The politics of the Middle East (and North Africa) are a subject for research within a number of disciplines, fields and subfields, including history, comparative politics, international relations (IR), anthropology, human geography, security studies, terrorism studies, and international political economy (IPE). This can be seen as either as weakness or as strength: the lack of disciplinary coherence precludes a unified approach, but also allows for a considerable degree of inter-disciplinarity in terms of approaches, foci, and results. Yet, these varied standpoints share more than appears at first blush: all display the predominance of positivist epistemology and research methods, and while some are more theoretically-minded than others, they all remain dominated by empirical aims, be these comparative or not. Unsurprisingly, the emergence and growing challenge of a variety of post-positivist standpoints in these disciplines and areas have elicited a mixed reception. It is in this context that this special issue of the *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* operates. It is devoted to considering the ways in which some of these disciplines have been debating a movement away from positivist mainstream traditions, and towards perspectives more sympathetic to post-positivist concerns.

Of the disciplines whose explicit remit is to analyse political dynamics at the levels of the state, regional and international politics, a useful distinction between International Relations and so-called Middle East Studies (MES) may be drawn. Despite the fact that MES scholars come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds—e.g. history, comparative politics, political science, etc.—, this distinction is useful in that it reflects different positions on the nature of the study of the politics of the Middle East, and on what constitute appropriate methods of enquiry. These differences have meant that, until the present time, little cross-fertilisation has taken place between these two literatures. This volume contains papers which consider how recent developments within these two sets of perspectives might provide the foundations of precisely such intellectual exchanges.
Middle East (Area) Studies (MES) have often been accused of being theoretically ‘backward’: either because of lack of engagement with theory—particularly with ‘critical’ approaches—or because of a certain lack of ambition and sophistication in their application. Indeed, Edward Said and post-Orientalist scholarship notwithstanding, little theoretical innovation has arisen out of MES in recent years, and of the vast area studies literature on the Middle East, precious little is read outside MES itself. This state of affairs has been regularly lamented by certain quarters of the MES scholarly community as well as from outside the discipline, only to make little long-term impact upon the disciplinary mainstream. Part of the problem is that ‘theory’ means different things to different scholars and different disciplines: politically as well as intellectually sensitive debates permeate the treatment of issues and the choice of theories, to the point that the very relevance of ‘theory’ is at times questioned. In this context, within IR Theory, the Neorealist-Neoliberal materialist mainstream and its social scientific project are often—and not without reason—portrayed as the villain of the piece. Unfortunately, the ‘baby’ of possibilities being opened up by recent developments at the post-positivist margins is being thrown out along with the ‘bath water’ of criticism of the Neoutilitarian mainstream.¹ Recent debates within international theory—for instance, those surrounding Constructivism—present opportunities for cross-fertilisation between International Theory and Middle East Studies, as well as other disciplines such as politics, comparative politics and foreign policy analysis, or sociology and social theory.

Positivist approaches generally view the (social) world as objectively real (i.e. independent of observation or of observer), and view knowledge of that world as objective and objectively attainable. Indeed, by relying on a transposition of the scientific method in some guise, the social scientific enterprise intends for the endeavour of discovery to be cumulative (and perhaps ultimately predictive). At the core of most post-positivist approaches is a degree of scepticism towards some or all of these assumptions: the social (and therefore political) realm is seen as one built around shared (and/or imposed) norms and institutions which have no necessary/ultimate permanence in time or space, and the emergence of which is intimately connected to questions of identity on the one hand, and power on the other. In such a ‘world of our making’, all that is tangible is ultimately fluid. Understanding this world, in turn, may imply being receptive to the applicability of conventional, ‘scientific’, methods, but it also requires an awareness of the limitations of these approaches, and, at the very least, of the necessity of complementing one’s theoretical toolkit. In addition, the
In this context, this special issue has two aims. Firstly, it seeks to explore various ways of imagining/understanding politics in the Middle East that have thus far remained at the disciplinary margins but which might usefully be deployed to approach the arena of ‘the political’ in the Middle East. Aside from requiring an emphasis on how particular perspectives might provide lessons to be learned from contributors, the guest editorial panel placed no limitation on the theoretical perspectives used, or the areas for their application. Here, the simple point that post-positivist sensitivities can and should be brought to MES has been made adequately enough (if perhaps too rarely). Therefore, this volume also seeks to apply examples of critical perspectives to concrete empirical analyses (e.g. countries and/or issues), thereby seeking to draw out the potential of marginal approaches and contributing to a dialogue with the mainstream of disciplines such as Middle East Studies, IR, and Politics.

Given these objectives, the papers in this volume are organised as follows. Part I: New theoretical approaches and their potential focuses on reviewing new and/or marginal approaches in disciplines relevant to the study of the politics of the contemporary Middle East; Part II: Applying marginal theoretical approaches aims to make critical approaches more relevant to a non-specialist audience through examples of application to concrete political analysis; Part III: The politics of legitimisation and control focuses on a prominent current issue in the study of the Middle East, namely the relationship between socio-political control and political/ideological legitimisation.
Article Summaries

The first two articles in this issue are explicitly concerned with analysing the intellectual background to the question of convergence/boundaries between fields concerned with analysing the politics of the Middle East. In particular, Morten Valbjørn analyses the often fraught relationship between International Relations (IR) and Middle East Studies (MES), while Claire Heristchi considers the connection between MES and postcolonial studies, notable again for its absence.

Morten Valbjørn reflects on the paradoxical division between scholarship on the politics of the Middle East between MES and IR, and presents a systematic analysis of their differences with reference to the literature. A ‘universalising’ IR in search of laws of (international) politics makes it ‘culture blind’, while a ‘particularlistic’ MES which emphasises the spatial and temporal distinctiveness of these same politics becomes ‘blinded by culture’. In this sense, then, IR and MES have so far followed a logic of disciplinary self-interest which has brought them to diverge rather than collaborate: while the pursuit of universal laws at the heart of IR’s enterprise as a social science cannot view the Middle East but as ‘a region like any other’, MES’ raison d’être is in turn predicated on the significance of its distinctiveness, on the representation of the Middle East as ‘a region like no other’. Valbjørn then analyses the scholarship offered by these two fields identifying possible loci of fruitful convergence between the two—an ‘academic Mesopotamia’.

Claire Heristchi’s contribution also asks questions about potential convergence between the interests of two fields—this time MES and postcolonial studies—and comes up against the paradoxical lack of cross-fertilisation between them. Edward Said’s Orientalism was one of the founding texts of postcolonial studies as a field of enquiry, but mainstream MES has, by and large, failed to follow up on this kind of analysis, bar a few exceptions, and this despite the centrality of the fact of colonialism to the region’s politics throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. Nor indeed has postcolonial studies made any serious attempt to conceptualise post-independence politics of the Middle East as postcolonial politics. Heristchi suggests that what might appear to be an odd mutual disciplinary ignorance has roots in very different understandings of what ‘theory’ is and how it should be deployed in empirical analysis, and again here we encounter a picture of MES gingerly applying standard models of positivistic comparative politics and/or foreign policy analysis, while postcolonial theory has, since its inception, been predicated on a radically different understanding of the underlying nature of the socio-political realm.
The article by Andrea Teti provides a transition from the analysis of disciplines towards a range of papers which develop, and deploy, innovative approaches from within a series of disciplines—comparative politics, IR, human rights, historical sociology, post-structuralism, psycho-analytic theory—in empirical analyses in order to reflect on their usefulness. These articles are also concerned with reflecting on the potential contribution of their own approach(es) to disciplinary debates, but in so doing the also offer the non-specialist a vantage point on the development—convergent or divergent—of a range of concrete issues in the politics of the Middle East. To this extent, these articles are intended to act as points of access for non-specialists wishing to explore the potential bounties of inter-disciplinarity.

Andrea Teti’s paper in particular considers a recent development in IR theory, Constructivism, as one possible candidate for such a cross-fertilisation, and assesses its ability to explain two central moments of Egyptian and regional politics: the formation of the UAR and the descent towards the 1967 War with Israel. Responding to a series of concerns about the theoretical soundness and sophistication of mainstream IR theory, Constructivism affords a rather different picture of the political from mainstream IR: by emphasising identity as central to the realm of the political, and by arguing that the process of ‘imagining’ communities and their relations with their designated ‘Others’ occur in cumulative fashion through interactions. These interactions reflect both the impact of the choices made by individual and collective agents—e.g. political leaders or governments—, and the constraints placed upon those choices by the normative parameters which provide ruling groups with their legitimacy. One of the most important implications of this ‘ontological fluidity’ is that social science conceived as the pursuit of universal laws, valid irrespective of time or place, becomes impossible: explanations of the political can no longer reduce place, time, or culture to mere ‘dependent variables’ of deeper material foundations. As such, Constructivism promises to address not only the concerns voiced within IR theory, but also removes one of the central objections to IR as an enterprise voiced from within MES. To Constructivism, every region of world politics must be—to use Valbjørn’s metaphor—‘like no other’. At the same time, Constructivism offers MES the possibility of addressing its lack of theoretical sophistication by offering a framework which attempts to reconcile both material and discursive elements.

Aurora Sottimano’s article uses Foucault’s analytics of discourse to offer alternative perspectives on the political economy of modernisation and ‘globalisation’ in Syria. Much of the conventional political economic
(and economics) literature on reform processes throughout the region laments the incompleteness and frustratingly slow pace of these reforms, explaining them in terms of a ‘tension between the logic of economics and the logic of politics’. Sottimano emphasises the need to shift the focus of analysis to consider the ‘ways in which economic knowledge is produced, how it comes to be culturally inscribed and socially constructed’. This, in turn, leads to the question of the role economic discourse plays in producing (and reproducing) a certain form of power which aims to optimise the deployment of human and material resources, as well as the role of the social imaginary at its heart. In this sense, then, Syria’s fraught reform process is emblematic of the centrality of a ‘modern’ economy to ‘modern’ politics and strategies of power. The development policies and economic reforms involve a re-articulation (rather than an ‘erosion’) of the state’s role, involving a re-thinking of the modalities and points of application of power. This opens up the possibility of locating authoritarianism (as well as liberal government) on the trajectory of what Foucault called the ‘governmentalisation’ of the state.

The evolution and construction of identity is without doubt one of the most frequently analysed themes in Middle East Studies. However, as with much of MES, analyses of nationalism have only recently begun to acquire a theoretical sophistication comparable to that found in nationalism studies. Here too, the emergence of what might generally be called post-positivist sensitivities is involved in bringing this movement about. Tim Jacoby’s article explores the applicability of Michael Mann’s historical sociology to the question of the ‘creation’ of national identity(ies) in Turkey. Jacoby compares the social trajectories in Mann’s explanation of national identity formation in Europe with an analysis of the Turkish case. He suggests possible amendments to Mann’s model in the light of this analysis and, more generally, reflects on the validity of the macro-historical sociological approach.

The final section of the special issue contains articles the explicit role of which is to understand the role of the politics of identity in the context of political legitimisation and control. André Bank focuses on the emergence of new authoritarian practices in Jordan, Morocco and Syria; Rolf Schwarz considers more generally how the state in the Arab Middle East has ‘re-invented’ itself throughout the 1990s; Abdeslam Maghraoui reflects on the dilemmas of identity construction in the postcolonial Arab World through a structural metaphor from Lacanian analysis; Nicola Pratt analyses the ‘counter-hegemonic’ potential of NGOs/PVOs in Egypt; while Declan O’Sullivan looks at the way in which hisba law has been politicised as a tool of ideological control in Egypt.
André Bank considers developments from within comparative politics which have emerged in response to the problems of ‘democratisation’ and ‘transitology’ literatures. These approaches bring a new emphasis on non-coercive aspects of legitimisation, thus presenting a potential linkage with both post-structuralist concerns (e.g. Foucault’s emphasis on the ‘productive’ forms of power), and with international theory in the specific guise of the study of the ways in which polities are ‘imagined’. Bank argues that, particularly with respect to studies of Middle East states, ‘transitology’ has been informed by the assumption that political and economic liberalisation were going to be the inevitable result of reform processes particularly in the post-Cold War context. The empirical durability of authoritarian systems during the 1990s has induced comparative politics to consider its approaches to the Arab Middle East more carefully. In this vein, Bank develops an ‘integrative’ approach to a leadership’s strategies of legitimisation which he then applies to the cases of Jordan, Morocco and Syria in an attempt to illustrate some elements of the modus operandi in contemporary authoritarian systems. In particular, Bank argues that in order to explain non-democratic regime stability in these polities, it is imperative to look at different strategies of legitimisation, with evidence suggesting a general trend towards an ‘economicisation’ of the ruler’s legitimisation strategies. These are non-repressive techniques which constitute a part of the leadership’s repertoire of techniques of rule, and Bank suggests that these have helped smooth leadership successions in these states.

Rolf Schwarz goes back to mainstream IR theory, and he explores ways in which the specific challenge posed by the ways in which Arab regimes have innovated on their legitimisation bases can be tackled. Schwarz, like Bank, takes as starting point of a puzzle which reveals itself to be as much analytical as it is empirical. The stability of authoritarian regimes throughout the Arab Middle East in the 1990s was largely unexpected by liberal peace theorists within IR, as well as ‘transitologists’ within comparative politics. The stability of the region’s regimes is remarkable also in view of the frequent radical changes throughout the 1950s, and, today, in the face of the Arab regimes’ recognised lack of legitimacy. Schwarz here suggests an interesting hybrid of two of IR’s mainstream theories—Realism and Structuralism—arguing that the idea of territorial sovereignty has become part of a repertoire of strategies of political legitimisation. This is pitted against the argument that territorial sovereignty, having emerged in Europe after the Treaty of Westphalia, was later exported to the region by European ‘core’ states as a form of political organisation. The repertoire of strategies of legitimisation deployed by Arab regimes draws on the local specificities
of identity, culture, history, and political and patrimonial networks. Recognition of the rightful place of such factors, Schwarz argues, requires ‘opening’ what mainstream international theory often considers the ‘black box’ of the state, ‘unpacking’ it in a way which recognises the spatial, temporal, historical and cultural ‘distinctiveness’ of every case. Moreover, Schwarz reiterates the idea that the ‘simple application of Western theoretical constructs to the study of Arab states in this argumentation is thus inappropriate and inadequate to understand the specifics and particular dynamics of the Middle East’. As Bank’s article did with comparative politics, Schwarz’s contribution raises concerns that, once again, should resonate with the criticisms found in MES of the mainstream IR treatment of Middle East politics.

Abdeslam Maghraoui’s paper argues that the identity problématique remains at the centre of contemporary Arab writings on emancipation. Drawing from prominent Maghrebi historians and philosophers, Maghraoui argues that debates about ‘self’-emancipation involves two ‘others’: the Arabo-Islamic heritage and the West. Maghraoui goes on to suggest that preoccupation with identity in contemporary Arab writings is not just a dated remnant of nationalist ideology. Rather, it reflects unsettled battles from the colonial past—most vividly analysed by Frantz Fanon in Algeria—between imported modern politics, on one hand, and local cultures and languages, on the other. While the liberal democratic states’ efforts to reconcile universal citizenship with distinct cultures could be a useful political model, the liberal’s fundamental focus on the rational individual in pursuit of interest is limiting. To understand the tortuous course of self-emancipation in the historical context of the Arab world, Maghraoui suggests a possible deployment of the metaphor of the child’s traumatic and symbolically violent emancipation from both the mother and the father figures.

Nicola Pratt’s article explores whether advocacy NGOs in Egypt are counter-hegemonic organisations or whether they simply replicate existing power relations. Her paper analyses this question by first breaking down the basis for current regime hegemony in Egypt into mutually constituting elements of a national-patriarchal discourse, state corporatist institutions, and a state-led economy (now becoming a neoliberal market economy). Through the deconstruction of several dichotomies that underpin hegemonic discourse—the Arab world/the West; political/civil society; private/public; and civil and political rights/social and economic rights—various NGOs challenge regime hegemony through their discourses on postnationalism, autonomy from political society, patriarchy, the dichotomisation of rights, and alternative globalisation. Taken as a whole, these discourses provide
the basis for a counter-hegemonic project challenging the notion of the supremacy of the interests of the nation that justifies undemocratic practices against all citizens and political exclusion of women and working people. In conclusion, the paper considers the limitations of this project—particularly the absence of an alternative model for the material (e.g. economic) organisation of public life.

Declan O’Sullivan’s article assesses how the concept of ‘freedom of expression in Islam’ can be analysed, but his starting point is not the assessment of a Muslim perspective from a non-Western, cosmopolitanist point of view on rights. Instead, he focuses on how, in recent years, there has been a rather intense internecine dispute within Islamic studies among Muslim scholars and jurists on this issue. In particular, his article covers two very recent court cases in Egypt where the law of hisba was used to accuse a Muslim of apostasy. The first one involves the academic Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, who was convicted of apostasy in 1996, and was punished by an enforced divorce from his wife. The second case involved the feminist novelist Nawal al-Sa‘adawi, who was accused, but later acquitted, of blasphemy and apostasy in 2001. An overview of hisba law within Shari’ah is provided to help articulate reflection on whether such political uses are appropriate (especially in such cases where a person remains devout to Islam, but expresses an opinion on how interpretation of the Qur’an and ahadith (Traditions) can be ‘modernised’). The conclusion highlights that there are disagreements within the Muslim community on how these issues can be dealt with, and thus that there is a large degree of variation in how ‘freedom of expression in Islam’ is understood by Muslims themselves. This variation in turn, is the reflection of ideological, political and often personal considerations.

In conclusion, Sami Zemni reflects upon the state of play offered by the fields touched upon in this volume, dealing with the articles written by some of the authors, but also offering, more widely, an assessment of the challenges facing Middle Eastern Studies since the end of the Cold War. In particular, he reviews the opportunities and obstacles facing a new attempt within the scholarship on the Middle East to achieve a balance between the theoretical and the empirical, between the ideational and the material parameters of politics. Zemni describes Globalisation as an additional challenge, but one which also brings calls to re-evaluate the function and indeed the very nature of ‘area studies’. In this context, the debate over how the Middle East should be studied is located within the wider debate over the nature and function of knowledge in the post-Cold War globalised world. Zemni then highlights the importance of an awareness of the sociology
of knowledge involved in the (re)production of the academic divergence between social science and area studies, and moves to consider the possibilities afforded by Constructivism in this light. Constructivism is seen here as presenting both opportunities and difficulties: on the one hand, it focuses on the importance of the linguistic, cultural, and historical dimensions of the political, on the other, it risks either a new cultural essentialism, or the inability to understand the structural dimension of political dynamics. In a Western political (and academic world) increasingly radicalised and dominated by right-wing voices—what Geisser calls ‘the new experts of fear’—, the possibility of the Constructivist agenda being hijacked to legitimise neo-Orientalist views of the Arabo-Islamic ‘world’ as a unitary, fixed, ‘natural’ entity has become very real.

**Conclusion: After the Politics of Certainty**

The primary objective of this special issue is to open up the consideration of how one can understand the politics of the Middle East once the conventionally dominant positivist approaches in the social sciences are questioned, or perhaps even abandoned. These emerging post-positivist concerns present Middle East Studies scholars with a double opportunity: firstly, to absorb (and, crucially, participate in the development of) more sophisticated theoretical frameworks to address the criticism of theoretical naïveté levelled at a field which otherwise presents a ‘treasure trove’ of fascinating and important studies. Secondly, this allows us to overcome the interdisciplinary politics of division which have so far characterised MES’ relations with other fields concerned with regional politics. It is perhaps ironic that these possibilities are enabled by the movement towards post-positivist perspectives in some of the social sciences, since, as Timothy Mitchell (2003) points out, Area Studies and ‘the disciplines’ were originally conceived as complementary enterprises within the quintessentially positivist project of systematically gathering and analysing data from all non-Western states in order to arrive at a generalised understanding of the political.

One theme that emerges only explicitly in a few of the articles herein, but which ultimately runs throughout all of them, is the complex, mutually influential relation between politics and the *study* of politics. The articles which raise this concern explicitly (Heristchi’s, Valbjørn’s, and Teti’s) make it clear that there are political consequences to the academic debates scholars engage in, Academia conceived of in a positivistic vein (as a neutral, objective—indeed, ‘scientific’—enterprise) is often contradicted by the clearly political dimension of scholarship and its deployment. In a way,
it is surprising that this dimension has not been systematically deconstructed, since the very topicality of the region’s politics alerts us to the problematic nature of the relationship between the supposedly ‘neutral’ academic enterprise and the ‘real world’ of politics and partisanship. In this context, the (inter)disciplinary silences and absences of cross-fertilisation between fields of inquiry such as IR and MES (whose narratives of self-identity are paradoxically grounded in inter-disciplinarity) should be all the more alarming.

It becomes even more important to understand this connection in the post-9/11 world, not only from the point of view of informing current political debates, but also because Middle East Studies is under close scrutiny throughout the Western world, with politicians and public opinion asking probing and politically explosive questions about the function, political allegiances, and indeed usefulness of the field. More generally, what is increasingly at stake is the intricate network of relationships between academia, politics, and policy. One does not have to look far for suggestions that this linkage between politics, its activists and its students is important: the policies pursued by the current US Administration, for example, received more than a little political legitimacy/credibility from Condoleezza Rice’s holding a PhD in International Relations from the University of Denver and having taught, researched, and published on international politics at Stanford. The so-called ‘neo-conservatives’ also have links to the academic world (particularly through Leo Strauss and Albert Wohlstetter). One might observe, not without a little ‘postmodern’ irony, that the policies embraced by the current Administration borne of this intellectual environment have suffered from the same criticisms of short-sightedness and plain ignorance which have been traditionally levelled at International Relations as a discipline.

But there is a more disturbing aspect of the politicisation of ‘knowledge’ and of academia. After ‘9/11’ Martin Kramer, Daniel Pipes and others close to them on the US right have carried out a populist savaging of Middle East Studies in the US by accusing the discipline of providing no ‘useful’ information for US foreign policy and even of being ‘unpatriotic’ left-leaning sympathisers of terrorism. In a truly singular vein, Kramer likens Edward Said to Ayatollah Khomeini, rubbishes ‘much of the “critical scholarship”, [for] its very narrow conception of the forces of change in the Middle East’ and imputes to him a fundamental misunderstanding of the significance of Islam (no mean feat, since Said’s scholarship is acclaimed for doing the exact opposite) (Kramer, 2001: Ch. 3). At its most moderate, Kramer’s criticism of Middle East Studies is that it ‘contributed to the public complacency about terrorism that ultimately left the United States vulnerable to “surprise” attack by Islamists’ (Kramer 2001: Ch. 3). All of
this serves the purpose of justifying an open call for political oversight of Middle East Studies—for example, through closer monitoring of so-called Title IV funding for area studies—in order to ensure compliance with what he believes Washington’s political agenda should be. Kramer declares: ‘Academic colleagues, get used to it. […] You are being watched. Those obscure articles in campus newspapers are now available on the Internet, and they will be harvested. Your syllabi, which you’ve also posted, will be scrutinized. Your websites will be visited late at night’ (cited in Dobbs 2004). Daniel Pipes then (in)famously proceeded to set up CampusWatch.org, the function of which is precisely to monitor scholars’ opinions and research (and non-research) activities in order to pressure them and university administrators to comply with their own vision of Middle East Studies’ political function. These developments can no longer be dismissed as the ravings of intellectual-political fringes. Pipes and Kramer, both of whom have strong connections with neo-conservative elements within the Administration, also epitomise the convergence of academia, professions and politics in evidence among politicians. Pipes, for example, was appointed to the board of the US Institute of Peace by George W. Bush (which, surprisingly, makes him a colleague of Stephen Krasner, a well-respected IR academic at Stanford). Kramer edits Middle East Quarterly, currently works at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University, but has also held visiting posts at Chicago, Cornell and Georgetown universities, as well as having been a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

These developments are disturbing also because they are couched in a narrative of freedom of speech and of academic debate, while setting up a climate of surveillance. Most frighteningly, these they have won support in several circles (and not only in the US), despite the fact that their practices run counter to precisely the values they claim to seek to defend. Indeed, this kind of unabashed advocacy relies on the ability to embed criticism in purportedly scholarly language and legitimise one’s public persona with the badge of academic credentials. It involves, in other words, deploying the representation of enquiry as neutral and objective to support what is in fact a highly ideological and perversely anti-academic agenda.

Last but certainly not least, and clearly related to the above, is the question of the political economy of the production of knowledge which ties together universities, funding councils (and funding bodies more generally), direct state funding of academia, and the requirements of an academic career (publishing, obtaining research grants, etc.). These themes, the articles in this special issue have not touched upon except indirectly,
but they are nonetheless undoubtedly vital to understanding the politics (and disciplinary politics) of the production of knowledge on, as well as practices towards, the Middle East, as recent debates clearly illustrate.

Positivist enquiry is commonly understood as a viable quest for certainty, and to be sure, Positivism remains an intellectual project that in principle encourages constructive scepticism and intellectual modesty as an intrinsic part of this enterprise. However, too many misapplications have come to produce an illusion of (the possibility of) absolute certainty, the illusion that it is always possible to definitively and unambiguously distinguish true from false, a sound policy from an inadvisable one, ‘good’ from ‘evil’. The production of these kinds of certainties can have very serious consequences for both academia and politics, as choices in US foreign policy over the past three years aptly illustrate. Certainty and its many concomitant illusions operate by making some options appear ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ while discounting others (e.g. on the ‘left’) a priori, thereby foreclosing serious debate over the nature and possible directions of US foreign policy, rather then genuinely opening up those debates. Current critics, whether neo-conservative and/or of the Pipes-Kramer school, offer precisely this kind of certainty and deploy it to precisely such ends. Post-positivist standpoints at the very least contain seeds capable of questioning such problematic canons.

Yet, fear of epistemological and methodological alternatives remains. Can we even risk opening the floodgates to ‘moral relativism’? Contributors to this special issue show in their different ways that there is nothing in what post-positivist openings earmark which necessarily leads down the path of intellectual or moral anarchy and chaos. On the contrary, to operate from within post-positivist perspectives in principle requires greater awareness of the ethical dimensions of scholarship, and if anything greater intellectual and political tolerance. In this sense, post-positivist perspectives could foster a truly pluralist—one might say ‘democratic’—intellectual and political culture. What post-positivist perspectives offer are complex tools to understand and act upon an increasingly complex world, and as such provide the possibility of bringing some much-needed sophistication to both policy-making and public debate. It remains ultimately up to us as academics and citizens to bring these voices to the discussion table. To paraphrase Foucault, intellectual pluralism can never be guaranteed by the institutions designed to defend it—it can only ever be found where it is practised.

In memoriam Edward Said and Maxime Rodinson. 
June 2004
Notes

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1. Ruggie (1998) labelled the resulting research programme ‘Neoutilitarian’ in order to emphasise the positivist common ground these two approaches have converged upon and in particular their debt to a model of agency and utility theory borrowed from Neoclassical economics.

2. Condoleezza Rice, her name deriving from the Italian ‘con dolcezza’ (‘sweetly’), obtained a BA in political science from the University of Denver, MA from Notre Dame, and her Ph.D. again from Denver. Provost of Stanford University and faculty member there for over 20 years, she specialised in the USSR and Eastern Europe (her book *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (1995) was written with Philip Zelikow, who co-authored the second edition of Graham Allison’s seminal *Essence of Decision*), even winning teaching honours. Politically, Rice worked for the Bush Sr. Administration as Director and Senior Director of Soviet and East European Affairs in the National Security Council (NSC), and as Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. She worked for ‘think tanks’ like the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the RAND Corporation, while in her ‘professional’ incarnation she worked for companies such as Chevron, J.P. Morgan, the Transamerica Corporation, Hewlett Packard, and the Carnegie Corporation. Although not as clear in their display of the nexus between academia, the professions and politics, several members of the current US administration share similar profiles in terms of the particular mix of academic professional background.

3. Though a more clearly ‘political animal’, Paul Wolfowitz is another member of the Administration with academic credentials. He received a BA from Cornell (taught by Allan Bloom, close to Leo Strauss) and a PhD from the University of Chicago in 1972 under Albert Wohlstetter, he went on to teach International Relations at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), via Yale (1970–73).

4. Kramer accuses Edward Said, for example, of failing to predict the Iranian revolution in *Orientalism* (Kramer, 2001: Ch. 3)—an interesting objection, since Said’s book is not about predicting anything, or even about contemporary political movements in the Middle East.

5. Leslie Carbone writes: ‘Americans [pay] taxes to support professors in Middle East Studies programs who openly sympathize with al-Qaeda’s “position” and oppose American values [and] American interests’. Entrenched in their professional organisation ‘Middle East scholars insisted that the United States could bring peace and democracy to the region only by supporting Islamic fundamentalists.’ Carbone (2002).
7. Although not a neo-conservative, Robert Cooper, member of the Foreign Policy Committee, former senior diplomat and advisor close to Tony Blair, promotes the notion of a ‘liberal imperialism’ by liberal democracies (2002). In a patent misunderstanding of the term, Cooper labels European states ‘postmodern’ merely because their relations are governed by ‘soft power’ (2002). Whether equally academically flaky or not, Blair himself recently questioned whether international law should not allow the violation of state sovereignty in the name of ‘humanitarian’ imperatives, such as those which drove him and President Bush to invade Iraq. This ‘may be the law, but should it be?’ adding: ‘The best defence of our security lies in the spread of our values. But we cannot advance these values except within a framework that recognises their universality.’ (Blair 2004)

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