“Orientalism’s Levantine Vicissitudes: Rereading the 1980’s Marxist Polemics against Said”

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It is needless to emphasize that by the time he passed away in 2003, Said was one of the most well-known and respected Arab intellectuals, both in specialized intellectual circles and with the larger public for his critiques of imperialism and unflinching commitment to the Palestinian cause. That said, Orientalism, has also generated polemical responses from prominent staunchly secular, Marxist and Liberal intellectuals in the Arab World. In this essay I will focus for the most part on two critical responses to Orientalism by two distinguished Marxist thinkers. The first is the early and widely circulated essay Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse (1981) by the Syrian philosopher Sadik Jalal al- Azm, which was published in English and later in an expanded Arabic version. The second is by Mahdi ‘Amil, the theoretical tenor of the Lebanese Communist Party, who published a small book, Is the Heart for the East and the Mind for the West? Marx in Edward Said’s Orientalism, in 1985. In rereading these two rejoinders I delineate the contours of their critical agendas, the sets of questions they were responding too, the theoretical tools they thought appropriate to answer them, as well as the institutional and political conditions of their own interventions. I end by looking into Orientalism as traveling theory to use Said’s own expression. In doing so I aim at thinking more about the fractured ground of criticism we inhabit as revealed in the fork in critical agendas and commitments between post-colonial critics, mostly located in the metropolis, and liberals and Marxists at home in the peripheries.