Beyond Imperial Blowback: 
Edward Said and the Worlding of Political Theory

The repeat appearance of John Yoo – author of the Torture Memos and legal mastermind behind the Guantanamo Bay detention camp – at the 2017 annual conference of the American Political Science Association, elicited protests from attendees that were unprecedented in both size and impact. The fact that half of Yoo’s audience stood up and silently turned their backs on him for the duration of both his talks infuriated right wing audience members who – no doubt egged on by Yoo’s comments about the need to bring a concealed weapon with him in the future – screamed derisions at the protestors. What appeared to most infuriate them about the truculent Political Scientists who would not endure the APSA’s legitimation of a war criminal, was their inability to move on from the Torture Memos and Guantanamo. “These folks need to get over it,” law professor John Eastman fumed to a reporter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "They seem to be still processing something that happened 15 years ago…”

With this single, off the cuff remark, Eastman beautifully performed the political problem that motivates the theoretical investigations below. For many scholars of International Relations (IR), Political Science, jurisprudence, and American history, as well as many journalists, political pundits, and public intellectuals (both liberal and conservative), the American state has always been exceptional to its own racism, violence, and imperial aggression, both internationally and on this continent. From this perspective, acts of violence, occupation, and human rights abuses committed by the United States government are always deviations from – rather than indicative of – the history and contemporary practice of American foreign and domestic policy. When acknowledged at all, such deviations are to be nodded at regretfully and then quickly forgotten. This paper (and the larger book manuscript of which it is a part, *Empire as Method: Edward Said and Political Theory*) takes as its central task the project of envisioning a worldly

1 “Scholarship and Protest in the Age of Trump,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 5, 2017. http://www.chronicle.com/article/ScholarshipProtest-in-the/241094?key=cYI_cumPve1wKLDReztcz6lqFspKQMAspUzCILsnkLGSbyg0XwJ1Z4hlj3mNUtUZJGNWdvNmUteFbvb1dOdHdtenAtld0FwSljQVmpkdy1Ha1VUEGlDZw
political theory grounded in the ongoing political and discursive connections (both historical and contemporary) between American racial violence at home and American imperial and racial violence abroad. This project is itself motivated, in part, by what I see as a genuine desire for this kind of reflection in the United States today following the election of Donald Trump, a desire observable, for instance, in the increasing number of critical pieces in media outlets as diverse as *The New York Times* and *Teen Vogue* devoted to treating the role of racial violence in America not as an incidental aside to the main narrative but, rather, as a legitimate plotline in this country’s unfolding story, one worthy of sustained investigation. This orientation toward reflection may also help explain why, a week after Trump’s inauguration, so many people thought to buy Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that Amazon completely sold out of copies.

In what follows, I argue briefly that while Arendt’s theory of imperial blowback – the boomerang effect – provides a richly suggestive approach for thinking about the relationship between imperial racialized violence abroad and authoritarian racialized violence at home, it is limited in both spatial and temporal terms. The bulk of the paper is thus devoted to developing a worldly theoretical approach which expands these parameters and which I derive from a close engagement with the work of Edward Said. In the course of the argument, I speculate about why it is that a thinker of such astonishing influence on the Humanities as Said has had such little impact on political theory scholarship, despite the significant interest we have seen over the last fifteen years in questions of empire and imperialism, what Jennifer Pitts terms theory’s “turn to empire.” The rest of the paper works through Said’s interdisciplinary and conceptually complex theory of counterpoint and touches upon his approach to democratic humanism. I conclude with some thoughts on...

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both the urgency of the contemporary moment, the frustrations of embracing an approach both as fertile and fraught with contradictions as Said’s, and then end with a call to embrace those contradictions anyway.

**Political Theory, Imperialism, and the Boomerang Thesis**

In her illuminating 2010 review essay, Pitts carefully lays out the contours of political theory’s recent engagement with questions of empire and imperialism. Over the last fifteen years, as Pitts elaborates, political theorists have focused especially closely on the role of empire in the history of European political thought (particularly liberal thought) and, to a lesser degree, on the lingering influences of imperialism found in contemporary constitutions throughout the world, in international law, and in the current economic and political global order. Pitts notes, however, that political theory “has come slowly and late to the study of empire relative to other disciplines,” finally turning its attention to an area of inquiry that has occupied scholars of literature, history, and anthropology for decades only after 2001 when America’s unilateral military actions following the bombings of September Eleventh sent the skeletons of empire – past and present – howling out of the closet. Similarly, she also notes that while these other disciplines were “rapidly, if incompletely, transformed by postcolonial studies” during the 1980’s, political theory’s engagement with postcolonial scholarship has also been sporadic and belated. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for purposes of this paper, political theorists have also been slow to engage what Pitts terms “the discursive features of empire,” those cultural practices, ideological orientations, and visual markers that reflect the presence of imperialist practices and languages in American popular culture and policy language,

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6 Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” 211-235.

7 Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” 226.
features which frequently go unseen or misidentified because of a legacy of exceptionalism and deflection. In effect, as a subdiscipline and field of inquiry, the bulk of political theory in North America is only now beginning – albeit boisterously – to emerge from the bunker where it has been avoiding questions of empire, imperialism, and postcolonialism for years.

Of course, this is not an entirely fair characterization of mainstream political theory scholarship since World War Two insofar as it ignores Hannah Arendt’s explicit engagement with late nineteenth-century high imperialism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this groundbreaking text, Arendt devoted considerable attention to the argument that the racialized violence honed to perfection in the “Scramble for Africa” contributed to the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. Arendt maintained that imperial expansion transformed the hitherto empty desire of the bourgeoisie “to have money beget money” into a reality by eliminating all the legal and ethical restraints imposed on them by European states while exporting “the state’s instruments of violence, the police, the army” into the colonized arenas of the non-West. With Karuna Mantena, I read the connection Arendt sewed between practices of lawless imperial violence abroad and the rise of totalitarianism at home (the boomerang effect) not as an argument about the direct impact of imperial institutions on European political practices but, rather, in Mantena’s words, as an investigation of the way the “experience of overseas empire” created the political conditions or “moral vacuum” in which Nazism could flourish. Thus, new, more brutal forms of economic imperialism led to the expansion of lawless forms of racialized violence which then gave rise to what Harold Laski had described two decades earlier as “habits of imperialism,” habits that eventually blew back on the European continent in the form of Nazi genocide.

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8 See Anthony Pagden’s unwillingness to identify the United States as an empire in *The Burdens of Empire: 1539 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015).


The reception of Arendt’s engagement with imperialism, however, has been more complicated than one would imagine in light of the fact that her analysis of the subject takes up the entire middle portion of Origins. On the one hand, over the years, many scholars have downplayed the significance of the book itself for the rest of Arendt’s scholarship and, when they take it up for analysis, have largely chosen to avoid the privileged theoretical role that imperial violence plays in the argument. While some dismissive attitudes towards Origins may be changing in light of Trump’s election – again, note the spike in popular interest in the book – it is still the case that, as Mantena puts it, Arendt’s engagement with imperialism “has left little or no imprint on the mainstream of Arendt scholarship.”

On the other hand, critics of Arendt’s approach to imperialism have drawn attention to both her own racism – most evident in the book’s jarring references to the “dark continent” and her characterization of Africans as primitive and averse to work – and the deep seated Eurocentrism of her vision. In this latter sense, the most salient difference between Arendt’s boomerang thesis and that of anti-colonial scholar Aimé Césaire – as both Araújo and Rodríguez Maeso (in The Contours of Eurocentrism) and Mantena note – is Arendt’s conviction that Western political life stumbled (with imperialism) and then fell (into totalitarianism) but that this tradition is itself ultimately worth reconstructing in some form. Her long term and impassioned attempt to address this “loss of the world” was by no means ever simple or nostalgic and it required a deeply novel engagement with history and with the normative ideals of the Greek polis, an approach that Arendt described as “thinking without banisters” because of its refusal to fall back on the customary rules and ethical guidelines of moral life. At the same time, Arendt never imagined that a crisis in Europe (generated through practices of imperialism abroad) would ever require that philosophers

\[\text{Prevent War} (\text{London: Camelot Press, 1933}, 527). \]

\[12\] See Mantena for further elaboration of this lacunae.

\[13\] Mantena, “Genealogies of Catastrophe,” 84.

ultimately look *beyond* Europe. By contrast, in *Discourse on Colonialism* (written at roughly the same time as *Origins*) Césaire looked at the same Nazi devastated landscape as Arendt, similarly described it as the logical blowback of imperial violence, and concluded both that “Europe is indefensible” and called for a wholesale re-evaluation of European “civilization” as a legitimating ideal.\(^{15}\) Moreover, while Césaire believed that imperialism was illustrative of Europe *writ large*, for Arendt, imperialism only became salient or even a problem when it threatened to undermine Western values. As she put three years after *Origins* in an entry in *Denktagebuch*, the “real tragedy” of imperialism was not imperialism itself but, rather, the fact that it had become the only way for Europe to solve “national problems that had become insoluble.”\(^{16}\) Moreover, other critics have rightly pointed out Arendt’s unwillingness to paint the dots between her sustained critique of imperialism in *Origins*, her own racism, and the analysis of race in America that she rendered later that same decade in 1959’s “Reflections on Little Rock.” For Arendt, imperialism would remain “the one great crime in which America was never involved.”\(^{17}\)

At yet at the end of the day, despite her deep and troubling limitations, Arendt’s willingness to actually engage imperialism as a political phenomenon with sustained, damaging effects on European culture, went a great deal further than the vast majority of her European or North American theory contemporaries were willing to go in thinking critically and reflexively through the imbrication of political ideology, political practice, philosophical norms, and colonial violence. My primary objection to Arendt’s theory of imperial blowback lies not just in her Eurocentrism, her racism, and her failure to imagine the United States as an imperial power. One could correct for these failures and still maintain the integrity and utility of the original thesis as, for example, Steven Robbins recently has in his reconstruction of Nazism’s

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\(^{16}\)See Michiel Bot’s translation of this entry at [http://hac.bard.edu/news/?item=14858](http://hac.bard.edu/news/?item=14858).

transnational roots in *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa*. Rather, my objection to the boomerang thesis lies in its temporal and spatial blinder and is different in substance from the way many of Arendt’s critics have rightly critiqued her historical definition of imperialism, a phenomenon whose origins she located squarely in the late nineteenth-century. Rather, I’m concerned with the conceptual limitations that inhere in the idea of blowback and how the metaphorical throwing and then receiving of the boomerang implies both a specified historical beginning (the “Scramble for Africa”) and an end (Nazism). In this narrative, the relationship between the imperial power and the colonized/occupied space is both directionally known (from Europe to Africa and back) and univocal (Europeans act, Africans suffer, Europeans turn that action onto themselves). In this form of analysis, the preoccupation of the political theorist is centered on the need to critique the effect of a discrete (if prolonged) practice of imperial aggression on the political culture of the metropole.

In making this observation, I am in no way implying that arguments which are temporally, historically, and/or spatially limited cannot serve as powerful forms of anti-colonial critique, as Césaire’s framing in *Discourse on Colonialism* amply demonstrates as does the scholarship of contemporary historians like Rashid Khalidi and Keith Wattenpaugh, (who have written on the long term impact of League Mandates in the Middle East). Rather, I want to suggest that the boomerang thesis’ temporally limited and metropole-focused approach cannot adequately capture the living complexity of imperialism, the extent to which the dense, multivocal connections between the metropole/great power and the

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18 Steven Robins, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (Capetown, SA: Penguin, 2016). Robins has also weighed in on Trump’s Muslim Ban, using Arendt’s boomerang thesis to tie both U.S. immigration policies and Nazi concepts of racial hygiene to imperialist practices of racial violence. See https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-02-16-trump-eugenics-and-the-historical-precedent-for-his-anti-muslim-travel-ban/#.WbQf43eGPHc.

19 See Mantena’s excellent analysis of these critiques.

colonized/occupied/invaded regions of the world are both historical and ongoing. In light of the American state’s long term investment in establishing itself as a global hegemon – most cogently captured in the shocking total of its military spending (more than the five closest great powers combined) and its 800 bases in over 80 countries (more, according to David Vine, than “any other people, nation, or empire in history”) – I argue that political theorists interested in thinking critically both about imperial politics and through imperial politics (empire as method) consider situating critique within the living set of connections that exists between the United States as an imperial power and much of the rest of the world. In other words, taking Pitts’ suggestion that political theorists more closely engage “the discursive features of empire” today seriously while simultaneously responding to the kind of irritated amnesia that consistently demands, for instance, that Americans “get over” the Torture Memos, Guantanamo, and the Iraq War more generally, requires cultivating an intellectual disposition that Said would call “worldly.” Worlding political theory, in the sense I use the term in this paper, implies first abandoning the fiction that America is not an imperial power, and then situating critique not only in relation to the loss of, or care for, the world (in Arendt’s sense) but also in the context of the living, contrapuntal, interconnected sets of imperial relations, past and present, that co-constitute the world. As Said reminds us, scholars who benefit from their position within the American academy have an additional duty to remember that when “we consider the connections between the United States and the rest of the world, we are so to speak of the connections, not outside and beyond them.” What follows is an encapsulation of my attempt to situate critique in this way through an engagement with Said’s work.

Political Theory and Edward Said


Before exploring the implications of Said’s critical disposition for a worldly political theory, however, it is useful to pause and reflect on his relative absence from political theory scholarship over the years. Notably, even as scholars note the pivotal role Orientalism played in creating the intellectual climate that made the “turn to empire” possible, very few political theorists have expressed much interest at all in the work of Said himself beyond Orientalism. This is unfortunate given that Said was one of the most astonishingly productive thinkers of the late twentieth-century, is credited with reinvigorating the study of imperialism in the American academy, and helped inaugurate postcolonialism as an intellectual movement. The author of over a dozen books, many more articles, and numerous collections of essays, Said also gave countless talks and sat for long, intensive interviews, many of which appear as collections. Even more impressive than his sheer productivity, however, was Said’s influence on scholars across fields, from cultural and literary studies to history and anthropology, an influence that can be seen in the abundance of retrospective articles and books that appear on his work every year, a “growth industry” (as Gauri Viswanathan called it in 2002) that shows no sign of abating since his death. A scholar of astonishing breadth, Said wrote about literature, culture, ideology, criticism, history, philosophy, and all of these at the same time, as well as dozens of books and articles on the political question of Palestine. Indeed, as a Palestinian living in exile, constantly negotiating and interrogating the space between the history of imperialism, the Palestinian present, and the global impact of America’s militarism, Said brought his interest in the politics of empire, movement, identity, and resistance to nearly all of his writings, scholarly and

23 There are notable exceptions, of course, to this trend. For example, see J. LeBlanc, Edward Said and the Prospects of Peace in Palestine and Israel (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). Also Nalini Persram (ed), Postcolonialism and Political Theory (New York: Lexington Books, 2007).

24 Pitts carefully documents the emerging variety of approaches taken by political theorists to the study of empire in her article while noting, twice, how astonishingly long it has taken theorists to engage with postcolonialism, a scholarly phenomenon “generally marked by the 1978 publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism.” Pitts does not refer to Said or his work again. (Jennifer Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” Annual Review of Political Science, 13 (2010), 212, 226).

popular. Throughout his career, he was one of a handful of well-known American intellectuals to consistently draw attention to the struggles of the Palestinian people and the extent to which they were denied “permission to narrate” their own experiences.\textsuperscript{26} As Akeel Bilgrami notes in his loving introduction to Said’s last collection of essays, \textit{Humanism and Democratic Criticism}, because of his political courage, his commitment to Palestinian freedom, and because politics was so integral to his most important writing, “Edward Said’s intellectual legacy will be primarily political – not just in the popular imagination, but also perhaps in the eyes of academic research.”\textsuperscript{27}

How ironic, then, that political theory – the subdiscipline of Political Science most closely linked to the humanities – would so consistently overlook Said’s work. What accounts for this lack of engagement? In many ways, Said’s scholarship (which is interdisciplinary to its core and which I will describe further below) runs perfectly counter to both a canon-oriented approach to the history of political thought as well as a normative approach which abstracts questions about justice from analyses of actual politics and history, the two modes of political theorizing that have traditionally dominated the North American academy for the last seventy years. According to John Gunnell, after World War Two, as the discipline of Political Science continued to ossify around scientific positivism, claims about the nature of political concepts such as justice, freedom, and democracy – questions social scientists once broached as an integral part of analyzing politics – were hived off, becoming the exclusive purview of political theorists. Into this emerging and increasingly sheltered subdiscipline stepped a number of émigré thinkers like Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Herbert Marcuse who wielded enormous influence over the development of political theory as a form of intellectual inquiry. According to Gunnell, these thinkers and the evolving subdiscipline they helped coax into being, tended to construe political theory as the emergence, contestation, and re-emergence of particular concepts through a particular set of authors over time, what he describes as “a plot containing


\textsuperscript{27} Akeel Bilgrami’s foreword to Edward Said’s, \textit{Humanism and Democratic Criticism} (New York: Columbia University Press; 2004), ix.
distinct points of beginning, transformation, and, even, end.” Thus, despite the variety of sometimes “mutually hostile” intellectual approaches taken by political theorists over the decades, as the subdiscipline’s exile from Political Science intensified, the canon of thinkers considered appropriate objects of inquiry by political theorists narrowed. At the same time, the questions considered relevant to political theoretical inquiry – What is the nature of “the political”? What are the limits of democracy? What is justice? What are the limits of freedom? – grew increasingly abstracted from analyses of politics themselves.

These developments were esaserbated following the Second World War by the erection of new disciplinary distinctions between the emerging subdisciplines of IR and political theory, a distinction which, by 1966, English School founder Martin Wight found so obvious as to “require no explanation.” In marked distinction from the way scholars like Harold Laski, Bertrand Russell, and G.D.H. Cole had felt entirely free to engage issues of international politics before the war, political theorists began avoiding foreign policy and international politics, a trend which might help explain why the analysis of imperialism that formed such a core part of Origins would be so little pursued by Arendt scholars. When theorists did, once again, turn their attention to international politics in the 1970’s, the majority of them did so not by engaging imperialism but by employing an approach to global justice largely inspired by Rawls. As Michael Goodhart has pointed

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29 Andrew March, “What Is Comparative Political Theory,” The Review of Politics, 71 (2009), 534. This constriction of canonical figures in the subdiscipline has been so tight that, even when writing his famous manifesto dedicated to reintegrating the study of political theory and the study of politics, Sheldon Wolin unwittingly reiterated the limited canon (“Plato to Marx”) that the segregation of political science from political theory had engendered in the first place. (See, Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” American Political Science Review, 62.4: 62-82). I also explore the narrowing of the political theory canon in “Urgent History: The Sovereignty Debates and Political Theory’s Lost Voices,” Political Theory, 2015.  
31 This is true even of scholars like Martha Nussbaum (and Charles Beitz, Henry Shue, etc.) who challenge and expanded Rawls’ thought, “beyond the frontiers of justice.” Martha Nussbaum, The Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership (Cambridge, Mass., 2006). Additionally, there are a number of theories to explain why the sudden interest in global justice happened in the 1970’s, ranging from Thomas Pogge’s argument that global poverty simply became too obvious to ignore to Samuel Moyn’s arguments.
out, the “overwhelming majority of theorists and philosophers working on problems of global justice today” remain committed to Rawls’ methodological attachment to developing an “ideal moral theory” capable of guiding the just behavior of states and individuals in an unjust world.32

This aversion to non-ideal approaches to global politics is clearly changing, however, as increasing numbers of historically and critically oriented political theorists turn their attention to both thinkers who have been traditionally excluded from the formal canon and to areas of inquiry that were formerly under- (or un-) studied. The last fifteen years has witnessed a flowering of work on African American thinkers as well as explicitly diasporic (often anti-colonial) black political thought, as well as the emergence of the (not uncontroversially named) field of “comparative political theory.”33 At the same time, political theory is becoming more interdisciplinary itself, as growing numbers of thinkers expand their inquiries into areas formerly outside the subdiscipline’s purview (such as global history) while more scholars embrace the need to engage both the productive interdisciplinary of postcolonial studies, the potency of anticolonial thought, and the political and discursive legacies of settler colonialism.34 The “turn to empire” itself has played a not

32 Goodhart, Political Theory and the Politics of Injustice (Forthcoming, Oxford University Press) quoted from manuscript, 9.
significant role in forwarding this trend because, as Pitts notes, if political theory “is becoming more cross-disciplinary, this is nowhere more true than in the study of empire.”

At the same time, as with the “turn to empire,” this evolution toward interdisciplinarity has been late in developing and is sometimes – even when urgently and genuinely expressed – still peppered by a basic naiveté about how thinkers in other disciplines engage with politics and theory. In 2005’s Edgework, for instance, in the course of making an argument for interdisciplinary scholarship, Wendy Brown noted that “the work of thinking about political matters theoretically has lately been undertaken in disciplines as far removed from each other and from political science as art history, anthropology, rhetoric, geography, and literature,” as though scholars in these other disciplines had not already been engaged in theorizing politics for decades. Brown went on to describe what she called “contrapuntal strategies” for a political theory that “agitates” along disciplinary edges, and she did so without even citing Said’s groundbreaking work on counterpoint or referring to that work as an influence on her thinking. Her failure to recognize scholars in other disciplines, like Said, who had been developing interdisciplinary approaches to theory and politics is troubling on a number of levels but speaks primarily to the powerful lingering influence of the subdiscipline’s isolation from the rest of the humanities. Moreover, I believe it likely reflects a general resistance by political theorists to approaches that seem unfocussed, that pull from too many scholarly areas of expertise and theoretical schools at once. This perhaps explains why, on those rare occasions when political theorists have engaged Said over the years, they often combine a sincere appreciation for his political vision and intellectual bravery with deep frustration about, what is perceived to be, his lack of philosophical clarity.

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35 Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” 213.
37 Brown, Edgework, 73.
38 E. San Juan Jr., for instance, ends his critique of Said’s failure to “situate culture and its diverse expressive forms” within a Marxist analysis of “production and reproduction” by adopting “a materialist or properly Marxist theorization of history” with a nod of approval at Said’s intellectual defiance. [See San Juan Jr., E San Juan Junior, “Postcolonial Dialogics: Between Edward Said and Antonio Gramsci,” in Postcolonialism and Political Theory, ed. Nalini Persram (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 107, 111, 115.”] Fred Dallmayr similarly concludes his critical account of Said’s theoretical “nomadism” with a tribute to Said’s call for a
Perhaps, even for theorists interested in question of empire, Said’s “nomadic” orientation toward critique – his radical interdisciplinarity, the expansive palate of genres he investigated, and the breadth of interpretive strategies he employed – simply flies the face of the subdiscipline’s dominant resistance to methodologies and orientations pulling from too many theoretical approaches at once or which appear to lack systematic rigor.

It was, however, precisely by drawing upon the theoretical and political insights of “people who are unsystematic” (as he put it in a 1997 interview) that Said developed some of his most important critical interventions regarding the study of imperialism. As he went on to explain in this same interview, one “cannot derive a systematic theory” from Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, or CLR James precisely because they were “involved in culture, in political struggle” and in the adaptation of conventional disciplines and genres to the study of politics. And yet, from Said’s perspective, creative engagement with politics and genre was absolutely essential for interrogating a global phenomenon as culturally and politically complex as imperialism. He thus cultivated a perspective that straddled what he identified in his critical evaluation of Frederick Jameson’s work as the “dichotomy between two kinds of ‘Politics”: a politics “defined by political theory from Hegel to Louis Althusser and Ernst Bloch,” and a politics “of struggle and power in the everyday world…” Such an approach provides neither ideal normative solutions to political/ethical problems nor the conceptual scaffolding (e.g. a theory of history, a theory of justice) that many theorists have traditionally desired to explain political phenomena and political ethics in systematic terms. Indeed, from the perspective of political theorists interested in conceptual clarity, Said’s intellectual “nomadism” (as he called it) can seem hopelessly muddled, “untidy,” in Iskander and Rustom’s words, and “spatially fluid.”

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In addition, because political theorists are often trained to think through a particular theorist’s mode of inquiry into the world – to provide a Rawlsian perspective on global justice for instance, or an Adornian account of the religious right – following the diverse theoretical influences that exit and enter through the revolving door of Said’s prose (from Vico to Foucault, Adorno to Fanon, Auerbach to Césaire) can feel like an exhausting form of intellectual whiplash.

In addition, political theory’s avoidance of Said might also be related to one of the main institutional impediments to its study of imperialism in the first place: the relationship of the subdiscipline to Political Science. As a field, Political Science – particularly in North America – not only segregates thinking about domestic politics and political theory from the professional remit of IR, it has also been notoriously reluctant to study global politics through the lens of imperialism, indeed, to utter the word aloud. When Political Scientists do analyze the politics of empire, these analyses tend be couched almost entirely in a state-centric language that views imperialism, in Michael Doyle’s terms, as “simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.” The parsimony of this definition presents two problems for scholars interested in how imperialism circulates historically and in the contemporary world. First, there is nothing simple about “establishing or maintaining an empire” because the process of imperialism entails constantly asserting, reasserting, rationalizing, and expanding differences in power and status between the colonizers and the colonized and among the colonized themselves. In order to sustain this scalar world, imperialism – as an ideology and political practice – must function on a number of different registers simultaneously. Cultivating an intellectual orientation committed to understanding these complexities thus

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42 For example, Richard Ned Lebow and Simon Reich’s 2014 book Goodbye Hegemony, lays out an excellent argument against American power that looks, for all intents and purposes, like a critique of imperialism, but they not only refuse to say the word, but have responded with distress those who suggest that they are making an anti-imperial argument. Lebow and Reich, Goodbye Hegemony (Princeton NJ; Princeton, 2014).
requires the critic to challenge Political Science’s (particularly IR’s) fixation with the state and focus, instead, on unknotting the tangled set of transnational connections between imperialism and the culture sustaining it.

Second, and relatedly, a definition of empire and imperialism that does not take into account the dense ideological and cultural assemblage necessary to rationalize and naturalize domination cannot adequately grapple with the way imperialism functions in a putatively post-imperial age. In other words, any definition of imperialism that stops at the level of “state control” – be it formal or informal – will necessarily fail to fully account for the way the terms and institutions of contemporary international political and economic organization and American power politics have been determined by former empires and great powers in such a way as to render their historic connections to imperialism invisible over time. For example, American military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq and its continued use of drone strike is rarely described as imperial by mainstream commentators (again, both liberal and conservative) and/or IR scholars. At the same time, many persistent ideological/cultural/rhetorical practices and terms thrown about in diplomatic and IR circles (e.g. “development,” “structural adjustment,” “good governance”) are treated by these same scholars as self-evident rather than as reflections of the dense networks of unequal power relationships originally established, in James Tully’s words, “during the first 500 years of western imperialism,” a complex relational universe characterized, Tully maintains, by “political and military domination, economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and horrific inequalities in living conditions of the majority of the world’s population in the former colonial world.”

Moreover, Said argued, while it is largely true that direct colonization ended in the middle of the twentieth-century, “the meaning of colonial rule was by no means transformed into a settled question” and spirited intellectual debates over imperialist practices and their sustaining ideologies continue unabated within the former colonized world to this day.

Imperialism, in this contemporary context, necessarily overflows its definitional floodgates, filling up

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postcolonial space. Any theoretical approach wanting to grapple with both the presence of the imperial past, as well as contemporary imperial practices, has to be able to think in more capacious ways about what the word “empire” means in the world now.

Said approached imperialism precisely in this spirit as a “constantly expanding,” “inexorably integrative” ideological formation that buttressed domination in the past, rationalizes imperial politics in the present, and renders the impact of the former invisible on the latter.\textsuperscript{47} For Said, imperialism was/is a dynamic process, ordering the world spatially and temporally through, first, the construction of what he famously called “imagined geographies,” forms of knowledge and cartographic common sense that naturalize fundamental differences between the Orient and the West, the colonized and the colonizing, the developing and the developed.\textsuperscript{48} In this sense, Orientalism’s most profound innovation was its assertion that understanding how the West came to dominate the East politically requires a deeper understanding of this geographic thinking and of the ways the West studied, imagined, quantified, and described the Orient. In Leela Gandhi’s words, Orientalism’s answer to “the way the East was won suggests that we reconsider some of the ways the East was known.”\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, Said’s inquiry also exposed the discursive mechanisms through which imperialism orders the world by telling developmental stories about peoples and places, narrowing the narrative aperture of history such that alternative accounts of colonization, pre-colonial time, and resistance simply disappear and “history” becomes the history of colonization alone.\textsuperscript{50} By this logic, active traces of the imperial past on the present (including the grotesque inequality of resources between the global north and south today) appear \textit{sui generis}, untethered from a history of imperialism, dispossession, and resource extraction – the natural order of things.

In essence, for Said, culture “works very effectively to make invisible and even ‘impossible’ the

\textsuperscript{50} Edward Said, “Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World,” 59.
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. Rendering such affiliations visible – writing back to the densely skeined, discursive landscape that was and is the relationship between the politics of modern imperialism and its culture – required, for Said, a commodious intellectual disposition capable of moving between the social/cultural/political context of colonialism in the past and present and the broad geographic and military systems that sustained it then and continue to sustain it now. In this sense, Said argued, the “work of theory, of criticism, demystification, deconsecration, and decentralization” is “never finished.” Rather, theory must commit to exceeding its boundaries in the same way as does imperialism, “to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile.” Such an orientation entails, first and foremost, a rejection of specialized disciplinary attachments that produce increasingly narrow “constituencies and interpretive communities,” reifying and privatizing the otherwise untidy landscape of history. In an intellectual environment where academic fields tend to “subdivide and proliferate,” scholars often fail to perceive the astonishingly complex overlap of the discourses, politics, and cultural formations buttressing imperialism. Said’s preferred “worldly” approach to inquiry was committed to reading texts as object which are “produced and live on in the historical realm,” always leavened by the “insinuations, the imbrications of power” and the multiplicity of cultural and political expressions woven into the imperial experience. Such an approach urges the critic to situate texts, theories, works of art within the whole “economy” of discourses that give empire life and to expand the boundaries of what counts as “texts” worthy of investigation to include, for instance, the rhetorical utterances of public intellectuals, travel narratives, and educational manuals. Theory must be capacious

54 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 13.
enough to travel across areas of expertise, between high and popular culture, while scholars themselves must be willing to embrace a kind of intellectual amateurism and “make connections across lines and barriers.”

Said also emphasized the importance of remaining attentive to what happens to theory itself when it “travels.” Something important gets lost, he argued by way of example, when scholars frame Fanon’s analysis of colonialism and nationalism simply as the adaptation of Lukascian insights to an imperial context, casting *The Wretched of the Earth* as “little more than a replication of Lukacs, with the subject object-relationship replaced exactly by the colonizer-colonized relationship.” Rather, for Said, it is essential to understand the way Fanon’s approach to the “subject-object dialectic” was shaped and transformed by the Algerian resistance and its suppression. The fact that theory travels and evolves in the context of empire – as it did for Fanon – means that critique must, according to Said, remain on guard against facile universalizing, “other worldly” approaches that claim to “account for everything.” Said responded to this universalizing impulse with a call for “secular” criticism, a term he used in the Gramscian sense to oppose synthesizing world views that naturalized the status quo. Gramsci, Said argued, understood that “nothing in the social world is natural, not even nature” and therefor that all social and cultural systems exist “because they come into being and are created by human agency.” Critique must thus aim at destabilizing the “permanence of vision” so central to Orientalist and imperialist narratives through, in part, a granular reading of history’s “disruptive detail,” those tension filled, human-created moments that Said found, for instance in the conflicted narrative visions of “imperial agents” like T.E. Lawrence and Rudyard Kipling.

Furthermore, in the transposition of theory through imperialism, Said also found new forms of affiliation between critique and political engagement that went beyond “borrowing and adaptation” but rather – as

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with Fanon’s re-articulation of nationalism’s complicated dialectic – challenged, reshaped, and refracted Western theory in ways that reignited and reinvigorated the “fiery core” of the original approach. 62

Said’s conviction that theory both travelled, needed to travel, and was transformed in the process was also fundamental to his theory of counterpoint. A classically trained musician himself, Said drew conceptual inspiration from Western classical music, describing counterpoint in Culture and Imperialism as the interplay of “various themes” with “only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one.” 63 In the “resulting polyphony,” he continued, “there is concert in order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work.” He thus cautioned against approaching the West’s “cultural archive” – its literature, philosophy, histories – as the univocal efflux of one, unsullied source flowing, unaltered, into the world, touching and reshaping the inert cultures of the non-West along the way. Rather, as Said maintained, it is essential to analyze these texts contrapuntally, “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history” narrated by Western authors and “those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.” 64 Reading nineteenth century British novels in this manner, for instance, means reading them with an awareness of how they were shaped by the often hidden or suppressed presence of the West Indies or India. Extracting cultural forms from the “autonomous enclosures” in which they are usually analyzed and placing them back into the polyphonies, “dynamic global environment” created by imperialism also required reading Western culture – and theory – in the context of anticolonial revolt and the competing discourses of domination and resistance within which nationalist and liberationist movements circulated. This meant being attentive to “the continuity of resistance,” thus reframing imperialism as a “contested and joint experience.” 65

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64 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 51.
65 Said, The Pen and the Sword, 77-78.
Said’s emphasis on both domination and resistance played a crucial political role in his critical vision. On the one hand, the way he folded the complex interplay of domination and resistance into the contrapuntal batter of imperial history mounted a challenge to dominant narratives that interpret resistance movements either as sporadic, local responses to the long development of European rule or as derivative phenomena that merely ape European ideas of liberation. Rather, as Said explained, imperialism (as a cultural and political assemblage) was always deeply fissured by the “overlapping” experiences of, and relationships between, protest movements in Africa, India, “and elsewhere in the peripheries” wherein the relentlessly incorporative and universalizing logics of imperialism were challenged and disassembled. It was simply never the case, he insisted, that the imperial encounter “pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.”

Reading imperial history contrapuntally – for both domination and resistance – disrupts universalizing narratives that locate progress, movement, “development,” in the West alone, narratives that reduce the rest of the world to passive recipients of enlightened discourse. It also disrupts poststructuralist analyses that imagine domination as a discursive flood that pours over the imperial landscape, disciplining all in its wake.

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67 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.
68 “There is no room in this paper to do justice to the fact that Said’s complex relationship with poststructuralist theorists, particularly Foucault, has played a prominent role in both his scholarship and commentaries on that scholarship. On the one hand, because a large focus of Said’s analysis interrogated forms of disciplinary knowledge that sustained Orientalist readings of the East (and thus sustained imperialism), he drew deeply from Foucault’s well, arguing in *Orientalism* that without such analysis, “one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient.” (Said, *Orientalism*, 3.) On the other hand, after *Orientalism*, Said became more roundly critical of Foucault for a variety of reasons, including his inability, in Said’s mind, to deal adequately with the historical fact of colonial resistance. At the same time, he continued to employ a Foucauldian orientation toward power and discipline in much of his later work. Thus, on its face, Said’s take on Foucault often appears inconsistent, a point that has been made by his detractors and supporters alike.

But, as Viswanathan has pointed out, one of the most striking things about Said was his willingness to revisit “arguments made in his books and essays not merely to defend and elaborate on them but, more important,
On the other hand, theorizing power as unidirectional and ignoring forms of resistance that dwell “beyond the reach of dominating systems” was a problem for Said because it allowed critique to draw “a circle around itself” and avoid possibilities for political change. In 1982’s “Traveling Theory” and elsewhere, Said took Foucault to task for this, arguing that he “has imprisoned himself and others with him” in a commitment to describing rather than challenging power, an orientation that rendered him a mere “scribe of domination” at best, an abettor of the status quo at worst. By contrast, Said understood “critical practice as a form of resistance” whose goal was to further the emergence of “non-dominative and non-coercive modes of life and knowledge.” Taking his inspiration from Gramsci’s suggestion in The Prison Notebooks that intellectuals were essential to the workings of modern society, Said argued that because intellectuals were “endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message,” they were also called upon to do more than play a “service or management role” in the culture industry. Rather, Said understood intellectuals as uniquely positioned to challenge orthodoxy and dogma, to raise embarrassing questions for the power elite, and to fight for people and causes that are perennially forgotten or “swept under the rug.” In order to do this, he once again stressed the need for amateurism and urged scholars to “raise moral issues” about discourses that went well beyond their areas of expertise. Finally, Said argued, given the global reach of American military, political, and economic power, intellectuals within the United States who benefit from that power have a particular responsibility to analyze the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world from “within the actuality” of those relationships, not from the

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74 Said, Representations of the Intellectual, 82.
perspective of “detached outside observers.” The global fight for justice and against imperialism was, by Said’s lights, “the functional idiom of the intellectual vocation” and it could only be sustained if scholars coupled inquiry into domination with inquiry into resistance, in the past, present, and future. Ultimately, I argue, it is this observation – that imperialism is a “contested and joint” experience – which can provide a compelling counterweight to the temporal and spatial limitations of the boomerang thesis and, at the same time, gesture toward the arresting possibilities of a worldly political theory.

**Worldly Theory: Counterpoint and Humanism**

While it is generally agreed that the 1978 publication of *Orientalism* provided the inspiration for postcolonial studies as an emerging mode of inquiry and critique, Said himself was not, as Rosi Bradioti puts it, “very keen” on the field that “nonetheless celebrated him as a foundational figure.” Said of course shared with postcolonial scholars an enduring interest in the disciplinary mechanisms and discursive apparatus that enabled imperialism as well as a sustained critique of the abstract universalism associated with modernity. However, he did have two major complaints about much postcolonial scholarship, both of which were political or, rather, related to his manner of reading politics, imperialism, and history contrapuntally. One way to begin unpacking Said’s political thought, then, is to examine these moments of departure more closely.

Said’s first objection to postcolonial studies lay in an affiliation he sometimes identified between postcolonial scholarship and identity politics, an approach to the “politics of knowledge” which, he argued, too often substituted the citation of “approved names” – authors associated with particular identity categories – for the kind of contrapuntal theorizing he cherished as an intellectual. Moreover, Said was

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uncomfortable with what he saw as a distinct similarity between politics oriented toward identity and nationalism’s tendency to read domination, resistance, and political future through a single understanding of origins and oppression that eliminated doubt, alterity, and hybridity. In this sense, fixed identity approaches imposed what Said called “constitutive limitations” on historical experiences which were, in fact, “polarized, radically uneven” and “remembered differently,” transforming these experiences into primal and unhealable wounds. Ultimately, he maintained, lassoing the experiences of dispossession associated with the historical overlap of the “metropolitan and ex-colonized worlds” to immutable identities resulted in what he called a “politics of blame” that vitiated possibilities for solidarity. In opposition to this fixity, he turned to both the political and critical experience of exile, arguing in a 1992 interview that if you are an exile “you always bear within yourself a recollection of what you’ve let behind and what you can remember, and you play it against the current experience. So there’s necessarily that sense of counterpoint.” From this perspective, he continued, “the notion of a single identity” becomes especially repellent because it mutes the tensions, contradictions, and polyphony of the exilic experience, demanding “simple reconciliation” between competing visions of home and identity which, from the perspective of exile, can never be made to cohere. From the perspective of exile – which Said once described as “compelling to think about but terrible to experience” – he developed his own fraught, generous understanding of identity that embraced both the unfixity of existence and the “many voices playing off against each other” while simultaneously rejecting both the political and philosophical imperative to reconcile them. Instead, he insisted, the point was “just to hold them together.”

At yet, at the same time Said argued against a “politics of blame,” he also resolutely refused to forget the historical and ongoing forms of imperial domination that shaped contemporary politics. In other words,

Said’s call to reject identity politics and the insistent return of those politics to fixed, univocal narratives of oppression differed profoundly from, for instance, the obstinate presentism and outright amnesia of many conservative pundits and members of the liberal and neoconservative foreign policy commentariat who absolutely refuse to see the current global political environment in terms of its imperial past, even the immediate past (again, one thinks of Eastman’s invective to “just get over” the Torture Memos). Said took direct aim at this dangerously bland species of short and long term memory loss in a piece he wrote for the London Review of Books in 2002 entitled “Always on Top,” which challenged the post September Eleventh trend of nostalgically praising classical imperialism for its ostensible ability to foster law and order in the now clearly violent and ungovernable regions of the Global South. How convenient, Said argued, that “after years of degeneration following the white man’s departure, the empires that ruled Africa and Asia don’t seem quite as bad” to the likes of imperial apologists like Niall Ferguson who shamelessly claimed that, because centuries of resource extraction and dispossession ended with independence in the 1960’s, the problems faced by residents of the former colonized world were entirely of these postcolonial states’ own invention, and, thus, that a firm imperial hand was once again clearly warranted. Said was deeply troubled by this move to dismiss the “enabling rift” between black and white, colonized and colonizing, East and West, North and South that was the essence of formal imperialism at its height and works still to justify and rationalize today’s grotesque global inequalities. Such flip dismissal leads (at best) to a form of “just get over it” politics and (at worst, as continues to be the case with Ferguson) an explicitly neo-imperial politics.

“Who decides,” Said angrily demanded to know, “when (and if) the influence of imperialism ended?”

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Additionally, even as he critiqued nationalism and the “politics of blame,” Said was profoundly sympathetic to the conditions under which anticolonial nationalism resonated precisely because he was attentive – in ways Ferguson’s lot were not – to the relationship between the ongoing trauma of imperial occupation and the construction of national identity. Moreover, he was also well aware that his own experience – as an exiled Palestinian academic, working at an Ivy League university – allowed him to step back from trauma. As he put it in After the Last Sky, “I write at a distance. I haven’t experienced the ravages. If I had, possibly there would be no problem in finding a direct and simple narrative to tell the tale of our history.” His reading here is both open to the experiences that make sense of nationalism while still resisting nationalism’s capacity to reduce competing experiences to a single “plot of a logically unfolding conspiracy against us.” “Holding” these two perspectives together without feeling compelled to reconcile them allowed Said to both tell imperial history through lenses focused on the “enabling rift” of occupation, dispossession, and settler colonialism as well as through those moments of polyphony and connection that trouble simplistic nationalist accounts of the present. It is particularly important, he insisted, to hold together these competing visions when analyzing works of art and culture. For instance, he argued in “Always on Top,” Kipling’s Kim “is a sympathetic and profound work about India, but it is informed by the imperial vision just the same.” The real problem, he continued, “is to keep in mind two ideas that are in many ways antithetical – the fact of the imperial divide, on the one hand, and the notion of shared experiences, on the other – without diminishing the force of either.” Again, Said addressed this problem by, in effect, approaching polyphony and nationhood – and domination and connection – without privileging one perspective or attempting to reconcile them to each other.

What enabled this kind of holding for Said? What forms of criticism did he believe encouraged intellectuals and activists to keep antithetical ideas always in mind and always together? What allowed for spaces of inquiry wherein a contrapuntal reading of the world became possible? For Said, a criticism that facilitated this level of polyphony assumed that in the “holding and crossing over” between imperialism,
postcolonialism, and resistance there was also a “common enterprise shared with others,” or, as he put it in his early defense of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, a deep awareness that, “although it contains many spheres, the contemporary world of men and women is one world.” And it is here, in Said’s commitment to a “common enterprise,” that we find his second major disagreement with much postcolonial scholarship: while the deconstructive impulses of his work resisted universalizing theories that claimed to reconcile all difference – be they Orientalist geographies, Enlightenment notions of civilization, or Foucauldian readings of power – Said was also critical of the tendency he identified in postcolonial studies to abandon the very possibility of “humanity” as a unifying principle in the first place. By contrast, he argued, it was possible “to be critical of Humanism in the name of Humanism” if, as scholars, we remain aware of the extent to which this historically Eurocentric conception was used and abused to justify imperialism, civilizational improvement, racism, sexism, settler colonialism, etc. He thus argued for a different form of humanist critique that was both explicitly cosmopolitan and “text-and-language-bound,” attuned to history while remaining resolutely democratic and open “to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial and unhoused.”

For Said, the key to fostering a humanism capable of escaping Eurocentrism’s yawning maw – always poised to swallow up difference through reason, to reinsert divisions between low and high culture, to hide behind the skirts of a canon while claiming to be broadly representative of human culture – was to keep its conceptual assumptions narrow. In other words, rather than nesting his attachment to the category of “human” in some ideal moral theory, or, in a long, singing-to-the-skies list of human attributes cobbled together from European high culture, Said was inspired by Vico’s commitment to the “secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women and not by God.” For Vico, Said explained, human

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beings are fundamentally makers of history and “we know what we make” or rather, “we know how to see it from the point of view of its human maker.” Limiting humanism’s definitional reach to “making history” frees it from the expansive set of specific requirements attached to Enlightenment conceptions of “reason” or “dignity.” Moreover, understanding that human beings are united in their shared “capacity to make knowledge” pushes back against the poststructuralist tendency to imagine people as inescapably bamboozled by power, capable only of “passively, reactively, and dully” absorbing its weight. Finally, the flip side of this definition – that we know how to see what we make from the point of view of another because we understand each other as makers – opens up humanistic practice to more expansively generative forms of reading and politics.

And it is this openness that most differentiates Said’s humanism from that of other contemporary thinkers who have similarly attempted to locate their approaches to ethics and politics in a limited claim on the human experience. Liberal imperialist, foreign policy pundit, and failed Canadian Politician Michael Ignatieff, for instance, argues that his approach to international political ethics flows from a “humble humanism” rooted in a common “capacity to imagine the pain of others.” Advocates of “new humanism,” such as Judith Butler, likewise ground their theories in the “corporeal vulnerability” of all human beings. There is, however, nothing terribly generative or transformative about a politics grounded in human suffering or, indeed, anything really political at all. As Bonnie Honig has pointed out, Butler’s humanism – oriented as it is toward “the ontological fact of mortality” – has the potential to eschew politics altogether for the moribund performance of permanent mourning. More troubling, while Ignatieff claims that his “humble humanism” enables people from liberal societies to engage people from illiberal societies that they might otherwise consider unworthy of toleration, there is absolutely nothing inherent in “the capacity to

imagine the pain of others” that would cause a member of an imperialist society – particularly a member of a liberal imperialist society in denial, like the contemporary United States – to pause and reflect on the historical content of their political and ethical perspective, much less call elements of that perspective into question. In practice, Ignatieff’s “humble humanism” rarely seems to enter his political calculus at all or have any effect on the arguments he so doggedly makes for American military intervention in the name of a broadly construed “responsibility to protect.” In the final analysis, imagining the victims of drone strikes or bombing expeditions as bodies capable of experiencing pain may prick Ignatieff’s conscience, it may cause him to consider the size and intensity of the mission, but it does nothing to alter the surety of his faith in liberal interventionism.

Said contrasted his approach with the bland universalism of liberal imperialist thought and policy making in his last book, 2003’s Humanism and Democratic Criticism. Rather than write “prescriptive articles for ‘liberals,’ à la Michael Ignatieff, that urge more destruction and death for distant civilians under the banner of a benign imperialism,” Said suggested that liberals concerned with foreign policy would do well “to imagine the person whom you are discussing – in this case, the person on whom the bombs will fall – reading in your presence.”

Imagine the person on whom the bombs will fall not merely as a body capable of experiencing pain – whose life one considers sadly before moving on to the business of bombing them with a resigned sigh – but as a reader and thinker, shifts the intellectual authority away from the policy makers at Harvard, Princeton, or the Council on Foreign Relations, to the person being discussed. Said’s insistence that we understand human beings first and foremost as makers of history acknowledges the person

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91 Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, 142-143.
you imagine in your presence as having alternative histories to tell and – because they are also readers and therefore interpreters of experience – having different prescriptions to offer and analyses to relate. Understanding this reading person as like you – equally able to make history – and yet as someone who potentially reads/theorizes/imagines history and the world differently from you, necessarily evokes a sense of counterpoint: of nearness and distance, familiarity and remoteness. Said’s democratic humanism thus urges the critic to begin thinking about specific events like the invasion of Iraq, the war in Syria, and putatively irreconcilable conflicts such as the situation in Israeli-Palestinian, contrapuntally by looking for “what has been left out” (which histories, which voices) and then reading these absences against the dominating discourse, “recovering what has been left out of peace processes that have been determined by the powerful, and then placing that missing actuality back in the center of things.”

Said repeatedly modeled this kind of reading in both his scholarly and political writings. We can see it, for instance, in his criticisms of liberal writers who are often, like Ignatieff, the most dismissive readers of alternative histories, preferring instead to weave inspirational narrative accounts of the past that privileged the triumph of right ideas in an otherwise unjust world. Said’s brutal critique of Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution*, for instance, draws attention to the noisy, fractious, polyphonic history of Palestine foreclosed by Walzer’s breezy insistence that “it is possible to trace a continuous history from Exodus to the radical politics of our own time.” Said cannily referred to his contrapuntal critique of Walzer’s book as a “Canaanite reading” that exposed the “severe excisions and restrictions” of Walzer’s narrative – what Said describes as a “strategy of découpage” – and the historical multiplicities his precise curating of the past-in-the-present necessarily hid from view.

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92 Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 142-143.
Likewise, Said maintained that a contrapuntal reading of contemporary Israel-Palestine similarly refused to empty the current conflict of its history, specifically, its imperial history. For instance, in *The Question of Palestine*, Said combined contemporary analysis with a historical critique of Zionist discourse during the period leading up to the creation of the state of Israel, focusing in particular on narratives that imagined the future state as emerging from the nearly empty ruins of an older, Arab Palestine. Said examined the way this discourse mirrored conceptions crucial to “high European imperialism” in its deployment of Orientalist narratives about lazy Arabs who were passing into obscurity, rationalized plans that required European ingenuity to make the barren desert bloom, descriptions of an all but empty landscape dotted sporadically with so few villages it was transformed in popular imagination from a densely populated region of the Middle East that had historically served as a cross roads for multiple cultures into a virtual *terra nullius*.94 The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British (soon to be the Mandatory power in Palestine) declared that they viewed “with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” was, Said argued, similarly imperialist in its logic and execution.95 In this text and in his other political writings, Said braided these evolving acts of dispossession, disclosure, and disappearing with the contemporary absence of Palestinian voices in accounts of whatever iteration of the “peace process” was currently being machinated over by world leaders, by mainstream Western media outlets, and foreign policy think tanks.96

Again, however, Said’s exilic commitment to hold together multiple identities and the “polyphony of many voices playing off against each other” rather than resolve any of these into a single historical narrative meant that the kinds of counternarratives he routinely told about Palestine were committed to revealing the lived world of the Palestinian people as a discrete nation – forged through shared experiences of exile and dispossession – without ever essentializing nationalism. Thus, in the wake of the failed Oslo accords (of

96 See, for instance, Said’s, “Permission to Narrate,” 247-48.
which he was tremendously critical) Said began to advocate for a form of “binational” citizenship that did not require either “a diminishing of Jewish life as Jewish life or a surrendering of Palestinian Arabs.”

This solution could not, however, function within the context of settler colonialism and the apartheid that structured everyday life for the Palestinian people. Only within a political community that fostered reciprocal recognition and equality between Palestinians and Jews, and only in a context in which the historical and contemporary fact of Palestinian dispossession was recognized and addressed, was it possible to foster the conditions of equality necessary for binationalism and “real reconciliation” (as opposed to “simple reconciliation”) between the two communities.

Notably (and typically) in contrast to the “prescriptive” approach that some political theorists have brought to the Israel-Palestine issue, Said did not reach this “binational” conclusion through abstract theorizing, through the imposition of an ideal theory, or through appeals to a humanism oriented toward human suffering. Rather, as a scholar who believed that humans make and interpret history and who understood that these histories produce contrapuntal realities which are ongoing and multivocal, Said found his binational solution, in part, by turning to the history of Palestine itself:

“Interestingly, the millennia-long history of Palestine provides at least two precedents for thinking in such secular and modest terms. First, Palestine is and has always been a land of many histories; it is a radical simplification to think of it as principally or exclusively Jewish or Arab. While the Jewish presence is longstanding, it is by no means the main one… Palestine is multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious. There is as little historical justification for homogeneity as there is for notions of national or ethnic and religious purity today.”

A critical engagement with Palestine’s polyphonic history, Said concluded, allows us to imagine a future in


98 A much more sympathetic version of this approach can be found in the thoughtful work of scholars like Irish Marion Young who addressed the situation by applying a model of “self-determination as non-domination,” or that of Will Kymlicka who brings to Israel/Palestine the same liberal concerns with the promises and problems of multicultural citizenship that he applies to the study of Canada. See Iris Marion Young, “Self Determination as Non-domination,” Ethnicities, 5.2 (2005), 139-159. Will Kymlicka, “Multicultural Citizenship Within Multinational States,” Ethnicities, 11.3 (2011) 281-302.

99 Said, “The One State Solution.”
which “real reconciliation” between Palestinians and Jews is possible, a reconciliation rendered invisible to liberal pundits and ideal moral theorists who bunker themselves within prescriptive circles of their own devising. Such an approach requires the critic to step outside of their theoretical circle, look around, and ask; “Who is allowed to narrate this situation? Whose experiences are obscured by dominant narratives? What forms of connection are being denied by fixed identities? What imperial practices and relationships are rendered invisible? What practices of resistance have been ignored? What futures remain unseen behind the wall of modular solutions?” In the end, this humanist attention to the other reading in your presence – and the worldly, contrapuntal critique such attention generates – not only exposes the provincialism of some ideas, it opens up our horizons to the broad possibilities of others.

**Conclusion**

At the end of the day, a Saidian disposition toward empire as method asks political theorists to privilege ongoing imperial connections in their theorizing and then to do two things simultaneously: to resist specific identity narratives that foreclose solidarity and mute polyphony and, simultaneously, to challenge universal narratives that obscure both historic and contemporary forms of domination. A worldly political theory takes seriously Said’s description of humanism as both a “technique of trouble” that disrupts fixed identities and generalizable theories as well as an instrument for imagining human comity, a comity found not only in shared capacity to make/interpret/read history but also in the fact that this history has frequently been shared. In Said’s words, an integrative or contrapuntal orientation to history “sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together because they are connected by imperialism.” Reading history and politics through these connections thus demands above all that we restore our analyses of culture and politics to “their place in the global setting,” a restoration that can only be accomplished “by an

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100 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 279.
appreciation not of some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world, but of the large, manywindowed house of human culture as a whole.”

Said’s approach deserves the enthusiastic attention of political theorists because it both allows us to craft more worldly theories with the potential to paint richer, contrapuntal accounts of the complex imperial past and, at the same time, suggests ways of thinking through that past to the ongoing imperial connections of the present. In this sense, it takes seriously the impulse behind Arendt’s boomerang thesis by expanding it beyond its temporal and spatial limits, insisting that anyone thinking and writing about politics in America today not only take seriously the relationship between the imperialist actions of this state in the past and the contemporary politics of xenophobia and racial violence at home in the present, but also to treat these connections as ongoing phenomena. Such an approach also requires treating the United States as an imperial state, rather than a perennial exception to the imperial violence it enacts. In reality, since Tocqueville’s prediction that the United States (with Russia) would someday hold in its hand “the destinies of half the world,” this state has gone on to assert dominance on a continental and (by the end of the nineteenth century) global scale, expanding its international hegemony after World War Two, becoming what it is today: the absolute military hegemon of the world with a military and nuclear arsenal that far outpaces all of the other supposed great powers. Since just 1949, the United States has either bombed, intervened in, involved itself with, or orchestrated coups in Syria, Iran, Guatemala, Lebanon, The Congo, Cuba, Chile, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Grenada, Cuba, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Yemen while simultaneously supplying military, financial, and political support to regimes throughout the world (including Israel) who use this largess to thwart and suppress ethnic minorities, political radicals, the democratic desires their own

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people.

And yet, coming to terms with the – to my mind – obviousness of American imperialism has been effectively thwarted for years by the complicity of liberal foreign policy pundits, the Democratic Party, and much Political Science literature, in promulgating the myth of an exceptionalist American where “who we are” – liberal, pacific, egalitarian, fair, non-aggressive, anti-imperial – ought to matter more than “what we do.” This deflective, amnesiacal strategy effectively mirrors the response of many politicians, pundits, and celebrities to the racial violence in Charlottesville. Thus, while Trump’s victory may have emboldened racist, Nazi-oriented, xenophobic nationalists in this country to take direct action in ways that have not been seen for decades, it isn’t as though racists and Nazis ever really disappeared from the American landscape and, as the sheer size of Trump’s portion of the electorate demonstrates, it isn’t as though these ideas have limited purchase. And yet, the dominant reaction has remained the same: how unfortunate that this happened, but ultimately, please understand, in Dick Durbin’s words, “This is not who we are.”

Is it any surprise that in a political environment like this, where deflection and amnesia not only remain the bedrock of American self-understanding but also the only conceivable response by so many to the rise of Trump inspired racism, that some Political Scientists would feel the time was right to demand critics “just get over” the Torture Memos? Is it any surprise that an article entitled “The Case for Colonialism” would find a home, just this month, in a journal as respected as Third World Quarterly? Should we really be marveling at the author’s audacity for suggesting that “Western and non-Western countries should reclaim the colonial toolkit,” as if this state – which spends five times more on its military than the top five great power combined – ever once

103 As sample of tweets: Dick Durban: “This is not who we are. I stand with Virginians and all Americans to condemn hate groups.” https://twitter.com/SenatorDurbin/status/896394868657967104. Tim Kaine, “Racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric sow seeds of hatred in our communities. That’s not who we are, that’s not what Virginians stand for…” https://twitter.com/kylegriffin1/status/896427710775480320?lang=en. Rand Paul: “Going forward, we must say to those who preach hatred – your time is over. This is not who we are, and we will not stand by while you divide us.” http://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/16/mitch-mcconnell-neo-nazi-trump-charlottesville-comments-241696.
gave up the tricks associated with that toolkit?  

In making these observations about the contemporary political environment and in suggesting that political theorists cultivate a worldly approach in response, I in no way want to imply that embracing such a disposition is either straightforward or easy. What political theorists will not find in the work of Said is either a well-articulated method for deconstruction that ends at the moment of disruption or a conceptual framework that provides ideal solutions to real world problems. Not only can this unfinished quality be deeply frustrating, the sheer breadth of interdisciplinary knowledge that goes into writing contrapuntal history is so vast and so overwhelming, it’s enough to drive even the most porous political theorist back into the sheltering arms of Kant or Rawls to mull over well-contained questions about, and well-crafted solutions to, problems of injustice. Said’s “method” is thus neither methodologically complete nor always intellectually coherent and his unremitting insistence on having it all – polyphony and unity, resistance and solidarity – can be exhausting.

Perhaps even more maddening is Said’s insistence that “the task” of humanist, contrapuntal inquiry is “constitutively an unending one” that resists conclusions even as it demands we continue to search for solutions to injustice. It is thus understandable that Mahmoud Darwish would conclude his beautiful poem – written after Said’s death and entitled “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading” – by imagining the words of a fictionalized Said, resisting conclusions until the very end:

“He also said: If I die before you,  
my will is the impossible.  
I asked: Is the impossible far off?  
He said: A generation away….  
… And now, don't forget:  
If I die before you, my will is the impossible.”

It is, finally, Said’s impossible will – his refusal to abandon or resolve opposed visions and experiences but,
rather, to just “hold them together” – that makes his worldly disposition so essential to the task of cultivating empire as method, that is, to theorizing out of the complex, overlapping, ethically charged history and contemporary politics of imperialism’s enduring connections. The task of worldly political theory, in the face of such complexity is thus, in Said’s words, to “grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth and try anyway.”

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ii Said, “Always on Top.”

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106 Said, *Humanim and Democratic Criticism*, 144.