

Workshop

Authority, Tradition and Critique in the Modern State

June 22, 2015

Venue: Forum Transregionale Studien, Wallotstr. 14, 14193 Berlin

Convened by

Nada Moumtaz (Ohio State University / EUME Fellow 2014/2015)

Karim Sadek (American University of Beirut / EUME Fellow 2014/2015)

Yazan Doughan (University of Chicago / Affiliated EUME Fellow 2014/2015)

Participants

Schirin Amir-Moazami (Freie Universität Berlin)

Humeira Iqtidar (King's College London)

Hussein Ali Agrama (University of Chicago)

Maeve Cooke (University College Dublin)

Ruth Mas (University of Colorado)

Report

These are times of crisis in that almost all political concepts and ideals are being contested. Such contestations have taken increased salience in the context of post-uprising Arab World: state borders are being questioned and disregarded (by the Islamic State for instance), constitutions are being rewritten (in Tunisia and Egypt for example), and populations are being relocated. In the midst of such a crisis where everything seems to be up for grabs, the need to get clear on the criteria for evaluating and assessing social and political critique is at its highest. What is the nature, ground, and limits of authoritative critique? This question constituted the overarching question for "Authority, Tradition, Critique under the Modern State," the title of a workshop held on June 22, 2015 at the Forum Transregionale Studien, in the EUME (EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, THE MIDDLE EAST IN EUROPE) program.

The idea of the workshop evolved organically out of one-on-one conversations between three 2015 EUME Fellows (Karim Sadek, Nada Moumtaz, and Yazan Doughan), then developed into a collective conversation between the three of them in the form of regular meetings to discuss key texts around themes of authority, tradition and critique with a particular concern for the historical present and current condition of the modern state. The culmination of these

meetings was the workshop which on the one hand attempts to extend that conversation to include other scholars with overlapping interests, and, on the other hand, provide a space for the encounter of the scholarly traditions of philosophy and anthropology.

The papers were pre-circulated to privilege a deeper engagement and were all work-in-progress rather than finished and polished pieces. It is in this vein of cross-disciplinary engagement that the workshop organizers chose discussants and arranged panels. Prof. Cooke, who is Professor of Philosophy at University College Dublin, commented on the more anthropological papers during the afternoon session, while Prof. Agrama, Associate Professor of Anthropology and of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, commented on the more philosophical/theoretical papers in the morning session: Ruth Mas (University of Colorado) *Critique and Tradition*, Humeira Iqtidar (King's College, London) *'Tradition' in Islamic Political Thought*, Karim Sadek (American University of Beirut / EUME Fellow 2014/2015) *Islamic Radical Democracy*. The afternoon session included Schirin Amir-Moazami (Freie Universität Berlin), *Can the Muslim Subject Speak?*, Yazan Doughan (University of Chicago / Affiliated EUME Fellow 2014/2015) *Speaking to Authority, Speaking with Authority*, and Nada Moutaz (Ohio State University / EUME Fellow 2014/2015), *In Pursuit of Coherence*.

Ruth Mas opened the workshop with a set of challenging questions: What is it to do a critique of the secular when the foundation of critique is the Enlightenment tradition, when as academics, our tools of critique come from this very tradition that we are attempting to critique, and not from any transcendental tradition. The flipside of this question is then what makes tradition be "not secular"/ Islamic/ religious when the foundational texts of the tradition (the Qur'an and the Sunna) already integrate (secular) reason? Hussein Ali Agrama suggested that, even under the modern state, there may be spaces of the "asecular" where the problematique of the secular (the delineation of the religious) is simply not relevant.

Humeira Iqtidar invited us to think about what characterizes tradition, taking as case study the new wave of "traditionalist" Muslim thinkers in South Asia: Is methodology (a way of doing things, making arguments, organizing thought) the hallmark of a tradition? Does this produce a "denuded" tradition? Shouldn't we also think of the conception of knowledge production and consumption, the sensibility, of this tradition? In his comments, Agrama proposed that there might be yet another hallmark of tradition to contend with, temporality. He also posed the question of the distribution of authority within the tradition, asking how come most studies concentrate on the ulamas.

Karim Sadek concluded the morning session presentations by first drawing on the works of Axel Honneth and Rached al-Ghannouchi to sketch the case for an Islamic radical democracy - a political arrangement that is radically democratic while being characteristically Islamic -, and second, identifying three critical interventions this political arrangement makes. These interventions concern (i) employing the notion of pluralism as a criteria for evaluating political arrangements, (ii) drawing the boundaries on public contestation, and (iii) the connection

between political Islam and the state. In response Agrama pushed a line of thinking that puts in question the commitment to democracy in the first place.

Presentations in the afternoon session addressed the conceptual nexus of authority, freedom, truth and critique from different angles. Maeve Cooke framed the relation between the three concepts by drawing on her own work, as well as on Hannah Arendt's seminal essay on authority which served as one of the workshop's key starting points. This helped the participants to bring into clear relief the difference between authority and authoritarianism. As Cooke succinctly put it, authoritative critique is critique that can be freely accepted because it is conducive to the spiritual and material well-being (or the human flourishing) of those it addresses. This articulation framed Cooke's commentary on the various workshop presentations and helped guide the rest of the discussion.

Schirin Amir-Moazami's paper moved the geographic focus away from Muslim-majority states with which other presenters were concerned to the status of Muslims as a minority in Europe in relation to secular state power. She attended to debates around the practice of male circumcision by Muslims in Germany and how they illuminate the workings of the secular, modern state in delineating distinctions between religion and non-religion and between acceptable and unacceptable religious practices. Amir-Moazami's argument rested on how secular discourse (in the form of scientific and legal reason) constructs a normative, presumably universal, "secular body" in relation to which certain religious practices, such as male circumcision, appear irrational and deviant, providing grounds for state intervention to govern Muslims as a religious minority through a bodily regime. As Amir-Moazami's contribution demonstrates, under such a regime, it becomes difficult to articulate forms of reasoning and critique growing out of an Islamic tradition within the public sphere constituted and governed by the state. Her contribution invited us to a serious consideration of the human body as a site of modern, secular governmentality. In response, Cooke suggested a clearer conceptual distinction between authoritarian and authoritative critique by bringing into clearer focus how human flourishing bears on the male circumcision debates.

Yazan Doughan addressed the same conceptual nexus from a different perspective--that of political activists in Jordan during the wave of Arab uprisings--and by focusing more on the practical dimension of critique. Guided by the empirical question of why anti-corruption activists in Jordan disagreed violently when the object of their critique was the Jordanian monarch, Doughan suggested that History, as the temporality and narrative frame within which political action takes place, provided the ontological grounds for the activists critique and thus bound them to the monarchy even as they protested against it. As such, Doughan invited a more serious consideration of self-narrative as the condition of intelligibility of action and hence of the authoritativeness of critique and of truth. In response, Cooke suggested that this may be one way to explain why disclosive critique--one that opens people's eyes to things they have not been able to see or feel before--can sometimes fail.

Nada Moumtaz's contribution focused less on the state and more on the grounds of authority within a tradition--in this case, the Islamic tradition. She suggested that the concept of "orthodoxy" as a concern for correctness could be a good space to investigate how authority functions as internally binding through structures of feelings and dispositions that compel obedience. Moumtaz acknowledged that the concern for correct practice and hence the production and reproduction of authority operates differently for different people within a tradition. For instance, an ordinary practitioner is concerned with how to live a life as a good Muslim while a religious scholar is concerned with how to determine what the correct practice is. Moumtaz also brought up the intersection of traditions and the way such encounters open up space for critique. She pointed that one needs to remain attuned to power relations between traditions, while keeping the possibility for external critique to be authoritative and for such encounters to be transformative, especially through the incorporation of new styles of reasoning. In response, Cooke suggested that the paper put too much emphasis on inner-binding through affect, before grounding it in the recognition of truth.

The concluding session of the workshop provided an open forum for discussion among all participants and attendees.