

## ANTI-THESIS

## Islam and the Alleged Incompatibility with Popular Culture

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This paper critically reflects upon the alleged incompatibility of Islam and popular culture, the antipathy toward the study of popular culture in the field of

Islamic Studies, and the question of what it is that puts “the popular” into culture.

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### Islam and Popular Culture

When preparing the present META issue, Igor Johannsen and I realized that, in the overall discourse on culture, particular attention has to be devoted to the issue of “popular culture.” Having done research on heavy metal and hip hop in the Middle East, it seemed inevitable to us to address this highly ambiguous concept, especially since both fields, metal and hip hop studies alike, are commonly assigned to the realm of popular culture. Furthermore, academic attention in the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies has increasingly shifted toward issues of popular culture in recent years, but only after this particular area of research had been widely neglected for a long period of time.

At the time I began working on my PhD dissertation on *Heavy Metal in a Muslim Context* over a decade ago, I usually received astonished, sometimes disdainful looks from friends and colleagues when I first told them about the subject of my research. Not only did many of them consider the topic to be “exotic,” but, even worse, academically irrelevant. People were either surprised about the very existence of metal culture in the Muslim world or regarded the phenomenon not to be worth investigating, as they refused to classify it as a serious research topic. Back then, the field of metal studies was

still to be established. Yet, from today's perspective, I see these reactions as a result of the dominant discourse on "Islamic culture," rather than a lack of academic research on metal (for more details on the debate on "Islamic culture" see the editorial of this issue).

Islam, from an essentialist perspective à la G.E. Grunebaum, Bernard Lewis, or Samuel P. Huntington, is still widely seen as the organizing principle of Muslim-dominated societies. Islam purportedly not only provides the rules of personal conduct and belief, but, moreover, the essence of a superordinate, collective identity. The efficacy of this highly problematic understanding of culture as a coherent and more or less closed system entails that the appropriation of cultural resources from outside the system must be perceived as "unnatural," non-representative (of "Islamic culture") and, therefore, irrelevant in the long term. Heavy metal in a Muslim context, viewed from this perspective, must be equally seen as something foreign or alien or possibly even considered a matter of cultural imperialism. The visible presence of a subculture that originates from the working-class districts of Birmingham in England is something that should not exist in Muslim societies, in the first place, and, if it nevertheless does, is to be considered a highly exceptional phe-

nomenon. With regard to the results of my own research, I dare claim that the presence of heavy metal is by no means an exceptional phenomenon in the Muslim world. I, moreover, assume that for most metalheads in Turkey, for instance, it would seem odd to consider heavy metal as something foreign or alien, as they were socialized into this culture in similar ways as fellow metalheads in Germany, Japan, the US or elsewhere—though the societal meaning of doing metal in Turkey admittedly has to be considered differently from other social or political contexts (Hecker). The globalization of cultural resources and the formation of hybrid identities in various contexts all over the world have long rendered essentialist assertions by Orientalist writers untenable. The persistence of the Islam-and-the-West paradigm, however, still fosters the widespread idea of the inherently "Western nature" of popular culture, making it therefore incompatible with Islam or "Islamic culture."

Another obstacle to the study of popular culture has been the persistence of particular academic traditions in the field of Islamic studies. The German Council of Science and Humanities only a few years ago came to the conclusion that "the field of Islamic Studies in Germany remains deep in the tradition of Oriental studies" (35), which in essence means that, as an

academic discipline, German Islamic Studies are rooted in a philological tradition of studying religious, philosophical, and historical texts from the past. This may no longer hold true for the entire discipline, especially with regard to the vast number of rather recent studies on contemporary Islamic movements in Germany. The study of popular culture, however, is still widely seen as lying beyond the research interests of Islamic studies. The primary purpose of Islamic studies appears to remain in the study of the "major languages of Islam" (i.e. Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) and the analysis of written texts that are somehow related to religion. Popular cultural phenomena such as heavy metal, hip hop, fashion, comic books, soap operas, or the like have been widely neglected until recently, even when seen from a perspective of conveying or contesting Islamic traditions and values.

### What is Popular Culture?

Despite all reservations, recent years have seen the publication of several edited volumes on popular culture in the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. In 2011, Andrew N. Weintraub edited the volume *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* which was followed by Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman's *Popular Culture in the Middle East and*

*North Africa* in 2013 and Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark Levine, and Martin Stokes' *Islam and Popular Culture* in 2016. All three volumes underline the significance of popular culture, not only in the everyday lives of ordinary people, but also with regard to politics. The study of popular culture is therefore of considerable academic relevance.

What the books of El Hamamsy/Soliman and Nieuwkerk/Levine/Stokes have in common is a neo-Gramscian approach, which originally evolved in British Cultural Studies in the 1970s (see also John Storey's contribution in this issue). Popular culture is thus seen by the authors as a means of resistance and containment. It is a site of political struggle and functions to either contest or consolidate the political power of the ruling elite. The authors explicitly relate this definition to the uprisings of the so-called "Arab Spring," during which graffiti, street theater, hip-hop, rai, and other forms of cultural production played a crucial role in the process of political mobilization. Popular culture, in this sense, is defined through meaning rather than form.

This, however, poses serious challenges to the observer. To conceptualize popular culture as representations of resistance and containment requires to closely study the production of meaning in the particu-

lar research context. Only if it is possible to determine the dominant representations that are being contested and contained as well as the signifiers that represent resistance will it be possible to classify particular cultural phenomena as popular culture. In other words, the question of what popular culture is depends on the particular research context. For instance, the depiction of penguins in graffiti and street art would most probably not be interpreted as a challenge to the political system in the UK, in Turkey's post-Gezi Park era, however, penguins signify resistance toward the present government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The penguin attained its iconic meaning during the so-called Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013. While the cable news channel *CNN International*, at the height of the protests, provided live coverage of the political events, its Turkish affiliate *CNN Türk* broadcasted a documentary on penguins instead. The protesters regarded *CNN Türk's* decision as an act of censorship and, accordingly, incorporated the penguin as a symbolic icon into their protest movement. Even today the image of the penguin is used as a symbol of defiance and remembrance of the democratic protests that were violently suppressed by the government. Consequentially, it is not graffiti and street art in

itself that makes it popular culture, but its relational meaning in a particular socio-political context. Penguins depicted by graffiti artists in the streets of London can therefore not be classified as popular culture—based on the assumption that graffiti and street art are no longer *per se* considered as a deviant art form by the authorities and the British public.

Needless to say, there are various ways of conceptualizing popular culture, and the aforementioned neo-Gramscian approach, due to its specific focus on resistance and containment, is clearly limited. John Storey in his highly acclaimed book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* stresses the ambiguous nature of the term by arguing that "popular culture is in effect an empty conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use" (1). Nevertheless, he also argues that the study of popular culture has been determined by a collection of six different approaches that, although they are partly overlapping, can be clearly identified. Namely, these are popular culture as widely favored or well-liked by many; as inferior culture (in contrast to high culture); as mass culture (mass-produced for mass consumption); as folk culture (the culture that originates from "the people"); as a site of struggle between

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subordinate and dominant groups (see above); as postmodern culture (6-13). Storey therefore would most probably argue that meaning alone does not put the "popular" into culture. He stresses, for instance, that popular culture must include a quantitative dimension (6). This idea of popular culture as something that is favored or well-liked by a huge number of people can, however, at least occasionally conflict with the previously outlined approach of popular culture as a site of resistance: The internationally renowned song "Şıkıdım" ("Shake") by Turkish pop singer Tarkan may be popular in terms of numbers (music downloads, record sales, radio airplay, clicks on *YouTube*, etc.), but not in terms of resistance. By the same token, the "resistance factor" in Murder King's Gezi-related song "Demokrasi" ("Democracy") is certainly high, its "popularity" due the relatively small number of Turkish-speaking (metal) listeners, however, is low. In the context of this short essay, it would not make sense to repeat and discuss every single concept of popular culture as outlined by Storey. It must be clear, however, that "the popular" in popular culture needs to be defined precisely if there is to be any point to its usage. Without a clear definition, "popular culture" could not be distinguished from the sim-

ilarly ambiguous term "culture" (see the editorial of the present META issue).

### Popular Culture in Islamic Studies

Having said this, I would now like to come back to the difficult relationship between Islamic studies and popular culture. Andrew N. Weintraub's *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* provides an inspiring new perspective that might help to overcome the antipathy to popular culture in Islamic studies. By comprehending popular culture "as a site of struggle over what counts as Islam" (2), Weintraub combines a neo-Gramscian approach with some of the traditional research interests of Islamic studies. The sites in which the struggle over the meaning of Islam takes place are identified by Weintraub as sermon-filled soap operas, veils on rock stars, Prophet cartoons and other contemporary cultural phenomena through which religious meanings are not only being conveyed but (re)negotiated. The purpose of studying representations of Islam in popular culture thus promises to produce much needed knowledge on contemporary religiosities in the Muslim world and the (re)interpretation of Islam's holy scriptures in the era of social media and modern communication technologies. With this in mind, any thought about

the alleged incompatibility of Islam with popular culture appears obsolete.

What distinguishes the study of popular culture from traditional approaches to culture in Islamic studies, in my opinion, is that popular culture must be conceived as a product of modernity, while "Islamic culture" is traditionally conceptualized as originating from the early days of Islam, the theological interpretations of religious scriptures, and the intellectual discourses of pre-modern thinkers (see the debate on Thomas Bauer's concept of "Islamic culture" in the editorial). Popular culture, however, is the result of modern means of cultural production and therefore closely linked to the processes of industrialization, digitalization, medialization, and globalization. Moreover, it is important to stress the spectacular nature of popular culture. Popular culture, especially when seen as a site of controversy and struggle, requires public display. Having said this, I think it is important to continue to use the term "popular culture" and to further reflect upon its relational usage in the aforementioned contexts of contemporary representations of Islam and the politics of culture as related to the resistance toward authoritarian regimes.

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