




BOOK FORUM

## Edward Said and Philosophy

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### Abstract

This article brings to the forefront Timothy Brennan's emphasis on Edward Said's engagement with philosophy. An attempt is made to reconstruct some of Brennan's claims about Said's views on the relationship between mental representations and the external world. It is shown that Said rejected naïve or direct realism in favor of representationalism. It is also argued that, despite being seen as a post-modern thinker, Said subscribed to a version of the correspondence theory of truth. Said embraced some form of standpoint epistemology, but he did not think that this had any direct bearing on how we should think about what makes a given claim true. Finally, an attempt is made to understand the relationship between Said's project and the classical Marxist project of ideology critique, as well as contemporary attempts to develop an epistemology of ignorance.

**Keywords:** Edward Said; Orientalism; philosophy; literary theory; postcolonial theory; Marxism

One of the most salient elements of Brennan's intellectual biography of Edward Said is his emphasis on Said's engagement with philosophy. Said's encounters with philosophy and his interventions as a philosopher are emphasized throughout the book. Brennan's careful research allows us to track Said's encounters with philosophy in his formative years, from the influence of the philosopher of art, Arthur Szathmary, during his undergraduate years at Princeton through to his lifelong struggle and relationship with the Lebanese philosopher and diplomat Charles Malik, who studied with both Alfred North Whitehead and Martin Heidegger. Brennan's meticulous research also uncovers Said's interest in history and philosophy of science, an interest that is not apparent in Said's published work.<sup>1</sup> Brennan also emphasizes the influence of Said's encounter

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (New York: Picador Books, 2021), 76.

with Giambattista Vico's *New Science*. On Brennan's interpretation of Said's encounter with Vico, among the elements that he found especially attractive in Vico is the idea "that no one people, race, or religion has priority in the story of human civilization."<sup>2</sup> This is a motif that dominates Said's thought, and it, in part, motivates Said's critical project in his most famous book; *Orientalism*.<sup>3</sup> However, this central motif would also seem to be in tension with another element in Brennan's account, namely Said's effort to "locate an original, completely indigenous, third-world theory."<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on "complete indigeneity" seems quite uncharacteristic of the general tenor of Said's thought, which tends to emphasize the impossibility of arriving at the requisite level of cultural purity that the pursuit of "complete indigeneity" presupposes.

Although Brennan's emphasis on Said's philosophical orientation is salutary, there are some problematic elements when it comes to Brennan's exposition of what he takes to be Said's philosophical positions. Brennan has a tendency to overstate the philosophical originality of the literary theory milieu of the 1970s from whose standpoint Said theorized, and to paper over some of the weaknesses that are evident in Said's philosophical interventions. This is especially evident in his account of the critical reception of Said's *Orientalism*. Brennan accuses Said's critics of failing to engage with his philosophical positions, which formed the point of departure for his analysis in *Orientalism*. When it comes to the philosophical positions which informed Said's approach, however, Brennan overstates the philosophical originality of these positions and makes it seem that they would have been baffling and unfamiliar to those located outside the disciplinary nexus of literary theory during the 1970s. For example, Brennan writes that Said's "point was simply that the reality 'out there' is inaccessible without shared conceptions communicated by words. All reality for us, insofar as we are human and not gods is necessarily mediated by language, even though that reality may be physically independent of our thoughts."<sup>5</sup> Brennan essentially portrays Said as rejecting naive or direct realism in favor of representationalism (these positions are usually spelled out in the context of debates about the nature of perception, although Brennan's framing is in terms of the relationship between "thoughts" and reality). Said seems to hold that we only ever have direct access to subjective mental states that represent a mind-independent reality, but we never have any direct unmediated cognitive access to a mind-independent reality.<sup>6</sup>

Brennan writes that "this view would have been common sense to anyone schooled in literary theory in the 1970s."<sup>7</sup> Yet Brennan fails to notice that this view is essentially the view that was held by many early modern European philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, that is, those who followed what Thomas Reid (who certainly did not take the aforementioned view to be in accord with common sense!) described as the "Way of Ideas" or the "ideal system" in his

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 172.

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1978]).

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 296.

<sup>5</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 206.

*An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*.<sup>8</sup> That Said himself was adopting a position that was common among early modern European philosophers is not in any way problematic in itself (although it does raise some interesting questions about his pursuit of a “completely indigenous” theory). Moreover, Said’s version of the “Way of Ideas” is, of course, much more attuned to the influence of social relations and specific histories that condition the formation of these ideas, which mediate our access to reality more than the version of it that was adhered to by many early modern European philosophers.<sup>9</sup> Yet it is important to point out that insofar as Said, as Brennan claims, was taking over this position from the ferment of literary theory in the 1970s, he was taking on a philosophical position with a long history, including a history of criticism by proponents of common sense such as Thomas Reid, going back to at least the early modern period. Moreover, at a more fundamental level, Brennan never really provides us with a reconstruction of Said’s arguments in favor of representationism and against naive or direct realism (e.g., appeals to illusionary experiences). Said, as his colleague and friend at Columbia, the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami notes, was averse to formulating arguments explicitly.<sup>10</sup> One wishes that Brennan would have strengthened his case for Said’s philosophical acumen by focusing on explicitly reconstructing his arguments and laying them out as clearly as possible.

With respect to Said’s views on truth, Brennan’s account of Said is interesting because it emphasizes that while Said played a crucial role in introducing many of the key thinkers who are subsumed, rightly or wrongly, under the nebulous category of “postmodern philosophy” to American academia, such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault,<sup>11</sup> he himself seems, in the end, to have held onto a rather old-fashioned correspondence theory of truth, namely the view that a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds with the relevant element of reality (which, as we have seen previously, is mind-independent in a significant way for Said). This is evidenced by Brennan’s account of Said’s views on interpretation. Brennan notes that while Said initially held the view “that there is no such thing as the correct interpretation,” he moved away from this view. One way to spell this out is to say that, for Said, the truth or falsehood of a proposition in the domain of literary interpretation is a function of facts about the text (i.e., truth is defined in terms of correspondence with the relevant facts). Brennan points out that as Said became more and more involved with the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) in the 1970s, the importance of appeals to facts as truth-makers became more and more salient to him.<sup>12</sup> It is not difficult to see how someone like Said who devoted himself to pointing out contradictions between Zionist narratives and facts would have held some version of a correspondence theory of truth.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000 [1764]), II. IV, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 45–46.

<sup>10</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, “Akeel Bilgrami Remembers Edward Said,” *3 Quarks Daily*, February 20, 2006, [https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2006/02/akeel\\_bilgrami\\_.html](https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2006/02/akeel_bilgrami_.html).

<sup>11</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 150.

There does, however, appear to be some tension in Said's position here. For if we cannot access the "facts" directly (which according to his representationalism, we cannot), then how can we assess the truth of propositions vis-à-vis the relevant facts? This by itself does not raise doubts about whether correspondence with mind-independent facts is the truth-maker for propositions, but it does raise doubts about our capacity to know whether the propositions that we take to be true are actually true. This problem is, of course, not unique to Edward Said's philosophical orientation, it is yet another iteration of the manner in which, as Reid pointed out, "scepticism is inlaid" in the "Way of Ideas."<sup>13</sup>

According to Brennan's account, Said does not deny that there is a mind-independent reality, but he is interested in how our representations of reality also exert a causal influence on reality. As Brennan puts it, "Those who followed his writing before *Orientalism* were unlikely to miss that the book was a meditation on the degree to which *representation* is a part of reality, not just its rendering in words."<sup>14</sup> There is an obvious sense in which our representations exert a causal influence on reality, especially when those representations guide or justify the actions of conquering imperial armies. There is a causal pathway between "Orientalist" representations and the British bombardment of Alexandria in July 1882. This is an admittedly rather pedestrian but still important way in which "representations" are a part of reality. But perhaps more interestingly Said was making a stronger claim, namely that our practices of representation can lead to the creation of new categories of people. In this way, Said may be said to have anticipated what Ian Hacking described as the effects of categorization and representation in "making up people."<sup>15</sup>

More specifically Said was interested in why non-veridical representations persist, and he was interested in ignorance as a structurally buttressed epistemic practice. In this respect, we can say that Said anticipated some of the questions surrounding the epistemology of ignorance. With respect to this point, there is common ground between Said's project and classical Marxist theories of ideology. On one plausible interpretation of the Marxist theory of ideology, advanced by Richard W. Miller, the key phenomenon that the theory of ideology is supposed to explain is the following: "Why have so many socially important ideas distorted reality when available data, reasonable inference and the state of science dictated no corresponding mistake?"<sup>16</sup> This is essentially the same question that Said poses in *Orientalism* as well as *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam*. The answer that Said provides is the same answer that is provided by the classical Marxist theory of ideology, namely that this phenomenon is to be explained by appealing to social forces that systematically interfere with the correspondence between our beliefs (understood as propositional attitudes) and reality. Of course, in the classical version of the Marxist theory of ideology, the social forces in question are spelled out in

<sup>13</sup> Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, I. VII, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," *London Review of Books*, August 17, 2006, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n16/ian-hacking/making-up-people>.

<sup>16</sup> Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 46.

terms of the notion of class interests within a society, whereas Said was primarily interested in the social forces associated with imperial interests as expressed in relations between the colonized and the colonizer. This similarity is not surprising given Brennan's emphasis on Said's engagement with the work of some of the most influential Marxist philosophers and sociologists of knowledge in the twentieth century, namely Lucien Goldman, György Lukács, and Antonio Gramsci.

Brennan provides convincing evidence to support his claim that Said, contrary to popular misconceptions, engaged seriously with Marxism.<sup>17</sup> It is obvious that, in Said's view, the Zionist narrative can be characterized as "ideological" in the pejorative Marxist sense and that its acceptance in the United States is to be explained by appealing to its functional coherence with the demands of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East. Emphasizing the Marxist moment in Said's thought might also explain why the philosophical elements of Said's thought have not been more widely recognized. One potential explanation is that once one takes seriously Marx and Engels's *German Ideology*, as Said claims to have done,<sup>18</sup> it becomes impossible to engage in philosophy (and specifically in epistemology) without at the same time engaging in a project that also has the shape of a descriptive sociology of knowledge. Philosophers are, for the most part, prone to regard this approach with much suspicion and even with outright dismissal. After all, Said was asking how we can explain the processes of canon formation in the humanities in general (including in philosophy) in a manner that takes seriously social factors as important causal elements.

Said's emphasis on the socially situated nature of epistemic subjects has also led to confusion among some of his critics. As Brennan notes, his emphasis on the socially situated nature of the knowing (or ignorant) subject and the role of this social position in explaining knowledge or ignorance has been taken by some of his critics to imply that Said somehow denied the importance of truth. Presumably by this, they mean to say that he denied something like a correspondence theory of truth. As I have tried to show, however, there is an obvious sense in which Said subscribed to a pretty much run-of-the-mill correspondence theory of truth. Said's critics seem to be confused about the relationship between claims of social determination and their relationship to knowledge or ignorance, on the one hand, and his theory of truth, on the other hand. To say that access to true justified beliefs (for the sake of simplification we adopt this standard definition of knowledge) about a certain domain of phenomena (in this case, about the social, political, cultural, economic, and intellectual history of the Middle East) is conditioned by one's social position does not involve any denial that truth itself is to be defined as a relation of correspondence between propositions and the relevant facts. This is a confusion which is worth pointing out because, as the philosopher of science Liam Bright notes, it is still around today in our contemporary second iteration of the "Culture Wars."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 260–67.

<sup>18</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 232.

<sup>19</sup> Liam Bright, "Truth in the Culture War," *The Sooty Empiric*, November 11, 2019, <http://sootyempiric.blogspot.com/2019/11/truth-in-culture-war.html>.

Moreover, to say that one's access to certain truths is conditioned by one's social position does not commit oneself to thinking that access to certain truths is impossible (or inevitable) for people occupying a certain social position, but only that it may be easier or more difficult for them to do so. Brennan points out that Said had reservations about the fixation of postcolonial studies as a field on "identity."<sup>20</sup> One way to construe this reservation in the epistemological terms in which we have been speaking of Said's interventions is to think of his reservation as a rejection of the view that access to certain truths is impossible (or inevitable) for people occupying a certain social position, that is, he rejected strong versions of standpoint epistemology.<sup>21</sup> It is also quite clear that sensitivity to the importance of social positioning for Said did not lead him to think that the humanist enterprise should devolve into an endless methodological discussion of positionality that never gets at something substantive.

Emphasizing the clear convergence between Said's project and Marxist philosophical positions also points to tensions in Said's approach. Brennan is adamant that Said did not neglect the importance of economic elements as causal factors. Yet the debate between materialists and idealists in the domain of philosophy of history is not about the neglect of economic elements as causal factors per se, that is, it is not the case that idealists in the domain of philosophy of history hold the thesis that economic elements play no role in explaining human history. For example, Hegel, the paradigmatic idealist, never claims that economic elements are causally inert. Rather the debate is about the relative causal importance of economic factors in comparison with ideational elements (or "representations"). Here, despite Brennan's protestations, Said seems to come across as a left-Hegelian of sorts. For example, Brennan writes that, for Said, "The first step in social change, therefore was critique, and this saying 'no' to power was developed best and most thoroughly, he argued, in the humanities."<sup>22</sup> Said is siding with Hegel and the left-Hegelians rather than with Marx. When all is said and done, Said would have readily assented to Hegel's declaration that "once the realm of representation [*Vorstellung*] is revolutionized, actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] will not hold out."<sup>23</sup> This also allows us to clarify the disagreements between Said and some third world Marxists such as Samir Amin, Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, and Aijaz Ahmed. The disagreement was a disagreement about whether causal primacy ought to be accorded to economic factors or representations. As Amin bluntly put it in an interview when asked about his main disagreements with Said: "Edward Said missed the most important aspects: political and economic."<sup>24</sup> One can still be a Marxist and think that, for example, the Marxism of the Second International did not accord sufficient

<sup>20</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 322.

<sup>22</sup> Brennan, *Places of Mind*, 213.

<sup>23</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 179.

<sup>24</sup> Jipsom Hohnjitheesh PM, "'Audacious Movements Have to Start': Interview with Samir Amin," *Frontline*, May 9, 2018, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/audacious-movements-have-to-start/article10107706.ece>.

causal weight to “representations,” but it is difficult to see how one could still be a Marxist and think that “representations” have the same causal weight as economic factors, when, for example, we are trying to give a causal explanation of imperialism in the Middle East. Of course, Said never claimed to be a Marxist and to this extent criticizing him for not being a consistent Marxist would be pointless, but Brennan has an unfortunate tendency to represent Said’s Marxist critics as simply having misunderstood him. Whereas it seems to me that they understood him quite well and simply disagreed with him on the question of the causal equipollence of representations and economic factors. Admittedly, the matter is rendered even more complicated by the fact that, no one, as far as I know, has ever had epistemic access to economic causal factors independently of “representations.” In fact, the work of someone like Samir Amin can be understood as a struggle against non-veridical representations in the domain of economic theories of development. Hence, there is a sense in which somebody like Amin would agree with Said that the struggle in the realm of representations is important, although he disagreed with him on the importance of the specific domain of representations that Said focused on.

It seems that Said as a professional literary critic who engaged in struggles in the realm of representation wanted to give the realm of representation at least an equal causal weight to economic factors. After all, as Brennan notes throughout the book, Said was never really satisfied with the idea that one should pursue theoretical literary criticism for its own sake, but it seems that Said’s way to justify for himself his devotion to theoretical literary criticism was to posit that the realm of representation had at least equal causal weight with economic factors. One question that Brennan’s study implicitly raises is whether it is possible to be a Marxist in literary criticism in the first place. There seems to be a fundamental tension (perhaps even rising to the level of logical contradiction) in thinking that “representations” are not the most important causal factor in, for example, bringing about the liberation of Palestine, while also thinking of oneself as being primarily oriented in one’s life around this goal, all the while having to engage in struggles over “representations” by virtue of being a professional literary critic. This seems to be a recipe for agony, an agony that seems to be central to Brennan’s biography, and it is not clear that Said ever found a way out of it.

**Author biography.** Zeyad el Nabolsy is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at York University. He specializes in African philosophy. Some of his publications have appeared in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *Science & Society*, *Kohl: A Journal of Body and Gender Research*, *Kant Studies Online*, *Safundi*, among others. He has also contributed to several edited volumes.

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