

EDWARD SAID AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

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Theoretical closure, like social convention or cultural dogma, is anathema to critical consciousness, which loses its profession when it loses its sense of an open world in which its faculties must be exercised'

Edward W. Said, 'Traveling Theory'¹

1. Edward W. Said, 'Traveling Theory', *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, pp226-47.

In the wake of the onslaught against Iraq and the cack-handed overhaul of that country, it is high time for us to admit that jittery compunctions about intellectual work will not advance what ought to be the calling of the postcolonial critic: to help humankind prevail over the manifestly undiminished consequences of imperialism. The war in Iraq has made starkly visible an imperialist project that has not, as our field's moniker suggests, been drawing to a close but has on the contrary been expanding American hegemony, extending corporate power and hijacking international institutions of governance. Therefore, in addition to exposing those destructive dealings that are the result of cupidity and misapprehension, postcolonial criticism needs methods and principles that will allow it to elaborate positive visions of genuine fellowship and equality to set against the parochial, self-serving universalism of the United States. It requires a critical vocabulary that fulminates against Iraqis' plight and arraigns their assailants in the name of universal principles and a vision of social transformation.

Many postcolonial thinkers have, alas, been persuaded against performing these tasks by their reluctance (often brought about by what I think is a misreading of Edward Said's *Orientalism*) to acknowledge that thinkers can write about, for and *in the name of* a broad international constituency. The fallacious doctrines that underpin imperialism are too often put down to an irremediable entanglement of knowledge with power. But this scepticism about the possibility of knowledge then leads to an equally unavailing political philosophy; incomprehension is put down to the fact that the culture of the perceived and that of the percipient belong to terminally discrepant realms, discrete spheres without values or aspirations in common, a belief that in my view is as far from reality as it is from providing an appealing alternative to the fractured, inequitable world brought into being by imperialism.

Not many will need reminding that the postcolonial field's governing idea is that much, indeed most, of what has been written in colonising societies about, for instance, the Arab world, though it pretends to be scholarly in intention and edifying in effect, is actually bound up with the misapprehension of such regions and the ill-treatment of their peoples. *Orientalism* traces a host of misrepresentations that portray 'Orientals' not as individuals and groups

that merit considerate analysis but as an easily digestible mass reducible to stereotypical figures. The term 'Orientalism' names the purportedly faithful and dispassionate but actually erroneous and self-serving set of ideas that has come to stand in for an obscured region and its inhabitants. Orientalists peddle distortions that evoke images of a dependent and powerless place, an ageless canvas for the realisation of the west's economic objectives, strategic plans and cultural fantasies. In the mainstream media, in orthodox political discussion and, alas, in much scholarly work there is a flattening out of the intricacy and unevenness of the Arab world's histories, cultures and societies (and even of the initiative and humanity of its inhabitants) into lifeless figures of civilisational decline, religious zeal and despotic torpor. Orientalism gives rise not to knowledge but to pretexts for the exercise of power.²

The popularity of Said's theory has not, I suspect, been unrelated to the postmodern distrust of intellectual work with which it has often been associated. This association has persisted despite the call in *Orientalism's* final chapter for readers to interrogate established doctrines about the Orient and to contrive encounters with its inhabitants, texts and circumstantial realities that are as far as possible unobstructed by preconceptions and considerations of power. This point is made even more forcefully in *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam*, books with which *Orientalism* forms a trilogy.³ Increasingly clear in Said's writings was his aversion to the thoughtless conflation of knowledge with power and his distaste for postmodernism's bestowal of attention on textual effects at the expense of the knowable world from which they spring.

The reason for postcolonial studies' enervating mood must be sought not in the work of its founder but in the downturn in the fortunes of liberation movements in the third world, the degeneration of the second and the rebuffs suffered by the labour movement in the first. In the light of these events many postcolonial critics concluded that all world-altering political projects are (as Stalinism in the East and postcolonial autocracy in the South proved) doomed to coercion, aberrancy and failure. Like the householder in Brecht's fable who still enquires after the commodiousness of the adjacent residence while flames engulf his own, many postcolonial critics wrongly convinced themselves that what we have is less awful than the alternatives. They reasoned that, since revolutionary projects of social and political transformation more often than not go awry, then the best political project is modestly local, reformist tinkering rather than system-toppling upheaval. Moreover, because knowledge is inextricably bound up with power then theorists must replace empirical study and the postulation of desirable norms with a masochistic harping on theory's shortcomings. But by thus casting doubt on ambitious practice and on the advice-giving, knowledge-seeking role of the dissident intellectual postcolonial criticism has tended to criticise imperialism without countenancing the means required to supplant it or imagine our way beyond it.

A model for a more practicable, worldly, even originaive form of critical activity has lately been advanced in the last two texts composed by Edward

2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Random House, 1978.

3. Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, New York, Vintage Books, 1980; *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1981.

4. Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press), 2004; *From Oslo to Iraq and the Roadmap*, London, Bloomsbury, 2004.

Said before his death in 2003: *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* and *From Oslo to Iraq and the Roadmap*.⁴ In them he espouses a type of humanism that has cast off the connotations of insularity and elitism that many postcolonial critics attach to that term but has retained both the belief in the dignity, value and equality of all human life contained in Seneca's great dictum ('nothing human is alien to me') and the capacity for self-criticism that great humanists like Giambattista Vico, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer all consider to be inseparable from humanistic practice. Said the unabashed humanist shares postcolonial critics' misgivings about bellicose, misleading accounts of other societies but is not so shy of saying something constructive about them that he throws in the intellectual towel altogether. On the contrary, his is an unseasonable but very salutary faith in the intellectual vocation: its capacity to produce knowledge, indict the powerful and sketch desirable futures. Said maintained his belief in the possibility of conducting theoretical work that is as principled and as penetrating as it is conscious of the atrocities frequently wrought and licensed by overreaching intellectual schemes. He certainly eschewed the prescriptive blueprints and adamant categories of the Orientalist, but unlike many of those inspired by his magnum opus he also took care not to succumb to fretful paralysis.

As I see it, the great virtue of Said's work is that it found a way of combining a ferocious aversion to imperialism with an upbeat, lucid account of the ideas and principles required to supplant it. Given urgent practical focus and restated with characteristic eloquence and passion in these late works is an unreconstructed fidelity to humanism's universal ideals allied to an equally uncompromising hostility to the violence, insincerity, and duplicity of the powers that pay them lip service. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* is the outcome of lectures given at Cambridge University and at Columbia in New York. Intended to justify the contemporary relevance of the humanist tradition, they were, Said tells us in his preface, amended after 9/11 in order to emphasise how the humanist's cosmopolitan and democratic sensibility offers a kind of intellectual *modus operandi* in an age of inward-looking doctrines of religious fervour, ideological self-certainty and civilisational pride.

There are, Said suggests, two chief precepts of humanist practice. The first is the deceptively straightforward proposition that that which has been humanly made (and which is subject, therefore, to neither the laws unearthed by the natural sciences nor the unchanging verities pondered by metaphysicians) is uniquely susceptible to analysis and change. Societies, dogmas, texts, and the very mores and ideas of the self are variable products of human work not benefactions of providence. Because they were conceived and made they can be reconceived and remade by what the great philologist Leo Spitzer, whose work is celebrated here, calls 'the power bestowed on the human mind of investigating the human mind'.⁵ Knowledge, however, is not uncontroversial or easily gained. Glossing Vico, Said remarks upon the mind's fallibility, its passionate rather than dispassionate nature, and its unavoidable entanglement with interests and situations. Knowledge of what is humanly constructed is

5. Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1948, p24.

always incomplete and provisional, a thing to be negotiated, interrogated and improved. Hence humanism entails a taste for self-renewal and a restless impatience with the mind's dogmas. The second precept of humanist practice, therefore, is the cosmopolitan moral intelligence that results from self-scrutiny, the unbounded regard for the humanity of others that follows when one starts interrogating provincial allegiances and doctrines. Said's definition gives the lie to humanism's reputation as a self-congratulatory, often clannish reverence for an exclusive local group, for unimpeachable masterpieces, and for a national culture that is being swamped by undesirables.

Having established the principles of humanistic endeavour, Said goes on to elucidate the special attributes required of the American humanist in the wake of 9/11 and the United States' belligerent response. For a start, democratic humanism contrasts with the provincial version of this creed lately espoused by the Bush administration. It has nothing to do with any unselfconscious defence of one's own sinless, unfaltering culture against malevolent interlopers, not just because the United States – as Said is at pains to stress – is a society made up of immigrants and therefore in conception if not always in fact a multifarious and hospitable place, but more importantly because it is of the very nature of humanistic activity to upset, interrogate and reformulate ostensible certainties. Those dogmatic presuppositions cannot survive the knowledge of self and world to which humanistic scrutiny gives rise. Awareness of a world rendered indistinct by media clichés, filtered through the ideological preconceptions of policy makers, or else glimpsed through the cross hairs of military planners demolishes the myth of the United States's irreproachable virtue. That this myth has for many gained rather than lost credibility since 9/11 is a fact that has made all the more urgent the sort of careful humanistic scrutiny required to break through blinkeredness and patriotic fealty. Critical consciousness or, put differently, a biting distrust of accepted wisdom is the humanist's customary mode. A form of resistance, humanism necessitates a militant critique of jingoistic ideologies and a practical refusal to tolerate distant suffering.

Principally it means situating critique at the heart of humanism, critique as a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of questioning and of accumulating knowledge that is open to, rather than in denial of, the constituent historical realities of the post-Cold War world, its early colonial formation, and the frighteningly global reach of the last remaining superpower of today.⁶

6. Said, *Humanism*, op. cit., p47.

The book's central chapters on German hermeneutic and comparative philology, most notably its compelling account of the insightful and reflective method at work in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, call for a return to close reading. However, such scrutiny is not, Said tells us, to be conducted in the manner of the New Critics' pedantic connoisseurship, of a belletristic bracketing off of the aesthetic object from any investigation of its contexts and implications. Nor should it resemble the analogous and equally unavailing approach of

deconstructive critics like Jacques Derrida (whose insights and argot have been employed far too uncritically by postcolonial theorists) who are on principle disinclined to enlarge their readings into an instructive study of the world outside the text. For Said a patient, meticulous inspection of words and their usage (and *philologia*, after all, is literally the love of words) ends not in the approval of one's presuppositions or, as deconstructive readings usually end, in vacillation and uncertainty but in the continual expansion of moral and intellectual horizons. Reading literature in the philological manner entails a scrupulous sensitivity to the nuances and connotations of the words on the page, an attentive and open-minded form of scrutiny which then authorises one to broaden one's scholarly perspective to consider the various contexts in which those words were written and received. Thus the critic influenced by philology moves from the specific point of departure (*Ansatzpunkt*) he discovers in a text, event or problem to an informed elucidation of its wider pertinence.

The challenge presented to his readers by the humanist in the public sphere is, then, to peer beyond the bounds of ordinary knowledge, to make out facts and lives that are usually obscured by heedlessness. His or her task is to promote the rights of mistreated persons, to preserve the memory of forgotten events, and to recount an alternative narrative of how the status quo has arisen and at what cost: in short, 'to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power'.⁷ What this important little book teaches us is a novel understanding of humanism as the basis of principled intellectual work undertaken not with the intention of fending off or belittling outsiders but with the aim of instilling a fully global sensibility. It constitutes among other things an emphatic reaffirmation of the relevance of the humanities as inquisitive methods of study in the face of the increasing annexation of the university system by corporate interests. In particular it is a well-timed vindication of the study of literature, which is not a celebration of vernacular master works as the likes of that flag-waver Allan Bloom would have us believe, but an especially heightened and acute form of reflection on language: an extraordinary meditation on humankind's changeable affiliation with itself and its world, a source not of doctrinaire certainty but of self-criticism and cosmopolitan conscience. Said succeeds in rescuing humanism from its conservative exponents whilst refuting avant-garde theorists' assumption that humanism and imperialism are synonymous.

The points of departure for the short commentaries contained in *From Oslo to Iraq and the Roadmap* are the commencement of the second intifada, the collapse of the putative peace process, the carnage of 9/11 and the American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. None of these essays, written for the Arab-language Cairo newspaper *Al-Ahram* and for periodicals in the west, pull their punches. Said confronts his European and North American readers with the reality of Israel's misdeeds, the parochialism of received ideas about the region, and the likely outcome of a misbegotten war.⁸ His

7. Ibid., p135.

8. The best account of the fraudulent and illegitimate invasion of Iraq is provided by Dilip Hiro, *Secrets and Lies: The True Story of the Iraq War*, London, Politico's, 2005, which meticulously dismantles the fabrications and sophistries used to justify it.

Arab readers, meanwhile, are not spared his insistence on the need to parley with Israeli dissidents and to recognise the murderousness and venality of Arab regimes. The really useful thing about these passionate interventions, therefore, is that his analyses of specific events lead Said not to stress cultural separateness but to state boldly the need for universal humanist principles. He refuses to abandon ideals like democracy, freedom and human rights that have been pressed into service by discredited powers that are hostile to their true meaning. Said enumerates their misdemeanours, but even a cursory scrutiny of the records of the US and UK reveals that these delinquent states have behaved for decades in a manner designed to forestall liberation and to abet the abuse of human rights.⁹ Actions taken by these two serial miscreants beneath the cover of the enforcement of human rights, the promotion of freedom and the begetting of prosperity need to be opposed and resisted not because those things are undesirable but because states with such a deplorable track record of contempt for humanity are manifestly unqualified to appoint themselves its guardians.

We postcolonial critics should have the courage to heed Said's proposition that the problem with American imperialism is not that it is too universalist but, on the contrary, that it is *not universalist enough*. Our opponent is not universalism, in other word, but a provincial, two-faced caricature of it. The apparent universalism of the Bush administration is in fact nothing of the sort. Insofar as its talk of freedom, democracy and human rights is not merely a smokescreen sent up to conceal more unseemly motivations, America's missionary universalism represents a circumscribed view of the world that propagates systems, priorities and courses of action that further only the special interests of American elites.¹⁰ Hymning the virtues of unregulated business activity, privatised public services and cursory forms of democracy betrays a worldview far too parochial to be described accurately as universalist. So narcissistic is this particular vision of the world that, far from being characterised by the global sympathies and self-conscious mindset of humanism, it actually has more in common with the cast iron certainties of religious belief.

Of great relevance, therefore, to the humanist as he or she operates in the public sphere is not just the idea of humanistic or democratic criticism but also Said's earlier notion of secular criticism, which was set out in *Beginnings* and, most persuasively, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, and which reverberates in these late essays. Said's secularism is a powerful antidote to the self-righteous, double-dealing piety of orthodox humanism. He proclaims the need to resist abstract doctrines that claim all the incontestability of God-given truth and he attests the very urgent requirement to apply oneself instead to a perspicacious and watchfully self-conscious engagement with the world. In the present context secularism involves rejecting the sort of fanatical self-certainty brought into relief by Gregory Thielmann, director of the US State Department's bureau of intelligence until his 'retirement' in 2002, when he remarked that '[the Bush] administration has had a faith-based intelligence

9. Noam Chomsky, of course, has exhaustively documented the United States' wrongdoings. Mark Curtis exposes those of its junior partner: see *Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World*, London, Vintage, 2003; and *Unpeople: Britain's Secret Human Rights Abuses*, London, Vintage, 2004.

10. I am thinking principally of the neo-liberal dogma unleashed in Iraq. Corruption and racketeering since the invasion have resulted in the rampant privatisation of state assets, the inhibition of trades unions, the milking by multinational corporations of Iraq's reparation payments to Kuwait, and the underhanded awarding and negligent performance of security, supply and reconstruction contracts. See Pratap Chatterjee, *Iraq Inc: A Profitable Occupation*, London, Seven Stories Press, 2004. An interesting overview of the situation in Iraq is provided by Patrick Cockburn, 'The Abyss of Iraq', *New Left Review*, 36 (2005): 35-67.

11. 'Former Intelligence Officials, Arms Control Experts Say Bush Administration Misrepresented and Hyped Iraqi Threat', *Arms Control Association*, <http://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/2003/iraq_july03.asp>.

12. New Labour's illiberal, and, given its failure to prevent the attacks on London last July, ineffective 'security' agenda is taken apart in Helena Kennedy's *Just Law: The Changing Face of Justice – Why it Matters to us All*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2005. Measures include internment without trial, attacks on judicial independence, reduction of the right to trial by jury, expansion of the power of the state to spy on its citizens, extradition of citizens to the mercy of unsavoury regimes, and, in order to justify these and other measures, the deliberate incitement of public fear. A trenchant critique of the Blair government's misdeeds since 2001 is contained in Tariq Ali, *Rough Music: Blair/Bombs/ Baghdad/ London/Terror*, London, Verso, 2005.

attitude ... "We know the answers, give us the intelligence to support those answers"". ¹¹ The disciples of that 'faith-based' worldview credit it with the impregnable, fact-proof authority of divine scripture. Gathered about the maundering president and his blowhard lieutenants, therefore, are the most garrulous but unselfconscious votaries. Theirs is a clueless executive, 'advised' (or at least sweet-talked) by corrupted intellectuals like Fawaz Gerges, Richard Perle and Norman Podhoretz as well as the usual minstrels like Francis Fukuyama, Fouad Ajami and Bernard Lewis, an unctuous crowd assembled at court to admire the emperor's new humanitarian clothes and deliver their wrong-headed waffle about a clash of civilisations. Seemingly devoid of conscience and evidently without accountability, these thinkers (if thinking is what they are doing) issue jeremiads against the evildoers and declaim from their pulpits the merits of America's divinely sanctioned power.

Of course, the problem with this one-eyed view of the world is that its devotees consider values that are decreed by the almighty (and Bush, remember, is reported to have confided to Mahmoud Abbas the celestial source of his instructions) rather than made by men and women to be invulnerable to qualification or disproof. Seeing the world in such dogmatic and indiscriminating terms leads the neo-conservative gang, their doltish ringleader and his sanctimonious British accomplice to glorify their own cause and then traduce and assume control over the inferior existence of those who think and live differently. Thus the disciples of the 'faith-based' worldview act not out of principled solidarity with a tormented people but out of a blundering haste to replace second-rate societies with a low-grade imitation of their own superior values and institutions.

Said reminds us that it is the function of a self-censoring media in the grip of received ideas and priorities to mystify and to abstract until what percipients in the west see are not interlocutors but dependants and 'extremists'. It seems reasonable to preside over and dispose of the inhabitants of distant climes once their existences have been reduced to simple images and concepts, glib riffs for a compliant media to repeat and underscore until a sophisticated and vital, albeit long tyrannised, people are made to appear nothing more than shiftless supplicants and fanatical ingrates. Their country is then set forth as a basket case to be delivered at gunpoint by god-fearing rescuers. The irrational doctrine of pre-emption that underpins it all is premised on the infestation of a directionless segment of the globe by mortal enemies who are not vexed by remediable grievances but consumed by a loathing of our unblemished virtue. This unlikely proposition, Said argues, along with the equally absurd and insupportable (not to say counter-intuitive) belief that American power is fundamentally benign, is made plausible for many because the contexts and consequences of these 'representations' have been made to disappear.

The result is a simplistic dichotomy of good versus evil that can be used to justify expansion and invasion abroad and, at home, permit the vilification of minorities and the execution of a long-planned crackdown on civil liberties. ¹² The mainstream media, dominated by a handful of deferential multinationals,

are in thrall to their corporate sponsors and to politicians with the power to make laws to swell their profits. They marginalise progressive voices, present events without elucidating their context, describe matters in glib slogans and rely for 'analysis' on phoney 'experts', insiders and retired top brass whose role is not to unravel the causes or probable consequences of events (and certainly not to stress the humanity of their victims) but to make them fit a preconceived view of the world based on the bogus myth of America's rectitude.

Absent from the authorities' Manichaean worldview and from the media's simplistic figures is any attention to the actual people of Iraq, who are portrayed by planners not as an agglomeration of thinking, living, suffering human beings but as so many lab rats detained for an experiment in corporate and military expansion and by the media as ungrateful beneficiaries of American altruism. Of greater moment than Iraq's population are the region's quiescence, the integrity of the prevailing consensus of opinion on the Middle East, the president's approval ratings, the profits of the administration's cronies, the plentiful availability of cheap oil, and so on. Lost in these calculations is Iraq, which is viewed not as a large, complex and multifarious society with a will and a history of its own (one, by the way, that brings no credit to its invaders) but as a static and helpless backwater, a blank, resource-rich tract to be shaded in by American might.

What *From Oslo to Iraq and the Roadmap* and its uncharacteristically cumbersome title make clear are the connections and continuities in American foreign policy, notwithstanding the World Trade Center atrocities and their aftermath. Said recalls, for example, Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, which was a model for lawless regime change. Turning to Iraq, he rails against glib assertions of altruistic purpose made by states that lately presided over the murderous and futile sanctions regime. Above all, by contrasting the US's rhetoric with its ongoing connivance in the denial of human rights to the Palestinians he finds wanting the administration's commitment to upholding humanitarian principles. Forecasts of the Iraq invasion's effectiveness and assessments of its perpetrators' motives should be based, he says, not on the hot air of the administration's propagandists but on the widely documented record of American misconduct.¹³ From such an appraisal Said forms the judgement that it is, to say the least, unlikely that the government of the United States could not bear to see continue in Iraq the abuses it has tolerated and encouraged in Israel for upwards of forty years: assassinations, torture, illegal detention, mass killing, violation of human rights, defiance of the United Nations, the illegal annexation of territory, and impunity for the perpetrators of the gravest crimes. In angry and eloquent detail Said enumerates the woes endured by his compatriots. The Palestinians, he reminds us once again, are continually imprisoned, checked, and mistreated without qualm. The same lofty disregard of Palestinian entitlements and the same puffed-up contempt for their sufferings is apparent in the now forgotten 'road map', as lop-sided and desultory a gimmick as all the other so-called

13. A similar argument was made in relation to the 1991 war by Peter Gowan, 'The Gulf War and Western Liberalism', *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance*, London, Verso, 1999, pp141-81.

peace initiatives, designed as it was not to lead to an equitable settlement but to placate the timorous misgivings of the war's liberal critics and soft-pedal the Palestinian nuisance.

In these important final statements Said's preoccupation was what his mentor R.P. Blackmur called 'the true business of literature, as of all intellect, critical or creative, which is to remind the powers that be, simple or corrupt as they are, of the turbulence they have to control'.¹⁴ His subject was a region menaced by external foes and superintended by despots. There is a pertinacious Arab reality to which Said bore witness that will not be obscured by the malevolent fantasies of Bush's gurus or presided over forever by juntas and consuls. Similarly, in spite of all their afflictions, the Palestinians, as he was anxious to attest, endure and do not disappear.¹⁵ Said frequently stresses his compatriots' indomitableness, their unbroken confidence in the justice of their cause, the almost miraculous vitality of the initiatives and institutions that make up their national life, and their 'insistence (like that of Bartleby the Scrivener) that "we would prefer not to," not to leave, not to abandon Palestine forever'.¹⁶ Animating all Said's work, from his early exposition of Joseph Conrad's struggle to retain his writerly authority to these inspirational late statements, are the gravity, complexity and sheer vitality of human life that, with its intrinsic capacity for initiative and renewal, ultimately frustrates every effort to effect theoretical or political closure. To imagine then, that a rambunctious reality can be disciplined and rendered orderly, that complex and sophisticated societies can be remodelled uncomplainingly, that the recalcitrance, concreteness and multiplicity of millions can be made to act in ways decreed in advance, is to demonstrate the most deplorable ignorance of human affairs.

Fitting epitaphs both, these final texts constitute a rousing call for a new global consciousness of critical vigilance, moral obligation, and political solidarity. Like Shelley's '[r]ulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,' American and British leaders have emphatically not shown a convincing commitment to democratic and humanist principles. Happily, however, as Said is evidently delighted to observe, many of their people have:

[It is] a great and noble fact that for the first time since World War II, there are mass protests against the war taking place *before* rather than during the war itself. This is unprecedented and should become the central political fact of the new globalized era into which our world has been thrust by the United States and its superpower status. What this demonstrates is that despite the awesome power wielded by autocrats and tyrants like Saddam and his American antagonists, despite the complicity of a mass media that has (willingly or unwillingly) hastened the rush to war, and despite the indifference and ignorance of a great many people, mass action and mass protest on the basis of human community and sustainability are still formidable tools of human resistance. Call them weapons of the weak, if you wish.¹⁷

14. R.P. Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Solicitude and Critique*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1955, p41.

15. See Mustafa Barghouti, 'Palestinian Defiance: Interview by Éric Hazan', *New Left Review*, 33 (2005): 117-31.

16. Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, Photographs by Jean Mohr, London, Vintage, 1993, p42.

17. Said, *Oslo*, op. cit., pp253-54. The phrase, 'Weapons of the Weak' is of course James C. Scott's from his *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, London, Yale University Press, 1987.

What is now happening is that critical consciousness, open discussion and international solidarity are emerging as alternatives to the larcenous intercessions of the United States. 'Neither their war nor their peace' is the motto of this emerging movement. There is a proliferation of NGOs and political movements pressing for minority and human rights, environmental protection, equality and peace. Many of these constitute alternative communities in embryo, spaces in which democratic sensibilities are being nurtured and barriers between peoples broken down. Cities across the world reverberated to the sound of protest on 15 February 2003 as millions sought to avert the invasion of Iraq. That display of solidarity was an expression of this emergent community, which contrasts the globalised exploitation and violence of the strong with the communal and international consciousness of the weak. The marchers were empowered by alternative sources of information, emboldened by the presence of allies, and driven by the prospect of replacing the law of divine right with that of humanitarian obligation.

Despite all its valuable work there has been, within the field of postcolonial theory, too little concerted attempt to delineate such visions or to offer social and political alternatives that might serve to lead us away from a still operative imperialism. Postcolonial theory has usefully analysed the deficiencies of ways of thinking and acting associated with imperialism without showing any comparable dedication to the equally necessary task of outlining ethical precepts to facilitate constructive intellectual and political work. All at once the opportunity, the means and the motivation have presented themselves to develop a radical humanist intellectual practice. What the war in Iraq evidences is both the irksome durability of imperialism and the urgent need to set genuine humanism against the fraudulent and parochial version purveyed by the United States. Events there make clear that the normative aspect of our work, too frequently neglected or postponed hitherto, must now take centre stage.

I believe the consequences of such an approach are potentially more far-reaching than even Said imagined. Though this is less true of the political articles than it is of the book on humanism, one flaw shared by both texts is that the humanism advocated therein is that of a liberal appalled by cultural strife rather than of a socialist inspired by the prospect of transformation.¹⁸ But far more than a means of reproving insularity, what Kwadwo Osei-Nyame has called 'revolutionary humanism' constitutes a practical alternative to the inequity and inhumanity of the status quo.¹⁹ Said's 'weapons of the weak' must take aim not just at the smug provinciality of Iraq's assailants but also, even more importantly, at the economic system that compels these depredations and that skews international institutions into implements of powerful states' self-interest. Iraq's ordeal makes clear the fact that, as ever, humanist principles are more honoured in the breach than the observance. In fact they have been misused to such an extent that they sometimes no longer mean what they should mean or what they might have meant had numerous groups

18. Timothy Brennan makes a similar claim in 'Resolution', in Homi K. Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell (eds), *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp43-55.

19. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr, 'On Revolutionary Humanism: The Existentialist Legacy of Frantz Fanon', *new formations*, 47 (2003): 29-33.

not been prevented for centuries from participating in the process of their definition. Nevertheless, despite our legitimate misgivings they remain the only feasible basis of political protest and social transformation. The war on Iraq evidences the need for universal principles. The task facing postcolonial critics is to espouse them.