Edward Said: The Politics of an Oppositional Intellectual, by Nubar Hovsepian. Cairo, New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2025, 294 pp.

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A few years ago, I gave a talk to a group of interdisciplinary scholars about using Edward Said's ideas from *Orientalism* to critique the imperial entailments of contemporary American foreign policy discourse. In the question-and-answer session that followed, one historian suggested that it was inappropriate to apply the ideas of a "literature scholar" to political analysis. While I did manage to suppress the strong urge to slam my head on the table, my answer was nonetheless a bit testy: "Have you ever *read Orientalism*?!"

Testy or not, that response reflected my legitimate irritation with a question that, unfortunately, mirrors one of the key strategies by which reactionary and liberal critics of Said have sought to discredit his scholarship and his politics. For instance, when not acting as court philosopher to George W. Bush, the self-appointed Orientalist-in-Chief, Bernard Lewis, spent much of his time in a lathered fit of pique at the affrontery of Said, a mere literary critic, for rendering judgment on a field outside his expertise.[1] In an infamous 1989 *Commentary* article entitled "Professor of Terror," literary scholar Edward Alexander called Said "a literary scholar and an ideologue of terror."[2] Thirty years later, the affronted neoconservative journalist Caroline Glick railed against the long-dead (but evidently, still dangerous) Said for becoming a "celebrity intellectual for a work that had nothing to do with comparative literature."[3] Liberal critics deploy the same rhetorical move, for similar political ends, but with a slight alteration. For commentators like Irving Howe, there were "two Edward Saids." One was a "literary scholar and critic, cultivated,

[1] Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books*, 1982.
[2] Edward Alexander, "Professor of Terror," *Commentary,* 88. 2 (1989), 49.
[3] Caroline Glick, "Edward Said, Prophet of Political Violence in America; Opinion," Newsweek, July 7, 2020.

knowledgeable," and the other, "a spokesman for the Palestinian cause and adherent of the PLO, polemical and sometimes, as happens in political disputes, strident."[4]

As Nubar Hovsepian's wonderful new book, *Edward Said: The Politics of an Oppositional Intellectual,* makes clear, there were *never* "two Edward Saids." Instead, following his political awakening after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Hovsepian demonstrates that Said's literary/critical scholarship, as well as his fierce political advocacy, were not only informed by each other; they were inextricably intertwined. Hovsepian's book thus joins the ranks of several recent publications dedicated to fleshing out the political-intellectual life of Edward Said, one of the twentieth century's greatest public intellectuals and the man who, in the words of Mahmoud Darwish, "placed Palestine in the world's heart, and the world in the heart of Palestine" (149). Like Hovsepian's book, these new works are written mainly by friends of Said's. Some of them, such as Timothy Brennan's 2021 *Places of Mind*, tend to read Said's political analysis *through* his literary impulses.[5] Others, such as Bruce Robbins and Hamid Dabashi, focus more on the blending of Said's literary, cultural, and critical interests with his impassioned anti-imperialism and activism for Palestinian self-determination.[6]

Hovsepian's book shares with Robbins and Dabashi a refusal to privilege Said's literary credentials over his political affiliations, arguing instead that Said's "literary career and politics feed into each other." (xiv). However, by providing what Hovsepian describes as the first "systematic" account of Said's enmeshed intellectual and political journey, this book offers something new to readers who want to think about Said's work in more integrative terms. Of course, there is a certain irony to approaching Said's career "systematically," given his notorious description of himself as an "unsystematic" thinker attracted to other "unsystematic" thinkers like Gramsci and Fanon.[7] And yet, while it's true that Said was never beholden to a

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[4] Irving Howe, "History and Literature," *Dissent*, Fall, 1993, 557.
[5] Timmothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A life of Edward Said* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).
[6] Bruce Robbins, "Said of the Sixties," n+1, September 20, 2021, https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/said-of-the-sixties/. Hamid Dabashi, *On Edward Said: Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2020).
[7] Te-hsing Shan, "An Interview With Edward Said," in *Interviews With Edward W. Said*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Bruce G. Johnson, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 131.

particular system of thought and purposely drew upon a diversity of philosophical and theoretical approaches, his own work was certainly "systematic" in the sense that he built careful, coherent arguments that painted richer portraits of a complicated world. Hovsepian does something similar by situating Said's ideas within their political context, creating a richer picture of a man whose overall *oeuvre* was oppositional and disruptive, yet sincerely committed to constructing "fields of coexistence rather than fields of battle."[8]

Hovsepian structures the book around the idea of Said as an "oppositional intellectual" whose writings unsettle "the narrative structures that undergird domination" (2). He develops this idea in Chapter One, focusing on Said's dual commitment to both the deconstructive work of disrupting hegemonic narratives and the *re*constructive work of forging counter-narratives (what Said sometimes called "counter-memory" or "a counter-archive").[9] The following two chapters are dedicated to tracing these "oppositional intellectual" impulses through Said's most influential books, 1978's *Orientalism* and 1993's *Culture and Imperialism,* while also situating these books within the context of the times and Said's evolving and intensifying political affiliations. Chapters Four and Five reverse that approach by leading with Said's politics – first his engagement with the PLO and then his eventual rejection of the PLO and the Oslo Accords – but, at the same time, consistently returning to the intellectual interventions that flowed through and from those political engagements. Thus, Chapter Two and Chapter Four productively mirror each other, as do Chapters Three and Five, rounding out Hovsepian's focus on the connection between Said's political and intellectual worlds.

Because *Orientalism* is a book about literature and culture saturated with political meaning and political intent, beginning with it rather than with a chronology of Said's political development in the wake of 1967 is a particularly clever way of exploring Said's imbricated relationship to scholarship and politics. Hovsepian ably demonstrates how Said's reading of Orientalism (and the cultural power knowledge it

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[8] Edward Said, "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 141

[9] Edward Said, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims," *Social Text*, 1 (1979), 14.

evokes and enables) can never be unlinked from imperial domination in the past and remains integral to the process through which the "liberal democratic," capitalist West continues to exert power over the colonized and formerly colonized Rest. In Aamir Mufti's words, Orientalism "is the name of the cultural logic of rule in the post-Industrial era" (35).

More importantly, however, beginning with an analysis of *Orientalism* allows Hovsepian to draw out the conceptual themes that inflect nearly all of Said's scholarly and political (and scholarly-political) writings. Particularly noteworthy is Hovsepian's treatment of *Orientalism* as a condemnation of "totalizing visions" that compress and obscure complexity and hybridity, reducing entire populations to caricatures. Because "totalizing visions" like Orientalism (or American exceptionalism) are never intended "simply to describe, but also to dominate," this fixing of cultural and political characteristics has profound political consequences (58). For Said, Hovsepian explains, dominant cultural narratives about identity must be understood for what they are: human-made constructions, forged through "urgent social contests" that involve concrete political issues such as "immigration laws, the legislation of personal conduct, the constitution of orthodoxy, and the legitimization of violence and/or insurrection, the character and content of education, and the direction of foreign policy which very often has to do with the designation of official enemies"(37-38). The current interpolation of essentialist narratives about "the other" into the policy practices of today's ruling fascist party in America is just one example of Said's often haunting intellectual/political prescience.

In this chapter, Hovsepian also deepens our understanding of *Orientalism* as a text in context, particularly through his reading of its translation into Arabic and its contested reception in the Arab world. Through his involvement with the Beirut-based Institute for Arab Research, Hovsepian secured the rights for the Arabic translation from Said and was privy to many of the thorniest debates involved in that translation's "afterlife." A large part of what made Kamal Abou Deep's "masterful and turgid" translation so controversial, Hovsepian argues, was his attempt to expand the Arabic language in the process of conveying *Orientalism's* complex ideas, a "herculean effort" that many sympathetic critics argue went awry. For Fawwaz

Traboulsi, the effort to "match" Said's prose ultimately damaged the translation, transforming it into a "baggage of words, terms and concepts coined by the translator-cum-author." (54) The resulting story of the text's dissemination in Arabic is thus a fascinating glimpse inside the possibilities and pitfalls of "travelling theory," a subject with which Said himself had a career-long fascination.[10] The complexity and turgidity of the text, coupled with the timing of the translation around the Iranian Revolution, led some to interpret it through the narrow politics of identity, precisely what Said himself most opposed. On the one hand, some scholars associated with al-Azhar in Cairo read *Orientalism* as a defense of exclusively Muslim studies of Islam. On the other hand, Arabic neoconservatives and liberals similarly misinterpreted the text as a rank defense of identity politics that, in Hazim Saghiyyah's words, "shares the Khomeinite Revolution's blaming of everything on the Other" (58).

The story of *Orientalism's* travels in Arabic is thus also a story of its multifaceted, often convoluted, travels writ large, and the way those travels were themselves saturated with power politics, something most evident in the frantic desire of its many detractors in Europe, North America, and the Middle East – from Islamicists, to neocons, to liberals – to misread it as an essentialist screed. Hovsepian significantly deepens that story in Chapter Four by offering us an in-depth analysis of the broader political landscape in the 1970s that shaped *Orientalism*, particularly Said's evolving relationship to Palestinian and Arab American politics and his conscious decision to "affiliate" with the PLO despite the threats and professional challenges he faced as a result.[11] Hovsepian thus situates *Orientalism* in the larger universe of Said's advocacy and scholarship, linking its themes to 1968's "The Arab Portrayed" and 1979's "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims." He also argues that from the early 1970s, Said was actively researching material for 1979's *The*

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[10] Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). Edward Sati, "Traveling Theory Reconsidered," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[11] Hovsepian does not touch on this, but the FBI surveilled Said for most of his career. David Price, "How the FBI Spied on Edward Said," *Counterpunch,* January 13, 2006, https://www.counterpunch.org/2006/01/13/how-the-fbi-spied-on-edward-said/

Question of Palestine and that this research was "central to his explorations and study of Orientalism" more broadly (122).

The book is also unique for the intimate glimpses Hovsepian offers the reader into Said's political lifeworld. Not only was Hovsepian a close friend of Said's, but he also served as the political affairs officer for the United Nations Conference on the Question of Palestine from 1982 to 1984, working closely with Said for years to expand the visibility of the Palestinian cause within the American context. However, because Hovsepian's book is so committed to integrating analyses of Said's political work with his intellectual work, this privileged perspective never comes across as simply biographical or interestingly gossipy (although it is that sometimes, but never in a bad way!) In his blending of the personal and analytic voices, Hovsepian often mirrors Said's style, drawing out precisely the fusion of mind, politics, and heart that the book celebrates. For instance, in 1991, Hovsepian helped Said organize a conference in London called "Making Connections" that brought together Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and throughout the diaspora who were separated by geography, exile, and, in Said's words, "the sheer pressure of being outnumbered and trying to do many different things without time or preparation…" (164). During the proceedings, Said took a phone call from his wife in Hovsepian's hotel room, where he learned that his doctor in New York suspected he might have leukemia. Asked not to share the news with anyone, Hovsepian watched and grieved for his friend as Said continued to preside over the last session, but with a much subdued and increasingly resigned affect. He then watched as, back in New York, Said transformed this resignation into a renewed sense of urgency. "I've got a lot to say and write, and I just want to go on doing that," he told Hovsepian (166).

It is precisely this sense of urgency – this doggedly humanist desire to somehow make people *see* that any non-exterminationist future depends on rejecting "denial-based schemes for shutting out one side by the other, theoretically, or politically" – that suffuses the last chapter of the book (228). The chapter explores some of the villainizing portraits of Said put forward by his most grating detractors, contrasting

them with Said's own "late style" of "oppositional intellectual" engagement. Unlike "native informants" such as Fouad Ajami, "scholar combatants" like Samuel Huntington, and "morally anguished" (but equally combatant) liberals like the perennially peeved, liberal Zionist doyen, Michael Walzer, Said's "late style" of intellectual intervention insisted on confronting historical reality as a precedent for coexistence. By contrast, from "his perch in Princeton" at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Hovsepian observes, Walzer spent decades of his life deflecting confrontation with the historical reality of Zionism as a settler colonial ideology, choosing instead to play the liberal game of dodging and weaving around the obvious by toggling between the language of "justice" and the language of "terror." Said refused such rigid Manichaeism. Any shared future for Arabs and Jews on the land of Palestine-Israel must begin with self-reflection, he insisted, and with "some form of contrition from Israel instead of the nauseating demand that Palestinians must demonstrate that they are worthy adversaries or potential partners in constructing a common future" (217).

Right now, in the fall of 2025, as the Israeli state commits active genocide against the people of Gaza through starvation and military slaughter, with the total economic and ideological support of a United States led today by a full-blown fascist, we know two things for sure. Edward Said was right. And Michael Walzer was (and remains) disastrously wrong. Hovsepian's entire book is a testament to the fact that Said's prescience and Walzer's blindness boil down to the difference between the two men as intellectuals. The deeply human portrait of Said, the "oppositional intellectual" that crackles off its pages, is of a ferocious, intense, impatient, and yes, sometimes petty and vain man, who put self-reflection at the core of his political-intellectual life. This orientation becomes most apparent, Hovsepian argues, in Said's reading of Gramsci on critical self-consciousness. "The starting point of critical elaboration," Gramsci maintained in *The Prison Notebooks*, "is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited *in you* an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."[12] And yet, Said cautions in *Orientalism*, Gramsci's observation doesn't end there. The English translation, he

[12] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 25. Italics mine.

notes, leaves Gramsci's comment at that, while the original Italian text continues with: "Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory." "In many ways," Said explains, "my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces *upon me*."[13]

To make an inventory, Said argued, was to probe the ways history, scholarship, aesthetics, politics, knowledge, and power shape the modern world and accrete within oneself. It thus requires the intellectual to move critically between the self, the other, and the world. Walzer, on the other hand, has devoted his career to blocking critical inventory, working tirelessly to protect the sacred objects of his political mind – the belief that Zionism is a movement of liberation, that there is one acceptable form of resistance, and that wars of aggression and annihilation can be just – from the harsh light of historical reality. The burden of such protectionism, as Said observed, requires the "redeployment of myths" and a rigidly pillared self-consciousness (210). Projection and deflection, rather than self-reflection, are Walzer's rhetorical weapons of choice, and he deployed them often in his various ad hominem attacks on Said for his supposed "anger" and his supposed refusal to distance himself from terrorism. Through these buttressing gestures, Walzer builds walls to fortify his sacred objects from the multivocal reality of the world and from any future where coexistence is possible.

Having spent the last year at the Institute for Advanced Studies (ironically *in* Walzer's old office), I know how brittle and isolating that buttressing can be, how bare and dark that room was, how those walls seemed to repel self-reflection. By contrast, through Hovsepian's beautiful ode to his friend, we come away with a different sense of the "oppositional intellectual's" perspective on the world. In 2025, as liberals like Walzer continue to retreat further from reality in the face of Israeli genocide and fascist ascendence, Hovsepian's book reminds us again that there were never "two Edward Saids." Rather, Said would most likely read this moment as an opportunity to deepen critical connections between the life of the mind and political struggle. Ultimately, and perhaps ironically, to be "oppositional" in a Saidian sense is to remain

[13] Italics mine.

open: to the presence of "the other," to uncomfortable truths about one's political society, to the infinity of traces history has deposited on you, and to everything that comes and goes, in Said's words, through the "large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole."[14]

[14] Edward Said, "The Politics of Knowledge," *Raritan*, 11.1 (1991), 382.