

# Mahdi Amel on Edward Said

## Mechanisms of Expansion in the Reproduction of Knowledge and Capital

ZIAD KIBLAWI

Mahdi Amel's *Is the Heart for the East and Reason for the West? On Marx in Edward Said's "Orientalism"* first appeared in article form in Mahmoud Darwish's journal *al-Karmel* in October of 1982 and then in the journal *al-Tarik*'s third and final issue in 1982.<sup>1</sup> The leftist bimonthly *al-Tarik* was forced to take a six-month hiatus due to the June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut, which lasted until October of the same year. Amel's text, originally titled *Marx in Edward Said's "Orientalism": Is Reason for the West and the Heart for the East?*, appeared after the issue's opening dossier, "On Resisting the Israeli Occupation," which addressed the recent events, and before the issue's second dossier on racism in the "human sciences." Far from a fortuitous accident, the article's placement echoes Amel's assertion that the danger of the idealist tendency in structuralist thought lies not only in its racism but in its repressive, imperialist character. "Perhaps [Sartre] was right," Amel concludes the book, uncharacteristically entertaining Sartre's accusation that structuralism was the latest form of imperialist bourgeois ideology.<sup>2</sup> In this commentary, I will locate this text within Amel's project in general and in his theoretical treatment of the production of knowledge and its material effects in particular.

Amel accuses Said of disregarding the reality of thought and the political determinations of class struggle and contradiction (chapters 1 and 2), and consequently claiming that the essence of the "Orient" could only be apprehended through the heart (chapter 3). By confusing Marx with Goethe and misreading Marx's claims on history (chapter 4), Said reduces the materialist conception of an objective historical movement to a theological one anchored in messianic redemption (chapter 5), thus self-Orientalizing and provincializing thought by restoring

bourgeois theoretical ideologies through anthropological dualisms and the category of the subject (chapter 6). Additionally, in upholding the primacy of individual or collective thought in the place of a topographical theoretical structure permeated by class struggle (chapter 7), Said reduces theoretical practice to representational discourse, whose “raw material” (in this case, pre-discursive or pre-linguistic objects) is sensuous experience instead of existing generalized—ideological as well as nonideological—knowledge (chapter 8). Because cultural structuralism is unable to recognize the orders of knowledge or the revolutionary breaks with existing structures that constitute new ones, it totalizes what it empirically assimilates to preexisting generalized discursive systems (chapters 9 and 10). Amel compares the process of theoretical production to a mode of production of knowledge and points to a homology between social formations and thought structures. By temporalizing the process of knowledge production, Amel draws a parallel between the mechanism of reproduction of dominant knowledge undertaken by this logic and capital’s mechanism of reproduction. Amel concludes by identifying this totalizing drive for infinite expansion in the domain of knowledge and social relations with imperialism (chapter 11).

The five translated chapters (1, 2, 3, 4, and 7) serve a polemical role; they represent Amel’s practical designation of a problem in Said’s reading of Marx that Amel had to pose and that he resolved, admittedly to a questionable degree of success. The remaining chapters, however, are dedicated to explaining the mechanism underpinning Said’s reading of Marx. In brief, while the aforementioned chapters discuss “cultural structuralism’s” theoretical effects, the rest discuss its practical effects. Amel is infamous for “bending the stick”<sup>3</sup> in his writings, often producing “lessons” in reading that vacillated between theoreticism and practicicism. He nevertheless remained wary of philosophy’s ability to think or prescribe politics.<sup>4</sup> The iconoclasm characteristic of his often obtuse ideological practice has given rise to contextualist and historicist interpretations of his encounter with Said. These tend to displace Amel’s theoretical and political stakes. Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* is seen as an organon of a nascent postcolonial criticism, and it is credited with having fractured the grounds of materialist thought in the so-called periphery. Such claims, which reduce the debates to a series of topical stances independent of their analytical grounds, risk obfuscating their critical objects. More importantly, *Orientalism*’s apparent lack of critical purchase for intellectuals in the non-West cannot be reduced to its lack of political wherewithal or its response to the strategic imperative of searching for an operationalizable politics during the war. As I will show, Amel’s rejection of Said’s thesis was not made on the grounds of *Orientalism*’s inability to constitute a political project; rather, it was on the grounds of Said’s inability to recognize transformations in knowledge—an inability whose material effects tended to totalize the theoretical field. In this text, the determination of

politics is not absent. It is present in the last instance and relates to the metaphor of drawing lines of demarcation in ideological as well as nonideological knowledge. Eight years before the publication of *Orientalism*, Amel wrote the following on Orientalists such as Cromer, Renan, and Goethe: “We came to know our history through the distorted history [of Orientalists], so we had to go back and write it, not to make it beautiful, but to establish a line of demarcation between correctness and incorrectness, and science alone is this limit.”<sup>5</sup>

Amel’s intellectual development, which began in 1950s Lebanon, was heavily influenced by existentialist Marxism<sup>6</sup> before his theoretical formation in Lyon, France, and Constantine, Algeria.<sup>7</sup> It could be said that Amel’s formation was the result of the conjuncture of Bachelardian historical epistemology, a widespread Althusser effect, and Algerian anticolonialism (and more importantly Algeria’s failed independence). Amel’s doctoral dissertation was premised on the rejection of (Western) representation and sought to “Marxify” the existentialist “project.” In its introduction, Amel highlighted the need to eventually break with “Western modes of thought” as well as with Western and Soviet Marxism, which had become the sites of an inescapable “occidental exile.”<sup>8</sup> In effect, Amel recognized the difficulty of commensurating two experiences of time (imperial and capitalist, on the one hand, and underdeveloped and decolonized, on the other) outside a phenomenological and existentialist problematic, which connects the (subjective) experience of time to historical time or resorts to metaphysics. The dissertation undertook a double dislocation: building on Louis Althusser’s symptomatic reading of Marx in the first section, Amel sought to dislocate the figure of the subject in the existentialist effort to think of the conditions of possibility of the decolonized as agents *in* (not of) history. This double dislocation effectively decenters the figure of the individual human subject as the center of history in Sartre and makes it possible to reread (the science of) history in Marx in order to allow for the study of the relationship, at once of totalization and of differentiation, between capitalist and “underdeveloped” countries. While Amel soon distanced himself from existentialism, the development of Althusser’s study of conjunctures and social formations proved challenging to parse in a context of national liberation. The difficulty incurred by Amel’s marriage of *structure* and *becoming* in his dissertation remain present as an internal antagonism in his concept of the “colonial mode of production,” well after he broke from his Sartrean moorings.

The Arab-Israeli war of June 1967 was a watershed moment within intellectual circles in Lebanon and the Arab world: it led to a widespread disenchantment with Marxism—accentuated further by the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90)—and the resurgence of culturalist discourses of Arab authenticity and nativist claims of Islamic fundamentalism. While many intellectuals began a process of self-critique by making Arab thought and society the object of their critiques, the prevailing

discourse shifted to one of developmentalist civilizational discourses centered on “Arab underdevelopment,” understood not only in terms of the economy but also in terms of a lagging “Arab mind.” Amel positioned himself against this discourse: he denied that the cause of these problems could be a result of linear history, or alternatively that it could be traced back to an original cause (the colonial relation).<sup>9</sup> Instead, he sought to study ex-colonized social formations through the mechanisms (re)producing them as determinate societies. Amel’s reformulation of *structural causality* as a causality governing different extimate (imperial and colonial) structures made it possible for him to think the relation of uneven development between social formations as well as theoretical apparatuses across different structures of capitalist production.<sup>10</sup> Amel’s research on the “constitution” of history was not invested in producing an alternate modernity or historical reality but in coming to know modernity’s mechanisms, and he made the mechanisms of the procession of history the object of his scientific practice. His interest in the notion of “underdevelopment,” as a historical effect of colonialism, gradually disappeared into his concept of the “colonial mode of production” (which was later reformulated as a “colonial form” of the capitalist mode of production).<sup>11</sup>

Amel’s theory of the mode of production builds on Althusser’s own work on the mode of production, with several key differences pertaining to politics and reproduction, which are of relevance to this text. First, the primary antagonism in social formation for Amel is always the dominant political contradiction, which has ideological, economic, and political levels but cannot be replaced by them. The principal economic contradiction exists in history outside of the social formation and is determinant of the mode of production and the form of class struggle. The political contradiction of a social formation has multiple relatively autonomous levels, which correspond to different social practices (ideological, economic, and political). Whereas each of these social practices for Althusser corresponds to its own temporality, for Amel, social practices share the same temporality of the social formation. It is the social formation, rather than the practices, that has multiple temporalities (formation, reproduction, and rupture). For Amel, the place of politics, and therefore struggle, is the blind spot of structuralist thought—contradiction in Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas, and transition in Étienne Balibar—which, for Amel, makes structuralism incapable of thinking anything other than reproduction. Most curiously, Amel reproduces the claim previously made against Althusser’s mode of production and Balibar’s work on transition, in the theoretical mode of production underlying Said’s reading and its recognition of transformations in knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

In the eighth chapter of his text, “On the Knowledge Production Process,” Amel considers the critical purchase of his detour through Said’s work, a detour that took the place of a direct engagement with the empiricist tendency of struc-

turalism present in Foucault. He concludes by insisting that it is more efficacious to critique this tendency's effects on the ideological struggle within the Arab world; that is, the interpretation of Marxist thought by Said and the portrayal of Marx's position on the East. Said's position on that moment's historical reality in countries with national liberation movements was symptomatic of the dominant ideological knowledge effects.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere Amel singles out a statement by Said that diagnosed a generalized wariness of "radical intellectuals [from our Arab world—M. A.] whose Marxism is taken wholesale from Marx's own homogenizing view of the Third World."<sup>14</sup> Amel problematizes this statement for two reasons. First, for its replacement of the "Orient" with "Third World," where he argues that Said transposes the past (the object of Marx's critique) onto the present. Second, for enlisting this transposition in an ongoing ideological struggle between revolutionary thought and bourgeois thought. The danger, however, is in the practical effects on Marxist thought of the introduction of an imaginary East/West dualism and, more importantly, to the categories of "self" and "Other." Amel claims that the sleight-of-hand characteristic of this "counter-revolutionary ideological weapon" conceals its determinate theoretical ideology. Its aim is to negate Marxist thought not on the grounds of its scientificity or lack thereof, but by identifying it with the West, or "Other."<sup>15</sup> Amel's implicit assertion is that Said's own theory reinforces a minimal designation of a singularized subject-form that is totalized within the dominant discourse.

Amel rejected the simple Manichean contradiction between imperialists and the colonized, which flattens the real, tragic process of history. Instead, the imperialists for him serve as the instruments of history's procession, in a theater without an author.<sup>16</sup> Later in the text, Amel clarifies that while Marx is not immune to Orientalist discourse—and may have succumbed to it in other parts of his work—the statements provided by Said on the British rule in India cannot be deemed Orientalist. For Amel, Said was committed to a naive assumption in denying the "objective law" of historical necessity<sup>17</sup> and, consequently, affording imperialist powers the status of writing and directing an otherwise authorless theater but also foreclosing the ability to reflect on the mechanism producing these effects. It must be noted that while Amel sought to "specify" the concepts of historical materialism, he nevertheless rejected the particularization of Marxism into "Arab Marxism." While he did write under the aegis of Marxism-Leninism, this was safeguarded in his view by an objective science. In other words, it sought to "appropriate the world"—without speculating on a subjectivity of knowledge—through theoretical practice.<sup>18</sup> The real danger for Amel was not Said's replacement of Marx's historical materialist question with an ethical one<sup>19</sup> but the implications of Said's "sensualism."<sup>20</sup> In particular, Amel objects to Said's denunciation of Marx's replacement of "existential human identities" with "abstract generalities."<sup>21</sup> On this account, Amel

finds Said guilty of seeking to “disarm thought engaged in the struggle of producing knowledge on the science of history” or the struggle of “deducing the theoretical tools capable of discovering historical laws and formulating them scientifically.”

*Is the Heart for the East and Reason for the West?* was Amel’s intervention in the spontaneous ideology of *Orientalism*’s machine of interpreting culture; it did not belong within Said’s Weltanschauung. Amel’s critique of Said’s “cultural structuralism” is more than an obdurate defense of Marx or a castigation of Said’s postcolonialism. *Orientalism*’s dominant function, Amel contends, obfuscates the question of knowledge of the object by identifying it with the real object. For Amel, Marx’s scientific knowledge, or any scientific object, can only be appraised as a scientific knowledge—a relation that Said’s discursive analysis cannot maintain. More importantly, his central argument concerns the mechanisms enabling Said’s *Orientalism* to appropriate empirically what idealism and its various theoretical ideologies—humanism, existentialism, structuralism, and so on—always already generalizes speculatively. This displacement is a theoretical effect that manifests practical effects in real struggle: the displacement of the struggle of tendencies in the history of the production of knowledge. It, therefore, institutes a new relation to culture—not merely consumption or appropriation, but reproduction.

---

**ZIAD KIBLAWI** is pursuing a DPhil in history at the University of Oxford. His extended graduate thesis at the American University of Beirut, “Reading, Repeating, and Working Through: On Mahdi Amel’s Theoretical Practice,” examines Amel’s theoretical and political writings, which remain largely untranslated in the English language. Parts of this research project have been presented in seminars and conferences and are currently being prepared for publication. He is a historian and translator of Arab intellectual thought and an archival consultant specializing in modern Arab art. His research interests include the historiography of modern thought, critical theory, and modern art in the Middle East.

#### Notes

1. Amel, “Marx fi istishrāq Edward Said” (*Al-Karmel*); Amel, “Marx fi istishrāq Edward Said” (*Al-Tarik*).
2. Amel, *Hal al-qalb li-l-sharq*, 91.
3. See Louis Althusser’s discussion of the Leninist ideological practice of “bending the stick” to level the field, *Essays*, 171.
4. Amel rejected the notion of an identity between theoretical and political practice. See the introduction in Amel, “Al-Mumārāsa al-nazariyya.”
5. Amel, “Ba‘ḍ al-afkār,” 38–39; my translation.
6. Hamdan, *L’homme aux sandales de feu*, 158.
7. Amel’s doctoral dissertation, “Praxis et projet: Essai sur la constitution de l’histoire,” was completed in 1967 under the supervision of French phenomenologist Henri Maldiney and the direction of professor of Islamic studies Roger Arnaldez and philosopher of science François Dagognet. Along with Dominique Lecourt and Michel Foucault, Dagognet was a

- student of Georges Canguilhem. Part of the dissertation's introduction was published in Arabic in *Al-Tarikh* 78, no. 28–29.
8. Amel, "Praxis et projet," 51–52.
  9. See Amel, *Azmat al-ḥadāra*. For a discussion of the three seminal conferences on this subject, see Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*.
  10. See the respective first chapters of "Fī al-Tanāquḍ" ("On Contradiction") and "Fī Namaṭ al-Intāj al-Kūlūnyālī" ("On the Colonial Mode of Production") in Amel, *Muqaddimāt naẓariyya*.
  11. See Nadia Bou Ali's critical assessment of Mahdi Amel's concept of the colonial mode of production in Bou Ali, "Mahdi Amel."
  12. This formulation can be found in Amel's posthumously published unfinished manuscript of his theoretical trilogy's third part, *On the Periodization of History*. See Amel, *Fī tamarḥul al-tārīkh*, 52–79.
  13. It is worth noting that while Amel locates Said within the Foucauldian camp, Amel distinguishes between the two. Reservations notwithstanding, Amel argues that Foucault's "cultural structuralism" does not deny the existence (and the difference) of "orders of knowledge" since his work was developed precisely for their study. Said, on the other hand, is seen to take Foucault's theory to its extremes not by denying the existence of nonideological knowledge (consequently, scientific knowledge) but by reducing all knowledge to representation, whose difference is discernable quantitatively.
  14. Said, *Orientalism*, 325, quoted in Amel, *Hal al-qalb*, 53. The note in brackets is Amel's addition.
  15. Amel, *Hal al-qalb*, 51.
  16. Amel, "Fī al-masrah al-siyāsī."
  17. Moreover, Amel argues that Marx is not immune from slipping into Orientalist discourse but that he could not be accused of doing so based on this statement. Amel, *Hal al-qalb*, 44–47.
  18. Amel summarized his incomplete theoretical trilogy's model of production in these terms:
    - 1—The process of producing scientific knowledge on:
      - i. The mechanism of colonial development of capitalism in Arab societies.
      - ii. The mechanism of class struggle specific to this development; or the development of the mechanism of national liberation that is the form of class struggle in this historically specific form of capitalism.
    - 2—The process of producing the scientific tools to produce this knowledge. (Amel, *Muqaddimāt naẓariyya*, 13)
  19. Amel, *Hal al-qalb*, 40.
  20. Amel, *Hal al-qalb*, 86.
  21. Said, *Orientalism*, 154–55.

### Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. *Essays in Self-Criticism*. Translated by Grahame Lock. London: NLB, 1976.
- Amel, Mahdi. "Al-Mumārāsa al-naẓariyya wa-l-mumārāsa al-siyāsīyya." In *Al-Naẓariyya fī al-mumārāsa al-siyāsīyya: Baḥṭh fī asbāb al-ḥarb al-ahlīyya fī Lubnān*, 3rd ed., 11–22. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1990.
- Amel, Mahdi. *Azmat al-ḥadāra al-ʿarabīyya am azmat al-burjuwāzīyāt al-ʿarabīyya*. 5th ed. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1987.
- Amel, Mahdi. "Baʿḍ al-afkār ḥawl kitāb 'Tarīkh al-ḥaraka al-ishtirākīyya fī Misr.'" *Al-Tariq* 31, no. 10 (1972): 36–56.

- Amel, Mahdi. "Fī al-masraḥ al-siyāsī." *Al-Tariq* 32, no. 4 (1973): 129–41.
- Amel, Mahdi. *Fī tamarḥul al-tārīkh: Makhṭūṭa*. 2nd ed. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013.
- Amel, Mahdi. *Hal al-qalb li-l-sharq wa-l-‘aql li-l-gharb? Marx fi istishrāq Edward Said*. 4th ed. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2018.
- Amel, Mahdi. "Marx fi istishrāq Edward Said: Hal al-‘aql li-l-gharb wa-l-qalb li-l-sharq?" *Al-Karmel*, no. 6 (1982): 35–67.
- Amel, Mahdi. "Marx fi istishrāq Edward Said: Hal al-‘aql li-l-gharb wa-l-qalb li-l-sharq?" *Al-Tarik* 41, no. 3 (1982): 91–129.
- Amel, Mahdi. *Muqaddimāt nazariyya li-dirāsāt athar al-fikr al-ishtirākī fī ḥarakat al-ṭaḥarrur al-waṭanī*. 7th ed. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013.
- Amel, Mahdi [Hamdan, Hassan]. "Praxis et projet: Essai sur la constitution de l’histoire," translated by Abdallah M. Ghattas. *Al-Tarik* 78, no. 28–29 (2019): 47–58.
- Bou Ali, Nadia. "Mahdi Amel’s Colonial Mode of Production and Politics in the Last Instance." *Critical Historical Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020): 241–69. doi.org/10.1086/710800.
- Hamdan, Evelyne. *L’homme aux sandales de feu*. Translated by Roula Zoubiane. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2018.
- Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.