

Occidental Truth

Ibn Warraq

**Defending the West: A Critique of
Edward Said's *Orientalism***

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Reviewed by Daniel Mandel

It is one of today's sad truths that to be an open critic of Islam is to incur mortal risk—even while living in the West. For this reason, the author of such daring works as *Why I Am Not a Muslim* goes by the pseudonym “Ibn Warraq,” an alias favored by Muslim apostates for centuries. Since 1995, this 61-year-old, Indian-born, ex-Muslim secularist has devoted his considerable talents to raising awareness in the West of the dangers posed to democratic liberties by radical Islam. He is also a strident opponent of the tendency—stemming from political correctness and general academic culture—to refrain from critically examining

Islam. It is fitting, therefore, that his new work, *Defending the West*, is a spirited rebuttal of post-colonialist thought and its originator, the late Columbia University professor Edward Said.

For the most part, Warraq concentrates on Said's seminal 1978 book, *Orientalism*, a scathing assault on traditional Western scholarship of Islam and the Middle East. There is a very good reason for this choice of target: Said's theories laid the groundwork for “post-colonial studies,” the academic discipline whose founding principle is the belief that the West—and everything identified with its intellectual and cultural traditions—is guilty of oppressing and exploiting those foreign cultures that came under its power and influence at one time or another. Warraq's critique of Said, therefore, is not only an intellectual polemic, but also a forceful refutation of an academic onslaught that for three decades has derogated and condemned almost

everything connected to the Western tradition.

Edward Said, who played a defining role in this cultural polemic, was born in 1935 in Jerusalem to a Palestinian Christian family. Contrary to much of what he said or implied before his eleventh-hour memoir, *Out of Place* (2000), he was raised not in Jerusalem but in Egypt. He enjoyed a childhood of considerable privilege, was educated at the Victoria College in Alexandria, and eventually took up residence in the United States. He subsequently studied literature at Princeton, Harvard, and Oxford universities, establishing himself as a major literary theorist. Eventually, he became a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University. Said often noted that, his origins notwithstanding, “most of my education, and certainly all of my basic intellectual formation, are Western.”

Israel’s crushing defeat of the neighboring Arab armies in 1967 was a source of humiliation for many Arabs both in the Middle East and abroad. In the case of Edward Said, it was the catalyst for his increasingly vocal role on behalf of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Soon, he became its intellectual spokesman in the West, publishing such polemics as *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *The*

Politics of Dispossession (1994), and *The End of the Peace Process* (2000). In these and other works, he presented Zionism as a colonialist movement imposed by the West upon a hapless and oppressed people. During the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when the Palestine Liberation Organization was openly waging a terrorist campaign against Israel and advocating its elimination and replacement with an Arab state, Said penned the hagiography of the movement and its leader, Yasser Arafat. According to Said’s heroic narrative, the Palestinian cause was a national liberation movement in its purest form. In his 1983 essay, “Solidly Behind Arafat,” Said claimed that Arafat “built institutions, dispensed arms, and instilled a sense of hope and pride.” He went on to say:

Beyond that, Mr. Arafat did two supremely important things. First, he made the PLO a genuinely representative body. Even his enemies knew that Mr. Arafat and the Palestinian will—though not always clearly and consistently articulated—were in a sense interchangeable.... Second, he was the first popular Palestinian leader to formulate the notion that Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews would—indeed must—seek a future together on an equal footing in a shared territory.

Such thoroughly disingenuous language—“equal footing,” for instance,

is misleading shorthand for an Arab-dominated unitary state—was typical of Said. His adulation of Arafat, however, did not last: When the PLO chairman signed the Oslo accords with Israel in 1993, Said denounced the agreement as an “instrument of surrender.” Galvanized, perhaps, by the Palestinian leader’s seeming betrayal of the anti-Zionist cause, Said also wrote starkly of Arafat’s corrosive habits: “Political discourse no longer exists: People discuss matters that affect survival, and politics is discredited”—leaving one to wonder what became of the “genuinely representative” leader he had once valorized.

Despite occasional conciliatory words about Jews and criticism of Arafat, Said was openly opposed to Israel’s existence. In an August 2000 interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, he said of the Jews that “They can certainly be a minority... in Israel. A Jewish minority can survive the way other minorities in the Arab world survived.” Given the historical treatment of Jews in the Muslim world, it is hardly surprising that Said’s largesse met with little enthusiasm from its intended beneficiaries. By the end of his life, Said had degenerated into referring to New York City as “the citadel of Zionist power” and promulgating conspiracy theories about Jewish domination of American politics. At his passing in 2003,

even some of his old comrades, most notably the literary critic Christopher Hitchens, found it difficult to sing his praises.

Orientalism, however, has demonstrated remarkable staying power. Beyond turning Said into an academic superstar, it turned “Orientalist”—once an entirely unexceptionable term describing scholars of Islam and Eastern cultures—into a dirty word: academic shorthand for racism, colonialism, and oppression. At the beginning of *Orientalism*, Said declares:

I doubt that it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India or Egypt in the later nineteenth century took an interest in those countries which was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact [of imperialism]—and yet *that is what I am saying* in this study of Orientalism. (Emphasis in original.)

Said put it most succinctly when he wrote that “It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.”

Following the massive success of *Orientalism*, Said’s work became ubiquitous in university syllabi, and his

columns appeared regularly in such bastions of the mainstream media as the *New York Times*. As a result, Middle Eastern studies became deeply politicized, a situation Said did his best to promote through the heated and often personal rhetoric he employed against his opponents. None of this in the least affected the cult of personality which grew up around him. Following his death, a chair was endowed in his honor at Columbia, largely as a result of donations provided by Saudi Arabian plutocrats.

To be sure, Warraq is not the first to chronicle and critique Said's impact on the intellectual world: Distinguished Orientalists of diverse political leanings—such as Ernest Gellner, Albert Hourani, Nikki Keddie, Malcolm Kerr, Bernard Lewis, and Maxime Rodinson—repudiated Said's ideas in scholarly fashion decades ago, though they largely proved exceptions to the acquiescent rule of their colleagues. Robert Irwin, an Orientalist of note, published the book-length critique *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* in late 2006, as Warraq's own work was nearing completion. Nonetheless, Warraq deserves credit for his pioneering work in this field, particularly the long essay "Edward Said and the Saidists," which has been adapted—without major changes—into the first of the

three parts which constitute *Defending the West*.

Warraq sees Said's oeuvre as deeply pernicious. He believes that it laid the foundation for the cultural and moral relativism of Western intellectuals who indict the West for aggression and imperialism, all the while exculpating the East of any responsibility for its own dysfunctions. As a result, Said's theories provided (and continue to provide) aid and comfort to radical Islam's assault on Western liberties. Warraq sets out to demonstrate and critique this malign influence, first by exposing Said's defective scholarship, and second by providing a survey of the Orientalist tradition that refutes Said's central claim that it is based on Western supremacism and imperial power. Third, and last, Warraq defends Western works of art that depict the Orient and demonstrate, he believes, impressive cultural openness—something that, according to Saidian post-colonial theory, is simply impossible.

Warraq's attempt to repudiate the claim that Western scholarship is inherently a form of cultural imperialism begins with an exhaustive survey of notable Orientalists, the details of whose lives and works render accusations of racism, imperialism, and ethnocentricity absurd on their face. He cites, for instance, the work of British Orientalist Simon Ockley, renowned

for his altruistic, scholarly devotion to the task of producing his *History of the Saracens* (1708). Others include Sir William Jones, the brilliant eighteenth-century lexicographer who posited a linguistic connection between Britons and Indians—a far cry from the “otherness” of the “colonized” that allegedly dominated the Orientalist mind; Stamford Raffles, the British imperial administrator who unearthed and preserved archaeological evidence of Buddhism in Java, which had been stamped out by Muslim conquerors in the thirteenth century; and Austen Layard, a nineteenth-century scholar who praised the Turcomans and Turks he met on his travels in Anatolia for their civility and hospitality and who elucidated the causes behind resistance to British rule in India in terms that could scarcely qualify him as an apologist for imperialism.

Warraq also produces an impressive list of Western authors, translators, and philosophers who favored Islam over Christianity. They lauded its freedom from clerisy and dogma and considered the Christian West inferior to it. For instance, Warraq discusses Ignaz Goldziher (a Hungarian whom Said misidentified as German), an “objective but always sympathetic observer” of Islam who despised Christian missionaries and was, at one point, “inwardly convinced” that he was a Muslim. Peter Martyr and Michel de

Montaigne, for their part, wrote about non-European civilizations with great sympathy and regard and denounced those Europeans who had brutally conquered them. Said essentially ignored such thinkers, or failed to discuss them in detail—most likely because, according to his thesis, such people simply could not have existed.

Warraq finds Said’s professed admiration for certain Orientalists equally disingenuous and sometimes outright inexplicable. He notes that Said discussed both Raymond Schwab, the French autodidact and author of the much admired book *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (1950), and R.W. Southern, the twentieth-century Oxford medievalist, as if they somehow anticipated and endorsed his own views. In fact, neither of them did anything of the kind. Both were emphatic in their praise for many of the Orientalists denigrated by Said. These included scholars such as William Jones, whom Said denounced for the basic scholarly procedures of “codifying, tabulating, comparing,” tasks that Said, following the lead of French post-modernist thinker Michel Foucault, saw as exercises in power and control.

Warraq finds Said’s praise for Louis Massignon equally bizarre in view of the French scholar’s tendency to indulge in a fetishistic love of Eastern

spirituality, which Said usually condemned. Yet Massignon's hostility to Western civilization—well described in a posthumously published essay by Elie Kedourie, another of Said's many *bêtes noires*—surely gives us something of an answer. Warraq notes Massignon's virulently anti-Jewish sentiments but ought to have elaborated on them, especially Massignon's conviction that banking and finance were instruments of illicit domination which, along with homosexuality, were introduced into the supposedly pristine Arab world by the West in general and the Jews in particular. (As Warraq wryly recounts, these views did not prevent Massignon from enthusiastically availing himself of the opportunities for pederasty offered by Arab brothels.)

Another aspect less than fully considered by Warraq is Said's monopolization of cultural criticism of the East. For the most part, Said arrogated this right entirely to himself while simultaneously condemning it as one of Orientalism's most monstrous aspects. In his 1981 book, *Covering Islam*, for example, Said savaged Princeton scholar Bernard Lewis for describing contemporary Middle Eastern societies as intellectually incurious. Yet, a decade and a half later, he said as much himself in his book *Peace and Its Discontents*. Warraq notes ironically that some of Said's own criticisms of the Arab

world turned out to be ill-founded. Said claimed, for instance, that there were no credible scholarly journals in the Arab world dealing with Arab studies. Warraq happily provides a list of them for the reader.

Nonetheless, Warraq does not underestimate the relative weakness of intellectual culture in the Arab world. His book is filled with telling indices of the fact, both past and present. He notes, for instance, that "even after eight centuries of Muslim presence in Spain, we know of only a single document that reveals any Muslim interest in a European language." Warraq also cites the Arab Human Development Report of 2003, published by the United Nations Development Program, which disclosed that the total number of books translated into Arabic over the last thousand years is fewer than those translated into Spanish in a single year; and Greece, with a population of 11 million, annually translates five times more books than the 22 Arab countries combined, with roughly 300 million people.

This malady, Warraq argues, has its roots in the Islamic past, one in which Muslim interest in other civilizations was the exception rather than the rule. He cites Bernard Lewis—a near-capital offense for Saidians—whose book *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* demonstrated that, with few

exceptions, a lack of intellectual curiosity pervaded Muslim contact with the West. Warraq does not absolve the West of its own responsibility for the decline of Orientalist studies, however. In particular, he points to the slow corruption of the Western intellectual tradition in its own institutions of higher learning through the acceptance of vast sums of money—with strings attached, of course—from Saudi Arabia, Brunei, and other oil-rich countries. These countries have used their financial power to establish chairs at major academic centers with the aim of imposing an apologetic presentation of Islam on Western intellectual discourse—a presentation, that is, in which Said’s theories are always front and center.

Warraq ends his book with an erudite refutation of Said’s attack on Western literature and art, which he saw as wholly complicit in the imperial project. A noteworthy example is Warraq’s adroit dissection of Said’s perverse theory, based on a single reference to a character’s slave plantation in the novel *Mansfield Park*, that Jane Austen condoned slavery. Ignoring the evidence that Austen’s attitude, as it emerges from this passage, is far more likely anti-slavery than not, Said indicts her for having “prefigured” references to colonial ventures in subsequent novels by other writers, some of them

written over a century later. One might expect a more rigorous and attentive reading from a professor of English literature.

In the realm of art, Warraq places a special emphasis on the cultural openness of the West and its curiosity about other cultures. Genovese and Venetian artists, he states, led the way in opening Western eyes to the East. Their work was based on scrupulous observation of Eastern locales visited by these seafaring merchant city states. Artists like Giovanni Bellini and Vittore Carpaccio did not distort or degrade the Orient in their work; rather, Warraq argues, they depicted it through the critical eye of the technically proficient artist. One of the most interesting features of Warraq’s narrative is the manner in which Western art has itself changed artistic styles in parts of the East, such as the Italian influence discernible in Persian art since the seventeenth century. Warraq is justifiably impatient with the arguments of Said’s disciples, who have asserted that any kind of Western artistic influence on the East constitutes some form of imperial manipulation or derogation of other cultures.

Warraq chooses not to speculate about the origins of Said’s animus to Orientalism and the West in general. His book is about the

coherence of Said's arguments—or lack thereof—and not their source. Readers will be left to wonder why Said—the privileged son of a wealthy family, educated in the finest American universities, and almost completely Westernized—took the line he did. Having read Warraq, I remain of the view that Said, perhaps like some Jewish intellectuals, responded to the hostility—real or imagined—of his host society by remorselessly deconstructing it; or in this case, by storming its literary citadels. As with many of these intellectuals, one suspects that a measure of guilt was at work: For members of minority groups, professional success is often followed by a belated awakening to one's distance from and subtle non-acceptance by the majority. It is not a new experience

for educated people to move between continents and cultures, accompanied by the vertiginous feeling of personal and psychological displacement. It is a great pity that Said chose to address his feelings in such a corrosive way, obscuring rather than clarifying the literary and scholastic canon in the process. Warraq's book is an invaluable antidote to this poisonous legacy, and its impact, one hopes, will be a lasting one.

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