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1

Said's Political Humanism

An Introduction

Bashir Abu-Manneh

In 1967, politics burst into Edward Said's life and changed him instantly and permanently. From a conventional liberal humanist literary critic, ruminating on the relationships between individual author and human existence, Said became a political critic and public intellectual committed to Arab and Palestinian freedom and self-determination. What triggered this transformation was Israel's decisive victory in the June 1967 war in which, in a mere six days, Israel occupied the remainder of Palestine, Syria's Golan Heights, and Egypt's Sinai. The abject defeat of Nasser's Arab nationalism left Arabs reeling in yet another historical crisis of self-examination, less than two decades after the loss of Palestine in 1948. With further domination came new resistance, and Palestinians rose to challenge the new Arab status quo.¹

In one of his first political essays after 1967, Said would dub this new alternative "Palestinianism." The shift was distinct: "from *being* in exile to *becoming* a Palestinian once again"; from "a political living death" to "vitality" and "a revitalization of thought." For Said, "[A] void, felt by every Palestinian, has been altered by an event into a discontinuity ... One is inert absence, the other is disconnection that requires reconnection." To describe this new reality a "whole range of Palestinian speech has erupted," including Said's own. A political baptism of a whole people is being announced here: "Previously a classless 'refugee,' since 1967 he [the Palestinian] has become a

politicized consciousness with nothing to lose but his refugeedom.” Note the language. It echoes Marx and Engels’s famous phrase from *The Communist Manifesto*: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.” But Said substitutes a class of workers with a nation of refugees that is coming into political consciousness and determining their own fate. The “new Palestinian ideology,” he proudly proclaims, “owes next to nothing to the Western Left,” which he saw as either complicit with Israel (like official communism) or contributing nothing to Palestinians.² Substituting nation for class and distancing himself from the socialist left are early indications of Said’s emerging political orientation: nationalist but neither communist, Marxist, nor internationalist. Said’s challenge was now clear: how to contest Israel’s occupations and Western empire using the ideological tools and instruments he selected.

The impact of 1967 goes much deeper than Said writing political tracts and analyses of the question of Palestine. Its effect was structural and marked everything Said did afterward. The year 1967 meant a long-lasting intellectual orientation that focused Said’s critical faculties on the nexus of colonialism and imperialism in the region and motivated him to locate empire’s cultural and political forms within the West’s own national cultures. Said’s own process of becoming was thus triggered: From being a mainstream literary academic, he would become the most influential cultural critic of empire of his generation. To understand the nature and contours of this change is to understand Edward Said: his varied intellectual and cultural investments; his distinct methodological combinations, ambivalences, and anxieties; and his firm anti-imperial principles. During the period of the defeat of the grand narratives of global emancipation (including decolonization and socialism), Said emerges as a defender of the colonized and oppressed. First, as a new species of radical intellectual: anti-

imperialist but not socialist; materialist but oblivious to political economy; political but inflating culture in human affairs. Second, as embodying anxious critical energy: in search of anchoring foundations yet profoundly skeptical about their permanence and value. Third, as an endlessly curious mind: engaging with intellectual and political questions beyond the narrow confines of his academic discipline.

How can one characterize the nature of Said's thought and capture the range of his contributions? For someone as prolific and erudite as Said, whose work ranges widely from British fiction, Oriental studies, Middle East politics, to music and cultural theory, this is no easy feat. No one volume is adequate for the task, and it is not the aim of this one to be either exhaustive or complete. Before I delineate the specific contribution that this volume aims to make to scholarship on Said and postcolonial studies, I propose to focus on some core features of Said's thought. These may help orient the reader to Said's *oeuvre*. Exactly because Said's work ranges across disciplines and themes, it is essential to identify his core intellectual features to understand what is distinctive about Said as critic and theorist. The features I examine speak to his method and style as well as to his intellectual tendencies and critical dispositions. I have clustered them into three categories: his political humanism, commitment to modernism, and antisystemic theory. I will spend most of my time defining his distinctive humanism and elaborating on why it is so consequential in his work. I will then briefly link it to the two other features of his thought.

Why is Said a political humanist? *Humanism* is hard to define and its multiple forms range across civilizations and traditions. To specify Said's own sense and usage is to say that Said saw himself as both a cultural and secular humanist. Cultural because "it encapsulates the idea that the humanities are worth studying because they foster

valuable features of human life and celebrate valuable qualities of human beings.”

Secular because it involves “the positive affirmation that human beings can find from within themselves the resources to live a good life without religion.”³ Said believed in the humanities as an intellectual vocation and thought that it should return to its “rightful concern with the critical investigations of values, history, and freedom.” He also thought that the questioning of certainties entailed by humanism should be turned against the artistic and literary products of the humanities “to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible.”⁴ What makes Said’s humanism political is his preoccupation with uncovering culture’s complicities in injustice and power, and exposing its role in historical injury. What if the culture Said revered and admired so much did play a role in the political oppression and domination he despised? That is Edward Said’s defining problem. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he defines it as follows: how to connect “the prolonged and sordid cruelty of such practices as slavery, colonialist and racial, and imperial subjection” with “the poetry, fiction, and philosophy of the society that engages in these practices.”⁵

Said had a lifelong commitment to the philological tradition epitomized by Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953). What struck him most about Auerbach’s project is that it affirmed the redeeming value of a sympathetic imagination able to capture and affirm the particularity of individual authors at a time of devastating European interwar conflict and antagonism. To see beyond national divisions and codify a common human heritage was key. What captivated Said about Auerbach’s humanism was “its emphasis on the unity of human history, the possibility of understanding inimical and perhaps even hostile others

despite the bellicosity of modern cultures and nationalisms, and the optimism with which one could enter into the inner life of a distant author or historical epoch even with a healthy awareness of one's limitations of perspective and insufficiency of knowledge."⁶ Said defended the universal kernel of this vision – even when he came to worry about its purely European register. He also cotranslated Auerbach's powerful defense of the concept of world literature "Philology and *Weltliteratur*." In the face of emerging Cold War divisions and the pressures of cultural standardization, Auerbach sought to renew humanism. He did so by extending his literary brief to the whole globe and gesturing toward a conception that seeks "a spiritual exchange between peoples," "the reconciliation of peoples," and an exchange "between partners" that "hastens mutual understanding and serves common purpose." As he concludes: "our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation."⁷ These are constitutive motifs for Said: culture as a precarious repository of human value in a world debased by power and national antagonism.

But what if, again, culture is not only involved in worldly politics but, through its own workings, contributes to conflict and dehumanization? What if humanism and the humanities are as much a part of the problem as the solution? More. What if culture leads to political domination? As when Said says: "I very much doubt that England would have occupied Egypt in so long and massively institutionalized a way had it not been for the durable investment in Oriental learning first cultivated by scholars like Edward William Lane and William Jones."⁸ Said's answer to this possibility is "secular criticism," an ideological house clearing of sorts. Rather than isolating both text and critic from historical circumstances, contemporary criticism needs, he posits, to re-engage with the world, actively interfere in it, and undermine the unjust status quo

created by “a new cold war, increased militarism and defense spending, and a massive turn to the right on matters touching the economy, social services, and organized labor.” Simply put, Said argues that: “The realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics. I propose that these realities are what should be taken account of by criticism and the critical consciousness.”⁹

Imperialism was the one reality that exercised Said most. After 1967, it hit home. As he clearly states in his massively influential *Orientalism* (1978): “The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny.”¹⁰ *Orientalism*'s theoretical contradictions, between an Auerbachian humanism and a Foucauldian antihumanism, have been widely discussed. What I want to do here is look at the problems of knowledge and imperial power that *Orientalism* raises in its sequel *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Because it examines both domination and resistance, domestically and in the outlays of empire, *Culture and Imperialism* is a more complete theorization of that nexus. It also allows Said to anchor his political humanism in Fanon's emancipatory “new humanism.”

The basic claim Said makes in *Culture and Imperialism* is that national cultures in the West are imperial. This is not a new claim. *Orientalism* advanced it in a more ontological manner: that anyone who speaks about the Orient is subject to the constitutive pressures and enunciative powers of Orientalist knowledge. For example: “So far as anyone wishing to make a statement of any consequence about the Orient was concerned, latent Orientalism supplied him with an enunciative capacity that could be

used, or rather mobilized, and turned into sensible discourse for the concrete occasion at hand.”¹¹ In *Culture and Imperialism*, this notion is generalized. The book is not only about how the West narcissistically develops self-constituting and self-generating (Oriental) knowledge about others but also about how active resistance in the colonies breaks that generative power and makes new knowledge in the center possible.¹² Until the consequential moment of decolonization, empire and culture can, for Said, be spoken about as practically the same.

To convey the sweep and permeation of imperial culture, two examples from the text will suffice. First: “The great cultural archive, I argue, is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made. If you were British or French in the 1860s you saw, and you felt, India and North Africa with a combination of familiarity and distance, but never with a sense of their separate sovereignty.” Second: “With few exceptions, the women’s as well as the working-class movement was pro-empire. And, while one must always be at great pains to show that different imaginations, sensibilities, ideas, and philosophies were at work, and that each work of literature or art is special, there was virtual unity of purpose on this score: the empire must be maintained, and it *was* maintained.”¹³ Imperialist assumptions and imperatives affected the realistic novel, fiction narratives, philosophers, deconstruction, Marxism, opera, and so forth. In short: “Modern imperialism was so global and all-encompassing that virtually nothing escaped it” (81). I shall show in the following text why modernism for Said disrupts this total imperial hegemony. But what I want to emphasize now is that the reason why Said views Western culture as inescapably imperial is clear: because he regards silence or indifference to empire as consent.

What the decolonization generation taught him was “that in so globalizing a world-view as that of imperialism, there could be *no neutrality. one either was on the side of empire or against it*, and, since they themselves had lived the empire (as native or as white), there was no getting away from it” (337, emphasis added). These may well have been the political terms of the decolonization struggle *in* the colonies: If you are not with us, then you are with the colonists. Said, however, assumes that metropolitan culture was as contentious and affected by imperial struggle as colonized society, and that not taking a position about empire in the imperial metropolis is the same as not taking one in the colonies. This equation, however, makes no historical sense. Not only because it is, in fact, the structural privilege of national societies that had overseas empires (like Britain) to be able to ignore empire – unless one was part of the small elite minority actively involved in running it – but also because attitudes to empire varied across classes and were strongly impacted by purely domestic concerns. Only exceptionally was the choice either *for* or *against*. The Boer War is a good example, when British elite interests in South Africa required public support and involvement. Mostly, though, empire was beyond the realm of everyday concern for the majority of Britons, and the imperial elite wanted to keep it that way.

This is the argument that Bernard Porter makes in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* (2004). Indifference to empire and a lack of commitment to it were widespread in British society. Britain, obviously, benefitted from empire, and its material impact was widespread (sugar, profits, trade, etc.). Porter recognizes this, and puts it in no uncertain terms when he says:

The empire probably affected nearly everyone materially ... They [effects] include Britain’s participation in two world wars, her economic

rise and decline, the perpetuation of her class structure, and the state of her people's teeth. In all of these ways the empire impacted hugely on her culture and society. That should be enough material repercussions for anyone. But they were all indirect.

After reviewing hundreds of tracts and diaries, he does find, though, that empire's attitudinal and cultural effects were far less evident and that, crucially, when they did exist they were determined by class. Porter does affirm that the British elite (especially its aristocracy) was profoundly imperialist and believed in its mission of ruling over others (as it did throughout the British empire). But what he finds no evidence for is that the majority class in Britain had any interest in empire or actively supported it. The reason for this, he argues, lay in the nature of Britain's *two-nations* class structure, which was premised on the "principle of complementarity, rather than community or commonality."¹⁴ Porter also shows that even the middle class was more ambivalent about imperialism than some presume: They were not demonstratively imperialist, were more interested in settlement colonies than in others, and had no distinctively imperial ideas of their own (unlike the upper classes). His conclusion is therefore clear. Contra Said: "[T]here can be no *presumption* that Britain – the Britain that stayed at home – was an essentially 'imperialist' nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."¹⁵

Said, in fact, never examines either the working class or women's movements. Yet he tars them both with imperial sympathies. And he even concedes that there is a long lull in representing empire in the British novel (which he, nonetheless, regards as born imperial): "But most of the great nineteenth-century realistic novelists are less assertive about colonial rule and possession than either Defoe or late writers like

Conrad and Kipling” (75). There is no question that imperial presence is registered in the British novel: mentions of colonies, characters being shipped off to British dominions or shipped back, colonial inheritances, and even colonial dispossession as structuring of novelistic plot lines and as shaping fictive events (as in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* [1868] – strangely ignored by Said). There is also no question that a whole genre of colonial travel and adventure writing arose to account for actual imperial encounter, especially when imperial ideology was at its strongest and most widespread in the late nineteenth century (Conrad is its high literary incarnation).¹⁶ But that hardly makes the British novel as a category imperial, or makes empire (more sweepingly) its main condition of possibility, as when Said says: “Without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it” (82). The picture is more complicated and nuanced than Said posits. Purely by virtue of representing history and capturing various historical processes, British novels could have, of course, responded to colonialism and empire. But that is not what is at stake here. The argument with Said is not *whether* the British novel contains invocations, traces, or registers of empire. These are undeniable. The argument is about what those mean and whether the whole trajectory of the British novel can be explained by empire.¹⁷

A famous case in which Said deploys this reading mode is Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). If Raymond Williams, in his pioneering reading in *The Country and The City* (1977), saw Sir Thomas Bertram as *both* domestic capitalist owner (improver) and imperial plantation exploiter (a “great West Indian” and “a colonial proprietor in the sugar island of Antigua”) at the same time, Said radically revises this assessment.¹⁸ He insists that slavery is the silenced core of the novel – even though that is a flawed claim because Austen was an abolitionist and her main protagonist in the

novel actively raises the topic of slavery with the master of the house. Said also argues that slavery alone *makes possible* Mansfield Park both as a country house and as a novel. I will later on examine what this tells us about Said's understanding of the relationship between capitalism and imperialism. What, though, does it tell us about Said's critical reading practices? That empire for Said is the *primary* if not the *singular* determiner of meaning in the novel; that this is why he rejects Williams's account of empire as playing only a part in a wider integrated capitalist accumulation process; and that this is why it is not enough for him to argue, as Williams does, that *Mansfield Park* is at the cutting edge of the moral and ideological negotiation between different fractions of the British elite. For Said, the novel has to be actively structured by the decisive and generative power of empire, which trumps all else in explaining the novel. Austen thus exemplifies a core notion for Said: that British domestic culture is simply imperialist and that all novels and intellectual tracts published in the last 300 years identify with an imperial identity.

This far is clear. But what has not been explored before is why Said believes that British domestic culture is imperial. I want to argue that he does so because of his particular conception of empire and its relationship to metropolitan capitalism. Said believes that empire as a category is equivalent to British "servants in grand households and in novels" and "transient workers": "profitable without being fully there" (75). But to make that assumption is to make a category mistake. Workers have a different relationship to Britain than the colonized, and the British working class is much more centrally located within the British polity than the imperialized living in the outlays of empire. By putting them on a par with the domestically exploited and seeing both servants and colonized as subjects suffering from invisibility and silence, Said devises

his job as literary critic: to counter their exclusion and register their (overlooked) voice and presence in text.

This equivalence and lack of clear distinction between different social categories suggests that Said has a very specific understanding of empire. And this is my point. Simply put: Said assumes that the imperialism he refers to is of the settler-colonial variety – a distinct version of empire. He thus regards empire *as a way of life*, exactly as it is for America in relation to Native Americans and for Israel in relation to Palestinians.¹⁹ In such settlement societies, the frontier is close to home and the struggle for territory and sovereignty shapes all aspects of life: Empire is a constitutive part of everyday politics, society, and culture. The colonized native is not *out there*, to be ignored or forgotten by most, but *in here*, seen as either an immediate threat to colonial security and survival and requiring exclusion (as dispensable) or controlled as exploited labor.²⁰ Whatever the case, settler colonies are different from purely imperial societies. William Appleman Williams emphasizes their distinctive nature when he says: “We Americans, let alone our English [colonist] forefathers, have produced very, very few anti-imperialists. Our idiom has been empire, and so the primary division was and remains between the soft and the hard [imperialists].” In settler colonies, empire permeates all core aspects of life and the anti-imperialism (of settlers) is a far more restricted activity.²¹

Said transposes this understanding of settler colonialism to empire in general. Rather than focus on the specific structures and histories of different imperialisms and their commensurate political and cultural forms, Said posits one category that fits all: control of land. As when he says, “The actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about ... Imperialism and the culture associated with it

affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory” (93). The focus on land, he argues, is how a “spatial moral order” is sanctioned “even where colonies are not insistently or even perceptibly in evidence” (94). Spatiality aids the imperial process by “validati[ng] its own preferences while also advocating those preferences in conjunction with distant imperial rule” (96) and by “devalu[ing] other worlds” (97). In other words, empire as control of land gives you a culture spatially structured by imperialism. But this is only true for settler colonies that require possession of land. Said presumes that the effects that are distinct to settler colonialism are general to all forms of empire. And that is the profoundly consequential slippage that lies at the heart of *Culture and Imperialism* and mars it.

Said gives empire such extensive domestic influence for another reason. Because he believes with Fanon that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples.”²² This statement, too, is not without its problems. That Britain and France impoverished the Third World and ravaged its independent modes of existence is without doubt. But does this mean that Europe’s overall economic and material self-making can be extrapolated from this fact? Not really. There is a whole tradition of radical critique in Britain that shows that: “Not only were the costs of imperialism higher than the benefits: the benefits went to the few, the nation paid the costs.” A host of contemporary economic historians have also argued that the benefits of empire were, in fact, underwhelming. Peter Cain summarizes these findings when he states that “[key] calculations probably indicate the upper bounds of possible gains from trading with empire before 1914 and that, if underconsumption is taken seriously, the empire may even have had a negative impact on British growth.” Indeed “the whole imperial

exercise was actually a burden on the economy even if it was beneficial to some sectional interests such as traditional elites.” Cain’s conclusion goes against Fanon’s blanket generalization that Said shares: Empire “probably slowed down the development of industry in Britain” and “undoubtedly slowed down the rate of social and political change.”²³ Individual imperialists and some elite sectors did benefit from empire, but probably at the cost of everyone else. These economic findings thus undermine the notion that modern Britain was economically made by its empire.

The same conclusion can be reached about the profits coming specifically from slavery. In his symptomatic reading of *Mansfield Park*, Said relies on Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) to show how central plantation profits were to the development of industrial Britain. That too, however, cannot be empirically sustained. After reviewing the economic record, Kenneth Morgan concludes: “Slavery and Atlantic trade made an important, though not decisive, impact on Britain’s long-term economic development between the late Stuart era and the early Victorian age, playing their part in enabling Britain to become the workshop of the world.” But that, “[d]espite the lucrative returns arising from these [slave plantation] investments, however, the various arguments for slavery and sugar’s role in metropolitan capital accumulation have not proven that the direct connection between the two was substantial.” Individual plantation owners may well have used their profits in “conspicuous consumption” back in the metropolis to build country houses, “but it is doubtful whether the impetus [to ‘British economic development’] was on a sufficient financial scale to have had a major impact.”²⁴

What this research shows is clear: Empire did contribute to metropolitan economy and society and it did shape some of its elite forms in decisive ways. What it

did not do is make the overall basis of British economy possible. Capitalism did that – as Raymond Williams had originally suggested. As Marx’s analysis in *Capital* shows, a whole world of colonial loot came with the “primitive accumulation” that announced the emergence of capital in Europe:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.

What Marx’s materialist conception shows is that it is capitalist production that fueled colonial exploitation, not the other way around.²⁵

To summarize my argument: Because Said ignores capitalism and class as determinate and structuring processes, he overestimates the significance of empire in domestic metropolitan affairs. By replacing political economy with geography and by spatializing empire, distinct causalities and determinations are ignored. Imperial center and periphery become mutually constitutive. What Said risks here is positing that domestic society in imperial nations is as determined by empire as colonized society: a negation of imperial inequality if ever there was.²⁶ To avoid such distortions, Said’s two core presumptions need to be rejected: that imperial practices have wall-to-wall domestic effects and that domestic culture is *carte blanche* imperial. The historical record is far more uneven than he presumes, and far more determined by class than he wishes to acknowledge. Rather than assuming that every worker and humanist was an

imperialist, the work of pinpointing the influence of empire should be a more determinate question.²⁷

Said is on firmer ground when he argues that a new form of humanism was generated by the decolonization struggle. As he argues, the struggle against imperialism was not just nationalist but had a universal emancipatory core as well. It shunned the “national bourgeoisie and their specialized elites, of which Fanon speaks so ominously, [that] in effect tended to replace the colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative one, which replicated the old colonial structures in new terms” (269). Fanon epitomizes this anticolonial culture for Said: a universalist who struggles against chauvinist nativism and colonial mimicry and formulates an alternative politics of liberation instead. Said describes Fanon’s position as real humanism: “more generous human realities of community *among* cultures, peoples, societies. This community is the real human liberation portended by the resistance to imperialism” (262). If Said simply ignores Fanon’s clear socialist worldview and commitments, he does anchor his own humanism in Fanon. He also contrasts it with “an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history” (366–367) that postmodernism represents for him. With Césaire (another socialist from Martinique), Said affirms that “no race has a / monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength” and that “there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest” [or: “rendezvous of victory”] (279). He also shows that such grand narratives of emancipation had global effects. They helped spur internal “humanist opposition to colonial practices like torture and deportation” (292) in the metropolis. These came not only from colonial émigrés like George Padmore, C. L. R. James, and Kwame Nkrumah, but from prominent European intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet as well.

What Said takes from this decolonizing generation is the insistence on resistance. To register both humanism's participation in domination and in resistance Said formulates a new construct: contrapuntal. This epitomizes his method in *Culture and Imperialism*: to unpack the complexities of the "intertwined and overlapping histories" (19) of empire while emphasizing its conflictual nature. As he clearly states: "But this global, contrapuntal analysis should be modelled not (as earlier notions of comparative literature were) on a symphony but rather on an atonal ensemble; we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices – inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions – all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography" (386). With that, Said revises Auerbach's cultural humanism and turns it into a global critique of imperialism.

Said's humanist commitment is also entangled with aesthetic and nonsystematizing preferences: modernism and eclecticism. Let me comment on both briefly. Modernism provides Said with an atonal ensemble. He relies on it to critique the imperial real. If Orientalism is philosophically seen as "a radical realism," as a language that "is considered to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality," then what disrupts realism's seamless connection to empire is the antirepresentational energies of modernism.²⁸ The form's ironic resistances to the imperium are advanced in "A Note on Modernism" in *Culture and Imperialism*. And modernism's core features are posited as a critical response to empire: "Conrad, Forster, Malraux, T. E. Lawrence take narrative from the triumphalist experience of imperialism into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality, and corrosive irony, whose formal patterns we have come to recognize as the hallmarks of modernist culture, a culture that also embraces the major work of Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Proust, Mann, and Yeats" (227).

Said favored modernism over realism. Though his first two books had absolutely nothing to do with empire and had conventional titles like *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) and *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), they conveyed Said's modernist investments and his methodological tendencies.²⁹ Conrad was regarded as an individual mind grappling with the problems of objective chaos and egoistic order. And *Beginnings* were conceptualized as a source of potential freedom – as departures, discontinuities, divergences, displacements, and modes of complementarity and adjacency. These were contrasted with forms of restriction that for him are linearity, succession, mimesis, dynasty, and theology. Said believed that a (molestive) affiliation is superior to bounded filiation. What *Beginnings* ultimately articulates is Said's own sense of critical self-invention and political rebirth after 1967, but at this stage in a literary-philosophical register and not yet in the language of political humanism that would define his books from *Orientalism* onward.

There are lines of continuity here, especially with modernism. Said's modernist investments, evident in his early work, are transposed onto the relationship between empire and culture. Against the authority of imperial rule, the full exilic force of modernist anxiety and ambivalence are unleashed. Realism becomes part of imperial representation while modernism stands in the vanguard of resistance to it. The problem with that is that such a binary cannot be historically sustained, and a literary mode by itself is no indication of orientation toward political power. Both modernism and realism could justify empire. If modernism can give you a communist Bertolt Brecht or a Fascist Ezra Pound, realism can give you an anti-imperialist George Orwell or an imperialist Kipling. Said ignores the ramifications of this point. Embedded in his analysis is the notion that, because modernism is ambivalent and ironic, it is a

historically progressive literary mode. But that is a context-specific question and depends on many other variables. It is impossible to read into a representational crisis like modernism one kind of political attitude or another. If Said seems aware of this when he suggests that Conrad is both imperialist and anti-imperialist, he does not change his overall conception of modernism as simply an anti-empire mode.

The emphasis on discontinuities is a key element in Said's theoretical toolkit. Discontinuities disrupt authorities, solidarities, and systems – which Said tends to regard as oppressive. That is why Said advances the notion of “never solidarity before criticism.” Criticism stands over solidarity. It is also elevated over method. The “dangers of method and system” is of becoming “sovereign” and having “their practitioners lose touch with the resistance and heterogeneity of civil society.” To avoid this eventuality is to embrace eclecticism. As Said put it in an illuminating interview in 1995: “[O]ne is moved in ways that are mysterious, and that is better for me than trying to find some system to contain them [interests] all. I am invariably criticised by younger postcolonialists (Ahmad, etc.) for being inconsistent and untheoretical, and I find that I like that, who wants to be consistent?”³⁰ If system is external and imposing, what is needed is something closer to the modernist sensibility he held so dear: atonal rupture. “Criticism in short is always situated; it is sceptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings.”³¹

Whether one agrees with Said's methodological preferences, they were guided by one political constant: his commitment to truth and justice.³² This comes across most powerfully in his work on Palestine. Whether as a Palestinian nationalist in the 1970s and 1980s or as both a critical nationalist and binationalist after the capitulation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, Said

actively participated in the struggle for Palestinian justice and liberation. In his most radical work, Said articulated the urgent necessity of both Palestinian self-criticism and the critique of Israeli power. For the first time since the rise of “Palestinianism,” Said developed an internal critique of Palestinian elite nationalism that mirrors Fanon on the social betrayals of the “national bourgeoisie.” Said’s anti-PLO *Peace and Its Discontents* thus performs a similar task to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. By holding out for the justice embodied in the popular self-organized mobilizations of the first intifada, Said affirms the potentialities of mass politics against a defeatist Palestinian elite. He also exposes a whole imperial morality when he argues that: “Peace really means peace between equals; it means freedom and equality for both peoples, not just one, nor peace for one as a lesser appendage to the other, who has full rights and security. Above all it means understanding the coherence and integrity of our own history as Palestinians and Arabs.”³³ Such judgments exemplify Said’s political humanism. As Noam Chomsky acknowledged, Said’s life project sought to undermine both the dominant principles of empire and the culture of imperialism.³⁴ Herein lies his real political legacy.

This volume ruminates on the problems and opportunities afforded by Said’s work: its productive and generative capacities as well as its in-built limitations. *After Said* aims to capture the essence of Said’s intellectual and political contribution and his extensive impact on postcolonial studies; it also reflects on what comes *after* Said. How have literary criticism and literary and political theory changed in the light of Said’s field-shaping and multifaceted interventions? The main objective of this volume is to examine Said’s legacy both intensively and extensively: by critically elaborating his core concepts and arguments and by tracing some of their significant afterlives.

By moving simultaneously inward into Said's *oeuvre* and outward to his growing legacy, this volume reframes and refashions key areas in the postcolonial literary field, especially the relationship between imperialism and culture. Critical thought *after* Said requires radical reorientations. Does the contemporary political moment, marked by imperial war, disorder, and neoliberal economic crisis, usher in the return of politics and political economy in postcolonial studies? What happens to postcolonial studies with capital (rather than just culture) as a core analytic category? A *materialist* Said is here excavated to fortify a materialist critique of historical and contemporary imperialism.

The volume is divided into three interconnected clusters.

First: clarifying Said's key concepts, interpretations, and critical contributions from his earliest book on Conrad to his Adornian ruminations on exile. Examined here are Said's formative humanism, critique of Orientalism, own distinction as postcolonial theorist, and rich response to exile as a mode of critical affiliation. Conor McCarthy captures Said's birth as a critic and his early intellectual investments in modernist exile and philological humanism that shape his life project. Vivek Chibber zooms in on the dual legacy of *Orientalism* as both razor-sharp critique of imperial ideology and theoretically contradictory and shows how through its culturalism the book risks disabling its own resources of political critique. Seamus Deane revisits *Culture and Imperialism* and Said's project of moving American criticism to a critique empire, and he too thinks about the costs of dismissing Marxism and turning imperial violence into a question of culture. Keya Ganguly identifies the contours of Said's exilic standpoint, identifies its political determination by Palestinian dispossession, and shows how

concepts like the contrapuntal and the paratactic express real-world irreconcilabilities and historical irresolution.

Second: charting Said's transformation of key intellectual fields and his generative intellectual legacy. Examined here are Said's seminal reinterpretation and reframing of the British literary canon from the perspective of empire, his emerging impact on the political theory of empire, the struggles between postcolonialism and theories of world literature, and the inflations of postcolonial modernism as an anticolonial transnational mode. Lauren M. E. Goodlad reads nineteenth-century British literature contrapuntally *after* Said as "a world-system in motion," remobilizes existing links between capitalism and colony and reformulates Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* as "a groundbreaking novel of geopolitical consciousness" – productively engaging Raymond Williams in the process. Jeanne Morefield identifies the value of Said's contrapuntal disposition for the "turn to empire" in political theory and posits its importance for analyzing contemporary American imperial power. Joe Cleary shows how postcolonial criticism ran up against its own culturalist limitations and neglected the crucial resources of a sociology of culture, thus allowing world-system theory to step in and challenge its global ambition – where should radical theory go from here? Dougal McNeill shows how the Saidian inflation of modernism has contributed to the distortions of transnational modernism, obscuring the key role that realism and the universalization of capitalism play in contemporary culture.

Third: focusing on key areas of Said's afterlives. Examined here are theoretical and political issues crucial to postcolonial studies today, such as migration and exile; the resurgence of orientalism and Islamophobia; and the crucial significance of political economy to the analysis of imperialism after the Iraq War. Joan Cocks critically engages

with Said and Freud on exile to advance a politics of possibility for both strangers and natives in our turbulent present, connecting immigration with alleviating the domestic problems of class inequality. Saree Makdisi renews the ideological critique of orientalism today in order to counter an America-led global demonization of Islam after 9/11 that dovetails with America's resurgent imperial policy. Robert Spencer calls on the resources of political economy (ignored by Said) to reveal the role of American imperialism in the organization of the global economy and in the neoliberal resurgence of capitalism and shows how it is simply impossible to understand the Iraq War without them.

The combined effect of *After Said* is clear: a materialist postcolonial study that takes both capitalism and imperialism seriously as core and connected categories of analysis, and that critiques the forms of culture they both generate to justify their dominations. Only then can the field join with Raymond Williams and say: "I believe that the system of meanings and values which a capitalist society has generated has to be defeated in general and in detail by the most sustained kinds of intellectual and educational work."³⁵ For Williams, the Welsh European, that meant defeating capitalism on an imperial scale: an objective worth upholding both in theory and in practice.

¹ Looking back on this period in his *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta, 1999), Said explained: "I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it had all started, the struggle over Palestine" (p. 293).

² Edward W. Said, "The Palestinian Experience" [1968–1969], in *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994* (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 3–23, p. 4, p. 18, p. 9, p. 19.

³ Richard Norman's definitions are concise and clarifying: *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 14, p. 18.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 14, p. 135.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994 [1993]), p. xiv.

⁶ Edward W. Said, "Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition," in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representations of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. ix–xxxii (p. xvi).

⁷ Erich Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," trans. by Maire and Edward Said, *The Central Review* XII.1 (Winter 1969), 1–17 (6–7, 17).

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 1997 [1981]), p. 26.

⁹ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (New York: Vintage, 1991 [1983]), p. 4, p. 5.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995 [1978]), p. 27.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 221–222. Aijaz Ahmad rightly describes this as Said seeing "that Europeans were ontologically incapable of producing any true knowledge about non-Europe": In *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 178.

¹² For an excellent reading of *Orientalism*, see Timothy Brennan, "The Illusion of a Future: *Orientalism* as Travelling Theory" *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Spring 2000), 558–583.

¹³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xxiii, p. 62. Page numbers follow future quotations in the body of the text.

¹⁴ Bernard Porter, "'Empire, What Empire?' Or, Why 80% of Early-and Mid-Victorians Were Deliberately Kept in Ignorance of It," *Victorian Studies* 46.2 (Winter 2004), 256–263 (260).

¹⁵ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. xv, p. 24. There is now a voluminous body of historical writing around these issues. For a similar perspective to Porter, see Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strike Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005). For a range of historical work from the opposite (though non-Saidian) perspective, see John M. Mackenzie, "Empire and Metropolitan Cultures," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 270–293.

¹⁶ Patrick Brantlinger's most recent book provides a good introduction to this genre: *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ For an excellent refutation of Said on the Victorian novel, see Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Henry shows that by searching for a nonexistent imperial ideology in Eliot, critics like Said have been "blinded to the visible": Her actual material links to empire (p. 113). Another important materialist reading of the Victorian novel is Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The*

Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Goodlad anchors her study in the geopolitics of transnational capital but without assuming that “Victorian culture was built around a coherent idea of Britain as an imperial nation-state” (p. 6).

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 114.

¹⁹ I take that evocative phrase from a book Said quotes: William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2007 [1980]). Williams shows how America’s vast and expansive imperial worldview begins as colonial at home. Next quotation is from page 34.

²⁰ Said elaborates on Zionism’s exclusionary settler colonial dynamics in *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1992 [1979]), pp. 56–114. For an examination of the colonization model in Israeli sociology, see my “Israel in US Empire,” *New Formations* 59 (Autumn 2006), pp. 34–51.

²¹ Said does refer to the British anti-imperial tradition and to Bernard Porter’s *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge*. He concludes that anti-imperialists like Wilfrid Scawen and William Morris “were far from influential” and that “there was no overall condemnation of imperialism until – and this is my point – *after* native uprisings were too far gone to be ignored or defeated” (291). But this is factually incorrect. For example, Marx in 1869 conditioned the success of the working-class revolution in Britain on anticolonialism in Ireland and thought that Ireland is closer to revolution than Britain because the Irish question combined economic exploitation with national oppression (his and Engels’s anticolonialism was evident from the late 1850s, with both supporting the Indian Rebellion of 1857). Marx’s anticolonial views on Ireland are well known. Lenin utilizes them to formulate his principles of self-determination and socialist strategy. See Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 115–153. Said ignores all this (including the fact that all the major socialist revolutions happened in the Third World) because he wrongly believed that Marx was both Orientalist and Eurocentric, and that the tradition he spawned, therefore, was implicated in empire. For a recent review of Said’s “fundamentally flawed and unsound” views on Marx, see Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Saqi, 2013), pp. 68–102, p. 90.

²² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001 [1961]), p. 81.

²³ Peter Cain, “Was It Worth Having? The British Empire 1850–1950,” *Revista de Historia Económica* 16.1 (March 1998), pp. 351–376. Quotations, in order, are from pages 352, 356, 359, 367, and 371.

²⁴ Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economic, 1660–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Quotations from pages 97 and 95. For the most extensive analysis of country houses and empire, see Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

²⁵ Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued that we cannot attribute to empire “any decisive role in the origin of capitalism”: *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 148.

²⁶ For an example of such conceptual obfuscation, see Gauri Viswanathan, “Raymond Williams and British Colonialism: The Limits of Metropolitan Cultural Theory,” *Views beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Roman (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 217–230.

²⁷ An illuminating example from political theory is Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For an excellent materialist critique of postcolonial theory’s flaws and blind spots, see Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013).

²⁸ The phrase comes from *Orientalism*, p. 72.

²⁹ For Said’s partiality to modernism as a critical mode of interrogating modernity and later empire, see Abdurahman A. Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 111, p. 119.

³⁰ *Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. by Amritjit Singh and Bruce G. Johnson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), p. 90.

³¹ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, pp. 25–26.

³² Jan Selby thinks that Said’s “concern with narrative is epistemologically and politically subordinate to a concern with justice and truth”: “Edward W. Said: Truth, Justice and Nationalism,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8.1 (2006), pp. 40–55 (51).

³³ Edward W. Said, *Peace and Its Discontents* (London: Vintage, 1996 [1993]), p. 25.

³⁴ Noam Chomsky, “The Unipolar Moment and the Culture of Imperialism,” Edward Said Memorial Lecture at Columbia University, December 3, 2009: <https://chomsky.info/20091203-2/>.

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 76.