

In "Representations
of the Intellectual"
by Edward Said

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Speaking Truth to Power

to people

I WANT TO continue to look at specialization and professionalism, and how the intellectual confronts the question of power and authority. During the mid-1960s just a short while before opposition to the Vietnamese war became very vocal and widespread, I was approached by an older-looking undergraduate student at Columbia for admission to a seminar with limited enrollment. Part of his line to me was that he was a veteran of the war, having served there in the air force. As we chatted, he provided me with a fascinatingly eerie glimpse into the mentality of the professional—in this case a seasoned pilot—whose vocabulary for his work could be described as “Insidese.” I shall never forget the shock I received when in responding to my insistent question, “What did you actually do in the air force?” he replied, “Target acquisition.” It took me several more minutes to figure out that he was a bombardier whose job it was, well, to bomb, but he had coated it in a professional language that in a certain sense was meant to exclude

and mystify the rather more direct probings of a rank outsider. I did take him into the seminar, by the way—perhaps because I thought I could keep an eye on him and, as an added inducement, persuade him to drop the appalling jargon. “Target acquisition” indeed.

In a more consistent and sustained way, I think, intellectuals who are close to policy formulation and can control patronage of the kind that gives or withholds jobs, stipends, promotions tend to watch out for individuals who do not toe the line professionally and in the eyes of their superiors gradually come to exude an air of controversy and noncooperation. Understandably of course, if you want a job done—let us say that you and your team have to provide the State Department or Foreign Office with a policy paper on Bosnia by next week—you need to surround yourself with people who are loyal, share the same assumptions, speak the same language. I have always felt that for an intellectual who represents the kinds of things I have been discussing in these lectures, being in that sort of professional position, where you are principally serving and winning rewards from power, is not at all conducive to the exercise of that critical and relatively independent spirit of analysis and judgment that, from my point of view, ought to be the intellectual’s contribution. In other words, the intellectual, properly speaking, is not a functionary or an employee completely given up to the policy goals of a government or a large corporation, or even a guild of like-minded professionals. In such situations the temptations to turn off one’s moral sense, or to think entirely from within the specialty, or to curtail skepticism in favor of

conformity are far too great to be trusted. Many intellectuals succumb completely to these temptations, and to some degree all of us do. No one is totally self-supporting, not even the greatest of free spirits.

I have already suggested that as a way of maintaining relative intellectual independence, having the attitude of an amateur instead of a professional is a better course. But let me be practical and personal for a moment. In the first place amateurism means choosing the risks and uncertain results of the public sphere—a lecture or a book or an article in wide and unrestricted circulation—over the insider space controlled by experts and professionals. Several times over the past two years I have been asked by the media to be a paid consultant. This I have refused to do, simply because it meant being confined to one television station or journal, and confined also to the going political language and conceptual framework of that outlet. Similarly I have never had any interest in paid consultancies to or for the government, where you would have no idea of what use your ideas might later be put to. Secondly, delivering knowledge directly for a fee is very different if, on the one hand, a university asks you to give a public lecture or if, on the other, you are asked to speak only to a small and closed circle of officials. That seems very obvious to me, so I have always welcomed university lectures and always turned down the others. And, thirdly, to get more political, whenever I have been asked for help by a Palestinian group, or by a South African university to visit and to speak against apartheid and for academic freedom, I have routinely accepted.

In the end, I am moved by causes and ideas that I can actually choose to support because they conform to values and principles that I believe in. I do not therefore consider myself bound by my professional training in literature, consequently ruling myself out from matters of public policy just because I am only certified to teach modern European and American literature. I speak and write about broader matters because as a rank amateur I am spurred on by commitments that go well beyond my narrow professional career. Of course I make a conscious effort to acquire a new and wider audience for these views, which I never present inside a classroom.

But what are these amateur forays into the public sphere really about? Is the intellectual galvanized into intellectual action by primordial, local, instinctive loyalties—one's race, or people, or religion—or is there some more universal and rational set of principles that can and perhaps do govern how one speaks and writes? In effect I am asking the basic question for the intellectual: how does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?

Unfortunately we must begin to respond by saying that there is no system or method that is broad and certain enough to provide the intellectual with direct answers to these questions. In the secular world—our world, the historical and social world made by human effort—the intellectual has only secular means to work with; revelation and inspiration, while perfectly feasible as modes for understanding in private life, are disasters and even barbaric when put to use by theoretically minded men and women. Indeed I would go so far as saying that the intellectual must

be involved in a lifelong dispute with all the guardians of sacred vision or text, whose depredations are legion and whose heavy hand brooks no disagreement and certainly no diversity. Uncompromising freedom of opinion and expression is the secular intellectual's main bastion: to abandon its defense or to tolerate tamperings with any of its foundations is in effect to betray the intellectual's calling. That is why the defense of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* has been so absolutely central an issue, both for its own sake and for the sake of every other infringement against the right to expression of journalists, novelists, essayists, poets, historians.

And this is not just an issue for those in the Islamic world, but also in the Jewish and Christian worlds too. Freedom of expression cannot be sought invidiously in one territory and ignored in another. For with authorities who claim the secular right to defend divine decree there can be no debate no matter where they are, whereas for the intellectual, tough searching debate is the core of activity, the very stage and setting of what intellectuals without revelation really do. But we are back to square one: what truth and principles should one defend, uphold, represent? This is no Pontius Pilate's question, a way of washing one's hands of a difficult case, but the necessary beginning of a survey of where today the intellectual stands and what a treacherous, uncharted minefield surrounds him or her.

Take as a starting point the whole, by now extremely disputatious matter of objectivity, or accuracy, or facts. In 1988 the American historian Peter Novick published a massive volume whose title dramatized the quandary with

exemplary efficiency. It was called *That Noble Dream*, and subtitled *The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Professor*. Drawing on materials taken from a century of historiographic enterprise in the United States, Novick showed how the very nub of historical investigation—the ideal of objectivity by which a historian seizes the opportunity to render facts as realistically and accurately as possible—gradually evolved into a quagmire of competing claims and counterclaims, all of them wearing down any semblance of agreement by historians as to what objectivity was to the merest fig leaf, and often not even to that. Objectivity has had to do service in wartime as “our,” that is American as opposed to fascist German, truth; in peacetime as the objective truth of each competing separate group—women, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, gays, white men, and on and on—and each school (Marxist, establishment, deconstructionist, cultural). After such a babble of knowledges what possible convergence could there be, Novick asks, and he concludes mournfully that “as a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist. . . . The professor [of history] was as described in the last verse of the Book of Judges: In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”¹

¹Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 628.

As I mentioned in my last lecture, one of the main intellectual activities of our century has been the questioning, not to say undermining, of authority. So to add to Novick's findings we would have to say that not only did a consensus disappear on what constituted objective reality, but a lot of traditional authorities, including God, were in the main swept away. There has even been an influential school of philosophers, among whom Michel Foucault ranks very high, who say that to speak of an author at all (as in “the author of Milton's poems”) is a highly tendentious, not to say ideological, overstatement.

In the face of this quite formidable onslaught, to regress either into hand-wringing impotence or into muscular reassertions of traditional values, as characterized by the global neo-conservative movement, will not do. I think it is true to say that the critique of objectivity and authority did perform a positive service by underlining how, in the secular world, human beings construct their truths, and that, for example, the so-called objective truth of the white man's superiority built and maintained by the classical European colonial empires also rested on a violent subjugation of African and Asian peoples, who, it is equally true, fought that particular imposed “truth” in order to provide an independent order of their own. And so now everyone comes forward with new and often violently opposed views of the world: one hears endless talk about Judeo-Christian values, Afrocentric values, Muslim truths, Eastern truths, Western truths, each providing a complete program for excluding all the others. There is now more intolerance

and strident assertiveness abroad everywhere than any one system can handle.

The result is an almost complete absence of universals, even though very often the rhetoric suggests, for instance, that “our” values (whatever those may happen to be) are in fact universal. One of the shabbiest of all intellectual gambits is to pontificate about abuses in someone else’s society and to excuse exactly the same practices in one’s own. For me the classic example of this is provided by the brilliant nineteenth-century French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville, who, to many of us educated to believe in classical liberal and Western democratic values, exemplified those values almost to the letter. Having written his assessment of democracy in America and having criticized American mistreatment of Indians and black slaves, Tocqueville later had to deal with French colonial policies in Algeria during the late 1830s and 1840s, where under Marshall Bugeaud the French army of occupation undertook a savage war of pacification against the Algerian Muslims. All of a sudden, as one reads Tocqueville on Algeria, the very norms with which he had humanely demurred at American malfeasance are suspended for French actions. Not that he does not cite reasons: he does, but they are lame extenuations whose purpose is to license French colonialism in the name of what he calls national pride. Massacres leave him unmoved; Muslims, he says, belong to an inferior religion and must be disciplined. In short, the apparent universalism of his language for America is denied, willfully denied application to his own country, even

as his own country, France, pursues similarly inhumane policies.²

It must be added, however, that Tocqueville (and John Stuart Mill for that matter, whose commendable ideas about democratic freedoms in England he said did not apply to India) lived during a period when the ideas of a universal norm of international behavior meant in effect the right of European power and European representations of other people to hold sway, so nugatory and secondary did the nonwhite peoples of the world seem. Besides, according to nineteenth-century Westerners, there were no independent African or Asian peoples of consequence to challenge the draconian brutality of laws that were applied unilaterally by colonial armies to black- or brown-skinned races. Their destiny was to be ruled. Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and C. L. R. James—to mention three great anti-imperialist black intellectuals—did not live and write until the twentieth century, so what they and the liberation movements of which they were a part accomplished culturally and politically in establishing the right of colonized peoples to equal treatment was not available to Tocqueville or Mill. But these changed perspectives are available to contemporary intellectuals who have not often drawn the inevitable conclusions, that if you wish to uphold basic human justice you must do so for everyone, not just selectively for the people that your side, your culture, your nation designates as okay.

²I have discussed the imperial context of this in detail in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 169–90.

The fundamental problem is therefore how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society, and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, peoples. This can never be done simply by asserting one's preference for what is already one's own: tub-thumping about the glories of "our" culture or the triumphs of "our" history is not worthy of the intellectual's energy, especially not today when so many societies are comprised of different races and backgrounds as to resist any reductive formulas. As I have tried to show here, the public realm in which intellectuals make their representations is extremely complex and contains uncomfortable features, but the meaning of an effective intervention in that realm has to rest on the intellectual's unbudgeable conviction in a concept of justice and fairness that allows for differences between nations and individuals, without at the same time assigning them to hidden hierarchies, preferences, evaluations. Everyone today professes a liberal language of equality and harmony for all. The problem for the intellectual is to bring these notions to bear on actual situations where the gap between the profession of equality and justice, on the one hand, and the rather less edifying reality, on the other, is very great.

This is most easily demonstrated in international relations, which is the reason I have stressed them so much in these lectures. A couple of recent examples illustrate what I have in mind. During the period just after Iraq's illegal invasion of Kuwait public discussion in the West justly focused on the unacceptability of the aggression which with extreme brutality sought to eliminate Kuwaiti

existence. And as it became clear that the American intention was in fact to use military force against Iraq, the public rhetoric encouraged processes at the United Nations that would ensure the passage of resolutions—based on the UN charter—demanding sanctions and the possible use of force against Iraq. Of the few intellectuals who opposed both the Iraqi invasion and the subsequent use of largely American force in Operation Desert Storm, none to my knowledge cited any evidence or made any attempt actually to excuse Iraq for its invasion.

But what was correctly remarked at the time was how considerably weakened the American case against Iraq became when the Bush administration with its enormous power pressed the UN forward towards war, ignoring the numerous possibilities of a negotiated reversal of the occupation before January 15 when the counteroffensive began, and refused to discuss other UN resolutions on other illegal occupations and invasions of territory that had involved the United States itself or some of its close allies. Of course the real issue in the Gulf so far as the U.S. was concerned was oil and strategic power, not the Bush administration's professed principles, but what compromised intellectual discussion throughout the country, in its reiterations of the inadmissibility of land unilaterally acquired by force, was the absence of universal application of the idea. What never seemed relevant to the many American intellectuals who supported the war was that the U.S. itself had just recently invaded and for a time occupied the sovereign state of Panama. Surely if one criticized Iraq, it therefore followed that the U.S. deserved the same

criticism? But no: "our" motives were higher, Saddam was a Hitler, whereas "we" were moved by largely altruistic and disinterested motives, and therefore this was a just war.

Or consider the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, equally wrong and equally condemnable. But U.S. allies such as Israel and Turkey had illegally occupied territories before the Russians moved into Afghanistan. Similarly, another U.S. ally, Indonesia, massacred literally hundreds of thousands of Timorese in an illegal invasion during the middle 1970s; there is evidence to show that the U.S. knew about and supported the horrors of the East Timor war, but few intellectuals in the U.S., busy as always with the crimes of the Soviet Union, said much about that.³ And looming back in time was the enormous American invasion of Indochina, with results in sheer destructiveness wreaked on small, mainly peasant societies that are staggering. The principle here seems to have been that professional experts on U.S. foreign and military policy should confine their attention to winning a war against the other superpower and its surrogates in Vietnam or Afghanistan, and our own misdeeds be damned. Such are the ways of *realpolitik*.

Certainly they are, but my point would be that for the contemporary intellectual living at a time that is already confused by the disappearance of what seem to have been objective moral norms and sensible authority, is it accept-

³For an account of these dubious intellectual procedures, see Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

able simply either blindly to support the behavior of one's own country and overlook its crimes or to say rather surlily, "I believe they all do it, and that's the way of the world"? What we must be able to say instead is that intellectuals are not professionals denatured by their fawning service to an extremely flawed power, but—to repeat—are *intellectuals* with an alternative and more principled stand that enables them in effect to speak the truth to power.

By that I do not mean here some Old Testament-like thunderings, proclaiming everyone to be sinful and basically evil. I mean something much more modest and a great deal more effective. To speak of consistency in upholding standards of international behavior and the support of human rights is not to look inwards for a guiding light supplied to one by inspiration or prophetic intuition. Most, if not all, countries in the world are signatories to a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed in 1948, reaffirmed by every new member state of the UN. There are equally solemn conventions on the rules of war, on treatment of prisoners, on the rights of workers, women, children, immigrants and refugees. None of these documents says anything about *disqualified* or less equal races or peoples. All are entitled to the same freedoms.⁴ Of course these rights are violated on a daily basis, as the genocide in Bosnia today bears witness. For an

⁴A fuller version of this argument is to be found in my "Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation" in *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1992*, ed. Barbara Johnson (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 175–205.

American or Egyptian or Chinese government official these rights are at best looked at "practically," not consistently. But such are the norms of power, which are precisely not those of the intellectual, whose role is at very least to apply the same standards and norms of behavior now already collectively accepted on paper by the entire international community.

Of course there are questions of patriotism and loyalty to one's people. And of course the intellectual is not an uncomplicated automaton, hurling mathematically devised laws and rules across the board. And of course fear and the normal limitations on one's time and attention and capacity as an individual voice operate with fearsome efficiency. But whereas we are right to bewail the disappearance of a consensus on what constitutes objectivity, we are not by the same token completely adrift in self-indulgent subjectivity. Taking refuge inside a profession or nationality (I have already said) is only taking refuge; it is not answer to the goads all of us receive just by reading the morning's news.

No one can speak up all the time on all the issues. But, I believe, there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorized powers of one's own society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised in a manifestly disproportionate and immoral war, or in a deliberate program of discrimination, repression, and collective cruelty. As I said in my second lecture, all of us live inside national borders, we use national languages, we address (most of the time) our national communities. For an intellectual who lives in America,

there is a reality to be faced, namely that our country is first of all an extremely diverse immigrant society, with fantastic resources and accomplishments, but it also contains a redoubtable set of internal inequities and external interventions that cannot be ignored. While I cannot speak for intellectuals elsewhere, surely the basic point remains pertinent, with the difference that in other countries the state in question is not a global power like the United States.

In all these instances, the intellectual meaning of a situation is arrived at by comparing the known and available facts with a norm, also known and available. This is not an easy task, since documentation, research, probings are required in order to get beyond the usually piecemeal, fragmentary and necessarily flawed way in which information is presented. But in most cases it is possible, I believe, to ascertain whether in fact a massacre was committed or an official cover-up produced. The first imperative is to find out what occurred and then why, not as isolated events but as part of an unfolding history whose broad contours include one's own nation as an actor. The incoherence of the standard foreign policy analysis performed by apologists, strategists and planners is that it concentrates on others as the objects of a situation, rarely on "our" involvement and what it wrought. Even more rarely is it compared to a moral norm.

The goal of speaking the truth is, in so administered a mass society as ours, mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles—peace, reconciliation, abatement

of suffering—applied to the known facts. This has been called *abduction* by the American pragmatist philosopher C. S. Peirce, and has been used effectively by the celebrated contemporary intellectual Noam Chomsky.⁵ Certainly in writing and speaking, one's aim is not to show everyone how right one is but rather to try to induce a change in the moral climate whereby aggression is seen as such, the unjust punishment of peoples or individuals is either prevented or given up, the recognition of rights and democratic freedoms is established as a norm for everyone, not invidiously for a select few. Admittedly, however, these are idealistic and often unrealizable aims; and in a sense they are not as immediately relevant to my subject here as the intellectual's individual performance, as I have been saying, when more often than not the tendency is to back away or simply to toe the line.

Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to

⁵Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 90–99.

get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship.

For an intellectual these habits of mind are corrupting *par excellence*. If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits. Personally I have encountered them in one of the toughest of all contemporary issues, Palestine, where fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history has hobbled, blinkered, muzzled many who know the truth and are in a position to serve it. For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate intellectual. This has been even more true as a result of the Oslo Declaration of Principles signed on September 13, 1993, between the PLO and Israel. The great euphoria produced by this extremely limited breakthrough obscured the fact that far from guaranteeing Palestinian rights, the document in effect guaranteed the prolongation of Israeli control over the Occupied Territories. To criticize this meant in effect taking a position against “hope” and “peace.”⁶

And finally a word about the mode of intellectual intervention. The intellectual does not climb a mountain or pulpit and declaim from the heights. Obviously you want to speak your piece where it can be heard best; and also you want it represented in such a way as to influence with

⁶See my article “The Morning After,” *London Review of Books*, 21 October 1993, volume 15, no. 20, 3–5.

an ongoing and actual process, for instance, the cause of peace and justice. Yes, the intellectual's voice is lonely, but it has resonance only because it associates itself freely with the reality of a movement, the aspirations of a people, the common pursuit of a shared ideal. Opportunism dictates that in the West, much given to full-scale critiques of, for instance, Palestinian terror or immoderation, you denounce them soundly, and then go on to praise Israeli democracy. Then you must say something good about peace. Intellectual responsibility of course dictates that you must say all those things to Palestinians, but that you make your main point in New York, in Paris, in London around the issue which in those places you can most affect, by promoting the idea of Palestinian freedom and the freedom from terror and extremism of *all* concerned, not just the weakest and most easily bashed party.

Speaking the truth to power is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change.



Gods That Always Fail

HE WAS A brilliantly eloquent and charismatic Iranian intellectual whom I was first introduced to in the West sometime in 1978. A writer and teacher of considerable accomplishment and learning, he played a significant role in spreading knowledge of the Shah's unpopular rule, and later that same year of the new figures who were soon to come to power in Teheran. He spoke respectfully of Imam Khomeini at the time, and was soon to become visibly associated with the relatively young men around Khomeini who were of course Muslim but assuredly not militant Islamists, men like Abol Hassan Bani Sadr and Sadek Ghotbzadeh.

A few weeks after the Islamic revolution of Iran had consolidated power inside the country, my acquaintance (who had gone back to Iran for the new government's installation) returned to the West as an ambassador to an important metropolitan center. I recall attending and once or twice participating with him on panels on the Middle