Contexts and Consequences
...a conference in memory of Edward Said, 1935-2003

University of Sussex
Brighton
14 May 2004

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Edward Said, whose legacy this conference aimed to commemorate, was unique in his role as a public intellectual whose academic work and political activism were inseparable and constantly in communication. Since his (1978) publication *Orientalism*, he was a major force in the emerging discourse on the post-colonial. At the same time, his tireless engagement on behalf of the Palestinian people made him well-known and respected beyond the narrow confines of academia. The conference, then, attempted to draw together these two strands of Said's life, to think through his work and engagement beyond him and to formulate perspectives on how to continue what he began.

The program was divided into three panels of three speakers each, drawn from different academic disciplines but broadly concerned with Said's intellectual legacy. The first panel was dedicated to 'Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory'. It commenced with a presentation by Ato Quayson (Cambridge), Quayson talked about his newest book, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social*, in which he defends a way of reading that takes an interested form and discloses the social. Referring to Said's conviction that literary criticism is always already intertwined with the social and historical circumstances and that this relation must be materially characterized rather than being merely asserted, Quayson outlined his approach with reference to thinkers such as Adorno, Goldmann, Lukács and Žižek, and applied it to contemporary African writing. The focus was on reading the social through the literary form.

Robert Spencer (Warwick) investigated Said's relationship to universalism and thereby touched on a number of points which were taken up during the second panel, concerned with Said's politics. Indeed, Spencer's talk set the scene for much to follow, as the topics he addressed, exile, homecoming, dialogue and engagement, reverberated throughout the conference and were taken up again and again. Spencer explicated Said's dialectical method in comparison to Adorno's and showed how for both exile was the possibility of overcoming narrow-mindedness and taking an outside view on the familiar while, at the same time, never being an end in itself and rather always connected with a desire for homecoming. They elaborated an ethical cosmopolitanism, which takes common humanity as its goal. This universalism that is developed through a continual taking of another's place is a lived one, rather than the false universalism that is based on abstraction and cannot really take into account the other. While discussing this view, Spencer reminded his audience that the condition of exile was a painful one for Said (and indeed all Palestinians), bound up with emotional hardship and a draining sense of dispossession. Substantially, for Said dialogue was the ability to engage on the level of social reality with literature and society, rather than depicting it from above in sweeping generalizations. Politically, he emphasized how this ability to dialogue presupposed equality of the interlocutors rather than establishing it as its end. This point connected neatly with Said's critique of the Oslo Accords and the subsequent Israeli-Palestinian 'peace process'. The co-existence he fought for was not to be reached by subsidiary Palestinian negotiators at America's behest, but in real dialogue in which public intellectuals (such as literary critics) could play a role through the expansion of horizons.

The final speaker on the literary panel, Denise DeCaires Narain (Sussex), took issue with the relation between written and spoken language - indeed, as several audience members pointed out, her own presentation, partly spoken freely and partly read, served to undermine those categories from the start. She observed that in some post-colonial literary theory orality is privileged over writing, because it is seen as more authentic and, by way of a Saidian counterpointed reading, she questioned this assumption. Reading texts from different post-colonial locations and investigating the role of mediatory characters in these texts, DeCaires Narain argued that it is crucial to differentiate between different locations within the post-colonial domain rather than subsuming diverse experiences under one paradigm.

The second panel, 'Rethinking the Political' focused more straightforwardly on Said's role for the Palestinian cause, with the exception of the last con-

tributor, of whom more below. Thus Ghada Karmi (Exeter) opened the session with an account of Edward Said's intertwined life as outstanding academic and as the Palestinians' most famous and revered spokesman, being 'worth more than a dozen armies'. Recalling personal memories, Karmi related how Said's intellectual work must be understood in the context of the Palestine question, for at the heart of both is the idea of dispossession, be it the actual dispossession of Palestinians or the intellectual dispossession of the colonized who are robbed of their voice and represented through the prism of orientalism, a process which Said, of course, described in *Orientalism* and later works. The condition of exile that was placed on Said was intrinsically related to the 'in-between' character of his academic work. Karmi also advanced the view that while Said originally was a spokesman for the Palestinian Diaspora, after 1992 he connected increasingly to the occupied territories and East Jerusalem; this change was also a matter of discussion at the question and answer session later, due to Said's changing position away from a two-state solution for Israel-Palestine and toward a one-state solution.

Nur Masalha (Surrey) presented a paper on Said and the discourse on Palestine, pointing out that it was Said's (1979) book *The Question of Palestine* that first proposed a counter-narrative to the Zionist one to an American audience. It was directly related to both *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam* (1981) in that it explained how the Israelis came to represent the Western access to the Orient and shaped Western attitudes toward Islam. In this sense the power/knowledge relation is enacted in a critique of the political consequences it engendered, namely, a complete erasure of the Palestinian plight from the Western public. The critique that Said leveled at spurious scholarship also extended to some Israeli historians who met Said in Paris in 1998. Masalha related how at this meeting, which he participated in (along with Ilan Pappe, who spoke on the final panel of this conference), Said undermined the position of Benny Morris, according to which the history of the Palestinian dispossession could be reconstructed on the basis of (Israeli) archival documents alone, by urging Morris to take into account oral history and be attentive to the ideological framework of which these documents were an expression. On another note, Masalha elaborated on the history of Said's support for and subsequent rejection of the two-state solution. It became clear through the accounts of Karmi and Masalha that there is a break here in Said's thought, occasioned by the Oslo Accords of which he was very critical and which led him to believe in the need to replace the authoritarian and

corrupt Palestinian leadership and effect change from below.

After two presentations very much concerned with the fate of Palestine, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's (Oxford) paper struck a very different chord. She associated with Edward Said a form of secularism that encompasses a critique of ethnic particularism as well as religion and is situated within the discourse about identity. Rajan argues that Nehru's secular nationalism, understood as transcending national particularisms within the emerging Indian nation, has much in common with Said's secularism; both advanced a secular form of 'careful' nationalism that was not ethnic nor relied on organic metaphors of belonging. Given the fact that the universal form of this reasoning is increasingly challenged, Rajan argued that multiculturalism and communitarianism are not viable alternatives, if the role of 'minorities within minorities' (e.g. women) is considered, thus the need for a universalistic lexicon of rights will prevail. Practically, the case of Indian politics shows the topics with which 'secularism' has to deal; religious fundamentalism which takes the form of genocidal violence was supposed to be prevented by a secular national state. The success/failure of this model needs to be investigated further.

The final panel of the conference invited speakers to think 'Postcolonial Theory: Beyond Orientalism'. Suki Ali (London School of Economics) talked here about Said's relation to feminism and his influence in education. She discussed concepts of ethnicity and presented from her work with 'mixed-race' children from more than one community. Jane Cowan (Sussex) contextualised Said's critique of the orientalist paradigm with reference to work in anthropology and looked specifically at ways in which anthropologists came, through critical self-reflection, to similar conclusions to Said's. The final paper was a bridge between the last two panels and wrapped up the conference by relating back to the Palestine question and Edward Said's personal legacy. In the talk that led to the most extensive discussion during the conference, Ilan Pappe (Haifa) talked about the emergence of post-Zionist thought in Israel in the mid-1980s. He outlined how young academics found in writers like Said the resources to confront the ideological conception of history prevalent in the academic-military complex that is the Israeli university. Unfortunately, as Pappe emphasised, this movement was relatively short-lived and had subsided by the late 1990s, as a lasting peace agreement with the Palestinians became less likely. Pappe gave an excellent account of how, even in the ideological atmosphere of Israel, an intellectual counter-move-

ment did appear, but found its limits all too soon, a fact exemplified by his own background and his protracted struggle to maintain his position at Haifa University in the face of massive politically-motivated hostility (see http://defendpappe.freeservers.com/index.html). The ensuing discussion soon brought back the topics from the second panel, centring on the Israeli-Arab conflict and the future of Israel in the Middle East. Pappe took the view that Israel must accept its embeddedness in a Semitic region and forego the colonial outlook of its self-image as a Western state surrounded by Arabs. He illustrated this view with reference to a variety of examples from popular culture, one of which led to a discussion of Edward Said's rejection of Arabic music, bemoaned by many audience members and conference speakers. The role of music became topical again during the reception, when representatives of the London-based multicultural orchestra 'Hafla' talked about their work and about Said's and Daniel Barenboim's musical project. A photo exhibition of children in Palestine was also shown.

In conclusion, it can be said that several motifs appeared as threads throughout most of the presentations and discussions (although they were not necessarily subject to explicit discussion by each of the speakers). It was emphasised throughout that for Said the Palestine question was more than a sideline which he pursued as a public intellectual. Rather, it penetrated most of his academic work as much as his academic work penetrated his political activism. Clearly, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* are the clearest but not the only examples of this. This relation between politics and academia was complicated, however, by the tension between nationalism and universalism that runs through Said's work. The way in which he tried to work through this tension, by building alliances with other intellectuals (e.g. Daniel Barenboim) and Israeli academics could serve as an example for those who continue his struggle today.

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