

## For a Politics of Exile

### *Criticism in an Era of Global Liberal Decline*

Jeanne Morefield

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the white nationalist movement it has engendered, the Brexit vote, the rise of anti-immigrant movements throughout Europe, and the collapse of so many social welfare institutions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to considerable handwringing among some political theorists about the future of democracy. This has prompted a surge of interest in the politics of populism and identity. For liberals such as Rogers Smith and Michael Walzer, this means both puzzling through the “stories we tell ourselves” about “who we are” and recommitting “ourselves” to what liberalism means “for us” in the context of a country in which 40 percent of Americans clearly prefer the leadership of a racist autocrat.<sup>1</sup> For left Schmittians such as Chantal Mouffe, this rightward shift demands a left populist reimagining of “the people,” sharply contrasted with a reactionary enemy.<sup>2</sup> And yet, both of these reactions to the rise of xenophobia and the decline of liberal democracy in the Global North fail to adequately grapple with the way the very construction of “the people” in the Global North – the demos upon whose shoulders settles the weight of the liberal state – has been linked historically to practices of imperialism, settler colonialism, and the antidemocratic processes of resource extraction, dispossession, slavery, and military expansionism.

To begin with the conceit that the liberal, state-bounded peoples of the Global North are coherent units, in and of themselves, is to deny the co-constitutive history of European imperialism and “Western” liberal

<sup>1</sup> See Keith E. Whittington, “Rogers M. Smith: The Stories We Tell Ourselves,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 51 no.4 (2018): 895–99; Rogers M. Smith, *That Is Not Who We Are! Populism and Peoplehood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Michael Walzer, “What It Means to Be a Liberal,” *Dissent*, Spring 2020 [www.dissentmagazine.org/article/what-it-means-to-be-liberal](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/what-it-means-to-be-liberal).

<sup>2</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

democratic states. Such a move erases the structural relationship between practices of colonial resource extraction and land dispossession and the emergence of those liberal welfare states whose citizens are now explicitly rejecting both immigrants and democracy. Political responses that ignore these constitutive relationships and privilege notions of “the people” also inadvertently give succor to precisely the mode of rhetorical deflection that has sustained liberal imperialism for hundreds of years, a phenomenon embodied today in the ideological justifications of liberal internationalists like John Ikenberry who lean on “such Western values as openness, the rule of law, human rights, and liberal democracy” to justify American military and political hegemony.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the indwelling fixation with peoplehood makes it more difficult to identify potential sites of human coexistence and democratic futures that emanate from beyond the blessed circle of those Anglo-European, liberal democracies, now in crisis and yet as self-contained in memory as ever.

This chapter thus begins with a provocation: how would the kinds of questions scholars of politics ask about our political moment change if we thought in more historically capacious ways about the relationship between “the people” as a bounded site of political action and the history and ongoing politics of imperialism? What would happen if political theorists in the Global North who are interested in the future of democracy – both global and domestic – began their theorizing from an unsettled position of radical reflection and humility about what went into the creation of both modern, liberal democratic states and their own conceptions of “the political”? I first explore what such an orientation might look like by engaging Edward Said’s approach to living, being, thinking, and writing in exile. I then compare this approach to the closed notions of “the political” that still dominate political theory as well as to that mode of political thought that has traditionally been most committed to the concerns of the world outside of the nation-state: cosmopolitan, global justice theory. I conclude with some thoughts about the conceptual reorientation toward politics and the democratic humanism that a reflective mode of exilic inquiry enables.

#### EDWARD SAID AND EXILIC CRITICISM

Edward Said, who died of leukemia in 2003, was one of the most productive scholars and influential public intellectuals of the late twentieth century. His groundbreaking 1978 book *Orientalism*, and the similarly powerful *Culture and Imperialism*, transformed the academic study of imperialism from historical engagement with a known historical object whose policies, theories, and cultural practices run solely in one direction – from Western metropolises to

<sup>3</sup> John Ikenberry, “The Next Liberal Order: The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism, Not Less,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no.4 (2020): 133–43.

Asian/African/Latin American sites of occupation – into engagement with the “constantly expanding,” “inexorably integrative” ideological formation that buttressed domination in the past and rationalizes imperial politics in the present.<sup>4</sup> Said’s work explored the way active traces of the imperial past on the present (including the grotesque inequality of resources between the Global North and South) continue to appear *sui generis*, untethered from a history of imperialism, slavery, settler colonialism, dispossession, and resource extraction – the natural order of things. In addition, his work stressed the increasing urgency with which he believed it necessary to pair interrogations of imperial culture’s constitutive, disciplinary power with genealogical investigations of anticolonial resistance. Finally, the corpus of Said’s work stresses the need to cultivate a contrapuntal orientation toward history, culture, and politics that “sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together because they are connected by imperialism.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, for Said, the “great imperial experience of the past two hundred years is global and universal,” implicating all of us, “the colonizer and the colonized together.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his work, Said repeatedly tied his orientation toward imperialism to his own experience as a Palestinian living in exile and to the more generally productive qualities of an “exilic” perspective that resists domination and upends univocal accounts of identity and history.<sup>7</sup> As he put it in a 1994 interview:

If you’re an exile . . . you always bear within yourself a recollection of what you’ve left behind and what you can remember, and you play it against the current experience. So there’s necessarily that sense of counterpoint. And by counterpoint, I mean things that can’t be reduced to homophony . . . And so, multiple identity, the polyphony of many voices playing off against each other, without, as I say, the need to reconcile them, just to hold them together, is what my work is all about. More than one culture, more than one awareness, both in its negative and its positive modes.<sup>8</sup>

Exile, critique, and counterpoint thus sit at the very core of Said’s approach to politics, history, and text, generating a mode of analysis which is itself always “out of place.” Throughout his work, the friction created by exile – by the strange juxtaposition of a home lost, a home remembered, and a contemporary moment lived otherwise – gives rise to an unreconciled, “unhoused and rootless” disposition toward text and the world which is, by its nature, irresolvable, contradictory, and paradoxical.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 6, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 279. <sup>6</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 259.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Out of Place* (New York: Random House, 1999), 293.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, “Criticism, Culture, and Performance,” in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage, 2002), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, “Narrative, Geography, and Interpretation,” *New Left Review* 180, no. 1 (1990): 84–97.

The unfixedness of exile is precisely what makes it, in Said's words, "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience."<sup>10</sup> This tension between concept and experience is particularly true, he argued, in our era. Whereas the romantic idea of exile in western literature and philosophy often focuses on isolated intellectuals forced from home – Cicero's time in Thessalonica, James Joyce's years of alienation abroad – exile today is primarily a mass phenomenon. For this reason, Said argues, any analysis of exile must begin by "setting aside" exiles by choice (e.g. Joyce) and then purposefully turning our minds to "the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created."<sup>11</sup> The disruptions created by settler colonialism, imperialism, violent nationalism, mass warfare, and covert intervention since the nineteenth century have led to waves of mass migration, floods of refugees, and a constantly expanding global population of displaced persons. Thus, contemporary exiles may sometimes look like Said himself – a Columbia professor living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan – but they are far more likely to look like traumatized Central American children trudging hundreds of miles with their parents through Mexico, Syrians caught in the no-mans-land of Greek refugee camps, Rohingyas trapped in temporary settlements in Bangladesh, or the third generation of Palestinians to grow up in the Shantila refugee camp in Beirut. The fact that, throughout his work, Said looked straight into the desperate and disparate faces of exiles, saw the experience for what it was, and still insisted that the perspective it provided offered the world a powerful, even necessary, way of seeing, is a testament to how strongly he believed in its illuminative power.

For Said, exiles bear within themselves recollections of what has been left behind, which they then play against the current experience. This ebbless loss, this constant friction between past and the present, home and displacement, becomes the exile's "permanent state." That state is characterized, above all, by contradictions within and between experiences; between state violence on a grand scale and the profundity of individual suffering, between mass migration and the longings of the lonely poetic soul, between political violence and political art. This "agonizing distance" remains unsutured for the exile, like an irritating open wound whose healing is relentlessly stymied by the reality of "terminal loss."<sup>12</sup> Loss, therefore, is the pebble in the exile's shoe that pains with every step and, in that pain, brings insight.

Said does not argue that the experience of exile *necessarily* leads to reflection and, in fact, notes that it is often "a jealous state." Exiles, he argues, often "look

<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.

<sup>11</sup> Said, "Reflections on Exile," 174.

<sup>12</sup> Said, "Reflections on Exile," 173; and Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 8.

at non exiles with resentment,” which can lead to an “exaggerated sense of group solidarity” and a stubborn “hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you,” a feeling that sometimes resembles the “bloody minded affirmations” of nationalism.<sup>13</sup> But what differentiates the experience of exile from nationalism, Said argues, is the permanence of loss.<sup>14</sup> Exile, he notes, “unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a *discontinuous* state of being” wherein subjects are constantly drawn up hard against the jagged edge of today’s reality and forced to occupy an indeterminate space endlessly mediated not just by distance but also time and the fundamental uncertainties of memory. If the exile can resist the impulse to sit “on the sidelines nursing a wound,” he argues, they can transform this unsettledness into a particularly revealing mode of subjective reflection.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Said maintained, because their sense of natality – their supposedly natural connection to a place and a culture-in-place – has been severed, exiles are often in a position to observe the way all connections between culture and place are essentially unnatural. In other words, seeing the world through exile is to see the guts and sinews of culture itself revealed, to catch a glimpse of the braided relationship between what Said referred to as *filiative* and *affiliative* forms of cultural connections.<sup>16</sup> For Said, *filiative* understandings of culture are commonsensical, in Gramsci’s sense of the term: they appear to reflect the “mere natural continuity between one generation and the next.”<sup>17</sup> For instance, scholars who are interested in tracing the coherence of western civilization over time often present that coherence in *filiative* terms as an inheritance linked directly to particular populations through genealogical descent. *Affiliative* connections, by contrast, are both consciously made and compensatory, often replacing the perceived loss of *filiative* relations. Looking at the relationship between “the west” and its culture through *affiliative* lenses implies taking a denaturalizing attitude toward the relationship between culture and population, one which interprets these links ideologically as rhetorical lines of descent forged through the active and creative fusing of particular ideas with particular peoples rather than the simple gift of one generation to the next. It thus means interrogating the way culture is sustained and re-instantiated by the intellectual work of human beings who are themselves situated within a complex web of cultural/political/material connections they participate in weaving.

Exile, Said argued, wrenches the critic out of their situated perspective and compels reflection on the relationship between place and people, self and home, thus illuminating the constructed/*affiliative* realm of culture more generally.

<sup>13</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 177–78.   <sup>14</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 177.

<sup>15</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 184.

<sup>16</sup> Said, “Secular Criticism,” 16. Said developed his notion of *filiative* and *affiliative* connections through an engagement with the work of Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, and others.

<sup>17</sup> Said, “Secular Criticism,” 16.

Fundamentally, this orientation toward culture, history, and politics entails, as Said noted in *Representation of the Intellectual*, seeing things “not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way.”<sup>18</sup> Such a denaturalizing orientation – one that disrupts affiliative associations between “the people,” place, and culture – is particularly useful for analyzing inherently global political phenomena such as imperialism. Thus, because it is always unstable, always balanced on the interstitial lip of identity and place, the exilic disposition illuminates how the ideology of imperialism works to disassociate Western culture from the “institutions, agencies, classes, and amorphous social forces” that constitute its relationship to (and dependence on) imperial rule.<sup>19</sup> As a discursive apparatus, Said argued, imperialism works to “make invisible and even ‘impossible’ the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force on the other.”<sup>20</sup> The distance between the exile and her natal culture opens the door on a vista of critical reflection that renders those ongoing affiliations – between ideas and power, culture and domination, history and contemporary practice – more visible. Moreover, Said argues, the very unsettledness of life in exile means that exiles tend to approach their lived attachments “*as if* they were about to disappear.” This gives rise to a mode that constantly queries these experiences themselves: “What would you save of them,” Said asks, “what would you give up, what would you recover?”<sup>21</sup>

Two further aspects of Said’s approach to exile differentiate it from other approaches to critique similarly oriented toward exposing the multiple, overlapping, disciplinary modes of power at work in culture (e.g. Foucaultian genealogy and poststructuralist criticism). The first is that, beyond its critical, illuminative capacity, exile in a Saidian sense is also a deeply compassionate mode of seeing. Because living in exile is, in Said’s words, “a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old,” the exile’s feelings are never entirely detached from home but are, rather, “predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with, one’s native place.”<sup>22</sup> What is thus true of all exile, he insisted, “is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, analyzing politics through the lens of exilic loss doesn’t mean abandoning sympathy for critique, nor does it mean dismissing all notions of belonging – national, local, regional – as affiliative fictions. Rather, it means combining sympathy with a baseline discomfort for easy, commonsense

<sup>18</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 60.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, “The American Left and Literary Criticism,” in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 174.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” in *Reflections on Exile*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336. <sup>22</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 185.

explanations about who belongs and who does not belong to a given community.

Second, and perhaps most controversially, Said sometimes wrote about exile as a tangible, clawing thing into which one is born or forced. But he also claimed that an exilic perspective can be voluntarily adopted by intellectuals willing to unsettle their view of the world. In his words, while exile “is an *actual* condition,” it is also “for my purposes a *metaphorical* condition,” an act of will that committed intellectuals can perform in order to stand outside the familiar, a disposition likely “to be a source not of acculturation and adjustment, but rather of volatility and instability.”<sup>24</sup> But there is nothing flip or easy about adopting a metaphorical exilic position. Rather, for Said, being an exilic intellectual is a vocation, a way of being and seeing that is deeply transformative. Occupying the perspective of exilic loss is thus different from assuming, for instance, a Rawlsian “original position”: that is, a methodological perspective one can move in and out of in order to clarify the basic foundations of justice for a given “people.” Instead, the exilic critic is resigned to remaining permanently unsettled. “You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home,” Said notes, and thus “you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.”

On a fundamental level, the exilic critic alters their relationship to their homeland in a way which makes them perennially uncomfortable with assumed, commonsense notions of peoplehood and closure, modes of inclusion and exclusion built into the very collective pronouns that structure politics. For instance, Said argues, an American reporter writing about the Vietnam War who uses “the words ‘us’ and ‘our’” has “appropriated neutral pronouns and affiliated them consciously either with that criminal invasion of a distant Southeast Asian nation” or “with those lonely voices of dissent for whom the American war was both unwise and unjust.”<sup>25</sup> The impulse of the exilic critic, by contrast, is to interrogate what makes the national “we” a “we” in the first place. Embracing the alienation of exile means remaining hyper-attentive to the way the subtleties of language mask some identities while constructing others, hide some histories while highlighting others. Ultimately, unsettling the “we” voice and reconnecting it to histories of conquest, resistance, and connection is perhaps the most productively *disruptive* quality of the exilic disposition, particularly for those of us doing critical work that links the history of imperialism to the present.

#### TURNING IN AND CLOSING DOWN

Surprisingly, given the number of major figures in political theory who were exiles and who theorized the experience, political theorists have remained astonishingly uninterested in Said’s interpretive approach. While most fields

<sup>24</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 53.   <sup>25</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 33.

in the humanities – from history and comparative literature to anthropology and cultural studies – were fundamentally (if not completely) transformed by the publication of *Orientalism* and the postcolonial revolution to which it gave rise, political theory as a subdiscipline has remained resolutely unaffected by that work.<sup>26</sup> Aside from the work of James Tully, when political theorists do mention Said it is usually briefly and only in regard to orientalism as a concept or *Orientalism* as a totemic reminder of the postcolonial turn.<sup>27</sup> On those rare occasions when scholars of political theory have expressed interest in Said's other works, it is usually gestural or, worse, without attribution.<sup>28</sup> Stranger still, political theorists and scholars of politics who are part of the discipline's "turn to empire" since the late 1990s *still* largely fail to engage Said's work.<sup>29</sup>

Why has it been so hard for political theorists just to *see* Said – this man whose scholarship and politics sat at the fulcrum of a transformative intellectual movement elsewhere – for so long? There are a variety of responses to this question, but the most illuminative set of explanations cluster around that same phenomenon that helps explain why, in Jennifer Pitts' words, the discipline of political theory came so "slowly and late to the study of empire relative to other disciplines": our disciplinary attachment to Political Science and Political Science's attachment to state sovereignty.<sup>30</sup> Thus, following World War Two, Political Science in North America began to organize itself around its current four subdisciplines, an act of professional hiving off that led to the confinement of almost all scholarship concerned with politics on a global scale within the emerging field of International Relations (IR).<sup>31</sup> Moreover, during this early

<sup>26</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, "Introduction," in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), xi. Note that critical IR theorists have been more engaged with Said than political theorists. See, for instance, Geeta Chowdhry, "Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading: Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations," *Millennium* 36, no. 1 (2007): 101–16; and Raymond Duvall and Latha Varadarajan, "Travelling in Paradox: Edward Said and Critical International Relations," *Millennium* 36, no. 1 (2007): 83–99.

<sup>27</sup> See Brown's use of the term "imaginative geography" in Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 73–74. Tully references Said's work explicitly and thoughtfully in James Tully, "Dialogue and Decolonization," in *Dialogue and Decolonization*, ed. Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press & Bloomsbury, forthcoming); and James Tully, "Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity," *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002): 533–55; James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 2, *Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) for an example of the former. For the latter, see Wendy Brown's discussion of a "contrapuntal strategy" that "agitates" along political theory's disciplinary parameters, in Wendy Brown, *Edgework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> See Pitts' brief discussion of Said in Jennifer Pitts, "Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 211–35.

<sup>30</sup> Pitts, "Political Theory," 212.

<sup>31</sup> It was not until the late 1970s that theorists such as Beitz and Schue began challenging at least part of this distinction. Bell describes contemporary IR and political theory approaches as



postwar period, founding thinkers within IR began associating their work explicitly and exclusively with the relationships between sovereign states, an assumption that remains foundational to this day. As a field, IR continues to read the contested landscape of world history through the lenses of sovereign statehood, often by re-inserting the “security dilemma” into the writings of a selected canon of Western political philosophers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.<sup>32</sup>

Political theorists reflect the state-orientation of the discipline by containing their thinking about democracy and its possibilities to bounded notions of “the people” structured by a foundational notion of nation-statehood which usually functions as deep background for theorizing. Rawlsians, for instance, “work up” their theories about the basic structure of society, justice, distribution, etc., by assuming a historically grounded social grouping attached to a particular kind of (liberal democratic) state with a particular economic form.<sup>33</sup> Critical theorists such as Nancy Fraser may challenge some of the baseline assumptions of liberalism by critically analyzing the development of liberalism in the context of capitalism and the welfare state, but these analyses circle around Eurocentric conceptions that fail to account for the constitutive role played by extra-state practices of imperial extraction, slavery, settler violence, and land dispossession in the emergence of capitalism itself.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, critical acolytes of Carl Schmitt, like Mouffe, argue for democratic, pluralist, and populist responses to reactionary politics by consistently reasserting the necessity of a “people” bound by a “moment of closure.”<sup>35</sup> Even when Mouffe is most strenuously insisting, as she does in *Left Populism*, that “the people” is itself the product of democratic contestation rather than state, nation, or ethnicity, she simply fails to account for the fact that “the people” just happens to cohere to the nation-state and fails to consider the limitations baked into that formative “closure.”<sup>36</sup>

The obsession of political scientists and political theorists with *bounded* notions of political identity and community runs counter to the way political identity and community has actually been experienced historically. As David Armitage reminds us, the vast majority of human beings “for most of history

“parallel universes” with markedly different literatures and understandings of the very same terms (e.g. “liberalism” and “realism”). See Duncan Bell, “Political Realism and International Relations,” *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017): 12.

<sup>32</sup> See Morgenthau’s discussion of Thucydides, in particular his insistence that the centrality of state interest “is indeed of the essence of politics and is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place.” Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 10.

<sup>33</sup> See John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Nancy Fraser, “A New Form of Capitalism? A Reply to Boltanski and Esquerre,” *New Left Review* 106 (2017): 57–65.

<sup>35</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy,” *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence* 10, no. 1 (1999): 21–33.

<sup>36</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.

lived not in nation-states but in empires,” a reality that persisted well into the 1960s.<sup>37</sup> A fixation with sovereignty and boundaries as the only historically identifiable forms of political association not only fails to account for the contrapuntal richness of this history, it also fails to appreciate the extent to which today’s liberal democratic states – often the background political communities assumed by political theorists – were themselves forged through imperialist practices: explosions of settler violence, prolonged resource extraction, predatory taxation. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, this mode of unseeing also fails to account for the “continuing colonial presence” of the USA and its European/Great Power allies throughout the world today.<sup>38</sup> As Gurminder Bhabra argues, today’s European welfare states are the products of long-standing historical patterns of racialized immigration policies that were normalized within their imperial ambit, while today’s white settler nations would not exist if not for the near genocide of first nation peoples. These same states developed labor markets grounded in racial forms of domination and exclusion. In postwar Britain, for instance, the “apparently domestically inclusive welfare state regime” depended upon a political economy “of Imperial and (subsequently) Commonwealth preferences which was designed to enrich the British state while restricting the rights extended to subjects throughout its territories.”<sup>39</sup>

Given the tendency of political theorists to attach their thinking about “the people” to enclosed sovereign units untouched by imperialism, it is hardly surprising that Said’s kaleidoscopic perspective on politics – his cross- and trans- and sub- and antinational way of reading culture and imperialism in history – make him almost indecipherable to so many. This also means that those few theorists who have looked at his work often emerge confused or unsatisfied. Both Frederick Dallmayr and Joan Cocks, for instance, are similarly attracted by much of what they see in Said’s work but are, at the end of the day, deeply dissatisfied with his unfixed, exilic perspective. Cocks believes that his conception of exile fails to “map out and fight for clear political alternatives to the nation-state” while Dallmayr is critical of Said’s unwillingness to abandon disruptive tensions for the hope of reconciliation provided by a Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>40</sup> And yet, I think it is fair to say that both of these critiques miss the point. Said’s is not a theory of political/epistemological closure, nor does it provide theorists with an alternative *theory of politics*. Rather, Said’s approach

<sup>37</sup> David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 205–25.

<sup>39</sup> Gurminder Bhabra and John Holmwood, “Colonialism, Postcolonialism and the Liberal Welfare State,” *New Political Economy* 23, no. 5 (2018): 574–87.

<sup>40</sup> Joan Cocks, “A New Cosmopolitanism? V.S. Naipaul and Edward Said,” *Constellations* 7, no. 1 (2000): 47; and Frederick Dallmayr, “The Politics of Nonidentity: Adorno, Postmodernism – And Edward Said,” *Political Theory* 25, no. 1 (1997): 33–56.

to exile provides us with a critical disposition, a mode of humble reflection and opening up, that begins from an uncomfortable sense of being *out of place*, which then fundamentally disrupts the way “we” – as political theorists – approach questions of justice, democracy, power, and domination that are our bread and butter.

Imagine, for instance, how occupying such an unstable position might alter the way political theorists approach an issue as fundamentally transnational as global justice. As it stands, since the 1980s the debate about global justice engaged in by major figures in political theory, such as David Held, Thomas Pogge, David Miller, Martha Nussbaum, and Will Kymlicka, has circled around a clash between what Fraser calls “the right” and “the good.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, cosmopolitan thinkers argue that, in Nussbaum’s words, “reason rather than patriotism or group sentiment” ought to guide moral action when it comes to theorizing solutions to the vast inequality of resources between peoples in the first and third worlds.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the particularities of their approaches, cosmopolitan theorists today generally agree that human beings within nation-states have obligations to human beings in other parts of the world and that a right understanding of these obligations can be determined through (some form) of Kantian or Stoic reason. Cosmopolitans thus ask questions such as: What obligations do citizens in the first world owe to citizens in the third? To what extent are first-world citizens responsible for rectifying poverty in these countries? What responsibilities do developed countries have to mitigating the effects of climate change? All of these questions boil down to some version of: What do “we” owe to the global poor?<sup>43</sup>

Over the years, debates between cosmopolitans and their critics have tended to focus on the role of local or national communities in the formation of moral obligations, and they almost always revolve around questions of *identification*. That is, whether citizens within nation-states can really sustain a robust sense of moral and political connection to others with whom they do not identify as fellow nationals. For cosmopolitans, cultural and political identification with “the other” isn’t necessary since people are capable of understanding moral obligation through reason. But for a communitarian like Alasdair MacIntyre, this faith in reason ignores the role that identification with one’s community plays in the development of moral consciousness.<sup>44</sup> Conservative scholars such as Jack Goldsmith similarly argue that individuals first learn lessons of morality from “members of their community . . . with whom they identify,” and Will

<sup>41</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Recognition without Ethics?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, nos. 2–3 (2001): 22.

<sup>42</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1997): 3.

<sup>43</sup> Mathias Risse, “What We Owe to the Global Poor,” *Journal of Ethics* 9, no. 1 (2005): 81–117.

<sup>44</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

Kymlicka frames his critique of David Held's "communities of fate" in terms of the "sorts of collectivities" with whom people also identify.<sup>45</sup>

From a Saidian-inspired, exilic perspective, cosmopolitan theorists *and* their critics share an untroubled surety about the fixedness of the position from which they validate or minimize identity. This argument is similar to, but distinct from, those posed by postcolonial critics of cosmopolitanism, many of whom have already exposed the Eurocentrism of Enlightenment universalism, in part by "provincializing it," by linking it to the "cultural discourses" that sustain imperialism.<sup>46</sup> My argument, by contrast, is meant to demonstrate the way both champions of universal reason (cosmopolitan global justice scholars) and critics of that universal reason (communitarians, etc.) actually share certain subjective assumptions which then impose epistemological limits on political thinking. Thus, cosmopolitans consistently ask questions about "our" ethical obligations toward "others": impoverished nonnationals, climate refugees, potential victims of genocide, etc. In response, communitarian and conservative critics then raise concerns about the extent to which human beings within communities can identify with that broader conception of humanity. But whether they take identification as key to morality or not, neither Nussbaum and Beitz on the one hand, nor Macintyre, Goldsmith, and Kymlicka on the other, question *their own* identity.

In other words, none of these scholars ever wonders whether the ground upon which *they* stand – as theorists writing about the promises or problems of cosmopolitanism – is solid. Nor do they consider what questioning the solidity of that ground might do for their theorizing. Whether they think of themselves as citizens of the world, assume themselves to be linked in a thin, liberal fashion to their natal communities or communities of choice, or personally experience the ethical impact of their "little platoons" as vitally important to their identity, they know that when and if they leave, they can come "home" again. By contrast, Said's exilic subject begins their analysis of the world from the perspective that return is impossible and from the position that the ground upon which they stand, from which they critique and theorize, is not the home with which they identify fully. Indeed, sometimes even that tenuous connection is uncertain. Because exilic critics begin from a place of instability rather than closure, Said maintains, they are less likely "to derive satisfaction" from assumed connections and foundations. They are thus more likely to ask questions about the world that differ significantly from the core question asked by cosmopolitans or their critics: "What do *we* owe to others and what

<sup>45</sup> Jack Goldsmith, "Liberal Democracy and Cosmopolitan Duty," *Stanford Law Review* 55, no. 5 (2003): 1677; and Will Kymlicka, "Citizenship in an Era of Globalization," in *The Cosmopolitan Reader*, eds. Garret Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 437.

<sup>46</sup> See the work of Gurminder Bhambra, "Whither Europe? Postcolonial versus Neocolonial Cosmopolitanism," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 187–202; and Ines Valdez, *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

enables or prohibits *us* from identifying with them?” Rather, the exilic intellectual who begins from the unstable ground of wondering “Do we exist? What proof do we have?” asks questions about the *filiative* appearance of the “we” itself and about the *affiliative* relations that naturalize the categories of “us” and “them.”

When oriented, for instance, toward those same problems of global injustice that preoccupy cosmopolitans, an exilic perspective is more likely to query affiliative connections between culture, politics, domination, forgetting, and collusion that, when woven together, set the stage for the current international environment. Rather than “what do we owe others?,” the exilic theorist asks “How, in a global historical context framed by movement, violence, dispossession, extraction, domination, and connection, did *we* come to be *us* in the first place?” That then leads to a whole series of other questions: What is the relationship of today’s global resource distribution to the history of imperial extraction that has allowed “us” to maintain “our” welfare state which we now argue is in crisis? How might the relationships between entities we call “liberal states” and entities we call “non liberal states” reflect that complicated history of imperial governance and extraction? What theoretical (moral, ethical, critical) resources for theorizing might be available to “us” were we to take the contrapuntal, interconnected histories of “the west and the non-west” seriously?

An exilic orientation pushes the question of identification – and all the subsequent questions of distribution, justice, reparations, obligation, and intervention that flow from it – inward, backward, outward, toward an investigation of those affiliative connections that structure the current global order today. An exilic inclination reorients the object of theoretical concern away from the shivering, starving, bomb-throwing masses (“them”) toward an interrogation of how they came to be “them” and we became “us” in the first place. It thus recasts the terrain of global justice as, in Said’s words, “a series of reflections rather than a string of assertions and affirmations.”<sup>47</sup>

#### UNCLOSING DEMOCRACY

Because liberal democracy has increasingly come under attack by forces on the right, many scholars of politics have correctly responded with a sense of urgency. Unfortunately, that urgency is often misplaced, reactionary, or even nostalgic. Jeffrey Isaacs warns darkly about the “danger” lurking behind this move away from liberal norms, while William Connolly has stressed the resemblance between our moment and the fascist aesthetic of the 1930s.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Edward Said, “A Method for Thinking about Just Peace,” in *What Is a Just Peace?*, eds. Pierre Allan and Alexis Keller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 176.

<sup>48</sup> William Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy Under Trumpism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2017); Jeffrey Isaac, “It’s Happening Here and Now: Thoughts on the Recent Immigration Detentions and William E. Connolly’s

Supporters of “the American-led liberal world order,” like Ikenberry, clutch their pearls in horror that the “hostile revisionist power” who now intends to destroy liberal democracy sits in the Oval Office scheming against “trade, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environmental protection, torture, and human rights.”<sup>49</sup> Both responses seek to counteract the attenuation of democracy on the level of the nation-state by burrowing into narratives about the exceptionalism of Trump and his resemblance to fascists of old rather than to “us.” They then combine these narratives with nostalgic accounts of “our” essential goodness as a liberal democratic people overcome by reactionary, “revisionist” forces.

By contrast, adopting an exilic orientation toward the affiliative relationships between imperialism, identity, and history has the potential to pry open political theory to new ways of theorizing the *demos* that ask questions about what is being occluded by the “we” that inhabits the shape of democracy. Rather than mourn the loss of liberal democracy, adopting Said’s exilic disposition prompts us to look at the world and our own theoretical perspectives contrapuntally and to ask: “What would we save of them, what would we give up, what would we recover?” Such an approach is, by design, unsettling and can feel like a willful act of throwing the baby out with the bathwater precisely at a historical moment when the world appears to crave not deconstruction and problematization but solutions. What could feel worse in this moment of crisis than looking down and seeing your foundations of belonging shift beneath your feet? At the same time, Said’s work presses us to consider whether the security of that foundation is worth sacrificing the clarity of insight that comes from exile, from an interrogation of the liberal democratic state’s imbrications with the ongoing politics of imperialism. After all, according to Said, it is “only in the precarious exilic realm [that] can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway.”<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, a Saidian perspective that works to destabilize the assumed foundations of peoplehood lurking in the background of so much democratic theorizing also aims to open up our conceptual horizons to new forms of human comity and global solidarity. At the end of the day, for Said there is no escaping the fact that the long history of global imperialism was grounded in both the “enabling rift between black and white, between imperial authority and natives” and in the historical interdependence between the Global South and the Global North, connections and affiliations sewn over time which now assure that “No one today is purely *one* thing.”<sup>51</sup> Drawing on the work of anticolonial

‘Aspirational Fascism’,” *Public Seminar*, June 25, 2018, [www.publicseminar.org/2018/06/its-happening-here-and-now](http://www.publicseminar.org/2018/06/its-happening-here-and-now).

<sup>49</sup> John Ikenberry, “The Plot Against American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017): 2.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>51</sup> Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

scholars Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, and Franz Fanon, Said argued that a critique of colonialism couched from within the disruptive register of exile ultimately encourages a rejection of both nationalism and imperialism and an acceptance of what Césaire called “true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world.”<sup>52</sup> Said’s contrapuntal reading provide us with a glimpse into, as he saw it, “a more integrative view of human community and human liberation” untethered from both the rigidity of states and the exploitation of empires.<sup>53</sup> This is a vision of democratic humanism framed not in terms of “some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world” but rather – from the beginning and always – in light of “the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York; Monthly Review Press, 2000), 73.

<sup>53</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 216.

<sup>54</sup> Edward Said, “The Politics of Knowledge,” in *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2000), 382.