

EPILOGUE

There is no theory of subversion that cannot also serve the cause of oppression.

—JACQUES RANÇIÈRE

What gets from the territory onto the map?

—GREGORY BATESON

Authority of Theory

Attempts to think the relationship of theory to the world have suffered from a priori fetishization of its political performative powers. This hegemonic image of theory's a priori powers in, and on, the world is shared by critics who occupy divergent ideological positions: anxious reactionaries who fret about the decline of the West, epistemology critics who think that the discourses of Arab intellectuals make them complicit with, or vectors of, imperial epistemological and ontological violence, and those calling for abandoning critical theory after it became a weapon in the hands of conspiracy theorists and climate-change deniers. Bruno Latour, for instance, paints a picture of a world, a West to be more accurate, turned upside down, a world where danger no longer comes from ideology posturing as fact, but "from an excessive *distrust* of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases!"¹ The conspiracy theorists may be deforming the critics' arguments, but Latour, drawing on a military analogy, notes that they are appropriating "our weapons."² The weapons have moved into the hands of the wrong party and are now aimed at wrong targets. It is time to stop manufacturing them.

Constructionist skepticism, after all, was not initially devised by critical social scientists to undo reifications and essentialized and naturalized accounts, and later on moved into the world. Syrian Ba'athist ideologues and officials refused to recognize Lebanon's sovereignty by marshaling constructionist arguments. Lebanon's borders, they claimed, were artificially designed by imperial powers, which carved it out of greater Syria. The Ba'ath condensed its constructionism into two mantras repeated ad nauseam: "One people in two

countries” and “Unity of path and destiny.” The Iraqi Ba’th marshaled similar constructionist arguments to prepare and legitimize its invasion of Kuwait. Constructionist skepticism is one of the oldest tricks in the book of Arab nationalists, which, rest assured, they did not appropriate from Bourdieu’s critical sociology. Needless to assert, there was nothing emancipatory in the Ba’thist breed of skepticism. It was not, in essence, an antiessentialist move against the fabrications and invented traditions of Lebanese and Kuwaiti nationalist ideologues. It was an ideological tool of political power that was marshaled by much larger and powerful countries (Syria and Iraq) to call into question the right to sovereignty of their much smaller neighbors (Lebanon and Kuwait).

Latour’s calls, and those of the epistemological critics of Arab intellectuals, are not entirely new. They share similar structural features, and anxieties, with earlier debates about relativism, which an older generation of critics like Allan Bloom dubbed a disease carried by philosophy that has infected politics.³ “The practical efficacy attributed to academic philosophy and social science—both to destroy and save its object of analysis—quite belies its actual power and role,” John Gunnell writes.⁴ Holding critical theory’s corrosive skepticism responsible for the increasingly precarious and friable world we inhabit, whether it is done from the Left or the Right, partakes of the same short-circuiting of thinking the relationship of theoretical discourses with the world that forgoes an investigation of the former’s authority in its zones of deployment and intervention.

Doing fieldwork in theory calls into question the assumptions of scholars, who simultaneously give too much and too little practical efficacy to theory. They give it too much by attributing radical transformations in the world—whether it is the breakdown of a common world or the ontological violence that threatens life forms—to its own internal workings and discursive assumptions. And they give it too little, because they do not investigate how, in particular conjunctures, theory may be appropriated, transfigured, and embedded in various political projects, endowing it with ideological force and authorizing practices. Granting critical theory both too much and too little are the result of adhering to a metaphysical image of theory that assumes that the practical effects it will produce in the world are contained a priori in its epistemology. Theory, then, is cast in either the heroic role of saving the world or the bad one of destroying it. I hope I am not understood as calling for abandoning the reading practices of epistemological critics altogether and for reverting back to a celebration of universals such as human rights as the harbingers of emancipation. This would be to revert to the same metaphysical thinking that mistakes theoretical questions that are contested

politically for philosophical ones that can be settled a priori once and for all by a “better theory.”⁵

Difference in Theory

Earlier generations of Orientalists and anthropologists, who mapped Christianity and Judaism onto the West and Islam onto the Middle East, elided, as a consequence, the discussion of Judaism and Christianity in the region.⁶ They saw Sephardic Judaism and Eastern Christianity as being in the area but not of it, their histories being tied to European history. Today, the plurality of intra-Arab and intra-Islamic religious, ethnic, and communal differences remain invisible and cannot constitute the matter of theoretical reflection for a binary grid that sifts people through a mesh that separates the westernized native from the nonwesternized one and the secular-liberal Muslim from the pious one. What counts as difference and what does not? Whose lives, discourses, and practices are interesting and subject to the minutiae of anthropological understanding and translation? And who is incorporated into (by Orientalists), or criticized for being an agent of (by epistemological critics), the West?

The overdetermination of critical scholarly works on the Middle East by the injunction of speaking back to hegemonic Western discourses is clearly revealed in the different theoretical engagements with the question of difference. Roughly speaking, there is a form of difference—Islam—that one seeks to understand, via ethnographic close-ups and a deep engagement with the complexities of that tradition, and understandably so, in Islamophobic times, when Muslims are increasingly targeted and racialized.⁷ And then there is that other form of difference—community, mostly sectarian, but also ethnic, regional, or kinship based—that one seeks to deconstruct and explain away by zooming out to shed light on the structural forces (imperialism, capitalism, modern states) that construct it. In the first case, the discourse of the critical scholar is close to the discourse of the subjects of study. In the second, it takes its distances.⁸

Both of these contrasting theoretical treatments of difference highlight the modernity of the phenomena they are investigating. One form that imperial discourses of power take is asserting that one cannot be a practicing Muslim and a modern subject, that the process of reaching the much coveted shores of modernity necessitates jumping ship and converting out of Islam into secularism.⁹ Critical scholarly works counter these discourses of power by contending that one can be both a Muslim and modern. Alternatively, they show how the Islamic tradition is inside-outside modernity, by making a case for how

Muslims have been conscripted by the powers of Western civilization, to draw on Talal Asad's felicitous phrase, without eradicating difference.¹⁰ Another form that discourses of power take is asserting that conflicts in the Arab and Muslim worlds are fueled by atavistic religious, ethnic, and sectarian hatred that are as far as possible from a modern world that overcame its wars of religion centuries ago. Against these discourses, oppositional scholarship highlights the modernity of communal solidarities, but this time around not to highlight that a subject can be both attached to his community and modern since this literature rarely bestows its ethnographic, charitable understanding on those subjects. It is worth quoting at length Lara Deeb's courageous reflexive consideration of how writing in, and for, a US audience on the Middle East impacts the objects of study, the scale of analysis, and the methods and theories at work. "For the most part," Deeb writes,

this critical scholarship addresses sectarianism in its political, institutional, or legal registers rather than in the social or interpersonal realms. Why is there so little attention to the latter? Perhaps, as scholars of the region, we hope that we can move beyond the category by demonstrating that sectarianism is socially and historically constructed and maintained through institutional and political-economic processes. Perhaps acknowledging that people care about sect feels a bit like airing a family secret, or venturing into the messiness of discrimination and prejudice that we wish didn't exist, or a betrayal of activist efforts that we support. Perhaps we fear that writing about how sect matters at an interpersonal or affective level will contribute to those seemingly intransigent assumptions that sectarianism is unchanging or primordial. But much as we want to escape or deny it, the fact remains that *sect matters* to a lot of people in their daily lives, not only in relation to politics, networks, legal status, or the material realm but in their interpersonal interactions.¹¹

Deeb's rich panoply of possible explanations for the neglect of work on sectarian subjects are instances of psychic disavowal, which operates according to the formula: "I know very well, but still . . ."¹² I know very well that sectarianism matters, but still I can't write about it because it is a thorny issue and I want to wish it away, or I am afraid that in doing so I will be betraying my own politics. More importantly, the disavowal of sectarian matters is related to the fear of consolidating an already impressive archive of Orientalist discourses, and the anxiety generated by the potential of having one's critical work *appropriated* by imperial policies that lean on such discourses in setting

out their agendas. These anxieties about consolidation and appropriation of scholarly discourses produced and circulated in imperial centers about a major area of Western military intervention result in what Deeb called “representational paralysis.”¹³ The critical metropolitan scholar of the Middle East is split and endowed with a form of double consciousness, which can be mapped onto the binary spatial-temporal structure of fieldwork and writing. He knows, for instance, from his own everyday encounters during fieldwork that sectarianism matters. And he also knows very well that writing about these issues in English for a Euro-American audience is a potential minefield. Double consciousness results in a disavowal that itself results in representational paralysis or theoretical diversion.

This same double consciousness, conjured by the justifiable anxieties of consolidation and appropriation, and which results in disavowal when it comes to one’s work, is also responsible for the drive to censor, which takes the form of critique, the discourses of those intellectuals, militants, and artists in the Arab world who steer away from the critique of empire to address those same issues of authoritarianism, sectarianism, and gender inequality.¹⁴ If the Muslim subjects and discourses are understood, sectarian ones are disavowed, and the liberal/leftist/feminist/queer/secular varieties are subject to criticism or critique. In this theoretical economy of handling difference, those who are seen to bear the least coefficient of difference do not get understood or redeemed as modern, or deconstructed as modern, but get hailed as accomplices of Empire. In splitting these subjects into two—“westernized natives,” “liberal Muslims”—they conjure back into being specters of “culture” that are used to adjudicate on the representative nature, and therefore the validity and political import, of these discourses.¹⁵

If we shift our attention for a minute from geopolitical notions of Empire and the idealist predication of the subject as consciousness to the materialist predication of the subject as labor power, we get a very different picture of how what is constituted as difference relates to power.¹⁶ Julia Elyachar’s brilliant ethnography *Markets of Dispossession* shows how, by the late twentieth century, international organizations, the Egyptian state, and nongovernmental organizations attempted to produce new economic value by transforming the social networks and culture of Cairo craftsmen into value.¹⁷ Nineteenth-century British colonial rulers such as Lord Cromer, twentieth-century modernizers, and historians of labor, Elyachar argues, put the indigenous cultural practices on the side of tradition, backwardness, and impediments to progress and development. Culture, which was thought to be an obstacle to modernity, was later incorporated into the market as a new source of economic value.¹⁸

Coda

For as long as I can remember, I have witnessed intellectuals and critical theorists slide from critique to loss and melancholia after having witnessed a political defeat or experienced a regression in the state of affairs of the world. Some Arab Marxists criticized liberalism, or thought that they had transcended it, as the revolution was just an arm's length away, before they suffered a string of defeats. In their wake, they rediscovered the works of nineteenth-century Arab liberals and mourned the margins of freedom that the prenationalist regimes enabled. Pierre Bourdieu spent a good deal of time as he was chiseling out his theoretical cathedral from the body of classical social theory, critically analyzing how the institutions of the welfare state reproduce social inequalities, before emerging from his theoretical workshop into the world of politics and strikes to staunchly defend those same institutions. Wendy Brown eloquently issued an appeal to resist left melancholy in the late 1990s before ringing the alarm about neoliberalism's hollowing out of liberal democracy a couple of years ago.¹⁹ I can go on and on about critics of liberal multiculturalism mourning its loss, or potential loss, as chauvinist nationalism cast its ominous shadow over large parts of capitalist liberal democracies. What is common to these theoretical moves is a retreat to a second line of defense, in the wake of political setbacks, not theoretical critiques. This retreat seeks to defend what one took for granted and criticized earlier for its enmeshment in grids of power—domination, exploitation, exclusion, you name it. They index a regression in practice from the promises of a dignified life and equality, as well as a radical tightening, and fencing off, of the boundaries of political communities.

This retreat is in tension with the positions of some of these same thinkers—Bourdieu and Brown—against the collapse of the space of intellectual inquiry to that of political engagement and for preserving the autonomy of thought and the unexpected paths it may lead one toward.²⁰ This call is a generous and sensible one. I am also mindful that this call to separate thought from politics has certain political, economic, and institutional conditions, mainly that it is much more amenable to be achieved in liberal capitalist societies—for now at least—that have more stable political governance (not as prone to coups, civil wars, occupations), relatively autonomous educational institutions, more legal guarantees for freedom of expression, and economic conditions, such as salaries, grants, prizes, that allow some intellectuals to lead a more or less comfortable middle-class life. As Bourdieu reminded us in *Pascalian Meditations*, his last major work, *skholè* (leisure in Greek and the etymological root of school and scholastic) is the condition of existence of all scholarly fields.²¹

Thinking in politically saturated and precarious conditions, in a police state, during civil wars, in underfunded, failing educational institutions under the weight of bureaucratic inflation and political interferences—when speaking your mind, and parrhesiastic speech, can cost you anything from a mild phone call by a security officer to your life—is a different game altogether. The uncharitable readings, condemning tone, and accusations of unoriginality that contemporary Arab intellectuals are subjected to by epistemic critics could be partly understood as a result of the latter’s embarrassment because of their “theoretical unsophistication”—read, they still believe in progress or that liberal democracy is a good thing—and “old fashioned” Enlightenment positions.²² This, as I mentioned earlier, reproduces a historicist progressive logic in practice as it criticizes it in theory, contributing to reinforcing the trope of a “belated” Arab world. More importantly, though, its conflates the labors of the situated and accountable critic with what it takes to be the most updated version of critical theory, whose cognitive superiority enables it to be parachuted into Buenos Aires, Seoul, and Beirut to become operational in capturing these societies as soon it hits the ground.