passed over by scholars more immersed in the details. Much of my own work of the last decade or so has been dedicated to trying to understand the present-day process of globalization in an historical perspective, where history is understood in an interdisciplinary fashion. It is from that perspective that I will be viewing my topic.

I will also honor Said by viewing him critically, as he would have wished. My thesis is that Said came to the edge of a global world, but never truly transcended the colonial spirit that informed and inspired his work. His milieu was basically that of the anti-colonial movement, which spawned the nationalisms that he came to criticize so severely, necessary steps though they were, and which he wanted to go beyond to what he called liberation. Liberation for Said meant a transcending of local identities in the name of humanity. It is at this point that Said stood at the edge of what we now characterize as globalization, and peered into that world, but did not enter fully into it, certainly not in the sense of trying to analyze it with the tools of social science.

II

One quote from late in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) will illustrate what I am getting at. "The major task," Said

¹Editors' Note: The Second Annual Meeting of the Social Theory Forum held at UMass Boston on April 6-7, 2005. Theme: "Theories and Praxes of Difference: Revisiting Edward Said in the Age of New Globalizations."

declared, “is to match the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale.” To do this, he recognized, “A new critical consciousness is needed.”¹ For him that critical consciousness was rooted in the disciplines of literary study, social theory, and philosophy. His heroes were such as Auerbach and Adorno, and behind them Vico. The other source from which flowed Said’s understanding was his own divided consciousness, as an individual without a rooted home, as an intellectual in the service of both his national ties—Palestine—and the world at large.

From this matrix flowed his extraordinary insight into the linkage between culture and imperialism, as a special example of the connections between culture and politics in general. All of *Orientalism* (1978) was devoted to the explication of this latter linkage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here he gave a masterly account of how scholars in the West came to regard the Oriental peoples, countries, and cultures as the Other by which the West could define itself and achieve its own identity. This Other was loaded with all of the negative features of the West itself. Thus equipped with the justifying ideology of Orientalism, countries such as Britain and France could engage in their conquest of large parts of the globe. At this point, I don’t want to enter upon a critical account of Orientalism—others have done so—but rather to extrapolate from it Said’s awareness of the pervasive power of imperialism.

As he recognized further in his subsequent work, imperialism was one of the major causes of the expanding globalism around him. That of the Modern West was the greatest in history, with 19th-20th century Europe holding roughly 85% of the earth in one form of possession or another. Thus, he tells us, “This pattern of dominions or possessions laid the groundwork for what is in effect now a fully global world.”² This is a note he sounds frequently, remarking in various places upon the fact that “The great imperial experience of the past two hundred years is global and universal; it has implicated every corner of the globe, the colonizer and the colonized together.”³

Said was also interested in capitalism as a major force that was leading to a global experience. What I find striking, however, is how comparatively little attention he pays to economics. Whereas so many students of globalization almost myopically single out the economic, in the form of a free market, as the unique cause of the process the world is now undergoing, Said correctly resisted such temptation. While he was concerned with capitalism as fostering a world market, his focus was on imperialism as such. Linking it especially to culture, he has left us with an analysis of one of the factors of globalization hitherto under-theorized in the terms he deploys, that of cultural imperialism.

Graphically depicting the different styles of empire, specifically the British and the French, he shows how they contributed to a single powerful movement of imperialism, i.e., Western dominion over so-called lesser peoples and societies. These different styles also gave rise to a similar mixture of different resistances, but culminating as we can see in hindsight in a global struggle for freedom that we call anti-colonialism. These struggles, as he points out, did not take “place in a vacuum.” They were “spurred by global forces—churches, the United Nations, Marxism, the Soviet Union and the United States.” In the end, they were “universalized.”⁴

There is simply no question but that at the end of his life Said was preoccupied with the notion of globalization. How then can I say that his was a colonial spirit in a globalizing world? My answer is that we must turn to the actual globalization taking place after WW II, mostly ignored by Said. Here we find many other causes than imperialism, pushing peoples to greater interconnectivity and interdependency. Let me touch on a few of these forces, or what I call factors of globalization.

I want to start with the step out into space, in 1957. This makes for a fundamental alteration in the consciousness of the human species. Said had his eyes fixed on the earth—geography is a central concern of his—and the competition for land. This is still part of a “colonial” vision, and not that of a true transcendence of boundaries that takes us into outer space. Buckminster Fuller had a better idea of what was involved when he spoke of the view from outside our atmosphere as causing us to envision our planet as “spaceship earth.”

I do not want to derogate anti-colonialism, which is a necessary freeing of peoples, and immediately connected to their earthly lives. But I want to look at it as well as a precondition for globalization. When we lift our gaze beyond national boundaries, as Said would have us do, it is space exploration which fundamentally alters our conception of the nature of our species and our consciousness of our position in the universe. It is this new consciousness that forms a bedrock aspect of the universalism that underlies part of the aspiration toward a global society. What I find striking is how little significant attention has been paid by literary figures, except perhaps in the genre of science-fiction, to

1. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 330.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. *Ibid.*, 259.

4. *Ibid.*, 199.

this earth-shaking “happening.” It is a true failure of imagination.

The next event that I want to call attention to is the lofting of satellites. These allow for instantaneous communication beyond anything previously known. Of course there were intermediate steps: semaphore signals, the telegraph, radio, and such like. With satellites, however, an extraordinary space-time compression takes place, which allows for further tightening of human bonds around the planet. Our “immediate” neighbor now is as likely to be, not our fellow “national” or urban dweller but the person with whom we correspond timelessly over the internet.

These satellites are then joined to the emergence of the computer, a “revolution” starting with the work of Charles Babbage in the early nineteenth century and then exploding in the post WW II world. Together, satellites and computer systems foster among other developments the growth of multinational corporations, which in turn spur globalization and exercise increasing domination over our lives. For example, whereas in 1969 there were an estimated 7,000 plus MNCs, by 1992, a year before *Culture and Imperialism* was published, the number had risen to over 30,000, swelling to around 63,000 by the turn of the millennium. These are the new “Leviathans,” as I have called them, greater in wealth and power than many if not most of the nation-states that comprise the UN.¹ Are these MNCs the masters of the new imperium in a globalizing world? If so, how do they operate and how do we define imperialism in their shadow?

Here Said’s work hints tantalizingly at economic imperialism and its accompaniment, media imperialism, but he doesn’t himself go much further. And why should he? The point I am making here is that we be clear about his contributions, enormous in themselves, but also recognize the limits to his insights. So engaged was he, and many who still follow him, that he did not see beyond imperialism and anti-colonialism to the world that was shaping itself around him; or rather he glimpsed it, but shrouded in vagueness. While the post 1945 period was marked by anti-colonialism it was equally marked by the growth of MNCs, and these were and are shaping the global consciousness for which Said called in prophet-like terms.

Nor did he seem to see the growth of NGOs as a possible conscience of the world, and certainly as an expression of global consciousness. Yet, from the 1960s on the INGOs, though smaller in number than the MNCs, grew in a comparable J-like curve. They are as important as the UN in offering a kind of global governance. INGOs certainly transcend national boundaries, though linked to the local in the form of NGOs, and utilizing the satellites and computers mentioned earlier, connect peoples in a global fashion. So, too, they have become a prime vehicle for the human rights movement, which takes humanity as its constituency, a step that Said would certainly approve but about which he said little.

Should we talk also about the step into space forcing us to see the environment as a planetary system, transcending the geographical lines drawn on a map by national representatives? Here there are rich possibilities for exploring the way global and local forces are at interplay. Here, too, the future of the species and not just colonizers or colonized is in jeopardy, together. While in practice there are differentials—usually expressed in terms of North/South—in the longer run everyone is at risk. Environmental damage is the result of global forces, which have an impact everywhere on the globe.

By now, some of the outlines of present-day globalization and the factors making for it should be evident. Many more could be added, such as the Nuremberg Trials immediately after the end of WW II, and their adding to the notion of war crimes that of “crimes against humanity.” Humanity is a universal notion, taking on new valences in a time of globalization. An effort to institutionalize it can be found in the International Criminal Court, opposed as we all know by the USA, which also opposes such other transcending measures as the Kyoto accord on global warming and the Land Mines agreement. In short, globalizing and anti-globalizing forces are at war in many areas and in many guises.

Anti-globalization can take such forms as protests against the WTO and its free market policies, as well as the less obvious ones found in the U.S. policy of the last two or three decades. It can also take the form of cultural particularism, which rejects the claims of humanity and its accompanying human rights. Understandably, Said has little or nothing to say directly, for example, on this latter quarrel, but his work linking culture and politics serves as background for any further discussion. Again, I would conclude that Said realized that the world was on the cusp of globalization, but himself did not cross over the range separating the colonial spirit from the new world whose contours he glimpsed.

1. See *Leviathans. Multinational Corporations and the New Global History*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler and Bruce Mazlish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

III

I need to be entirely fair to Said. I remarked that he did not involve himself in the quarrel over particularism and human rights. The fact is that he obviously favored the latter. His position is implicit in almost everything he wrote. In my spotty reading, however, I encountered only one explicit comment, made in a 1999 interview, when he announced that “The whole point of the kind of work that I try to do, and many others do it as well, is to extend the notion of human rights to cover everybody.”¹ Aside from such a generality, it appears that Said did not address directly an issue such as Asian values trumping human rights, seen as Western. By this omission he seems to have made it possible for some who argue against the application of universal human rights to their particular national, ethnic, or religious affiliations to parade their position as if under his blessing.

The fact is that though Said spoke of Western liberalism as “bankrupt,”² and preferred to profess what he called a conservative streak, much of his thinking was profoundly liberal (of course this is a portmanteau word, loaded with ambiguity). He was a secular thinker to his marrow. He placed his critical thinking inside civil society, another loaded term, especially so in relation to the Middle East. Although he didn’t make a big deal of it, he obviously aligned himself with Afghani who, as Said summarized his thought, found in all religions “an irreconcilability with science.”³ These are strong words, especially as they resound in today’s turn to religion. They are the words of a liberal, of a person who has had a “liberal” education.

What I am calling Said’s liberalism came from the complicated amalgam of his personal situation and his intellectual development. We are all familiar with the first element, but it is especially well if cryptically put in his musings about “a cultural discourse of suspicion on the part of formerly colonized peoples, and of theoretical avoidance at most on the part of metropolitan intellectuals.”⁴ Said, of course, was tempted by both elements of the discourse. Refusing to align himself, however, with postmodernists, deconstructionists, neo-Marxists and the like, Said declared that “My homemade resolution of the antitheses between involvement and theory has been a broad perspective from which one could view both culture and imperialism and from which the large historical dialectic between one and the other might be observed.” Then, turning to an image that came so natural to one of his musical talents, he ended this long and rather confused paragraph by recommending that we view culture *contrapuntally*.

This was his method of working: develop different themes and then intertwine them. In this context, we could speak again of Said’s cosmopolitan leanings. Significantly, he quotes a saying of Hugo of Saint Victor more than once (I have noted at least two occasions). The quote is as follows: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.” I noticed it first in *Orientalism*,⁵ and then in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*⁶ (1983). This same note is sounded again in a different key when Said remarks of Yeats as well as Soyinka as to how important it is to not to remain “trapped in the emotional self-indulgence of celebrating one’s own identity.”⁷

The way out of the trap is to turn to universalism, which is more than cosmopolitanism though like it in many ways. The steady bass note in his intellectual performance was to sound the dialectic whose outcome was universalism. Universalism accords with Said’s commitment to a secular embrace of human rights, his belief in science as the right way to knowledge, and the awareness of belonging to humanity, an identity that goes beyond the local. Said’s working method of advancing to these insights is, as remarked, contrapuntal. Leaving aside the method itself, personally it leaves him with a double or divided consciousness, which allows him in an integral fashion to transcend the colonial and post-colonial mentality that so many others wish to bind him in. I realize that this goes beyond the received wisdom. Nevertheless, it is the conclusion to which my readings of Said bring me.

Such a reading also correlates with my thesis that Said was a colonial spirit in a globalizing world, who yet never really crossed the divide. He himself was too divided, too bound to the problem of his own colonial situation, from which he first had to free himself and others, to enter fully into that globalized world which he recognized as shaping itself around him and everyone else. As I have tried to argue, his awareness of globalization increased toward the end of his life. Thus, he touched on it in many places in his inspiring book, *Culture and Imperialism*. But the note had few

1. *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 433.

2. *Ibid.*, 434.

3. *Culture and Imperialism*, 263.

4. *Ibid.*, 194.

5. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 259.

6. *Edward Said Reader*, 225.

7. *Culture and Imperialism*, 229.

resonances or major resolutions in his own work. I say this not to condemn Said, but to help clarify his position in the canon of major thinkers of our time.

Having used the word “clarify,” I think it necessary before continuing to make it clear that neither Said nor I use the term globalization in the simple, ideological fashion employed, for example, by Thomas Friedman. The NY Times columnist says much about free markets, but little about cultures. He has little or no sense of the historical and humanistic roots of the present-day globalization process. In contrast, for Said, if I may speak for him, and myself, the notion of “difference” is central. Here I would like to quote the words of Fernando Coronil in his provocative article “Beyond Occidentalism,” where he tells us that the difference between cultures must “be historicized rather than essentialized.”¹ Globalization does not mean homogenization alone, but also heterogeneity. Peoples are and always will be different in their cultural practices. What one eats or how one worships is or should be a matter of individual choice. The problem arises when one attempts to impose one’s own culinary or cult requirements on all others. Difference cannot be taken to mean the negation of human rights and its accompanying aspiration toward universalism. In short, difference, like the local, is intrinsic to the concept of globalization being used here.

IV

There is one more aspect of Said I wish to consider before concluding. It concerns the bearing his work has on the idea of social theory, the core of this conference. Said, of course, was a literary scholar, not a social scientist. He did not use the terminology of sociology, yet he obviously had read canonical figures such as Durkheim, Weber, Mannheim and others. Instead, he appealed to humanists such as Auerbach, poets such as Yeats, and intellectuals such as Gramsci. The result, I wish to argue, is a major contribution to aspects of social theory, made in the accents of a general purpose intellectual, and without the rhetoric of the specialists.

In fact, of course, Said opposed the usual alignment of the disciplines and their professionalization. He disliked these artificial boundaries in the world of the mind as well as in that of the nations. Global in his instincts, Said wished to transcend such limits, and be unbound in his aspirations. One of his significant contributions was to the sociology of knowledge, and here Said could be looked upon as one of Mannheim’s free-floating intellectuals. Specifically, of course, Said contributed to the sociology of knowledge by his magisterial, though often one-sided, handling of Orientalism. It is a classic contribution to sociology, though not generally advertised in that fashion.

Another major contribution to social theory was his theory of representation. It was how the West saw, not the reality of the Middle East, for example, but how it represented that reality to itself, fulfilling its own need to construct an identity that played off the negativism of the Other, which was central. In Said’s view, masked by an attempt at scientific knowledge—the gains of archaeology and philology, for example—the West sought to appropriate the East for itself both mentally and physically. Each served the other. Generalizing, Said argued that representation could always be seen as domination. More broadly speaking, culture, of which representation is a part, could and should be viewed as the way in which a society exerts power over other societies. This was a fundamental finding of social theory for Said, suffusing all of his work and exemplified in the case of imperialism.

I want to bypass all the problems inherent in talking about “reality”—is there one aside from its representations, and how would we best approach it?—and simply register the importance of Said’s contribution to theorizing in what has come to be a standard manner, i.e., invoking the idea of representation. Needless to say, one can also see how the idea of representation fits in with his thinking about the sociology of knowledge.

At the heart of Said’s social theory is the notion of the intellectual. He was one, and a very self-reflective one. Taking as his hero the Jewish scholar-intellectual Erich Auerbach, who did his work as a refugee from the Nazis in Turkey—and note the admiration for a Jew, the potential enemy—Said asked, “How did exile become converted from a challenge or a risk, or even from an active impingement on his European selfhood, into a positive mission, whose success would be a cultural act of great importance?”² That cultural act was specifically the book *Mimesis*, but Said

1. Fernando Coronil, “Beyond Occidentalism,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 11, 1, Feb. 1996), 73. Here I might add that Coronil sees Said’s colonial spirit in a different light than I do. Rather than this spirit blocking Said from seeing the globalization of which I have been talking, it gives him a different way of viewing it, i.e., able to “recognize the persistence of reconfigured colonial relations in the present—and to take a stand against them” (personal communication). While I do not disagree with this last statement, I would argue that globalization is much more than just “reconfigured colonial relations” i.e., updated imperialism—and needs to be understood as well in wider terms. Said as a “colonial spirit” did not attempt this task though he apparently glimpsed some of its outlines and may even have recognized the challenge.

2. *Edward Said Reader*, 225.

had in mind a larger achievement: using exile to break past the settled boundaries and native loyalties. After all, wasn't this the story of his own life?

Another "exile" lurks in the background. It is Gramsci whose exile took the form of imprisonment. Here he developed his theory of the organic intellectual, emerging from the national soil, and able both to connect with ordinary people and their struggles and with history and theory. By extending Gramsci's ideas in a global direction, Said can be said to have also made a significant contribution to the sociology of the intellectual. Now the intellectual is placed in the soil of humanity as such, interpreted as humanity is in terms of a universalistic and globalizing perspective. While Said himself didn't explore the details of the latter, he pointed inspirationally in the right direction.

A theory about the sociology of knowledge, about the relations of culture and politics, about the nature of representation, and about the role of the intellectual, these surely are major contributions to social theory. Just as clearly, they are not in the positive mode of much of modern-day sociology. But this is to say that such sociology is narrow; it must be made insistently complementary with the hermeneutic approach. While Said, to my knowledge, does not use that particular word, hermeneutics, such an approach is central to his achievements in social theory. The way of Said staked out his position was to invoke the name of Vico frequently. The over-all result of Said's hermeneutic, or should I say literary, inclinations, when added to his double consciousness, and his exilic awareness is a lasting gift to the world of social theory.

V

There is so much more to be said about Said. But I am not the one to do it, and others will deal with these aspects fluently. I also recognize that given the present-day conflicts about knowledge and power, and the centrality in these conflicts of ethnic, national, and religious claims, my perspective may be little welcome, or at best seen as distracting from the real struggle and real life. I think otherwise. Globalization is all about us, in our immediate existence, shaping all our interactions, and calling out for greater comprehension of the age in which we find ourselves, and which we are helping to create. Said by the end of his life understood this. I wonder if he had lived for another decade or two what he would have gone on to say about our situation. I suspect that while the colonial spirit within him would have persisted it would have dialectically entered more and more into a grappling with the forces of globalization propelling him and us past the limits of ethnicity, nationalism, and narrow religious ties. Perhaps I am indulging in wistful thinking, but in Said I sense a fellow traveler out into the space where one encounters humanity and a global persona.