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Enough Said

by [David Pryce-Jones](#)

On *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* by Ibn Warraq.

In the aftermath of World War II, a tide of nationalism swept over Asia and Africa. It was understandable. Europeans had just devastated their own continent. Bystanders if not participants in the Holocaust, they could no longer claim any moral authority to be ruling over others. Furthermore their political classes had almost invariably maintained that they were preparing their empires for ultimate independence. For the likes of Nasser, Nkrumah, Sukarno, Ben Bella and Boumedienne in Algeria, Nehru and Gandhi, and Ho Chi Minh, the time for self-rule had arrived. The Third World duly took shape on the international stage. One central element was systematic resentment against the West, a resentment ably attacked by Ibn Warraq in his *Defending the West*.[\[1\]](#)

Third World leaders were mostly military men ready and willing to resort to violence. To mobilize the masses in support, they denigrated the previous European administrations as so many embodiments of the white man and his manifest faults. "Imperialist," "colonialist," "racist" served as so many collective curse-words. It is doubtful that they really believed the sloganeering and stereotyping so useful to them. As soon as they themselves were securely in power, they hurried to westernize their countries as best they could, evidently wanting similar universities and hospitals and armies, sports, and even pop music. So far-reaching has imitation been that some of the new nationalist rulers incorporated second-hand the fascism, Communism, and anti-Semitism that had wrecked Europe.

The British responded to Third World nationalism in a welcoming phrase about "the winds of change," as though those mobilizing enmity towards them had simply blown in with the weather. Only the French made determined efforts to resist, and then in vain. Defenders of empire had always been few and far between. Treasurers resented the expense—research shows that the imperial powers all had to pay out immense and unaffordable sums on maintaining possessions abroad, and the money would have been better spent at home. The calculations are uncertain, but it appears that Britain alone may possibly have enjoyed some small financial benefit from empire. Military staffs resented the posting abroad of troops needed in the European theater. Empire-builders such as Lord Cromer, Lord Curzon, and Alfred Milner, or Jules Ferry and Marshal Lyautey in France, could only advance arguments about responsibility for others and a *mission civilisatrice*. Hard-headed colleagues listened to these abstractions with skepticism.

Intellectuals in Europe went much further, pleading guilty to all the accusations levelled against them by Third World nationalists. They and their predecessors had always been constant and enthusiastic critics of empire, and now were thrilled to have their diatribes against their own countries thrown back at them, as it were by clever students and disciples. Violence committed by

the ruled against the rulers won their applause. This attitude of opposition starts with the delight so widely expressed in Britain over the loss of the American colonies—even the conservative-minded Edmund Burke supported the colonists. Innumerable nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers treated whatever reflected badly on the imperial power as a running scandal—the Indian mutiny, the Governor Eyre episode in Jamaica, Denshawi in Egypt, Amritsar, the Arab revolts in Mesopotamia and Palestine, partition in India, and so on. Following Marxism-Leninism, leftists everywhere took it for granted that imperialism was the ultimate by-product of capitalism, to be extirpated accordingly in the glorious and imminent world revolution. Bernard Shaw and the Fabians, Sir Roger Casement, J. A. Hobson, Bloomsbury and the *New Statesman*, Arnold Toynbee, and other opinion-makers all over Europe acquired reputations as they savaged not just the British but the Belgians in the Congo, the Dutch in Indonesia, the French in the Maghreb or Indochina. Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon recommended the murdering of Frenchmen as a measure that Arabs owed themselves if they were to be free.

The outcome of this long-drawn anti-imperial campaigning has worked its way into today's truism—taught in classrooms everywhere—that Europeans were exclusively vicious oppressors while those they ruled are exclusively virtuous victims. This incarnation of the myth of the Noble Savage overlooks, or carefully ignores, that imperialism brought far-flung peoples into contact with European languages, law, and culture, a necessary prerequisite if East and West were to meet on equal terms.

The United States is not an empire, but its intellectual elite has so resented its rise to the status of superpower that they have adopted the self-same contempt for their own country, now exemplifying the West as a whole. In these circles, the United States is depicted as guilty of unmitigated racism and imperialism, while also responsible for triggering the Cold War and a course of outrageous events from My Lai to Gitmo. In common with Sartre, Norman Mailer recommended murder as the key to personal freedom from racism. Mary McCarthy, fresh from admiring Communist Hanoi under American attack but still enjoying royalties that paid for her large country house on Cape Cod, agreed with Hannah Arendt in their exchange of letters that they both would soon have to flee a fascist America. Among many similar media stars, the likes of Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, and Michael Moore have proved as determined as their European counterparts to show everything to do with the West in as bad a light as possible, and everything to do with others in as good a light as possible.

Such alienation culminates in the morbid gloating that on 9/11 America “had it coming,” and it spreads infectiously too. As I write, the Archbishop of Canterbury, by name Rowan Williams, and self-described as an intellectual, a Druid (of all things in a Christian primate), and a “hairy Lefty,” is reported giving an interview to a Muslim magazine in which he compares the United States unfavorably to the British Empire in its imperial heyday. Its response to 9/11, he opines, has been gratuitous violence.

Edward Said was an outstanding example of an intellectual who condemned the West root and branch while taking every advantage of the privileges and rewards it has to offer. In its dishonesty and exercise of double standards, his was truly a cautionary tale of our times. Born in Jerusalem in 1935, he laid claims to be a Palestinian, dispossessed by Zionist Jews, and therefore an archetypal Third World victim. In sober fact, he was the son of an American father, a member of a prosperous Christian family with extensive business interests in Egypt. Undoubtedly an intelligent and civilized man with one side of his personality, he became a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. Yet with his other side, he wrote speeches for Yasser Arafat in the 1970s, and was far and away the most vociferous advocate for the Palestine Liberation Organization. Although he knew the history of persecution that lay behind Zionism, he could not accept Israel as anything but an injustice that had to be put right in bloodshed. On the pretext of victimhood, but from the safety of

New York, he urged others to kill and be killed. When Arafat professed (falsely as it turned out) to be willing to make peace with Israel, Said broke with him, insisting on armed struggle. At the end of his life, this professor of a subject within the humanities was photographed throwing a stone from Lebanese soil against the boundary with Israel.

The contradictory aspects of the man came together in *Orientalism*, a book Said published in 1978. The thesis was that every Westerner who had ever studied or written about the Middle East had done so in bad faith. From ancient Greece through the medieval era to the present, the work of historians, grammarians, linguists, and even epigraphists had been “a rationalization of colonial rule.” There was no colonial rule in the lifetimes of the majority of these scholars, so they must have been “projecting” what was to come. For Said, these highly eclectic individuals were all engaged in a long-drawn conspiracy, international but invisible, to establish the supremacy of the West by depicting an East not only inferior but static and incapable of change. At bottom, here was the vulgar Marxist concept that knowledge serves only the interest of the ruling class. Said had also latched on to Michel Foucault, with his proposition—modishly avant-garde at the time—that there is no such thing as truth, but only “narratives” whose inventor is putting across his point of view. This reduces facts to whatever anyone wishes to make of them.

Omitting whatever did not fit, misrepresenting evidence, and making unwarranted generalizations, Said committed the very sin for which he was accusing Westerners—of concocting a “narrative” to serve his purposes. As he summed up: “Every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist.” The “narrative” shaped a conclusion particularly crucial to Said. Europeans included Jews and later Israelis, and they were therefore integral to the conspiracy to do down Orientals and ensure that Palestinians were prime victims of racism and imperialism. Palestinian violence and terror was therefore natural and legitimate.

Orientalism owed its éclat to fashion. Here was someone within a prestigious American university making the nationalist case in an approved high-brow idiom that the West was really to blame for the misfortunes of Arabs and Muslims, including harm they had done to themselves. The timing of the book was also propitious. The balance of power was already tipping against the West, and in favor of Muslims. The public was ready for instruction about the encounter with Islam, this rather shadowy novelty suddenly looming on the horizon. The whole range of intellectual guilt-mongers and masochists, stretching out to Middle East lecturers, area specialists, experts of one kind and another, and not least those with anti-American and anti-Jewish prejudices, eagerly promoted Said their champion and hero. In these circles, Said earned further immediate praise by welcoming Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic revolution because it was anti-American in principle and practice. Universities instituted courses deferring to Said, who was invited to present his bright new “narrative” to one prestigious audience after another. Orientalist, the portmanteau term for every Westerner with a scholarly, literary, or artistic interest in the East, is now firmly in the almanac of curse-words. Said succeeded in widening animus against Israel by folding it into generalized anti-Westernism. More than that, he had politicized the study of the Middle East in its manifold aspects.

Discussion of inconvenient facts soon began to expose piecemeal Said’s “narrative.” An Israeli scholar, Justus Reid Weiner, uncovered the extent to which Said had been romancing his own victimhood. Leaving Jerusalem as a young boy before Israel became independent, he had grown up in Cairo and been educated at its most prestigious British-run college. His credentials as a Palestinian refugee and a spokesman demanded more than a stretch of the imagination. It was not the Zionists who had dispossessed the Said family, it turned out, but Nasser when he expropriated the property of all foreigners including theirs. The victim of Arab nationalism, Said was nevertheless its most ardent defender, and this psychological inversion is the most mystifying thing about him. Perversity of the sort may perhaps illuminate the psychological process whereby so many kindred

intellectuals misplace hatred and guilt, admiring those who injure them and condemning those who might protect them.

Said did not live long enough to read Robert Irwin's book *For Lust of Knowing*, published early in 2006. This thorough rebuttal of Said is a monument of genuine scholarship, examining who the Orientalists were, how historically they advanced their disciplines all over Europe, and what their achievements have been. At the outset, Irwin calls Said's book "a work of malignant charlatanry," and he demonstrates the point calmly; in contrast to Said, he is free from either spite or arrogance. (Stephen Schwartz, another informed critic, also deploys the words "malignant charlatan" to describe Said.) Irwin's account of the founding of chairs in European universities for the sake of studying and translating Eastern languages and literary texts is particularly strong. Dedicated scholars handed down to their successors a tradition of learning and research. Even Christian churchmen and apologists among them were prepared to pursue knowledge objectively.

Some of Said's critics have had Arab or Muslim origins, for instance Sadiq al-Azm, Fouad Ajami, and Kanan Makiya, and Said treated them all as though they were traitors. He would surely have issued another personal fatwa in his usual style of bluster and insult against Ibn Warraq, whose *Defending the West* further demolishes in close detail the Saidian "narrative."

Originally from the Indian subcontinent, Ibn Warraq is the author of a previous book, *Why I Am Not A Muslim*. This is a scrupulously documented examination of the life and teaching of the Prophet Muhammad, of the Qur'an and its sources, and the resulting culture. As he sees it, intolerance and ignorance, and all manner of taboos, have been deliberately preserved and cultivated down the centuries, doing the faithful no service, and creating what he openly calls the totalitarian nature of Islam.

Like the earlier book, *Defending the West* rests on very wide reading in several languages; there are almost a hundred pages of footnotes. The impact is all the more solid because the tone expresses neither ridicule nor anger but only determination to get at the truth. The book mounts its demolition of Said from several angles. To begin with, Said's pseudo-Foucault style often descends into meaningless verbiage and contradiction. Said's selectivity and failure to take historical context into consideration also lead him astray wildly. Out of laziness or carelessness, he makes egregious historical blunders. For instance, at the time when Said is accusing the British of imperialism in the Middle East, the actual overlords were the Ottoman Turks. And if British and French Orientalists were imperial agents by definition, how come Germany had no Middle East empire when its Orientalists were the most distinguished and original of all? And what about Ignaz Goldziher, the founding father of modern Orientalism and ready to consider converting to Islam, but Hungarian, therefore from a country with no imperialist aims in the Middle East?

As common sense suggests and Ibn Warraq substantiates, the interest of Westerners in the East from classical antiquity onwards was motivated by intellectual curiosity; they wanted to find out about the other human beings with whom they were sharing the world. To seek knowledge for its own sake is the special and wholly beneficial contribution the West has made to mankind. "Only the West" in one of Ibn Warraq's lapidary judgments, "seems to have developed the notion that the natural world is a rational and ordered universe, that man is a rational creature who is able to understand, without the aid of revelation, or spiritual agencies, and able to describe that universe and grasp the laws that govern it." Rationalism, universalism, and self-inspection are Western traits which expand civilization. Said's cultural relativism leads only to a dead-end.

More than that, intellectual curiosity on the part of only a handful of Western scholars was the indispensable prelude to the rescue and revival of cultures—Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist among them—that were on the edge of extinction. Henry Rawlinson in Persia, Austen Layard in Mesopotamia, Sir William Jones and Henry Colebrooke in India, and Max Müller the great Sanskrit

philologist restored to the local peoples the pasts that had once been theirs, giving them pride in their ancestors, and the self-respect without which there could have been no nationalism. Nationalist historians now concur, and even the more extreme among them are able to praise a figure like Lord Curzon for salvaging the monuments of India in his years as viceroy.

The final hundred or so pages provide an account of various artists, writers, sculptors and even musicians who either worked in the Middle East or used themes and subjects from it. From Herodotus to Kipling, and from Gentile Bellini to Delacroix and Gérôme—to Said, all such at all times and in all places were collaborators with one or another imperialism. In reality, as Ibn Warraq has no difficulty showing, they were reporters and observers, enthused by unfamiliar customs and colors, and any social or political opinions they might express were in sympathy with the local people. They were actually celebrating everyone and everything that Said believes they were injuring.

Defending the West might seem a specialist book with a narrow focus on someone who made a spectacle of himself by absorbing uncritically the Third Worldism of his day, a lost soul who perhaps ought to be pitied rather than exposed. That would be quite wrong. The purpose here is to reinvigorate the humane and universal values without which there is no civilization worth the name. Ibn Warraq is anxious because these are bad times for the West: its culture is in decay, its achievements denigrated, its citizens everywhere demoralized, and therefore in a weak position to defend themselves against militant and mindless Islamism. It is a source of hope, and some sort of historic milestone as well, that a Muslim by birth should now be the free spirit calling on the West to be true to itself.

Notes

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1. *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* by Ibn Warraq; Prometheus, 500 pages, \$29.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

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