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Edward W. Said

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45 Edward W. Said

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Edward Said was one of the most brilliant and prominent public intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century. Said was known for his ground-breaking works on the relationship between culture and imperialism – which were foundational to the field of Post-colonial Studies – and he also fought unrelentingly for Palestinian self-determination. During his prolific career Said published more than 20 books; was translated into 37 languages; and was regularly interviewed in print and on television, including in several documentaries. Said, whose last academic position was as University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York, received numerous distinguished awards and honours, including Harvard's Bowdoin Prize in 1963; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1972; and Columbia's Lionel Trilling Award in 1976 and again in 1994.

Said served as President of the Modern Language Association in 1999, and was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, American Academy of Sciences, American Philosophical Society and the Royal Society of Literature. He received approximately 20 honorary doctoral degrees. His book *Orienta* (1978) was a runner-up for the Nati Book Critics Circle Award, and his a biography, *Out of Place* (1999), won New Yorker Book Award for non-fict Said's articles regularly appeared inte tionally – in the US in *The Nation*, *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street J nal*; in London's *The Times*, *The Obser* and *The Guardian*; the French *Le Mo Diplomatique*; in the Arabic *al-Hayat*; a in Madrid's *El Pais*.

When Said was born in 1935 to a pri leged Christian-Arab family in Jerusale Palestine had been under British adm istration for 15 years. Said was baptis at an Anglican mission school in Jeru lem, and following his family's exile Cairo during the 1947 partition and w Said attended British schools. During h youth Said read avidly, listened to cla sical music, learned several languag (being fluent in English, Arabic, ar French, and literate in several others), an played the piano. He finished his secon ary education at Mount Hermon Prepar tory School in Massachusetts, attende Julliard School of Music, and went on t receive his BA from Princeton Universit in 1957, and an MA (1960) and PhD (1964 from Harvard University. His doctora dissertation in comparative literatur focused on the interplay between Josep Conrad's fiction and his correspondence While travelling widely and serving many visiting positions and fellowships at other

institutions, Said remained at New York's Columbia University from 1963 onwards. He died of leukemia in 2003.

The themes of exile and displacement, and especially his advocacy for Palestinian rights, grew out of both his personal experiences and a broader concern for the Palestinian people. While Said's work prior to 1967 primarily focused on 'high' European canonical literature, the Arab–Israeli war that broke out that year marked a radicalising moment in Said's life when his own identity as a Palestinian became inseparable from his scholarly pursuits. He lived and worked in a pro-Israeli environment hostile to Arabs, leading Said to shift attention to the West's distorted view of the Middle East and Arab world. As an academic but also a major voice in the mass media, Said contested the caricature of Arab people as terrorists and barbarians. He was a major dissenting voice during the Persian Gulf War, and was perhaps the most frequently cited and interviewed critic of American foreign policy in the Middle East for the several decades preceding his death. Said was a member of the Palestinian National Council and supporter of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), as well as its critic. He turned down an invitation to attend the White House signing of the Oslo agreements in 1993, arguing that they ignored the majority of Palestinians residing outside of Gaza and the West Bank. Not surprisingly, Said received harsh criticism and even death threats for his support for Palestine.

Said's self-construction as an exiled Palestinian was central to his scholarly arguments, and it was the apparent contradiction between his personal location and his scholarly works that some critics focused on. He was born into a Christian-Arab, not Islamic, family (though he was secular in orientation); he lived in the Middle East only during his youth and was educated in the West's most elite institutions; he was a political exile but a wealthy, privileged, 'cosmopolitan' one; and he was a scholar who advocated concern for 'narratives of the forgotten' but who himself devoted attention throughout his life to the West's high canonical literature, music, and culture (Ahmad, 1993; Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999). Though not to be dismissed, the politics of his own paradoxical location do little to undermine Said's extraordinary contributions to cultural studies and cultural and social geography.

SPATIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Edward Said's intellectual contributions are difficult to categorise in disciplinary terms. He wrote on subjects as diverse as the role of the intellectual, music criticism (he was *The Nation*'s music critic), Palestinian politics, the experience of exile, as well as on culture and imperialism. His work initiated debates across the humanities and social sciences, from literature to music to anthropology to political science to geography. Much, if not all, of Said's work was explicitly geographical, although it would be highly un-Saidian to attempt to separate his geographical contributions and sensitivity from the rest of his literary and social theory. While much of Said's work can be classified as literary criticism, he strongly advocated against disciplinary boundaries and the excessive specialisation they encourage. To him, all texts, literary or otherwise, are political, and must be 'worlded' – located in the world and exposed for the geographical imaginations from which they arise. Much of Said's work was devoted

to analysis of literary, political, and journalistic texts; and he was at his most geographic in such attempts to emplace texts, writers, audiences, and, indeed, himself: 'geography ... is the only way that I can coherently express my history' he noted (Katz and Smith, 2003: 643).

Said's influence in human geography, particularly his theory of Orientalism, was so compelling that one might describe it as almost transparent to practitioners today. Said not only initiated a spatial turn in post-colonial and cultural studies, but within the field of geography itself his work transformed the terms around which the histories of geography, critical historical geographies, geographies of empire, and analyses of territory and land dispossession are discussed today. While geographers have long-understood that imperialism and colonialism ought to be conceptualised geographically, Said theorised the cultural processes and discursive formations that aid colonial or imperial control over people and place. The complex cultural, ideological, and intellectual processes involved in domination and control that accompany the political, economic, and territorial, hence, become standard in geographical studies, thanks in part to Said's ground-breaking works. Said's notion of the 'imaginative geographies' embedded in colonial discourse formed the basis of two of his books, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1983a). This concept has done much to invigorate post-colonial and cultural studies with a spatial sensitivity. Imaginative geography to Said refers to the invention and construction of geographical space beyond a physical territory, which constructs boundaries around our very consciousness and attitudes, often by inattention to or the obscuring of local realities (Said, 2000b: 181). Said arguably laid the foundation for post-colonial studies with the publication of *Ori ism*, and it was this book that laur his international reputation and lished some of the main terms of d that other post-colonial critics, su **Gayatri Spivak** and **Homi Bha** have engaged. (For their personal r tions on Said following his death, as as that of others of his close assoc see Bhabha and Mitchell, 2004).

Orientalism moved the concept colony and empire to centre stag the American academy in the 197 addition to infusing it with the cr methods of French post-structura Orientalism as a field of study prec Said, taking in two millennia of st of Eastern culture by the West. Wha tinguished Said's work was his atte to the totalising essentialism, ethnc trism, and racism embedded in st of the Orient. Said examined the w of an array of eighteenth-and ninete century British and French nove poets, journalists, politicians, histor travellers, and colonial administra (applying the same type of analysi twentieth century American discou and hegemony in later works). He ar that through a series of oppositions, t works systematically represented Orient/East as irrational, despotic, static, backward, while the Occident/West rational, democratic, dynamic and gressive. Importantly, it did not matte Said whether the stereotype was posi or negative (and many were in fact p tive), since either is equally essentialis In a Foucauldian move Said showed such stereotyped representations st for 'knowledge' itself and were de implicated in the exercise of authori ian power. Where the focus of Sa work becomes cultural *imperialism* i showing how the political or economic administrative fact of dominance re on this legitimating discourse.

Orientalism formed the first part of a trilogy that subsequently included *The Question of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1981). Together these books demonstrated how European colonialism, Zionism, and American geo-politics all worked together to dispossess Palestinians of their homeland, and even a past. In the latter two works, Said moved away from literary scholarship to a more political and historical investigation of Palestinian dispossession. Probably the most powerful argument in *The Question of Palestine* is that Israeli Zionism is itself an Orientalist (i.e., racist) discourse, with critiques of Israeli politics being too easily dismissed as anti-Semitic. *Covering Islam* showed how the US media and foreign policy worked in an Orientalist fashion in the late twentieth century. In this book Said took his ideas about cultural representation into the arena of practical politics. At the time (1979) the US was engaged with the Iranian 'hostage crisis' when students seized the American embassy in Teheran. Said asserted that journalists' uninformed reports seemed devoid of any historical contextualisation (such as previous US involvement in Iran, including helping train their secret police), and simply reinforced images of Islamic barbarism and terrorism and, in contrast, American innocence and heroism. Said followed up on Palestine's unique position as the 'victim of victims' in several later books. No other contemporary academic had so passionately attempted to tell a counter-narrative of Palestine. Other books, including *The End of the Peace Process* (2000a), document Said's political position on the Israel–Palestine conflict. He consistently argued against partition and for a bi-national state in Israel, insisting that the terms of citizenship must be made inclusive and democratic and not based on principles of racial or religious difference.

The World, the Text, and the Critic (1983) followed Said's trilogy on cultural imperialism. This book, a collection of essays written between 1968 and 1983, received much notoriety for two pieces in particular, 'Secular Criticism' and 'Travelling Theory'. In the former Said lamented what he saw as an apolitical cult of professionalism that had saturated intellectual life and argued for a more politically charged oppositional literary criticism and role for the intellectual. In 'Travelling Theory' Said developed a geographical model of how ideas or theories 'travel' from place to place, and what happens to them when they do. He argued that because theories develop within particular socio-historical contexts, they lose their oppositional weight when moved and 'domesticated' into other spatio-temporal contexts. He later revised this position, conceding that possibilities exist for theories to be effectively reconstituted in new political situations (Said, 2000b).

Said described his next major work, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993a), as the sequel to *Orientalism*. In this series of essays he addressed some of the intellectual conundrums to which *Orientalism* had given rise. Here, he adopted a musical term for literary criticism, offering a strategy of 'contrapuntal' reading of texts. To read a text contrapuntally 'is to read with a simultaneous awareness of both the metropolitan history that it narrates and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourses act' (1993a: 51). These essays were more attuned than was *Orientalism* to 'dialogues' between colony and empire – intertwined histories and spaces of resistance to European metropolitan cultural products that produced not exactly hybrid outcomes, but 'harmonisations' of a sort. Said's controversial essay on *Mansfield Park*, for example, fundamentally shifted the terms of discussion

about Jane Austen's novel by politicising and grounding it in the colonial geography of the Caribbean.

In some of his later works, Said continued to reflect on his own personal experience of exile and on relationships between memory and place. He considered the pain of exile in several of his works, including most profoundly in his autobiography, *Out of Place* (1999). While he struggled with his own displacement and the experience of never feeling completely at home anywhere, Said also recognised the empowering potential in remaining distanced from partisan politics and the habitual order. In 'Invention, memory and place' (2000b) Said further reflected on the importance of narratives to collective memories and senses of place, and on new constellations of power and identity around which 'invented' memories in place take shape. Using Palestine as a case-study, Said showed the overlapping and competing place memories that arise there for Christians, Jews, and Muslims, based as they are on historical narratives, landscape features and physical structures. Part of Palestine's problem, according to Said, is that its leaders have failed to articulate an effective, collective, national narrative as part of its independence struggle: a debatable position (Gerber, 2003).

KEY ADVANCES AND CONTROVERSIES

The full force of Said's scholarship, the numerous studies, books, theses, conferences, and discussions that it inspired, can be barely hinted at via the selected secondary source list below. Much of the criticism of Said's work can be though as *extensions* of his thinking rather tl attacks on it. Nonetheless, there have b a number of debates and controversie which it has given rise, again attestin its provocative power more than anyth else. Such arguments have flourisl principally around Orientalism; on Sa own subjectivity in relation to his p lished work; and on some basic tensi at play with respect to Said's humani Marxism, and post-structuralism.

A number of Islamic and Arabic spec ists criticised *Orientalism* as unneces ily politicising scholarship on the Orie Such critics unconvincingly claimed t knowledge of the Orient produced Western scholars over the last cou of millennia was well-intentioned a 'disinterested' politically, refusing notion that all knowledge is situated a produced to serve particular purpo whether consciously intended or r Conversely, in-depth, fruitful debates *Orientalism* emerged from scholars exa ining the cultural aspects of empire a theories of representation (e.g., Cliffo 1988; Hussein, 2002). One of its m contested aspects was Said's inclinat to commit 'Orientalism in reverse' – t is, he failed to recognise vast differen within Orientalist discourses about Orient and Middle East. Critics asser that Said himself produced a (count stereotype of a homogenised, racist a ethnocentric Westerner. Texts, discour and representations about the Ori are considerably more ambivalent, h erogeneous, and dynamic than Said first allowed, especially if looking acr Western academic discourses and dis plines (literature versus social scien for example) and across national cultu (Britain, France, and the US), which S had tended to downplay in his attempt prove resonances among them. Criti especially those outside the West, we

also quick to point out Said's failure to consider resistance and opposition to Orientalist stereotypes, which itself reinforced an (Orientalist) image of an Eastern subject as passive, inarticulate and lacking self-determination. Said corrected this silence in later works, including in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993a).

Other social axes of difference were likewise ignored by Said in his attempt to construct a coherent Orientalism. He, for the most part, neglected gender as an analytical framework, and feminists in particular made some key advances on *Orientalism*, especially those focusing on colonial women travellers, missionaries, educators, and so on (albeit going beyond the spaces of the 'Orient' to which Said had limited his own discussions). Said's work was brought to bear widely on the role of travel writing in the creation of imaginative, popular geographies of empire (e.g., Duncan and Gregory, 1999; Kennedy, 2000). In fact it is arguable that the proliferation of scholarship on travel writing as a genre of colonialist discourse is attributable to Said's theories of representation and cultural imperialism. Much of the feminist work within this subfield demonstrates the contradictory, heterogeneous, and sometimes counter-hegemonic positions women occupied with respect to colonial and imperial discourses and structures of power (e.g., Mills, 1991).

Although most would dismiss such divisions today, the notion that Said's literary theories and 'aberrant textualism' should be better grounded in material practices initially found popular backing in geography (**Smith**, 1994), an argument that mirrored Marxist and neo-Marxist debates in other fields (**Gregory**, 1995). Ahmed (1993) submitted one of the most infamous critical assessments of Said's writing, though other, more discerning critiques came from Lazarus (1999) and Hussein (2002). Working from a materialist standpoint, Ahmed challenged Said on the relationships between texts and representations and their associated social and material practices. Ahmed criticised Said's excessive 'textualism', arguing that we come to know the world through the effects of global capitalism, not through texts and representations. This is a false dichotomy, since representations are materially located in the world, and, as Said noted, maintain 'a web of affiliations' in the world. Among other complaints, Ahmed also noted that Said failed to 'world' himself in his particular historical, cultural, and institutional frameworks that are, just as are the subjects Said studied, governed by dominant ideologies and political imperatives. Said's own privileged class position and his affiliation with elite American schools (which, as Ahmed points out, reproduce the international division of labour), as well as his position as part of the metropolitan elite more generally (even if an exiled one), arguably limited Said's ability to challenge the status quo.

Numerous critics also maintained that Said's methodological and theoretical framework was at best eclectic and justifiably impatient with received dogmas; at worst inconsistent, arbitrary and sometimes at odds with itself. Some critics see strength in Said's ability to bring together diverse theoretical orientations, as situated provocatively between 'the West Bank and the Left Bank' (Gregory, 1995: 448). Hussein (2002: 4) in particular stresses the positive aspects of Said's methodology – his 'technique of trouble' – which he argues allowed Said to subject received wisdom to 'theoretical and historical insight and to what might be called the controlled anarchism of critical consciousness'. However, Said's eclecticism raises thorny, not easily resolvable issues for others. Said has been criticised, for example, for his ambivalence about

whether a 'real' Orient exists beyond its representation. On one hand, Said argued that Orientalism is a misrepresentation of the 'real' Orient, in which case Orientalism is a type of ideological knowledge in a Marxian sense. On the other, Said followed the logic of discourse theory in implying that no 'real' Orient exists, and is solely a Western construct, an imaginative geography (see Clifford, 1988: 255–76 for an extended discussion). For Said, the issue was not so much 'a dominant representation hiding a reality, but of the struggle between different and contesting representations' (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999: 4).

Said's frequent recourse to his own lived experience and thus traditional humanist arguments about human agency also raised questions about his alliance with discourse theory. Though parting with **Michel Foucault** in the notion of authorless texts, Said followed him in privileging discourse and language as prime determinants of social reality, and knowledge as a type of power or force that works impersonally through a multiplicity of sites and channel Said adopted a more conventional ist approach when discussing Am foreign policy in Israel and Pales rights. In addition, Said can be c ered Marxian in orientation, partic in his development of Gramsci's th of cultural hegemony, the dynam domination, and possibilities for ance. Yet here too, he aligned with post-colonial critics in pointing ou limits of (an ethnocentric) Marxis ory in confronting the needs and riences of the colonized world. As Said's work consistently implied t non-dominating, non-coercive mo knowledge is possible and desirable he oftentimes cited the role of the c geous intellectual in creating it, incl in his final book, *Humanism and D cratic Criticism* (2003), published po mously. Among other things, in this Said admonished the intellectual to p against and forestall the disappearan the past, and to construct fields of co ence – rather than battle – as the ulti outcome of our intellectual labour.

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46 Saskia Sassen

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Saskia Sassen was born in The Hague, in the Netherlands, in 1949 but moved with her parents to Buenos Aires within a few years. This move from the Netherlands to Argentina was to be one of many international relocations experienced by Sassen, with time spent in Italy, the US and France during her early years, studying at the Università degli Studi di Roma, the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and the Université de Poitiers. As she points out, this constant mobility made her somebody who is 'always a foreigner, always at home' (Sassen, 2005) and this transnational perspective continues to influence her work.

One way that mobility has influenced Sassen's work relates to her use of language. Growing up competent in five languages gave her an awareness of particular 'gaps' in a given language compared to another, and vice versa. This awareness projected itself on the larger stage of research and explanation because, for Sassen, it made theorising important and meaningful as part of an attempt to compensate for existing language's deficiencies. Another influence of mobility was the experience of acting in ways that were 'out of place' due to a lack of situated knowledge. Sassen found that small actions, particularly when 'out of place', could have an effect on even the most powerful events or processes. This led her eventually to develop the proposition that, under certain conditions, powerlessness can be complex and thereby be a factor in the making of a history and a politics (see Sassen, 2007a, and Gane, 2004 for a more detailed discussion of these points). In addition, Sassen's time at universities in different countries facilitated encounters with a range of philosophies and theoretical perspectives as diverse as Marxist political economy, the work of Berger, Luckman, Kuhn, **Deleuze**-Guattari, **Foucault** and Althusser. This would influence her in a variety of ways and most importantly would encourage her to develop an approach to research that focuses on what she sees as strategic empirical domains – that is, conditions that are heuristic in that they produce knowledge about more than themselves: cities, immigration, and nation-states are three such subjects.

In the context of her nomadic early years, it is perhaps unsurprising that migration acted as the focus for the research which led to Sassen's first major publication – *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* (1988 and continuously reprinted since then). In this book her original contribution is to contest the notion that foreign direct investment will actually