

The Great Dis-Orientator:

Edward Said

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When one thinks of orientation, Webster tells us, one should first think of directing or placing something so as to face the east. But then he found a secondary meaning—the act of determining one’s bearings or setting one’s sense of direction.

I rather like the “secondary” (the second) meaning, because it accords well with what I think our conference¹ seeks to help us do, and on account of the fact that it expresses what Said sought to do. I would like to put that second meaning in a broader context, however, because it is within this broader context that we can better understand the importance of Said’s work. That context is defined for us by the late Erich Fromm, in his book *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973). In that work, he wrote:

Man needs a map of his natural and social world, without which he would be confused and unable to act purposefully and consistently. He would have no way of orienting himself and finding for himself a fixed point that permits him to organize all the impressions that impinge upon him. Whether he believed in sorcery and magic as final explanations of all events, or in the spirit of his ancestors as guiding his life and fate, or in an omnipotent god who will reward or punish him, or in the power of science to give answers to all human problems—from the standpoint of the need for a frame of orientation, it does not make any difference. His world makes sense to him and he feels certain about his ideas through the consensus with those around him. Even if the map is wrong, it fulfills its psychological function. (Fromm, 1973)

Fromm was saying several things. Among them that our capacity for self-awareness, reasoning, and imagination requires a picture of the world, requires images. Second, that satisfying this requirement permits one to organize all the impressions that impinge on one and provides a basis to act purposefully, whether or not the content of those images is false. Third, this need for images is not a historical or contingent one; it is universal and trans-historical.

Said understood the powerful need to which Fromm referred; he understood even more deeply, the witting and unwitting ways—note his work *Culture and Imperialism* (1994)—by which culture is used as a map to shape orientation, by which one’s social, political, aesthetic, and moral outlook become hinged to that orientation, and the construction of identities based on that hinging. He, therefore, became the great dis-orientator, as he witnessed the building of empires of meaning based on those images, as he countenanced the humiliation and undoing of cultures and peoples, and as he faced the progressive denuding of the everything human of individuals and societies. *Orientalism* (1979), as well as *Culture and Imperialism*—to cite two of his works—were efforts to dis-orient people; to reverse centuries of

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false devotions, fears, and loyalties; and to awaken the world and its generations of people to the cruel truth that the self itself is constituted in the activity of making and moving among images. As such, the great disorientator, knew that it is not enough that the intellect identifies and wrestles with the defects and evils of our or any age or—indeed—the culmination of ages. It is not even enough to identify the instrumental remedies for those evils.

What we must do is nothing less than become what we truly are—humans. To so become, we need to eliminate the hierarchies within ourselves—as individuals and collectivities—between word and deed; and then begin the work of eliminating other hierarchies of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, cultural status, among others. Finally, the dis-orientator warns us about tomorrow—the history we imagine, the promise of the better. That promise is an orientation, also, that allows for present brutalities. So he told us that no moment holds more promise than the one we have; do not privilege tomorrow. Now is the accepted time. Let us begin.

It is in the spirit of that beginning that we think it particularly fitting that members of this conference should elect the site of the academy to revisit Edward Said. It is part of the task of the academy not only to conserve our intellectual capital but, as well, to help recover or restore what has been lost; to re-establish what has been destroyed; to purify what has been corrupted; and to amend, refine, re-form, and often re-name that capital. The great dis-orientator ask us not to look east; orientalism is a metaphor for the renaming of ourselves as members of the human family.

REFERENCES

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