In a series of interviews with David Barsamian when Eqbal Ahmad was asked to comment on Edward Said’s intellectual contributions, he summed it up as follows: ‘I think the singular achievement of Said, as a literary critic, beginning with Orientalism, has been to put imperialism at the center of Western civilization… He put therefore the whole issue of Western expansion, domination and imperialism as central forces in defining the nature of civilization itself.’ Reflecting, in turn, on why he dedicated his book Culture and Imperialism to Eqbal Ahmad, Edward Said wrote that ‘it was because in his activity, life and thinking Eqbal embodied not just the politics of empire but that whole fabric of experience expressed in human life itself, rather than in economic rules and reductive formulas. What Eqbal understood about the experience of empire was the domination of empire in all its forms, but also the creativity, originality, and vision created in resistance to it. Those words—“creativity”, “originality”, “vision”—were central to his attitudes on politics and history.’ The relationship between these two men was an important one—a Palestinian scholar extraordinary and a charismatic activist intellectual from Pakistan—for they came to share a profound understanding of the relationship between knowledge, power and resistance, and leave us a legacy of challenges for drafting an anti-imperialist politics.

End of colonialism

They were born around the same time (Ahmad in 1933/4 and Said in 1935) in two parts of the world which were under British colonial rule (India and Palestine), and both experienced the violence of decolonization as a formative experience of their childhoods. In a BBC documentary on his life, Ahmad traveled along the historic Grand Trunk Road which once stretched the breadth of the Indian subcontinent from Calcutta to the threshold of Afghanistan. On the way he revisited the village in Bihar where he grew up, recounting his father’s murder because of his pro-Congress leanings, the decision of his elder brothers to migrate to Pakistan because of their pro-Muslim League leanings, and his mother’s refusal to leave their familial home. Torn asunder, the ‘moment of arrival’, independence from colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent was constituted by the very experience of Partition. Almost thirty million people were displaced in the violence that ensued, one of the largest forced migrations of modern times, and Eqbal and his brothers walked with the massive caravans of the uprooted along the G.T. Road into what had become the state of Pakistan.

Said also experienced a series of displacements as the state of Israel was carved out of British Mandate Palestine. He moved from Jerusalem to Egypt, and then, alone, to the United States while the rest of his family went to Lebanon. After being diagnosed with cancer, Said wrote a memoir, ‘Out of Place’ (1999) in which he reflects on what the loss of ‘place’ meant to him and his family. However, it was not the personal losses associated with displacement, but rather the profound and shared dispossession of a people from both their land and from history that moved him to write as an act of resistance.

On hearing statements by the likes of Golda Meir who, in 1969, declared that there are no Palestinians, Said felt compelled to articulate a history of loss and dispossession that had to be extricated, minute by minute, word by word, inch by inch, from the very real history of Israel’s establishment, existence and achievements… This was the world of power and representations, a world that came into being as a series of decisions made by writers, politicians, philosophers to suggest or obfuscate one reality and at the same time efface others.

The 1967 war drew Said into Palestinian politics. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod asked Said to write an article on the war for Arab Affairs and that article, ‘The Arab Portrayed’, became the starting point for his path-breaking book Orientalism (1978). The article so impressed Ahmad that he asked Abu-Lughod to convey his appreciation to Said. The two men met each other in 1968 at a meeting of Arabs in the United States where Ahmad was a keynote speaker. Ahmad had already earned a reputation for fighting against French colonial rule with the National Liberation Front in Algeria. He was also an eloquent civil rights and anti-Vietnam war campaigner in the United States. In his address Ahmad argued, as a veteran of guerilla warfare in Algeria, that the success of an armed struggle lay not in its ability to ‘out-fight’ the adversary, but rather to ‘out-legalize’ or morally isolate it. He thus concluded that armed struggle would not work for the Palestinian cause because it would simply reinforce the Israeli state’s proclaimed legitimacy as a homeland for those who had suffered, for it would allow Zionists to continue to portray Jews as victims of Arab violence instead of confronting the dispossession and suffering of Palestinians.

Although Ahmad’s advice against armed struggle disappointed most Palestinians there, particularly as their hopes came to be tied to the emergent PLO’s armed struggle for liberation, Said was so impressed that he introduced himself to Ahmed after the lecture. Of their initial meeting Ahmad said, ‘I knew from his article that I was meeting someone who had a very fresh and original mind. Since then we have been very close friends’.

Comrades-in-arms

Through the ensuing years Said saw Ahmad as a comrade-in-arms, and turned to him for advice and help in negotiating the challenges of advocating the Palestinian right to national self-determination. When in the late 1970s Said served as a member of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian parliament in exile, he invited Ahmad to Beirut to meet Yasir Arafat and other Palestinian leaders. He noted that ‘[t]hose leaders sensed about Eqbal that he was a real friend in the struggle and his sincerity and commitment could not be gainsaid, despite the fact that he wasn’t a native’. Ahmad notes that he repeatedly advised Arafat to engage in non-violent strategies of civil disobedience, of the Mahandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King kind, rather than armed struggle. Although Arafat often took notes, his advice went unheeded. Said too, in The Question of Palestine (1979), questioned the PLO’s use of violence, and later both became critics of the PLO and the Oslo Accords.

Politics and poetry

For Ahmad, a poem by the communist Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, ‘Dawn of Freedom’, captured the bathos of decolonization. In 1980 Ahmad introduced Said to Faiz who was in exile in Beirut, and
their oft-recalled evening of poetry recitation inspired Said’s essay, ‘The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile’. In politics and poetry the two men developed their critiques of power and expressed their faith in people’s capacity to resist through creativity. Yet, although they shared a great deal, the two men’s contributions differed enormously in substance.

Said was a professor of English Literature at Columbia University and wrote a large number of books in literary criticism, music, the Middle East and Palestine. Certainly the impact of Orientalism has gone far beyond the study of the Middle East, so much so that some have claimed that he founded the very field of ‘post-colonial studies’. He also regularly wrote articles on contemporary politics as they pertained to the representation of Islam, the Middle East and Palestine. Although he also participated in political discussions, his pen was his most vital sword. In comparison, and although Ahmad was a professor of politics at New Hampshire College, he left his mark wherever he went through his very person—his ‘superbly accurate analysis’, perception, compassion and oratory—and became a friend of people’s struggles in many different parts of the world. Said described Ahmad’s contributions as ‘essentially performative achievements, “stylists of the uttered word, pluri-lingual, generous with ideas and stories.”’ On his retirement from New Hampshire College, Said urged his friend to publish his ideas, telling him, ‘you shouldn’t leave your words scattered to the winds or even recorded on tape, but they should be collected and published in several volumes for everyone to read.’ Unfortunately, Ahmad died on 11 May 1999, before compiling such works. While Said leaves us a legacy of written words, their friendship offers reminders of some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Pluralizing and humanizing

Ahmad conceded that ‘[i]n literary criticism and historical writing there were two times: before Orientalism and after Orientalism’, yet he felt the work’s impact, although centered on the Middle East, didn’t have enough influence on the study of Islam. He argued that the book had had a far more decisive impact on histories of other parts of the world, particularly on writings of colonial Western expansion. As far as the study of Islam was concerned, the outcome was two-fold: there were writings that had absorbed and deepened some of Orientalism’s insights, but there were also established Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and polemists like Harold Bloom who continued to demonize Islam and Muslims. Certainly since post-11 September 2001 a large number of books and articles have reproduced a threatening and monolithic Islam for public and political consumption. As Joseph Massad pointed out at Orientalism’s Silver Jubilee meeting in New York, the conditions for the production of an abstract ‘Orient’ remain unchanged. Said, although battling his own illness, repeatedly took the now best-selling author Bernard Lewis and others to task, and argued that ‘[t]o understand anything about human history, it is necessary to see it from the point of view of those who made it, not to treat it as a packaged commodity or as an instrument of aggression. Why should the world of Islam be any different?’ With the passing of Said, this task of pluralizing and humanizing the diverse parts of the Muslim world now takes on a certain urgency.

Further, Said reminded us through Joseph Conrad that the distinctions between civilized London and ‘the heart of darkness’ quickly collapsed in extreme situations, and that the heights of European civilization could instantaneously fall into the most barbarous practices without preparation or transition. Ahmad also quoted Conrad’s statement, in a lecture entitled ‘Culture of Imperialism’ that self-evidently drew upon Said’s work, that ‘[t]he conquest of the earth, which means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing when you look it into too much.’ Ahmad went on to argue that ‘an enlightened civilization could engage in ‘not a pretty thing’ only on the condition that it did not ‘look into it too much’.

Notes

3. Stories my country told me: With Eqbal Ahmad, Grand Trunk Road, BBC, 1996.
7. Ibid., p.xxi.
8. Ibid., p.33–34
16. Confronting Empire, p.66.

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In Retrospect