

Middle East-Related Economic Research in Germany –

A Refuge for Nonconformists?

Ulrich G. Wurzel, FHTW Berlin, University of Applied Sciences

ulrich.wurzel@fhtw-berlin.de

1. Who Is Doing Economic Research on the Region?

1.1. Mainstream Economics Does Not Deal with the Middle East

1.1.1. The “Relevance Gap”

The most important factor determining the thematic, theoretical and methodological choices of economic research on the Middle East in Germany is the fact that German (as well as general European) mainstream economics is ignoring the region as an object of research. One reason for this neglect is that economic research issues considered important in Western Europe have been rarely those which have been of relevance for Middle Eastern societies. Therefore, for an average German economist, it would be difficult to simply extent his/her research on a particular topic that is relevant to European societies directly to the region of the Middle East. This “relevance gap” mainly results from the differences in the levels of socio-economic development between the European and Middle Eastern economies – and linked to that – from different practical challenges and priorities for scientific analysis, in particular in economics being one of the so-called “sciences of government”. At the same time, topics of importance for the region are not very attractive for a German mainstream economist as one cannot make a career as an economist with research on the Middle East. There are, of course, issues and topics which are relevant for both regions at the same time – and, one should add, in times of globalisation, cross-border migration, etc., this is increasingly so. However, compared to the high priority issues of German and European economic research, these topics are still relatively unimportant.

1.1.2. Orthodox versus Non-orthodox Paradigms – and the Consequences of Choice

Economics is, of course, not a uniform discipline. However, in essence German and European mainstream economics is still based on orthodox, neo-classical assumptions and methodology, albeit in different stages of modernisation and adjustment. This constitutes a major problem for research on the Middle East because the inadequacy of the basic assumptions of mainstream theory is particularly obvious when the approach is to be applied in the context of a less-developed country such is the case of this region. A researcher has to make a rather difficult choice: He or she can stay in mainstream economics – and will therefore not produce too much meaningful work on the Middle East.¹ Or, he/she decides to

¹ Some noticeable exceptions exist in research areas such as oil and gas and trade.

do serious research on the region and, as a pre-condition, has to leave the dominant orthodox paradigm – and, with it, the mainstream economics community. For a young researcher planning his/her academic career, this implies a huge risk, in particular as jobs for economists with an explicit specialisation in *any* “area studies economics” are much less available than for general, mainstream economists. Being accepted in both scientific communities is a status difficult to achieve.

1.1.3. Data Problems: Limited Applicability of Mainstream Methods and Instruments

Another set of factors deterring German mainstream economists from dealing with research on the Middle East are the framework conditions of research in the region, first of all the limited availability and accessibility of data and the manifold restrictions concerning surveys and large-scale interview campaigns. Mainstream economics has been based more and more on advanced mathematical models, applied in the form of statistical testing of hypotheses with the help of computer simulations for which huge data sets are required. Although econometrics – the related methodological approach – is gaining in importance world wide, it cannot be used as a major research tool for research on the Middle East, due to the still limited quantity and quality of data.²

1.2. The Middle East Economic Research Community in Europe

1.2.1. A Specific Profile of the Researchers

With very few exceptions, European economic research on the region is either done by economists who cannot be said to be members of the mainstream economic research community or by researchers who have a primarily non-economic background, for example, political scientists, (economic) geographers and sociologists. This implies that differences in the choice of research issues, theories and methods between economic research on the Middle East and general economic research to a larger degree result from the particular perspectives of the members of the respective research communities. Empirical findings suggest that the share of critical intellectuals with a rather non-orthodox perspective – not only with regard to the discipline of economics but also in a broader philosophical, social and political sense – is significantly higher among economic researchers working on the Middle East than among an average sample of economists. There is a clear dominance of nonconformists vis-à-vis mainstream economists – the opposite of what is true for most other economic research fields in Europe.

1.2.2. Institutional Affiliation of European Economic Research on the Middle East

Institutional Structures: Another factor concerning the choice of research issues, theories and methods is institutional affiliation. In (West-) Germany, as in a number of other (mostly, bigger) European countries, the institutional landscape consists of (i) specialised area studies research institutes such as the former German Orient Institute, DOI; (ii) area-specific university institutes, working groups or chairs within the faculties of the mother discipline of economics or management “science”; (iii) a limited number of large, independent economic research institutes as well as (iv) various smaller institutions which do self-initiated research

² There are only a few exceptions, for example input-output and trade simulations or oil market analyses, often relying on somewhat more accessible data or estimations.

on a wide range of issues, and which are either publicly or privately financed, such as the German Development Institute, GDI, and the Center for Development Research, ZEF, in Bonn, the Institute for Strategic Studies, SWP, in Berlin or research units of ministries, bigger NGOs and the like.³

In most of these institutional bodies economic research on the Middle East is not very important: The six major German independent economic research institutes have been doing substantial research on the region only in exceptional cases, if at all⁴, reflecting the lack of interest of mainstream research in the Middle East. The few cases in which economists of these institutes have been working on the region are either explained by extraordinary funding opportunities linked to major political events (e.g. the Oslo Peace Accord in the early 1990⁵) or just by the personal interest of individual scientists based at the respective institutes.

The specialised area studies institutes usually have a strong focus on the domestic, regional or foreign politics of their respective areas or countries and rarely work on “hard” economic issues. Also other organisations which do self-initiated research on area-specific issues have been dealing with economic topics linked to the Middle East only sporadically. For both groups of institutions, economic research is a secondary issue, if at all. It is not even guaranteed that there is an economist among their staff.

Only a handful of institutes, working groups or chairs at German universities have been doing continued and consistent research on proper economic issues concerning the Middle East. However, among the 230 German universities (as of 2006, including universities of applied sciences which teach economics), systematic economic research on the Middle East has only taken place at little more than half a dozen of them, mainly in Berlin, Bochum, Bremen, Erlangen-Nürnberg, Mainz and (with a strong political science background) Tübingen. In addition, it have been primarily those departments which had their budgets cut recently. One prominent example has been the prestigious chair for Economics of the Near East formerly held by Univ.-Professor Dr. Dieter Weiss at the Institute for International Economics, Free University of Berlin. The chair has been closed after the professor’s retirement in 2002 – despite the fact that generations of its graduates made successful careers in national and international organisations, in academia as well as in international business and politics (see, for example, Wippel, Cornelssen 2001).⁶

³ In the smaller European countries, the institutional landscape usually consists of a national area studies research centre and some university institutes, complemented by a limited number of public or semi-public research and education institutions of different kinds such as diplomatic academies, institutes of international relations, academies of sciences, etc., dealing with more or less systematic economic research on the Middle East.

An analysis of the four decades of systematic multi-disciplinary research on the region in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), that in terms of institutional structures was much more similar to the Anglo-Saxon area studies model than to the West German structures, goes beyond the scope of this paper. See, for example, the various contributions in Krauth, Wolz (1998) – on Middle East studies in particular Hafez, Höpp in this volume – and Hopfmann, Krause, Schilling (1992).

⁴ For example, according to the DIW’s public relations department, the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin) – in its best times with 120 staff – between 1980 and 1990 did not produce a single publication on the Arab world, while the total registered number of the institute’s official publications was 680.

⁵ “After decades of virulent conflict, the first signs of a new development have emerged after the signing of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement on 13 September 1993 that has already drastically altered the external appearance of the Middle East. ... In autumn 1993, the Federal Ministry of Economics commissioned the ifo Institute with a first stock-taking examination of regional cooperation in the Middle East.” (Halbach et al., 1995, p. 1)

⁶ This last round of closures seems to be only the second stage of a continued dismantling of area-specific research institutions in the German university landscape – after the first stage of the nearly complete destruction of the interdisciplinary area studies centres at the former East German universities (not to forget also the former Academy of Sciences in Berlin, Capital of the German Democratic Republic, that had been eliminated immediately after German unification).

Finally, another “institutional structure” relevant here is the one of the “non-institutionalisation” of research activities, i.e. the work of non-employed or underemployed researchers as a consequence of lacking job opportunities and resources for scientists active in the field.⁷

The Impact of Institutional Affiliation and Funding Schemes: The institutional setting in which economic research on the Middle East takes place is important in two respects. First, the limitations in terms of positions, funding and institutional structures clearly express the lack of interest shown by the mainstream economic research community and by relevant decision-makers in public and private policy bodies for a consistent and systematic economic research on the region.

Second, the given institutional framework has a direct and an indirect influence on which research is done and how it is done. For a researcher at one of the big economic research institutes (or at a university’s economics faculty where there is no support for area-specific economic research) it means that he/she is always confronted with a lack of understanding for his/her “spleen”, with distrust and with the suspicion of colleagues and/or supervisors. In practice, this means that he/she has to do the expected routine mainstream research work first in order to justify the employment at the institute or faculty. All he/she does in terms of area-specific research has to be disguised as part of that routine work – or any respective activities simply are additional efforts, leading to longer working hours. For example, an analysis of Arab countries’ innovation and technology policy, under such circumstances, should be framed as being part of a larger comparative project on the same issue in a European context (only possible in case that the researcher in his/her regular work has to deal with industry or technology policy). Or the analysis could be presented as research on a primarily “European topic”, e.g. in the policy framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Such tricks, however, are nothing but manipulative, second-best options to justify the researcher’s particular research activities vis-à-vis the majority opinion in an adverse environment. Research issues which cannot be sold in this way to presidents of institutes, deans of faculties or professors supervising master or PhD theses, quite often, will simply not be dealt with.

Throughout the last couple of decades, in Germany there have been very few funding programmes or budgets explicitly geared toward economic research on the region. Funding, that has been successfully utilised to finance economic research on the Middle East usually had been intended primarily for other issues. Here again, creative reframing or disguising of research projects helped to get access to the funds, often with the more or less open understanding and support by individuals in the respective funding agencies or decision bodies. When a lot of money was available for economic research on Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) in the context of their “transition” to market systems, economic research projects on the Middle East were designed in ways to fit into the transition debate. Prior to this period, during the times of the cold war, economic research on the region was sometimes presented in ways that made it fit into the larger issue of regional conflict before the background of the East-West confrontation. In the post-9/11 world, potential economic research projects are presented in terms of “stability” and “security” of countries and/or the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Although scientists can be quite flexible and adaptable in writing up their research proposals as long as there is a chance to get access to funding, many relevant and interesting research ideas, in such an environment, will hardly get institutional and financial support – and, therefore, often will not be realised.

⁷ Wippel (2005) highlights that a lot of valuable research, in particular by younger researchers, has been done without proper institutional affiliation at all or based on dissatisfying (in many respects) and often precarious contract relations.

2. The Choice of Research Topics, Methods and Theories

2.1. The Spectrum of Research Topics

2.1.1. Factors Contributing to the Choice of Research Topics

The concrete choice of research issues is a result of complex and not always totally conscious decision processes involving various factors of influence as well as different categories of actors. The funding schemes available, for example, express the relevance and importance of the supported (or suppressed) issues as perceived by the funding agencies and the experts they consult. These “experts”, quite often, have a conservative mainstream background. The staffing of commissions to evaluate research institutes in Germany is notorious for bringing in people who represent exactly those scientific and methodological approaches which to overcome the specialised institutes outside the traditional university structures once have been established for! Depending on the preferences of the funding boards’ members or the contracted experts, funding institutions can increase tendencies of de-linking economic research on the Middle East from general economic research. For example, the call for Germany’s independent economic research institutes to concentrate on their so-called “core competences” (in the light of an increasing scarcity of funds for independent research) led to an almost complete abolition of development-related economic research at those institutes. The formerly application-oriented institutes recently also came under strong pressure (again, owing to external monitoring missions staffed with conservative university professors) to produce more “real science” in the sense that their research, first of all, should lead to publications in selected refereed journals – the traditional strongholds of the mainstream. This does not only collide with the initial mission defined for the institutes but also drives out most of the potential research activities of the area studies economics type.

With regard to the choice of research topics, particular fashions – distortions of collective perception and collective action – may also have some influence, and this not only in the short-term. Fashions feed back on the institutional setting in the long-term as well as on the funding mechanisms available in the medium-term. A recent example is the availability of substantial amounts of money for research linked to the phenomena of political Islam, radical Islamism as well as “Islamic” violence and terrorism. This is in strong contrast to the funding opportunities and institutional support for other Middle East-related research issues. Even job opportunities for young researchers in the field shift from university faculties and research institutes to security in intelligence bodies on the state and federal level.

However, differences in terms of agendas for economic research on the Middle East as compared to mainstream research still result to a wide extent from the specific research interests of individual scientists (see also below).

Finally, pure chance may play a role when it comes to thematic selectivity: The forerunner of today’s Center for the Modern Orient (ZMO) in Berlin was established in the early 1990s – to save some of the knowledge embodied in a handful of Middle East researchers from former East German area studies institutes. Suddenly two publicly funded institutes potentially dealing with the contemporary Middle East co-existed: the newly established predecessor organisation of the ZMO in Berlin and the old and well-known Orient Institute in Hamburg. While nobody would ever have questioned the right of other (West German) research centres, university staff or anybody else to work and publish freely on contemporary affairs of the Middle East, the implicit and explicit task definitions for the ZMO and its forerunner institution right from the start had been somewhat restrictive: They should focus on historical issues (usually phenomena situated in the times before the end of World War II) and/or on historical and regional comparative research, primarily on the interaction of Muslim societies

in different parts of the world among each other as well as with their non-Muslim neighbours. In other words, the institute should not work on the most prominent topics linked to the contemporary Middle East proper.

2.1.2. Are There Any Clear Patterns in the Choice of Research Topics?

As for the spectrum of topics of German economic research on the Middle East, almost all potential issues of economic research have been addressed in one form or the other. There are, however, some particular patterns to be found.

General Scientific Research on Middle Eastern Economic Systems vs. Application-Oriented Analysis: One line of sub-division of the research activities can be established between general scientific research on economic systems as such on the one side and application-oriented research activities with a less abstract, more practical focus on the other. The first sub-group of activities can be characterised as classical research for the sake of knowledge production. Even if it quite often includes substantial (and sometimes remarkably deep) empirical investigations, its general feature is a higher level of abstraction and the positioning of the activities in a larger context that is given by the respective ongoing scientific debates. The second sub-group consists of activities undertaken with a higher degree of application-orientation. Here, the starting point can be a practical question or challenge that national policy-makers, bi- or multilateral donors, aid and cooperation agencies or other interested actors may face. Many research activities have been taking place in the framework of direct advisory and consulting activities for various policy bodies, as in the case of the German Development Institute. This shows that also with regard to the region under study economics indeed may serve as a science of government. It seems that very abstract research is largely absent because European researchers dealing with the region usually pick topics which have a relatively high degree of economic, political and social relevance for the societies under study. Both kinds of Middle East-related economic research – directly application-oriented activities *and* general scientific research – are concerned with concrete, real-world objects of analysis and not with the abstract model-worlds so much detached from reality that “sophisticated” mainstream theory often deals with.

Thematic Selectivity – Some Empirical Findings: Regarding thematic choice of Middle East-related economic research, first, it turns out that some topics and issues feature much more prominently than others. Further, there are different clusters of importance within the overall spectrum of topics when compared to research on the European countries. Political and institutional framework conditions of economic activities, for example, feature much more prominently among research issues chosen by Germans and other Europeans working on the Middle East than in average economic research on Europe.⁸ The interest in the institutional and political structures impacting on the economic systems in the region culminates in analyses on the necessity and possibility of (full-fledged or partial) system transformation (see e.g. Pawelka 1985, Schmid, Pawelka 1990, Weiss 1993, Hopfinger 1996, Albrecht, Pawelka, Schlumberger 1997, Weiss, Wurzel 1998, Wurzel 2000a, Schlumberger 2005). By contrast, the possibility that Western European economic systems may need to undergo substantial

⁸ The contributions to a book on globalisation in different world regions (Barrios et al. 2003) illustrate this quite well: Besides two chapters on the cultural and political implications of globalisation for Middle Eastern societies, the chapter on the *economic* aspects of globalisation in the Arab world almost exclusively deals with the *socio-political* conditions which lead the authoritarian Arab regimes to try to resist economic globalisation processes – but not with the core economic mechanisms and consequences of globalisation (see Beck 2003).

system transformation as well is not an issue for economic research. Other prominent issues are cultural aspects impacting on economic processes in the Middle East, in particular the role of religion (see references below) – an issue that is also not very important in European economic research and usually left to small circles of scientists and practitioners interested in business ethics and related “philosophical” matters. Further, various forms of government failure (even if not explicitly named so) and misguided government intervention are dealt with. On the other hand, certain sub-areas of research featuring prominently in a German and European context are more or less absent from economic research on the Middle East, for example regional economic policy within individual countries of the Middle East, research into the business cycle of individual countries.

Second, the importance of the different clusters of topics changes over time. Looking back, it turns out that in the first decades after World War II, many publications have been rather descriptive, including only vague predictions and policy recommendations. The Arab world, at first, had to be discovered as an object of modern economic research with primarily descriptive work only to be followed with some time-lag by more analytical approaches. Besides this, the 1950s and 1960s did not only see the usual modernisation-theoretical discourse that was dominating the development debate at that time, but also the first radical attempts of leaders of the newly independent states in the region to undertake “development” in practice. Nasser’s increasingly “socialist” course and some of its key measures attracted the interest of researchers working on the Middle East as later did the socialist experiments in Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, Iraq and South Yemen (e.g. Weiss 1964, Alkazaz 1981, Meyer 1987). The bi-polar world system of the Cold War era provided the major framework for bigger parts of the research on the economies in the Middle East (e.g. Hoeppner 1973, 1980).

After the first oil price shock in the early 1970s, oil turned out to be *the* central question. The earlier rather descriptive way to deal with the issue (e.g. Nasr 1967) soon was complemented by more analytically oriented research (Hoeppner 1973a and 1973, Alkazaz 1974, 1975a and 1975b, Ehlers 1978). In the early to mid-1980s, the research field was broadened again: now the consequences of the oil wealth for the exporting economies – and other economies in the region benefiting directly and indirectly from it, too – were studied (see the numerous contributions of Beck, Boeckh, Pawelka, Schlumberger, Schmid, Weede, Wurzel as well as Schliephake 1990 and Biegel 1992).

At about the same time, the first strong symptoms of a structural crisis of most of the economies in the region came to light. This period saw the first wave of research and publications centred on the need for economic reform and the difficulties of the reform process in the region (an early example is Möller et al. 1980). Sometimes, these phenomena were studied already in the context of the rentier state paradigm (e.g. Weiss, Wurzel 1998, Wurzel 2000a, Wils 2003, Gräfe 2003, Roll 2006).

The apparent unwillingness or inability of most regimes to undertake fundamental economic change or to deliver positive development results also gave a boost to research dealing with cultural features which were thought to strongly impact on economic decisions and processes in the countries of the Middle East. As will be shown below (see section 3.1), different strands of research employed different degrees of essentialism and culturalism – from rather primitive applications of old Orientalist stereotypes to careful and intelligent attempts to go beyond the boundaries of traditional economic thinking by incorporating recent results of other social sciences into explanations of economic phenomena in the Middle East.⁹ This trend was supported by the economic events following the Islamic revolution in Iran (see e.g. Ehlers

⁹ For the latter approach see in particular the publications of Volker Nienhaus and Dieter Weiss and of their numerous students and disciples (as represented, for example, in Wippel, Cornelssen, 2001 and under www.klaus-schwarz-verlag.com/schiler/diskussion.htm). Other examples include Gottstein 1986, Alkazaz 1985 and 1987, as well as various contributions by Wippel.

1980 and Korooshy's contributions), the obvious rise of politically relevant Islamic movements in many countries of the Middle East and the first real arrival of the discourse on "the Islamic economy" in Western academic circles (see Nienhaus' publications).¹⁰

With the late 1980s and earlier 1990s a whole wave of Stabilisation and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SSAPs) imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on countries in the region renewed the interest in the process of economic reforms: In the 1990s, parallel to the intense research into the transition of the centrally-planned economies of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, a number of research projects and publications dealt with Middle Eastern economic reforms (e.g. Matthes 1988, Weiss 1992a and 1992b, Nour 1995, Hopfinger 1996, Meyer 1996, Poelling 1996, Herrman 1997, Wieseback 1996, Weiss, Wurzel 1998, Wurzel 2000a, Wünsch 2001, Albrecht 2002, Wils 2003, Nunnenkamp 2004, Wurzel 2004, Albrecht 2005).

In addition, the seemingly promising peace process for Israel/Palestine in the early 1990s, brought about a brief period of hope that the economic development of the region could be freed from conflict-related restrictions. A number of researchers analysed the economic potential of countries in the region (primarily of the Mashreq) as well as opportunities for cooperation and the potential role of external donors in this context (see e.g. Halbach et al. 1994, 1995a, 1995b, Alkazaz 1995, Weiss 1995). This kind of research overlapped in part with activities to explore the opportunities and potential consequences of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership project launched by the EU as the "Barcelona Process" in 1995, among others including the related trade issues (e.g. Nienhaus 1997, Wippel 1999, Wurzel 2000b, Jünemann 2002, Löwe, Wurzel 2002, Koehler, Wurzel 2003, Brach 2006).

Issues of Arab economic cooperation – or regional south-south-cooperation and sub-regional integration – seemed to become relevant whenever new such projects (e.g. GAFTA, GCC and UMA) were announced or developed some new momentum. In the scientific debate, these projects were often linked to other issues relevant at that time, such as the question of Euro-Arab development cooperation, the Middle East peace process, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership project or issues of reform credibility, i.e. the potential of such cooperation agreements to enhance the credibility of reforms (e.g. Hoeppner 1979, Matthes 1989, Bahadir 1990, Alkazaz 1992, Englert 2000, Matthes 2001, Roll 2004, Wippel 2005).

Towards the end of the 1990s, the latest in the first years of the new century, the illusion that the authoritarian regimes of the region would undertake substantial structural economic reforms turned out to be unjustified – even for many of the formerly very optimistic observers. Since the early 1990s, some researchers have been dealing with the politico-economic reasons which could explain the general unwillingness of the region's authoritarian regimes to substantially reform their economies. However, before new attempts to explain what had gone wrong with the economic reform programmes could have been undertaken on a larger scale, the events following the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, shifted the focus of larger parts of the research community to the impact of Islamist terrorism on economic developments in the region and elsewhere. As a side effect of "9/11" and the following increase of what has been portrayed by some as traditional tensions between "Islam" and "the West", a number of economists – exclusively from the mainstream and without any knowledge of the region – began to establish something they called the "economics of terror" or the "economics of political violence", with rather disconcerting results (see section 3 below).

¹⁰ The interest in "Islamic models" of the economy never really vanished. With the increasing importance of the region and of "the Islam" for the average European citizen after 9/11 and other terror attacks, in particular in Europe, Islamic concepts of state, society and economics seem to have returned as prominent issues of debate and research after only a short period of decreased public and academic interest (see e.g. Nienhaus 1981, 1982, 1995, 2004 as well as Roßkopf 1991, Wippel 1994, 1995, 1997, 2002).

After the dust had settled a bit, economic researchers on the Middle East returned to the question why major parts of the region continued to lag behind other developing regions in terms of economic and socio-economic development, why it did not take part in globalisation as other developing regions did (see e.g. Beck 2003), and why all the reform programmes that had been presented with so much fanfare during the last 10 to 20 years did not produce any substantial positive outcomes (Werenfels 2002, Gräfe 2003, Wurzel 2003, Weiss 2004a, 2004b, Schlumberger 2005, Roll 2006). Now, more than twenty years after the first SSAPs had been imposed on the region, a whole number of researchers joins the effort to conceptualise the lack of fundamental economic change as the logical outcome of political power considerations on the side of the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. However, quite surprisingly, the interesting question to what extent Islamic models and concepts of economic development might serve as suitable counter-models to the rentier mode (Nienhaus 2004) has not yet met a wider discussion.

With the announcement of new reform attempts in a couple of countries in the Middle East at about the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, research began to focus on the particular features of these processes, sometimes in comparison with the earlier reform periods. Often the analysis has been linked to the discourse on the relation of political authoritarianism and (economic) change – or the lack thereof (Nunnenkamp 2004, Schlumberger 2005, Roll 2006, Zorob 2007, Wurzel 2007).

In part, this account on the main fields of economic research on the Middle East throughout consecutive periods of time is also reflecting the importance particular issues have gained during certain stages of the general (economic) development debate. However, the emergence and decline of specific topics in economic research on the Middle East has not necessarily been synchronous with the parallel changes in the general development debate. The importance of some issues was “discovered” much earlier in the discourse on economic development in the Middle East than in general development research. Other issues and research traditions have been first established in the debate on other world regions or the third world in general and have been applied to the Middle East only with some time lag. Among these “late arrivals” are, for example, issues like fiscal policy reform, trade liberalisation, strategies and measures to increase productivity and competitiveness (including science, technology and innovation policies) as well as successfully implemented projects of economic south-south cooperation and globalisation issues in general. The explanation for the rather late interest for these issues on the side of German and European researchers in most of the cases is that the phenomena to be studied were only of minor magnitude and importance in the region.¹¹

However, it is quite remarkable that one theme that has been very prominent in non-orthodox development economics for decades and that has returned recently in the globalisation-critical debate seems to be totally missing from contemporary German economic research on the Middle East: the impact of the international economic order – and Europe’s role in it – on the internal economic situation in Middle Eastern countries. The absence of this topic may be linked to a particular kind of thematic selectivity – the implicit or explicit decision of Western researchers working on the region *not* to reflect on the role that “their” societies play in obstructing economic development in the Middle Eastern part of the “Global South”. While there are publications on the negative influence of Western industrial societies on the socio-economic and politico-economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa or parts of Latin America and Asia, contributions dealing with such issues in the Middle Eastern context can hardly be found. A possible explanation may be that the state of domestic affairs and policy-

¹¹ In other words, with regard to such topics, it was neither a kind of negative selectivity resulting from “Western” self-interest nor ignorance that led to the neglect of such issues in German and European economic research on the region – but simply the absence of the very object of study.

making – in particular concerning economic affairs and economic policies – in many countries of the Middle East has been so miserable that the focus of even the most “critical” of the Western researchers has been on *internal* obstacles to economic development – and not on the external factors which quite often underlay the destructive behaviour of the local elites.¹² Another explanation may be that European economic researchers on the Middle East primarily focus on the role that the USA has been playing in the region – together with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF in which the US government also has strong influence.

Besides these general trends concerning thematic selectivity in economic research on the Middle East, there also have been some more *specific issues* which enjoyed particular importance either during certain, limited periods of time or even throughout the whole of the last two or three decades. One example is the link of education (in the widest possible sense) and development in the Middle East, including the deficits of the science and technology systems and the lack of technological capabilities – often linked to the socio-political and socio-cultural framework conditions in the region.¹³ Other research has been done in more or less systematic ways as a result of consultancy activities or contract research for public policy bodies such as ministries, councils, commissions, etc. In this context, researchers did follow the choice of research topics as *defined by government agencies* as their “clients and customers”.¹⁴ With this regard, the specific modes for the production of knowledge are determined by the internal institutional features, including the general policy-orientation of the concerned public policy bodies (usually the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and the Ministry of Economics), but also by additional organisational characteristics such as the institutional self-interest of certain government agencies or sub-units within them. Others factors of influence may have been certain perceptions on the side of influential politicians and civil servants on what matters, pressure from the implementing organisations in the area of technical and financial development cooperation or the general political climate in society with regard to particular issues (e.g. oil prices and energy security, Middle East peace process, EU foreign policy or trade initiatives, etc.).

2.2. The Choice of Research Methods and Instruments

2.2.1. The Lack of Data and its Consequences for Methodological Choice

The lack of comprehensive and reliable data is one factor that has been influencing not only the choice of topics of European economic research on the region but also the choice of methods and instruments. The quantity and quality of economic data on the region has been improving somewhat recently. However, with a higher level of sophistication in data production and presentation also the attempts of ruling regimes to manipulate the figures in order to realise particular policy objectives get more sophisticated. In some cases, directly

¹² One of the rare exceptions in this regard seems to be the economic dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership project (e.g. Neugart, Schumacher 2004).

¹³ See, for example, the early publications of Weiss on the issue as of the 1980s, followed by regular further contributions to this debate till today. A complete publication list of the author up to 2001 is available in Wippel, Cornelissen 2001. Other examples include Ghose 1999, Knaupe, Wurzel 1994, Wurzel 2000b, Wurzel 2001, Löwe, Wurzel 2002, Koehler, Wurzel 2003.

¹⁴ Examples for Middle East area studies economics as a “science of government” are numerous sector studies (e.g. Hoepfner 1976, Gälli, Alkazaz 1986, Reinhardt et al. 1989, Theobald 1996, Loewe 2000), studies on particular cooperation projects (as an early example, see Claus, Rügner 1969, further e.g. El-Nagar 1981, Zeuner 1996) or on regional economic development prospects against the background of a potential peace settlement (Halbach et al. 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

fiddled figures are released to the public.¹⁵ In other cases, the calculation methods employed are bluntly manipulated in order to produce results favourable for the regime. The official images and representations of economic and social affairs put forward by mainstream scientists and governments in general have been criticised for decades.¹⁶ Sometimes, official figures and findings have been revised by scholars from the region in order to show how misleading the official data and their use are.¹⁷ For both reasons – the still rather limited availability of comprehensive data and the increased manipulation attempts in parts of the region – economic research on the Middle East still faces many problems.

Facing severe data problems, researchers have no choice but to design their analysis in terms of methods and instruments in ways that limit the negative impact of these conditions. Basically, two strategies exist to cope with the problem:

(1) Those, which have the necessary time, institutional backing (at home and in the Middle Eastern countries under study) and other necessary resources, will attempt to collect their own data through extended field research. This may take place in the form of surveys, interviews, participative observation and/or representative in-dept case studies, usually supported by other methods of gathering data.¹⁸ With this regard, also so-called expert interviews, at least in some areas of research, play a crucial role. However, here clearly exists the danger that a few well-known and well-connected experts willingly or unwillingly accumulate an extraordinary authority in terms of definition and interpretation power so that they can shape the perception of a wider community and are in a position enabling them to prioritise and suppress certain issues and discourses. Also belonging to this type of empirical approach is the eclectic collection of bits and pieces of primary and secondary data through extended field studies in order to (hopefully) eventually be able to put it together and arrive at a larger – but essentially micro-data based – picture. Another possibility to do field research are internships of (usually younger) researchers in European development agencies, chambers of trade and commerce or NGOs and UN organisations active in the country to be researched.

Quite naturally, such research designs will be shaped by the challenge that data collection poses and by cross-checking and processing of the primary information obtained. On the one hand, the empirical activities are an important and very valuable part of research. On the other hand it often may consume so much resources, time and energy that a kind of empirical bias sometimes will still be visible in the final product (the master or PhD thesis, the publication). In terms of instruments, such empirical economic research will strongly rely on the established methods and tool-kits of empirical social research as developed in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

Consequently, the necessity and importance of primary data production in an unsupportive environment is one of the main features distinguishing economic research on the Middle East from economic research on average European countries in terms of instruments and methodology. Field research, therefore, is a mode of analysis that is used relatively more than desk-top research when compared with economic research on Europe. This also includes that sources of knowledge such as interviews and (usually unofficial) surveys conducted by the researchers play a particularly important role as does anecdotic evidence of the case study

¹⁵ For example, Egyptian figures on major macroeconomic indicators delivered to the external world such as the IMF and the World Bank or foreign business journalists often differ strongly from figures on the same indicators for the regime's domestic use (author interviews, Cairo).

¹⁶ For a fundamental critique see Mitchell 2002.

¹⁷ See Fergany cit. in Bush 2007, pp. 264f.

¹⁸ Typical examples for such field research are investigations on developments in rural areas (e.g. Ehlers 1975, Meyer 1984, Meyer 1986a, Trenk, Nour 1992, Meyer 1986a, Müller-Mahn 2001) or patterns of urban economic activities and their change (Meyer 1986b, Schliephake 1989, Biegel 1990 and 1992, Knaupe, Wurzel 1995, Wurzel, Knaupe 1996).

type in order to partially compensate for the lack of comprehensive and systematic data. For Schlumberger, an extraordinarily high degree of informality in economic exchange in the Middle East together with a far-reaching dominance of informal over formal rules (by contrast to the Western model of the market economy) and the fact “that formal rules and informal norms and values contradict each other“ (Schlumberger 2005, p. 367) imply a particularly important role of social science analysis in any research on the region’s economies – and of the related research methods, respectively. Schlumberger further insists that even “innovative“ approaches such as the economic mainstream’s “new institutionalism“ do not help to overcome the problems which result from the high degree of informality that characterises economic relations and activities in the concerned societies.

(2) However, for other researchers, the collection of necessary data through self-coordinated, extended field research is not an option. Many scholars, therefore, limit their research design, including methodological approaches and instruments, right at the outset in such a way that they can produce meaningful results despite the data problems. Here, choice of topics and methodological selectivity are closely inter-connected. Dealing with general questions of economic structures or with the broader political economy of a country, for example, may be a way to avoid difficulties linked to data and information problems. In such cases, the analysis takes place on a level of abstraction where comprehensive micro-data is either not necessary at all or only employed as an illustration of certain statements rather than as proof for concrete hypotheses. However, since also data regarding macro-economic aggregates such as growth, inflation, budget figures etc. is often incomplete or incorrect, this does not mean that all the problems linked to the availability of data really could be prevented this way (see Weiss, Wurzel 1998, p. 11).

2.2.2. Other Factors Impacting on the Choice of Research Methods and Instruments

There are, of course, areas for which more and better data is available than for others. Trade statistics, for example, often are much better than data on household income or production structures in the informal economy. However, despite the availability of at least some useful data, the majority of German researchers on the economies of the Middle East prefer *qualitative* ways of analysis and presentation of their findings. Further, European researchers dealing with the economic development of countries in the Middle East usually prefer multi-dimensional explanations to one-dimensional ones (i.e. a wider spectrum of explanatory elements and potential determinants of the processes under study will be considered). In general, both the topic chosen as well as the methods and instruments employed, thus, will be less reductionist than in an average mainstream setting. This, quite naturally, also implies that a broader analysis will be undertaken – in the sense that the authors will choose more complex research questions than do economists in average research projects in Europe on the respective career levels (master and PhD thesis level, for comparison).

2.3. Theories, Paradigms and Concepts

2.3.1. Empirical Findings Concerning Theories, Paradigms and Concepts

Analysing the contributions of German economic research on the Middle East, it is clearly visible that the authors in general refer to certain theoretical debates more than to others. First of all, it turns out that there is a very limited use of the standard terms, assumptions and styles of discourse which are typical for neo-classical mainstream economics. Approaches,

categories and theoretical concepts of the mainstream debate are frequently replaced by terms and categories from other economic research traditions (such as non-orthodox institutional economics and classical or Marxian political economy). However, in many publications explicit reference to economic theory is only made sporadically, if at all. This means that many researchers do not clearly name or explain the theoretical foundations which their work is based on. As a consequence, in many cases the authors follow a rather pragmatic and eclectic approach – taking bits and pieces of concepts and traditions of thinking from here and there, sometimes not even realising that some of the elements chosen do not fit together so well.

The obvious de-linking of economic research on the Middle East from the mainstream in terms of theoretical frameworks has been substituted and partly compensated for by a stronger link of Middle East area studies economics to development theory in general and to non-orthodox economic development theory in particular. The non-orthodox development community understood quite early that economic development must be seen as a multidimensional process – that it affects proper economic phenomena such as investment, growth, employment and income as well as social and political structures, institutional arrangements and systems of norms and values. For most German (and other European) Middle East area studies economists, the functional mechanisms of economies as social systems can only be understood fully, if research manages to go further than just analysing seemingly simple economic rationales, causes and effects – an understanding that has been distinguishing non-orthodox development economics from mainstream economics till today.¹⁹ The absence of the usual mainstream dominance allowed for the “survival” of earlier non-orthodox theories, paradigms and schools of economic thinking – often in explicit contradiction to the neo-classical orthodoxy – in the economic area studies domain. Examples are, among others, approaches in the tradition of the classical political economy (including different strands of Marxist and neo-Marxist thought), classical institutionalism, non-orthodox kinds of structuralism, and more or less modernised dependency approaches (sometimes rarely made explicit, but usually implicitly shaping the author’s research question and focus). In addition, the German Middle East economic research community takes up with ease new non-orthodox perspectives, concepts and approaches, often resulting from broader development studies (which, sometimes, are not very new in their core but resemble modernised and further developed versions of earlier non-orthodox paradigms).

German (and European) Middle East economic research did not have a substantial impact on the mother discipline of economics in terms new concepts and theories – at least as long as one defines the discipline of economics in the way in which its mainstream representatives would do it. However, Middle East area studies economics in fact has been able to construct both, its *own* objects of research as well as its *own* concepts, paradigms and theories. The attribute “own” here means that economic research with a regional focus on the Middle East has put issues and concepts on the agenda which so far have been widely or totally ignored by the mainstream. This process of agenda setting and of creating original concepts and

¹⁹ Even the so-called “new development consensus” – that allegedly brings together knowledge from both the non-orthodox and the mainstream economic development debate – in essence is little more than the recent acceptance of many facts and insights which have been produced in the heterodox camps already three or four decades ago by influential representatives of the mainstream. Now, this initially non-orthodox knowledge is being appropriated, distorted and reinterpreted by mainstream development economics in order to superficially modernise its own, increasingly irrelevant and inappropriate theoretical foundations. While most orthodox schools, in order to finally arrive in a roundabout way at these “new development consensus” positions, had to undergo painful learning processes after the obvious failure of their theories and paradigms, many non-orthodox approaches followed a development path that has been leading up the respective researchers much more directly to contemporary insights and positions (which is, of course, not to say that heterodox development thinking did not have its own problems, contradictions and aberrations).

categories, in some cases, finally has been leading to the establishment of the community's own paradigms and theories – in the sub-discipline of economic research on the Middle East. The most prominent example is the concept of the “rentier state” – or “rentier economy”, to be more precise – in all its different (non-orthodox) forms of appearance. Taking the dominant role of oil for the economic development of the respective countries as a starting point of politico-economic analysis in the classical sense, first the very concept of the rentier state has been developed and further developed. Afterwards, in particular in Germany this concept has been used as an important reference point for a wide spectrum of research activities on issues of economic, politico-economic and socio-economic development (see the references in section 2.1.2). Further, the obvious primacy of political over economic considerations (i.e. the absolute dominance of political aims over economic goals proper) by the governments in the Middle East may soon emerge as an original research object for (political) economists working on the region. The apparent dominance of purely political incentives for action and non-action does not only contradict the classical Marxian structure-superstructure dichotomy but also most other descriptions and conceptualisations of contemporary societies built on capitalist economic systems. And, a consistent conceptualisation of this phenomenon *for individual states* of the region that goes beyond the paradigm of the rentier state is still lacking.²⁰ However, serious research on the issue would imply that the sub-discipline of Middle East-related economic research would have to develop an appropriate theoretical framework for such investigations, too.

2.3.2. Do Methodological Constraints Shape Preferences Concerning Theory and Research Topics – Or Does the Researcher's Theoretical Background Determine Research Focus and Methodological Orientation?

After what has been presented above (see in particular sections 1.1.3. and 2.2.1.), it looks as if methodological constraints – mainly related to data problems – have an extraordinarily strong influence on the theories and concepts employed by the Middle East economic research community, possibly even being the decisive element in shaping the sub-discipline's broader theoretical orientation. However, this may be a misperception.

It is true that, due to the limited availability of data, mainstream economists with their quantitative focus rarely work on the region and that “neo-classical imperialism” – the poisoning influence of reductionist mathematical methods on research questions and approaches – is more or less absent. This, of course, leaves more room for non-orthodox paradigms, while the choice of potential research issues, theoretical foundations and methodological approaches available widens substantially. Further, limitations concerning the application of neo-classical econometrics and the absence of the dominating mainstream theory give researchers with other theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds a stronger position in defining research topics and priorities as well as in putting forward categories and concepts. However, the related *methodological selectivity* of German economic research on the Middle East is, first of all, a negative one – the rejection of the neo-classical approach with its strong focus on econometrics. In this regard, theoretical and methodological selectivity are linked very closely, at least in that negative sense of a rejection of the orthodoxy, its theories and its methods and instruments. A clear disadvantage of rejecting the mainstream, of the absence of mainstream economists and of the widely practised eclecticism and pragmatism is that it prevents the absorption of mainstream methodological innovations by Middle East economists. Such methodological innovations arrive very slowly in the research community, if at all. Many researchers follow a rather pragmatic and eclectic approach that is usually not

²⁰ For an explanation of the secondary role of economic considerations in the *regional* political context, see Perthes 2000.

based on the latest developments in the mother discipline of economics. Where methodological foundations are explicitly mentioned, they are often rooted in research areas outside standard economics, such as non-orthodox political economy or non-orthodox institutionalism, economic geography, economic sociology and psychology (survey and sampling techniques, participative observation), etc. This situation implies the need to borrow and adapt methods, instruments, concepts and categories, etc. from other research disciplines than economics. However, the need to borrow and adapt methods, instruments and concepts also opens the way for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research approaches. Middle East area studies economists work more inter- and multi-disciplinarily than mainstream economists. The “de-linking” of economic research on the Middle East from the rigidities and constraints, as well as from the innovations linked to mainstream economics has, thus, both positive as well as negative effects in terms of creativity and further development of the (sub)-discipline.

A consequence of what has been presented above – disinterest of the mainstream and a stronger role of multi- and interdisciplinary research – could be that, quite naturally, there should be a high “demand” for non-orthodox approaches and methodology. Both aspects together could well explain the most striking feature of the sub-discipline’s thematic and methodological selectivity – the dominance of non-mainstream research methods and instruments.

However, it is also possible to explain the reluctance to apply standard economic methods and instruments with the profiles and preferences prevailing among the members of the Middle East economic research community: Instead of linking the dominance of non-mainstream methods to the mainstream’s disinterest in the region, the *alternative explanation* would be that a bigger number of Middle East economic researchers has a strong individual bias against standard economics in general and the related quantitative methods in particular (see section 1.2.1). In other words, according to this perspective, most of the Middle East area studies economic researchers, right from the beginning, would never consider standard economics as the appropriate methodological foundation for their analysis – even in those cases where it offers strong advantages over other methods and instruments.

3. Essentialist Approaches – Periodic Disappearance and Return

As for the question of potential essentialist assumptions, one can surely say that the discipline of economics has by far one of the most universalistic approaches among the social sciences, independent of whether a researcher belongs to an orthodox or heterodox community. Therefore, in explaining differences between general German economic research and economic research on the Middle East potential essentialist assumptions about the region usually do *not* play a major role. It seems that most of the economists regularly working on the Middle East keep up the universalistic spirit of their mother discipline, despite – or because of – the fact that many also possess considerable non-economic knowledge of the region. Also the fact that a bigger number of researchers dealing with the economics of the Middle East have a background in other social sciences than economics has not been leading to a strong and persistent “culturalist turn”.

However, in certain contexts and at particular times, culturalist explanations for economic processes and their outcomes in the region have been quite fashionable. It seems as if such essentialist explanations, in modern economics in general, often have been the last refuge when other explanations could not be found. Accordingly, with the rise of new, non-culturalist approaches and paradigms more suitable to analyse the previously unexplainable phenomena, essentialist perspectives tend to decline again: Earlier culturalist explanations are

deconstructed and the relevant “cultural features” re-interpreted as being related to concrete politico-economic and socio-political structures.

The generally limited role that essentialist approaches play when it comes to economic research on the Middle East does not mean that the research community does not have any interest in non-economic factors impacting on economic developments in the region. Quite the opposite is true: Since the early 1980s, prominent members of the German Middle East area studies branch of economics, such as Nienhaus and Weiss, have been dealing with the socio-cultural, socio-political and historical framework of economic action as well as with the respective institutional expressions in the form of norm and value systems, beliefs, modes of socialisation, patterns of social embeddedness and interaction in the societies under study. These efforts have been characterised by a constant search for new perspectives, for innovative links between elements already known and for interesting new empirical findings – often produced during the extensive fieldwork done by graduate students, strongly encouraged by their professors. At the same time, these efforts strongly tried to avoid – and often explicitly rejected – traditional Orientalist assumptions and explanatory patterns.²¹ The definition of important relevant categories, such as “culture”, “norms” or “tradition”, was neither static nor essentialist: “Japan has demonstrated how to build successful development on core elements of revered old values and virtues. Similar phenomena can be studied in other parts of the world. Their message is: Only if the timeless essence of creativity is tapped within one’s own culture, modernity is not paid by a loss of identity. ... Culture has never been a static concept. Its strength lies in its adaptive capacity. Man is adaptive to technical and institutional innovations.” (Weiss 1992a, p. 8 f.) In striking a balance between proper economic analysis and the inclusion of anything “non-economic” while leaving behind essentialist simplification, some researchers at a few German universities implanted a stimulating spirit of intellectual curiosity and creativity into generations of students that left its imprints on Middle East research in Germany till today (as it shaped the approaches of numerous practitioners in various Middle East and development-related fields).

Also with regard to identification of “the Middle East” as a distinct region, essentialist assumptions usually do not play a role. The most important points of departure for defining this region as to be distinguished from other parts of the world are the geographical location of the respective countries, the specific challenges the economies in the Middle East are facing and their development level in general – complemented by specific historical and cultural commonalities such as language and religion. In addition, certain socio-economic and politico-economic structural characteristics seem to overlap quite well with some geographic features, e.g. oil states at the Gulf, the importance of oil-related income throughout major parts of the region, etc. All in all, the definition of the region by the European Middle East economic research community seems to be basically a *pragmatic* undertaking.

However, the ghost of Orientalism is still haunting. In the aftermath of “9/11”, some German mainstream economists began to engage in something they called the “economics of terror”, trying to explain the apparent tensions between “the West” and “the Islamic world” or “the clash of civilisations” in their own way. Often, these activities lead to extremely disconcerting results – implicitly reviving the worst Orientalist stereotypes, threat scenarios and dull fears associated with this tradition of thought.

One example is “The Analysis of Terrorism from an Economic Perspective” (von Hauff 2004), a chapter in an edited volume (title translated from German as all following quotations). According to the introduction, the author attempts to analyse the reasons for

²¹ See, for example, Nienhaus’ publications on Islamic economic thinking or Weiss’ contributions on norms, values and structural change in economic development.

(Islamist) terrorism with the help of economic methods. What follows is a shockingly simplistic and uninformed attempt to employ economic mainstream paradigms in order to explain why radical Islamic leaders (sic!) undertake terrorist attacks – with the silent consent or open support of the majorities of their societies or constituencies:

The basic assumptions are that there are increasing tensions between the “Western” and “the Islamic world” (p. 44), but “latent conflict” had already existed, during the times of the cold war only covered by the East-West confrontation (p. 46), and that “the religious commandment to act in a terrorist way is the most important feature of contemporary terrorism” (p. 43). Next, it is taken for granted that religion, i.e. Islam, provides the basic rules for economic action in the Islamic world (p. 49), thus leading to essentially different economic models and value systems than in the West (p. 49 f.). Further, the author assumes that institutions matter, that “culture” is an “institution” and that “culture” is the major determinant for people’s action in Islamic countries: “all other levels such as law and economic systems are derived from it and are secondary to it” (p. 52). The author then goes on to reason that external pressure to establish market economies in Islamic countries, in part resulting from globalisation but also from the economic superiority of the West, will provoke counter-reactions of Muslims desperate to defend their “culture”. It takes von Hauff just one more sentence to conclude that “the motivation for terrorism carried out by Muslims can therefore also be explained from an economic perspective” (p. 53).

The next paragraph employs the so-called principal-agent “theory” to explain that religious leaders may “build-up fundamentalism” in order to receive material and immaterial contributions from their followers (the members of the religious community) and that this may probably result in acts of anti-Western terrorism: Religious leaders are understood to be the agents of the community (who employs these agents in order to realise some of the community’s aims). The agents’ task is to establish and enforce religiously motivated rules and regulations the existence and observance of which is described as a major need of the community (German: “Bedürfnis”). Defending the community’s culture – “if the occasion arises through terrorist attacks” (p. 55) – is part of that task definition. In other words, the community’s need – the defence of its culture against external influence – will be satisfied, as one way, by terrorist attacks on a foreign culture. The material and immaterial resources which the community transfers to its religious leaders are meant to be used for such attacks against “the West”. The “need” or “want” on the side of the community for the protection of its culture – according to von Hauff – directly implies a demand for terrorism. As the agents of the community, the religious leaders satisfy this demand – and give the community what it wants: the death, suffering and fear of Westerners. On pages 56 and 57 we further learn that a larger number of followers of the religious leaders can provide them – von Hauff’s potential terrorists – with more material and immaterial support which, in turn, “increases the probability of terrorist attacks” (p. 57).

In short: According to von Hauff, Muslims are fundamentally different from Westerners because all they do is primarily determined by religion. Religion makes up the core of their culture. Western models of market economy are an external threat to that culture as they are not in line with Islamic values. The protection of their culture (religion) is the primary concern of all Muslims – it even is a kind of basic need. Islamic communities assign the task to defend their culture to certain actors, their religious leaders. In order to protect the community’s culture, these religious leaders, among others, carry out terrorist attacks “if the occasion arises” (p. 55). This kind of action satisfies the needs of the community and therefore, it will continue to provide resources to their agents = religious leaders = terrorists. Finally, the more followers of religious leaders there are (i.e. the more Muslims), the more their agents can be provided with resources, and the higher “also the probability of terrorist attacks” (p. 57) – the more Muslims, the more terrorism against the West. Thus, while the author claims to present economic explanations for Islamist terror against “the West”, he

actually resorts to nothing but cultural “explanations” as – according to his assumptions – in the region anything economic is determined by (Islamic) culture.

It is not very surprising that the author, according to vita and publication list on his website, does not seem to have any knowledge on the Middle East – and that the article mentioned above apparently marks his first ever “academic” contact with this part of the world.²² On the contrary, this fits quite well with what can be said about nearly all of the mainstream economists which jumped on the issue of “Islam and the West” during the last years, usually producing dangerously simple-minded contributions, while not even sensing how sub-standard their whole effort looks from the perspective of specialists, or just common sense.²³ However, it comes a bit as a surprise that the second editor of the book – a Parliamentary Secretary of State for the German Federal Minister of the Interior and Vice Chair of the German Social Democrat Party since 2003 – accepted to publish such a text under her name.

4. The “Other” and the Opportunity to Fundamentally Criticise the Established Politico-Economic System of the “Other”

From what has been said above about personal profiles and preferences of individual scientists and the bias against the use of standard economic models in the Middle Eastern context, one could conclude that young researchers, disliking the sterile, scholastic atmosphere in mainstream economics, often deliberately “migrate” to different kinds of area studies economics, just to escape the conservative mainstream environment prevailing in the conventional economic research landscape. Area studies are domains of economic analysis where one can still deal with other things than “subjective, individual benefit curves”, “consumer rent”, the “equilibrium” on “perfect markets”, the assumption of “diminishing returns” of the “factors of production” and the like – even if this comes at the price of anything but bright career prospects for most of these intellectual migrants.²⁴

Further, in Germany as in other European countries, nowadays it is almost impossible for a young researcher to fundamentally criticise the basic socio-economic organisation of the “Western” society – at least, if he/she plans to continue an academic career in economics. A fundamental analysis of ownership patterns, the distribution and acquisition of wealth, or the influence of economically powerful groups on economic decision-making and of business interests on politics is considered inappropriate, as long as this concerns one’s “own” society. By contrast, in “the West” it is well-accepted to explore the same phenomena for the societies in the Middle East, often with rather drastic conclusions and implications: An overcoming of the established socio-politico-economic system and a substantial re-distribution of power and access to resources in the countries of the Middle East can be advocated openly and quite aggressively by Western scholars, all, of course, for the sake of “modernisation” and “development” in the respective Middle Eastern societies.²⁵ In so far it is possible indeed to undertake a fundamental critique of economic and political structures associated with contemporary capitalism (albeit in its distorted Middle Eastern variant) – but only in the

²² The author, one of the two editors of the book in which the article dealt with has been published, is a German university professor for economics. He has been working on a wider range of issues which were fashionable at particular times, with some focus on environmental issues.

²³ See, for example, also the confusing chapter by Ahrens and Hinsch in the same volume (Ahrens, Hinsch 2004).

²⁴ Such tendencies of a conscious escape of young scientists from the conservative research environment dominated by the mainstream further increases the divergence between area studies economics and the economic mainstream, possibly setting in motion a circular, self-enforcing causal chain.

²⁵ This may even culminate in a kind of scientific legitimisation of calls for *regime change* to be engineered by external actors in the region.

refuge of the “area studies island” to which the Western economist can travel, if he/she is in the mood to substantially evaluate the established order.²⁶

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