

SPECIAL SECTION
Mahdi Amel Reading Edward Said
Reading Marx

Introduction

Mahdi Amel Reading Edward Said Reading Marx

NADIA BOU ALI

ABSTRACT This roundtable revolves around the translation of selections from Amel's book *Is the Heart for the East and Reason for the West? On Edward Said's Marx in "Orientalism,"* published in Arabic in 1986. The importance of bringing this Arabic text to an English and global readership is twofold: it sheds light on the work of an influential and widely read Arabic critical social theorist and philosopher; and the translation of this critical theoretical work from "the margin" opens up central epistemological and conceptual problems in Marxist theory and its relation to postcolonialism in the present. The work of translation here does not simply involve introducing a marginal novelty into mainstream critical theory; rather it is a process of exhuming the elements that are untranslatable in the text—that is, the conceptual problems that have universal implications from within the particular site of their articulation.

KEYWORDS Karl Marx, Edward Said, postcolonialism, Arabic thought, Mahdi Amel

After the translation of Edward Said's *Orientalism* into Arabic in 1981, Mahdi Amel (1936–1987) wrote a book-length response to Said's reading of Marx's writing on the "Eastern question." This roundtable revolves around the translation of selections from Amel's book *Is the Heart for the East and Reason for the West? On Edward Said's Marx in "Orientalism,"* published in Arabic in 1986. The importance of bringing this Arabic text to an English and global readership is twofold: it sheds light on the work of an influential and widely read Arabic critical social theorist and philosopher; and the translation of this critical theoretical work from "the margin" opens up central epistemological and conceptual problems in Marxist theory and its relation to postcolonialism in the present. The work of translation here does not simply involve introducing a marginal novelty into mainstream critical theory; rather it is a process of exhuming the elements that are untranslatable in the text—that is, the conceptual problems that have universal implications from within the particular site of their articulation. Universality emerges from the deadlocks within any

CRITICAL TIMES | 4:3 | DECEMBER 2021

DOI 10.1215/26410478-9355225 | © 2021 Nadia Bou Ali

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

particular position; the impasse in the particular is a springboard for the universal. Amel's entire work is concerned with articulating a universalist stance despite and against the singular modes of production in the postcolonial world. In this text, Amel critically interrogates Said's reading of Marx in order to argue for the need for a different reading, one that does not shore up a liberal politics of recognition or a bourgeois account of culture. Said's critique hinges on Marx's misrecognition of the human plight of the "Oriental" in his account of the brutality of colonization. Said sees Marx's position on colonialism in India as representative of Western Orientalist thought: the terms "Oriental" and "Asiatic mode of production" are complicit with the logic of silencing the subaltern encapsulated in the claim, repeated in *Orientalism's* first epigraph, that "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."¹ In Said's appraisal, Marxism is morally culpable for not denouncing the suffering of the people of the Orient. Said reads Marx's invocation of Goethe in describing the scene of colonization as "Romantic and even messianic: as human material the Orient is less important." The Orient is the site of a romantic fantasy rather than the site of a tragic unfolding of a revolutionary trajectory. Said's quote from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* overlooks the fact that the object of Marx's critique in this context was parliamentary democracy and its politics of representation that crucially disavow the hole or gap that makes any system of representation possible. The tragic unfolding of history and its "stuckness" in a repetition compulsion that oscillates between nation, state, and capital preoccupied Marx. Amel in a sense inherits Marx's concern, and he dedicates his works to elaborating on the mode of sectarian representation in postcolonial Lebanon.

Amel questions Said's understanding of culture (*al-thaqafa*) as a construct or a discourse devoid of any further determinations particular to capitalist global dynamics. Against Said's humanist reading, Amel argues for a historical materialist account of thought that grounds it in class society. For Amel, Orientalism may be a discourse, but it is one that pertains to the European bourgeoisie in particular; it is a fantasy of an Other to the Western democratic bourgeoisie. Amel interrogates Said's Foucauldian account of Orientalism as a discourse, and he argues for a dialectical conception of "thought" against poststructuralist accounts of "discourse." Even more crucially, Amel argues that Said's understanding of "Orientalism" as a discourse of power based on a regime of Western knowledge production reifies a bourgeois understanding of knowledge production that relies on the model of the individual thinker who expresses a collective culture. This is to say that Said offers an account of discourse as a process of transformation of individual experiences into predetermined, transcendent structures of experience that are collective. Amel claims that this model of knowledge, which he calls "structuralist," implies the impossibility of producing new knowledges or criticizing existing ones. It thereby obfuscates Marx's critical position and presents it as just another moment

in a prevalent discourse of Orientalism. Such structuralism cannot but lapse into a Nietzschean nihilism incapable of accounting for the emergence of truth and non-ideological knowledge.

Amel raises the following questions: how to formulate a critique of regimes of knowledge production that not only recognizes the power of discursive formations but is also able to articulate a politics for a nonliberal and nonreligious or non-communal collective entity? How to safeguard a position for critique of regimes of knowledge production that is not solely organized around the questions of representation and identity and that can work beyond the bourgeois binary of individual and society? Amel proposes that *fikr* (thought) is irreducible to discourse and that critical enunciation is also irreducible to *ta'wil* (discourse). This roundtable brings together a group of scholars who are concerned with working through the contemporary ramifications of the unresolved issues confronted by Amel and Said.

NADIA BOU ALI is associate professor and director of the Civilization Studies Program at the American University in Beirut. Her research interests are intellectual history, psychoanalysis, and critical theory. She has coedited the book *Lacan contra Foucault* (2019) and published the book *Psychoanalysis and the Love of Arabic* (2020).

Note

1. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 187, quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, xii.

Works Cited

- Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 11:99–197. New York: International, 1979.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.