

■ An explorative workshop and subsequent summer school with the title 'Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel' were held in Berlin from 12<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> March 2014, with the aim of bringing Arab and German Arabic Studies and study practices closer to each other. Funded by the VolkswagenStiftung, around thirty junior and senior scholars from Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine/Israel and Germany participated actively in lectures, presentations of research projects and a critique and discussion of two recent publications in the field of Arabic Studies.

## MUTUALITY AND SELF-CRITIQUE ARABIC STUDIES: AN EXCHANGE OF PERSPECTIVES

BY STEPHAN MILICH AND KARIM SADEK

What are the main research topics in Arabic Studies today? Do Arab philologists and scholars of Arabic culture tend to choose different topics in research and teaching than their non-Arab colleagues abroad? What are the predominant conceptual approaches and methodological tools for the study of pre-modern and modern Arabic cultures and texts? And finally, where do these tools, concepts and approaches originate, and in which ways are they to be translated, modified and adapted in other research contexts?

These and other questions that were hotly debated at the explorative workshop and summer school are at the heart of the controversial self-understanding of a once primarily philological discipline that has changed enormously since Edward Said's groundbreaking book *Orientalism* in 1978. Although it has numerous times been claimed that what is needed most is to do research 'with' rather than 'on' the cultural other, realities have not changed in a way that led to a really shared scholarly practice and a common cultural and linguistic ground: the still existing gap between the Arab and the European/North American academic world of Arabic Studies cannot be overlooked, and it is particularly evident when it comes to the question of which language is used in teaching, research and academic writing.

**REVISING ARABIC STUDIES** The first thing to realise is that there is a crisis in how to understand and teach Arabic Studies. It is as if the very foundations of the field are being questioned and revised. At the heart of this revision is the place and role of classical philology in Arabic Studies, which in turn raises questions such as: What is a text? How to approach a text? What is the role of subjectivity when dealing with a text? What is the place and role of theory? In what ways should Arabic Studies draw on sociology, psychology, and other disciplines? How can the gap between "Arab Arabic Studies" and "non-Arab Arabic Studies" be closed or

minimised? Similar questions were also raised with regard to history and the Koran. These are not the kind of questions that can be satisfactorily addressed in a week. Nevertheless, they are indicative of the sort of crisis Arabic Studies is going through.

To constructively engage with a text or a contender requires critical self-relation. That much was getting clearer by the day as the workshop and summer school proceeded and the discussions unfolded. To adequately address the crisis of Arabic Studies we have to figure out, both in theory and in practice, how to approach moments of contestation as moments that call for self-reflection as a necessary and recurrent step in the journey towards a contending other or text. To put it simply, understanding and teaching Arabic Studies requires understanding and teaching how to relate to an other through oneself and back. The same applies to all fields of inquiry where humans, their activities, and their productions are being investigated or evaluated. Thus, the lesson learned is more about education in the humanities and social sciences generally than about Arabic Studies particularly. Further, and crucially, this is not a lesson about what to teach as much as it is about how to develop the ability to learn from texts and others about one's self in order to be able to understand and do justice to an other as an equal.

**ABOUT TRANSLATION** Closely related to this issue is the practice, theory and critique of translation, as has been highlighted by one Moroccan scholar. In view of the strong influence of Cultural Studies exercised on a once philological discipline, not only the translations and editions of major works of classical and modern Arabic literature and culture form a crucial part of the Arabist's endeavor, but also the translation of key concepts, literary genres and paradigms (e.g. 'society', 'the novel', 'identity'). How then to translate a



new term like *al-tamaththul al-thaqafi* (e.g. adaptation, acculturation, assimilation, or mimicry), convincingly coined by Samy Soliman, to explain the processes and practices, but also the obstacles to reception (*'aqabat at-talaqqi*) of European literary genres by Arab authors and critics of the nineteenth century. A comprehensive history of concepts and etymological dictionaries of Arabic are needed, as another participant put forward.

Translation, however, does not stop here: in order to write about a specific textual materiality and 'mentality', the author has to reconstruct the social, cultural and sometimes psychological and economic 'realities' of a distant past or a foreign context in order to be able to refer to the 'realities' and 'worlds' her/his texts refer to. Here, both Arab and non-Arab scholars find themselves confronted with several major obstacles: first, the lack of comprehensive sources in various fields of knowledge (e.g. modern social history of a particular region or archives of various epochs of Arabic literature), resulting in the risk of doing (epistemological) violence to the 'object' of study. In order to avoid violent or problematic readings and a misuse of texts, the scholar has to constantly question and contest her/his readings, practising what one participant called 'the ethics of reading'. Without awareness of one's own cultural bias and hidden psychological dynamics and mechanisms, research risks projecting not only the scholar's questions but also his own dispositions on its object of study, distorting through this 'reality' or reducing the vitality and plurality of meanings as well as the agency of texts and contexts. At other times and in view of the asymmetrical power relations between cultures and nations – and more specifically the

political, economic and epistemic violence exerted on Arab countries by the 'West' – the simple recognition of a both political and scientific claim might open up new horizons of understanding and new possibilities of interacting scientifically with each other.

To allow ambiguity thus enables us not only to avoid producing simplified representations and unverified generalisations, but also to deconstruct certain ideological agendas, as for instance the misuse of cultural heritage (*turath*) as a discursive weapon, or over-theorised writing that just turns out to be a projection of a biased self, its hidden or obvious interests and individualist worldview. In conclusion, science, education and learning as well as understanding the other has to be accomplished by a constant interrogation of oneself, be it on the northern side of the Mediterranean or on its southern shore.

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**STEPHAN MILICH (PDH)** is a lecturer at the Institute of Oriental Studies (Cologne University). His research interests focus on modern Arabic literature, culture & ideology as well as representations of exile and trauma in Arabic culture. He currently works on the politics and aesthetics of trauma in contemporary Arabic prose and film.

**KARIM SADEK** is currently teaching philosophy at the American University of Beirut (AUB). His research falls on the intersection between critical social theory, Islamic political thought, and political philosophy.

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→ [www.arabic-philologies.de](http://www.arabic-philologies.de)



Discussions  
at the Arab  
Philologies  
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*Editor's Office:*  
Stefan Weidner  
Art&Thought / Fikrun wa Fann  
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*e-mail:*  
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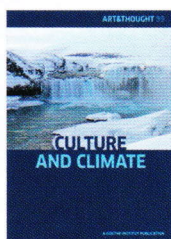
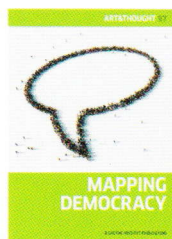
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