

Introduction

Perhaps it would be best to begin by explaining what this book is *not*. It is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed, comprehensive history of the study either of Islam or of the region that has come to be called the Middle East, as conducted by scholars and others in what has come to be called the West. Nor does it claim to be a full-scale, in-depth scholarly analysis of the origins, development, character and implications of Western perceptions of, and attitudes toward, Islam, Muslims, Arabs, Iranians, or the Middle East.

This book's purpose is much more modest. It seeks, first of all, to introduce readers to the history of the sometimes overlapping enterprises known as Orientalism, Oriental studies, Islamic studies and Middle East studies as practiced in the West, with particular attention to the United States from the mid-twentieth century onward. It does not attempt to identify or discuss all the scholars, writers, artists, travelers, texts, schools of thought or institutions involved in studying, commenting on or depicting Islam, the Middle East or the broader Orient over the past millennium and a half. Rather, it explores broad trends, some particularly influential interpretive paradigms and theoretical approaches, important debates and significant transitions, along with their political, social and cultural contexts, largely by focusing on a selection of representative individuals, illustrative texts, key institutions and important developments.

A better understanding of how the Middle East and Islam have been perceived, understood, studied and depicted would seem to be more important today than ever before, especially for Americans. The United States is in our time very deeply engaged in the Middle East and in other predominantly Muslim parts of the world. That engagement, which goes back more than half a century, has had complex political, military, economic and cultural dimensions and powerful consequences, not only for the peoples of the Middle East but also for ourselves, as the events of September 11, 2001 brought home all too tragically. Those events, but also much else in the tangled, often painful history of US involvement in the Middle East over the past six decades, demonstrate that Americans

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cannot afford to remain as uninformed as they have generally been about the histories, politics and cultures of that region. Nor can we any longer trust blindly in the assurances, predictions and promises of those in power or in the kinds of knowledge about the Middle East and Islam which have often been used to shape and justify the policies they have pursued.

As this book seeks to show, there has been over the past several decades a great deal of criticism of, and controversy over, the ways in which the peoples, politics and cultures of the Middle East have been studied in the United States, the kind of knowledge that has been produced about this part of the world, and the implications and consequences of that knowledge. These disputes among scholars who study the Middle East or Islam often stem from fundamental disagreements over which approach, concepts, interpretive framework or methods should be used in order to best understand what it is they are studying; indeed, as we will see, there has even been substantial disagreement over how scholars should define what it is that they are studying.

As in other academic fields and disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, scholars studying the Middle East or Islam have, explicitly or implicitly, drawn on one or another interpretive framework, model or paradigm – often rooted in a broader vision about how the world works (or ought to work) – in order to make sense of whatever historical period or social institution or event or process they were seeking to understand or explain. Each of these approaches has its own (often unacknowledged) premises, analytical categories and preferred methods, and each defines what is being studied in a different way. Each approach or interpretive framework thus tends to treat certain aspects or features of the society or culture or place or period they are studying as important while ignoring or downplaying others; each explains how and why things change (or do not change) differently; each prescribes certain types of sources, and methods for exploring them, as most useful or relevant for the scholarly task at hand. Moreover, these differing (and sometimes diametrically opposed) paradigms always take shape within, and are thus influenced by, complex historical and contemporary contexts, involving (among other things) personalities and personal networks, generational inclinations and shifts, political contention, cultural trends and conflicts, and institutional developments.

Scholars who study the emergence and development of scholarly fields and disciplines often refer to the contexts, arguments, conflicts and processes which affect the production, dissemination and reception of knowledge in a particular field or discipline as its “politics” or its “politics of knowledge.” Understanding something about the politics of knowledge in Islamic and Middle East studies, and the alternative ways of

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understanding Islam and the Middle East in the modern world which scholars advocate and argue about, is important for several reasons. For one, scholars and students engaged in this field would, one might think, benefit from a better understanding of its origins, history and debates. But I would also like to hope that a better grasp of the politics of contemporary Middle East studies might enable ordinary Americans to make better sense of what is going on in the Middle East, and to more effectively assess the policies advocated by government officials, politicians, pundits and “talking heads” on television, since those policies are often rooted in, and justified by, certain (often much disputed) ways of understanding the Middle East and the wider Muslim world initially elaborated by scholars.

That is why, after offering a largely narrative account of the emergence and development of what would eventually be called Islamic or Oriental studies that takes us from ancient Greece down to the twentieth century, this book narrows its focus to explore in greater depth the politics of knowledge in US Middle East studies over the past half-century. After a chapter centered on the emergence of the new field of Middle East studies in the United States and its Cold War contexts, I turn to the critiques of the key intellectual paradigm that initially underpinned that field, but also of Orientalism as a scholarly discipline, that gathered force in the 1960s and 1970s. There follows a chapter devoted to Edward W. Said’s very influential 1978 book *Orientalism*, its critical reception and its longer-term impact and consequences. A final chapter discusses subsequent developments in US Middle East studies, bringing us to the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the US occupation of Iraq in 2003.

My chief concern in this part of the book is how different theories, models or modes of interpretation have shaped the kinds of questions scholars have asked about the Middle East or Islam (and therefore what answers they have come up with), the methods and sources they have used, and the meaning they have given to the results of their inquiries. In so doing the book also calls attention to the historical contexts, and the specific political, social, cultural and economic forces and factors which have contributed to the emergence and acceptance – among scholars and in society at large – of certain interpretive paradigms, as well as to the social and political interests which have been served by the adoption of one way of construing reality rather than another.

Having argued for the importance of paying attention to the politics of knowledge in this field, I hasten to add that we need to be very careful not to conflate a particular theoretical or interpretive approach with, or to explain it solely or even mainly in terms of, bias, prejudice, stereotyping

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or racism. As we will see, for many centuries – indeed, down to the present day – a good many people in the West, including the ostensibly learned, have embraced and espoused crude prejudices about Islam, Muslims, Arabs and others. However, for purposes of analysis at least, we need to distinguish clearly between such sentiments, however repellent or pernicious, on the one hand, and on the other the interpretive framework embraced by an individual scholar or by a group of scholars in a given field. As we will see, there have been a substantial number of scholars who were highly respectful of Islam and empathetic toward its adherents' beliefs and aspirations but who nonetheless produced work which critics have argued is implicitly or explicitly informed by a questionable interpretive framework. So while I will certainly be noting instances of prejudice, stereotyping and racism in scholarship on Islam and the Middle East, I will also be insisting that it is important to distinguish such attitudes from the interpretive frameworks which scholars use; these are, analytically at least, two different things, though they all too often coincide and can be hard to separate.

I should also acknowledge at the outset that there have been, and continue to be, scholars of the Middle East and Islam (as well as scholars in other fields and disciplines) who reject the entire notion of a politics of knowledge and insist that their own scholarly impartiality, critical faculties and good judgment, along with the use of tried-and-true scholarly methods, allow them to produce knowledge that is not informed by any implicit or explicit theory, model or vision of the world but is simply and objectively true. They might be said to take their motto from police sergeant Jack Webb's favorite line in the old television series *Dragnet*: "Just the facts, ma'am."

Adherents of this epistemological position, which (depending on how it is formulated and implemented) may be characterized as empiricism or positivism, insist that they simply examine the facts, which are deemed to "speak for themselves," and derive their analyses directly from them, without allowing any presuppositions, theory, political viewpoint, social values or personal prejudices to affect their judgment. In contrast, they tend to see their epistemological opponents – those who see the production of knowledge as always involving some degree of interpretation and judgment and as always influenced by historical contexts – as wrongly injecting a distorting political and subjective element into what should be the politically neutral, objective world of scholarship.

Of course, scholars who see knowledge as socially produced or constructed respond by insisting that what we believe we know about the human world, what we take to be true about whatever aspect of human social life past or present we are interested in, is never simply the product

of the direct observation of reality and our capacity for reasoning. Rather, attaining such knowledge always entails resort to some (often implicit and unacknowledged) theory, interpretive stance or exercise of judgment. Nor do the facts ever really speak for themselves in any simple sense. What we deem to be a fact, which facts we deem to be significant, which questions we want our data to help us answer, and how we go about producing an explanation of something – all these involve making choices, which again means interpretation, judgment, some notion or theory or vision of how the world is put together and can be understood. Facts thus do not stand entirely on their own: they come to make sense within a theoretical or interpretive framework which specifies that they are indeed facts, that is, true statements about reality, and that it is *this* set of facts and not some other that counts, that tells us what is really going on. And the emergence, dissemination and decline of the contending scholarly frameworks of interpretation, the many alternative possible ways of comprehending the social world, are always bound up, if in complex ways, with broader contexts and developments.¹

Given this book's title and its substance, it will be obvious that I share the perspective outlined in the preceding paragraph. However, to argue that the facts do not simply speak for themselves, that knowledge and truth are not immediately and self-evidently available to us but are embedded within systems of meaning generated and embraced by human beings and human societies, and further that social interests have something to do with how knowledge is produced and received, is not necessarily to argue that facts mean absolutely nothing or that all the different stories one could tell about reality are equally true or valid. Even as we recognize that how we interpret reality is not the simple outcome of direct and unmediated observation (or of experimentation, for the "hard" sciences), we are entitled to establish, and demand adherence to, what we might call community standards for truth, broadly agreed-upon ways of selecting and treating relevant data and of making, supporting and challenging arguments, as well as procedures for avoiding gross distortion, not to mention fabrication.

This is something scholars in specific fields and disciplines have long done, and it is what makes it possible for them to talk with one another and collectively judge (or at least constructively argue about) the accuracy and utility of alternative interpretations and narratives. I certainly believe that my interpretation here is a reasonable one that conforms to the procedures and standards my fellow historians and other scholars have established in order to advance knowledge and avoid the production and dissemination of tendentious distortions and outright falsehoods, and I hope that those who read this book will agree.

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Because I wanted the nonspecialist audience for which this book is intended to find it as accessible as possible, and because it could not be too long, I had to make a great many decisions about what to discuss and what to leave out. Among other things I opted, once I got to the twentieth century, not to address work by, and debates among, French, German, Russian/Soviet or other scholars of the Middle East or Islam who were (or are) neither American nor British, or their political and institutional settings. This is not to suggest that those scholars and settings are unimportant; it is simply that, linguistic constraints aside, one of my chief goals for this book was to provide an introduction to how the Middle East, Islam and related issues have been studied and argued about in the United States over the past half-century and thereby to help Americans acquire a better understanding of the implications and consequences of some of the kinds of knowledge which have over recent decades framed both US government policy in the Middle East and popular perceptions of the region and its peoples.

Nonetheless, I expect that some of those who read this book will deem some of my choices, as well as my overall approach and specific interpretations and judgments, idiosyncratic, wrong-headed, inaccurate or even perverse. I am in fact not so concerned with those who fundamentally reject this book's basic approach, from which its specific analyses and arguments flow: it is clearly written from a particular intellectual, disciplinary, political and moral standpoint. It also reflects my two decades of experience as a university-based teacher of modern Middle Eastern history and my sense of what American college and university students know (or what is sometimes worse, think they know) and don't know about the Middle East and Islam, and what *I* think they need to know. In addition, it has been shaped by what I have learned from the time and energy I have invested in trying to help Americans outside the academy acquire a better understanding of the Middle East and the Muslim world, and of the role of the United States in them, a commitment which this book seeks to further.

I will not be surprised if those who understand the world in ways that are diametrically opposed to my own do not like this book. In fact, I would feel as if I were doing something wrong if they were not unhappy with what I had to say. But I do regret any annoyance or disappointment that this book may engender among those who may be broadly sympathetic to its thrust or purpose but are unhappy about what they see as my failure to deal with, or properly treat, what they believe to be critical scholars, texts, trends and debates.

In response I can only hope that disgruntled readers will keep in mind what I said at the outset: this is an *introductory* survey, intended primarily

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not for scholarly specialists but for students and for a wider reading public. There is clearly much more to be said about the issues I have addressed here (and about many others I have not), and I hope that other people will go ahead and say them – though I would also point out that a great deal more research is needed before we have anything like an adequate scholarly understanding of the histories of Islamic studies and Middle East studies as they have developed in Europe and the United States. If this book helps generate discussion, stimulate intelligent and constructive criticism, and encourage further research and writing, I will feel as if I have done something right.

Because this book is itself something of an extended historiographical essay, it would be redundant to devote space in this introduction to a systematic review of the extensive literature on Orientalism and related topics. But I hope that readers will compare, at their leisure, this book's similarities with, and differences from, other relatively recent synthetic works on the Western study of Islam and the Middle East. At the risk of offending the authors of the many other works which I have found useful, I will mention here only Maxime Rodinson's *Europe and the Mystique of Islam* and Thierry Hentsch's *Imagining the Middle East*. Both are very valuable contributions to the literature, but my specific purposes, interests and intended audience have led me to produce a rather different kind of study. The same applies to Alexander Lyon Macfie's *Orientalism*, which I first read only after I had substantially completed the manuscript of this book. Though Macfie covers some of the same ground as I do, especially with regard to the material in Chapters 5 and 6, this book ranges much more widely, is much more concerned with historical, political and institutional contexts, and deploys a very different analytical framework. I would also call readers' attention to *Orientalism: A Reader*, the very useful collection of readings on Orientalism which Macfie has compiled.

In the end, of course, in addition to assuming responsibility for any factual errors, I must leave it to my readers to render final judgment on the virtues and defects of this book, in its own right, in relation to comparable work and, last but not least, in terms of its avowed purposes.

1 In the beginning

In this chapter I explore some of the ways in which Christians living in the region that we think of today as western Europe during the medieval period came to perceive Islam, the new faith that emerged in the Arabian peninsula in the third decade of the seventh century and rapidly spread across much of the world as it was then known to them. As we will see, even the initial western Christian perceptions of Islam and of its adherents did not come out of nowhere or develop in a vacuum. Seventh-century “Europeans” – of course they did not think of themselves as Europeans at the time – already possessed concepts and categories through which this new and frightening phenomenon could be made sense of. Some of these concepts and categories, and the images they generated, would prove quite durable over much of the medieval period, though by the end of this period a handful of scholars had begun to lay the basis for a somewhat better understanding of Islam.

To adequately understand the development of western Christian images of Islam, it is helpful to go even further back in time, to ancient Greece and Rome, and there begin to explore the origins and evolution of the idea of a “Europe” and a “West” often deemed essentially different from an “East.” Over the succeeding centuries these and other ideas and images would be drawn on, in different ways and in changing contexts, to underpin certain ways of dividing the world and categorizing its parts, and thus of understanding Islam.

To begin with ancient Greece and Rome and to discuss medieval western European understandings of Islam is not to suggest that there was any continuous or monolithic Western image of, or attitude toward, the East or Islam stretching from antiquity through the medieval era down to the modern period. But as we will see, at various points over that very long span of time, some European scholars, writers and others appropriated certain images and notions about the East and Islam from what they had come to perceive as Europe’s distinctive past, refashioned them in keeping with their own contemporary concerns, and propagated them as relevant for their own time. It is this process of selective borrowing

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and creative recycling, which goes on even today, that makes delving into early images and attitudes useful for understanding how Islam and the Middle East would come to be understood and portrayed even in the modern era.

The cradle of the West?

“Ancient Greece” is itself a term that requires some unpacking. What would much later be given this label, as if it were a unified and coherent entity, more accurately denotes a rather diverse collection of city-states, principalities, towns, villages and islands inhabited largely (but not exclusively) by speakers of some dialect of Greek. After centuries of expansion this zone encompassed a large geographical area, from Athens and Sparta and Corinth and Thebes and other city-states located in what is today Greece eastward to the many Greek (“Hellenic” would be better) settlements in Asia Minor (“Little Asia,” today Anatolia in Turkey), south and east to the islands of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, northward into southeastern Europe and along the coasts of the Adriatic and Black seas, and westward to the settlements established by Greeks in what are today Italy and southern France.

Many centuries later, Europeans would come to identify ancient Greece, and particularly Athens in its “golden age” (about 500–400 BCE), as the source of core components of the thought and culture of what they had come to call “Western civilization,” indeed as the “cradle” of that civilization, the time and place in which it originated. This identification rests on the notion – popular in the nineteenth century and still powerful today – that over the past four or five thousand years the histories of the myriad peoples and cultures of the world can be most usefully grasped in terms of the successive rise and fall of various civilizations. In this view, each civilization constitutes a more or less coherent entity with its own distinctive core values, beliefs and principles, its own unifying spirit or essence, which clearly sets it apart from other civilizations with different core values and beliefs, different spirits or essences. Furthermore, civilizations are often deemed to have a life cycle similar to that of human beings: they are born in some specific time and place; when young they are vigorous, flexible, creative, able to absorb new ideas; they grow to maturity and reach the height of their cultural and political powers in a “golden age”; then they gradually lose their cultural energy, they grow less creative and innovative, more rigid and insular; and finally they decline toward social stasis and cultural senescence, until they disappear from the scene or are absorbed by some other younger and more vigorous civilization.

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I will discuss this conception of history and of how humanity can best be divided up, and how Islam fits into it, more fully later on. For now let us keep in mind that the ancient Greeks did of course not see themselves as Europeans or Westerners, much less as the originators of anything resembling “Western” or “European” civilization. Rather, they regarded themselves as a distinctive and culturally superior people surrounded by less advanced “barbarians,” by which the Greeks meant all those who spoke not Greek but some other language, disparaged as gibberish. Moreover, though many European scholars would later depict Greek culture in the “classical” period of antiquity as wholly new and unique, as an achievement of incomparable genius which the ancient Greeks created virtually out of nothing, we know that in fact the Greeks were very much influenced by, and borrowed from, the cultures of their older, richer and more powerful neighbors to the south and east. These included mighty Egypt, the various empires which arose in the fertile and densely populated lands between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia, from the Greek for “between the rivers”), and the Phoenicians, who originated along what is today the coast of Lebanon and who, like the Greeks, ranged far and wide across the Mediterranean Sea as traders and settlers.¹

This is not to say that the philosophers, poets, playwrights, historians and scientists of ancient Greece did not create anything new and distinctive; of course they did. But it is also clear that ancient Greek culture did not exist in a vacuum, that it was always influenced by the cultures of the surrounding peoples (and vice versa), and thus that what the ancient Greeks achieved rested on, and was interwoven with, the achievements of other peoples and cultures. Similarly, while our culture, language and politics are still influenced by elements of classical Greek culture, we need to be very careful about tracing the historical origins of ideas and institutions back into the distant past. We may be able to find what appears to be a familiar idea or institution in some earlier historical setting, but it probably meant something very different in that setting than it would later.

For example, Athens of the fifth century BCE is often depicted – indeed, revered – as the first democracy, the ancestor of today’s western democracies. But in fact the political institutions of ancient Athens, and what those institutions meant to Athenians, were in many important ways different from what we understand by democratic political institutions today. As a result, to trace a more or less direct link between fifth-century Athens and today’s United States or Britain is to distort history by projecting our own conceptions onto the past and assuming that they were shared by the ancient Greeks, whose vision of the world