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Orientalism, Globalism and the Possibility of Alternative Systems of Representation

Abstract: Orientalism and globalism refer to materially founded relations of power and domination and culturally constructed discourses that simultaneously conceal these relations and justify behavioural patterns or specific actions that sustain them. Drawing mainly on Said's notions of representation, the role of the critical intellectual and the question of knowledge, this paper focuses on those aspects of Said's work that either relate more immediately to the current concerns of an increasingly globalised world or are particularly useful methodologically or theoretically to provide a better understanding of the current discourse of globalism. Although globalisation cannot be simply perceived as the latest stage of imperialism, and globalism not as the most recent version of Orientalism, there are "overlapping territories" and "intertwined histories." But there are also new questions and limits of Orientalism that need to be investigated. The main criterion for the consideration of certain aspects is not the centrality to Said's work, but their relevance for the analysis of the hegemonic discourses of globalism and the possibility of producing alternative systems of representation.

The major task [...] is to match the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale [...] The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment.

Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

When Said wrote this, the diverse processes commonly subsumed under the term globalisation had become widely acknowledged phenomena and the term itself a buzzword in political rhetoric and scholarly discourse. Although Said acknowledged the existence and relevance both of globalising processes and the corresponding discourse of globalism, he did not and, as I will argue, could not take it much further than *within* the framework of Orientalism and imperialism.

It seems advisable to make two preliminary remarks. The first concerns the terminology I am using. In view of the fact that my usage of the term *globalism* is neither generally accepted nor self-explanatory, I would like to give a working definition: Globalism here is understood not to be interchangeable with *global-*

isation but as a system of ideas or a discourse that claims to provide a description and an explanation for the current processes and phenomena commonly subsumed under the term globalisation. The discourse of globalism, however, is not monolithic but rather consists of a number of recurrent core convictions, assumptions and predictions. The following could be given as typical examples: free-market economies necessarily work in the interest of the general public; free trade is a panacea for almost all economic problems; globalisation is a fairly novel phenomenon; the long-term effects of globalisation are positive because, although negative consequences do exist, they are not systemic; the problems and the respective solutions are basically the same for all countries; national governments have lost the power to determine policies in many areas because of pressures and restraints of globalisation; the world is becoming a community (an argument usually accompanied by lip service to global responsibility or as a pretext for interventionist policies); and, finally and perhaps most importantly, changes are unavoidable and quasi-natural – globalisation is not a choice but a reality.

The second preliminary remark is meant to position my own analysis in relation to the work of Edward Said. This paper focuses on those aspects of Said's work that either relate more immediately to the current concerns of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, or are deemed particularly useful, methodologically or theoretically, to provide a better understanding of the current discourse of globalism. The main criterion for the selection of certain aspects is not the centrality to Said's work but their relevance for the analysis of the hegemonic discourse of globalism and the possibility of producing alternative systems of representation.

The paper concentrates on four closely related aspects that were of major concern for Said throughout his life – the problem of representation, the role of the critical intellectual, the question of knowledge, and the possibility of alternative systems of representation – and relates them to the discourse of globalism. In view of the centrality of the issue of representation in Said's work and in this analysis, I let, wherever possible, Said speak for himself. Some of the quotations are therefore longer than what might be deemed to be appropriate in a different paper.

1. Globalisation or Imperialism, Globalism or Orientalism

It seems to be clear that globalisation can neither be perceived simply as the latest stage of imperialism nor globalism as the most recent version of Orientalism but there are a number of connections and similarities. This becomes particularly apparent if the analysis is focused on what Said describes in his introduction to *Orientalism* as the third meaning of Orientalism: "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1995, 3). Both Orientalism and globalism refer, on the one hand, to materially founded relations of power and domination and, on the other, to culturally constructed discourses that, at least partly, conceal those relations of power and domination and justify behavioural patterns or specific actions that sustain those relations.

The continued intellectual force and practical applicability of Said's critique of Orientalism to important aspects of the contemporary situation are specifically located in those areas that he characterises as "overlapping territories" and "intertwined histories." These are discernible in the manifold historical, structural and discursive continuities between our globalised world and the era of imperialism. It is therefore not surprising that apologists of globalisation tend to play down these continuities and rather emphasize the novelty of the phenomena subsumed under the term globalisation – thus they are de-historicized, de-contextualized and, finally, disconnected. It may be tempting to follow Said's reasoning which seems to consider most of the phenomena that others commonly perceive as globalisation as, basically, a continuation of imperialism or, more specifically, American imperialism. But globalisation also raises new questions and can therefore neither be fully comprehended by Said's concept of Orientalism nor by his notion of American imperialism. It is when the territories no longer overlap and the histories cease to be intertwined that the limits of his critique become visible.

The problematic relationships between, on the one hand, globalisation and imperialism and, on the other, globalism and Orientalism can be addressed on two levels. First, it is necessary to more clearly establish the continuities between the imperial era and current forms of globalisation. Second, the differences between the two phenomena and the new quality of specific aspects of globalisation need to be identified. What seems to be an analytical imperative, however, throws up almost insoluble problems that would require a much more detailed analysis than can be provided here. I can address only two of those questions that require further investigation: first, terminological problems and, second, the historical, structural and discursive continuities and discontinuities between, on the one hand, imperialism and globalisation and, on the other, Orientalism and globalism. This would enable us to more fully appreciate the contemporary opportunities but also the spatial, methodological and conceptual limits of Said's critique of Orientalism.

Any attempt to demarcate imperialism from globalisation almost immediately has to face the fact that both concepts are similarly problematic and often contentious. With regard to globalisation, Nederveen Pieterse, for example, argues that

we may well conceive of globalizations in the plural. Thus in social science there are as many conceptualizations of globalization as there are disciplines. [...] Accordingly, globalization may be understood in terms of an open-ended synthesis of several disciplinary approaches [...]. Another way to conceive of globalizations plural is that there are as many modes of globalization as there are globalizing agents and dynamics or impulses [...]. We can further differentiate between globalization as policy and project [...] or as unintended consequence. (Nederveen Pieterse 1995, 45-4)

It is very difficult to discern any clear notion of globalisation in Said's work. There are, however, scattered references to phenomena, especially in his more recent work, that others might consider to be instances or manifestations of globalisation. The contexts in which Said refers to globalisation differ as much as

the respective meanings he implies. The following examples illustrate this. In an interview in 2000, Said expressed the view that globalisation exacerbates social inequities:

There's been a widening gap between the rich and the poor in Middle East society. Globalization, with its transformation of economies into vast consumer markets for venture capitalism, has made things worse. (Barsamian and Said 2003a, 61)

In an interview in 2001, Said criticised the increasing commodification of information and the negative role of the mass media on the individual consciousness and the oppositional role of intellectuals following that:

The individual consciousness in our age is bombarded, if it isn't also stifled, by vast amounts of organized and packaged information. Its main goal is to generate a kind of accepting, unquestioning, collective passivity. Most of the time we are bombarded with images that ask us to submit to them and in the end buy them, whether through news or commodities or travel or whatever. Everything is packed and up for sale. This is the meaning of the neoliberal market economy, which globalization has foisted on the world, leaving very little room for individual challenge and questioning, whereas large organizations, whether governments or corporations, pursue policies that are virtually blind in many instances, causing widespread environmental destruction, widespread genetic destruction, and the possibility for powerful groups to pursue profit without responsibility. In such a context, the role of the intellectual is to oppose, and I would have thought it an absolutely, perhaps even a desperately needed role. (Barsamian and Said 2003b, 98-9)

Elsewhere in the same interview, Said seems to equate globalisation with the perpetuation of the hegemony of the United States through the fight against terrorism on a global scale:

Since the United States is the only global superpower, has or pretends to have interests everywhere, from China to Europe to southern Africa to Latin America and all of North America, terrorism becomes a handy instrument to perpetuate this hegemony. Terrorism is now viewed as resistance to globalization. That connection has to be made. (Barsamian and Said 2003b, 89-90)

That Said's usage of the term globalisation was neither particularly lucid nor consistent might be explained by the fact that it was not central to most of his literature-based analyses in *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism* or elsewhere. The same, however, obviously cannot be said about the term imperialism. Said left no doubt that he was fully aware of the terminological problems. Imperialism, he writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, is

a word and an idea today so controversial, so fraught with all sorts of questions, doubts, polemics, and ideological premises as nearly to resist use altogether. To some extent of course the debate involves definitions and attempts at delimitations of the very notion itself: was imperialism principally economic, how far did it extend, what were its causes, was it systematic, when (or whether) did it end? (Said 1994a, 3)

Elsewhere, also in *Culture and Imperialism*, he overcomes that resistance and defines his usage of the term imperialism in contrast to colonialism:

As I shall be using the term, 'imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism,'

which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory. [...] In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism [...] lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices. (Said 1994a, 8)

In chapter one of *Culture and Imperialism*, “Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories,” Said emphasises the continuities between imperialism and the actualities of the contemporary world. With reference to classical nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European imperialism, he argues that this

pattern of dominions or possessions laid the groundwork for what is in effect now a fully global world. Electronic communications, the global extent of trade, of availability of resources, of travel, of information about weather patterns and ecological change have joined together even the most distant corners of the world. This set of patterns, I believe, was first established and made possible by the modern empires. (Said 1994a, 3-4)

The historical continuities are made sufficiently clear but what remains rather fuzzy is whether there is not only continuity but also discontinuity and difference between Said’s “fully global world” and his notion of imperialism. At the end of the same chapter, Said seems to be more strongly aware of the differences but gives a reason for his emphasis on continuities when he writes that he has

insisted on integration and connections between the past and the present, between imperializer and imperialized, between culture and imperialism [...] not to level or reduce differences, but rather to convey a more urgent sense of the interdependence between things. (Said 1994a, 72)

Against the background of certain developments in the early 1990s (USA as the only superpower, Yugoslavia, the Gulf War, etc.), Said seemed to argue that imperialism was actually returning. In an interview in 1993, Said expressed the view that at the time when he was writing *Culture and Imperialism* it was “not ‘after imperialism’; there’s a late-twentieth-century renewal of it” (Said 2001b, 191).

2. Limits of Said’s Orientalism

A further step to assess the possibilities of applying Said’s version of Orientalism to certain phenomena and processes at the beginning of the twenty-first century would be to identify the different levels on which specific limits are located. This would enable us to aim at two things simultaneously. Firstly, the lasting applicability of Said’s concept of Orientalism to certain problems could be brought out more clearly. Secondly, the identification of *specific* limits would also enable us to consider the possibility of revising and further developing Said’s approach. The following remarks are only meant to indicate some of the limits of Said’s Orientalism when applying it to globalisation and globalism; they should not be read as an attempt to reflect the scope of other criticisms of Said’s work.

The most obvious limit of his critique, the spatial, was fully acknowledged by Said himself. In an interview in 2001, he said that

Orientalism didn't really cover Asia at all. So, I wanted [in *Culture and Imperialism*] to extend the analysis to include further and different places than the Arab and Islamic Near East. (Said 2001b, 183)

In *Culture and Imperialism*, which can be read, at least partly, as a response to criticism levelled against *Orientalism*, Said states that he tried

to expand the arguments of the earlier book [*Orientalism*] to describe a more general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories. (Said 1994a, xi)

Large areas of the world remain, in spite of the spatial expansion of Said's concept of *Orientalism*, necessarily uncovered. Arguably, they cannot be covered, because what would be necessary to make this step is not just a wider geographical coverage but a different conceptual scope.

Said's *Orientalism* is further characterised by methodological limits when certain aspects of globalisation and globalism are analysed. Two should be mentioned here. The first problem has been identified by many of Said's critics and is related to the character of the material analysed by Said in his search for alternatives to orthodoxies. Kennedy says that this search is

characterized by two contradictory tendencies: the radical impulse to link literature, politics and culture on the one hand, and the fundamental conservatism of Said's literary tastes and loyalties on the other. (Kennedy 2000, 97)

The problems arising from this contradiction become, not surprisingly, most apparent in the final chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* which clearly shows that Said also encountered methodological problems when trying to study the most recent period. It could be argued that his preferred material, the novel, was simply not relevant anymore for the study of the link between literature, politics and culture in the same way as it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Said seems to be aware of this when he writes that

[t]heoretically we are only at the state of trying to inventory the *interpellation* of culture and empire, but the efforts so far made are only slightly more than rudimentary. And as the study of culture extends into the mass media, popular culture, micropolitics, and so forth, the focus on modes of power and hegemony grows sharper. (Said 1994a, 71-2)

Cochran sees even more dramatic changes and holds that the importance of literature for the overall production of culture in general has undergone dramatic changes:

In the twentieth century, the place of literature in the overall production of culture has undergone radical transformation, and the literary premises of modernity are under increasing scrutiny. [...] literature and the literary tradition no longer single-handedly dominate cultural production, and the economic force of the cultural commodity has upset the well-policed conjunctures of literature, universalism, and humanism. Without this privileged ideological investment, writing – shorn of its grandiose literary claims – takes its more modest place alongside other sectors of culture. (Cochran 2001, 217)

Said's preference for the 'canonical' should not be dismissed as mere prejudice, however, but rather has to be viewed against the background of his biography and cultural identity. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia argue that

[p]ersonal experiences, and the particular nature of personal history, have the power to dictate that certain interests are embedded so deeply in one's cultural identity that they cannot be dislodged. (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999, 10)

The second and arguably more important methodological limit is the pervasive reliance both of Orientalism and Said's critique of it on the construction of difference between the West and the 'Orient.' Said argues that Orientalism "aided and was aided by general cultural pressures that tended to make more rigid the sense of difference between the European and Asiatic parts of the world" (Said 1995, 204). His analysis of the relationships between Occident and Orient leads him to the conclusion that

what seems to have influenced Orientalism most was a fairly constant sense of confrontation felt by Westerners dealing with the East. The boundary notion of East and West, the varying degrees of projected inferiority and strength, the range of work done, the kinds of characteristic features ascribed to the Orient: all these testify to a willed imaginative and geographic division made between East and West, and lived through during many centuries. (Said 1995, 201)

Said's view could be interpreted, at least partly, as a logical consequence of his method of analysis. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, for example, point out that Said's use of the concept of discourse "emphasises dominance and power over cultural interaction" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001: 70). Such constructions of difference, division and adversity, which are typical of Orientalism, cannot be maintained in the same way for the analysis of globalism unless you represent and reduce the world at the beginning of the new millennium, as Said repeatedly does in the final chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* and in later works, as a kind of globalised American imperialism. This reduced contemporary actuality then enables Said to study it within the conceptual framework of imperialism and Orientalism again. Globalism, however, in order to function as a hegemonic discourse – in contrast to Orientalism – is based on discursive inclusivity and not exclusion. It is this discursive inclusivity that needs to be challenged against the backdrop of the exclusive political, social and economic realities of globalisation.

The most critical limit of Said's critique of Orientalism – if applied to the late twentieth century – is of a conceptual nature. It is, however, also more difficult to ascertain for different reasons. One reason is Said's foregrounding of what he perceives as American imperialism, for example, in chapter four of *Culture and Imperialism*, "Freedom from Domination in the Future," which helps him to sidestep, among other problems, the question of new politics in a globalized world and to contain his analysis within the framework and terminology of imperialism and empire. Nederveen Pieterse, by way of contrast, sees the need to develop new conceptual tools to study the situation at the end of the twentieth century when he cautions that the term imperialism "may no longer be adequate to address the present situation. It may be adequate in relation to US actions in

Panama or Grenada, but less to describe the Gulf War” (Nederveen Pieterse 1995, 59). Interestingly, he also refers to Doyle’s definition of imperialism and empire, the same source that Said quotes when defining imperialism in *Culture and Imperialism*:

Empire [...] is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire. (Doyle 1996, 45)

In contrast to Said, Nederveen Pieterse seems to be more aware of or willing to acknowledge the problems of applying the concepts of empire and imperialism to certain phenomena and processes at the end of the 20th century. This becomes apparent when he argues with regard to the same quotation that such terminology is not adequate to characterize certain phenomena like the activities of today’s major non-state actors, the IMF, the World Bank, transnational corporations and regional investment banks or the emergence of regional blocs:

The casual use of terms as recolonization or neocolonialism to describe the impact of IMF conditionalities on African countries remains just that, casual. The situation has changed also since the emergence of regional blocs which can potentially exercise joint foreign policy (for example, the European Community) or which within themselves contain two or more ‘worlds’ (for example, NAFTA, APEC). Both these situations differ from imperialism in the old sense. (Nederveen Pieterse 1995, 59)

Another phenomenon that reflects the material differences between imperialism and globalisation can be discerned in industrialised countries – in many cases former colonial powers. The common lack of domestic resistance in the metropolitan societies to the concept and practice of imperialism is now notably absent in the context of certain aspects of globalisation, i.e. with regard to changes that also negatively affect an increasing number of people in metropolitan societies. The spectrum ranges from environmental problems to increased pressures on wage levels due to increased global competition and supply-side policies of national governments. Admittedly, this resistance to globalisation is not as widespread or vocal as far as quasi-imperial relations are concerned that continue to benefit the majority of the population in industrialised societies as, for instance, in the case of cheap coffee – the retail prices of which are only possible due to starvation wages paid to the producers in former colonies.

4. The Possibility of Alternative Representations

To argue that Said’s concept of Orientalism cannot contain all aspects of a globalised world does not, however, mean that his more general notions of representation, the role of the critical intellectual and the question of knowledge cannot be usefully employed anymore. In “Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories,” Said outlines his notion of the complex nexus of representation, authority, knowledge and the role of the critical intellectual:

Modern thought and experience have taught us to be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the socio-political role of intellectuals, in the great value of a sceptical critical consciousness. Perhaps if we remember that the study of human experience usually has an ethical, to say nothing of a political consequence in either the best or worst sense, we will not be indifferent to what we do as scholars. And what better norm for the scholar than human freedom and knowledge? (Said 1995, 327)

Said was fully aware of the problematic character of the processes which are involved in representation – perhaps more so than some of his anti-representational critics. He argues that

representation, or more particularly the *act* of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involve violence of some sort to the *subject* of the representation, as well as a contrast between the violence of the act of representing something and the calm exterior of the representation itself, the *image* – verbal, visual, or otherwise – of the subject. Whether you call it a spectacular image, or an exotic image, or a scholarly representation, there is always this paradoxical contrast between the surface, which seems to be in control, and the process which produces it, which inevitably involves some degree of violence, decontextualization, miniaturization, etc. The action or process of representing implies control, it implies accumulation, it implies confinement, it implies a certain kind of estrangement or disorientation on the part of the one representing. (Said 2001c, 40-1)

In the context of imperialism, it is not only the act of representing or the representation that is produced but rather the instrumentalization of that representation which is critical. Said maintains this because

above all, representation involves consumption: representations are put to use in the domestic economy of an imperial society. In the case of *Orientalism*, I was speaking of an economy whereby the manipulation and control of colonies could be sustained. (Said 2001c, 41)

The instrumental nexus between representations and imperialism is reflected in and affects the process of knowledge production and the character of the knowledge itself. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia assume – along the same lines of Said's position – that there is a *direct* and *active* connection between representations and political processes, and that there can be no neutral knowledge in the context of colonialism and imperialism. For them 'Knowledge'

is always a matter of representation, and representation a process of giving concrete form to ideological concepts, of making certain signifiers standing for signifieds. The power that underlies these representations cannot be divorced from the operations of political force, even though it is a different kind of power, more subtle, more penetrating and less visible. (Ashcroft und Ahluwalia 2001, 65)

Said's conviction that there is a *direct* and *active* relationship between political, socio-economic and cultural domination and systems of representation that produce and sustain each other applies both to Orientalism and globalism. It is therefore not surprising that a comparison between the discourses of Orientalism and globalism shows similarities in terms of means, methods, structures and objectives. Globalism, for example, is often characterised by totalising theories,

historical reductionism, ignorance of diversity and seemingly neutral assessments of specific aspects of the current situation that, at closer observation, often serve very specific purposes and concrete group interests. Central to this discourse are the different representations of what is allegedly 'going on,' the decisive trends, the causal structures behind those trends and the ensuing consequences and necessities. The non-industrialised countries, for example, are represented as being in need of modernisation in order to enable them to partake in the global economic and social progress, which is considered to be a function of the free-market economy, free trade and liberal democracy. The latter, however, does not seem to be essential as long as stability can be maintained, i.e. the safety of property and foreign investments is guaranteed. There is also very little acknowledgement of historical circumstances, cultural specificities, different sets of traditions, values, beliefs and needs that characterise those countries. Although lip-service is often paid to the distinctiveness of the countries affected by globalisation, there seems to be a widespread and potentially dangerous belief that the same measures applied to completely different contexts may lead to similar results. Tony Blair signifies this problem when he argues that

even as between developing and developed nations, it is the similarities in the economic and social issues that often mean more than the differences. And as for within the developed world, the challenges are virtually identical. (Blair 2000, n.a.)

It would obviously not require too much of an effort to critique Blair's or similarly simplistic arguments but that would not solve the underlying problem. Assuming that hegemonic representations and discourses can and should be challenged, the more intriguing question is whether the establishment of just another reductionist and exclusive discourse can be avoided and how more inclusive, participatory, collaborative and non-coercive knowledge can be produced. The problem can be addressed for analytical purposes on three distinct but, in practice, closely interwoven, levels: first, the methodological level, second, the character of the representational system and the knowledge it is based on and, third, the role of the intellectual in the production or critique of this knowledge.

The opportunity to challenge the domination of different systems was one of Said's central concerns. In an interview in 1993, he said that the question of domination

has always interested me most. I mean how – given the domination of one or another powerful system, whether economic, social, or political – one can break through. That is the most interesting thing, I think, about human behaviour – that and the way people try to build on it, that oppositional quality. (Said 2001e, 169)

The acknowledgement of the need to challenge dominant systems, material or immaterial, does not, however, automatically provide us with the means to do so in practice. Said insists with regard to the methodological level that

[w]e must expand the horizons against which the question of *how* and *what* to read and write are both posed and answered [...]. Instead of the partial analysis offered by the various national or systematically theoretical schools, I have been proposing the

contrapuntal lines of global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together [...]. (Said 1994a, 385)

Said believed that, despite all the intricate problems involved in the process of their production referred to above, representations cannot be avoided. Consequently, the character of the system of representation and the knowledge on which it is founded need to be foregrounded:

What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the kind of authority which, to my mind, has been repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented [...] The alternative would be a representational system that was participatory and collaborative, noncoercive, rather than imposed, but as you know, this is not a simple matter. We have no immediate access to the means of producing alternative systems. Perhaps it would be possible through other, less exploitative fields of knowledge. But first we must identify those socio-cultural-political formations which would allow for a reduction of authority and increased participation in the production of representations and proceed from there. (Said 2001c, 42)

In other words, the *primary* question is which socio-cultural-political formations "would allow for a reduction of authority and increased participation in the production of representations." In view of the fact that the production of alternative systems of representation crucially depends on "socio-cultural-political formations," it is somewhat disappointing that Said does not address this question in detail.

Elsewhere, Said reflects methodological problems with specific reference to the new challenges at the end of the twentieth century and argues that they cannot be addressed by the polemical and oppositional models of the past but

rather, you provide models of reconciliation by which you can situate yourself and the other in a territory or in a space that isn't all about fighting, that isn't all about polemics and oppositional politics in the crude and reductive sense of the word. [...] There are overarching problems [...] there's the whole problem of north and south now. There's the whole problem of the environment. There's the whole question of the fractious quality of identity politics. All of these things require new ways of thinking that can't be served and can't be advanced by the polemical and oppositional models of the past [...]. (Said 2001b, 203-4)

Central to the question of the possibility of alternative representations for Said is also the role of the intellectual. Throughout his life Said never tired to voice his view of the role of intellectuals and their positioning towards authority, common sense and power: "The intellectual always has a choice either to side with the weaker, the less well-represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the more powerful" (Said 1994b, 24). At the same time, he was fully aware of the obstacles that have to be faced not only in authoritarian societies but also in democracies:

The great problem in essentially administered societies, the Western democracies, is precisely the drowning out of the critical sense. That has to be opposed by the secular intellectual and the critical sense revised for various audiences, various constituencies. (Said 2001d, 223)

He was similarly clear about the fact that his insistence on the oppositional function of the intellectual should not be mistaken as advocating opposition as an end in itself. For Said it means “asking questions, making distinctions, restoring to memory all those things that tend to be overlooked or walked past in the rush to collective judgment and action” (Said 1994b, 25). This understanding of the function of the intellectual entails a specific notion of the concept and practice of criticism which he defines as ‘secular’ criticism:

It is not practicing criticism either to validate the status quo or to join up with a priestly caste of acolytes and dogmatic metaphysicians [...] The realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men and women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics. I propose that these realities are what should be taken account of by criticism and the critical consciousness. (Said 1991, 5)

There is, however, another problem, arguably the most important one, which Said tends to evade in his discussion and celebration of the role of the secular intellectual. Robbins is acutely aware of it when he says that the

secular ideal of the intellectual who ‘speaks truth to power’ [...] pays no explicit attention to the decisive question – the same question in another form – of *why power would listen*, what might *make* it listen, what makes *anyone* listen. That is, it has nothing explicit to say about the source of *counter-authority* that intellectuals must be assumed to counterpose to ‘power.’ (Robbins 1997, 77)

The character of the knowledge produced by secular criticism and the underlying perception of the relationship between knowledge, truth, objectivity and politics almost necessarily clashes with scholarly conventions about the character of knowledge in the contemporary West in general and the United States in particular. One problem for Said therefore was to expose how

the general consensus that ‘true’ knowledge is fundamentally nonpolitical (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not ‘true’ knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. No one is helped in understanding this today when the adjective ‘political’ is used as a label to discredit any work for daring to violate the protocol of pretended suprapolitical objectivity. (Said 1995, 10)

In this context, it is important to bear in mind that Said was convinced that certain fields of knowledge are characterised by a higher degree of political importance than others. This is, I would argue, equally true for the production of knowledge about imperialism and globalisation because of their close relations to questions of economic and political power. Said maintains that to

some extent the political importance given a field comes from the possibility of its direct translation into economic terms; but to a greater extent political importance comes from the closeness of a field to ascertainable sources of power in political society. (Said 1995, 10)

Admittedly, Said’s notion of the character and function of representations, his understanding of the role and the responsibilities of the intellectual, and the

problems involved in the production of knowledge are not always consistent, sometimes fairly vague, and often contentious. But Said, says Kennedy, was aware “at least intermittently, of the problems associated with the issue of representation” and he “has chosen to make use of his persuasive powers as a public intellectual and to shoulder the responsibilities nonetheless” (Kennedy 2000, 148 and 149).

4. Conclusion

There is, in my view, no doubt that Said’s work can still provide us with useful insights into the history, character and operations of imperialism and the accompanying discourse of Orientalism. But one also has to state clearly that certain processes of globalisation and aspects of globalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century, although *historically related to* are not simply *a continuation of imperialism*. They can therefore not be comprehended fully within Said’s critique of Orientalism and imperialism.

Important remnants and persistent effects of imperialism cannot be denied nor can the framework of imperialism provide a sufficient basis for the analysis of many aspects of a globalised world. Specific relations can still be analysed and interpreted as imperialism but what is also necessary are historically aware and contextualized studies of global processes that must draw upon studies of imperialism but also go beyond them.

The challenges of an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world can only be addressed if the whole political, economic and social process becomes more participatory, representative and equitable than today’s arrangement. This is equally true for the process itself and the production of knowledge about that process. The divergent priorities, objectives, values, concerns and cultures of those concerned – nation-states, international institutions, non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, global social movements, religious groups – have to be actively involved in the production of more inclusive, participatory, collaborative and non-coercive knowledge – but, to quote Said again, “this is not a simple matter” (Said 2001c, 42).

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