

1970**Edward Said, 'The Arab Portrayed'****Citation:**

"Edward Said, 'The Arab Portrayed'", 1970, Wilson Center Digital Archive, The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: an Arab Perspective, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 1-9. Annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/291056>

Summary:

It was following the Six-Day War of 1967 that Arab Americans began to seriously discuss, and be politically active in, questions regarding the Arab World and US government policy and US public mindsets towards it, as Salim Yacub's *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (2016) has argued.

This is an essay written in 1967/68 by the literary scholar and then slowly emerging public intellectual Edward Said (1935-2003). It was originally published in a special issue of the US journal *The Arab World*, which was republished as an edited volume titled *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of 1967: An Arab Perspective*. Beginning with an incident at Princeton University in summer 1967, Said analyzes US views of Arabs—situating them vis-à-vis European views somewhat differently than he later would in his 1978 classic *Orientalism*—and ends by invoking (Western) “imperialism” and “the Arab’s ... right to reoccupy his place in history and in actuality,” a theme he would develop in his masterly *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

EDWARD SAID**The Arab Portrayed**

Here are two examples of how the Arab is often represented or, more correctly, misrepresented. What is disheartening in both representations is how readily he seems to accommodate the transformations and reductions into which he is continually being forced by vulgar pressures.

The costume for Princeton's tenth-reunion class in 1967 had been planned before the June War. The motif was to have been Arab—robe, headgear, and sandals.

Immediately after the war, and before the reunion, when it became clear that the motif was an embarrassment a change in the program was legislated: wearing the Arab costume as originally planned, the class were to walk in procession with their hands above their heads in a gesture of abject defeat. Surprisingly, there was no serious complaint made about the really vile taste at work as there might have been if any other national or racial group had been similarly insulted. The logic, not so much of events in the war but of events in American consciousness of the Arab, permitted this tasteless demotion of a people into a stupid and offensive caricatures.

The second example is to be found in the average film in which an Arab appears. He can't come on as an oversexed degenerate capable—it is true—of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, and low. For example, the Arab leader is often seen snarling at the captured American hero and a blonde girl, "My men are going to kill you, but – they like to amuse themselves beforehand." He leers suggestively as he speaks.

The American imagination has always turned westward. The romantic impulse has been generously capable of attention lavished upon the Pacific, as in Melville's novels in tails of the Pacific. And this has been the direction toward which the frontier has moved – even if, as in the case of Vietnam, the adventure was in cordially misguided, or, as in the case of the Indian wars, truly dedicated. I have in mind the American capacity – an imaginative one – for taking in the exotic and the strange, since interest in the European, as we find it embodied in Henry James' international theme, is more a recovery of the subtly *different-but-similar* than of a genuinely *rival* culture.

America has not, as have England and France, had a T.E. Lawrence, a Doughty, a Blunt, a Jacques Berque, a Maspero—shapers of a sympathetic eastward movement of the imagination. The vision of such men has complicated and enriched, I believe, their national modes of perceiving the Arab, and it has been enlivened all dealings with the Arab on the part of England and of France. That this has been the case in countries whose historic interest in the East has also been patently colonial is far less ironic than the almost unthinkable contradiction between the Princeton reunion costume and march and the existence at Princeton of one of America's oldest and most distinguished departments of Near Eastern studies. In the the case of the British and the French colonialist, dealings with the Arab were balanced, if not finally moderated or redeemed, by enthusiasts like Doughty and Blunt, who deeply acknowledged the presence of the Arab in the European consciousness. What is strikingly apparent here is how little human space is occupied why the Arab in the American mind.

During and after the June War few things could have been more depressing than the way in which the Arabs were portrayed. Press pictures of the Arab were almost always of large numbers of people, mobs of hysterical, anonymous men, whereas photographs of the Israelis were almost always of stalwart individuals, the light of simple heroism shining from their eyes. Before the war Renata Adler wrote a "Letter from Israel," published after the war in *The New Yorker*, in which heroism, sentimentality, earthy practicality, and life near the apocalypse were celebrated in about equal parts. This piece, together with advertisements solemnly exhorting America to rally to Israel in her hour of need, were published at a time when it ought to have been clear, if only because the war had been hardily won, that Israel was beyond danger. Still, these and other offenses to reality were very much the order of the day. The symbolism repeated the simple pattern of a Cooper novel—was not the June War the conflict between the white European bravely facing the amoral wilderness in the person of savage natives bent on destruction? As an intelligible unit in the mind, the Arab has been reduced to pure antagonism to Israel. The sheer mass

of his numbers—against which, it seems, any injustice counts for very little—has been abstracted into unitary order, the better to deal with the uncomfortable moral demands his history and actuality might make. Indeed, one can speculate on the connection between, on the one hand, a kind of cybernetic process that converts the gigantic tragedy of the Final Solution into voluble but proxy support for Israel, which works as a symbol of compensation for the tragedy, and, on the other hand, the process that essentializes the Arab presence on all sides of Israel into pure opposition to a rightful compensation for a people that suffered outrageously in World War II. Two tragedies thus lose their density: one becomes a sop for the bewildered conscience of guilty Western supporters of Israel, the other disappears in exteriors on behalf of the former. the history of the Jews and Arabs in its full detail is thus telescoped into a convenient formula of opposition which, with its every use in descriptions of the Near Eastern situation, reinforces the poverty of the formula as well as its hold on the mind.

All sorts of contradictions stem from this formula. Instance, although Israel illegally occupies a vast mount of territory, Arabs who resist the occupations are "terrorist" rather than "resistance fighters" or even "guerrillas." In the demands for direct negotiations reported constantly in American press, Israel seems justified in requiring the Arabs a radical examination of their past and present, yet this would appear to place no moral burden on Israel to account for the fact that its existence is dependent upon the displacement of an entire people, the Palestinian Arabs. Thus any argument from the Arabs is suppressed and converted into what is now a mindless cliché of the sullen Arab who will not "face reality." Liberal sentiment, always quick to champion liberation causes, will continue to bypass the Arab so long as there remains a conflict between Arab and Israeli claims for attention. Interestingly enough, the Arabs can become acceptable as objects of admiration in the context of Third World struggles against colonialism, but only if Israel is not involved. Which was clearly the case with Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers*. To most Arabs the Algerian struggle against French paratroopers and *colons* depicted in the film is easily translatable into the Arab-Israeli conflict – the analogies are too obvious to miss. But in the United States these implications are ignored and what is appreciated is an easy revolt of natives against foreign domination. Similarly, while it is expected that liberal sentiment will interest itself seriously in the plight of North Vietnam – as, for instance, in Mary McCarthy's first-rate set of articles for the *New York Review of Books*—it has occurred to no one to dramatize, or even to report, the dilemmas, problems, and agonies of the thousands of Arabs now subject to Israeli rule. The *Times Literary Supplement* of September 26, 1968, put the problem admirably:

Part of the Arab case against the West is that they cannot get through. The communications are blocked, or so it seems to them. They see themselves in the same situation as any other non-European people subjected to European colonization and the force of European arms, but their situation is not recognized. The liberal and left-wing sympathies which are so freely engaged for Africans and Vietnamese today as once upon a time they were for the Irish or the various Balkan nationalities have never been available for the Palestine Arabs. Their Zionist opponents seem to control all the lines to liberal world opinion. ... There will have to be some penetration of world opinion why the Arab, that is the Palestine Arab, point of view.

In the mind's syntax, then, the Arab, if thought of singly, is a creature without dimension. His history is obscure, for it is written neither in terms of institutions the American can recognize nor in a language he can read. Where his story has actually formed the history of the West, as in Spain for example, the Arab has been assimilated by the consciousness, in this case into a figure of the Spaniard. This cuts off the Arab at a point where European traits begin to weaken. (The work of Américo Castro is an exception to this attenuation.) What is most telling about Western consciousness of the Arab is how few ordinary categories of human existence seem applicable to him. Suffering and injustice, it seems, can never be his lot. I recall that during the summer of 1967 when I. F. Stone, a lone courageous voice, remarked on the irony of fate that made the Arabs suffer at the hands of a people which had itself suffered egregiously, there came a barrage of complaints (in *Commentary* especially) registering the outrage at the "obscenity" of speaking of Arab suffering in the same breath as that of the Jews. In the Near East, then, suffering has been monopolized, for

it is a European import. Furthermore, suffering does not grow locally except, as in June, 1967, in its hybrid variety. Arab lives and property taken, lost, or destroyed, Arab villages bulldozed out of existence, Arab resistance of any sort mercilessly liquidated—all these do not count for very much even though they have gone, and are still going, into the making of Israel. When in the introduction to his remarkable June, 1967, issue of *Les Temps Modernes* on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jean-Paul Sartre noted that two bodies of live history sat next to each other in the Near East, each inert to the other except as a pure antagonist, he was formulating a complex truth of a sort unacceptable to the American consciousness of the problem.

If the Arab occupies space in the mind at all, it is of negative value. He is seen as a disruptor of Israel's continuing existence, or, in a larger view, a surmountable obstacle to Israel's creation in 1948. This has been, of course, part of the Zionist attitude toward the Arab, especially the years before 1948 when Israel was being promulgated ideologically. Palestine was imagined as an empty desert waiting for burst into bloom, its inhabitants imagined as inconsequential nomads processing no stable claim to the land and therefore no cultural permanence. At worst, the Arab is conceived as a shadow that dogs the Jew. In that shadow (because Arab and Jew are Semites) can be played whatever traditional latent mistrust Americans might feel towards the Jew. The Jew of pre-Nazi Europe has split in two: what we have now is a Jewish hero, constructed out of a revived cult of the adventurer-pioneer, and his creeping, mysteriously fearsome shadow, the Arab. Thus isolated from his past, the Arabs chained to a destiny that fixes and dooms him to a series of spastic reactions, which are periodically chastised by what Barbara Tuchman imperiously calls "Israel's terrible swift sword."

At the very least, then, the Arab must be admitted to one's consciousness as a human quality with which one must come to terms. I do not want to be hortatory about this, but I do want to connect this need with what is going to have to take place in the West generally and in the American political imagination in particular. The change is already taking place among the youth, which has forced itself, impelled by the pressures of actuality, to venture into political complexities hitherto ignored and unnoticed by previous generations. The McCarthy campaign in 1968 had affective stimulating just that sort of exposure and excursion, thought it was only a first step.

A superb way of watching an individual mind allowing yourself full exposure to political situations to read I. F. Stone over the years. His efforts at rich vision culminate in his essay in the *New York Review of Books* of August 3, 1967, an essay which originated as a review of the June, 1967, *Les Temps Modernes*. Stone's personal background includes notable reporting of voyages made by Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine before 1948, and though his commitment as a Jew are never compromise, his integrity has always enabled him to see the Arabs. Hence one has his view in August, 1967, of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a tragedy, and more important, his assessment of Nasser in the July, 1967, *Ramparts* as a truly estimable, as opposed to simply hateful, leader of the Arabs.

Stone, in short, is the only major political commentator in America to have grasped and sustained in his work most of the intricacies of the Arab-Israeli imbroglio. These intricacies are not so much a matter of recording every pull and push in the struggle—this is the pretense of Theodore Draper's *Israel and World Politics*, which is premised on the legitimacy of Israel's domination and mastery of the Near East—but more a record of the enduring presence of the Arab in the Near East. It is precisely this latter sort of reckoning that characterizes, for instance, a set of three articles entitled "Israel and the Palestinians" by Jacques Lefort, which appeared in *Le Monde* in August, 1967, or the reports from occupied Gaza by Michael Adams, which were published throughout the last half of 1967 in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, or Isaac Deutscher's view of the conflagration of July-August, 1967, *New Left Review*. Lefort's particular accuracy derives from two fundamental truths: first, there is such a thing as an authentic Palestinian Arab culture now, as before, in danger of total extermination by Israel, and second that—and I quote from Lefort—"in practice, one finds in Israel, however, the banal attitudes that exist in colonial societies, going from latent racism, to a paternalism with regard to 'the good Arab' which is supported by a knowledge of 'the Arab psychology.'" What is extremely important here is how the official Israeli view of the Arab as a kind of troublesome non-person feeds the

common and accepted view of the Arab that is currently held in America. It would not be accurate to neglect, in this connection, the converse of the commonly held view of America by the Arabs. Thus one simplification and reduction generates a supporting set, and this mutual reinforcement abets further misapprehension, disaster, and suffering.

The contrast between Lefort's work and, to take a recent example, Joel Carmichael's *The Shaping of the Arabs: A Study in Ethnic Identity* is striking indeed. For this book, admittedly a popular work that draws on secondhand sources, rides the demotic view of the Arab to a logical conclusion—one supported by events, at least as Carmichael sees them through an ungenerous squint. because they are a dislodged, uncentered people *now*, the Arabs, according to Carmichael, have always been that. They have no identity as such, no ideology—"It is incontestable that the Arab national movement has demonstrated a singular vacuum of ideas; the phrase 'Arab nationalist ideology' implies little beyond itself" (p.386). And they have no life that any decent middle-class Westerner would deign to call life—ghetto life "is a natural condition, perhaps, of the Middle East as a whole" (p.281).

Lefort's major effort, however, is to argue for the continued existence of the Palestinian Arab: this is an identity with its own civilization, history, and social organization. Threatened as he is with total extinction, and by kind of retrospective fiat denying his history, the Palestinian rarely features in recent American accounts of the Near East. Martha Gellhorn's articles on the Palestine refugees (first in the *Manchester Guardian*, then in the *Nation*) portrays them as a people incapable of telling the truth, nurtured on a kind of vacant hatred of Israel, and doomed to an aimless existence. These are refugees, she seems to be saying, and in some ways they have deserved it because they think and talk and act like refugees; take away the hatred of Israel (which alone has made them refugees) and they will no longer be refugees. This is like the scientist in *Gulliver's Travels* who argues that since a sunbeam went into the making of a cucumber, it must be possible somehow to extract sunbeams out of cucumbers. Take away the refugee's hatred and ignorance – not, of course, the cause of his hatred, or whatever it was that made him a refugee – and he will be a refugee no longer, just a better adjusted Arab.

Another type of polemic turns up in the July, 1967, *Ramparts* in an article by Michael Walzer and Martin Peretz, both of Harvard entitled "Israel Is Not Vietnam." Once again there are instructive contrasts to be made, this time with Deutscher's interview in the *New Left Review* of July-August, 1967, and with Maxine Rodinson's "Israel fait colonial?" in the June, 1967, *Les Temps Modernes*. What is clearly the case with Israel – that it is based on Western ideology militantly claiming for itself the status of an exclusively indigenous (because of "timeless" attachments to Palestine) presence in the Near East – is obscured in a rush of furious casuistry. Peretz's and Walzer's main point is that, unlike America's presence in Vietnam, Israel's presence in the Arab world is neither colonial nor oppressive: it merely is, by force of historical legitimacy and necessary strength. Here too the polemic draws on exactly the values disclaimed by "liberals" (whether Jewish or not) in discussing Israel, but eminently suitable for the Arabs. And these values, however else they might be whitewashed, are racist values. The Arabs are depicted as backward, enmeshed in the fantasies of their language, entitled only to a condition of subservience, incapable of facing reality (Israel) whose existence of twenty years has assumed the position of undisputed historical fact with timeless standing.

It is no accident, I think, that in America the representation of the Arab and accounts of the modern Near East rely so heavily on a simple, so to my mind seriously defective and malicious, conception of fact. One of Dwight McDonald's most trenchant essays in *Against the American Grain*, "The Triumph of the Fact," characterizes and attacks this peculiarly American tendency to dignify so-called facts with indisputable authority, a tendency that ignores the intersubjective origins of a fact. To call something a fact means one accords to it an ultimate sort of privilege, but at the same time the label regrettably conceals a fear of dealing with ambiguous, the nuance, the in-between, and the precarious. Israel is a fact and that, the argument runs, is what the Arabs cannot or will not face; and that also is a fact about the Arabs. Yet it is precisely the Arab sense of fact that is being denied in this argument, that sense which sees Israel, funded without limit from abroad, displacing

a whole population into limbo that now seems, factually, to be their fate without limit of time. All facts are equal, but facts about Israel are more equal than those either perceived by or about Arabs. And, in this, it is not only the popular press or television which are to be faulted, but also the academic or enlightened liberal view, not to mention those Israeli view of the Arabs as well. Compelled into the strait jacket of "regional studies" institutes that were designed to serve the Western, or at least the American, sense of *fact* about other parts of the world, the Arab becomes simply an observable collection of factual statistics based on rigidly frozen categories of population, climate, trade, and so on. To say, therefore, that the Arab is a victim of imperialism is to understand the statement as applying not only to the past, but also to the present, not only in war and diplomacy but also Western consciousness. There are signs, however, that with much of the Third World, the Arab has now fully recognized his predicament: he is demanding of the West, and of Israel, the right to reoccupy his place in history and in actuality.