

What's it all about? Arab identity.

I have lived for more than ten years in 'Arab' countries and feel an affinity with Arabic culture. Yet what do I mean by this expression? And who are the Arabs? If you ask an Egyptian, he'll most likely reply that they are the people of the Arabian peninsula, all of whom he regards as Bedouin. But ask him which is the leading Arab country and he'll answer without hesitation, 'Egypt!' Where are most Arabic films produced? From where does *Saut al-Arab* broadcast? Where is the most respected newspaper in the Middle East, *Al-Ahram*, published? Clearly, then, in some sense Egyptians *are* Arabs.

We can quickly dismiss the idea of a racial Arab identity. Arabs come in all shapes and sizes and range from jet black to lily white. They are, like most if not all peoples, a mixture. In Palestine this is particularly the case. The indigenous population there descend from, among others, Phoenicians, Israelites, Greeks, Romans, Hejazis and Turks, as well as from crusaders of French, German and English origin.

The only sensible definition of an Arab is someone whose native language is Arabic (in any of its various dialects). Like all languages, Arabic is the repository of the cultures of those who speak it, but notice the use of the plural. Bedouin culture is far removed from the ambience of Beirut or Cairo, Islam has a major input but there are important Christian, Jewish, Druze and non-religious strands as well, and there is a wide range of political thinking and practice.

Edward Said's recently published memoir, *Out of Place*, vividly illustrates this diversity. His book, *Orientalism*, also gives us a key to understanding how the word *Arab* has come to be misused by imperialists. Israel has a particular interest in portraying Arabs as 'different' but also homogeneous. Its propagandists do this by emphasising those supposed or real aspects of Arabic culture which are unacceptable in the West. It then becomes possible to say that there are no good Arabs, 'the only good Arab is a dead one', Jews are never Arabs, and so on.

Of course this idea of the homogeneity of all Arabs is particularly useful in denying the existence of a specifically Palestinian identity, though Zionists are all too ready to exploit the diversity of Arab culture when it suits them. Mirroring their attempt to mould a secular Jewish identity, the relatively recent phenomenon of Arab nationalism has provided an ideology around which Arab opposition to foreign domination can focus. Ideology is, however, rarely an accurate reflection of reality and I would suggest that Edward Said's parting words in his memoir apply rather well to the concept of Arab identity: 'I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance.'