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Review

Gauri Viswanathan (ed) (2002) *Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward W Said*. New York: Vintage.

Derek Hook

South Africa is a consistent point of reference in Edward Said's recent career-spanning collection of interviews. This is perhaps unsurprising given that as much as half of Said's prodigious output has been devoted to advancing the Palestinian cause, a cause which he sees as having much to learn from the South African experience. Said of course is the celebrated author of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, two titles whose unorthodox blend of literary/cultural criticism and politics largely inaugurated the field of postcolonial studies. This overlap of traditional academic activity and more forthright politics has been the hallmark of Said's originality, and this title replicates such an approach, split as its contents are into sections on theory and criticism, and the other on Palestinian activism.

The parallels between the struggle of black South Africa and that of Palestine looms large for Said, and it is here more than anywhere that he best develops such comparisons. Hence his thoughts on the historical differences between the ANC and PLO (the former 'strategically very firm and tactically flexible', the latter 'exactly the opposite' [2002:406]), and on the similarities between Afrikaner and Israeli territorial claims (the Afrikaner possessed 'a proto-Zionist ideology' [2002:452]). Likewise, his musings on a model for integration: here the binational solution of a shared sovereignty he poses for Israel/Palestine is held up against the 'political realism' of the South African model based on goals of 'coexistence and equality with a hope of truth and reconciliation'. The overwhelming lesson of South Africa's recent political history, for Said, however, is that of looking carefully 'at a complex history of ethnic antagonism' understanding

it, and then 'moving on', rather than being mired in a rhetoric of blame which redivides constituencies along the old lines of separation (2002:451).

We have less 'Said the author' than 'Said the speaking intellectual' on show here. As quickly becomes apparent, there are very different risks involved in publishing a collection of interviews than in remaining within the more guarded domain of the strictly written word. Whether it is his intention or not, Said's text reminds us of the importance of the interview, of the spoken interchange, as a vital medium of intellectual activity – particularly so when activism forms a central part of the project. Of course the interview can make for a precarious situation for the intellectual. Whereas the printed word means that the author has had the time to consider his or her thoughts, to think them through, the spontaneity of the interview necessitates a 'thinking on one's feet'. Moreover, here it is the interviewer – for the most part – who is best prepared. It is here the case that sometimes Said's interlocutors make the best points; that the text, perhaps somewhat ironically, foregrounds some of the most trenchant critiques of his own position. One critic laments the 'flat-footedness' of Said's attack on Western media representations of the Arab, implying that Said's rather stark analysis of these mechanisms itself leans towards the stereotypical.

Far closer to touching a nerve is the point of a Calcutta interviewer who asks whether it is not the case that, as a result of his influence on colonial discourse studies, that Indian history writing has been derailed from its social history agenda. As much as Said insists on the historical groundedness of his work, the interviewer is right. Although Said has a great deal to offer us as a critic, his critical system has detracted attention from Marxist conceptions of history, ideology and capital. As important as Said's assertion of 'worldliness' is – that is, his aversion to intellectuals as super-specialised technicians with elaborate jargons and little or no contact with the real world of power, authority and struggle – at times his approach to critical activity seems dangerously atheoretical. This is especially the case when he suggests that 'the intellectual role is essentially that of ... heightening consciousness, becoming aware of tensions, complexities' (2002:385). At times, Said's implicit trust in a 'critical consciousness' seems not to take full cognisance of the ideological nature of power, that in itself might produce something akin to a false consciousness, even in the ballowed form of ostensibly progressive critical activities.

This book also illustrates Said's own situation or, more to the point, the double-edged sword of what it means to be a popular intellectual. There are

gains to be had here. When the book's dustcover identifies Said as 'the most widely known Palestinian intellectual in the west', we are not confronting a facile exaggeration. The profile that Said was able to lend the Palestinian cause as a result of his prominence has been considerable. This popularity, however, has also meant that Said has been prey to some systematic misreadings, perhaps chief amongst which is the 'identity politics' appropriation of Said that proclaims that a staunch ethnic or nationalist identity is the foremost weapon against cultural dispossession, marginalisation, or racism. Said repeatedly opposes such a view, baldly stating that a 'principal role of the intellectual is ... to break up these large, transcultural identities' (2002:391).

Such a politics of identity leads all too easily to insularity, to forms of separatism and xenophobia. In contrast to such approaches, Said prefers a far more serviceable form of 'rootedness'. 'There's only one way to anchor oneself', he claims, 'and that is by affiliation with a cause, with a political movement ... [through] identification with matters involving justice, principle, truth, conviction' (2002:366). This is no doubt a more difficult and more elusive goal than it might first appear, and one that is at times perhaps less ideologically straightforward than Said would have us believe. As a goal of intellectual activity, though, it certainly has its merits.