

Edward Said's Long Reach from Harvard to Hamas



by Bruce Gilley

I once sat on a faculty hiring committee for an international studies position that rejected a candidate because she failed to apply the theories of Edward Said to her work.

Said, a former professor at Columbia University, is most renowned for his theory of “Orientalism,” which posits that every interaction between the West and the East is influenced by racism, ignorance, and rapaciousness. His theory penetrated the Western academic establishment so deeply after the publication of his book *Orientalism* in 1978 that it established the paradigm in which all scholars of the

societies, cultures, and histories of the East were compelled to work. If you failed to pinpoint the central fact of your research as being the depredations of the West's system of knowledge upon your subjects, as did our luckless candidate (whose research was on the motorized rickshaws, or Tuk-Tuks, of Thailand), then you had failed as a scholar.

I [wrote](#) recently of the direct influences of Said's theories on the murderous violence of Hamas. The Hamas founding charter of 1987 used the term "Orientalist" in a way that precisely echoed Said's theory of 1978. The West had infected the minds of the Orientals, according to Hamas, who were therefore entitled to violent reprisals. As Said [wrote](#): "The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny."

As a result, the Palestinians must mobilize like a peasant army to storm the cosmopolitan citadels of Western liberal values in their midst, killing Europeans both in order to emancipate themselves and to free the whites from their awful sense of supremacy (and, as [Robin DiAngelo](#) would later add, from their pathetic sense of "fragility" when being told that they are scheduled for execution).

The genius of Said was to wear his anti-Semitism so lightly.

It only really appeared in his sneers at concert pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy, or his rock-throwing at an Israeli guardhouse. He avoided direct smears by simply turning all Jews into Westerners, and thus inline for the same blood debt that Orientalism claimed against all Westerners. The manifestation of that theory in the October 7 Hamas attacks has underscored that we are all Jews now. In a world where Said's theory of Orientalism is alive, those who identify as defenders of the Judeo-Christian values, upon which Western Europe was built, find themselves targeted by Hamas.

Imagine if college syllabi across the United States made it a point to inculcate the anti-Westernism of generations of Russian thinkers as the paradigmatic truth in which research must be conducted. Or imagine if the virulently racist anti-Western ideologies of imperial Japan, or of today's China, were made standard-issue requirements for graduation. One might as well add here the continued obsessive hatred of the British among nationalists in India, although that ship sailed into port in the Western academy shortly after Said.

The point is that the Western academy, in its uncritical and enthusiastic embrace of the murderous theories of Edward Said, purposefully made itself the adjunct of not only the students who have flooded the streets of Western capitals in support of Hamas but also of the organization itself (as its promise to extirpate the Orientalists in its midst indicated).

It is no coincidence then that the English-language library in Gaza is named the Edward Said Public Library.

Consider Said's influence at Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. in 1964 after his father sent him away from his native Egypt (not Palestine as he fraudulently [claimed](#)). The university press published perhaps his most guerrilla-guide book in 1984, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, which taught undergraduate students that their role in life was to be "critics," drawing upon Marx and Foucault. After September 11, it published his collection, *Reflections on Exile*, with its scathing attacks on how the Palestinian cause had abandoned revolutionary "liberation" from the Jews in favor of "democracy and free markets," which clearly had nothing to offer.

Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies quickly turned itself into a hotbed of Said's "postcolonial" hatred, where he enjoyed special support from [Roger Owen](#), who worked at and directed the center from 1993 to 2013 (see [photo](#) of Owen with Said at a conference). In 2021, for instance, the center

hosted a [talk](#) by Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said professor of history at Columbia, entitled “The Latest Chapter in the Hundred Years War on Palestine,” a reminder that for Said, the Jews were merely the latest Orientalists to oppress the Orientals.

The Center responded to the Hamas’s terrorist attacks by hosting a talk by a Palestinian-American poet on the suffering of the Palestinians at the hands of Israel: “Our history is embedded in human bodies and we have human lives, we have people we love, people we grieve,” she [told](#) The Crimson. “These events that Palestinians have suffered for the last 75 years, they are done by humans, to humans.”

The Center then hosted a [talk](#) on October 30 featuring [pro-Hamas](#) Italian lawyer, Georgetown professor, and U.N. Special Rapporteur on Palestine, [Francesca Albanese](#). She discussed the *root causes* of the conflict, the codeword for the evils of Israel.

In a strange sort of way then, Said’s claims about a Western knowledge system that found its real-world manifestations in violence and human suffering in the Middle East became a more accurate description of his own work, *Orientalism* (the book, not Orientalism the alleged historical phenomenon was the culprit.)

While Said believed that Israel was a product of the Orientalists, we might argue more convincingly that Hamas is the product of *Orientalism*. The bitterness that Said produced towards the West (with its “democracy and free markets”) created a system of knowledge that justified the racism, ignorance, and rapaciousness of Hamas.

If there is something that desperately needs to be decolonized, it is the imperial control of Edward Said over a blood-curdling mindset that extends from the polite seminars of Harvard to the deadly brutality of Hamas.

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