Chapter 5

A Shift in Intellectual Trajectory:
The Marxist Connection

Indeed, Said presented us with a general critical attitude and critical consciousness that enables us to imagine that someday—sooner rather than later I hope—we shall be free from the coercive and dominative forms of knowledge and power that have been exercised at an extraordinary cost to the experience and lived realities of human beings

—Andrew Rubin, “Intellectual Giant” 112

What Said has accomplished is not just the invention of a counter discourse, a dialogic performance, but a way of reading and/or interpreting. It is a reaf- firmation of the theme of resistance against domination, the pervasive frag- mentation and reification of life in late capitalism

—Mustapha Marrouchi, Edward Said at the Limits 52

This chapter investigates the profound shift in Said’s trajectory of thought and attempts to map out the formulation and evolution of Said’s own subjectivity. Beginning with Said’s initial appraisal and application of Foucault, I attempt to outline the implications of Said’s later disengage- ment with him. Discovering Foucauldian elements and antihumanist reso- nances in Said has always been a fashionable but obsessive and excessively emphasized trend in many critical quarters. This, in effect, has given a post-structuralist label to Said despite his persistent stance against post- structuralist theses like the “death of the subject.” Therefore, the major task of this chapter is to address Said as a secular intellectual of the Left, in spite of his many disagreements with various doctrines of Marxism. This
in one way is an attempt to save Said from the prison-house of Foucauldian protocols. Toward this objective, his affinities and even dissonances with the prominent Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci, Williams, Adorno, and—to a certain degree—Lukács are examined here.

Said’s encounters with these thinkers help one to recognize and elaborate a discernible method of critical pursuit, though he never outlined a persistent method in quite this way for himself. While attempting to draw a linear trajectory starting with Foucault to Gramsci, Williams, and Adorno, I conjecture that there is an inherent logic of subject formation in Said’s writings that involves a gradual evolution from an anti-humanist theoretical framework to a more humanist and Leftist mode of secular politics.

Michel Foucault: Anxiety of Influence

Undoubtedly, Michel Foucault is one of the greatest theoretical sources for Said. One can find the resonances of Foucauldian ideas on discourse, discursive formations, power/knowledge, and representation in Said’s protocols for critical enquiry. Said approaches Orientalism as “discourse” primarily by drawing on a Foucauldian historiography that is fundamentally discontinuous and genealogical. The illicit bond between power, knowledge, and discipline has been well conceived by Said in order to analyze the detrimental effects of the Orientalist forms of knowledge production. He also examines how the oriental body is often a submissive and docile one always subjected by the all-pervasive power of Orientalism in a Foucauldian fashion. As Ashcroft and Ahluwalia put it:

Foucault’s notion of discourse is a firmly bounded area of social knowledge. For him, the world is not simply “there” to be talked about; rather it is discourse itself within which the world comes into being. It is in such a discourse that speakers, and hearers, writers and readers, come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity). It is that complex of signs and practices that organizes social existence and social reproduction, which determines how experiences and identities are categorized. (68)

For Said, this becomes all the more important as he always tried to view how his own subjectivity is constituted, and how the identity of Palestinians in general is implicated in contemporary histories and discourses. The fact that the history of Palestine is either distorted or erased