

George Saliba

The Pebble That Became A Fist-Full Rock:
On the Continued Importance of Edward Said's *Orientalism*

by
George Saliba

After some twenty-two years of the most brutal occupation, an occupation that tore the very fabric of Lebanese society, killed thousands of innocent Lebanese civilians, murdered cold bloodedly women and children taking refuge in a United Nations shelter, demolished houses, displaced and deported thousands of Lebanese farmers, humiliated the population by subjecting their every move to checkpoints and road detours, turned some of them into surrogate forces, traitors and killing agents, raped and tortured prisoners for long term detention periods without due trials or even as much as issuing warrants for their arrests, designated simple farming villages as “terrorist strongholds” and bombed them from high-flying F-16 bought and paid for by U.S. tax payers thus killing countless innocent farmers in the process, stealing water, and even bulldozing top soil and trucking it across international borders to land settlements that were themselves built on stolen land taken by force, finally the Israeli forces pulled out of Lebanon on May 24 of the year 2000.

Israel did not carry out this act because it suddenly found itself in violation of the United Nation's Security Council resolution 425 which stipulated some 22 years earlier that Israel should pull out its forces immediately without any condition behind the international borders. It did so only after it had been forced out by the longest sustained resistance movement in Lebanon, first started by a variety of Lebanese political factions as a reaction to the Israeli occupation itself and then continued, organized, and brought to an effective victory by what became the Lebanese Resistance Movement led by Hizbollah.

Within days of the fateful pullout, and as Hizbollah resistance fighters were still parading the captured armored vehicles, tanks, and artillery pieces that were left behind by the fleeing Israeli forces, which had coordinated its pullout in the wee hours of the early dawn, thousands of Lebanese flocked to the liberated land of the South, a South that had become like every forbidden

and occupied land the subject of longing songs and romance over the years of occupation, in order to smell its soil, to gaze once more at its terraced rolling hills, to embrace and gently caress its little shrubs and trees, to lie down on its meadows and gaze at the free and “liberated” skies—skies that are incidentally still subjected to almost daily incursions by the Israeli airforce up till this very day. Jubilant, and drunk with the smell of dignity coming back to them, almost every Lebanese made or wanted to make a pilgrimage to the South to greet its residents who started to return to their farms and houses, to congratulate them, to shake the hands of the prisoners who were finally freed from the Khiyam notorious house of torture called prison. But they also all wanted to get as close as possible to the Lebanese Israeli border to take a look at the monster that lay behind the barbed wire and concrete walls, a monster that had turned their lives into nightmares for more than twenty-two years, and continues to threaten their very existence on daily basis. The curiosity, the jubilation, the congratulatory embraces to each and every one who survived the occupation of the South, made it feel like a continuous festivity and each and every Lebanese wanted to scream at the top of his/her voice “Free at Last.”

For the Palestinians who still live in miserable conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon, the joy was mixed for it scratched a deeper wound and stirred up a much deeper anger. The Lebanese victory allowed them now to see the land they had to flee almost fifty years earlier under the onslaught of the Israeli forces who were brutally establishing their state in 1948. But they also came to the border, they also looked at the monster. Some of them, especially the children, had never seen the space beyond and were then gazing for the first time at the land that carried in their minds all those images and dreams of return that their fathers and mothers had told them about, the orchards and the vineyards and the keys to their houses that they still carried with them during all those years of dislocation. Yes, the Palestinians came too, some of them from as far as Paris and London, to take their first look at their land of dreams. And yes all of them embraced the southern Lebanese and joined in their dance, and yet envied them a little, for they could not scream, as the Lebanese were doing, that they were free, too.

One of those Palestinians who also came to the border was Edward Said. He too wanted to look at the forbidden land. He too wanted to join in the ongoing festivity along the Lebanese border, and he too wanted to exorcise the monster that had tortured him all his life. He too picked a pebble and tossed it in the direction of that monster. Old men and women, children, even well

behaved children from nun-schools did the same. The big party stirred up all sorts of emotions that are very hard to explain to any person who have never slept under a walnut or an almond tree or in his own vineyard along the eastern Mediterranean shores during the warm months of the summer. It is the kind of joy that I think citizens of a snow-ridden countries will never understand.

It was in that mood that Edward Said, picked up his now-famous pebble and tossed it in the direction of the land of Palestine, a land that changed its name to Israel during his lifetime, and was lying there, right in front of him, and yet he could not reach it. It was with curse and joy that he tossed that pebble, and only he could answer to the underlying motives that I am sure would have taken him years of therapy to figure out which of them were motives stirred by hurt, which by joy, and which were stirred by sheer rebellion against the injustice that had befallen his people and his country.

But with that pebble toss, Edward Said stirred another controversy. As it happened, there was a photographer around, and just at the moment when Edward Said had picked up the pebble in his right hand, stretched his hand backward in preparation to toss it, the photograph was clicked and the picture made it to the wires. It was first made available for the press by Agence France Press, I believe, and since then has appeared in newspapers around the world. Because of this wide distribution of the photographs, I bet any reader who has even a minimum acquaintance with any internet search engine can get a copy of it freely and glance at it for him/herself. And once you do that, you immediately see a frail man, definitely not in tip top physical shape, who had by then been fighting leukemia for a full decade, holding an object in his right hand, literally with only three of his fingers: the thumb, and the first two fingers, the other two duly folded onto his palm. So here was this man carrying an object with his three fingers stretching his hand in a gesture willing to toss that object. Across from him in the direction where he was about to toss his pebble all you can see on the photograph is what looks like a concrete wall, but quite some ways away.

Now just think about it. How big that object could be, in order for a frail man to attempt to through it in any direction if it could be held by three fingers only? The photograph shows this very clearly, take a look at it. And even if he had succeeded to throw that pebble all the way across the well defended border, with all the concrete walls and bunkers and armored vehicles and personnel on the other side, how much damage could that

pebble create, and what kind of violence it could arouse that would threaten the state of Israel, which had the fourth largest and well armed forces in the world? How could it be any more damaging than the other pebble also widely published in the hand of a Palestinian child, about 10 or 11 years old, attempting to throw it against an Israeli tank?

Admittedly, it was not the object that stirred the controversy at Columbia University, but the very gesture itself.

The gesture was interpreted by two of Edward Said's Columbia colleagues on the faculty, and I am ashamed to say my colleagues as well, as an act of violence and demanded from the university administration to at least reprimand University Professor Said, if not more. The picture was not attached to the article that my and Edward's colleagues published in the student's paper, but the pebble was duly transformed into a "stone," a term at once conjuring the "stone"-throwing children of the Palestinian intifada, and probably the "stone" of the New Testament. The children of Palestine who were also fighting their own demons and monsters of occupation had been tossing their own "pebbles" for years. They have to be pebbles, for how big a stone can a child of ten or eleven years old throw? But since those children had already been vilified in the Western press, and especially that of the U.S., as "terrorists," Edward too was connected by the same term. And thus a big outcry at Columbia, for and against Edward Said, ensued during the early weeks of the Fall semester of 2000.

But it was not only the gesture that irked the opponents of Edward. They knew that language mattered, and thus wanted to attach some form of criminality to his gesture, and thus sought to do so by changing the name of what is obviously an innocuous pebble into a "stone," and later on as the controversy grew the "stone" became a "rock," as if to say that he really intended to hurt someone with it. In the latest re-incarnation of this episode, which unfortunately was also repeated in the *New York Times* obituary—true to form good old *New York Times* words fit to print—the gesture was used to add to Edward's name the adjective "controversial," a term also wisely chosen to imply that he could not be taken without a grain of salt, so to speak. And in the latest attack on Edward's memory that came to my attention in the website of Daniel Pipes, the pebble became "a fist-full rock." If this controversy keeps growing, and I expect it to grow once Columbia University has a formal memorial for Edward Said, I also suspect that someone somewhere will transform that "pebble" into a "boulder." All that

without anyone looking at the picture that had three front fingers grasping this small pebble ready to be thrown.

I REPEAT ALL OF THIS NOT IN JEST, FOR I DO BELIEVE that the episode should teach us a lot about Edward Said's legacy. It is not the first time that the grounds of the discourse had been changed from the facts to the incriminating intent of Edward Said. What happened is that his assailants did not want to discuss the facts that were obviously captured in the picture, but deformed those facts to impute his intent. They did not want to point to the fact that no one could have been hurt by that pebble, and that it was only an expression of joy, shared with thousands of Lebanese and tourists who did the same, but wanted to translate that gesture into an act of violence. It is to the credit of the then Provost of Columbia University, Jonathan Cole, who finally issued a statement declaring that Professor Said did not commit any crime by that gesture and no one was intended or could have been hurt by what he did. And thus the University interpreted that as an expression of his free speech.

But the lesson is not there. The lesson lies in the fact that even Edward Said's defenders fell for the polemical arguments of his opponents and went along with them in the process of the deformation of facts, for they too referred to the "pebble" as a "stone" and even a "rock" in their defensive writings. At one point, and in a neglected interview, Edward himself referred to it as a "pebble," but in the heat of the polemics no one noticed, and both friend and foe continued to speak of the pebble as a stone, a rock, and now a "fist-full rock." We can all anticipate the "boulder." I think it is coming.

This episode brought to mind another similar one, as I was sitting in the Riverside Church, bidding farewell to Edward Said. I thought then that Edward's friends have also failed him in another context. They let the opponents usurp the discourse and forced them to fight their battles on their own terrain. I thought of the controversy that surrounded his epoch-making book *Orientalism*. I remembered how some of Edward's friends thought that he did not expose the orientalists enough. He, for example, did not say enough about the German Orientalists who were also responsible for the deformation of facts about the Orient just as much as their French and English colleagues if not more. Everyone was caught in that controversy in the late seventies and the early eighties. But the controversy was framed as

such: Did Edward, the well-acknowledged literary critic, have the right to critique a field that had its own parameters, jargon, and specialists that date as far back as the Renaissance if not earlier? What was a literary critic doing in the halls of well-grounded orientalists who chalked several Semitic languages next to their names, and had a series of Dr. Dr. and final Profs. appended to their names in the good old German professorial fashion?

The debate over the thesis of Said's *Orientalism* shifted then too from arguing the merits of that thesis—namely the damage that those orientalists had done to the field by their ideological biases, conscious or otherwise—to a debate over whether Said had the right to do that or not. The fact that the orientalists had indeed warped the facts of the field by their ill-conceived ideas, just like the facts in the picture of the hand tossing a pebble, were quickly forgotten, and his defenders were side-tracked into the polemics of the argument.

Some of his friends even misunderstood the main thesis of *Orientalism*. They were worried that if Said was preaching that the orientalists did not know even the languages of their own field and his demand that they should have known their field better, that in fact meant that he was inviting them to offer better services to their colonial masters, and thus endangering the very people he was trying to protect from the orientalist deformation. By his heavy emphasis on the modern orientalists, and by exposing their amateurish grasp of the field, he sounded, even to his friends, as if he were excusing the older well-grounded orientalists who did indeed master the tools of their trade. His opponents would cite one orientalist after another who edited an Arabic classical text here, or authored an Arabic-English, or even Arabic-Latin, dictionary there, all to say that the orientalists did something worth respecting and thus Said was unfair in attacking them. These polemical arguments branched off in all directions and all, in my view, missed the point, and still do.

To me Said was not saying that orientalists are simply incompetent, biased, and worked within an ideological colonial framework that could not allow them to see any better. They were all of that. He was not only saying that they served their political masters instead of serving their academic fields properly. They did that too. But he was also saying, and that to me is the

most enduring legacy of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, that they theorized the history and culture of the Orient in such a way that its true features were no longer retrievable. It is not enough to edit texts, and write dictionaries, it is equally important to understand those texts and deploy those dictionaries in their cultural context and not distort them by incompetence, political bias, colonial desires and the like.

And like the defense of the pebble that became a stone Edward Said's friends have not yet looked at the facts for themselves, have not examined the picture of their own history, and here I speak of his Arab and Muslim friends, for they are still engaged in the polemics and the political repercussions of Said's *Orientalism*, and continue to defend him to the death, but not for the right reasons.

Unfortunately many a friend of Said in the Arab countries continue to defend him, especially when they speak of the modern period of their history, but when the occasion calls for their analysis of the historical continuity that brought the modern times of their history into being, that is when they need to theorize about their own Orient; almost all of them turn around and adopt the theories of the orientalists. How many a modern Arab or Muslim intellectual can one still read, for example, who is an avowed friend of Edward, and still thinks that the golden age of Islamic civilization, to which modern Islam is umbilically connected, was the period of the first two centuries of Abbasid times, that is from the ninth to the eleventh centuries! How many a friend still does not realize that the very periodization of Islamic civilization into periods of gold and silver, and periods of decay and decadence were all formulated by those very orientalists who also edited texts and composed dictionaries? It is those very orientalists who had pronounced Islamic civilization dead as of the twelfth century, and with that laid down the foundation for the contemporary dehumanization of that civilization, by designating the modern period as simply a continuation of that process of decadence that was begun in the twelfth century. Incidentally, the twelfth century is very important for those same orientalists, who were all European, as well as for their respective students from the Arab and Muslim worlds, for the twelfth century also brought the medieval Renaissance in the West, admittedly produced by direct contacts between the Europe of the time and Islamic civilization. It is those same orientalists and their followers who see no further contacts beyond medieval times, and thus theorize the European Renaissance as a European miracle almost in tandem with the Greek miracle to which it is often wedded.

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The good news is that there are some good friends of Edward Said who may have not have known him in person but who are beginning to subject the pronouncements of modern Arab and Muslim intellectuals to fresh scrutiny and are also beginning to critique those very statements as perpetuating the orientalist legacy. There are few books that have appeared within the last few years that deal particularly with that issue. Others have yet to come.

But the most important task for those who inherited the legacy of orientalism has barely begun, and that to me is the most enduring aspect of that legacy, namely, the task of looking again at the very history of Islamic civilization with new eyes, eyes that are not blurred by orientalist aberrations, and to study that civilization for its own sake, and thereafter emerge with a new theorization that will replace the general paradigms of the orientalists.

Those who are beginning to go down that road are beginning to find new periods of gold and silver in Islamic Civilization that do not mesh well with the orientalist periodization, and are also beginning to find out that this whole metallic analogy is not all that useful anyway. That work has barely begun, but thanks to Edward Said's *Orientalism* it can now proceed with steady footsteps. And that too is a pebble that was once tossed by Edward Said into an academic pool whose ever-widening circles are now touching every field connected to Edward's Orient.

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