



BIMSON HUMANITIES SEMINAR

**CHALLENGING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)**

JUNE 18TH-23RD, 2018

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Rationale

- identify the most common biases towards MENA;
- learn about the theories behind and understand their sources;
- learn effective ways of targeting them early on;
- exchange ideas with other instructors and learn from their own experience;
- learn how to transfer the knowledge gained in this seminar into a K-12 classroom.

Northern Africa and the Middle East



Bimson Seminar Program

June 18th – 23rd 2018

- 12 Participants
 - 3 Leaders
 - 8 Guest Speakers
 - 1 Facilitator
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- 6 Consecutive Days
 - 6 hours each

Projected Outcome

- Will be able to identify the most common biases (including subtle ones);
- Will be able to generate classroom activities to target biases;
- Will obtain resources (readings, map, movies, etc.);
- Will learn from other instructors' best practices.

Introduction-Leaders

- Gamze Çavdar, Political Science
- Andrea Duffy, International Studies
- Mary Vogl, Languages, Literatures and Cultures

Participants

- (1) Fort Collins High School (Fort Collins, Colorado)
- (1) Rocky Mountain High School (Fort Collins, Colorado)
- (2) Greely Center High School (Colorado)
- (2) Poudre High School (Fort Collins, Colorado)
- (1) Hertford County Public Schools (North Carolina)
- (1) Monarch High School (Florida)
- (1) Catalina Foothills High School (Arizona)
- (1) Madison Central High School (Wisconsin)
- (1) Lineweaver Elementary School (Arizona)
- (1) A G Cox Middle School (North Carolina)

Research on Students' Perceptions of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

- 241-Introduction to Government and Politics
- 6 country cases (UK, Egypt, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia and China)
- Anomaly about Egypt: **psychological bloc**
- Chats with TAs
- TILT (Institute of Teaching and Learning) funding
- Pilot Study with open ended questions

- Coded students' responses → surveys with multiple choice questions
- Prepared lectures that specifically targeted the bias (about 2:30 hours)
- Pre and post-lecture surveys
- 2 consecutive years; 3 sessions; 142 students
- Pre-lecture Surveys → Lectures → Post-lecture Surveys
- First study to systematically study students' biases towards MENA

In Sum: Data and Method

- 142 Students
- Pre and post-lecture surveys
- Statistically measured the effectiveness of lectures in targeting the bias

Research Findings:

1-Students' knowledge about MENA is limited

- Ethnicity (Arab) and religion=often confused
- Strong connotation with Islam
- Sources of knowledge:
 - TV (52%)
 - Regional and national newspapers (48%)
 - Courses (23%)
 - Peers and family (22%).

2-Students hold biases against MENA

- A. “MENA is fundamentally different from the rest of the world”
- B. “MENA does not progress”
- C. “Islam determines every aspect of life”
- D. “Little diversity among Muslim-majority countries”
- E. Subtle bias
- F. Lectures are effective in lowering bias

Limitations of the study

- 1. Long term impact (of the lectures) unknown
- 2. Significant bias remains

Conclusion: *A need for a concerted effort
at every level*

Group Activity

- Your own experience with bias towards MENA in the classroom;

 - How often? Examples?

 - Similarities and differences between the research findings and your own experience

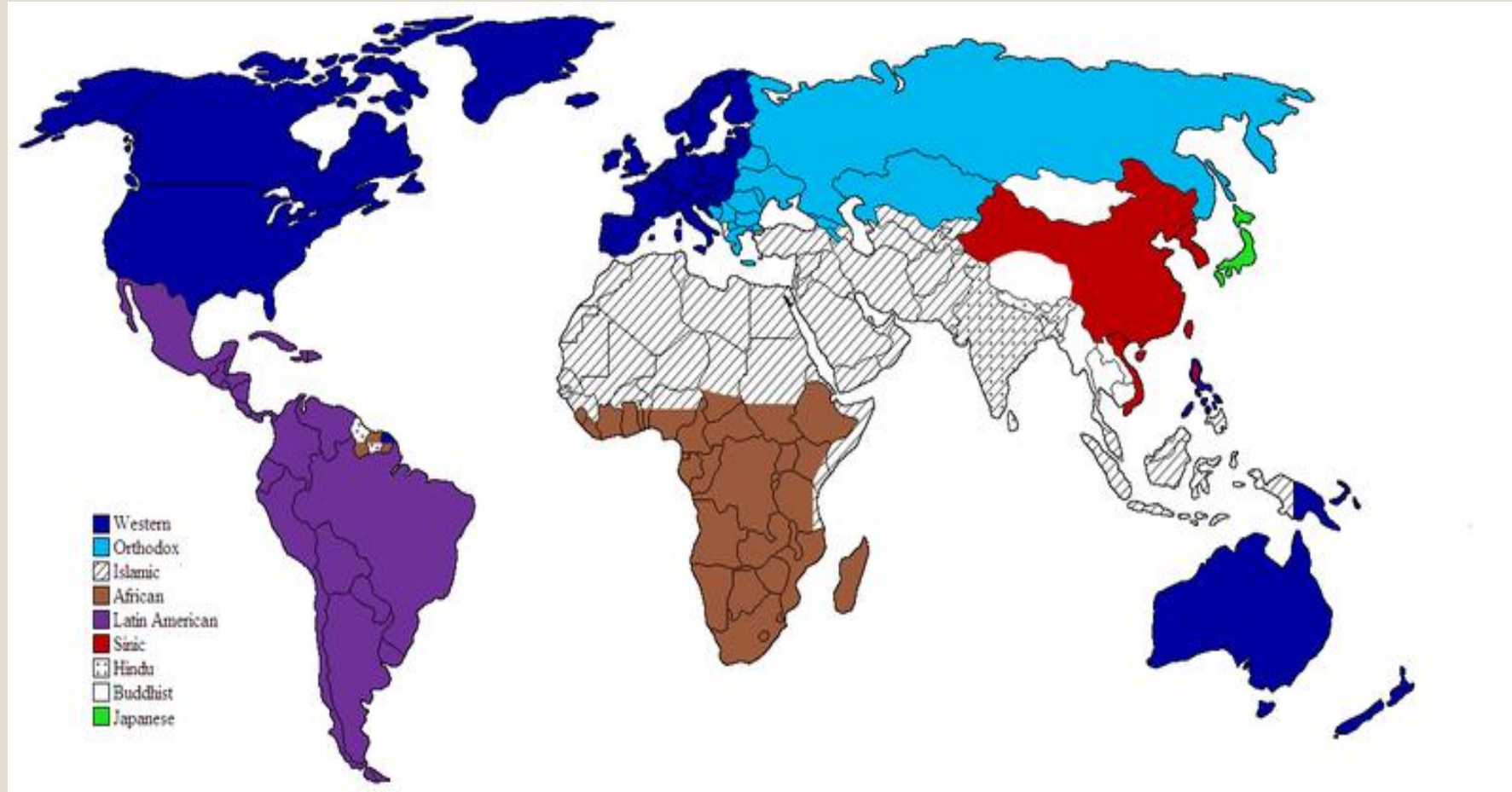
 - Sharing the tips: what has worked/what hasn't in targeting/challenging the bias

 - Textbooks: Are the textbooks helpful in challenging the biases? Why/Why not?

How to Approach to the Study of MENA?

- Dominant/Mainstream Approach: Represented by Bernard Lewis (the assigned article) and Samuel Huntington (The Clash of Civilizations)
- Alternative Approach: Represented by Edward Said who developed the term of Orientalism.

Clash of Civilizations by Huntington



Huntington's Thesis

- Civilizations consist of homogenous groups of people that share the same history, language, identity and political aspirations;
- Each civilization has become more civilization-conscious as interactions increased; therefore, the clashes are inevitable;
- Civilizations will inevitably clash; especially the Islamic civilization, which has “bloody borders”;

Islam and Liberal Democracy by Bernard Lewis

Summary of Arguments:

- Liberal democracy is a product of the West.
- Islamism AND Islam are incompatible with democracy.
- The power of the government in the West were limited even in Greek cities (by laws, assemblies, etc.), a practice never existed in the Islamic world.
- “All aspects of Muslim government are personal: “Even the famous Ottoman imperial divan—the *divan-i humayun*—described by many Western visitors as a council, could more accurately be described as a meeting, on fixed days during the week, of high political, administrative, judicial, financial, and military officers, presided over in earlier times by the Sultan, in later times by the Grand Vizier. Matters brought before the meeting were referred to the relevant member of the divan, who might make a recommendation. The final responsibility and decision lay with the Sultan or the Grand Vizier.”

Continued

- “The Muslim subject owed obedience to a legitimate Muslim ruler as a religious duty. That is to say, disobedience was a sin as well as a crime.”
- Traditional Islam has no doctrine of human rights, the very notion of which might seem an impiety. Only God has rights—human beings have duties. But in practice the duty owed by one human being to another—more specifically, by a ruler to his subjects—may amount to what Westerners would call a right, particularly when the discharge of this duty is a requirement of holy law.

Criticism?

- Work in groups

Criticism 1: Lack of Evidence & Abundance of Counter Evidence

- Millions of Muslims live in democratic regimes and find no contradiction between their faith and democracy: Turkey, Albania, Lebanon, Tunisia, India, Indonesia, etc. Millions of Muslims also live in Europe and North America.
- “Sectarian strife and religious persecution are not unknown in Islamic history, but they are rare and atypical, and never reached the level of intensity of the great religious wars and persecutions in Christendom.” **Bernard Lewis**
- Snapshots vs. essential characteristics

Criticism 2: “Civilizations” consist of diverse groups of peoples (at a given time)

- Diversity across time

Criticism 3: Religious doctrine does not determine everything about a society from the political system to the economic system

- Examples:

- Great diversity among Muslim-dominated countries in their economic, political and cultural systems;
- Quran gives ideas about Muslim societies to the extent that Bible gives an idea about the American society;
- Many other factors have shaped and determined these systems, such as the colonial legacy, dependent development, wars, etc. in addition to Islam.

Criticism 4: “Civilizations” do change over time

- According to Huntington (and Lewis)
- The West: democratic
- The Chinese: authoritarian
- The Islamic: conflict-ridden, non-democratic and Islam determines every aspect of the life.
- Was the West always democratic and the East authoritarian? Can you think of some evidence that contradicts Huntington’s thesis?

Response from Amartya Sen:

- [Amartya Sen](#) (1999) argues that “diversity is a feature of most cultures in the world. Western civilization is no exception. The practice of democracy that has won out in the modern West is largely a result of a consensus that has emerged since the [Enlightenment](#) and the [Industrial Revolution](#), and particularly in the last century or so. To read in this a historical commitment of the West—over the millennia—to democracy, and then to contrast it with non-Western traditions (treating each as monolithic) would be a great mistake” (p. 16).

An Alternative Approach: Orientalism by Said

- Especially when we study a culture, a country or a region that we are not quite familiar, we start with preconceived notions about that group of people.
- Mostly unconsciously, we tend to have ideas about what kinds of people they are, how they act, and who they are.
- These preconceived notions sometimes may significantly distort the actual reality.

Who is Edward Said?

- A Christian Arab born in the Israel/Occupied Territories
- Professor of comparative literature
- Died in 2006

Orientalism by Said

- Said argues that orientalism (the way the West perceives the East, in general, and MENA, in particular) goes beyond this innocent and to some extent natural preconceived notions.
- According to Said, these images were consciously, deliberately and systematically produced in the West to justify the Western domination in the form of colonialism.
- In other words, these preconceived notions were deliberately constructed for political purposes.

Interview with Said

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdE18HdfanI>