

The Subversive Potential of Inconsistency

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J EANNIE Morefield's *Unsettling the World* begins with an absence.¹ Where is Edward Said in political theory? Said should need no introduction to political theorists. His theoretical insights on empire, justice, power, critique and oppression, among numerous other topics, are central to the concerns of political theory on any given understanding. Said's 1978 classic *Orientalism* inaugurated the field of postcolonial studies, and his Foucauldian insights pushed those within the discipline of political theory to see how and why they might contend with Foucault. Yet, Morefield argues, professional political theorists are yet to produce a thorough and critical engagement with Edward Said and his work. Morefield's project begins with this historical observation and moves on to do something about it. Over six chapters of exquisite writing, the text shows why Edward Said is a thinker with whom political theorists should be more regularly engaging.

Morefield argues that political theory's occlusion of Edward Said is emblematic of a deeper disciplinary compartmentalization: postwar North American political science segregated fields of inquiry into 'domestic', 'comparative', and 'international'.² As such, even though political theorists commit themselves to a critical interrogation of fundamentally large structural concepts such as race, class, gender and sexuality – systems of oppression that are honed transnationally – 'international politics' is ceded to International Relations scholars. Morefield suggests that this creates a double unseeing – 'first unseeing imperialism, then unseeing postcolonial theory and the study of imperialism outside political theory'.³ This double unseeing stops political theorists from accessing the theoretical insights of scholars who have been marked as belonging to 'other' fields. Edward Said is but one of them. Morefield's book urges theorists to disturb this compartmentalization. What it means to do that, she says, is not simply to cite him, but genuinely and thoroughly to engage him.

What would such an engagement entail? First, Morefield says, it requires of theorists an willingness to 'unsettle'. Morefield fairly warns that political theory cannot uncritically offer itself as a new Saidian house. For if the

¹ A version of this commentary was first presented on 6 March 2023 in New College, Oxford at a roundtable on Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

² Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xxxv.

³ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xl.

inclusion of Said is sincere, political theorists risk an unsettling not just of disciplinary boundaries (between political theory and international relations) but also of the content and methodology with which they are familiar. ‘Said both uses theory and theorizes differently from the way most political theorists use theory and theorize’, Morefield writes.⁴ While political theorists err on the side of conceptual closure and parsimony, Said brings an ‘intellectual nomadism’ that others have rightly called ‘theoretically unhoused, methodologically untidy and spatially fluid’.⁵ A strength of Morefield’s book is that she makes the case for why this kind of ‘unsettling’ is exactly what contemporary theory needs. Morefield welcomes the discomfort and the critical perspective Said invites. As a long tradition of theorists have shown, and as Morefield reiterates, theory, in both its evolution as a discipline and in many of the arguments its proponents have made, is entangled with imperialism, race and settler colonialism. As such there is much to learn from Edward Said because his manner of theorising and work ‘illuminates the discursive complexities of imperial history’.⁶

How does he do this? Here, Morefield emphasises Said’s insistence that one begin theorising from a place of connection rather than a desire for foreclosure. This does not simply mean requiring close knowledge of the particular contexts about which one writes; it also means scaling out to try and see sociological, political and ideological connections across perhaps quite different contexts. For those housed in the North American academy – the primary object of Morefield’s focus – this means a structural analysis including interrogating who theorises, what is theorised, and what makes theorising possible.

Via meditations on exile, music, humanism, public intellectualism and liberal narcissism, *Unsettling the World* elucidates the depth and range of Said’s theoretical insights and exalts their value for political theory. In a chapter on exile and loss, Morefield presents Said’s unique approach to exile as a position which is generative for critique. For Said, exile was both a ‘necessary habit of life’ for the critic and a completely horrible, frequently intolerable way of living.⁷ But Said’s reflections on exile substantially differed from the romantic ideal of exile found in much Western literature by refusing to be preoccupied with the isolated individual thinker. Rather, Said insisted that, by comparison, contemporary exile was a mass phenomenon, gravely violent, and ‘absolutely necessary for critical inquiry’.⁸ Likewise, in a chapter on liberal narcissism Morefield utilises Said’s theoretical insights to foreground the irrefutable historical and discursive connections between ‘liberal global order’ and ‘imperialism’.⁹ But simply asking ‘is liberalism imperialist?’ – an old question – isn’t enough. In fact, Morefield shows that attempts to answer this question ‘in principle’ are counter-productive. Instead, Morefield suggests that one must

⁴ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xlvii.

⁵ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xlvii.

⁶ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, xxv.

⁷ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 5.

⁸ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 6.

⁹ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 175.

once again turn, like Said, to the actual historical and contemporary connections between imperialism and liberalism.

Across the text, Morefield takes on numerous critics of Said who have been frustrated by his resistance to neatness. For example, in the chapter on exile and loss, Morefield addresses the critics who are uncomfortable with the fact that Said sometimes appears to make claims that stand in tension with one another. So, for example, at one point Said speaks of as exile as ‘serving no humanism’, while elsewhere he says that it is ‘absolutely necessary for a critical subjectivity’.¹⁰ Some even remark that his concerns for exilic refugees were disingenuous, his work depoliticising.¹¹ Morefield addresses this by pointing to Said’s own response to his critics that ‘inconsistencies are at the core of an exilic experience’.¹² ‘Inconsistencies are, Said maintained, at the core of his work because they are the hallmark of the exilic experience, captured in the irritating rub between state violence and individual suffering, between mass migration and the longings of the lonely poetic soul, between political violence and political art’, Morefield writes.¹³ However, Morefield insists that these inconsistencies were not simply Said’s intellectual gloss on a generalised exilic experience but rooted in his specific experiences of exile. For Morefield, Said’s work on exile cannot be separated from his occupation as a Palestinian professor in a North American university who could rally resources to resist, in some ways, the violent erasure of exile. But this does not necessarily imply that Said’s elite status, and the positions that status sometimes led him to articulate, undermines his support for Palestinian liberation. By drawing on several examples from Said’s vast range of works, Morefield nuances this charge of ‘elitism’ by pushing the reader in directions that do not ‘foreclose generative and genuinely complex’ ways of reading Said.¹⁴

However, one wonders if political theory would benefit much more from a critical engagement with Said rather than a wholesale defence of his inconsistencies or lacunae. Given that Morefield’s text inaugurates a detailed engagement with Said as a political theorist, perhaps many other sections of political theory such as Black Political Thought and Feminist Theory, can now be brought into conversation with a Saidian framework. For example, Said’s argument that a desire to detail the complexities of the world be prioritised over an urge for foreclosure for the sake of a ‘theoretical machine’ seemed interestingly similar to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s reimagining of the university space from a fugitive lens.¹⁵ Said’s *Treason of the Intellectuals* and Moten and Harney’s *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* are somewhat united in their interrogation of the North American liberal academia for disregarding the not so tenuous connections with imperial labour. Similarly, Said’s theorization of exile as a site of critique reminds the reader of bell

¹⁰ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 7.

¹¹ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 8.

¹² Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 7.

¹³ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 7.

¹⁴ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 156.

¹⁵ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 16.

hooks's insights in theorising marginality as a site of resistance.¹⁶ Said's exile as generative of critical faculty and hooks's urge to reconsider marginality also as a site of radical possibility – both assert that resistance is 'sustained by a remembrance of the past'. Morefield's urgent appraisal of Said also forces one to seek more from Said – for example, to ask, if Said prioritised gender as an important lens for understanding the material processes, institutions and ideology that shaped both resistance and oppression? Especially as so much painstaking academic work has now shown how the conditions of imperialism disproportionately disadvantage those who are left outside the neatness of gender division or those who do not predominantly uphold its values.

Insofar as we might seek theory beyond 'unsettling', the reader is perhaps left wondering: is there also a rehabilitative Said? Morefield's Said can unsettle several fundamental assumptions on which political theory is based. But what might it mean to think of a Said that focuses on 'rehabilitation', post critique? Might there be merit in showing how thinkers such as Said can also help us to rethink central concepts that political theorists often deploy: freedom, equality, justice among them. Perhaps the project of constructing a rehabilitative Said in political theory might also lead us to a closer engagement with his later texts, including *Freud and the Non-European* (2003) or *On Late Style* (2007).

Morefield's book is especially welcome at a time when the dilemmas of intellectualising from a position of exile cannot be ignored. It is difficult to see the subversive potential of exile when almost two million people are being displaced from Palestine, a fact that makes a conversation about theory's implication in present imperialism even more urgent. In a 1984 essay 'Reflections on Exile' Said recounts the time he met Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whom he calls 'the greatest of contemporary Urdu poets'. Faiz was also an exiled poet, forced to move out of his homeland by Zia Ul Haq's military regime in Pakistan and stationed in Beirut at the time.¹⁷ Said's poignant description merits quotation in full:

To see a poet in exile – as opposed to reading the poetry of exile – is to see exile's antinomies embodied and endured with a unique intensity. Several years ago I spent some time with Faiz Ahmed Faiz...naturally, his closest friends were Palestinian, but I sensed that although there was an affinity of spirit between them, nothing quite matched – language, poetic convention, or life history. Only once, when Eqbal Ahmed, a Pakistani friend and a fellow exile came to Beirut, did Faiz seem to overcome his sense of constant estrangement. The three of us sat in a dingy Beirut restaurant late one night, while Faiz recited poems. After a time, he and Eqbal stopped translating his verses for my benefit but as the night wore on, it did not matter. What I watched required no translation: it was an enactment of a homecoming expressed through defiance and

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', *Granta* 13 (1984): <https://granta.com/reflections-on-exile/>

loss, as if to say, 'Zia, we are here'.

Said's account of this meeting reaffirms Morefield's insight that Said was comfortable with contradiction. At the same time, it shows another Said – one who is hesitant to engage in any kind of broad generalization even when reflecting on his own exilic intellectual experiences.