NATIONALISM, SECULARISM, POSTCOLONIALITY

An Interview with Edward Said

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IBISH: It is pretty clear that there has been a shift in the past 20 years, in western universities anyway, in studying the dynamics of the colonial and postcolonial encounter from an economic model, defined by dependency theory and concentrated in departments of economics and political science, towards a cultural model defined by postcolonial theory and concentrated in the departments of literature. The turning point in many ways, I think, was the publication of *Orientalism*. Do you agree with this?

SAID: Certainly there has been a proliferation of books and teaching in courses in departments of literature about colonialism, and about colonialism as manifested in cultural practices. This doesn't mean that there still isn't quite a bit of work done in economics, politics, sociology and anthropology at the same time, but it does seem as if postcolonial writing, as it is called, has come to the fore, not always, by the way, with good effects or good results or with accurate scholarship. The model that I used in *Orientalism*, and again in *Culture and Imperialism*, was imperialism as a form of control and domination in which the line between the colonizer and the colonized was always preserved, even though, of course, there was movement back and forth. In the first chapter of *Culture and Imperialism*, I talk about overlapping territories and interdependent areas.

But I think what's happened is that the gravity of history, the whole dialectic of exploitation, of repression, of real and genuine suffering on the part of the colonized and the exercise of control and domination in all sorts of exploitative and repressive ways on the part of the colonizer, has dissipated and what you now find is the absence of that. We have seen a shifting of interest away from, you might say, the practical, historical and the material to the psychological and the ambivalent, to a kind of slyness. I am thinking, for example, principally of the work of people like Bhabha, and

unpersuaded by it. It strikes me, in the first instance, as subtle, and some of it is very interesting and very ingenious, but it does tend, I think, to falsify the colonial encounter.

Second, as for postcolonialism, sometimes there is almost a kind of triumphalism, the idea that, if you are from the Third World, if you are Indian or Algerian or Sudanese or Latin American or something, then your point of view is the only important one in writing about the postcolonial situation. Not enough attention is devoted to the continuity of control and domination exercised on the formally colonized world. A sort of nativism sets in, and ethnic studies, as well as the power of a kind of essentialism which I also deplore because it tends to take away attention and interest from the struggle for liberation. In other words, liberation, which is an ongoing struggle, becomes less important than the fact that you are able to write.

Third, the whole practice of postcolonial literature, theory and discourse has become completely displaced from the real world to the academic world, and has become merely an academic specialty. And that it is very different from the oppositional and resistance practices that characterize the work of Fanon, Cabral, C.L.R. James and so many other people.

IBISH: But is there a special role for the critic as opposed to other scholars, or for intellectuals in general? You've written a lot about this but I am specifically interested in the critic. What, if anything, would a critic bring to the question that other scholars might not?

SAID: I think that certainly there is such a role, and it has to do with very specialized and extremely refined kind of reading and analysis. Texts have to be, you might say, the core, because individual expression is in itself individual and therefore has to be read and interpreted that way. But, on the other hand, I don't think that there is a very important role for the critic who is looking at text removed from the context, that is to say, taken out of history, taken out of an ongoing dialectic of struggle. I think the displacement away from the core of attention to such things as the economic and the political and the historical just trivializes the work of the critic. The critic mustn't just be sitting back in his or her chair reading and saying what has been read, but rather be part of much more complex structure, to which one either contributes or is removed from.

IBISH: And this has to do with the importance of narrative in politics?

SAID: Yes, narrative and other things. It has lots to do with class. It has a lot to do with global capital. It has lots to do with nationalism, and so on.

IBISH: Your definition of a 'genuine intellectual' as opposed to mere specialist or professional academic seems to be based entirely on a set of ethical

considerations. Please correct me if I am wrong about that. You say that there is no ideological orientation involved in this, but except for Benda, who is the only example I can find, all the contemporary intellectuals, or even 20th-century intellectuals, you cite as examples are identifiably of the left. Can you talk a little bit about where the space for 'genuine intellectuals' of the right enters your thinking?

SAID: Certainly, intellectuals of the right played a very important role in Europe, the Third World and the United States. It is not my provenance of interest to talk about them, but of course they played absolutely clear roles. William Buckley in America played a fantastically important role, and there are people like Thomas Friedman and Samuel Huntington, as well.

IBISH: In Gramscian terms, these would qualify as 'organic intellectuals'?

SAID: Yes, organic intellectuals connected to class and corporate interests and central values of a particular kind, and of course connected to think-tanks and universities and other institutions. But my interest is on the other side. I am really interested in dissenting intellectuals in the post-war period, where the emergence of the United States, both during and after the cold war, is the central fact of power. Who are critics of that power?

IBISH: I want to come to the problem of nationalism. For you and many other scholars whose work is considered to belong to the category of postcolonial theory, the problem of nationalism, especially in formerly colonized nations in the Third World or developing countries, seems to have emerged as one of the most challenging ethical issues. Your own thinking on the subject seems to have gone through a discernible evolution. *Orientalism*, of course, was silent on the issue, as it does not really come into the subject. In the *Question of Palestine* you seem to unequivocally endorse Palestinian statehood. But by the end of the 1980s, 10 years later, in the essays that went on to form much of *Culture and Imperialism*, you had emerged as a very strong critic of nationalism in general, or at least certain types of nationalism. Now you are championing a bi-national state in Palestine, very persuasively I might add, based on the concept of citizenship and equality. I would like you to describe how your thinking on the question of nationalism in general, and Palestinian nationalism in particular, has developed.

SAID: Yes, but I think buried or implied in the *Question of Palestine* is a critique of nationalism as well. That is to say, it was received by radical nationalists within the Palestinian movement as being soft on the question, whereas what I was proposing was basically a nationalism of coexistence. I certainly still feel that, at a certain stage of historical development in the colonized world, nationalism is a necessary defence against extermination,

elimination and ethnocide, those things Palestinians and others such as Native Americans and African-Americans have suffered. So at that level, I am unequivocally a supporter of nationalism. What I have become more explicit about is that buried within the discourse of nationalism, in my case and I've read it back into other nationalist movements, for example, Indian nationalism and African nationalisms of various kinds, there is also a self-awareness of nationalism which includes a critique of its limitations. In other words, it can develop into triumphalism and, especially in the Arab case, it can develop into a kind of anti-democratic structure. The Arab case is perfectly exemplified in Nasserism, Ba`athism, and even in Palestinian nationalism, where issues of democracy, of participation, of civil and human rights, all are abrogated in the name of the national struggle, or made secondary to the main outlines of the national struggle. And this has usually carried with it a great deal of militarism, and a lot of it has included intolerance. The most glaring example is Nasser's prosecution of the left, who were certainly nationals but were independent of the Arab Socialist Union, the main party in Egypt, and were seen as equally threatening to the regime as the Islamic movement. They were persecuted, they were eliminated and there was a wholesale attack, in the name of nationalism, on the intelligentsia. The same thing has gone on in Iraq and Syria, and to some extent even in the Palestinian arena, so I have been aware of this all along.

Therefore, it seems to me that one of the lessons you learn when you reread the history of nationalism is to pay more attention to the critics of nationalism within nationalism like Tagore, Fanon, Cabral and James, who are constantly positing what seemed to be more coherent and universal goals like emancipation and a kind of universal struggle for social equality, in other words what Fanon called social consciousness, over and above the national consciousness. On that point, I think, most nationalisms have failed. It failed terribly, it seems to me, for example, in the case of Israel, where Zionism has in fact remained more or less at the stage of 1948 or even earlier, incapable of dealing with what I consider to be one of the main challenges to nationalism, namely, the problem of the 'other'. It certainly has been a tremendous failure in the former Yugoslavia. It's been a failure in parts of Africa and Asia. Look at Sri Lanka and see what a horrendous post-independence, post-nationalist state that country is in, largely because of the question of the other, because the forms of democracy and citizenship have not been extended to the whole community and where the problem of the national minority has not been sufficiently addressed. So, the evolution of my thoughts has, I think, gone along, not only with the Palestinian situation, but in other places where, as Eqbal Ahmed used to say, pathologies of power developed out of nationalism. This is a problem that the early nationalists in most instances never thought about, nor, in a way, should we blame them for not thinking about it, because they were too busy with the central struggle, which is essentially defensive.

IBISH: With regard of the question of bi-nationalism in Palestine, the model which you have mapped out is general, of course, as it would have to be. But I think we get a strong sense of what you are imagining, what you are talking about. The question then would be, isn't bi-nationalism, for example in Palestine, another form of nationalism comparable to a kind of 'Titoist' pan-south Slavic vision of Yugoslavia, strongly secular, avoiding ethnic dominance, but still a vision of a national entity or a nation-state entity, or something along those lines.

SAID: I think that is a very good point and I agree with it. I've been so embattled on bi-nationalism that I haven't really had a chance to elucidate it much. Here and there I have talked about it but I haven't have a chance to elucidate the pitfalls of it, you are absolutely right. I mean, pan-Slavic, and in the case of the Middle East, pan-Arab, those are not to me very hopeful developments. That is to say that I have a feeling that what we also need to talk about is statism, not exactly the worship of the state but the idea that the state is the solution. [What] I've been very interested in, and though I haven't written much about but I'm thinking and reading about, are different sorts of communities. These could be Mediterranean or regional or even the model provided by the European Union and currently there has been some talk about this in southern Africa, which strikes me as a much more hopeful way to go than simply the nation state, which has shown itself to be insufficient. Now, on the other hand, and this is very important. I don't think we can abandon the nation state, which is what in a certain sense neo-liberalism is suggesting: give it up because there is this other community, and the free market, and all the rest of that. But there are certain things that the state has to deliver, such as welfare, health and education. But there are more and less enlightened versions of that. The more enlightened one is still a hopeful model.

IBISH: You talked about larger structures such as a Mediterranean grouping or something along the lines of the European Union. There are also people who think in terms of smaller structures as well. Chatterjee does certainly and Chomsky does from another point of view, so there are also possibilities in the smaller.

SAID: Yes. I don't think there is contradiction between them. It could go either smaller or bigger.

IBISH: In fact, you could say that the largest structures open up space for the more localized to function.

SAID: Yes. The syndicalist model strikes me as very useful as Chomsky talks about it and Chatterjee, in a different way, talks about it also. I think the

smaller, regional and artisanal or communal models are much more full of promise than a kind of free-for-all dominated by the market where, in the end, the state is really in the hands of a relatively small number of people whose interests transcend the state in the wrong way.

IBISH: Is there, in your view, an Israeli constituency for this model of citizenship?

SAID: Yes, I think there is. I will give you a very simple example. There is the movement in Israel, nascent right now, but it is to be seen here and there, in the universities and so on, people who worried about the hold on Israel of the rabbinate. And certainly in the Arab countries, you have the threat of religious groups who also aspire to a model of government that is transnational or supranational, as certainly the Islamists do. Zionism itself is like that, insofar as it defines Israel not as the state of its citizens but as the state of all the Jewish people. What Oren Yiftachel calls 'ethnocracy' is really at the core of Zionism, and which has its own pitfalls as many people in Israel are aware. The national dimension is so accentuated by tension and the struggle with the Palestinians and the Arabs in general that all of that was avoided for a while. People have focused on the security of Israel and things like that, but they are all chimeras in the end.

IBISH: One of the more difficult aspects of some of your work for me is the evocation of alternatives to current insufficient ways of thinking about the world, particularly with regard to political and cultural ethics. Following on Fanon and Césaire and others, you and others who are seen as engaging in postcolonial thought, Spivak, Bhabha, etc., look towards the identification of some kind of new universality, something that goes beyond Enlightenment models of universality, that can help to orient the intellectual and the political activist ethically. You, I get the feeling, are unmoved by ideas of purely contingent, purely relative discrete approaches, as you suggested with regard to Bhabha's reading of postcolonial cultural relations. And I was wondering whether you can talk a little bit about the challenge of coming up with a functional model of a universal political ethics at the time when particularities come under threat all the time, when identity is threatened both by the global market and by local oppressors. It seems to me a very difficult challenge.

SAID: No, I don't think it is an easy thing to deal with, but I don't like the word 'universality'. I prefer 'universalism'. That is to say, if you are going to adopt universal norms of human behaviour, that is to say, if you believe, for example, in freedom of expression, freedom from abuse and corporal punishment, freedom from deprivation, freedom to reside, freedom to assemble and all those things are allowable as a collection of norms for

political behaviour, I simply don't accept the idea that they can be modified radically in the discussion of eastern versus western values. I find that simply unacceptable. We do have enough of a body of coherent work, whether the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the conventions against child labour, slavery and so on, to make them the norm and to apply them in every situation, allowing at the same time for individual practices and cultural differences. I don't see that it is always necessarily going to be a conflictual situation. So I would call for difference without domination, difference without repression, difference without the abuse of human rights. I find that not so confusing. In other words, it seems perfectly possible. Go back to the principle of self-determination, even in the bi-national situation, one must be very careful in trying to define it in such a way that it is self-determination for more than one community. Then each can decide how collectively it wants to live, so long as the universal norms of human rights and human behaviour are applied and maintained without special pleading, such as saying it's OK in this tradition to do thus-and-such, for example, in the Islamic traditions it's OK to stone people. That to me is a fantastically unconvincing kind of argument.

IBISH: Just to pick up where you are with regard to the bi-national state in Palestine again, how would a Zionist affect, a yearning for Israeli Jewish self-determination and for Jewish statehood, be compatible with the universalist state?

SAID: Well, Zionism has always involved the oppression of another community. I mean, we are talking about the physical presence–bodies. In lieu of the Zionist model, there is the South African model, which is multi-cultural and allows for 11 official languages. There is a pluralism, not only of languages, but of cultures and that is embodied in the Constitution. And nobody has complained, to the best of my knowledge, not even the largest community, the Kwazulus, that it abrogates their nationalism. They are certainly at liberty to live according to their own cultural and traditional norms, so long as this doesn't at the same time infringe upon and destroy the same possibility for others. There is a necessary self-limitation in a multicultural or pluri-cultural situation. I don't like the use of the word 'multicultural' in this context, it's too much of an academic word. But we're talking about a pluri-cultural situation such as a bi-national state. Certainly, within the bi-national state, one needs to allow for differences. Zionism even overrides or pretends not to know about the differences between Ashkanazi and Mizrahi Jews. It also overrides the presence of Palestinian Arabs, Kurds, Druzes and others. And certainly this is the big challenge facing Europe today. We are dealing really with an ongoing dialectical of multi- or pluri-culturalism. Italy now has 10 percent population of non-Italians and non-Catholics. There is a large Muslim population there. There is a 15 percent

presence in Sweden of Kurds and Muslims from Turkey and the Arab world and elsewhere in the Middle East. All those are part of the same problem. How do you deal with a pluri-cultural situation which is constantly developing, for which the only answer seems to have been limitations on immigration? I mean that is simply not a satisfactory answer. You can't just keep them out because you have their presence. It's the same with Israel. That is why, it seems to me, all the nonsense about denying and refusing to deal with the right of return, is a way of saying, 'We don't accept the presence of somebody else.' But that somebody else is already there. It is not that it is suddenly coming out of the blue.

IBISH: Can you describe the centrality to your work of your understanding of secularism?

SAID: Very easily. Back to Vico. To a certain extent Ibn Khaldun talks about it too. I make a very clear demarcation between the historical world and the world of the nation, which is made by human beings, men and women, and that which isn't, including the world of nature and what Vico called sacred history, the world as made by God. About that, I have nothing to say. It doesn't seem to me to enter into the world of secular effort. Secularism means the world of time, the world of history, and above all that made by human beings, which can be understood because it is made by human beings. There is no room in it for revelation, nor for redemption, nor for a kind of transcendental telos of one sort or another, nor for a transcendental origin. So that's what I mean by secularism. It's not simple but it is, I think, quite coherent.

IBISH: So the question then would be, how is secularism available to the ethical narration of decolonized of collective subjectivities, and how would you deploy it as a practical point of view, politically.

SAID: I would say that it is available first of all in the possibility of change. As Raymond Williams pointed out, no social situation is exhausted by one system or one dominant view, there is always room for alternatives and for social change. We have the faculty to change. I mean you can go back to abduction, and generalize from the known facts to a hypothetical situation in the future which is better than the current situation. So if you are an oppressed colonial or, in the case of Lukacs, you are a member of the proletariat, you can posit a kind of putative alternative to the situation in which you find yourself oppressed and deprived of your rights. And in that respect it becomes something deployable as a goal to begin to move toward, but only as part of a group. I mean, you can't do it on your own. It has to do with being part of a whole class that suffers the same fate. In that respect it strikes me as eminently available.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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