

Interview: Edward Said on Humanism
Columbia Scholar to Receive Award and Give Lecture in Annandale
By Kerry Chance
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Edward Said has remarked that one of the most important roles played by the intellectual is that of "an oppositional critic of power." From his academic and political engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to his cultural critiques locating modes of Western hegemony, Said has complicated and brought closer the roles of the radical intellectual and the political actor.

On February 14th, Bard will present Said with the Charles Flint Kellogg Award in Arts and Letters for his contributions to cultural and literary criticism. Said is the author of over 20 books, including: *Orientalism*; *The Question of Palestine*; *Culture and Imperialism*; his recent work *The Edward Said reader*, and others. The award presentation will be followed by a lecture by Said entitled "The Relevance of Humanism."

In this following interview, Said discusses past work, present political conflicts, and his perspective on humanism.

Kerry Chance: You said in a previous interview that, starting with imperialism in the 19th century, the entire global scene has increasingly become one economic unit. Considering the problems with the applications of humanism in a universal sense, could you answer your own question, "What kind of humanism is possible?"

Edward Said: Well, I think the difficulty to begin with is that humanism in many ways is discredited. It has participated in, for example, systems like apartheid and colonialism that were exported to the non-European world by European thinkers and powers who thought they were doing humanism's work - civilizing the natives and bringing the benefits of Western technology to the peripheries. And of course in this process they brought racial discrimination, racial hierarchies, and systems of exploitation, which were established in the interests of a humanism that said, "We are the bearers of an advanced culture and we should have the benefits of that even if it means subjugating lesser people." The whole concept of "lesser" civilizations and so on is, unfortunately, one of the burdens that humanism has to bear.

Then you have the great period after the Second World War, the decolonization and the elimination of the classical empire. You have an emergence of a new world. I mean, first there was the Cold War and the division of the world into forces of the so-called free world and forces of communism and totalitarianism, or what came to be socially called the Third World. Then, with the end of the Cold War, you have a world that is basically dominated by one single power and what has been called globalization.

KC: As the East-West opposition continues to change shape, do you see the need for some kind of new political configuration and/or new paradigms within which to work?

ES: Unfortunately these divisions seem to be even more reified now. As with Samuel Huntington's notions of a clash of civilizations, there is a sense of nationalism that you see everywhere: India and Pakistan; Europe and non-Europe; Africa and Europe; and in the Middle East, with Israelis and Arabs. All of these polarized nationalist units, although they seem to be merging in a postmodern world, all are really regressions to a much earlier period of nationalism, in which cultural conflicts are aggravated and are turned into new forms of belligerence.

Look at the debate in our society about immigration. This is a kind of [nationalist] hysteria and, of course, immigration is all about the reemergence of barriers. I think that it is not only regression, but also a very dangerous, in my opinion, stupid, acceptance of these divisions. The reality is that, no matter where you look, certainly in this society, everything is mixed. The power of the society is diversity, and we really haven't learned to accept that as a given, rather than something you try to forget and then go around and try to find some simpler form of unity.

Labels like East and West and American and foreign are a kind of phony, and in my opinion, dangerous, polarism of "Us" verses "Them." Everything I've tried to do has been to show not only the inadequacy of that, but also the falseness of it, and the kind of damage it does to the complexity of human experience.

KC: How then would you characterize these emerging paradigms?

ES: Well, they're obviously transnational. Richard Falk, the Princeton political science/international law expert, talks about something called globalization from below, where you have, for example, the emergence of the environmental movement. That's not an American thing, it's across boundaries. It unites people in Australia with people in South Africa with people in Sweden. Transnational concerns include the women's movement, the human rights movement, the movement against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the whole notion of war crimes.

What's interesting, of course, and terrible for us as Americans, is that the United States has mostly opposed those movements because they're thought of as infringements on our sovereignty. And I think that is the new paradigm, the notion of citizenship on a very wide scale, instead of just national citizenship; the sense of belonging to a complex of human groups that are really across the board, and raise questions like; Why should we, in the United States, who represent 5 or 6 percent of the world's population, consume 40 percent of the world's energy resources?

That's the new paradigm, and it's fairly more complicated and difficult to deal with than something simple like, "We're Americans," whatever that means, or "He's a good American" or "This is un-American."

KC: How would you describe the changes or constants in representations of Palestinians in the US media and, more specifically, can you discuss the ways in which the Middle East has been collapsed into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

ES: It's been done in a very kind of lazy, unscrupulous way. I did a survey last fall for an article I wrote, I surveyed about 98 or 99 news broadcasts about eh Intifada, and only four of them, out of 100 let's say, mentioned the fact that these were occupied territories. The constant reference to Middle Eastern violence and Palestinian violence obscures the fact that there is a military occupation, and has been since 1967, and what is going on is basically an anticolonial rebellion.

What [the media] doesn't talk about is how, in a period of seven years, the number of Israeli settlements increased, and the military occupation essentially continued in far worse terms than before the Oslo Peace Accords. More settlements, more roads, more divisions, and more appropriations of land - all the contributed to this uprising, and makes it not only understandable but makes you ask, "Why didn't it happen before?" So I think a major element is the inadequacy of representation, where it's assumed that Palestinians are savage, and fundamentally terrorists. I mean, the constant reference in the media, particularly from Israeli spokesmen (who are never questioned) to "all this terrorist uprising." Why is it terrorism? Why isn't it thought of as anticolonial resistance? And yet the United Nations entitles people to resist, by any means possible, military occupation.

KC: Over the years, your ideas about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have shifted. What is your position now in terms of finding a solution, and whether peace is a feasible goal?

ES: It seems to me that you have to two peoples in a tiny territory, called Palestine and Israel. By the year 2010 there will be demographic parity between them - there will no longer be a Jewish majority, which is what exists now. At that point, the idea, first of separation, in such narrow space, a tiny space, is impossible, physically not possible; and second, the idea that two people equal in number should be unequal in status is also unmanageable.

That's why I was so upset, as were many Israelis, with the advent of Ariel Sharon. Sharon is a regression of the [time] when an Israeli army can march into a place like Lebanon and say, "We're going to drive out the PLO and set up a new republic and sign a peace treaty with Palestine." That kind of mentality, which has been Sharon's trademark all his life, that a few attacks will do it, especially if you kill a few Arabs (as if to say, "That's the only language they understand"), that's completely unacceptable in the world today.

Of course, many Arabs, many Palestinians say, "These Jews of Israel are basically intruders, let's send them away, let's send them back to Poland and America and wherever they came from." And I say that's again humanly unacceptable. You can't just

as Palestinians were driven out in 1948, now set about to plan the exodus and eviction and ethnic cleaning of another people. Therefore, the only acceptable idea of vision is some form of coexistence, where they can live together, not separated by these boundaries that are based on inequality.

KC: And how do you envision that?

ES: One state, a binational state, based on the concept of two people. Switzerland has done it, the Belgians have done it, and certainly South Africa has. In other words there are many models that go beyond the notion of partition that envisage a notion of citizenship. I come back to this idea as the common denominator allow[ing] self-determination for groups within it.

I think a binational state is really needed. And were it to succeed, were it to come into existence, it would be a tremendous liberating force in the whole area, because it would obviously be based on democracy, and equality for all people, men and women, and it would begin to chip away at these national security states like Syria, Iraq, and even Egypt.

KC: What needs to happen before this is possible?

ES: Perhaps it's a cliché, but I keep coming back to the opening of the mind, education. I mean, ignorance is not a solution. I'm deeply opposed to that particular form of anti-intellectualism. The fact is that you have to learn about other people, because they're there. It's like being told in the United States that we must teach only one form of history, the official history, and that if you teach women's history, and Chinese American history, and Latin American history, and all these other forms of history, America will no longer exist in the same way.

What I say very often when I go to the Arab world is that it's a disgrace that there isn't a single Arab university today that offers a course on Israeli society, or that offers a course in Hebrew, and it's even more disgraceful that that's the case with Palestinian universities, which mostly ignore Israel in their curriculums, and they live within 5 miles of the place. That's been the history of the conflict from the Arab point of view, a kind of ignorance of Israel and the Israelis, as if to say, "It's an artificial entity, we're not going to recognize it, we're not going to talk about it." I mean, that's catastrophically unacceptable, and Israelis in Tel Aviv, on the other hand, have no sense of what's taking place 10 miles away in [Palestinian towns]. That's scandalous, that's a tremendous indictment of an entire generation of educators who have allowed this situation to go on.