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ARAB-GERMAN  
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# Theorizing in a Global World: Arab Perspectives

Hybrid Workshop of the  
Arab-German Young Academy  
of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA)

13 December 2021  
9 a.m. – 4 p.m. CET



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This internal workshop is part of the project  
“Theorizing in a global world: Arab perspectives”  
by the AGYA Working Group *Dynamics of Transformation*

- 08:45 – 09:00 a.m. **Registration and 2G+ Check**
- 09:00 – 09:30 **Welcome and Introduction**
- 09:30 – 09:45 **Reconfiguring Knowledge Production on the “Other”**  
**Anaheed Al-Hardan**  
*American University of Beirut, Lebanon*
- 09:45 – 10:00 **Positionality and Perspective – The Continuous Reconfiguration of Fragmentations and Overlaps**  
**Florian Zemmin**  
*Freie Universität Berlin, Germany*
- 10:00 – 10:30 **Discussion**  
*moderated by Sindyay Qasem*  
*Freie Universität Berlin, Germany*
- 10:30 – 10:45 **Coffee Break**
- 10:45 – 11:00 **A Critical Turn to Germany – Engagements between Germany and the Global South**  
**Nahed Samour**  
*Humboldt University zu Berlin, Germany*
- 11:00 – 11:15 **Contemporary Carceral Knowledge Production – Between Syria and the EU**  
**Anne-Marie McManus**  
*Forum Transregionale Studien, Germany*
- 11:15 – 11:30 **Berlin’s Ruh Al-Asr – The Arab Exile Manual of Thought**  
**Amro Ali**  
*American University in Cairo, Egypt*
- 11:30 – 12:00 **Discussion**  
*moderated by Sindyay Qasem*  
*Freie Universität Berlin, Germany*
- 12:00 – 01:30 **Lunch Break**
- 01:30 – 01:45 p.m. **The politics of Naming – Epistemology in the Study of Armed Non-State Actors in the Middle East and North Africa**  
**Hanna Pfeifer**  
*Goethe University Frankfurt and Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Germany*
- 02:00 – 02:15 **Knowledge Production on Protests in the MENA-Region – Deconstructing the Hub-and-Spoke Model**  
**Irene Weipert-Fenner**  
*Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Germany*
- 02:15 – 02:45 **Discussion**  
*moderated by Sindyay Qasem*  
*Freie Universität Berlin, Germany*
- 02:45 – 03:00 **Coffee Break**
- 03:00 – 04:00 **Wrap-up Discussion**

## Reconfiguring Knowledge Production on the “Other”

Anaheed Al-Hardan

In this paper, I build on Edward Said's thesis in *Orientalism*, and reflect on how modern knowledge production on the Arab world continues to be driven by a will to knowledge that is at once also a will to power. By critically tracing normative epistemologies, and modes of producing the scholarly “expert,” I argue that the way in which knowledge on Arab societies in the US-European academy, and particularly area studies, is undertaken continues to treat Arab societies as the particular culture to be processed through the universal theories of Europe. In this paper, I suggest that a mitigation of this hegemonic mode of knowledge production could be undertaken in two ways: First, through situating “particular” Arab intellectual and theoretical production in the “universal” social science and humanities disciplines, and second, through empirical case studies which build on such theoretical approaches and necessitate a relational study of European and Arab societies.

## Positionality and Perspective – The continuous Reconfiguration of Fragmentations and Overlaps

Florian Zemmin

We need to account for the nexus of knowledge and power and acknowledge our own positionality as a researcher, both as concerns the overall structure of knowledge production globally and the set-up of individual research projects. This is to state the obvious – having been made obvious by decades of post-colonial critique but also other strands of questioning the previously assumed universality of categories in the humanities and the social sciences. At the same time, opposition to universality in the name of particularism, radical difference, or incommensurability has by now proven to be a dead-end. This basically follows from the factual entanglement of knowledge production globally and from commonly shared premises of scientific modes of producing insights, in distinction from other modes, such as art. While thus never constituting radical difference, differences in perspectives do obviously abound. Each scholarly perspective is made-up of multiple factors, including gender and geographical location, socio-economic background and political position, theoretical affinity and personal experiences. In the last consequence, when considering all its constitutive factors, each perspective is even unique. In this sense, there is fragmentation. However, scholarly knowledge production would obviously be impossible if there were not also overlaps between perspectives. This are obviously never fixed. Rather, the formation of fragmentations and overlaps is a continuous and contingent process. Individual scholars will share one constitutive factor, but not another. Some factors are so basic and so widely shared, some overlaps so significant that they are highlighted so frequently as to leading to more stable common positionalities and perspectives, e.g. theoretical schools or new disciplines; other factors overlap only momentarily, e.g. within one research project, for the sake of which other, diverging factors are bracketed.

In view of these basic considerations, what is the status of “an Arab perspective” or “a German perspective”? What is, first of all, required to represent such a perspective? What about scholars from Arab countries working and/or living in Germany for a prolonged time or vice versa? Even if this question could receive a clear answer (which I doubt it can), how does this factor of our multi-factored perspectives relate to other factors, such as common disciplinary background, theoretical premises, political concerns or strategic academic aims? In which context and under which question is an Arab or German perspective the decisive factor that is worth singling out, while bracketing differences between Arab perspectives as well as commonalities between an Arab and a German perspective? In an Arab German Academy, this question is obviously on the table, and worth addressing at the outset of envisioned collaborative projects, as well as at repeated stages during a project. Most collaborative projects – that is, all projects that are not turning the perspectives of the collaborating researchers into the topic of research itself – will however be constituted based on other overlapping factors. In my position paper at our workshop, I will first elaborate on the basic considerations above and then use as an example my own research on sociological knowledge production in Arab countries and my collaboration with Arab sociologists in this regard.

## **A Critical Turn to Germany – Engagements between Germany and the Global South**

**Nahed Samour**

Germany has emerged as a key international player in funding international academic and cultural exchange with the Arab world and the Global South more generally. Programs funded through the DAAD, Alexander-von-Humboldt- Foundation, Goethe-Institute and others evidence that Germany is engaging in questions such as governance, rule of law, constitutionalism, human rights or memory politics. Similarly, the Federal Constitutional Court is increasingly translating its decisions into English, French and Spanish, and aims to engage through „Begriffsbildung“ with the world. Recent discussions in Germany are controversially addressing in how far Germany is becoming hegemonic, not least by referring to its lessons learned from its history (with repercussions for the Arab world) to „make a better world“. From this derives the wish to become permanent member of the security council, a growing role in NATO lead military offensives, or Germany's financial and personal capacity supporting of the International Criminal Court. A critical turn to Germany engages with how Germany's past and present is creating a new set of challenges in international engagement with the Arab world in particular and the Global South in general.

## **Contemporary Carceral Knowledge Production – Between Syria and the EU**

**Anne-Marie McManus**

My paper presents my ongoing research on the production of knowledge, art, and cultural formations (including archives, collaborative research and artistic relationships, and activist networks) related to Syrian prisons in the contemporary EU. This emergent field – which I provisionally call carceral knowledge production – is transnationally constituted between Syria and surrounding nations (e.g., Turkey, Lebanon) and the EU, with Germany, France, and the Netherlands acting as unofficial and often delinked centers. My own research is part of this field of carceral knowledge production. It is also an effort to reflect critically, through literary and collaborative ethnographic methods, on its historical development and its position as a site to interrogate the ethics and politics, notably after 2011, of knowledge production in European languages “on” the Middle East. Core topics will include the historical academic reception of “prison literature” and current efforts (in various cultural and digital forms) to wrest carceral knowledge production onto new epistemic and political grounds; the imagined audiences (or publics) of such efforts; and the possibilities and risks of collaborative academic research and its associated forms of output.

## Berlin's Ruh Al-Asr – The Arab Exile Manual of Thought

Amro Ali

In this project we aim to address a lot of questions about the Arab intellectual exile presence in Berlin. We raise questions with Arab publics in Berlin about who is here, why, and their aims. We try to draw a map of intellectual currents, worldviews, allegiances and modes of knowledge production that have been made possible for Arabs in the German capital and discuss how these individuals and their production can be of use to a broader and varied Arab publics throughout other western capitals. This exploration will allow us to bring about new definitions of intellectual and exile that are relevant and unique to the Arab Berliner experience in a post-2011 world.

We then go on to discuss why Berlin is the prime place for this exploration to happen, and why now is the right time. We talk about Berlin and its history, both as a city of exile, making it an already prime ground for Arab intellectual existence and its place in Arab consciousness and relationship to the Arab world – addressing both the opportunities these present and the ironies they show about exile, history, and collective politics.

The definition of intellectual that we focus on is one that includes the intellectual as a guide or driver of public awareness and engagement in issues beyond individual existence. To begin hoping for such intellectual practices and intervention, we begin by trying to add to our map the discussions and interventions that are already happening. What do they focus on and where do they come short? This will then help us better imagine what is possible and how to begin a move towards making it possible.

### Who is here? (How to engage them, where to find them?)

- Exile
- Arab Exodus
- Intellectual/Avant-guards
- Public/counter-public
- Guild over unfinished business
- Living in hiatus between the no-longer and the not-yet

### What/where/why is here?

- Distantly safe city
- Geographical/social/cultural conditions
- Germany in the Arab Psyche
- Exile Capital
- Exploring an Arab's Berlin
- Europe and the loss of political imagination
- Berlin and Arab cities

### What conversations are happening?

- Political obligations
- Exile as a mental state
- Arabs are intellectually orphaned
- Over-lapping legitimacies
- What questions/issues do Arabs raise through their access to Academia

### What interventions are needed?

- Ideational movement
- Collective triumph over the individual
- Forgiveness
- Reconciliation
- Reflection
- Church/mosque

### What's in the way?

- Self-preservation
- Ego
- Legal limbo
- Right wing currents
- Berlin being new to Arab migratory history
- Survival mode
- The visa regime
- Existential exhaustion
- The politics of rest
- The threatening reach of Arab embassies
- Competitive victimhood
- Living in ambiguity

### How to put it in Motion/What next?

- Political redemption: redeeming the moments that got us here from what incriminated them retrospectively when things went astray. Returning them to their original meanings and intentions.
- New ways of relating to Berlin
- Berlin and Arab cities
- A conference in perpetual motion
- Defining the zeitgeist/Ruh al-Asr

## **The politics of naming: Epistemology in the study of armed non-state actors in the Middle East and North Africa**

**Hanna Pfeifer**

In this contribution, we investigate the politics of naming which revolves around armed non-state actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from a critical perspective. By “politics of naming”, we refer to the process of (political) labelling and (academic) typologising of those actors who are deemed (problematically) different and (ontologically) separate from the Westphalian state. We hold that the epistemology of studying such actors carries – more or less – hidden assumptions about the region and the actors under investigation which reify dominant understandings of what a state and a “normal” political order are, from which actually existing political orders “deviate”. We discuss the effects that the politics of naming has on a political and academic level.

## **Knowledge production on Protests in the MENA-Region – Deconstructing the Hub-and-Spoke model**

**Irene Weipert-Fenner**

Protest research in the MENA has engaged more and more with social movement studies since the Arab uprisings 2010/2011. The question whether “general” social movement theory (SMT) with its origins in US- and European contexts could be applied to the MENA (Beinin/Vairel 2011) was not at the heart of the debates anymore. Any MENA exceptionalism was rejected (e.g. Volpi/Clark 2019).

However, I argue that other questions regarding academic knowledge production in this field should be addressed. I focus on the question of who produces what kind of knowledge. Particularly I focus on the role of scholars being based in the region. I first investigate their share in publications on social movements and protests in the MENA in academic journals of political science, social movement studies and an area journal. The results show a shockingly low representation of MENA topics in general, followed by an even lower representation of scholars being based in the region. I argue that these results call for further comparative research with other regions in the global South in order to find out whether the low representation is specific for the MENA (and then think about what could be done to change it.)

Second, I follow up on older debates in the area studies controversy that criticized the hub-and-spoke model in the social sciences: accordingly, the global South scholar with access to first-hand information on his or her country of residence was reduced to a provider of local data whereas the global North scholar without regional and language expertise processed this information in comparative studies and hereby produced general knowledge.

I believe that the view on both sides is not adequate, yet I still have experienced that many colleagues being based in the region tend to work on their country of residence (and mostly not in comparative studies). In the presentation I reflect on why this is the case and which reasons are actually problematic. They range from incentives to work on the specific country (like scholar-activism) to barriers that might keep scholars from working on other countries of the region (e.g. repression, visa restrictions). I propose a nuanced picture that differentiates between explanations resulting from social movement studies as a specific subfield and structures that might be specific to global South regions or the MENA as such. Particularly part two of the presentation should just be seen as a starting point for a debate. I planned for focus group discussions with colleagues being based in the region, but because of the Covid pandemic this has all been postponed for the time being. (And topics that I would like to discuss such as the impact of repression on scholarship are too sensitive to be discussed on Zoom and alike). This means this part is based on personal experiences, observations and informal discussions I had over the course of the last decade.