American Studies in the Middle East: scenes of obscenity or scenes of multiplicity?

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In 1963 Iranian intellectual Jalal al-I Ahmad was outraged by what he called the disease of “homegrown Montesquieus” embracing a Western imperialist mode of thought which demands and expects from its non-Western holders a devalorization and simultaneous disqualification of their traditions of knowledges, their histories as well as their sensory experiences in making sense of everyday life. This paper seeks to probe the role of American studies in the Middle East, a context that is still constitutive of violence and colonialism. I attempt to explore whether American studies in the Middle East manages to move beyond the powerful exceptionalist paradigm, thereby turning its practice into making visible what Amy Kaplan calls the legacies (and I would add current realities) of colonial modernity. I focus on whether American studies’ critique of US’s imperial state formation does push for alternative and opposing lines of inquiry in a geopolitical context, such as the Middle East, that suffers US’s state power. My analysis will draw on my own teaching experience at the American University of Beirut as well as my interactions with Iranian students at the University of Tehran. Teaching American Studies, Patrick McGreevy points out, is inseparable from American power, a global fact which always “dialogues” with students, some of whom are painfully aware of their powerlessness and the irrelevance of their perspectives. These teaching experiences can be indicative of continuing injustices, but can be also used to project and articulate new visions of equality.