

Chapter 1

In Conversation with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul, and Ania Loomba

Edward Said

Ania Loomba: We have decided to structure this conversation around three or four major issues, and then we will keep homing in. What we thought we'd tell you by way of introduction is that some of these issues may seem either reductive or repetitive. But they tap into critiques of your work current in India. So instead of quoting names and mentioning people and particularities, we have actually consolidated a set of issues, which are recurrent.

Edward Said: So, who beginneth?

Suvir Kaul: All right, this is our 'beginnings'. This is a quotation from *Orientalism*, which I am sure you will recognize: 'My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.' Have you revised or rethought the conceptual frameworks suggested here?

Said: Perhaps I may have overdone the notion of how systematically – I mean to what extent, to what level of detail – the system operated. Maybe I overstated it. But that there was, to use Foucault's language, a kind of discursive regularity, I have no doubt. Second, I think, maybe what you are getting at is the common misunderstanding and misreading of that passage, which claims that I was saying at the same time that there was no answering voice. That is not implied here at all. In fact, I say very often that the question of the Other in this sense was irrelevant, and the example I love to give is the case

of Gérard de Nerval who goes to visit Syria for his *Voyage en Orient* and immediately when you read the book – and if you know Syria – you realize that he is talking about some other place. You look a little further and you notice that what he is doing is simply repeating what Edward Lane says about Egypt. That is what I am talking about. There is a kind of occlusion, which by virtue of its authority, and by virtue of its successes, academic and artistic, gave Orientalism this kind of – persistence, you could call it.

AL: It is amazing how that misreading, as you call it, has persisted. But I want to shift the discussion slightly because it has been suggested by various recent critics that in postcolonial studies the emphasis is routinely on the analysis of colonial discourses instead of more material institutions, and often your own work, especially *Orientalism* (and this is ironic because everyone concedes that you are politically engaged and one of the few people who will talk about the material legacy of imperialism and colonial structures of authority) is seen as the source to which all these askew notions of discourse travel back.

Said: No, but I make very clear in *Orientalism* – to the best of my ability to discuss it in a manageable frame – that none of this could have happened without institutions, for example. For instance, the influence and the importance of the French school of Orientalism founded by Silvestre de Sacy in France in the late teens: you know that most of the great German Orientalists studied with him and went back to Germany and established colleges of Oriental studies and so on and so forth. That is a persistent theme throughout the book. I also talk about the institutionalization of knowledge about the Orient as epitomized by the *Description de l’Egypte*. And of course in the last part of the book (I am just jumping around now) I talk about the importance of this kind of knowledge to the State Department, to the Defence establishment, to the Intelligence establishment, and the connection between those and Anthropology, Political Science, ‘field work’ and the construction of paradigms – it is all in there. Later, of course, and in other essays, I developed this more and quite specifically.

AL: So do you think the field of postcolonial studies is subject to some of the same problems?

Said: I would rather not myself talk about it because I do not think I belong to that. First of all, I don’t think colonialism is over, really. I don’t know what they are really talking about. I mean colonialism in the formal sense is over, but I am very interested in neocolonialism, I am very interested in the workings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and I have written about them. I care very much about the structures of dependency and impoverishment that exist, well certainly in this part of the world and my part of the world and in all parts in what is now referred to as the global South. So I think to use the word postcolonialism is really a misnomer and I think I referred to the problems of that term in the Afterword to *Orientalism*.

AL: I just wanted to finish this by saying that there is a whole debate about the literary emphasis of postcolonial studies or the genesis, the disciplinary

home, from which it began. One of the unfortunate spillovers is that precisely those material details – you know what Arif Dirlik says . . .

Said: [intervenes] are left out. Yes, I agree. I have quoted Arif Dirlik precisely for that reason.

AL: So would you think it is slightly unfair if everyone cites *Orientalism* as a poststructuralist text?

Said: Now, listen, that is not even half as unfair as the way *Orientalism* is cited as a kind of sacred text of [religious and cultural] fundamentalism. I mean that is the most difficult burden for me to shake. You know I publicly insult these people [fundamentalists] – I mean, in my part of the world. I will be very happy to do it here, but nobody gave me the chance. . . . *Culture and Imperialism* has just been banned in the entire Gulf.

AL: Really?

Said: Yes, absolutely. I mean the Arabic translation. I suppose the English version is allowed, but the Arabic translation has been banned from all the countries of the Gulf. I am very opposed to that. The idea of banning books is so primitive and so inimical to everything I believe; and to think that in some way my book licenses these characters [fundamentalists] to fulminate against something called the West, which is a position I abjure. I say even the notions of the Occident and the Orient are ideological fictions and we should try to get away from them as much as possible. And then people say, ‘well, your “identity”’. I remember . . . (I am getting excited now) I remember this past summer in Beirut there was a conference held to honour me in the Arab world, and one of the big discussions was my attack in *Culture and Imperialism* on ‘identity’. ‘Identity’ bores me, I am simply not interested in defending ‘identity’. I mean Palestinian identity, or in the case of something about to be exterminated or where there is political oppression, then of course I will defend against that. But the idea of defending the notion of identity as a kind of – how shall I put it . . .

AL: essential?

Said: . . . essential, as a kind of necessary thing, and that we – this may not at all be true in India – but that we as Arabs need to defend our identity against the onslaughts of the West, I believe this is complete nonsense.

SK: No. There are versions of that claim offered here on almost exactly those terms.

Said: Yes, of course. I have great difficulty with those kinds of reductions.

Neeladri Bhattacharya: To continue with the question of Orientalism: in *Orientalism* you suggested two alternative structures of Orientalism. One, which seeks to appropriate and represent the Orient in scientific ways, codifying and recording the Orient objectively and from a distance; and the other which seeks to commune with the Orient, voyage to the Orient, and in some way exoticize the Orient. Yet, we find that in most criticisms of your book there is a recurrent claim that you have seen only the consolidation of a homogeneous Orient, the crystallization of an Orientalist vision, which is homogeneous and has a unitary essence. Would you agree with the criticism and if not, if you

were rewriting the book today, would you look at the fractures within Orientalist ideology in other ways?

Said: Yes – though not to the extent that is done by some postcolonialist theorists, that is to say, you look at the structures of anxiety and suspicion and narcissism and all these other things that suggest a kind of deep fracture within the Orientalist gaze during the period of high imperialism. I mean, both in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, these facts are to me unassailable: you know if you are a white man in the South or in the Tropics or in the East, that is a very powerful thing. There is no way of saying that you are overcome by fear or suspicion and all the rest of it or that you are anxious – you know, Homi Bhabha's elaborations of that just don't speak to me. I don't think they are that important because the other is much more important. Now – as to the business of homogeneity: I am not sure which one you mean, the homogeneity of the Orient or the homogeneity of the Orientalist?

NB: The homogeneity of the imperial conception of the Orient.

Said: Well if it was homogeneous, I wouldn't have spent so many pages talking about it and giving, adducing, so many examples. The point is that it is not homogeneous, but it is possible that, as Chomsky has shown in his work on syntactic structures, you can devise a fantastically complicated structure, endlessly variant, out of a very small number of elements. I think this is the case with Orientalism. I think there is a kind of deep structure of Orientalism, which is able to multiply and proliferate in all kinds of ways. Orientalist writers all depart from the same premise, that there is a line separating 'us' from 'them'. And it keeps recurring. I mean look at that Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*: it has re-emerged and it's been there all along, I mean, for hundreds of years. That doesn't mean it's the same, you understand, but it can be reappropriated. I come back to a model I referred to in *Culture and Imperialism*, namely counterpoint, where you have one line, a *canto fermo*, a sort of base line, and in the case of a composer like Bach he can devise the most complex contrapuntal structures. But that doesn't diminish the fact that the Goldberg variations are based on a very simple descending motif in the bass.

AL: There is a related question to all of this: there are different models of colonial relations which are now circulating, and it is curious that both the people who have criticized you from within colonial discourse studies – you have mentioned Bhabha, who says that the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized is far more interactive . . .

Said: [interrupts] I say that too, actually.

AL: Well, I think you do. But what I am going to come to . . .

Said: . . . excuse me, I say that explicitly in *Culture and Imperialism*, which is why I wrote it.

SK: But *Culture and Imperialism* is taken to be the text in which you rewrite some conceptual problems from your earlier work.

Said: Well, I don't know about conceptual problems, but I expand the notion. In other words, what I said specifically in the Introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* – although I didn't say that I should have done it in *Oriental-*

ism – is that I didn't pay enough attention to other regions of the world. And because of the time – look, I mean, I wrote *Orientalism* in 1975. I was attempting something for the first time, on a relatively open field as it were. Second, I thought that the notion of interaction precisely played an important role, which in *Culture and Imperialism* I wanted to look at, which didn't mean I needed to look at it in *Orientalism* because I was talking of something quite different.

AL: I am going to push this a little bit. People have argued that even in *Culture and Imperialism* you look at domination and then you look at resistance, whereas someone like Megan Vaughan working out of African materials, and a lot of people working out of Indian materials, say that the problem is not a question of simply domination and then resistance, but that, as Vaughan puts it, customs and traditions were created out of face-to-face encounters of colonizer and colonized. She specifically says that this is something you don't do and she then goes on to say that older models of writing social history were actually far better in a way for understanding the nature of colonial power than a kind of Foucauldian emphasis, which again she sees – though I must say, she is quite fair to you in some ways because she says that you are interested in the question of resistance – as a contradiction in your work, because the method you imply is not that of the actual interaction. So it is not domination versus resistance, but how do you understand their imbrication. I would like you to spell this out.

Said: Well I don't disagree with that. I suppose what the problem is, is how do you stylistically get around the problem of representing an interaction, which has to be represented as – I mean, in your own prose – as basically sequential. I mean it is a going back and forth, but that is still a sequence – it's not getting away from the sequence. There wouldn't have been resistance had there not been colonial incursion, right? So to say that domination and resistance continue is to say what I think is a commonplace. Obviously they continue and they are implied in each other. There has been far more work developed along these lines. Terence Ranger has done a huge amount of work on primary and secondary anti-colonial resistance. But the question is: how is it best described? I think we probably would agree on the fact that it takes place from the moment the white man sets foot somewhere – that he is immediately resisted, I mean, I don't think we have any doubt about that. The question is what is the best way to represent that in a posthumous prose, if you see what I am trying to say. There are different ways of doing it and I find that analytically, the way I did it in *Culture and Imperialism* is, how should I put it, more convincing, more analytically clear and in the end probably more certain of what it is doing. I find most of the other things that have been written in this style unreadable – let's put it that way.

NB: I am continuing the same question. There are two related issues: one is how do you bring in resistance in *Culture and Imperialism* and the other is, how is the question of resistance best incorporated in an argument. When I read *Culture and Imperialism* I felt that you have a temporal argument there –

in the way you present it – that first there is a phase of consolidation of empire, consolidation of an Orientalist vision through the writing of novels and other discursive processes, etc., and then there is a process of anti-colonial struggle when this vision is contested and questioned. Most of your evidence of contestation shows a twentieth-century questioning of the colonizer. Now I felt that creates a problem.

Said: No that is not entirely correct. I talk very specifically for instance about the response to Napoleon's invasion by Abd-al-Rahman al-jabarti that is simultaneous, that is contemporary with Napoleon. So there are examples like that, but I don't think it is always necessary to give [other] examples from the same time because then it becomes very cumbersome.

NB: No, I am not talking about that kind of resistance. There obviously has been resistance. What we are bothered about in History is to see how specific forms of contestation lead to the restructuring and refiguration of ideology, of colonial ideology. There I felt that your evidence has problems. For instance, you cite Guha's *A Rule of Property for Bengal* approvingly as an instance of empire writing back. But Guha's conception of ideology in that book conforms to your earlier model for the study of Orientalism. Guha argues that Western ideas, physiocratic and mercantilist, shaped policies in India, whereas subsequent historical work suggests that is not the case, and that ideas were refigured through contestation and questioning and the local situation – and that is really the question. If that is occurring then what is the power of ideology to structure colonial society? Does it not also get refigured in the act of domination?

Said: Yes, in a chapter on the consolidation of the imperial vision, I tried to describe changes that take place, and – to go to the question of the novel – to ask what is the difference between, say, reading a few pages of Jane Austen and then reading a few pages of Kipling or of Conrad? The imperial vision is much more explicit, there is much more ready and available 'content' in that respect. This is extremely striking, as is the contrast between one period and another. But what you are talking about is something that has to do with I think a more, how shall I put it, a more minute or more detailed interaction between ideology and resistance. Is that right?

AL: Actually, could I rephrase that because it need not even be resistance. I think if you think of it as just 'power' and 'resistance' then possibly what you are saying is correct, that actually it is impossible to represent either unless you keep them separate. I think that some social historians suggest that colonial authority consolidates itself, indeed articulates itself, by resonating dynamically with what it encounters, whether that is resistance, or earlier structures of power. Or it might be indeed what Terence Ranger talks about, that the creation of the idea of the 'tribe' is with local participation, so it is that element of dynamism . . .

NB: . . . and dialogue. There is continuous dialogue, where people are not necessarily resisting, but for instance you depend on local informants for knowledge and their information is actually structured through traditional categories and notions of local people, so their ideas get inscribed in . . .

Said: Yes, that's extremely interesting, but that wasn't my subject. I can see how extremely important that is for social historians, but I was talking in particular about a domain I call culture, where culture is, according to my definition of it, a realm that is – let us say like Orientalism – relatively impervious to *that* kind of dialogue, or *that* kind of interaction. Now there is of course a subcultural tradition, for example, as Guha and others have shown, a whole range of colonial writing which is not artistic but is administrative, is investigative, is reportorial, has to do with conditions on the ground, has to do with interactions depending on the native informant. All that exists, there's no question about that. I was trying to adumbrate, perhaps a less important, but to my way of thinking, a larger picture of a certain kind of stability, which, because of my education, because of my training, has impressed me. Why is it so stable, why does it shake off the kinds of things you are talking about or why does it seem to succeed? Maybe I am wrong, maybe it doesn't, but I think I am not wrong. And why does it seem to hand itself on as 'the culture' quite without regard for all kinds of experiences, from horror to interaction, which are somehow excluded from it? Camus is a perfect example. For there's a long history, which he incorporates in some of his prose writings, I mean non-fictional prose, which he deliberately leaves out of *L'Etranger* – you know, the life of a lower-middle-class colon in Algeria who is outraged at the treatment of Algerians like himself and Arabs and Muslims by the French colonial system. But that is left out entirely in this particular vision, and I am really talking about vision in the end, more than I am about policies and working methods of the kind that you're talking about.

SK: Part of the problem with your concern with what you just described as the, and I like that word, 'vision' of imperialism is that it's opened you up to the kind of critique that says that in *Culture and Imperialism* you lavish a great deal of hermeneutical attention on the explication of metropolitan artists like Conrad, Kipling, Austen, or indeed when you do an allegoric reading of Magwitch in *Great Expectations*, as opposed to the moments in the text when you consider Ngugi, Césaire and Achebe, who come across – in Michael Sprinker's terms – in a 'comparatively straightforward analysis'. Sprinker suggests that in doing so, you valorize that kind of metropolitan culture and its aesthetic achievements, as opposed to a flattened understanding of what exists at the other end. How does your sense of your emphasis on imperial vision work with your reading of these different texts?

Said: Well look, there is also the fact that you're writing, or at least one is writing, a book, something one wants to be read; one isn't writing a didactic manual, one isn't writing a workbook for future students who want everything spelt out! And of course I was writing for a largely metropolitan audience, I was not being published by a local Arab press. I was writing for a commercial press in the United States where one wants to get the largest number of readers. Now, your question of the 'valorization' of one or the other: first of all, I never use a word like valorization! But I mean, to think that one is better than the other is inimical to my argument. I never said that. But I am not

trying to describe the same thing in both texts, you see, and they try to do different things. And the nature of my subject – perhaps it's a mistake on my part to have made that assumption – is that I was trying to show a wide range of quite dramatically different, impressive responses from Césaire to C. L. R. James to George Antonios to Guha to Ngugi to Naipaul – a lot of writers – and to go through each of them painstakingly in a book that was already far too long – actually the book was cut – so it was an exigency of sorts.

SK: If we can shift tack a little to slightly more theoretical questions: various forms of poststructuralist inquiry have argued for the political necessity of giving up the 'grand narratives' of historical explanation in favour of a more nuanced understanding of local hierarchies of power, etc. Such scepticism asks us to decouple our analysis of, for instance, capitalism and colonialism, which have often been understood and interlinked (that is, one couldn't have taken the form that it did without the other), or indeed to give up a 'world systems' approach. Do you have a . . .

Said: [interrupts] I have a very strong critique of the world systems approach, in an essay I wrote about fifteen years ago. It will be published in a collection of my essays which is going to appear in a year or so when I have the time to put it together and write a preface for it. There I spoke about the problems of a world systems approach, which is that most of the work they have done, and I am speaking of Perry Anderson here, or even Samir Amin, depend very heavily on what I consider to be Orientalist sources. I mean, who is the major authority that they cite for example on the emergence of the Ottomans – it is Bernard Lewis. I give a lot of such examples. So, in that sense, I find it flawed. It doesn't take enough account of local scholarship or what you might call new knowledge of that kind – not that I have it. I mean what are we talking about if I have to depend upon this kind of thing ['Orientalist sources'] to understand. There is therefore, a kind of lack of understanding. I remember having used the example of Alatas's book, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. It is an extremely important book because there he looks very carefully at precisely the kinds of figures, estimates, trends cited by colonial economists, which they [world systems theorists] rely on, and over which there's a lot of disputation. Also, for instance, it was taken to be the case that capitalism was entirely a Western, European invention, and that in Islam capitalism really never had a local base. There has now been some very interesting work by economic historians of a younger sort, anti-Orientalist historians like Peter Graham, who shows that in Egypt, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Egypt, there was the emergence of a local capitalism which was quite powerful and which has really never been studied as such.

SK: Versions of that argument have been made about India.

Said: I'm sure. So the 'world system' approach, yes, but with a kind of scepticism about the data that one is using – some of it of the kind that you have expressed and some of it expressed by the critique I get. Such data is always challengeable and one has to be careful about what one is using and what one

is not using. But in the end, if one is attempting a global perspective, one then falls into the trap, but at least one is aware of it.

AL: I was going to say that this has been a big debate around Subaltern Studies as well: they are doing all these local things, they are writing post-foundational history rather than thinking about capitalism, etc. But I was going to ask you about a slightly different version of this debate, which is that in *The World, the Text and the Critic* you have said that you find the Foucauldian understanding of power not sufficient for a politically engaged criticism and now . . .

Said: I wrote something beyond that. What I say is basically that Foucault writes always from the point of view of power, there's never any doubt in your mind when you pick up one of his books that power is going to win out in the end. So that the whole idea of resistance is really essentially defeated from the start. Poulantzas says the same thing, that the sites of resistance in Foucault are very difficult to follow.

AL: And Stuart Hall says that Foucault doesn't have any understanding of a system. That's the problem. But this idea that this Foucauldian notion of the dispersal of power is incompatible with Gramsci's notions of hegemony and power: you rightly said that you believe you can combine critical methods and that there is no necessary contradiction. Now some people have offered a critique of Subaltern Studies saying that if you try and combine Foucault and Gramsci, it's like trying to ride two horses at the same time. And Gyan Prakash answers by saying then we all need to become stunt riders!

Said: I was just thinking of Charlton Heston!

AL: I wanted to ask you to comment in a little more detail on what you think is the potential of such combinations. Is this a productive tension at all between Foucault and Gramsci?

Said: Extremely productive. Well look, one of the problems with Gramsci (having been a very, very assiduous student of Gramsci for many years – I was the first to lecture on Gramsci at Columbia about twenty years ago) is the state of the texts. When you talk about Gramsci, you are talking about something that is extremely slippery. When I gave a series of lectures on Gramsci (which I recall very vividly) and I think this is still the case, I felt that it was necessary to do a kind of philological analysis of the different ways in which he uses the word 'hegemony', for instance, or the different ways in which he uses the word 'intellectual'. All the key words – 'war of position', 'war of manoeuvre' and others – are constantly shifting and constantly changing because of the way in which he wrote and because of the condition of his notebooks.

Most of the readers of Gramsci have read him only in that one-volume compendium, which is full of mistakes, by the way. I have corrected some, I don't know whether you know this, but there are passages in it which I quote in *Orientalism*, in a footnote I believe. The four volumes of *The Prison Notebooks* had just come out in the middle seventies, and I noticed that what the translators [Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith] had the tendency to do was to lop off bits of Gramsci. For instance in that passage that I quote: 'history is

deposited as an infinity of traces in you without leaving an inventory'. That's what you get in the book. But Gramsci goes on to say (and I put it in there) that therefore it is necessary to make an inventory, which is quite a different thing than to say that it leaves us with an infinity of traces without an inventory. And therefore, of course, you have to start by making an inventory. So that problem is very strong.

Once you've begun to circulate a bit in Gramsci, you realize that he is talking about very different situations at very different times, and that there is a danger of abstracting from the situation to a general theoretical term – which is almost impossible, I mean the danger is almost too great. Nevertheless, Gramsci, unlike Foucault, is working with an evolving political situation in which certain extremely important and radical experiments were taking place in the Turin factories in which he was involved, and from them he generalized periodically, I mean in periodical form. You don't get that sense in Foucault; what you get instead is a sense of teleology where everything is tending toward the same end, and so the attempt to bring the two together involves in a certain sense breaking up the Foucauldian narrative into a series of smaller situations where Gramsci's terminology can become useful and illuminating for analytical purposes. In other words if you are talking about, let us say, the state of the clinic or the prison at a certain moment, [you need to ask] what else do you need to know about the situation besides what those people have written about it? What is the condition of factory workers at the time or what was the condition of convicts at that time, what class do they come from, what type – that's never been referred to in that book on the prison – what type of people are put into prison? In that sense, the introduction of historical, what I would call a historical context, to Foucault is extremely important and worth doing.

AL: And then it becomes possible to negotiate some of the larger tensions of ideological orientation?

Said: Yes. But what is ideological? There is a big difference with Gramsci you see, who is always trying to change the political situation.

AL: That's what I meant.

Said: Foucault isn't. Foucault is really not interested in that. I mean there was a little period in the sixties to the middle seventies when he was very interested in the condition of prisoners and so forth, but by the time he came to America – I think it was in the late sixties for the first time, but he came consistently during the seventies – he had changed and he was really not interested in the social movements at all and I think that is clear in his work. I am much more interested in that aspect of Gramsci; in other words how do you modify a political situation by organization and so on, all of which begin – since I am writing at a very restricted level – as Gramsci says, with trying to take stock of the situation. You sit down and work it out, the way he did on the Southern question, which is the only systematic analysis he ever did. So I find myself in that position, which is not the position Foucault found himself in. And from that, because of my political writing, which is enormous in

volume, I am always trying to gear my writing not towards the theoretical constituency but towards a political constituency.

SK: This may be the time to switch to our last rubric: I had said that some forms of poststructuralist inquiry have asked us to give up on – as a political necessity – grand narratives.

Said: You mean Chantal Mouffe and Laclau?

SK: Yes, exactly. That is the model.

Said: I have no time for that. That's the answer to that question. What does it mean? And Baudrillard! It's just nauseating, it's just gobbledegook. No, Laclau is a serious man, I don't mean that. Both Baudrillard, and what's the name of that other guy – Lyotard, it's a kind of provincial atavism of a very very unappealing sort, and I feel the same way about postmodernism. I think it's the bane of Third World intellectuals, if you will pardon the expression. I'm not accusing you, of course; present company excluded!

NS: Again, carrying on from the earlier question about productive tensions and opposite frames: I felt, when reading your books as well as hearing you lecture, that there is a strong tension or opposition between two kinds of frames in your writing. One is what is often identified as a constructionist frame, in which you see nation as a narration, you see the Orient as a narrative, and the imperial idea as a discursive product, etc.; on the other hand there is also the recurring objectivist emphasis which you have in all your work on fact, on reality, on objective events, etc. I was wondering: it is not that these two cannot be reconciled, but how do you reconcile these two conceptual frames?

Said: I don't think they can be reconciled. I think the relationship is frequently, in my experience, and I am coming increasingly to that view – there's a sense in which the relationship between one and the other is a relation of distortion, and manipulation. Now we are perfectly ready to accept that when Harold Bloom talks about a poet misreading another poet. We are perfectly willing to accept it in the case of a novelist misrepresenting or misreading or misinterpreting reality in order to produce a fiction. But we tend sometimes to find it just as acceptable (and this is one of the great problems with postmodernism) to say 'well, the media always lies, we know that', and to say that we know that representations are always just representations. My interest is in the more pernicious forms of these relationships, where actual lives, actual identities, actual political destinies are distorted and destroyed by a process of this sort. That's why I think the relationship between the 'constructionist' and the other one ['objectivist'] increasingly is in my view irreconcilable. It is reconcilable in a way, but for my purposes it's always been something to be profoundly suspicious of – the relationship between the two. Perhaps I am not answering your question?

NB: No, I had a feeling that in your own writing you are drawing from both.

Said: Of course, I am drawing from both.

NB: And you want to retain that opposition between them?

Said: Yes, I do.

SK: These last two sets of questions have to do with the other important part of your life, which is your role as a public intellectual, your ideas and your performance. You have argued for, and your own career has demonstrated, the need for the public intellectual to work alongside larger collectivities and causes (and this is the Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual). But in recent years, and this too has been paralleled in your own life, you have talked at great length about independence and of the importance for intellectuals to resist the seduction of office and power. Is this a shift in your understanding of the role of a public intellectual or is this to be explained with reference to the peculiar circumstances of the Oslo agreement and the Palestinian–Israeli accord?

Said: No, I think it's a development, because I was always close to political power in one way or another, by virtue of my education, by virtue of my class, by virtue of my political involvement. I am not going to waste your time by trying to explain that, except to tell you that's the case.

SK: We understand that in India.

Said: Exactly. But what I found increasingly important to me was independence. And of course this caused a tremendous debate when the Arabic version of *Representation of the Intellectual* came out, because a word which means 'not committed' in Arabic was substituted for the phrase 'independent intellectual', and I don't mean it that way. In other words, what I find is that if one is close to power, it takes an increasingly greater effort as one grows older to maintain that distance, and the cost is greater because you have to weigh the consequences, which are that if you did get involved maybe you could make things better, to put it bluntly.

I made a choice which is not to do that, and to remain distant from it, and this was well before Oslo. It was all during my period of very close association with the PLO when I was on very close terms with them and *with* them. And not only with them – it's an interesting part of now-forgotten history – but during the seventies the PLO in Beirut was the lodestone for every liberation movement in the world. When I went to South Africa in 1991, for example, when Mandela had just been released, I remember seeing him then, apartheid was still on, but the ANC was acknowledged and had their headquarters in the Shell building in downtown Johannesburg. One of the things that astonished me was how many faces were familiar to me. It was my first trip to South Africa, but many of them I had seen in Beirut or PLO embassies elsewhere: Nicaraguans, Irish, various European liberation groups, but mostly Third World liberation groups that I had come to know. So in that respect I was very close to all that and I knew what was happening in many instances, not *everything* that was happening, but a lot.

The thing that impressed me the most was a paradox: on the one hand, in the case of a people who had suffered a great deal, like prisoners, or the spouses of prisoners who disappeared, I saw the importance of the party, of the organization, how it gave hope, how it sustained one, but it exacted a price from one, a price of submission, which was that you gave up a critical distance. And

of course on the other side were those who were in power, who used that power in a certain sense to insulate themselves from their mistakes, and from the fact that there were things, particularly in the Palestinian case, that involved tremendous destruction. You couldn't have lived through the various Israeli invasions, or the bombings, or the siege of Beirut in 1982 – I was in Amman during the Black September of 1970 – you can't have lived through that without realizing that you are to some extent responsible for that kind of damage, which produced nothing, only more suffering. So I always had the sneaking suspicion that if you were too close, and you accepted too much, the prerogatives of power, and the insulations of power, and what my sister used to call quite brilliantly, a seat in the front row, you don't see what is going on behind you. Then, of course, it came to the fore, but my break with Arafat really occurred in 1988 or 1989. I did a public denunciation of him in the Arab press. Then there is the whole question of where you do it; in America where they are already attacked, it doesn't help me to attack him more, so I tried to confine myself mostly to writing in Arabic, which I still do. But then after Oslo, I felt that it was so disastrous, and the Gulf War, and the alliances and the whole tremendous . . . [his voice trails off].

Now – to conclude – I have become in my late years, I suppose, partly because of my illness and partly because of other things, I have become very involved in a different view which is – you know, Adorno is very important to me now – the idea of trying to maintain a certain kind of tension without resolving it dialectically, as a sort of witness, a testimonial to what is happening. That seems to me to be something worth trying. You know, our situation as Palestinians, and, generally speaking, in the Arab world is so parlous, so desperate, that, *I feel*, perhaps hubristically, that it is important to maintain that distance and the voice. It gives me hope, when they ban my books and I am not allowed to go there and all that sort of thing, to see people reading me in faxes and emails and that's a possibility which I exploit. That means a lot to me. Logically, the next step would be to enter politics, because I could, and I am sure that I could spearhead a very serious political opposition to Arafat, but I am too ill to do it, I am too weak physically.

SK: And bearing witness is a powerful historical practice.

Said: Yes, it's something, but let's not exaggerate it. But it *is* worth doing, I think; anyway that is all I can do. I don't now have much activity unfortunately, but I place great hopes in my political activities which I now try to confine to the young. I try to see students, Arab students, throughout the world and I always speak to them, and that's important.

SK: Last question. This has to do with the whole notion of tradition and its weight that you talked about in your lecture at Jamia Millia Islamia, which is of great consequence not simply within the confines of Jamia but in India generally. Now what you have been saying is that tradition has proved to be one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the achievement of democracy and human rights in many nations across the world. You have also talked about – you referred to Terence Ranger, for instance – the fact that tradition is always a

motivated reinvention of the past to serve the interests of present-day power. Yet tradition is not only invoked by cultural and religious fundamentalists, but also by more secular communities concerned that they must resist the effects of modernization in so far as they understand modernization to be synonymous with American globalization, or consumer culture, or the media culture of the West. What is your sense of – how do you negotiate these?

Said: I don't take any comfort in tradition. I think it's exaggerated and I think we know too much about its misuse. I very much admire analysts of tradition like Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, who had to leave Egypt because he did a discursive reading of the Qu'ran and showed to what extent Islamic fundamentalist discourse was a discourse of power and not of vision or ethics as it pretends to be. For which they tried to make him divorce his wife, and he had to leave the country because he lives under a death threat. I think that kind of 'us analysing our traditions' is of the utmost importance. It's the most urgent thing we can do, and understand how traditions are live and not passive things stuck in a closet but they are – and I go back to Vico – made by human beings and that they are recollections, they are customary practices, collective memory, they are all kinds of things, but they are certainly not the simple pure thing to which people return and get comfort in. Maybe because I am so rootless myself and deracinated in that sense, I firmly believe that it is a tremendous mistake to give up to tradition as much as is being given up to it, certainly in the Arab world. You know better about it in India.

AL: Here too, and quite dangerously.

Said: Is it the same? Yes, the BJP and so on . . .

Acknowledgments

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