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Theories of Modernity — The Transferability of Concepts*

Under the auspices of the Arbeitskreis Moderne and Islam, in which the Wissenschaftskolleg is a principal participant along with various Berlin institutions in the field of Middle East studies, the Berlin Seminar was inaugurated at the Kolleg. Held in a bi-weekly rhythm and initially chaired by Prof. Dr. Gudrun Krämer (Freie Universität Berlin), the Seminar represented various disciplines (*Islamwissenschaft*, political science, sociology, economics, anthropology, and others) that are more or less intimately related to either questions of religion in general and Islam in particular or to studies of the specific regions of the "Muslim world". The aim at that time was to bring senior scholars and doctoral students together. Whereas the first year intended to offer primarily doctoral and post-doctoral students in Berlin an opportunity to present and discuss their recent research, this Summer Semester, under my guidance, another aim was envisaged. In the light of conceptual constraints on the field and a certain amount of intellectual inertia which translate themselves into exoticist or otherwise rather arid philological practices, and of the resultant culturalist positions that deny rigour to the concepts of the humanities and social sciences in relations to Islamic matters, it was felt necessary to address, thematically and methodologically, the broad theme of the transferability of concepts in the context of the entire field that is encompassed by the purview of the Arbeitskreis.

Hence, under the heading *Theories of Modernity: The Transferability of Concepts* a new structure for the Seminar was established. The principal and guiding idea was to open up conceptual areas of investigation and research in the field of Middle Eastern studies in the broadest possible sense including specific and comparative attention to other areas in the South. As for the structure of the Seminar, it was intended that a broad range of readings should guide individual sessions, so that broad thematic and conceptual matters could be discussed cumulatively, in order to enrich the field, introduce scholars active in it to essential debates that are not often welcome in it, and thus to contribute towards the integration of the field of Islamic studies within the broader discipli-

* Berlin Seminar: Modernity and Islam at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Summer-term 1997

nary and conceptual universe of the social sciences and the humanities, which is, after all, one of the aims of the Arbeitskreis. It was also thought important that in the course of each session, a chance also be given to discuss the themes under consideration in light of the participants' own research and interests, in order to ensure a close relation to the empirical field. It was particularly pleasing that this Seminar attracted the attention of various Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg, some of whom participated regularly in its discussions.

The individual sessions were organized around a number of key words and key themes which at present constitute the overall agenda of current academic writings and theory-making in the world beyond the conservative institutional set-up of Islamic Studies in Germany. Thus, in practice, with meetings arranged either as thematic discussions or as presentations by participants and invited scholars, the reading of salient texts and discussions finally resulted in establishing cumulative discussions and a shared culture of readings and interests that went over and above the disparate individual research themes of the participants. With the generous support of an Ansgar Rumler stipend, a research assistant (Dr. Nadia Al-Bagdadi, Freie Universität Berlin and the American University of Beirut) was engaged to assist in the identification of salient texts and to help in the overall design and running of the Seminar.

Taking up the very title of the *Schwerpunkt Moderne and Islam*, one of the major objectives — and indeed, in retrospect, one of the achievements of the Seminar — was the rigorous historical, conceptual, and comparative questioning of the widespread ahistorical usage of the notions of Islam and of modernity. With regard to the first, the Seminar contributed to disabusing a number of its members of the implicitly and commonly held monolithic and essentialist understanding of Islam, and brought in the history and the experience of other regions, especially India, which hold many salient points of comparison, both substantive and conceptual. It was an equally important achievement of the Seminar to consider rigorously the conception of modernity as an historical process rather than as a given set of ideas and ideals, contrary to the fashionable anti-Enlightenment and anti-modernist rhetoric, no less than the rather simple notions of modernity held by writers in the field of Islamic studies. It became increasingly evident during the course of the Seminar that a checklist of normative ideas and norms of what modernity is or is not leads nowhere, but that this did not imply that one must subscribe to the conceptually nihilistic theories of history in current fashion, especially those that take the emphasis on particularity to be a denial of conceptual rigour and of the applicability of general concepts.

While preparing the Seminar and looking at appropriate material, we were already puzzled by the fact that, despite the opposing tendencies of either energetic rejection of or laudatory claim for a transferability of concepts, full-fledged formulations or reflections of such theories seemed not to have developed beyond the statement of primary positions. Starting from a discussion of history and ideology in relation to conceptual formations and collateral questions of objectivity and the applicability of theories, the Seminar moved on to the theme of the epistemological and politico-historical dimensions of sociology in the Arab world. This is closely linked to another issue. Under the title of "Reformism: native knowledge and the Islamization of knowledge", a currently debated topic with highly political implications was taken up. Correlatively, the rich and instructive Indian (and Western) debates on nativist sociology were taken up. The last two meetings concentrated on two interrelated conceptions and notions that emerge from what had already been discussed, and which have a contemporary salience: the concept of the public sphere, and the twin notions of identity and culture.

One achievement of the seminar was to elevate the niveau of discussion based on cumulative reading and the intensity of exchange from a variety of fields and experiences. It served its primary purpose of contributing to the critical, conceptual and methodological rehabilitation of the field of Islamic Studies within the confines of the present institutional configuration of the field.

Programme of the Summer Semester 1997:

Introductory Session: Transferability of Concepts? State of the Art and Related Theoretical and Political Controversies

30.04.1997 Theories of Transferability

14.05.1997 Transferability of Concepts: Arab Sociology

28.05.1997 Reformism as Native Knowledge and the "Islamization of Knowledge"

18.06.1997 Comparative Perspectives — An Indian Sociology?

25.06.1997 The *Muslim* Public Sphere? Notions of Identity and Culture

09.07.1997 Sharia and Social Practice: Approaches to the Concept of the Public Sphere