

A Tribute to Edward Said, Istanbul, May 25, 2007

'Orientalizing the Orientals': The Other Message of Edward Said

By **Fawwaz Traboulsi**

Arising from an interest in the study of the modalities of production of knowledge in and about the Arab region, this paper will deal with Occidentalism, understood as the body of narratives and discourses by which Europeans and the US societies, governments and policies are represented and interpreted in this part of the world. The main thesis in this paper is that Edward Said's critical secular project should be perused and enriched by an equivalent critique of Occidentalism. Informed by Said's early warning against the "participation of the Orient in its own Orientalization", we will follow that process of self orientalization among larger sections of the Arab intelligentsia. Contrary to the current wisdom, Orientalized Arab intellectuals are not confined to the "native informants" but cover many of those who pretend representing and defending Arab and Muslim specificity and who belong to the camp opposed to the Empire. Case studies will touch upon economic reform, democratization, the Holocaust, 9/11, the Iraq War, and others.



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In this contribution, I wish to make the case that Edward Said has in fact established two disciplines. One explicit, in Orientalism, amended, developed and continuously enriched with an array of new contributions; the other implicit, and under-developed in the form of a contribution toward a critique of Occidentalism, i.e. the ways in which the West is represented in the non-Western world. Edward Said imagined the two processes to be intimately bound and warned very early on against a vicious circle in which Orientalism becomes complete when "the modern Orient ... participates in its own Orientalizing" (Orientalism, 1985: 325).

The main reason for this interest is partly due to the fact that Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, the discipline and the ideology, is tirelessly hijacked in the Arab World as well as in the circles of the Arab intelligentsia in the Diaspora, by all sorts of nativists or by 'social and cultural parvenus' who transform the critique of Orientalism into nagging about the way the Arabs are (mis-)represented in the West, the assumption being that Arabs/Muslims are "better", i.e. more civilized than the way they are represented. Such complaints presuppose the existence of an Oriental essence, which is not correctly apprehended by a West likewise fixed into an immutable essence. Let me say, en passant, that too much wasted effort has been invested in the fields of representation (the representation of the Arab in the cinema, the novel, the ads, what have you) at the expense of the production of knowledge in the Arab World and by Arabs abroad about both Arab and Western societies.

Edward Said made it sufficiently clear many an occasion that his critique of Oriental representations does not imply the existence of such an essence. His most recent argument can be found in the posthumous Humanism and Democratic Critique:

"My critique [of Orientalism] was premised on the flawed nature of all representations and how they intimately toed up with worldliness, that is, with power, position and interests. This requires saying explicitly that my work was not intended as a defense of the real Orient or that even made the

case that a real Orient existed. I certainly held no brief for the purity of some representations against others, and I was quite specific in suggesting that no process of converting experience into expression could be free of contamination. It was already contaminated by its involvement with power, position and interests, whether it was a victim of them or not" (Humanism, 2004: 48-49).

Said's insistence is that knowledge is always at the service of "power, position and interests". Many amongst those who have not read any of his works beside Orientalism forget that Edward Said attacked Occidentosis, that pathological tick to blame all ills on the West, in addition to conspiracy theories (though colonial history reveals that real conspiracies greatly surpass the wildest imagined conspiracy theories!). Said also criticized the Arab regimes for their failure to resist imperialism and Zionism (despite the fact that he was rather 'soft' on the oil-oligarchies). And though he envisaged his critique of Orientalism as a cultural-political contribution to the anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist struggle worldwide, he was far from being complacent with certain ideologies which accompany liberation struggles such as nativism (making nevertheless the distinction between nativism, nationalism and nationality). His critique of Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership especially since the Oslo accords, which he brilliantly termed as 'the peace of the weak', is in essence a critique of the misreading by a national liberation movement of US and Israeli strategies. Neither did Said spare Arab intellectuals from criticism (for example, those who supported Roger Garaudy's revisionism and denial of the Holocaust, *Le Monde Diplomatique*: August-September 1998). An indefatigable writer explaining to his fellow Arabs US foreign policy how it should be countered, one of Edward Said's latest articles- also in *Le Monde Diplomatique* - explained the new mechanisms of decision-making in the US with the advent of the neo-cons to power and the rising influence of the Christian fundamentalists (insisting, on the other hand, on the great potential contained in the protest movement by the American people against the war in Iraq). One of the last messages by a man who saw himself both as Arab and American made in the last year of his life, was the call, at a

commencement address at the American University of Beirut, for devoting more time and effort to study American society and state in the Arab World rather than simply teaching Arab students textbooks designed for American students.

Occidentalism

Occidentalism, for the purpose of this paper, can be defined as a discourse nurtured by local versions of nationalism, nativism informed by "conspiracy theories" and inflamed by anti-Semitic foibles imported from the huge reservoir of European and American right wing literature. By occidentalism, I do not refer to the definition used by Burma and Margalit as "The dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies..." (Occidentalism - The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies, Penguin, London, 2005). Theirs can be dismissed as a purely Orientalist and essentialist use of the term. My definition of occidentalism also assumes that knowledge is at the service of power. In that sense occidentalism as a sum of partial, non-knowledge partly derived from the "power, position and interests" of those who defend it becomes a source of weakness, not only in the field of production of knowledge but also in the struggle for the liberation of the region from Western domination.

Against the "imperialism of our times" (Aijaz Ahmad) – globalized, security driven, militarized, in which culture plays an increasingly greater role as Edward Said had predicted, etc. – Occidentalism is also a body of impoverished cultural and practical concepts that belong to the era of outdated anti-colonialism.

Universality and Development of Edward Said's Thought

Before proceeding further, let me make two additional comments. First, let me reiterate the universality and development of Edward Said's thought. Any attempt to reduce Edward Said's work to his remarkable and path-breaking critique of Orientalism overlooks the corrections that Said

made to his initial theory as much as it ignores the different phases of development of his thought.

Edward Said's thought proceeds in a clearly dialectical manner (Said would have preferred to call it "contra-punctual"). Many of the one-sidedness of Orientalism with its Foucauldian influence, its implied East-West essentialism (the West starts with Aeschylus, Dante reduced to where he placed the prophet Muhammad in his Inferno, Marx to his views on India and Algeria, etc.) was corrected partly in acceptance of many criticisms. Said admits in Humanism to taking into consideration James Clifford's critique in which he said of Orientalism: "The book sometimes appears to mime the essentializing discourse it attacks".

Culture and Imperialism was a corrective of Orientalism in more than one way, not least in revealing the importance of resistances to imperialism, both cultural and practical, and in dealing with national liberation movements in a critical manner. On a more methodological level, Edward Said took his distances from Foucault because the latter neglected classes, exploitation, economics, and revolution and used in his critique the works of Fanon, Poulantzas and Chomsky among others (see: 'Traveling Theory', The Said Reader, p. 214). There is a big difference between the critic who only saw in Marx his comments on India and Algeria and lumped him with the rest of the Orientalists, and the same man who in his "late style" acknowledges the influence Marxism and Marxist authors had on him, such as Gramsci, Lukacs, Raymond Williams and others. He even came to speak of himself as an "undeclared Marxist". Finally, the East-West binary, with its domination, hegemony and resistances, is subsumed in a call for the "discovery of a world not constructed out of warring essences". This revision was no other than Said's commitment to secular critique and humanist outlook, based on the belief that men make their own history and that the real world is the main object of knowledge.

Speaking Truth to Power

A second point refers to “speaking truth to power”, a seminal concept of Edward Said, which deserves more examination. In the era of the “imperialism of our times”, I take it to mean all powers, imperial power as well as its local supports. The concept of power includes the economic, political and cultural spheres in Said’s argumentation by all means, without making distinctions between those who hold power, backing one dictator or autocrat against another, or identifying with one on the grounds that he is being attacked by the “West”!

The other key word here is “truth”; it connotes a moral stance but mainly implies the production of knowledge that can contribute to subverting the powers to be and changing power relations.

All the above places Said in the tradition of the self-critical Arab intellectuals of the post-1967 period, a tradition that greatly contributed to creating the ‘other’ Said, author of *Out of Place*, the Said we know.

1. Conspiracy Theories

Let me hasten to say that real conspiracies by colonialist and imperialist powers concerning the Arab and Islamic worlds surpass the more phantasmagoric produced by the imagination of “conspiracy theorists”. Two such flagrant examples of real conspiracies would be the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot accords of 1916 and the Tripartite Suez War against Egypt of 1956.

The Sykes-Picot Syndrome

In fact the Sykes-Picot secret accords and their implementation which led to the partition and colonial mandate of the Arab East left an indelible mark on future generations. What I call the Sykes-Picot Syndrome is a fixation on only one aspect of colonial and imperial strategy: divide and rule. While the adage is supposed to imply that dividing is in the service of ruling, i.e. of colonial and imperial domination, to those who suffer from the Sykes-Picot Syndrome the reverse seems to be the case: rule is put at the service of division. In

other words, rule has become the means and division the end.

The most immediate connotation of the syndrome is the reduction of US strategies, usually called ‘projects’, to basically one function: that of dividing the Arab countries both externally (from each other) and internally (the partition of each Arab country i.e. Iraq into potentially a multiplicity of ethnic-sectarian defined cantons or mini-states). And all at the service of legitimizing the state of Israel by cloning it in the form of a myriad of weak and warring ethnic and sectarian-based statelets.

Even in old colonial times, dividing in order to rule or to better rule was always subject to colonial interests. In fact, the partition plan within Sykes Picot can be referred to as partition in contrast with the aspirations of the peoples of the Arab East to live in one independent and united Arab (nation-) state. But upon closer look, the Sykes-Picot “partition” itself was a process of both partition and unification. While natural Syria was partitioned into five states in 1920, Iraq was created out of the union/merger of three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. The adding and subtracting of whole regions followed closely colonial interests both strategically and economically. Palestine (southern Syria) was wrenched from the French colonial mandate zone and added to the British area of dominion in the name of the Balfour Declaration, in step with a basic strategic British interest to control the Eastern bank of the Suez Canal. The Mosul region was detached from Syria because of the discovery of oil. Despite the fact the France divided natural Syria into five statelets - Damascus, Aleppo, Druze, Alawite and Lebanon - in order to weaken the anti-colonial independence movement and amputated Alexandrite in the North (ceded to Turkey in 1933) and ceded the oil-rich Mosul region to British-mandated Iraq in return for a share in the Iraqi Petroleum Company, it nevertheless later reunited them into only two states - the Syrian Republic and the Republic of Lebanon - in preparation for retaining some influence in either republics after independence and under pressure from the nationalist movement in Syria.

One should add that imperial strategy might lean toward what is more dangerous, even fatal: dividing the people without dividing the political entity. The issue does not end here. Granted that imperial strategy was to divide a country along ethnic, religious and sectarian lines, does that absolve the ruling classes and the political leaders and parties of a said country from any responsibility even when they accept the division of their people along these lines?

Western designs for the partition of Iraq and fostering sectarian and ethnic strife no doubt exist. But if Iraq is to be dominated as a whole, why bother divide it?! Nevertheless, the relevant question is how to foil such designs. Certainly not by accepting the imperial, "identitarian", geo-strategic definition of Iraqis into one ethnicity (Kurds) and two Muslim sects (Sunnis and Shi'as) in a "non-Arab Iraq", as the oft repentant neo-con Keenan Makkiya had wanted to build), and certainly not by building parties on those sectarian and ethnic bases.

Whom do Conspiracy Theories Serve?

Conspiracy theories are not neutral. They usually reflect the material interests and class locations of dominant social and political forces, and very frequently, play into the hands of colonial and imperialist powers covets. Many of them are mere imports from the intellectual arsenal of the European and American extreme right.

If the creation of the State of Israel and the European and American support for it has helped turn many Arabs against the West, there is no doubt that the opposite is also true. Zionist colonization and the existence of the Arab Israeli conflict have also served to divert attention from Western colonialism and imperialism and from the Arab regimes themselves.

Take "the Jewish conspiracy". In its Jewish-Bolshevik amalgam, it served the purpose of alienating Arabs from communism and also absolving both Western powers and Arab regimes from responsibility for the Palestinian tragedy.

The Public Records Office (PRO) archives in London contain an interesting early specimen of this amalgam. It is allegedly a copy of a tract found on the body of one of the victims of the 1921 bloody clashes between Jews and Arabs in Jaffa- Palestine. The tract is undoubtedly a forgery, as it takes the form of a letter, supposedly written in Arabic and dated 10 April 1921, addressed by Leon Trotsky, then Soviet People's Commissar of Army and Navy, to Herbert Samuel, the first British High Commissioner in Palestine. In it, Trotsky (described as "Minister of War for the Russian People") thanks the British because their project in Palestine has opened the road of Egypt and India to Bolshevik propaganda. "England in confirming the Zionist question in Palestine facilitates our way to the East", says Trotsky. Not only that, but the Jewish immigration has been the occasion to send Bolsheviks into Palestine, "we have dispatched to Palestine those [Jews] who are bearing the Red Flag and the Bolshevik propaganda and are only a few. Millions of Bolshevists are still in Russia awaiting orders". After establishing the common Jewish identity of both the Soviet leader (Trotsky is made to be the son of the Chief Rabbi in Russia, which, of course he was not) and the British High Commissioner, Trotsky makes it clear that in establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine the British serve the interests of Bolshevism: "I am a Jew, as you are my friend: my father is the Chief of the Rabbi in Russia. I would not hesitate in hanging my father on the electric lamp [-post] near my office in the Karmelein [Kremlin], should he intend to establish a Jewish kingdom in the heart of Soviet Russia, but I will be glad to assist him with all my power should he demand of me to send the laboring Jews to any land for establishing a national home for them. I am sure that these laborers, wherever they are located, will not establish a National Home but they will establish Bolshevism". Reiterating Soviet support for the Zionist project in Palestine, the Soviet commissar even offers to lend money to that enterprise if need be. The notion of 'Moscow gold' had already reached the East!

The message is clear in its dual play: it fuses Zionism with Communism, in the person of Trotsky, a Communist Jew, who is at the same

time a Zionist who simultaneously supports a Jewish state, on condition that it is not constructed on Russian territory, with the intention of transforming it into a Bolshevik state. Hence the message that the Zionist colonization in Palestine benefits neither the British nor even the Jews - not to speak of Palestinians and the Arabs! It will only establish Bolshevism, the common enemy of all concerned.

One variant of this is the idea of the "Jewish conspiracy" founded on both elements of power: money and revolution. One such propagator of this European anti-Semitic notion is Michel Chiha, ideologue of Lebanese nationalism but also fierce anti-communist and defender of Arab conservative regimes. His writings invariably served the purpose of absolving Britain and the US from any responsibility concerning the creation and support of the state of Israel. In a series of op-eds in his daily *Le Jour* in the late 1940s, Michel Chiha wrote, "The West is deceived" [by the Jewish conspiracy], as much as the Arabs are. He goes on to say that Britain and the United States are "prisoners of Zionism". It does not take much imagination to conclude that all "deceived" and "prisoners" should be allies against the deceiver and jailer.

Later, mainly after the defeat of 1967, British and American responsibility for the creation and support of the state of Israel were manipulated to the benefit of the US. If Western powers are responsible then they are most suited to find a solution to the Arab Israeli problem. More recently the logic goes as follows: since the US has created Israel, it is the only party that can pressure it to withdraw from the Occupied Territories and achieve peace. These views were most popular at the time when Anwar Sadat's claimed that 99% of the cards were in America's hand. This is the logic that led to the notion of the American "honest broker" with the results that we know.

2. Democracy or Imperialism?

The contemporary orientalist/ occidentalist dichotomy is best expressed in the juxtaposition of

democratization against resistance to colonial conquest and imperial policies. Partisans of democratization end up justifying colonial occupation (as in the case of the invasion and occupation of Iraq as the necessary birth pangs of democracy). In contrast, opponents of colonial domination end up justifying Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. This echoes debates that erupted during the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis and War when a certain Fred Halliday declared that if he had to choose between (American) imperialism and fascism, he would chose the former. Since that time, the question of this Manichean choice looms over our heads like Damocles' sword. Throw the question "If you had to choose between Saddam and Bush, who would you chose?" and you will find the majority of an Arab or Islamic audience defending the former. A few might opt for the latter. But rarely would a voice be raised to refuse the choice.

It is also highly interesting to note how many occidentalists share with the orientalist the belief that democracy is not a natural product of Arab-Islamic societies. Some welcome it as "salvation" imposed from the outside and others reject it as "imported commodity".

In the twenties of the last century, resistance to colonialism in the Arab East managed to easily mix the struggle for independence (and the evacuation of the Mandatory armies) with the struggle for widening local political representation and the construction and defense of representative democratic institutions. There is no reason why a similar strategy cannot be adopted in our present times.

3. Talking to the 'Other'

One other variant of Occidentalism is the age-old ploy by Arab elites to speak to the "West in its own language". The many tribulations that this logic leads to are beyond imagination.

If the amalgam between Zionism and Communism is an attempt to convince the "West" that backing Zionism serves the West's enemies, while its real interests lie with the Arabs, drawing analogies

between Zionism and Nazism are attempts to speak to the West in its own language with an implied search for a similar affinity, establishing some identification between European resistance against Nazism and the Palestinian (and Lebanese) resistance against Zionism. "Just as you fought Nazism in the past, we too are fighting Zionism today." The words are by a Lebanese legislator from Hezbollah addressed to Ségolène Royal, the French Socialist Party's presidential candidate, during her visit to Lebanon in December 2006. Ségolène's failure to aggressively react to the comparison triggered a political storm against her in France.

This analogical discourse is coupled, in many cases, with its opposite: a yearning for Nazism and a mimetic desire to identify with it in its persecution of the Jews. About the same time as Ms Royal's visit (on December 11 and 12, 2006) to Lebanon a 'revisionist' conference on the Holocaust was being held in Tehran, attended by an assortment of well-known Holocaust-deniers and anti-Semites from Europe and Australia, such as Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, but also anti-Zionist ultra orthodox rabbis, and many others. In a speech to the conference, Iran's president Ahmadinejad predicted that Israel would disappear just as the Soviet Union did and the majority of the participants vied in denying the Holocaust, maintaining it is a myth, or putting in doubt the number of its victims. The Teheran conference epitomizes a kind of discourse on the Holocaust, Zionism and the state of Israel in general, that has been in vogue among certain Arab (and Iranian) elites embodying their desire for mimesis vis-à-vis the Nazis. The unstated premise is: "Too bad he didn't finish them off". The "he" is for Hitler and the "them", of course, the Jews: a barely veiled mimetic desire to be associated with the Nazi crime or to complete a crime left unfinished by the Third Reich's 'final solution'!

At times, that same antinomic discourse is found not only within the same political tendency [Hezbollah/Iran] but by the same author. Pierre Sadeq, the cartoonist of Lebanon's daily An-Nahar commenting on Ariel Sharon's invasion of the West Bank, and the Jenin massacre on 9

March 2002, published a cartoon that shows a remorseful Adolph Hitler blaming himself for not exterminating Sharon: "How did I forget Sharon? How did I?", reads the caption. Of course, the only reason for Hitler to want to exterminate Sharon is that he is a Jew. Yet, less than ten days earlier, on 28 February 2002, Sadiq's cartoon had pictured Sharon as a Nazi general, with the following caption: "A Failed Fascist"!

4. The Political Economy of Envy

On the 12th-14th March 2004, a big rally of intellectuals, experts and NGO activists, from the majority of the countries of the Arab World convened at the Alexandria Library under the banner of the "Congress of Arab Reform Issues - Vision and Implementation". They produced a comprehensive reform project known as the "Alexandria Document".

Apart from the fact that it pretends to plan reforms for 22 Arab states with some 270 million people, the document does not take into account such elementary things as the uneven development of those countries, and the difficulties of imposing a common program, worse yet, it does not even try to find common characteristics to address. Oil is not mentioned once, in a region whose very definition, not only its geo-strategic and economic position and importance in the world, revolves around the fossil fuel. "Where there are Arabs there is oil", goes the current saying.

What the document identifies as a common denominator is that these peoples and countries do not conform to the neo-liberal model of globalization and the injunctions of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. That is usually called bridging the gap between the Arab World and the "more developed" parts of the world.

Of course, you will not find any reference to the control of natural resources as a means of development, assuming that development is the central issue, which is not the case. Only indicators of Direct Foreign Investment worried

conference participants, in a region whose main function is to export petrodollars to Western metropolises! For some reason, the financial sector is considered the motor for Arab economies. While the charter calls for the increase of production, there is no mention of how this should happen [agriculture does not appear in the platform].

We are told that state monopolies should be abolished, but not a hint on measures to control private and corporate monopolies, not even inspired by anti-trust laws, following the American model. On the scale of political reform, everything concerning democratization is there except the principle of political and judicial equality of citizens. In the kingdom of freedoms, the Press and the Media are to be freed from state intervention, but no mention is made of the power of money in limiting the freedom of information. Presently, all the major Arab satellite TVs and the pan-Arab press media are financially tied to – not to say completely owned by – a handful of Saudi and Qatari rulers. Is that to be considered state control or financial control?

Here is a “culturalist” program par excellence with a post-9/11 US agenda aimed at producing a moderate form of Islam with an inflated emphasis on education. Concerning gender, the charter starts with the call for the empowerment of women and concludes with the call for the “liberation of women’s culture”, which lays the blame on Arab women for their present inferior status.

Coupling technocratic mentality and neo-liberalism, the platform is a masterpiece of the political economy of envy; a shopping list exactly in the sense as Huntington uses it constituted of some 36 shopping bags, some containing up to a dozen articles of Western consumption. It happens to overlook a few minor details: i) the means and methods [we dare not mention ‘struggle’] required for the implementation of its ‘reforms’; ii) the articulation, periodization and priorities of those demands; iii) the processes involved in the implementation; including the time limits required (where do we start? where do we want to be within a set limit of time?); iv) what

social, human resources should be mobilized in order to fulfill those tasks? Etc.

It is no wonder that this pure unadulterated intellectual product of our orientalized orientals led Jihad al-Zein, the op-ed editor of An-Nahar, to affirm that he does not see any single difference between the Alexandria platform and the Reform Initiative proposed by the US Administration earlier that year. He concluded, however, there would be no reform except from the ...outside! (Jihad al-Zein, ‘La Islah Illa Min al-Kharij’, An-Nahar, 31 March 2004).

Needless to mention that the signatories of the Platform never met again. Yet they may still be waiting for reform to come from... outside, waiting for the Barbarians.