

Post-Colonialism and Political Modernity in the Middle East

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Abstract

Introduction-For a long time, the dominant approach within the study of International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline has been to regard the Middle East as a separate geopolitical entity –which is assumed to portray crucial aspects of a distinct regional political system: with its major and minor powers; core and peripheral states or regions. Although rarely manifested and mostly unacknowledged, this implied an engagement with some rather complex epistemological and ontological claims, which hold a major stake within the philosophy of social sciences, in general, and the study of politics, in particular. The rise of regional conceptions of inter-state, inter-national relations in the post WWII academic pursuit of IR has undeniably been a development that precipitated some consensus or a middle ground upon which an engagement with a supposedly mechanical anarchical state-system has become possible, with the appropriation of an attitude that calls itself realism which has successfully monopolized over linguistic and normative vocabularies in an uncompromising attempt to construct and authorize a specific empirical position as a reification of "the real." Thus, what is primarily at stake in the study of regional systems –whether as a function of policy-formulation, specialized investigation or an academic pursuit –is this almost absolute conception of the reality of regional systems that seems to prevail overwhelmingly within much of the literature.

Index terms—

1 I. Introduction

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To be sure, however, the institution of this regional conceptualization of inter-national, inter-state relations has been undoubtedly a development which has only come about after some rather intense and controversial debate that have mainly revolved around the possibility of a scientific study of politics as a behavioral science.

The counter claim of maintaining a classical conception of politics within a philosophical tradition –which in the post WWII has mainly manifested itself around normative philosophical debates –has been a contention that has had much stake in shaping the dominant realist position, especially within the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the disciplinary practices of IR. ?? The debate between traditionalists and behavioralists in the 1970s has precipitated as a synthesis of a traditional conception of politics with an appropriate coating of the necessity of situating political science within the wider vicinity of social and behavioral sciences. As a result of this the neo-realist, neo-liberal ?? This debate between behavioralism and various forms of classicism have mainly taken place in the US. Nevertheless, the root of this dichotomization of the two approaches took place within more broad themes in 20 th century European thought revolving around the crisis of historicism and the dubious status of positivist epistemologies within the social sciences. Noteworthy, the literature on this subject is rather broad and arcane. My reading has been mainly influenced by an engagement within structural linguistics and anthropology. An interesting attempt to chart the roots of the problem –as it has manifested itself within political realism in the 20 th century theories of international relations –is that of Brian Schmitt in his book entitled, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* (2000). To the Realists: You sober people who feel well armed against passion and fantasies and would like to turn your emptiness into a matter of pride and an ornament: you call yourself realists and hint that the world really is the way it appears to you. As if reality stood unveiled before you only, and you yourselves were perhaps the best part of it–O you beloved images of Sais! But in your unveiled state are not even you still very passionate and dark creatures compared to fish, and still far too similar to an artist in love? And what is "reality" for an artist in love? You are still burdened with those estimates of things that have their origin in the passions and loves of former centuries. Your sobriety still contains a secret and an indistinguishable darkness. Your love of "reality," for example, that is a primeval "love." Every feeling and sensation contains a piece of this old love; and some fantasy, some prejudice, some unreason, some ignorance, some fear, and ever so much else has contributed to it and worked on it. That mountain there! That cloud there! What is "real" in that? Subtract the phantasm and every human contribution from it, my sober friends! If you can! If you can forget your descent, your past, your training–all of your humanity and animality. There is no "reality" for us–not for you either, my sober friends. We are not nearly as different as you think, and perhaps our good will to transcend intoxication is as respectable as your faith that you are altogether incapable of intoxication.

nexus, with the origins of the former generally attributed to the seminal work of Kenneth Waltz *Theory of International Relations* and the subsequent development of his work by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane is a position that is deeply rooted within the American and British universities.

Much of the new regional conceptualization of the world has mostly been formulated in the shadows of this neorealist, neoliberal nexus. This in turn, has some crucial implications for the various possibilities of formulating theoretical positions that make it possible to speak about geographical designations as subsystems, which, for various reasons, exhibit special characteristics and require distinct approaches. Nevertheless, what remains striking in these accounts is the overwhelming ahistoricism and structuralism ?? It seems the problem turns out to be two-folded. On the one hand, such a rigid structuralism applied to a domain, which is susceptible to incessant flux resulting from a variety of factors, seems constricting even within the "Core Capitalist" region of the world, where principles and institutions of the state system have been formalized and consolidated since two centuries ago.

On the other hand, it is the problem of applying such a rigid structuralism into a regional environment, where states are still on the way to consolidation and where territorial disputes and conceptions of security centered around the sovereignty of states and their territorial integrity are characteristic of the political struggles of another era–such as was the case in 18 that imposes a rather rigid, and arguably, simplistic on contextual reading on such a culturally and ethnically diverse region, such as the Middle East. Thus, what might appear as a natural extension of a classical realist position –with its emphasis on the sharp distinction between the domestic and the international into some version of a more sophisticated comprehension of the world, or regions of it, as interdependent and complex entities –has been more than merely logical or natural. The development has been characterized by an almost disregarding anything that falls outside the bubble of billiard ball models, in which states are viewed as black boxed entities struggling for the maximization of their autonomy and security, in a milieu that is structurally anarchic. Indeed, this approach refuses to think outside the box of Miles Copeland's classical realist book of the *Game of Nations*. ?? Noteworthy, the term "structuralism" is used in its original context, as the word has been known with the development of structural linguistics and anthropology in Continental Europe. The reader is aware that within the discipline of international relations some authors use the word to designate versions of Marxism and accounts of Capitalist Imperialism as approaches to the study of International Relations. Notwithstanding that such a use is a slippage and distortion of the original use, it might be also considered that Marxism as it proliferated within the confines of a distinctly critical project in the Post-Cold War discipline of International Relations is a relatively recent development that has been usually referred to as "Marxian Inspired Critical Theory." and 19 century continental Europe. Thus, it is inaccurate to assume that what has transpired in the Capitalist Core throughout the 19 th and 20 th century, with the resulting pacification of "zones of liberal peace" will necessarily be the case in a region where state building –although has largely obeyed the logic of its colonial powers process-wise –differs largely content-wise. It is precisely in this respect that problems of cultural ambiguities, economic disparities, and political instabilities, generate a field of paradoxes and contradictions that gain special significance, once one is willing and able to engage them.

Surveying the history of the last half century of the region compels one to succumb to the realist claim: that politics is uniform in space and time; conflict is inherently immutable (whether attributed to human nature, the nature of the state, or the inter-state system); and the world of guns and bombs and violence is all that matters, and is what should constitute the proper site of the study of politics between nations or states; or indeed nation-states. Looking at the modern postcolonial history of the region one finds ample evidence of the abovementioned logic: major wars during the Cold War era between Israel and its neighbors (1948, 1967, 1973, 1978, 1982); a Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1990); the war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988); and enough intra-state violence. The bewilderment this generates as to the causes and consequences is not to be taken lightly given the enormous loss and suffering incurred on the inhabitants of the regions.

2 II. The Realist Theory and Sovereignty from the Outside

The "modified form of realist theory" that Hennesbusch and Ehteshami (H&E) develop in the introductory chapter of the book, is the reference point of this section. The claims of realism that the author assumes are set as follows. The state is the main actor in foreign policy and thus the elites of state have an "interest in maximizing the autonomy and security of the state." ?? Secondly, it accepts that anarchy is an inherent feature of the international system which generates "profound insecurity and pervasive struggle for power," even more so in the Middle East. ?? Finally, the assumption that states seek to counter these menaces "through reason of state," notably power accumulation and balancing, and that the latter is a key to the regional order." ?? and outside the discipline of IR. This much is at once clear and ambiguous. It seems that the clarity in the "unshakable" tenets of realism clash with the ambiguities of the Constructivists, Pluralist and Marxist-Structuralist contentions over what constitutes the proper emphasis of the International. H&E suggest resolving this by reference to the three domestic, regional, and international levels of environments 6 that affect and shape foreign policy. Nevertheless, there remains an ambiguity on the status to be ascribed to the state-building process and how that might have enhanced or constrained the autonomy and independence of states. 7 III. Structural-Marxism and the Logic of Imperialism

H & E's emphasis moves to pin down the character of the three levels or environments and the way they might constitute determinants of foreign policy.

Using the Marxist-Structuralist theory of Imperialism and by making ample references to diverse scholars that have used this theory to understand the "dependent" or "penetrated" nature of the Middle Eastern region, H&E offer the processes of "bandwagoning" of local client states with major powers; the incorporation of the regional economy into the world capitalist system; and the economic dependency such an incorporation has generated to point to the hierarchical relationship between Middle Eastern States and major Capitalist powers. ?? Examples are ripe with references to the Gulf Oil Monarchies and their interest in the global core; the application of economic sanction on states whose interests clash with those of the core, like Iraq and Libya. However, this hierarchical and rigid dependency model is rejected by H&E –who by reference to more realist-centered views –emphasize the degree of autonomy that has been obtained by states in the conduct of foreign policy through fostering horizontal ties. Ties, which in many respects, have bypassed the hierarchical control of the global hegemonic power, especially during the Cold War (1945-1990) when the split of the global core into a bipolar system gave a chance for states in the region to enhance and consolidate their autonomy. 9 6 The three levels of analysis –which became influential after the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State and War* –have been a major issue of theoretical contention within IR. However, the substitution of the state level with the regional level by Hennesbusch is interesting in this respect, as it reveals the closure of the site of politics within the state, which, as will be argued later, has a profound impact on the devising and formulating of long term policies of states within the region. 7 Ibid., p.2. 8 Ibid., p.3-4. 9 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

Notwithstanding the ambiguities and controversies, H&E site three consequences of the impact of the regions position within the international system. First, the overlap of local states with those of global patrons; second, the nationalist resistance that such a penetration might generate; and third the prevailing environment in the international system –whether bi-polar, uni-polar or multi-polar –and the effect this has on the possibilities that might emerge in the region. 10

3 IV. Political Identity and State Sovereignty

Explaining western penetration into the region in economic terms seems the best way to evade the more profound question of cultural, social, and political penetration. However, such an evasion neither erases those questions nor makes them non-existent. One might assume that those in power –who constitute the elite in realist terms –are rarely effected by such a phenomena, but what cannot completely be ignored is the effect such penetrations might have on the very process of molding the discursive horizons of regional political discourses and political ethics. What might not prevent the emergence of anti-imperialist and nationalist political discourse, might however, and quite subtly, chart the direction of such discourse in ways that might evade the eye of the negligent spectator. It is in this context that questions of political identity and state sovereignty become crucial and interesting.

Concerning the juncture of identity and sovereignty that has become one of the chief tenets to challenge the superiority of realism in explaining international relations, H&E display an admirable selfindulgence. He is open

to discuss themes that a wellrespected realist is to leave well behind as questions more properly concerning the analysts of political life inside the state. He writes,

The unique feature of the Middle East state-system, specifically the uneasy relation of identity and state sovereignty, immensely complicate foreign policymaking in the Middle East. The realist model, in which elites represent loyal populations insulated from external influence in the conduct of foreign policy, must be substantially modified in analysis of the region. ??1 Nevertheless, the substantial modification in H&E view is the lack of "impermeability and secure national identity-that realism assumes." ??2 Thus, trenchant anomalies of irredentist tendencies, which the author sees them as "built-in", are characteristic of the region reflected in the expression of the practices and worldviews of various ethnic and religious milieus, and how these challenge the immutability of territorial borders and thus simulate territorial conflict between states. An incisive example in this respect is the Kurdish problem the horizons of which stretch from the North of Iraq to the Turkish heartland passing through Syria, and which incidentally was of a 1998 Turkish-Syrian confrontation. Beside these, the problem of Palestinian and Syrian refugees, Shi'ite tendencies to export the Islamic Revolution out of Iran, and the sectarian struggle in Lebanon, which resulted in a long and destructive civil war more than telling in this respect. ??3 Added to this is the immense, but somehow ambiguous and complicated power that Islam possess as a transnational, supra-state identity. This power, in many ways, and more than H&E are willing to concede, structures and commands the lives and worldviews of the people in the region, makes the resort to the juncture of political identity and state sovereignty legitimate and wanting. Thus, the generated duality that the ruling elite have to grapple with between asserting *raison de la nation* (pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism) and *raison d'état* (state sovereignty) is what has compelled H&E to treat the region as an arena of trans-state political competition, while authorizing political discourse, such as is the case with the Palestinian problem ??4 The interaction of leaders also "deconstructed" Pan-Arabism, so to speak: interstate disagreement over its meaning and the failures of Arab unity projects and of Arab collective institutions disillusioned and demobilized Arab publics, reducing Pan-Arab constraints on state leaders.

(and, recently, by extension the Syrian problem). Such a reading, which incidentally is a modified form of political realism, is what makes the authors' approach at once interesting and ambiguous.

The ambiguity arises as soon as one advances to survey the authors' treatment of state formation and the foreign policy making process. The authors discuss at length the various manifestation of Pan-Arabism (note that there is little mention of Pan-Islamism and its manifestation, which have been no less significant in this respect), especially as they came to influence the period of Nasser's rule (1952-1970). H&E mention how from a constructivist point of view identity as such, is never monolithic and given, but is something that is shaped and molded by the historical experience and interaction of leaders and nations. Extending this logic the author points to the fact that local communities have amply taken advantage of this and manipulated leaders who advocate such supra-state tendencies to their own interests. Nevertheless, H & E are prompt to retract from this position and claim that, mention the extraordinarily limited room left for leaders while dealing with the Palestinian problem in order to see how those identities as contested and complex as they are, constitute the conditions of political possibility and discourse. The public statements of Arab leaders, although not the site reliable reflection because of their contradictory nature, seem to reveal how the pure logic of power rarely manifests itself which is devoid of any appeal to those complex and contested identities in the name of which those leaders speak, act and devise policies. The views might differ, but as H&E use the word "deconstruction" in his text, it is presumed that he might be willing to allow some room for the reader to "deconstruct" his text in an attempt to reveal ambiguities in the discourse that he is willing to offer.

V. The Decline of Pan-Arabism and the New International H&E give two main reasons why these identities have declined. Firstly, he points to the neglect of power by constructivists who fail to see that it is military power and not public opinion that was responsible to lead state to put self-help over identity. Secondly, the residual Pan-Arabism still continues to have an impact on foreign policymaking since the state identities are no good substitute for that matter. Thus, the problem of legitimacy is partially resolved by recourse to Pan-Arabism or Pan-Islamism as a contingency measure to disguise, justify and sometimes modify the reason of state. ??6 Although the Arab world constitutes in the words of Hedley Bull an "international society" bound by rules and norms, it is constantly drifting towards a "system of state" defined in terms of pure power and interest. ??7 The feeling of unease about the system of sovereign states is a deep-rooted one in Western thinking about international relations. It exists not only among those who explicitly espouse the Bull being a founding member of the English School in the discipline of IR has a somewhat different, more historically orientated conceptualization of "systems of states" and "international society". His approach, which is central to such an argument, retains only one brief mention. Bull, who worked alongside Martin Wight, was weary of this argument in its various extensions, while being cautious about the way this logic jumps straight to a position that depicts the world as a billiard table with the balls standing for the states in constant collision. Thus, while Arab leaders are cautious not to be affected by sub or supra-state identities (such as the so-called Arab Spring, for instance), they are also aware that what constitutes *raison d'état* is an inseparable from the global web of political concepts and realities that challenge it. As Martin Wight would have put it, elimination of this system, but also where we might least expect them to find it, in the pronouncements of the servants of sovereign states themselves, by whose daily acts the system is preserved. These pronouncements often betray a sense of the inadequacy of the anarchical system, a lack of confidence in its institutions, a tendency guiltily to disguise their operation of the

system or to apologize for doing so. The League of Nations and the United Nations we are invited to see not as diplomatic machinery in the tradition of the Concert of Europe, but as first steps towards a world state. Military alliances, in this manner of speaking, become regional security systems; exclusive political groupings, like Little Europe or the British Commonwealth, experiments in world order; war, police action. Men of affairs, even while in their actions they are seeking them, in their words are sometimes suggesting that solutions cannot in the long run be found within the framework of the existing system. Whether by a social contract among the nations or by conquest, whether gradually or at once, whether by a frontal assault on national sovereignty or a silent undermining of its foundations, the problem of international relations, if it is soluble at all, is taken to be in the last analysis the problem of bringing international relations to an end. ??8 In the same token, Arab political consciousness is gradually coming closer to the realization that solution to its own particular political struggles and the contradiction that emerges from them are not to be pursued with a blind belief in the state-system. Increasingly, political elites, statesmen, and analysts are turning their attention into a more positive appropriation of their political power and position, which unlike in the past, is beginning to leave an enduring mark on the Arab body politic. While the last 50 years have been turbulent and violent, to paraphrase Marx, they have been conditions evading the will and choice of the political communities subjected to them. Thus, most what has transpired during this half a century has left Arab politics (both internal and external), compelled to act contingently but not under conditions of its own choosing. It is at least open to contestation that such a course of action is susceptible to change as the World together with the Arabs walks through the doorsteps into the uncertain 21 st century.

4 VI.

5 Conclusion: Between Political Realism and Political Modernity

In an influential essay concerning the epistemological problem characteristic of modern social sciences on how an autonomous knower is able to make knowledge claims about a world external to it, the renowned anthropologist Levi-Strauss had this to say, In the first place, he (Wiener) maintains that the nature of the social sciences is such that it is inevitable that their very development have repercussions on the object of their investigation.

The coupling of the observer with the observed phenomenon is well known to contemporary scientific thought, and, in a sense, it illustrates a universal situation. But it is negligible in fields which are ripe for that most advanced mathematical investigation; as, for example, in astrophysics, where the object has such vast dimensions that the influence of the observer need not be taken into account, or in atomic physics, where the object is so small that we are interested only in average mass effects in which the effect of bias on the part of the observer plays no role. In the field of social sciences, on the contrary, the object of study is necessarily affected by the intervention of the observer, and the resulting modifications are on the same scale as the phenomenon that are studied. In the second place, Wiener observes that the phenomena subjected to sociological or anthropological inquiry are defined within our own space of interests; they concern questions of the life, education, career, and death of individuals. Therefore the statistical runs available for the study of a given phenomenon are always far too short to lay the foundation of a valid induction. Mathematical analysis in the field of social science, he concludes, can bring results which should be of as little interest to the social scientist as those of the statistical study of a gas would be to an individual about the size of a molecule. ??9 As mentioned earlier, the discipline of IR has been a solitary field of knowledge that has remained largely intact from the developments in social and political theory in the 20 th century and the various themes revolving around the philosophies of social sciences and their relationship to modern subjects. Thus, themes that derive their cannon from a more prolific reading of the twentieth century as the culmination of the modern epoch have been set aside in favor of an ahistorical structuralism that has elevated the concept of pure power into the superior analytical tool of the observer. Even when dealing with questions concerning the origins and ontological status of power have been set aside, and superseded by more quantitative and descriptive survey of geographies, resources and strategic geo-political aspects. While these are undeniably inseparable from what politics has come to be within the confines of the massindustrialized modern world, they do not outrightly assume an unchallenged status of superiority over such questions are becoming more and more appropriate and helping with the down of a global era.

The construction and the proliferation of the concept of the international that is not able to deal with the increasingly complex world emerging out of a curious relationship between Global Capitalism and the conflation of fractured, but nonetheless sovereign states is to be held under more intense critical attitude than has been the case thus far. A theory that claims to authorize reality out of a crude treatment of conceptions of power and security that reflect the horizons of the increasingly archaic 18 th and 19 th century social and political thought is to be, not only modified but seriously revised and reshuffled. However, when the theory at hand is as pervasive as political realism has been, then one is at least to be prudent on the assessment of its value as an edifice of conceptual tools and analytical strategies. Not to succumb to the charm of political realism is what has been the central aim of this paper. More significantly, not to dismiss it out of hand, which requires a critical engagement with its central tenets has been the general attitude towards the paper. The contention of this paper is that political realism as an edifice of concepts and tools is a much more serious intellectual project, than has been

5 CONCLUSION: BETWEEN POLITICAL REALISM AND POLITICAL MODERNITY

forwarded by the H&E in their textbook on International Relations of the Middle East. In a similar manner, state sovereignty as a political principle, political concept and a political practice that authorizes, shapes, and molds both individual and state behavior is a much more complex and fertile site to be engaged with than this author seems to offer. The construction of the "International" from the concept of the "political"; the constitution of modern politics on the pillars of the state as the only form of political community emerging from the modern epoch; and the closure of political discourse by the imposition of a hegemonic discursive logic (as has been the case with the crude expression of realism within IR) are themes, with their complexity and puzzling nature, are outside the parameters of this paper.

To paraphrase Weber "The iron cage of modernity" seems to have a solid hold on the political consciousness and possibilities. By the extension of the internal constitution of politics to the external realm and the imposition of highly subtle forms of practices of legitimization, the modern state has been able to forge a body politic that seems to be entrapped forever in the "iron cage of modernity" in its own particular and idiosyncratic manner. Understanding the banality, ethical, and critical modes of attitudes towards political ideals and aspiration of the present, the populace also grasps some of the inherent paradoxes and contradictions of this discursive space. A discursive practice, to be sure, so strong that repeatedly succeeds to transform one into a novice, if one makes an attempt to handle and reorganize the material that forms it. The logic of the modern nation-state in the 21st century Middle East –fused with the degenerate remaining of the web of traditional and parochial ontology of its classical era –has transformed the political field of the region, and consequently the entire body politic, into a seemingly irresolvable ontological dilemma (here understood in the sense of the duality of identity and the violation of the particularistic character of the local culture by competing versions of universalism) persistently subjected to possible epistemological solutions. Such epistemological logics of inescapable dualism, or more often, achieved monistic notions of virility are responsible for what might be termed as the structural and ideational predicament in modern Middle Eastern politics.

As a final word, the discourse on the International Relations of the Middle East is moving turbulently towards the identification of the character and nature of the changes that are radically transforming modern Arabic societies and nations. The intensification of communication of practices, the gradual infusion of the conception of a community along dialogic lines; all taking place within the (secular) modern city, are all factors that will leave their mark on the future. While the future is still ahead of us and open for negotiation and contestation; rather than being the property of the transcendental manifesto, one has to be clear about the conditions that might ameliorate (or not) such a negotiation of "the yet to come." What remains essential in this respect is the development and proliferation of a critical attitude that frees itself from the imposition of a global/imperial/neo-colonial will while remaining critical of what is local. What might be understood as a process of "Enlightenment" or "Renaissance" that is still underway in the Middle East has to be conceived as an investment that will shape the character and course of the possibility of becoming otherwise than we are now. To conclude in Foucault's words,

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. ^{1 2 3 4 5 6}

¹Hinnesbusch, R. "Introduction: The Analytical Framework" in Hinnesbusch, R. & Ehteshami, A. *The Foreign Policies of Middle*

²Ibid., p. 6. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 7. ¹² Ibid.

³Although the logic is clear, the conclusion could be contested, just as H&E view that identities in the region are contested and complex. One has only to ¹³ Ibid. p.7-8 ¹⁴ Ibid. p. 8-9. ¹⁵ Ibid. p. 9.

⁴Ibid., pp. 9-10. ¹⁷ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, London: Macmillan, 1977. © 2017 Global Journals Inc. (US) Volume XVII Issue IV Version I

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