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This essay addresses both the nature of what it means to be a public intellectual and the politics such an understanding would entail by examining the work of the late Edward Said. Said embodied both a particular kind of politics and a specific notion of how intellectuals should engage public life. The author takes up these issues by providing a critical commentary on the relevance of Said's notion of wakefulness and how it both shapes his important consideration of academics as oppositional public intellectuals and his related emphasis on cultural pedagogy and cultural politics. The author concludes by arguing that Said's work and legacy are crucial to rethinking the nature of academic work and the work of academia within the larger context of a democracy under siege.

Keywords: *Edward Said; public intellectual; worldliness; wakefulness*

Crisis and criticism are two concepts that are pivotal to defining both the nature of domination and the forms of opposition that often emerge in response to it. Within the past decade, the urgency associated with the notion of crisis and its implied call to connect matters of knowledge and scholarship to the worldly space of politics has largely given way to a concept of criticism among many academics, which implies a narrowing of the definition of politics and an inattentiveness to the public spaces of struggle, politics, and power. As Sheldon Wolin (2000) points out, crisis invokes a particular notion of worldliness in which politics embodies a connection between theory and public life. In contrast, criticism signifies a more disembodied, less tactical version of politics. Such a politics downplays or disregards worldliness and is generally more contemplative, spectorial, and in "search of distance rather than intervention driven by urgency" (p. 15).

Those in the academy who support the professional act of criticism often argue that the close reading of texts has important educational value, especially for students learning how to read critically (Fish, 1999; Graff, 1992). But Wolin's notion of criticism as "unworldly" does not deny the pedagogical value of a critical attentiveness to texts but argues, instead, against the insularity of such a pedagogical task, one which has a tendency to ignore questions of inter-

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vention and degenerate into either scholasticism, formalism, or career opportunism. Alternately, a politics of crisis often links knowledge and learning to the performative and worldly space of action and engagement, energizing people to not only think critically about the world around them but also to use their capacities as social agents to intervene in public life and confront the myriad forms of symbolic, institutional, and material relations of power that shape their lives. It is this connection between pedagogy and agency, knowledge and power, thought and action that must be mobilized in order to confront the current crisis of authoritarianism looming so large in the United States today.

Few intellectuals have done more within the past four decades to offer a politics of worldliness designed to confront the crisis of democracy and the emerging authoritarianism in the United States, Israel, and other nations throughout the world than Edward Said, one of the most widely known, influential, and controversial public intellectuals of the latter part of the 20th century. Although known primarily as a critic of western imperialism and a fierce advocate of the liberation of the Palestinian people, he is also widely recognized for his important contributions as a scholar whose work has had an enormous impact on a variety of individuals, groups, and social movements. His importance as a cultural theorist and engaged intellectual is evident in his path-breaking work on culture, power, history, literary theory, and imperialism. Not only is Said responsible for the founding of such academic genres as postcolonial studies and colonial discourse analysis, his work has also had an enormous influence on a wide range of disciplines as well as on an array of academics and cultural workers, including visual artists, museum curators, filmmakers, anthropologists, and historians. He is one of the few academics whose voice and work addressed with equal ease a variety of specialized and general audiences within a global public sphere. Although he was always clear he was never simplistic, and he managed throughout the course of his 40-year career to provide theoretical discourses and critical vocabularies that enabled a range of academics and activists within a variety of disciplines and public spaces to not only speak truth to power and write against the historical narratives fashioned by ruling classes and groups but also to reclaim a politics in which matters of power, agency, resistance, and collective struggle became paramount.

A controversial and courageous public intellectual, Said provided a model for what it meant to combine scholarship and commitment. And in doing so, he did not shy away from the difficult theoretical and political task of trying to understand how the current elements of authoritarianism in changing historical contexts could be addressed and resisted. Said recognized that the newer models of authoritarianism, with their drive toward absolute power and relentless repression of dissent, were taking different forms from those 20th-century regimes of terror that marked the former Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and fascist Italy. Fascism in the new millennium was now emerging under the banner of democracy, a reckless unilateralism in foreign affairs, an embrace of religious fundamentalism, and the corporate control of a mass media reduced largely to a

benign, if not sometime cranky, adjunct of corporate and government interests. The war on terrorism, Said rightly recognized, had become a rationale for a war on democracy, unleashing both material and symbolic violence at home and abroad on any movement fighting for the right to justice, liberty, and equality, but especially on the rights of the Palestinians.

Attentive to how the university and other dominant sites of power constructed historical narratives, Said urged generations of students to take seriously the narrativizing of political culture as a central feature of modern politics. His now legendary works *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) probed deeply into questions concerning who controls the conditions for telling historical narratives, which agents produce such stories, how such stories become part of the fabric of common sense, and what it might mean for scholars and activists to seriously engage the fact that struggles over culture are also struggles over meaning, identity, power, inclusion, and the future. Of course, such interventions reap no rewards from established powers, and his own work was constantly policed and dismissed as either anti-American or anti-Semitic. Of course, Said's work should be taken up critically, but I want to challenge the frequent denigration of his public interventions in terms which often implied that the real object of such attacks was the existence of any form of influential criticism emerging from the academy that called American power into question. One recent example of such a hostile dismissal can be found in how one of the most powerful newspapers in the world, *The New York Times*, framed his obituary. Richard Bernstein (2003), the author and a noted conservative, constantly invoked Said's critics who claimed that his work was "drenched in jargon" and "ignored vast bodies of scholarship" and that his critiques of Israel were tantamount to "supporting terrorism." Bernstein even went so far as to bring up a story that appeared in 2000 about a photograph that pictured Said at the Lebanese border about to throw a rock allegedly at an Israeli guardhouse. What makes Bernstein's commentary all the more shocking is its juxtaposition to *The New York Times*'s obituary of the filmmaker for the Third Reich, Leni Reifenstahl, who had died a few weeks before Said (Riding, 2003). Considered one of Hitler's most brilliant propagandists, Reifenstahl was treated to a memorial in *The New York Times* that is far more generous and forgiving than the one accorded later to Said. This display of crassly distorted reporting may say less about Bernstein's own ideological prejudices than about the mainstream media's general propensity to be more supportive and comfortable with authoritarian ideologies than with those intellectuals who critique and resist what they perceive as both the escalation of human suffering and the increasing slide of the United States into a new and dangerous form of authoritarianism.[1]

Although it is a daunting task to try to assess the contributions of Edward Said's overall work in these dire times in order to resist the increasing move toward what Sheldon Wolin (2003) calls an "inverted totalitarianism," I think it might be useful to commence such a project by providing a critical commen-

tary on the relevance of Said's notion of wakefulness and how it both shapes his important consideration of academics as oppositional public intellectuals and his related emphasis on cultural pedagogy and cultural politics. I want to begin with a passage that I think offers a key to the ethical and political force of much of his writing. This selection is taken from his 1999 memoir, *Out of Place*, which describes the last few months of his mother's life in a New York hospital and the difficult time she had falling to sleep because of the cancer that was ravaging her body. Recalling this traumatic and pivotal life experience, Said's meditation moves between the existential and the insurgent, between private suffering and worldly commitment, between the seductions of a "solid self" and the reality of a contradictory, questioning, restless, and at times, uneasy sense of self. He writes,

> "Help me to sleep, Edward," she once said to me with a piteous trembling in her voice that I can still hear as I write. But then the disease spread into her brain, and for the last six weeks she slept all the time. . . . my own inability to sleep may be her last legacy to me, a counter to her struggle for sleep. For me sleep is something to be gotten over as quickly as possible. I can only go to bed very late, but I am literally up at dawn. Like her I don't possess the secret of long sleep, though unlike her I have reached the point where I do not want it. For me, sleep is death, as is any diminishment in awareness. . . . Sleeplessness for me is a cherished state to be desired at almost any cost; there is nothing for me as invigorating as immediately shedding the shadowy half-consciousness of a night's loss, than the early morning, reacquainting myself with or resuming what I might have lost completely a few hours earlier. I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents like the themes of one's life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. That skepticism too is one of the themes I particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place. (pp. 294-295)

It is this sense of being awake, displaced, caught in a combination of diverse circumstances that suggest a particular notion of worldliness—a critical and engaged interaction with the world we live in mediated by a responsibility for challenging structures of domination and for alleviating human suffering. As an ethical and political stance, worldliness rejects modes of education removed from political or social concerns, divorced from history and matters of injury and injustice. In commenting on his own investment in worldliness, Said (quoted in Howe, 2003) writes, "I guess what moves me mostly is anger at injustice, an intolerance of oppression, and some fairly unoriginal ideas about freedom and knowledge." For Said, being awake becomes a central metaphor for defining the role of academics as oppositional public intellectuals, defending the university as a crucial public sphere, engaging how

culture deploys power, and taking seriously the idea of human interdependence while at the same time always living on the border—one foot in and one foot out, an exile and an insider for whom home was always a form of homelessness. As a relentless border crosser, Said embraced the idea of the "traveler" as an important metaphor for engaged intellectuals. As Stephen Howe (2003), partly quoting Said, points out,

> It was an image which depended not on power, but on motion, on daring to go into different worlds, use different languages, and "understand a multiplicity of disguises, masks, and rhetorics. Travelers must suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals . . . the traveler crosses over, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions all the time."

And as a border intellectual and traveler, Said embodied the notion of always "being quite not right," evident by his principled critique of all forms of certainties and dogmas and his refusal to be silent in the face of human suffering at home and abroad.

Being awake meant accepting the demands of worldliness, which implied giving voice to complex and controversial ideas in the public sphere, recognizing human injury beyond the privileged space of the academy, and using theory as a form of criticism to redress injustice (Scarry, 2000). Worldliness required not being afraid of controversy, making connections that are otherwise hidden, deflating the claims of triumphalism, bridging intellectual work and the operation of politics. Worldliness meant refusing the now popular sport of academic bashing or embracing a crude call for action at the expense of rigorous intellectual and theoretical work. On the contrary, it meant combining rigor and clarity, on one hand, and civic courage and political commitment, on the other. From the time of his own political awakening after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Said increasingly became a border crosser, moving between his Arab past and his New York present, mediating his fierce defense of Palestinian rights and the demands of a university position that gave him the freedom to write and teach but at the same time using its institutional power to depoliticize the politics of knowledge or, to use Said's (2001b) terms, "impose silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power" (p. 31).

A number of us writing in the fields of critical pedagogy and cultural studies in the early 1980s were particularly taken with Said's (1994) view of the engaged public intellectual, particularly his admonition to intellectuals to function within institutions, in part, as exiles, "whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to refuse to be easily co-opted by governments or corporations" (pp. 8-9). This politically charged notion of the oppositional intellectual as homeless, in exile, and living on the border, occupying an unsutured, shifting, and fractured social space in which critique, difference, and a utopian potentiality can endure, provided the conceptual framework for developing my own

concept of border pedagogy—a mode of pedagogy that was not only oppositional, questioning, political, and cut across disciplines but also moved between different zones of theoretical and cultural differences (Giroux, 1992). His notion of the academic as an engaged intellectual traveling within and between different disciplines, locations, sites of pedagogy, and social formations provided the conceptual framework for generations of educators fighting against the deadly instrumentalism that shaped dominant educational models at the time.

Said also provided many of us in the academy with a critical vocabulary for extending the meaning of politics and critical awareness. In part, he did this by illuminating the seductions of what he called the cult of professionalism with its specialized languages, its neutralizing of ideology and politics through a bogus claim to objectivism, and its sham elitism and expertise rooted in all the obvious gendered, racial, and class-specific hierarchies. He was almost ruthless in his critique of a narrow ethic of professionalism with its "quasi religious quietism" and its self-inflicted amnesia about serious socio-political issues" (Hussein, p. 302). For Said, professionalism separated culture, language, and knowledge from power and in doing so avoided the vocabulary for understanding and questioning how dominant authority worked through and on institutions, social relations, and individuals. Rooted in narrow specialisms and thoroughly secure in their professed status as experts, many full-time academics retreated into narrow modes of scholarship that displayed little interest in how power was used in institutions and social life to include and exclude, provide the narratives of the past and present, and secure the authority to define the future (Aronowitz, 2003, p. 53). Abdirahman A. Hussein (2002) captures lucidly the crux of Said's critique of the seductions of professionalism and its underlying propensity to depoliticize academics and render them either irrelevant politically or complicitous with dominant power. He writes,

> What could be called a narrow ethic of professionalism covers up the absence of any really engaged ethics of worldliness. With the exception of a tiny minority, [too many academics] have undoubtedly succumbed to the same fastidious dodginess that hamstrings the typical academic humanist—the self-inflicted amnesia about serious socio-political issues; the studied, carefully nursed, quasi-religious quietism; the stuffy self-importance and pettifoggery; the spurious myth that weightless "theoria" effortlessly wafts over the quotidian realm of "praxis." In short what transpires under the grandiloquent rubrics of "philosophy," "literary studies," and "critical theory" in the United States and Britain constitutes a substantial part of the cloy, immunizing minutiae of hegemonic culture—that vast, multi-dimensional process of elaboration, saturation, and fine-tuning which cocoons individuals and collectivities in civil society while at the same time camouflaging projections of political, industrial, and military power. (p. 302)

Said was especially critical of those intellectuals who slipped into a kind of professional somnambulism in which matters of theory have less to do with a con-

scious challenge to politics, power, and injustice than with either a deadening scholasticism or a kind of arcane cleverness—a sort of narcotic performance in fashionable irony—that neither threatens anyone or opposes anything. But he did more than supply a language of critique; he also illustrated what it meant to link text to context, knowledge to social change, culture to power, and commitment to courage. He gave us a language for politicizing culture, theorizing politics, and recognizing what it meant to make the pedagogical more political. Not only did his pioneering work give us a deeper understanding of how power is deployed through culture, but he laid the foundation for making culture a central notion of politics and politics a crucial feature of pedagogy, thus providing an invaluable connection between pedagogy and cultural politics. More specifically, Said made it clear that pedagogy resided not merely in schools but in the force of the wider culture, and in doing so, he not only expanded the sites of pedagogy but the possible terrains of struggle within a vast number of public spheres.

Refusing to separate learning from social change, he constantly insisted that we fail theory when we do not firmly grasp what we mean by the political, and that theorizing a politics of and for the 21st century was one of the most challenging issues facing the academy. He urged us to enter in a dialogue with ourselves, colleagues, and students about politics and the knowledge we seek to produce together and to connect such knowledge to broader public spheres and issues. He argued that the role of engaged intellectuals was not to consolidate authority but to understand, interpret, and question it (Said, 1994, pp. 8-9). According to Said, social criticism had to be coupled with a vibrant self-criticism, the rejection "of the seductive persuasions of certainty" (Hussein, 2003, p. 297), and the willingness to take up critical positions without becoming dogmatic or intractable. What is particularly important about Said's work is his recognition that intellectuals have a special responsibility to promote a state of wakefulness by moving beyond the language of pointless denunciations. As such, he refused to view the oppressed as doomed actors or power as simply a crushing form of oppression. For Said, individuals and collectivities had to be regarded as potential agents and not simply as victims or ineffectual dreamers. It is this legacy of critique and possibility, of resistance and agency, that infuses his work with concrete hope and offers a wealth of resources to people in and out of the academy who struggle on multiple fronts against the rising forces of authoritarianism both at home and abroad.

At a time when domination comes not only from the new Right and neoconservatives but also from the religious Right, Said's emphasis on secularism—"the observation that human beings make their own history" (Said, 2001a, p. 501)—not only reminds us of the need to fight against all those forces that relegate reason to the dustbin of history but also to recognize the multiple sites in which a mindless appeal to scripture, divine authority, and other extrasocial forms of dogmatism undermine the possibility of human agency. For Said, new sites of pedagogy had to be developed and old ones used to edu-

cate existing and future generations to the value of critical thought and social engagement. Said believed that criticism was always intertwined with public life and that rather than lift the activity of the contemporary critic out of the world, it firmly placed him or her in the material and political concerns of the global public sphere, one that could never be removed from the considerations of history, power, politics, and justice. And it is this linking of a healthy skepticism for what authorities say and Said's insistence on the need for human beings to make their own history that gives his notion of secular criticism such force. Of course, Said was against all fundamentalisms, religious and political, and he believed that secular criticism should always come before solidarity. Priestly acolytes occupy both churches, mosques, synagogues, and the university, and their quasi-religious quietism—with its appeal to either extrasocial forces (such as the hidden hand of history or the market) or to complex, theoretical discourses that drown out the worldliness of the text, language, and public life—must be rejected at all costs. Both Said's view of the public intellectual and secular criticism informed each other and is clear in his claim that

> even in the very midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for. (Said, 1983, p. 28)

Near the end of his life, Said argued that the United States government was in the hands of a cabal, a junta "dominated by a group of military-minded neoconservatives who are fanatically pro-Israel" (Said, 2003). For Said, the battle over democracy was in part a struggle over the very status of politics as a critical engagement, agency as an act of intervention geared at shaping public life, and resistance as the ability to think critically and act with civic courage. He believed that any vestige of culture as a site of political struggle and courage was being effaced from the American landscape. He argued that such acts of symbolic violence could be seen in Laura Bush's attempt to bring together poets in ways that gave art "a decorative rather than engaged status" (Said, 2003), in Attorney General John Ashcroft's ordering that the "Spirit of Justice" statue be covered up so as to hide the view of her naked breasts, or the United Nations' willingness to cover up a reproduction of Picasso's famous antiwar painting *Guernica* during a visit by Secretary of Defense Colin Powell to the Security Council. Said believed such acts of censorship provided further evidence of the fact that Americans live in a culture increasingly ruled by fear and repression, a culture where the gap between the rich and the poor has become obscene, and where the stranglehold of the far Right on government does not bode well for the environment, youth, labor, people of color, or the reproductive rights of women.

To take back this country from the radical Right and the religious extremists, we need to abide by Edward Said's call to speak the truth to power, but we must do it in a vast majority of sites, including education, and we must do it not

just individually but collectively. In doing so, intellectuals must be willing to untangle the complexities of global power as it moves across the globe creating new social divisions, social formations, and potential sites of resistance. One important social formation that must be addressed is that of youth, whose voices, experiences, and political power must not only be taken seriously but also understood as a crucial element in forming possible alliances that bring together young people, labor unions, intellectuals, educators, and religious organizations. In addition, we also need a new politics marked by a serious investment in cultural pedagogy, an appropriation of new and old technologies for producing knowledge, and a propensity for combining critique with acts of refusal including, as Joseph Hough, the current president of the faculty at Union Theological Seminary argues, nonviolent civil disobedience (Moyers, 2003). The most important question facing this country is what changes are going to have to be made in how we think and act politically to make a claim for a substantive and inclusive democracy.

So much of what Said wrote, and did with his life, offers both a model and inspiration for what it means to take back politics, social agency, collective struggle, and the ability to define the future. Said recognized with great insight that academics, students, and other cultural workers had important roles to play in arousing and educating the public to think and act as active citizens in an inclusive democratic society. Most important, he called upon such groups to put aside their petty squabbling over identities and differences and to join together collectively in order to become part of what he called, after C. L. R. James, a "rendezvous of victory" (Said, 2003), a fully awakened, worldly coalition against those forces at home and abroad who are pushing us into the age of totalitarianism lite, without anyone much noticing or, for that matter, complaining.

Note

1. A classic example of this can be seen in the November 2, 2003, *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in which Deborah Solomon interviews Noam Chomsky. Solomon (2003) ends the interview by suggesting Chomsky is a self-hating Jew because he criticizes Israeli policies, needs to be psychoanalyzed, and is driven by ambition. She ends the interview by asking Chomsky if he feels guilty about "living a bourgeois life and driving a nice car" and if he has "considered leaving the United States permanently." Clearly, these questions reveal much more about Solomon, her editors, and *The New York Times* than they might about Chomsky, though he answers all of her questions in ways that reveal how foolish she is. Two of the questions and answers are worth repeating:

> Q: How would you explain your large ambition?
> Chomsky: I am driven by many things. I know what some of them are. The misery that people suffer and the misery for which I share responsibility. That is agonizing. We live in a free society, and privilege confers responsibility.

> Q: If you feel so guilty, how can you justify living a bourgeois life and driving a nice car?
> Chomsky: If I gave away my car, I would feel even more guilty. When I go to visit peasants in Southern Columbia, they don't want me to give up my car. They want me to help them. Suppose I gave up material things—my computer, my car and so on—and went to live on a hill in Montana where I grew my own food. What that help anyone? No. (p. 13)

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