

Power, Knowledge, and Edward W. Said (1935 – 2003)¹

Shamil Jeppie

On his death in the morning of Thursday September 25 Edward Said was University Professor of English and Comparative literature at Columbia University in New York. Said (Sa-eed) was a towering figure in a number of fields: in literary criticism, cultural studies, and Middle East studies, and specifically the question of Palestine. He attempted in many ways to combine these areas of research and commitment. It is hard to say what he was “best known for” because he was prolific and in each area of activity he made distinctive and distinguished contributions. In literary studies he was well-known for his disciplined theoretical writing to bring the messiness of the world to the study of texts. In cultural studies he was virtually the founder of what is now called “postcolonial studies”, which has spawned an outpouring of interdisciplinary works on the cultural politics and presence of Empire in post-colonial situations. And, of course, on the issue of Palestine, as a dispossessed Palestinian himself, he has been a consistent critic of Israeli and U.S. policies, and after the Oslo Accords, of Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. In each of these areas there are dozens of scholarly essays in learned journals, extensive interviews in literary magazines, his own journalism, and a collection of books, including the first installment of his autobiography. He wrote until his end. It will take up too much space to mention only the essential essays and works in each field.

Orientalism (1978) is now a classic statement of the ways in which western imaginations of the Middle East, and Islam in particular, in contemporary times has a deep historical lineage intimately bound-up with assertions of power over the Islamic “other”. The work is more relevant today than it ever was when it first appeared, just as the Iranian revolution was unfolding. Willful ignorance and misrepresentation of the region, then and now, seems not to have changed much. This study spawned numerous more specific studies, including on other spaces similarly constructed, and various humanities disciplines, such as anthropology and history, for instance, subsequently went through phases of critical scrutiny of their presuppositions. But it also evoked harsh criticism especially from conservative establishment scholars of the region. Other critical reviews and whole studies were, often in sympathetic vein, focused on theoretical and methodological questions. It was translated into 36 languages and this year saw its 5th reprint.

A sort of sequel to *Orientalism* was *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Western imperial expansion and domination over the rest of the globe has to be the context, Said argues, for the study of literary and artistic production. Imperialism is an important source of the “worldliness of texts.”

He distinguished himself early in his career in literary studies but it was the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that saw him write passionately about the struggle of the Palestinians. In 1948, while in his youth, his family had to flee their ancestral home in Jerusalem. As a member of the prosperous Palestinian Christian elite his father

was able to quickly establish himself in business in Cairo where the young Edward went to school at the then famous Victoria College in Alexandria. Undergraduate education at Princeton University was followed by a doctorate, before he was thirty years old, from Harvard University. A tenured position at Columbia University followed.

With such credentials and a blossoming career in literary criticism there was little reason to take up the cause of despised, wretched of the earth Palestinians thousands of kilometers away. A Palestinian activist in New York had everything against him. Once, a journalist wanted to visit his Upper West Side apartment to just see what a Palestinian lives like! She found a grand piano – he was a first rate pianist and music critic for *The Nation* - among other items reflecting his very fine tastes.

Palestinian history was obliterated, their identity as a people denied, as Golda Meir announced in 1969: “There is no such thing as a Palestinian”. Against tremendous odds, Said embarked on the relentless work of writing, speaking and travelling “for Palestine”. *The Question of Palestine* (1979) began with an investigation of zionism “from the standpoint of its victims” and explicated the meanings of the Palestinian struggle. He was no narrow nationalist bent on revenge. He was afraid of any successful nationalism, he once remarked.

He was for a long time a member of the Palestinian parliament in exile. He was never a party man, a dutiful follower of the leader. He remained a critical voice, alert to the problems in the Palestinian movement. He warned very early on of the limits of the Oslo

Accords, for the Palestinians, and he went on to criticize Yasir Arafat himself, the figure who had kept the movement together in exile. That the PA was expected to be a Bantustan police force and that the Israeli leadership now openly ponders the assassination of Arafat is testimony to Said's early warnings.

Edward Said visited South Africa in 1991 and again in 2001. On his last visit he spoke to a group at the District Six Museum. On its memorial cloth he signed his name and wrote a simple message in Arabic: "Return". He died with the struggle for Palestinian "return" not having looked worse in a long time. What is remarkable is that such an accomplished scholar engaged so bravely in developing an articulate public voice, often with necessary vigour but never with hate, for a cause so denigrated in the west, and the U.S. in particular. In recent years he began to have many more genuinely interested interlocutors in Israel itself than in the mainstream American media. His contribution to keeping alive the memory and struggle for Palestinian dignity is enormous.

¹ This article was originally published in the *Mail & Guardian*, 3-9 October 2003, and is reproduced with permission (Editors).