

## Edward Said and the Politics of Humanism

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**ABSTRACT:** Edward Said contributed immensely to the debate around the role of intellectuals in the Public Sphere. Through his scholarly work and political activism, he shows a consistent commitment to the tradition of humanism. One may venture to say that his political intervention in the struggle for Palestinians rights and freedom can be regarded as a politics of humanism. What makes Said so exceptional in his contribution? Why is he still, years after his departure, an inspirational public intellectual? To answer these questions, one is compelled to delve into the humanistic approach with which he conducted his work and the very notion of representation he adopts apropos universal causes of justice, freedom and democracy. It seems untenable in the case of Said to extricate the scholarly intellectual from the political or the humanistic. In this paper, I argue that Said's politics for Palestine demarcate the trajectory of his humanistic scholarly project, and this can be put fairly under the rubric of "Politics of Humanism". His commitment to aestheticism is impressive, he draws our attention to the significance of the philological reading and humanistic interpretation of knowledge. The approach he magnificently celebrated throughout his scholarly and political writing. Therefore, engaging with Said's work certainly illuminates us to see how he was able to use the scholarly tools of criticism to provide the readers with new ways to perceive reading and learning critically and use it as a tool of resistance to official narratives. One may argue that Said thrives to address the humanistic role of the intellectual in the public sphere through political intervention in three dimensions. One, through presenting the alternative narrative; two, through providing ardent critique of those who are in power and their circles of intellectuals; and three, through offering a vision for the future epitomised in a message of coexistence and shared experiences and histories.

**KEYWORDS:** *Palestinians, Humanism, Politics, Criticism, Philological Reading, Intellectuals*

### I. INTRODUCTION

"An American humanist of Palestinian ancestry"

Said was introduced by his friend Ibrahim Abu Lughod (1970) as "an American humanist of Palestinian ancestry" [1]. So, the first appearance of Said on the political scene showed that he was known as a humanist, a nomination that one has to deal with further in the context of his political thoughts and activism. To begin with, one can argue that Said's political and public commitment to the question of Palestine is the crux of his politics of humanism. Clearly, his humanist position informed the way he looked at the conflict, through which he strives to reset criteria of humanism that are worthy of the name. A number of writers such as, Rashid Khalidi, Saree Makdisi, Joseph Massad, Ghada Karmi, Karma Nabulsi, Ilan Pappé, and Avi Shlaim, to mention but a few, indicate that the centrality of the question of Palestine in Said's intellectual project is essential to the nature of his political intervention [2]. For Said, the question of Palestine is a universal cause, perhaps, because of the universal nature of the place and the struggle over it [3]. The political struggle, for Said, becomes the tool through which he perceives humanism in its most practical terms. From the outset, humanism for Said is what it does usefully on the part of the intellectual and life at large [4]. Such a practical perception of humanism precipitates the imperative connection between humanism as an idea of universal values and humanism as a critical and political practice that is anchored on both a secular and democratic perspective. In fact, one notices that Said's political commitment in the battle over Palestine as a universal place of coexistence was seemingly also a battle over a discredited tradition of humanism. The scholarly project in Said's case is therefore enmeshed with the personal and the political.

The present paper engages critically with Said's notion of the role of the intellectual and the different dimensions of politics of humanism. It encompasses three sections. The first introduces Said's concept of

humanism in light of his thoughts on philological reading and humanistic interpretation of knowledge. The second section looks at Said as a political, humanist and public intellectual. In effect, shedding the light on his intellectual public persona, compels one to see the living example of his notion of humanism as a democratic critique and resistance to orthodoxy and unquestioned narratives. The third section elaborates on the dimensions of his politics of humanism through his presentation of the alternative narrative; his humanistic critique of some intellectual *vis-à-vis* the question of Palestine; and finally, his humanistic vision of the political solution for the question of Palestine. I argue throughout that Said in his entire oeuvre and activism is considered a practical model of the humanist academic in the public sphere.

### 1.1. Philological Reading:

Considering Said's thought on philological reading in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) would serve the notion of practical and critical humanism so well. For the humanist, Said argues, philological reading involves two crucial motions; reception and resistance. In the first instance, the act of philological reading entails submitting oneself to texts knowledgeably and treating them provisionally [4], and then being able to make informed statements about its meaning and what that meaning might attach itself to [4]. In the second instance, reading as resistance means reading critically for the purpose of presenting the "alternative now silenced or unavailable through the channels of communication controlled by a tiny number of news organisations ... that offer a pre-packaged and reified representations of the world that usurp consciousness and pre-empt democratic critique" [4]. So, for Said, humanism is an act of resistance based on critique, which 'is always restlessly self-clarifying in search for freedom, enlightenments and more agency and certainly not their opposites' [4]. It is squarely anchored in philological reading, as it offers a practical deployment of an alternative, the alternative that can only be found when one connects parts of the text to other parts for the purpose of expanding the space of attention to include the marginalized, the silenced and widening circles of pertinence [4]. To recap, for Said, humanism firstly, is a critical practice that perforce means an act of resistance, secondly, connects things, identities and experiences, and thirdly, expands the margins of attention participation, therefore becoming democratically inclusive of all marginalised and antinomian circles. For Said, the opposite to this reasoned perception of humanism means separation, limitation and exclusion, which is therefore anti-democratic and anti-humanist.

It is noteworthy that Said's thoughts on philological reading manifest his adherence to the tradition of aestheticism which can be traced back to Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) and Leo Spitzer (1887-1960). In fact, aestheticism forms an intrinsic aspect of his humanistic reading, and as a true follower of Theodor Adorno, Said asserts "the irreconcilability between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic" [4]. He draws the attention of his audience, in an interview with Micheal Zeeman, to the fact that aesthetics are not immune to various affiliations and connections, and one has to be aware that "there is aesthetics and there is the appropriation of aesthetics. What the Nazis did with *Fidelio* is a case in point, where works that can be described as works of liberation are put to different uses" [5]. This can be taken as a practical example of Said's philological reading set out above as an informed act of resistance and a practical critique to humanise the way we form our knowledge about the world we live in. Evidently, in Said's writing the scholarly, the political and the musical show commitment to the aesthetic tradition of humanism in the best practical manner. This is as manifest in *Orientalism* (1978) [6] as it is in his political essays *From Oslo to Iraq and the Roadmap* (2000) [7] and *On Late Style* (2006) [8].

### 1.2. Humanistic Interpretation:

The corollary to the notion of philological reading as resistance is based on criticism and it is necessarily formulated into action. Said also draws our attention to what makes knowledge in the first place. In *Covering Islam* (1981), for instance, Said perceives knowledge, especially knowledge about human society, to be a form of interpretation, and therefore it has to fulfil certain requirements on the part of the reader to qualify as 'humanistic interpretation' [9]: these are the awareness of one's own prejudices, and of one's alienation from the text to be interpreted [9]. This is only possible if the reader or the interpreter fulfils two conditions: one, to be aware of the predilection that lurks behind the contact with the culture or the text to be studied. It has to be based on 'uncoercive contact,' unlike the orientalist's approach, which proceeds from the vantage point that defined the relationship between West and the East, namely colonialism; in the forms of domination, confrontation and cultural antipathy [9]. So, the purpose is essential in this context and the reader has to be prepared to be open to the value and newness of the text, the desire to know and learn with full awareness of 'the interpretative situation', 'interest, and 'purpose'. The second important condition that Said raises in this context, is that knowledge about human society as a form of interpretation, —unlike knowledge of natural science, which demands specific learnings and training— "acquires the status of knowledge by various means, some of them intellectual, many of them social and even political" [9]. Said therefore argues that:

interpretation first of all is a form of making...It depends on the willed intentional activity of the human mind...such an activity takes place perforce in specific time and place and is

engaged in by a specifically located individual, with a specific background, in a specific situation, for a particular series of ends [9].

The critical awareness of the reader and interpreter discerns the light of reason, according to Said, only when he or she sets the bases of uncoercive contact with the text or other cultures and secondly, s/he becomes consciously aware of the interpretative situation. Only then can the reader discern the biased antithetical scholars who espouse their interpretations of other cultures and knowledge production in line with the government's policy interest [9]. After all, Said asserts that most knowledge about human society is both accessible to common sense and subject to critical assessment; these are intellectual attributes cultivatable by everyone, not the privilege of a special class, nor the possession of a handful of 'experts' [9]. What troubles Said throughout his intellectual and political journey is the covert complicity between knowledge and power. Illuminating the readers and interpreters with new ways of reading was Said's battle to forge not only new ways of reading cultures but also to bring forth challenge and resistance to the official interpretations and narratives.

## II. EDWARD SAID, THE POLITICAL, THE HUMANIST AND THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

In his political writings, Said set humanism in practice [10] as precisely as he discerns it in philological reading and knowledge as a humanistic interpretation. He relentlessly reminds the world that the Palestinians are 'the indigenous inhabitants who were thrown away to make way for the Jewish state' and therefore they are 'the victims of the victims' [3-11-12]. Said derives the phrase in his 'The Arab Portrayed' from I.F. Stone's courageous "remark on the irony of fate that made the (Palestinian) Arabs suffer at the hands of a people which had itself suffered egregiously" [1]. In this case, the Jewish people, whom Said describes in return as "a community of suffering (who) have brought with them a heritage of great tragedy" [4]. And while Said exposes the ideology of Zionism and what it did to the Palestinians, he refuses to equate Zionism with racism. In fact, he criticises the 1975 "Zionism is racism" UN resolution, and insisted that "*Racism* is too vague a term: Zionism is Zionism"[13]. Yet, the resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in his view, can only be possible through genuine reconciliation between the two sides of the divide, based on coexistence and mutual recognition. His critique of the peace process is precisely against the spurious notion of peace implicated in the Oslo Accord between the PLO and Israel in 1993, which lacks genuine will on the part of Israel to attain a real and sustainable peace based on freedom, equality and justice for all. He also rails against Arafat and his coterie for their ineptness, opportunism and lack of political and moral responsibility and leadership by which to address the vital issues in the conflict. The right of return is inclusive. His political writings and activism show that the (binational state), one democratic state for its entire citizenry, becomes his well-rounded vision of the solution during the last decade of his life (1993-2003). This is not to say that the binational state proposal is an entirely novel idea in his political thought, but one could comfortably argue that the one state solution was developing throughout his journey of the political struggle for Palestine. It changes over time from a 'binational state solution' (BN), in line with Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber (1878-1965), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Judah Magnes (1877-1948) to a Two-State-Solution; although his<sup>1</sup> was a more open debate [14-15]. This officially was endorsed by the Palestinian National Council's (PNC) summit in Algeria in 1988 [11]. Finally, he re-embraces the One State Solution after the Declaration of Principles in 1993 and became more critical of Arafat and the Palestinian leadership after that [2].

In fact, the last decade of Said's life is the most startling episode in terms of his political activism, the range of his writings and the variety of his contributions in the political public sphere. It resulted in the publication of three volumes of political essays *Peace and its Discontents* (1995); *The End of the Peace Process*, (2000); *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map* (2000), and five volumes of interviews, with David Barsamian: *The Pen and The Sword* (1994); *Culture and Resistance* (2003); *Interviews with Edward Said* (2004) edited by John, Singh; *Power, Politics and Culture* (2001) edited by Gauri Viswanthan; and *Parallels and Paradoxes* (2002) conversations with Daniel Barenboim. Remarkably, his intellectual productivity reached an unprecedented level for someone with his health conditions, especially after he was diagnosed with rare type of leukaemia. His real pain, sleeplessness, and sorrow were due to the fact that death was approaching but he did not feel well enough to participate in the struggle or to fully tell the story of Palestine to the world. His memoir *Out of Place* (2000) which he started in the form of letters to his mother, was an attempt to regain the world he had lost, to tell the world the story of the Palestinians through his own words. Throughout this decade he strove to connect his humanistic project not only with the public political sphere through his writings (weekly essays to a general readership) but also through different forms of institutionalised initiatives, such as the 'Palestinian National Initiative', which was organised with Mustapha Barghouti and the 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra'. More attention is given now to the 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', founded with Daniel Barenboim as the

<sup>1</sup>In "One State Solution" (1999) a conversation with Barsamian, Said asserted that his endeavour is different, he opened the debate and reached out to the Israelis and Zionists, whereas those thinkers, although dissident, were a minority and ineffective politically compared to other branches of Zionism, and their debate was restricted within the Zionist circle [14].

manifestation of Said's legacy of the politics of humanism [16]. The political message implied by these projects is evidently a message of peace and reconciliation based on coexistence and mutual recognition in the most practical and strategic terms. His far-reaching political thoughts also inspired other local and international campaigns in support of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and equal rights in a binational state, both locally and internationally, such as the BDS movement and the One State Group.

### III. SAID'S ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL AND THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF HUMANISM

In his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Said set the role of the intellectual in the public sphere against what he called "identitarian thoughts". This is a phrase Said draws from Adorno, coined for him by Martin Jay[11] which denotes the identitarian forces that manifest themselves through three 'negative models': religious enthusiasm, nationalism and exclusivism[4]. According to Said, these forces have wreaked havoc and destructions on the human race. This is why intellectuals, in his view, have to engage in a life-long battle with these forces. In his view, therefore, the intellectual's task in his intervention in the public and political sphere involves three struggles: one, to present the alternative narrative; two, his/her contribution is to produce forms of connection and coexistence not only between fields of knowledge but also with different histories, experiences, cultures and peoples; and three, the position from which he or she has to delve into the world of politics is that of universal values (freedom, justice, and equality) and critical humanism, which also implies moral judgment [4]. To be sure, this delineation of the task demarcates the concept of the intellectual in Said's view as a constellation of characteristics as being an exile, oppositional, secular and, above all, a humanist.

One would venture to say that Said's role as a public intellectual, politics and commitment to the question of Palestine can be qualified as the politics of humanism. True, one is bound to see Said's political commitment as part of a larger scholarly commitment to a discredited tradition of humanism into which, as he tells Harvey Blume in a given interview in 1999, he tries, through his intellectual and political intervention, 'to restore some sense of fullness to it' [17].

To put it more comprehensively, Said's politics of humanism can be demarcated through his work and activism in three dimensions. The first is his commitment to present the alternative narrative about the Palestinians by looking at Zionism from the standpoint of its victims, and how he connects the scholarly analysis of Orientalism and its relation to the European imperial project with the political analysis of Zionism and its genealogical, epistemological and historical connections. He bluntly argues that Zionism emanated from European imperialism in terms of its ideas and practice. The nub of this context is the well-argued connection between knowledge and power, and how the discourse of the powerful works against the narrative of the weak, which has, in turn, not only been suppressed but also totally distorted, dehumanised and rendered irrelevant. The history of imperialism, of which Zionism is an intrinsic part, is essentially a history of de-legitimization and denial. By presenting the alternative narrative, Said demystifies the very narrative which was based on the systematic demonization of the Palestinians. In his work, Said earnestly sought to reclaim a human space for the Palestinians other than the menacing image of the terrorist, the lawless, the pariah that was proposed in the eyes of the Zionists and their Western supporters. Contrary to the prevailing perception of their image in Western media, Said relentlessly asserts that Palestinians are "the victims of the victims" and "exiles' exiles" [3-1]. A phrase, touching in its resonance, which acts as a stunning reminder to the Israelis, oppressors of the Palestinians today, that you (they) were once victims and had behind you (them) a history of suffering and pain. In fact, the phrase's unmistakable tragedy and irony, serves to humanise both sides of the conflict, in the hope that they become aware of the necessity to venture into a different kind of relationship based on coexistence and a shared history. In this context, the counter-narrative or memory to which Said is committed entails looking at the phenomenon of terrorism critically and the ways in which the Palestinians were gratuitously connected to it. In his political writings, especially in *The Question of Palestine*(1979), Said has the task of producing an inventory of Zionism's victims, following Gramsci's observation with regard to the consciousness of what one basically is, which entails "'knowing thyself" as a product of historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory" [13]. This task seems to be the role of the intellectual for Said. He therefore looks critically, in *After the Last Sky, Blaming the Victims, The Politics of Dispossession* and a number of interviews, documentaries and lectures, at the notion of terrorism. He attempts to historicize, universalise, and open this notion up to the actualities of interpretation; in effect, to include Israeli acts against the Palestinians. Although he was always critical of the Palestinians' armed struggle throughout the 1970s-80s and later of the suicide bombings in the 1990s, he utterly refuses to equate the Palestinians' acts of violence with terrorism. Rather, he insists on drawing our attention to the disparity between Israel and the Palestinians in this conflict by referring to facts and numbers. The nub is that, on the Palestinians' side, the magnitude of loss, almost in everything, is far greater than on the Israelis' side. "There is no symmetry in this conflict" he tells Ari Shavit in an interview given in 2000 that was published in the Israeli magazine *Ha'aretz*, "there is a victim and a guilty side" [3]. This, of course, raises the question of the objectivity of the intellectuals' practice when it comes to the universal values of human rights. Despite being partisan, Said, in this respect, is similar to Julien Benda

(1867-1958); he sides with the victims, the poor and the usurped. Conversely, as mentioned earlier, despite his criticism of Zionism, Said refuses to equate Zionism with racism inasmuch as he rejects the very premises which conflate the criticism of Zionism and anti-Semitism and that of Zionism and Judaism.

While Said presents the alternative narrative through universalising and humanising, it becomes more noticeable in this area, in particular through his indefatigable diatribe on intellectuals, especially Western and American liberals, for their complacency and lack of a critical and moral stance *vis-a-vis* the Palestine question. This is the second dimension that manifests Said's position of humanistic criticism of those intellectuals and their self-censorship apropos the question of Palestine. Said aptly put those intellectuals under three categories, either outright liars, or meekly silent or wilfully schizophrenic, such as those with liberal sentiments who acted along the lines of a Jekyll and Hyde case [18]. Nevertheless, he credits a handful of other intellectuals who bravely speak against the grain and reflect the reality of the conflict such as Noam Chomsky, Israel Shahak, Matti Peled and others, [19-20-21-22]. From this critique of the liberal intellectuals, Said's political stance (as a humanist and a public intellectual) is that of coexistence, sharing and utterly against the politics of identity formations or identity triumph at any cost. This forms the third dimension, which can be epitomised in Said's recurrent epigram of Césaire's "there is a place for all of us at the rendezvous of victory". Evidently, Said's oppositional stance against Zionism is not because of Zionism *per se*. On the contrary, for him, Zionists can remain Zionists and celebrate their claims for the land of Palestine [3]. What Said utterly refuses, though, is the Zionists' 'ideology of difference' that denies the rights of the others and the very language that asserts that denial [11]. Said was deeply concerned with the use of language in the political struggle over Palestine. He warns the Arab intellectuals in particular about the use of 'apocalyptic language,' [3] or that which does not sustain the moral vision of the Palestinian struggle. Said's politics of humanism is consummated in the message of coexistence between Israel and the Palestinians. For Said, the resolution of the conflict has to be grounded in the acknowledgement and atonements on Israel's part. Israel had to assume responsibility for what it did to the Palestinians, similarly to the way that the Japanese, the Americans, the British and the French act towards other nations who endured the horrors of colonialism and dispossession. This, for Said, is crucial because it brings some sort of parity between the two sides of the divide; following the arguments of writers like Edward Thompson [23]. It asserts a notion of justice based also on equality of rights including the right of return. Although he looks at the right of return metaphorically [24], he insists that there is no resolution to the conflict without a fair solution to this vital issue. He contends that it is not acceptable that the Palestinians should remain refugees forever. At the same time, he assures in his interview with Ari Shavit (2000) that such an acknowledgement does not mean that the Jews had to leave. On the contrary, he utterly rejects the idea of Jews leaving or becoming refugees again. For him, there must be a formula of justice that can address the Palestinian historical rights to the historical Palestine and the realities of the present. It is impossible for the Palestinians to go back to their past conditions and the Israelis cannot forever keep ignoring the fact of the Palestinians [3]. Interestingly enough, Said ironically calls the Jews to be open to their own Jewish identity, one that historically coexists with different identities. Exile is the manifestation of the Jewish identity, which simply denotes plurality. To conclude with two instances: one is Said's interesting analysis of *Freud and the Non-European* (2003) [25], which fittingly accentuates the essence of the Jewish identity and calls the Israelis to look back even to the very Judaic identity that is represented in Moses' identity: "the Egyptian". The second is his Canaanite reading of Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*, (1988) through which he challenges the official Zionist narrative [21]. The two scholarly essays represent the democratic connectivity that Said suggests in his political thoughts and which perhaps suggest a notion of humanism that humanises the very notion of humanism in its European and universal settings. Both require further critical readings in the forthcoming papers.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this paper, the politics of humanism is the leitmotif that bridges Said the academic, the humanist and the public intellectual. The political urge is not only seen in the way he encourages the reader to read philologically, in terms of reception as well as being critical but rather he deems the very act of critical reading as an act of resistance to the established orthodoxies and unquestioned narrative inasmuch as it is a search for democratic alternatives. And this seems impossible without humanistic interpretation of knowledge. As we have learned, Said's battle for a politics of humanism is not only to be found in his scholarly work. In fact, his entire life was the manifestation of his ideas and ideals over the role of the intellectuals in the political and public sphere. Indeed, the political leitmotif permeates his entire oeuvre. Therefore, one cannot separate between the scholarly aesthetic analysis to be found in his *Orientalism* or *Culture and Imperialism* and that of writings of a political nature such as the *Question of Palestine*. I argued that all are political and represent the urge of politics of humanism *par excellence*. Through the elaboration of dimensions of his politics, we learned that Said strives in his work to present that alternative narrative either against the spurious representation of the Orient or the Palestinians in the context of the Palestine question. His stance of critique rails against the intellectuals who betray their moral calling, those who opt to stay silent when universal rights of justice and

truth are violated. In this, he echoes Julien Benda's *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. Contrary to this, Said seems determined to speak truth to power, to expose lies and above all to put forth a solution based on coexistence, connection and openness to envision a future that admit all. A politics of humanism simply defines the moral role of the intellectual in the public sphere, the type of politics that Said enjoins intellectuals to adopt when delving into the world of politics at large, not only into the politics of justice for Palestine.

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