



Toward a Dialogue with Edward Said

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An Exchange on Edward Said and Difference

II

Toward a Dialogue with Edward Said

**Daniel Boyarin and
Jonathan Boyarin**

To see others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted.¹
—EDWARD SAID

As critics, a vital part of our task is to examine the ways in which language mystifies and reveals, serves and diserves human desires and aspirations. In that spirit we feel that engaging the leading Palestinian intellectual in the United States in a critical dialogue is a vital task. Although this reply takes issue with several points in Edward Said's paper, "An Ideology of Difference" (*Critical Inquiry* 12 [Autumn 1985]: 38–58), our critique is intended as part of the struggle for increased mutual empathy. We in no way wish to deny Said's claims regarding the legitimacy of Palestinian aspirations, nor the validity of Said and other Palestinian intellectuals' efforts to counter the destructive military, political, and ideological forces that stand in the way of the Palestinians' achievement of self-determination. Said's critiques of the idea that Israel is somehow above criticism, and of the elimination of the Palestinians from "Western" discourse, are both valid.²

1. Edward W. Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Winter 1989): 225.

2. We are hardly alone among Jewish intellectuals in concurring with this point. Compare the recent comments by the American Jewish leader Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg:

In the memory of the Holocaust we have been reminded by you that silence is a sin. You have spoken out against indifference and injustice. Why are you making a special

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We wish to make our own perspective clear at the start. We are both Jewish nationalists. We believe that it's a good thing to be Jewish. We believe that those of Jewish heritage who fail to explore and re-create that heritage lose something of themselves. We think that Judaism still has a role to play in the healing of the world. By making this statement, we are not claiming that our views are identical,³ nor that they are the same from day to day, nor, a fortiori, that they are identical or even similar to those of many or most other people who would define themselves in that way. This, we note, touches on one of the aspects of Said's paper of which we are most critical: the statements that he makes at several points, which seem to reify Zionists and Zionism into one model of theory and social practice, as well as his occlusion of the fact that other options for Jewish self-renewal were obviated by genocide or Soviet repression.

We are, ourselves, fully committed to national liberation for the Palestinian people. This commitment is, moreover, seen by us as a direct continuation of our dedication to our own people in several ways. Pragmatically, there can only be hope for a healthy social future for the Jewish people in a world of peace, and peace demands justice for all people—in our immediate frame, for all of the people of the Middle East. There is more than that, however. In our understanding, insofar as Zionism is a movement of national liberation for the Jewish people, sympathy for other movements of national liberation is concomitant with Zionism. It follows, therefore, that activity on behalf of Palestine is a direct consequence of Zionism properly understood.

Below are responses to various points in Said's paper that troubled us. For the sake of clarity and brevity, we are presenting them in outline form.

exception of Israel? Do you think that our silence will help Israel? The texts that we study and reread teach the contrary.

(Arthur Hertzberg, "Open Letter to Elie Wiesel," *New York Review of Books*, 18 Aug. 1988, 14.)

3. Thus, only one of us believes that the only viable medium for the realization of the cultural, social goals that we both share is the existence of a Jewish nation-state.

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1. "Israel's status in European and American public life and discourse has always been special, just as the position of Jews in the West has always been special, sometimes for its tragedy and horrendous suffering, at other times for its uniquely impressive intellectual and aesthetic triumphs" (p. 38). This statement casually accomplishes several mystifications:

a) The "just as" equation. Yes, Israel's status is special, and the position of the Jews is special, but not in the same way, not at all "just as." Actually Said's emphasis throughout the article is on Israel's *privileged* status in European and American public life. (Incidentally, there has always been much more concern in Europe for the Palestinians than in America.) Thus Said finesses the entire question of anti-Semitism and Jewish genocide by acknowledging it as the subordinate term of an analogy to his main concern, and he then remains silent about it for the rest of his essay.

b) There is an implied symmetry of "horrendous suffering" and "impressive intellectual and aesthetic triumphs." But Jewish history wasn't just "sometimes up, sometimes down." As a people, Jews in pre-World War II Europe were headed for disaster. The triumphs Said refers to are in the arena of European secular culture, not in an autonomously Jewish sphere. It is interesting that Paul de Man, in an article for a collaborationist newspaper during World War II, labeled Franz Kafka as one of the four greatest European writers;⁴ but we would willingly trade that endorsement for any one of the Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis.

c) As a corollary of the previous paragraph, the triumphs Said (and other non-Jewish intellectuals) are aware of are presumably those that occurred outside of Jewish tradition at the price of "assimilation," certainly outside of Jewish languages. Zionism, whatever its disastrous flaws, also *included* the desire to maintain and transform an autonomous Jewish cultural sphere, which would preserve the heritage of creative geniuses such as the Gaon of Vilna.

2. Said points out correctly that all human groups are heterogeneous, and he goes on to state that "all efforts (particularly the efforts of governments or states) to purify one or several of these [always mixed] human agglomerations are tantamount to organized discrimination or persecution: the examples of Nazi Germany and South Africa argue the force of such a judgment with considerable authority in today's world" (p. 41). There is systemic discrimination against non-Jews within the pre-1967 borders of Israel, and even more so, of course, in the occupied territories. Yet recourse to "the examples of Nazi Germany and South Africa" implies the charge that Israeli *government* policy constitutes an effort to purify the population of Israel by genocide or apartheid. Such

4. Paul de Man, "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" (*Le Soir*, 4 Mar. 1941), *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln, Nebr., 1988), p. 45.

a policy is indeed what certain elements of the Israeli polity intend. However, it is a distortion to claim that even the current right-wing government of Israel is actively carrying out a policy of "purification" consistent with the examples of Nazi Germany or South Africa. Overstating the case discredits critique and thus harms the effort to rectify the situation. Regarding the implied analogy to apartheid, the following must be said: *apartheid* is a racist ideology *tout court*; Zionism is an ideology that has racist aspects and effects, and also is a response to racism. Both apartheid and the racism in Zionism have common roots in the ideology of imperialism. Apartheid, however, arises as a reactionary justification of a colonial situation, yet the racism in Zionism is the result of a flawed response to oppression within the imperial metropolis. It is possible (for us, at least) to imagine a Zionism purified of its racist aspects, whereas apartheid without a doctrine of racial superiority is inconceivable.

3. Said criticizes Hannah Arendt, who "was always critical of mainstream Zionism," for contributing to the Jewish Defense League "in 1967 . . . and . . . in 1973" (p. 47). For the record, the point should be made that this criticism is invalid in the terms in which Said has stated it. The JDL in those years served primarily as vigilantes in defence of Jewish people and property in Brooklyn. It was only in 1971 that the group's executive decided to focus on immigration to Israel, and even then there was opposition, as Janet Dolgin writes: "Wasn't JDL formed, asked many members, exactly because Jews had finally decided to 'stay and fight'."⁵ Presumably, given Arendt's own critique of Jewish passivity, it was the JDL's diaspora militancy that drew her to the group in those years, rather than Meir Kahane's vicious anti-Arab racism. Arendt's support of this unattractive organization may be criticized as blindness on other grounds, but it hardly demonstrates a retreat from or contradiction of her criticism of mainstream Zionism or dedication to justice for both nations.⁶

4. "During the antiwar uprisings of the 1960s, two prominent American liberals, Michael Walzer and Martin Peretz, characterized Israel as 'not

5. Janet L. Dolgin, *Jewish Identity and the JDL* (Princeton, N.J., 1977), p. 41.

6. Similarly, Said's attack on Avishai Margalit seems both unfair and counterproductive. Said attacks Margalit's review of Noam Chomsky's *The Fateful Triangle* as "breathtakingly dishonest and hostile," a claim that is undocumented in Said's essay and, upon rereading, seems to us wrong. We see no evidence there for Said's claim that "it is, and remains, possible [in Margalit's view] to discuss Israel in terms that do not necessarily include the whole atrocious history of what Israel has systematically inflicted on the Palestinians" (p. 52). On the contrary, Margalit says, "Painful as it is for me to acknowledge it, we Israelis should, I believe, plead guilty to many of Chomsky's charges" (Margalit, "Israel: A Partial Indictment," review of *The Fateful Triangle* by Noam Chomsky, *New York Review of Books*, 28 June 1984, p. 9). Specifically, Margalit acknowledges in reference to the Sabra and Shatila massacre that "to have allowed the Phalange commander Elie Hobeika and his men—the Damour Battalion—to enter the camps was something like appointing Dr. Mengele as chief surgeon at the Hadassah Hospital" (*Ibid.*, p. 13). These quotes should demonstrate adequately that Margalit's review is neither a broadside against Chomsky nor a whitewash of Israel, as Said implies.

Vietnam,' as if to say that Israeli acts of conquest belong to a different genre from those of French and American interventions in Indochina" (p. 47). Obviously they do and they don't; they are like and unlike. Israel is neither free from the critique (not just the unthinking "charge") of imperialism, nor reducible to being "just another Western power." Said knows that "genre"—whether in literature or in history—is also a constructed and loaded term. Yet he makes it appear natural, as if he were a biologist correctly insisting that Israel objectively belongs to the same class, *Empirus empirus*, as the United States and France, rather than an engaged scholar trying to overcome the weight of accumulated, massive distortion. As one of our leading teachers concerning the relationship between the mask of objectivist, categorical science and the workings of imperialism, it behooves him once again to acknowledge the specificity of the case (not, obviously, its untouchability, which may well have been Walzer's and Peretz's thrust). *Israel represents, in large measure, a colonial effort on behalf of a people victimized by internal colonialism.*

5. Implied in everything we say is the criticism that Said reductively proceeds as if "the Zionists" (that fictitious identical mass) came from no place, no history. *Ideologically* (though not necessarily in its historical efficacy) this denial of the historical context of Zionism (or worse, its reduction to a sideshow of colonialism) is as misleading as the Zionists' assumption that they were settling "a land believed to be either previously uninhabited or merely tenanted by an inferior people without nationhood or national aspirations" (p. 50). Such continued denial is understandable on the part of the mass of Palestinians who *only* know Zionism as an impingement. On the part of intellectuals, it should not be tolerated, because historical blindness is a material block to the resolution of the conflict.

6. "The early Zionist settlers either overlooked the Arabs completely or actively plotted to remove them" (p. 53). This blanket statement lays perhaps the most serious charge possible against Zionism at its very foundation and therefore bears some examination. First, it states that these were the *only* two positions of early Zionists. (Who precisely is meant? Early Zionists belonged to several ideologically incompatible groups.) While in retrospect it is hard to argue against the thesis that Zionism in general was drastically flawed by the failure to acknowledge the presence of the Palestinian Arabs, this was not true of a number of individual early Zionists. Moreover, while the first position (overlooking) is a well-documented aspect of much early Zionist writing, the second (active plotting) requires careful documentation before its presence and extent could be assessed. This point goes to the heart of Said's paper. "Overlooking the Arabs completely," tragic as were its effects, can be understood as blindness in service of the desperate search for a solution for the Jewish people. "Active plotting to remove" another people would reveal an evil ideology of difference from the very start and at the very heart of Zionism.

7. The last two points together appear thus as part of a totalizing thrust toward the utter delegitimization of Zionism. Without in any way calling for special pleading and special treatment of Israel's and Zionism's racist aspects, we believe that the predicament of the Jewish people in history, culminating in the tragedy of the twentieth century and the positive desire of Jews for a place of our own, a language of our own, and land to work and feel close to, is at least as constituent of Zionist ideology as was any tacit or stated "ideology of difference."

8. "After the 1982 war there has been a tremendous Zionist effort . . . to bludgeon the media and the public back into line" (p. 51). Just "Zionist"? Are the "Zionists" really powerful enough to "bludgeon" the media and the public? If so, why? This kind of rhetoric dangerously echoes persistent phantoms of all-powerful Jewry. There are other reasons for United States media distortion beside the efforts of the pro-Israeli lobby and the "major American Jewish organizations." For one thing, there is a heritage of European and North American guilt at having permitted the genocide of the Jews.⁷ This bad conscience surely is one cause of the syndrome of "falling into line." Furthermore, who is really served by the distortion? Said is doubtless aware of the "defense establishments"'s and the Reaganites' manichaeic view, which lines the Israelis up with "democracy" and the Palestinians with "Communism," to the grave detriment of both our peoples. He himself has claimed in other contexts that the United States supports Israel because of a conjuncture of the strategic interests of the two states. (We would say, "what the two governments mistakenly perceive as the two states' interests.")

9. "The largest, wealthiest, and most organized Jewish community in the world—the one in the United States—has moved on several fronts since the Israeli invasion in 1982" (p. 53). Said uncritically borrows the rhetoric of "community" from the leaders of so-called major American Jewish organizations themselves. But the levels of democracy, of knowledge and of tolerance of debate within these organizations are so low that they fail to even approach genuine community. Any thinking person concerned with this issue would do well to consider the ways hierarchy (ethnic, class, and so on) in America systematically distorts communication among Jews as well. One reason for Jews to promote a balanced discussion of the question of Palestine is that respect for searching dialogue among Jews about our condition has helped us survive thus far. The defensive insistence on "unity," on the other hand, has been drastically destructive of "community." The *intifada*, of course, has done much to begin a rectification of the terms of the debate among Jews as well as the general public.

7. This is recognized in the following statement, contained in an editorial published by the Jerusalem Palestinian newspaper *Al-Bayader Al-Siyasi* on 13 May 1988: "The entire European community should bear responsibility for the displacement of our people. They should support us in our right to establish our own state, just as they did for the Jews" (Trans. under the title "Isn't It Time?!" *New Outlook: Middle East Monthly* [June 1988]: B).

10. “But the ideology of difference fueling Zionism has progressed to such a point that *any* Arab, *any* Palestinian can be tolerated only in the sort of [racist] terms employed by [Leon] Uris and [Martin] Peretz” (p. 56). Where—in Israel, in America? By whom—Zionists, Jews, Americans, elites? Some Zionisms are indeed fueled by an ideology of difference, but others are motivated by the same desires, hopes, and aspirations that fuel the movement for a Palestinian homeland (at its best), and some by paranoia and fear.⁸ Sweeping nonrecognition of these desires, hopes, aspirations, and fears (and the history that lies behind them) can only fuel, in its turn, the paranoia.

11. As in *The Question of Palestine*, Said qualifies his critique with the statement that “it is quite possible for us [Palestinians] to appreciate the impressive social, political, and cultural gains of the Jewish state so far as Jews are concerned” (p. 57). His silence about the context of Jewish oppression unfortunately makes this appear a patronizing sop. He stops short of the realization that (a) as suggested above, the way Israel has been realized follows the “West”’s interest and guilt as much as the desire of Jews; (b) Israel is extremely problematic *for Jews* as the postgenocide embodiment of Jewish identity; and (c) Jews have been victimized in ways analogous (though obviously not identical, and the difference once again must be specified) to the victimization of Palestinians. Again this is not to be understood as a plea for different canons of morality for Israel and the Jews than for any other people.

Edward Said, other Palestinian intellectuals, the residents of the Occupied Territories, and the Palestine Liberation Organization—their political representative—have moved more and more clearly toward a unified call for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. This has entailed not only pragmatism but, in many cases, explicit acknowledgment of the right of the Israeli Jewish people to self-determination. Paradoxically, this in turn entails practical abandonment of the hope of regaining lost homes within pre-1948 Israel, which is no doubt why not all Palestinian factions are willing to grant it.

8. Once again, we are not reducing the issue to Jewish angst, but talking about one of the material factors blocking resolution. The following are the comments of Hashem Mahameed, the Palestinian-Israeli mayor of Umm al-Fahm:

All my life I have known Jews as the strong ones, the ones in power. We Arabs here and in the territories are the powerless ones. And yet the Jews insist on seeing themselves as the victims, the underdogs in this situation. Why have they no confidence in their own strength? Why do they make all their decisions based on fear? They are so busy, for example, worrying that I am going to stick a knife in their back that it doesn't occur to them that I might be more interested in fixing the sewage system in my own town.

(Tirzah Agassi, “Hashem Mahameed: Living among the Jews,” *New Outlook: Middle East Monthly* [July 1988]: 20).

There has also been a consistent movement on the part of progressive Jews inside Israel and around the world toward a realization that Israeli and Jewish well-being, as well as the justice we insist on for ourselves, demand the realization of Palestinian national rights. The reopening of the debate about the terms on which the Jewish people are to operate in the world is one more fitful step in the tortured journey toward the *realization* of Jewish self-determination.

We would wish to collaborate with Edward Said and others in tracing the path toward Israeli-Palestinian equality and reconciliation as one facet of the global effort to overcome the heritage of imperialism. We fully concur with him that the past is effective in the present. Our primary point here has been the importance of understanding the relations among three issues: Israeli repression of the Palestinians, the historical predicament of the Jewish people, and the Jewish struggle for self-determination. The intellectual representatives of suffering, struggling peoples share the task of ever more thoroughly incorporating each other's histories, so that our differences may serve our common humanity rather than keep us in thrall.