“Fellow Citizens in the World of Nations”: The Secular Mission of the American University of Beirut in the Interwar Period

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In the interwar period, American global power was on the rise. The United States was increasingly supplanting the European Powers as global hegemon and beacon of the West, and though it did not possess colonies to the extent that Britain and France did it inarguably wielded cultural influence on non-Western societies. Thus, when sociologist Stuart Carter Dodd wrote *Social Relations in the Near East*, a textbook for the freshman sociology course he taught at the American University of Beirut, his writing bore the mark of Western dominance in its confidence of *knowing* not only itself, but the world, and the Near East in particular. Dodd and his co-authors were speaking to the Arab world, laying the foundation for a civilizing mission that had been updated for the age of decolonization.

In this paper, I deconstruct Western modes of thought and analyze the West as a discourse in colonial and post-colonial pedagogy, focusing on Dodd’s text and placing it in the context of shifting political relations in the interwar Middle East. I hope to argue that hegemonic Western discourse and developmental theory were embedded in American school curricula, and that consequently such schools were disseminators of Western dominance no less than colonial armies and policy makers were. The interwar American worldview, post-imperialist and yet still subscribing to the cultural implications of imperialism, is embedded in the text. In this way the age-old East/West binary was reinforced, largely through benevolent attempts at “making” the East anew. My hopes in embarking on this study have been twofold: to demonstrate the ways in which power and knowledge, and schools as sites of knowledge, are intertwined, and to call attention to the Western tendency to articulate a self-serving evolutionary model when speaking of the world, which continues to this day.