

# What future for Middle Eastern studies?

Pinar Bilgin \*

*Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara, 06800, Turkey*

Available online 2 November 2005

## Abstract

Middle Eastern Studies (MES) has increasingly come under attack in recent years. The critics have included the more politically oriented (as with Martin Kramer who reproached Middle Eastern scholars for failing to serve US interests) as well as generalists in various social science disciplines (who have criticised MES for having produced ‘theory-free’ work thereby failing to serve the cause of building cumulative social scientific knowledge). Middle Eastern scholars have responded to such criticism by seeking to point to various contributions MES has made over the years. These debates between Middle Eastern scholars and their critics have revealed three alternative future courses for MES: (1) going back to its roots in ‘Oriental Studies’ (as called for by Martin Kramer in *Ivory Towers on Sand*); (2) establishing itself firmly in the discipline-oriented social sciences (as called for by the avatars of methodology in the Social Sciences); (3) building upon the pioneering works of those Middle Eastern scholars who have sought to theorise from Middle Eastern experiences thereby contributing both to MES and the disciplines. Pointing to how the sides to these debates differ radically in terms of their understanding of ‘theory’, the article will suggest that the future of MES would be shaped depending upon which understanding of ‘theory’ comes to prevail.

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Middle Eastern Studies (MES) in the United States has increasingly come under attack in recent years. The critics have included disciplinary generalists who criticised MES for producing atheoretical work thereby failing to produce knowledge that would be ‘globally useful’ and ‘universally applicable’ [39] as well as the more politically oriented who reproached Middle Eastern scholars for failing to serve US interests [14,34,35,36]. The broader point raised by both groups of critics was that MES had to change or risk becoming increasingly marginalized.

Such concerns were voiced in the post-Cold War context where questions were raised about the relevance of area-based knowledge in an increasingly globalising world. Although scholars disagree regarding the significance of the Cold War context in the creation of area studies in the United States (compare [45,50,57] with [41,42,61]) they nevertheless agree that were it not for

\* Tel.: +90 312 290 21 64; fax: +90 312 266 43 26.

*E-mail address:* [pbilgin@bilkent.edu.tr](mailto:pbilgin@bilkent.edu.tr)

the perceived threat of Soviet expansionism, area studies would not have developed in the way that it did. In the aftermath of 1989, major funding bodies in the United States (such as the Ford and Mellon Foundations) let their post-Cold War priorities be known: interdisciplinary research on ‘themes that resonate within the cultures of several regions’ was to replace Cold War area studies [64, p. 3].

Although it was the study of areas in general that was facing troubled waters in the post-Cold War era, the future of MES seemed even bleaker as criticisms of the field turned overtly political. In the tense environment created by the September 11 attacks, Middle Eastern scholars’ criticisms of US foreign and security policies towards Afghanistan and/or Iraq were portrayed as ‘disservice to US Middle Eastern Policy’ [28]. In the Summer of 2003, the issue of the future of MES was taken up by the US Congress where the critics voiced their conviction that Middle Eastern scholars abused government funds provided under Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (under which grants to area centers have been administered since 1958) by producing ‘extreme and one-sided criticisms of American foreign policy’ [35]. The efforts of the critics paid off: In November 2003 the US Congress passed Resolution 3077 to set up ‘an inquisitorial advisory committee to oversee teaching of Middle Eastern studies in American universities’ [28]. Such criticism has meant that in the post-Cold War era, Middle Eastern specialists have had to defend themselves not only against the avatars of methodology in the social sciences who considered area studies work to be theoretically and methodologically unsophisticated, but also their more politically-oriented critics who sought to reshape MES.

When following these debates, one cannot help but ask: Are not these debates on the future of MES peculiar to the US context? Should they be of concern to those who are outside the debates of the ‘US campus and beltway alike’ [21, p. 958]? It might indeed be argued that these debates have little relevance outside the United States where the political context is very different and the disciplinary hold of the social sciences is not as strong. Yet, these debates are also of concern for the rest of us because what happens in US MES has an effect on the rest of the world. Over the years, MES in the US has come to shape the thinking of many Middle Eastern scholars from around the world. Thanks to generous scholarships and fellowships provided by US funding bodies, numerous scholars have spent time in the United States (either for education or for research) thereby internalising the concepts and categories created and developed there. Accordingly, the categories of thought and modes of representation used by numerous Middle Eastern scholars around the world have been shaped by this—what [50, p. 91] has referred to as—‘North American style of knowing’. It is US MES that has taught many of these scholars the rules that enable them to know and articulate their knowledge about the ‘Middle East’ no matter what their subject matter and/or conclusions are. Hence, the significance of these debates for scholars in other parts of the world.

Aforementioned exchanges between Middle Eastern scholars and their critics have revealed three alternative future courses for MES. These are: MES (1) going back to its roots in ‘Oriental Studies’ (Kramer’s preferred future as outlined in *Ivory Towers on Sand*); (2) establishing itself firmly in the discipline-oriented social sciences (as called for by the avatars of methodology in the social sciences); and (3) theorising from Middle Eastern experiences thereby contributing to both MES and the social science disciplines. The article will discuss these alternative future courses for MES and argue that such disagreements regarding the future of MES are a symptom of fundamental disagreements about ‘theory’ and its uses. The article will conclude by suggesting that the future of MES would be shaped depending upon which understanding of ‘theory’ comes to prevail.

## 1. Back to the future? Oriental studies as the future for MES

In *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, Martin Kramer suggested that the cure to the problems of MES could be found in going back to the field's roots in Oriental Studies and restoring 'some continuity with the great tradition' which served imperial interests during previous eras [34, p. 123]. MES failed to serve the interests of 'American foreign policy or private initiative' in a similar manner, maintained Kramer, because Middle Eastern scholars made a break with the Orientalist tradition by adopting 'fashionable theories' (e.g. modernisation and development theories during the 1960s and 1970s, postcolonial theory in the 1980s and democratisation theory in the 1990s) which obscured more than they revealed about developments in the region.

Viewed from the author's perspective, if existing knowledge about the Middle East does not enable one to 'explain and predict' regional developments, Middle Eastern scholars and their 'fashionable theories' are to be blamed. However, although Kramer seems, at the outset, to be critical only of 'fashionable' theories—but not theory-laden studies—given his 'Orientalist nostalgia' [50, p. 102], it could safely be assumed that he would not be in favour of adopting rational choice theory or game theoretic models—the kind of approaches that seek to predict the future. In other words, although Kramer builds his critique upon the points raised by disciplinary-oriented scholars, he would not be in favour of establishing MES in the discipline-oriented social sciences.

The broader point being that Kramer's longing for MES going back to its roots in Oriental Studies is based on his distaste not only for 'fashionable' theories, but for theory in general. For he states, albeit in passing, that he considers theory as a 'variable that [has] nothing to do with the *real* Middle East' ([34, p. 78], emphasis added). It is worth scrutinising this statement, as it gives away the narrow understanding of theory that shapes his thinking. For Kramer, theory is something that the theorists do. MES, in turn, should remain theory-free. What allows Kramer to chart a theory-free course for the future of MES is this narrow understanding of theory, which does not allow him to see how a 'Western way of knowing' shaped Oriental Studies in the past. It is also this 'Western way of knowing' that grants him the epistemological authority to depict a 'Middle East' and to claim that his depiction is more 'real' when compared to some others that are shaped by theories.

No work—including Kramer's own—is theory-free. For, even those studies that deny their interpretative status (those texts that claim to merely look at the world 'out there' and describe it 'as it is') are shaped by theories. Such works are clearly not 'theoretical' in the way those studies that adopt and/or develop rational choice theories or game theoretic models are. Appreciating the way all studies are shaped by (and, in turn, shape) theories, in one way or another, requires moving beyond the narrow notion of theory that shapes Kramer's thinking (as 'something' that 'theorists' do), towards adopting a broader understanding of theory as 'something' that informs individuals' conceptions of the world (see e.g. [11]).

Then, if Kramer's diagnosis regarding MES is problematic, then his 'back to the future' scenario for MES is unlikely to be a cure to the problems he has identified. Yet, this is not to say that MES has been able to totally shed off its Orientalist legacy. After all, Edward Said's [51] major contribution to MES was to enable scholars to see (and show) how 'a degree of Orientalism remains in all area studies' [50, p. 91]. A degree of Orientalism remains in MES too, as it continues to '[reproduce] a North American style of knowing, one that is ordered toward the proliferation and containment of Orientalisms and their critiques' [50, p. 91]. The American prevalence in MES that was established in the post-war era (largely due to Middle Eastern

centers based in US universities) still remains whereby the thinking patterns and modes of representation used by Middle Eastern scholars around the world are shaped by US MES. The phenomenon of the ‘indigenisation’ of MES in the United States (poked fun at by the critics who say that MESA has changed ‘from an American organization interested in the Middle Eastern to a Middle Eastern one that happens to meet in the United States’ [14, p. 70]) could be viewed as an indication of how ‘Western ways of knowing’ continue to shape MES. Indeed, MES is shaped by its Orientalist legacy to the extent that it is critical of it [54]. Then, although it would be a fallacy to expect that seeking the future of MES in its Orientalist past would alleviate the problems identified by Kramer, it would also be erroneous to assume that the future could be totally devoid of the remnants of Orientalism.

## 2. Establishing MES firmly in the discipline-oriented social sciences

Since the end of the Cold War, debates about the future of area studies in the United States have brought to the fore the issue of ‘lack of theoretical vigour’ in the scholarly study of world regions. Characterizing the current state of MES as a ‘crisis’, Jerrold Green [17, p. 517] maintained that scholars should seek to establish their field firmly in the discipline-oriented social sciences or risk becoming irrelevant in an increasingly globalising world that demands knowledge about the universal not the particular. Robert Bates [8, p. 169] concurred: area studies specialists should embrace the move toward a disciplinary-oriented view and hone their skills in quantitative research techniques so that they would produce more ‘theoretically vigorous’ work (also see [20,55]).

In response to such criticism coming from the avatars of methodology in the social sciences, area studies went through a process of self-defence, self-reflection and introspection (see, e.g. [44, 58,64]). Although the debates have yet to die down, both parties have become somewhat more conciliatory towards each other with several studies coming out underlining the past contributions of area studies to social science, and emphasising the need to prepare for the future by encouraging area studies specialists and disciplinary generalists to develop greater understanding of what each other does (see, for example, *PS: Political Science* 1997; [44,64]). The need for the sides to develop greater understanding of what each other does comes out clearly when reading some of these works where the authors invariably claim that ‘most of the stuff that people say area studies should be doing is what area studies is already doing’ (Campbell quoted in [55, p. A13]). In a similar fashion, Middle Eastern scholar, Baghat Korany [31, p. 148] has maintained that ‘much of the criticism directed at area studies is outdated’, for, a ‘dynamic and dialectical relationship’ has characterised the interaction between area studies specialists and disciplinary generalists.

The point here is that notwithstanding the objection of Korany that such self-questioning is not warranted, the critics’ (see also [27]) appeal for introspection within MES is not totally uncalled for (for examples of stock-taking in MES, see [10,12,18,19,22,24,29,56,59,60,65]). After all, as Middle Eastern scholars themselves admit, the bulk of their work constitutes detailed descriptions of the region ‘that does not explicitly seek to generalise beyond the specific case’. Indeed, in 1990, Lisa Anderson [1, p. 52] observed that notwithstanding certain exceptions

much of what passes for political science in Middle Eastern Studies is a theoretical [sic.] description: modern diplomatic history, journalism, the regional counterpart of Kremlinology sometimes known as ‘mullah-watching’. The fundamental questions about the exercise of power and authority which constitute the core and *raison d’être* of

political science as a discipline are infrequently raised in studies of contemporary Middle Eastern politics, and Middle Eastern data rarely contribute to disciplinary theory building.

Almost a decade after the publication of her early rendition, Lisa Anderson [2, pp. 4 and 7] again pointed to the field's lament: MES had made 'little progress', notwithstanding the increasing number of political scientists choosing to 'flex their theoretical and methodological muscle' in the Middle East. Anderson urged the students of MES to 'work harder to ensure that the study of Middle Eastern politics is not isolated from the mainstream of American political science' ([2, p. 2]; see also [17,21,42]). Yet, following the advice of the critics is no easy task, particularly at a time when mainstream American Political Science is becoming more and more methodology conscious and demanding that students of area studies gain new skills in the use of formal theory, statistical methods and mathematics to become able to produce 'theoretically vigorous' work (see [7,8]).

Even before this methodology-conscious turn in Political Science, area scholars did not find it easy to establish their work in the discipline-oriented social sciences. Kramer's view of theory as 'a variable that [has] nothing to do with the *real* Middle East' ([34, p. 78] emphasis added) rests upon a concern shared by many Middle Eastern scholars that existing theories lack explanatory value in the Middle Eastern context. This incongruity between social science theories and Middle Eastern 'realities', in turn, is a symptom of a broader problem—that is, the limited utility of 'standard' concepts and theories within 'non-Western' contexts. This is one reason why many students of the Middle East, who were frustrated in their efforts to 'fit' existing theories to Middle Eastern experiences, have increasingly turned away from doing theory-informed work and sought solace in assumptions of 'Middle Eastern exceptionalism' (meaning that the Middle East requires narratives specific to itself), thereby further reinforcing a restricted notion of 'theory' as something that the 'theorists' do.

What Kramer [34] was particularly critical of was the 'civil society' and 'democratisation' theories adopted by students of the Middle Eastern during the 1990s (see, for example, [13,16,23,48,49,53]). Anderson [2] also admits that Middle Eastern scholars, during this period, were inspired less by concrete developments on the ground (as in the democratisation process in Eastern Europe which owed a great deal to the agency of civil societal actors) than by their 'wishful thinking' that similar processes could be jumpstarted in the Middle East as well. Having said that, some scholars' normative commitment to bringing about change in the Middle East goes only so far in explaining the 1990s proliferation of studies on democratisation. Consider the excerpt below taken from an article where Anderson voices the sentiments of the authors of such works:

Are those of us who study politics where 'parties, public opinion, elections, and legislative behaviour' are notable mostly by their absence to be relegated to 'premodern' political science? Are the authoritarian regimes and kinship networks, the kings, cliques and clients we struggle to understand, unfit subjects for political scientists, and appropriately assigned to the obscurity of second-rate journals as 'mere area studies'? [2, p. 1]

Middle Eastern specialists' attempt to give an end to this feeling of isolation 'by producing institutions instantly recognizable to other American political scientists' (2) resulted in a proliferation of studies on democratisation in the Middle East where next-to-none existed. To play on the words of a book by Ghassan Salame [52] entitled *Democracy without Democrats*, Middle Eastern scholars seem to have produced a literature on democratisation without democrats. Yet, this was caused, according to Anderson, not because of a lack of commitment to

‘scientific’ methods but because Middle Eastern scholars wanted to be recognised by their colleagues as being committed to producing social scientific knowledge. Scholars, who had, for years, felt professionally isolated because of their inability to study political institutions or processes (such as political parties and/or elections) that other American political scientists would recognise, jumped on the opportunity to work on democratisation in the Middle East when there was little evidence of democratisation but rhetoric.

Then, imagining a future for MES establishing itself firmly in the discipline-oriented social sciences in general and methodology-conscious Political Science in particular is not likely to constitute a cure to the problems identified by the critics. The way the arguments that back this future scenario is set up finds fault with the scholar who is considered to have failed to ‘do the hard-slogging, tough political and scientific work of penetrating into the organizations, journals, professional associations, and departments of relevant disciplines’ [42, p. 192]. The element of truth in this statement is corroborated by the evidence on offer: ‘from the beginning of 1997 to the beginning of 2000, three of MESA’s 2600 members published a peer-reviewed article in [*World Politics* and *Comparative Politics*]’ [42, p. 192]. Yet, what often goes unnoticed and/or unsaid is that the social science disciplines and existing theories were developed through theorising from ‘Western’ experiences and thus are of limited relevance in ‘non-Western’ contexts. What is more, such “Western ways of knowing often do not allow for the experiences of the ‘others’ to be represented unless they are slotted into one of roles that are available [40, see also, 30].”

Over the years, as ‘scientific means’ became ‘an end in itself’ [9, p. 43] the gap between disciplinary-oriented Political Science and MES further widened with the latter feeling alienated from the methods and approaches used by the former. The fact that the gap was already pretty wide to begin with only adds to the gravity of the problem at hand. Given this state of social sciences in general and Political Science in particular, seeking to establish MES firmly in the discipline-oriented social sciences is not likely to constitute a solution to the problem of explaining developments in the Middle East. In the following section, a third scenario—theorising from Middle Eastern experiences—will be examined.

### 3. Theorising from Middle Eastern experiences

In response to the criticisms raised against MES, a third alternative is offered by Middle Eastern scholars who have urged the others to follow their example and theorise from Middle Eastern experiences thereby contributing to both MES and the disciplines. Pointing to the example set by himself and others, Korany has maintained that ‘much of the criticism directed at area studies is outdated’ and that ‘many have gone so far in establishing a bridge between area and disciplinary specialization that it is often their counterparts, those who regard themselves as social science generalists, who are in danger of parochialism’ [31, p. 149]. The issue of the limited relevance of social science theories in ‘non-Western’ contexts was touched upon above. The issue of ‘parochialism’ in the social science disciplines will be discussed further below. What is significant here is to point to the discrepancy between Korany’s and the critics’ understanding of what constitutes ‘theoretically vigorous’ work.

When Middle Eastern scholars are criticised for lack of ‘theoretical vigour’ in their scholarly studies, their critics may mean different things depending on their understanding of ‘theory’. Those students of the ‘hard social sciences’ (such as economics or psychology) who do not consider the ‘soft social sciences’ (such as history) to be ‘scientific’ are likely to find all but very

few works in MES lacking in ‘theoretical vigour’ (with ‘theory’ defined in the scientific-objectivist sense of the term). Those who accept the ‘scientific’ credentials of ‘soft social sciences’, on the other hand, are to find MES less lacking.

Having said that, the issue of ‘theoretical vigour’ in MES cannot be resolved merely by recognising the ‘scientific’ credentials of ‘soft’ social scientists and encouraging students to follow their example. For, there is also the problem of those scholars who either explicitly or implicitly reject the relevance of ‘theory’ when studying Middle Eastern dynamics. Judging by the reception Kramer’s book has received, their numbers are not very few. They fall into two groups: those who do not reject the relevance of ‘theory’ but consider ‘realism’ to be the only ‘relevant’ theory, and those who profess to provide ‘theory-free’ accounts of Middle Eastern dynamics (as in the case of Kramer).

Those who do not explicitly reject the relevance of ‘theory’ insist on realism having greater utility in this part of the world. What is problematic with such professedly ‘realist’ accounts of the Middle East is that they also lack in ‘theoretical vigour’. For, more often than not, such accounts provide descriptions of current events through resorting to realist jargon in a loose fashion. Theirs is not a ‘realism’ that Morgenthau [47] or Waltz [63] would recognize as their own with the stress both put on methodological precision and parsimony. What such students of MES do is to mistake describing the world as they see it for ‘realism’. What is more, the fact that they claim to represent the world ‘as it is’, thereby denying the interpretative status of their studies, does not render their work more ‘objective’ or ‘realistic’. In a sentence: such accounts also fail to meet the standards of ‘theoretical vigour’ as set by the explaining or understanding approaches.

The strategy favoured by many scholars such as Korany and Anderson is the more demanding one in that it requires scholars to ‘develop’ those concepts and theories to enhance their utility when understanding/explaining ‘non-Western’ contexts (see also, e.g. [5,6,25,26,32,33,43,62]). Notwithstanding the difficulties involved, this alternative may be to the benefit of both MES and the disciplines. This point begs further clarification.

The promise of area studies when they were initially founded in the late 1940s was that of making the social sciences a ‘whole’ and their findings of ‘universal’ relevance by providing data about ‘non-Western’ parts of the world. Thus, Gabriel Almond called on political scientists to study the ‘uncouth and exotic’ regions of the world in order to make political science a ‘total science’. The development of area specialists would provide the detailed knowledge of exotic regions required to universalize the science of politics ([46, p. 157]; see also [50]).

In the post-war era, this division of labour became even more hierarchical with students of the social science disciplines looking down upon their area studies colleagues (including students of the Middle East) as ‘native informants’ who produced ‘thick descriptions’ (‘low politics’) so that the ‘upstairs’ members may theorize grandly about the world (‘high politics’) [4, p. 30].

The emergence and prevalence of a restricted notion of ‘theory’ as something that ‘theorists’ do has been an unfortunate outcome of this division of labour for MES. Another unfortunate outcome has been the failure to fulfil the task of ‘universalizing’ the social sciences. Putting aside the issue of ‘desirability’ and ‘possibility’ of universalising the social sciences, what should be noted here is that, in time, efforts focused on representing the ‘non-West’ as part of an ostensibly universal story told in (and about) the ‘West’ [45,46]. Whereas the original task would have required de-parochialising the social sciences by disturbing the unquestioned dominance of ‘Western ways of knowing’, in time the task has become one of adopting and ‘testing’ those frameworks that were developed in the ‘West’. Ideally, such ‘testing’ should have

involved further developing the theories at hand thereby contributing to the project of achieving ‘universal’ knowledge. It would also have required recognizing the problems of both sides to this relationship (between the disciplines and area studies). Whereas it is often the latter that is criticized for the failure in this task. For, the overbearing authority of the US approaches to social science and their claim to *know* have so far marginalized critical engagements and made it very difficult for area studies scholars to penetrate the disciplines.

The promise of critical approaches as introduced by Said [51] was the possibility of ‘a form of area studies that did not treat the region as a “thing that exists” but explored in the representation of the non-West fundamental questions about Western ways of knowing and the project of a general social science’ [45, p. 16]. Notwithstanding their achievements in disturbing the disciplines’ claim to produce authoritative ‘knowledge’ about the ‘non-West’, critical approaches have yet to make significant inroads into the disciplines and challenge ideas about the possibility of ‘universalising’ the social sciences or pointing to the parochialism of such universalism [3, p. 109]. Interestingly, the academics most resistant to even considering the problematic nature of the project of a universal social science are ‘unselfconscious area studies generalists themselves—their “area” being the United States’ [57, p. 13]. This, in turn, is symptomatic of a general ‘crisis of the disciplines’ ([57, p.11]; see also [45, pp. 16–20]) understood to be caused by the ‘deterritorialisation of the disciplines’ and the ‘deterritorialisation of contemporary global politics’ [45, p. 17]. At the moment, such a crisis is not widely recognised. The problems with explaining dynamics in ‘non-Western’ locale are usually explained away by pointing to a lack of theoretical vigour in area studies. The solution that follows such a diagnosis is that of returning to the disciplinary home. Yet, as [45, p. 24] put it, ‘area studies has no compelling future as merely the servant of the American social science’. Its potential contribution lies in disturbing the ‘disciplinary claim to universality and the particular place this assigns to areas’ [45, p. 17].

Accordingly, the debate about the future of MES would no longer be about *whether* to use theory or not, but one about ‘what kinds of theory are being used, and how explicit or implicit, ambitious or modest, scholars are in articulating their theoretical assumptions and concerns’ [57, p. 14]. Viewed as such, ‘a self-conscious attempt to articulate as clearly as possible the commitments, perspectives and power relations one brings to one’s research, is perhaps the best any scholar can do’ [57, p. 15]. This, in turn, would require the scholar to come to terms with how American power has been complicit in the emergence and sustenance of the hierarchical division of labour between the social science disciplines and area studies, and the development of MES to its current status.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article sought to explore alternative future scenarios for MES. It was argued that the current debates about the future of MES are a symptom of fundamental disagreements between the parties regarding their understanding of ‘theory’ and the role it plays in shaping social research. The significance of such a discussion is rooted in the conviction that the future of MES would be shaped depending upon which understanding of ‘theory’ comes to prevail. If a narrow understanding of ‘theory’ as something that ‘theorists’ do were to prevail, then we are likely to see Kramer’s ‘back to the future’ scenario coming true with modern day Machiavellis gaining the upper hand in the production of professedly theory-free ‘knowledge’ about the ‘Middle East’. Alternatively, a narrow understanding of ‘theory’ might come to prevail with disciplinary generalists gaining the upper hand and convincing Middle Eastern scholars to establish



themselves firmly in the disciplinary-oriented social sciences. In such a case, we are likely to observe a movement towards the universalisation of the social sciences no matter how parochial such universalism may be. Needless to say, such a scenario is highly problematic in that it ‘allows the authority of the social science disciplines to persuade us that the only worthwhile way of engaging with the politics and history of other world regions is to the extent that they could be made to appear as particular instances of universal stories told in and about the West’ [45, p. 22]. This, in turn, would amount to robbing the ‘non-West’ of alternative visions of the future. This is because ‘[t]he present of the non-Western world, one surmises from much academic work, is none other than the past of the West; its future is only the present of the West, and one suspects a poor version of that present’ [37, p. 8]. This scenario coming true would also involve silencing the stories that the ‘non-West’ might want to tell the rest of the world or allowing them to be told only through a process of translation that distorts their meaning. Admittedly, there is no way around the problem of translation. Yet, as [45, pp. 22–3] has maintained, ‘those anxious to contribute to the universal knowledge of the social sciences seldom recognise it as a problem’. As the article has argued, recognising and being explicit about such problems as well as one’s theoretical and/or political commitments constitute the best step any scholar can take.

This brings us to the third scenario, which requires a broader understanding of ‘theory’ coming to prevail in MES to reveal the relationship between power and knowledge and how our knowledge about the ‘Middle East’ has been implicated by American power. Such a scenario would involve theorising from Middle Eastern experiences to ‘historicize and contextualise—in effect to de-naturalize—the formulations and universalising tendencies of the US social science and humanities disciplines’ [57, p. 2]. While doing this, adopting desirable visions of the future would be crucial—visions that ‘may help make sense of the present, and the past as well’. After all, the loss of such a vision would leave us ‘at the mercy of our own creation’ ([15, p. 86]; also see [38]).

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