

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Another Cartography is Possible: Relocating the Middle East and North Africa¹

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Abstract

Teaching the history of the modern Middle East and North Africa at a small liberal arts university offered an opportunity to address student demands to “decolonize the curriculum.” As the survey course comes under increasing scrutiny, we asked where exactly is the Middle East located in our political imagination today? This essay focuses on the role of maps in rethinking geographic frameworks by using a seaborne perspective, that of the Mediterranean, Arabian and Red Seas (MARS) in contrast to the familiar Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Keywords: modernity, cartography, geography, pedagogy, decolonization, geopolitics

Decolonization, an ambivalent term that came of age during the postwar end of empires, has been applied in various ways across academic fields, chiefly to excavate the eurocentric foundations of disciplines and their methodologies. It is an idea whose time has come, judging from the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement in South Africa and parallel efforts to challenge institutional histories and arrangements around the world.² Even at Oxford, where students have campaigned since 2015 as an independent chapter of RMF, several colleges have been prompted to fund initiatives investigating financial links to the slave trade and colonialism. On the other side of the world, amid student demands to “decolonize the curriculum” at a small

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² See Wahbie Long, “Decolonising Higher Education: Postcolonial Theory and the Invisible Hand of Student Politics,” *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy* 69 (2018): 20–25.

Catholic university in Oakland, a survey course on the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa addressed the implications of the past for the “colonial present.”³

While most students had limited direct experience of the region, except for a church trip or tour of duty, everyone had been exposed to media representations. On screen a fictional Middle East teemed with helpless refugees and violent militants, categorized into good and bad Muslims.⁴ Our first order of business was to examine such stereotypes, starting with the impression that the majority of the world’s Muslims are Arabs, not to mention potential insurgents. The simple formula that “we must kill them there, before they kill us here” opened a discussion of “there” and “here,” unpacking ideas crowded into momentary soundbites.⁵ Behind current events loomed the tableau of the political imaginary, “a theater for representations of the Orient.”⁶ While Edward Said’s *Orientalism* remains a crucial text with which to probe knowledge construction of the so-called “East,” we also had to ask where we, as so-called minorities, stand in a “West” that is often portrayed as equally monolithic. To name unequal power relations Said had coined the term “positional superiority,” particularly useful for our map-making and unmaking of “geographical spaces with indigenous, radically different inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space.”⁷ Connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe, the Middle East is paradoxically situated at the center, yet on the periphery. The “middle,” while bringing these continents together, does not denote centrality in the sense of being leading actors in the past or present. Rather, countries of the region continue to be classified as satellites or rogue nations. Thus, policies relating to knowledge, power, and culture update a civilizing mission of unveiling the Middle East, effecting “regime change,” and rescuing Muslim women.⁸ How then might the Middle East be repositioned, or rather its positionality be relocated?⁹ Once a crossroads of

³ See Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Blackwell, 2004).

⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

⁵ New York Governor George Pataki, November 2015, <https://www.wkbw.com/news/us-news-world/pataki-im-declaring-we-kill-radical-islamists>.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 86.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁹ For further discussion, see Rashid Khalidi, “The ‘Middle East’ as a Framework of Analysis: Re-mapping a Region in the Era of Globalization,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18:1 (1998): 74–81.

commerce, the Middle East has been perpetually in the crosshairs of imperial power. In an echoing of past precedents, our modern history survey made an imperious move of our own in endeavoring to redraw the map. In this exercise, our curriculum furnished new coordinates for replotting the region's cartography. To unsettle preconceptions based on a landlocked perspective, students embarked on a figurative journey across the waters of the Mediterranean, Arabian and Red Sea region, or MARS for short. The three seas, seen as bridges rather than barriers, brought into relief the "connected histories" of Western Asia, Southern Europe, and North and East Africa. Rather than re-inscribe territorial delineations established during the modern period, and therefore give credence to imperial designs, we considered the region from another horizon. The notion that "coloniality" has been asserted as being synchronous with and constitutive of modernity made this geographic shift all the more instructive, raising questions about normative ideas of space and time.¹⁰

To blur the vantage point of "over here" versus "over there," we highlighted flows and continuities alongside boundaries and breaks. Our alternative framework highlighted circulations of people and commodities, culture and knowledge, following the dissemination of ideas and technologies. It also allowed us to reevaluate the forging of European continental identity, ostensibly threatened by the presence of migrants. Enfolding the northern rim of the Mediterranean into MARS enabled us to reevaluate the notion of an undifferentiated West embodied in "Fortress Europe," bringing down conceptual walls. Naturally, kingdoms in Andalusia and Sicily found a place in our new geography.¹¹ This Muslim presence in the Mediterranean lands upset the exhausted dichotomies of East and West, North and South, Europe and Africa. The field of Mediterranean history, thanks largely to Braudel's explorations, provided a departure from compartmentalized thinking defined by borders, even if the Eastern and Western halves of the sea were viewed as "quarrelling brothers."¹² While not coterminous, the "Middle Sea" presented something of a unifying body in contrast to the fractures of the Middle East. This act of reconfiguration also allowed us to monitor the evolving classification of

¹⁰ For a scintillating discussion of cosmic order, see Ahmet Karamustafa, "Cosmographical Diagrams," in J.B. Harley and David Woodward, eds., *The History of Cartography*, vol. 2, Bk. 1, *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 71–89.

¹¹ Michael Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper, eds., *Is there a Middle East? The Evolution of Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹² Fernand Braudel, *Memory and the Mediterranean* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 15.

places like Pakistan and Somalia, increasingly drawn into the region by international news.

Our cartographic shift was especially useful in assessing the learning outcome of geographic literacy. An entry point into the practice of critical map reading employed relevant “memes” that, for example, centered the Americas with the caption, “have you ever wanted to be the center of attention so bad you cut Asia in half?” Other memes took a comparative perspective in showing American flags encircling Iran and the equivalent of Iranian flags surrounding the United States, as well as similarities between American westward expansion and Israel’s supplanting of Palestine. These illustrations upset the conventional balance of power we take for granted by questioning the notion that there is a center of the world, the basis for positional superiority in its geographic mode. As visual representations, maps offer built-in exercises in interpretation, neatly contrasted in Mercator and Peters projections. For a medieval “throwback” map, we viewed al-Idrisi’s *Entertainment for Those Wanting to Discover the World* (1154), created under the patronage of Roger II. Arabic geographers like al-Maqdisi had their own ideas for describing the world and with Anglophone nomenclature we learned Arabic names for regions like the Khaleej, Maghrib, Mashriq, and Sham. While the admittedly outlandish “MARS” may not replace the customary MENA, the suggestion of a tongue-in-cheek alternative allowed us to reflect on our own “global positioning.”

Tracing the origins of political entities such as Transjordan, Iraq, and the United Arab Republic underscored how global, regional, and local powers negotiated a variety of interests in the establishment of new borders. Gertrude Bell exemplified the pivotal role of orientalist in concert with a range of other actors in state formation. The technicolor spectacle of *Lawrence of Arabia* depicted this in a new cinematic aesthetics that retold a desert tale of modernity for a popular audience. Physical geography, formulated into political sovereignty, and translated into historical experience, real and imagined, produces ontological categories which endure once history has faded. If in the drive for political independence nationalist movements reproduced categories of modernity that had resulted from their colonial status, then it also laid bare the paradox of emancipation and confinement. While compounding problems of colonial rule, it provided a key index of modernity. In this respect, a critical study of the Middle East performs an anatomy of modernity, amid conflicted Enlightenment ideals of freedom and the realities of enslavement, as we observed the modernizer Mehmet Ali embark on his own conquest of the

Sudan. Examining territorial occupation revealed not only economic and political interests, but the cultural and epistemological practices of colonial powers. What basis is there for divisions between the Middle East and Africa, North and sub-Saharan Africa, or the west and the rest? A cautionary note was sounded when recalling that arguments regarding the “invention” of the Middle East may aid further trespasses on sovereignty. The insinuation is that once again borders *should* be redrawn, along the lines of Joe Biden’s proposed division of Iraq into three ethno-religious states.¹³ Redrawing boundaries, whether geographic, cartographic, or disciplinary, allowed us to raise larger questions of where we are, what we know, and who belongs. Students in the class who frequently traveled between California and Mexico already had an intrinsic understanding of both cultural fluidity and procedural exclusion at the border, summed up in the refrain, “we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” In the aftermath of the presidential elections students organized to make our university a sanctuary campus that would protect the rights of undocumented people by not cooperating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, active in the nearby Fruitvale neighborhood.¹⁴ In that regard, the catchall “decolonization” meant delimiting the nation-state by questioning fixed concepts of citizenship. Beyond platitudes about diversity, being inclusive can help to challenge a variety of frameworks, as we learned in recalculating our own coordinates and redrawing the boundaries of our education.

¹³ Michael Bernstam, “Redraw Country Lines in the Middle East,” *Forbes*, Dec. 23, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2015/12/23/redraw-country-lines-in-the-middle-east/#59d7ddfd756e>.

¹⁴ Hannah Moore, “ICE Raids Recall the Fruitvale Gang Injunction,” *Oakland Voices*, July 10, 2018, <http://oaklandvoices.us/ice-raids-recall-fruitvale-gang-injunction/>.