

Bernard Lewis, the Intellectual Giant and the Grasshoppers

It is a truth universally acknowledged, except by book reviewers in the New York Times, that Bernard Lewis is the most important and distinguished scholar on the history of the Middle East and of the Islamic and Arab past.

Therefore, it was startling that Jacob Heilbrunn in his review of the book *Ally* by Michael Oren (Sunday, July 12, 2015) when referring to the “legendary Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis,” under whom Oren studied at Princeton, repeated Edward Said’s scurrilous remark that Lewis was, “dripping with condescension and contempt toward the Arab world.”

In repeating this infamous comment, Jacob Heilbrunn reveals he writes more from a political perspective than from scholarly analysis. Even if Heilbrunn himself does not subscribe to this offensive statement, he has disgraced himself by quoting it.

Heilbrunn might have done well to misquote the poem, “Now that the truth is out,” by W.B. Yeats: How can Bernard Lewis compete, being honor bred, with one who were it proved is otherwise?

Lewis is recognized as a world renowned scholar, the master of a dozen and more languages, historian, philologist, and a leading expert on Turkish history and Arab culture. It was Said who distorted the meaning of the honorable word, “Orientalism” by defining it as the writings of British and French persons who provided justification for Western imperialism.

What is important here is the rationale that the scholarly accomplishment of westerners can exist, without ideological,

ethnic, national, or cultural frontiers, even if there is occasional prejudice of which we are all guilty.

The late Oleg Grabar, Professor of Islamic Art, himself on the political left, although critical in a proper academic way of some of Lewis's writings, remarked that Lewis was entirely right in pointing out the scholarly achievements, and in many ways the intellectual probity and generosity of what we call orientalism.

Lewis was never guilty of imparting his political views, especially those as a Zionist supporter of the State of Israel, to his students or colleagues. By contrast, Said reduced his remarks on Lewis to the level of political polemics and personal abuse.

Said himself later explained his purpose: the book *Orientalism* was written as a result of being "politically associated with a struggle, the struggle of Arab and Palestinian nationalism." Said attacked Lewis, not for his scholarship, about which Said probably knew little or nothing, but because he was a supporter of Zionism.

Heilbrunn associated, as if they were intellectually comparable in analysis about the Middle East, the extraordinary scholar Lewis, with Said, who wrote a book called *Orientalism* full of errors and who misstated his own personal history, yet referred to the "bad faith" of Lewis.

Though born in Jerusalem while his parents were in the city for a short time, Said did not live in Palestine, the impression he conveyed about his Palestinian roots. In fact he lived a privileged life and went to school in Cairo before moving to the United States in 1951.

He became Professor of English Literature at Columbia University and was a long-term member of the Palestinian National Council and deeply involved in Palestinian politics, including throwing stones at Israeli checkpoints. He viewed

Yasser Arafat as “a much misunderstood and maligned political personality.”

Real scholars have indicated the partisan and vitriolic nature of the attacks on Lewis. They know that Lewis wrote 21 books, including the majestic *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, for which he used the Ottoman archives, the first Westerner to do so, dozens of articles in both scholarly and popular journals, and translations of classical Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Hebrew poetry.

It is the dishonorable condescension of Said that is conspicuous, when he wrote in 2003 that Lewis, “knows something about Turkey, I’m told, but he knows nothing about the Arab world.”

Robert Irwin, Professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, who regarded himself as on the political left, called Said’s book *Orientalism* “a work of malignant charlatanry in which it is difficult to distinguish honest mistakes from willful misrepresentations.”

Although certain concepts in the book are illuminating, present day admirers gloss over its faults. It is full of errors and misquotations of which they seem to be unaware. Rather, those admirers share the fashionable politically correct mode of distorting Western thought while behaving as anti- Western, anti-America, anti-Israeli, and often antisemitic.

Heilbrunn further confuses political partisanship with objective appraisal in his unnecessary remarks about Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer, whom he terms “a maladroit Israeli ambassador,” and dismisses him as “a protégé of Newt Gingrich.”

In contrast, he praises Dan Shapiro, current American Ambassador to Israel for interfering in Israeli politics and trying to ask Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to

repudiate a statement critical of President Barack Obama. Only at the very end of his review does Heilbrunn acknowledge Oren's own efforts at moderating the striking differences between Obama and Netanyahu.

These are minor issues compared with Heilbrunn's totally irrelevant quote of the remark by Said "and other academic foes" of Lewis.

Lewis asked the pertinent question, never answered by perceptive scholars of gender studies in the American Studies Association or by the expert members of the Irish Union of Students, or by the rest of the passionate anti-Western activists, that in effect destroys the whole politically correct position.

What imperial purpose, Lewis asks, was served by Orientalists, French and British scholars, deciphering the Egyptian language and then restoring to the Egyptians knowledge of and pride in their forgotten ancient past?

It is time for everyone genuinely interested in the truth about the complex history of Arab and Muslim countries, and the past and present Middle East, to reject the simplistic argument that all writing by Europeans, and now Americans, on the area and on the threat of Islamist terrorism is racist, imperialistic, and ethnocentric.

Lewis has never denied his solicitude for the State of Israel. This makes it even more imperative that objective observers take notice of his numerous balanced and insightful commentaries on Muslim societies. In one of them, his article written in *Commentary* in May 1986, he discusses the present types of Islamic hostility towards Jews.

In a scrupulous appraisal, Lewis argues that the situation of Jews in Islamic societies was, "never free from discrimination but only occasionally were they subject to persecution...While prejudice was always present in Islamic lands, it was often

muted, rarely violent, and mostly inspired by disdain and contempt rather than by the explosive mixture of hate, fear and envy that fuels the antisemitism of Christendom.”

Heilbrunn, of course, has not joined in any malignant charlatanry or made dishonest arguments, or been part of the tendentious attacks on Western scholarship or on Lewis.

But he did, inadvertently or otherwise, make public a loathsome slur, not simply on Michael Oren’s education, but most importantly on the writer, who has adorned the history of the Middle East by his work over most of the 20th century.

As a minimum, Heilbrunn, and *The New York Times*, the journal termed the paper of record, owe Bernard Lewis an apology.