

The Deceptions of Edward Said

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Published online: 22 April 2014
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Edward W. Said (1935–2003) was one of the most celebrated intellectuals in American public life. A professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, Said was at various times president of the Modern Language Association, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an honorary fellow of the Middle East Studies Association, a regular interviewee in the national media, a witness before Congress, and the recipient of countless awards and visiting lectureships, as well as embarrassing encomia by his legions of admirers in journalism and academe. He was also a member of the Palestine National Council, the ruling assembly of the PLO, and an adviser to and occasional speechwriter for Yasser Arafat at the height of the latter's terrorist atrocities.¹

Said's intellectual career began as it continued—with a fabrication. Eager to build a reputation as a spokesman for the oppressed, he invented his past as a Palestinian exile dispossessed by Israeli colonial violence. For decades he pretended to have grown up in the Talbiya neighborhood of Jerusalem until his departure, at age twelve, at the end of 1947. Yet, as Justus Reid Weiner documented in 1999, this was a politically motivated fiction. Said's father had emigrated from Palestine to America in 1911, and then moved to Egypt. Said himself, though born during a family visit to Jerusalem, had been

¹For his PLO activities, see, for example, Edward Said, *The Politics Of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), xxiv, xxviii; and Said K. Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), 156.

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raised in a privileged neighborhood in Cairo. He had not been usurped in his Jerusalem home by the Zionist philosopher Martin Buber, as he had claimed; rather, it had been Said's relative who had evicted the tenant Buber, a refugee from Nazism, from that house in 1942.² Outraged at the revelation of his deceit, Said hastily rewrote his pending memoir to fit the new timeline, and suffered no repercussions from the scandal, either in his university career or in the court of American elite opinion.

Said's fame rested on a series of books indicting the Western intelligentsia for its alleged role in what he saw as the organically linked crimes of colonialism and Zionism. The first of these was *Orientalism*, published in 1978, which became one of the core texts of the discipline of postcolonial studies and is now prescribed reading in university courses all over the Western world. The following year came *The Question of Palestine*, which had a massive impact on a progressive mindset formerly sympathetic to the cause of Jewish statehood. These and later publications were consistent in method and purpose with the brazen falsification of his life story.

The gravamen of *Orientalism* is that Western perceptions of Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East are, and long have been, thoroughly racist. For Said, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric."³ Orientalism, as he defined it, was not what it seemed to be, namely the objective study by Westerners of Eastern lands and societies. It was instead a doctrine stipulating the inferiority and otherness of the peoples it described; and it was the preserve of anyone in Europe who had ever encountered or even thought about an Arab or a Muslim, from academic specialists to travelers to pilgrims to governments to military expeditions to commercial enterprises to mere readers of novels.⁴ And this approach had now been internalized by the American political and educational elite concerned with the Middle East—a social stratum that "retains, in most of its general as well as its detailed functioning, the traditional Orientalist outlook."⁵

In creating his demonic image of the Orientalist as racist ideologue, Said was loath to express any appreciation for the achievements of the tradition he

²Justus Reid Weiner, "'My Beautiful Old House' and Other Fabrications by Edward Said," *Commentary* 108, no. 2 (September 1999): 23–31; "A Tale of Two Frauds," *Academic Questions* 13, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 46–55.

³Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 204.

⁴*Ibid.*, 203.

⁵*Ibid.*, 295.

derided. Salvaging texts, mastering difficult languages, bringing the knowledge of alien cultures to the West—all this counted for nothing in his eyes. Was it really for the sake of consolidating empire that Orientalist scholars established university chairs to study the literature of Arab and Islamic societies?

It is no exaggeration to say that Said treated the whole of Western discourse about the East as the sinister expression of an elaborate colonialist plot to subjugate the natives. And he was undeterred by the fear of stretching his readers' credulity—that is, by the apprehension of making himself look ridiculous. Who else, asked one commentator, “had ever thought that Lamartine and Olivia Manning, Chateaubriand and Byron, Carlyle, Camus, Voltaire, Gertrude Bell, the anonymous composers of *El Cid* and the *Chanson de Roland*, Arabists like Gibb, colonial rulers such as Cromer and Balfour, sundry quasi-literary figures like Edward Lane, scholars of Sufism like Massignon, Henry Kissinger—all belonged in the same archive and composed a deeply unified discursive formation!”⁶ And who else, in arguing such an absurd thesis, could display such a remarkable lack of self-awareness? In the words of historian Yoav Gelber, “As an Egyptian of Palestinian origin teaching English literature at an American university, who had built his scholarly career on a Polish sailor that became an English writer (Joseph Conrad), Said’s assertion that western orientalists could not comprehend the East and easterners because they were born into a different culture, seems somewhat bizarre.”⁷

The intellectual procedures of *Orientalism* can be summarized without too much difficulty. Said began by excluding from his analysis of European scholarship every field of inquiry that did not fit his desired conclusion. Therefore, Semitic studies was out of consideration, as were Turkish and Persian studies. That left Arabic studies. But this was still too broad for Said’s requirements, so he eliminated all contributions made before the eighteenth century as well as all of the crucial work undertaken by German scholars and their counterparts in Italy, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Belgium, and Scandinavia. That left Arabic studies in Britain and France from the eighteenth century forward as the sum total of Orientalism. Within this domain, Said then passed over all of the important personalities whose output might not be judged “racist” and “imperialist.” Those Orientalists who

⁶Aijaz Ahmad, *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 177.

⁷Yoav Gelber, *Nation and History: Israeli Historiography between Zionism and Post-Zionism* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011), 56.

were mentioned often had their major works ignored. The result was outlined by Malcolm Kerr:

Said's selection of European authors leaves out a veritable army of luminaries familiar to every graduate student in Islamics: Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, Becker, Nöldeke, Wellhausen, Gabrieli, Levi Della Vida, Schacht, Rosenthal, and Goitein, all of whom failed to be native citizens of the most successful imperial powers. Yet also omitted are the most distinguished contemporary Oriental scholars even in Britain and France....Then there are all those native American scholars...about whose work he says nothing....It would be hard indeed to claim that they have been bamboozled by the establishmentarian troika of the Zionist lobby, the State Department, and the Ford Foundation.⁸

Indeed, while Said put on a great show of his erudition and verbal facility—expressions such as “virtuosic,” “scriptively,” and “mentalistic” abounded—his learning was a façade. No one as familiar with his subject matter as Said pretended to be would have referred to Palestine and Egypt as “colonies,” to Egypt’s “annexation by England,” or to “Egypt, *then* Turkey, *then* North Africa” falling to Muslim armies (emphases added).⁹ Nor would someone who possessed even a modicum of respect for his readers’ intelligence have designated the Arab world of the late 1970s—including Syria, Iraq, and Libya—as an “intellectual, political and cultural satellite of the United States.”¹⁰

Even Said’s admirers found his methods hard to stomach. “Misquotes, dropped ellipses in quotations, and historical errors plague the unrevised text of *Orientalism*,” laments anthropologist Daniel Martin Varisco, who is generally in ideological sympathy with Said.¹¹ Calling *Orientalism* “a powerful critique” and “a milestone in the critical theory of academic bias three decades after its first publication,”¹² Varisco nevertheless elsewhere

⁸See Malcolm H. Kerr, review of *Orientalism*, by Edward Said, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 4 (December 1980): 544–47.

⁹Said, *Orientalism*, 25, 35, 59. For these and other examples, see C.F. Beckingham, review of *Orientalism*, by Edward Said, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42, no. 3 (October 1979): 562–64.

¹⁰Said, *Orientalism*, 322.

¹¹Daniel Martin Varisco, “*Orientalism’s* Wake: The Ongoing Politics of a Polemic,” *Middle East Institute Viewpoints*, no. 12 (September 2009): 3, <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2009.09.Orientalism%27s%20Wake.pdf>.

¹²Daniel Martin Varisco, “On His Book *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*,” interview, *Rorotoko*, April 03, 2009, originally published under the cover-page headline, “The Other Half of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*—and of Three Decades of Polemics,” http://rorotoko.com/interview/20090403_martin_daniel_varisco_reading_orientalism_edward_said_unsaid/.

catalogues the book's scholarly derelictions, and gives pride of place to Said's mistranslation of a verse from Goethe. Far from being a textbook example of Western prejudice, the offending line is in fact Goethe's quotation from a German edition of the Koran.¹³ Another of Said's political supporters, Robert Irwin, classifies *Orientalism* as a "work of malignant charlatanry in which it is hard to distinguish honest mistakes from wilful misrepresentations."¹⁴

What was the point of the book? Why produce a tract that maligned a whole tradition of inquiry extending over centuries based on a minuscule and unrepresentative sample of its practitioners, mangled facts, misquoted and mistranslated sources, and covered the result in layers of faux-indignation and paranoid defamation? The explanation, surely, is that *Orientalism* was an exercise in academic intimidation: the aim was not to get at the truth, but to bully a generation of scholars into adopting the political positions favored by Said—anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, Third Worldism—for fear of exclusion from the ranks of the ideologically tolerated. And in this project, he was eminently successful. Who, today, in the discipline of Middle East studies would be happy to be considered an Orientalist?¹⁵

If *Orientalism* is dismissed even by sympathetic critics as an intellectual scandal, what are we to make of Said's polemics against the State of Israel? The *locus classicus* of Said's anti-Zionism is *The Question of Palestine*.¹⁶ Published in 1979, the book had a message that dovetailed perfectly with the propaganda line of the PLO: Israel/Palestine belongs solely to the Arabs; Jews are not a people, have no historical ties to the land and no national rights; Zionism is the ideology of European colonial invaders determined to dispossess the natives who want only to live in a secular democratic state, etc.¹⁷ These arguments are familiar, and so are the rebuttals: that any Arab claim to the land rests on past conquest of territory that had once belonged to the Jews; that there had been a native Jewish population in the Middle East for thousands of years until its expulsion by the independent Arab states; that Palestinian nationalists, far from

¹³Varisco, "Orientalism's Wake," 3.

¹⁴Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 4. See also Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

¹⁵See Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001), 27–43.

¹⁶Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

¹⁷There is evidence that Said simply paraphrased PLO propaganda pamphlets; see Efraim Karsh and Rory Miller, "Did Edward Said Really Speak Truth to Power?" *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 13–22.

being the innocent victims of Zionist aggression, secured a pledge from the Nazis to massacre their Jewish neighbors before there was any Jewish state and then tried to destroy that state as soon as it was created; that Israeli leaders accepted the two-state solution that the Palestinians rejected and gave the Palestinians democratic rights they still do not enjoy in Arab countries.

What is noteworthy about *The Question of Palestine* is not its message but its mode of argument. In a disquisition on “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,” Said presented examples of the supremacist mentality of the Zionist movement and its contempt for Arabs. His paradigmatic Zionists included such historical figures as Charles Clermont-Ganneau, C.R. Conder, Stanley Cook, Tyrwhitt Drake, R.A.S. Macalister, Sir Flinders Petrie, and the Dean of Westminster—none of whom was even Jewish, and none of whom had anything to do with the Zionist movement, but all of whom, in the eyes of Edward Said, somehow “prepared for” Zionist attitudes.¹⁸ When Said turned to attacking actual Zionists, he resorted to underhanded tactics. He quoted some lines from Herzl’s diary—“We shall have to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country”—as revelatory of a Zionist master plan to dispossess the Arab natives.¹⁹ Said did not mention what Herzl had written after those words: “It goes without saying that we shall respectfully tolerate persons of other faiths and protect their property, their honor, and their freedom with the harshest means of coercion. This is another area in which we shall set the entire world a wonderful example.”²⁰

Said’s readiness to falsify facts was characteristic of his anti-Zionist propaganda, both in *The Question of Palestine* and subsequently. At one point he informed his readers that “the historical duration of a Jewish state in Palestine prior to 1948 was a sixty-year period two millennia ago.”²¹ (Actually, Jews had been sovereign in the country for many hundreds of years.) “As far as the Jewish minority in Palestine was concerned,” he wrote, “Zionism [at the time of the Balfour Declaration] had very little to do with them.”²² (The majority of the Jewish population then consisted of Zionist

¹⁸Said, *Question of Palestine*, 79–81.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰Raphael Patai, ed., *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, vol. 1 (London and New York: The Herzl Press and Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 88.

²¹Said, *Question of Palestine*, 58.

²²*Ibid.*, 19.

immigrants.) In the 1920s, he announced in an interview, it was “Zionists [who] introduced terrorism into Palestine.”²³ (On the contrary, it was Arab lynch mobs that massacred Jews in Palestine in the 1920s.) “Immediately after the state of Israel was declared in 1948,” he asserted on another occasion, “every major Arab state—Syria, Jordan, Egypt—petitioned Israel for peace. Yet Ben-Gurion systematically refused their offers, preferring to maintain Israel in a state of war.”²⁴ (Immediately after the State of Israel was declared the surrounding Arab states attacked it with the intent of wiping it off the face of the earth.) “There were no Jews in [Hebron] before 1967,” he proclaimed.²⁵ (There were Jews in Hebron for centuries until, during the 1929 massacre by Arab rioters, they became the victims of what historian Christopher Sykes called “deeds which would have been revolting among animals.”)²⁶

If Said was never held to account for his falsehoods, he was almost never taken to task for the extremist positions he adopted. Said was an open opponent of the two-state solution and an advocate of the destruction of Israel. “Palestinian self-determination in a separate state is unworkable,” he avowed in an opinion piece published well before the collapse of the peace process.²⁷ While shrouding his ideas in a diaphanous veil of rhetoric about coexistence and equality, Said made it clear that his aim was simply to get rid of Israel as a Jewish state, no matter what. “I don’t find the idea of a Jewish state terribly interesting,” he explained. “[T]he Jews are a minority everywhere. They are a minority in America. They can certainly be a minority in Israel.”²⁸

What would have been the fate of Israel’s Jewish population under Said’s plan? Idyllic, if you trusted his professions in the *New York Times* and *Ha’aretz*; less enviable, if you paid attention to his views stated elsewhere. For Said was, during his lifetime, the foremost apologist in American public life for PLO terrorism. “There are no divisions in the Palestinian population

²³“David Barsamian Interviews Edward W. Said,” *Arts & Opinion* 2, no. 3 (2003): http://www.artsandopinion.com/2003_v2_n3/said.htm.

²⁴Edward Said, “How to Answer Palestine’s Challenge,” *Mother Jones* 13, no. 6 (September 1988): 17.

²⁵David Barsamian and Edward Said, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 54.

²⁶The Jews in Hebron today are settlers or descendents of settlers who moved to the city after the Six-Day War in 1967.

²⁷Edward Said, “The One-State Solution,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/10/magazine/the-one-state-solution.html>.

²⁸Edward Said, *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 452–53.

of 4 million,” he insisted, “We all support the PLO.”²⁹ So extreme was his commitment to the policy of atrocity that he even advocated terrorism against fellow Palestinians who deviated from the PLO party line (thereby belying his own assertion that Palestinian support for the PLO was universal). “When [PLO leaders] Farouk Kaddoumi or Abu Iyad say that collaborators would be shot,” he mused, was it not undeniable that “the UN Charter and every other known document or protocol entitles a people under foreign occupation not only to resist but also by extension to deal severely with collaborators”?³⁰ To this, Edward Alexander replied that he had searched in vain for any “document or protocol” that would have authorized the followers of Tojo or Hitler to murder Japanese and Germans assisting the American occupiers after the last world war. More important, if Said believed that his superiors in the PLO had a right, sanctified by the United Nations, to kill hundreds of fellow Palestinians in cold blood, it was not hard to imagine what he must have had in mind for Israelis.³¹

With regard to Diaspora Jews, Said affected to be entirely without prejudice. But once in a while the mask slipped. In an essay on “America’s Last Taboo,” he referred to the “Zionization” of the American media and let loose on the country’s “well-organized, well-connected, highly visible and wealthy Jewish population.” He singled out “right-wing Jewish pundits,” owing to their “brazen arrogance, moral sanctimony, and unctuous hypocrisy” and their diatribes resembling “curses from the Old Testament.”³² Elsewhere he accused “the Perles and Wolfowitzs of this country” of beating the drum for war, defended by the likes of White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, “who I believe is also an Israeli citizen.”³³ A columnist investigating the

²⁹Edward Said in “Responses to ‘Carter and the Jews’—I,” *New Leader*, August 11, 1980, 20. Said also boasted of his meeting with Hezbollah’s Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, “a remarkably impressive man,” and applauded the latter’s decision to “make them [i.e., Israelis] feel it in body bags.” *Power, Politics and Culture*, 445. On this episode, see Gregory Shill, “Said’s Shameful Summer: Rocks and Terrorists,” *Columbia Spectator*, September 14, 2000, <http://www.columbiaspectator.com/2000/09/14/saids-shameful-summer-rocks-and-terrorists>.

³⁰Edward Said, “An Exchange on Edward Said and Difference,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 641.

³¹Edward Alexander, “Professor of Terror,” *Commentary* 88, no. 2 (August 1989): 49–50. On PLO atrocities against Palestinians, see Steven Emerson, “Meltdown: The End of the Intifada,” *New Republic*, November 23, 1992, 26–29; and Yosif Mahmoud Haj-Yahia, Edy Kaufman, and Sufian Abu Nijaila, *Alleged Palestinian Collaborators with Israel and Their Families: A Study of Victims of Internal Political Violence*, Peace Papers, no. 12 (Jerusalem: Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999), 18–19.

³²Edward Said, “America’s Last Taboo,” *New Left Review* 11, no. 6 (November-December 2000): 45, 49, 51.

³³Edward Said, “A Monument to Hypocrisy,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, February 13–19, 2003, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/625/op2.htm>.

source of the latter invention traced it to neo-Nazi websites.³⁴ Did Said's many sympathizers on the Jewish radical left ever wonder at his use of this kind of innuendo?

Neither Said's manifold dishonesties nor his calls for Israel's destruction nor his advocacy of terrorism nor even his slurs against American Jews incurred the slightest displeasure from his many acolytes in academia and elsewhere. On the contrary, as each new offense became public knowledge, Said rose higher and higher in the esteem of the ideologically correct. On his death in September 2003, staff and students at Columbia University assembled outside his office building for a candlelight vigil. A memorial held in March 2004 included speeches by university president Lee Bollinger, Vanessa Redgrave, and Nadine Gordimer. Their tributes, though fulsome, were surpassed by the effusions of Rashid Khalidi, newly appointed to Columbia's Edward Said Professorship of Modern Arab Studies, who took to the journal of the Middle East Studies Association to mourn "one of the most profound, original, and influential thinkers of the past half-century," to hail his "utter lack of chauvinism," and to celebrate his "passionate voice for humanistic values and justice in an imperfect world."³⁵ There was also Hamid Dabashi, chair of Columbia's Middle East and Asian languages and cultures department, who intoned:

We were all like birds flying around the generosity of his roof, tiny dandelions joyous in the shade of his backyard, minuscule creatures pasturing on the bounteous slopes of the mountain that he was. The prince of our cause, the mighty warrior, the Salah al-Din of our reasoning with mad adversaries, source of our sanity in despair, solace in our sorrow, hope in our own humanity, is now no more.³⁶

Edward Said, having been elevated to intellectual sainthood during his lifetime, is today the object of an academic cult, whose devotions should embarrass any true place of learning.

³⁴Zev Chafets, "Prof's Slip Is Showing—So's His Anti-Semitism," *New York Daily News*, February 19, 2003.

³⁵Rashid Khalidi, "In Memoriam: Edward W. Said (1935–2003), Honorary Fellow of MESA," *MESA Bulletin* (December 2003).

³⁶Hamid Dabashi, "The Moment of Myth: Edward Said (1935–2003)," *CounterPunch*, October 2, 2003, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2003/10/02/the-moment-of-myth/>.