Edward Said
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Source: *History Workshop Journal*, No. 57 (Spring, 2004), pp. 235-243
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25472735
Accessed: 31-10-2019 08:39 UTC

REMEMBERING EDWARD SAID
(1935–2003)

Edward Said
by Catherine Hall

In April 2003 I was honoured to be invited to speak at a one-day conference at Columbia University, New York, organized to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Edward Said's path-breaking book, *Orientalism*. It was a very special occasion. A number of scholars spoke about the significance of the book in their different disciplines and from their different locations. People in comparative literature, anthropology, critical theory, history, Middle Eastern Studies, from the US, Britain and the Middle East all spoke of the lasting significance of the book in their areas of work. It was just after the war in Iraq had been declared officially over. Everyone there was preoccupied with the tragic events that were unfolding in the Middle East and with the effects on the rest of the world. There was much talk of the difficulties faced by critics of the war and of US policy in Israel and Palestine in American universities. Edward Said was there all day, sitting on the front row of the hall with his wife Mariam, asking questions, engaging in debate, a constant and generous presence. At the end of the day he spoke, to a completely packed auditorium, full of colleagues, students and friends. We hung on his words as he reflected on the terrible continuities between the time when he was writing *Orientalism* and now. Much of what he said on that occasion can be read in the introduction to

the new edition of the book that Penguin has just published. When he finished speaking we all stood up to celebrate him and the importance of his words and his thinking over these last decades. It was a truly memorable occasion, made especially poignant by the sad news of his death in September. What follows is an edited version of my talk on that occasion, printed in tribute to an exceptional public intellectual.

ON *ORIENTALISM*: REFLECTIONS FROM LONDON

We are gathered together today to reflect on the extraordinarily productive impact and continued relevance of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. My brief comments are concerned with the ways in which the book helped critical scholars in the U.K., particularly historians, to think about Britain in its postcolonial moment.

Orientalism was published twenty-five years ago. Said's argument was that 'European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'.[1] That management was a discursive production, through the discourse of orientalism that made 'the Orient' an object of knowledge and an object of power. Said argued that these forms of cultural power, organized through disciplines such as history, anthropology and philology, were as significant in the maintenance of colonial rule as the political, economic and military policies that had dominated academic study. Drawing on Foucault's notion of discourse he examined the Western European constructions of those who lived in the Middle East, and the ways in which orientalist discourse became, in Foucault's terminology, a regime of truth. He linked this with Gramsci's notion of hegemony, or the winning of consent by the rulers to their rule. Truth resided in the power of writers and academics to tell stories of the Orient that claimed successfully to represent it. Those representations depended on a set of binary oppositions between Europeans and orientals which always worked to the detriment of the latter. Yet the othering of orientals also rested on fantasized notions of their sexuality which made them objects of Western desire. This could be done only by constant discursive work, fixing and refixing the boundaries between Western rationality and oriental irrationality, Western industry and oriental indolence, Western self-control and the oriental lack of it.

Said's analysis of the discourses of orientalism ranged over a wide variety of texts and periods: from key politicians, colonial officials and ideologues to great writers and scholars, from the French and British Empires to the post-war United States. One example of his method must suffice. Take his analysis of Arthur James Balfour's speech to the House of Commons in 1910 on 'the problems with which we have to deal in Egypt'. These, Balfour argued, 'belong to a wholly different category' than those 'affecting the Isle of Wight or the West Riding of Yorkshire'. Egyptians could not expect to

be treated like Englishmen. British superiority and Egyptian inferiority were taken for granted by Balfour. As Said unpicks his speech for us we see how it is British *knowledge* of the Orient which legitimates British colonial intervention. 'We' know 'these people', he told his audience, better than they know themselves. 'As Balfour justifies the British occupation of Egypt', Said explains:

> supremacy in his mind is associated with 'our' knowledge of Egypt and not principally with military or economic power. Knowledge to Balfour means surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline – and of course, it means *being able to do that*. Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a 'fact' which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it' – the Oriental country – since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it.

Balfour rhetorically asks the House of Commons whether it is a good thing for absolute government to be exercized in Egypt by the British and answers thus:

> I think it is a good thing. I think that experience shows that they have got under it far better government than in the whole history of the world they ever had before, and which not only is a benefit to them, but is undoubtedly a benefit to the whole of the civilised West. . . . We are in Egypt not only for the sake of the Egyptians, though we are there for their sake; we are there also for the sake of Europe at large.

Egyptians, it is assumed, cannot speak for themselves. It is the job of the British, Balfour instructs his audience, to represent them, for they know how subject peoples think and feel. It is this knowledge that legitimates the exercize of colonial power.[2] Balfour would have occupied a particular place in Said's mind since he provided one of the key inspirations for Zionism, and perhaps even for the Zionist state. In 1917, when he was Foreign Secretary he authored what became known subsequently as the Balfour Declaration, supporting the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

The Britain in which *Orientalism* was published was just entering the Thatcher period and as yet its particular version of postcoloniality was not fully articulated. The book played an important part in making it possible to think in new ways about colonialism, the legacies of empire and questions of 'race' and otherness as they continued to figure in the culture. In

the Thatcherite world of 'them' and 'us' it drew attention to the connec-
tions between the past and the present. Said incited us to read and think
differently – to focus on the common-sense and taken-for-granted assump-
tions about who is 'one of us' that have circulated in England for centuries.
For those of us trained in Marxism, and particularly the cultural Marxism
that was so influential in Britain in the 1970s, the Gramscian framework of
the book, alongside Foucault, was very important. *Orientalism* contributed
to the efforts to delineate what it might mean to take empire as central to
British society and history.

   Britain's version of 'postcoloniality' was very particular. The term itself,
as many have noted, is always problematic and occludes as well as pointing
to very important changes. Britain has been an imperial power for a very
long time. Some date it to the twelfth century, and England's colonialism
on the Celtic fringe, some to the sixteenth century and England's activities
in Ireland, some to the seventeenth century and the development of
colonial activities in the Caribbean and North America.[3] Whichever 'point
of origin' is taken as critical it is clear that English/ British identities (and I
am skirting over a series of issues here about English hegemony and its
relation to a wider somewhat more inclusive British identity) are crucially
associated with the idea of the English as 'an imperial race'. In the First
British Empire, that of the eighteenth century – associated primarily with
the Caribbean, the North American colonies and naval supremacy – the
trope of the island served as an explanation for English dominance and
superiority, the nation and 'the island race' were tied together by customs,
descent and blood, and colonial alterity provided one of the axes for
constructions of self and other.[4] The Second British Empire was born after
recovery from the loss of the American colonies and the successful
conclusion of the Napoleonic wars. By 1820 Britain ruled twenty-six per
cent of the world population. This empire, as it expanded in the nineteenth
century was critically divided between the new colonies of white settlement
– Australia, New Zealand, the Cape – and those 'dependencies' with
majority brown and black populations – India, Ceylon, the Caribbean, West
and East Africa, Malaya and so on which were thought incapable of ruling
themselves. It was common sense to Thomas Babington Macaulay –
historian of the nation in the late 1840s and 1850s – that the English were
an 'imperial race' suited to colonizing and civilizing others. And this was
the vision that was sustained into the twentieth century – indeed until
recently Churchill might have been seen as the last great protagonist of the
historic theme of England's providential destiny.

   The period after 1945 saw the rapid disintegration of that empire – from
1946 to the 1960s. All that is left now is a few tiny outposts. Decolonization
appeared to take place without any great trauma inside Britain – or any
crisis over questions of British identity. Since the late 1960s, however, it has
become apparent that there is a long-term crisis over British identity – how
it is to be thought once Britain is no longer an apparently homogeneous

white nation, and the British are no longer an 'imperial race'. Up to the post-war period there was no significant non-white population in Britain – 'race' was for the most part lived at a distance. The geographical gap between metropole and colony was, I would argue, critical to the rule of colonial difference, and makes British history in relation to 'race' and other-ness very different from that of the US.[5] Those 'others' who were present inside – the Irish, or Eastern European Jews – were sometimes racialized and often constructed as 'alien': but their presence never seriously threat-ened the imagined whiteness of the nation. The arrival from the late 1940s of West Indian and South Asian migrants – who it then became apparent had come to stay – has changed forever the demographics and the cultural and political identities of these islands.

Since the 1960s – the moment at which it became clear to many that 'migrants' were here to stay, and Enoch Powell memorably articulated a new racism which was to become Conservative party orthodoxy under Thatcher – 'race' has become a key issue within British society. 'The empire came home' as it is often put, and seriously challenged assumptions as to what it meant to be English/British. This was Britain's post-colonial moment, the time of transition, as Simon Gikandi puts it, when the foun-dational histories of the metropole began to unravel, a disjunctive moment when imperial legacies came to haunt English and post-colonial identities.[6] *Orientalism* provided a critical tool through which to read this transition. The moment coincided with the shift in power to Europe, the loss of aspects of British sovereignty, and the demand by Scottish and Welsh nationalists for forms of devolution – the partial disaggregation of the United Kingdom. At the same time the eruption of Catholic demands for civil rights in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s – and the subsequent failure to settle these issues has been a constant, though little acknowledged, reminder of unresolved colonial issues.[7] It is all of this that provides the context for Britain's particular form of postcoloniality – one in which a profound amnesia about the past is coupled with ongoing fantasies of 'imperial white-ness' and continued aspirations to play a part in the world which are rooted in such assumptions.

It was in the hot moment of this transition to postcoloniality during the 1980s and '90s that the influence of *Orientalism* really came home in Britain. Together with a number of other key texts, from Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney and C. L. R. James, it was crucial to a generation of black British activists – seeking ways of understanding the workings of colonialism in the mind. Said's own position as a committed Palestinian was very important in opening up the intersections between old and new forms of colonialism. It helped those who were committed to black struggles in Britain to see the connections with Northern Ireland more clearly. It became the paradig-matic text for the rethinking of Britain's relation to the rest of the world in a number of disciplines, from literature and anthropology to cultural studies. In drawing attention to the long history of how Britain and the west

came to know and understand the rest of the world in an imperial context it unmasked sets of relations which had previously not been seen as central to the making of the modern western world. It was not only class and gender identities, but also national, racial and ethnic identities that were constantly being constructed through relations of power. In insisting on the centrality of power to systems of representation, it gave a political edge to questions of otherness. His explicit anti-essentialism and 'radical scepticism about all categorical designations' has prompted us to examine the taxonomic conventions of colonial knowledge, how these conventions have shaped contemporary scholarship and why students of colonial knowledge did not ask about them.[8] His insistence that what is at risk from attention to Orientalism is the European heartland itself, and that 'the principal motifs and tropes of the European cultural tradition far from being self-generated, were the product of constant, intricate, but mostly unacknowledged traffic with the non-European world', has encouraged the re-thinking of the canon.[9] The book therefore played an important part in the revision of theoretical perspectives and the changing of research questions. And, as is often the case with great books, its apparently simple binary system made a critical point that has been very productive.

Many historians in Britain have been exceedingly reluctant to take on the arguments of *Orientalism*. Its status as a literary text was in part at issue. This was a book about the reading of texts, not about what happened. In the context of the heated debates amongst historians about the pleasures and dangers of 'the cultural turn' *Orientalism* provided a prime target for critique. Furthermore, it raises questions that are deeply disturbing to established historical orthodoxies. The Whig interpretation of history, which more or less dominated the field from the founding of history as a discipline to the 1960s, was built on the idea of progress. The nation was at the heart of 'the island story', and gradual democratization, the inclusion of one group after another in forms of political representation, was the marker of progress. Constitutional reform 'at home' was the historical key, and empire was more or less irrelevant to metropolitan politics. In the 1880s J. R. Seeley proposed an alternative account in his *The Expansion of England*, arguing that nation and empire were indissolubly linked, challenging insular thinking and seeing 'Greater Britain', that is Britain plus the colonies of white settlement, as one nation.[10] His vision, however, while critical to the development of imperial thinking at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly that of Joseph Chamberlain, failed to break the hegemony of 'the island story'. Imperial history developed as a sub-field, built on the assumption that empire had little effect on the metropole, while colonies were of course shaped by the metropole.

The major challenge to the largely atheoretical, empiricist, field of British history in the mid twentieth century came from Marxism. The British school of Marxist historiography focused on a rewriting of British history. Faced with the power of the myths of British exceptionalism, the

reforming and non-revolutionary character of key transformations, they determined to rewrite that history with an attention to questions of class and class antagonisms. R. H. Hilton devoted himself to reconceptualizing English feudalism through a Marxist lens, bringing issues of freedom and power back into medieval society. Christopher Hill insisted on 1640 as a revolution. E. P. Thompson's epic, *The Making of the English Working Class* constructed working men and women as a revolutionary force and rearticulated English radicalism as a native tradition. And E. J. Hobsbawm's trilogy, *Age of Revolution, Age of Capital, Age of Empire*, followed by *Age of Extremes* reinterpreted nineteenth and twentieth century Britain through a classical Marxist frame.[11]

The Marxist historians, with a few exceptions (notably John Saville on 1848 and Victor Kiernan on empire), did not challenge the established divisions between domestic and imperial histories, or the prevailing assumption that empire had little impact on the life or politics of the metropole.[12] 'Race' was not a category of significance in their thinking and their political stance as anti-colonialists did not push them to engage with black scholarship or to think critically about their own whiteness. Despite the publication of C. L. R. James' s *The Black Jacobins* in 1938, for example, Thompson did not see these arguments as important to his own thinking about the 1790s and 1800s. The insularity of Englishness and the assumptions of Eurocentrism were hard to break.

Orientalism has been critical to a rethinking of the relation between nation and empire and an insistence on the importance of placing metropole and colony in one analytic frame. Said's emphasis on colonial discourse and the ways in which European culture managed and produced 'the orient' made possible a new attention to the workings of colonial discourse in many different contexts. It was the iconic text that linked culture with colonialism. His insistence on the cultural dimensions of colonialism and the impetus he gave to the analysis of colonial discourses has contributed over time to the breakdown of the idea of a single colonial project, of manichean binaries and of simple hegemonic blocs. His determined focus on questions of power and knowledge has remained absolutely central.

It was feminists who took up this challenge in relation to history writing. In the British context it was feminist historians working in British history who addressed these questions and led the way in the rethinking of the relation between 'race', nation and empire. Said has been widely critiqued by feminists for his failure to engage with questions of gender and sexuality. But that critique acted as an incentive to understand the ways in which questions of 'race' and otherness were structured through other forms of difference too. The initial challenge by feminist historians in the 1970s and '80s to the category of 'class' meant that they had already engaged in the deconstruction of established narratives. Post-structuralism, first Foucault and Lacan, then Derrida, provided key tools for understanding difference and dismantling not only class but 'woman' as a unitary category. The

challenge of black feminism – which dominated feminist politics in the late 1980s and early '90s – was critical to the recognition of the specificity of white feminism and the ways in which white feminists had assumed an 'imperial' voice. All of this meant that some feminist historians of Britain – both in the UK and the US – were open to both the politics and the theoretical perspectives of post-colonial thinking, from Said to Spivak and others. These influences can now be seen across a range of work produced in the last ten years – from Antoinette Burton's re-thinking of the English feminist tradition of the mid nineteenth century, to Kathleen Wilson's work on the formation of modernity in the eighteenth century, or Mrinalini Sinha on imperial masculinity – the makings of manliness and effeminacy in late nineteenth century England and Bengal, or the body of work on women travellers, or my own work on nineteenth-century Englishness as a racialized identity – to cite just a few examples.[13]

Many British historians refused to acknowledge that *Orientalism* had any relevance for historians. Some simply ignored it, as, for example Christopher Bayly in his *Imperial Meridian*; others, like John MacKenzie, tried to demolish the arguments by claiming that they were not properly historical.[14] The rapid expansion of new approaches in imperial history has, however, had a significant impact on the discipline. At a time when in the US especially, British history is of declining interest to students, more global perspectives have proved to be far more popular and 'new imperial history', as it is sometimes called, is remarkably present in the research agendas of young scholars – to the evident dismay of historians not working in that field. The success of this work, with its critical perspectives, has resulted in new forms of revisionism, both from the centre and from the right. Modernizers such as Linda Colley, David Cannadine and David Armstrong have recognized the significance of taking nation and empire in one analytic frame, but at the same downplay the significance of 'race'.[15] Simplified versions of Said's argument are produced as a form of critique, or indeed the fame of *Orientalism* is mobilized to popularize work which is an attack on those positions – as with Cannadine in *Ornamentalism*. From the right come more straightforward defences of empire – as in the case of the very successful recent TV series in Britain made by the self-proclaimed protagonist of capitalism and empire, Niall Ferguson. Imperial history is now the most hotly contested of fields. In these struggles over the nature of the discipline and the future of British history, Edward Said's work, and his political commitments, remain a key point of reference.

At the end of the introduction to *Orientalism* Said quotes Raymond Williams on the importance of 'unlearning' modes of cultural domination. We celebrate Said's commitment to the possibilities of emancipating forms of thought and knowledge.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 3.

2 Said, *Orientalism,* pp. 31–6.

3 See, for example, John Gillingham, *Richard Coeur de Lion: Kingship, Chivalry and War in the Twelfth Century,* Hambledon, London, 1994; Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1975; Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution,* Blackwell, Oxford, 1985; Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: a History of Four Nations,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

4 Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race. Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century,* Routledge, London and New York, 2003.

5 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993: Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867,* Polity, Cambridge, 2002.

6 Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness. Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism,* Columbia University Press, New York, 1996.

7 The significant point here is the book's location in a political circuit. *Orientalism* provided a way of thinking about the spatial ordering of the world that disrupted the East/ West binary created through the colonial mindset. It opened up the connections between the 1967 Israeli/ Arab conflict and British troops going into Northern Ireland. These were new configurations of the colonial. (Personal communication with Gail Lewis.)

8 Said, 'Afterword to the 1995 Printing', *Orientalism,* p. 331; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002, p. 13.

9 Peter Hulme, 'Subversive Archipelagos', *Dispositio* 14, 1989, pp. 36–8.

10 J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England,* Macmillan, London, 1883.

11 See 'Remembering the Hard Way: E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991',* Victor Kiernan, Bob Chase and Edward Said, *History Workshop Journal* 42, autumn 1996.

12 John Saville, *1848. The British State and the Chartist Movement,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987; V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind. European Attitudes to the Outside World in the Imperial Age,* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969.

13 See, for example, Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture,* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill NC, 1994; Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race;* Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century,* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995; Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918,* Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992; Hall, *Civilising Subjects.*

14 C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian. The British Empire and the World 1780–1830,* Longman, London, 1989. It should be noted that Bayly's book is a powerful attempt to analyze metropole and colony in one frame; John M. MacKenzie, 'Occidentalism, Counter-Point and Counter-Polemic', *Journal of Historical Geography* 19, 1993, pp. 339–44.

15 Linda Colley, *Captives. Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850,* Jonathan Cape, London, 2002; David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism. How the British saw their Empire,* Allen Lane, London, 2001; David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.