

6. TRAVELING THEORY AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

Orientalism in the Age of the Islamic Revolution

I speak of “occidentosis” as of tuberculosis. But perhaps it more closely resembles an infestation of weevils. Have you seen how they attack wheat? From the inside. The bran remains intact, but it is just a shell, like a cocoon left behind on a tree.

—JALAL AL-E AHMAD

Our culture was felt to be of a lower grade.

—EDWARD SAID

My dear friends, you should know that the danger from the communist powers is not less than America. . . . Both superpowers have risen for the obliteration of the oppressed nations and we should support the oppressed people of the world.

—AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI

In the span of a few years (1972–76), as he confronted organizational crises at the heart of the OICAL he helped found (1970–), militant setbacks (1972–73), and the eruption of fighting (1975–), Waddah Charara attempted to take stock of the fast-paced unfolding of events he took part in, and observed, in a politically saturated, polarized society. Leaning on theoretical resources from the Marxist tradition Charara’s works from that period called into question the Left’s theories of the workings of capitalism and sectarianism in Lebanon. In his late militant years (1973–75) Charara’s populist Maoism first turned “backwardness into an advantage” by celebrating the revolutionary potential of the masses as they are, enmeshed in their communal forms of solidarity in their neighborhoods, outside of an imaginary idea of the “factory worker” devoid of attachments.¹ He attempted to resolve the militant’s conundrum by stretching the notion of class struggle so that it encompasses communal solidarities while acknowledging how including these forms redefines the notion, foreclosing the possibility of emancipatory teleology. Second, it showed the founding paradox at the heart of modern Lebanon, by underscoring how sectarianism is a modern outcome of nineteenth-century Maronite peasants’ struggle against their lords.

Both these accounts celebrate and highlight the primacy of political practice from below and, in *Origins of Sectarian Lebanon*, its capacity to fashion subjectivities and new military, economic, and political forms of organization. The autonomy of the political, and of the masses' own initiatives, were advanced as an internal, minoritarian, oppositional argument against top-down organizational forms, and against vanguardist and instrumental political practices. It also targeted a common Marxist theoretical trope that takes the form of designating the agent, for example, capitalism or the Palestinian revolution, that will get rid of difference—sectarianism as a brake on revolutionary politics—and pave the way for a “difference-free” emancipatory political practice. After the outbreak of the fighting, he underlined again the poverty of social and political theory in accounting for the logics of power, and the forms of violence, at work during civil wars.² Ibn Khaldun's accounts of fusion and subjugation supplemented Mao's and Gramsci's emphasis on the political and the operations of hegemony. Charara moved from a celebration of the autonomy of the political will of the masses against a vanguardist Marxism to the practical realization of the structural primacy of the social fabric over the political and the ideological. This last move foreclosed the hope of an emancipation-to-come. Political practice no longer made History. It became hostage of the social fabric's structural times of repetition.

Charara inhabited an impossible position that did not easily align itself with the axes of theoretical and political positioning either in Arab cultural spheres or in the Western academy. It was an anti-anti-imperialist political position that articulated an immanent critique of communal politics—and adopted a genealogical approach to the history of Arab societies and discourses while leaning on their own theoretical resources—coupled with a muted attachment to a horizon of emancipation from the communal logics of subjugation. It was, at one and the same time, *politically* critical of the Left and subsequent Islamist militant anti-imperialist forces, *theoretically* Arab-Islamic, and *normatively* attached to an overcoming of the permanent civil wars produced by the logics of subjugation. Charara's impossible position will be at odds with the anti-imperialism of diasporic thinkers, like Edward Said, who subjected the West's knowledges of the non-West to critical scrutiny, revealing their entanglement with power, and of the majority of his former comrades at home who splintered in different political directions in the wake of the fragmentation of the revolutionary subject into its infranational communal solidarities and the high tides of militant Islamist political practices after the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

This chapter takes the critical reception of Said's *Orientalism* as its focal point, to chart the theoretical and political divergences that separated Left

militant intellectuals at home from diasporic critics who were initially brought together by their support of, and engagement with, the Palestinian revolution in the wake of the 1967 defeat. In doing so, I also highlight Charara's solitary position along these cardinal axes that came to delimit the different positions of thinkers and intellectuals. Charara's critiques of Eurocentrism, and the modernizing distinctions of social theory that separate myth and ritual from politics and economics in the face of the salience of communal forms of solidarity, have much in common with Arab diasporic modalities of criticism and with the South Asian ones that will inaugurate the field of postcolonial studies in the Anglophone academies. Having said that, these agendas of criticism, operating in different problem-spaces and arising from different personal and political experiences and sensibilities, will become increasingly at odds with each other. For instance, both Charara and Ranajit Guha, the inspiration behind the Subaltern Studies collective, who were also influenced by Gramsci's and Mao's thought, used the same expression, "dominance without hegemony," to diagnose their respective postcolonial modernities. Having said that, this term does different labors for these two thinkers. For Guha, "dominance without hegemony" is imbricated within a historical project critical of the postcolonial state that reveals the continuities between the rule of colonial and national elites. Charara's argument in *Wars of Subjugation* about the imbrication of the political in the social was formulated in the aftermath of the state's breakdown and the acknowledgment of the impossibility of revolutionary practice during a sectarian civil war. As the subaltern historians posited the subaltern as the new revolutionary subject, Charara was affirming the impossibility of identification with any of the warring parties.³

Charara's critique of the Lebanese and Palestinian anti-imperialist Left, and his focus on the logics of subjugation and the mutating resilience of forms of social solidarity, will come to clash with the anti-imperialist critique of Eurocentrism that singled out the epistemological layer for criticism, catching like wildfire in the wake of Said's *Orientalism* (1978). This critique unmasked how Western concepts, artworks, traditions, and disciplines reified non-Western difference and marked it as inferior and backward. It revealed the entanglement of representations of non-Europeans in the colonial enterprise. These critical strategies also showed how modern "universal" categories could never escape their own European particular origins. Therefore, their deployment across the globe by Westerners and non-Westerners was not part and parcel of a universal process of modernization but an imperial act of epistemological and ontological violence. To put it briefly, they injected history into the culturalist reifications of Orientalists to undo the exceptionalism of the "Orient" and

foregrounded the culturalism of unmarked universal categories. Both these strategies are acts of theoretical anti-imperialism—they are defensive vis-à-vis non-Western societies and extend the critique of Western imperialism beyond the economic and the political to the discursive.

The critical works of Said and Charara, who were both writing in the mid- to late 1970s, shared an important feature. They both sidelined the ideological dimension of the political by uncovering deeper and more fundamental planes than the ideological one that organizes the difference between Left and Right, progressives and reactionaries. They did it from different angles, though. The first showed how, in practice, the political could not extricate itself from the *social fabric*, while the second argued in theory how it could not extricate itself from *discourse*. The primacy of the social fabric, and of the discursive, sidelined the political and rendered the ideological more or less epiphenomenal to what came to be posited as a deeper structural ground. Moreover, both authors posited that modalities of operation of the social fabric, and of Orientalist discourses, managed to both transform themselves historically while reproducing themselves. The communal forms of solidarities are modernity's offspring, whose articulation is transformed with the modern state, capitalist penetration, and urbanization, while retaining their function. *Orientalism*, in Said's text, can digest and incorporate works by different traditions and authors—for example, Oswald Spengler, Darwinism, the Freudian tradition—and transform itself from textual hermeneutics to area studies modernization theories while retaining its structural knowledge-power features.

This is where similarities end. At a time when diasporic intellectuals were theoretically criticizing their disciplines for their culturalist reifications, militants and intellectuals at home were discovering, and confronting politically, the problem of the social fabric. To put it somewhat crudely, when the Manchester anthropologist Emrys Peters was dealing with genealogies of Shi'i families, equilibrium models, and trying to account for historical change and reproduction, Socialist Lebanon's militant intellectuals, many of whom came from southern Shi'i villages—the same area Peters was doing fieldwork in—were reading Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, and Foucault to formulate a revolutionary project.⁴ Anglophone metropolitan academic fields, as I have noted earlier, were theoretically “belated” vis-à-vis the readings of Lebanese New Left militant intellectuals. That said, belatedness is not only an “abstract” temporal marker that connotes a before and an after. It is a function of power that inscribes itself temporally. When anthropologists and literary critics drew on these same theoretical resources in the mid- to late 1970s to subject their disciplines to critique, these by now disenchanting militants had already left these

theories behind to home in on understanding the communal violence that was tearing the country apart.

In the wake of the Iranian Revolution, the politics of culture will come to occupy center stage, adding further complications to the multiple communal politics at work. Diasporic oppositional intellectuals had to increasingly face the problem of the politics of representation of Islam. This took the form of opposing increased racialization and discrimination where they lived, and an anti-imperialist, anti-interventionist stance against multiple strands of imperial liberalism, feminism, and so on. Whether on the internal front or the external one, the diasporic oppositional position could be articulated within a theoretico-political jargon of binary opposition: colonizer/colonized; empire/resistance, self/other; majority/minority; secular liberalism/Islam. Things were not nearly as clear-cut and easy in the Arab world. For instance, the aftermaths of the Iranian Revolution witnessed the formation of militant Islamist parties that confronted the anti-imperialist Left. By the late 1980s the Lebanese Left had lost its ideological, political, and military confrontations with the nascent Islamist groups. Militants and thinkers had to confront a host of political and military powers—foreign interventions, Arab regimes, militant Islamist political parties, and infranational communal forces—that could not fit neatly into the anti-imperialist binary matrix.

With every intra-Arab major event that will take place, starting with Lebanese civil war or even the Jordanian Black September until the Arab revolutions, without forgetting the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the pan-Arab political consensus around “Empire” as the main contradiction, which reached its zenith during Nasser’s reign, will slowly erode. The Syrian revolution will reveal the moral and political bankruptcy of the Arab and international anti-imperialist discourse that denied its solidarity to Syrian revolutionaries from the beginning on the basis of a geopolitical support of a “progressive,” “anti-imperialist,” “secular” regime. All of these events, forces, and powers could hardly be squeezed within the binary matrix of diasporic intellectuals who have developed the *theoretical* critique of Empire at the time when leftist and secular nationalist *political* anti-imperialist forces were being sidelined by Israeli invasions, authoritarian regimes, communal forces, and militant Islamists who took from them the anti-imperialist mantle.

Even when oppositional diasporic intellectuals such as Said were critical of the authoritarianism of regimes and of communal infranational politics, these practices did not constitute for them an *event in theory* that steered them toward a conceptual investigation of the modalities of power at work. Their criticisms remained ideological ones that condemned the abuses of power and

corruption of authoritarian rule, or called for upholding values such as freedom of speech and human rights, but did not displace Empire as the main object of their political and theoretical cathexis.

In other words, this is a story of the dispersion and fragmentation of a generation of intellectuals, both at home and in the diaspora, who were brought together by, and became political allies and fellow travelers, of the Palestinian revolution in the late 1960s. The military defeat of 1967 snatched academics at home and in the diaspora, like Edward Said and Sadik al-Azm, from their professional lives and threw them into the political fray.⁵ The meteoric rise of the Palestinian revolution, as the alternative revolutionary force in the wake of the defeat of the “progressive regimes,” brought together the new political converts, as well as the militant intellectuals of Socialist Lebanon. It won’t take much time before the two academics and the militant intellectual (Said, al-Azm, and Charara), who were united in the wake of 1967 by their solidarity with the Palestinian revolution, will go their separate political and theoretical ways. The relationship of al-Azm, a fellow traveler of the Palestinian New Left, with the revolution deteriorated after the events of Black September in 1970, during which it clashed with the Jordanian army. al-Azm wrote a book lambasting the failure of the Palestinian experience in Jordan.⁶ It caused him several problems. He lost his job with the PLO’s Research Center (Markaz al-Abhath al-Filastini) in Beirut, which he took part in founding, after Arafat considered him *persona non grata*, and he was forced to use a pseudonym whenever he published pieces in *Shu’un Filastiniyya* (Palestinian Affairs).⁷ Very early on, Charara theorized the revolutionary potential of the Palestinian resistance, dubbing it the detonator of Lebanese contradictions in 1969, calling a few years later on the masses to fuse with it at the height of his Maoist phase of militancy (1973). In the wake of the civil and regional wars, he would grow increasingly distant from and severely critical of the military and political practices of the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon. Unlike al-Azm and Charara, whose critique of the Palestinian revolution pertained to its intra-Arab practices in Jordan and Lebanon, Said will resign from the Palestinian National Council much later (1991) in protest over the terms the PLO agreed to for going to the Madrid conference, before becoming a vocal critic of the Oslo accords (1993) and their legacies.

Fragmentation and Conversion of the Revolutionary Subject

In the wake of the Lebanese civil and regional wars, the posited Arab revolutionary subject began its division into its infranational, regional, familial, and sectarian components. A couple of years later, the Iranian Revolution of 1979

and its regional aftershocks brought to a close the anticolonial age of national liberation inaugurated by the Egyptian Free Officers in 1952, nearly thirty years earlier. What took place in Iran proved that Islam, to the chagrin of a couple of generations of modernization theorists, could be an endogenous revolutionary force. Why go to Marx, a nineteenth-century European thinker, when you could politically mobilize the masses through their own autochthonous tradition? Moreover, a decade and a half after its rise, the Palestinian revolution was defeated in the wake of the brutal Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982).

These thirty years, from the Egyptian Revolution of July 1952 to the June 1982 invasion, would constitute the thick ideological interlude during which political questions, namely, anticolonial ones, were negotiated for the most part on a common discursive ground, which began its splintering by the late 1970s. It was this age of thick ideological politics that produced the demand for intellectual labor and theories to guide political practice toward achieving socialism, Arab unity, and national liberation, as well as arguments about the appropriate organizational forms this practice ought to take: Would it be a loose collective leadership? A Marxist-Leninist democratic centralism? Or a more a Maoist inspired mass line? The most appropriate modes of militant struggle were also debated: Should it be conventional warfare by the regular armies of the nation-states? Or should one adopt a national popular liberation war, and follow the *foco* theory of revolution? Whether they understood themselves as a Leninist vanguard, Gramscian organic intellectuals, or swimming like a fish in the masses' waters following Mao Tse-Tung's aphorism, the labors of militant intellectuals were predicated on the presence of the people, a universal subject and agent of emancipation. This fragmentation not only destroyed the societal and discursive ground from which their theories rose but also dispensed with the role of the progressive committed intellectual and the revolutionary militant intellectual: Where does he speak from? And to whom does he address himself after the fissuring of the masses—the revolutionary subject—into a multiplicity of regional, familial, sectarian, and religious loyalties?

From the 1980s onward, the stark secular/religious and modernity/authenticity binaries would come to replace the earlier multiplicity of ideological shades. The vigorous arguments in the 1960s and early 1970s on the most appropriate forms of socialism would soon be perceived as faint echoes of a vanished world. One can get a glimpse of these larger historical transformations in following the successive theoretical and political turns of Georges Tarabishi, the prolific Syrian thinker (1939–2016). Tarabishi, who started out as an Arab nationalist and a member of the Ba'ath Party, later steered toward Sartre and Marxism, the title of his first book (1964).⁸ Sartre's positions in the wake of the

June 1967 war, which did not express solidarity with the Arabs' cause, shocked the Sartrean Arab intelligentsia. "In a few days," Tarabishi recalls, "his [Sartre] aura crumbled."⁹ With the beginning of the Lebanese civil and regional wars in 1975, Tarabishi took refuge in Freudian psychoanalysis: "He [Freud] helped me to stay alive intellectually and psychically, he was a protecting father against all this barbarian auto-destruction."¹⁰ In the 1980s Tarabishi began reading and commenting on the Islamic tradition (*turath*), engaging in a "struggle against Islamism," and founding, in 2007, a decade before his death, the League of Arab Rationalists.¹¹ Dwelling in the ruins of the Left and having lost their revolutionary organizational moorings, some of these former revolutionaries would retreat to guard the Enlightenment's temple.

If militant intellectuals of the late 1960s attacked the Arab regimes and revolutionaries for not being radical enough, three decades later some would withdraw to a defense of liberal and democratic ideals. "Don't you agree with me that some old Marxists have taken off their cloaks and put on secularist and sometimes fundamentalist ones?" al-Azm was asked in 2007. "This is true," he replied, affirming that with the failure of socialist experiences, a majority of Marxists have "retreated to the second line of defense."¹² In a retrospective gesture, al-Azm tells his interviewer that his generation of Marxists thought they were defending "a more advanced set of values" than "human rights, social justice, democracy and the rotation of power," which were brought forth by the French Revolution and the "liberal revolution."¹³ al-Azm then points out that a substantial number of Marxist intellectuals staged a defense of these values "in the face of a 'Medieval Talibani' march . . . we are now faced either by the emergency and martial laws [of the postcolonial regimes] or the Taliban model."¹⁴ Unlike Charara's immanent sociological diagnostic critique, al-Azm's description of the political situation is an ideological lament mapped on a secular/religious Enlightenment grid. al-Azm sees in the retreat to liberalism—a historicism in reverse—an insurrectionary ideological language that calls for the defense of the "values" that are threatened by state authoritarianism and the forces of "medieval" religious forces. His diagnosis was not uncommon in the years preceding the Arab uprisings. Samir Kassir, who defined himself as a secular, westernized, Levantine Arab, wrote the following:

If it is primarily a consequence of the democratic deficit, the rise of political Islam could not constitute an answer to the impasse of Arab states and societies. While it is a resistance to oppression, it [the rise] is also born from the failure of the modern state and the ideologies of progress

and in this sense it has a resemblance to the rise of fascisms in Europe. Actually, the social conduct of Islamist movements reveals a number of analogies with fascist dictatorships once the religious veil that envelops them is uncovered.¹⁵

While al-Azm (1934–2016) and Kassir (1960–2005) belonged to two different generations, separated by a quarter of a century, these two intellectuals were bound by a common affiliation to a defeated leftist tradition and the vision of total emancipation it sustained.

Shifting the analytical gaze inward toward the culture of these societies, inaugurated as a minoritarian position in the wake of 1967 and propelled then by the ethical impulse to take responsibility for one's defeat, became more and more normalized, and at times acrimonious, among some disenchanted leftists. Some, such as the Tunisian ex-Marxist al-Afif al-Akhdar (1934–2013), welcomed foreign military operations during the US invasion of Iraq (2003) as the solution to the deadlock of “unenlightened religious culture” and authoritarian rule.¹⁶ In 1965, three years after Algeria's independence, al-Akhdar took part in the meeting between Che Guevara and Abu Jihad at the Hotel Elité in Algiers.¹⁷ Forty years separate the victory of the Algerians against French colonialism (1962) and the American occupation of Iraq (2003). Forty years also separate the meeting of Al-Akhdar with Guevara in Algiers from his celebration of the US missiles on, and the invasion of, Iraq. The harsh prose of this veteran of national liberation struggles, Marxist ideologue, and militant alongside the Palestinian resistance from 1962 until he left Beirut for Paris in the first years of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) is not his alone.

Facing those disenchanted leftists who had elected the question of culture and modernity as “the main contradiction” were their ex-comrades who remained attached to the question of politics and empire as the central contradiction, critically aligning themselves at points, as fellow travelers, with nascent militant Islamist parties, such as Hizbullah and Hamas, who took on board the national question. The fracturing of the Marxist ground of total emancipation from colonialism and imperialism, economic exploitation, and tradition split the inheritors into those coalescing around the first leg of the tripod, focusing on geopolitical analysis (game of nations), the balance of powers, and imperial intervention (external causes), and those emphasizing culture, sectarianism, and religion as the internal impediments to progress (internal causes). In the splitting of the Marxist inheritance between culture and geopolitics, the socioeconomic question found no heirs. The calls of the very few who claimed it were muffled in a setting saturated by questions

of authenticity/modernity, authoritarian rule and civil wars, and relentless imperial interventions.

Reading Orientalism in the Wake of the Iranian Revolution

If Said published “The Arab Portrayed” in the wake of the 1967 defeat with a focus on the Arabs, by 1981 he would put out *Covering Islam*, which tackled the image of Islam in the West, particularly in the US, and the different uses it is put to.¹⁸ From 1979 onward, a string of events, including the Iranian Revolution, the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat (1981) in the wake of the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt (1978), and the aftermaths of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), will increasingly put “Islam” at the center of media, policy, and scholarly attention. Said noted in *Covering Islam* the “critical absence of expert opinion on Islam” (18), highlighting in the process the experts’ failure to understand that “much of what truly mattered about postcolonial states could not be easily herded under the rubric of ‘stability’” (22) and how the area programs that house modern scholars of Islam are “affiliated to the mechanism by which national policy is set” (19). Around the same time, “Islam,” long the preserve of Orientalists, emerged as an object of anthropological inquiry. Talal Asad opens “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” an essay that realigned the coordinates of the field, by saying that “in recent years, there has been increasing interest in something called the anthropology of Islam. Publications by Western anthropologists containing the word ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslim’ in the title multiply at a remarkable rate. The political reasons for this great industry are perhaps too evident to deserve much comment.”¹⁹

The 1980s inaugurated the battle for the representation of Islam that took place on several fronts: the academy, the media, and policy centers. Ayatollah Khomeini is the icon par excellence of this decade, which heralded the post-Cold War politics of culture. A few months before his death in 1989, Khomeini addressed both the Eastern and Western camps. On January 1, he sent a long letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, which he concluded by noting that “the Islamic Republic of Iran as the greatest and most powerful base of the Islamic world can easily fill the vacuum religious faith in your society.”²⁰ A few weeks later, on February 14, 1989, he issued his famous death sentence against Salman Rushdie, which alongside the burning of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford, England, a month earlier, increased the hostility toward Muslim immigrants and saw the proliferation of discourses about Muslim “fundamentalism,” “violence,” and “integration” into the “host” society.²¹ By the end of the 1980s, the battle for the representation of Islam was

a no longer a matter of “how we see the rest of the world,” as Said’s subtitle to *Covering Islam* had it. It gradually became an integral part of internal politics in Europe and increasingly in the US after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

“Maybe the biggest catastrophe that befell Arabs is Marxism as a set of foreign templates,” said Maroun Baghdadi (1950–93), the young and talented Lebanese movie director in February 1979, to his interviewer Hazem Saghieh (1951–), a journalist at the Beirut-based *al-Safir* daily. “Until now, Marxism did not manage to find a place for itself in the Arab world.”²² The Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), which was founded in 1924, had been around for more than half a century when Baghdadi underscored Marxism’s exogenous status. Having said that, this statement was not really an affront to the longevity of the LCP. Its shock effect, so to speak, comes from the fact that it was asserted only a decade after the birth of the New Left by one of its members. Both intellectuals, Baghdadi the movie director, and Saghieh the journalist, were previously associated with the O.C.A.L.

As a result of a historical contingency, Said’s US-based critique of Marx and contemporary Third World radicals was contemporaneous with the rise of the question of culture, one symptom of which was a wave of conversion of Marxist militants into supporters of political Islam in the wake of the Iranian Revolution. This conversion was particularly prominent among Lebanese and Palestinian Maoist militants and intellectuals, for whom swimming in the waters of the masses entailed this time around an exit from Marxism into the authenticity of the masses’ creed. Roger Assaf, the prominent Lebanese theater director, who did his Maoist *établissement* in the Palestinian camps in the 1970s, was one of the converts. Assaf told his interviewer: “The passage to Islam was a putting into practice of Maoist principles. I went into Islam, like others go to the factory. But here in Lebanon, no one goes to the factory. There are no factories, or so few of them.”²³ Nicolas Dot-Pouillard draws our attention to the fact that “the intellectuals of Fatah’s Student Brigade began integrating a non-Marxist intellectual corpus: Ali Shariati, and particularly Ibn Khaldun” before the Iranian Revolution.²⁴ I quote at length from Dot-Pouillard’s interview with Nazir Jahel, a member of the brigades, who taught at the Lebanese University:

For us, what did Maoism and the passage to Islamism entail: it was reading our history, in order to transform it; reading our culture, our history, through apparatuses and conceptual tools that we could fashion ourselves through a return to traditions (*turath*), to history, to Islamic thought. We read Mao, Lenin, Gramsci, all the Marxists, but we also began reading Ibn Khaldun. . . . We reinvented a vocabulary with *Ghalaba*

[predominance], *Assabiyya*, *Mumana'a* (resistance, refusal), Hadara (civilization). . . . All of this led us bit by bit to Khomeini, to Islam. Because Khomeini constituted an effective mass discourse, a popular discourse that articulated the intellectual dimension with the popular aspect.²⁵

The conversion from Marxism into a Khomeinist militant Islam via Maoism's vector retained its Third Worldist anti-imperialism, but rearticulated it through Arab-Islamic conceptual tools. The conversion was both a personal and theoretical act of cultural decolonization as well as a political alignment with the Islamic masses, under the leadership of Khomeini, as the new revolutionary subject.

Souheil al-Kache, another member of the brigades who was swept by the tidal waves of the Iranian Revolution, criticized modernist Arab thinkers for reproducing the classifications of Orientalists, while underlining how for Islamists these two groups share the same theoretical framework and are associated with foreign political, ideological, and cultural interests.²⁶ In opposition to the sapping of Islam by colonialism and its internal agents, the Islamist discourse asserts, according to al-Kache, the continuity of the Arab and Islamic Self throughout history, refusing the narrative of its defeat by the West. This emphasis on the historical continuity of the self enables a politics of cohesion in the face of the central issue: "that of foreign domination, particularly on the cultural level."²⁷ The discourse of the Islamic Awakening, al-Kache argues, constitutes the resolution of the West's cultural domination since it affirms the Muslim Self, as a discourse of the master that escapes the resentment of the dominated. This discourse, he writes, stands for the end of the contradiction with "Orientalism and its shadow, the modernist Arab intellectual." Its fundamental concern in its hostility to Orientalism, he adds, is a political one, but it also leaves its marks on the methods and hermeneutics of Arab political thought. In advocating an affirmation of Muslim identity as a voluntary action, the "Muslim Self" is resuscitated "while ignoring the Other (the West). This Other then sees the universalism of its culture contested. Al-Khomeini is the best illustration of this discourse."²⁸ The revolutionary fervor of some of the converts to and fellow travelers of militant Khomeinist political Islam will subside in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War, and Khomeini's "quasi-total elimination of the Marxist Left and the Islamo-Marxist one in Iran."²⁹

Marxists like al-Azm, who did not exit the tradition like Charara and Beydoun, or were not swayed by the Iranian Revolution, will increasingly become on the defensive. "Former radicals, ex-communists, unorthodox Marxists, and disillusioned nationalists" have come to form, in the wake of the Iranian

Revolution, “a revisionist Arab line of political thought,” wrote al-Azm in his review of *Orientalism*.³⁰ “Their central thesis may be summarized as follows: ‘The national salvation so eagerly sought by the Arabs since the Napoleonic occupation of Egypt is to be found neither in secular nationalism (be it radical, conservative, or liberal) nor in revolutionary communism, socialism or what have you, but in a return to the authenticity of what they call ‘popular political Islam’” (234). The set of conditions that confronted *Orientalism*’s eastern travels couldn’t have been more fraught. At a time when Marxists were being politically and ideologically attacked from their eastern flank, so to speak, came an additional theoretical blow, this time, though, from New York. In his afterword to *Orientalism*, written in 1994, Said wrote the following on the reception of his book in the Arab world:

Moreover, the actuality I described in the book’s last pages, of one powerful discursive system maintaining hegemony over another, was intended as the opening salvo in a debate that might stir Arab readers and critics to engage more determinedly with the system of Orientalism. I was either upbraided for not having paid closer attention to Marx—the passages on Marx’s own Orientalism in my book were the most singled out by dogmatic critics in the Arab world and India, for instance—whose system of thought was claimed to have risen above his obvious prejudices, or I was criticized for not appreciating the great achievements of Orientalism, the West, etc. As with the defenses of Islam, recourse to Marxism or the “West” as a coherent total system seems to me to have been a case of using one orthodoxy to shoot down another.³¹

Indeed, al-Azm and Mahdi ‘Amil spent a lot of intellectual energy on these few pages of Said’s book, strenuously attempting to extricate the moor (Marx) from the charge of Orientalism. Marx’s views on British rule in India in Said’s work were put to work to reveal how a non-Orientalist’s writings on Asia first reveal his “humanity” and “fellow feeling” for the suffering inflicted by colonialism to be shortly hijacked thereafter by Orientalist discourses when Marx posits that the British destroyer is also the creator of a new modern society. “The idea of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia,” wrote Said, “is a piece of pure Romantic Orientalism.” Marx’s humanity has succumbed in Said’s reading to the “unshakable definitions built up by Orientalist science.”³² al-Azm’s tone in his defense of Marx is harsh:

I think that this account of Marx’s views and analyses of highly complex historical processes and situations is a travesty. . . . Marx’s manner of

analyzing British rule in India in terms of an unconscious tool of history—which is making possible a real social revolution by destroying the old India and laying the foundations of a new order—cannot be ascribed under any circumstances to the usurpation of Marx’s mind by conventional Orientalistic verbiage. Marx’s explanation (regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with it) testifies to his theoretical consistency in general. . . . Like the European capitalist class, British rule in India was its own grave digger. There is nothing particularly “Orientalistic” about this explanation. Furthermore, Marx’s call for revolution in Asia is more historically realistic and promising than any noble sentiments that he could have lavished on necessarily vanishing socioeconomic formations. (226–27)

al-Azm’s strategy of defense lay in reinscribing Marx’s views on Asia within his overall progressive historicist framework, undoing in the process any essentialization of East and West as a product of Orientalism’s “ahistorical bourgeois bent of mind” (228). Marx, wrote al-Azm, “like anyone else, knew of the superiority of modern Europe over the Orient. But to accuse a radically historicist thinker such as Marx of turning this contingent fact into a necessary reality for all time is simply absurd” (228).

Said was most probably referring to al-Azm and Aijaz Ahmad, and maybe others, regarding the defense of Marx.³³ He may have not been mistaken in pointing out the dogmatic character of some of their defenses. Nevertheless, their harsh responses, al-Azm’s at least, are not adequately and fully captured by just dubbing them dogmatic critics defending their guru and guarding the orthodoxy. They may be doing so, but what Said’s reading overlooks is the character of the intervention Marx performed for these militant intellectuals in their respective fields, and how an epistemological critique of Marx’s Orientalist discourses came hand in hand with, and could possibly be mobilized in, the intellectual and political battles they were fighting in the difficult conjuncture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At a point when Marxism was attacked by the purveyors of authenticity for its foreignness, Said’s critique, which repositioned Marx from the thinker of emancipation to one who is discursively complicit with Orientalists, could, to say the least, not be warmly received by cornered Arab Marxists. The discursive ground, on which ideological differences were organized, was being called into question simultaneously by the political heralds of authenticity calling for nativist solutions and the theoretical critics of Eurocentric epistemology.

Said, who never tired of calling for secular criticism and of drawing attention to the domestication of radical theories, and whose hypersensitivity to

closed systems and dogmas needs no further exploration, was as far as possible from nativists of all ilk in the East as well as poststructuralist pieties in the North American academy.³⁴ He, in fact, had much more in common with Marxists, such as al-Azm and 'Amil, than the fraught reception of *Orientalism* reveals. To say the least, they were in agreement on the question of secularism and religious politics. Here, however, I am less concerned with pointing to convergences and divergences than in fleshing out how political and theoretical developments led to the emergence of a fork in critical agendas between thinkers at home, who were attached to an emancipatory theory of politics under attack, and diasporic oppositional intellectuals in the metropole, who inverted those terms to focus on the politics of revolutionary theory and its entanglement with power. What I am after is an examination of the different analytical and political effects produced by traveling theories hopping from Paris to New York to eventually land in Beirut.

In the years following the Israeli invasion (1982), Mahdi 'Amil (1936–87) wrote a hundred-page-plus polemic against Said's book entitled *Does the Heart Belong to the Orient and the Mind to the West? Marx in Edward Said's Orientalism* (1985).³⁵ Hassan Hamdan, who was academically trained as a philosopher in France and wrote under the pseudonym of Mahdi 'Amil (the Laboring Mahdi), was, and still is, regarded as the most prominent theoretician of the Lebanese Communist Party. 'Amil, who had joined the party in 1960, was later elected to its central committee in 1987, the year of his tragic assassination. 'Amil's ambitious theoretical project ran counter to al-Azm's Marxist historicism. He had "meshed Althusserian influences with conceptualizations of the periphery inspired from dependency theory" in an effort to break away from historicist readings of Marx through his theoretical development of the characteristics of a colonial mode of production.³⁶ 'Amil's conceptual labors were as far as possible from epistemological naïveté. He sums up the overall argument of his *Theoretical Prolegomena* in the introduction to the third edition of the two volumes (1980) as an attempt to produce a "scientific knowledge of the mechanism of capitalism's colonial development in Arab societies" and of the national liberation movement, which is the peculiar form class struggle takes in this case, as well as "the tools of production of this knowledge."³⁷ Reflexivity was at the heart of 'Amil's project, which sought to produce a theory that thinks the conditions of possibility of its own conceptual building blocks as it is thinking its object. 'Amil's lengthy and at points repetitive Marxist critique of *Orientalism* begins by pointing to Said's idealist move, which affiliates Orientalism to Western thought in general rather than rooting it in the particularity of its historical class character. The title of the first chapter says it all: "The

Nation's Thought or That of the Dominant Class?" 'Amil's defense of Marx, in a similar vein to al-Azm's, is keen on shifting the terms of the debate from Said's categories of Orientalist Western thought to those of bourgeois thought. The exclusion of the historical class character of this body of knowledge, in 'Amil's reading, "banishes the possibility of existence of its opposite, which gives it a totalitarian aspect by which it occupies the whole cultural space."³⁸ In doing so, he seeks to steer back the conversation from one that rests on common discursive formation of European knowledges to one grounded in opposed ideologies.

More importantly for our purposes, 'Amil points to how *Orientalism's* critique of Marx and contemporary Marxists is in line with the positions of his nativist political opponents in the Arab world. "The main ideological weapon used by counterrevolutionary forces in their counterattack on the advanced positions they began to occupy in the strategic historical horizon," wrote 'Amil in his characteristic tortuous theoretical prose, "is to portray this thought [Marxism] on the basis of the Self/Other binary, or that of East and West. As if it [Marxism] is bourgeois imperialist thought, since it is, like its class antithesis, Western thought."³⁹ Again, Said, of course, would have protested, as he did later on, that he didn't hold nativist views, of the Western thought is only valid for the West and Eastern thought for the East, but what I am after is less Said's retrospective views and more the political and theoretical stakes animating the problem-space into which *Orientalism* landed at a particular time and place. Not any time and place, for that matter, but the place to which its author is intimately related, and a time when he was becoming more and more immersed in public political and intellectual interventions.

Nearly five years after al-Azm's observation on the resurgence of a politics of authenticity, 'Amil criticizes Said in the wake of the progress of what he dubbed the "counterrevolutionary forces." On May 18, 1987, during one of the bleak episodes of the Lebanese civil wars, 'Amil was shot dead on the street. Like Husayn Muruwwa, who was assassinated on February 17, 1987, it is widely believed that 'Amil too was shot by Shi'i Islamist militants. Under the biographical details corner of the book's third edition (2006), published by the LCP's printing house, the publisher wrote that 'Amil was assassinated for "his commitment to the struggle for a unified, secular and democratic Lebanon." "He was called," the blurb continues, "the Arabs' Gramsci, since he was the only one in the Arab world who tried to construct a comprehensive scientific theory of the Arab revolution, and perhaps, of the revolution of underdeveloped countries, more generally."

In the wake of *Orientalism*, Marxists and liberals in the Arab world continue to be critically targeted by the rise of postcolonial studies in the North American

metropolises, which would collapse the question of the political into its epistemology critique. What these quarreling critics shared, and what constituted the condition of possibility of a postcolonial critique, was an attachment to, and an interpretation of, a body of theory drawn primarily from the corpus of European thinkers. Their difference was located in how they both conjugated the relationship of theory to politics. If the age of national liberation (1952–82) was characterized by a high demand on theory as a guide for political practice, as the biographical blurb on the back of ‘Amil’s book tells us, the eclipse of the revolutionary subject and the rise of postcolonial studies would inaugurate the age of the politics of theory. It is not because they are dogmatic critics, although some may well be, that these thinkers singled out the passages on Marx in *Orientalism*; it is rather because, as Said would surely agree, traveling theories disable certain critical paths and open up new ones, stifling political projects while potentially boosting others, despite the best intentions of the secular critic.

Ending the story of *Orientalism*’s Marxist reception at this point will only reveal a set of resistances to the text. There is more to its travels than that. In the second section of his review of *Orientalism*, al-Azm productively and strategically puts Said’s insights to use to debunk the claims of Arab nationalists and of, mostly ex-Marxist, “Islamic” intellectuals who had fallen under the spell of the Iranian Revolution. In this section, which is expanded from the five pages of the text’s initial English version to twenty-six pages in the later Arabic iteration, al-Azm mobilized Said as an ally to counter antihistorical and nativist anti-Western pronouncements of Arab intellectuals.⁴⁰ “One of the most prominent and interesting accomplishments of Said’s book,” he wrote, is its critique of

Orientalism’s persistent belief that there exists a radical ontological difference between the natures of the Orient and the Occident. . . . This ontological difference entails immediately an epistemological one which holds that the sort of conceptual instruments, scientific categories, sociological concepts, political descriptions and ideological distinctions employed to understand and deal with Western societies remain, in principle, irrelevant and inapplicable to Eastern ones. . . . This ahistorical, antihuman, and even antihistorical “Orientalist” doctrine I shall call *Ontological Orientalism*. . . . This image has left its profound imprint on the Orient’s modern and contemporary consciousness of itself. Hence Said’s important warning against the dangers and temptations of applying the readily available structures, styles, and ontological biases of Orientalism upon themselves and upon others.⁴¹

al-Azm's *Ontological Orientalism* shares with Said the analytical and political worry of always pointing to the "Oriental" exception, eliding history, politics, and economics altogether to reproduce tautologies such as "Islam is Islam, the Orient is the Orient."⁴² Said and al-Azm worried about the elision of historical transformations, which mask the contemporaneity of social dynamics, of the vast social, political, and economic shifts that did and still work on and in the area. Said's concern to get rid of Arab exceptionalism and to put Arabs back in history was applauded in *Ontological Orientalism* by al-Azm, who sought to uncover the claims of those who have fallen "in the temptations against which Said has warned," engendering "what may be called *Orientalism in Reverse*" (231).

al-Azm's reading of Said's work as fundamentally an antiessentialist critique enabled him to use it to counter Arab nationalist Ba'thist thinkers who "proposed to study 'basic' words in the Arabic language as a means to attaining 'genuine knowledge' of some of the essential characteristics of the primordial 'Arab mentality' underlying those very words" (231). It also enabled him to take a stab at the post-Iranian Revolution revisionists, such as the famous Syrian poet Adonis who, in the wake of 1967, like al-Azm, professed culturalist critiques of Arab backwardness. Adonis wrote after the Iranian Revolution that the "Western essence is 'technologism and not originality'" and that "the peculiarity of the Orient 'lies in originality' and this is why its nature cannot be captured except through 'the prophetic, the visionary, the magical, the miraculous, the infinite, the inner, the beyond, the fanciful, the ecstatic,' etc." (236). al-Azm concluded his review by alluding to recent debates on whether the "Islamic Republic" can be qualified as democratic, citing "the conservative 'Orientalistic' logic" of the prevailing argument that "Islam cannot accept any additional qualifiers since it cannot be but Islam" (236). As Ayatollah Khomeini, quoted by al-Azm in the last sentences of his review, put it, "the term *Islam* is perfect, and having to put another word right next to it is, indeed, a source of sorrow" (237).

Orientalism in reverse put the accent on the unmasking of essentialist assumptions in Arab thought and Islamic thought that point toward its self-sufficiency and its implicit and sometimes explicit superiority to its Western counterpart. al-Azm mobilized Said to shift the lens of critique from imperial discourses on the "Orientals" to the latter's own knowledge of themselves. These Arab thinkers share the same essentializing traits and methods of Orientalist scholars while reversing the normative value judgment to the benefit of the Orient, which comes out triumphant in its face-off with its materialist, decadent Western counterpart. *Orientalism in Reverse* is then not the self-

Orientalizing that Said warns against, and that al-Azm, with his critique of the backwardness of Arab society, can easily fall into, and is not merely Occidentalism, which is the reification of the West.

al-Azm's resistance to *Orientalism's* treatment of Marxism, as well as his productive use of some its insights, are, of course, part and parcel of the same response to the newly emerging political conjuncture. On the one hand he was attempting to leave a breathing space for his historicist Marxist critique (of "backwardness," "religious obscurantist thought," and "tradition") by disentangling Marx from Orientalism, and implicitly himself from the charge of self-Orientalization—one that could too easily be used against him by the postrevolutionary currents. On the other hand, he uncoupled Said's epistemological and ontological critique from the West's will to dominate and reversed the terms to undo the antihistorical and self-congratulatory currents in Arabic thought of both the earlier nationalist and more recent Iranophile strands. *Orientalism in Reverse*, by inverting the terms of Said's work, from a criticism of the West's knowledge of the non-West to the internal criticism of the then current politics of authenticity in the Arab world, reveals clearly the emerging fork in critical agendas—that will solidify subsequently—between al-Azm and Said, whose births as public committed intellectuals we owe to the 1967 defeat and who were brought together personally and politically by their engagement alongside the Palestinian revolution in the late 1960s.

Coda: Culture and Imperialism

There are more interesting critical readings of Said's work that are not theoretical attempts to salvage Marx or Enlightenment thought from the charge of Orientalism, or to show how his binary divisions between East and West reinscribe in practice a certain nationalist logic. These readings underscored how Said's binaries, which focus on imperialism and the resistances to it, do not take into account the different modalities of power at work in colonized and post-colonial societies.⁴³ In the last pages of *Orientalism's* introduction, under the subheading "The Personal Dimension," Said borrows Gramsci's words about the importance of "knowing oneself" through compiling an inventory of the historical processes that have deposited an infinity of traces on the self as a starting point for a critical elaboration. *Orientalism*, Said then notes, is an attempt to "inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals."⁴⁴ This practice of self-knowledge, like Freudian psychoanalysis, has an emancipatory aspect. The critical

awareness of colonialism's constitutive traces is a first step toward neutralizing their grip on the self.

Said's pathbreaking work, and this is not unrelated to its appeal, is a theoretical work with a therapeutic edge. By diving into the multiple sedimented layers of the inexhaustible Orientalist archive, while making a strong case for its repetition in the present, and rendering visible the patterns of its entanglements with power, Said's text contributes to undoing their hold not only over disciplines but also on colonial and postcolonial subjects. Postcolonial theory has a therapeutic dimension, particularly for diasporic subjects who experience everyday and institutional racism in their metropolitan homes. Said's theoretical practice, like psychoanalysis again, is not a normative one. The Lebanese and Palestinian Maoists who converted to Islamist politics in the wake of the Iranian Revolution—and for some, such as Roger Assaf and Munir Shafiq, who were born into Christian families, this entailed a religious conversion—were also critical of the cultural domination of the West. Their critique of the multifaceted dimensions of imperialism entailed a personal and political conversion that inscribed them in a nativist ideological universe.

Both Said and the Maoist converts to Islamism retain Western imperialism at the heart of their attachments. Said fought it through acts of theoretical deconstruction of its hegemony and a political alignment with the Palestinian national liberation movement. He held the tension alive between his critical theoretical practices and his national liberation politics. The Maoists, on the other hand, underwent a process of conversion to militant Islam that came to form the unified ideological and political, and at times personal, ground of their anti-imperialism.

al-Azm and 'Amil retained Marxism at the heart of their attachments. They attempted to salvage it from Said's critique and its association by Islamists with Western Orientalism and forms of cultural domination. They tried hard, in desperate political times, via different theoretical strategies to defend Marxism's promise of universal emancipation. They clashed with Said theoretically and Islamists politically. 'Amil was assassinated by Islamist militants. al-Azm retreated in subsequent years to a defense of Enlightenment values, holding very critical views of Islamist politics. In the last years of his life, he supported the Syrian revolution against the brutal Assad regime, steering away from his earlier hardline critiques of religious politics.

In the wake of his very early disenchantment with revolutionary politics, Charara turned into a harsh critic of leftist and anti-imperialist politics. This was compounded by his observation of how these emancipatory discourses

were put to use by political parties, national liberation movements, and regimes to strengthen their hold on power and silence their opponents. His early observation on the difficulty of establishing hegemony in a country divided by multiple communal solidarities put him at odds with Said's views on two main points. The first was Said's emphasis on the strength and effectivity of the webs of imperial power-knowledge discourses. The second was Said's theoretical silence on the multiple modalities of power and rule at work in these societies that are not part of the matrix of Empire. Charara called into question very early on the poverty of the categories of Western social theory to account for non-Western forms of power. Unlike the Maoists, whose nativist *ideological* concerns led them to fashion a political vocabulary from the resources of the Arab-Islamic tradition, Charara turned to some of the same resources, but for heuristic and *theoretical* reasons. His turn to Ibn Khaldun was coupled with an implicit normative horizon that saw in the logic of the state—which he didn't articulate—and more broadly in the logic of the autonomous functioning of institutions an antidote to the pervasive logic of subjugation. Unlike al-Azm, his immanent critique of the societies was never articulated in the reified stock phrases of modernist intellectuals that posit "religion" and "culture" as a problem and the Enlightenment or "democracy" as the panacea.

I illustrate some of these points, and bring this chapter to a close, with Ahmad Beydoun's generous review of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*.⁴⁵ After lauding the comprehensiveness of the work, and some of its brilliant readings, Beydoun notes that Said's defensive position, especially that he lives in the West, is very precise in its diagnosis of the different manifestations of Western racism.⁴⁶ Having said that, Said's work, Beydoun continues, is less precise when it comes to looking into, and analyzing, the suffering the dominated underwent at the hands of their rulers and fellows. Not taking the modalities of power at work in these societies and their cultures, alongside imperial ones, Beydoun writes, leads to "theoretical disasters in understanding historical catastrophes. This is the case in [Said's] dubbing Saddam Hussein no more than an 'appalling figure.'"⁴⁷ Beydoun's critique shows the limits of Said's binary matrix—colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed, imperialism/resistance—to diagnostically apprehend the complexities and catastrophes of postcolonial Arab history. Beydoun notes how the theoretical emphasis on showing how Orientalists invent their Other, to assert the superiority of their own self-image, is an easy inversion of the racist position that locks the colonized in ahistorical essences. Difference in a larger scale is neither an ahistorical essence nor an invention of colonizers. He

finds theoretically wanting the confinement of the critique of power to imperialism. Toward the end of his review, Beydoun remarks that the vital question is whether there is a possibility for a critique of the practices of the colonized and the oppressed that finds its sources in their own culture—and not in the acts of imperialists—that both escapes essentialization and would not be dubbed an act of racism or self-racism.