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Author(s): Ernest J. Wilson III

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# **Orientalism: A Black Perspective**

ERNEST J. WILSON III\*

Domination, like liberation, tends to be a total phenomenon. It cannot easily be restricted to the political, cultural or economic. When social groups seek to dominate others they have historically done so through every institution and social process at their disposal. Some efforts are conscious and carefully crafted strategies of domination. Others, especially after the initial forceful establishment of control, come to be automatic and unconscious. Similarly, when people struggle against domination and for liberation, one of the conclusions quickly forced upon them is that their movement must encompass the breadth and width of a people's life. If it is to be far-reaching in its scope and lasting in its effect then a liberation movement must insinuate itself into all human relationships, not merely between oppressor and oppressed, but between man and woman, parent and child, religious teacher and follower. Each of these fundamental relationships must be touched and transformed by the movement, since the character of the social domination is there and must be altered.

Certainly, the evidence of African liberation in Algeria or Mozambique points to the ubiquity of change. Thus, when the struggle breaks out in earnest, it will be fought in the realm of ideas, in the media as well as in the trenches. In turn, the struggle will be resisted by those who hold power using prisons, union busting and truncheons as well as the more subtle forms of control, including cooption, all the way through changing college curriculae and admissions procedures. As the struggle mounts, more and more of the

\* Ernest J. Wilson III is a member of the Political Science Department at the University of Michigan.

oppressed come to recognize its totality, and to learn the “there is no refuge except in purposeful action.” Actions, perceptions and feelings that once seemed merely personal and idiosyncratic now appear political, closely interconnected with and reflecting the character of the society.

The actual interconnectedness of things, despite the artificial barriers of convention, is perhaps a useful point of departure to consider the recent efforts by Black Americans and Palestinians to establish contact with one another, and to reflect further on the totality of anti-colonial struggles in an interdependent world.

The political importance of barriers of social convention must be considered when we examine the bitter and antagonistic establishment response that greeted the early attempts at Afro-American/Palestinian bridge building. The vitriol in the press cannot be understood only in terms of what was or was not accomplished during these few and limited sessions, for little concrete was, in fact, accomplished. No wars were declared or ended, there was no massive shift of political coalition, and millions of dollars did not trade hands – the usual topics that invite such intense scrutiny. Rather, these counterattacks were a response to threats to the old, established ways of defining and dividing and ruling the world. Such contacts challenged the dominant Euro-centric, racist vision of what the world must be.

I contend that the campaign launched against these two coloured, colonial peoples was spurred because two unpredictable and volatile forces were breaking down old walls of containment and were cautiously seeking out an alliance. The old categories of “domestic” and “international” were challenged. The most “irrational” and potentially dangerous force *within* the belly of capitalism’s bastion – Blacks – was sending powerful signals to the great unstable, “irrational” and unpredictable force *beyond* the bastion’s walls – the Palestinians – in that most explosive of regions, the Middle East. Of course, the Russians are more powerful and more of a threat to America’s leaders, but they are a threat that is known, stable and predictable. US unions are perhaps more powerful domestically than Blacks, with their occasional spasms of protectionism and occasional anti-capital postures; but they are also more stable and less threatening than Blacks. Thus, it was the image of domestic “savages,” looters from the South Bronx and Black radicals finding common cause with the “murderers and terrorists” of Munich and the bombers of oil pipelines that prompted such racist responses. *That* was the genie let out of the bottle that the media sought to crush; that was the demon that demanded exorcism.

This first step toward greater communication and the possibility of cooperation should be seen as part of a larger effort on the part of both Blacks and Palestinians to reach out into the wider world. One of the

characteristics of being dominated is that the daily struggle to survive is so terribly demanding that one has time for little else. The next meal, or outfoxing the landlord or the butcher takes priority over manoeuvres on the international stage. Yet lately in the Black American community there has been a much greater outward movement. American Blacks are now reaching out to understand how other areas and issues in this increasingly interdependent world may affect the material and political interests of the Black community: issues from energy to Afghanistan, SALT II and the threatened resumption of the Cold War. The "Euro-Arab Dialogue" is but one example of the worldwide outreach efforts of the Palestinians. These parallel – though by no means identical – movements would eventually intersect; the question was one of timing and context.

The mutual benefits of such a meeting are clear. There would be quite simply one additional force, one new international pressure group, that could be brought to bear, however obliquely, against conservative and *status quo* forces internationally, and especially in capitalism's bastion, the United States of America. Ironically perhaps, the greatest model of the successful use of such international and domestic alliances is the 30-year-old success story of the Israeli-US Jewish alliance. The fear on the part of this Israeli-US Jewish alliance is clear – that the US political and economic support for Israel will be weakened, and perhaps an anti-Jewish backlash will be stirred up in the US. But the palpable aversion to the American Black/Palestinian talks goes much deeper into both the psyche of non-Jewish White America, and into the material interest of America's ruling circles.

It is useful to recall the tremendous fear in American political and economic ruling élites when the Black revolt of the 1960's began to smash headlong into the conduct of the undeclared war in Vietnam. Would it be possible to fight two wars simultaneously? Here, we aren't talking about Vietnam on one hand and the War on Poverty on the other (although trying to fight those two wars did lead to the inflationary stagnation that is torturing America today). Rather, it was the undeclared war of the FBI, the CIA, and local law enforcement agencies against Black radical groups like the Black Panthers and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that preoccupied the powers that be, and with good cause. Therefore, the threat to the present conduct of foreign and domestic policy priorities and the underlying structural features of the US that they reflect is not an alliance between Operation PUSH and the PLO. It is the fear that these contacts may presage further, more radical contacts in the 1980's which could coincide with Black domestic rebellion, with possible White and Black guerrilla conflicts, at the same time that the Middle East situation is deteriorating from internal pressures and possible threats from the USSR moving onto the world market to meet COMECON oil needs. In the middle

of this potential Middle East conflagration stands the PLO just as the “Negro problem” stands at the centre of US desires to “reindustrialize” without provoking domestic revolt. There is, therefore, every good reason on the part of the American establishment to accomplish its two major imperatives in the rest of this century — a private sector-led, supply-side, de-regulated strategy of monopoly capitalist “reindustrialization” domestically, with the pacification of the oil lands around the Gulf internationally — without creating a Palestinian-Afro-American alliance, and without producing changes that will lead them both to rise up in revolt.

Yet in retrospect what is most remarkable about the modest Afro-American openings to the East is not that they took place but that they did not occur sooner, and are not happening with even greater frequency. To understand why they have not, it is useful to consider the recent work of an Arab-American author who, with a steady and unflinching eye, dissects the single cloth of Western domination in the area of the world that they call the Orient. Edward Said’s work<sup>1</sup> is useful for what it can tell us about the history of the region that concerns us here. But it is ultimately more useful for what it can tell us about how dominant cultures come to capture, de-nature, and assimilate other cultures. Said, through massive documentation, shows us precisely how ideologies and research institutions and assorted partial truths are erected on the sure base of economic and political domination. Yet so sure is his grasp of the facts of domination that his narrative rarely — one is tempted to say never — permits a flash of anti-colonial or anti-imperialist resistance to show, nor strategies of liberation to shine through this great grey Orientalist wall of world domination.

Edward Said’s purpose in *Orientalism* is to demonstrate the way in which a distinct “vocabulary and imagery” (p. 68) is employed by Western observers of the East, and how these constitute a veritable structure of knowledge and perception, collectively sustained and transmitted by universities, research institutes, and official pronouncements of governments and the popular press. Western perceptions of the “real world” must pass through this ensemble which thereby shapes “reality” for the viewer. The structure of beliefs and values is what is called Orientalism. Orientalism is the way Westerners learn about the Orient; it is a set of categories, of questions and implied answers which are based more upon the political and social needs of the West, than upon the underlying realities of Eastern peoples (Arabs, Indians, etc.).

The main “dogmas of Orientalism” guide Westerners’ study of the Eastern civilizations, and provide the general axioms which shape subsequent specific

<sup>1</sup> *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

conclusions about concrete phenomena and events. Said offers his list of what the principal dogmas are:

1. "Absolute and systematic difference between the West and the Orient." The West is rational, developed, humane, superior, while the Orient is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior.

2. Abstractions about the Orient are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities.

3. "The Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself" (or speaking for itself: it must be interpreted).

4. The Orient is to be feared ("Yellow Peril", "Mongol hordes") or to be controlled (pp. 300-301).

These principles are, in turn, promulgated and reproduced from generation to generation through means as diverse as travelogues written by "apolitical humanist" wanderers, by leaders of military expeditions, and by "objective" scientists from Western countries. Eventually, Orientalism as a form of domination and a way of discourse takes on a life of its own, gaining a certain degree of intellectual autonomy but still serving the same purposes.

But ultimately, all the general principles and their specific applications are sustained and propped up through raw power. Orientalism, after all is said and done, is "fundamentally a political doctrine" (p. 204). It facilitates the daily business of one group dominating another. The Orientalist then mixes the fact of domination with the fact of differences and concludes that all aspects of the culture are inferior.

To the Afro-American audience all of this should sound very familiar, for we are very much at home on such ground. The Black community has been subjected to a kind of *internal* Orientalism. Its members too have been defined as "The Other," to be feared and controlled; the dark, exotic native son viewed as the near mirror image of civilized and respectable white people. The concerns and apprehensions of the dominant society are projected upon Black society. Black Americans too, in the view of the oppressor, have their common appointed spokesmen and their anointed leaders. And like Orientalism as described by Said, the white study of the "Negro Problem," especially prior to the militance of the 1960's, tended to ignore the ever-present anti-imperialist or radical nationalist movements of Black history, at the same time that the white-controlled state apparatus repressed these same movements.

What Said has contributed therefore is a very useful guide to what Langston Hughes called, in his book of the same title, the "ways of white folks." He has focused on their external predations on other cultures of coloured peoples, just as Hughes in his short stories examined their predations on domestic people and cultures of colour. Although he does not do so as self-consciously as a Fanon, for example, he shows the reader from

Latin America or Africa or Afro-America the outline of his or her own domination. His analytical categories, and especially his linking of political and economic domination — in a word, imperialism — on the one hand, and the intellectual life of the dominant culture on the other, are applicable beyond the Middle East. Some of its worldwide applicability comes from what is one of the most novel and interesting features of the work — its nearly exclusive focus on the mores and internal meanings of Euro-American culture, and not on the impact of that cultural domination on the subject peoples. This was the terrain that Said chose to map, and it is indeed a relatively uncharted one. Still, it is a peculiarly undialectical exploration, which often leaves the reader with little feel for the reality behind the stereotype, and which also tends to reproduce the Orientalist's own exclusive focus upon the dominant culture with little examination of the reactions to and attacks upon Orientalism by the dominated.

A consequence of Dr. Said's tight focus on the oppressor rather than on the oppressed is that by the end of the book the possibilities for change seem remote indeed. He cites only a handful of examples of those who, like himself, managed to break through the bonds of Orientalism to strike out on a new road of liberated scholarship. One wonders if there were so few efforts at cultural as well as political liberation from Western domination. Of course there were [others], but because of his stated objectives Said did not include them. [Not] to do so is perfectly legitimate, but leaves the reader with little vision of a reconstructed future vision of a truly liberated society.

Here too one is reminded of Afro-American efforts in the late 1950's and 1960's to criticize the prevailing biases of white scholarship, to criticize it from within, and then simultaneously search for ways to set up parallel Black institutions, as with Black Studies programmes. One wonders if this is happening today in the Middle East. One remembers too the resolute and vicious resistance by Whites to the entire Black Studies movement. Especially singled out for crude denunciations and sarcasm in the popular press were efforts by Blacks to insist upon their own historical ties to Africa as well as certain political objectives that they shared. These same forces hounded people like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael for the same reasons. For Afro-Americans to insist upon their Africanness threatened the psychological categories, as well as the political interests, of many Whites in America.

All of this suggests that not only do dominant cultures try to maintain the integrity of their world-view and their political control by crafting and recrafting modes of knowing other cultures, but they will respond with special alacrity and concern when heretofore self-contained and "orientalized" groups try to reach out to make contact with one another. We might postulate three levels at which challenges to Orientalism operate, especially if we conceive Orientalism to be another word for an organizing paradigm.

First, intellectuals and political leaders could challenge the sub-categories that operate within the orientalist paradigm, but without challenging the logic of Orientalism as such. Next, challenges could be made against the very notion of the entire paradigm and its principal dogmas as the once-dominated seek to destroy it and replace it with a view of the world that reflects their own unique structural position and cultural heritage. Finally, a special kind of challenge is launched against the West when separate “Orientalisms” – in this case the world-view “containing” Arabs and that “containing” American Blacks – are shattered and the once divided and conquered peoples reach out to explore potential political alliances as well as explore the creation of new world-views that would operate from within a Third World perspective. The dictum “Divide and Conquer” is reversed: Unite and Conquer.

This latter challenge to Western domination occurred when American Blacks and the PLO began their discussions. It challenged many of the prevailing categories carefully constructed by the United States’ domestic and international versions of Orientalism.

However, negative visions of what must be destroyed are not sufficient to build a more humane and democratic world order. The dominated of the world, whether in the Middle East, North America, Africa or elsewhere must fashion a consistent set of goals and a set of strategies and tactics to get there. The foundation for such a change has been laid down, for example, in the discussions originating within the Third World which led to demands on the industrialized “Northern” countries to create a New International Economic Order (NIEO). One task before American Blacks is to explore the implications of an NIEO for their own efforts for liberation within the US, and to examine more seriously and consistently the role that international alliances may play in future Black liberation movements, movements which may be the best hope for a more humane and democratic America. To such an effort, Blacks may bring what the Black intellectual and activist W.E.B. DuBois called the problem of the veil. Black Americans, he argued, viewed the world about them as through a veil, with two hearts and through two separate but intertwined visions – one Black, the other American and white. He saw this as an ever-present and painful dilemma which afflicted the Black man in America. The double vision of DuBois may have transformative power, as leaders like Martin Luther King have long recognized. In foreign affairs as in domestic, Blacks must try to turn this vision to an advantage.

Turning the “two-ness” DuBois described into an advantage and using its insights to transform US foreign policy means that Blacks must draw from their painful and unique view from the bottom of American society, a structural position whose resultant ideologies have also been heavily informed by an African cultural heritage. This unique vantage point should make



Afro-American political leaders and intellectuals sensitive to two issues. The first, through shared cultural norms and racial oppression, is a sensitivity to African demands and needs. The second is a general sensitivity to demands from the oppressed of the world, from the Palestinians to sovereign Third World nations seeking international justice. Armed with such a vision a new Black leadership could transform the current world view of American foreign policy away from its myopic focus on the "Soviet Menace" and other East-West issues, to place North-South issues centrally on the agenda. This is of course, what Andy Young tried to do during his tenure at the United Nations. Such a vision would also call for a more democratic foreign policy, insisting that "foreign" policy not be seen as foreign to the bread-and-butter issues of the average American Black or White, but central to them.

Such a redefinition will only come about, however, through linking this outward-looking vision with the requirements for social change within the United States. In other words, it must be rooted initially in the domestic needs of the Black poor and working class in this country. To construct such an international vision means that the phenomenon of domestic domination/liberation remains at the centre of the analysis. What must be analysed in detail is whether, in fact, it is possible for the United States to adapt itself to the rapid changes in today's international arena without fundamentally altering the condition of Black oppression. These are international adaptations which will be attitudinal and cognitive, as well as material. The question of whether America can be truly great if its Black citizens are suffering from oppression has been posed throughout Black history in this country, and most recently during the conjuncture of the war in Vietnam and Black domestic rebellion. The answer given then was no. Much of the current stagflation and loss of international prestige experienced by the US results from trying to ignore this domestic contradiction throughout the Johnson war years. The problems that Black Americans face are not problems susceptible to easy solutions at the margin. They are structural problems that can only be met with structural solutions. This means big political and economic changes in everything from sectoral balances to the regional distribution of firms to the labour intensiveness of American industry. This will require something that America has thus far refused to develop – a national industrial policy consciously and democratically arrived at and implemented. The political volatility and the growing economic marginalization of Black people in America will render all efforts at "reindustrialization" extremely problematic. Yet some form of structural readjustment is absolutely imperative if America as a whole is to be able to grow in tomorrow's more highly competitive, more mercantilist and more politicized world. This brief discussion of the position of the Black masses in US adjustments to a changing international order is meant to be suggestive of

the kinds of issues that need to be addressed throughout the 1980's.

As history may put Afro-Americans at centre stage in the coming decade as the US is forced to adapt rapidly to a new international environment of many other powerful actors, so history puts the usual burden on the Afro-American intellectual. For it is the intellectuals among the community who must begin to reconstruct a vision of a unified world-view in which the dialectic between America's standing in the world on the one hand, and the position of Black Americans domestically is systematically explored. How is the internal dialectic between Afro-American domination and Afro-American liberation influenced by the new environment?

Afro-American intellectuals must renounce the carrots and sticks of mere "professionalization" through an uncritical integration into the ranks of socially certified status categories of lawyers, economists and other purveyors of publicly acceptable data bits. Not to do so is to accept the position of "native informer" (Said's term) or of intellectual irrelevance. It is absurd for Black intellectuals to buy into artificial disciplinary boundaries at a time when daily events come more and more to challenge their analytic validity. One good example of reactionary efforts to delimit critical Black inquiry are the moves underway around the country intellectually to gut Black Studies departments. Here again Said's notion of Orientalism is useful. What we are seeing in the US is what Said has described for Oriental Studies in the US and elsewhere, to wit, the dominant social system forcing its constituent parts to conform to prevailing economic and political norms by changing institutions responsible for the production, dissemination and evaluation of knowledge. First there are pressures to separate African from Afro-American subject matter. Then there are efforts to quash the idea that Afro-American studies should share methodological and normative orientations with Third World studies, whether Chicano, Native American or Arab. This is not to say that Black Studies cannot be strengthened through greater focus. The question is what shall be the issue that informs the focus: Afro-Americans (or Africans or Arabs) as a strictly American social pathology, or as human actors on a world stage seeking liberation? In a period of growing class formation in the Black community, Black activists and intellectuals must struggle to sustain a liberationist, "anti-Orientalism" perspective.

If we can retain the focus on *domination/liberation set within a rapidly changing international context*, we will have made an important contribution to the future of critical Black studies and critical thinking in general. This will mean a hard-headed examination of many questions which now deserve more attention than they have been given in the past. Again, a good starting point to the programme of the NIEO. We can ask, what will be the impact on Black economic and political conditions of the United States acceding to Third World NIEO demands? Will there be a short-term, medium-term or

long-term improvement in economic conditions, or will Black economic status decline? Will political conditions improve? How will monetary and foreign aid reforms demanded by Third World countries affect Black domination/liberation in the US? It appears initially that there are a number of political gains and economic losses which work in opposite directions here. For example, Black support of a more just price for raw materials, and occasional Third World diplomatic support of Black domestic demands, cannot hide the fact that Blacks are especially hit by higher oil prices. Jobs lost through foreign trade tend to be among workers with the least skills, lowest education and little mobility, characteristics which most of the Black workforce share. Yet there are other benefits, including the creation of jobs in other sectors. Are these jobs Blacks can get? This raises the inevitable political economic question as to whether the economy must get worse for Blacks in America before things can be improved politically. Or can there be a variable sum game wherein Black conditions improve along with movement towards an NIEO? My suspicion is that this is the case. The point is, however, that these are questions that demand very serious investigation, and they cannot be sidestepped or simply assumed.

These then are the kinds of questions which are rightfully forced upon the Afro-American leadership once the barriers between them and the outside world are chipped away through actions such as reaching out to explore the Palestinian issue independently. A kind of restraining "Orientalism" has prevented Palestinians and Afro-Americans from even considering reaching out to one another, just as a kind of domestic Orientalism has failed to prompt Blacks in greater number to consider the impact of the wider world system on Black efforts at liberation within the US. Several trends are likely to erode such barriers. Firstly, the objective fact of growing US reliance on imports and on exports for jobs and profits is bringing this fact home to all Americans. This awareness is prompted, of course, by the recent supply interruptions and price hikes on imported oil.

The second factor is heightened international conflicts over trade, investment and strategic relations between North and South, East and West, and among Western nations. This will no doubt impinge more and more on everyone's consciousness throughout the 1980's. Finally, the debilitating stagflation of the past seven years is likely to continue for at least the next seven. This will lead Black and White Americans alike to search for its world causes, and to examine the solutions that other countries, with other social systems, have tried to make work for them.

This leads us full circle back to our earlier discussion of Black American-Palestinian relations. Within the structuralist analysis given above, such relations are important to the degree that they provide one more wide window on the world for Black Americans to recognize the interrelationship

of domestic and international factors from a progressive perspective. A better understanding of the Palestinian struggle provides an important example of another dominated people seeking not merely "participation" but liberation through a reordering of the prevailing political relations, *using international as well as national strategies*. The "Palestinian problem" is now before the entire world for resolution. It is not just a local struggle. The resolution of the Black liberation struggle will have international as well as local significance, not only for Blacks but for the United States as a whole, and hence the entire international community. The time has not yet come when Third World nations define it in their interest to support efforts at Black liberation because that liberation will prompt a more progressive US position on the New International Economic Order. But that time may still come.

The challenge to American Blacks is to create a new vision, a new paradigm, that recognizes not only the ties that bind us to the domestic structures that dominate, but also the ties that bind us to overseas political movements seeking liberation, and to the big international shifts that can make liberation possible. Conversely, Black intellectuals must also think through and clarify the impact that a successful Black liberation movement in the US would have on the possibilities for world peace.