

At last, a genuine Palestinian authority

The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and after by Edward W Said (Granta, £15)

Tuesday 3 October 2000 23:00 BST | [0 comments](#)

What exactly is an intellectual nowadays, and do we need them? Edward Said recently described meeting Jean-Paul Sartre a year before Sartre died in 1980. Sartre's stance on Israel disappointed Said, but he remained a "great intellectual hero" to Said's generation because he invested his "insight and intellectual gifts" in the service of "nearly every progressive cause of our time".

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Sartre's notion of an intellectual, someone whose learning and achievement in one field is applied elsewhere, describes Said himself. He is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, and the author of influential works such as *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. But he has also been active in Palestinian politics and a prolific analyst of dispossession in books like *The Question of Palestine*.

So, although Said updates this definition, the question remains whether we need such intellectuals in the 21st century. It's one that this collection of essays answers unequivocally.

The End of the Peace Process contains 50 polemical articles written between May 1995 and January 1999. Most are re-publications of his columns in *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Hayam*, periodicals based in London and Cairo respectively. Other pieces have also been published across the Middle East and Europe and even, occasionally, in the US. The distribution is important, because Said remains almost the only sceptical commentator on the territorial negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians in the Western media.

Just as every acre is contested by overlapping claims, so are many of the terms used in these essays. Just as the facts on the ground change, so has Said's position moved. It is a decade since he broke with Arafat, opposing what he regarded as the PLO's embrace of defeat in the Oslo deal which gave Palestinians some authority over the West Bank and the Gaza strip. But Said also regards a Palestinian state as unworkable, and these essays chart his shift towards an alternative.

Said's alternative would be a single, secular state for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs that guaranteed equality for all its citizens. That this initially sounds wilfully irresponsible demonstrates the peculiarity of the situation. That it seems eminently viable by the end of this collection testifies to Said's rigorous intellectual effort to see beyond the cruel absurdities of a messy "peace process".

One notable piece, "On Visiting Wadie", is about his son's work for an NGO based in Ramallah. Wadie, a "New York City kid", reveals himself to be at home in Arabic, and among a new generation of Palestinians. Said invests his hope with them after discovering their shared impatience with the Palestinian Authority and Arafat's security forces. Throughout, he is at least as scathing about the Palestinians' corrupt incompetence and self-betrayal as he is of the Israelis' brutal exploitation of that "sloppiness".

Said's reporting here is acute and affecting as he carefully assembles anecdotes and facts towards a larger picture. It exemplifies all those yardsticks for cultural criticism established in his early work, *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Criticism should be "situated... sceptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings". It should remain concrete and focused on "existential actualities" and resist the political configurations that incorporate us by origin or affiliation.

Said's writing enacts this complexity with style. These essays are brilliant displays of rigorous perspective, relentless concentration and impassioned dedication. He is uniquely impressive in the way that he combines appeals to the largest of categories - justice, humanity, civility - with attentiveness to detail.

Said avoids infantile loyalties in order to shore up truths, and emerges from this collection as a vital ethical thinker. The important thing, he writes, is "to think new thoughts and open lines of reflection that convention and orthodoxy have closed to us". *The End of the Peace Process* is the work of the kind of non-aligned intellectual that we need more than ever today.

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