

Scientific Knowledge, Liberalism, and Empire: American Political Science in the Modern Middle East, by Lisa Wedeen¹

This essay takes up Michel Foucault's invitation to "question ourselves about our aspirations to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany...science" (Foucault 1980: 84). It investigates the contemporary fascination with science in political science; it also shows how basic assumptions and oft-repeated terms have operated to instantiate liberal values by making them seem self-evident. An epistemological community has been produced at the intersection of two sets of norms—belief in the inherent value of science as a method of producing objective truth about the real world, on the one hand, and a commitment to the value of preserving liberalism, on the other. Not simply a fortuitous coming together of two separate sets of norms, the intersection between science and liberalism speaks to a longstanding reciprocity and, as we shall see, an elective affinity between logics.² Contemporary practitioners of science in political science

¹ The author would especially like to thank Nadia Abu El-Haj, Michael Dawson, Resat Kasaba, Zachary Lockman, Karen Pfeifer, Don Reneau, and Seteney Shami for their comments on early drafts of this article. My gratitude also extends to audience members of the Comparative Politics workshop at the University of Chicago for helpful suggestions—in particular, Rohit Goel, Daragh Grant, Todd Hall, Chris Haid, Diana Kim, John Mearsheimer, John Padgett, Sarah Parkinson, MJ Petersen, Erica Simmons, Nick Smith, and Steven Wilkinson. A colloquium on disciplinary innovation at Columbia University also allowed me to refine my ideas, and I am grateful to Gil Anidjar and Partha Chatterjee, my discussants, as well as to Akeel Bilgrami, James Chandler, and Joseph Massad for their questions. Paul Amar and Jillian Schwedler read the penultimate draft and offered important last-minute suggestions. Special thanks are also owed to Rohit Goel and Daragh Grant for research assistance. Please do not cite or quote this version without permission.

² I am beholden to Saba Mahmood (2006) for this formulation. This historical mutually implicating relationship between science and liberalism can be traced back as far as the seventeenth century.

not only validate scientific methods as value neutral, but also tend to accept the same basic assumptions (about human nature, the good life, proper government, and acceptable forms of evidence). They deploy a vocabulary—a set of terms, juxtapositions, metaphors, and phrases—that describe their findings while also specifying which debates count as intelligible, meaningful, and worthy of scholarly attention.

In the context of political science's commitments to scientific objectivity and to the production, or at least protection, of the U.S.'s liberal order, studying the Middle East has always been a vexed enterprise. In the post-9/11 world, a spate of articles laments the shortage of experts at elite institutions and the seeming lack of interest political scientists have traditionally had in covering the region. Granting agencies and universities scramble to make up for lost time, creating programs and hiring faculty, many of whom are dedicated to "understanding Islam" or to assessing the region's risks to U.S. security. The United States' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have prompted regime critics to conjure up images of a "resurrected empire" (Khalidi 2004), while supporters provide the Bush administration with arguments for its maintenance (e.g., Huntington 1993, 1996; Lewis 2002). On the whole, this shift in American foreign policy from "low-intensity proxy wars (the preferred mode of intervention since Vietnam) to

high-intensity direct warfare” (Mamdani 2005) has found support in renewed research interest in the Middle East.³

The late Edward Said (1978) famously underscored the connections between empire and distinct forms of knowledge, and in the spirit of his book *Orientalism*, this essay also specifies the normative conditions, in this case in political science, that have helped make possible distinct visions of the Arab and Muslim Middle East. I want to argue that these visions are not simply embellishments of an imperial domination independently existing; they are an integral part of the project itself.⁴ Such a claim is not meant to suggest that *all* political scientists participate in reproducing possibilities for empire, or that they do so single-handedly and deliberately. Thus this essay also takes issue with approaches (including those inspired by Said) that attribute political power to scholarly discourses without attending to the ways in which scholarship operates within broader discursive and institutional frameworks.

Admittedly, it is by no means self-evident how political science’s complicities with U.S. empire would jibe with the two aspects of political science I argue above are currently defining the discipline—the

³ I write “on the whole” because the U.S. has also engaged in wars or battles with direct intervention throughout this period as well (e.g., Panama, Grenada, Libya, and Somalia). Despite evidence of a shift, what characterizes all of these wars is the asymmetry between the U.S. and its foes.

⁴ This formulation is a paraphrase of Geertz who is discussing ceremonials in Negara’s theater state (1981).

convergence, or perhaps more historically accurate, the continuing coalescence in new forms, of science and liberalism. This essay is devoted to fleshing out those links while considering how scholarly convictions, combined with the realities of U.S. foreign policy, have structured the terms in which the Middle East is understood and studied today. Part one explores the discipline's seemingly contradictory commitments to value-neutrality and liberal values. Part two foregrounds the constitutive relationship among science, liberalism, and empire in the making of modern Middle Eastern politics as an area of academic inquiry. One caveat worth noting from the outset: the words "empire" and "imperialism" are politically charged nouns these days. By empire I simply mean, following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a state with extensive political and military dominion. In the age of nation-states, imperial states generally exercise this dominion over populations that are perceived (by conqueror and conquered) as different from (in the sense of ineligible for incorporation into) the dominant state exercising control.

The Convergence of Science and Liberalism: Context, Text, and Effects

From the inception of the American Political Science Association in 1903 until the present, there have been repeated attempts within the

association to “transform the study of politics into an independent science” (Ross 1991: 288; see also Heaney and Hansen 2006). Despite important variations among positivists and significant disagreements between positivists and nonpositivists (including what “positivism” means), efforts to make political science a science have generally entailed separating facts from values, identifying law-like principles governing political action, and subjecting these rules to empirical tests. In this context, objectivity enjoys an “aura of self-evidence”—practical agreement about what counts as a fact and the modes through which knowledge about facts are produced (Shapin and Schaffer 1985: 13-14). Committed to objectivity and value-free scholarship, dominant political science’s applications of positivist principles find expression in causal explanations that rely on a nomothetical understanding of what causation entails. Formulated by Hume and formalized by the prominent positivist, Carl Hempel, the task of science, in this view, is to discover a “covering law” that, in the context of observable initial conditions, can be said to produce the observed event (Hempel 1965; on positivism see Hacking 1983; Cederman 1997; Johnson 2006).

Yet contrary to scientific commitments to objectivity and value-free scholarship, much research in “mainstream” political science has also historically presupposed the value of liberal politics (Ross 1991; Ricci 1984;

Gunnell 1993). Like positivism, liberalism has embodied divergent ideas and been identified variously in different geographical and historical locations. Despite these variations, the liberal tradition in political science can nevertheless be characterized by four interrelated assumptions about the connection between human subjectivity and good government (Ricci 1984, 72-73). First, human beings are born as rights-bearing individuals. A good government is one that protects an individual's inalienable rights. Second, human beings are capable of thinking clearly and rationally. Good institutions are ones that cultivate human proclivities to reason. Third, individuals naturally come together and form groups in order to promote their interests and check those of rival factions. Good institutions are ones that encourage pluralistic interests while dampening potentially incendiary conflicts. Fourth, individuals are capable of creating governments that operate democratically, namely, that are responsive to the will of the people.⁵ Good democratic governments are those that provide procedural

⁵ Of course each liberal postulate has always had its counter-conditions. The conviction that humans are born with inalienable rights has never prevented practices in liberal societies that enable some people to enjoy more or better rights than others. Indeed, definitions of what constitutes full human-ness have been subject to contestation and revision; people of color, the poor, and gays and lesbians have often been treated as less than human in America's political history, for example. The belief that all humans are capable of rational thinking—postulate number two—does not mean that all humans always regularly think rationally, or that we scholars consensually understand what rationality means, or that rational calculations are necessarily always a desirable way of conducting political life in all circumstances. The third postulate—that individuals are likely to form factions in order to pursue their interests—is most famously articulated in James Madison's *Federalist Paper #10*. Madison argued that compromises conducive to the public interest necessitated that factions of citizens must have their interests checked and balanced against other factions. In practice, such ideas have found institutional expression in political parties, but these

mechanisms, such as elections, that enable people to exercise their will as individuals.

I am not arguing for better science, however. Nor am I claiming that positivist social science is bad. Rather, I want to bracket the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the enterprise and consider how the insistence on separating fact from value, in particular, has contributed to three persistent disciplinary moves. First, the division has excluded viewing science as a value in and of itself, indeed as a metaphysic. Political scientists do not tend to ask how scientific knowledge operates to cultivate passionate belief or why science is inherently the most valuable form of knowledge. Second, the split between fact and value has prevented thinking through how epistemological assumptions and national-political commitments coalesce to defend the stability of a liberal politics—how liberalism is itself ideological or “hegemonic,” and how political science helps to make it so. Or to put it differently, epistemologies have a politics, and knowledge production in political science tends to shore up certain liberal assumptions and aspirations even while overt prescription and “bias” are seen to be outside the objectivist goals of science. Third, the split between fact and value allows

vehicles of group interest have not, at least in the case of the United States, been able to advance all citizens’ interests or express all grievances adequately. Finally, a government responsible to the people’s will generates familiar concerns about what constitutes the people’s will, “the people,” responsibility, etc.

methodology, in particular, to be viewed as value neutral, as a technique devoid of normative assumptions. This view enables positivist political science to occupy the position of authorized (because disinterested) discoverer, teacher, and enforcer of what counts as true or justified statements about politics.

The ultimate effect of this sequestering of fact-finding from rigorous philosophical examination has been that dominant epistemological communities are maintained by institutional and practical-discursive means rather than by any exclusive purchase such conceptual frameworks could have on the truth. Disciplinary strategies (such as writing a methodological textbook designed to unify the discipline) and power-brokering practices (such as dismissing out of hand arguments that are epistemologically reflexive) help establish the rules and devise the evaluative criteria by which statements about the world are considered knowledge or not. At the same time, these activities supply and enforce norms about what may and may not be asked. They generally discourage scrutiny into the practices that bound and normalize a discipline, enabling certain kinds of knowledge to thrive while foreclosing or de-authorizing other ways of knowing. In other words, in addition to the tasks of socializing student-citizens and advising government officials, political science, not surprisingly, operates as a

discipline, reproducing the norms, prohibitions, conventions, and constraints that generate standards for identifying expertise. In political science, this expertise affirms the possibility and importance of pursuing value-free science, on the one hand, and the vision of a rationalist liberal politics, on the other.

Although this coalescence between liberalism and science has arguably been a feature of political science since its emergence, such conjunctures do not imply that political science is a unified discipline or that there is no resistance to mainstream convictions. Theorists as radically different as Arendt and Strauss, and many inspired by them, have criticized the fact/value distinction, the social scientific preoccupation with “behavior,” and for Arendtians at least, the consequent disregard of spontaneous action. They have also challenged the reduction of politics to liberal ideas of expedience—to instrumental interests and means/ends calculations. Critiques have also thrived outside of political theory, animating “realist” theories of international relations, for example. One has only to recall Hans Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man Vs. Power Politics*, a book that is both deeply skeptical of political science’s aspirations to science and

its ethical commitments to liberalism.⁶ More recently, Ido Oren (2002) pursues arguments congenial to some of this essay's own, challenging American political science's definition of itself as an objective science and spotlighting the discipline's ideological underpinnings.⁷ Most apposite to this paper's claims is Oren's discussion of some political scientists' complicity with U.S. war-making—their participation in village “pacification” and in interrogating Viet Cong prisoners during the Vietnam

⁶ Morgenthau worries, in particular, about the trend towards identifying politics with science, science with ethics, and liberal conceptions of international affairs with reason (1974 [1946], 35; 71). Like other positivists, however, he does have a notion of a genuine “political reality” that is separate from a liberal “misconception” of it. In reality, “power is pitted against power for survival and supremacy” (71), an understanding of the political beholden to Carl Schmitt, of course. For Morgenthau, liberalism's notions of “reason, of progress, and of peace” (6) failed to acknowledge fascism's rootedness, not only historically in the “bankrupt age that preceded it,” (7) but in human nature. Liberalism was part of the problem; its attachment to the rule of law, science, and social planning left democracy weak in the face of enemies. (See John G. Gunnell's discussion of Morgenthau in *The Descent of Political Theory* (1993: 209)) As Daragh Grant has pointed out to me, in the somewhat later *Politics Among Nations* (2006 [1948]: 17-26), Morgenthau titles his second chapter “The Science of International Politics,” and his descriptions of realism make appeals to an objectivity consonant with the discipline's commitments to science: “Realism, believing as it does in the objectivity of the laws of politics, must also believe in the possibility of developing a rational theory that reflects, however imperfectly and one-sidedly, these objective laws. It believes also, then, in the possibility of distinguishing in politics between truth and opinion—between what is true objectively and rationally, supported by evidence and illuminated by reason, and what is only a subjective judgment divorced from the facts as they are and informed by prejudice and wishful thinking” (4; see also page 5). Morgenthau's distinctions between scientific judgments and liberal wishful thinking are important, but so too is the conundrum he generates by suggesting that liberal democracy can only be saved (from fascism, for example) by being abandoned. Morgenthau's views of science in *Politics Among Nations* also reflect a tension between appeals to science and a Schmittian skepticism of it. Morgenthau doubts that scientific advances can transcend the political and produce perpetual peace. He sees the “scientific era of international relations” as abandoning “genuine political evaluations” and impeding “if not entirely destroy[ing] the ability to make any intelligent political decisions at all” (48). And he connects “the use of the scientific method in politics” to liberalism in ways that make clear his problems with both. John Mearsheimer believes that Morgenthau titled his second chapter “The Science of International Politics” not because he saw himself producing scientific theory, but because he saw the discipline moving in that direction and “tipped his hat” to the trend. (Discussion with John Mearsheimer, April 3, 2008).

⁷ Oren is less interested in political science's commitments to liberalism or the intersections between liberalism and science, and more concerned with the discipline's early fascination with German fascism, another important if less persistent trend. He notes that John W. Burgess, often considered the founder of the discipline, viewed the “Teutonic race” as politically superior. He also cites Woodrow Wilson's well-known admiration of Prussia's efficient bureaucracy and the favorable review of *Mein Kampf* published in the *American Political Science Review*. I thank Jillian Schwedler and John Mark Hansen for drawing my attention to this work.

War, as well as the discipline's longstanding and ongoing relationship with the U.S.'s national security agencies (points to which we shall return). Contestation in political science has also extended to various initiatives for change, including the Caucus for a New Political Science established in 1967 and the "Perestroika" movement founded in 2000. As the well-known political scientist of American politics David Mayhew writes in his endorsement of a recent book chronicling the latter movement's hopes and demands for methodological pluralism: "every now and then American political science has an uprising. Questions are asked, emperors are declothed, bastions are stormed or at least infiltrated."⁸ These moments of resistance are important, not only because they suggest a less monolithic and more contingent image of the discipline than might otherwise be apparent, but because the presumed fragmentation prompts prominent scholars to lament divisions and work towards unity.⁹ Anxiety about a "discipline divided" (Almond 1990) has generated repeated attempts to establish political science's intellectual coherence.

Efforts at unifying the discipline have to be understood against the backdrop of a changing relationship between liberalism and science. Lee Sigelman, a former editor of the discipline's flagship journal, the *American*

⁸ The book is Kristen Renwick Monroe's *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (2005).

⁹ On worries about political science's divisions, see Bunche 1954; Easton 1997; Almond 1990. For an overview see Sigelman 2006.

Political Science Review, notes that in the early years “‘good government’-oriented reformism and the championing of direct democracy devices were regular features of *Review* articles...Through the end of World War II, 10% to 20% of *Review* articles contained an explicitly prescriptive element, often in combination with the presentation of empirical findings. That element was particularly pronounced during and immediately after the Depression and World Wars I and II, when the nation’s energies were harnessed to economic recovery, the war effort, and the shaping of the postwar order” (Sigelman 2006: 467). Sigelman charts how in the 1950s and 1960s, political science became increasingly protective of its status as a scientific enterprise; the epistemological convictions of the “behavioral” revolution coincided with a “dramatic upsurge of quantitative research” (ibid. and 467). Notably, Sigelman sees this coupling of behaviorism and quantitative research as ushering in the decline of prescriptive articles in the *Review*. But whereas *Review* articles may have become less policy oriented in the 1960s and whereas they may have ceased to speak “truth to power” (Sigelman 467), behaviorism in political science continued to be prescriptive in the sense that it encoded liberal presumptions about good government, democracy, and the individual in its statistical analyses; and it developed survey research questions that were designed to assess individuals’ orientations towards the

political system in ways that were geared towards upholding a U.S.-inspired order in the context of Cold War communist and leftist domestic challenges to it. Although the behaviorism of the post-war period and the methodological individualism of the present share commitments to science and to liberalism, there is a key difference: liberal political systems *were* explicitly valorized in behaviorism (e.g., Dahl; Truman), even when, as Sigelman suggests, there was a move away from explicit prescription and an insistence on a distinction between matters of fact (is) and normative judgments (ought). As the recovery from the war succeeded and the political threats diminished, the extent to which the existing order was in question, i.e., in need of prescription, became less obvious. In some contemporary rational choice paradigms and in most political methodology texts, the liberal “good society” touted among behaviorists (e.g., a society that safeguards equality of opportunity under the law; is politically pluralist and non-ideological; is governed representatively; and is protected by a “neutral” state not captured by any single or permanent set of interests) is most often assumed, so that the prescriptive character of the approach becomes even less apparent, to the point of disappearing into a concern with “science” rather than “society” as such.¹⁰ It is this development, toward work that

¹⁰ Thanks are owed to Michael Dawson for discussing with me the features characteristic of the “good

specifies the procedures of good science, to which I want to direct our attention in the following pages.

The exponential growth of rational choice in the 1980s is an important part of this story, and it reflected political science's turn towards economics for inspiration. Not since the 1890s, according to Adam Przeworski, had the social sciences been subject to such a "deliberate thrust to impose the monopoly of the economic method over all study of society" (Przeworski 1985: 379). True, the use of mathematics to explain the decision-making calculus of actors who were themselves presumed to be mathematically rational (in the sense that actors could rank any two alternatives and have complete transitive and reflexive preferences), had arguably been dominant since the 1950s in economic theory, especially in microeconomics. Social choice theorists, a few of whom were prominent political scientists, also used rational choice approaches to address explicitly political-economy concerns. But Przeworski's periodization speaks to a profound transformation in the scale and scope of rational choice's influence, as students of social choice theorists began to people key political science departments and to influence the direction of the discipline.¹¹ Przeworski's

society."

¹¹ I have in mind, for example, the students of William Riker and Richard McKelvey (e.g., Ken Shepsle, John Aldrich, Skip Lupia, and Peter Ordeshook.) Chris Haid deserves thanks for his help in sorting out this history.

article announced his own acceptance of the methodological validity of individualistic postulates, calling on his colleagues to recognize how all social phenomena could be understood as the product of individuals' actions and formalized mathematically. Individuals' behavior, moreover, was "rational in the instrumental sense of that term" (Przeworski 1985: 401). Thus the liberal understanding of the rational, self-interested, rights-bearing subject could come to undergird increasingly sophisticated economic models. Przeworski was one of a number of former Marxist-oriented political scientists who came to accept both the scientific potency of the game theory apparatus and a view of the individual as a maximizing, cost-benefit calculator. For him and his like-minded colleagues, game theory posed "irrefutable and salutary challenges to Marxism" (Przeworski 1985: 391).

By 1990, historical events had followed suit, and a remarkable convergence occurred between the underlying presuppositions of rational choice theory, on the one hand, and statements heralding the triumph of liberal capitalism, on the other. In the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union and the fall of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, conceptual frameworks in political science became increasingly beholden to game theoretic perspectives, ones that in post-hoc fashion, could "anticipate"

the tumultuous changes and map out subsequent “transitions” to “democracy.” Democracy, as defined by many rational choice theorists, was seen in institutional and procedural terms. A country qualified as a “democracy” as long as it held regular elections in which outcomes were uncertain.¹² This definition, beholden to the earlier work of Joseph Schumpeter (1942), was exceedingly minimalist and driven in large part by methodological concerns for coding large-N, transhistorical cases. Others have described such formulations as “low-intensity” democracy, demonstrating how this methodological decision works to justify a specific political order and an image of the citizen as an atomistic, passive consumer of politics (Marks 2000; Scott, n.d.; Wedeen 2007 and in press). Indeed, the “transitions to democracy” literature is one that, to borrow the anthropologist David Scott’s words, “comports almost seamlessly with the contemporary self-image of American liberal democracy, the rights-oriented public philosophy of what Michael Sandel aptly calls the ‘procedural republic’” (Scott, n.d.: 19; Sandel 1996).

In a scholarly world in which the assumptions of scientific inquiry in political science meshed particularly well with important tenets of contemporary liberalism (e.g., the rights-oriented individual who has

¹² For particularly influential versions of this definition of democracy, see Przeworski (1991) and Przeworski et al. (2000).

“political preferences,” leaders who operate as rational calculators or “political entrepreneurs” in the “market place of ideas,” and democracy as contested elections in which procedures ensure uncertainty in principle if not in fact), a new book appeared on the scene—one that was to have a dramatic impact on conversations within the discipline and on the training and professionalization of graduate students. No book in recent years has been as influential in authorizing experts and disciplining the discipline as Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba’s, *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994). By 2001, more than twenty-thousand copies had been sold, the book had already been reprinted six times, and more than five hundred libraries had purchased it.¹³ Insisting that differences in traditions within the discipline were simply *stylistic*, the authors sought to produce a unified epistemological and methodological community, one in which the scientific methods familiar to quantitative researchers (both statistically minded practitioners and game theorists) would also become the norm in qualitative

¹³ Keisha Lindsay supplied this information through a World CAT Internet database search (June 2001) and through a telephone interview with Eric Rohmann, Sales Director, Princeton University Press, June 11, 2001. Although KKV claim that their “goal is practical: designing research that will produce valid inferences about social and political life” (3), several political scientists, some of whom support the enterprise, have likened the project to a religious one— a “missionary effort” (Shively 1995), a book which has “the aim of evangelizing” (Rogowski 1995, 467), a “homily,” one that “puts forth a simple straightforward faith” (Brady 1995, 12). These are all cited in James Johnson’s excellent “Consequences of Positivism: A Pragmatist Assessment” (2006). That essay differs markedly from my analysis of KKV here in that the former argues directly with the text rather than analyzing how the book “works” in the Foucauldian sense. In other words, Johnson does not bracket whether the text is good or bad, but argues that the authors’ theory of inquiry impedes our ability to make sense of successful quantitative analyses and of causal explanation. He also argues that it fails in its mission to “impart intellectual unity to the discipline of political science” (224). I am more interested in asking why and how that unity matters.

studies. The unity desired by King, Keohane, and Verba (KKV) was not therefore based on the argument that qualitative work is potentially both nonscientific and legitimate. The claim, rather, was that there is simply no political science worthy of the name that does not conform to the putatively generalizable scientific strictures they defined. As the authors made explicit:

Our main goal is to connect the traditions of what are conventionally denoted ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research by applying a unified logic of inference to both. The two traditions appear quite different; indeed they sometimes seem to be at war. Our view is that these differences are mainly ones of style and specific technique. The same underlying logic provides the framework for each research approach. This logic tends to be explicated and formalized clearly in discussions of quantitative research methods. But the same logic of inference underlies the best qualitative research....” (3)

According to KKV, the “best qualitative research,” like quantitative research, operates with “the same underlying logic of inference.” Whether causal or descriptive, this logic can be made “systematic and scientific.” Indeed its value relies on its claims to the scientific method. Although the authors concede that not all questions of abiding concern for politics can be covered by learning the rules of inference, “the rules are relevant to all

research where the goal is to learn facts about the real world.” The “real world” remains underspecified in this account, but in drawing a sharp distinction between “what is” and “what ought to be,”¹⁴ and by insisting on a strict separation between the “philosophical” and the “empirical,” the real world becomes that which is constituted by the “rules of inference.” Questions about “agency, obligation, legitimacy, citizenship, sovereignty, and the proper relationship between national societies and international politics” are located outside the domain of proper scientific inquiry (all from KKV 1994: 6). The KKV approach thus not only reproduces a classic intradisciplinary divide between political science and political theory, but also reads the manifestly political concerns of theory out of the discipline of political science, indeed out of the world of “facts” as such.

The belief that such an approach is ontologically, rather than merely provisionally, adequate may signal the authors’ unacknowledged metaphysical commitments. Certainly such a conviction seems to limit the range of possibilities open for rigorous work in political science. For KKV, “the distinctive characteristic that sets social science apart from casual observation is that social science seeks to arrive at valid inferences by the systematic use of well-established procedures of inquiry” (6). “Good

¹⁴ For a sophisticated discussion of the distinction between is and ought, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993 [1972]).

research,” for which the authors used “the word ‘scientific’” as the “descriptor,” is work that adheres to the dictates of explicitly scientific research (7). “Valid inferences” are those established by scientific work. Scientific work assures objectivity.

King, Keohane, and Verba’s methodological treatise thereby rested on familiar understandings in the discipline: they assumed not only the intrinsic worth of scientific studies, but they also posited a specific and by no means self-evident understanding of science as a practice based on a clear divide between empirical facts and philosophical values. Science, in their view, required testable, falsifiable hypotheses, an acknowledgement of the tentative nature of findings, and (therefore, arguably) a belief that acceptable results depend on a specific epistemological and methodological approach. Worried that the absence of consensus about what social science is necessarily entailed disagreement about what constituted good work or shared standards, the authors ignored underlying philosophical problems raised by their position, attempting to impose one kind of rigor on the discipline at the expense of other rigorous forms of engagement with politics. In this sense, the book fit well with a number of others in the 1980s and 1990s, many of which decried the divisions within political science and

insisted on the methodological assumptions of the natural sciences.¹⁵

Although *Designing Social Inquiry* has yet to create the desired consensus, the book was arguably more successful than any other in specifying the terms under which scholarly work would be taken seriously in the field. The book has helped produce guidelines for hiring and tenure decisions, as well as for what is sayable and practicable in the discipline, participating in the discipline's overall move towards quantitative, formal, and "mixed methods" research.¹⁶ The book has defined the space of contestation over what "good" political science should look like, reinforcing a common definition of scientific standards rather than calling underlying assumptions into question.¹⁷

The book's impact should not be divorced from the institutional location of its authors and their reputations in the discipline, on the one hand, and the felicitous historical conditions that made this effort at

¹⁵ The most obvious text is Gabriel Almond's *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990). One of the most oft-cited critiques of *Designing Social Inquiry* is Brady and Collier (eds.), *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). Gary King's, *Unifying Political Methodology: The Likelihood Theory of Statistical Inference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) is an effort to unify statistical methods in political science. *Designing Social Inquiry* is more ambitious.

¹⁶ Data collected by Daragh Grant on the top ten political science departments in the United States for the academic year 2006-07 show that approximately 71 percent of all junior faculty do quantitative, formal or "mixed methods" research, another 16 percent are political theorists, and 13 percent are unambiguously identified with qualitative work. These numbers reflect a significant generational shift. Note: twelve departments enjoy "top ten" rankings according to US News and World Report, last updated in 2005. Those rankings include the following universities (in alphabetical order): Berkeley, Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, Michigan, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, UCLA, and UCSD. Grant arrived at these figures by canvassing a broad sample of publications (including dissertations). Data are available from djgrant@uchicago.edu

¹⁷ The self-styled critique *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (2004) is a case in point, as the title suggests.

unification particularly noteworthy, on the other. The authors first conceived the book in 1989 while co-teaching a graduate seminar on research design during their years together at Harvard University (KKV 1994: ix).

Methodological concerns had been most explicit in King's preceding work, much of which was devoted to demonstrating the utility of statistical inference techniques for what could one day be a unified political science. King, more than the others, was at the forefront of a new subdisciplinary field. (Verba was a well-known behaviorist and advocate of liberal political systems who used survey methods to explain political behavior and public opinion; Keohane applied a range of explicitly scientific research methods to cases in international relations while also, like many theorists of international relations, upholding implicit assumptions about the virtue of American values and the existence of an objective "national interest.") King was a young methodologist whose career has coincided with the growing importance of methodology as a field in its own right. As a former president of the Society for Political Methodology and a member of important editorial boards, including the discipline's flagship journal the *APSR*, King, among others, has been successful in helping to enhance political methodology as an autonomous institutional concern. The National Science Foundation has also been a major force in the continuing growth of the

subfield of political methodology, investing millions of dollars in such projects.

King's work, in particular, has not simply been produced within an environment congenial to the subfield's advancement; it has also helped make possible the growth of political methodology as a subdisciplinary field with its own literature, job positions, relatively high salaries, and considerable cultural capital. Political methodologists have assumed high-profile roles in the American Political Science Association and publish, referee, and edit prominent journals. Their letters often carry considerable weight in securing jobs and promotions for epistemologically like-minded scholars in all of the subdisciplines of political science. The institutional power of game theoretic and statistical methods facilitated the book's disciplinary work, registering how disputes over facts and over the rules for producing facts should be managed and adjudicated. *Designing Social Inquiry* exemplified ongoing efforts to secure assent, to generate collective agreement about what the discipline was and how its discursive and social practices should be conducted.¹⁸

At first glance, the book's valorization of science and its guidelines for practicing it properly may not obviously connect to liberalism.

¹⁸ For a remarkably stimulating book on how experiments secured assent about matters of fact and the rules of the game that determined those facts, see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Methodology was presented as a technique that carries no normative assumptions, liberal or otherwise. The book's task was to specify the "right questions to ask," show students how to avoid "bias" and "endogeneity," help would-be scholars with case selection, and identify ways to estimate and report the tentative nature of conclusions. The book's claims that science moves us toward a fully adequate description of social life, or that systematic knowledge is the kind that counts (Poovey 1998, 1), found expression in formulations throughout political science drawing on KKV's distinctions between descriptive and causal inferences while separating both from matters of normative value. Ruled out of consideration were questions of what a fact is, as well as discussion of the ways in which the distinction between facts and values is itself philosophically problematic (see Pitkin 1993).¹⁹

Of course normative claims infuse the text—assumptions about what counts as a public act of research, the virtue of "societal judgments" (15), the nature of research as instrumentally rational (15), the conventions that ought

¹⁹ It is important to recognize that there *are* quantitatively minded political scientists who recognize problems in treating "data" uncritically as factual in quantitative analyses. See, for example, Wilkinson (forthcoming 2008). Wilkinson's critique does not undermine the belief that there are "objective developmental and other facts waiting to be found out about India," and I am not arguing here that such a belief is wrong or that there are no such things as facts. Rather, there are different kinds of facts, not all of them subject to easy ostensive delimitation. Saying "this is a chair" and pointing to an example is not the same exercise as identifying a "developmental fact" and deploying it in social scientific discourse. Statements of "fact" that are value laden or dependent on concepts that generate puzzlement, such as development or democracy or crime or justice, may lead to especially important but neglected—at least in political science—disagreements about what a fact *is* or what makes it relevant. (The quotation above is from an email correspondence, April 1, 2008).

to regulate controversy, and so on. These norms may not be explicitly liberal. They nevertheless evince some of the worries about disagreement and methods for managing conflict central to a liberal politics. Assertions that the “content of ‘science’ is primarily the methods and rules, not the subject matter” (9) suggest that the rules supply their own content, a recourse to proceduralism that is itself a liberal move. And liberal content, presumptions about the individual, rational agency and good government, *do* creep into the examples selected for particular praise.²⁰ Like the discipline more generally, the book discusses democratic peace theory, “social capital” studies on good governance, and the transitions to democracy literature without questioning the liberal premises undergirding each. The highly valued methodologies of game theory and statistical analysis, moreover, reproduce affinities between the rational actor and the “good society” where the latter encourages pluralistic interests and dampens potentially inflammatory conflicts through procedural mechanisms (such as elections) that enable people to express their “preferences” as individuals.

In the wake of the poor performance of science in anticipating the demise of the Soviet Union and as versions of the “cultural turn” came to inspire other social sciences, an increasing focus on methodology operated

²⁰ To take one instance, citations of research quoted on electoral democracy refer to its positive effects while authoritarian rule is described parenthetically as suppressing labor organization and labor demands (142), a parenthetical that might also aptly describe some “stable democracies.”

to reinvigorate political science. As methodology became a field in its own right, and as formalized methods, in particular gained ground (“second only to quantification” in the *APSR*, according to Sigelman, and dominating the esteemed *American Journal of Political Science*),²¹ the circulation of formal methodologies and game theoretic arguments could have the indirect effect of working on behalf of an undertheorized elision between science and liberalism. By combining empirical research with nonempirical techniques of logic and pure mathematics, even abstract formal models required practitioners to hold assumptions (about the individual, cognition, and what democracy is) that were congenial to both projects. Terms like “trade-offs,” “cost-benefit analysis,” and “equilibria” could appear as neutral variables or consensually accepted standards rather than the product of a distinct political context. Sharing these assumptions has helped constitute a community that is epistemological (in the sense that it directs how we know what we know), methodological (in the sense that members adhere to the same sets of processes in producing and evaluating results), and ontological (members of the group self-identify as participants in a community of argument whose conditions make questioning basic assumptions seem irrelevant, if not silly or embarrassing). Agreement on the procedures for research seems to entail

²¹ For data on the number of quantitative and formal analyses by volume of the *APSR*, see Sigelman’s Figure 4 (2006: 469).

distinguishing between descriptive and causal inferences and according the latter greater prestige; treating the individual as the unit of analysis and identification; presupposing a world in which it is sufficient to depict agents as if they act only instrumentally; and taking initial interpretations as descriptive facts or raw data, rather than information mediated through the experience of a particular researcher.

To conclude this section: Epistemological assumptions and liberal political commitments get constituted in and through the workings of political science.²² Dominant scholarly production in political science rests on particular views of science as the ultimate form of knowledge and liberalism as the desirable kind of politics. The positivist insistence on separating fact from value, moreover, obscures how science is itself an exalted value. Deciding what results political scientists want to explain (e.g., contested elections and procedures in place to ensure them, peace among democracies, conflict avoidance) can be seen in current texts as simultaneously politically relevant and devoid of value. As political science has become more scientific, liberal values have seemed to retreat into the background or been partially concealed by an emphasis on methods over content. Yet political science remains implicated in reproducing the liberal

²² Nadia Abu El-Haj's book on the ways in which distinct epistemological and national-cultural assumptions operated through archaeology as a field science in Israel has been helpful to my thinking about the dynamics of scholarly production in political science.

moral-political world in which practitioners live, in part by enacting the norms of proceduralism through which political projects are selected for inquiry, imagined into existence, and sustained. And scholars' everyday enmeshments in institutional relationships—the pleasures of status, funding, approval, inclusion, prominence, job security and respect—have also worked to foreclose alternative political visions, while defining what is valid, good, and praiseworthy.

Or to put this differently, the connection between science and liberalism in political science is most substantively evident in what the “scientific” part of the discipline has maintained as a set of common features across the transformations from pre-WW II through behaviorism to KKV. This includes, most fundamentally:

1. objectivist reductionism: that the world exists “out there,” as a collection of facts to be apprehended and analyzed, independent of the values of the scholar undertaking to study it, and that complex phenomena (such as “political cultures” or democratization) are to be explained in terms of simpler elements that all phenomena of a given category share in common.
2. the epistemological primacy of method, entailing that the procedures of social scientific inquiry must be public and subject in principle to

repetition, i.e., validation, by other practitioners, a point nicely summarized by KKV when they insist that “the content is the method” (p. 9).

This constancy has been achieved by means of considerable intradisciplinary policing, which itself has been a constant across fundamental changes in conceptual approach and methodology. As we have seen, the practice of political science has evolved along a number of axes since its beginnings early in the previous century. It has gone from openly prescriptive to less so, and from tentatively scientific to more assertively so; or, summarizing in more substantive terms since WW II, from behaviorism to rational choice to KKV. Throughout, when scholars acknowledge the absence of a satisfactory explanation for a recognized phenomenon, the mainstream practice has been to assume that the answer must be sought within the epistemic terms favored at the time.²³ The assumption that the needed explanations will be found by persisting with a given approach often involves shutting down alternatives, as institutional power is applied to disqualify or dismiss other rigorous accounts with competing epistemological and political foundations. One obvious example is the marginalization of psychoanalysis as a way of discussing attitudes and

²³ See Gould and Lewontin (2004) on pressures to conform to orthodoxy in evolutionary biology.

behavior. Another is the more general sequestering of political theory from other aspects of disciplinary knowledge.

Marginalizing political theory entails ignoring questions of reflexivity—what it means to separate fact from value, how the discipline works to construct the world as an objective “other” to meaningful political commitments and interests. It also means bracketing questions such as why, since its inception but continuing on into the present day, this putatively objective science has produced finding after finding in support of liberal American/Western political superiority in the world.

The tendency to reduce epistemological questions to methodology (e.g., asserting the importance of “rules of inference” without linking them to what counts as a fact or to the disciplinary conditions that make some inferences seem more plausible than others) is a form of proceduralism. In both this epistemological variety and in the proceduralism of liberal politics, valid results are taken to be strictly independent of intention, so that practitioners are relieved in principle of all moral/political responsibility for outcomes or findings. The claims to impartiality that derive from the discipline’s “scientific” reliance on procedure, with its attendant refusal of reflexivity, are critical to generating and maintaining what might be called a liberal universalism, a transnational moral imaginary that through a set of

agreed upon, seemingly power-free procedures tends also to produce findings in line with Western liberal ones.

How does the twentieth-century study of Middle East politics fit into this story of the discipline's commitments? And what does any of the above have to do with empire or imperial projects? It is to these questions that I now turn by considering political science's ambivalence towards area studies; its emphasis on the field of American politics as a generalizable non-area capable of providing the intellectual standards and methodological techniques for the rest of the discipline; the deployment of political culture arguments to affirm invidious distinctions between the West and "the rest"; and the decades-long use of liberal, procedural "democracy" as both an area of inquiry and a benchmark for progress.

Middle East Studies in Contemporary Political Science: Liberalism, Empire, and Science

The emergence of area studies programs in the United States, including ones focused on the Middle East, corresponded with the consolidation of American social sciences between the 1930s and 1950s (Mitchell 2003; Lockman 2004). By the 1950s, these programs had become a key feature of American national security initiatives and a symptom of Cold War anxieties. In part as a response to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch

of the satellite Sputnik, Congress was prompted to pass the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the first large-scale government funding package for higher education (Lockman 2004: 125). With the aim of cultivating knowledge about areas judged crucial for United States national security, Title VI of that law secured funding for university-based area studies centers and for graduate student fellows. Among the foreign languages deemed necessary for safeguarding national security were ones spoken in the Middle East—Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Much has been written about Title VI, and about foundation funding, especially Ford, Rockefeller, SSRC, and Carnegie (see especially Lockman 2004). My goal is not to rehearse those arguments here, but simply to note that by the late 1960s this massive infusion of funds contributed to an increase in the number of PhDs being awarded to students of Middle East studies (Lockman 2004: 127), and arguably prompted more political scientists to become interested in the region (Mitchell 2003). By the 1970s, however, area knowledge had come increasingly under attack. Growing disaffection coincided with various transformations in area studies programs themselves, in notions of the scientific enterprise, and in political science's relation to both of these matters.

Initially, according to Timothy Mitchell, area studies had been seen as a “supplement to social science, a supplement that would help make it whole.” Social science knowledge aimed at expressing “universal truths,” and area studies would be part of that project, revealing through research in non-Western regions any “provincialism” (Herring 1947, cited in Mitchell 2003: 23). The professionalization of area studies, achieved by the mid-1960s, coincided with a growing sense of the project’s problems and made it vulnerable to challenges from all sides (ibid.; see also Lockman 2004). The radicalization of politics within and outside of the academy, the circulation of “Third World” scholars and ideas, the dynamics of exile, and stated visions of a moral-political future independent of former colonial powers helped to spotlight area studies’ complicity with colonial and postcolonial forms of domination. The positivist social sciences, themselves vulnerable to the political crises of the 1960s and the economic ones of the 1970s, also increasingly raised doubts about area studies’ ability to contribute to universal knowledge. The presidential address at the annual convention of the Middle East Studies Association, delivered by the political scientist and Middle East scholar Leonard Binder, registered area studies’ move to the defensive. As Mitchell points out, Binder could no longer represent the field as part of a “grand theoretical scheme of total science.” Instead, he justified

area knowledge by appealing to the region as an “objective fact,” one of the “things that exists” and therefore can be the subject of “true knowledge” (Mitchell 2003, 16). As Binder stated:

In my own opinion area studies rest upon a single key idea and that is that the object of study, the thing we want to know, is the determining and organizing principle of the intellectual enterprise and not the method or discipline. Research methodology and disciplinary paradigms are not to determine what is selected for study, and they are not to limit observation. Area studies, from this perspective, holds that true knowledge is only possible of things that exist, while methods and theories are abstractions which order observations and other explanations according to non-empirical criteria.... The quest[ion]... is whether Middle Eastern events constitute a valid unity so that the consequence of their study could reasonably be called knowledge (1975, 4-5; cited in Mitchell 2003: 15).

Binder’s address affirmed political science’s commitments to objectivity and depicted areas as the raw material for testing and confirming scientific hypotheses or for discovering important variances. In this view, areas are filled with facts and regions can be treated as if they were objects to be

apprehended by ostensive definition rather as concepts and imaginaries constituted, at least in part, by the analyst.

Binder's defense responded primarily to the concerns of positivist social science, but it was Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that offered a particularly influential critique of the area studies project, challenging both Binder's objectivist recuperation and the idea of universal science more generally. Said explicitly took up Binder's presidential address to point out that "things that exist" are to some extent "constituted by the knower" (Said 1978; cited in Mitchell 2003: 15). Said also argued that the relationship between modernity and imperialism was one of co-formation and mutual implication. He therefore placed an analysis of empire at the heart of studying the modern and invited scholars to shift attention away from the Orient to the ways in which it had been studied. As Nadia Abu El-Haj notes, "Orientalism" referred to a pattern of thinking that "made imaginable, even natural, imperial visions of the Arab-Muslim East," a view that posited the region as a "space demanding intervention, a space radically, even incommensurably, different from the West," one that "had to be remade by and in the image of (European [and now American]) civilization" (Abu El-Haj 2006: 538).

Said's intervention was both a product of an increasing turn towards epistemological reflexivity in the social sciences and generative of further developments. His specific commitments to the Middle East helped to transform how that region in particular was viewed as an object of study and an area vulnerable to great power intervention. And insofar as Said's contribution was embedded in a broader intellectual project that was recognizably Foucauldian, his work could appeal to students across the disciplines, enjoining them to be more attentive to the ways in which concepts and styles of reasoning, as well as scholarly commitments, are historically situated, and enmeshed in, as well as productive of, power relationships.²⁴ The Foucauldian turn more generally allowed scholars, particularly anthropologists, historians, and postcolonial and cultural studies theorists to analyze the discursive and institutional dynamics of scholarly production. Instead of searching for truths, Foucauldian analysts examined how truth claims worked.

Political scientists tended to desert area studies at this time, criticizing such research (and the reflexivity some practitioners inspired by Foucault and Said had come to demand) for failing to produce general,

²⁴ Nadia Abu El-Haj (2006) discusses the tensions between Said's Western Enlightenment humanism and his indebtedness to Foucault. Rosalind Morris (2007, 33) suggests that there may be an affinity between Foucault's concept of episteme and American anthropology's notion of culture, especially under the influence of structuralism, that explains anthropology's receptivity to Foucault's thought.

universalizable knowledge for the social sciences. The interdisciplinary focus and emphasis on the particular could even be seen as especially threatening to science. Thus whereas the study of “alien cultures” could initially be seen as forefending against “provincialism” within disciplines, as Pendleton Herring of the Carnegie Corporation asserted in 1947, by the 1980s, it was not uncommon in the halls of political science departments to hear scholars register the opposite—decrying simultaneously the parochial specificities of area studies knowledge and the Foucauldian critiques of it.

Revealingly, the discipline’s allergies to reflexivity and its entanglements with versions of liberalism and science allowed the subfield of American politics to avoid being understood as an “area study”; American politics was therefore impervious to the growing depreciation of area studies scholarship. The discipline’s flagship journal, the *APSR*, provides us with a portrait of how dominant American politics was and remains to the study of political science. The United States was the subject of 59 percent of its articles during the first decade of its establishment, and 65 percent during its second. Far from coming to represent greater geographical diversity over time, *Review* articles actually narrowed in their focus with the US representing 72 percent of all articles written in the discipline’s main journal by the end of the century. As Sigelman (2006: 470) notes, “even Britain,

which ranked second over the entire century, was featured in just 96 articles, nowhere near the United States' 1,108".²⁵ It was not only nation-states in the Middle East that received scant coverage, but also China, India, Russia, the emerging "democracies" in Eastern Europe and Mexico—every country outside of the United States.

The predominance of the United States, a constant in political science, was matched by an increasing attention beginning in the mid-1950s to quantitative research as the primary method required for addressing political problems of universal import. American politics was at the cutting edge of the discipline's celebration of statistical knowledge, and the embrace of statistics enhanced the subfield's prominence. During the last half of the twentieth century, in the post-WW II era, quantitative research became the norm, at first favoring simple statistical analyses (such as percentages means, chi-squared tests, product-moment correlations) and then giving way to more sophisticated multivariate analyses. Facilitating the growth of quantification was the development of survey research (Sigelman 2006; Converse 1987), a key tool of the behaviorist quest to measure individuals' attitudes and behaviors. As we have seen, with the increasingly prominence of rational choice and game theory in the mid-1980s, political scientists

began to engage in formal modeling, which became a regular form of analysis in mainstream journals. In the 89th volume of the *APSR* (1995), 42 percent of the articles featured formal models (Sigelman 2006, 470.). The use of these tools was not confined to American politics, but also spread to the subfields of international relations and comparative politics. Although political scientists specializing in the United States have always captured the lion's share of disciplinary clout and funding for faculty positions, as other subfields have adopted these methods, the status of other subfields has also arguably improved.²⁶ Despite this change, American politics continues to put forth many of the scientific models and the agenda-setting puzzles for the rest of the discipline. Having always occupied a status outside of area studies debates, the United States is so central to the discipline that it is able to stand in for and produce knowledge about the general character of political life.²⁷ Or in returning to the concerns animating the first part of this essay: the field of American politics exemplifies the conjunction between liberalism and science, embedding in its favored methods the universal aspirations and procedural norms characteristic of each.

²⁶ The predominance of quantitative methods and formal models in key journals does not represent the discipline as a whole, of course, but it does correlate well with recent trends in department hiring at the top ranked universities. I thank Daragh Grant for his research into current hiring practices.

²⁷ Of course the United States has its own particularities (one has only to recall the controversy over America's "exceptionalism"), but nevertheless America's status as a specific area is usually a non-issue, and it is rarely treated as a case among cases in comparative politics, although that might be changing.

The position of American politics as a non-area has always been in tension with the treatment of other regions in the subfields of international relations and comparative politics. To some extent, such tensions could be resolved by viewing the rest of the world in friend-or-foe terms, at least during the Cold War. As Cold War concerns waned and area studies programs came increasingly under fire in the 1970s and 1980s, nation-states coded as “areas” remained important on the condition that the details they produced could be put in the service of universal knowledge about politics. In the words of one political scientist who began his career as an ethnographer in Africa: area studies offered a way of “tantalizing theorists with uncomfortable data” and the local knowledge derived from work in the field could be used to “discover interesting anomalies” (Laitin 1993), a view adumbrated in Binder’s presidential speech to the Middle East Studies Association twenty years before.

Within the context of embattled area studies programs and the persisting predominance of the United States as a non-area, the study of Middle Eastern politics in particular chafed against scientific assertions of impartiality and value neutrality—at least until recently. Or to put it differently, for several decades, the Middle East became too political for political science. In the late 1960s, “eight or more of the dozen leading

political science departments had a tenured Middle East specialist,” compared to a “relatively weak field like Latin American studies” (Mitchell 2003: 14). Yet by 2005, a *Washington Post* article could lament the paucity of tenured professors specialized in the Middle East (Berkowitz and McFaul: April 12, 2005), a lamentation that is itself likely to seem outmoded in a few years time. The decline was real enough, however, and it no doubt had to do with the marginalization of area studies in political science more generally. But the case of the Middle East was extreme, and it cannot be understood without considering the problem that Israel, in particular, posed for political science as a self-avowed scientific community. Efforts to unify the discipline could easily be thwarted by an issue as politically divisive as the Arab-Israeli conflict became, especially in the aftermath of the 1967 war when the United States’ presence in that part of the region became increasingly pronounced and one-sided. Perhaps too there was a sense that political scientists’ emotional investment in the conflict threatened to undermine their own principle of objectivity. After the events of September 2001, political science departments started making up for lost time, and they were aided in their quest for experts by the presence of a new generation whose commitments to the methodological precepts outlined in KKV could stave off concerns about political bias and case study particularities.

Even during the decades when few senior scholars knowledgeable about the area occupied posts in major universities, political scientists who had no language training or professional experience in the region continued to discuss it. Take, for example, Samuel Huntington's 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs*, "The Clash of Civilizations?" and his subsequent book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). Huntington was a comparative politics specialist with no training in Middle East studies. But his arguments could operate within a recognizable tradition of political culturalism in the discipline, representing perhaps the most prominent and polemical example of this literature in recent decades.²⁸ Although Huntington's thesis carried more weight outside the discipline than within it, political culture arguments have had an enduring life in political science. And they have been resurrected repeatedly in the study of the Middle East in particular—sometimes as a means of validating what is considered the "alternative" explanation focusing on formal institutions and processes.²⁹

²⁸ The following paragraphs on culture are excerpted in slightly modified form from my essay, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," in the *American Political Science Review* (2002).

²⁹ Mitchell (2003) makes a similar point and uses Kiren Chaudhry's (1997) book on Saudi Arabia and Yemen as an example. But this practice is so typical, that one would be at pains to find in international relations work, for example, analyses that do not make this division between culture (sometimes "ideas") and institutions. Of course recent work in economics also speaks of an "institutional culture," which suggests some blurring of the divide. To the extent that institutional explanations (which focus on underlying organizational structures and material interests) are juxtaposed to "ideational" ones (which sometimes include empirically untenable political culture assertions and sometimes simply connote "ideas"), political scientists end up ignoring the important interplay of political institutions and semiotic circumstances. Or to put it differently, institutions and ideas are constitutive of one another; they are constructed historically and change over time; and although they are analytically distinct, they are

In their heyday in the immediate aftermath of World War II, political culture accounts contributed to a variety of policy initiatives, some of which were designed to reproduce the conditions of Western democratization abroad (Somers 1995: 114). Derived from Max Weber’s classic analysis of the “elective affinity” between the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism in the West ([1905] 1958), these accounts attempted to show how cultural attitudes and beliefs either hindered or enabled “progress” (Banfield 1958; McClelland 1961, 1963; Pye and Verba 1965).³⁰ Conceived in terms of an alleged set of residual values and norms—what Sherry Ortner has aptly characterized as “a deeply sedimented essence attaching to, or inhering in particular groups” (Ortner 1997: 8-9)—this notion of culture was prominent in the sociology of Talcott Parsons, in modernization theory, in the American cultural anthropology of Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict, as well as in the behavioral revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. In political science, it was Gabriel Almond’s seminal essay, along with his subsequent collaboration with Sidney Verba, that produced one of the most influential understandings of political culture in terms of “orientations

empirically entangled and mutually co-forming (Wedeen in press). An education system is not simply an institution; it presupposes ideas about what counts as pedagogy, who can be a student, etc. In other words, in addition to problematic notions of what “culture” is, political scientists tend to see culture and institutions as opposing explanations, each one respectively recruited to provide contending explanations of political outcomes.

³⁰ I have written about the political culture paradigm in “Conceptualizing Culture” and do not rehearse the full argument here.

toward the political system,” whereby some populations had civic “cultures” and others did not (1956; 1963).³¹

With their tendencies towards cultural essentialism, political culture claims were subject to critique by political scientists of various stripes.³² Rejecting such views as either fundamentally tautological or empirically invalid, some critics opted for one or another strictly “materialist” approach, objecting to the consideration of cultural variables in any form (see, for example, Tilly 1975: 603-21; Hirschman 1984; Jackman and Miller 1996).³³ The ascendance of rational choice theory in the mid-1980s also led practitioners to argue that the analysis of group values or customs such as those associated with the term culture was irrelevant to political inquiry (Przeworski 1985). Politics concerned material interests and the relative success or failure of the individuals articulating them. Symbolic displays and rhetorical practices were dismissed as epiphenomenal.

However, faced with explaining postcommunist upheavals, ethnic

³¹ This summary of the political culture school admittedly simplifies a complex group of approaches. In political science, the “classic” study was Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba’s *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963). See also Verba’s essay in Pye and Verba (1965: 512-60). For one of the most recent influential books in this genre, see Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993). For an insightful extension of Putnam’s concept of “social capital,” see Boix and Posner (1998).

³² In the mid-1980s at an elite political science department, graduate students in an American politics class were told that political culture is the “refuge of scoundrels.”

³³ Middle East studies is one field in which the concept has been especially charged. I have in mind scholars such as Lisa Anderson, Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, and Michael Hudson, all of whom use “culture” to mean identifiable essences or sedimented values inhering in particular groups. Chaudhry (1994), in particular, tends to confuse Samuel Huntington’s invocations of the term with any interest in “culture” or cultural studies. See also Anderson in Brynen et al. (1995: 77-92) and Hudson in Brynen et al. (1995: 61-76).

violence, “identity” politics, religious “fundamentalism,” and the ongoing problems of democratic transitions from the early 1990s onwards, even political scientists hostile to Huntington’s approach came to use culture as a “fallback” position, a way of accounting for divergent, and usually disappointing, political outcomes (Kuper 1999: 10). By claiming that “cultures” have “peculiarities” that explain the failure of those nation-states to democratize, or by asserting that political conflict is the outcome of “irreducible cultural differences” (Rogowski 1997; 14; Bates et al. 1998; Greif 1994: 912-50), even the most scientifically minded theorists responded to what they perceived as explanatory needs by resorting to a Parsonian version of culture as group traits. This tendency toward cultural essentialism was perhaps most pronounced in post September 11 discussions of the Middle East—in writings about the failures of democracy, the menace of militant Islam, and the overriding anxiety about terrorism.³⁴

The discipline’s increasing concerns with methodological rigor may have changed the language and tenor of current political science writings, and permitted political commitments to appear less obvious than they used

³⁴ As the political scientist Lisa Anderson has argued, democracy promoters assume that a country’s failure to embrace it [democracy] is evidence of political perversity or moral obtuseness on the part of its citizenry,” and this failure is often seen to be ahistorical, or to have deep, centuries-long roots (cited in Gelvin 2005, 306). The debate within political science about “terrorism” has tended to pivot on the question of the rationality (or not) of “terrorists” and “terrorist” groups. Either they are seen as not rational, itself often a reflection of their deviance from the liberal ideal, or they are rational, purposive actors who have rejected the (often implicitly preferable) option of liberalism.

to be in the early years of the discipline or in the “good society” days of behaviorism. But an enduring emphasis on political order provides the substance for the reproduction of norms that blend scientific certainties with normative endorsements of liberal democracy. At times cultural difference is used to explain challenges to liberalism, U.S. interests, or to the stability important to both. At other times support for liberal democracy finds expression in the ways scholars embed assumptions about human subjectivity, motivation, “interests,” and desirable institutions into their models.

Studies of democracy arguably dramatize this commitment to liberalism and science best—and link the two to current imperial projects. Democracy studies offer normative benchmarks of progress while simultaneously inciting scientific inquiry into causes of success and failure. As David Scott writes:

Democracy has become a new normative standard taking over the conceptual-ideological work hitherto performed by civilization in governing the conduct of international order, and disciplining, where necessary, and by diverse technologies (largely military and economic), its recalcitrant or otherwise uncooperative members. Or, perhaps, put slightly differently, democracy is the contemporary

political name of an old civilizing project: it is now a regulative principle in the political rationality of international order by which the political prospects of (especially, if not only) the Third World are governed.³⁵

This civilizing project has taken on various forms in the discipline of political science historically, instantiated previously in versions of modernization theory,³⁶ in theories of “underdevelopment,” and for the last two decades, as Scott notes, most prominently in debates about “democratization.”³⁷ Such civilizing impulses, importantly, are often concealed by taken-for-granted assumptions about the good life. As the French philosopher Alain Badiou (2005: 78) points out provocatively, these days “it is forbidden not to be a democrat.”

Scott’s analogy of democratization projects to earlier civilizing missions is helpful in thinking about how discourses that “other” colonial or occupied subjects work to shore up institutions of administrative rule, or to

³⁵ This is David Scott’s prose from an unpublished paper, “Norms of Self-Determination: Thinking Sovereignty Through.” Thanks are owed to him for allowing me to cite him here and for drawing my attention to Badiou as well.

³⁶ On modernization theory, see especially the highly acclaimed work on the Middle East of the social scientist Daniel Lerner whose *The Passing of Traditional Society* was widely read throughout the discipline. Lerner had no training in Middle Eastern history or languages.

³⁷ Saba Mahmood (2006) shows that the United States has also waged a theological campaign aimed at changing the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims. In pursuing this project, the United States has found allies among moderate or liberal Muslims who, in this historical period, share an approach to “scriptural hermeneutics,” or interpretations of scripture. Mahmood argues compellingly that there is a convergence between U.S. imperial interests and secular liberal reformers. This convergence has to be understood from “the standpoint of normative secularity and the kind of religious subjectivity it endorses” rather than simply a “fortuitous coming together of political objectives and an indigenous social formation”(329).

make possible and justify political action. In considering the nature of power in the post-colonial world, and in focusing on what seems to be a resurgent empire in the form of U.S. domination in the Middle East, the differences between current imperial projects and their antecedents are also illustrative, hinting at political science's complex contemporary entanglement.

Briefly: there seems to be a presumptively different ontology of the person in, say, nineteenth-century British colonial enterprises and the current Bush administration's project of democratization, a project that had some political scientists actively participating in "democracy building" (e.g., Larry Diamond who, as an advisor to the Provisional Coalition Authority, described his task in those terms). In British colonial understandings, according to Bernard Cohn, the application of social evolutionary theories by a wide range of British officials and scholars generated a "crucial ruling paradigm: the Indian present was the European past.... India was seen as being capable of being changed through British beneficence" (1996, 121). But this would take time. The British had to create the conditions for the Indians' "advance up the social evolutionary ladder by introducing the ideas of private property and modern education, the English language and its thought on literature, railroads, modern sanitation and medicine," etc. The Indians, in this view, were in the feudal stage, and change needed to be slow

so that it was not too disorderly. To prevent dangerous outcomes, “Indians had to be managed, made to conform to the British conception of appropriate thought and action, for their own future good,” according to Cohn (122). In the eyes of the British, Indians were viewed in the first half of the nineteenth century as “misguided children,” subjects in need of civilizing (124).

Colonial assessments changed after the mutiny in 1857–1859, and Indians were then refigured as “treacherous and unchangeable” (124).

Some of the Bush administration’s initial stated assumptions about Iraqis seem importantly different from Cohn’s depictions of colonized Indians in nineteenth-century Britain. No longer guided by Darwinian versions of upward mobility, continual progress, and colonial conquest, but by ruling paradigms of rational actors and procedural democracy, the Bush administration often portrays Iraqis as inherently “born free,” naturally, inalienably free. The language of occupation here presumes, like many institutional design analyses in political science, that with the right institutions—electoral, judicial, and legislative—humans can be forced to realize, and quickly, what is, in fact, their nature. Such understandings of the universal subject as one who can be “forced to be free” may not be *caused* by political science paradigms, but they are enabled by them, or at least by the paucity of theoretical criticism against such formulations. In this way,

political science has arguably played a structuring role in facilitating U.S. armed intervention in non-European polities, not simply through advisory roles for policy-makers or through CIA involvement, although these are real enough, but through the conceptual-ideological work that political scientists perform—by fixating on “transitions” to elections in other countries while ignoring the United States’ own problems with democratic rule, for example. Institutional design models that scientifically demonstrate the merits of electoral systems (e.g., Przeworski et al. 2000) coexist with those that simply presuppose the desirability of elections and see them as coterminous with democracy.

Not surprisingly, such dominant concerns in the discipline more generally also undergird studies of Islam and the Middle East specifically: failed or partial transitions to democracy, the puzzling “resilience” of authoritarianism, questions about why some Islamic activists are moderate and willing to work within the system (a good thing) while others are extreme and work to undermine it (a bad thing), and the role that women’s oppression plays in making the region deficient democratically all contribute to a view of the Middle East as a territory in need of transformation. Such studies also tend to reaffirm the discipline’s commitments to rationality as the preferred mode of being and procedural institutions as the best way to

secure rational actors' "preferences."³⁸ Assumptions about the efficacy of institutions and the universal subjectivity of rational agents work in tandem with others, including ones steeped in political culturalism, even though the two orientations can seem to be at odds. Together these analyses help to produce a powerful but potentially incoherent project: one in which institutions designed to facilitate expressions of political will are championed while the actual expressions of political will are often repudiated. The bifurcation of "good Muslims and bad Muslims" can be understood as a product of this tension.³⁹ To put it crudely: the "good Muslims" are those who are willing to realize their natures and build democratic institutions that contain conflict (a version of institutionalism), or to become westernized and thereby lose the group traits hobbling their progress (the culturalist orientation).⁴⁰

³⁸ There are a plethora of works that focus on failed democratic transitions and/or authoritarian resilience, including Bellin (2002), Lust-Okar (2005), Brownlee 2007, and Pripstein and Angrist (2005). Jillian Schwedler's award-winning *Faith in Moderation* (2006) exemplifies current preoccupations with moderate Islamic activists. A recent concern with gender dynamics in the Middle East and their relationship to authoritarianism includes the widely cited articles of non-specialists Fish (2002), Inglehart and Norris (2003), and Ross (2008).

³⁹ The phrase comes from Mahmood Mamdani's book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2005).

⁴⁰ Even studies such as John Mearsheimer's *The Israel Lobby* (2007) or Robert Pape's *Bombing to Win* (2005), which enjoin the United States *not* to engage in democratization or other civilizing projects, are still underwritten by a commitment to the importance of America's place in the world and in the right of the United States to intervene when that intervention upholds the "national interest." This appeal to the "national interest" may not be liberal in the way that, say, democratic peace theory is, but it nevertheless defends an explicitly American liberal order while also presuming that such a defense is scientific (and therefore representative of how the world really is) rather than normative (and therefore representative of how the world ought to be). As noted earlier in the text, this distinction between "is" and "ought" has been subject to important critiques in political theory but ignored by the rest of the discipline. My point here is to underscore that such a distinction informs an ongoing coalescence of science, liberalism, and empire, even in studies that disavow America's current democratization projects.

To conclude: Scholarly work and policy exist in the same semiotic world; the Bush administration's stated beliefs coincide well with prevailing liberal and scientific notions about the individual. The idea of human beings as rights-bearing, rational individuals who naturally form groups to protect their interests and check those of rival factions is part of the "horizon of the taken-for-granted" (Hall 1988: 4) in much of political science. The assumption too that a good government is one that protects inalienable individual rights, is pluralistic, and democratic (in procedural terms) has even prompted some political scientists to offer their services as "democracy experts" in the new Iraq. My argument in this paper is not that such convictions about the individual or good government are by themselves wrong or right, but that they have helped organize the current terms of and imaginings about politics. The coalescence of liberal values with scientific methods and the presumptive exigencies of U.S. foreign policy have helped reproduce the normative and practical conditions under which the Middle East can continue to be viewed as a space demanding intervention.⁴¹

Not all political scientists participate in promoting U.S. empire or have liberal values or pursue the scientific method. Nor do those who *do* espouse liberal values or who practice science necessarily support any

⁴¹ For a discussion of liberal theorists' complicities with empire in previous eras, see Mehta (1999) and Pitts (2005).

particular aspect of U.S. foreign policy. My argument is not about individuals, although there are individuals who exemplify the processes I highlight in this essay. Rather, my contentions concern the discipline *qua* discipline, how mainstream normative assessments of what is valuable to study and the methods needed to study it combine with epistemological commitments and institutional routines (such as the subdisciplinary divisions that sequester political theory from science, or that privilege American politics as *the* field with a geographical name but no area specificity) to generate scholarly thinking congenial to U.S. imperial politics.

To put my argument in schematic terms, the discipline of political science helps make possible U.S. imperialism in the Middle East in the following ways: 1) by supplying “democracy brokers,” to institutions such as the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq;⁴² 2) by putting forth affirmative, specifically liberal ideas about “good governance” that work as standards of scientific assessment in awarding or denying countries financial aid or in justifying military intervention;⁴³ 3) by failing to offer substantial and regular critiques of U.S. imperialism as a general problem; 4) by maintaining subdisciplinary boundaries that have the effect of insisting on

⁴² See Sheila Carapico’s tentatively titled *Mixed Messages: Democracy Brokers in the Arab World*. Political science’s participation in imperial projects is not confined to the Middle East, of course.

⁴³ For critical discussion of the proliferation of standards such as “good governance” and “social capital,” in the World Bank, see Bebbington, Woolcock, Guggenheim, and Olson (eds.), 2006.

the divide between fact and value, of upholding scientific neutrality, and of viewing scientific methods as devoid of ideological underpinnings; 5) by creating a notion of American politics as a non-area, a field of importance to the discipline whose standing comes from the cultivation of a generalized, specifically positivist methodological rigor and its concomitant refusal to “provincialize” America, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s sense of the term; 6) by bifurcating institutions from ideas, thereby failing to analyze how ideas saturate institutions while institutions are unthinkable without the ideas that inspire their creation and maintenance; 7) relatedly, by producing problematic institutionalist or culturalist analyses that are a product of this split—institutionalist analyses about the Middle East that write out of history American involvement⁴⁴ or studies that see culture as “group traits” specific to Arabs (or Muslims or Middle Easterners), characteristics that hinder progress and are outside of history or power relationships.

Studies more generally in political science about the “democratic peace” ask why democracies fail to fight one another without adequately interrogating what democracy means, or perhaps more importantly here, whether peaceful coexistence among democracies is itself a product of a colonial system in which “democracies” were actively waging war against

⁴⁴ (e.g. Chaudhry’s 1997 study of state-building in Saudi Arabia; see the critiques by Mitchell 2003; Vitalis 1999)

people of color.⁴⁵ My point is not that the latter is a valid inference, although it may be, but that political science tends to write such hypotheses out of consideration. Thus, it is not only through explicit assertions and implicit assumptions that science, liberalism, and empire coalesce, but through omissions that both register and generate what is conceivable, discussable, and knowable.

In short, in the post-Cold War period political science has helped to foster what David Scott aptly calls a “civilizing effect,” in which being a good Muslim or a good Arab state has come increasingly to “depend upon a willingness (sometimes coerced, sometimes induced)” to accept the normative terms (if not the actual implementation) of procedural democracy as the ethos on which models of political organization are constructed and evaluated (Scott, n.d.: 25). And in the name of this principle, the Middle East or Islam, as laggard or trouble-maker, becomes the problem to be solved, the incommensurably “other” place that needs special attention—and new assertions of control.

⁴⁵ The “democratic peace” has produced a cottage industry of supporters and detractors. See Doyle (1983); Russett (1993); Owen (1994); Lipson (2005); and for critiques see: Layne (1994); Spiro (1994); Rosato (2003). An edited volume that has compiled many of the key articles is *Debating the Democratic Peace* (1996).

