

The Legacy of Edward W. Said

William V. Spanos

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Reviewed by Saadi Nikro, Berlin Graduate School for Muslim Cultures and Societies, Freie Universität Berlin

Considering its impressive cover, which reproduces the woodcut “Palestinian Refugee” by artist Nikos Stavrolakis, I approached William Spanos’s *The Legacy of Edward W. Said* expecting a sense of empathy towards the work of the late Palestinian American cultural critic, which on the whole it maintains. This empathy is primarily concerned with claiming the work of Said to the scope of poststructural criticism, which informs the book’s polemical edge. In doing so, Spanos manages to perpetuate the influence of Said’s work, entertaining a “worldly” approach to poststructural theory, and situating it within a particular genealogy of the intellectual culture in North America. But given Said’s own consistent critique of poststructuralism, it is fair to ask: to what extent does Spanos’s empathy read Said against the grain?

Spanos’s discussion of poststructuralism is mainly found in the second chapter, “Heidegger, Foucault, and the ‘Empire of the Gaze’: Thinking the Territorialization of Knowledge.” A somewhat irritating aspect of this chapter is the repeated parenthetical references to Said, to indicate the congeniality of his thought to, mostly, that of Foucault (see especially pages 42-43). It seems to me that this ‘detour’ through Heidegger and Foucault shifts the book’s focus and tends to leave Said hovering in the background. Spanos nevertheless justifies his detour by showing it to be one of the ways to weigh the influence of Foucault on Said, particularly in *Orientalism*, and to better outline what he regards as the reductive tendency to position Said as an opponent of poststructuralism. To this end, he claims, the poststructuralist Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* is more important to consider than the earlier, more structuralist Foucault of *The Order of Things*, or *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, particularly as this earlier work has been positioned—by “postcolonial critics,” Spanos argues—as the antithesis of Said’s “secular,” or “worldly” project. To demonstrate the influence of poststructuralism on Said, the later “genealogist” Foucault must in turn be approached through a detour into “the Nietzsche he discovered only after reading Heidegger” (27). This double detour “into the relationship between Heidegger, particularly his ‘destruction’ of the Western ‘ontotheological’ tradition (metaphysical inquiry), and Foucault’s genealogy of the disciplinary society” is necessary “to identify this Foucault and to demonstrate his pertinence to Said’s monumental analysis of the discourse of Occidental Orientalism” (27). Curiously enough, the value of this ‘detour’ appears to have less to do

with the stated aim of demonstrating that Said was a closet poststructuralist, or a “genealogist,” than with what transpires to be an innovative reading of Heidegger *through* the work of Said, particularly *Orientalism*. This is suggested in the section entitled “Heidegger’s Critique of Ontological and Epistemological Imperialism,” which foregrounds the keen and significant distinction the philosopher makes between imperial Rome and pre-Socratic Greek thought. Much the same could be said about the manner in which Said’s attention to the discipline of Orientalism and the culture of imperialism allows for a more productive/enabling reading of Foucault, one that considers how his genealogies of power and knowledge demonstrate the varied ways in which imperial disciplinary culture was practised on European subjects themselves. As Spanos says: “Heidegger and Foucault belong together because they both, if only in a resonantly symptomatic way, reject the West’s seductively disarming disciplinary orientation toward knowledge production . . .” (29). This rejection is “symptomatic” because Heidegger and Foucault, as Spanos argues, “fail to adequately adhere to their antidisciplinary commitments to relationality” (29), or fail to put into relief the possibility of an alternative ethical or epistemological thought beyond the disciplinary assemblages their respective works address.

Spanos frequently uses the term “overdetermine.” It could be said that he, in turn, “overdetermines” a notion of “postcolonial studies” which, he claims, has a vested interest in maintaining Said’s opposition to the “unworldliness” of poststructuralist criticism. Apart from singling out the work of a former student of Said’s (the “competitive possessiveness” of Timothy Brennan), Spanos tends to use the term “postcolonial” in an all-encompassing manner, referring to “Said’s disciples” (158), “Saidians” (6), “oppositional intellectuals” (2), “late followers” and “those professing cultural and postcolonial studies” (14), “Said’s followers and the vast majority of the postcolonial critics he influenced” (74), and finally “postcolonial critics” (115). More of an effort could and should have been made to nuance this generalization. In respect to Spanos’s preoccupations, perhaps this could have been achieved by contrasting the “symptomatic” aspects of Heidegger and Foucault with the ethical and epistemological scope of postcolonial studies, and further by considering how this relatively recent and interdisciplinary field of critical inquiry tends to occupy an uneasy border territory between, on the one hand, anti-Humanist impulses of discourse analysis and deconstructive reading strategies, and on the other, a liberationist work ethic that strives to critically redeem lost and forgotten historical traces of subjugation.

Within postcolonial studies, as well as around its fringes, I think, there has been quite a vigorous debate concerning the tendency to treat theory as an end in itself, calling to account the ways in which methodological circulation, or the exchange of conceptual currency, comes to substitute itself for a closer inspection of the particular material conditions in which texts, histories, subjectivities and agency take place. This debate, it seems to me, has never merely been aimed at what would constitute an equally narrow positioning of poststructuralism, despite Said’s perhaps reductive comments on what

he called “the labyrinth of textuality,” or “the flight into system and method,” in his *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (pages 3 and 25 respectively). But I think it is important to situate this early work of Said’s—published in 1983, and constituting a collection of essays written over a period of twelve years—in its particular context. The important distinction between the early and middle work of Foucault that Spanos makes would then be more compelling in terms of appreciating the intellectual, perhaps even disciplinary, *symptoms* of Said’s own work (for example, Said’s essay on Conrad hardly lives up to the form of “worldly” criticism he argues for). I would otherwise not write off the significant, transitional essay “The Discourse of Language” that is placed as an appendix to Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, as merely “structuralist” (70). I would also consider how mischievous Foucault tended to be in his additions to and rewritings of prefaces and introductions to the English language translations of his major books—such as *Madness and Civilization*, *The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology* itself.

Spanos’s following chapters on *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, respectively, do offer nuanced readings of these major works, pointing out the affinities with Foucault’s genealogies of knowledge and power as disciplinary networks in the production of specific subjectivities. Much emphasis is placed on the notion of geography—an “affiliation between Said’s imaginative geography and Foucault’s territorialized temporality” (93)—to foreground the non-Hegelian, or non-“temporal metaphysics” common to both. Concerning *Orientalism*, he points out Said’s tendency to generalise a history of Orientalism from ancient Greece to modern imperialism, a point previously made by Aijaz Ahmad, whose somewhat narrow critique of *Orientalism* Spanos does mention. Spanos’s more interesting suggestion points to an ambivalence in the structure of Said’s *Orientalism*, concerning how it both insists on a “latest phase” associated with the United States of the post-second world war period and on the demise of this phase, if only because of its unconcealed crudeness, its flagrant “expertise”:

Said’s genealogy of Orientalism seems to culminate in an irresolvable ambivalence. On the one hand, he speaks of the fulfilment of the ‘productive’ logic of Orientalism, and on the other, he points to the symptoms of its demise, that is, to a weightlessness that renders visible the power that was previously embedded in and thus theoretically invulnerable to resistance by minds that the earlier Orientalism had hitherto colonized. (108)

Of particular interest in Spanos’s reading of *Culture and Imperialism* is the attention he gives to Said’s understanding of Modernist European critical and creative culture as a retreat from better appreciating the colonial/imperial implications of disciplinary knowledge practices (Said’s critique of Foucault could well have been mentioned in this context). One of the text’s shortcomings is a creeping Hegelian historicism (something that Spanos otherwise disavows) that can be recognised, for instance, in the following, rather broad claim: “by attending to its neglected structure, I have been trying to show that Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* is the precipitate—the *distilled* and articulated *contradictory fulfilment*—of

the western imperialist project” (143). This is because the book embodies “... a potential force of resistance that no longer needs to resort to the kind of identity-oriented resistance demanded by the monolithic (binarist) narrative of imperialism ...” (143, my emphasis). To my mind, particularly when binary frames of reference are vehemently disavowed, a recuperative economy of reconciliation all too often creeps in through the back door. Notions of non-identity or hybridity become themselves privileged vantage points to maintain a peculiar economy of transcendence and recuperation of historical contingency, as Spanos’s choice of words seems to suggest: “... these possibilities are also the *foundation* ... for an antiutopian utopian vision ... of a diversified, *hybrid* humanity ... living ... *harmoniously* together in a globalized, *borderless*, and utterly secularized world” (143, my emphasis).

In the opening chapter of his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said claims to be “critical of humanism in the name of humanism” (10), and goes on to outline the value of maintaining a commitment to what he variably calls “secular” or “critical” humanism. This claim tends to be consistent with the arguments he put forth in his earlier *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) and *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993). Spanos is mostly sympathetic to Said’s arguments, and suggests that this renewed effort to outline the contemporary significance and value of humanist inquiry can be read as a corrective to how “his poststructuralist predecessors were blinded by the very disciplinary structure they had called into question” (187). Yet he also laments how Said again reductively positions poststructuralism as irretrievably anti-humanist, claiming that his “apparent cavalier indifference” (152) to the history of poststructuralist critique (Spanos provides a list of the major writers) renders his argument prey to a form of liberal humanism that Said would have been uncomfortable with.

Yet, in the second half of his book, Spanos develops an interesting genealogical tracing of “exceptionalism,” the puritanical heritage at work in American political culture, providing a “history of the present” that revolves around September 11. This genealogical scope is extended in the excellent final chapter, “Said’s Mt. Hermon and Mine,” which begins as personal memoir and drifts into intellectual history and culture, then back again to his personal acquaintance with Said. As it turns out Spanos began his teaching career between the years 1951 and 1953 at the Mount Hermon preparatory school in Massachusetts, when Said was also present as a student. While Spanos’s account of Mount Hermon’s “worldless education regime” (211) pretty much squares with Said’s reflections in his memoir, having had an equally disorienting experience, he nevertheless writes favourably of a “marginal Kierkegaardian momentum” (225) that induced a transformation in his intellectual development. Spanos provides an account of the intellectual trajectory of Continental existentialism in North America as a radical movement amongst dissident Protestants, Christians, and Jews, “creating a matrix for the later reception of an even more consciously political poststructuralist thought that includes Edward Said’s” (222). This

lively account, Spanos graciously says, was inadvertently triggered by his reading of Said's memoir *Out of Place*.

Spanos's memoir provides an account of the emergence of poststructuralism in North America that is more home grown, rather than a neat body of thought transplanted from Europe, primarily France. In tracing this genealogy he carries the influence of Said's work, maintaining a worldly approach to the study of intellectual culture. This, it seems to me, is the strength of Spanos's book, with respect to how he positions and approaches Said's "legacy" as an interaction between intellectual insight and its variable conditions of emergence and embodiment. It is not, then, so much a question of whether Spanos's empathy reads Said against the grain, but rather how he makes productive use of the irremediable ambivalence informing the tenor of Said's work.

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