

SAID'S POST-SEPTEMBER 11TH MEDIA PRESENCE

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Edward W. Said left such a strong impression on Mid-East politics that even his critics defined him as “a familiar face on the network news—an urbane, articulate man, invariably dressed in an elegant suit and tie, who could always be counted on to provide polished, unaccented, pro-Palestinian (or, more generally, pro-Arab or pro-Moslem) spin on recent Mideast developments” (Bawer 620). Yet this “urbane, articulate man” shunned U.S. Media attention after Saudi Arabian nationals hijacked two passenger airlines and used them as guided missiles in a fatal attack on U.S. soil the morning of September 11th, 2001. If this character, Said, “could always be counted on to provide” his interpretations, or his “spin on recent Mideast developments,” then what were his reasons for withdrawing from the media attention he had previously enjoyed?

Although Said did publish a piece in the *Observer* (a U.K.-based paper) five days after the terror attacks, its somewhat sympathetic stance towards the terrorists was blasted by Bruce Bawer, an independent critic who has written articles for (among others) the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and the *New York Times Magazine* and whose book reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Bawer claimed that after reading Said’s piece in the *Observer*,

One no longer wonders why it appeared in a British newspaper rather than on the op-ed page of Said’s usual high-profile outlet, the *New York Times*—whose readers, many of them ordinarily receptive to Professor Said’s critiques of Western democracy and whitewashing of Islamic tyranny and terror, were perhaps too busy that week trying to recover from the violent assault on their city to be able to profit from his wisdom.

Bawer’s insinuation is that New York City, once the bastion of Said’s liberal pro-Muslim ideals, could no longer afford the luxury of self-criticisms, and thus, had no use for Said’s radical opinions. Could this be why Said avoided U.S. media interviews after the 9/11 attacks?

Perhaps an understanding of Said’s tumultuous life could shed light on this question. Said, as he narrates in his memoir *Out of Place*, was born in 1935 as a Protestant Arab Palestinian in Jerusalem, Palestine. His father was a very successful businessman, giving Said a privileged upbringing from which he could observe the events that shaped the modern-day Middle East. He was raised in Cairo, Egypt, where he experienced the direct effects of British, and then American, imperialism. He was able to enjoy summers in Lebanon, where he began to notice the undercurrents of

cultural divisiveness that still affect the region. He experienced first-hand the controversial declaration of Israel as a state and the subsequent displacement of countless Palestinians. In 1951, Said began his studies in America at a private New England High School. He continued his American education by attending Princeton, and later Harvard, en route to a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. Said remained apolitical until the 1967 war, when a second wave of Palestinian refugees was triggered during a six-day conflict between Israel and the combined states of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. This event, and its dire consequences, generated the intense interest in politics, specifically in the creation of a Palestinian state, which Said maintained throughout the remainder of his life.

But the question remains, why would Said refuse media attention in the days (and years) following 9/11? Why would he pass up such an ideal opportunity to speak to an American public about an issue very dear to his heart? Could Bawer be correct in that Said no longer had a receptive audience?

Said's own voice indicates otherwise. Several comments made after 9/11 indicate that he withdrew because he feared being presented as a definitive subject matter expert. It was this notion of a subject expert, or a single person who could classify and explain a vast group of cultures, that Said definitively condemned in *Orientalism*, a book first published in 1976. In fact, one might say that Said's refusal of media attention was the direct extension of his main argument in *Orientalism*.

Said summarizes this argument as the issue of "whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer" (*Orientalism* 272). Said argues in *Orientalism* that constructs such as the Orient contain inaccuracies because they are created by individuals: individuals with their own political, career, and personal agendas. He feels that these simplified identities (such as the East and the West) involve "the construction of opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from 'us'" (*Orientalism* 332). In other words, the East and West cannot be pointed to as physical entities. Instead, they exist as constructs that allow one group of people to differentiate themselves from another.

Said criticizes the people who forge on without admitting these subjective interpretations. He observes that within the field of Oriental Studies (whose practitioners are labeled orientalists) there is a predominant view that "such things as an Islamic society, an Arab mind, an Oriental psyche" do exist (*Orientalism* 301). Said counters this view by claiming that "cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality" (*Orientalism* 347). Throughout *Orientalism* Said argues against broad stereotypes and against "the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion,

culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space” (Orientalism 322). Although Said makes extensive use of western generalizations of “the East” he explicitly states in the Afterword (written in 1994) that he is not solely criticizing Western imperialism. Rather, he is using specific examples to rebuke the notion that any large group of people can be adequately defined by their religion, geographic location, or ethnicity.

One of Said’s post-9/11 fears was that the American public might begin to equate Osama bin Laden (or other extremist figures) with the entirety of the Islamic religion (“Fears”). While bin Laden is certainly representative of a very small subset of Islamic fundamentalists, he does not represent the larger Muslim community. But who would be qualified to speak about the Muslim community? Perhaps a Muslim academic, or better yet, perhaps the Muslim philosopher Akeel Bilgrami, whom Said praised in “Impossible Histories.” Bilgrami is a Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and has extensively explored the philosophical aspects of how people identify themselves and others. As someone who was raised within the “Eastern” country of India he can shed light on how he regards the Muslim community. In an article titled “The Clash Within Civilizations,” he contends that the majority of Muslims

have no particular desire to perpetrate atrocious (and self-defeating) acts of terrorist violence in Islam’s name, no particular desire to live lives observant in the last detail of Shariah laws, no particular desires to live under the tyrannies of oppressive governments that impose the strictest of Islamic ideologies upon them, such as for instance in Saudi Arabia or Iran. (Bilgrami, “Clash” 88)

Bilgrami offers a historical, social, and economic perspective to the problem instead of broadly categorizing the East with sweeping statements. He explains that “most Muslims are not absolutists [his term for fundamentalists] at all, and are in fact deeply opposed to the absolutists in their midst. This is evident in the fact that whenever there have been elections, the ‘fundamentalist’ parties have failed to gain power, whether in Iran or in Pakistan” (Bilgrami, “Lessons” 32). He further interprets the animosity many Muslims feel towards the West as not being directed at freedom or modernity, but rather, at the “naked, corporate-driven wrongs of American and Western dominance of their regions” (Bilgrami, “Lessons” 32). By way of comparison, Said’s critic Bawer claims that “a substantial percentage of Moslems are in fact religious fundamentalists who despise individual liberty and sexual equality, who believe profoundly that all sorts of things should be punished by death, and who readily cheer acts of violence directed against innocent civilians in the West” (Bawer 622).

Bawer relies on heavily unsupported generalizations. He claims that “a substantial percentage of Moslems” are fundamentalists without ever citing a figure or where that figure was drawn from. Bilgrami, by contrast, offers a clear account of fundamentalist support by referring to specific elections in Pakistan where fundamentalist groups have

consistently received less than ten percent of the popular vote (Bilgrami, “Clash” 90). Bawer, through his broad generalization of Muslims, represents a striking example of the mentality Said condemned in *Orientalism*. Bilgrami’s approach, however, of carefully examining the conditions surrounding a group, of acknowledging the motivations for their actions, and of treating them as a diverse group represents the tactic that Said supported. But, the distinction between Bawer and Bilgrami is more subtle than it first appears.

From the surface it appears that Bilgrami, because he was raised in a Muslim country, can offer valid assertions about Muslims, while Bawer, because he is an outsider, is doomed to hopelessly inadequate generalizations. This misses a fine point of Said’s, that any identity (such as “Muslim,” “Arab,” or “American”) is a constructed image that generalizes a broad group of people. Even though Bilgrami was raised in a Muslim country, his definition of “Muslim” is no more accurate than Bawer’s is. Or rather, his definition is just as hopelessly inaccurate as Bawer’s is. Where Bilgrami does succeed, however, is by attempting to understand that “Muslim” is a man-made term that refers to a large disparate group of people. Bilgrami recognizes that the beliefs held by individuals within this group will vary wildly while Bawer attempts to polarize the group into a black-or-white, either-or, extremist vs. liberal perspective. Said hoped that a humanist understanding such as Bilgrami’s would help prevent “the terrible conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics such as ‘America’, ‘the West’, or ‘Islam’ and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse” (“Window”).

But what does this tell us about our original question? Why did Said choose to avoid post-9/11 U.S. media contact? With a solid understanding of Said’s historical perspective on the bipolar constructs of East and West we can now investigate this question using his own voice.

In an article published in *Harper’s* magazine in July 2002, titled “Impossible Histories,” Said assaults the implication that he might have some insight into the events of 9/11. Through a rhetorical question he exclaims “what could I know about the crazed fanatics who committed suicide in the slaughter of innocents” (“Impossible Histories” 69). This is very telling, because it sets up a very clear distinction between Said’s area of knowledge, and the area of knowledge required to understand “the smoldering twin towers” (“Impossible Histories” 69). Said had always proclaimed himself a secularist, so from his perspective he had no insights into the people who flew airplanes into buildings in the name of religious fervor. While he did feel that he had contextual information about the socio-political conditions that might lead a person to attack the United States, he felt that such information was not welcomed by the American populace. Two months after the attacks Said addressed this in an article for the *Arab American News*. In the article he claimed that “any attempt to place the horrors of what occurred on 9/11 in a context that includes US actions and rhetoric is either attacked or dismissed as somehow condoning the terrorist bombardment”

(“Fears”). So although Said felt that he could provide contextual information about the events leading to the 9/11 attacks, he sensed that this was not what the U.S. media wanted.

Instead, he observes,

bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange oriental peoples. (“Window”)

He further criticizes the media as assigning “itself the role of producing so-called ‘experts’” who then support “the kind of simplified view of the world” that U.S. political strategists have provided (“Window”). Small wonder, then, that Said might not “want to be tokenized or made to represent the ‘other’ point of view” (“Impossible Histories” 69).

But Said’s refusal to interview with the U.S. media stretches beyond avoiding the label of “other.” His refusal was directed instead at the U.S. notion of providing “experts” to aggregate and summarize disparate regions of the world. Said’s rebellion, then, was not against being labeled as pro-Muslim, but instead it was against the thought that the East could be labeled, and further, that it could actually be objectively described by any one person without understanding the historical, social, and economic context. The U.S. media criticized his contextual information as “condoning terrorism,” yet they still asked him for information. Why? So that they could produce a sensational headline that would drive Americans, out of fear, to purchase more papers, to view more news media, and to further the development of the “us” versus “them” divide. Yet, as was illustrated above, this type of bipolar classification is exactly what Said argued against in *Orientalism*. So is it any surprise that Said refused U.S. media attention following the 9/11 terrorist attacks? Of course not! The only way for Said to maintain his beliefs, as described in *Orientalism*, was to refuse media attention.

But how is this knowledge helpful? Said refused to cater to the desires of the U.S. media, and in so doing illustrated that the U.S. media still operates under the assumption that large numbers of people can be grouped together under a single name. This is evident when the media refers to a “Chinese” identity, or a “Muslim” identity. The assumption, then, is that a subject expert can accurately define the attributes of these identities. This categorization, as was explained above, risks oversimplifying many of today’s current events. Said recognized this, and claimed these so-called objective identities were no more than a subjective means of distinguishing one group of people from another as “us” versus “them.” He argued instead that we should investigate the social and economic context in which events occur, and thereby arrive at a more accurate understanding of those events. But, as was illustrated by Said’s dilemma above, the U.S. media does not take this approach. Therefore Said’s legacy,

and challenge, to us is to force the media to provide us with the contextual information necessary for a broad understanding of their issues.

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