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PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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TITLE: Methodologies of resistance: A Critical Muslim Studies appraisal

CONVENOR(S): - Sarah Marusek, University of Leeds
- Mustapha Sheikh, University of Leeds

ABSTRACT:

The sudden appearance of mass street demonstrations during the 2010/2011 Arab uprisings was shocking to most Western audiences. After all, most of the MENA states had been portrayed in the West as stable authoritarian regimes. Viewed through a Western secular liberal lens, the comprehensive and yet contradictory demands of the protestors were reduced to calls for secular liberal democracy, which is why so many were in denial about the role of Islam in mobilising the protests. Accordingly, the failure of these uprisings to transform the region says as much about our contemporary (mis)understandings of resistance as it does about the abstract and exclusionary nature of Western secular liberalism: the wider implications of the uprisings were minimised, while their immediate potential was exaggerated. Furthermore, this hegemonic framing obscures how resistance to Western secular liberalism has always thrived within the Islamicate, past and present. This panel will adopt a different approach to think about Islam and resistance. Building on the pioneering work of S. Sayyid, the panellists all employ the framework of Critical Muslim Studies (CMS), taking critiques of Orientalism seriously while firmly rejecting positivism, to provide the analytical tools for creating and recognising pluriversal counterhegemonies that Western secular liberalism fails to account for. Drawing on different research disciplines, methods and historical periods, this panel aims to demonstrate the potential of CMS as a revolutionary approach to reimagine our thinking and doing, decolonising our pasts, presents and futures.

CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Sarah Marusek is a Research Fellow at the University of Leeds and Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg. She is the author of *Faith and Resistance: The Politics of Love and War in Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2018) and co-author of a series of Spinwatch reports on the overlapping funders of the transatlantic Islamophobia network, neoconservative movement and Israeli settlements.

Mustapha Sheikh is lecturer in Islamic Studies and Co-Director of the Iqbal Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *A Treasury of Ibn Taymiyyah: Timeless Wisdom of His Words (Treasury in Islamic Thought and Civilisation)* (Leicester: Kube Publishing, 2017) and *Ottoman Puritanism and Its Discontents: Ahmad al-Rumi al-Aqhisari and the Qadizadelis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

PAPERS:

1. Sarah Marusek, Research Fellow

Faith, Islam and resistance: Decolonising world systems theory

Although debates about decolonisation are dynamic and have multiple expressions depending on their cultural and historical contexts, collectively they are responding to the reality that the colonial infrastructure continues to be reproduced in everyday knowledges, economics and politics. However, while the promise of decoloniality is certainly inspiring, many of our critical ideas and practices have yet to evolve at the revolutionary pace that we owe to ourselves and the generations to come. Two major concerns are: (1) what might decoloniality look like in a world that is now thoroughly embedded in the neoliberal capitalist system; and (2) how can we understand decolonial resistance within this hegemonic world system? In this paper, I employ the lens of Critical Muslim Studies to analyse how the Western post-Enlightenment experience has normalised conceptions of faith as a lesser form of knowledge and stripped rationality of its humanity. This decentred approach helps to highlight how resistances to hegemonic knowledge frameworks is happening all around us, even though Western secular liberalism rejects them as serious alternatives. Based on extensive fieldwork, but also informed by other recent scholarly interventions, I will then explore how contemporary Islamic activists in Lebanon are negotiating with capitalism and neoliberalism in everyday practices, negotiations that may look familiar, but which are actually decentred through a commitment to faith, Islam and resistance, creating what I call a 'resistance subjectivity,' thus presenting a counterhegemonic challenge to Western secular liberalism.

Sarah Marusek is a Research Fellow at the University of Leeds and Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg. She is the author of *Faith and Resistance: The Politics of Love and War in Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2018) and co-author of a series of Spinwatch reports on the overlapping funders of the transatlantic Islamophobia network, neoconservative movement and Israeli settlements.

2. Mustapha Sheikh, Lecturer in Islamic Studies

Critical Muslim Studies: A post-Orientalist ground for the critique of tradition

The articulation of "critical" in Critical Muslim Studies, as set out in the manifesto of *Reorient: Journal for Critical Muslim Studies*, yields among other concerns, the critique of tradition. Yet the critique of tradition is an engagement with a long and rich history in Euro-American academia, so why the need for Critical Muslim Studies to make this one of its central concerns? The short answer to this is that the critique of tradition in existing configurations has not been sufficiently attentive to the way in which such critique might actually play into the hegemonic Orientalist project; neither has it been sufficiently attentive to the fact that this engagement happens within the paradigmatic Islamic Studies in which Orientalist method, epistemology and standards continue to shape the field. So while it is true that there is no shortage of scholarship of this type produced, often by well-meaning Muslim academics, there is a sense in which the normal science of Orientalism remains undisturbed. I will argue that Critical Muslim Studies, therefore, provides an important alternative space and ground for enquires where a Muslim subjectivity can finally explore questions which actually represent Muslim concerns; the space and ground where epistemology can finally be de-linked from the project of Orientalism and linked instead to the

Ummah; the space and ground where an engagement such as the critique of tradition can be put into the service of decolonisation/decoloniality, rather than re-inscribe colonisation/coloniality.

Mustapha Sheikh is lecturer in Islamic Studies and Co-Director of the Iqbal Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam at the University of Leeds.

3. Shaheen Kattiparambil, PhD Student

Decolonising Narratives: The Myth of Persian Gulf Piracy

The word pirate conjures up a persona of barbarianism, lawlessness and violence and hence the pirate according to English law was *hostis humani generis* (enemy of humanity). As a precursor to the contemporary application of the word terrorism or terrorist regimes to the Persian Gulf to enforce a state of exception, the British Empire designated the Persian Gulf as the 'Pirate Coast' in the 17th century as a rationale for the deployment of violence and warfare. The chroniclers of Empire constructed narratives of the powerful Al-Qasimi tribe, labelling them the enemy of humanity, and depicted Empire's violence as part of its responsibility towards mankind, providing legitimacy for the British colonial authorities in countering Al-Qasimi resistance. Subsequently, the Royal Navy conducted a sustained bombing campaign against the Al-Qasimi which led to their eventual capitulation in 1820. This paper will highlight the role that constructed historical narratives play in delegitimising and dehumanising resistance through an exercise of epistemic de-centring. By subjecting these narratives to a post-orientalist and decolonial analysis, this study will fall within the area of Critical Muslim Studies. Making use of primary documents online and also from counternarrative studies done by Mohammed Al-Qasimi, I will take into account the sociohistorical realities of the period, analyse the dynamics between the main players and look into the reports of incidents of piracy, focusing on discrepancies arising from such narratives and the bias in narrative construction positioning the Al-Qasimi at the borders of civilisation by ascribing their alleged immorality to their religious fanaticism.

Sheheen Kattiparambil is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, having completed his Masters in Modern Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

4. Sümeyye Sakarya, PhD Student

Resistance through Government: Islamism in Turkey

The notion of the nation-state as the main unit of analysis in the mainstream international relations and political science literature, thus reflecting the hegemony of Western secular liberalism, creates great obstacles when making sense of "resistance" in Muslim dominated countries. The acceptance of the nation-state and secularism as norms, particularly ones requiring each other, not only reduces resistance to non-state actors, mainly and almost exclusively against the nation-state, but also ironically assumes that resisters must have a Western secular discourse, as this is conceived as the only way of being political. Any reading of the Arab uprisings through the deployment of the concepts of democracy-bread-freedom while ignoring the Islamicate elements in them exemplifies this misunderstanding. So, while the Gezi protests in Turkey were celebrated by many as resistance, the people's stance against the 15 July coup attempt is not

portrayed as resistance. Another contradiction appears in the evaluation of Islamist parties. As their political struggle has employed the instruments of the nation-state to become government, they have never been regarded as resistance. On the other hand, they have had to resist to exist against the treatments such as party closures, political bans and imprisonments. Having such concerns, after discussing the concepts of the political, hegemony and resistance in S. Sayyid's work, I will show how, paradoxically, Islamist parties and even governments can and even should be understood as resistance against Western secular hegemony and, while doing this, the journey of Islamism in Turkey will be my main referent.

Sümeyye Sakarya is a PhD student at the University of Leeds, Department of Sociology. Her project is on how to construe the transformation of Islamism, mainly its political language.

5. Islam Tajul

Wrestling theology from the theologians: On the Liberation Theology of Hasan al-Banna

Hasan al-Banna's influence on Islamism cannot be understated. His role, however, as theologian and Imam is often overlooked in academic studies of this charismatic figure. The Twenty Principles (*al-'Uṣūl al-'Ishrūn*) of his *Risālat al-Ta'ālīm* exemplifies not only al-Banna's grounding in traditional scholasticism but also his liberation theology which speaks to the *umma* with deferential reference to orthopraxy of Muslims of all denominational persuasions. The principles are once again interpreted the 15th Islamic century *ummatic* context. In unpacking these twenty principles, the influence of al-Banna on other Islamist, Salafi, political Sufi and Islamic Left projects can be appreciated. This paper examines an often neglected aspect of al-Banna's thought, that of liberating theology, from the 'wranglings of the theologians' by giving Muslims autonomy over their religion through a CMS approach.

Tajul Islam is lecturer in Islamic Studies and Co-Director of the Iqbal Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam at the University of Leeds.