

# The role of institutions in non-Western contexts in reinforcing West-centric knowledge hierarchies: Towards more self-reflexivity in marketing and consumer research

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## Abstract

Critics often associate West-centric knowledge hierarchies in marketing (as well as in business and management studies) with (neo)colonialism, academic journal ranking fetishism, resource scarcity in non-Western societies, and the domination of the English Language in the international scholarly landscape. I advance this debate by examining the role non-Western societies themselves have played in reinforcing the phenomenon. Using the Muslim Middle East as a context, I argue that the coupling of the institutions of state politics and religion during the 20th century has negatively influenced the development of social sciences. I show how unreflexive Islamic civilizational revivalism has paradoxically contributed to the reproduction of the same hegemonic discourse it intended to repudiate. These, I argue, are the outcomes of the institutional arrangements that Western colonial/imperial powers have left behind in subordinate societies. I conclude by inviting researchers in both Western and non-Western contexts to develop a sense of self-reflexivity, one that can help create more consciousness about how what they write can impact upon self and others.

## Keywords

self-reflexivity, colonialism, orientalism, West-centrism, Eurocentrism, non-Western contexts, social theory development, knowledge hierarchies, power relations, institutions

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## Introduction

There is a growing consensus that knowledge generation in marketing, and in business-management studies in general, is West-centric (Boussebaa & Tienari, 2021; Jafari et al., 2012; Kravets and Ger, 2018; Westwood and Jack, 2007; Varman, 2019; Varman and Saha, 2009). A pivotal part of this argument is that marketing theory is predominantly reliant on the knowledge produced in and based on some of realities of Western contexts and in the light of the theoretical insights developed in the West. Such West-centrism omits, and at best, marginalizes or misrepresents a large population of the world – often treated as ‘subalterns’ (Gramsci, 1971; Spivak, 1988a) – whose life conditions differ to those of their counterparts’ in the West (Jafari, 2009; Kravets and Ger, 2018; Varman, 2019).

Scholars often associate knowledge West-centrism with resource scarcity in non-Western contexts (Au, 2007; Westwood and Jack, 2007), academic journal ranking fetishism (Hussain, 2015; Tourish & Willmott, 2015), the domination of the English Language (Boussebaa and Tienari, 2021), and the historical project of colonialism (Jafari, 2009; Varman, 2019; Varman and Saha, 2009; Westwood and Jack, 2007). I do recognize that these factors matter, but I argue that a deeper understanding of knowledge West-centrism also warrants the scrutiny of the role non-Western societies themselves have played in reinforcing the phenomenon. This proposition aligns with the kind of self-reflexivity that Al-Azmeh (1993) and Said (2005) deem necessary. That is, since the project of colonialism does not function as a linear relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, debates on colonial knowledge hierarchies should include critical evaluations of non-Western societies’ role in enabling a hegemonic relationship between the two.

In this article, I ask: (1) what institutions are involved in shaping the social sciences landscape in non-Western contexts?; (2) what relationships exist between these institutions?; and (3) How do such relationships influence the development of social theory? By addressing these questions, I advance the debate on West-centric knowledge hierarchies as I draw attention to deep-seated institutional dynamics in non-Western societies. I show how the institutions of the state and religion in some Muslim countries of the Middle East have historically co-constructed a political-ideological environment in which critical social theory has become stifled. I also show how the 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamic revivalism has paradoxically contributed to the reproduction of the same hegemonic discourse it intended to repudiate.

The Muslim Middle East is a fertile context in which to address my questions because, once regarded the cradle of knowledge during the Golden Age of the Islamic civilization (8th–13th centuries AD), the Muslim Middle East now struggles with generating novel and impactful knowledge in social sciences. Many critics (e.g. Mohammadi, 2011; Rabiei, 2012; Saeedinia, 2011; Zibakalam, 1994) associate the stagnation of social theory in Muslim countries with the political and ideological institutional dynamics that have historically shaped social sciences in these societies.<sup>1</sup> Here, I emphasize that I do not mean to treat this broad context as a homogenous entity. On the contrary, I stress that each society has its own historical trajectories that underlie knowledge generation and, hence, deserves a detailed analysis in its own right.

The article is organized as follows: after presenting an overview of the literature on knowledge West-centrism, I discuss the status of social sciences in the Muslim Middle East. Then, I explain the rise of Islamic revivalist discourse in the 20th century and show how the coupling of the institutions of the state and religion has historically influenced social theory development. I conclude by discussing the implications of these dynamics for marketing theory.

## Knowledge West-centrism in marketing and business-management studies

Debate on knowledge West-centrism in the field is largely rooted in the critical thoughts of several postcolonial critics such as Samir Amin, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Ibrahim Fanon and Chinua Achebe. These thinkers commonly argue that the distorted picture the colonial and imperial West has historically depicted of the rest of the world has been that of an inferior and uncivilized world whose subjects would essentially need to be redefined, reshaped and developed by the West. This view is best explicable by Spivak's (1988a) seminal interpretation of the powerlessness of the colonial subjects when she uses the phrase 'White men saving brown women from brown men' (p. 297) to explain how British colonizers abolished the widow-sacrifice practice of *sati* in colonial India. Due to space constraints, these theorists' ideas (and their criticisms) cannot be fully discussed in this article. Therefore, in the interest of brevity and focus, I will only briefly outline their key responses to Western hegemonies.

Amin (1989, 2011) identifies two key structures that underpin West's dominion over the rest of the world. The first one is the global economic capitalist structure which uses political (e.g. international relations), educational (e.g. universities' curricula), and economic (e.g. financial systems) tools to maintain the centre-periphery binary (i.e. Global North-Global South). The second structure is the Eurocentric ideology in which Western values are presented in such a way as if without them non-Western societies could not embrace development. Such prejudice, Amin argues, can be identified in the bulk of Western social theories which distort the realities of the world and conceal West's supremacist nature. Therefore, Amin urges non-Western societies to abandon viewing the colonial West as the centre of the world, delink from its capitalism, and pursue authentic developments based on their own local knowledge, abilities and realities.

While criticizing colonialism for portraying the people of the Middle East as primitives, Said (1978, 2005) equally blames Arab societies for allowing orientalists to treat them like that. From Said's perspective, whilst colonizers use the imperial knowledge to dominate the colonized, the colonized become complicit in shaping flawed imaginations about themselves. Dabashi (2009) furthers Said's analysis by arguing that the Cold War contributed to the rise of a new form of Western hegemony. The conditions of the Cold War motivated Western powers to establish 'area studies' (e.g. Middle East Studies, Russian and East European Studies, African Studies, and Chinese Studies) in different research institutes. The aim of this initiative was to produce 'disposable knowledge' (often with the cooperation of researchers from those geographies), which would situationally and instrumentally help Western powers to maintain their imperialist sovereignty. From a feminist perspective, Spivak (1988a, 1988b) calls upon those who are portrayed as sub-alterns to develop a hyper sense of reflexivity to understand how colonialism's discursive representations can present distorted images about them.

For Fanon (1952, 1959, 1961), a fundamental step towards alleviating the psychic impacts of the colonial dehumanizing oppression on the colonized subjects is to reconstruct the self through liberation and revolution. This view stems from Fanon's analysis of the way colonizers exercise violence against colonized societies. This violence does not always manifest as physical because colonizers use a variety of other mechanisms (e.g. discourse and schooling) to construct the colonized subject as less worthy, inferior, and dehumanized entities. Under such conditions, and deprived of their human and indigenous sociocultural identity, the colonized people's daily life activities (e.g. social, economic, and cultural) would only benefit the colonizers. Therefore, in order to regain their identity and dignity, colonized people need to engage in liberatory and revolutionary activities (e.g. resistance and employing violence) and decolonize their education and language.

Finally, employing literary criticism as a powerful decolonization tool, [Achebe \(1958, 1988\)](#) demonstrates how individuals from colonized contexts can challenge the hegemonic knowledge produced about them by the colonial West. Achebe's writings showcase the institutionalization of the project of colonialism through the establishment of Western systems of governance in local contexts and the instrumentalization of moral discourse and values (e.g. democracy, human rights, and gender issues). These dynamics, Achebe's stories show, materialize Western supremacy over time.

Analytical insights from these thinkers have inspired a wave of critical writings on the inequalities of knowledge generation in marketing and business-management studies. For example, some (e.g. [Au, 2007](#); [Westwood and Jack, 2007](#)) argue that different types of resource scarcity (e.g. financial) and infrastructural deficiencies in non-Western societies hinder the generation and dissemination of knowledge in/from these societies. Others (e.g. [Hussain, 2015](#); [Tourish and Willmott, 2015](#); [Willmott, 2011](#)) view fetishizing academic journal rankings detrimental to the growth and visibility of other journals that emerge from non-Western contexts and have the potential to offer alternative explanations for or solutions to the research problems published in established popular journals. [Boussebaa and Tienari \(2021\)](#) and [Murphy and Zhu \(2012\)](#) view the domination of the English Language in international scholarship as a form of neocolonialism. Such domination, the authors argue, eventually contributes to socioeconomic inequalities between the Global North (i.e. Northern America and Western Europe) and the Global South (i.e. the rest of the world). It also significantly and unfairly renders the knowledge produced in other languages less- or un-acknowledged by the wider community of academics in the world.

Criticism of colonialism intensifies in the writings of other scholars who hold the historical project of colonialism accountable for the existing knowledge hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South. Drawing on [Saïd' \(1978\)](#) orientalism, [Jafari \(2009\)](#) criticizes the prevalence of stereotypes in the cross-cultural business and management literature, which polarize the world into the superior Western and the subordinate non-Western spheres. [Westwood and Jack \(2007\)](#) argue that the domination of West-centric knowledge is deep-rooted in the project of (neo)colonialism, which maintains the economic, political, military, cultural, scientific, and technological hegemony of past colonizers and the USA over the rest of the world.

[Varman \(2019\)](#) complements these arguments further. Revisiting [Foucault \(1977, 2008\)](#) and some of the foundational postmodern and post-structuralist studies in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research, he shows how this scholarship often overlooks the role of colonialism in shaping marketplace realities in the Global South. For example, colonialism still widely manifests itself in India through the violence global firms such as Coca Cola use against local villagers. He further critiques the tendency in the field to theorize consumer vulnerability without acknowledging how phenomena of this kind have been exacerbated by the ongoing project of colonialism. This type of scholarship, Varman argues, exemplifies West-centrism because the institutionalization of the colonial epistemological lens can distort researchers' examination of everyday life realities. In an empirical study, [Varman and Saha \(2009\)](#) demonstrate how researchers in two top business schools in India are unreflexively dependent on the Western episteme. Finally, [Jafari et al. \(2012\)](#) lament that non-Western scholars barely attempt to enrich marketing theory by bringing fresh insights from their local social theorists into the field. As a result, non-Western contexts remain largely 'invisible' in international scholarship because although they are partially represented in the field, their research problems are addressed in the light of the familiar Western theories. In sum, although offering precious insights, scholars in marketing and business management have not sufficiently examined the role of non-Western societies' in fuelling knowledge West-centrism.

## Social sciences in the Muslim Middle East: what knowledge and for what purpose?

Unlike the prevailing trend in the West, in which social theory has gradually developed over time and relatively parallel with its political, sociocultural, and economic dynamics since the advent of the European Enlightenment in the 18th century, social sciences' progress in the Muslim Middle East has been less consistent with and reflective of its realities (Zibakalam, 1994). It was only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that Muslim countries in the Middle East became familiar with modern social sciences. In this period, the educational systems of the societies that had significantly contributed to world knowledge (e.g. Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Ottoman Turkey) were predominantly based on the old traditions of Islamic scholarship. It was during the early to mid-20th century that modern social sciences seriously entered the curricula of many newly established universities in the Middle East (Ibrahim, 1997). Even so, most social scientists (e.g. sociologists and anthropologists) would strive for legitimacy in society because they were not seen as real scholars (Rabiei, 2012; Zibakalam, 1994). Such strife is not confined to the Muslim Middle East as social sciences are still largely seen as inferior to other disciplines in many parts of the world including the West (Shaw, 2015). This is due to the general perception that, compared with natural, formal or applied sciences, social sciences are less useful (Boulding, 1967). Yet, as I will explain later in this article, such struggle over legitimacy has been an additional disadvantage for social scientists in the Muslim Middle East.

With such a short lifespan in the region, social sciences have been expected to deliver things beyond their capacity (Ibrahim, 1997). This is because the question of novel knowledge development has been closely intertwined with attempts to address the contemporary challenges (e.g. socioeconomic inequalities, violence, and drug addiction) in these societies (Roshan and Azar Kamand, 2015). Whilst addressing these challenges would require novel and progressive knowledge based on critical and interdisciplinary social science research, lack of institutional support from different stakeholders in the generation and implementation of such knowledge render social sciences ineffective in these societies (Mohammadi, 2011).

In the wake of mounting social problems in the Muslim Middle East, scholars often adopt three overarching approaches. Assuming that the above-mentioned problems are common among all human societies, one group of scholars tries to resort to any relevant theory available to them to explain and resolve the problem under investigation. Since this available source is largely replete with the knowledge produced by Western theorists, local scholars become inevitably dependent on it. This approach often offers little theoretical novelty when researchers are less sensitive to theory development (Iman and Kalatesadati, 2012). This approach does not produce customized solutions for social problems because the institutional particularities (e.g. historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and ideological) of the research contexts are not usually analysed in sufficient depth (Jafari, 2014; see also Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). To avoid misinterpretation, I emphasize that contexts offer great opportunities for theory development. For example, in their study of acculturation among poor female migrants in a Turkish squatter, Üstüner and Holt (2007) improve Bourdieu's theory of status consumption. Nevertheless, focus on context with no/little attention to theory development is less likely to offer new analytical insights.

Scholars in the second group associate their social challenges with the global expansion of Western modernity and capitalism and tend to abandon Western theories. With the hope of reinstating the previous order of society – either in the near past (e.g. before the age of the Internet or opening up to the global media, tourism, or trade) or distant past (e.g. the Islamic Golden Age) – researchers in this category turn to the knowledge they have inherited from their own traditions and

predecessors (Rabiei, 2012; Roshan and Azar Kamand, 2017). For example, the advocates of Islamic economics have, for a long time, tried to extract economic theories from the Holy Qur'an with a view to solving Muslims' modern economic problems, but it turns out that such theories, which are loaded with moral campaigns, are largely ineffective (Kuran, 1995; Nasr, 1991). The problem with this approach – seen as 'indigenization' (Abaza and Stauth, 1988) or 'Islamization' (Haghighat, 2012) of social sciences – is that the knowledge researchers rely on does not have the analytical power to explain/resolve societies' modern complex problems (Nasr, 1991).

Finally, there is the third group of scholars who are aware of the limitations of the previous approaches and seek to develop new theories that can benefit human societies at large. However, depending on the institutional characteristics of their society (i.e. the extent to which they are constrained by political/ideological forces), these scholars may not be able to fully participate in the generation, dissemination, or implementation of novel and impactful knowledge. As Mohammadi (2012) and Kandiyoti and Emanet (2017) note, these scholars are often coerced, marginalized or disempowered by institutional entities whose interests warrant a different type of knowledge. Therefore, scholars may publish their work when less at risk, albeit with a moderate tone (i.e. applying self-censorship to avoid conflict with powerful institutions). Alternatively, when more at risk, they either remain silent or informally communicate their views with closed circles of likeminded people (e.g. in seminars) (see Deeb and Winegar, 2015; Haghighat, 2012).

## Islamic revivalism and social theory development

Understanding the status of social theory in the Muslim Middle East requires the examination of the political and ideological dynamics that have shaped its knowledge landscape. This enterprise itself warrants the scrutiny of the relationship between the rise of Islamic revivalism and the manifestations of Western hegemony (e.g. colonialism, imperialism, and modernity) (Rafipoor, 1998; Soroush, 2000; Zibakalam, 1994). Exploring this relationship is vital because it has affected the co-construction of social sciences' scholarly environment by the institutions of the state and religion (Rabiei, 2012). Islamic revivalism, however, is not uniform. Although different Islamist movements are commonly inspired by Islamic sentiments, they vary in terms of societies' experience with the West and their own internal dynamics. For example, *Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan* was initially driven by discursive politics of identity (e.g. ethnic and linguistic) of Muslims in the colonial India. That is, the Islamist movement was motivated more by Pakistani Muslims' thirst for a distinct cultural/national identity than by their quest for a pure religious identity. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, the movement has endeavoured to access power in the political structure of the country, but due to its uncompromising views on Islam, the movement has gained limited legitimacy among the masses (Mukherjee, 2010). Conversely, contemporary Islamist movements in Turkey are often, associated with rebuilding a glorious past (e.g. the Islamic Ottoman) (see Alimen and Askegaard, 2020). However, the main motivations behind the rise of Islamic sentiments in the country should be searched for in many factors including the suppression of the institution of religion by the secular state (during 1924–2002, with intermittent and contained appearance of Islamic parties in power in the 1970s and 1990s), urbanization and socioeconomic inequalities, and increasing public perceptions of the secular state's corruption and inability to solve people's problems (Delibas, 2009; see also Göle, 1997).

Several scholars argue that Islamic revivalism has paradoxically contributed to the stagnation of social sciences in the Muslim Middle East (Arkoun, 2007; Mohammadi, 2011; Rabiei, 2012; Roshan and Azar Kamand, 2017; Zibakalam, 1994). This paradox stems from the fact that whilst Islamic revivalists have sought to enhance peoples' life conditions, they have unintentionally

exacerbated their conditions in the long term. This is because the Islamic revivalist discourse largely prescribes an apologetic knowledge agenda, one which allows no/little self-critique (Nasr, 1991; see also Abaza and Stauth, 1988).

Focused on the above-mentioned paradox, Rabiei's (2012) historical analysis of Islamic revivalism in the 20th century Muslim Middle East offers useful insights into the challenges of social theory development in this context. He argues that socioeconomic underdevelopments of Muslim societies in the 19th century Middle East disadvantaged them against their counterparts in Europe. Whilst the European Enlightenment and industrial revolutions were strengthening the scientific, technological, military and political power of European colonizers, Muslim societies in the Middle East were still struggling with slow development (e.g. sluggish urbanization and industrialization). These inequalities in international power relations and the humiliating extension of European colonialism into Muslim geographies (e.g. Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia) forced Muslims to find a way forward to develop their societies and catch up with the fast-paced Western modernization. Educational reforms accelerated the establishment of modern educational institutions (e.g. in Egypt, Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey). However, for two reasons, this type of modernization could not develop game-changing knowledge: firstly, knowledge in these societies was largely dependent on theories borrowed from the West. Secondly, the political-ideological institutions' intolerance would not allow critical thinking in social sciences. Consequently, influential social scientists who were critical of power structures (i.e. state politics) or had views that challenged the religious status quo received hostile reactions from the institutions of the state and religion; they were either silenced or forced to live in exile (Abrahamian, 1982; Ibrahim, 1997; Sharabi, 1970). Consider, for example, how Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd were accused of heresy by al-Azhar University in Egypt, a tradition that has continued to date (see Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017; Yeşilada and Rubin, 2013). For example, because of their critical views, many scholars are dismissed from their academic institutions, forced to retire, or end up in exile mainly in Western countries (El-Affendi, 2009; Sertdemir Özdemir, 2021). A glance at the Human Rights Watch world reports (e.g. 2018, 2021) also reveals that, over the past decade, many academics have been dismissed from Muslim Middle East universities.

As Rabiei (2012) further highlights, frustrated with slow-paced developments in their societies, and parallel with other thinkers (e.g. secular, religious reformist, or Marxist intellectuals), traditionalist religious thinkers were also increasingly critical of Western hegemonies. However, compared with their counterparts, religious critics were more tolerated by despotic rulers, mainly for three reasons: firstly, they targeted more Western hegemonies than the political power structures of their own society. This may be associated with the funds some religious institutes would receive from states (see Afzal, 2019) or the control of states over religious institutes (Adanali, 2008). Secondly, since their discourse was familiar to the traditionally religious masses, religious thinkers had widespread legitimacy among people. Therefore, aware of religious leaders' ability to mobilize the masses, states would maintain their legitimacy and safeguard their powerbase by showing respect for religion. Thirdly, since local rulers (specially in Arab countries) along with and supported by Western powers were afraid of Communism (and knowing that religious leaders also opposed the ideology), they would instrumentally show respect for religion. These dynamics, as Rabiei (2012) notes, facilitated the growth of an overarching Islamic revivalist discourse in the following three phases:

Phase one (1920s–1945): the Ottoman Caliphate came to an end and the proponents of a united Islamic empire lost a devoted guardian (i.e. Sultan Abdülhamid II). Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) established the Republic of Turkey in 1924, and the Arab League was founded in 1945. In this phase, the relationship between Islam and the West was conflictual. Influential Muslim figures (e.g.

Hassan al-Banna in Egypt) would instrumentalize Islam to mobilize the masses against the colonial West. Emerging religious nationalist movements were geared to achieving independence from colonizers and establishing sovereign nation-states (e.g. *Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan*). On the other hand, with the expansion of modern education and the rising level of literacy, people were becoming aware of the promises of Western modernity (e.g. chic concepts such as democracy and the rule of law). Conscious of such public awareness, religious thinkers had to adjust their agendas to correspond to the expectations of the public. Therefore, recognizing the Western civilization as a globalizing reality, religious thinkers would attempt to show that West's concepts of democracy, social justice, lawfulness and equality were innately embedded in Islam. The Islamic discourse started to become equipped with terms borrowed from Western social sciences. Although not directly present in modern educational institutes such as universities, these thinkers would disseminate their ideas through publications (e.g. books and magazines) and lectures to create public awareness and recruit advocates (e.g. Sayyid Qutb in Egypt).

Phase two (1945–1960s): this period witnessed heightened nationalistic, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist sentiments. Western powers (e.g. the USA and Britain) increased their presence in the region to support its despotic rulers in return for fighting the manifestations of Marxism and socialism. For example, the USA's and Britain's motivation for supporting the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) (established in 1955) was getting better access to the region and tackling the progress of Communism in Iran, Iraq and Turkey (Duffy, 1967). Such presence was also because of their interests in the oil reserves of the Middle East (Louis, 1984). The relationship between Islam and the West became more confrontational because for Muslim thinkers (as well as for secular and critical intellectuals) the two World Wars and the West's support of the establishment of the State of Israel proved the vanity of West's modernity discourse. This was a turning point in history because Islamism started to shape itself up by theorizing the significance of returning to the principles of the 'true Islam'; that is, because the cause of Muslims' underdevelopments was departing from the sharia, they should eliminate anything that was un-Islamic. The ideas of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din Asadabadi, Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad Iqbal Lahori, Abul A'la Maududi and others rapidly travelled in the Muslim world. Disenchanted with the promises of Western modernity and the pitfalls of Marxism, Muslim thinkers started to demonize both. While secular educational institutes continued their Western curricula, religious thinkers turned to Islamic teachings for devising an Islamic model of modernity.

Phase three (1967 onwards): this period begins with Arabs' 1967 defeat in the Six-day war with Israel which deeply injured Muslims' pride. This was also a period in which the West increased its presence in the region (e.g. because of oil resources and the Cold War with the Soviet Union). Despite rapid urbanizations and modernizations in the Middle East, socioeconomic inequalities were on the rise and the West's cultural hegemony (e.g. consumerism) was increasingly tangible in society. Therefore, Islamists felt dutybound to reform their societies' political structures, even by employing militia (e.g. the 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat in Egypt) or revolution (e.g. the 1979 Iranian Revolution that overturned the country's monarchy). All these events, along with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, energized the proponents of Islamic awakening. As such, Islamic revivalism started to become more seriously theorized by its advocates in educational institutes and/or thinktanks in countries such as Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (see Sayyid, 2015). For example, the revolutionary ideas of Iran's Ali Shariati became popular in many Muslim countries and personalities such as Ali Bulaç and Abdurrahman Dilipak in Turkey started to theorize Islamic revivalism (see Göle, 1997)

Throughout these phases, a trade-off has existed between the institutions of the state and religion. Both institutions have reinforced each other's legitimacy by respecting the rules of the game and



refraining from openly criticizing each other. For example, while the former has availed the latter with the necessary resources to somehow shape society (e.g. in educational institutes and media outlets such as newspapers or via public speeches), the latter has avoided open criticism of polity. However, such participation, as [Al-Atawneh \(2009\)](#) observes, is a controlled one. That is, states instrumentalize religion for achieving their political goals. Therefore, the mutually beneficial relationship between the two institutions eventually creates a situation in which social sciences become subject to constant surveillance. Such scrutiny is to ensure that the knowledge produced does not trespass the boundaries of those whose interests best lie in maintaining the status quo (see Abdolkarim Soroush's detailed discussion in [Vakili, 1996](#)).

Such a complex relationship between the two institutions can best be understood in [Agrama's \(2010\)](#) analysis of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's excommunication by the Egyptian High Court in 1996. Abu Zayd's humanistic hermeneutic approach towards understanding the Qur'an challenged the established rigid readings of the Holy Book. Therefore, a group of Al-Azhar scholars criticized him and called for the annulment of his marriage on the ground of apostasy (reasoning that according to the sharia law, a non-Muslim man could not marry a Muslim woman). Although the court changed its decree later, due to death threats, Abu Zayd and his wife left Egypt. This case triggered serious questions about the relationship between the state and religion, that is, the extent to which a secular state could be influenced by the institution of religion. This case further testifies to the fact that besides competing over domination in society, the institutions of the state and religion can, over time and situationally, collaborate to oust critics (see [Vakili, 1996](#)).

Sometimes, past relationships between the two institutions can enormously accelerate their collaboration. For example, following the top-down secularization periods in Iran (during 1925–1979) and Turkey (mentioned earlier), the institution of religion was sidelined in both countries ([Chehabi, 1991](#); [Keyman, 2007](#)). Yet, since the victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and coming to power of The Justice and Development Party in Turkey (2002), the institution of religion has been empowered in these countries. Such empowerment facilitates the instrumentalization of religion by the state ([Chehabi, 1991](#); [Yavuz and Öztürk, 2019](#)) creates a situation in which both institutions can safeguard their interests against critical social theory ([Mohammadi, 2011](#)).

With the above in mind, it becomes apparent why understanding novel social theory development necessitates a critical examination of power dynamics. Both states and unreflexive Islamic revivalism in the Muslim Middle East constrain critical social theory by cultural engineering and advocating certain schools of thought over others ([Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017](#); [Razavi, 2009](#); [Yeşilada and Rubin, 2013](#)). Such cultural protectionism instrumentalizes some stimulating concepts developed by Muslim intellectuals to justify its agendas. For example, [Al-Ahmad's \(1982\)](#) concept of 'Weststruckness' (a term coined to criticize those who blindly and unreflexively mimic Western theoretics) is often used to defame those whose critique points to the drawbacks of regressive thinking. Similarly, by sticking to threadbare apologetic arguments, unreflexive scholars unintentionally strengthen the foundations of power institutions (for detailed critiques, see [Haghighat, 2012](#); [Kuran, 1997, 2012](#); [Nasr, 1991, 1996](#)).

To sum up, losing their powerbase (because of colonizers' military, scientific, technological and political power), rulers in the Muslim Middle East traditionally adopted a perspective that reduced modernization to technological development. The establishment of modern educational institutes was confined mostly to technical disciplines. The reforms were limited to engineering and hard sciences to reinforce the military establishment. Given its traditional legitimacy among the masses, religion was an economical and effective substitute for modern social sciences when addressing societal challenges. In a similar manner, imperial/colonial powers maintained their legitimacy by showing respect for religion and instrumentalized it as a cheap peace keeping mechanism. When

this was relatively hard to maintain due to the post-WWII rapid modernization, social sciences were instrumentalized to keep order in society. Critical social theory development was increasingly difficult in societies where political and religious institutions' survival was inter-dependent. Such mutual dependency can be argued to be a root cause of animosity towards critical theory. Such hostility manifests in different forms: sometimes, hard power is employed to coerce or dismiss critical thinkers, and sometimes soft power is used to control them. As regards the latter, for example, political/religious institutions of Muslim countries continue to financially sponsor research centres not only in their own countries but also abroad. Seen from this perspective, therefore, the 'disposable knowledge' [Dabashi \(2009\)](#) refers to is not only to serve colonialism; it is also a means of exploiting knowledge for rulers in many Muslim societies.

## Discussion and implications

In this article, I have focused on the role of political and religious institutions in shaping the social sciences' environment in the Muslim Middle East. This environment, as [Acemoglu and Robinson's \(2012\)](#) insights inform, serves three regimes of power: (a) colonial/imperial powers, (b) domestic rulers and (c) traditional religious institutions.

To elaborate, the project of colonialism/imperialism is a never-ending phenomenon because it leaves its institutional trace behind in subordinate societies. In their development programmes, these societies can barely come up with new institutional structures (e.g. governance mechanisms) and systems (e.g. administration) of their own because they often follow what they inherited from foreign powers. This mimicry includes a wide range of institutional practices such as hard and soft power relations between different stakeholders (e.g. between the ruler and the ruled). The main legacy of colonialism/imperialism is 'extractive institutions' (i.e. a small group of elites exploit the rest of society) which continue to shape most non-Western societies ([Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012](#)). The form of such extractive institutions, as Acemoglu and Robinson explain, varies from society to society because of the nature and extent of the colonial/imperial powers' experience with/in those societies. These institutions eventually serve both foreign and domestic exploiters: the former continue to benefit (e.g. economically and politically) from their colonial/imperialist subjects by directly or indirectly keeping the rulers in power; and the latter benefit from controlling their societies' resources. [Afoaku \(2000\)](#) explains this relationship between the foreign and domestic exploiters by using the phrase 'patron-client' to argue that, given the international power imbalance between powerful and underdeveloped countries, imperial powers act as patrons who help their clients (namely, dictatorships in less powerful countries) to maintain their sovereignty. To these, one could also add Western powers' support of religious institutions aimed at tackling Communism ([Milani, 2018](#)). The third beneficiary is the institution of religion. Despite being instrumentalized by foreign and domestic regimes of power, and in the absence of (relatively) strong critical social theory, religious institutions have been able to theorize their own version of social theory, develop their own elites, and increase their participation in shaping society.

Applying this discussion to my argument means that while colonial/imperial powers help preserve the power of the institutions of the state and religion, these institutions become complicit in extending the lifecycle of colonialism/imperialism. As [Dabashi \(2019\)](#) notes, in the postcolonial era, the shadow of colonialism and imperialism continues to persist in the global arena mainly because of the way power is exercised in producing skewed knowledge about Western and non-Western contexts. For example, as many critics (e.g. [Jafari, 2012, 2021](#); [Jafari and Sandikci, 2015, 2016](#); [Kuran, 1997, 2012](#); [Nasr, 1991](#); [Süerdem, 2013](#)) highlight, parallel with the orientalist discourse on Muslims (see [Said 1978](#)), and under different banners (e.g. Islamic

marketing, Islamic tourism, and Islamic economics), a growing body of researchers from Muslim societies fuel the very same orientalist discourse by exceptionalizing Muslims as ‘unique’ entities. While often critical of the moral deficiencies of West-centric theoretics in marketing and business-management studies, this stream of scholarship is largely silent on domestic political and ideological power structures that have contributed to numerous ills in Muslim societies (e.g. marketplace vulnerability, socioeconomic injustice, debt, etc.). As Göle (1997) informs us, the paradox is that such scholars become the mirror image of what they criticize. The published works of many of these scholars indicate that they can be as unreflexive as their counterparts in the colonial/imperial camps of secular scholarship (see detailed critiques in Jafari, 2012, 2021; Kuran, 1997, 2012; Nasr, 1991; Süerdem, 2013).

Furthermore, and at an institutional level, such Islamist revivalist discourse is increasingly upheld by political/religious institutions. At an international level, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) often provides these streams of research with certain resources (e.g. financial and logistical). Similarly, at a national level, state organizations such as funding bodies, universities, research centres, and corporations support these research programmes. In contrast, research projects that are deep-seated in critical theory are not/less favoured. Such favouritism prevents the growth of critical and impactful knowledge that is more likely to point to the structural dynamics (e.g. institutional power relations, corruption, nepotism, incompetence, etc.) that underpin different underdevelopments in society (see Jafari, 2012, 2021).

Despite the above-mentioned issues, and given the institutional complexities discussed in this article, it is heartening to see that the number of non-Western scholars who employ critical social theory is on the rise. A glance at marketing and consumer research journals indicates that more doctoral students from these contexts are embarking on topics in critical marketing, macro-marketing, and transformative consumer research (TCR). Although small in number, established critical scholars from Muslim societies in the Middle East also continue to make novel and significant contributions to marketing theory. However, there is a need for more research that applies critical theory. This necessity arises from the potential impact critical theory can have on understanding (and possibly resolving) pressing issues in society. Many studies have already shown such potential by investigating the intersections of politics, religion and the market (e.g. Husain et al., 2019; Jafari and Süerdem, 2012; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Sandikci, 2021; Sandikci and Ger, 2010; Süerdem, 2013), poverty and displacement (e.g. Saatcioglu et al., 2016; Üstüner and Holt, 2010; Yurdakul et al., 2017), politics and institutional corruption (e.g. Dholakia et al., 2020; Özgün et al., 2017).

The problems West-centric knowledge hierarchies impose on social theory development in my research context may not be resolved (at least in the near future), but by engaging in dialogues of this kind in marketing, we can, hopefully and collectively, help develop a greater level of reflexivity when researching, theorizing and reporting. Such reflexivity (in a Spivak, 1988a, 1988b) applies to researchers in both Western and non-Western contexts. By critically assessing the impact of institutional structures on their ontological and epistemological lens, researchers can gain more awareness of what they write. To follow George Orwell (1946), when reflecting on ‘Why I Write!’,<sup>2</sup> researchers can initially examine the motives of their writing and then contemplate how what they write can impact upon others’ lives. Whilst the former reflection can be an individual matter, the latter is certainly a collective one. This is because one’s writings are not only representations but also presentations; that is, scholarly writings inexorably become part of the ‘imaginal politics’ (Bottici, 2014) that shape peoples’ (e.g. researchers, students, and the public) perceptions of and attitudes towards each other. For example, when examining the life conditions of ‘Middle Eastern’ refugees and victims of war in Western marketplaces (e.g. Gollnhofer and Kuruoglu, 2018; Hokkinen, 2019),

researchers' silence on the role of Western powers in displacing those people significantly distorts reality.

Given the focus of my argument on self-reflexivity, doctoral students (from both Western and non-Western contexts) are invited to study the history of their own society (also that of the society they aim to investigate in their research) profoundly and with a great amount of self-reflexivity. This can help develop a higher-level emic understanding of the institutional (international and domestic) power relations that have shaped the institutional underpinnings of the knowledge they believe they possess about self and other. To expand on the latter, self-reflexivity should not be confined to the justification of researchers' linguistic or cultural affinity with their subjects or with their own lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Rather, researchers should become more sensitive to the episteme(s) in light of which their society has been represented and presented in the broad arena of social sciences.

Such self-reflexivity is particularly vital in situations wherein non-Western doctoral students work with Western supervisors whose contextual knowledge largely depends on their students. It is, therefore, important that these students strengthen their emic analyses of their context and avoid partial (re)presentations of their social realities. Delving into the social science repositories of their own society can also help possibly explore the theoretical insights that have remained less visible but can shed light on their studies. This does not mean to reject Western theories or to be apologetic; rather, it means that by bringing novel insights from their local social theorists, researchers can dialectically enrich our theoretical knowledge at large. This also requires their supervisors' commitment to the generation of responsible knowledge. It is important that supervisors invite non-Western scholars with expertise on a relevant aspect of the context (e.g. politics, religion, or history) to act as external advisors. This is particularly useful when research involves pressing issues such as market-mediated ethnic-religious conflicts, displaced consumers, socioeconomic inequalities, political consumerism and the like. Finally, perhaps it is time that senior non-Western scholars engaged more systematically in leading discussions on reflexivity in research. One feasible step could be to incorporate reflexivity as a fixed track in marketing and consumer research conferences and Doctoral colloquiums. Researchers can take the opportunity to discuss how (self)reflexivity can be improved in the field on both individual (e.g. authors) and collective levels (e.g. journal editorial and review boards). Understanding the earlier-mentioned institutional challenges critical marketing scholars in non-Western contexts face should be discussed more openly and with a view to offsetting the negative consequences of those obstacles. These steps can help produce less distorted images about the people whose life conditions we examine in marketing and consumer research.

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## Notes

1. There are many factors (e.g. wars and conflicts) which have also negatively influenced knowledge development in the Muslim Middle East (see Zarrinkoub, 1957; Zaydan, 1967; Zibakalam, 1994), but their full account is not within the remit of this article.
2. Orwell identifies four motives: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose.

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