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‘Beginnings: Edward W. Said and Questions of Nationalism’

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‘Identity, always identity, over and above knowing about others’

Edward W. Said, 1995, 291

‘That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance’

Patricia Williams, 1993, 10

Theoretically, Edward W. Said has advocated the crossing of boundaries whilst at the same time abjuring the existence of those very boundaries. In practice, this has been played out in his opposition to nationalism existing alongside his support for the Palestinian people – a relationship that many have regarded as paradoxical if not contradictory. Said’s regard for nationalist movements, as having progressive and liberatory potential, stands alongside his recognition of the bleaker, regressive, aspects of nationalism. The tension between the two modes arises, for him, as a consequence of the processes of differentiation (associated with the emergence and existence of nations) sitting uneasily with narratives of emancipation which, in their strongest form, he argues, are ‘narratives of integration not separation’ (1993: xxx). In service of his commitment to truth and justice, Said recognised the delineation of boundaries and barriers as giving rise ‘to polarisations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagogy more than they enable knowledge’ (1993: 35). In particular, he was opposed to the idea that ‘only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience’ (1993: 35). Identity, for him, be that national, cultural, or other, was best understood as a starting point for a more interesting journey. It is not all that human life is about.

Edward W. Said's championing of Palestine arose, not out of a narrow sectarianism, but out of a deeply felt sense of injustice that Palestinians were denied rights (among much else) even by those who affirmed that all people had rights. In presenting the case for the Palestinians, Said stressed the importance of a settlement 'based on justice, self-respect, and human rights for all, not just for members of certain ethnic groups, religions, nationalities' (1995: 49, emphasis added). Justice can not be contained within boundaries but must transcend boundaries; for it is a narrative of integration not separation. Said was wary of political practices which used 'difference' to police boundaries as much as he was wary of knowledge practices which did the same. Instead, he advocated striving towards a more creative sense of 'difference': one that, in distinguishing 'difference' from 'domination', would produce a new dynamic in the Middle East by acknowledging 'the historical, cultural, and material distinctions between Jews and Palestinian Arabs, while refusing to privilege the experience or the contemporary situation of either' (1995: 106). To take an extended quote from Said, we see that he believes that the phenomenon of Palestinian nationalism

has made possible a critique whose premise is the need for forging connections and, more important, the existential need to find modes of knowledge, coexistence, and justice that are not based on coercive separation and unequal privilege. Let us then say that we can reinterpret ideologies of difference only because we do so from an awareness of the supervening actuality of 'mixing' or crossing-over, of stepping beyond boundaries, which are more creative human activities than staying inside rigidly policed borders. And that awareness is the achieved product of a political process responding to the travail and expense of separation imposed upon – and to some extent creating – a national community, the Palestinian Arabs. Perhaps more important, we develop in the process a heightened critical consciousness not only of what difference can do, but of where its politics can lead (1995: 89-90).

The challenge of writing in the West about what was happening to the Palestinians in the Middle East, Said suggests, was to affirm that the Palestinians did not only exist in opposition to Zionism but - and this he believed passionately - that the idea of Palestine represented an alternative, an alternative that was embodied in 'a non-exclusivist, secular, democratic, tolerant, and generally progressive ideology, [which was] not about colonising and dispossessing people but about liberating them' (1995: xix). In succumbing to Zionism, the state of Israel could not perform this role but a future state should not be a mirror of what Israel had become. A future state should, Said argued, secure the rights of its citizens independently of their religious or ethnic

affiliations. ‘If you don’t see the justice of the injustice,’ Said argued, ‘then you are on one side or the other’ (1995: 126): that is, as opposed to being on the side of justice. Identification, he believed, has to be with a cause, with a political movement, ‘with matters involving justice, principle, truth, conviction’ (1995: 317) and not with the parochial concerns of identity itself. Said’s interests in securing a political solution to the problems highlighted here developed and changed over time. His primary concern with the notion of the nation-state was that it should not be regarded as a national-state. To argue against a national-state, however, is to identify aspects of nation-states which are seen to be problematic. It is also to recognise the existence of processes which go beyond the nation-state - for example, those associated with human rights - and which may not be resolvable within its boundaries. Rights, and the identities with which they are associated – both in the struggle to gain them and in living them – require political institutions for their expression, but those institutions should not be thought of as identical with them.

The projected demise of the nation-state has been a central aspect of many different kinds of debates about the nature of contemporary society. Yet, amidst varying discussions about ‘glocalisation’, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism, and debates about the validity of the transfer of national economic and public welfare decisions to transnational organisations such as the IMF and WTO, there is still a generally held view that the nation-state remains a significant unit of sovereignty and, importantly, that human rights are mediated through it. Human rights are not only mediated through the state, the principle of self-determination is generally understood as being a fundamental human right expressed through the achievement of a state.

The relationship between ‘nation’, ‘state’, and the ‘right to self-determination’, however, is not straightforward. The acceptance of the principle of national self-determination (as exercised in the era subsequent to the First World War) was rapidly superseded by that of state sovereignty and/or territorial integrity such that political authority has since been prioritised over political community. The ‘state’ has become naturalised as the main political subdivision of the globe through its fusion with the concept of the ‘nation’ and, due to this, gained legitimacy and history - in the sense that once defined as such, evolution towards nationhood (and statehood) has been seen as the intrinsic movement of History.¹ As Connor (1978), amongst many others,

has argued, whilst the state, as a territorially bounded entity, can be readily defined and conceptualised, the same cannot be said for the nation. The boundaries of the nation have been variously defined in relation to ‘a people’, ‘a culture’, ‘an essence’, ‘linguistic communities’, ‘ethnic groups’ among other classifications and the nation itself has been seen as ‘invented’, ‘imagined’, ‘primordial’, and ‘modern’.

The intellectual history of the ‘nation’ can be seen to begin with both Herder’s expression of it as a living organism based on the unconscious ‘spirit’ of a people and Rousseau’s identification of ‘nation’ and ‘people’ (which was soon to become ‘a people’). Although there are some theorists (and many activists) who would place the emergence of the origins of nations in a more distant past (see, for example, Smith 1983, 1986), the majority of scholars agree that the association of the state - as that unit of administration that organises the daily public life of its citizens - with a clearly defined cultural or ethnic grouping is a relatively recent phenomenon (see, for example, Hobsbawm 1994). It was not until the establishment of nation-states in the nineteenth century, for example, that the idea that political boundaries ought to be congruent with cultural or ethnic ones came to be more widely articulated. And this political form, itself, did not find global expression until the mid- to late-twentieth century, with the successes of various independence movements, the subsequent waves of decolonisation, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc accompanied by the convulsions in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. More recently still, there are, and have been, various ‘peoples’ calling for their right to self-determination through the establishment of a separate state: from the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, to the Palestinians in historic Palestine (now Israel), to the Kurds, the Basques, the Sikhs, and many others. What unites these various claims and counter-claims is that they all seek to legitimise their political actions through an appeal to ‘origins’ - be they cultural, ethnic, or religious.

It is not my purpose here to chart the emergence or establishment of nations, nor to debate their ‘authenticity’ (Smith 1986) or ‘inventedness’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Rather, whilst acknowledging the presence, and perhaps even intensification, of ethnic and cultural nationalisms in the past decades I will address the search for origins that appears to be constitutive of most forms of nationalism and the associated demands for a separate state that emerge from this. I do so in the context of a

commonly held understanding that the establishment of identity in the present – both politically and epistemologically – rests on a search for origins in the past (Bartelson 1995). Whilst the search for origins is generally regarded to be a matter of establishing an (unbroken) link from the past to the present I would suggest that it is better understood as a contemporary reconstruction of the past serving current realities and/or projected aspirations. In other words, the search for origins that is supposed to confer legitimacy on current political activities itself needs to be recognised as part of the politics of the present.² As Bove (2000), among others, has argued, the struggle over history is a political struggle and the future is both lost and won and differently shaped through the battles for the stories of the past. It is the emphasis on ‘origins’, then, and the politics of difference to which it leads, that I take to be centrally problematic to the issues being discussed here and which I seek to analyse further.

The category of ‘origins’ displaces any attempt to understand the contemporary moment in terms other than those of a particular history; where the history is then taken as a homogenous totality and endowed with an ideal and unique significance separate from all other histories (Chartier 1994). This focus on ‘origins’, on ‘where we have come from’, is necessarily past-directed and denies the complexity of the present (as well as the interconnections of the past) in favour of a belief in a past that was ‘pure’. It not only denies the complexity of the present, however, but often seeks to re-create the presumed cultural integrity of the past through policies of organised discrimination, (forced) migration, and, in more extreme cases, ethnic genocide. In examining the case of Eastern Europe, for example, Nenad Dimitrijevic (2002) argues that following the collapse of the Soviet bloc the various regimes turned to the past - that is, to symbolic and mythic understandings of their presumed ethnic and cultural origins - both to claim power and to consolidate it. This was done, he suggests, through the adoption of an exclusionary approach aimed at establishing ethnically homogenous states based on idea(l)s of pre-existing traditions of cultural integrity and longevity.

Whilst many theorists have begun to envision the world as cosmopolitan, ‘transnational’, multicultural and so forth, the pull towards establishing homogenous political units, ideally composed of singular identities, remains potent. It remains

potent in the face of, or perhaps precisely because, as Said (1995) argues, all situations, populations, states, and groupings are mixed. The ideas of discontinuity and radical difference that have sustained the fiction of cultures as discrete phenomena occupying discrete spaces are, however, gradually ceding ground to more complex understandings of cultures as ‘always already’ interconnected (see Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Questions of difference and identity, then, are beginning to be rethought through such understandings of connection and relation, through, as Said suggests, ‘seeing things in their context, seeing them as they develop together’ (1995: 304). As Said has argued on a number of occasions – especially in terms of the question of Palestine – “we need to connect things with each other, and see them, not as they are hidden ... but as they are ignored or denied” (1980: 46). It must be noted here that this is not to suggest an argument ‘against difference’ or one ‘for sameness’ but, rather, one that is critical of the politicisation of difference for the purpose of separating, or segregating, populations. Recognising the complexity of the world in which we live is, I suggest, the first step to thinking politics beyond culture.

In contesting the historical adequacy of interpretations which regard the past as ‘pure’, I am also making a political argument in favour of complexity. The argument for developing current political endeavours from an understanding of complexity comes about not only as a consequence of the belief in the greater historical adequacy of interpretations based on ‘interconnections’ over ideas of cultural integrity but also from a normative position in favour of complexity (and heterogeneity) over homogeneity. As Said argues, the triumph of a particular national or cultural identity is almost always ‘implicated directly or indirectly in the denial, or the suppression of equal identity for other groups, states, or cultures’ (1995: 356). He suggests that in Lebanon and Israel state nationalisms have fragmented and fractured into forms of apartheid – which exist as group feelings if not state practices – and expresses a frustration with the fact that, often, more effort is spent by theorists and activists at bolstering a particular identity ‘rather than in thinking critically, perhaps even audaciously about the national program itself’ (1995: 291). The change to be made in the first instance, he argues, is ‘[t]o argue and persuade rather than to boast, preach, and destroy’ (1995: 294). The point here is not that there is nothing in culture or identity worth protecting but rather that the enjoyment of identity and culture does not require the establishment of ethnically homogenous states and, in fact, may be better

served in adequately constituted plural ones. As Said has argued on many occasions, there is no need to deny the persistence of traditions, languages, and ways of life and, at the same time, there is no reason 'except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about' (1993: 407). If, in following Said, we distinguish between 'origins', which are taken as foundational, and 'beginnings', which are understood to be amenable to reconstruction, then theoretical space opens up for the development of different sorts of interpretations (1997).

Said has argued that a 'beginning' is the first step in the intentional production of meaning, where intention is defined as an intellectual appetite to do something in a specific way. The consciousness of beginning, he continues, projects the task in a particular way, that is, it provides 'the created inclusiveness within which the work develops' (1997: 12). This is neither to suggest inclusivity as totality, nor beginning as origin. Said distinguishes the idea of 'created inclusiveness' by suggesting that the limits of the field of investigation already identify relationships and possibilities beyond those limits. This occurs, he suggests, through the use of examples (or empirical work) 'whose nonconforming, overflowing energy begins to carry them out of the field' (1997: 15). As Gadamer has argued (1979), it is by recognising the limits of our horizons that the possibility opens up for us to move beyond them. In other words, that is, in Gadamer's words: 'to have a horizon means not to be limited to what is nearest, but to be able to see beyond it' (1979: 269). Further, in making a distinction between origins and beginnings, Said points to the restructuring and animation of knowledge, not as something already achieved, but as a continual self-examination of methodology and practice (1995, 1997).

Whereas an origin is seen to dominate what derives from it, then, the notion of beginning is constituted through an acknowledgement of the complex of relations within which it emerges. In an analogous way, I suggest that the politicisation of identity needs to move from the ground of 'origins' to an understanding of beginnings, where beginnings are understood not as foundations, but as reconstructions of the past in different ways of going forward. We need to think beyond past-based narratives of origin and identity and begin to think instead of political communities as future-oriented projects that, as Homi Bhabha argues, are

both visions and constructions; that is, projects which take us beyond ourselves ‘in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present’ (1994: 3). In other words, instead of looking to the distant (allegedly pure) past, or to the definition of a core identity, to stabilise political regimes we could look, instead, to what might currently be shared and work from there.

Dimitrijevic suggests that ‘no common past is exclusively conflictual’ (2002: 250) and, that in bringing the past to bear on the present, we should also not forget that the very same people who are now in conflict had been living together previously. In reference to the Middle East, Said makes a similar observation when he writes that the ‘Israelis and Palestinians are two communities that will neither go away nor leave each other alone’ (1995: 49). He further suggests that it is only by acknowledging their shared history that processes of confrontation and hostility can be converted to those of exchange, dialogue, and reconciliation. The sooner we recognise the complexity that provides the context for our identities as the condition of our common humanity, the sooner we can begin to de-link projects of identity from those of political organisation.

This special collection in memory of Edward W. Said, then, takes as its beginning – its intentional production of meaning – his engagement with the question of nationalism, whilst recognising that our own engagement with his work, as with all engagements, is only a beginning. Thus, we have here, Ilan Pappé’s engagement with the politics of history and Post-Zionist scholarship, Joan Cocks’ exploration of the psychology of Jewish nationalism, and Jan Selby’s exploration of the connections between Said’s thought and that of Chomsky and Foucault. From the disciplines of political science and international relations – and in keeping with Said’s belief that the words we write and the texts we produce need also to speak to the worlds in which we live (1983) – these articles engage substantively with both the words and worlds of Edward W. Said.

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¹ See, for example, the special issue on 'History and National Destiny' Nations and Nationalism (2004) Vol. 10 (1/2). Also, as Said argues, not having a state of their own has contributed to the Palestinians sense that 'they have been excluded, denied the right to have a history of their own' (1995: 126).

² See, for example, the work of Arjun Appadurai (1981), Ashis Nandy (1995), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) among others.