SPECIAL SECTION REPORT ON THE MODERN MUSLIM SUBJECTIVITIES PROJECT

Modernity, Islamic Traditions, and the Good Life: An Outline of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project*

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Abstract

This article provides a brief overview of the heuristic framework of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project that is being conducted at the University of Southern Denmark as of the writing of this article. The project explores ways in which Islamic traditions have played a role in the construction of modern Muslim subjectivities. Applying a problem-driven perspective, it selectively borrows from theories of successive modernities, sociology of religion, and poststructuralist approaches to modern subjectivity formation, introducing a novel heuristic framework to the field of Islamic studies. In posing the question as to the ways in which Muslims have constructed modern selfhoods, the project combines studies on Islamic reform, young Muslims in Egypt and Denmark, (post)modern Sufism, Islamic higher education, and changing notions of intimacy in two Egyptian revolutions. In criticizing the alleged exclusivity of Western modernity, the project wants to make original contributions to both conceptual discussions in the humanities and our knowledge of modern Muslim societies.

Key words: Modernity, subjectivity formation, social order, Islam, religious traditions

Research on "political Islam" has dominated the scholarly debate about the relationship between Islam and modernity in the past decades. This focus on the politicization of Islam applies to contemporary research both on Muslim majority societies and on Muslim minorities in Europe and North America.[1] Not that research on political Islam is without merits. On the contrary, the politicization of religion by a broad range of Islamist groups and organizations certainly deserves our attention. Yet given the often polarized

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and repetitive nature of the debate on Islam and politics, this project suggests a change of perspective. Instead of focusing on Islamist politics, we intend to address one of the main issues that underlie them: the formation of modern subjectivities and related notions of the good life in the Muslim world. More precisely, this project aims to explore the ways in which the interlacing of Islamic traditions with globally relevant social imaginaries has contributed to the construction of collectively acknowledged modern ways of forming meaningful Muslim selfhoods.

The Modern Subjectivities Project brings together senior and junior scholars engaged in the study of Muslim majority and minority countries. The author of this introductory essay and the authors of two of the following three case studies are affiliated with the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark. In addition, other participants hold positions at Aarhus University, Denmark, and Howard University in the U.S. My introductory essay will necessarily remain rather abstract, giving an overview of the research questions, hypotheses and theoretical approaches of the project in light of the state of the art. This theoretical perspective provides the abstract heuristic frame of reference for the individual case studies of the project. The subsequent three essays, then, will go into substance, presenting first and therefore still very preliminary findings from our case studies.

Social Theory, Islamic Studies and the Emergence of Global Modernity

In theoretical terms we depart from the general assumption that we all are modern but modern in very different ways. We selectively derive our heuristic framework from theories of world society, the concepts of entangled, multiple and successive modernities, and from poststructuralist approaches to modern subjectivity formation. In this way, we combine three distinct theoretical discussions in contemporary social theory, which often do not communicate with each other. In our definition of the modern subject we adopt a specifically poststructuralist approach in which elements of autonomy and subordination, of freedom and power, dialectically intersect (Foucault 1986, 212). Consequently we clearly deviate from the liberal imaginary of the emancipation of a reflexive, rational, self-interested, and expressive individual. Instead of reifying this hegemonic narrative of liberal individualism, we emphasize the hybrid nature of the modern subject, basing it on competing orders of social and discursive practices. Forms of subjectivity are, then, collectively shared but contested cultural types

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to which individual identity constructions refer in an idiosyncratic way (Reckwitz 2006).

In building on these elements of contemporary "Western" social theory we contend that a critical application of its concepts in a Muslim context can tell us something about ongoing social transformations in Muslim societies. There is still a tendency among social theorists to assume that their respective theories of modernity only have analytical relevance with regard to "Western" or "developed" societies. This applies also to scholars such as Foucault, Reckwitz, Taylor, and Wagner whose works serve as theoretical points of reference in our own project. To a certain extent, this assumption of "Western exclusiveness" finds its counterpart in the field of Islamic studies in which a substantial number of scholars still emphasize the unique features of Islam. This is no doubt true for the orientalist tradition, whose essentialist image of Islam was heavily criticized in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In Islamic studies proper, this tradition meanwhile plays a rather marginal role. Contemporary scholarship on Islam has increasingly but not systematically been informed by conceptual debates in the fields of cultural and social theories. Scholars on Islam have been moving from the analysis of canonical texts to the exploration of forms of religious discourse and social practice in the everyday life of Muslims.[2] With respect to Muslim minorities in Europe and North America, more recent studies have investigated how ritual practices, purity movements, religious body politics, and the re-interpretation of authoritative scriptures have contributed to individual and collective identity constructions among Muslim immigrants.[3]

We consider our project to be a part of these new approaches to study Islam. Yet the mainstream of these studies differs from our project in at least three significant ways. First of all, it is characterized by a strong emphasis on searching for differences rather than similarities between Western and Muslim social experiences. Secondly, critical research in Islamic studies addresses Islamic modernities often not as an intrinsic part of global modernity but rather presents Muslims as "conscripts of Western modernity," as being engaged with modernity as an external force colonizing their lives (cf. Soares and Osella 2009). Finally, in the contemporary anthropology of Islam there is a tendency to focus on strictly pious forms of Islamic behavior at the expense of their interlace with broader discourses of a non-religious character (Bangstad 2011; Schielke 2009, 2010). In sum, social theory and Islamic and Middle East studies still share a certain potential for reinforcing ideas of an, in principle, mutual exclusiveness between Western and Islamic modernities.

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This project wants to make a contribution in breaking with this circular reinforcement of exclusivist and reductionist perspectives. In making similarities in the formation of Western and Muslim subjectivities our point of departure, we do not discard differences. On the contrary, we claim that our understanding of differences has to be grounded in more precise knowledge about similarities. In methodological terms, we use the conceptual tools of social theory to develop a heuristic standard of global modernity against which we interpret differences resulting from historically contingent paths of social change. With its specific and problem-driven theoretical framework, our project wants to contribute to the field of social and cultural theories in showing the relevance of "Western" concepts in "non-Western" contexts. Moreover, it will enhance our knowledge of the multiple ways in which Muslims have constructed Islamic modernities. Integrating studies on Muslim majority societies with those on Muslim minority societies, the project will explore these modernities in a comparative perspective that can open up new directions of research. In addition, we apply in our case studies the category of "Muslim" analytically in the nominal sense of the term, ranging from those who identify themselves as Muslims yet rarely or never follow religious rules and practices (frequently classified as "secular") to those who consciously construct Islamic identities. Thus, we try to avoid the pitfalls in defining Muslims as religiously observant people *per se*.

Theory, Hypotheses, and Case Studies

Social theorists identified in the "affirmation of ordinary life" a major feature of modernity. According to Charles Taylor (1989, 2002, 2007), this term designates aspects of human life that are concerned with the reproduction of everyday life, making work and the family the main locus of the good life in modern times. Similar to Taylor, Andreas Reckwitz (2006) identified three complexes of social practices in which the "subjectification" (Foucault) of the modern self takes place: as working subject; as subject of private and intimate relations; as subject of technologies of the self. Each complex is characterized by networks of collectively acknowledged discourses and social practices that offer modern individuals various dispositions of institutionalized modes of behavior and symbolic orientation for the interpretative construction of their identities. In European history, Reckwitz (2006) discerned three formations of subject cultures that have dominated the modern epoch: the classical bourgeois, the peer-group-oriented type of the salaried masses, and the postmodern creative worker and entrepreneur. The bourgeois gains autonomy as a morally sovereign subject through daily practices of disciplined work and technologies of the self mainly related

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to literacy. In contradistinction to the rationalistic and introverted self of the bourgeois, the peer-group-oriented second type builds on collectively binding and extroverted practices. These practices are combined with technologies of the self, related to audiovisual media, new generalized modes of consumption, and bodily and public performances. Finally, the postmodern type of subjectivity resembles the self-reliant, dynamic, and creative entrepreneur who is individually engaged in shifting projects and applies digital technologies as new means in practicing hermeneutics of the self.

In our heuristic framework we combine these three ideal types with the sequence of social orders that has been conceptualized in theories of successive modernities. With reference to the work of Peter Wagner, we distinguish thereby among three successive stages of modernity: restricted liberal modernity, organized modernity, and pluralistic modernity (1994, 2010). The first form was characterized by an elitist application of morally and rationally grounded liberal rules to a distinguished bourgeois minority. This restricted liberal order of the nineteenth century was replaced by the state-centered imaginary of the organized masses with its collectively shared belief in linear progress and the management of society. Since the second part of the twentieth century, a pluralistic form of modernity has increasingly challenged the hegemonic imaginary of collectively organized modernity. Emphasizing the autonomy of the individual this form of modernity is characterized by multiple choices and an increasing pluralization of social practices. These ideal types do not represent modern ontologies but social imaginaries, that is, globally relevant horizons to which collective and individual processes of identification relate. Consequently, they do not mark radical breaks in the sense of a linear process of replacement. Instead, these types are better understood as competing imaginaries in ongoing conflicts about hegemonic positions in the representation of modernity.

We argue that we can detect similar forms of subjectivity related to successive forms of modernity in the social imaginaries that have been constructed in modern Muslim history (Jung and Sinclair 2015). However, at least at first glance, religion seems to play a rather different role in the historical formation of modern Muslim subjectivities when compared to the mainstream European trajectory. In Muslim societies forms of subjectivity resembling the classical bourgeois, the organized and the pluralistic types have often been constructed in strong reference to Islamic traditions. In the course of the twentieth century, these references to religion have gradually assumed a hegemonic status. In the Muslim discourse of modernity "Islam" became the dominant signifier in defining the authenticity of

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Muslim modernities. Yet at the same time, these references to Islamic traditions have taken on a polysemic nature: While Islamic traditions remain authoritative in defining Muslim authenticity, at the same time they tend to become almost entirely open in meaning. In constructing specifically Islamic identities, Muslims combine religious language, symbols and practices in idiosyncratic ways with political ideologies, neoliberal imaginaries, digitalized technologies, and various forms of consumptive practices. In the theoretical language of Laclau and Mouffe, in the discourse of modernity Islam has turned into an "empty signifier" (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Islam meanwhile represents a discursive nodal point for the multiplicity of ways in which Muslims have tried to construct meaningful modern selfhoods. The meanings of Islamic traditions, however, are highly contested and subject to continuous processes of re-construction and re-interpretation in light of globally relevant non-religious discourses and social imaginaries. It is this idiosyncratic combination of these global discourses and imaginaries with Islamic traditions that our case studies address.

From this heuristic perspective we consider the construction of Islamic modernities as an inherent part of global modernity. Our research is thereby informed by three very general questions:

1) In which ways has the formation of modern forms of subjectivity in the Muslim world been tied together with the reinterpretation of Islamic traditions?
2) What role does religion/Islam play in modern Muslim imaginations of the good life?
3) To what extent does the construction of Muslim modernities rest on global social imaginaries?

In order to answer these questions, the project has to translate its heuristic framework into analytical research strategies for empirically thick case studies. We are not looking for general answers to general questions, but we try to contextualize these general questions in giving particular answers. More precisely, the individual case studies deal with topics such as spirituality and the good life in postmodern forms of Sufism, gendered images of intimacy in two Egyptian revolutions, imaginations of social order and the good life during the occupation of Tahrir square, the intersection of Islamic traditions with the governmentality of the Danish welfare state, or Islamic universities as social sites for subjectivity formation in Asia, Europe, and the USA. In putting their focus on Islamic universities, for instance, two of the following case studies explore the field of higher education as an arena for the construction of both meaningful identities as working subjects and

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forms of intimacy beyond immediate family relations. Imaginations of the good life here, relate at the same time to general ideas emanating within the global system of education, to career expectations framed in the context of different national states, and to normative elements of Islamic traditions as foundational for the construction of moral selves. The following three essays will illustrate the ways in which our subprojects address particular cases guided by the heuristic assumptions of our general theoretical framework.

Endnotes

[1]For studies on the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, see: Bayat 2007; Crooke 2009; Esposito and Mogahed 2008; Esposito and Voll 1996; Hafez 2003; Hegghammer 2010; Kepel 2000; Lewis 1988, 2001; Roy 1992, 2002; Schwedler 2007; Tibi 2009; Vertigans 2008; Wickham 2002; for discussions of Europe and the USA, see: Arigita 2006; Cesari 2004; Kibria 2008; Mandaville 2009; Meer and Modood 2009; Schiffauer 2010; Shadid and Koningsfeld 2002.

[2]Examples for this move are: Cooke and Lawrence 2005; Deeb (2006); Haenni 2005; Hefner and Zaman 2007; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Peterson 2011; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Shehabuddin 2008; and Soares and Otayek 2007.

[3]For studies on Muslim minority contexts, see: Caeiro 2010; Dessing 2012; Fadil 2009; Furseth 2011; Jacobsen 2011; Lewis 2007; Otterbeck 2011; Schmidt 2002, 2004; Sunier 2009; and Winchester 2008.

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