

Title—Culture and Imperialism

Author—Edward Said

Year—1993

Categories: Theory, Culture, Imperialism, Politics, Third World

Place: The World

Time: 1850-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Said's book investigates a general world-wide pattern of imperial culture and a historical experience of resistance against empire. He locates the struggles of empire and imperialism at the heart of culture. He seeks to expand the arguments from *Orientalism* to describe a more general pattern of relationship between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories. For Said, culture refers to all those practices that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, especially cultural forms like the novel. For the purposes of his study, Said considers the novel as the aesthetic object whose connection to the expanding societies of Britain and France is particularly revealing. Said also characterizes culture as a concept that includes a refining and elevating element. He argues that culture comes to be associated with the nation or state and this serves to differentiate 'us' from 'them.' In this sense, culture is a source of identity. He begins by critiquing the perception of culture as separate from its worldly affiliation. Said posits that nothing illustrates the worldliness of culture better than the works, especially novels, that originated in the modern Western empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Said argues for a consideration and re-contextualization of imperialism and its underpinnings in all cultural texts. The book is loosely organized into two main parts. The first half illustrates the link between European literature and imperial ideology through a discussion of several novels, including Conrad's *Nostromo*. The second half is focused on the discussion of anti-imperial resistance discourses arising out of the peripheries. Said constantly emphasizes the threat of nativism, which he argues will breed chauvinism, fanaticism, and fundamentalism in a postcolonial context. Although he aims for his theory to be applicable globally, Said specifically focuses on the British, French, and American empires because the idea of overseas rule has a privileged status in these three cultures. He does not discuss the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman, Spanish, or Portuguese empires. His book is the history of imperial adventure rendered in cultural terms.

Part of Said's goals are to underscore that populations of non-white migrants and voices have been there for some time, thanks in part to the globalized process set in motion by modern imperialism. He claims that one of imperialism's achievements was bringing the world closer together and the historical experience of empire should be regarded as common. In general, his method is to focus as much as possible on the individual works, usually novels, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire. He argues that because narrative plays such a large part in the imperial quest, it comes as no surprise that both France and Britain have unbroken traditions of novel-writing.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience
- All cultures are involved in one another, partly because of empire—all are hybrid, heterogeneous and un-monolithic
- Imperialism's culture was not invisible, nor did it conceal its worldly affiliations and interests