The Rhetoric of Academic Controversy after 9/11: Edward Said in the American Imagination

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No cause, no God, no abstract idea can justify the mass slaughter of innocents, most particularly when only a small group of people are in charge of such actions and feel themselves to represent the cause without having a real mandate to do so.

—Edward Said

In the summer of 2002, Stanley Fish reminded us of the scary times in which we are living. In “Don’t Blame Relativism,” he spoke of the various threats that had been made to academic freedom since 9/11. Fish foresaw a time in which a U.S. senator might peer down from a raised dais, look into the eyes of a frightened English professor, and ask, “Are you now or have you ever been a postmodernist?” (27). Although neither Fish nor any of us have yet to hear senators asking academics this question, the current political climate on our college campuses suggests that such a time might not be that far in the future. Fish was responding to Edward Rothstein, who in two opinion pieces expressed concern that rarefied forms of academic talk could be used to understand rather than to condemn the terrorist attacks. Rothstein was at least generous enough to acknowledge in the second article that “[o]f course, postmodernism isn’t directly or indirectly responsible for 9/11. But cannot…” (Moral”). After 9/11, “possession of the truth” seems to be something to which members of the cultural Right are especially privy.1

After Rothstein’s first diatribe, Fish could have easily added to the list of possible questions that might issue forth from the mouth of a U.S.
senator the following: “Are you now or have you ever been a postcolonial theorist or a follower of Edward Said?” Rothstein condescendingly labeled postmodernism “pomo” and postcolonial theory “poco,” alleging that poco goes further than pomo in doing away with standards of judgment. He claimed that, “For while affirming most of the pomo rejection of ideals and universals, poco establishes its own universal: Western imperialism becomes a variety of Original Sin. The implication is that any act against the West by a postcolonial power can be seen as a reaction to an act by the West” (“Attacks”). Rothstein praises Said—whom he acknowledges as one of postcolonial theory’s founders—for pointing out that “unlike radical pomo advocates, [Said] accepts universal principles like ‘human rights.’ However, according to Rothstein,

Said refers to “ideological confections”: ideas like “the clash of civilizations” that, coincidentally, were invoked by many European and American leaders in condemning the terrorist attack. Such “false universals,” Said says, are used to legitimate “corporate profit-taking and political power.” Similar arguments have become commonplace in worldwide protests against “globalization.” (“Attacks”)

Said expressed disdain for Samuel Huntington’s thesis, continually emphasizing that we live in a political world not in a metaphysical one that can be neatly divided into Manichean categories such as “East” and “West.” Indeed, to sort the world by such divisions is to engage in the “clash of ignorance.” Nonetheless, Rothstein continues his attack:

Following [Said’s] logic to its extreme conclusions, and the rejections of universal values and ideals leave little room for unqualified condemnations of a terrorist attack, particularly one against the West. Such an attack, however inexcusable, can be seen as a horrifying airing of a legitimate cultural grievance. Military responses can seem no different. And so the conflict becomes a series of symmetrical confrontations, as is often asserted about battles in Israel. (“Attacks”)

In Rothstein’s opinion, Said’s logic (and postcolonial theory more generally) hold dire implications for intellectual culture and world politics: the issuing of apologies for terrorism committed by individuals of previously colonized countries and presently occupied populations when that terrorism is directed against Western imperialism and the beneficiaries of Western imperialism. For Rothstein, such a ledger sheet logic—that attempts to frame terrorist action according to a “tit for tat”
analysis—allows for a form of nefarious argumentation that conceptualizes terrorism as an attempt to right historical wrongs that have taken place over several centuries. Such historical contextualization, it seems, might lead us to commiserate with terrorists and their aims, possibly legitimating the use of violence against civilians to advance a political agenda.

Rothstein echoed—in seeming approval—Christopher Hitchens, who asked shortly after the 9/11 attacks, “Does anyone suppose that an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would have forestalled the slaughter in Manhattan? It would take a moral cretin to suggest anything of the sort; the cadres of the new jihad make it very apparent that their quarrel is with Judaism and secularism on principle, not with (or just with) Zionism” (“Attacks”). According to Rothstein, Hitchens’ rhetorical question and his forthright answer clearly demonstrated that—for all but the Chomsky Left—the 9/11 perpetrators were not to be understood as fighters against political oppression (Palestinian, Afghani, or otherwise) but instead as nihilistic zealots bent on causing maximum death and destruction for Jew and non-Jew alike. While Hitchens refused to ascribe a specific political agenda to the 9/11 perpetrators, Rothstein—along with such equally problematic figures as Stanley Kurtz and Dinesh D’Souza—viewed postmodern and postcolonial theory as endorsing just such an agenda.

The events of 9/11 automatically brought those objects that have been of critical concern for Said for over thirty years into sharp focus: the understanding and coverage of Islam, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, the Question of Palestine, and the public sphere. What he came to suspect were pseudo-expert discussions on the “Arab mind” and “Islamic resistance to modernity” constantly occupied the center of Said’s efforts to educate Americans and citizens of the Arab world about the pitfalls of such attributions, warning that totalizing assumptions always get one into trouble, particularly in a world of radical heterogeneity. In this sense, 9/11 proved the importance of and reconfigures such Saidian works as The Question of Palestine, Covering Islam, The Politics of Dispossession, After the Last Sky, Orientalism, and Culture and Imperialism.

Providing critical commentary about Said after 9/11 is difficult precisely because the process of describing his immense influence and various political and cultural interventions easily engages one in transferential relations, which presents the danger of becoming implicated in and repeating the very problems Said analyzed. In discussing a figure such as Said in the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict within the American public sphere, one can easily succumb to the repetitive process
of “acting out” against rather than “working through” a particular set of theoretical and historical problems. For Dominick LaCapra, “Acting out is a process but a repetitive one. It’s a process whereby the past, or the experience of the other, is repeated as if it were fully enacted, fully literalized” (Writing 148). In the course of battling various interlocutors, commentators on 9/11—on both the Left and Right—have tended to repeat and become implicated in the very processes they are seeking to elucidate.

In his response to Rothstein and others, Fish claimed that two arguments about postmodernism were being made—often, both at the same time: one, that postmodernism caused the events of 9/11, and that postmodernism was proven wrong by 9/11 (“Don’t” 28). Similarly, many commentators seemed to argue that postcolonial theory—as represented in the work of Said—caused 9/11, and that postcolonial theory—as represented in the work of Said—was proven wrong by 9/11. Both ascriptions, with respect to postmodernism and postcolonialism, are preposterous and do not withstand even the most superficial analysis. The more interesting question, of course, is why anyone would connect seemingly rarefied forms of academic talk to a historic event on the world stage. A perhaps facile answer is that this is what happens when academic theories are “translated” into the language of public discourse and are “transported” into the public sphere. However, members of the Cultural Right appear pretty confident that they have the central tenets of both theories down pat and are equally confident that no more explanation is needed—either for them or the general public.

How does one go about explaining this misplaced confidence in figures such as Rothstein, who never takes the time to examine a single supposedly postmodern or postcolonial text (equating Fish with pomo and equating Said with poco) in the course of excoriating the supposed academic “Left”? Cultural relativism has long been a favorite scapegoat of those wishing to rally a country around a cause while stifling dissent. I found this out firsthand.

On April 24, 2002 I took part in a roundtable entitled “The Courage to Refuse: Fighting Disinformation and Ignorance at the Academy,” a forum that was devoted to analyzing the reductive media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict within my campus community. As soon as the framework for the roundtable was established, I—along with my co-hosts—found myself face to face with a terrible predicament: our advocacy on behalf of Palestinian human rights was perceived by some as advancing potentially anti-Semitic arguments.
Because we wished to insert our own views and voices into this intractable international situation and sought to address the gross asymmetries between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian factions that affected the coverage of the conflict, an immediate reaction followed whereby the "the voices of dissent" were attached to postmodernism and anti-Semitism. Interestingly enough, one of our ideological opponents within the department found us to be "influenced by postmodern relativism" which allowed us to "equate Israeli defensive action with Palestinian terrorism against civilians." As this person stated,

Encouraged by the postmodernist tradition of relativizing the truth, denying reality, and priding oneself on the ability to get to any point from any other, one has to establish a moral equivalence between a small bunch of professional terrorists deliberately targeting Israeli and Palestinian civilians and their Israeli victims trying to defend themselves.

This person went on to claim that

The agenda is thus stacked, deliberately or ignorantly, against Israel, and the result is a foregone conclusion: the right to dissent (i.e., to condemn Israel against any factual and historical data) and [for the organizers] to feel good about themselves (by equating the terrorists and their Israeli and Palestinian victims) will be easily confirmed by the absolute majority of participants. Your voices will be ignored and/or a permanent participant of such events will repeat his mantra that you are indoctrinated while his friends are talking from the heart. The mantra will be applauded by the open and covert terrorist sympathizers in the audience.

Finally, this person—who decided not to attend the discussion—proclaimed, "Any voice of reason will be overrun at a meeting like the one called by the roundtable organizers. They will not be interested in listening to you. This is not what the meeting is about. Anybody interested in the truth or, for that matter, in the well-being of the Israelis and Palestinians alike, has no business to attend." In my brief talk at this roundtable, I drew heavily on the writings of Said, attempting to capture the effects of Zionism from the standpoint of its Palestinian victims. Although Said never called himself a postmodernist, he—in this post-9/11 logical economy where postmodernism can promote anti-Semitism—becomes as controversial a figure as ever because he embodies the Palestinian Question and, perhaps more importantly, because he serves as
a persistent reminder of Palestinian dispossession, grievances, and resistance to the Israeli government's domination and occupation.

Postmodernism and postcolonial theory problematize and interrogate the narratives of nationalism. If we are to draw on Fish's definition of postmodernism, in his eloquent riposte to Rothstein, "as a series of arguments," we understand that postmodernists do not deny that there are things like reality and objectivity or national narratives in the world but do doubt the possibility of ever being able to deploy a vocabulary that will convince our enemies of the rightness of our position and the wrongness of theirs. The fact that no such vocabulary can be deployed, however, should not cause consternation. There are national aspirations, preferred values, and textual authorities from which we draw such vocabularies. However, our enemies have other national aspirations, have other preferred values, and value other textual authorities through which they make sense of reality. These enemies, perhaps, invest phrases like "minimum standard of living," "military-industrial complex," and "the War on Terrorism" with different types of meaning. It might be said that those attempting to understand the different connotations of these phrases for our supposed enemies might be doing postcolonial theory. In other words, postcolonial theorists are attempting to understand Third-World *schadenfreude* or the taking of joy in the misfortune of First-World others.\textsuperscript{13}

As an example, consider Noam Chomsky's analysis of why there were such different reactions "on the two sides of the Irish Sea" to 9/11:

It [9/11] was a historic event. Not unfortunately because of its scale, unpleasant to think about, but in terms of the scale it's not that unusual. I did say it's the worst . . . probably the worst instant human toll of any crime. And that may be true. But there are terrorist crimes with effects a bit more drawn out that are more extreme, unfortunately. Nevertheless, it's a historic event because there was a change. The change was the direction in which the guns were pointed. That's new. Radically new. ("New" 39)

Such statements, while on first appearance somewhat frightening, are quite necessary in answering the now well known question, "Why do they hate us?" "They" cannot necessarily be reduced to Muslim fundamentalists, followers of Osama bin Laden, who are "resisting" modernity.

As the renowned international journalist, Robert Fisk, someone who has interviewed bin Laden, acknowledges, bin Laden would not even know what "modernity" or "modernization" means. Bin Laden's gripe, if
you will, is with the un-Islamic, corrupt regimes of the region (such as Saudi Arabia, which is supported by the United States) that represent Western interests rather than the interests of the indigenous population. In this line of reasoning, bin Laden has tapped into a wide reservoir of sympathy and support within the region, enabling the channeling of regional frustrations into very visible expressions of schadenfreude against the United States, and the oppressive regimes it supports, through acts of violence. These acts of violence, while not condoned by any state, cannot so easily be labeled “weapons of the weak.” Chomsky claims that

It is a very serious analytic error to say as is commonly done, that terrorism is a weapon of the weak. Like other means of violence, it’s primarily a weapon of the strong, overwhelmingly, in fact. It is held to be a weapon of the weak because the strong also control the doctrinal systems and their terror doesn’t count as terror. Now that’s close to universal. I can’t think of a historical exception, even the worst mass murderers view the world that way. (“New” 43)

In these statements, Chomsky—much like Said did—is forcing us to confront our own culture of terror and our contributions, as a nation, to worldwide terror. Although neither Chomsky nor Said embraced the term “postmodernism,” each considers what it might mean to speak of American or Israeli state “terror.”

Such difficult recognitions create a sort of epistemological vertigo whereby those for whom dominance is the norm are subjected to the subject position of their victims. For example, characterizing Israeli “defensive action” against the Palestinians of the West Bank as “terrorism” invites the charge of being purblind to the historical realities of Israel’s birth in the aftermath of World War II and the necessity of that birth to prevent a future Holocaust. Israeli terror, even if it meets the descriptive requirements of “terror,” can never be called “terror.” Postmodern and postcolonial theory are questioning just how tenable this seemingly unassailable tenet can be.

After 9/11, postmodern and postcolonial theory have been condemned as promoting anti-Semitism because both question the cohesiveness of the Zionist narrative, and that questioning, according to some, inevitably leads to objective anti-Semitism. This, of course, raises the very sensitive issue over whether or not pro-Zionists abuse the moral capital generated by the genocidal horrors of the Holocaust, rationalizing the oppressive treatment of the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories,
effectively immunizing Israel against international criticism.\textsuperscript{14} Zionism, as the founding ideology of Jewish nationalism, posits the supreme rights of Jews \textit{qua} Jews to inhabit ancient Palestine. According to some, if you reject or critique that founding ideology or support or commiserate with the victims who have suffered because of that ideology, you are anti-Semitic.\textsuperscript{15} If you are unable to condemn your enemies with a vocabulary of moral absolutes, you are a postmodernist.

In \textit{Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism}, William Bennett claims that after 9/11 he was made angry by the seeming incapacity of some Americans, particularly academics in the humanities, to come to the nation’s aid in what he saw as a crystal clear case of “good versus evil.” His outrage, if you will, betrays the perspective of a disappointed “patriot” who expects a confirmation of his ideological leanings. When his ideological leanings are not confirmed, he scapegoats those who are the bearers of a long overdue message: there are plenty of people in the world who cannot condemn the events of 9/11 in the language of absolutes that Bennett finds so necessary.

The academics for whom Bennett holds contempt are presenting alternative “narratives” or “perspectives” at a time when the narrative of American dominance is under attack. More remarkably, these perspectives are relatively trivial because they merely echo the fact that terror has roots, that serious analysts should examine these roots if they are serious about terrorism, and that when there are legitimate grievances being expressed through desperate acts, these grievances should be addressed rather than dismissed—by the intellectuals of justification—as anti-Americanism or anti-Semitism.

While Fish tells us that postmodernism is just another name for serious thought, Bennett and Rothstein tell us that postmodernism and postcolonialism are forms of academic thinking that weaken moral resolve and patriotic commitment and are attempts to understand or perhaps sympathize with our enemies—the very enemies who wish to see our destruction.\textsuperscript{16} Bennett finds cultural relativism undermining not only patriotism but also U.S. support for Israel. For Bennett, to be a U.S. patriot is to be a supporter of Israel and its unfortunately repressive policies in the Occupied Territories. He even manages to imply that postmodernism or cultural relativism—with its commitment to placing oneself in an enemy’s shoes (perhaps the shoes of a Palestinian)—possesses the potential to advance anti-Semitic arguments (134–36).

If postmodernism (Rothstein and Bennett never name any supposed “postmodern” thinkers, viewing Fish as postmodernism’s provocateur)
allows us to think about the subject positions of the weak and the
dispossessed who are angry with us, it’s Bennett’s contention that such
moves should be disallowed because they rationalize destructive action
and commiseration with a people who harbor ill-will for Americans and
Israelis. After 9/11, under Bennett’s logic, “We are all Israelis now”
(129). According to Bennett, 9/11 paved the way for increased expres­
sions of anti-Semitism as “the radical Left” pointed to the United States’
support of Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—
merely “disputed territories” by Bennett’s lights—and claimed that the
Palestinian issue had become a byword for American-Israeli hegemony
in the Arab world. In making this connection between the Israeli occupa­
tion and the anger of the Arab world through postmodern and postcolonial
theory, the Left—in Bennett’s estimation—has forgotten about the long
history of worldwide anti-Semitism (130–36).

We really should help Bennett be more precise, however: aspects of
postmodern thinking and postcolonial theory advance not anti-Semitic
arguments but post-Zionist arguments. Post-Zionism is the most recent
and, to date, the most effective effort within Israe­

The Israeli-based journal *Theory and Criticism* has been using
postmodern and postcolonial thinkers in advancing the post-Zionist
debates for over ten years. Drawing on figures such as Said, Spivak,
Bhabha, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard, post-Zionist scholars such as
Daniel Boyarin, Michael Gluzman, and Sara Chinski have dramatically
exposed the inadequacies and harsh realities of Zionist categories for
ethnic minorities (Palestinians, Mitzrahi and Sephardic Jews) and women
within a rapidly and continually evolving Israeli society.

Other thinkers such as Baruch Kimmerling, Illan Pappe, Neve Gor­
don, Anton Shammas, and Emile Habiby also question such Zionist
categories but do not draw on the same postcolonial and postmodern
figures. Postmodern and postcolonial theory are helping to loosen the grip
of the Zionist hegemony in Israeli academic institutions. Kimmerling
claims that the vast majority of “contemporary academic historians and
social scientists in Israel are not only Zionists, but also ‘proudly attached’
to their Zionist convictions when producing their historiographic output,
no less than the founding fathers of their vocation” (47).

All of these post-Zionist writers argue that “the refusal to acknowl­
dge the centrality of power relations occludes the actual conditions of
Israeli life, particularly as they relate to Palestinian Arabs both inside and
outside of Israel,” and they “find unacceptable the taken-for-granted
discursive framework within which Israeli public debates are carried out”
(Silberstein 167). New Historians contribute to the elimination of this
form of repression of historical fact, and therefore their work may be
regarded as therapeutic.

In some sense, Bennett seems to suffer from the same anxieties that
plague Israeli-Zionist historians in their fight with post-Zionist revision­
ists. Bennett’s and Rothstein’s rhetoric sounds much like the angry
musings of the Israeli writer, Aharon Megged, who accused the New
Historians of “disseminating anti-Zionist propaganda and declare[d] that
anyone who calls the Zionist movement and policies colonialist identi­
fied with the Palestinians—i.e., Israel’s threatening and destructive
other” (Brunner 283).17

Anita Shapira, the author of *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to
Force (1881–1948)*, writes, “Some of the ‘revisionists’ have sought to
give renewed legitimacy to the politicization of research, justifying this
move by a vulgarized version of postmodernism: there is no reality but in
the eyes of the beholder” (26). Shapira goes on to recite some *idées reçues*
about deconstruction, claiming that—according to its internal logic—
every narrative is equal in value to every other and that, by extension, the
revisionist historians are claiming that an equivalence can been drawn
between the Zionist and Palestinian narrative (the Jewish Question and
the Palestinian Question). Shapira’s elaborate condescension and trou­
bling misunderstandings of deconstruction suggest that she must find
some way to put the newest generation of Israeli historians in their proper
place, claiming that history has “ceased to relate to what actually
happened because even facts are an illusion.”18

Thus, a depiction of what did not happen has equal weight: why did
Israel fail to reach a peace agreement with its neighbors in the early
1950s? Why was the War of Independence not prevented? Why was a
Palestinian state not established in 1948? Why did the Zionist leadership
not save European Jewry? The very formulation of the question is
accusatory: from the advantage of hindsight and from the standpoint of
the present, the heroes of the past are forced to account for their deeds—
not only for what they did but for what they did not do—before a self­
righteous tribunal whose members have no doubt they would have acted
more wisely and certainly more ethically (27).

Shapira seems to be telling these “New Historians” to give up their
revisionist historiography with its “dubious” methods, to acknowledge
the generational gap that separates them from their Zionist counterparts,
to understand that they did not fight the founding wars of the nation as these counterparts did, and to be thankful that their Israeli birthright was ensured.

Just as Bennett tells American academics in the humanities to toe the ideological line when it comes to waging the new War on Terror, Shapira and Megged admonishes the “New Historians” to grow up before assessing the sins of their Zionist ancestors in their dealings with the Palestinians. Generational divides, as well as disciplinary methodological divides, are exacerbated in times of national and ideological crisis, inevitably making themselves the very subject of post-crisis analyses.

While Zionist historians use a positivist approach to understanding of history, post-Zionist scholars use a pluralistic/multiperspectival paradigm that might very well be deemed “postmodern” and “postcolonial” in its approach. The debates between Zionists and post-Zionists almost mirror the debates between the cultural Right and Left after 9/11 in the United States. Zionism—like the narrative of objectivity in the American culture wars after 9/11—has turned into an ideology, in the strict sense: an instrument employed by the established dominant groups to defend both their interests and the status quo. In the instances of both the Israeli and American Right, representations of a nation’s “collective memory” are at stake, with post-Zionists wishing to write Israel’s history from the standpoint of its Others and postmodernists and postcolonial theorists wishing to understand American imperialism from the standpoint of those it has most affected.

The “post-Zionist” predicament, like the post-9/11 objectivity predicament, is thus one of pure anomie: a lack of clear and agreed value preferences and ideological injunctions, which could endow courageous and innovative decisions with general approval and legitimacy. Said, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, wrote,

The intellectual’s role is first to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by the combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity—who tend to work in terms of falsified unities, the manipulation of demonized or distorted representations or undesirable and/or excluded populations, and the propagation of heroic anthems sung in order to sweep all before them. (“Public”)

Post-Zionist scholars in Israel, and those who embrace the postmodern or postcolonial label in the U.S., are engaging contemporary questions about national identity that Said problematized and refined throughout
his scholarly career: challenging cultural dogma and orthodoxy by deploying contrapuntal readings that examine “structures of attitude and reference.”

In a book filled with diatribes against postmodernism and the supposed provocateur of postmodernism, Stanley Fish—whom Bennett attempts to compare to Charles Manson, claiming that Manson simply took Fish’s views on relativism to their extreme conclusion—Bennett asks, “Why [under the logic of relativists] should Manson languish in a jail cell, while Fish is the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at a prestigious university?” (69). Bennett again and again finds postmodernism or cultural relativism incapable of discriminating between Israeli defensive action and Palestinian terrorism and for its incapacity for paying close attention to moral and political messages. Compare Bennett’s comment to Anita Shapira’s:

History, as a chronicle of injustice and misery—that is the post-Zionist message. History becomes a sentimental description, in which we are always supposed to identify with the vanquished and criticize the victors. Thus, the very fact that Zionism turned out to be a victorious movement makes it amoral. (33)

Shapira, like Bennett, views postmodernism and postcolonialism—as deployed by the post-Zionists—as issuing an indictment against strength, stability, conquerors, and state founders. Of course, it is not as if one needed postmodernism, postcolonialism, or post-Zionism to understand that in this conflict where one stands determines what one sees.

These tendencies to connect postmodernism’s and postcolonial theory’s supposed “softness” on moral and political problems to an incapacity to see the enemy in our midst are discursive attempts to attain cognitive stabilization—that is, they are rhetorical moves that ground the contingency of events and preferences that shape our world within a framework that is consistent and recognizable. Clichés about and easily drawn equations between expressions of Third-World nationalism, particularly Palestinian nationalism, and terrorism help us to avoid psychomachia—the internal division and conflict that produce the conditions of possibility so very necessary for the stabilization and legitimation of beliefs and discursive acts—and, more importantly, self-blame and self-interrogation. It is somewhat disingenuous, but perhaps human, to automatically impugn the motives of suicide bombers without trying to assess the grievances they bring with them. The language of
moral condemnation inevitably uses an axiological system that allows for epistemic self-privileging and its concomitant, epistemic scapegoating. Barbara Herrnstein Smith persuasively demonstrates that axiological systems require an unexplained privileging of value that is circular and that ultimately this privileging if critically examined always fails—as it always must.24

In his influential That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession, Peter Novick states, “A central problem for any new cognitive structure is to legitimize its epistemological foundation. This may involve a myth of an individual genius or hero whose personal qualities exemplify the way in which the new knowledge is acquired. . . . Without some such myth, cognitive structures lack grounding and authority” (3). Although Novick was referring to the concept of “objectivity” within the discipline of professional historians, I think some useful lessons can be gathered from his insights.25

After 9/11, terrorism—as the weapon of our enemies—becomes this myth that will surprise us at any moment within the cognitive structure of “objectivity” whereby states act justly and those resisting racist occupations act illegitimately.26 Objectivity demands that this must be so.27 Barraged with idée reçues about al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade and Hamas, this myth and cognitive structure stabilize the aspirations, textual authorities, and heroes that a nation falls back upon in times of crisis.28 Forms of thought that question the centrality of these aspirations, textual authorities, and heroes will be ripe for attack in times of national crisis. The movement of previously neglected perspectives into the public sphere creates an ideological clash between dominant and marginalized groups that generates intellectual controversy all along the political spectrum. This observation has proven especially true in Said’s advocacy for Palestinian self-determination in the American imagination.29

Media coverage of the Israel/Palestine conflict in the American public sphere comprises one of the most scandalous chapters in the history of journalism: complex historical events, such as those leading to Israel’s birth in 1948, are completely erased within mainstream American commentary. Often, those who attempt to introduce this complex history into mainstream discourse face slander and accusation. In his introduction to Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Question of Palestine, Said writes, “Frequently, the Zionist mouthpiece simply attacks one’s ethnic identity (‘He’s a Palestinian—or a self-hating Jew—
after all') or one's general political tendency ('He's a well known Left apologist')." Although this might appear to be a hyperbolic and offensive statement, it does—at the very least—warrant examination. The framing of the gross asymmetries that exist between the Israelis and the Palestinians by American journalists often completely erases the very complicated history of 1947–48 that stands at the background of Israel's birth, while justifying vile and racist stereotypes of Arabs. For example, one might easily lose sight of the fact that Israel is engaged in a military occupation that violates articles of the Fourth Geneva Convention, U.N. Resolutions 194, 242, and Article 13 of the Declaration of Human Rights. Palestinian resistance to Israel's illegal occupation is guaranteed under international law and is a human right according to the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights of 1949. The laudatory chorus that dominates the U.S. journalistic scene (Thomas Friedman, Fouad Ajami, Daniel Pipes, Steve Emerson, and Judith Miller) has so readily effaced the basic aspects of the conflict that "condemnations of Palestinian terrorism" and "calls for the defeat of threats against Israel's existence" have become just so many easily formulated assertions that pass with facile piety and craven hypocrisy.

Those who advocate on behalf of Palestinian self-determination in the American public sphere, though their numbers are relatively small, directly threaten the institutions and ideologies that defend the repressive policies of the Israeli government and an increasingly militarized Israel. Drawing on the very real history and imagery of the destruction of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazi killing machine during the Holocaust, these institutions and ideologies sometimes abuse this historically generated moral capital in attempts to justify Israeli government atrocities in the Occupied Territories, claiming that the Palestinians wish to kill Jews simply because they are Jews, confirming the Zionist thesis that meta-historical anti-Semitism necessitates the existence of a state of the Jewish people rather than an Israeli nation of its citizens.

Both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian partisans have capitalized on Holocaust imagery, invoking the phrase "genocide" to justify one side's violence against the other. Approaching this aspect of the conflict is naturally very sensitive because one inevitably ends up drawing comparisons between Jewish suffering and other types of group suffering. Making such comparisons, and commiserating with the plight of the Palestinian people in the American public sphere, can have repercussions.
Despite all of the vilification and slander that Edward Said's name endured throughout a remarkable career, it still remains as a remnant of the most intransigent resistance movement of the twentieth century and acts as a metonym for expressions of Palestinian nationalism symbolized by the Intifada. To use the word "Palestine," as Said continually pointed out, is to commit an immediate act of resistance and political assertion against Zionist erasure. The attempts to erase the history and memory of the Palestinian people are met by the indefatigable efforts of individuals such as Said, Chomsky, Rashid Khalidi, Ibrahim and Janet Abu-Lughod, Norman Finkelstein, and most recently and valiantly, Rachel Corrie. The asymmetries that exist between Pro-Zionist and Palestinian power are often overlooked or forgotten in the American public sphere because of various cultural and political forces.

While it is perhaps impossible to provide a counterweight to the influence of these forces, one can safely interpret Said—as he enacted, through his political commitments, a defense of the Palestinian people's fundamental humanity—as a sign of Palestinian resistance. Said's scholarship and political activism seemed to always place the plight of the Palestinian people and their quest for self-determination in front of an evasive and complicit American audience. The bloody events of 1947-1949 and the creation of what Benny Morris has called the "Palestinian refugee problem" are rarely discussed—if even known—in the American public sphere in all the media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that presents decontextualized and dehistoricized images that blame the victims and label them as terrorists.

Said never attempted to rationalize or explain away terrorism. He always argued that peaceful coexistence remains the answer to the conflict with the Palestinians being embraced as "equals" by the Israelis. Recently declassified Israeli documents have allowed for the retelling of Israeli history by the "new historians." For example, Benny Morris and Tom Segev have revealed how the tragic dispossession of the Palestinians was the price of Israel's birth. Morris claims,

The new history is one of the signs of a maturing Israel (though, no doubt, there are those who say it is a symptom of decay and degeneration). What is now being written about Israel's past seems to offer us a more balanced and more "truthful" view of that country's history than what has been offered hitherto. It may also in some obscure way serve the purposes of peace and reconciliation between the warring tribes of that land. ("New" 102)
In *After the Last Sky*, Said states, "There has been no misfortune worse for us than that we are ineluctably viewed as the enemies of the Jews. No moral and political fate worse, none at all, I think: no worse, there is none" (133). While always recognizing the horrific plight of twentieth-century European Jewry and never questioning the right of the existence of a Jewish homeland, Said accepted his moral and political fate with great dignity because the burden of history required him to do so.41

By challenging the dominant Zionist myths that create the reality that is the Israel-Palestine conflict in the American public sphere, Said threatened one of the most powerful ideological hegemonies in the U.S.: pro-Zionist institutions and organizations.42 As a Palestinian within a culture that wishes to erase and forget that there are Palestinians, Said never allowed readers to forget the pangs of dispossession, deprivation, banishment, exile, torture, house demolition, anguish, and migration—the constant condition of those living under a U.S-funded Israeli occupation.43

If you find yourself, as that professor mentioned at the beginning of this essay, under the glare of the television lights, facing down a determined U.S. Senator, who asks, "Are you or have you ever been an admirer of Edward Said?" perhaps you might consider providing the following answer: "No, Senator, not just an admirer but an indebted reader and an enriched human being. Perhaps you can be that, too."

Until American taxpayers muster the moral and intellectual courage to face their role in the perpetuation of the endless cycles of violence and occupation in the Middle East, there will be no peace—not even prospects for it—only the continual deployment of a cynical *real politik* that will ensure the destruction of all involved parties. To ignore these crucial issues is to engage in a morally depraved act that may eventually endanger human survival—not just Arab, Jewish, Israeli, American, or European. A recognition of our common humanity will be the first step in solidifying the prospects for peace in the future.44

As rhetoricians and composition teachers, it is incumbent upon each of us to reject the intellectual cowardice that taints the "narration" of the history of the Israel/Palestine conflict and to risk the political and professional ostracism that often tames otherwise fierce liberal critics, who are frequently at the forefront of criticizing human rights abuses at home and in other parts of the world but choose an embarrassing silence when it comes to the Israeli government's repressive treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.45
Creating facts on the ground—to enforce a false, self-justifying, and comforting reality—will no longer suffice as either an intellectual or rhetorical performance: if we are to count ourselves among those living within a universe where ethical imperatives have any effect whatsoever, the story of Palestinian dispossession must be heard. Edward Said's critical corpus created the conditions of possibility for that story's telling; indeed, Said sought—often demanded—the world's "permission to narrate" the Palestinian viewpoint. Because of his scholarly and political resistance, no one can simply forget the Palestinians. Indeed, that rhetoric of resistance continues because the spirit of dignity and defiance Said exemplified—throughout his life as a literary critic, political activist, and public intellectual—lives on.46

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**Notes**

1. As will become clear in this paper, the rhetoric of the American and Israeli (pro-Zionist) Right is similar in the enforcement of "objectivity and "truth." Consider Said's reflection in *The Question of Palestine*: "How [Zionism] drew and where it stood when it drew deserve attention [here], because it is a perfect instance of how propaganda, politicized scholarship, and ideological information serve power, implement policy, and at the same time, can appear to be 'objective truth'" (26). Also see Mailloux. Rothstein responded to Mailloux's article with his "Pomo."

2. For a discussion of the problematic uses of the term "postcolonialism," see Anne McClintock and Shohat.

3. In this regard, see Said "Clash" and Huntington *Clash.*

4. Said writes, "American public discourse has been grappling most energetically with our enemies, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, the axis of evil, and so on, but not with any particularly useful results that I know of. Reflective, disinterested research on delicate matters of faith or history appears to be out of the question—and isn't what the market requires, at any rate. The context and framework of discussion and writing about Islam is too inflamed, too urgent, too locked up in questions of defense, war, the clash of civilizations (to say nothing of such equally fractious issues as American values, freedom, and righteousness, and the crusade on behalf of the "West"), for anything that could be considered an adequate understanding of Islam's huge complexity and its basic resistance to reductive formulas. That obviously doesn't mean that writers will not try, or will not attempt syntheses that answer the need for quick pseudo-understanding" ("Impossible" 70).

5. Said states, "Above all, 'we' cannot go on pretending that 'we' live in a world of our own; certainly, as Americans, our government is deployed literally
all over the globe—militarily, politically, economically. So why do we suppose that what we say and do is neutral, when in fact it is full of consequences for the rest of the human race? In our encounters with other cultures and religions, therefore, it would seem that the best way to proceed is not to think like governments or armies or corporations but rather to remember and act on the individual experiences that really shape our lives and those of others. . . . Avoid the trots and the manuals, give a wide berth to security experts and formulators of the us-versus-them dogma, and, above all, look with the deepest suspicion on anyone who wants to tell you the real truth about Islam and terrorism, fundamentalism, militancy, fanaticism, etc” (“Impossible” 74).

6. For critical background on the concept of “transference,” see LaCapra, Writing 142–43 and Lowenberg. Also see LaCapra Representing 205–23; Friedlander 39–55; Caruth; and Leys.

7. For an example, see Kramer 27–43.

8. Fish writes, “The point of the public sphere is obvious: it is supposed to be the location of those standards and measures that belong to no one but apply to everyone. It is to be the location of the universal. The problem is not that there is no universal—the universal, the absolutely true, exists, and I know what it is. The problem is that you know, too, and that we know different things, which puts us right back where we were [a few sentences ago], armed with universal judgments that are irreconcilable, all dressed up and nowhere to go for an authoritative adjudication (“Postmodern” 37).

9. For a perhaps more convincing albeit shameful analysis, see Walzer; for a less critical appraisal see Berkowitz. Also see Street.

10. In response to Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin’s response to his “Ideology of Difference,” Said wrote in 1989: “What they [the Boyarin brothers] cannot accept is that the Palestinian and Israeli positions are not symmetrical today, and whatever the horrors of Jewish suffering in the past it does not excuse, abrogate, or exonerate the practices of the Jewish state against the Palestinian people” (“Exchange” 636). Marc Ellis writes, “With the essay on difference and his response to the Boyarins, Said’s discussion of Zionism and Israel, and the role of intellectuals comes full circle. His two important insights—that Jewish intellectuals have, in the main, become experts in legitimation, and that the ideology of difference, no matter how carefully disguised or argued, is ultimately an assertion of choseness reinforced with the apparatus of the state of Israel—are clearly and forcefully enunciated” (61).

11. I will not divulge the identity of this individual but only say that, in a communication widely-circulated within the department, he or she attempted to initiate a boycott of the roundtable through what might be called “a minor propaganda campaign.” Another individual—believing that the roundtable was deliberately stacked against Israel—sent a communication to one of my roundtable co-hosts entitled “20 Facts on the Middle East” that was written by Jack Kemp and Jeanne Kirkpatrick. The implication was clear: anyone speaking up for Palestinian human rights was badly misinformed.
12. See Said *Question*; Shohat; and Aronson.

13. Many were disturbed to see the jubilant celebration of the 9/11 attacks in the West Bank.

14. On this topic and related matters, see Novick *Holocaust*.

15. On these matters, see Silberstein *Postzionism*; Novick *Holocaust*; Finkelstein *Holocaust*; Cole; and LaCapra.

16. As I was preparing the final version of this essay, a fierce debate was emerging over H.R. bill 3077, which calls for the creation of Title VI oversight boards to monitor the development of curricula within Area Studies and Foreign Language Departments. See Kurtz “Testimony.”

17. According to Brunner, “Megged leaves no doubt that as a fighting participant in the founding state he has a strong personal identification with Israel’s collective self-image. Those who interpret this conflict from an angle that differs from that of the Zionist actors are accused of completely negating the existence of the latter” (284–85).

18. Shapira writes, “If the deconstructionist trends followed by some of the “new historians” gains strength, then it will become clear we are facing a total crisis in all that concerns the human sciences and the domain of history in particular. For if no historical reality exists to be uncovered, if there are no agreed-upon research principles of what is permitted and forbidden, accepted, and unaccepted, if there is no methodological rules, then there can be no common language between historians” (34).


20. See Gedi and Elam; and Brunner.

21. See Cohen 211

22. Discussions of “contrapuntal reading” and “structures of attitude and reference” appear most prominently in Said *Culture*.

23. Also see Khalidi. Harvard law professor, Alan Dershowitz, in his *Why Terrorism Works*, writes, “It is impossible to understand the terrible events of September 11, 2001, without understanding the dynamics—and the success—of Palestinian terrorism” (36; emphasis added). In September of 2003, Dershowitz—accused of plagiarizing parts of his *The Case for Israel* from Joan Peters’ *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine*—attributed attacks against him as being motivated by anti-Semitism and anger at his Pro-Israel book. See www.normanfinkelstein.com for full coverage of the controversy.

24. See Smith 54–55 and 96–99. She writes, “The project of axiology—that is, the justification of the claim of certain norms, standards, and judgments to objective validity, which is to say demonstration of the noncontingency of the contingent—must, by the definition of it just given, fail. And, in a sense, it always does fail. That is, all axiological arguments, no matter what their epistemological tradition, or explicit logical method, whether empiricist or rationalist, positivist or phenomenological, and also no matter what the domain—aesthetic, cognitive, or moral—of the judg-
ments and standards at issue, enact a characteristic array of ultimately self-canceling moves” (54).

25. Novick describes the “objectivity question in the historical profession” as being similar to “nailing jelly to the wall.” He writes, “The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian’s conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressure or political influence, and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias—not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another. Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all of this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties: the history’s primary allegiance is to “the objective historical truth,” and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance toward that goal” (2). Also see Haskell 145–73.

26. Kimmerling claims that historiography is “part of a sociopolitical hegemony and is committed to serving it” and that to challenge a hegemonic body of knowledge is “far more complicated than the struggle against a politically directed elite.” He writes, “Any dissonant (“revisionist”) voice is perceived as an assault threatening the cosmological and ontological world view of the nationalist players and their rules of the game” (58).

27. In the United States Code and in military manuals, “terrorism” is defined as “the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to attain political or religious ideological goals through intimidation, coercion, or instilling of fear” (qtd. in Chomsky, “New 48”). Noam Chomsky argues that this definition cannot be accepted by the United States and Israel because all of the wrong consequences follow: by this definition, the United States and Israel are the leading international terrorist states. This definition of terrorism, as it turns out, mirrors quite closely the definition of “counterinsurgency” or “counterterrorism.” On these matters, see Michael McClintock. In addition, the definition of “terrorism” mentioned above poses a propaganda problem with respect to the Palestinian Intifada in the Occupied Territories: the U.N. has established that this definition does not apply to people resisting racist occupations or suffering under human rights violations.

28. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Said wrote, “Political rhetoric in the U.S. has overridden [reasoned deliberation] by flinging about words like ‘terrorism’ and ‘freedom’ whereas, of course, such large abstractions have mostly hidden sordid material interests, the efficacy of the oil, defense and Zionist lobbies now consolidating their hold on the entire Middle East and an age-old religious hostility to (and ignorance of) ‘Islam’ that takes new forms every day. The commonest thing is to get TV commentary, run stories, hold forums, or announce studies on Islam and violence or on Arab terrorism, or any such thing, using the predictable experts (the likes of Judith Miller, Fouad Ajami, and Steve
Emerson) to pontificate and throw around generalities without context or real history. Why no one thinks of holding seminars on Christianity (or Judaism for that matter) and violence is too obvious to ask” (Al-Haram http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/612/op2.htm).

29. White writes, “In fact, its [Zionist interpretations of the Holocaust] truth, as a historical interpretation, consists precisely [in] its effectiveness in justifying a wide range of current Israeli political policies that, from the standpoint of those who articulate them, are crucial to the security and indeed the very existence of the Jewish people. Whether one supports these policies or condemns them, they are undeniably a product, at least in part, of a conception of Jewish history that is conceived to be meaningless to Jews insofar as this history was dominated by agencies, processes, and groups who encouraged or permitted policies that led to the ‘final solution’ of ‘the Jewish Question.’ The totalitarian, not to say fascist, aspects of Israeli treatment of the Palestinians on the West Bank may be attributable primarily to a Zionist ideology that is detestable to anti-Zionists, Jews, and non-Jews alike. But who is to say that this ideology is a product of a distorted conception of history in general and of the history of the Jews in the Diaspora specifically? . . . So far as I can see, the effort of the Palestinian people to mount a politically effective response to Israeli policies entails the production of a similarly effective ideology, complete with an interpretation of their history capable of endowing it with a meaning that it has hitherto lacked,” a project to which Edward Said wishes to contribute (80).

30. Said writes, “The sad truth is that where discussion of Israel is concerned, the United States is well below Israel itself in norms of truth and methods of debate. Here there is a perfect illustration of Richard Hofstader’s ‘paranoid style’ in American political life. This is not, alas, a matter of the left being better than the right. The young progressives who publish Radical History conscientiously avoid discussion of the Palestinians. Those who know better are cowed by the Israeli lobby. It is true that the American-Israel Political Action Committee has been criticized in the press for its campus campaigns against those who dared to speak out against Israel or to support Palestinian rights; yet how many deans and faculty members have raised their voices against the censorship and blackmail still applied by AIPAC against ‘enemies’ on the nation’s campuses?” (“Conspiracy” 30).

31. Chomsky writes, “Resolution 242, of course, is completely rejectionist and says nothing about Palestinian rights; in fact, the word ‘Palestinians’ is not mentioned. There is a phrase about the just rights of refugees, but only in passing. So Resolution 242 is a totally rejectionist resolution, with nothing about Palestinians, and the fact that the permanent settlement is based on it is an important victory for the United States, one that was reestablished in December 1993” (“United” 78). Israel is in violation of sixty-five U.N. resolutions and frequently stands alone, with the United States, in defying an overwhelming international consensus on the justness of the Palestinian refugee question and
the illegality of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Also see Boyle.

32. See Said, *Question* 40–41. The growing peace movement in Israel, among both Jews and non-Jews, holds out the prospect for a genuine peace dialogue. A group calling itself “The Geneva Accords” is seeking to circumvent the Israeli government and the PLO, believing that people of goodwill—not governments—can end the conflict. In the same vein, one would be remiss in not acknowledging the *Refuseniks*, military reservists who are refusing to serve in the Occupied territories because—as these nearly six hundred reservists see it—the politics of occupation is destroying the humanity of both Israelis and Palestinians.

33. See van Teeffele 127.

34. Consider the case in Finkelstein, “How.” Also see Findley *Dare*; Tivnan; Cockburn and St. Clair; and Said *Question*.

35. One might object to this claim by pointing out that President George W. Bush has called for the creation of a Palestinian state. However, there is a huge difference between Palestine and a Palestinian state. The use of the name “Palestine” acknowledges that a cohesive people, the Palestinians, existed in what is now present-day Israel and confirms the forceful removal of the Palestinians from that area in 1947–48. Bernard-Donals writes, “I am reminded of how high they [the stakes involved for a generation fifty years removed from the disaster] are this year [2000] by my eight-year old’s question about the armed police officer stationed outside the door of our synagogue as we entered to recite the *Kol Nidre*, by the violence in Jerusalem, and by the cries of ‘death to Jews’ that have been heard coming out of the mouths of stone-throwing men in Ramallah and those of demonstrators here at home” (956). One wonders if Bernard-Donals can bring himself to say the words “Palestinian,” “illegal occupation,” “legitimate resistance,” or “Fourth Geneva Convention,” without at the same time hinting at their “anti-Semitic” implications.

36. Corrie was murdered by the Israeli Defense Force on March 16, 2003 when she was run over by a sixty-ton Caterpillar bulldozer in Rafah (Gaza) as she protected the home of a Palestinian family against demolition.

37. See Said “American.”

38. See Van Teeffele 130.


40. Interestingly enough, Morris undertook a dramatic reversal in some of his advocacy for Israeli negotiations with the PLO and Arafat in February 2002, claiming that today the Palestinian leadership really denies Israel’s legitimacy. See his “Peace?” For a response to Morris’s *Guardian* article, see Shlaim. Also see Finkelstein.

41. Marc Ellis writes, “In the entire body of Said’s work there is never a hint
of overt and or covert anti-Semitism, nor even the construction of an argument that cleverly conceals such a view. From the beginning of Said's writing on Orientalism and Palestine, his sensitivity to Jews and Judaism is evident, along with a willingness to take both seriously in the forms that impact the Western perception of the East and the Israeli perception of the Palestinians” (62).

42. See Alexander; Halkin; and Weiner “My.” Ellis writes, “Though Jews have continually and with great difficulty fought the myth of anti-Semitism, Said presents, indeed embodies, a nightmare of epic proportions, because his criticism is of Jewish power that is abusive and real” (65).

43. Ellis claims, “If the entry of point of Jews into modernity is an intellectual and ethical probity, thereby allowing the claim of distinctiveness in secular times, what is left of that distinctiveness when Jewish intellectuals are found, like many non-Jewish intellectuals, to be in service to the state, and when Jews who wield power are found, like non-Jews who wield power, to be unjust, coercive and self-aggrandizing? If there is no difference, is there any content to Jewishness in the contemporary world?” (Israel 64).

44. See Hersh; and Chomsky Fateful. Israel’s nuclear arsenal poses a tremendous risk to the stability of the Middle East region. Citing Warner Farr, Chomsky states, “Like other analysts, [Warner] assumes that one ‘purpose of Israeli nuclear weapons, not often stated, but obvious, is their use on the United States,’ presumably to ensure consistent U.S. support for Israeli policies. The concept that ‘we will go crazy’ (‘nishtagea’) if challenged goes back to the Labor governments of the 1950s.” See http://www.americanempireproject.com/bookpage.asp?ISBN=0805074007 for this note, which does not appear in the print version of Chomsky’s Hegemony. Also see Zunes.

45. Yehoshafat Harkabi, one of Israeli’s former leading intelligence officers, writes, “Intellectuals are in the habit of expressing themselves in moderation and detached explanations, but the severity of the present situation is such as to require strong words” (195).

46. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable and careful readings of this essay by Professors Noam Chomsky, Norman G. Finkelstein, Dominick LaCapra, Victor Vitanza, Michael Kleine, and Luciana Bohne. This essay is dedicated to the memory of the late Professor Edward W. Said and Rachel Corrie—two resistance fighters.

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