

MUBIT-Workshop Review: “Arab Marxism: The Global History of Revolutionary Movements in the Middle East in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries”, University of Basel, September 25.-26. 2020

The topic of the 8th Annual MUBIT Doctoral Workshop in Late and Post-Ottoman Studies in Basel were revolutionary movements in the Arab world. Dr. Ali Sonay organized and lead the course together with PD. Dr. Manfred Sing and Miriam Younes on September 25th and 26th 2020. The focus was on Marxist and leftist movements in the Arab world and was held online due to the circumstances with pandemic. The participants were PhD and Master Students from Europe, the USA, and the Middle East. Most of the participants presented a text and added their interpretation based on their research experiences. The participants discussed four different thematic panels: (1) Socialist and Communist Movements before and after World War I (2) Woman Participation and Women Rights in Marxist/Communist Movements (3) Communist/Marxist Movements and Religion (4) Leftism in the Recent Uprisings in the Arab World.

PD. Dr. Manfred Sing received his doctoral degree in Islamic Studies and is currently a Senior Researcher at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz. In his research, Manfred Sing focuses on the multi-religious history of Islam, secularism, and Arab Marxism in a transnational and transcultural perspective. In 2018 he published about Arab Marxism the article “The Tempestuous Affair between Marxism and Islam: Attraction, Hostility, and Accommodation since 1917” in Béatrice Hendrich’s *Muslim and Capitalism – An Uneasy Relationship?* Miriam Younes is the regional Director of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Beirut Office, responsible for the foundation’s work in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Iran and Saudi-Arabia. She is currently finishing her PhD thesis with the title “Living leftism in Lebanon. A historical anthropology of leftist intellectuals in Lebanon, 1930-1990” at the University of Roskilde, Denmark. Her researches is mainly on modern intellectual and transnational history, theories of ideologies and collective action and the concept of revolution, leftism and post-colonial resistances.

Manfred Sing and Miriam Younes have furthermore jointly authored “The Spectres of Marx in Edward Said’s “Orientalism” (in *Die Welt des Islams* 53/2, 2013).

During the workshop the participants discussed about the different faces of nationalism. Arab nationalism was presented as “liberational nationalism” which was a nationalism that focused to obtain freedom and independence and was different than the French “occupying nationalism” which focused on colonializing other countries. Therefore, for the sake of the Arab struggle for freedom the Arab countries needed to unite and face their struggle

independently without the support of other countries as it posed the threat to end up in different oppression.

In the first panel focused on the trajectories of communist movements and parties before and after World War I. It was shown how these organizations struggled first with colonialism and imperialism and in the wake of World War II with fascism. The participants discussed the position of the Arab countries during the second world war and how they demonstrated their point of view. Nazism and fascism were in contrast to Islam and Arabs as these ideologies neglected their values.

The second panel addressed the participation of women in the abovementioned movements. History shows that on the one hand women played a crucial role during communist activism particularly since the 1940s. On the other hand, overall the class struggle seems to have had priority over the struggle against women's oppression, also within the movements and parties themselves. The recent uprisings in Iraq illustrate the strong involvement of women. Generally, this theme is still very much understudied.

The focus of the third panel was the relationship between Communist/Marxist movements and religion/Islam. While Islam has been differently coming together with Marxist thought than Christianity for example, it was also highlighted that new intellectual currents emerged in the Middle East, such as Arab socialism and Islamic socialism, both having a critical perception of Communism. An article by Israel Gershoni, for instance, refers to Muḥammad Najātī Ṣidqī who argued that 'pagan' Nazis are imperialist and racist, and these ideas contradict the Islamic concept of equality. Therefore, it was more important for the Arabs to support France and Great Britain as they were the lesser evil. Arab countries had to postpone their fight for freedom against colonialism and the struggle against Zionism.

The final panel emphasised that leftist thought and practice is still very relevant in the Middle East. The recent protest dynamics in Iraq and Sudan stressed their critique of the capitalist world order and likewise do not have hopes that their expectations might be addressed by political parties leading their mobilization. The ideological strands of these movements and their demands are awaiting to be researched.

The workshop was a great platform for the participants to discuss these topics. It offered the possibility to bond between people with similar research fields and to speak about the current problem of obtaining resources during the pandemic. The possibility to continue to keep in

touch through various channels was a great opportunity for the participants to support each other in their researches and continue their debate.

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