Critique is the World*

Jeanne Morefield

Within the febrile intellectual universe of political theory and political philosophy, the word 'critique' remains simultaneously over-defined and ill-defined. Is critique the traceable provenance of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud?[1] Is it a 'virtuous' type of 'attitude'?[2] Does critique refer to argumentative conviction or rhetorical persuasion?[3] What is its relationship to something we call criticism? Is critique meant to be diagnostic?[4] Is it primarily about text or ideology or both? Is critique entirely the historical product of secular European modernity?[5] And, at the end of the day, has critique really just come to mean 'theory' writ large?[6]

For roughly the last thirty years, amidst these various definitional debates, there has also been much handwringing over the tendency of critique to become *too* critical. Former–critical–theory–critics–of–critical–theory, for instance, have long chastised the tradition for its supposed solipsism, its nit picking, its tendency to distance itself from the kinds of moral frameworks and utopian visions necessary for social transformation. Critique, they argue, must give way to either communicative reason (Habermas), recognition (Honneth), creative disclosure (Kompridis), or contextualized justice (Forst).[7] Critique alone for these thinkers, cannot *produce* a better politics. Only the turn to positive idea–making enables us to 'decide with knowingness' (in Butler's words) on the criteria for a better world.[8]

For some, this turn away from critique reflects an 'impasse within critical and post-critical theory'.[9] For others, the tools of criticism have not only been turned inward, they've been weaponized by wily champions of a militarized 'war on terror'.[10] For still others, the very idea of 'post–critique' mirrors larger anti–political trends toward the deracinating impulses of a hegemonic neoliberalism.[11] But if we were to channel these family feuds over the nature and future of critique – so routinely rehashed within the intellectual spaces in which many of us dwell – through the perspective of Edward Said, much of this debate begins to feel strangely misplaced. Or rather, out of place. Unworldly.

As early as 1976, Said – who died in 2003 and who spent the better part of his career as a critic rather than a meta–critic of critique – had already grown impatient with the dominant approaches to criticism he confronted in literary studies. That year, in an interview for *Diacritics*, Said expressed real frustration at intra–textual approaches to literary criticism

* Accepted for publication, *Philosophy, Politics and Critique*, December 2023.

that treat both the text, the critic, and critique as detachable from society and from history: as worlds in themselves. Rather, he stressed, texts, human beings, politics, culture, and critique itself, are all part of a world: they are 'produced and lived on in the historical realm'.[12] Because the critic is always situated *in* the world, Said continued, they necessarily transform the world through their criticism.[13] He called this inescapable entanglement *worldliness*, and throughout his career, the concept structured his approach not just to critique but to what it meant to live and write as a public intellectual.

At the heart of this idea of worldliness lay Said's understanding that the critic is always caught up in the warp and weave of twinned phenomena he described most fully in 1983's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, as *filiative* and *affiliative* connections. For Said, filiation is immediate: just as one cannot choose one's family, one cannot choose one's filial connections to one's natal place. At the same time, he continued, filiative connections always circulate within a complex discursive universe of textual, cultural, political, and social objects, historical narratives, and common sense that collectively provide the interpretive foundation upon which one's sense of belonging unfolds. Said called the discursive linkages that bind this assemblage 'affiliative' and the passage from one realm to the next – from filiation to affiliation – as the passage from nature to culture.[14]

The social critics to whom he was most attracted throughout his career – Gramsci, Vico, Fanon – were well aware, Said argued, that they existed within a 'system of utterances that has all sorts of affiliative, often constricting relationships' to peoples, nations, empires, and power.[15] He described this awareness as both 'oppositional' and 'in the world and self-aware simultaneously'.[16] In other words, for Said, the worldly critic understands themselves to be both embedded within, and opposed to, the complexity of overlapping power relationships that animate their environment. It also means that they identify the work of the critic not so much with diagnosis but with excavation (and illumination) of the various aesthetic, discursive, and ideological means by which affiliation comes to resemble filiation; by which culture comes to seem natural. In his most influential and field transforming texts, Said turned the razor's edge of this oppositional and self-aware critique on discursive formations that naturalize cultural and morph political alterity into essentialized forms of meaning that both uphold systems of power and 'make invisible and even "impossible"' the affiliations between ideas and these systems.[17] *Orientalism*, for instance, concentrates on the accumulation of knowledge about 'the other' and the construction of dense, 'knowing vocabularies' and 'comparative frameworks' that essentialize cultures and, in the process, naturalize imperial domination.[18]

Political philosophers most dissatisfied with the 'oppositional', non–productive qualities of critique – qualities that don't lend themselves easily to establishing moral and political frameworks – would no doubt fault Said for failing to put forward an alternative vision of political life or even an Adornian 'distant hope' of reconciliation.[19] From this perspective, Said's worldliness can only look like disruption without end, what Dallmayer once called Said's flawed attachment to a self–perpetuating 'principle of nomadism'.[20] Said, for his part, was in agreement with Foucault that critique which abandons opposition for coherent alternatives crafted from moral principles can't help but replicate the unreflective affiliative assumptions and modes of exclusion woven into theory. His prescient 1989 critique of the 'interlocutor … dreamed up' in 'Habermas' "ideal speech situation"', for instance, pointed directly toward the starkly Eurocentric and deflective turn that Habermas' writings on immigration and cosmopolitanism would take in the early 2000's.[21]

Said's worldly orientation, however, also differed from Foucault's in its attachment to the 'essential untidiness of history', the inescapable fact of resistance, and the 'continuous history of struggle' – particularly anticolonial struggle.[22] Foucault's failure to 'account seriously' for resistance and for the forces of change that move history, Said argued, corralled his otherwise expansive thinking into a world of 'master narratives' that strangely naturalized history itself, as if, like nuclear elements with an assigned half-life, periods simply live and pass off'.[23]

By contrast, worldly criticism begins from a place that is smack dab in the middle of history's essential untidiness, a place where the self–aware critic seeks to understand and unsettle the affiliative relationships around them. It entails engagement with those affiliations that have been rendered 'invisible and even 'impossible'' by the hegemony of imperialism. For scholars in the American academy, Said argued, worldly criticism demands that when we speak of 'the connections between the United States and the rest of the world' we also acknowledge that we are '*of* the connections, not outside and beyond them'.[24] Such acknowledgment serves as an invitation for anyone living within the sheltering zone of America's security benevolence to 'make an inventory,' in a Gramscian sense, of the infinite imperial traces left on those who live outside or fall afoul of that benevolence.[25] It thus invites worldly scholars writing from within that sheltered space to interrogate the imperial threads that striate contemporary global discourse – e.g. development narratives, the banal vocabulary of humanitarian intervention, or odes to 'liberal democracy' – and to do this, in part, through an attention to both domination and the obdurate voices of rebellion, at home and abroad.[26] From this perspective, to turn away from critique toward the philosophical ease

of deciding with knowingness is to turn away from the historical presence of imperialism and resistance in the contemporary world.

At the same time, Said insisted, adopting a worldly disposition toward critique neither vitiates the critics' feelings of filiation with a particular place nor the need to fight in the name of those filiations when the struggle against domination requires. But the pull toward self–awareness and opposition is always present, always drawing the worldly critic toward interrogation and opposition. Said explained this phenomenon with a simple phrase: 'never solidarity before criticism'.[27] Even in the 'midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another', he thus maintained, 'there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for'.[28]

This commitment to critique, even in the midst of taking sides, colored both Said's politics and his intellectual work, becoming most apparent in those texts where he reflected on his complicated and deeply personal relationship to nationalism. As a Palestinian exile working in the American academy, Said believed in the strategic and moral imperative to establish a Palestinian homeland (and a right of return) and threw himself into various forms of organized resistance against the hegemonic forces – both discursive, political, and military – that naturalized Israeli policies and rationalized Palestinian suffering. Throughout the 1980's, those commitments propelled his solidarity work with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (P.L.O). That solidarity work eventually came to an end, however, because of Said's refusal to essentialize the Palestinian national experience and deny the connection 'between our national experience as a people with that of other peoples'.[29] By his lights, solidarity without critique leads inevitably to 'separatism or exterminism'.[30] For this reason, Said argued, 'nationalism, for all its obvious necessity, is also the enemy'.[31]

It is, however, in those moments when he lets us catch a glimpse of his own inner turmoil about nationhood, belonging, and connection, that Said's worldly approach expresses itself most powerfully. 'When I let myself go and feel as if everything in the Palestinian situation flows directly from one original trauma', he explained in *After the Last Sky*, 'I can then see a pattern emerging inexorably, as intertwined and as recountable as any other sequential tale of misfortune'.[32] The need to challenge that inevitable sequence – despite the intensity of the feeling and in the face of exile and dispossession, and loss – is the intimate, pulsing political ethic at the heart of Said's criticism.

Rather than turn inward – perorating on critique's futures and pitfalls, haggling over definitions, taking refuge in the warm embrace of normative idea–making – Said's approach

pushes critique outward toward the world. Even when it would be infinitely easier to just settle into a single account of political life, the kind of criticism Said inspires refuses to decamp from the unsettled terrain of history's "disruptive detail" and refuses to disengage from the complex political connections and possibilities generated through disruption.[33] Ultimately, I suggest, in a world where the political futures of millions of people are increasingly constrained by the zero–sum politics of separatism or exterminism, Said's approach to critique remains urgently necessary precisely because of the critics' choice to stay unsettled. The choice, in other words, to theorize from worldliness rather than knowingness.

---

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
[2] Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?' *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions,* ed. by James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press), 382–83.
[3] Axel Honneth, 'The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 7 (2000).
[4] Seyla Banhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 176–82.
[5] Talal Asad, 'Free speech, blasphemy, and secular criticism', in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
[6] Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.
[7] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987). Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (New York; Columbia Univ. Press, 2014). Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2006). Rainer Forst, *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2002).
[8] Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', in *The Political*, ed. D. Ingram (Malden MA; Blackwell, 2002).
[9] Butler, 'What is Critique?'
[10] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry,* 30 (2004).
[11] Hal Foster, 'Post-Critical', *October,* 139 (2012).
[12] Edward Said, 'Orientalism 25 Years Later: Worldly Humanism v. the Empire-Builders', *Counterpunch,* August 3, 2003, www.counterpunch.org/2003/08/05/orientalism
[13] Edward Said, 'Interview with Edward Said', *Diacritics*, 6.3 (1976).
[14] Edward Said, 'Secular Criticism', *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
[15] Said, 'Interview', *Diacritics* 39.
[16] Said, 'Secular Criticism', 29.
[17] Edward Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community', in *Reflections on Exile* (, 119.
[18] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 250.
[19] Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 191.
[20] Fred Dallmayr, 'The Politics of Nonidentity: Adorno, Postmodernism – and Edward Said', *Political Theory*, 25.1 (1997), 51.
[21] Edward Said, 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors', *Critical Inquiry*, 15.2 (1989), 210. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* (Cambridge; Polity Press, 206). For an excellent critique of Habermas and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism see Gurminder Bhambra, 'Whither Europe?: Postcolonial versus Neocolonial Cosmopolitanism', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 18.2 (2016).
[22] Edward Said, 'Traveling Theory', in *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 210. And, Edward Said, 'Culture and Imperialism', in David Barsamian (ed.), *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations With Edward Said* (New York: Haymarket, 2010), 78.

[23] Said, 'Traveling Theory', 210. And, Edward Said, ''Abecedarium Culturae': Structuralism, Absence, Writing', *TriQuarterly*, 20 (1971), 60.
[24] Said, 'Representing the Colonized', 217.
[25] Antonio Gramsci, 'The Study of Philosophy', in *The Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1992), 324. Bhattacharya, Kaul, and Loomba, For Said's thoughts on Gramsci and inventory, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul, and Ania Loomba, 'Edward Said: In Conversation, 16 December 1997', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 1.1 (1998), .
[26] See Edward Said, 'Identity, Negation, and Violence', in *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
[27] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 32.
[28] Said, 'Secular Criticism', 28.
[29] Edward Said, 'Citizenship, Resistance, and Democracy', Edinburgh Lecture, 1998. In Edward Said Papers, Box 74, Folder 10, Series II.3, Columbia University.
[30] Edward Said, 'A Method for Thinking About a Just Peace', in Pierre Allan and Alexis Keller (eds.), *What Is a Just Peace?* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 193.
[31] Said, 'Representing the Colonized', 225.
[32] Edward Said with Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 130.
[33] Said, *Orientalism*, 240.