Pensée 2: Assessment of the Field

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What has changed in the field of Middle East studies over the last five years, especially when perceived from the vantage point of the United States? Certainly a lot, due mostly to the reverberations of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing haphazard U.S. adventure first into Afghanistan and then Iraq in apparent search for the culprits, accompanied by a strong underlying interest in gaining access to oil and other natural resources, as well as sustaining world supremacy. Perhaps as a consequence of these developments, MESA membership escalated, especially among younger cohorts of Americans now interested in the culture and languages of the region, and studies of Middle East and Central Asia as well as Islamic studies once again increased in public significance. Yet the dark side of these developments was of course present once again in the—once again haphazard—associations often made in popular culture among Islam, the region, and terrorism: orientalism tended to rear its ugly head, as all of these were analyzed as the "other," entirely distinct and separate from "us."

I am thankful that the articles submitted for consideration to *IJMES*—which is my main focus here—remained, at least in my experience, healthily unaffected by such negative developments. Quite contrary to the popular trend, the many submissions I had the privilege of reviewing revealed several positive developments. As a social scientist, I often used to complain about the descriptive and atheoretical nature of the work conducted in our field. The *IJMES* submissions demonstrated that this is no longer the case: younger generations of scholars in particular employ theory often, and very skillfully, to contextualize, highlight, or compare historical and contemporary realities across countries, social groups, and/or institutions. The submissions were also often nuanced analyses taking into account the complexity of the issues, studying the inherent, previously silenced and/or normalized differences, exclusions, and marginalizations. As such, they successfully traversed national boundaries to undertake local as well as comparative studies. The use of space emerged as a major topic as did the experiences of particular minorities such as the Kurds and Alevis. The temporality of issues was also addressed as many scholars focused on the impact of history on contemporary developments or the significance of collective memory—or amnesia—in shaping events. In addition, alongside analyses of ideological movements, gender studies seemed to have finally joined the mainstream.

There were, however, some weaknesses that I also observed. Perhaps the most significant among these was the lack of distinction in the submissions between what is said, that is, *rhetoric,* and what is done, namely, *social practice*. On occasion, authors seemed to take for granted that expressed ideas naturally and automatically translated into what was practiced. Yet this, critical thinking tells us, is not often the case—one needs to be aware that theory and praxis often diverge, and we as scholars need to take into account possible divergences. The second weakness stemmed from reading what has been published within a rather narrow frame; in spite of increased interdisciplinary

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work, the submissions often remained within a particular disciplinary field where the authors often chose to remain within their comfort zones, that is, within the boundaries of their own particular field of study. I add, however, that this was most often the case when the research question the authors attempted to address was defined within their field, such as in history, political science, or sociology. Those submissions addressing gender issues or literature tended to be much more interdisciplinary.

Given these observed trends, what would be the research trend I would like to see in the future? Perhaps the most significant would be works that rely less on traditional, "formal" sources often generated by the state. Instead, new sources such as memoirs, oral histories, literature (including not only fiction but also poems, songs, and folktales), and local knowledge often derived from regional newspapers could make valuable contributions to the field. Also important is the knowledge contained in relation to the activities of civil society; minutes of the meetings of various political and social organizations, or correspondence of banks and philanthropic societies, could provide the rich texture of social life that formal sources often fail to capture. As for new topics that could be covered, several areas—such as those relating to health (nursing, midwifery and the related process of professionalization, medical studies on epidemics, illnesses, and childcare), disability (especially changes in its perception over time), local histories (all the while critically relating these to the dominant narrative), use of time and space (and how these altered with modernity), memoirs (especially of women and minorities, critically contextualized in relation to the existing works on those belonging to the dominant groups), and human rights issues (their transformation over time especially in relation to various minority groups)—come to mind.

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