

EDWARD W. SAID: TRUTH, JUSTICE AND NATIONALISM

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Said

Foucault

Chomsky

nationalism

Palestine

Within post-colonial debates, Edward Said has tended to be viewed by critics and admirers alike through a predominantly postmodern lens: as an (albeit inconsistent) Foucauldian genealogist of the relations between western truths and oriental subjugation, and as an opponent of cultural homogeneity and advocate of hybridity and exile. This paper argues, by contrast, that Said was above all a critical modernist committed to truth and justice; that despite his opposition to pure identities he was not anti-nationalist; and that he was remarkably consistent, both philosophically and politically, across a lengthy period of at least twenty-five years. In his desire to ‘speak truth to power’ and in his ethical universalism, Said had much deeper affinities, the paper argues, with Noam Chomsky than with Michel Foucault. It was this critical modernism, I argue, that underlay Said’s belief that nationalist movements could be of progressive and liberatory potential, and that also underlay his critiques of mainstream propaganda on the question of Palestine, as well as his ambivalent positions on the utility of the two-state solution.

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It has become almost commonplace to charge Edward Said and his work with inconsistency, even hypocrisy. The list of objections that have been made is long indeed. For not only did Said deploy Foucault alongside Gramsci in *Orientalism* (1991 [1978]), and T. S. Eliot alongside Fanon in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994a [1993]) – in a manner that elided their intellectual as well as political differences. Not only did Said juxtapose searing denunciations of the racism inherent within ‘western thought’ (claiming of the nineteenth century that ‘every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was . . . a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric’) with, on the other hand, a quite conservative preference for that same humanist tradition (1991 [1978]: 204, 2004). Not only would Said move, epistemologically, between Nietzschean critiques of objectivity (‘truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are’) and Chomsky-like exhortations of the importance of ‘speaking truth to power’ (Nietzsche 1954; Said 1991 [1978]: 203, 1994b: ch. 5). Not only did Said (1999a) think of himself, biographically, as an ‘out of place’ exile and a homeless outsider – despite his privileged background and his professional location near the centre of liberal American culture. Not only did Said, for some, walk a tightrope between being a detached literary scholar, on the one hand, and pro-Palestinian polemicist, on the other – ‘Yasser Arafat’s man in New York’, as one headline had it (Smith 1989). Not only this, but Said was also seemingly unsure on certain directly political issues relating to the plight and future of the Palestinians. Thus for many he appeared to combine a hostility towards the nation-state and nationalism, with his well-known and forceful championing of the Palestinian right to self-determination. Said also, it is often claimed, switched from support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the 1980s and 1990s, to advocacy of a single bi-national state in the years before his death. The question necessarily poses itself: what are we to make of all these supposed switches, tensions and contradictions?

It seems to me that there are at least four possible answers. One could respond that Said’s arguments were indeed ‘distinctly schizophrenic’, however provocative and productive they might have been (Said in fact admits as much of *Orientalism*, adding – a touch disingenuously perhaps – that ‘I designed it that way’) (Mackenzie 1995: 5; Salusinszky 1987: 137). One could respond, alternatively, as Joan Cocks does in this volume and elsewhere, that the tensions within Said’s writings and life are testimony to the ‘inevitability of subjective contradictions in human beings’ (2002: 150) and are important and interesting precisely for that reason. Alternatively again, one could interpret Said’s shifting and equivocal positions as a very practical function of the diverse and fast-changing problems and audiences which his work endeavoured and struggled to address, ranging from questions of literary theory to the problem of Middle East peace, from the

era of Third Worldist post-colonial struggle to the contemporary ascendancy of American neo-liberal imperialism. Or, fourth and finally, one might want to insist that Said simply was not as inconsistent as may at first appear, and that the antinomies and reversals that so pervade his thought are often misread, and are not necessarily founded on logical contradictions.

There is something to be said, I think, for each of these interpretations, but I want here to explore the latter two in particular since it is these which shed most light, in my view, on the thorny question of nationalism, as well as on the value of Said's contributions. Said, let me assert first of all, was both more consistent and much more modernist and humanist than is generally recognized within postcolonial studies, and was not anti-nationalist (if by that we imply hostility to the idea of nationhood, or to the institutional form of the nation-state). Moreover, taken as a whole, Said's *oeuvre* is sharply at odds with the generally post-structuralist flavour of contemporary post-colonial studies, this being true both of his substantive theoretical orientations, as well as of his stylistic and political distaste for the 'generally hermetic, jargon-ridden, unthreatening combativeness' (Said 2004: 125) of the modern academy. The irony, of course, is that Said and *Orientalism* in particular were the formative influences on the field of postcolonial studies, and continue to be key reference points in its development. Yet this, it seems to me, is precisely where one of the main problems of interpretation arises, namely that Said's use of Foucault within his extraordinarily influential *Orientalism*, combined with his deployment and articulation of some of the key tropes of post-structuralist and postcolonial theory – his concern with texts, representations, identity, hybridity, exile, resistance, etc. – has tended to result in critics and followers alike viewing Said through a predominantly postmodern lens (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001: 13–14). Equally, Said's celebration of exile and his opposition to cultural homogeneity has, within the context of a postcolonial field strongly hostile to nationalism and statism, too often been misread as an anti-nationalist position. I argue below that, interpreted outside the fold of postcolonial studies, it becomes evident that Said was neither as post-structuralist nor as anti-nationalist, nor indeed as contradictory, as may otherwise appear.

That said, the inconsistencies in Said's work cannot all be interpreted away in this fashion, for others of them remain – and result largely, I think, from the diversity of locations, issues and audiences to which he tried to speak. Said spoke to more different types of audience, and on a wider range of exceedingly difficult themes, than any other late twentieth-century intellectual. Thus, if we compare him, for instance, with Noam Chomsky – the only comparable figure in American intellectual life – it becomes readily apparent just how disparate were the audiences and problems that Said addressed. Across his work on both cognitive linguistics and international politics, Chomsky speaks and writes in a philosophically naturalist

and realist key, with few tensions between his approaches to the two issue areas; in his work on international politics, moreover, his central aim has consistently been to expose the lies and double standards which underpin the foreign policies of the United States and its local allies (see, e.g., Chomsky 1972, 1991). Said, by contrast, spoke on a diverse range of literary, cultural and political issues that often demanded quite different epistemological starting points; and in his essays and articles on Middle East politics he addressed not only the abuses of US and Israeli policy, but also the deficiencies of Arab politics and society (and Said was also, of course, a participant in debates within the Palestinian national movement). Add to this Said's 'worldliness' (Said 1983) and his pragmatically grounded commitment to each of these problem areas, and it is little wonder, I think, that there are so many twists and tensions across his work.

This paper attempts to develop these arguments in relation to both the broad contours of Said's thinking, and the specific questions of nationalism and the Palestinians. I argue that Said was above all a critical modernist committed to truth and justice; that he was not anti-nationalist; and that he was remarkably consistent, both philosophically and politically, across a lengthy period of twenty-five years. But I also suggest that Said did struggle with the problem of addressing diverse 'worlds', this being reflected in tensions across his work. The Said that emerges here is both less radical and less inconsistent than the Said who features in most postcolonial studies. Whether this adds to or detracts from his work is a question I leave to one side. I begin by summarizing Said's views on truth, justice and critique, and only in subsequent sections do I turn to the questions first of nationalism and the nation-state, and then of Palestinian rights and the one- and two-state solutions.

Truth, justice, critique

Perhaps the best place to start exploring Said's basic orientations is a debate that took place in 1971 between Foucault and Chomsky, during which the two of them set out their very different approaches to human nature, knowledge, power and justice (and during which the interviewer, the Dutch anarchist Fons Elders, also repeatedly attempted to disrupt the gravitas of the occasion by placing an orange wig on Foucault's bald head) (Elders 1974: 133–97; Wilkin 1999). During this encounter Chomsky set out his views that serious social theory and analysis must be founded on some conception of human nature, that it is the task of social science to analyse reality and discover truths in the service of freedom and justice, and that true knowledge stands in an oppositional relationship with power (as he puts it elsewhere with characteristic clarity, 'it is the responsibility of intellectuals to

tell the truth and to expose lies’) (1967: 257). Foucault disagreed entirely. In his view, human nature, truth and justice simply did not exist as a-historical abstracts outside discourse and society, against which reality could be evaluated and critiqued; for him, to the contrary, claims about ‘human nature’, ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ were always themselves premised on and implicated in ceaseless struggles for power. For Chomsky, truth and justice can and do oppose power; in Foucault’s view, a Nietzschean will-to-power governed all.

The relevance of this here is that both philosophically and politically, Said was much closer to the modernist thinking of Chomsky than to the archetypally postmodernist thinking of Foucault. Said did, of course, draw heavily upon Foucault in *Orientalism*, analysing European scholarship and literature on the Arab-Islamic world as a system of power-knowledge in the service of (and to some extent constitutive of) imperial domination. But thereafter Said quickly moves away from Foucault’s position that ‘power and knowledge directly imply one another’, arguing that Foucault had an overly sympathetic and insufficiently oppositional ‘imagination of power’ and had succumbed to ‘political hopelessness’ (Foucault 1977: 27; Said 1986a, 1997: 18). Furthermore, even in *Orientalism* Said holds not only to the possibility, but also to the actuality, of the transcendence of *Orientalism*’s will-to-power: ‘I would not have undertaken a book of this sort,’ he asserts in its concluding chapter, ‘if I did not also believe that there is scholarship that is not as corrupt, or at least as blind to human reality, as the kind I have been mainly depicting’ (and Said then lists a range of vigilant individual scholars – Clifford Geertz, Maxime Rodinson, Roger Owen and others – whose work he views as not dominated and disciplined by the ‘guild tradition of Orientalism’) (1991 [1978]: 326). For Said, the central cause of contemporary Orientalism is not some universal will-to-truth inherent even within the best of scholarship, but rather ‘intellectual dishonesty’ and ‘dogmatic slumber’ (1991 [1978]: 327). Said acknowledges that this espousal of a ‘non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective’, and of ‘non-dominative and non-coercive knowledge’, is distinctly un-Foucauldian, claiming that his argument is ‘deliberately anti-Foucault’ (1991 [1978]: 24, 1985: 15; Salusinszky 1987: 137). Even at its height, in *Orientalism*, Said’s use of Foucault is remarkably thin.

And in his subsequent work, as well as in his parallel writings on US imperialism and Middle East politics, this essentially modernist vein of Said’s work is even more apparent. Chomsky’s work becomes a constant reference point, with Said speaking with unstinting admiration for Chomsky’s ‘propaganda model’ of the American media (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Said 1994c: 81), and for his dissections of American foreign policy and Middle East politics (Said 1975, 1999b), and also claiming an inclination, with Chomsky, for anarcho-syndicalism – even if this was only for its

‘romantic appeal’ (Wicke and Sprinkler 1992: 261–2). Said acknowledges that Chomsky and Foucault represent the two poles of his thinking and practice, concluding in the end ‘that Chomsky’s is the more honourable and consistent position’ (Salusinszky 1987: 133–4). And Said even discusses the aforementioned clash between Chomsky and Foucault, making it clear in his brief remarks where the greater portion of his sympathies lie (Said 1982). It is remarkable, given this, how little attention Said’s affiliation with Chomsky has received within post-colonial studies.

For Said, as for Chomsky, ‘the intellectual represents emancipation and enlightenment,’ and ‘the purpose of the intellectual’s activity is to advance human freedom and knowledge’ (1994b: 84, 13) – this juxtaposition of knowledge and freedom being classically modernist and distinctly un-Foucauldian. In Said’s view, the intellectual can participate in promoting knowledge and in turn freedom through what is, in effect, a threefold strategy. In the first place, Said argues, intellectuals need to detach themselves from the interests and biases of the state, it being only through the practice of maintaining a safe distance from the powerful, and by maintaining a ‘critical and relatively independent spirit of analysis and judgement’, that it becomes possible to ‘speak truth’ (1994b: 64). There is no sense here of power as a dispersed, amorphous fabric of relations, as it is for Foucault: power, to the contrary, is concentrated in the hands of the state, and in those institutions that surround it and are its ideological bulwarks, most notably the media. Moreover, ‘speaking truth’ is not, in Said’s view, merely a rhetorical device, still less a utopian aspiration: as he pithily asserts, ‘[s]peaking truth . . . is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change’ (1994b: 75). Such a project is realizable, in Said’s view, because there do exist social spaces where one can think and write without being beholden to power, the American university being one of these ‘quasi-utopian spaces’ (1994b: 61). The defence of truth is, for Said, at the very centre of critical intellectual practice.

If ‘speaking truth’ is one core principle of intellectual practice, a second, for Said, is ethical commitment to certain intrinsic universal goods: justice, equality, freedom and knowledge. In Said’s view there is an empirical basis for this universalism: ‘people all over the world are moved by ideals of justice and equality’, he observed in his final book, before adding that ‘the affiliated notion that humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try and overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well’ (2004: 10). Almost thirty years before he had remarked on a personal level that what moved him mostly was ‘anger at injustice, an intolerance of oppression, and some fairly

unoriginal ideas about freedom and knowledge’ (1974: 36). But this was no mere personal matter: for Said, universal human rights as enshrined within international law provide universally applicable benchmarks for political judgement and intervention (1980 [1979]: xvi, 47–8). As he put it in his 1993 Reith Lectures:

Political activity has to rest on the intellectual’s unbridgeable conviction in a concept of justice and fairness. . . . Everyone today professes a liberal language of equality and harmony for all. The problem for the intellectual is to bring these notions to bear on actual situations where the gap between the profession of equality and justice, on the one hand, and the rather less edifying reality, on the other, is very great. (Said 1994b: 69)

Implicit within this, finally, is a critical attitude towards prevailing dogmas and states of affairs, a commitment not just to ‘speaking truth’, but also to ‘speaking truth to power’ (1994b: ch. 5). This oppositional mode of thinking is not grounded, for Said, in some Nietzschean affirmation of identity, or in resistance as an end in itself, but rather in an ethical opposition to mistruths, misrepresentations and denials of freedom and justice. Moreover, for Said, as for a whole tradition of critical social science (see, e.g., Fay 1987), an oppositional stance flows straightforwardly out of sound intellectual practice. The words with which Barrington Moore concludes his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* are instructive in this regard:

[A]ny simple straightforward truth about political institutions or events is bound to have polemical consequences. It will damage some group interests. In any society the dominant groups are the ones with the most to hide about the way society works. Very often therefore truthful analyses are bound to have a critical ring, to seem like exposures rather than objective statements, as the term is conventionally used. (Moore 1966: 522–3)

In Said’s work political critique develops naturally out of the disclosure of injustices, falsehoods and misrepresentations. From this perspective, and contrary to the claims of some commentators, there is no clash between the detachment of the scholarly humanist and the commitment of Said the polemicist who argues for Palestinian rights (Kennedy 2000: 6).

But matters are also more complex than this since Said also, as noted above, addressed a bewildering variety of problems, disciplines and audiences – many of which demanded starting points very different from a desire to ‘speak truth to power’. In his commentaries on international and Middle East politics, Said wrote in a realist vein that was sharply attuned to global realities of power and the authority of the state, the American state in particular, and that understood these global realities in implicitly structuralist terms (his ‘working understanding or sketch of the global system’ being

informed by the world systems theorists Immanuel Wallerstein and Janet Abu-Lughod, among others) (2004: 138). His interpretations of the 'western' literary canon, by contrast, necessarily had a very different feel, displaying a sensitivity to the complexity and irreducibly provisional character of textual exegesis, to the intrinsic aesthetic value of great works of literature and art (even if these also needed to be interpreted in relation to their particular socio-political and historical contexts) and to the human capacity for creation and invention, 'the achievement of form by human will and agency' (2004: 15). Finally, in his discussions of identity, Said combined a concern with the cultural and historical narratives through which national identities take shape, with deeply personal reflections on his own experiences and self-consciousness of exile, homelessness and loss. Across these very different terrains, Said necessarily spoke in quite distinct and divergent voices.

This, as it stands, is not in my view a problem. Recognition of the uncertain or context-bound quality of textual interpretations, or of the centrality of narratives and meanings in personal and group identities, does not necessarily contradict – or trump – a project of speaking truth to power. Arguably, Said sometimes got the balance wrong, on some occasions exaggerating the determining power of discursive structures, for instance, while on others overstating the 'historical impact of human agency' (2004: 10). But such inconsistencies did not in themselves vitiate his ambition to address multiple audiences or to explore issues of narrative and meaning while holding on to universal principles and a realist commitment to exposing lies. For Said's central concern was 'justice, not identity' (Eagleton 2004) – it being in this light, in turn, that his views on nationalism and Palestine should also be seen.

Nations, states, nationalism

Postcolonial studies, and indeed postmodernist thinking more broadly, has an insistent anti-nationalist and anti-statist leaning. Postmodernists, as Stuart Hall puts it with only slight exaggeration, tend to reject all the 'great collective social identities of class, of race, or nation, of gender, and of the West' (1991: 44), viewing them as hegemonic identity narratives that suppress marginality, heterogeneity and difference. This applies with equal force to 'nation' and 'state'. Thus, to give just a couple of well-known examples, Homi Bhabha depicts the nation not only as an ambivalent narrative strategy but also as 'one of the dark corners of the earth', contrasting both with the heterogeneity of the modern city and with the emergent global trans-national culture (1990: 6, 319–20, 4), while Rob Walker critiques the state and the attendant discourse of state sovereignty as the constitutive and limiting features of modern political life (1995: 24). For

such authors, nation and state are problematic because of their twofold suppression of internal differences and trans-national hybridities. The postmodernist and postcolonial hostility to the nation-state, in sum, is founded above all upon a problematics of identity.

Influenced, perhaps, by this prevailing anti-nationalist and anti-statist sentiment, as well as by his cosmopolitan celebration of exile, Said has often been presented within postcolonial debates as an anti-nationalist thinker. Thus, for example, Eqbal Ahmad claims that Said argued ‘beyond nationalism and post-colonial statehood’ (1994: 22); Ashcroft and Ahluwalia observe that ‘Said was no apologist for Palestinian nationalism’ (2001: 132); and Aijaz Ahmad, writing in a much more critical vein, bemoans Said’s ‘strident’ rejections of ‘nationalism, national boundaries, nations as such’ (1992: 201). Others have placed greater stress upon the tensions within Said’s position on nationalism (e.g. Parry 1992; Cocks 2002). It is no doubt true that Said’s more hyperbolic remarks on the subject were distinctly anti-statist and anti-nationalist. He asserted, for instance, that ‘the nation . . . is always triumphalist, always in a position of authority, always exacting loyalty and subservience rather than intellectual investigation and re-examination’ (1994b: 27); and elsewhere he observed that ‘the chief, most official, forceful and coercive authority is the State with its borders, customs, ruling parties and authorities’ (a statement to which Aijaz Ahmad takes justifiable exception: ‘that a stateless Palestinian, longing always to have a state of his own, should describe the state – *all* states; the state *as such* – as a “coercive identity” signifies a paradox too painful to bear comment’) (Said 1990; Ahmad 1992: 215). Yet, while there is undeniable inconsistency on these questions, taking the broad sweep of Said’s work I do not think it was either as anti-nationalist, or as tensional, as most commentaries suggest.

In the first place, Said was generally more discriminating of the pros and cons of nations, states and nationalisms than the sweeping denunciations quoted above might imply. His references to nation-states and nationalism are usually prefixed with qualifiers that make it clear that he is talking about nation-states and nationalisms at their worst: about ‘exclusivist’ nationalisms, about the dangers inherent in ‘untutored national consciousness’, about ‘xenophobia’, ‘chauvinism’, ‘tribalism’ and ‘nativism’, rather than about nationalism *per se* (e.g. 1990: 6, 1994a [1993]: 64). Likewise his comments on the state imply that it is ‘statism’ – the worship of the state – and not the state itself, which he views as so insidious (1984: 169). Said is less opposed to the state *per se* than to certain state forms (principally the authoritarian, national security state which was so much the object of his critiques of the Arab world), the counterpoint to this being his advocacy of essentially liberal democratic forms of statehood and citizenship, including the founding ideas of the US constitution (e.g. 2000: 32–7, 234–8, 2004: 50). Underdeveloped as Said’s comments on these matters often were, it

nonetheless seems clear that his was not a critique of the nation and state *per se*, merely of its less-than-ideal concretisations. Said, as he himself claimed, did not advocate ‘a simple anti-nationalist position’ (1994a [1993]: 263).

The reasons for this, second, arise out of Said’s central concern with the problematics of justice rather than identity. For Said, national identity is or at least can be ‘a good’ when it is allied to, or conducive of, a liberationist project. Thus when allied to imperialism or to authoritarian post-colonial states, nationalism tends to promote bellicose ‘narratives of patriotic sovereignty’ and inhuman ‘policies of arrogant interventionism’ (2004: 50), while, when it takes an anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian form, nationalism can at least potentially be a servant of freedom and liberty. This is especially so of anti-imperialist nationalisms, in at least three respects: because they can enable recoveries of identity and reassertions of belonging that are suppressed under foreign rule; because national consciousness, as Fanon says, can pave the way for the emergence of ‘social consciousness’, and in turn for liberation; and because the most progressive nationalisms are themselves founded on universal principles, being at their best when they see individual national histories ‘as an aspect of the history of *all* subjugated men and women’ (1994a [1993]: 258–9; Fanon 1965 [1961]). Said even takes students of postcolonial politics to task for their inattention to the radical, liberationist dimensions of nationalist thought and practice (1994a [1993]: 264). For Said, while national consciousness cannot be an ‘end in itself’, it can be progressive when it takes a critical, ‘anti-systemic’ form (1994c: 60; Arrighi *et al.* 1989).

The question of Palestine

With these general positions in mind, we can now turn to a final set of supposed contradictions in Said’s work – on the question of Palestine. For commentators such as Bryan Turner there is a ‘hiatus’ between Said’s Foucauldian philosophical leanings and his essentially realist and universalist politics relating to Palestine (1994): 6). For others, moreover, there is a (painful) contradiction between Said’s anti-nationalism and his support for Palestinian statehood (Ahmad 1992: 215). For still others, Said significantly shifted his positions on the one- and two-state solutions, from support for a two-state solution during the 1980s and most of the 1990s, to support for a bi-national state in the final years of that decade (Shavit 2000; Cocks 2002: 149). In my view, however, none of these criticisms bears close scrutiny.

To start with, because Said’s worldview was more Chomskian than Foucauldian (as argued above), there was no contradiction between his general philosophical positions, on the one hand, and his defence of Palestinian rights, on the other. Said’s essays on Palestine are dedicated,

above all, to ‘speaking truth to power’. Thus in publications such as *The Question of Palestine* (1980 [1979]) and *Blaming the Victims* (Said and Hitchens 1988), as well as in countless articles and interviews, Said’s consistent aim was to critique historically spurious scholarship and media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This involved, for instance, lambasting Joan Peters’ much-lauded (at least in the US) but absolutely fraudulent thesis that a large proportion of the Arab ‘residents’ of what became Israel were recent immigrants from elsewhere in the Arab world (Said 1988a; Peters 1984); critiquing the orthodox Zionist narrative that the Palestinian refugee problem resulted less from the Palestinians’ expulsion by Israeli forces, than from advice to flee given by Arab leaders (Said 1980 [1979]: 83–114); and exposing the fatuousness and double standards inherent in most American and Israeli ‘expertise’ on Middle Eastern terrorism (1988b). It involved arguing that turn-of-the-century Palestine was not a ‘land without a people, for a people without a land’, as Israel Zangwill had it, but a land inhabited by an ‘identifiable people’ who were systematically displaced and dispossessed through the creation of the state of Israel (Said 1980 [1979]: 9, 7). And it involved reasoning on universalist grounds that the Israel-Palestine question was not ‘just a matter of two stories contesting each other’ (as Israeli centre-left ‘doves’ like Amos Oz tend to argue), but one where there was ‘a truly profound, irreducible injustice’ done to the Palestinians ‘for which the injured side needs to get institutional recognition’ (Said 1986b: 78; Oz 1994). ‘There is no symmetry to the conflict’, Said observed. ‘There is a guilty side and there are victims’ (Shavit 2000). On these issues, there was no dissonance, or hiatus, between Said’s philosophy and his politics.

Said’s defence of the Palestinian right to self-determination, meanwhile, and his advocacy of (and participation within) the Palestinian national movement, was completely in tune with his universalist support for anti-systemic nationalisms. The effacement of the existence of the Palestinians as a people has long been a cornerstone of Zionist thinking, as Said correctly recognizes, it being this that has enabled the Israeli state to argue, for instance, that the Palestinians are merely Arabs, and should therefore be incorporated into an Arab state, or to deny, for instance, its responsibility for the dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinians. Conversely, the affirmation of the existence of the Palestinians as a people is, for Said, a crucial and necessary step towards the righting of the injustices done to the Palestinians as a people, and as individuals. It is for this reason that Said was so concerned (in *The Question of Palestine* in particular) to present a Palestinian narrative: not on the basis of some communitarian ethic or a contradictory essentialism, or even out of an overweening interest in identity, but rather as a step towards their attainment of justice (1980 [1979]: 37–45). Imperial and colonial powers, Said emphasizes, consistently seek to

ignore and suppress their subject peoples' capacity for self-representation (this being one of the main themes connecting *Orientalism* and *The Question of Palestine*). Said's attempt to write a collective Palestinian narrative – to speak on behalf of a Palestinian 'we' – and to put the Palestinian reality before the 'western' reader is, in turn, but part of a universalist project of liberation (1980 [1979]: 5). Once again the concern with narrative is epistemologically and politically subordinate to a concern with justice and truth.

Now, none of the above necessarily implies support for either a one- or a two-state solution: one could argue, on the strength of the very same assumptions as Said's, *either* that the dispossession of the Palestinians is best 'put right' through the establishment of a Palestinian nation-state alongside the nation-state of Israel or that the optimal solution would be the creation of a single bi-national state on the entire territory of Israel-Palestine. As it happens, Said consistently expressed an ethical preference for the latter bi-national solution. Where his view changed was not in this but rather on the issue of whether the two-state solution constituted a helpful step towards this ultimate goal.

In *The Question of Palestine*, for instance, Said argues that 'Palestinians and Jews in Palestine have much to gain ... from a human rights view of their common situation, as opposed to a strictly *national* perspective on it', and he also espouses as a 'long-run goal' a situation in which 'people are allowed to live free from fear, insecurity, terror, and oppression', and in which Israel would 'no longer be the state of the whole Jewish people resident there or not, but the state of its present Jewish and non-Arab citizens' (1980 [1979]: 52–3). Yet he concludes, in much more pragmatic terms, that in his view 'an independent and sovereign Palestinian state is required *at this stage* to fulfill our history as a people during the past century' (1980 [1979]: 175, italics added). Even here in the late 1970s, the formation of a national Palestinian state is seen only as a step towards a more thoroughly universalist solution.

And in the 1980s and 1990s Said's preference for bi-nationalism, and his distaste for the pragmatics of partition, becomes even more apparent. Consider the following, from a 1986 interview:

I'm not sure ... that I believe in what would have to be at the outset a partitioned Palestine. I've stopped thinking that the solution to political problems is to divide up smaller and smaller pieces of territory. I do not believe in partition, not only at a political and demographic level, but on all sorts of intellectual levels, and spiritual ones. The whole idea of parceling out pieces for communities is just totally wrong. Any notion of purity – that such and such a territory is *essentially* the Palestinian or Israeli homeland – is just an idea that is totally inauthentic, for me. (Salusinszky 1987: 129)

Or indeed the following, from an interview conducted in 1994, which is worth quoting at some length:

It struck me as implicit in the Palestinian struggle... that we from the very beginning as a movement said that we were not interested in another separatist nationalism. That's when I joined the movement. We were not interested in just another nationalism, resisting theirs in order to have ours, that we were going to be the mirror image of them. That just as they had Zionism we would have Zionism too, except it would be Palestinian. But rather that we were talking about an alternative in which the discriminations made on the basis of race and religion and national origin would be transcended by something that we called liberation. That's reflected in the name of the Palestine Liberation Organization... One of the saddest things, I believe, in the history of twentieth-century liberation movements is the betrayal of liberation by short-range goals such as independence and the establishment of a state. (Said 1994c: 165–6)

Long before the failure of the Oslo 'peace process', in other words, Said already had deep misgivings about the two-state solution, even as only an interim stage towards the resolution of the conflict. The experience of Oslo merely confirmed and consolidated these fears. For not only did Oslo lead to the establishment of an authoritarian and arbitrary quisling regime whose power derived above all from being 'Israel's enforcer' in the Occupied Territories; and not only was Oslo never likely to result in meaningful, independent Palestinian statehood, above all because of its wholesale neglect of the question of refugees. In addition, the 'peace process' was paralleled by an ongoing Israeli settlement-building programme on the West Bank in particular, which undermined the very geography and demography of the two-state solution. All of this Said's scathing critiques of Arafat and the Oslo process amply and accurately documented (e.g. Said 1995, 2000). It was in the context of these debilitating failings of the Oslo process that Said came to view the two-state solution both as 'unworkable', and as an impediment to the 'long-run goal' of liberation – an 'instrument' that had 'put off the real reconciliation that must occur if the hundred-year war between Zionism and the Palestinian people is to end' (Said 1999c; Shavit 2000). Partition, Said now came to believe, constituted a regressive step away from, not a progressive step towards, the bi-national liberation of Israelis and Palestinians. And it was for this pragmatic reason – rather than because of any contradiction or shift in political ideals – that Said came to argue from the late 1990s against a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Conclusions

It has not been my intention here to argue that Said's work is without its inconsistencies, still less without serious weaknesses. There no doubt were some gaping contradictions in Said's writings, above all within *Orientalism*, and between it and much of his other work, especially on the question of Palestine. More significantly, there are in my view some fatal flaws running through the whole of his *oeuvre*: an elitist over-estimation of the impact of writers and critical intellectuals upon social formations and social change; an over-insistence on the racial bases of colonialism and imperialism (and concomitant under-recognition of their roots in social structures to do with rank, status, capitalism and class); a tendency to reproduce and unwittingly reaffirm Orientalist categories of 'East' and 'West'; and the emptiness of a humanism that, despite the frequent references to 'liberation', was always more liberal than it ever was socialist. But on the questions of truth, justice, nationalism and Palestine, Said was in my view both broadly consistent and largely convincing. His interventions on these subjects were marked by an extraordinary blend of radicalism and judiciousness, by an insistent defence of truth and justice, and by admirable bravery. As Aijaz Ahmad appropriately observes, Said's writings on Palestine constitute 'not only the most enduring part' of his work, 'but also, by any standards, the most persuasive insertion of a national-liberation struggle into the American imagination' (1992: 198).

Whether Said was right to abandon the two-state solution is a more difficult matter altogether. Certainly the prospects for Palestinian statehood and self-determination do not currently look bright. Yes, Israel has 'disengaged' and withdrawn its illegal settlements from the Gaza strip; and yes, at the time of writing (January 2006), Israelis and Palestinians have temporarily stopped killing each other to such brutal degree. But if the first Oslo process was a tragedy – premised on a fraudulent chimera of 'co-operation' (Selby 2003), and offering little chance of meaningful Palestinian independence – history is now being replayed as farce. The Gaza strip and West Bank towns like Jericho have, according to the mainstream press, been 'liberated' and returned to Palestinian rule. But movement and trade in and out of the devastated Gaza strip is still tightly restricted; and, as for the West Bank, as one resident recently commented, 'The Jews were never inside Jericho. . . . I don't understand what they mean when they say Israel is withdrawing from Jericho. This is a big joke' (Abu Toameh 2005). Or, as another observed of the recent return of Palestinian police to the devastated streets of Tul Karm:

The Palestinian police were always in town, what difference does it make if their rifles are in the car or on their shoulder? The criterion for freedom is not the presence of policemen or their weapons. When will the Israelis understand that you

can't talk about the liberation of one city, when the entire West Bank is occupied?
 (Hass 2005)

These are sentiments with which Edward Said would no doubt have wholeheartedly concurred.

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Jan Selby

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