

## Decolonising ARU: Said's critique of Ruskin

Edward Said's insightful critique of John Ruskin in *Culture & Imperialism* holds a great deal of relevance for an institution which both bears Ruskin's name and is ostensibly committed to decolonisation. Expressed in the unique style and gravitas of Said's prose, this critique makes clear that while we may justifiably celebrate Ruskin's remarkable achievements, it is incumbent on us also to grapple with the notion that his ideas bestowed a sense of authority on 'the subjugation of inferior peoples and colonial territories' (p. 12).

The focus of Said's critique is a lengthy passage from Ruskin's Slade Lectures at Oxford in 1870, during which Ruskin sets out, in refined aesthetic tones, his idealised vision of England and its supposedly harmonious relation with its foreign colonies. The passage is quoted as part of a wider analysis of nineteenth century theory and novel writing that provided the cultural basis for imperialist thought in Britain. Among the most revealing lines include the following (as cited in *Culture & Imperialism*):

"There is indeed a course of beneficent glory open to us, such as never was yet offered to any poor groups of mortal souls. But it must be - it is with us, now, 'Reign or Die'. And it shall be said of this country, 'Fece per viltate, il gran rifiuto', that refusal of the crown will be, of all yet recorded history, the shamefullest and most untimely. And this is what she must either do, or perish: she must found her colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men; seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on, and there teaching these her colonists that their chief virtue is to be fidelity to their country, and that their first aim is to advance the power of England by land and sea: and that, though they live off a distant plot of ground, they are no more to consider themselves therefore disenfranchised from their native land, than the sailors of her fleets do, because they float on distant waves".

And, further;

"The England who is to be mistress of half the earth, cannot remain herself a heap of cinders, trampled by contending and miserable crowds; she must yet again become the England she was once, and in all beautiful ways, - more: so happy, so secluded, and so pure, that in her sky - polluted by no unholy clouds - she may be able to spell rightly of every star that heaven doth show; and in her fields, ordered and wide and fair, of every herb that sips the dew; and under the green avenues of her enchanted garden, a sacred Circe, true Daughter of the Sun, she must guide the human arts, and gather the divine knowledge, of distant nations, transformed from savageness to manhood, and redeemed from despairing into peace."

All of the central ideas of imperialism are nakedly visible here: the divine and natural right of England's global reign, the ennoblement of savages and the 'waste ground' they inhabit, contrasted with the eternal beauty and splendour of England. Said is unequivocal in his analysis of Ruskin's imperialist perspective:

"Ruskin speaks plainly; his meaning, while draped in allusions and tropes, is unmistakable. England is to rule the world because it is the best; power is to be

used; its imperial competitors are unworthy; its colonies are to increase, prosper, remain tied to it. What is compelling in Ruskin's hortatory tones is that he not only fervently

believes in what he is advocating but also connects his political ideas about British world domination to his aesthetic and moral philosophy". (P. 125)

Said's overall thesis is that British culture, particularly but by no means exclusively in the nineteenth century, played a formative role in the generation and spread of imperialism, which in turn enabled the violent subjugation of other peoples. His work in *Culture & Imperialism* presents a compelling rationale for revisiting the major cultural works and figures of the time, that we might add to our understanding of Ruskin, Kipling, Conrad, Austen, and others a knowledge of the geopolitical power relations that framed the possibilities of their thinking, and that presented to us a world in which Britain and Europe were the at apex of civilisation, with other lands existing simply to be invaded and colonised.

What does this mean for ARU? Should we thereby expunge Ruskin's legacy from our institution, renounce his work as imperialist propaganda, and change our name to Anglia University? That would hardly be the 'Saidian' approach. Said was at pains to distance himself from what he described as the "rhetoric of blame" directed against Ruskin and others like him for "being white, privileged, insensitive, complicit" (p. 115). Rather, the Saidian project was about advocating a more intellectually robust, honest, and less selective dealing with culture, "to see complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history" (p. 115).

Said's critique encourages us to view Ruskin as a more complex figure than, arguably, is the case at present. To engage more critically with his legacy and its part in the founding of our institution. Was Ruskin a product of his time, that of high imperial conquest by the British Empire in the nineteenth century? Certainly. But Ruskin was also one of the leading figures in British cultural production at the time, and his views and those of his contemporaries played no small part in creating the political conditions under which the colonial invasion and domination of distant lands was able to advance. It is a mistake to celebrate his work and cultural contribution without an honest appraisal of the logics of power and domination that framed his thought and his work.

As Said himself argued, more important than the past itself is its bearing upon cultural attitudes in the present. Important, therefore, is what we can do now to move towards decolonisation. We must confront with honesty the legacy of imperialism carried into the present in the very name of our institution. Resist the government's imposition of a 'culture war' upon our public institutions, which denies the possibility of institutional racism and seeks to enforce a celebratory account of British history. Support our ARU colleagues in their efforts to realise a Race Equality Charter and to promote racial equality. Challenge racism wherever we find it, especially when where we find it may be embedded in operational procedures or in satisfaction with the status quo. And avoid making assumptions

about how historical and present-day inequalities alike may be affecting the lives of our own staff and students. Following Said, then, let us pursue a more honest dialogue about our culture and the different ways it impacts on all of our lives.

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