

Edward Said and the Iranian Revolution

David Zarnett

The Iranian revolution was not only a godsend for those Muslims who identified with its cause, it was also a blessing for those among the American Left who saw it as a significant blow against the evil American Empire. For them it was a non-violent resurgence of the oppressed of the Third-World, noble and progressive in its cause and buoyed by its religious character. Richard Falk in *The Nation* wrote ‘the religious core of the Khomeini movement is a call for social justice, fairness in the distribution of wealth, a productive economy organized around national needs and simplicity of life and absence of corruption that minimizes differences between rich and poor, rulers and ruled.’ [1] The fears expressed by Iranian leftists and feminists were an exaggeration and not worthy of pause or consideration. That Tehran’s bookstores were selling books once banned by the Shah and that newspapers were engaging in lively political debate was sufficient proof that the inherent progressive forces of the revolution would prevail. ‘Whatever the future course of this remarkable revolution,’ Kai Bird wrote in *The Nation*, ‘the spring of 1979 is budding with hopes of broader freedoms and economic well-being for the Iranian people.’ [2]

What led so many on the left to predict utopia in Iran after the overthrow of the Shah? This essay will seek part of the explanation in Edward Said’s influential analysis of the Iranian Revolution. It is a locus of some key errors – of denial, evasion, and abstract categorial thinking immune to the facts – that led to such a gross miscalculation on the part of so many American Leftists.

Said’s analysis negated two realities. The first reality was the one reported by the mainstream American media. One assumption that underpinned Said’s analysis was that the media’s portrayal of the revolution must be inherently wrong and that the truth must lie in a ‘counter-narrative.’ [3] That Said was neither an expert on Middle Eastern politics nor the history of Islam; that he knew little of the Shah or Ayatollah Khomeini beyond what an informed layman would have known; and that he did not read or write Farsi, makes his utter conviction concerning the inaccuracy of the media’s portrayal all the more indicative of his method of analysis and thought. The second reality that Said negated was the words written and spoken by Ayatollah Khomeini, notably in *Velayat-e Faqeeh* (Islamic Government), and the

clues they provided for the future path of the Iranian Revolution. Khomeini's belief that the Jews were bent on world domination and that Shari'a law would create an ideal society was purposefully kept out of Said's analysis. This same approach was taken by Richard Falk who dismissed Khomeini's writings as having little significance because they were 'disavowed by Khomeini's closest advisors.' Instead Falk saw it more appropriate to rely on Khomeini's utterances to Western visitors and journalists claiming that the earliest critics of Khomeini were simply supporters of the Shah and nothing more. [4]

Said's analyses of the revolution are found in four articles written between 1979 and 1981 [5], and can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, writing in *Time Magazine* in April 1979 and the *Columbia Journalism Review* in March/April 1980, Said rejected both the portrayal of the revolution as Islamic and what he saw as the demonization of Khomeini. The second phase writings – *The Nation* in April 1980 and *Harper's Magazine* in January 1981 – register that much of the pro-revolution American Left were coming to terms with the harsh reality of Iran under Khomeinism. In this phase, Said *changed the subject*: his analysis shifted away from Khomeini and focused predominantly on the US media's portrayal of the revolution.

Denying Reality

The revolution in Iran thrust 'Islam' into mainstream discourse in America. From his residence-in-exile in Neauphle-le-Chateau on 12 January, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini stated that the 'struggle will continue until the establishment of an Islamic Republic that guarantees the freedom of the people, the independence of the country, and the attainment of social justice.' [6] A few months later, in his hometown of Qom, Khomeini declared the establishment of the Islamic Republic, calling on the new government to 'enact Islamic justice under the banner of Islam and the flag of the Qur'an.' [7] These statements received much publicity and Khomeini's words were widely circulated through major news outlets. Taking its cue from Khomeini's rhetoric, the American media began to portray the revolution as religiously inspired, which gave rise to a concerned debate about the implications of this new political ideology rooted in Islam. Specifically, Khomeini's declaration to establish an 'Islamic Republic' begged the question of what such a polity would look like. *The Washington Post* predicted a political catastrophe based on a reading of excerpts of Khomeini's *Velayet-e Faqeeh*. [8] *The Associated Press* and *Time* followed suit. (the cover of *Time Magazine* of 16 April, 1979 read: 'Islam: The Militant

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Revival.’). In the pages of the *New Republic*, Michael Walzer, in an article Said specifically attacked, depicted Khomeini as a clerical fascist and wrote of the need to ‘remind ourselves of the power of one religion still capable of generating great zeal among large numbers of its followers.’ [9] In *Foreign Affairs*, where the early analysis had generally minimized the role of Islam in the revolution [10], William Quandt depicted Khomeini as more concerned with the ‘Great Satan’ than with the significant and numerous domestic problems plaguing post-Shah Iran. Similar to Walzer, Quandt noted that ‘one of the questions that surrounded the Iranian Revolution from its onset was whether Khomeini and his Islamic Republic might signal a new resurgence of Islamic feeling and solidarity that would affect other Islamic nations, especially those in the Middle East.’ [11]

After his years of research and writing for his book *Orientalism* (1978), Said thought he knew exactly what was going on. His analysis of systematic Western mis-perceptions of Islam – orientalism – was to be vindicated by a stinging critique of this orientalist discourse about the Iranian revolution. His critique would draw heavily upon his earlier writings. In a 1976 review of *The Cambridge History of Islam* (1970), edited by Said’s arch-nemesis Bernard Lewis, Said described this widely respected book as an anti-Islamic diatribe void of ‘ideas and methodological intelligence.’ [12] In *Orientalism*, which reproduces this review of *History* almost verbatim, Said emphasised that the work’s central point revolves around the question of what defines the Muslim human experience: ‘*Orientalism*, however, clearly posits the Islamic category (over the socio-economic category) as the dominant one, and this is the main consideration about [*History*’s] retrograde intellectual tactics.’ [13] In other words, to an orientalist, Muslims were only Muslims and not economic, political and rational beings, so their revolutions could not be rational political acts.

Using P.J. Vatikiotis’ *Revolution in the Middle East and Other Case Studies* (1972) as a benchmark, Said explained that the orientalist perceived an Islamic revolution as an act born out of ‘a bad kind of sexuality (pseudo-divine act of creation), and also a cancerous disease.’ [14] Analysing Bernard Lewis’s contribution to Vatikiotis’ work, Said wrote that the message one gets on the nature of an Islamic revolution ‘is excitement, sedition, setting up a petty sovereignty – nothing more.’ [15] Accordingly, Islamic revolutions were not the drastic social upheavals that were the French and Russian revolutions. Instead, they were the product of parochial worldviews. They were not rooted in political grievance for the sake of betterment and improvement of society but rather were minor fluctuations in an all-together

static and backward civilization. Since America inherited these reactionary assumptions from the British and the French, Said was hostile to any depiction of the Iranian revolution as 'Islamic' in American mainstream discourse.

Said's first article on Iran, 'Islam, Orientalism and the West: An Attack on Learned Ignorance,' appeared in *Time Magazine* on 16 April, 1979. Rehashing many of the same points he made in *Orientalism*, Said zeroed in on the phenomenon that concerned him the most: the reliance of experts and pundits on an abstract and essentialist view of Islam to explain all events in the Middle East. The politics of Algeria, Palestine, Egypt, and Iran were all (mis)understood as an expression of a shared 'Islamic mind.' [16] What irked Said most was the idea that the Iranian revolution symbolized a 'Return of Islam.' Contrary to how the media reported it, Said saw the Iranian revolution as unrelated to Islam. The real roots of the revolution, and of resentment towards the West throughout the Middle East, he thought, lay not within Islamic culture or society but rather Western treatment of the region: 'If Iranian workers, Egyptian students, Palestinian farmers resent the West or the U.S., it is a concrete response to the specific policy injuring them as human beings.' Attacking what he saw as the quintessential American mindset, Said asked 'will it not ease our fear to accept the fact that people do the same things inside as well as outside Islam, that Muslims live in history and in our common world, not simply in the Islamic context?' [17]

Accordingly, argued Said, Khomeini should be viewed neither as the symbol of a resurgence of a new political Islam nor as an irrational and crazed religious figure, but rather as a part of 'a long tradition of opposition to an outrageous monarchy.' Denying all that was unique, and uniquely dangerous in the Ayatollah, Said described Khomeini as an oppositionalist leader like any other driven by rational and universal political concerns. Therefore, the description of Khomeini as a clerical fascist was not only misguided and ignorant but also anti-Islamic and orientalist, producing 'fearsome caricatures' of Muslims. [18] An over-emphasis on the Islamic inspiration in Khomeini negated the influence that American foreign policy had on his ideas and his feelings of resentment. In this light, the Iranian revolution is not Islamic but political. According to Said, the media, bolstered by a cabal of academics, were denying Muslims their humanity and implying that they have no understanding of democracy, seeking only 'repression and medieval obscurantism.' [19] Reluctant to engage critically with the writings and speeches of Khomeini – for this would show that Khomeini's drives were also Islamic, repressive and medievalist – Said's main 'arguments' were in fact assertions and regressed into a

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simple counter-narrative based on a series of categories, rather than a reality-based rebuttal of conventional wisdom.

In 'Iran and the Press: Whose Holy War?' which appeared in the March/April 1980 edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Said criticized the negative coverage of Khomeini. As the revolution progressed, Said observed, 'Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's image and presence took over the media, which failed to make much of him except that he was obdurate, powerful and deeply angry at the United States.' [20] But, as in his previous article, Said did not provide counter-evidence to the media's characterization of Khomeini. *His only proof was his own theory*: if the media was inherently fearful, ignorant, and hostile to Islam than it must be portraying Khomeini incorrectly.

Said believed that the media's misrepresentation of Khomeini was due to ignorance: 'why did no reporter seem to avail himself of crucial material contained in the Summer 1979 issue of *Race and Class* – for example, the material on Ali Shariati, an Iranian friend of Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon, who with Khomeini was the major influence on the revolution?' [21] This point raises two important questions. First, if Said had versed himself in Iranian revolutionary ideology as he demands of journalists reporting and writing on Iran, why did he not once cite the writings of Shariati or Khomeini and pass on any of this required information to his readers? Second, if Khomeini is indeed a 'major influence on the revolution,' is it not understandable to be deeply concerned with Khomeini's political agenda considering the ideas and political programme presented in his major work *Velayat-e Faqeeh*? Even if Hamid Algar's translation of *Velayat e-Faqeeh* was not yet available to Said at the time of writing this article – Algar's work first appeared in 1981 – *the Washington Post* published excerpts in February 1979, making its core ideas widely accessible. Perhaps it was for this very reason – that it was published in a mainstream media outlet – that Said, and many others who believed Khomeini to be a progressive, failed to take into consideration Khomeini's own words.

Said's defence of Khomeini came at a time of mounting evidence against him and his leadership. Even *The Nation*, who early in 1979 was committed to viewing Khomeini as a progressive, was beginning to realize their error in judgement. [22] Still clinging to its optimism about the revolution, *The Nation* asked its readership not to associate the current human rights violations under Khomeini with the revolution itself. [23] Said, however, was distinct in this regard and did not budge from his position – his hostility to the media threw off his moral compass. Reports

of human rights abuses, executions, and violent atrocities committed by Khomeini and other Iranians in the name of the revolution were greatly exaggerated for obvious reasons: 'More important, reporters and editors have clearly favoured stories reporting atrocities, executions, and ethnic conflict over those of the country's extremely fluid, actually quite open, political struggle...If aggressive hyperbole is one journalistic mode commonly used to describe Iran, the other is misapplied euphemism, usually stemming from ignorance, but often deriving from a barely concealed ideological hostility.' [24]

Evading Reality

Eventually, under the weight of growing criticism of Khomeini by members within his own leftist milieu, Said succumbed to reality. But he did not shift to take a strong stance against Khomeini nor write urgently and in detail about the atrocities being committed. Instead, Said evaded reality by focusing on the US media's characterization of the Iranian revolution as 'Islamic.' This marked the start of a second phase in Said's writings on the Iranian revolution.

In his article, 'Islam Through Western Eyes,' published in *The Nation* in April 1980, Said does show that the excesses of Khomeini are no longer defensible: 'What is the Islamist apologist to say when confronted with the daily count of people executed by the Islamic Komitehs or when – as reported on September 19, 1979 by Reuters – Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini announces that enemies of the Islamic revolution would be destroyed?' [25] However, his primary argument is that the revolution's excesses can not be explained simply by invoking the all-encompassing adjective of 'Islam.' He attacked the American obsession with Islam arguing that 'no non-Western realm has been so dominated by the United States as the Arab-Islamic world is dominated today.' [26] America lacked sympathy for Islam: 'in the United States, at least, there is no major segment of the polity, no significant sector of the culture, no part of the whole community capable of identifying sympathetically with the Islamic World.' [27] And because of this hostility, figures like Khomeini typify an Islamic world seen as being 'populated by shadowy (although extremely frightening) notions about jihad, slavery, subordination of women and irrational violence combined with extreme licentiousness.' Conversely, Anwar Sadat was fashioned in the media as the ideal Muslim 'whose remark that Khomeini was a lunatic and a disgrace to Islam was repeated ad nauseam.' [28] Therefore, Said thought, American perceptions of Islam were defined by American interests. When American interests are not at stake, Islam was of little concern but when these

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interests were challenged it was because the all-encompassing Islamic menace reared its head. In this case, Said emphasized the dangers of associating events in Iran to Islam because this approach would negate the nature of the American presence in the region and the legitimate and intense political grievance it creates. Lacking an appreciation for complexity and nuance, Said countered the media's narrative by denying the Iranian revolution an Islamic quality entirely. But as the late Malcolm Kerr once wrote: 'Does Said realize how insistently Islamic doctrine in its many variants has traditionally proclaimed the applicability of religious standards to all aspect of human life, and the inseparability of man's secular and spiritual destinies? What does he suppose the Ayatollah Khomeini and Muslim Brotherhood were all about?' [29]

'Inside Islam: How the Press Missed the Story in Iran,' was published in *Harper's Magazine* in January 1981. A critique of 'The Islam Explosion,' by Michael Walzer, it provides a particularly clear example of Said's method. Said asserted that 'Walzer has convinced himself that when he says the word Islam he is talking about a real object called Islam, an object so immediate as to make any mediation of qualifications applied to it seem supererogatory fussiness.' [30] However, Said's charge that Walzer saw Islam 'as a single thing' simply misrepresents Walzer. Contrary to Said's charge, Walzer warns his reader against conflating Islam into a single entity and insists on the need to consider local conditions when interpreting conflicts throughout the region. [31] More importantly, and again characteristic of his style of argumentation, Said does not refute Walzer's argument with a counter-argument but with only a swift waving of his hand. What we can see clearly now is that – and note this is an inversion of Said's narrative of 'orientalist' western intellectuals – while Walzer takes heed of what Muslims in the Middle East are saying, Said ignores them.

Said's analysis marginalized Khomeini in two ways. First, when defending Khomeini, Said showed no understanding of the major themes that were at the centre of many of the Ayatollah's writings and lectures. In effect Said ignored Khomeini's ideas. Second, when Khomeini could no longer be defended, Said resorted to simply bracketing his existence and preminent role in the new Iranian state. In 1982, Said, alongside Richard Falk, personally endorsed a public statement by the 'The Emergency Committee for the Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Iran' which, while lambasting the Iranian regime for its human rights abuses and anti-democratic practices, curiously makes no mention of Khomeini. [32] And it was

in a 1984 eulogy of the French post-modernist Michel Foucault, who had a great influence on Said, in which he dedicated only a few sentences to the philosopher's very public endorsement of Khomeini and his revolutionary politics that was by no means marginal to his intellectual career, as Said himself admits. [33]

It is not surprising that Said came to a gravely mistaken conclusion of a watershed event in the modern Middle East. His argumentation was not based on expertise or a careful consideration of the evidence available but on the theoretical category of 'orientalism.' His out-of-hand rejection of the media's characterization of the revolution as 'Islamic' resulted from his apriori hostility to all American mainstream media discussions of Islam. His method blocked a more nuanced approach that might have seen the Islamic *and* the political dimensions of the revolution. It would have served Said well to consider one of George Orwell's dictums: 'Just because you read something in the *Daily Telegraph* doesn't mean it's wrong.'

Said's disastrous method was used by others at the time. Most notably, in 1979 Princeton Professor Richard Falk 'regarded Khomeini's leadership, on the whole, positively' and did not believe 'it was a foregone conclusion that Khomeini would throw his support behind the clerics.' [34] Such a astonishing error could only come from the wilful denial of the reality of Khomeini's *Islamic Government* whose title and content made crystal clear his political intentions. [35] To ignore this work is analogous to trying to understand Adolf Hitler without reading *Mein Kampf*, or Sayyid Qutb without reading *In the Shade of the Qu'ran*, or Niccolo Machiavelli without reading *The Prince*. Disparaging those who took heed of Khomeini's words, Falk believed that 'those who prophesized calamity' were driven by 'pro-Shah sympathies, or Western biases,' and 'wanted to discredit the revolution by every means possible.' [36]

The method – linguistically dense, impressively 'theoretical' and 'militant' but in fact crude and reductive – continues in use today, and it has bled alarmingly from the academy to the mainstream. Those chanting 'We are all Hiz'ballah' in Trafalgar Square; those glorifying Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah as a progressive ally; those arguing that Osama Bin Laden and his followers, like the 7/7 bombers, will be contented with the establishment of a Palestinian state; those claiming that Iraqi suicide bombers will cease their atrocities once America and Britain withdraw, all utilize a Saidian approach to Middle East politics that fails to comprehend the primary motives of these actors or to grant them an autonomy outside the categories of

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‘orientalism’ or ‘blowback.’

The irony is that while Said made his career criticizing the West for denying Muslims or Arabs their own fully autonomous existence, his own thought – as Kanan Makiya has pointed out [37] – contributed to that very denial. Through the distorting lens of ‘orientalism’ key Muslim and Arab personalities and movements are routinely denied their identity, their words are ignored, and an alternative and self-serving image is thrust upon them (and us). The result, as Kanan Makiya’s seminal book catalogued, is that in the face of immense cruelty directed towards actual Arabs and Muslims, the Saidian intellectual can be curiously silent.

David Zarnett is a postgraduate student at King’s College, University of London.

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Notes

[1] Falk 1979, p. 136.

[2] Bird 1979, p. 322.

[3] This assumption also appears in Bruce 1979, p. 589.

[4] See Falk's 1982 *Nation* article in which he argues (p. 105.) 'The critics of Khomeini supported their arguments with some controversial texts drawn from his lectures while he was in Iraq. Their tone and contents were disavowed at the time by Khomeini's closest advisors and seemed more than offset by the Ayatollah's own clarification of his position to visitors and journalists.'

[5] Said (1981) dealt with the Iranian Revolution, however much of its content is taken directly from these four articles.

[6] Algar 1981, p. 247.

[7] Algar 1981, p. 267.

[8] *Washington Post*, 1979.

[9] Walzer 1979, p. 21.

[10] Rouleau 1980, pp. 1-20.

[11] Quandt 1979, p. 545.

[12] Said 1976, p. 4.

[13] Said 2003 [1978], p. 305.

[14] Said 2003 [1978], p. 313.

[15] Said 2003 [1978], p. 315.

[16] Said 1979, p. 16.

[17] Said 1979, p. 16.

[18] Said 1979, p. 16.

[19] Said 1979, p. 16.

[20] Said 1980, p. 23.

[21] Said 1980, p. 33.

[22] Bird 1979, p. 321.

[23] *The Nation* 1979, p. 621.

[24] Said 1980b, pp. 29-30.

[25] Said 1980a, p. 488.

[26] Said 1980a, p. 489.

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[27] Said 1980a, p. 490.

[28] Said 1980a, p. 490.

[29] Kerr 1980, p. 545.

[30] Said 1981, p. 27.

[31] Walzer 1979, p. 20.

[32] Organizing Committee for the Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Iran 1982, p. 110.

[33] Said 1984, pp. 9-10.

[34] Falk 1982, p. 104.

[35] Algar 1981, pp. 42-43.

[36] Falk 1982, p. 104.

[37] Makiya 1993, Makiya 2006.