Pensée 3: Political Science and the Middle East

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Over the past five years, from volume 37, number 1 (February 2005) to volume 41, number 3 (August 2009), *IJMES* published thirty-seven articles that deal with politics in the contemporary Middle East, broadly understood. This is my count, of course, and others might add or drop some articles. I define contemporary as post World War II and have a relatively expansive definition of politics. My count does not include short features, only full articles.

Eighteen of the authors of these articles are identified as having academic appointments in political science departments, fewer than 50 percent of the total (some of the articles are co-authored, so there are more than thirty-seven authors involved). The other authors are concentrated in the discipline of anthropology (with one sociologist and one historian) or have appointments in religious studies or Middle East studies departments. Of the eighteen political scientists who have published in *IJMES* during this period, only eight were employed in North American universities. The majority of the political scientists appearing in *IJMES* during this period have appointments in European or Israeli universities; one political scientist working at an Arab university appeared in the pages.

Although those North American political scientists who did publish in *IJMES* during this period did some very good work, and it was my pleasure to review many of their articles, these numbers lead me to the troubling conclusion that there is a growing gap between the professional requirements for disciplinary success in political science in North America and the standards and forms expected of the best Middle East studies work. Increasingly, particularly at the best research universities, advancement in political science requires work concentrated in formal and statistical methods. There are, of course, exceptions. Some political scientists working on the Middle East who use postpositivist methods have secured leading jobs at top research universities. There is a refreshing recent trend toward encouraging mixed-methods research in dissertations, with large-n statistical and/or rational-choice formal mathematical components supplemented by case studies based on field work and more classic discursive and qualitative approaches. However, professional advancement in the field is driven by publication in journals that are heavily weighted toward quantitative and formal methods. In the subfield of comparative politics, where most Middle East work is done in the discipline, there are also strong currents arguing that cross-regional work, not intense concentration on a single region, is preferred. In promotion and tenure decisions, publication in regional-studies journals, although not actively discouraged, is not credited as highly as publication in disciplinary journals. The sad fact is that, for ambitious political scientists looking to get the best North American jobs, publication in *IJMES* is not a great career move.

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The kind of work that does advance a political scientist's disciplinary career is not commonly found in *IJMES* and for good reasons. It is theory testing and theory building that gets noticed in the discipline. One is rewarded more for counterintuitive theoretical findings than for getting the cases right. Of course, the best work does both, but if you have to slight one side of the equation from a disciplinary perspective, make sure it is not the theory side. Most readers of *IJMES* are not political scientists and might not be that interested in the theoretical debates in that discipline. For them, it is the solid empirical work that advances our understanding of the region that is key. We therefore have a situation in which the interests of the consumer and the interests of the producer are not well aligned. Moreover, the disciplinary demands to demonstrate formal and statistical skills lead to work that might not be particularly accessible to many *IJMES* readers, who are in fields where those skills are not central to advancing knowledge. I am sure that the editors of *IJMES* would be open to such articles if they are well done and teach us about the Middle East, but they would be running against the interests of the vast majority of their readers if they published too many of them. Thus, there is little professional interest among ambitious political scientists to publish in *IJMES,* and understandable readership interests militating against publishing too much "tech'ed-up" political science in the journal, particularly if the thrust of that research is to challenge theory more than to advance our understanding of the Middle East. That is where we are.

The professional situation of political scientists outside of North America is not as constrained. Good area-studies work that is informed by the epistemology of social science but relies on "old-fashioned" area-studies methods of qualitative analysis and considerable field work is more highly respected in the discipline in Europe and elsewhere. One can advance professionally at the best universities in Europe and the Middle East doing such work. Because of these different incentives, and different financial-support systems, graduate students at European universities who are interested in the Middle East tend to spend more time in the field and produce work that is more accessible to cross-disciplinary Middle East studies audiences. The significant representation of European-trained political scientists in the pages of *IJMES* over the last five years is testament to this different set of career structures and incentives.

I hasten to emphasize that there are numerous political scientists whose research concentrates on the Middle East at very good universities all over North America. Some of them have appeared in *IJMES* during this period. They have successfully pursued their disciplinary careers while producing work that is of interest to the broader Middle East studies community. However, the trends I have commented upon in political science are real. They are reflected in the fact that, at some of the top North American research universities, Middle East political scientists are now finding homes not in political science departments but rather in Middle and Near East studies departments or in policy schools. It is possible that this is only a temporary phenomenon. Younger scholars who have both the technical skills and the classic area-studies qualifications of language proficiency and field experience are emerging who might, in the coming years, bridge the political science–Middle East gap. However, for the near-term future, the requirements of their professional advancement will probably keep them out of regional studies journals like *IJMES*.

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