

## CHAPTER I

*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.<sup>1</sup>

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 refugedom." 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 his generation's most influential cultural critic of empire. 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 "secular humanism" encapsulates the idea that the humanities are worth studying because they foster valuable features of human life and celebrate valuable qualities of human beings, and secular because secular humanism involves "the positive affirmation that human beings can find from within themselves the resources to live a good life without religion."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup> *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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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).<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 “validat[ing] 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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, “Despite 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.”<sup>24</sup>

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: