

„Islam“ as an Epistemic Field. Imperial Entanglements and Orientalism in the German-Speaking World Since 1870

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Datum, Ort: 11.10.2018–12.10.2018, Berlin
Bericht von: Nils Riecken, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

„Islam“ does not figure prominently in standard historiographical narratives of modern German history. But the claim that it does have a central place in the Federal Republic has given rise to fierce debates about German identity, the political foundations of this polity, and its limits. The conference, which was organized by NILS RIECKEN and LARISSA SCHMID (both Berlin), had set out to make an intervention into these debates about the curious status of „Islam“ in German history and politics from a historical perspective, and to ask how a postcolonial history of knowledge might contribute to such an endeavor. As Riecken explained in his introduction, this approach was designed to provide an analytic frame to trace the processes and practices through which „Islam“ was produced as an epistemic and thus political object of debate and intervention in a specific historical period and in a particular political space, namely the German-speaking world since 1870 with its imperial and transregional connections. What kind of questions did this constitution of „truths“ about „Islam“ and „Orient“ as areas of knowledge answer?

To this end, the conference brought together younger and more senior scholars from the fields of history, Islamic, and religious studies. While engaging in such a mode of historicizing the knowledge production about „Islam“, the topics of the individual papers of the conference ranged from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century to the present. All papers revealed the central importance of the transregional dimension for understanding the constitution of „Islam“ in this period.

The first and the last paper directly took

on the political dimensions of our present. From a genealogical perspective RUTH MAS (New York) addressed the question of how sovereignty is produced through the racist exclusion of the figure of the Muslim refugee that has come to stand for the unreason outside of the rational grounding of the *polis*. She highlighted how secularism's logic of transcendence reiterates the logic of „turning away“ from the knowledge that sovereign power places at its exterior margins. In her major intervention, Mas traced this logic of the „turning away“ through a far-reaching reading of debates in political philosophy that took her from Aristotle to Jacques Derrida's reflections on bestiality and sovereignty, and a present-day German court ruling.

Likewise exploring the intricate relationship between epistemological margins of „Islam“ and sovereignty, BETTINA GRÄF (München) examined the question how the current drone wars in Yemen constitute a topic that is difficult to approach from within German *Islamwissenschaft*. Based on her case study, she advanced the argument that *Islamwissenschaft* in fact needs an object of inquiry that is, by definition, the other person, the other people, or the other region. In contrast, a postcolonial history of knowledge questions the conditions that have led to the emergence and continue to sustain this demand, as she pointed out. She made a plea for critically questioning the (geo-)politics of representation underpinning research in *Islamwissenschaft*. This shift, she argued, requires scholars to acknowledge that they are in fact part of the „epistemic object“ they study.

The papers by JÖRG HAUSTEIN (London) and ZUBAIR AHMAD (Berlin) focused on the question of how „Islam“ as an object of political debate and intervention was produced in and through German colonies and colonial policies in East Africa. Following Michel Foucault's work, both raised the question when the notion of an „Islamic population“ emerged in these politics of rule. Taking reports about how German soldiers stormed into a mosque in the East African port town of Pangani as an example, Ahmad claimed that the epistemic object of a „Muslim population“ and knowledge about „Islam“ as a

political object of intervention had yet to be created. Haustein's paper elucidated the discursive framework within which „Islam“ was produced as an epistemic object in the period from the German conquest of East Africa until the First World War. He observed that, at first, there was a central focus not on „Islam“, but on „Arabdom“ – a category overdetermined through economic interest, race, politics, and religion. He then showed through a series of practical debates how the concept of „Islam“ that came to structure German colonial policies up until the Second World War framed it as a religion that was inherently politically potent and required strategic governmental response.

A second group of papers addressed scholarly networks and discourses at different sites. AMIT LEVI (Jerusalem) focused on German-Jewish scholars, their role in founding the School of Oriental Studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and their attitudes towards „Islam“ as well as the integration of Arab and Muslim intellectuals in this institution. Levi analyzed how plans to integrate Arab or Muslim scholars into the institute clashed with the political realities of nationalist ideologies and the declared Zionist purpose of the Hebrew University in the context of military and political conflicts in Palestine and Israel.

DAVID MOSHFEGH (Madrid) zoomed in on the emergence of *Islamwissenschaft* as a „science of religion“, articulating his argument as a critique of linking *Islamwissenschaft* too closely with imperialist politics. He differentiated Carl Heinrich Becker's emphasis on *Kulturpolitik* (cultural policy) from the way the Dutch Orientalist Snouck Hurgronje emphasized *Kolonialpolitik* (colonial policy). Whereas Hurgronje was implicated in colonial politics, Becker's goal for Islam was, as Moshfegh suggested, rather a modernization on its own terms. In the discussion, it was critically pointed out that Becker's view, instead of embracing an ideal of autochthonous Islamic reform, rather replicated a secularizing vision of a modernized Islam according to the precepts of secularization from outside.

NORA DERBAL (Cairo) looked at a couple of articles by Heinrich Freiherr von Maltzan

in the *Magazin für die Literatur des Auslands* (1870-73). She identified three themes as structuring Maltzan's Orientalist discourse: the Orient as a place of Islam, Muslims as both „fanatical“ and „pragmatic“. In response to her argument that Maltzan voiced a cautious criticism of colonialism regarding the French occupation of Tunisia, a number of participants emphasized that it is important to distinguish between the critique of individual colonial projects on one hand and the colonial gaze on the other. REBEKKA HABERMAS (Göttingen) stressed that it was possible to criticize individual projects, but still retain a colonial gaze that ordered the world around racial differences.

CAROLINE HERFERT (Hamburg) and PHILIPP BRUCKMAYR (Vienna) turned their attention to the Habsburg empire. Herfert scrutinized the Orientalist discourse in relation to the empire's trade policy in the Viennese Oriental Museum and its journal *Österreichische Monatsschrift für den Orient* (1875-1918). She asked about the rationale that was organizing the display of objects and the activities of the museum as well as the choice of the various topics for the articles of the journal. Importantly, she drew attention to how „economic supremacy“ has formed part of Orientalist forms of knowledge and power – a point that is well worth asking regarding our contemporary present. Bruckmayr asked how the take on „Islam“ by the Catholic priest, scholar and Professor of biblical studies Hermann Stieglecker differed from those of his mostly Protestant colleagues at secular universities. He pointed out that whereas for Protestant secular scholars of *Islamkunde* such as Carl Heinrich Becker, „Islam“ was crucially an issue of colonial politics and seen through the lens of the ideal of modernization as secularization, Stieglecker's view of „Islam“ was more in line with clerical circles that saw secularization as a threat to believers.

Another group of papers addressed the German Federal Republic. JOSEPH BEN PRESTEL (Berlin / Princeton) looked at how the „Western German Radical Left“ construed „Islam“ in the 1970s. Prestel traced a conceptual shift that was, as he argued, brought about by certain political events in the late 1970s, especially the Lebanese civil war (1975-

1990). He explained that whereas the concept of „Third World“ solidarity, understood as a shared struggle against imperialism, was dominant during the 1960s and 1970s, conceptualizing the Middle East in terms of „religion“ and „Islam“ became stronger in the 1980s.

ISKANDER AHMED ABDALLAH (Berlin) analyzed how discourses about „liberal Islam“ in present-day Germany must be studied not simply as attempts at limiting the reach of religious norms. Instead, one should look at „liberal“ regulative imperatives as productive of new practices, spaces, and hermeneutics. Taking the „liberal“ mosque founded by Seyran Ateş in Berlin as case study, he made a plea for looking at the secular politics of time through which subjectivities are produced in the context of a state-driven governing discourse. His point was that these calls in fact create a „liberal Other“ – a „modern“, „secular“, „tolerant“ Islam – that conforms to, rather than questions politics of liberal and national discourse that powerfully define what counts as tolerable, as the same, and as different.

ALEX KONRAD (Potsdam) presented three Muslim associations established in the 1970s and 1980s and their place in relation to Western German society's expectations for integration – the Islamic Community in Southern Germany (ICSG) in 1973, the Association of Islamic Cultural Centers (AICC) in 1979/80, and the DITIB in 1984. He used these cases to study the location of Muslim spaces in Western Germany through the lens of West Germany's law of associations.

In conclusion, Rebekka Habermas pointed out that the conference was successful in providing a more precise picture of how „Islam“ as an epistemic field emerged in the German-speaking world. She emphasized among other things that *Islamwissenschaft* was apparently made by many, that it came into existence as a Protestant discipline, even though it is yet unclear how Protestant it is, that its emergence was firmly located in a colonial and secular field, and that many places were involved in the creation of what came to figure as *Islamwissenschaft*. Second, she pointed to the challenge of relating the emergence of *Islamwissenschaft* to broader spaces of knowl-

edge such as the empire, gender, and magic, as well as the emergence of religious studies – in order to not separate the analysis of the production of „Islam“ as an epistemic field from debates of colonial history. She made clear that this requires a fuller theorization of the „secular“ not in the sense of disenchantment, but rather in Talal Asad's sense as something more than a lack of religion.

SCHIRIN AMIR-MOAZAMI (Berlin) highlighted that even though all papers explored moments of empire, they could have addressed more systematically how the imperial, the practices and politics of knowledge production have been entangled in those moments. She reemphasized the organizer's point that, to understand the stakes of confronting the knowledge production about „Islam“, the present needs to be understood as a reproduction of those colonial and imperial moments and against the prevalent equation of the official end of empire with the end of its epistemological and political effects. Moreover, she urged to put this in relation to the self-critical understanding of *Islamwissenschaft* / Islamic studies and to reflect upon the hierarchization of „major“ and „minor“ disciplines. In the ensuing discussion, the question what *Islamwissenschaft* actually „is“ was fiercely debated.

As DYALA HAMZAH (Montréal) succinctly put it, the major disciplines continue to keep Islamic studies as a „minor discipline“ in relation to the „major disciplines“, but „mine it“ as a source of knowledge.

The conference showed that looking at „Islam as an epistemic field“ through the lens of a postcolonial history of knowledge is – while building on existing research – a promising field of inquiry. It made particularly clear how important it is to ask about the specificities of German *Islamwissenschaft*, *Islamkunde*, *Arabistik*, and *Orientalistik* in comparison to other disciplinary formations of knowledge and international debates on the history of area studies. Moreover, going beyond common temporal, spatial, and thus epistemic and political framings of modern German history proved useful to elucidate the often paradoxical place of „Islam“ and „the Orient“ in German-speaking worlds, past and present.

Conference Overview:

Nils Riecken and Larissa Schmid (both Berlin): Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Panel 1: The Sovereign State, Modern Politics, Religion, and Islam

Ruth Mas (New York): The Muslim Refugee and the Bestial Sovereignty of the State

David Moshfegh (Madrid): *Islamwissenschaft* as a Science of Religion

Panel 2: Islam and the German Empire

Zubair Ahmad (Berlin): Managing Muslim Bodies in the Colonies: On the Formation of Germany's *Islampolitik*

Jörg Hausteil (London): How the Germans brought „Islam“ to East Africa: Colonial Debates and the Politics of Religion

Panel 3: Transnational Histories of German Orientalism I

Nora Derbal (Cairo): Jews, „Turcos“ and the French in North Africa: Heinrich Freiherr von Maltzan's not so Disinterested Writings in the *Magazin für die Literatur des Auslands* (1870-73)

Amit Levy (Jerusalem): Islam without Muslims: German-Jewish Scholars and Oriental Studies in Palestine/Israel

Panel 4: Transnational Histories of German Orientalism II

Robert Terrell (Syracuse, NY): The Geopolitics of Islam and Islams in Post-Imperial Berlin, 1922-1928

Dyala Hamzah (Montréal): Oriental Professors and German Orientalists in 1930s Berlin: Improbable Communities, Transnational Imaginaries, and Networks

Panel 5: „Islam“ and Orientalism in the Habsburg Empire

Caroline Herfert (Hamburg): „Enlightening the Orient is Our Agenda [...]“: Orientalist Discourse and the Habsburg Empire's Trade Policy in the Viennese Oriental Museum and its Journal *Österreichische Monatsschrift für den Orient* (1875-1918)

Philipp Bruckmayr (Vienna): Catholic Revi-

sionism in the Making of „Islam“ as an Epistemic Field: The Case of Hermann Stieglecker

Panel 6: „Islam“ in German Politics and Public Debates

Joseph Ben Prestel (Berlin / Princeton): Degrees of Separation: Islam and the West German Radical Left in the 1970s

Iskandar Ahmed Abdalla (Berlin): Rendering Islam Liberal: Time, Space and The Imperative of Intelligibility

Panel 7: Rendering „Muslims“ Visible, Framing „Islam“

Alex Konrad (Potsdam): The Hybridization of Muslim Spaces in Germany: A Historical Perspective on the Perception of Muslims

Bettina Gräf (München): Drone Technology: An (Im)Possible Topic of Islamic Studies

Panel 8: Comments on Papers, Concluding Discussion, Publication

Rebekka Habermas (Göttingen): Comment

Schirin Amir-Moazami (Berlin): Comment

Tagungsbericht „Islam“ as an Epistemic Field. Imperial Entanglements and Orientalism in the German-Speaking World Since 1870. 11.10.2018–12.10.2018, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 12.12.2018.