

Said, Marxism, and Spatiality: Wars of Position in Oppositional Criticism

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Abstract: Although he maintained that he was not himself a Marxist—and frequently criticized both existing communism and Marxist literary criticism—Edward W. Said’s thought and work were profoundly influenced by Marxist theory, critical practice, and general discourse: his writings owe much to a Marxist tradition and draw inspiration from the committed aesthetics and politics of Jean-Paul Sartre, the narrative theory of Georg Lukács, the postcolonial psychology of Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci’s notions of hegemony and the function of intellectuals, the Frankfurt School’s critique of everyday life, and Raymond Williams’ cultural studies. This essay examines Said’s putative anti-Marxism in the context of his distinctively spatial approach to literature and culture and argues that understanding his spatially oriented criticism helps to square the circle of his ambiguous relationship to Marxism and amplify the power of his oppositional criticism. Said’s engagement with Marxist theory informs his humanism and democratic critical practice, which are all the more relevant and necessary in our present condition.

Keywords: Marxism, spatiality, critical theory, postcolonial studies, literary criticism

It seems strange to put it this way, but had Edward W. Said been a Marxist, he would have been one of the most important Marxist critics of his era. In his writings and interviews, he made it clear that he was not a Marxist, and he frequently criticized both existing communism and Marxist literary criticism. And yet, as any reader of his vast and var-

legated corpus readily discovers, Said's thought and work is thoroughly infused with Marxist theory, critical practice, and general discourse. His most admired predecessors in literary history include a number of writers who are either self-described Marxists or sympathetic fellow travelers, and his heroes include major figures from a recognizable tradition of Western Marxism, including, notably, Karl Marx himself. Indeed, Said's writings are filled with references to a veritable who's who of twentieth-century Marxist cultural critique. And although Said never identified himself or his work as Marxist, many Marxist critics of his own generation and since have found his work to be extremely valuable to their own (not only those engaged in postcolonial studies but also those working in other areas of literary and cultural criticism). Said's work thus resonates with Marxism in fruitful ways, and such resonance is worth examining more closely in our present moment of neoliberalism and globalization when critics are struggling to come to terms with the state of humanistic inquiry. Said's "oppositional criticism" (*The World* 29), as he preferred to call it, remains well-suited to our present situation, and, I argue, Marxist theory and criticism does as well. The elective affinities between Said's positions and Marxism suggest productive avenues for critical theory today.

This essay examines Said's putative anti-Marxism in the broader context of his distinctively spatial approach to literature and culture, which I contend is tied, in large part, to his elective affinities toward Marxist theory. While Said does not embrace Marxism as an ideology, methodology, or epistemology, he derives much of the force of his critical investigations and discoveries from a Marxist tradition, drawing inspiration from, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's committed aesthetics and politics, Georg Lukács' narrative theory, Antonio Gramsci's notions of hegemony and the function of intellectuals, the Frankfurt School's critique of everyday life, and Raymond Williams' cultural studies. I argue that understanding Said's spatially oriented criticism helps to square the circle of his ambiguous relationship with Marxism and locate his quasi-Marxist theory amid his broader sense of oppositional criticism as well as his humanism and democratic criticism more generally.

I. Said's Quarrel with Marxism

For a critic so obviously influenced by writers associated with Marxist theory, Said has written relatively little on Marxism proper. Some might even accuse him of deliberately avoiding the topic. As Stephen Howe observes, when Said does discuss his attitude regarding Marxism, he often does so “in ways that were brief, allusive, ambivalent—and when he was more forthcoming, it was largely when directly challenged by interviewers, rather than in his own written texts” (50).¹ While Said certainly devoted no essays or books to the critique of Marxism, he also refused to embrace Marxist criticism or theory as his own. Although Said's cultural criticism and theory owes much to that tradition, he remained somewhat ambivalent—if not, at times, antagonistic—toward Marxism. Part of his objections, no doubt, relate to the political problems connected with what used to be called “actually existing communism”—that is, everyday life in such places as the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, Cuba, China, North Korea, and Vietnam, not to mention many vaguely Stalinist regimes scattered across parts of Africa and the Middle East—but this really does not explain Said's objections to the Marxist theory of Fredric Jameson or Terry Eagleton, for instance, contemporaries whose criticism and political views Said would likely sympathize with. Nor, I think, can one simply look at the Orientalism of which Marx was, and later Marxists were, guilty as the main reason for Said's objections, because Said's secular (and later contrapuntal) approach makes room for far more objectionable figures. At first glance, Said's ambivalence toward Marxism seems to relate mostly to his vexed relationship with theory.

Said occasionally criticizes Marxists in particular and academics in general for overvaluing theory at the expense of practice. In some respects, this is Said's way of bemoaning the apolitical or at least politically disengaged or ineffective work of ivory tower intellectuals tout court. Said is not an opponent of the academic world, of course; he celebrates the “utopian space still provided by the university” in *Culture and Imperialism* (xxvi), for example.² But Said decries the disciplinary rigidity and methodological narrowness he finds in the work of many of his fellow academics, and throughout his career he remained concerned that

many such otherwise brilliant scholars kept themselves distant from, if not also ignorant of, the material basis for social and political theory—which is to say, the people themselves. Said is no anti-intellectual, but there is an element of E. P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* in his more polemical asides; indeed, Said explicitly makes reference to this text in "Traveling Theory," a justly famous essay included in Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Just as Thompson excoriates the work of Louis Althusser and his followers, Said finds even among some very good critics a tendency toward theoretical closure that, in his view, is strictly at odds with critical consciousness. "Indeed," he writes, "I would go so far as saying that it is the critic's job to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and therefore circumscribed by any theory" (242). Thus, the author of *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, one of the twentieth century's most profound works of literary theory, famously turns his back on theory (or at least what might now be called, in the aftermath of its heyday in academe, Theory-with-a-capital-T) and consequently, though almost certainly unintentionally, provides a modicum of aid and comfort to the rising tide of anti-theory sentiment within academic circles and the broader public sphere in the 1980s and after.³

Said is far too brilliant a critic to get caught up in mere theory-bashing, which in the United States has gone hand in hand with a more basic anti-intellectualism so thoroughgoing and persistent that it was noted even in the eras of Alexis de Tocqueville and Thomas Jefferson. However, in a moment that coincided with the ascent of Thatcherism and Reaganism, Said is especially hard on critics whose political sympathies ought to have made them actively resistant but whose work seems too far removed from the exigencies of everyday life.

For example, in his 1982 essay "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," Said discusses Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, a "major work of intellectual criticism" that displays "rare brilliance and learning" and makes a "remarkably complex and deeply attractive argument" regarding the priority of a political interpretation of texts

and, more particularly, of Marxism as the “untranscendable horizon” (Jameson’s echo of Sartre’s expression) of contemporary criticism and theory (13). Said argues that Jameson’s ingenious exposition of a certain type of politics, “the politics defined by political theory from Hegel to Louis Althusser and Ernst Bloch,” tends to ignore or downplay another, “the politics of struggle and power in the everyday world, which in the United States at least has been won, so to speak, by Reagan” (13). Said thinks that this lack of attention to the second type of politics is due, in large part, to the fact that “Jameson’s assumed constituency is an audience of cultural-literary critics,” which “in contemporary America is premised and made possible by the separation of disciplines” into “autonomous realms of human effort” (14). Said also finds Jameson’s objections to appeals to morality, something Jameson derives almost as much from Friedrich Nietzsche as from Marx, to be part of this disciplinary provincialism. Jameson argues that “ideological commitment is not first and foremost a matter of moral choice but of the taking of sides in a struggle between embattled groups” (*Political Unconscious* 290). Said concedes that this framing allows the category of moral choice to be “de-Platonized and historicized” but finds Jameson to be strangely naïve with respect to the roles played by moral choice and moral outrage in existent political struggles, such as those involving the dispossession of a family’s land (“Opponents” 14).

For his own part, Jameson’s position with respect to moralizing, which he views as epistemologically unproductive and ontologically false, has been consistent throughout his career and derives much of its urgency from the sort of historic political struggles Said later recognizes as requiring a contrapuntal approach. Following Nietzsche’s lead (and also Sartre’s, one might add), Jameson maintains that behind every ethical argument lies the traces of power relations, such that the ostensibly urgent moral or ethical arguments often mask the truly political content of such perceptions. Moreover, the dialectic itself cautions one to be skeptical of hasty judgments, especially because the logic of the dialectical reversal dictates that what might appear “bad” at a given moment or in a discrete situation can reveal itself to be altogether “good” in another time and place. In Jameson’s words,

a genuinely historical and dialectical analysis of such phenomena—particularly when it is a matter of a present of time and of history in which we ourselves exist and struggle—cannot afford the impoverished luxury of such absolute moralizing judgements: the dialectic is “beyond good and evil” in the sense of some easy taking of sides, whence the glacial and inhuman spirit of its historical vision. (*Postmodernism* 62)

Being always situated (to again emphasize a Sartrean and existentialist point), our perspective is necessarily limited by the time and place in which we find ourselves at any given moment, a limitation that in turn means that our judgments about the relative goodness or badness of this or that aspect of our situation must remain somewhat provisional. That does not mean that we do not make judgments—an absurd proposition that even if possible would not be very practicable—but only that we do so from an always and already engaged, situated position. This notion actually comports well with Said’s idea of oppositional criticism except for the fact that Said maintains his commitment to the moral register associated with liberal humanism. In this respect, one can liken his critique of Jameson to his eventual move away from Michel Foucault, another theorist whom Said admires but in the end cannot ultimately endorse owing to the French philosopher’s theory of power, which, in Said’s view, does not respond effectively to the ethical imperatives of the present.

In sum, part of Said’s aversion to Marxism is its apparently bloodless abstractions in the face of real-world struggles—in other words, its commitment to theory or to a body of theories without a concomitant engagement with the exigencies of everyday life. This is a pretty common knock on Marxism, going back to its origins. I recall a conversation with one of my former professors, the historian Lawrence Goodwyn, who asserted that Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire* was one of the greatest works of social theory ever written but added, “It’s a little thin on people.” The old theory-versus-practice divide is made a point of moral opprobrium by anti-Marxists, who argue (erroneously) that all philosophy is practically worthless and that only direct actions matter. Perhaps

they would even cite Marx, in an attempt to prove the hypocrisy of Marxism, using his pithy and well-known eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (“Theses” 109). But even this line is not opposed to theory, as ought to be clear on the face of it and is especially vivid when considering that, in the eighth thesis of the same series, Marx advises that theory must delve into “human practice and the contemplation of this practice” (109). Marx was not opposed to theory, still less to interpretation, but he was not satisfied with *merely* doing these things. As evidenced by his entire career subsequent to writing these words, Marx maintained that although theory and interpretation are needed, they are insufficient in and of themselves to change the world.

Despite his concern that contemporary Marxist (and other “Left”) critics had ceded the moral ground of real-world politics in their pursuit of a more arcane and disciplinarily circumscribed theoretical discourse, Said was wary about anti-Marxism as well. However much disdain he may have felt for actually existing communism in the Soviet Union and other “socialist” states as well as in the deleterious effects of many self-proclaimed or Party-sponsored communist activities in Africa and the Middle East, Said certainly had no interest in red-baiting. In a 1992 interview, he repeated his by then long-held view that Marxism was “insufficient” but quickly added: “I’ve never indulged in anti-Marxism either. I may have been critical about certain of Marx’s pronouncements, but I have never been an anti-Communist; in fact, I’ve denounced anti-Communism as a rhetorical and ideological ploy” (“Interview” 259–60). Following Sartre’s lead, Said might prefer a policy of “anti-anticommunism,” a good position to hold when faced with an unacceptable Soviet-style communism on the one hand and an almost equally abhorrent American-led anti-communism on the other. At the time, when a number of influential critics and journalists were attacking Marxists like Jameson both for being too insulated within academe and for being too radical in their views, Said’s refusal to join that chorus is noteworthy, and perhaps his writings might be characterized as a kind of anti-anti-Marxism.⁴ To operate under such a banner is clearly not

the same thing as being a Marxist, but it also avoids the political and theoretical problems, not to mention the bad company, associated with anti-Marxism.

As this brief discussion suggests, Said's objections to Marxist criticism are largely connected to his sense that criticism, in order to function effectively, cannot be conditioned in advance by any ideological program, which would necessarily affect if not actually predetermine the results of any critical inquiry before it is even begun. In Said's view, such criticism would inevitably function as a quasi-religious discourse that removes human agency and intellect from the equation, installing instead a supra-human principle or logic that would provide answers befitting its own preconceived conceptions of the world. Said also bemoans the fact that newly developed and strictly defined disciplinary fields have undermined the effectiveness of criticism and even introduced their own orthodoxies, which he parodies by writing, "I'm sorry, I can't understand this—I'm a literary critic, not a sociologist" ("Opponents" 13). For instance, Said criticizes Jameson for limiting his vision to the bailiwick of literary studies in *The Political Unconscious*, although Jameson's work, even in that book, which is devoted to the question of interpretation, certainly ranges across many disciplinary boundaries; Jameson's own range of interests seems well nigh universal, such that Colin MacCabe quips that "nothing cultural is alien to him" (ix). The enhanced interdisciplinarity of cultural studies since the 1980s may have caused Said to modify this view, but one could argue that Marxism, in its insistence upon connecting the economic and the political to other spheres (including, notably, the aesthetic), was already far less guilty of disciplinary narrow-mindedness than other theoretical or critical traditions.

In addition, Said laments that, especially but not exclusively in the US, Marxism "risks becoming an academic subspecialty" (*The World* 28). Considering that the US has no operative socialist political presence, at least when compared with many European countries, Said finds that Marxism is largely academic, both in the literal sense that its most significant adherents and leaders are university professors rather than labor organizers or politicians and in the figurative, usually dismissive sense of not mattering in the so-called real world. As Said puts it in

The World, the Text, and the Critic, which was written amid the intellectual pathos of a moment beholden to a triumphant and hegemonic Reaganism, when the more radical or utopian prospects of the previous decades appeared to have evanesced completely, “[t]he net effect of ‘doing’ Marxist criticism or writing at the present time is of course to declare political preference, but it is also to put oneself outside a great many things going on in the world, so to speak, and in other kinds of criticism” (29). Without meaning to, perhaps, Said joins liberal and conservative critics in dismissing Marxism as a pseudo-religion, a merely academic exercise in theory, and an utterly irrelevant discourse.⁵

But that is certainly not Said’s ultimate position with respect to the theories and practices associated with Marxism. In his very next sentence, Said avers, “I have been more influenced by Marxists than by Marxism or any other *ism*” (29; emphasis in original). The list of names mentioned in my second paragraph above certainly testifies to this, as Said’s work is infused with the ideas of earlier critics, a large number of whom viewed themselves as Marxists of one type or another, even as they often vehemently disagreed among themselves. The history of twentieth-century Marxist criticism and theory—its orthodoxies and apostasies, later developments, disputes, intrigues, refinements, adaptations, extrapolations, and so forth—is that of a robust, mostly interdisciplinary (*avant la lettre*) or multidisciplinary set of discursive practices, to borrow a Foucauldian term, in which the crisis that is modernity or postmodernity is made visible and conceptualizable. Although Said demurs understandably enough when it comes to using the label “Marxist,” he recognizes the contributions of this discourse both to his work and the work he thinks we ought to be doing: “[A]t its best, this work also teaches us how to be critical, rather than how to be good members of a school” (29).

Said’s ambivalence toward Marxism reflects his reluctance to embrace any *-ism* at all, which, as I mention above, for him necessarily implies a presupposed adherence to an ideological position that amounts to a sort of religious belief. Writing in an entirely different context, Said delivers an impassioned and persuasive argument in favor of secular criticism. By this he means both that criticism must sever its ancient connections

to mysticism and to the exegesis of Scripture and that criticism should recognize its situatedness in, and its affiliations with, the world. Hence, for Said, various *grand récits* like Marxism (according to a certain understanding of it, at least) constitute a sort of “sacred narrative” that elevates and removes the object of study from the real world of human interactions and struggle, from that *irdische Welt* of Erich Auerbach’s philology and from the rest of world literature. In the conclusion to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said elegantly explains the problems associated with a literary critical or theoretical program subject to a religious, rather than secular or worldly, vision:

To say of such grand ideas and their discourse that they have something in common with religious discourse is to say that each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly. Like culture, religion therefore furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or to gain adherents. This in turn gives rise to organized collective passions whose social and intellectual results are often disastrous. The persistence of these and other religious-cultural artifacts testifies amply to what seem to be necessary features of human life, the need for certainty, group solidarity, and a sense of communal belonging. Sometimes of course these things are beneficial. Still it is also true that what a secular attitude enables—a sense of history and human production, along with a healthy skepticism about various official idols venerated by culture and by system—is diminished, if not eliminated, by appeals to what cannot be thought and explained, except by consensus and appeals to authority. (290)

Said is referring specifically to Orientalist discourse, but his words could easily apply to promoters and critics of other ideologies. It seems that the main thrust of Said’s objection to Marxism, conceived of as a vast but coherent body of knowledge and mode of investigation, is that it may be or become a system of authority that shuts down further critical

inquiry. There is no doubt that this quasi-religious status has been all too powerfully realized in various states or regimes associated with communism, although it has also been realized by most non- or anti-communist regimes as well—hence Said’s critique of Orientalism in British, French, and American political and scholarly discourse.

In an effort to eschew political labels like “Marxist” or “liberal” more generally, Said famously wrote that “[w]ere [he] to use one word consistently along with *criticism* (not as a modification but as an emphatic) it would be *oppositional*” (*The World* 29; emphasis in original).⁶ He explains that “[i]f criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method” (29). Understanding Said’s aversion to systems of thought in this sense, one might also recognize how much this vision of criticism comports with Marx’s and with the long line of Marxist criticism and theory that follows from it. I am thinking of the perspective of a young Marx, who in his famous 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge wrote that he was opposed to “dogmatic abstraction” and insisted that the urgent project of the present must be “a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be” (“For a Ruthless Criticism” 8). Marx’s position is rooted in a sense of spatiotemporal situatedness that critics such as Sartre, Jameson, and Said also emphasize—that is, the critical consciousness of one’s place in the world, of one’s worldliness. This basic Marxist precept is one shared by Said, and it informs the critical practice and *Weltanschauung* of their democratic humanism as well.

II. Critical Consciousness as a Spatial Sense

In “Traveling Theory,” his meticulously elaborated critique of contemporary literary theory, Said worries that a theory—not only Marxist theory, of course—could take on a somewhat religious role, becoming “an ideological trap” that “transfixes both its users and what it is used on,” which in turn would mean that “[c]riticism would no longer be possible” (*The World* 241). Said argues that, in place of theory, we should

strive for what he calls “critical consciousness,” which he understands in a specifically spatial way. He writes:

No reading is ever neutral or innocent, and by the same token every text and every reader is to some extent the product of a theoretical standpoint, however implicit or unconscious such a standpoint may be. I am arguing, however, that we distinguish theory from critical consciousness by saying that the latter is a sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating and situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the space and the time out of which it emerges as part of its time, working in and for it, responding to it; then, consequently, that first place can be measured against subsequent places where the theory turns up for use. The critical consciousness is the awareness of the differences between situation, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. And, above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict. (241–42)

In distinguishing critical consciousness from theory (or, again, Theory), Said argues for a more spatially oriented approach, one that pays particular attention to the situation, the site or sites of struggle, and thus also to spatial relations among various situations, places, and circumstances. Said’s critique of an identifiably Marxist critical theory thus involves a spatial turn.

As I have discussed in a number of other works, including my introduction to *The Geocritical Legacies of Edward W. Said*, the concepts of, as well as practices related to, space, place, and mapping have become key elements of literary and cultural studies over the past few decades. What has been called the spatial turn in recent critical theory has highlighted the significance of spatiality in comparative and world literature, among other areas, as the relations between geographical knowledge and cultural productions have been subject to greater scrutiny by scholars in various disciplinary fields. Geocriticism, literary car-

tography, and the spatial humanities more generally have introduced new approaches to and interpretations of literature while also drawing from the spatially oriented interventions of scholars not necessarily associated with these emergent discourses. Among the most influential of these scholars, Said represents an important figure in the development of spatially oriented cultural criticism. Although it would be misleading and anachronistic to characterize him as a geocritic, Said remains a powerful precursor whose writings on a vast range of subjects offer indispensable resources for scholars interested in the relations between spatiality, representation, and cultural forms. Said's oppositional criticism connects his diverse projects in relation to a spatially inflected critical consciousness.

Said is a significant force in the development of a type of spatial cultural or literary studies. For example, he was able to connect narrative representation in a nineteenth-century novel to the most complicated conundrums of contemporary politics and extend a project like that of Williams' *The Country and the City* into a multinational approach to literature. In works such as *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Said directly undertakes what he refers to as a "geographical inquiry into historical experience" (*Culture and Imperialism* 7), but even his less overtly geographical or political texts, such as *Beginnings* and *Musical Elaborations*, raise valuable questions pertaining to the relationship between space and culture. In such writings, Said persistently demonstrates the human (or, as Nietzsche would add, all-too-human) need for a sort of figurative mapping, particularly in the form of aesthetic productions, of the social, historical, and cultural spaces in which we live and struggle. From his earliest writings on Joseph Conrad and literary theory to his monumental studies of Orientalism and postcolonial criticism, Said always paid attention to the spatial and geographical registers of literary art, history, and representation.

The significance of both spatiality and geography is apparent, though understated, even in Said's first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. Originally written as his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard and first published by Harvard University Press in 1966, Said's study subtly assesses the spatial form as well as the geographical and historical

content of Conrad's letters and short fiction. For example, Said notes that "[w]riting and life were, for [Conrad], like journeys without maps, struggles to win over and then claim unknown ground. . . . As the physical and moral geography of Europe changed, he changed too" (63). Whether speaking more or less metaphorically about *l'espace littéraire* or focusing attention on the all-too-real geography of territorial conquest, Said's entire body of work is infused with a keen sense of the spatial.

Said is perhaps best known for his contributions to postcolonial studies, which as an interdisciplinary field has been at the forefront of geocritical or spatial literary theory. Postcolonial critics like José Rabasa and Ricardo Padrón have provided significant deconstructive readings of geographical discourses surrounding New World colonization, and geographers such as J. B. Harley and Derek Gregory have demonstrated how cartographic practices frequently served imperialist programs, whether or not the cartographers involved were aware of it. In *How to Lie with Maps*, Mark Monmonier shows how even the mathematical projections used in mapmaking came to serve ideological purposes, often in ways that supported colonial practices. Speaking of the Mercator projection, a map projection that distorts the represented areas of space by aggrandizing those located further from the equator, Monmonier writes that "[t]he English especially liked the way the Mercator flattered the British Empire with a central meridian through Greenwich and prominent far-flung colonies like Australia, Canada, and South Africa" (96). Said makes clear the ways that both literary and scientific productions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries abetted the spread and consolidation of imperialism.

In *Orientalism*, Said shows how "imaginative geography" represents different spaces and types of space according to the rather arbitrary distinctions made by individuals or groups (49–73). He observes that the "practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space which is 'theirs' is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be quite arbitrary. . . . It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours'" (54). Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's arguments

in *The Poetics of Space*, Said notes that “space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant and anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here” (55). Just as the “country” and the “city” emerged, in different ways, as models for organizing the domestic spaces of Great Britain and, eventually, the world, the ancient dichotomy of “our land—barbarian land” translates into a basic structure with which to organize the spaces of one’s imaginative geography (54). For Said, this lies at the heart of the Orientalism that develops in and alongside European culture, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said takes as his starting point the notion that “none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography,” a struggle that is not only about imperial armies and direct conquest but also “about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (7). Indeed, narrative is as much the contested territory that Said wishes to explore as are the earth’s physical spaces. He writes: “The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative” (xii–xiii). Clearly, material interests such as the profit motive and the geopolitical balance of power inspired the expansion of colonial empires, but Said rightly emphasizes the cultural aspects of imperialism (which is distinct from, though obviously related to, colonialism) that “allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated” and “these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples” (7; emphasis in original). In his examination of the topic in *Geographical Imaginations*, Gregory alludes to this ideological aspect of the imperialist project as “dispossession by othering,” whereby an identifiable “they” can be deemed unfit to govern themselves, which in turn allows the colonizers to undertake a humanitarian “civilizing mission” (179). Once a kind of *mission civilizatrice* is accepted, taken for granted even, it becomes the duty of those in the metropolitan center to look out for or take care of their colonized

populations on the periphery. Both cartography and narrative played significant roles in establishing these cultural attitudes.

Said points out that the so-called “age of empire” coincided neatly with “the period in which the novel form and the new historical narrative become preeminent,” but he insists that “most cultural historians, and certainly all literary scholars, have failed to remark the *geographical* notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territories that underlies Western fiction, historical writing, and philosophical discourse of the time” (*Culture and Imperialism* 58; emphasis in original). A proper analysis of this historical coincidence would require greater attention to the spatiality of empire, to the geographical and cartographical aspects of the imperial mission and its multifarious effects. An example of the type of work Said has in mind can be found in Paul Carter’s magnificent *The Road to Botany Bay*, an extended essay on what Carter calls “spatial history” that explores the polyvalent uses of myth, history, geography, and mapping in the colonization of Australia.

Such narrative representation is not limited to the great realist tradition of the nineteenth-century novel, historiography, and ethnography. In his “Note on Modernism” in *Culture and Imperialism*, Said suggests that the new aesthetic forms reflect a growing apprehension of the irony of imperialism, of the ways in which the presence of the peripheral “other” comes to be felt in the metropolitan centers. This sentiment is enunciated by Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) when, regarding England from the Thames River, he observes that “this also . . . has been one of the dark places on the earth” (6), thus suggesting the degree to which Europe’s supposed superiority is contingent and ephemeral. The greater social complexity undergirded by a multinational colonial network called for new narrative forms, and the modernist novel emerged in response. “To deal with this [complexity],” writes Said, “a new encyclopedic form became necessary” (*Culture and Imperialism* 189). The features of the modernist novel include “a circularity of structure, inclusive and open at the same time”—as, for example, in the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique deployed in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, whose “novelty [is] based on a reformulation of old, even outdated fragments drawn self-consciously from disparate

locations, sources, and cultures” (189). In Said’s view, the formal structures and literary techniques of the modernist novel, in many cases irrespective of the content of the individual texts, can be seen as ways of making sense of the spatial and cultural transformations attendant on the age of imperialism.

Writing of the same historical situation from an explicitly Marxist perspective, Jameson argues that the age of imperialism or monopoly capitalism brought about a schism between “truth” and “experience,” wherein, for instance, the material conditions for the possibility of an individual’s lived experience in a metropolitan center are actually to be found in the far-flung colonial elsewhere. As Jameson puts it,

[a]t this point the phenomenological experience of the individual subject—traditionally, the supreme raw material for the work of art—becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or wherever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are not even conceptualizable for most people. (*Postmodernism* 411)

For Jameson, the stylistic innovations of literary modernism were attempts to deal with this existential condition, effectively operating as strategies of containment that repressed the historical and political content of the novels. However, for Said this aesthetic of modernism was a reaction to the impending breakdown of the imperial system, as the artist attempted to hold an imaginary reality together that was no longer feasible in the real world. Said concludes that “[s]patiality becomes, ironically, the characteristic of an aesthetic rather than of political domination, as more and more regions—from India to Africa to the Caribbean—challenge the classical empires and their cultures” (*Culture*

and Imperialism 190). The spatiotemporal transformations of the world system in the early-to-mid-twentieth century thus find representational counterparts in the aesthetic and formal innovations within modernist literary practices.

The spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences, motivated in part by the work of Marxists and postcolonial critics, has placed greater emphasis in recent years on literary geography, literary cartography, and geocriticism, enabling critical interventions into these fields and suggesting new possibilities for them. Said's wide-ranging literary criticism, cultural history, and political activism have been and remain extremely influential with respect to such important developments.

III. Conclusion

In an essay that very much appears to be an acknowledgement of influence (and bearing the deceptively broad title "History, Literature, and Geography"), Said discusses three critics whose analyses of literature, culture, and society helped to shape his own: Auerbach, Lukács, and Gramsci. The latter, in particular, may be credited with helping to focus Said's thinking on matters of space and geography. As Said writes, Gramsci is "the producer of a certain type of critical consciousness, which I believe is geographical and spatial in its fundamental coordinates" (463). In Gramsci's "unity" of theory and practice, Said asserts,

all ideas, all texts, all writings are imbedded in actual geographical situations that make them possible, and that in turn make them extend institutionally and temporally. History therefore derives from a discontinuous geography. . . .

Connected to all this, then, we must remember that most of Gramsci's terminology—hegemony, social territory, ensembles of relationship, intellectuals, civil and political society, emergent and traditional classes, territories, regions, domains, historical blocks—is what I would call a critical and geographical rather than encyclopedic or totalizing nominative or systematic terminology. . . . The basic social contest for Gramsci is the one over hegemony, that is, the control of essentially heterog-

enous, discontinuous, non-identical, and *unequal* geographies of human habitation and effort. (466–67; emphasis in original)

For Said, part of the appeal of Gramsci's work is its insistence, as with Sartre's work, that "politics and power and collectivity are always involved when culture, ideas, and texts are to be studied and/or analyzed. More importantly, this also applies to the writing of texts—such as his [Gramsci's] own, which are always *situated*" (Said, "History" 465–66; emphasis in original).

For all his implicit or explicit criticism of a certain Hegelian or totalizing Marxism, Said here again participates in a vibrant Marxist tradition. For example, Jameson notes that a core feature of the dialectic is its unflagging commitment to the "logic of the situation," as opposed to logic of individual consciousness or abstract notions like "society" ("Interview" 194). He contends that "[t]he emphasis on the logic of the situation, the constant changeability of the situation, its primacy and the way in which it allows certain things to be possible and others not: that would lead to a kind of thinking that I would call dialectical" (194). From this position, Jameson's exploratory elaboration of a dialectical criticism at the end of *Marxism and Form* is intimately related to his later work on the political unconscious, cognitive mapping, and utopia, and this once more demonstrates its essentially Sartrean heritage—a heritage that I argue Said himself shares. And, although the phrase itself is not yet in his mind, Jameson's reflections on the "new modernism" of the 1960s, distinct from its *fin-de-siècle* predecessor, suggest the degree to which the concept of the postmodern was already insinuating itself into his criticism as early as 1971 or before.⁷ In such a postmodern situation, the project of dialectical criticism is all the more needed, since only that project heroically attempts to square the circle of (and give form to) both lived experience and the social totality, which is impossible from the limited perspective of various specialized disciplines. As Jameson observes, "[t]he works of culture come to us as signs of an all-but-forgotten code, as symptoms of diseases no longer even recognized as such, as fragments of a totality we have long since lost the organs to see" (*Marxism and Form* 416). Today, Jameson asserts, everything "cries

out for commentary, for interpretation, for decipherment, for diagnosis” (416)—in other words, for the traditional duties of literary criticism. Marxist criticism is uniquely suited to this situation, not only because it does a better job than those other, more specialized or local varieties of criticism, but also because it always and already contains their concerns within its own.

As Jameson makes clear, building on the work of others in the Marxist tradition, the logic of the situation and the Sartrean insistence upon our fundamental situatedness, historically and geographically, are not fundamentally at odds with some more global conception of the totality. In other words, Marxism does not, strictly speaking, impose some abstract structure upon the particularities of concrete situations but rather attempts to identify and to make connections between seemingly separate and discrete phenomena, which are themselves often held apart conceptually in such a way as to exert the hegemony of a particular group over another, as when the artifacts of culture are held to be outside the realm of social or political struggles. In many respects, the Marxist approach to culture and society is similar to Said’s. In his emphasis on the spatiality of critical consciousness, he joins with Marxism in the ruthless criticism of all that exists, perhaps even against his own instincts.

Notes

- 1 For a general overview of Said’s critical relationship with Marxist theory and criticism, see Howe.
- 2 Given the heavy-handed ideological assaults on higher education and the academic world more generally, far worse today than in 1993, it is well worth quoting Said’s comment in full:
In its writing [the writing of *Culture and Imperialism*] I have availed myself of the utopian space still provided by the university, which I believe must remain a place where such vital issues are investigated, discussed, reflected on. For it to become a site where social and political issues are actually either imposed or resolved would be to remove the university’s function and turn it into an adjunct to whatever political party is in power. (*Culture and Imperialism* xxvi)
- 3 To name only the first of many such works to emerge around that time, I refer readers to Knapp and Michaels’ “Against Theory” (which was republished as the title essay in Mitchell’s *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*).

- 4 This period, roughly the early 1980s through the mid-1990s, witnessed the emergence of anti-Left critique of higher education by such figures as former director of the National Endowment of the Humanities and President Reagan's Secretary of Education William J. Bennett, whose 1984 government report *To Reclaim a Legacy*, criticizing canon reform and multiculturalism, became national news. In 1987, Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* became bestsellers. These texts were followed in rapid succession by even more venal, politically charged Jeremiads such as Sykes' *ProfScam*, Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, and the later-to-be-convicted-felon D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*. With the continuing publication of similarly outraged diatribes against university professors and higher education over the past thirty years, one could argue that this genre, launched in the mid-1980s, has never gone out of style.
- 5 Harootunian points out a potential contradiction in the way that Said's work valorizes the literature, music, and art of a European tradition while also arguing for the elimination of cultural and geographical divisions on the order of "East" and "West."
- 6 In "Criticism between Opposition and Counterpoint," Arac notes that Said's shift toward a "contrapuntal" approach to criticism in *Culture and Imperialism* is a dramatic revision of his earlier "oppositional" view.
- 7 See *Marxism and Form*, 413–14.

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