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Edward Said and the Culture of Honour and Shame: *Orientalism* and Our Misperceptions of the Arab–Israeli Conflict

RICHARD LANDES

In his renowned book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said has few and dismissive words to say about the issue of honour and shame in Arabic culture. He aims his clearest barbs at Harold Glidden.

The article itself purports to uncover ‘the inner workings of Arab behavior’, which from *our* point of view is ‘aberrant’ but for Arabs ‘is normal’. After this auspicious start, we are told that Arabs stress conformity; that Arabs inhabit a shame culture whose ‘prestige system’ involves the ability to attract followers and clients...; that Arabs can function only in conflict situations; that prestige is based solely on the ability to dominate others; that a shame culture—and therefore Islam itself—makes a virtue of revenge...; that if, from a Western point of view ‘the only rational thing for the Arabs to do is make peace... for the Arabs the situation is not governed by this kind of logic, for objectivity is not a native value in the Arab system.’¹

This, for those who have not savoured it recently, is vintage Said. Sneering summaries of another man’s thoughts, presented to an audience of *bien-pensants* who know how much nonsense this all is. Anyone with the temerity to suggest that either Glidden’s observations, while perhaps expressed too categorically, may have some grains of truth or even that Glidden’s work may express these observations with considerably more subtlety, sympathy, and empirical base than Said’s dismissive asides (which have been cut) might suggest, can only belong to the bigoted, the racist, the imperialistic Western voice whose discourse inscribes and controls subaltern culture with its authorial voice.² Who would dare try and stand up to the hue and cry of the critical audience, whose progressive sensibilities had been offended by the mere suggestion that ‘they’ are not

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like 'us', and worse still, that they are less evolved, less morally developed than we are.

But what if Arabs do grow up in an honour–shame culture in which face is regained through the shedding of another's blood. What if this logic of belligerence *does* characterize Arab culture, perhaps not for all time, but certainly, and with some distinction, right now?³ What if the intractable nature of the Arab–Israeli conflict derives not from a calculus of rights and wrongs that can be negotiated between Israelis and Palestinians of good will—land for peace—but rather from a calculus of honour and shame that must be resolved in victory over the humiliating enemy, and a mind-set of suspicion that views everything as zero-sum manoeuvres (I win, you lose), and interprets all concessions as acts of weakness not generosity?⁴ What if these might not be 'essential' traits of Arab culture, but nevertheless dominant traits?

There is a widespread belief that Said's book criticizes Western Orientalists for their inability to understand their subjects, for their projection of their own problems onto this strange culture, which they therefore cannot understand; that Westerners are incapable of understanding so foreign a culture. Actually, the thrust of the argument is quite different. Said's underlying point is that all cultures are essentially the same, and if anyone presents the Arabs (his major concern) as significantly different (even in a positive—e.g., Romantic—light), then that is a form of racism. Hence his particular disdain for discussions of honour and shame culture applied to the Arab world.

Such an analysis appeals specifically to a liberal/progressive approach that assumes what Said would have us accept as an unnamed axiom—that people are basically the same everywhere; that it is unacceptable to generalize about the 'otherness' of anyone else. *Any* generalizations about the Orient are unacceptable. Indeed, a close reading of Said finds that, despite the impression he gives with his own generalizations, Western specialists of Arab culture have a remarkably wide range of views, positive and negative, about the 'Orient'. As Said himself puts it at the end of *Orientalism*, in a paean of praise to human freedom and scholarly self-criticism in which the moral dimension of knowledge takes pride of place:

At all costs, the goal of Orientalizing the Orient [what post-colonialists more generally call 'othering' someone] again and again is to be avoided, with consequences that cannot help but refine knowledge and reduce the scholar's conceit. Without 'the Orient' there would be scholars, critics, intellectuals, human beings, for whom the racial, ethnic, and national distinctions [note the lack of mention of religion] were less important than the common enterprise in promoting human community.⁵

These are noble sentiments, the very drivers of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. But is 'promoting this enterprise' the scholar's task?

Said does warn against excess: 'Yet an openly polemical and right-minded "progressive" scholarship can very easily degenerate into dogmatic slumber, a prospect that is not edifying either.'⁶ And that, under Said's approving guardianship, is precisely what happened as a result of this remarkable book to the field of Middle Eastern Studies over the past twenty-five years.⁷ The more bizarre and strangely Arabs have behaved by Western 'rational standards', the more dramatically self-destructive and self-impoverishing their political and social behaviour, the more astounding the levels of violence and hatred their culture has generated in word and deed, then the more determined our post-Orientalist scholars become to 'read' this dramatically different culture as an expression of the same forces that shape ours. The key elements in their behaviour, according to this kind of analysis, are not triumphalist, theocratic religion, frustrated imperialist ambitions, need for honour, horror at humiliation, clan loyalties, self-help justice, thirst for revenge ... but the familiar Western categories of social and economic forces, nationalism, rationality.

Such efforts entail what psychologists call 'cognitive egocentrism', or the projection of one's own mentality onto others.⁸ Bernard Lewis, in a simile that Said mocks, aptly compares the effort of 'liberal opinion' to explain Islamic and Arabic culture in the acceptable 'language of left-wing and right-wing, progressive and conservative, and the rest of the Western [political] terminology', as 'about as accurate and enlightening as an account of a cricket match by a baseball correspondent'.⁹ And if this were only a cricket match, the damage might not be that great. But if this is a clash of cultures—as certainly some on the 'other' side seem to think with a ferocity we like to think we have, in our search for a common humanity, left behind¹⁰—then misreading badly the motives of that 'other' may be very costly.

One of the many resulting consequences of the victory of postcolonial studies is the stunting of the field of honour–shame studies. Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of honour and shame, especially in Arab culture, that topic has largely been confined to gender studies.¹¹ Its use to understand political culture, despite the obvious connections, remains largely untouched by Middle East specialists, political scientists and International Relations scholars to this day. Quite the contrary, nothing but scorn accompanies the very mention of the current neo-conservatives' attraction to so 'essentialist' a book as Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*. 'Its best use is as a doorstop.'¹²

Such scorn is not accompanied by alternative approaches to the phenomenon studied by the 'honour–shame' paradigm. The people who dismiss discussions of honour and shame as essentializing do not like to examine closely behaviour such as killing one's daughter/sister for getting raped, or blowing oneself up among women and children as an act of revenge. Liberal cognitive egocentrism would sooner ignore the topic

(honour killings), or explain it in 'our terms'—suicide terrorism is a weapon of the despair at hopelessness and poverty, a predictable act of resistance to occupation.¹³ Such an approach has clear policy implications: give them hope and they will stop these terrible deeds; give them economic well-being and they will accept peace.

HONOUR–SHAME AS SOURCE OF THE CONFLICT'S PERDURANCE

One of the unusual characteristics of the Arab–Israeli conflict is the refusal of the Arab states to recognize the state of Israel. No other dispute in the world has so profound a refusal to acknowledge the very existence of the other side,¹⁴ and those sensitive to the problem of accepting the 'other' would normally consider this one of the most profound reasons for the persistence of the conflict. One could even argue that no 'cycle of violence' can be broken until the Arabs recognize the right of Israel to exist as a prerequisite for peace negotiations, not as a result of them. And yet such arguments seem hopelessly partisan and 'Zionist', as if to ask for such a unilateral concession from the Arab world represents an unfair demand. And, from the point of view of honour and shame, to cede Israel's right to live without concessions (including some that may imperil Israel's ability to survive), would strike most Arabs as an unbearable loss of face.

Although most observers instinctively sense how great such a demand would be, few appreciate the role of honour and shame in that remarkably long-lived and near unanimous position taken by the other Arab nations. (Even countries which *do* recognize Israel—Egypt, Jordan—keep relations cold, distant.) The best explanation for this unprecedented diplomatic behaviour comes from an understanding of the dynamics of tribal warrior honour–shame cultures.

In such cultures several rules apply to this conflict. First, honour is zero-sum: I have it because you do not; I am strong because I show you to be weak; I am on top because you are on bottom.¹⁵ Religiously we see this in the propensity of both medieval Islam and Christianity to subordinate non-believers, to make clear who are the honoured and who the disgraced.¹⁶ In Islam this has legal status as the laws of the 'dhimmi'. The term means 'protected', a euphemism for 'subjected'—protected from the choice of death or conversion, subjected to a set of rules designed to keep the infidel community in an inferior position.¹⁷ Some of the rules—like the prohibition on riding horses, the need to go to the left (impure) side when passing a Muslim, the inability to have houses of worship taller than mosques, a ban on weapons possession, summary execution for insulting Islam—explicitly focus on giving Muslim honour the strength of law.

And the ferocity or mildness with which such rules were applied reflect the relative self-confidence or self-doubt that Muslims or Christians feel at the moment in question.¹⁸ Presumably, all Muslim cultures at all times did

not forbid Jews from walking in the rain lest the filth from them wash into the streets and touch the sole of a Muslim's shoe.¹⁹ Islamic cultures, Arabic cultures, have historically shown themselves capable of generosity, but only when they dominate (or are in the distinct minority and cannot assert themselves).²⁰ *Noblesse oblige*. Condescension is fine. But relations of equality with non-believers do not sit well, and many Muslim commentators consider having Muslims in the inferior position intolerable. As the current wave of Jihadis emphasize repeatedly: Muslims should not live where they are the minority (who do not hold power).²¹

Similarly, warrior cultures of honour—shame admit certain people—the great clans, the nobles, the warriors—as honourable people. They are the ones with whom one shares the rules of aggression. They are the ones whose opinion matters, before whom one wants to preserve face, and, if it comes to it, these are the worthy opponents.

But for every noble adversary there are inferiors, people without honour, without face, people disgraced. These people, who do not (or cannot) defend their honour, who must yield before the powerful presence of men of 'respect', will be spared violence by showing subservience, and in their very subservience, bear witness to their lack of honour, to their loss of face. Such people should be beneath aggression. In some cases it is dishonourable even to enter into conflict with them.²²

Zionism represented a double challenge to this worldview. On the one hand, it was seen as a religious anomaly verging on blasphemy. During its first 1,300 years, Islam had only known the Jews as a subject people, subalterns in modern parlance, living in exile, forced to live by the laws and at the whim of foreign rulers and kings, Christian or Muslim. Although at times (for example, during the modernizing periods in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iraq and Egypt) they rose to considerable prominence, at others (for example, late Ottoman Palestine), they were the lowest of the dhimmis. Unlike the Christians, for example, who increasingly benefited from the concerns of European patrons during the long twilight of the Turkish Caliphate, the Jews were the subaltern people with no protectors.

To have Jews who took aggressive initiatives, who not only self-regulated within the framework of small and submissive communities, but had larger ambitions for self-rule and political autonomy, posed both a cultural and religious problem. From the religious point of view, Allah's honour depends on the dominion of Islam. Dar al Islam cannot have independent political entities in its midst, *a fortiori* in its earliest and most sacred heartland. It is bad enough to lose ground at the edges of Dar al Islam—Spain, the Balkans, India. It is quite another to lose the centre. And even worse, it is especially humiliating to lose territory at the heart of Islam, not to a great and worthy foe (the Christian West, hundreds of millions of Hindus), but to a tiny people without honour.

This last point has two dimensions. In the simple world of power-politics, to lose to inferiors is dangerous. As the Athenians explained to the Melians, it is one thing to be defeated by 'people who are used to ruling over others' (i.e., worthy opponents), but to be defeated by those who 'ought to be subject' is a catastrophe. Not only do we expect them to be especially cruel in their newfound power (get back at us for all we have done to them), but the humiliation of losing to an unworthy foe is well-nigh unbearable, and will invite further rebellion.²³ From this perspective, one can understand how the appearance of an independent Israel, capable of defending itself from Arab efforts to strangle it in the cradle, presented a literally unbearable affront to Arab honour, something so unbearable that Arab leaders—and the Arab 'street'—preferred denial over acknowledgment.²⁴

The denial of the Arabs' humiliating defeats at the hands of the Israelis, first in 1948 and then, still more spectacularly in 1967, manifests itself in a wide range of Arab behaviour and belief, from the refusal to recognize the 'Zionist entity' to the conspiracy theories that explain how the Jews were actually supported by the Americans.²⁵ These verbal manoeuvres salve the wound to honour, perhaps, but they do little to help them get on with life.²⁶ To return to the opening point of this discussion—not recognizing Israel is a fundamental, one might even say dogmatic form of denial, denial that the Arabs were defeated by a tiny subject people, denial of a catastrophic loss of face—al Naqba. As long as the Arab world does not recognize Israel, the 'logic' seems to run, honour can still be salvaged. The war continues, the defeat goes unregistered, and the hope of restoring face by wiping out the humiliation can still dominate public discussion.

The pathologies of that denial are everywhere evident, from the systematic victimization of the Palestinian people (the 'refugee problem'),²⁷ to the formal adoption of a role of victim by the Arabs in order to gain Western sympathies,²⁸ to the killing of women who were raped rather than the men who raped them.²⁹ Akhbar Ahmed has coined the term *hyper-asabiyya* to explain the distortions of honour that plague the Muslim world in the age of globalization, conditions that Muslims experience as a state of siege in which their very existence is at stake.³⁰ Whether or not their existence is at stake, their honour, traditionally understood, has been shattered, especially by the Jews, and their response—*hyper-asabiyya*—has taken on pathological forms.

For example, no honourable warrior would ever advertise (and exaggerate) his injury so as to get the sympathy (pity) and support (charity) of bystanders, all the more so if the sources of pity were enemies (Christians, modern liberals). And yet the treatment of the Palestinian refugees, the constant appeal to world opinion for intervention in the conflict, the systematic adoption of a posture of victimization, all characterize the Arab reaction to the humiliation of the Naqba. All this

serves to illustrate the enormous psychological catastrophe that Israel's very existence constitutes for the Arab world, in particular for its public and political culture.³¹

Similarly, no sane honour culture would kill their daughters for being raped; they would kill the rapists. And yet, especially among the Arabs near Israel (Jordan, Egypt), such actions occur with some regularity.³² As the logic of scapegoating runs: victimizing those who cannot fight back has become the resort of those who cannot fight back.

LIBERAL COGNITIVE EGOCENTRISM AND (MIS)UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT

Instead of considering these issues, Said and his anti-Orientalist disciples insist on seeing rational secular behaviour and attitudes at work. 'Do cultural, religious and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones?' asks Said in what is clearly intended as a rhetorical question meant to be answered with a resounding 'No!'³³ And yet the very opposition set up, lumping religious and cultural with racist as opposed to the secular issues of economics and politics, as if religion and culture had no influence on how various collectivities experience and interpret socio-economic and political issues, betrays the simplistic terms in which Said deals with religio-cultural issues.

To follow Said's lead, then, renders one a dogmatic victim to cognitive egocentrism: I must interpret 'their' mindset and behaviour as essentially the same as mine; I must give the same 'rational' gloss to everyone's behaviour. We are all humans. It is as if the economist's assumption about modern market behaviour—rational choice theory—had to work for everyone. If not, if a whole culture makes consistently self-destructive zero-sum choices that it consistently loses, if it makes an ideology of its irrationality, then acknowledging it becomes racism. Thus Abba Eban is a 'bourgeois colonialist', and the remark that 'The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity', an unacceptable expression of racist imperialism.³⁴

Actually, Eban's observation is a classic case of cognitive egocentrism: in presenting these positive-sum possibilities as 'opportunities', he obfuscates the motivations for their rejection: Arabs 'missed their opportunities' because, to their mind, such solutions were invitations to permanent humiliation precisely because they allowed the Israelis to 'win'. Any victory for Israel is a defeat for the Arab and Muslim nation. In their zero-sum world of honour–shame, they rejected the humiliation of defeat.

The ironic result of this determination to see the Arabs, in this case the Palestinians, through liberal cognitive egocentrism is that, given the staggering hatred and violence this conflict has produced, one must end up demonizing the Israelis. When one rules out a priori, as Said would have us

do, any role of a frustrated culture of vengeance, religious fanaticism, and humiliated honour in generating these hatreds, then one must find an explanation in our liberal world of experience. The obvious conclusion: the Israelis must have done terrible things to the Palestinians in order to provoke such violence. The 'understanding' that Western culture has tragically extended to suicide terrorists—and now when we are the target of that violence, many of us continue to extend to suicide terrorism—expresses precisely this cognitive irony. 'It is their desperation and hopelessness that drives them to it.' 'What choice do they have?'

Perhaps the best example of this attitude came in June 2002 (after the Jenin 'massacre') when Cherie Blair, wife of the prime minister of Great Britain remarked at a charity event: 'As long as young people feel they have got no hope but to blow themselves up you are never going to make progress.'³⁵ Embodied in this response we find all the assumptions and implications that fuel liberal cognitive egocentrism:

- that Palestinians, and therefore their leaders, want what we want, hope for what we hope for, namely independence and freedom (some Palestinians may, but they do not decide policy, nor dominate their media);
- that, given this natural desire, the only obstacle to their self-determination is the Israelis, who alone rob them of their hope;
- that when you cannot get what you want, it is natural to get pathologically violent (i.e., blow yourself up amidst women and children);
- that if their enemies, the Israelis, would only stop taking away their hope, they would be less angry and violent.

The sympathetic responses to Blair's comments take these projections to be simple matters of fact that only dishonest people refuse to utter. 'She was merely commenting on a fact', wrote one commentator at the BBC site. Wrote another: 'It does not require a genius to imagine the sheer desperation and hopelessness it takes for a person to blow themselves up.'³⁶ But as others noted at the same site, desperation is not the only emotion that can lead to suicide bombing and, unless it combines with hatred, desperation does not naturally lead to blowing up babies and women.

To Martians observing the events and reactions to events in the aftermath of the collapse of the Oslo 'peace process', these Western responses to the outbreak of Palestinian violence in reaction to an Israeli offer unprecedented in the history of recorded warfare for its generosity of a victor to a loser, could only make them shake their heads in disbelief. What irrational bug might drive civically minded people to so misread a conflict that they would demonize the negotiators and lionize the violent, all in the name of peace? Why would they not immediately focus on the

Palestinian and Arab positions, on all those ‘irrational’ zero-sum, violent passions that the West had renounced precisely in order to create a culture dedicated to peace? Why would they blame the people who were trying hard and sacrificing to resolve it and then make excuses—worse, lionize—the people with the most regressive attitudes.

What the Martian would need to know in order to understand is that Edward Said, by successfully condemning any discussions of honour–shame dynamics in discussing Middle East conflict as ‘Orientalist racism’, has made any such observations taboo. You cannot address these issues without being accused of demonizing the Palestinians, of cultural racism. Upon hearing this, the Martian might then conclude that by banning such discussions, by making any mention of honour–shame shameful, Said and his admirers, far from reducing the role of honour–shame behaviour have given free reign to its most destructive aspects in precisely that arena—academia—in which participants have self-consciously put honour aside in favour of honesty and freedom.³⁷ If you speak out against the ‘subalterns’, you are shunned, ostracized; if you speak out against the colonialist aggressors, you are honoured for ‘speaking truth to power’.

SAID, ORIENTAL AND ORIENTALIST

In a piece Said wrote in early 2003, shortly before his death, expressing his disgust with the pathetically weak Arab response to American plans to invade Iraq, he lashed out at the ‘assimilated’ Arabs in the West who criticize their own culture:

The only ‘good’ Arabs are those who appear in the media decrying modern Arab culture and society without reservation. I recall the lifeless cadences of their sentences for, with nothing positive to say about themselves or their people and language, they simply regurgitate the tired American formulas already flooding the airwaves and pages of print. We lack democracy they say, we haven’t challenged Islam enough, we need to do more about driving away the specter of Arab nationalism and the credo of Arab unity. That is all discredited ideological rubbish. Only what we, and our American instructors say about the Arabs and Islam—vague re-cycled Orientalist clichés of the kind repeated by a tireless mediocrity like Bernard Lewis—is true. The rest isn’t realistic enough... (If I had the time, there would be an essay to be written about the prose style of people like Ajami, Gerges, Makiya, Talhami, Fandy *et al.*, academics whose very language reeks of subservience, inauthenticity and a hopelessly stilted mimicry that has been thrust upon them.)³⁸

So anyone who understands the demands of civil society is a coconut—brown on the outside, white on the inside, a sell-out, an Uncle Tom. These voices are inauthentic, stilted; they are shameless dhimmis. Even the

Palestinian leadership, in its most insincere noises about negotiation (even as it gives free hand to 'unofficial' violence) falls into this category. 'Arafat', Said remarks derisively, 'seems inexplicably to want to have another go at [peace-making]. His faithful lieutenants make declarations and write opinion pieces for the press, suggesting their willingness to accept anything, more or less.' Said here places himself alongside the most ferocious honour-shame players in the conflict: those who cannot even swallow their pride long enough to get major advantages by *pretending* to negotiate.³⁹

Who does Said admire? The courageous Palestinian people.

Remarkably, though, the great mass of this heroic people seems willing to go on, without peace and without respite, bleeding, going hungry, dying day by day. They have too much dignity and confidence in the justice of their cause to submit shamefully to Israel as their leaders have done. What could be more discouraging for the average Gazan who goes on resisting Israeli occupation than to see his or her leaders kneel as supplicants before the Americans?⁴⁰

What we have here is shameless appeal to the very 'Arab Street' he elsewhere in the same essay dismisses as an invention of Orientalists. If anyone wants to see why Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity, Said offers us an excellent lead. Any negotiation, any compromise, any recognition that the 'justice' of the Palestinian cause might need to become aware of the Jewish/Zionist 'other', is mere pandering to Orientalist Westerners determined to humiliate the brave and noble Palestinian people. Indeed, if anything qualifies as 'Orientalism' it is Said's interpretation of a collective, 'courageous and noble' Palestinian people, defying its corrupt and cowardly rulers to stand up for its honour.

More likely, the Palestinian people here constitute a construct whereby Said can regain his own honour. *They* do not want their leaders to compromise with the Israelis; God help us, to *negotiate* with them. *They* are the last bastion of *his* Oriental notion of Arab honour.

Were Said to use a fraction of the critical subtlety he uses in dissecting the façades of Western culture to look at the forces behind the Intifada that he here romanticizes, he would have little difficulty discerning the abuse of Palestinian commoners by elites who regularly sacrifice their interests to the demands of honour politics. Instead we have the man who denounced Orientalism as racism, playing Oriental politics with the lives of poor and victimized people whom he willingly sacrifices to his own resentful need to defy the hated, humiliating West.

And so, Said works against the decent life that presumably all Palestinians want. He does not denounce the demonizing lies and abuse with which Palestinian leaders lead these wretched souls to embrace suicide terror and child sacrifice, to cheer an insane war in which they could only lose, only die, only bleed and starve daily. On the contrary, Said cheers on

the worst of it in search of Arab honour, and heaps contempt on any move to moderation. Here we can place Said alongside George Galloway, lately famous for his efforts to enrage Arabs into fighting the West by telling them that the US, Britain and Israel have raped their beautiful daughters Baghdad and Jerusalem.⁴¹ By publicly shaming the Arabs, these progressive heroes hope to whip them into the violent response necessary to regain their honour. After all, this is an ancient trope: shaming a warrior to violence.⁴² Bin Laden did the same with the story of Muhammad al Durah.⁴³ With friends like these, who needs enemies?

When all is said and done, Said's position comes down to something like 'anything but the West'. He is too proud to admit what he knows is true: that the Arabs may have a great deal to learn from the West (including allowing dissidents as critical of them as he is of the West to speak); too proud to engage in real *self*-criticism. So instead, his criticism of the Arabs in 2003 resembles that of Palestinians critical of the Arab League and Haj Amin al Husseini in 1948: their failure is not that they should have accepted the offer made by the UN and built a strong and proud Palestinian nation alongside Israel, but that they failed to wipe Israel out.

Said speaks from his tenured position at Columbia, where he can say anything he wants and not only *not* get 'disappeared', but rather get lionized by the culture he assaults. And yet his point is not that the Arabs are 'too tribal, too insular, too unselfcritical, too stuck on models of honour that demand dominion and do not work in the modern world'. All that is too subservient to the West, even if Said himself thrives on that Western ethos. No, his 'self'-criticism complains that Arabs are not proud enough to resist this Western onslaught, are not courageous enough to fight back, are not suicidal enough to turn their backs on everything that might lead to the reform he himself (in a parenthetical clause) admits they need.

THE DANGERS OF GETTING THIS CONFLICT WRONG: SUICIDAL PARADIGMS

No one can stop any given individual from applying the postcolonial paradigm to the Middle East thinking of the Palestinians as the legitimate victim and resister of Israeli imperialist aggression. If such an individual reads Said's references to the 'justice of the Palestinian cause' then there is little that anyone can say. Pointing out, for instance, that this 'justice' considers it a courageous call to conscience to teach one's own children such hate that they want to blow themselves up in the midst of enemy children have little effect. Similarly, appeals to conscience, arguments that accepting so black and white a picture is unfair to the Jews, the Israelis, the Zionists, will not make much of a dent. All those arguments will just register as propaganda designed to distract from the 'true' struggle for Palestinian dignity. And any effort to suggest that pressing the Israelis to

make concessions—to withdraw to the Green Line, for example—might not produce the reasonable response that one might anticipate from people ready to leave tribal grudges behind and get on with the job of living, but rather invite more aggression from an irredentist enemy who sees concession as weakness—any such caution will be dismissed as racism.

So we have a nice, aesthetically pleasing Moebius strip of mutual misunderstanding. The liberals, *a fortiori* the progressives, systematically project their own values—justice, freedom, dignity—onto the Palestinians, accepting their case as just and true in liberal terms, allowing the Palestinians to hide their overriding concerns with honour and vengeance, and blaming Israel for any problems that arise on the road to Palestinian ‘justice’. The Palestinians get to avoid any of the painful self-criticism that alone offers a civilized solution to their suffering.

But *if* this perspective, no matter how satisfying it may be from a cognitive, moral, or emotional point of view, significantly misjudges the situation, *if* both Arab culture and Islamic theology make Israel an anathema *no matter how well or badly Israel behaves*, and this hostility represents something aimed not only at Israel but *at the basic demands of tolerance that make civil society possible*, then the consequences of such a misjudgement may be immense.

If that is the case, the consequences of misreading it would affect not only Jews and Zionists but all members of a civic culture of tolerance and mutual respect that we now hope will prevail around the world. To read the ‘Al Aqsa Intifada’ as a secular nationalist resistance to an imperialist racist culture and ignore the perceptions of those activists for whom it is a key stage in the outbreak of global Jihad aimed not merely *against* global Western cultural imperialism but *for* a global *Islamic* religious imperialism, to view suicide terrorism as another ‘weapon of the weak’ in resistance to oppression rather than an act of frustrated genocide, to imagine that if only Israel were more generous, Palestinians would respond in kind, can lead to fatal lapses in judgement that encourage the very forces one imagines one opposes.

When it leads the Western Left to demonstrations in favour of Palestinian suicide terrorists as it did in the early years of the Intifada 2000–2002, when it leads policy planners to lay out ‘road maps’ that depend on rational attitudes prevailing on both sides, when it leads the media to under-report the virulent hatreds of Muslims and over-report every flaw in Israeli (and Western) society, then such attitudes may indeed represent self-destructive misjudgements so great, especially under current conditions, as to constitute a suicidal paradigm.⁴⁴ Follow it, good intentions and all, on the way to hell on earth.

Or not. One can always choose life, even if that means giving up the pleasures of the postcolonial moral grand narrative. It seems like so small a price. It would so well suit *real* postmodernists, who even as they listen to

the multitude of narratives, nonetheless understand the difference between an honest and a dishonest narrative. It would help rescue the Arab people from the talons of their oppressive elites. Why such reluctance?

NOTES

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London, 1978, p. 48; Harold Glidden, 'The Arab World', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 128, No. 8 (1972), pp. 984–988.
2. To take just one example, Glidden says: 'It is difficult to describe the depth of the Arabs' emotional need for revenge, but suffice it to say that Islam itself found it necessary to sanction revenge' (p. 985). This Said paraphrases as: 'a shame culture—and therefore Islam itself—makes a virtue of revenge'. To sanction is not to make a virtue of; it can mean to concede to (much as, say Christianity could not possibly expect all its adherents to 'turn the other cheek'). The whole issue of Islam's relationship to the values of honour–shame culture, and the strong survival of honour–shame traits in Islamic culture deserves volumes of analysis. Perhaps the most interesting area of study in this sense concerns the 'honour-killings' of daughters/sisters, something numerous scholars argue Islam opposes (see, for example, Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honour: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World*, Boston, 2003, chapter 2), but now characterizes the resurgence of Islamism in Europe.
3. On honour–shame culture, see J.G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, London, 1966, especially chapters by Abou-Zeid and Bourdieu on Arab and Bedouin culture; see Jacob Black-Michaud, *Feuding Societies*, Oxford, 1975, on the role of honour in feuds and blood revenge, especially pp. 178–207.
4. On the 'image of the limited good', see George M. Foster, 'Peasant Society and the Image of the Limited Good', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 67 (1965), pp. 293–315; on the relationship of honour–shame and feuding cultures to a notion of 'moral scarcity' which assumes zero-sum outcomes for even matters such as honour, respect, manliness, see Black-Michaud, *Feuding Societies*, pp. 160–178; and Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge: The Enactment and Management of Conflict in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies*, Philadelphia, 1984. On the relationship of this to what the author calls 'non-realistic' conflict—i.e., conflict that cannot be resolved through the redistribution of wealth—see Black-Michaud, *Feuding Societies*, pp. 184–190.
5. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 328.
6. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 327.
7. Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, Washington, DC, 2001.
8. David Elkind, 'Egocentrism in Adolescence', *Child Development*, Vol. 38 (1967), pp. 1025–1034.
9. Bernard Lewis, 'The Return of Islam', *Commentary* (January 1976), p. 40; for Said's treatment see *Orientalism*, p. 318.
10. Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, London, 2005.
11. For gender see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in Bedouin Society*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986; for a general survey see Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor*, Chicago, 1994, chapter 1.
12. Brian Whitaker, 'Its Best Use is as a Doorstop', *Guardian Unlimited*, 24 May 2004, available at www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,7792,1223525,00.html.
13. See, for example, Pape's analysis of suicide terrorism (which he does not distinguish from suicide bombing—i.e., of military targets) as a response to occupation, Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York, 2005; and Amnesty International's treatment of honour-killings in the Palestinian society as a response to the Israeli occupation 'Israel and the Occupied Territories: Conflict, Occupation and Patriarchy, Women Carry the Burden', available at web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde150162005.
14. There are cases of international diplomacy carried out by not recognizing a political entity (for example, the refusal to recognize the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) of East Germany, or the Chinese refusal to recognize Taiwan), but most of these represent fights over

- divisions within a people or ethnicity, not the right of an ethnicity to have sovereign power after it has won that right both legally and in trial by combat.
15. Boehm (*Blood Revenge*) and Black-Michaud (*Feuding Societies*) both emphasize this element of feuding societies. See also Foster's work on the 'Peasant Society and Image of the Limited Good'; and the allied notion of 'total scarcity' and 'moral scarcity' (Boehm, *Blood Revenge*). This notion, in which any gain to my neighbour is a loss to me, is closely connected to envy: see Peter Walcott, *Envy and the Greeks: A Study of Human Behaviour*, Warminster, UK, 1978, and Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*, Indianapolis, IN, 1987.
 16. On Augustine's interpretation of the Christian imperative to punish and humiliate Jews as proof of their deicide and the truth of Christian theological claims, see Paula Fredriksen, 'Excaecati Occulta Iustitia Dei: Augustine on Jews and Judaism', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 3 (1995), pp. 299–324.
 17. On the dhimmis in Islam, see the works of Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*, Madison, NJ, 2002, especially pp. 89–103; see also the more apologetic analysis of John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, New York, 1992; and Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe*, Cambridge, 2003; for Bat Ye'or's critique of Esposito, see *Islam and Dhimmitude*, pp. 313–316.
 18. For an interesting argument about the influence of self-doubt about theological dogma on the intensification of anti-Semitism in late medieval Europe, see Gavin Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Anti-Semitism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990; for a parallel argument about the rise of anti-Semitism in the modern period in Arab culture, see Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry Into Conflict and Prejudice*, New York, 1986.
 19. Bat Ye'or's example is Shiite, *Islam and Dhimmitude*, p. 103.
 20. For a discussion of the 'golden age' of Spain as a tolerant period, see Thomas Glick, Vivian B. Mann and Jerrilynn D. Dodds (eds.), *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain*, New York, 1992; for a discussion of this interpretation of Islam in modern polemical contexts, see Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*.
 21. There is a variant within these circles that argues that living as a minority in Dar al Harb is permissible as long as one struggles to transform the land into Dar al Islam. See discussion Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah, 'Muslims Living in Non-Muslim Lands', available at www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/shariah/muslims_in_non_muslim_land.htm.
 22. See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle', in Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame*, pp. 191–242.
 23. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 5.17; see also Eli Sagan, *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Athens and Modern America*, Princeton, NJ, 1991, pp. 295–297.
 24. For the most recent expression of this, see the remarks of the presumably sophisticated and relatively Westernized head of Al Jazeera. Asked why Israel is primarily responsible for the lack of democracy in the Arab world, he responds: 'It's because we always lose to Israel. It gnaws at the people in the Middle East that such a small country as Israel, with only about 7 million inhabitants, can defeat the Arab nation with its 350 million. That hurts our collective ego. The Palestinian problem is in the genes of every Arab. The West's problem is that it does not understand this.' Pierre Heumann, 'An Interview with Al-Jazeera Editor-in-Chief Ahmed Sheikh', in *Die Weltwoche*, 23 November 2006, trans. John Rosenthal, in *World Politics Watch*, 7 December 2006, available at www.worldpoliticswatch.com/article.aspx?id=395.
 25. Among these we find the belief that the Americans parachuted tanks with their crews into Sinai to defeat the Egyptian army in 1967. See Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy*, New York, 1998.
 26. For an excellent analysis of how 'conspiracy theory' paralyzes the Arab world, see the work of Tarek Heggy, *Culture, Civilization, and Humanity*, Portland, OR, 2003.
 27. On the refugee problem as face-saving see Aharon Cohen, *Israel and the Arab World*, London, 1970, pp. 481–483.
 28. See Shahid Alam, 'A Colonizing Project Built on Lies', *Counterpunch*, 18 April 2002, available at www.counterpunch.org/alam0418.html.
 29. Lewis, 'The Return of Islam', p. 40.
 30. Akhbar Ahmed, *Islam under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honour World*, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 14–16, 80–83, 162–164.

31. The initial use of the term al Naqba targeted the Arab elites who had brought this catastrophe down on the heads of Palestinian Arabs who had no say in the outbreak of the war and who found themselves displaced precisely as a result of Arab miscalculations about their ability to wipe Israel off the map. Today, the term has come to mean the cruel damage inflicted by Israel on the Arabs.
32. On honour-killings, see Joseph Ginat, *Blood Revenge: Family Honor, Mediation, and Outcasting*, Sussex, 1997. For more recent treatment in the media, 'Culture of Death? Palestinian Girl's Murder Highlights Growing Number of "Honour Killings"', available at www.sullivan-county.com/w/cul_death.htm; James Emery, 'Reputation is Everything: Honour Killing among the Palestinians', available at www.worldandi.com/newhome/public/2003/may/clpub.asp.
33. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 325.
34. Massignon, an Orientalist despite his deeply approving support for Palestinian nationalism, used this epithet—'bourgeois colonialist'—against Eban, 'Le probleme des refugés Arabes de Palestine', *Opera Minora: Textes recueillis, classés et présentés avec une bibliographie par Y. Moubarac*, Vol. 3, Beirut, 1963, p. 526; cited by Said approvingly, *Orientalism*, p. 270.
35. What makes these remarks particularly striking is that Blair would presumably never blow herself up amidst a group of women and children (the specifically heinous aspect of suicide terrorism), and yet manages to pretend that she would. The condescension involved in such ersatz sympathy for the downtrodden recalls the remarks made by Walcott at the end of his study of the Greeks and envy: condescension reinforces the sense of superiority so valuable to the envious, accompanied by assaults on anyone that threatens that sense, see Lawrence, *Messages to the World*.
36. 'It is true that if Palestinians FEEL that they have hope of change, they will be less likely to want to die for the cause. This is a *simple statement of fact*'. Peter D. London at BBC comment line, available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/2052507.stm (emphasis added).
37. Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, Chicago, 1994.
38. Edward W. Said, 'An Unacceptable Helplessness', *Al-Ahram*, Vol. 621, 16–22 January 2003, available at weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/621/op2.htm.
39. Said, 'Unacceptable Helplessness'. This is the core debate between the irredentists who will not even pretend to deal with Israelis—the shame!—and the pragmatists who will play the game of Trojan horse to get inside, pursuing the 'staged' strategy.
40. Said, 'Unacceptable Helplessness'.
41. 'Two of your beautiful daughters are in the hands of foreigners—Jerusalem and Baghdad. The foreigners are doing to your daughters as they will. The daughters are crying for help, and the Arab world is silent. And some of them are collaborating with the rape of these two beautiful Arab daughters.' George Galloway on Syrian television, 31 July 2005, transcript from Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), available at memritv.org/Transcript.asp?P1=788.
42. Suzanne P. Stetkyevich, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*, Ithaca, NY, 1993.
43. See the Recruiting Tape of Osama Bin Laden, available at www.ciaonet.org/cbr/cbr00/video/excerpts/excerpts_index.html, especially Segment 5, on Muhammad al Durah.
44. Bruce Bawer, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within*, New York, 2006; Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan*, New York, 2006.