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Workshop 3

The Social Role of Intellectuals in the Middle East

directed by

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Workshop abstract

The aim of this workshop is to provide a forum for the systematic, synthetic, and collaborative exploration of emergent approaches to the study of the social role of two major types of intellectuals, namely *public* intellectuals and *organic* intellectuals. The workshop aims to study intellectuals in the Middle East as a specific social group, and to systematically understand their social, as well as political and cultural, roles. Such a study of the social role of intellectuals provides important support for several other currently flourishing areas of research and commentary in Middle East studies: namely 1) civil society studies; 2) leadership studies; 3) social movement studies; 4) studies of the quality of public life and public debates; and 5) local social histories. The core research concerns revolve in part around what intellectuals say, but more importantly they revolve around such questions as: what are the distinctive features of intellectuals in the Middle East? What makes certain way of formulating ideas more readily propagated, accepted, or debated than otherwise in the public sphere? How do intellectuals influence public life and public debates? How does the work of intellectuals circulate under condition of relative openness or censorship, respectively? What is the audience of intellectuals, and how segmented or stable is it? What are meaningful ways of measuring the influence of intellectuals in society? What sort of relation exists between intellectuals, “street politics,” and civil society? What are the main idioms of public and organic intellectual discourse? What are the institutional venues of public and organic intellectual life, and how effective, stable, or flexible are they? Do public intellectual provide a common regional discourse that blends together sentiments in more than one country? How are intellectuals connected (in structured or ideational

ways) to social movements? Is the level of activity of intellectual in any given country a good predictor of the quality of political or other kinds of leadership?

Workshop description

The aim of this workshop is to provide a forum for the systematic, synthetic, and collaborative exploration of emergent approaches to the studying the social role of at least two major types of intellectuals, namely *public* intellectuals and *organic* intellectuals in the Middle East (in this proposal defined to include North Africa).

Significance of the workshop

There are few systematic studies of public intellectuals in the Middle East, especially in terms of their impact as a specific social group (rather than as separate individuals) on social, political, and cultural life. Yet, the systematic understanding of the social, as well as political and cultural, roles of public intellectuals is crucial for the proper appraisal of several other currently flourishing areas of research and commentary in Middle East studies: namely 1) civil society studies; 2) leadership studies; 3) social movement studies; and 4) studies of the quality of public life and public debates. All these are further directly connected to the intense interest in democratization and its prospects in the region.

By contrast, relatively more attention has recently been paid to the study of another category of intellectuals that can be approached, following the usage of Antonio Gramsci, as “organic intellectuals”--although not necessarily in ways that are always consistent with Gramsci’s specific use of the term. For the purposes of this workshop, organic intellectuals are regarded as ordinary individuals who are not intellectuals by profession, but nonetheless conduct mental work that is intellectually significant in local settings (including producing cultural memory). In this sense the study of organic intellectuals has relevance to all four areas listed above. In addition it has a specific relevance to the study of social history.

Characteristics of public and organic intellectuals

Public intellectuals are often understood as articulate thinkers whose role consists in either 1) popularizing existing complex intellectual systems for the benefit of a public rather than academic audience; 2) founding original systems of thought in a language that captures broad public audiences; 3) expressing existing public sentiments, feelings, and attitudes in intellectual and systematic but accessible formats (be it in the form of philosophical theses, literary works, expository exegesis of “tradition,” systematic analysis of current affairs, or popular artistic experiments).

Organic intellectuals are often thought of as sharing with public intellectuals the last of the three roles above, although they are generally less known and their audience tends to be local. Yet their collective role could in certain cases be even more significant than that of public intellectuals (see for the example the recent study of Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, which shows the significance of local women preachers in the dissemination of systematic conceptions of piety). Organic intellectuals therefore are locally active individuals who may or may not be political activists, but whose value, as seen by themselves and their audience, consists in the systematization and intellectual defense of “local knowledge” (say of a specific social class in a specific city), in ways that often introduces new social facts and movements.

There are many venues for the dissemination of the works of these respective intellectuals: popular treatises and commentaries; memoirs; literary works; old and new media; and so on. At any rate, the importance of intellectuals here consists in that they add intellectual substance to the public sphere; crystallize what is otherwise called “street politics” into intelligible and referenced arguments; provide ideational support for the further evolution of civil society as well as social movements; and establish models regarding the idea and quality of social leadership (in ways that may or may not cohere with traditional or established ways of assessing the quality of leadership in society).

Goals of the workshop

The overall aim of this workshop is to offer a forum for the systematic exploration of public and organic intellectuals as a social phenomenon; to assess the relevance of studying such intellectuals to the other areas of research mentioned at the beginning; to identify meaningful methods and theories as guides for empirical studies of the phenomenon of intellectuals; to identify empirical studies that could exemplify fruitful theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of intellectuals; and to identify further directions of research in preparation for future collaborative or synthetic work. This workshop, then, is designed as a building bloc of an ongoing and expanding collaboration in the study of the social role of intellectual in the Middle East.

The proposed workshop is not only highly pertinent given the above, but seeks to open original ground given the dearth of studies of various social features of “the intelligentsia” as a group that is of particular significance in light of various policy and academic agendas concerned with Middle East studies. There are of course important surveys of intellectual system, provided, for example, in Albert Hourani *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*; Sadiq Jalal al-`Azam (himself an important public intellectual in his own right) *The French Revolution in Nahda Thought*; or Hamid Enayat *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, to cite just a small sample. However this tradition of analysis and commentary explores largely the history of ideas and systems of thought, rather than the social nature of the activity of intellectuals. Saad Eddin Ibrahim is an exception among Middle East social scientists in having paid some attention specifically to the role of intellectuals, but the further development of various research agendas that are attentive to questions of civil society, democratization, the quality of public debates, and the intellectual genealogies of leadership, require much more extensive and comparative exploration of the role of intellectuals in all these areas.

In recent years there has been some scholarly interest in the history of intellectuals as a group, in a way closely linked to the study of genealogies of civil society. This interest has clustered around studying the role of the ‘*ulama* or (religious) scholars in Islamic history, who may be seen as a synthesis of both types of intellectuals—in particular in connection to their role in contesting governmental over-extension of authority, and in their highlighting of the authoritative role of expert knowledge in society. The common conclusions, expressed for example by such commentators as Richard Bulliet or John Kelsay, among others, is that modern authoritarianism in the Middle East is related in at least one way to the weakening of the ‘*ulama* as a social class and their cooptation by modern governments. This perspective on the historical role of “traditional” intellectuals, while not extensively documented, does nonetheless provide some basis for the study of their social role. The fact that it is a *historical* class that is the object of commentaries on *contemporary* civil society shows the dire need for launching and encouraging a research program oriented to placing more emphasis on contemporary social categories that moreover have broader scope of activities than the traditional ‘*ulama*.

Of course, the study of modern intellectuals does include religious scholars who act as public figures or seek to stand in for what they regard to be general but inarticulate sentiments. But a systematic study of intellectuals places religious authorities in a wider context and explores comparatively the nature of the ideas that may hope to become effective in public debates. The approaches that may be used for this exploration vary. Workshop participants are encouraged, as they construct their theoretical edifice, to explore comparative possibilities (e.g. the comparative role of intellectuals in the Middle East and Europe, or India, and so on). However they are advised not to impose too much of a theoretical straightjacket on their case studies, and they are reminded that while the theoretical development of this area of research is one of the primary aims of the workshop, the workshop is also designed to exchange research notes on how best to proceed further in exploring its theme.

The workshop seeks to enlist a pool of attendees who balance the various concerns of representing an appropriate mix of disciplines; a mix of institutional bases in the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere; and a generational mix between junior and senior scholars, as well as advanced graduate students where appropriate. It is expected that the workshop will attract practitioners from sociology, anthropology, political science, history, and some fields of humanities. The participants are expected to devote the bulk of their contribution to the theoretical development of the theme of the workshop on the basis of appropriate empirical studies. The core research questions thus do not simply concern what intellectuals say. The core research question also include: what are the distinctive features of intellectuals in the Middle East? What makes certain way of formulating ideas more readily propagated, accepted, or debated than otherwise in the public sphere? How do intellectuals influence public life and public debates? How does the work of intellectuals circulate under condition of relative openness or censorship, respectively? What is the audience of intellectuals, and how segmented or stable is it? What are meaningful ways of measuring the influence of intellectuals in society? What sort of relation exists between intellectuals, “street politics,” and civil society? What are the main idioms of public and organic intellectual discourse? What are the institutional venues of public and organic intellectual life, and how effective, stable, or flexible are they? Do public intellectual provide a common regional discourse that blends together sentiments in more than one country? How are intellectuals connected (in structured or ideational ways) to social movements? Is the level of activity of intellectual in any given country a good predictor of the quality of political or other kinds of leadership?

In selecting the workshop papers, the co-organizers have in mind as viable instrumental goals the publication of a version of the workshop papers as a volume; the coherence of the workshop as a whole (but also a healthy diversity of cross-communicating case studies, disciplines, and genres); and the prospects of the workshop being a groundbreaking site of future collaborative and synthetic possibilities.

Director's individual paper abstract

One Hundred Years of Intellectual Islam in the Public Sphere: Between Instrumental Reason and Hermeneutics

Mohammed A. Bamyeh

The paper outlines two major modes of expressing the social role of Islam in public intellectual discourse throughout the 20th century: an instrumentalist and a hermeneutic mode. The paper argues that the fundamental problem in most Muslim societies throughout the 20th century did not consist of speculative religious questions, but at its roots had rather to do with the character of the modern state as well as the colonial challenge. Initially, anti-colonialism as a common project of both Islamic and secular nationalist forces suggested that both shared similar or overlapping approaches to basic questions of modernity. The earlier trend within public intellectual Islam, the “instrumental” trend, combined core elements of both developmental and cultural nationalism. The paper charts out the ascendance of instrumental Islamic thought culminating in the Muslim Brethren, and its revival against the background of increasing dislocations and failures that began to placate secular nationalist orders later in the 20th century. However, that later period also occasioned the rise of a new and little explored form of public intellectual Islam, with a hermeneutic emphasis.

Unlike instrumental Islam in which the project was to organize society, the goal in the hermeneutic movement is to organize knowledge. Whereas the instrumental approach presented Islam as “the solution,” in the form of a ready-to-use “how to do” manual, the hermeneutic approach presents Islam as a contemplative “how to know” thought guide. The approaches and genealogy of the new hermeneutic movement are summarized and contrasted to instrumental Islam in its major features. The global spread of an organized form of instrumental Islam, and the later emergence of a public hermeneutic project almost simultaneously in different countries in the Middle East, suggests the similarity of basic modernist questions across the public spheres of broad expanses of the Muslim World. It is finally suggested that while instrumental Islam followed closely the projects of developmental and cultural nationalism and sought to unify them in spiritual clothing, the hermeneutic movement seems to be moving away from both projects, defining its main ideas instead against the backdrop of a postnational and postmodern world, in which questions of development and cultural identity are subordinated to questions of universality of being, the nature of human existence, and the limits of knowing as well as of authority.