

**An Intertextual Meditation on Edward W. Said's *Representations of the Intellectual*:
Roughly Thirty Years Later**

In Memory of Edward W. Said (1935-2003) and Scott Timberg (1969-2019)

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Abstract: In this wide-ranging article I engage in a detailed meditation on the book *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) by the late, great Palestinian-American academic and cultural critic Edward W. Said (1935-2003). In the course of discussing and evaluating *Representations of the Intellectual* roughly thirty years after its initial publication, I historically contextualize the book in relation to key cultural and sociopolitical issues of its relative era while simultaneously positioning it in intertextual dialogue with a variety of texts that help shed light on its core strengths, key limitations, and ultimate enduring significance as work that compels readers to think and question.

I have long been a fan of Edward Said ever since I first read his *magnum opus*, *Orientalism* (1978), in an undergraduate class on literary Orientalism that was taught by Professor Suzanne Akbari at the University of Toronto between 2000 and 2001. The course constituted my first in-depth introduction to a major literary-theoretical-critical text, and

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Said's *Orientalism* has stuck with me ever since. It is a book that I have returned to on many occasions over the years, including when I was writing my dissertation, in which I built on Said's notions of imaginative Orientalist geography. Consequently, I began reading *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) with high hopes, though I was often frustrated and at times annoyed with this book, which Said originally delivered as a series of six lectures for BBC's 1993 Reith Lectures. In the following meditation, I look back at *Representations of the Intellectual* roughly thirty years after its initial publication and put it in intertextual dialogue with some other significant texts that help elucidate its argumentative strengths and weaknesses.

Said begins this book well enough by discussing the revisionist Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the French cultural critic Julien Benda. Drawing a distinction between Gramsci's notion of "organic intellectuals" who fulfill a wide variety of socioeconomic roles and "are always on the move, on the make" (Said's definition here is somewhat reductive, 4) and Benda's notion of intellectuals as a cozy clerisy of "supergifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings who constitute the conscience of mankind" (4-5), Said champions his idea of the true intellectual as an "amateur" who is fiercely independent-minded and pursuing their intellectual passion in a conscientious manner that stands apart from dogmatic in-group imperatives and careerism, rigid specialization, and conformist-driven institutional affiliation: "[W]hat I shall call amateurism . . . [is] the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a group" (76).

In making this argument, Said would have benefitted from providing a brief

etymological definition of the word “amateur,” which today is commonly construed as meaning a dilettante or dabbler but historically referred to one who simply pursued an art—like the art of criticism—for the love of it and was not concerned with careerism or prestige. Granted, this is a minor critique on my behalf. I was a fan of the public intellectual Andrew Keen’s book *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet Is Killing Our Culture* (2007), which somewhat misleadingly operationalizes the general contemporary understanding of the word “amateur” in order to critique the rise of a “choose your own adventure” online culture in which confirmation of one’s own misinformed, delusional beliefs is only a few keystrokes away.

To get down to the brass tacks, Said’s overall argument works well enough, though I felt he dropped the ball on several occasions. To start with, in excoriating intellectuals who place careerism above personal commitment and in-group loyalty above free-thinking, he frequently champions the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre as a sort of outlier. Clearly, Sartre is somewhat of an intellectual hero to Said, for he emphasizes how Sartre had “refused the Nobel Prize in 1964 . . . [thereby] acting precisely according to his [amateur] principles” (76).¹ Yet, in heaping such generous praise on Sartre,² he says nothing of Sartre’s flagrantly delusional support of authoritarian communism.

To be sure, Sartre is a gifted thinker who should always be studied, and his courageous participation in the French resistance should be remembered and honored. Nonetheless, these factors should not prevent us from taking into account Sartre’s alarming acquiescence to groupthink given his apparently unwavering support for Soviet communism and Maoism during a period when he should have known better. Indeed, whenever I mention Sartre’s name to Central and Eastern European intellectuals who

experienced the horrors of Soviet repression, I am frequently greeted with smirks and negative comments about Sartre's politics. The fact that Said mentions nothing of Sartre's failings in this regard seems a problematic omission on his behalf given how he concludes his book by warning readers to beware of placing faith in intellectual "gods" who do your thinking for you: "[U]nquestioning subservience to authority in today's world is one of the greatest threats to an active, and moral, intellectual life" (121). Was it not Sartre who in 1973, during his Maoist heyday, said, "Un régime révolutionnaire doit se débarrasser d'un certain nombre d'individus qui le menacent, et je ne vois pas d'autre moyen que la mort"? ("[R]evolutionary authority always needs to get rid of some people that threaten it, and their death is the only way."; qtd. in Judt 126). As the late British-American historian Tony Judt writes in his book *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (2011), "For Sartre, violence, exercised at the expense of others over a suitable distance of time or space, was an end in itself" (126).

I also found Said to be somewhat glib when it comes to discussing intellectuals in regard to issues of American nationalism and—always a problematic term—patriotism. To be clear, I respect Said's informed criticisms of American neo-imperialism, and I recognize the inherent validity of his suspicions of U.S. statism given how the FBI had placed him under watch in 1971 for merely civilly discussing America's relationship to the Israel-Palestinian conflict and arguing for the need to recognize calls for some form of Palestinian independence. This acknowledged, the fact that Said was aligned with the Palestinian National Council clearly indicates that he believed in the nation-state and nationalism.³ And how could we blame him for this? After all, as Craig Calhoun writes in his book *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (2007), "We may doubt

both the capacities of nation-states and the morality of many versions of nationalism, but we lack realistic and attractive alternatives [given the existing geopolitical structure]” (149).

With this in mind, I find it curious that Said is generally so reductive in his critiques of American nationalism. Yes, more often than not, U.S. patriotic nationalism has morphed into the egregious handmaiden of aggressive military conquest and cultural and economic imperialism. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that Said’s Reith lectures were delivered in 1993, which was in close proximity to the American-launched Gulf War (1990-1991) that would serve as a warm-up for America’s disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq as part of its misprosecuted “War on Terror.” Still, if there are dark uses to nationalism and patriotism, there is also an arguable need for conscientious public intellectuals who can intervene in national debates and foment constructive multicultural nationalist appeals and inclusive forms of domestic patriotism that are geared towards healthy international outlooks. The ostensible goal here would not be an emphasis on a monolithic, assimilatory national “we,” but rather a shared national investment in respectful, informed sociopolitical dialogue that would be oriented towards serving the common national and geopolitical good while maintaining an awareness of and a respect for minority interests and concerns. I am not, of course, suggesting that Said is altogether unaware of these issues throughout his book, but rather that he gives them alarmingly short acknowledgment via the following sentence: “But, I believe, there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorized powers of one’s own society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised in a manifestly disproportionate and immoral war, or in a deliberate program of discrimination, repression, and collective cruelty” (98).

Understood in this context, the true American patriots would be those American intellectuals and activists who have historically challenged their nation to live up to its professed democratic ideals by championing abolition, opposing the Iraq and Vietnam wars, and leading the movement for recent social justice causes like LGBTQ rights. Indeed, this sort of revisionist American patriotism has been argued for in such books as Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1998) and Todd Gitlin's *The Intellectuals and the Flag* (2003), both of which emphasize alternative notions of patriotism that are geared towards seizing the state from elite power brokers—cue C. Wright Mills's book *The Power Elite* (1956)—and placing it in the just hands of an empowered multicultural populace that would embrace agonistic debate over antagonistic conflict. Here, I am building on the work of Chantal Mouffe, who in her book *For a Left Populism* (2018) defines the agonistic exchange as being different from the antagonistic conflict because “the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate” (91).

Yes, I am well aware of the dangers of blind patriotism as so beautifully captured by Samuel Johnson's pithy phrase “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel” (qtd. in Hawkins 380). Nonetheless, as the American historian Jefferson Cowie noted in his 2018 *New York Times* article, “Reclaiming Patriotism for the Left,” it is precisely because of the authoritarian populist scoundrels out there that patriotism is rendered “too powerful and too important” to be left to them. In light of Donald Trump's manipulative yet successful 2016 appropriation and slight recalibration of Reagan's neoconservative “Let's Make America Great Again” phrase (rendered as “Make America Great Again”) and the 45 percent of eligible U.S. voters who did not vote, it would seem foolish to write off those

conscientious American public intellectuals (Cornel West, Jill Lepore, Russell Jacoby, Thomas Frank, Chris Hedges, Asad Haider, and John B. Judis come to mind) who express a desire for some form of investment in a radically reconfigured nationalistic-patriotic dialogue. After all, understood in a classic Rortyan or Gitlinesque sense, the NFL San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick registers as a patriot given his decision to take a knee during the U.S. national anthem in protest against domestic racial inequality, a fact made all the more compelling given that he elected to do so after engaging in agonistic dialogue with Nate Boyer, a former U.S. Army Green Beret, who advised him that this would be more respectful than sitting.⁴

Another issue that left me somewhat confounded about Said's views in relation to the American national question was his frequent championing of those intellectuals who hold universalist values. As he notes in his Introduction, "The attempt to hold to a universal and single standard as a theme plays an important role in my account of the intellectual" (xiii). Though he immediately follows this up with a brief caveat about the importance of recognizing "the interaction between universality and the local, the subjective" (xiii), he seems to champion a basic faith in universalist concerns throughout his book. This, frankly, seems a bizarre oversight on his behalf, especially given universalism's general historical alignment with Western sociopolitical outlooks. Given Said's eminently justifiable criticisms of U.S. foreign policy throughout his book, one would think he would have a lot to say about how elite American power-brokers have often employed Machiavellian gunboat diplomacy initiatives abroad. The Vietnam War was, after all, launched by liberal-progressives in the name of human rights and "freedom" (little at the time was said about using Vietnam as a testing grounds for then newly developed U.S. counterinsurgency

techniques, and few today remember that it was compromised, crooked, yet crafty old Richard Nixon who eventually ended the U.S. draft and the war, albeit in “too little, too late” fashion). Similarly, American neoconservatives hid behind universalist rhetoric when manipulatively attempting to justify both the Gulf War and the later invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In relation to the then recent Gulf War, Said does acknowledge the self-interested duplicity of American neoconservative foreign policy, writing, “Of course the real issue in the Gulf so far as the U.S. was concerned was oil and strategic power” (95). This acknowledged, he essentially eschews detailed discussion of how universalist claims were marshaled to justify this conflict. Yes, he does briefly acknowledge the problematic Western tendency to suggest that “our values are universal” (96). And, yes, he does briefly mention that Saddam Hussein was portrayed as “a Hitler” (96) who needed to be dealt with accordingly. Nonetheless, he in my opinion fails to truly grapple with just how many Americans have unfortunately been compelled to support unjust foreign wars in the name of apparently sincere yet misguided universalist concerns about human rights and “freedom.” As Oscar Wilde memorably remarked, “When liberty comes with hands dabbled in blood it is hard to shake hands with her” (qtd. in Ellmann 196).

Said is, however, at his best when championing his vision of the true intellectual as an amateur concerned with a love of free-thinking. As he notes when ruminating on his own intellectual trajectory, “I am against conversion to and belief in a political god of any sort” (109). In upholding this view, one senses that Said is trying to hint at the highly problematic manner of simplistically dividing thinking into Left and Right in-group allegiances, a phenomenon that plagues more than a few contemporary cultural critics

whose careerism and dogmatic beliefs are built on such reductive cartographies. Surely, this antiquated Left-Right dichotomy, a holdover from the French Revolutionary notion of the National Assembly supporters of the King who sat to the right and the supporters of the revolution who sat to the left, is considerably lacking in regard to defining various intellectuals and ideas.⁵ Granted, the dichotomy may continue to have some general applicability in relation to differentiating between those who unwaveringly support the rich and powerful and those who stand for basic socioeconomic justice for the disempowered populace, but beyond this it seems reductive to group intellectuals and their ideas into simple Left and Right coordinates. Surely, a better approach would be to follow Said's subtle cue and practice free yet conscientious thinking, which would entail recognizing that intellectuals are complex, multifaceted beings. This approach would also entail engaging with intellectual ideas on their own merits rather than succumbing to the common ongoing tendency to vulgarly assign thinkers and thought "Left" and "Right" labels.

In making his overall argument, Said is, of course, not suggesting that intellectuals should be apolitical or pretend to clinical objectivity in matters. After all, economic, philosophical, scientific, and sociopolitical ideas are always intertwined with values. In this respect, I think Said is absolutely correct to highlight concerns about reactionary American movements like McCarthyism and neoconservatism that have posed considerable threats to the free expression of ideas, though these movements have surely not been the only enemies of freethinking. Here, Said makes some other questionable remarks, for in accurately highlighting how the term "political correctness" was manipulatively weaponized by neoconservatives during the Reagan-Bush era, he intentionally or not stacks the deck in favor of the "radical chic" humanities campus crew.

Yes, he acknowledges that there are occasional flourishes of “unthinking cant” (78) from the academic Left, by which I take him to be referring to how many American academics and grad students of this approximate era appropriated and bastardized strands of the variegated assemblage of thought known as French poststructuralism, which they often misleadingly referred to as “postmodernism.” Clearly, Said is alluding to this early on in his book when he describes the postmodernist Jean Francois Lyotard and his acolytes as being obsessed with playing “language games” that reveal their own “lazy incapacities” (18).

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the origins of the term “political correctness” can actually be traced back to radical Left dissidents who began to grow frustrated with the political dogmatism that had become palpable within their own political sects. Originally intended as a sort of sardonic phrase to mock their dogmatic confreres who adhered to rigid, unthinking political orthodoxies (e.g., “That’s very politically correct of you, comrade”), the term exploded in use on American university campuses during the 1980s as some students and faculty became disenchanted with a shift away from a focus on material concerns to exclusively identity-driven semiological struggle. This American campus phenomenon has been well documented by the French intellectual François Cusset in his book *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (2003), in which he writes,

This was the advent of the [popular American usage of] ‘politically correct,’ or PC, a term already used, significantly, by certain politicized rebels in the 1970s, in reference to the excessive emphasis placed on signs, rather than the substance of

oppression. . . . Its perverse effects . . . would arise from the [PC] movement's excesses, when it became impossible for minority students or professors to exist in the university outside of their minority affiliation. . . . (171-172)

In outlining this historical cultural-political phenomenon and interrogating dogmatic notions of Left and Right political affiliations alike, I am not gesturing towards any “centrist” or “radical centrist” agenda either. Rather, I am simply attempting to be true to the free-spirited, amateurish intellectual mindset that Said so admirably gestures towards in his book. Accordingly, there is a real argument to be made that the dogmatism of certain self-identifying campus Left movements and professors inadvertently helped provide ammunition for the reactionary neoconservative movement with which Said is so concerned.

Indeed, writing in his book *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (1994), which was published the same year as Said's *Representations of the Intellectual*, the late, great curmudgeonly Australian-American contrarian intellectual Robert Hughes noted, “Where would George Will, P.J. O'Rourke, the editors of the *American Spectator* and some of the contributors to the *New Criterion* all be without the inexhaustible flow of PC claptrap from the academic Left? Did any nominally radical movement every supply its foes with such a delicious array of targets for cheap shots?” (24). To be sure, there were at the time of Said's writing many self-identifying academic Left progressives who found themselves criticizing campus political correctness. Perhaps the most notable of them were Todd Gitlin, the 1963-1964 president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organization and author of *Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by*

Culture Wars (1995), and Russell Jacoby, author of *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America* (1994). Within the non-campus sphere, such public intellectuals as the liberal-progressive Bill Maher, host of the television show *Politically Incorrect* (1993-2002), and the late comedian George Carlin⁶ critiqued censorship and euphemistic, politically correct language, regardless of whether it be associated with what are commonly construed to be Left or Right positionalities. Indeed, Carlin's critique of the American military establishment's tendency to employ euphemistic terms like "neutralize" in place of "kill" (Carlin, *Doin' It Again*) positions him in good company with Said, who devotes brief discussion in his fifth chapter to the American militarist employment of "Insidese" terms like "Target acquisition" in place of "bombing" (85).

Given its 1994 release, *Representations of the Intellectual* appeared when the infamous American "culture wars" that had exploded during the Reagan-Bush era were at their peak during the recently inaugurated Clinton administration. Aside from Said's book, which was clearly influenced by the cultural debates of the time, 1994 also saw the release of Hughes's bestselling *Culture of Complaint* and Jacoby's influential *Dogmatic Wisdom*. A prolific American historian who had then recently come to widespread public prominence, Jacoby is a scholar whom Said mentions in relation to Jacoby's much discussed 1987 book, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, which he somewhat shortsightedly critiques as a sort of romanticized paean for a bygone mid-twentieth century era of American public intellectualism that had existed outside of the professionalized academy. While I do not think that Said is altogether wrong to imply that Jacoby is somewhat of a nostalgic for a much mythologized era, this does not mean

that Jacoby's book is entirely off the mark with regard to some of its observations.

Jacoby's argument is relatively straightforward. He looks back to such varied American public intellectuals as Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, and Mary McCarthy, who had all honed their writing skills during the first half of the twentieth century via a mixture of eclectic university education (Jane Jacobs, for example, did not earn a university degree and took a variety of courses in different disciplines at Columbia University's School of General Studies), literary and journalistic apprenticeships with small publications, and mentorships from writers and artists in such then rent-cheap bohemian communities as Greenwich Village. By the time these figures had achieved prominence or were on the path to success during the 1950s, the post-WWII boom was altering America's intellectual environment. Universities were rapidly expanding and giving way to an increased obsession with credentialization, and urban renewal and gentrification were changing the dynamics of many formerly bohemian communities. Also, many writers were succumbing to the lure of employment with large publications that paid them good wages in exchange for their accommodation to dominant editorial stances and an assigned area of journalistic coverage. As Jacoby sees it, the wide-ranging, intellectually free-spirited public intellectuals that had come to fruition during the 1950s would eventually be replaced by narrowly-focused journalists pursuing market-influenced stories and, more notably, rigidly disciplinized humanities and social sciences scholars who had earned PhDs in order to secure themselves comfortable tenured positions at the cost of writing only for their fellow academic insiders. In essence, Jacoby contends that America's last true public intellectuals were polymathic generalists who were able to work outside of the academy and write on a wide variety of topics in an accessible style

amenable to a wide variety of readers.

Clearly, there are some problems with Jacoby's argument. To start with, virtually all of the writers Jacoby focuses on are white, male, and heteronormative, which renders his essential "Lost Eden" argument somewhat problematic, though Said does not address this.⁷ Furthermore, in setting up figures like Howe, Jacobs, and McCarthy as America's "last intellectuals" (incredibly talented though they were), Jacoby comes across as somewhat naively romanticizing the intellectual icons of his own relative coming of age. What specifically troubles Said about Jacoby's argument, however, is that he feels that Jacoby is mischaracterizing the American academy. As he writes, "The particular threat to the intellectual today . . . is not the academy, nor the suburbs, nor the appalling commercialism of journalism and publishing, but rather an attitude that I will call professionalism" (74).

With regard to the current state of much cultural criticism, I am in firm agreement with Said here. The problem is, however, that in executing his critique of Jacoby's argument, Said reveals his own fundamental ignorance or naïveté about the historical evolution of the American academy. As the literary historian and public intellectual Louis Menand has meticulously demonstrated in his book *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (2010), the whole purpose behind the formal accreditation of liberal arts learning was professionalization. As Menand demonstrates, it was during the late nineteenth century that the American academy established the general liberal arts degree as a basic entry requirement for professional programs like medicine and law school, which in turn led to the need to professionalize the liberal arts professoriate itself via graduate study culminating in a PhD (45-48). There was also an evident

institutional anxiety at work in regard to what separated the “professional” literary scholar or historian from the published “amateur” practitioner of *belles lettres* (Menand 106-111).

Initiated during the late nineteenth century, the professionalization of the American liberal arts would solidify during the American university’s post-WWII expansion period, which ranged from roughly 1945-1975 (Menand 64). During this period, undergraduate and graduate liberal arts enrolments soared and liberal arts professors were hired *en masse*, which led to greater institutional pressures to ensure that they possessed PhDs. Although the G.I. Bill for returning WWII servicemen and the subsequent baby boom generation that would begin attending university during the 1960s helped fuel the expansion of the American university and the liberal arts, another influential factor resided in the Vietnam War. Faced with the understandable allure of receiving educational draft deferments from an unjust war, many young men pursued undergraduate and graduate liberal arts degrees that possessed far more lax entry requirements than did many science and engineering programs. If this seems a cynical rationale, consider that the end of the post-WWII “golden age” liberal arts boom roughly coincided with the end of the draft in 1972, for as Menand notes, this year marked the advent of a “downwards” shift with respect to liberal arts degrees awarded (54). Yet, in spite of this downturn, various liberal arts departments continued to create graduate programs, often to employ graduate students as cheap, part-time labor, which only served to intensify careerist-driven competition for tenure-track jobs that were declining in number once the “golden age” boom ended.

Though some fiery souls might be tempted to accuse Menand of being a shill for the capitalist marketplace, it should be noted that he is arguing that the whole purpose of professionalizing the liberal arts professoriate was to *protect* it from the ravages of

capitalist competition: “[P]rofessions are monopolistic: people who don’t have the credential can’t practice the trade. This monopolistic aspect of professionalization is clearly a reaction against the principles of the free market” (102). While some may justifiably point out that one would not trust a non-credentialed neurosurgeon to operate on them, this would be to draw a false equivalency between the scientific medical profession and liberal arts learning, which is in theory supposed to be about the contemplation of knowledge and wisdom. In essence, I would say that Said considerably underestimates the extent to which the late-twentieth-century American academy was encouraging its budding and recently minted liberal arts scholars to conceive of themselves as professionals. Thus, while he maintains that “the particular threat to the intellectual today . . . is not the academy nor the appalling commercialism of journalism and publishing” (74), by which I take him to mean the ruthless competitive careerism of these fields, “but rather an attitude” that he terms “professionalism” (74), he is in my opinion failing to comprehend how this professionalized attitude is deeply intertwined with the academy itself.

In keeping with Marshall McLuhan’s observation that schools are “the homogenizing hopper into which we toss our integral tots for processing” (McLuhan 244), it would seem that liberal arts programs often do not fare much better. After all, as Menand compellingly points out, the end result of professionalizing the liberal arts professoriate was that many of its members internalized this professional outlook and sought to reproduce themselves by selecting and mentoring students who shared their values: “[T]he anxieties over placement and tenure, do not encourage iconoclasm. . . . The academic profession in some areas is not reproducing itself so much as cloning itself” (153). We might note similar pressures with respect to the university’s creation of journalism and

creative writing programs given the increasing professionalization of these fields as well. Indeed, the post-WWII expansion of the American academy resulted in a glut of accredited graduates, which gave way to an increased emphasis on professionalizing reportage and writing by aligning these endeavors with undergraduate and graduate programs that entailed specialized internship/mentorship components that were often geared towards conforming to industry-driven norms.

Curiously enough, Said essentially says nothing about the cultural and political economy of healthy criticism and scholarship, by which I simply mean the basic material and political conditions that foster intellectual originality and creativity. Clearly, an open society that values debate and discussion is essential, but so too is an economic foundation that allows people time to read, contemplate, and develop and hone their critical thinking and writing skills. While Said does cite Virginia Woolf's superb extended essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), he exclusively focuses on the essay's feminist themes, writing, "[T]he effect of *A Room of One's Own* is to separate out from the language and power of what Woolf calls patriarchy a new sensitivity to the place, both subordinate and usually not thought about but hidden, of women" (34). Though in no way meaning to diminish Woolf's superlative feminist critique of the patriarchal intellectual establishment of her era, I cannot help but feel that Said would have enriched his overall argument by also focusing on how Woolf draws attention to how material conditions influence intellectual development.

As Woolf compellingly demonstrates throughout her essay, one must be decently fed and have comfortable lodgings and sufficient economic resources and leisure time in order to develop a life of the mind that is conducive to becoming an intellectual. By neglecting to focus on this specific aspect of Woolf's overall argument, Said misses out on

engaging with materialist concerns that he could have highlighted in order to launch a discussion about the importance of considering the cultural, political, and economic foundations of intellectualism. After all, regardless of whether one considers Marx's communism, Woolf's socialism, or Adam Smith's visions of an ethical capitalism, there is a commonality between all of these theories given how they all detail how a reasonable measure of material comfort is necessary in order for people to fully develop their intellectual capacities and thrive.

Though some may raise their eyebrows at my mention of Smith, it is Smith who in his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), his *magnum opus*, points out that the drudgeries of labor have an intellectually stultifying impact on individuals. As Smith cautions,

The man whose life is spent performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding our expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He generally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving of any just judgment concerning many of the ordinary duties of private life. (840)

This is why Smith, contrary to the vulgar misreadings of *The Wealth of Nations* that some dogmatic Marxists have generated, maintained that any socially responsible government would have to intervene in the economy in order to protect workers: “[T]his is the state

into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it” (840).

Strangely, Said often seems detached from considering how cultural, political, and economic factors tie into his concerns about the need for intellectual integrity and originality. While I am in no way seeking to boil everything down to material concerns, Said did write from a position of considerable privilege. Although his courageous stances against American neo-imperialism during the tumultuous years of the 1970s are commendable, he came from an affluent background and secured himself a comfortable tenured position at the Ivy League Columbia University. Thus, while Said spends a good deal of time excoriating those intellectuals who compromise their principles in the name of careerism, I cannot help but feel that he could have spent a little more time acknowledging the growing competition and economic pressures that many budding professors and journalists were facing when he composed his lectures during the neoliberalizing early 1990s. Straightforwardly put, there were a lot of talented young people at the time who were desperate for work and suffering under the weight of student loans, which undoubtedly helped compel many of them to compromise their intellectual principles in order to pay the rent and attain a measure of working-class comfort.

By saying nothing about the then growing competition for tenure-track jobs in the then increasingly precariatizing liberal arts, Said sidesteps confronting the growing competitive careerist professionalization of the field as a whole. As Menand argues in *The Marketplace of Ideas*, the one factor most likely to result in tenure-track hires in the liberal arts is collegiality, for as he notes, “The door to the faculty club leads both in and out” (15). In essence, while many academics in the liberal arts may be quite rhetorically radical, there

nonetheless exists a marked institutional pressure to conform on departmental matters and to publish in accordance with established academic norms. At the time Said was writing his book, these pressures were only intensifying given the array of talented people competing for jobs.

It is here that one of the central weaknesses of Jacoby's argument in *The Last Intellectuals* becomes palpable, and the fact that Said does not pick up on this weakness is, in my opinion, indicative of his failure to truly confront problems emanating from the American academy itself. As Jacoby views matters, the post-WWII American university had become a bastion of stability that had attracted many aspiring intellectuals with the security of comfortable, well-paying tenured positions that were attained in exchange for accommodating to professionalization, which generally severed academics from the public sphere via the indoctrinary in-group process of disciplinary specialization. Yet, while tenure may have been feasible for many academics during the post-WWII expansion of the American university, matters had considerably changed by the time Jacoby's book was released in 1987 when the "golden age" of tenure was effectively ending for liberal arts scholars.

Interestingly enough, while neither Said nor Jacoby truly registers the competitive careerist pressures that were surging within the American academy around the time of their writing, Robert Hughes—an ostensible conservative by comparison to these two figures—does. Writing in his book *Culture of Complaint* (1994), published the same year as Said's *The Last Intellectuals*, Hughes sardonically touches on the fraught liberal arts employment situation within the American university system, noting,

The status of [tenured] research and publication is high, and that of actual teaching disproportionately low. More and more, students are required to do research hackwork for the teacher's upcoming paper. American universities preserve, as though in amber, the medieval apprenticeship system. In part, this has been forced on them by the expansion of [American] academe itself. When there are so many students that the professors can't teach them all, and funds are limited, the answer is to use teaching assistants, paid at sweatshop rates; when the professor sees his or her academic duty as lying more in publishing than in teaching, he can call on a pool of 'research assistants'—his own students—to do his work for him. Some see this as good training for the dissenting and questioning mind. Others, with at least as much reason, see it as a form of indenture, leading to conformity and opportunism. (70, emphasis mine)

Although such then growing careerist tensions within the liberal arts were not much discussed outside of academia given how they had not yet registered in mainstream media, they were presciently detailed in the underrated 1988 Hollywood *neo-noir* film *D.O.A.* (dirs. Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel), which was released the year after Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*. A remake of the 1950 Hollywood *noir* classic of the same title (dir. Rudolph Maté), the film plays out its murder plot against the backdrop of the hypercompetitive, dog-eat-dog world of "publish or perish" English department politics at the University of Texas at Austin.⁸

In making these observations about the American academy, I do not intend to indict it as a whole but simply to point out that it was far more complicit in creating the sort of

disciplinized, specialized intellectual that Said critiques than he is willing to acknowledge. The end result of the expansion of the post-WWII American university system was credential inflation, which gave way to the declining value of undergraduate and graduate degrees and increased competition to earn credentials at elite universities that would give graduates competitive advantage in attaining tenure-track positions and securing jobs in journalism and media. Basically, the notion of becoming an American intellectual became intertwined with attending university, specializing in a certain field, and then searching for a career, often with an established organization. While freelance journalism continued to remain a vague possibility for many aspiring intellectuals, journalism had at the time of Said's writing become swamped with talent that was competing and working for declining wages. This put increased pressure on many journalists to compromise their principles in order to secure assignments or to seek out full-time employment with established media organizations that often required that they specialize in an area of coverage and conform to an overarching editorial position.

Surveying events from the perspective of the present, the situation looks grim. The 2008 financial crash intensified the crisis within the American liberal arts via further enrolment declines, increased precariatization, and intensified competition for dwindling tenure-track jobs.⁹ As for journalism, the Internet revolution that took effect from roughly 1995 onwards did not ultimately lead to improved working conditions for journalists as some digital utopians had anticipated, but instead resulted in many media organizations laying off full-time staff and availing themselves of cheaper online freelancers who were forced to compete with one another in a new journalism gig economy.¹⁰ While some digital utopians of the 1990s had envisioned online communication giving way to a bright future

of citizen journalists, this clearly did not take shape as anticipated either, but instead resulted in an avalanche of misinformed, conspiratorial, and, in some instances, outright lying content producers vying for attention in an ever-splintering Internet that resembles a “choose your own adventure” novel.¹¹

Most troublingly of all, established news organizations felt the pressure to acclimatize to the trends of this new online attention economy, often commissioning and running articles more calculated to provoke social media hits than deep thought. Though some may optimistically point to recent online publishing platforms like *Medium*, the reality is that it works by soliciting free content from an endless array of individuals who are often just looking for online attention. To be clear, the issue here is not one of professionalization, but rather the sort of commitment and passion that Said envisions as being befitting of the true intellectual. Read a good deal of *Medium* stories, and it seems evident enough that the site is really nothing more than an elaborate blogging mechanism that anyone can quickly publish on, regardless of how crude, sloppy, or blatantly misinformed their thinking is.

If I sound slightly arrogant—always a hazard for the working intellectual—in critiquing Said for not paying closer attention to the cultural, political, and economic factors that underpin the social ecology in which intellectuals develop and function, this is not to say that *Representations of the Intellectual* is without strengths that are worthy of acknowledgement and commendation. Where Said shines and proves truly prophetic is towards the end of his book, where he meditates on the ideological religiosity of those American “intellectuals” and policy wonks of the era who had rescinded critical thinking in favor of reactionary dogma and blatant careerism. Here, he is clearly gesturing towards

the neoconservative movement, which defined the Reagan-Bush era and adversely transformed the American political landscape with respect to domestic and foreign policy:

In recent years, alas, the swing from extreme Left to extreme Right has resulted in a tedious industry that pretends to independence and enlightenment but especially in the U.S. has only mirrored the ascendancy of Reaganism and Thatcherism. The American branch of this particular brand of self-promotion has called itself Second Thoughts, the idea being that first thoughts during the heady decade of the sixties were both radical and wrong. In a matter of months during the late 1980s Second Thoughts aspired to become a movement, alarmingly well funded by right-wing Maecenases like the Bradley and Olin foundations. The specific impresarios were David Horowitz and Peter Collier, from whose pens a stream of books, one rather like the other, flowed, most of them the revelations of former radicals who had seen the light, and had become, in the words of one of them, vigorously pro-American and anticommunist. (114)

So powerful was this movement that it reconfigured the Democratic Party itself, for by the time the Democrats had returned to power under Clinton, the party had moved away from its New Deal/Fair Deal/Great Society legacy of regulated welfare state capitalism in favor of deregulatory ideology. Commenting on this phenomenon in his 1994 book, *The Doubter's Companion: A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense*, the public intellectual John Ralston Saul writes, "By the early 1990s they [neoconservatives] had so successfully redrawn the intellectual map that whenever liberals returned to power they spent their time

mouthings neoconservative formulae” (220).

The pinnacle of the neoconservative surge would occur in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11, when President George W. Bush, who was surrounded by neoconservatives, would invade Iraq and launch a misprosecuted war against terrorism that would trigger a variety of conflicts throughout the Middle East. Writing in his 2006 book, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, Francis Fukuyama, the former neoconservative luminary termed discontent, formally disassociated himself from neoconservatism, writing, “I have concluded that neoconservatism, as both a political symbol and a body of thought, has evolved into something that I can no longer support” (xi). The author of the bestselling *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which became a core neoconservative text, Fukuyama was mentored by such intellectuals as Allan Bloom, Samuel P. Huntington, and Harvey Mansfield, who were all academics who had ties to the neoconservative movement.

According to Fukuyama, the roots of neoconservatism can be traced back to a group of intellectuals, many of them Jewish American, who had attended City College of New York (CCNY) during the “mid-to late 1930s and early 1940s” (15).¹² This group had “included Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Irving Howe, Seymour Martin Lipset, Philip Selznick, Nathan Glazer, and, a bit later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan” (15). Initially bound together by an intense commitment to Marxism, these men would later find themselves questioning their ideological commitments in the wake of the revelations of the Stalinist horrors as they grew to believe that “‘real existing socialism’ had become a monstrosity of unintended consequences” (16). Throughout the 1950s, these maturing intellectuals would swell their ranks by forming connections with Norman Podhoretz and other dissident

Leftists who were now supporting the social liberalism of welfare state capitalism. Over the course of the 1960s, however, all these figures would grow disenchanted with the Democratic Party's burgeoning social welfare programs and the nation's exploding New Left activism, viewing them as the collective manifestations of a decadent and rudderless society.

In essence, the American neoconservative movement that would explode during the late 1970s was the byproduct of a lengthy form of intellectual synergy that had emanated from a core group of intellectuals who had moved away from the Left over the course of a few decades. While some of these figures like Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset would essentially become centrist Democrats, others like Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz would become major backers of the so-called "Reagan Revolution." Though Fukuyama's *Neoconservatism at the Crossroads* is perhaps the best source to consult for a general overview of the American neoconservative movement and its disastrous legacy, this political phenomenon has also been well documented, albeit in implicit fashion, in such Hollywood films as *W.* (2008, dir. Oliver Stone) and *Vice* (2018, dir. Adam McKay).

Given the time period when Said was writing *Representations of the Intellectual*, I cannot help but wonder if his whole concluding notion of cautioning against the dangers of uncritically worshipping intellectuals and political ideologies was influenced by his knowledge of the historical evolution of neoconservatism. As he writes in his final chapter,

Because you serve a [intellectual] god uncritically, all the devils are always on the other side: this was as true when you were a Trotskyist as it is now when you are a recanting former Trotskyist. You do not think of politics in terms of

interrelationships or of common histories such as, for instance, the long and complicated dynamic that has bound the Arabs to the West and vice versa. Real intellectual analysis forbids calling one side innocent, the other evil. Indeed, the notion of a side is, where cultures are at issue, highly problematic, since most cultures aren't watertight little packages, all homogenous, and all good or evil. But if your eye is on your patron, you cannot think as an intellectual, but only as a disciple or acolyte. In the back of your mind there is the thought that you must please and not displease. (119)

The core neoconservatives had, after all, intellectually started out by essentially making a secular religion of Marxism and worshipping Stalin and Trotsky. In the wake of the horrors of the Hitler-Stalin pact, the revelations about Stalinism, and the failures of Soviet communism, they rejected their old political religion and its gods in favour of placing their faith in neoconservatism and such new gods as Leo Strauss and Milton Friedman. In the case of Irving Kristol, who would be billed as “the godfather” of neoconservatism on the cover of *Esquire* magazine in 1979, he would essentially establish himself as a god, encouraging the development of neoconservative power networks in American think tanks and universities that would mentor numerous young intellectuals who would go on to assume key roles in higher education, media, government, and policy development.

I can still recall that terrible day when the Twin Towers collapsed. As more information came forward in the coming weeks, I found myself reflecting a great deal on Said's book *Orientalism* (1978). I imagine that when the American government's War on Terror began there were many enthusiastic neoconservatives in Bush Jr.'s administration

and network who saw the initiative as their shining moment to “democratize” the Middle East and expand American cultural and economic hegemony throughout the region. As events would have it, however, the war would actually serve to intensify the spread of jihadist Islam while creating conflicts and schisms throughout the Middle East that continue to this day and have cost more than half a million lives. The neoconservative gods, it would seem, have failed, and like the Twin Towers they have fallen.

By most accounts, Edward Said was a charming man and a generous raconteur and interlocutor. If I have been somewhat critical of *Representations of the Intellectual* throughout this meditation, it is not for lack of holding Said in high regard. For many years he was an intellectual god to me, though with the passage of time and conversations spent with various people knowledgeable about Middle Eastern history and affairs, I gradually came to appreciate how he had his own scholarly limitations and blind spots. Although I was at times frustrated with this book, which I began reading with immense excitement, this is only because I feel that it does not quite live up to the greatness of *Orientalism* and some of Said’s other works. Nonetheless, in spite of my critical misgivings, the book contains some gems of insight, and it provoked me to think and say a great deal. As Said’s contentious intellectual confrere Christopher Hitchens wrote in the wake of Said’s 2003 death in his *Atlantic* article “East Is East” (2007), “It can be said for Edward Said that he helped make us reconsider our perspectives a little.” Edward Said is still making me think all these years later, even when I disagree with him.

¹ References to Sartre also appear on pages xiv, 10, 13, 66, 72, 74, and 75.

² Said does offer a minor, understated critique—to say the least—when he acknowledges that Sartre was a “fallible human being” (14).

³ For a controversial yet detailed overview of Said’s views on Palestinian nationalism, see scholar Yi Li’s 2011 *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* article, “Edward Said’s Thoughts and Palestinian Nationalism.”

⁴ See journalist Sam Farmer's Sept. 17, 2018 *Los Angeles Times* article, "Must Reads: The ex-Green Beret who inspired Colin Kaepernick to kneel instead of sit during the anthem would like to clear a few things up."

⁵ See philosopher Crispin Sartwell's June 20, 2014 *Atlantic* article, "The Left-Right Political Spectrum Is Bogus."

⁶ I sincerely believe this individual qualifies as one of the great public intellectuals of the late twentieth-century.

⁷ Oddly enough, many of the intellectuals that Said, the famed postcolonialist, discusses in *Representations of the Intellectual* are white.

⁸ For a concise overview of the film, see the late film critic Roger Ebert's Mar. 18, 1988 review of it, entitled "D.O.A."

⁹ See journalist Noah Smith's August 14, 2018 *Bloomberg* article, "The Great Recession Never Ended for College Humanities," and his January 4, 2021 *Bloomberg* article, "America Is Pumping Out Too Many PhDs."

¹⁰ See the late journalist Scott Timberg's book, *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class* (2015).

¹¹ For an engaging account of this phenomenon, see Andrew Keen's book *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture* (2007).

¹² A tremendous admirer of Jewish American culture, Fukuyama—like me—is simply stating this as a matter of historical fact and is in no way seeking to give credence to insidious anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This historical link between neoconservatism and Jewish American intellectuals was well documented by the late Jewish American historian Murray Friedman, founder and director of Temple University's Jewish American Feinstein Center, in his book *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (2005).

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