

Pitfalls of Scholarship

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Lessons from Islamic Studies

Ahmad Atif Ahmad

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PITFALLS OF SCHOLARSHIP

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To the memory of my father

...

The presence of the quiet one can be larger

Than the presence of the talker

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	1
Defending the Defenseless: The Humanities and Islamic Studies from an Oblique Angle	7
The First Person Singular: Personal and Social Knowledge in Conflict	47
Method, Discovery, and Knowledge	85
Democracy, National Religions, Disorder	113
Curriculum Vitae	147
Conclusion	159
<i>Notes</i>	163
<i>Bibliography</i>	181
<i>Index</i>	187

Acknowledgments

During the academic year 2012/2013, I served as Sultan Qaboos Chair of Middle East Studies at the College of William and Mary. New student audience, new academic environment, and a new role. I decided to experiment, offering new material and approaching some of my old material differently. My teaching load was light, but the emphasis on teaching was a basic commitment of the campus; also being back in an East Coast school allowed for basic reflection on the function of research and teaching in the humanities broadly, and Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in particular, in the United States today.

In the subsequent academic year, 2013/2014, I spent both fall and spring academic quarters on my exquisite campus of the University of California in Santa Barbara (UCSB), and the winter term (2014) at the University of California Washington Center (UCDC); then I served as associate academic director at UCDC during the academic year 2014/2015.

UCDC is a little residential college (housing 270+ students), occupying a beautiful building in Scott Circle at the heart of Washington, DC, which allows advanced undergraduates, juniors or seniors, from nine UC campuses (Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz—all ten but San Francisco, which does not have a regular undergraduate population) to intern in Washington, DC's many national and international, governmental and nongovernmental establishments to prepare for their careers. The center also houses students from non-UC campuses, and even non-US schools, and some of my memorable students came from

Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA) and the University of Sydney (Australia). I offered general research and method seminars and other broad-topic seminars with an international focus. While many of my students on campus have been non-humanities students, at UCDC it was a majority.

I would like to thank all my students at these institutions and acknowledge their impact on my thinking. Discussions with some of them brought me back to earlier times in my life where being an Islamic studies scholar was not inevitably what I was going to do. This must also serve as a qualifier for my subtitle: *Lessons from Islamic Studies*, as I have stated in the introduction.

I cannot, however, forget to thank the new generation of Islamic studies scholars whose work will likely shape any debates about the field and its place in the academy in the future. I benefited from conversations at the Middle East Studies Associations Annual Meeting of 2014 with Usama A zami, a graduate student at Princeton; so were conversations with Sa‘id Faris Hassan of al-Azhar University, whom I knew since he was a graduate student at UCLA, on *al-wala wa-l-bara’*, which appear in the fourth chapter (Democracy, National Religions, Disorder). I also continued to learn from the thoughts and experiences of my former students, now professors of Islamic studies; special mention is due to Elliott Bazzano of La Moyne College, Nathan French of Miami University of Ohio, and Sohaira Siddiqui of Georgetown University, Doha. Samy Ayoub, now with the University of Texas in Austin, not only taught my classes as a postdoctoral fellow at UCSB during my absence in 2014/2015, but also gave me feedback as the draft neared its final form.

Aside from my diverse students, I would like to especially thank David Marshall, UCSB’s executive vice chancellor, and Helen Shapiro, the executive director of UCDC, who gave me the opportunity to be present at the center for four academic quarters. Helen then must be thanked separately for allowing me to offer a variety of courses and work with students whose internships forced them to work one-on-one with me outside normal seminar times. Observing Helen lead the center was another source of lessons for me. Helen,

being a first rate leader in today's academy, should also be thanked for instructive comments during private meetings, and comments made during general faculty meetings, which, to me, came from a privileged perspective vis-à-vis education and its connections with broader markets that influence it in our world of 2015.

I also thank my colleague Fernando Lopez-Alves, a sociologist who hails from UCSB, but whom I was meant to know in the UCDC. Fernando and I engaged in many discussions, some bearing an optimistic tone and some touched by another, a more sober tone, about the present state and future of higher education. Our discussion was not limited to the United States, as Fernando's many international entanglements in Europe and Latin America made him a global type of sociologist and an observer of education on a scale that covers multiple continents.

In the same period, I received an assignment from the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, DC, to serve as a referee in their Summer Seminars and Institutes' grants program, which allows groups of scholars to get together and ask some basic questions about the intersections of research and pedagogy. I swerved into areas out of my epistemic comfort, into Latin American and border studies, theatre, the history of American education, among others. I am thankful to Victoria Sams and Richard Petit of the NEH for their trust and support, and to all colleagues from excellent academic institutions from the East Coast to the West, who served on my panel and whose insights stayed with me as I finalized the following reflections.

It goes without saying that instances of misunderstanding, excess, and misguided "experiments" of thought are all my own and cannot be attributed to anyone else.

Introduction

I have now resolved to collect together notes of lectures, conversations during conferences, and other material that was presented and discussed with a focus on scholarly activities and the academy. It turns out that once you contemplate scholarship of the university and its presumptive goals—knowledge production, education—you have to work out many schemes for topics that are as far apart as comparisons of natural and social knowledge and the impact of national environments on education. I will carry out the task from a specific vantage point, which will receive sufficient description in the following pages. But I will attempt to paint a full picture, and I hope it will resonate with the experience of others. I am aware of pitfalls besetting my own effort, not least of which is the fact that I am capable, unlike the rest, of imagining that others “agree” or “disagree” with me, only to later find out that the imagined agreement or disagreement was just that—imagined.

An easy starting point is to address what has become common in our time—discussions that center on the end of this or that institution or cluster of institutions—the end of nations and nationalism, the end of modern international order, and, of course, the already pending end of education and end of scholarship. If this is an *age of ends*, is scholarship one of its “genitive” pairs?

There are more scholars today than at any time in history; at least we are used to thinking that as if we knew it for a fact. Scholarship is self-perpetuating, and scholars are the first line of consumers for the production of their peers. Scholars will most likely read what they need to read in order to teach or write. Most scholars, however, are

too busy trying to make a name for themselves in a very narrow area, the area of their specialization. They hardly have time for basic, large questions. Those trained only to address narrow topics struggle most when they are forced to address large questions. The second line of consumers for scholarly work consists of the so-called intelligent, nonspecialized readership. This population has two qualities: they are literate and they lack depth. In this day and age, the intelligent nonspecialists also have access to much information, and they think they are capable of understanding anything they are able to read.

There is no way around saying that this is a nuanced picture; many things may be celebrated, but much can be lamented. Let us reiterate and add a few items. On the good side, the university, if you are on the university's side, is holding its own financially, despite constant threats of erasing unproductive research and teaching. And even when scholarly circles are small, they are, again we are told, large by historical standards. On the other side, so-called circles of learning are becoming increasingly impossible. The word "intellectual" is not quite a term of abuse, but it comes close. Scholars cannot muster the courage to really say what they think. They will at least require the comfort and protection of limiting their audience to their equals, those who have something to lose, a cost to pay, when they talk nonsense. (Some academics, an embarrassment to all in the category, say things for which they do not plan to take responsibility and look for audiences who will indulge them in far-flung assertions. I wish I did not notice that.) Meanwhile, the lay population, the literate who lack depth, will talk about anything, from new technology to systems of government, based on a newspaper article they have read, when they are the urbane, erudite type. Otherwise, they conduct their discussion based on what the word "research" now means: two minutes of looking up something on the iPhone.

In the age of ends, rare are relaxed queries and thoughtful reflection with the aim of better understanding. There is "debating," which can be unpleasant and hit dead-ends fast. And there is the classroom, which remains enjoyable for some and at least tolerable for others. But with the exception of kindred spirits among faculty members

and graduate students, many will not be excited about belonging to the university, the place that used to be beautiful, stimulating, and challenging in the best sense of the word. Fake prestige still sells, the *harvardosis* syndrome being one of its prime manifestations.¹ And all value, in principle, has to translate into something monetary. Scholars may have to learn the hard way that getting a salary raise is looked at more favorably than publishing a good number of pieces of academic scholarship, if the two didn't go hand in hand.

In any discussion, a large number of viewpoints can be identified and argued, defended and questioned. This, incidentally, is the perfect soil for old, rusty prejudices to survive and grow firmer roots and longer branches. If these prejudices can be questioned, their opposites can be questioned as well. And questioning *unpopular* prejudices and beliefs is supposed to indicate sophistication, because mere skepticism about anything is sophisticated. The sophisticated skeptic does not usually notice that his/her skepticism is done in the service of confirming the popular prejudice, the official patriotic or group view.

One sign of the deterioration of public discussions is the prevalence of ad hominem arguments. Personal attacks on the individual who delivers an argument was supposed to be unacceptable in the olden days, because these attacks were deemed irrelevant in an obvious sense. Our contemporaries beg to differ. Some have developed something of an art by which they cover up ad hominem attacks and present them as appeals to principles. This certainly gave me a long pause before I decided to include in here some information that could be abused by those comfortable making ad hominem arguments, but I realized that dropping the whole project would be a more defensible conclusion. It bears reflection whether the new prevalence of personal attacks masquerading as arguments is a sign that our knowledge has become so personal and personalized.² If yes, what good is it?

There is, more importantly in the long run, a new kind of disdain for the humanities as an unusually backward realm of academic investigation, unable to see the change in the world. Humanities'

scholars are still imprisoned in East vs. West divisions in a globalized world. Deaf and blind is their scholarship to some new facts: Non-Western powers act as if they are Western today; international trade shows that divisions of the world in civilization terms are useless. If the humanities *has* nothing to offer in a world of global conditions such as climate change and cultural diffusion, it should simply retreat and save the space for something else. Or so goes the argument, if there is an argument.

And, it does not stop there. The disdain for the humanities comes with the presumptuous force of an earthquake, followed by aftershocks: If the (suffering) scholars intended here are humanities scholars, why should they complain? Are they really as good or as useful as they pretend to be? Are they committed to their fields as much as they profess to be? And are they in a better position to understand the phenomena that are their object of study or provide insights (any insights) that go beyond the capacity of someone with or without a bachelor's degree who has been in the real world and done real learning? What is learning, anyway? Did not this word change its meaning completely during the lifespan of recent generations? Could today's populations be addressed, for example, by ancient, medieval, or enlightenment philosophy and theories on the meaning of life?

This writer is a humanities scholar, who frequently peeks into, and borrows from, areas that are far-off and remote from his academic realm. I cannot claim to be always on top of all the materials I investigate (what else do you expect?) but I could not stop the influence of these excursions. A diligent reviewer of an earlier draft of these pages reasonably complained that I demanded that the reader follow me into areas that are disparate and distant from one another; the reviewer then suggested that I flesh out some of the ideas I drew out of my diverse sources before I made them my own. I tried to do that, and I hope I got it in this iteration.

More than a simple slip of the tongue is involved in this talk of borrowing from areas outside of my field. It is a purposeful acknowledgment of a sense of the inadequacy of the humanities, broadly,

and the inability of the study of Islam, my particular field of study, to achieve even its declared, limited goals. This sense has been with me for longer than I care to remember. One clear implication is that I will be unable to offer a defense of the humanities in their (or its) current form, as an adequate concern even for a humanities scholar.

Yet, Islamic studies as I practiced it, if this is the right word, and persuaded some of my graduate students of its utility, provides a view unavailable outside of it, as far as I can see. It allows you to go back to basic questions, without the kind of diversion you would have to face from Aristotle scholars when you draw basic questions from Aristotle, or from Machiavelli scholars when you try to get to basic questions out of his “Discourses on Livy” or “The Prince.” Islamic studies scholars can be sure and confident, to be clear, that a historicist or a comparativist view of their materials is superior to the alternatives and is much more sophisticated, and I will, as I have done so far, continue to endure their occasional reprimand.

As I state in the acknowledgments section, the ideas I put in here came from broad interactions with different kinds of students, and in discussions that did not focus narrowly on my area of study. This must also serve as a qualifier for my subtitle: *Lessons from Islamic Studies*. If the following is to be taken as lessons, the lessons are from an academic whose work has been in Islamic studies, more specifically Islamic legal studies (with all the qualms I may have about these categories). But these lessons, so-called shyly, are not impositions from an Islamic studies perspective. It seems to me, as I review my writing here, that the impact of other fields in conversation with the themes of Islamic studies, both in pedagogy and research realms, is just as constitutive of these notes.

My concern is more properly the twofold concern of the classes of human knowledge and their interaction (# one) and the environments in which knowledge production takes place (# two). And I have no temptation, readers must be warned, to ride the wave of irresponsible attacks on the humanities and its scholars. There is a sense in which the new disdain for the humanities is a false problem; modern society, in the Euro-American world and outside of it, seems

to go through waves of hope that education's utility could be made apparent to all, only to come back and see the folly embedded in this hope. Not least of these movements was the Third Reich's hesitation about the value of the *Gymnasium*, which emphasized classical education and the study of languages, for its "non-utilitarian education."³ I will not dismiss voices that assert that our current moment is different. The present moment and the future running after it promises to be the same as the past, until it is not. There is always a chance that we are witnessing one such moment.

But even if we indulge in the thought that the humanities is the problem, whence comes a solution? Producing a crisis of purpose and addressing it are, perhaps, both within the job description of the humanities. And it is a *crisis of purpose*, rather than economic shortage, that is the larger challenge to the university, if the latter does not satisfy itself with its vocational side. Suspicion of both the Euro-American humanities of old times and postcolonial studies' excessive critique of Euro-American knowledge leaves us without a plan. I take it from this starting point to address the conditions of scholarship and its vulnerabilities, both inherent and specific to our modern context. The following pages, organized into four chapters and a statement on self-perception, purport to be an argument against both academic mysticism and the impulse toward democratizing education further and further. I hope the texture of the argument will command the reader's interest.

Defending the Defenseless: The Humanities and Islamic Studies from an Oblique Angle

I will acknowledge my limits, only if you acknowledge yours. If I am an accomplished historian of the KMT (Kuomintang) regime in China (1912–1949), who naturally knows quite a bit about Qing rule (1644–1911) and the communist Chinese regime (after 1949), and who also knows quite a lot about China’s *one-damn-thing-after-another* history, do I really have to be considered ignorant if I never cared to read Ibn Rushd (the twelfth-century Spanish Muslim philosopher)? Will my understanding of civilization or history or law be totally incomplete if I didn’t go as far as you wanted me to go?

The problem is that we will always generalize from what (little) we know. Both the KMT historian and those who read Ibn Rushd have ideas about history, civilization, religion, laws, and the rest. We will always talk about history and civilization, knowledge and truth, and ultimately what is of “value” in the abstract. And one side will set the rules for the whole discussion, when there is a discussion. The same is true outside of this little republic of the humanities, and is true outside of the whole academy; and, wait, it is true outside of any country in which one may take residence. When the humanities and the sciences clash, one will win. When old academic

standards clash with new ones, one will dominate. When academic and market standards clash, one will prevail. When “national” views of knowledge and justice compete, one will triumph, or at least act as if triumphant.

In this opening discussion, I will content myself with setting the stage for my more controversial points by describing our age and its scholarship, focusing on scholarship’s inherent problems, its constitutional vulnerability to being seen as futile—often by those who have not thought long enough to ask whether a human alternative is possible and what this alternative might be. Some context first.

When Are We?

This title is not the outcome of one of these cavalier computer auto-corrections, turning a misspelled *where* into a *when*.

The question is: What time is it? As if time is an absolute. (It is; is it not?) There are interesting meanings of time that are the subject of ancient histories, some cyclical, some still, all unlike a linear time one may have in mind.¹ One sense in which time changed its meaning since the middle ages, for example, is that it used to more apparently, for a medieval philosopher, indicate a corollary of the movement of the universe whose effect is seen in the changing positions of sun and earth, while in the late twentieth century a school child will have heard that the progression of an arrow of time corresponds to entropy or decay in the material cloth of the universe, which was initiated by the big bang. Roger Penrose is freaking some people out by contemplating not only the mathematics, but also some of the possible implications of the physics of the reversal of this process. (The reversal takes so much energy, but it is not completely out of the question, when one thinks of universe history.)² Enough of this: the question I am asking is, what chronological label should be given to the age of our inquiry. Is it a late modern, postmodern, or simply a postmedieval world that lacks a label?

Imagine histories of our moment written in the future,³ saying that by 2014 or 2015, it was obvious that the modern age of the

Enlightenment, imperialism, and the worldwide postimperial states was drawing to a close. (How is this for a modern image of the future of the modern?) Back in 2015, the image is being debated. Following in the footsteps of Chicago undergraduates from the mid-twentieth century, someone smirks and says: it all depends on what is meant by modernity.⁴ Others say that the purported “modernity” ended a long time ago. Then a voice protests: How could the modern end if the modern simply indicates the current, anyway?

We will most likely struggle, many will promise, to characterize the modern, what it is and when it is. Yet, the postmodern is already a label for much in art, literary criticism, and philosophy; has been for a while. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007)⁵ told of a 500-year-long story of modernity, passing by the Protestant Reformation, Deism, and the Enlightenment, which ended Christianity as anyone had known it before that. In 2008, Steve Shapin used the term “late modern” to refer to the world since 1900, for the purpose of writing about the intersections and sorrows of “university” and “industry” in the twentieth century.⁶ A wavering nationalism, with both the cultural contents of nations and their citizens’ capacity and desire to self-rule thrown into question,⁷ characterizes the postmodern as well as the late modern. This bad son of modernity, the postmodern, killed his father (the modern), and then committed suicide.

What of “modern” international order? There is a good tale to tell here. Once upon an ancient time, there was something called *jus gentium*, roughly the law of peoples, which developed as the Roman republic turned into the center of an empire and which (that law of peoples) ate up the local (Roman) *jus civile*. This Roman model for law, empire, and republic has been invoked as a precedent and an inspiration for our “modern” order now countless times. If this means nothing to the reader, take it on trust that modern international order has justified subjecting both one’s national laws and other nations’ sense of order to imperial goals—at least when significant gain is involved (oil, large investments).

The ancients also knew something we call natural law, which Greek Stoics invented but left for the Romans to develop. (Of