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Edward W. Said (1935-2003)

In *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), Edward Said writes eloquently about the figure of the “public intellectual,” whose mission is to further human knowledge and freedom. In contrast to the “academic intellectual,” who focuses on building a career and shies away from rocking the boat, the public intellectual is, first and foremost, a dissident, whose “place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations” (1994:11). Rather than serving power, while pretending to be the bearer of objective truth, public intellectuals speak truth to power, exposing hidden truths and the contingency of received ideas. They are unafraid of getting their hands dirty outside of academe. They thus strive to connect their functions as teacher and citizen, addressing their concerns to wider audiences and encouraging public debate. They resist the narrowness and esotericism of the academic specialist, and instead risk amateurism so as to locate themselves in diverse sites of learning. They are thus able to make linkages between issues normally kept separate, often “restoring to memory all those things that tend to be overlooked or walked past in the rush to collective judgment and action” (1994:52-53). But while straddling scholarly work and social activism, while committed to both personal interests and public concerns, public intellectuals are in a state of “permanent exile” (1994:56): Said insists that maintaining a critical stance, moving beyond the conventional and the comfortable, requires a certain estrangement.

Said admired individuals like Adorno and Fanon, and had them in mind when he wrote the above words; but of course, one is struck by how much he himself was the embodiment of the public intellectual, easily joining their company. He was a remarkably accomplished man (literary critic and political writer, with over twenty books to his name; opera *aficionado*; concert pianist), and his life works speak to his originality as a thinker and his engagement with a public world. He was decidedly a rebel and iconoclast, challenging triumphalism and never afraid to utter unpopular truths. At first, his *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) were hugely controversial because they dared to ask the western world to take a hard look at itself in the mirror: they insisted on the link between western knowledge systems and empire,

showing how orientalist thinking pervades the writings of such icons of western literature as Dickens, Austen, James and Hardy. Yet, years later, these two books are largely seen as having inaugurated postcolonial studies.

His original and unaccommodating stance inside the university was matched by his political activism outside it. At great personal risk, he spoke out against new forms of imperialism (notably post-9/11), and opposed every form of injustice and domination, particularly those experienced by his own people, the Palestinians. He supported the intifada and grass-roots Palestinian democratic struggles, but was equally critical of the militarism of the Israeli state and the growing authoritarianism and unaccountability of the Arafat regime.

As to being an exile: Said surely was one, both literally, in the sense of being exiled from his native Palestine, and figuratively, in the sense that he meant the public intellectual to be. It is perhaps this distancing, this constant travelling, that fostered his wide range of accomplishments and interests, giving him a compassionate spirit and a cosmopolitan outlook. But it also generated an ability to transgress frontiers (that separate people, nations, academic disciplines), build bridges, and imagine new topographies. Listen to his own words:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience (1990:365).

References

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