PSC

⑤SAGE

The ethics of the intellectual: Rereading Edward Said

Raef Zreik ⑩
Tel Aviv University, Israel

Abstract

This article is a close reading of Edward Said's image of the intellectual and offers a critique and restatement of that image. Said characterizes the intellectual in contrast to two other images: the political ideologue and the professional expert. The latter seeks knowledge and sees things as they are but does not see context. The former overlooks particulars, subsuming these within an ultimate context. Said attempts to situate the intellectual in the middle ground between the two. This article suggests that the intellectual so understood could be vulnerable to the same critiques Said applies to the expert and the ideologue.

1. Introduction

Edward Said's writings on the role of the intellectual, and his own performance as an intellectual, have attracted much attention.[1] The idea of the intellectual is not simply one topic of many that Said dealt with throughout his life, rather, it is tied intimately with a great many other concepts and themes that he spent his life working on and developing, including criticism, exile, humanism, resistance, opposition, the secular and beginnings.[2]

The role of the intellectual in Said, as with the role of criticism, is in part to interrogate, question, investigate and to unsettle dominant modes of culture, hegemony, identity and power. Said writes that criticism 'is most itself . . . in its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds . . . and

Corresponding author:
Raef Zreik, Minerva Humanities Center, Tel Aviv University, The Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel.
Email: raefz@post.tau.ac.il

orthodox habits of mind'.[3] Ironic and oppositional, it is 'opposed to every form of tyranny'[4] and is equally suspicious of any discourse of identity. Any reader of Said's *Freud and the Non-Europeans* will immediately be struck by his critique of identitarian discourse. Even what appears as a tribal closed identity like the ancient Jewish identity that goes back to Moses finds its origins in non-Jewish identity.[5] Purity is a myth and plurality has been there all along since day one. The 'I' always has a sense of 'we', for the 'I' is always part of a multitude and is split against itself. To Said, placing a single iconic label on a presumed 'we' is an act of silencing that subdues plurality to unity and polyphony to the univocal. As we will see, the intellectual is in part the one positioned to regain this plurality from beneath the surface of unity and oneness.

To that end, Said's take on the role of culture and the role of intellectual bear some resemblance to each other. He shows that there are – at least – two ways to understand cultures that correspond to two ways to understand the role of the intellectual. Said reads Mathew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*[6] as a book promoting a certain sense of culture that aims to unite the symbols, rituals, sensibilities and sensitivities of a people. Here culture is the site of consensus and stability; it is the ready-made way to intuit the world and make sense of it that the members of each nation share. According to this vision, the intellectual is assigned the role of creating, enhancing and articulating this consensus, by stabilizing all kinds of symbols, structures of meaning, myths, cultural imaginary, attitudes and so forth. In this regard, the role of the intellectual is seen as one of creating unity, consensus and common identity.[7] But one also might think of another meaning of culture and accordingly another role of the intellectual – the genuine intellectual for Said. One might think of culture as opposed to nature and in this sense as something that always has an element of transcendence in it, of a new beginning, of overcoming, of disputing what is taken for granted and natural.[8] This image of culture requires an appropriate image of the intellectual that does not aim to create consensus but instead to question it and interrogate it, to resist its dominant themes, and the hegemony of its symbols – and thereby to unearth the plurality beneath the unity at the surface. The role of the intellectual is to grow dissensus, to shatter the consensus and to give expression to that voice which is lost when, and after, a single voice has prevailed.

It is unsurprising that Said appropriates Julian Benda's image of the intellectual without fully endorsing it. Still, this image of the intellectual as posing questions, critiquing dogma, ready to be marginalized and even ostracized, seems somehow appealing to both Said and Benda. The images of the troublemaker, resisting and rebellious (Socrates, Jesus Christ, Emile Zola) are paradigmatic figures that Benda mentions and endorses while Said seems to be inspired by them despite his soft critique of the overtly romantic view Benda has of these figures. Still the image is of one who is embarrassing and contradictory, 'disputing norms' and one of 'skepticism and contest', 'disturbing the monumental calm . . . of the tradition',[9] whose 'whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant'.[10]

This article will not address all of these themes in Said's image of the intellectual but will instead reconsider the assumptions underpinning his discussion of the intellectual that allow him/her to speak truth to power and in support of just causes (an attempt that Said himself will not endorse, nor like, given the intellectual's refusal to spend time and effort on foundations, or philosophical underpinnings). Part – but not all – of the critique

that I want to offer of Said's vision of the intellectual is certainly derived from his own position regarding the role of criticism and its association with irony, opposition, interrogation, as well as its role in questioning dogma and method and other totalizing concepts. I will suggest reading his take on the intellectual in the light of these sensibilities and to ask whether Said's image of the intellectual, relying on solid concepts of truth and justice, escapes these interrogations, ironies and suspicions.

The article unfolds this way: The second section aims to trace the emergence of the intellectual in his writing as something distinguished from two other figures: the politician/ideologue (generally a national leader) on the one hand and the professional expert on the other – and will elaborate on this double negation. The third section will aim to interrogate the question of justice and its salient role in Said's thinking about the intellectual and aims to unpack the way he conceptualizes deep controversies regarding the meaning of justice and the role of the intellectual in these debates. In the fourth section, I will question the meaning of the responsibility of the intellectual as Said articulates it – as someone acting on principle – and I will do so by opposing two models of ethics following Weber: 'Ethics of Convictions' and 'Ethics of Responsibility'. I will argue that it is never clear when one should stick to principles and when one should bracket them temporarily for the sake of other kinds of principles and other public or private goods and will suggest that the idea of working according to principles is far more plastic than Said wants to admit. Based on that, in the fifth section, I present a restatement of the role of the intellectual compared to the professional/expert and the politician/ideologue. In doing so, I want, first, to locate each of these three figures on a continuum and, second, to show that the intellectual could be subject to the same critiques that he/she launches against the politician and the expert. This is not aimed at eliminating the image of the intellectual but rather a destabilizing of what might be thought of as the intellectual's principled stable ground.

I will conclude by arguing that the image of the intellectual in Said assumes a certain stability and clarity that is akin to the status assigned to the discourse of rights in political and legal theory, as something clear, defined and principled in a way that both allows and places limits on a critique of power politics. In part, I thus want to borrow the critique of rights discourse as a mode of critique of the role of the intellectual. And yet, at the same time, I will take stock of Said's performance as an intellectual to elucidate the backdrop against and through which his vision of the intellectual and the pivotal role it occupies in his thoughts and writings developed, and assumed its double and concurrent mission of affirmation and negation, stability and movement, and defending just causes while offering ongoing critique.

2. The intellectual, the politician and the expert

The image of the intellectual emerges slowly in Said's *Representations of the Intellectual* as a figure differentiated from two other classic figures: the *politician* or the *ideologue* and the *professional expert*. The intellectual is positioned to provide a critique of each of these figures and at the same time negates both. In the following, I will first elaborate on this double distinction to show its power, before arguing in the last section

that it in fact contains the seeds of the negation, or the destabilization, of the intellectual per se.

In the concluding part, I want to return to Said's performance itself and illuminate the tension between his affirmative role as a defender of Palestinian rights and just causes, as opposed to his negative, interrogative and unsettling role as a thinker, while noting that he practiced both roles under the label of public intellectual.

2.1. The intellectual and the politician

Let me first introduce the intellectual as opposed to the politician or the ideologue or the national leader or, indeed, any totalizing hegemonic ideology. This archetype is presented in the second chapter of his *Representations of the Intellectual*, 'Holding Nations and Traditions at Bay', where Said develops the image of the intellectual against such figures and projects. To the forefront here is the concept of *witnessing*. The role of the intellectual is to 'represent, speak out for and testify to the sufferings' of a people and to 'universalize' this anguish by 'associat[ing] that experience with the sufferings of others'. This is the role of witnessing, of registering all of those things which, absent the intellectual's scrutiny, might go unnoticed or undocumented.[11] This is a point that I want to expand on.

It is clear that Walter Benjamin, and in particular his 'Theses on the Concept of History', is in the background here – Said indeed refers to him.[12] History, Benjamin suggests, might appear to have a smooth surface, but this belies the harsh reality of war and suffering that lies beneath. The victors write history; seen from their point of view, history is a history of progress, while the loss and torment of those defeated in war – history's victims – simply vanish. The victims have been silenced, and it is the role of redemptive history to retrieve their lost voices. And, at least in part, it is the role of the intellectual to save these victims from oblivion by reinstating and retelling their story.

Benjamin here advances a critique of a Hegelian dialectic that views history as progressive. In this dialectical movement, history appears as a sequential advancement through necessary stages, no element of which – given this necessity – can be said to be wasted. At the end of this process, everything is transfigured, ushering in a higher stage of history. Thus, the suffering of the victims, the wars, the losses, the dead, the orphans, the widows and so on all constitute mandatory steps in a larger plan through which history reaches its teleological aims.[13]

The danger of such Hegelian – and Marxist – attitudes is clear. A dialectic of this kind is able to lend meaning to what would otherwise seem meaningless and superfluous to us: death and destruction. But when viewed – as Hegel would suggest – from the point view of history, within a broad and general context, such devastation might in fact make sense, that is, might appear to be something that one should learn to accept, to reconcile oneself to – this being the price of progress.

For Said, by contrast, one must insist on seeing the historical event *in itself and of itself* and reject its being inserted in a larger context at the price of overlooking the suffering of the victims.

I take this Hegelian view of history to be the paradigm of the ideologue and the politician (national leader) that Said wants to protest against by invoking the opposing

image of the intellectual who observes the duty of being a 'witness'. To be a witness means to testify to the way things are or were, without attempting to situate the event in a larger framework that would diminish its tragic nature. In this sense, the role of the intellectual as Said views it is to bracket the context – for a moment – and focus on the event, to bear witness the loss and to put aside the overall framework that might be used to justify atrocity. Said, then, insists on a deceleration of our moral scrutiny that would entail a refusal simply to side with the victors and would enable the voices of history's victims to be heard.[14]

In this regard, Said is closer to Foucault and Camus than to Sartre. It is worth recalling Foucault's response, when asked why he did not offer any program for the future, that he was too busy listening to the voices of the present.[15] By this he meant that utopian visions of the future can make us sacrifice the present and ignore its misery. The Camus–Sartre debate erupted in the 1950s following the revelation of the true extent of Stalin's crimes in the Soviet Union. The debate laid bare two different sensibilities as to the relation of the present to the future and the duty of the intellectual to expose and bear witness to those crimes, regardless of the greater picture. While condemning Stalin's atrocities, Sartre – who had just moved from existentialism to Marxism – still wanted to stress the context in which the West was exploiting the news of the crimes for propaganda purposes. Camus was not ready to do this and insisted on the role of the 'witness' who should record the crimes. For those who are subject to violence and torture, the march of history and the claims of progress are meaningless: hence Camus's willingness to denounce Stalin and his crimes in public. For Sartre, however, Camus represents someone who refused to be a protagonist in history: 'I do not doubt that for those contemplating [history] from Hell, it has this absurd and fearful face, because they have nothing left in common with those who are making it'.[16] By this he meant that Camus looked at matters purely from the standpoint of the victims and was thus blind to the broader picture of the Cold War struggle and the need to defend the socialist project and the great progress which it could achieve.[17]

My guess is that in all of this Said will insist, together with Camus and Foucault, on seeing the crimes: on witnessing and reporting them and putting the overall picture on hold for the moment. In this regard, the three thinkers share a Kantian sensibility that allows us to make separate kinds of judgments while bracketing other spheres, one which provides us with a robust critique of Hegel *avant la lettre*.[18]

In taking this position, Said identifies the politician/ideologue who claims to see the overall picture, the ultimate context or the march of history, as the enemy of the intellectual: it is the role of the intellectual to warn us against this overarching view of life and history.

2.2. The professional expert

The other image that Said juxtaposes to that of the intellectual is that of the expert/professional. In the fourth chapter of *Representations of the Intellectual*, 'Professionals and Armatures', he completes the juxtaposition, and thus the image of the intellectual emerges as a double negation.

Said's critique of the professional/expert covers a range of aspects. One of these, for example, addresses the careerism of 'thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for living',[19] something that clearly hinders any independence necessary for free intellectual enterprise. Here, however, I want to focus on the kind of critique that Said offers of professional experts that bears resemblance to the critique of the politician/ideologue. I will argue that Said deploys the same tools in his criticism of the expert but brings the opposite charge to bear against the expert: *if the politician aims at seeing too much context, then the expert/professional does not see any context at all*. This is the kind of critique that I want to carry further and elaborate, but later in this article I want to show the inherent tension in Said's thought as it tries to put the two negations together: the negation of the politician and the negation of the expert.

One major problem that Said identifies with the professional expert is the attempt to be 'uncontroversial and unpolitical' and 'objective'.[20] This in marked contrast to the stance of the intellectual, which is characterized by 'passionate engagement, risk, exposure, commitment to principles'.[21] Said is worried by specialization and the restrictions of the profession, and what he calls 'an increased technical formalism',[22] which interferes with our ability to 'mak[e] connections across lines and barriers',[23] and the lack 'of desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture'.[24]

The problem with the expert is similar to that of analytical philosophy: whenever he/she approaches a problem, he/she suggests dividing it into ever smaller problems and trying to solve each on its own.[25] This might be called a strategy of divide and rule (control), by which I mean control by reason itself: if we are not able to answer large and complicated questions about life, happiness, liberation and morality then we can unpack those questions into smaller units. This is a process in which we bracket the 'whole' and focus on parts, and then on parts within the parts we postpone the question concerning totalities, for we are aware that the discussion of totalities can lead us astray.

Two major problems with the professional expert are born out of this strategy of divide and rule.

The first problem is moral or ethical in its nature. The expert tends over time to believe that the discipline that he/she works within is a closed coherent one; his/her role is limited mainly to working with the discipline's internal logic and taking it to its limits. In fact, this might be considered an achievement of modern science in itself. When discussing the law, the expert tends to bracket question of morality or religion and focus on the concept of right. Experts who deal with economic issues address the problem of maximizing the efficient use of limited resources, while at least temporarily bracketing issues of aesthetics or ethics. The same applies to works of art: it is meaningless to ask about the efficiency of a work of art for the simple reason that art is not responsive to efficiency in the first place.[26] Experts must learn to discipline themselves, which is why a field of study is called discipline at the first place. Arising from this separation, a certain autonomy is granted to each field/discipline/sphere to organize its own body of knowledge according to what appears to be its internal intrinsic logical structure, without 'external intervention'.[27] The story of modernity is the story of this separation of domains.[28]

Despite the relative success of this division, it came at a price: an unquestioning obedience to the rules and the internal logic imposed by a given discipline that makes researchers forget that they have a responsibility beyond their narrowly epistemic field of vision. This belief in the self-contained rules of the field can seduce some into thinking that the research agenda is decided purely on its own internal terms. Researchers so seduced deny in bad faith that they have a residue of freedom and responsibility as to what they should research and publish and what they should intervene in. This may reflect an attempt to flee from human freedom towards false scientific necessity.[29]

Yet when we as researchers carry out research, or develop a project, or run an experiment, we in fact do two things at the same time. On the first and immediate level, we participate in gathering knowledge or try to answer specific and concrete questions in physics, medicine, archaeology or whatever field we are engaged in. But while performing these very concrete and particular acts of research, we also do something else: we participate in a larger scientific project – one that is itself embodied in certain social, historical political projects. This does not mean that everything is politics, but it does mean that whatever we do within our discipline has an effect that radiates beyond the discipline itself. This compartmentalization of questions, this consigning of them to the hands of bureaucrats and experts, may in fact amount to a form self-absolution, an abdication of responsibility.[30] Sometimes we have to be aware not only of what we do but of what we do 'does', that is, how our activity as academic researchers fits into the larger picture of power relations in society. The archaeologist who does scientific work on the immediate level might on another level be vindicating or repudiating a certain national narrative. In this sense, while doing research or performing any intellectual activity within our field of expertise, we do not stop being other things in life: parents, neighbours and most of all citizens: overstressing our roles as expert thus can come at the expense of our roles as citizens, of the relinquishment of our moral, social and political responsibility.

Seen from this perspective, there is always a residual question that is located beyond the field itself, the answer to which is inaccessible purely from within that field or discipline.[31] The question as to how to split an atom is answered by physics but the question of whether to pursue such a project and the consequences doing so, say, in the form of atomic bomb, is not scientific in nature. I believe that when Said warns us against experts, he means to warn us against this form of lack of responsibility.

But beyond the question of moral responsibility, I think Said is aiming at another problem with experts that accept the walls around their own disciplines.

The problem here is not that we have experts but that experts refuse to think beyond their discipline. And the answer here is not to stop having disciplines but rather to think across disciplines or to treat a disciplinary boundary as a merely provisional or heuristic device that the mind uses to master a body of knowledge. This device provides a means to overcome complexity, but one that paradoxically involves risk of the mind being subdued by the discipline. As such, the work of the mind and of reason itself cannot and perhaps should not stop there, at the level of division, of setting things apart; rather it requires some synthetic work of putting things together, creating connections, seeing processes and of viewing things in their relatedness or wholeness. The way we encounter life is different from the way we experience the academic universe with its various

divisions, disciplines and departments. Life pours itself on us as a whole, as a totality. It is the role of the intellectual to place the parts into a certain relationship that allows us to secure a grasp of life and of events in life. Reason has different practices and different activities and develops highly specific strategies. The major distinction regarding the role of reason is one between theoretical reason (what we can know) and practical reason (what we ought to do), but we are allowed to assume that reason is one. It is one and the same reason that operates when we put things apart to understand them and when we put them back together to conceive of them.[32] Understanding allows us to have knowledge, but the work of reason, through thinking, endows things with meaning, thus not only understanding but conceiving them. Far from urging us to abandon the role of the expert, Said instead calls on us not to be satisfied with this role. After we 'master' a certain field, we must connect with other fields as well to gain access to a wider picture. Seen in these terms, Said's appeal here is for the restoration of context.

3. The intellectual: Justice truth and controversy

In the same way that it would be impossible to understand the intellectual without the concept of exile and criticism, so is the case with truth and justice. The intellectual is committed to justice and truth and to a deep belief in these values; as he puts it in *Representations*, the role of the intellectual is tied to issues of freedom and justice: 'There is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented'.[33] The role of the intellectual is based on 'unbudgeable conviction in a concept of justice and fairness'.[34] It is thus unsurprising that we find Said repeatedly demanding that the intellectual 'speak truth to power'.[35]

Now it is clear that this interest in and enthusiasm for justice is clear, understood and even mandated, especially in a world that is witnessing gross disparities of wealth, wars, aggression and death. The value of justice has always gripped the mind of philosophers and Said stands in a long tradition of philosophers who have cherished its significance. For Kant, life on earth without justice is not worth living;[36] one should demand justice and let heaven fall.[37] In his writings on justice, Kant assumes that we are always able to know what justice requires from us.[38] We know this in the same way we know our right hand from our left hand.[39] And it seems that for him, the problem is not to know what justice requires from us, but rather whether we are ready to comply with its imperatives or whether we surrender to our self-love and betray the duties of justice/morality. Now this accessibility of the demands of justice corresponds with the Kantian duty to think for ourselves, to dare to know and to not to accept at face value whatever priests, society, parents or culture want us to think.[40] According to Kant, each one of us is an intellectual, in the sense of self-authorship, autonomy of thinking and the rejection of dogma. And the Kantian scheme for the person thinking for himself/herself assumes a certain universe in which thinking and reasoning are capable of orienting us morally.

Clearly, Said is neither a Kantian nor a transcendental idealist, but an echo of Kant's enlightenment is nevertheless present here. For Kant, conscience 'is the consciousness of internal court in man',[41] and the 'inner judge of all free actions'; it is the 'subjective principle of being accountable to God for all one's deeds'.[42] Said's praise for the role of conscience in moral orientation is telling.[43] He assumes that conscience usually does not

err and that the only question is whether we abide by its verdict; yet the judgment of our conscience is ultimately just like any other moral judgment and in part structured by common social norms that prevail in society, ideology, world views and so on. Said's firm belief in the possibility of telling the truth and of adhering to values of justice suggests that would have to accept a certain ontology in respect of these issues that I suspect he is not prepared to adhere to. Said warns repeatedly in *Orientalism* – deploying Foucault – of the ways the production of knowledge is entangled with power relations and systems of domination, to the point that one may wonder whether there is anything beyond discourse and whether all attempts at representation are by definition misrepresentation.[44] Did he find, or assume, the existence of another stable truth when he addressed the role of the intellectual?

Said speaks of the intellectual as someone who defends the causes of justice and human rights. He is aware that the belief in a solid natural meaning of justice and morality is problematic.[45] Accordingly, he articulates his position in a very thin and limited manner, writing that 'whereas we are right to bewail the disappearance of a consensus on what constitutes objectivity, we are not by the same token completely adrift in self-indulgent subjectivity',[46] and he still sees some refuge in 'the international regime of human rights rules of war, treaties on prisoners, workers and refugees'.[47]

I think that Said here assumes a certain consensus that does not really exist in human rights discourse and underestimates the internal tensions and contradictions in human rights discourse itself. To take just one example, in the dispute over the property right to pharmaceutical patents versus the right of sick people in the Third World to access their medication in an affordable way, both sides deploy the language of rights to support their position. It is enough to mention that the first organized campaigns for rights in US history were those launched by property owners against progressive and distributive policies of federal governments.[48] Examples of the conflictual nature of justice and the open-ended nature of right discourse are numerous in this regard.[49]

I think that the clue to understanding the way Said thinks about the nature of moral and political disagreements may be drawn from his discussion on humanism and clearly applies to his discussion of justice as well. Said is fully aware that many of the world's atrocities were committed in the name of humanism and that concepts like humanism and universalism were appropriated to legitimize and give moral justification to colonialist projects. Many times, he finds himself in the peculiar situation of using the same human rights terminology that is employed by the US State Department. The same holds for the concept of humanism when he discusses the abuses of the concept in his book on humanism. 'It is worth insisting', Said argues,

> in this as well in all other cases, that attacking the abuses of something is not the same thing as dismissing or entirely destroying the thing. So, in my opinion, it has been the abuse of humanism that discredited some of humanism's practitioners without discrediting humanism itself.[50]

Said offers his own reading of the meaning of humanism: 'to understand humanism at all . . . is to understand it as democratic, open to all classes and backgrounds and as a process of unending disclosure, discovery criticism, and liberation'.[51]

Said here is attempting to rescue the concept of humanism by means of what is in fact a familiar distinction between concept and conception.[52] We can speak of the *concept* of justice, though we have different *conceptions* of what justice requires in each and every case, but the fact of disagreement does not obliterate the fact that there is a *concept* of justice that hovers above its many different conceptions. The issue with Said is that he speaks of 'abuses' of the concept, and the concept 'itself', as if we were capable of thinking the concept beyond its various uses/abuses, and before the different conceptions that have been applied to it. Said's rhetoric in these passages indicates that he assumes he is making the right uses of the concept while others might be abusing it or that he has understood it correctly while others may have misunderstood it. His rhetoric also intimates that he assumes a univocal voice beneath the disagreements. If this is merely a rhetorical move by Said, an attempt to appropriate the concept, then this is clearly understandable, but it does not read as such. Rather it reads as a report about an existing state of affairs or the thing 'itself'. It strikes me that this is the same mode of argumentation that lies behind Said's description of the role of the intellectual, which assumes the existence of some solid ground regarding truth and justice. And I think it is this belief that makes him suspect that many intellectuals 'betray' their conscience and the call for justice.

4. Ethics of absolute ends and ethics of responsibility

But let's assume that Said's intellectual has reached a clear answer as to the requirements of justice. How shall he/she react or behave at this stage? Here again, I think that Said's answers raise some problems. The critique that I am about to offer now will somewhat resemble the critique that Said himself directed against the expert.

Said, despite his distance from Kant, seems to be ready to accept the imperative to tell the truth and to pursue justice at all costs. As we know, Said argues that between loyalty to a national project and to criticism, criticism has a categorical priority: 'never solidarity before criticism'.[53] There is something appealing in Kant, and in Said, in this non-consequentialist attitude to issues of justice and this refusal of trade-offs between justice and other goals: This *might* indeed be appealing as long as the alternative or the choice is between a moral imperative for justice as opposed to some personal material gain or fame. Yet things are not as clear cut as this and most of our dilemmas are not of this nature. In many situations, we simply do not know what the morally right thing to do is, given all the circumstances. Here the case does not involve choosing between moral principles and self-love but rather between two duties that bear moral weight for the agent. Anyone who enters political or public life faces more complicated situations: I am a journalist and I am a friend of a progressive promising leader, and I receive certain information about his past that might hurt his reputation – shall I publish it or not? Imagine, too, the variety of tactics that are used in politics, not for personal gain or fame, but to promote an emancipatory progressive agenda, tactics that might involve some lies, certain injustices or limited moral wrong, the employment of which thus involves a tragic dilemma. The paradigm of this tragic situation is the soldier fighting for his/her nation, or the guerrilla warrior participating in war of liberation, who along the way must commit all kinds of wrongs, not for his/her benefit at all, but for the group as a whole. Such a person is not the paradigm of self-love, seeking profit or fame, or

disobeying the demand of his/her conscience; rather he/she is someone acting according to impersonal moral commands.

How shall we behave in these cases? What does Said's intellectual suggest?

One strand in ethics and philosophy – Kant is its best representative – would ask us to stick to the right action in all cases: we are not entitled to do any moral wrong in the hope that in the long run, or at the end of the day, or in the final analysis (whatever these might mean) we will promote a greater good for society and humanity as a whole. We must do what justice requires of us, and let the results be whatever they will be. According to this logic, you should not perform some evil act in the hope of preventing a greater evil that others might commit in the future. You have to perform your duty hoping others will do the same. If they do not, then in fact a greater evil might indeed occur, but in that case you will not be the one to blame: we can blame others – God, bad luck and so on. You are still obliged to do what you have to do, that is, what the principles of justice require you to do that moment in time.[54]

Despite its appeal, this ethical position may be problematic. Weber was aware of this kind of ethics, which he considered to be too occupied with the saving of one's own soul rather than people, society or a movement. He referred to this as the ethics of absolute ends or ethics of conviction.[55] In ethics of conviction, agents tend to believe that they are under the duty to follow certain principles and are not responsible for the end result as long as they act upon these principles of justice or ethics. The problem with this is that we always have a responsibility to decide whether, and when, to follow moral principles and the demands of justice and to what extent we do so. These principles are not self-executing and we still bear the responsibility as to when to use them and apply them and when to bracket them temporarily.

Max Weber calls this latter kind of ethics the 'ethics of responsibility', in which one must 'give an account of the foreseeable results of one's action'.[56] An ethics of responsibility does not mean a consequentialist or utilitarian ethics, but an ethics that resists political agents' attempt to absolve themselves by reference to certain principles of justice. In fact, this is the kind of dilemma that anyone who spent a single day in politics would experience. Whenever one is in politics, one has a duty not only to save one's own soul by avoiding moral wrongs but also to promote the well-being of others. This extra burden complicates the simple picture, and ethical behaviour in these situations simply cannot be deduced from moral ethical principles.[57] An ethics of responsibility demands some responsibility from us, not only in relation to what we do but also in relation to the effects of what we do. The intellectual has no secure ground, and the earth beneath his/her principles is always shaky. Said himself knew this very well as an intellectual involved in the political life of the PLO. At times, he remained silent and at other times he had to speak out; there is no way for us to know when to compromise a principle temporarily and when to stand up for it.

5. The politician, the intellectual and the expert: Restatement

We can now return to our previous discussion of the three images of the politician, the intellectual and the expert.

As we saw, the role of the politician is more than simply to be negative – to avoid any immoral or unjust actions. Instead, politicians are expected – and this is their duty – to care for the well-being of others and create the enabling conditions that makes this possible. To do this, they must play with power and authority, and sometimes even get their hands dirty. What is the role of the intellectual compared to the politician in this regard? It seems that a major role might be one of keeping the politician in check – in the process of achieving the ends of politics which are collective by their nature; the intellectual should monitor the politician, for even in chasing noble aims one must operate within a certain boundary of decent and just means. It is unsurprising then to see the close proximity that Said assigns to human rights and the intellectual, for both act as 'side constraints'[58] on the pursuit of certain conceptions of the good. Rights constrain power politics the way the intellectual constrains the politician.

This entails a division of labour between the politician and the intellectual. The role of the politician tends to be positive and comprehensive, while the role of the intellectual is rather more limited and negative. It might be argued that intellectuals' limited responsibility could lead them to be reckless, if not opportunistic, given that their role consists only in supplying criticism and not in working to achieve collective goals: structure, order, organization and so on. Intellectuals, in their defence, might point out that while their responsibility may be limited, so too is their authority/power. They do not have an army, prisons, police, schools, tax authority and so on. Their responsibility extends as far as their individual authority and power extend.

At this stage, we have three social roles that we can compare and put into one scheme: The expert, the intellectual and the politician. I will argue that the expert in many ways stands in the same relation to the intellectual that the intellectual stands to the politician, and the critique that Said launched explicitly against the expert can be employed *mutatis mutandis* by the politician against the intellectual. On the other hand, the critique that Said directs against the politician can also be used by the expert against the intellectual.

The critique Said offers vis-à-vis the expert is that experts in many ways seclude themselves in their studies, pretending in bad faith that they are limiting their research, and with that their responsibility, to the field they researching, and that they bear no other responsibility to society writ large, refusing to see the interconnectedness between things. In doing so, they might be absolving themselves from responsibility in bad faith. But this is the exact accusation that the politician also makes of the intellectual: you limit your interest and with it your responsibility in bad faith. For whatever we do in political life has its consequences and you stop short of seeing the full context, or the full picture. This self-limiting position of negativity as a 'side constraint' of the spectator is also a form of retreat from responsibility.

The expert can borrow the argument that the intellectual might make against the politician. We – the experts – do indeed focus on the thing itself and we do bracket the context temporarily – and this allows us to see and notice things that others do not see, for we are not under any pressure from politics or subject to instrumental reason. We want to see things as they are. We are committed to our research and we have no social or political power – nor do we ask for any – and as such our responsibility is limited as well.

What allowed me to place the three figures together is the fact that the three occupy different locations, but on the same spectrum, vis-à-vis the 'event' and the context of the

'event'. While the expert sees only the immediate context, the intellectual sees a wider one, and the politician is supposed to see the 'full' context, if there is such a thing.

The art of the intellectual is to direct the double critique towards the politician and towards the expert, without ever falling into the false consciousness that intellectuals are not subject to the same argumentative tools that they develop through their mission; intellectuals operate within the same paradigm and the same accusation they raise against other roles can be brought against them as well. Intellectuals, like experts and like politicians, can be principled and honourable – as indeed Said was himself – but they can be opportunistic and can abuse power, and the fact that Said in his life was courageous, sincere and dedicated to causes of justice does not mean that he could not confuse his particular personal case with the conceptual universal one regarding the status of the intellectual.

6. Conclusion and discussion

This article has two aims. The first is to further explicate certain aspects of Said's theory of the intellectual; the second is to offer a friendly critique of Said's theory and to argue that some points were overstated, and some obstacles were underestimated.

One of these is his underestimation of our moral and political controversies. Said's intellectual seems to know too much about truth and about justice. In our world, however, there is not enough reason to buy into this image. Said could have easily escaped this problem by simply presenting the intellectual not as someone defending justice but as someone who stands *for what he thinks* justice requires. But he did not choose this path.

Second, Said seems to think that the cases in which intellectuals do not stand up for justice and truth are the result of a lack of courage or bad faith on their part, or of their preferring their own benefit to the more demanding role of confronting power and injustice. Here I think that Said underestimates the role played by ideology and other systems of belief – as well as other moral considerations based on loyalty – in determining the intellectual's choices. Those who end up silent are not necessarily traitors of a just cause (though they of course might be) but rather undecided as to what justice might require of them in general and what it requires them to do in particular.

The point that I dwelled upon, and probably the most important of them all, is the fact that the same critique that the intellectual can launch against the expert – that he/she is self-secluded and self-limiting, that he/she fails to see the overall picture and general context – could be launched against the intellectual him-/herself. The Saidian intellectual stands on grounds that are shakier than Said imagines or is prepared to confess. But was Said not aware of this? Was he not aware of the unstable, precarious philosophical grounds supporting his intellectual?

I think the clue to dealing with these kinds of questions reveals some of the most interesting aspects of Said's life and work. In Said's vision, the role of the intellectual is not only negative and interrogative; not dedicated to critique and questioning alone: rather it is at times positive and affirmative. Said took upon himself the mission of representing Palestine and the Palestinians, of communicating to the Western world in particular the justness of the Palestinian cause. As such, he certainly saw clearly that one

mission of the intellectual lies in the act of representation. Representing Palestine was a heroic mission for Palestine – what Aamir Mufti would call a non-place.[59] Palestine as a disappearing place must be inscribed by words into the language and consciousness of the world, saving it from memorial oblivion and apathy. Thus Said spoke of the intellectual as someone whose role it is to 'unearth the forgotten' and as someone who 'belongs on the same side with the weak and the unrepresented'.[60] The intellectual's task is to 'represen[t] the collective suffering of your own people...reinforcing its memory', 'to universalize the crisis,'[61] to 'advance freedom,'[62] to 'pronounce what it has been silenced or rendered unpronounceable'[63] and to 'alleviate human suffering'.[64] This was a mission that Said assigned himself, and for him the Question of Palestine reflected all these roles for the intellectual, given that 'Palestine provides a test-case for a true universalism'.[65] Said himself thus moved between the poles of affirmation and negation, solidarity and critique at the same time, and while he was a spokesman for his people, he never hesitated to launch fierce attacks against its leadership.[66]

This affirmative aspect of Said clearly explains his distance from the playfulness of Derridean deconstructionist readings 'that end (as they began) in un-decidability and uncertainty'.[67] Commenting on the works of philosophers like Richard Rorty and Hayden White, Said wrote that 'only minds so untroubled by and free of immediate experience of turbulence of war, ethnic cleansing, forced migration and unhappy dislocation can formulate such theories as theirs'.[68] Said, as someone troubled and occupied by questions of 'war, ethnic cleaning, forced migration' (and many other such questions), and as a member of the Palestinian people, could not allow himself to be on unsure ground when producing arguments as an intellectual promoting issues of justice. This stability, for Said, is not something that is, or which could ever be, shown or proven. It must be assumed by any intellectual who makes claims for justice and demands an end to suffering. Yet one of the aims of this article was to question this assumption. It might be the case that it is only at dusk, after the Owl of Minerva spreads its wings, that we can truly know if the intellectual was genuine, on the right side of history, and not in fact a mere narrow-minded expert shying away from politics, or a pseudo-intellectual, an apologist, seeking to justify domination and prevailing power relations in the name of engagement in politics. After all, resisting the withdrawal of the expert into a safe, secure, narrow room (absolving oneself from responsibility) on the one hand, and resisting the temptation to indulge in the power of politics on the other hand, while requiring moral courage, is mainly a matter of art and performance.

It may be the case, then, that Said's performance as an intellectual is more convincing than his writing on the topic.

Acknowledgements

Author's note

Raef Zreik is also affiliated with Ono Academic College.

ORCID iD

Raef Zreik ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3972-4837

Notes

1. Just to mention a few Bove (2000), Aram Vesser (2010), Curthoys and Ganguly (2007) and Pannian (2016).
2. See the following examples from his writings: Said (2003a, 6, 11, 22, 23, 77, 134, and 144), Said (1996a, 52, 61, and 63), Said (1983, 26) and Said (2000, 23).
3. Said (1983, 29).
4. Ibid. 29.
5. See Said (2003b), where Said offers a certain reading of Freud's (2010[1939]), in which Freud stressing the fact that Moses was actually was an Egyptian.
6. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (originally 2009). According to Said's reading, Arnold thought that it is the role of culture to stand in the face of anarchy, to create common codes and to claim authority.
7. See Said (1996a, 29).
8. See Raymond Williams (1998) who speaks of different meanings of the concept of culture. Two of them I use here.
9. See Said (1996a, 36–37).
10. See Said (1996a, 12).
11. See Said (1996a, 44).
12. See Benjamin (1969).
13. Hegel writes 'It is what we call the cunning of reason that it sets the passion to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must play the penalty and suffer the loss. For the latter belong to the phenomenal world, of which part is worthless and part of positive value' (1975, 89).
14. See Said (1996a, 35).
15. See Foucault (1988, 124).
16. See Sartre (1965, 101). Sartre (1965) accused Camus of being someone who stood outside history and wanted assurances of its meaning before entering into it. Sartre writes 'you decided against history, and rather interpret its course, you preferred to see it as one more absurdity' (p. 100).
17. See more on this exchange in Felman (1991).
18. On this Kantian sensibility, see Zreik (2018).
19. See Said (1996a, 74).
20. See Said (1996a, 74, 109).
21. See Said (1996a, 109).
22. See Said (1996a, 77).
23. See Said (1996a, 76).
24. See Said (1996a, 76).

25. It is never clear what is meant by the analytical method. Here I mean something akin to Descartes (2008) method that demands that we: 'divide all the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as many as were required to solve them in the best way' (p. 17: sections 18–19). For some analytic philosophy is one requiring 'decomposing propositions into their constituent concepts', see www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238842.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199238842-e-039#oxfordhb-9780199238842-note-12.

26. See on this issue of the separation of spheres, Walzer (1984).

27. In the Prolegomena, stressing the separateness of each field of study, Kant writes: 'If one wishes to present a body of cognition as science, a then one must first be able to determine precisely the differentia it has in common with no other science, and which is therefore its distinguishing feature; otherwise the boundaries of all the sciences run together, and none of them can be dealt with thoroughly according to its own nature' (2004, 15, 4: p. 265).

28. Max Weber (1946a) insights on the separation between these branches of knowledge, is very illuminating in this regard.

29. On Bad faith as this denial of freedom, see Sartre (1984, 47–67). I borrow the term 'false necessity' from Unger (2004).

30. See in this regard Zygmunt Bauman's (1989, 18–27) discussion of what he calls the 'social production of moral indifference', where he describes the mechanism of moving and handling major problems and human questions of life and death through experts, bureaucracy, routine and procedures in which each person simply performs their small technical part, but the result is human catastrophe and mass murder: this is the process that allows experts to dissociate themselves from the overall total result and to limit their responsibility.

31. 'Instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask *why* one does it, who benefits from it' Said (1996a, 83).

32. I borrow the distinction between understanding and reason (in a narrow specific sense) from Immanuel Kant. See the *Critique of Pure Reason* where he writes 'Understanding may be regarded as a faculty which secures the unity of appearance by means of rules, and reason as being the faculty which secures the unity of the rules of understanding under principles. Accordingly, reason never applies itself directly to experience or to any object, but to understanding, in order to give to the manifold of knowledge of the latter an a priori unity by means of concepts, a unity which may be called the unity of reason' Kant (1965, 303: sections A 302 and B 359). Kant summarizes the difference 'Concepts of reason enable us to conceive, concepts of understanding to understand' (p. 308: sections A 311 and B 367). Later on, Hannah Arendt (1971a) would capture this difference between 'knowing' or the thirst for knowledge, and 'thinking' as the thirst for meaning. Arendt (1971b) develops this distinction later in her life unto full-fledged distinction where she signals out the capacity for 'thinking' as distinguished from mere 'knowing' (pp. 53–68).

33. This position is a frequently recurring theme is Said (2003a, 134), and as well in Said (1996a, 22).

34. See Said (1996a, 94).

35. 'Speaking truth to power' is the title of a whole chapter in his book *Representations of the Intellectual*, chap. 5, pp. 85–103. This became the tile of a book on Said (1996a), by Paul Bové (2000).

36. See Kant (1996, 105).

37. See Kant (1983, 133).

38. See Kant (1983, 70).

39. See Kant (2002, 144: para 155).
40. 'Have the courage to use your own understanding-that is the motto of enlightenment.' See '*What is Enlightenment*?', in Kant (1983, 41).
41. See Kant (1996, 189) (section 6: 438).
42. See Kant (1996, 190) (section 6: 439).
43. 'Issues of justice related to intellectuals – **as conscience** – will not allow **conscience** to go to sleep' Said 2003a, 142 (my emphasis), and in *Representations* he asks: 'How does the intellectual address authority: as a professional supplicant or as its unrewarded, amateurish **conscience**?' Said (1996a, 83, my emphasis).
44. This lies at the heart of Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Said, which views Said as being in the same tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault. See Ahmad (1992, 190–203). I am not convinced that Said would subscribe to that description, and he clearly left more room for both human agency and truth. For a different take on the role of human agency, beyond structure, in Said, see Pannian (2016).
45. Said (1996a) asks: 'How does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?' His immediate answer is that there is no 'system or method that is broad and certain enough to provide the intellectual with direct answers to these questions' (p. 88).
46. See Said (1996a, 92, 98).
47. See Said (1996a, 97).
48. For the history of the deployment of civil rights rhetoric and the different interests that went under this banner, see Tushnet (2015).
49. See in this regard on the manipulative nature of rights and its abstract nature, Kennedy (1997, 315–39) and Horwitz (1988a, 1988b).
50. See Said (2003a, 13, my emphasis).
51. See Said (2003a, 22, my emphasis).
52. For such a distinction, see Dworkin (1986, 72–73). The distinction goes back to Kant (1993).
53. See Said (1996a, 32). For a similar formulation for his position, see Said (1983, 28).
54. Kant (1996) writes 'The good or bad results of an action that is owed, like the results of omitting a meritorious action, cannot be imputed to the subject' (p. 19). An action that is owed means 'to do just exactly what the law requires'. This presents Kant with the difficulty of how to face evil. See Korsgaard (1986).
55. For Weber (1946b), 'absolute ethics does not ask for consequences' and the paradigm for such ethics is a religious one: 'The Christian does rightly and leaves the result with the Lord' (p. 120).
56. See Weber (1946b, 120).
57. This is probably one of the most valuable insights of Machiavelli that was misinterpreted through history. For a defence of Machiavelli regarding evil, see Straus (1978, 180).
58. To borrow the term 'side constraints' coined by Robert Nozick (1988). The image of side-constraints was already invoked by Nozick in his early work (1974, 29).
59. See Mufti (2016), 166. See also Young (2016, 129–42).
60. See Said (1996a, 22).
61. See Said (1996a, 44).
62. See Said (1996a, 17).
63. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, p. 430.
64. See Said, *Reflections on Exile*, p. 503.

65. See Said, *Reflection on Exile*, p. XXIV.
66. See Said (1996b, 2001).
67. See Said (2003a, 66).
68. See Said, Introduction in *Reflections on Exile*, p. XXI.

References

Ahmad, Aijaz. 1992. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.

Aram Vesser, H. 2010. *Edward Said: The Charisma of Criticism*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Arendt, Hannah. 1971a. "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture." *Social Research* 38, no. 3: 417, 422–24.

Arendt, Hannah. 1971b. *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt & Brace Company.

Arnold, Mathew. 2009. *Culture and Anarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bauman. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornel University Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 1969. "Thesis on the Philosophy History." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 253–64. New York: Schocken Books.

Bove, Paul, ed. 2000. *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Curthoys, Ned, and Debajani Ganguly. 2007. *Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Descartes, Rene. 2008. *Discourse on Method*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dworkin, Ronald. 1986. *Law's Empire*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Felman, Shoshana. 1991. "Crisis of Witnessing: Albert Camus' Postwar Writings." *Law & Literature* 3, no. 2: 197–242.

Foucault, Michel. 1988. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. New York: Routledge.

Freud's. 2010[1939]. *Moses and Monotheism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Hegel, G. W. F. 1975. *Lectures on Philosophy of World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Horwitz, Morton. 1988a. "Rights." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 23: 393.

Horwitz, Morton. 1988b. "The Rule of Law – an unqualified Human Good." *Yale Law Journal* 86: 561.

Kant, Immanuel. 1965. *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Kant, Immanuel. 1983. *Perpetual Peace and other Essays*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Kant, Immanuel. 1993. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kant, Immanuel. 2002. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Kant, Immanuel. 2004. *Prolegomena for Any Future Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kennedy, Duncan. 1997. *A Critique of Adjudication*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Korsgaard, Christine. 1986, Autumn. "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 15, no. 4: 325–49.

Mufti, Amir. 2016. "The Missing Homeland of Edward Said." In *Conflicting Humanities*, edited by Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy, 166–83. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

Nozick, Robert. 1988. "Side Constraints." In *Consequentialism and its Critics*, edited by Samuel Scheffler, 134–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pannian, Prasad. 2016. *Edward Said and the Question of Subjectivity*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.

Said, Edward. 1983. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Said, Edward. 1996a. *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. 1996b. *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. 2000. *Edward Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Said, Edward. 2001. *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. 2003a. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Said, Edward. 2003b. *Freud and the Non- European*. London: Verso.

Sartre, Jean Paul. 1965. *Situations*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1984. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Straus, Leo. 1978. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Tushnet, Mark. 2015. "Civil Rights Policy." Harvard Public Law Working Papers No. 10–15. Accessed January 25, 2020. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2589183.

Unger, Roberto. 2004. *False-Necessity: Anti Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*. London: Verso.

Walzer, Michael. 1984. "Liberalism and the Art of Separation." *Political Theory* 12: 315–330.

Weber, Max. 1946a. "Religious Rejection of the World and Their Directions." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by Hans H. Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, 323–63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weber, Max. 1946b. "Politics as Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 77–128. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1998. "The Analysis of Culture." In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture – A Reader*, edited by John Storey, 48–57. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Young, Robert. 2016. "We Belong to Palestine Still: Edward Said and the Challenge of Representation." In *Conflicting Humanities*, edited by Rosi Baridotti, and Paul Gilroy, 129–142. London: Bloomsbury.

Zreik, Raef. 2018. "Kant on Time and Revolution." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 39, no. 1: 197–225.