

RESEARCH
ARTICLE**Cultural Resistance through The Question of Palestine and the American Community by Edward Said****Ghozlene Hachemi**

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Abstract

The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said seeks to critique dominant colonial discourses and expose their implicit assumptions. His intellectual project can therefore be situated within the framework of cultural resistance, which aims to deconstruct the Western mind in order to overcome the inferiority complex toward the Other, dismantle Western centrality, and reveal the contradictions and fragility of its ideological discourses. This article examines the specific features of this discursive resistance through his book *The Question of Palestine and the American Community*, in which he exposes the exclusionary nature of the American perspective and challenges the dominant narratives about the rationality of the Western mind and its alleged respect for human rights and freedoms. Our findings show that Said advances his form of resistance by carefully defining terms and concepts, and by deconstructing both political and international legal discourses.

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Introduction

The book *The Question of Palestine and the American Community* is based on a lecture delivered by Edward Said as part of a series of talks and seminars he gave during his tenure as a visiting scholar at the Institute for Palestine Studies in July and August 1979. The book was published in 1980, and in it, Said seeks to present a critical analysis of the American perspective and its exclusionary policies.

This work can be seen as part of a conscious re-evaluation of media-dominant discourses, where the defense of the Palestinian cause goes beyond its conventional, legally and politically framed representation. Instead, it takes a more analytical and rational approach that exposes the fragility and contradictions of Western discourse.

Accordingly, these efforts may be viewed as part of a deliberate cultural resistance that aims to understand the Other in order to dismantle the inferiority complex toward it—as phrased by Hassan Hanafi—and ultimately confront it.

This raises key questions: What are the main issues addressed in this book? And to what extent did Edward Said succeed in exposing the collapse of Western discourse?

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Transcending the Traditional Concept of Resistance in Edward Said's Book

In this work, Edward Said presents various perspectives from both the political establishment and civil society in the United States regarding the Palestinian cause. He deconstructs the nature of U.S.-Israeli relations, addressing the profound implications of this alliance on the Palestinian question. As he writes, *"The global context remains so unstable as to be bewildering—burdened with ideologies, prone to sudden shifts, tense, unpredictable, even destructive"*.¹ This instability necessitates a reexamination of the dominant discourses circulated through media, politics, and culture.

Readers of Said's work will recognize how he deliberately adopts an epistemological approach that goes beyond the traditional notion of resistance. He embodies the image of the responsible, revolutionary intellectual who refuses to submit to the narratives produced by Western and Zionist frameworks. In this sense, his intellectual struggle mirrors that of Abdelwahab Elmessiri, who likewise sought to deconstruct Zionist and Western thought. Elmessiri once emphasized, *"If one does not develop a grand theory, one will fall prey to the grand theory of the Other and become a victim of what is known as 'the imperialism of categories'—that is, importing explanatory categories from the Other and confining one's intellectual efforts to accumulating data through those borrowed concepts"*.²

In this context, Mahmoud Darwish once remarked: *"If a Palestinian were asked what he is proud of before the world, he would immediately answer: Edward Said. Palestinian cultural history has never produced a genius comparable to the unique and multifaceted Edward. From now (that is, from his passing) until some far-off time, he will remain the foremost figure who elevated the name of his homeland from the realm of political jargon to that of global cultural consciousness. Palestine gave birth to him, but through his loyalty to the values of justice trampled upon in his homeland, and his defense of its people's right to life and freedom, he became one of the symbolic fathers of a new Palestine. His vision of the ongoing conflict is a cultural and ethical one that not only justifies the Palestinians' right to resist occupation but regards it as both a national and human duty."*

Edward Said's Foundational Hypothesis: The Dual Structure of American Society

Edward Said's central hypothesis is that American society, like any industrial capitalist society, is divided into two distinct spheres: the political and the civil. The political society is embodied by government institutions, the military, and security apparatuses, and it functions as a tool of pressure and an imperialist force hostile to the rights and freedoms of peoples—particularly the Palestinian right to independence, freedom, and sovereignty over land.

In contrast, the civil society comprises cultural institutions, universities, trade unions, and religious organizations, all of which play a significant role in shaping American policy. Said demonstrates that this second sphere is often more influential than the political one, as it not only supports but also consolidates Zionism globally as an ideology and a hegemonic worldview. However, he notes that this civil society has undergone some transformations, particularly since the 1960s, when global awareness of justice, human rights, and anti-war movements began to rise.

Despite these shifts, certain segments within civil society continued to view Palestinians as mere terrorist groups. This biased perspective, rooted in double standards when evaluating Palestinian resistance, places a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of media professionals to combat partial and prejudiced representations. Said points out that support for Israel is often unconditional, remarking:

*"The West, in its stance toward Israel, adopts an absolute doctrinal discourse. It expresses deep sympathy with the Jewish desire to return to their ancestral land—the Promised Land—to establish a Jewish state and fulfill their historical identity. Yet, when it comes to Palestinians, the West assumes a pragmatic, utilitarian position and fails to understand why Palestinians insist on their right of return."*³

Thus, Said distinguishes between the two sectors of American society regarding their stances on the Palestinian cause. Civil society, being more open and moderate, should be the focus of political and media engagement. He also argues that the Arab world's heightened attention to the United States stems from America's increasing intrusion into their lives, as it emerged as a dominant foreign power. This leads Arab states and peoples to feel compelled to confront it.

Nevertheless, Said warns that this estimation of America's importance is often exaggerated, resulting from a lack of critical analysis regarding the nature of American society and its role in foreign policy. As he explains:

*"No state can automatically become a power simply for one reason or another—even a great imperialist power like America. In other words, America is a society with its own history, institutions, social forces, and cultural formations. These elements, combined, affect the world and operate within it in complex, often bewildering and contradictory ways."*⁴

Resistance through the Definition of Terms and Concepts

Edward Said seeks to offer a critical interpretation of America's influence on the Palestinian question. To do so, he argues for the necessity of analyzing the United States using unconventional and more precise terminology. However, this does not mean abandoning commonly used terms such as *the Zionist lobby*, *the Arab lobby*, or *American interests*. Rather, these terms must be employed "in a context relatively free from clichés, as they often say more about us and our projections than they do about the actual subject we are attempting to describe. In other words, I will try to present the issue interpretively, which then allows me to make judgments from the position of someone committed to the Palestinian cause, its truth, and its inevitable justice".⁵

Due to the importance of such an approach, **Wahid Ben Bouaziz** emphasizes that proper reading requires "a rich epistemological arsenal to confront texts. It is not easy for a reader to interrogate utterances by defining their boundaries and tracing the sites of power embedded within them. Nor is it easy to create intertextuality between these utterances and others unless a significant conceptual reserve is available".⁶

Rigorous analysis, therefore, must begin with the right questions. The Palestinian issue, Said insists, should not be confined to the actions of the Zionist or Arab lobbies, but should be examined within the broader framework of American society. These lobbies, in his view, are secondary phenomena, whose success or failure depends on how they operate within the possibilities made available to them by American society. As such, they serve more as superficial distractions in American political and cultural life, and are often overestimated. Consequently, lobby groups hold little real power in shaping major decisions.

From this point, Said draws a critical distinction between American political society, embodied by the state, and American civil society, comprised of private institutions such as the family, religion, education, culture, and modes of production. In his view, understanding this division requires acknowledging two important points:

1. The strength of a nation stems from its civil institutions, not from its centralized government or state authorities. This pattern is observable in many industrial Western countries such as France, Britain, and the United States, which are not military or authoritarian states. A great deal of activity—particularly in universities and cultural domains—takes place without direct state control or intervention. The identity of American society, therefore, is not defined by its military or its president, but by its civil society, which is formed through the web of interests and institutions generated by the private sector.

2. Said's second observation is that while the American state can be said to represent America, this representation is not absolute. The state is shaped by certain traditions, interests, individuals, and institutions that align with it—yet there are also opposing voices and forces within society. He recalls the split between civil and political society in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when universities mobilized American civil society against the state. On this basis, Said argues for the necessity of analyzing both points of tension and alignment between the American state and its civil society, as is the case with the Palestinian issue.

Once such an analysis is completed, Said contends, it becomes possible to assess several questions: What should we expect or act upon? What should be opposed or supported? Where are the true battlefields in which Palestinians and their American allies fight for the right to self-determination? And most importantly, in whom should we place our trust?

Deconstructing Political and International Legal Discourse

In his critical readings, Edward Said relied heavily on deconstruction, which reflects his conviction in *“rejecting the ideology of domination and questioning the political necessities of society.”* In doing so, Said draws significantly on the thought of Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Noam Chomsky.⁷ In his book, he makes it clear that the United States is an imperial power, especially in its dealings with the external world. Although certain individuals and groups have contributed to peace efforts and humanitarian initiatives—such as the American Friends Service Committee, the War Resisters League, and individuals like Chomsky himself, as well as philanthropic endeavors like the development of the polio vaccine—Said argues that such contributions do not qualify the U.S. as a peace-loving nation. On the contrary, it has intervened in the internal affairs of numerous countries.

He provides even more examples illustrating the fascist tendencies of the American state, its reliance on violence and war, and its destruction of other peoples—not simply to eliminate them, but to send a broader message that the U.S. is capable of irrational, unprovoked destruction. According to Said, America has supported numerous repressive client regimes across Asia, including South Korea, Israel, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Such foreign interventions, he explains, are largely orchestrated by the U.S. presidency and the National Security Council, which were behind what President Nixon dubbed the *“Madman Theory of War”* in 1970.

Even when the U.S. appears sympathetic to victims of conflict—such as the Palestinians or Lebanese under Israeli bombardment—its responses are superficial expressions of concern with no real political weight. On the contrary, it continues to provide advanced military support to Israel. This underscores the deep contradiction between America's proclaimed support for human rights and its consistent endorsement of repression, military bases around the globe, and the arming of Third World and developing nations.

Said highlights how American presence in the world has always relied on justificatory discourse, framed around the claim of promoting good and spreading freedom. People assume the U.S. supports liberty—even as it destroys nations—while it remains the world's leading arms dealer. For decades, it managed to maintain its image as a symbol of humanism and idealism, despite its policies. Therefore, Said calls for a reassessment of the desire to seek America's approval, urging a more precise evaluation of what must be opposed and what might be supported—especially in reference to its official policies in the Middle East. He emphasizes the need to understand how American civil society produces and sustains those policies, and to identify which actors within that society are worth engaging.

Even when changes do occur in U.S. policy—such as its willingness to enter into dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—Said argues that these are superficial shifts. Hence, it is more important to focus on the broader American society, because:

“In every culture and civilization, there are luminous aspects. Our task is to reconcile with these aspects—not through absolutism or hegemonic centralities, but in the spirit of mutual recognition. Human interaction is an existential imperative; peaceful coexistence is a form of reconciliation. The best form is that which is grounded in justice.”⁸

Said also draws attention to the submission of the American intellectual class to dominant cultural norms, deepening what he calls intellectual betrayal. Traditional intellectuals, he claims, have become preoccupied with personal advancement, not the dissemination of truth. Consequently, much of the destruction carried out by the

U.S. is framed by these intellectuals as part of its defense of the “Western way of life,” or as a show of force meant to teach “non-white dictatorships” that American power is divinely sanctioned. In this worldview, truth, justice, and ethics lose their value.

Those who adhere to this ideology, Said warns, enjoy considerable influence within American society, which results in a blatant double standard: racial bigotry against African Americans at home, and unwavering support for Zionism abroad. These issues, he contends, are often treated with more urgency than vital concerns like social justice or equality.

Edward Said’s reading of the American political order is a liberating intellectual act, free from prejudice. His stance embodies the figure of the exiled intellectual who used exile as a productive lens through which to interrogate Western discourse on democracy and human rights. In his view, exile—after freedom—

“frees the intellectual from the constraints imposed by national identity, allowing a broader and deeper understanding of the world. It enriches the meaning of identity itself, without falling into the trap of emotional rhetoric or, in his words, nationalistic boastfulness.”⁹

Conclusion

We may conclude with Edward Said’s own words:

“The role of critique and the act of pointing out shortcomings become increasingly important in the absence of a comprehensive legal and constitutional system. This is not only true for Gaza and the West Bank, but applies to any part of the Arab world. Criticism raises awareness and reconnects leaders with their people. Moreover, criticizing authority is a moral obligation. Silence, indifference, or submission to oppressive power reflects a lack of moral conscience. A measure of self-criticism could have brought us closer to honesty with ourselves and spared us many of the Arab defeats that we brought upon ourselves after Oslo—and even before it.”

Edward Said embodied the image of the revolutionary or organic intellectual, one who sought to engage with the concerns of his society and interact with contemporary issues beyond mere emotional or rhetorical discourse. His writings fall squarely within what is now termed “cultural resistance” or “epistemological resistance”—a form of critical engagement that probes into obscured spaces, reveals the contradictions of Western discourse, and exposes its collapse into veiled racism or implicit ideological bias.

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³ Abdelwahab Elmessiri, *My Intellectual Journey*, Al-Amal Publishing & Printing, Egypt, 1st ed., 2000, p. 175.

⁴ Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine and the American Community*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1980, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ Wahid Ben Bouaziz, *The Misery of Theory*, Dar Mim Publishing, Algiers, 1st ed., 2023, p. 60.

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⁹ Lounis Benali, *Edward Said: From Critique of Orientalist Discourse to Critique of the Colonial Novel*, Dar Mim Publishing, Algiers, 1st ed., 2018, p. 243.