

In Retrospect

Edward Said in the Netherlands

Edward Said's death was front-page news in the Netherlands and a Dutch journalist's interview with him in 1999 was broadcast on national television. This is the kind of attention given only to intellectuals of the stature of Sartre or Foucault. When he saw the interview on television, Pierre Audi, the artistic director of The Netherlands Opera, said that he had felt touched as though by the Allegro of Beethoven's great symphonies. Audi dedicated his production of Berlioz' *Les Troyens*, which had its premiere that same week, to his friend. Said was a great music lover; he wrote on classical music for the nation, and was a close friend of the conductor, Daniel Barenboim. According to Said, *Les Troyens* is not only Berlioz' greatest work, but also a good example of orientalism in its references to France's new domination of northern Africa in the 1850s and 1860s. Audi's was a pleasantly cosmopolitan gesture in an otherwise quite predictable set of responses from the Dutch cultural and intellectual communities. For scholarly and political reasons, Said has always been at least as controversial in the Netherlands as elsewhere, if not more so. His famous *Orientalism* (1978) has been translated into thirty-six languages, but not into Dutch. Many years ago, Said told me that a Dutch publisher bought the translation rights, but then followed the advice of an Indonesian history specialist to not publish it. His *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) was translated into Dutch, but received negative reviews from, among others, the then leading Dutch liberal politician and later European commissioner, Frits Bolkestein, who negatively compared Said's scholarship to the superior work of Princeton's Islamologist, Bernard Lewis. Some years before, the comparison to Bernard Lewis had already come up in a scandal at Leiden University. Both Said and Lewis had been invited to the opening of the Centre for Non-Western Studies in 1988, but after much quarrelling (including Parliamentary debate), Said's invitation was withdrawn.

The generally negative attitude towards Said in the Netherlands is the result of a combination of factors. In the Dutch Academy, orientalist dominate the study of the Middle East and these scholars feel very offended by Said's work because they see it as almost a personal attack on their integrity. The scholarship in these circles is by and large empiricist and positivist, while the impact of Foucault's *Knowledge and Power* has been rather limited. It remains puzzling, however, how little real attention specialists in the Netherlands have given to Said's work, given the fact that it is firmly rooted in the German historical tradition of Curtius, Panofsky and, of course, Auerbach, whose *Mimesis* has recently been re-published with a new introduction by Said. Contrary to what people who have not read his work often think, Said is not a radical iconoclast, but, in fact, a great lover of Western cultural and scholarly traditions. The other factor, obviously, is Said's Palestinian nationalism. Dutch politics is, in general, pro-Israel, and criticism of Israel is easily interpreted as anti-Semitism. This has its origins in Dutch guilt feelings about the Holocaust and post-war Protestant sympathies towards the Jewish inhabitants of the Holy Land. Against this background it was remarkable that Said was the first recipient of the International Spinoza Prize, awarded in The Hague in 1999. He was very moved by the event because he felt a strong affinity for the secular cosmopolitan, Baruch de Spinoza, who was born in Amsterdam in 1632. Spinoza and Said were humanists who distanced themselves from the radical religious politics of their times. They were independent secular thinkers with a strong ethical belief in tolerance and human rights. And both of them belonged to exile communities.

Said's work has been taken up by new generations of postcolonial scholars who have, like Said, migrated to the US. Many of them, like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Gauri Viswanathan, are from the Indian subcontinent and teach in English departments at Ivy League uni-

versities such as Columbia and Harvard. That kind of impact is hardly to be expected in the Netherlands, partly because the Dutch colonialists in Indonesia promoted Malay, not Dutch, and partly because Dutch is not a world language. In the Netherlands the impact of Said's work has been primarily on debates about Dutch colonialism and quite limited in its reach. Nevertheless, an increase in the importance of Said's work, in the Dutch academy and elsewhere, seems likely to grow with the rising demand for a renewed imperialism which can be seen in the new historical writing of Ferguson in Britain and Emmer in the Netherlands, for example, and which can be witnessed even more directly in current US foreign politics. As long as imperialism does not disappear, Said's work is sure to retain its topical importance.

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PHOTO: DICK DE JAGER, 2003

Said receiving an honorary doctorate at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague.

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