

Author's Response

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I WOULD like to begin by thanking Simple Rajrah and Samuel Holcroft for their extraordinarily thoughtful responses to *Unsettling the World*. It is a rare treat to have a print conversation with people who have taken the time to engage so closely and carefully with your work. It is also equally rare to find that you are largely in agreement with their criticisms. Both Rajrah and Holcroft quite rightly observe that my book is extraordinarily light on criticism of Said's work (public and scholarly) and his activism. In Rajrah's words, 'one wonders if political theory would benefit much more from a critical engagement with Said rather than a wholesale defense of his inconsistencies or lacunae'. Indeed, Rajrah is being too generous here. I am the first to admit that there is an almost fan-girl like quality to the book at times.

To this I can only respond: *Unsettling the World* is an over-correction, written in an extended fit of pique at political theory's glaring lack of interest in a man whose work shaped the very intellectual environment in which we theorize. More crucially, my uncritical orientation toward Said in the book is also overdetermined by my growing conviction that the field's refusal to see Said mirrors the field's refusal to see imperialism in itself, and that this refusal has political consequences. In other words, I am increasingly convinced, it isn't enough to simply engage the co-constituting relationship between imperialism and political theory in the textual / political / material entanglements of the past. Instead, like Said, we need to be constantly interrogating the indwelling traces of imperial ordering, imperial culture, imperial violence, and imperial geography in the structuring terminology and conceptual vocabulary that is the bread and butter of political theory today. In the book, I channelled Said's irrepressible will to unsettle everything—everywhere—all—the-time—all—at—once into a vexed attack on mainstream political theory for not interrogating these traces in everything we do everywhere—all—the-time—all—at—once.

Hence, the book overcorrects by leaning so hard on the disruptive utility of Said's criticisms that it neglects criticism of Said. Indeed, as I re-read the book now, I am a little amazed (and slightly embarrassed) by my willingness to turn even the most maddening of Said's vices – e.g. his refusal to resolve *anything* – into virtues.

All of this means I am deeply sympathetic to nearly all of Rajrah's and Holcroft's criticisms. For instance, I too wonder, with Rajrah, what would have happened if Said had 'prioritised gender as an important lens for

understanding the material processes, institutions and ideology that shaped both resistance and oppression'. What, for instance, would Said's account of the 'imaginative geography' of Orientalism have looked like had he taken the time to develop the obviously gendered notions of masculinity, sexuality, veiling, and secrecy that structure the cultural formations and species of power-knowledge he describes? What imaginaries for resistance might be revealed through these engagements? Or, what would we find if we took more seriously Holcroft's critique of Said's overly rosy attitude toward the university as a location free from precisely the kinds of power knowledge he spent his career excavating? What forms of politics might he have unintentionally offloaded to an ideal space in the process of interrogating non-ideal politics? Is there an irredeemable naiveté at work in Said's commitment to the university in our neoliberal era?

At the same time, I want to push back gently against two related criticisms that Rajrah and Holcroft make about Said's project in general and in the context of my book. These observations both circle around a version of the same question: when is Said's unsettled criticism simply ineffective, or worse, defeatist? For Rajrah, this question is one of theoretical urgency. At what point, she asks, do we query the benefits of a relentlessly unsettling, exilic project and instead start exploring the 'rehabilitation' qualities of 'post critique'? 'Might there be merit', she argues, '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?'

My irritatingly Saidian response to this is yes. And no. Said simply did not believe in 'post critique' but this did not mean that he was against – or that his work can't be used in the service of – 'rethinking' key concepts in political theory. But that 'rethinking' can never be 'rethought'. A Saidian disposition, I suggest, demands that theory be wary of the fixity that 'rehabilitation' projects engender. In other words, for Said, 'rethinking' concepts like 'freedom, equality, and justice' from an exilic perspective means reading them 'not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way', a project that can never be totally 'rehabilitative' in the context of a world striated with imperial power knowledge.¹ For instance, he once argued, any search for what might constitute a 'just peace' in Palestine-Israel that attempts to move beyond critique inevitably find itself 'at the starting point, looking for a solution now, even as that 'now' itself bears all the marks of our historical diminishment and human suffering'.² Because 'freedom, equality, and justice' – and 'peace' – are worldly concepts, embedded in history and power, they cannot be read otherwise. A Saidian inclined theorist, I thus argue in the book, is constantly on their guard against re-concretising and re-essentialising concepts. This doesn't mean that we give up hope for the thinking the world otherwise. It does mean, however, that the critical process of worldly reassessment follows the horizon of possibility into the future.

Holcroft asks a similar question about Said, but his concerns are political rather than theoretical. Yes, he argues, 'holding impossible tensions together'

¹ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 60.

² Edward Said, 'A Method for Thinking About a Just Peace', in Pierre Allan and Alexis Keller (eds.), *What Is a Just Peace?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 190.

is all well and good but, is there ‘a point at which, politically, this becomes inadvisable’. The example he provides is of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (started by Said and Daniel Barenboim) which has become the subject of BDS criticism. My response to this critique is not unlike my response above: yes. And no. Obviously, there are times when Said’s absolute commitment to the phrase, ‘never solidarity before criticism’ can undermine political coalitions in the moment.³ At the same time, as Said’s long history of involvement with the PLO in the 1970’s and 80’s attests, ‘never solidarity before criticism’ does not mean *never* solidarity, nor does it mean that we don’t take sides. But, he insisted, even in the midst of political battle, when ‘one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism’. There must, Said continued, ‘be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for’.⁴ Nothing exemplifies this commitment to criticism better than Said’s prescient rejection of the Oslo Accords which he quite rightly predicted would lead to an increasingly restrictive, Byzantine forms of apartheid. His refusal, in the face of massive political pressure, to set aside his interpretation of the contrapuntal history that shaped the political geography of Palestine–Israel, is testament to the power and necessity of ‘inadvisable’ criticism before solidarity.

Importantly, for Said, critical exilic consciousness looked different in the context of those broad, Third Worldist goals embraced by the PLO in the 1970’s and 80’s than it did in the context of the narrow, accommodationist politics of the PLO in the 1990’s. One assumes that it would look still different today, in the stark light of Israel’s ongoing genocide in Gaza and the internal displacement, as Rajrah points out, of two million people. However different these contexts, and regardless of whether the urgency of today diminishes the ‘subversive potential’ of exilic criticism, for Said, that criticism provided the contrapuntal thread that ties the fight for Palestine together with the global, anti–imperial struggle and with the history of imperialism itself.

Perennially inhabiting a critical disposition that never stops to rest can be utterly exhausting and sometimes deeply irritating for the people around you. One gets the sense that people sometimes felt this about Said and that he sometimes felt it about himself. The exilic intellectual, he once argued, ‘tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness, so that dissatisfaction bordering on dyspepsia, a kind of curmudgeonly disagreeableness, can become not only a style of thought, but also a new, if temporary, habitation’.⁵ He called this type of intellectual a ‘ranting Thersites’, but I think a ‘ranting Casandra’ is an equally appropriate name for an equally irritating disposition. At the end of the day, Said himself was often clearly exhausted by the work it took to inhabit this disposition – to live as an unsettled, exilic critic – and this is an exhaustion both Rajrah and Holcroft rightly associate with those moments in *Late Style* when he expressed a poignant, almost melancholic, longing for stillness. And yet, I want to insist, even in that late moment, in the midst of melancholy, Said was still reminding us that the ‘precarious exilic realm’ can be neither a

³ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 32.

⁴ Edward Said, ‘Secular Criticism’ in *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁵ Said, *Representation of the Intellectual*, 53.

place of retreat nor a place where we ‘search for solutions’. Instead, he ends the last passage of one of his last books, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, by affirming that only within this realm, can we ‘truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway’.⁶

I realize full well the irony of ending this exchange by doubling down on precisely the thing I began by admitting: I am an uncritical champion of Said the critic. Rajrah and Holcroft are right to observe this, and I truly look forward to reading more of their insightful (and no doubt, more balanced work) on Said in the future. And yet, I also just want to point out that the three of us *are* having an exchange about Said and we are doing so in the context of talking about political theory at Oxford. This wouldn’t have been possible that long ago. I’m not convinced it took such a vociferous over-correction on my part – sometimes uttered in the voice of a ranting Thersites, more often in the urgent trill of a Cassandra – to make that conversation possible. But I like to think it helped to kick a Said-shaped hole in the door.

⁶ Edward W. Said, ‘The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals’, in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 144.