 CHAPTER 1

An Introduction: The Sociology of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism (Theories and Praxis)


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Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; the object is a ‘fact’ which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it.

Edward Said, Orientalism

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Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

Chinua Achebe

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Western education remains a fetish of the colonial past.

Thorsten J. Pattberg

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Introduction

This book is intended as a contemporary exploration of Edward Said’s thesis, first laid out in his seminal work, Orientalism,¹ which posits that the field of Middle Eastern studies produces policy-oriented and not value-free knowledge and, moreover, is tied to the culture of colonialism. In the post-September 11th

era, we have witnessed an increasing tendency to establish closer, more explicit, and multifaceted relationships between universities and state institutions, and in the case of Middle East studies this may be considered one form of neo-Orientalism. There are many examples within U.S. academic study of the Middle East and Islam of work that is intimately connected to think tanks, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and driven by government interests and funding.

Said opened the door to a global discussion of Orientalism, based mainly on a theoretical approach to the concept. Many scholars have criticized the theory of Orientalism, perhaps because Said’s work touched and in a sense threatened the heart of some threads of Western academic discourse. He has been criticized strongly in some Western quarters, but at the same time, has been glorified in the global south from the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America to Africa. By most accounts, Orientalism produced a sea change and provided the theoretical foundations for critical studies of colonialism, imperialism, and other subaltern studies. However, it did not shed any light on the practical applications of the theory of Orientalism. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s into the early 1990s, we witnessed the emergence of a different trend within Middle East, Islamic, Turkish, Ottoman, Iranian, Arabic, and Kurdish studies. American hegemony, and the complex and multifaceted relationship between governments and academia, led in part to an increased emphasis on the production of policy-oriented knowledge in the United States. After September 11th, academics began to work more openly with government agencies, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions in order to fund and popularize their research.

In this book, we will develop a better understanding of Middle East and area studies subjects such as Iranian, Turkish, Arabic, and Islamic studies through the lenses of ‘Orientals’ and offer a perspective that is distinct from the interests of the U.S. academic power elite. Therefore, this book demonstrates that regional studies is a central element of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era and involves a complex process of state interference in the social sciences. The complex relationship we currently see between state actors and American academia and Middle Eastern studies is explored from a critical perspective, in an effort to implicate and update Said’s work on Orientalism. This book will bridge the gap between classical Orientalism and the neo-Orientalism that characterizes the post-September 11th era as it applies to Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in American academia. Its relevance also includes shedding light on the practical applications of Orientalism, including Title VI and flagship academic programs, the re-invigoration of Middle East studies after