Concepts of Culture in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies

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Introducing the seventh issue of META, this editorial discusses prevalent concepts of culture in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. Different conceptualizations of culture that explicitly or implicitly contain qualitative differentiations between cultures are revisited and discussed. Bearing considerable weight in the respective disciplines, the Islam-and-the-West paradigm, the delineation of diverging cultures along ethnic lines, the equation of culture with art or religion, and the culture-as-civilization paradigm are being scrutinized. Serving as an example for the confusion and lack of clarity regarding the concept of "culture," the book *The Culture of Ambiguity* by the German scholar of Islamic Studies Thomas Bauer is analyzed regarding its use of the term.

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The Confusion about Culture

The idea for a META special issue on "culture" was born from an indefinite feeling of discomfort which regularly creeps up on us when it comes to the usage of the term "culture" in the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. "Culture" is still widely treated as a universal, commonly understood concept that requires no further explanation. Even though the idea of culture as a closed, coherent, and clearly distinct system, as advocated by Orientalist authors such as G.E. Grunebaum, Bernard Lewis, Samuel P. Huntington, or André Miquel, has long been dismissed as pejorative, essentialist, and unscientific, we still stick with the all-dominant classification of "Islam" and "the West," which implies the existence of two distinct cultural entities that either battle against or coexist separately from each other. The Islam-and-the-West paradigm is still so dominant in academic texts that its theoretical implications and, subsequently, its impact on the production of knowledge commonly go unchallenged, if not unnoticed.

The resilience of this paradigm is further augmented by the common usage of the term culture as a means to classify humankind into different ethnic, national, or religious communities that are supposedly bound together by shared cultural traits,

which are equated with linguistic, religious, or historic commonalities. In the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, Dwight F. Reynolds, for instance, assumes that the Arab world is "bound together by certain shared cultural ties," which are based on the Arabic language, and "the larger shared history of the region," which is "in essence, what makes Arabs Arab" (1). Although Reynolds acknowledges the existence of "distinctive" local identities within the Arab world, it remains far from clear what, aside from language, makes Arab culture—as represented in the aforementioned book through separate chapters on law, music, art, theater, or architecture—distinct from, for instance, "Berber culture," "Coptic culture," or "Kurdish culture." The usage of culture as a means of ethnic or national classification, therefore, remains highly problematic, even though today the majority of authors show sensitivity toward avoiding any form of previously common characterizations that would imply cultural superiority or inferiority respectively (e.g. clichés of the "hardworking Protestant," the "fatalist Muslim," the "belligerent, aggressive Turk"). Ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism*, it should be obvious that culture is by no means a neutral category. Cultural classification is indeed prone to ideological abuse and closely related to questions of power and dominance.

Another problem we have come upon in the past is the *confusion between culture and art*. It is no rare phenomenon that both terms are used indiscriminately. An author may speak of "culture" when actually meaning "art" or even restrict his or her study of culture to artistic production only. Accordingly, "Islamic culture" or "Arabic culture" are frequently associated with and exclusively defined through specific forms of cultural production that would usually be assigned to the realm of art. This includes performing arts such as music, dance, or theatre; visual arts such as film, painting, or calligraphy; applied arts, with a special focus on architecture; and, perhaps most importantly, literature. What these various forms of cultural production have in common is a creative impetus that intends to express particular ideas, emotions, or experiences. Artistic production is, furthermore, widely assumed to require particular sets of advanced skills that need to be learned and trained beforehand. This professionalization of cultural skills consequently excludes a considerable part of the population from participating in artistic production. Cultural activities classified as art thus stand for an elitist notion of ("high") culture, in contrast to what is labelled as "low," "profane," or "popular" culture. Artistic production, especially with regard to nation-building processes or the endeavor to establish and maintain cultural hegemony over a society or societal group, is also assigned an educational task in terms of "civilizing" or forming a society in accordance with particular ideals. The latter necessarily includes an institutional level that is needed to implement dominant cultural policies. What is definitely not included in the idea of art is the ordinary or, differently speaking, the everyday cultural life and practices of ordinary people. The idea of *culture as a whole way of life*, which is said to determine the anthropological perspective on culture, stands diametrically opposed to the notion of *culture as art*. The concept of art is meant to mark a distinct sphere of social life (similar to sports, work, politics, etc.) that is concerned with aesthetics, creative impulse, self-expression, and the striving for perfection and excellence. In this sense, art can be considered a subdivision of culture.

The idea of understanding humankind as being composed of different cultures (Arab culture, Alevi culture, Turkish culture, hip hop culture, working class culture, etc.) is based on the assumption that different ethnic, religious, national, or societal groups can be clearly distinguished from

each other along objective criteria. Culture, in this sense, is meant to provide a model of comparison or, as Stuart Hall put it: "It allows us to compare to what extent different societies resemble, or differ from, one another" (186). This means that culture, on the one hand, is treated as an *analytical category* that allows us to study and compare human communities; on the other hand, it is perceived as a *system of practices and beliefs* that constitutes the "essence" of a particular group of human beings. This brings us to another common phenomenon in the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies: the usage of *culture as a variable to explain human behavior* on an individual and collective level.

In the past, this has not only led to judgmental conclusions regarding cultural differences but, moreover, to a *confusion between culture and religion*. G.E. Grunebaum, who conceptualized culture as a closed system, assumed that value judgements convey coherence and provide the rules of conduct for interaction among the members of a particular culture (19). Religion, argued Grunebaum in *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity*, has the power to revise and even replace the value judgement of the cultural system, as happened in the case of Arab civilization that was transformed by Islam (20-22). Islam thus constitutes the organizing prin-

ciple of the cultural system. It sets the rules of life and determines human behavior in all spheres of the social world, on a personal and communal level. On a related note, Grunebaum perceived Islamic civilization as an isolated cultural unit that is insusceptible to change initiated from outside. We could now continue and point to the ideological abuse of culture in Grunebaum's work, such as when he pictures Islam as an anti-humanist civilization, or the resemblance of his argument to modern notions of racism, especially when he speaks of cultural superiority and inferiority and foreign, "genetically non-Arab" ideas and aspirations (25). However, in our opinion, it is not explicit racism we have to be most attentive to, but rather the implicit equation of culture and religion or, more precisely, culture and Islam, which plays a crucial role in the writings of many contemporary authors. The confusion between culture and Islam has been particularly popularized by Samuel P. Huntington's incredibly influential claim of an inevitable clash of civilizations. Similar to Grunebaum, Huntington assumed religion to be the dominant variable that determines human behavior and constitutes cultural entities as represented through a fixed number of seven (or possibly eight) world civilizations. Another popular example for the confusion of cul-

ture and religion and the usage of culture as a variable to explain human behavior is David Landes' book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, in which he seeks to explain why some are rich and some poor. It is his contention that culture, which is mostly defined through religion, provides the determining factor for economic success or failure. Islam is accordingly used as an example to portray the "losing side" in the global economy (392-418).

The aforementioned feeling of discomfort is caused by the conceptual confusion surrounding the term "culture." Culture has indeed been frequently described as one of the most difficult scholarly terms to define. Different academic discourses have yielded such a wide array of meanings and concepts that one might express serious doubt about the analytical usefulness of the term in the human and social sciences. In 19th-century European thought, "culture" was not only meant to represent the "best that has been thought and said in the world," as suggested by Matthew Arnold (5), but also to describe differences among mankind, thus resulting in "culture" increasingly becoming associated with the concept of the nation, as for instance in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder. Theorizing culture in the plural laid the foundation for what became known as the already mentioned *culture-*

as-civilization paradigm, a highly normative concept, which claimed the world to be "naturally" divided into chunks of culture whose specific ways of life might evolve to a state of excellency that would then be called civilization. Edward Said, on a related note, identified culture as an effective means of European imperial domination and highlighted the central role of the concept in the imperialist effort to rule distant lands on the premise of bringing civilization to the primitive and thus inferior peoples around the world. The culture-as-civilization paradigm was finally challenged by what came to be known as the "cultural turn" in the human and social sciences. Pioneering thinkers such as Raymond Williams, who described culture as "a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior" (*The Long Revolution* 57), seemed to put an end to the old "high culture-low culture" dichotomy and opened the way for "reading" culture as a text or primarily regarding it as a means of symbolic communication (Clifford Geertz) or resistance toward political dominance (Stuart Hall).

Ambiguities and Essentialism
A good example to illustrate the level of conceptual confusion resulting from the different theoretical approaches and the efficacy of the aforementioned pitfalls and paradigms is Thomas Bauer's highly acknowledged book *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* ("The Culture of Ambiguity: A Different History of Islam"). *The Culture of Ambiguity*, which was published in 2011, has probably been the most influential book in German-speaking Islamic studies over the past decade. Bauer's self-declared purpose was to write an incomplete cultural history of Islam. In this, he follows an approach that in German-speaking academia is referred to as *kulturhistorischer* or *kulturwissenschaftlicher Ansatz. Kulturhistorisch* stands for a particular scholarly tradition in German academia and, therefore, lacks a direct translation into English. The essence of the term may be best described as "concerning the history of civilizations." Accordingly, an artifact can be regarded as either *kulturhistorisch wertvoll* or *unbedeutend*, which means that, in terms of historical progress and cultural achievements, a cultural product can be classified as either valuable or negligible. This theoretical approach favored by Bauer is still quite common in German-speaking Islamic studies.
Bauer contends that early Islam, unlike today, was characterized by a high level of cultural ambiguity and tolerance toward pluralism and dissent. Ambiguity, he asserts, was not just tolerated, but was an integral feature of "Islamic culture" (31). This Islamic culture of ambiguity was altered only in modern times under the influence of Western imperial rule. On a related note, he blames "Western Orientalist discourse" not only for ignoring and consciously denying the cultural ambiguity of Islam, but, moreover, for portraying Islamic society as completely permeated by religion. This, says Bauer, resulted in the common prejudice that Islam does not know a distinction between the spheres of the religious and the secular and, therefore, must be considered incompatible with modernity (192). Bauer refutes this claim by arguing that "religion-free spheres" have always existed in Islamic culture (193). Substantiating his claim, he points to the coexistence of clearly distinguishable "academic" and "pious" discourses of medicine in Islamic history. The academic medical discourse, Bauer argues, is free from religious influence, while the pious discourse is solely based on religious sources and arguments. With regard to the latter, he refers to the Arabic expression *aṭ-ṭibb an-nabawī* ("The medicine of the Prophet"), which, as he points out, represents a distinct field of medicine exclusively attributed to the sayings and deeds of the prophet Mohammed (195).

In order to further assess the "Western Orientalist" discourse on Islam, Bauer introduces the term "Islamization of Islam," with which he intends to subsume the discursive strategy of Western Orientalists to render Islam's culture of ambiguity invisible. Based on this argument, he identifies five interrelated mechanisms: first, the common practice of adding the label "Islamic" to all spheres of social life (e.g. "Islamic art," "Islamic medicine," "Islamic literature") even though they might be completely free from, or at least not directly influenced by, religion; second, the practice of either ignoring non-religious discourses entirely or declaring them as non-representative and irrelevant; third, the practice of preferring those discourses, whose notions of religion are closest to Western concepts, over others; fourth, the practice of considering religious discourses to represent the dominant norm, even in cases in which a coexistence of religious and non-religious discourses can be observed; and fifth, the practice of regarding the "most conservative" and "orthodox" religious discourses as the dominant norm, even if several religious discourses coexist equally alongside each other. As a consequence, Bauer sums up, the Islamic world is bereaved of its cultural ambiguities and pluralities and (re)constructed as a monolithic, "Islamic-religious culture" that is meant to represent an antithesis to "modern Western culture" (222-23).

Bauer's intentions in *The Culture of Ambiguity* are clear. Delving deep into literary, theological, and philosophical sources that were written by Arabic-speaking scholars between the 10th and 15th century A.D., he aims to write against and disprove what he identifies as the dominant Western Orientalist discourse on Islam. As an alternative, he offers a more differentiated perspective that emphasizes the heterogeneity and plurality of the Islamic world. This becomes particularly evident when he vehemently criticizes essentialist perspectives á la G.E. Grunebaum by dismissing them as a "Fantasy-Islam," which only applies to the lifeworlds of radical Salafis and the imagination of Western Orientalists (202). Despite its anti-essentialist intent, Bauer's argument does, however, fail to completely break away from the essentialist spirits of the past. This, as we see it, is mostly due to a great deal of confusion regarding the term "culture" in his work.

Bauer defines culture as "the sum of all cultural activities of its members" (17). This, however, does not provide sufficient conceptual clarity, especially when we look at how the term culture implicitly takes on different meanings in his text. To begin with, Bauer's definition, which regards culture as constituted by "all cultural activities of its members," apparently assumes that only certain human activities are to be considered "cultural" while others are not. Culture consequently appears to be conceptualized as autonomous from other spheres of life, such as the political, social, or economic spheres. This idea becomes further evident when we look at the empirical sources of Bauer's study. In his attempt to provide proof for the ambiguous nature of Islamic culture, he exclusively draws on intellectual sources from the fields of literature, poetry, philosophy, and theology. Seen from this angle, Bauer's idea of culture resembles the Arnoldian concept of culture and thus at first glance could be taken to mean (in analogy to Arnold) "the best that has been thought and said in the Muslim world." Placing exalted intellectual achievements at the center of what is conceptualized as Islamic culture, moreover, stands in contrast to the equally influential concept of *culture as a whole way of life*—an idea that has been formative not only for anthropology but also for cultural studies; in the latter case, after being complemented by Raymond Williams with a focus on popular culture (cinema, TV, etc.) and the trivial but significant statement that "Culture is Ordinary." Bauer's notion of culture has little to do with the daily lives of

ordinary people who, with regard to the pre-modern period that he concentrates on, mostly did not know how to read or write and thus were unlikely to have access to the intellectual sources which he assumes to constitute Islamic culture.

Having said this, it appears safe to conclude that Bauer's notion of culture—at least as far as the empirical sources of his study are concerned—relates to the realm of intellectual excellence and not to the realm of the ordinary. Yet, in his overall argument, he uses the term differently—in a way that links culture to the realm of modern identity formations—as a collective whole that, although it is characterized by various differences, is held together by what appears to be shared customs or habits of behavior. When he speaks of "Islamic culture" or "the culture of Islam," Bauer appears to imagine culture in a similar way as Samuel P. Huntington conceptualizes "civilization." That is, as "the highest cultural grouping of people" (Huntington 24) or, differently phrased, as a superordinate cultural entity, which, although it may consist of a variety of distinct cultures at a local, regional, or national level, is held together by a set of dominant, commonly shared cultural traits that determine people's identities. Correspondingly, "the culture of Islam" consists of different "Islamic cultures," as

implicitly mentioned by Bauer when he specifically refers to the "Arab-Islamic culture" as distinct from other Islamic cultures. "Islamic culture," in its function as a superordinate category, however, is moreover conceptualized by Bauer as distinct from "Western culture." With this, he not only adopts the idea of culture as civilization but, moreover, refrains from challenging the aforementioned paradigm of Islam-and-the-West. Bauer criticizes the undifferentiated, demeaning way in which Western Orientalist discourse used to portray Islam. Yet he does not question the categories of the discourse and its theoretical implications in itself.

A central point to Bauer's argument of the "Islamization of Islam" is the finding that the term "Islam," in Western Orientalist thought, commonly takes on a double meaning. Islam, he observes, either signifies the realm of religious norms or the realm of culture. In a religious sense, Islam accordingly relates to questions of personal belief and theological debate, while, in a cultural sense, it involves Muslims and non-Muslims alike as "the culture of Islam has also been the culture of many members of other religions [who are living in the Muslim world]" (193). With this, Bauer's observation corresponds to the aforementioned confusion of culture and religion, though he confines himself to

the critique that the coexistence of religious and non-religious discourses has not been properly recognized and acknowledged in the past. Apparently, he intends to solve this problem by speaking of "Islamic culture" only when referring to Islam in a cultural sense.

Consequentially, Bauer neither succeeds in breaking away from the concept of culture as civilization, nor does he give up on the Islam-and-the-West paradigm, which leaves us with the idea of the world as being divided into clearly distinguishable, perhaps competing, or even hostile cultural entities. Simply by retaining the term "Islamic culture," he considerably weakens his central argument, or, to put it another way, the very same author who so aptly criticizes the Islamization of Islam actually contributes to reproducing the "Western Orientalist discourse" by himself subsuming every "thing"—discourses on medicine, art, literature, science, etc.—under the term "Islamic" or, more precisely, "Islamic culture" (222-23).

This criticism does not intend to devalue the outcome of Bauer's study, and it should not obscure the fact that *The Culture of Ambiguity* succeeds in reducing formerly dominant Orientalist discourses to absurdity. Bauer does in fact convincingly demonstrate that religious sources have been interpreted differently at any

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time, wherefore Islam by no means represents a totalitarian or monolithic system. We have chosen Bauer due to the importance of his work within German-speaking Islamic studies and because we see the usage of the term "Islamic culture" in his work as symptomatic of a field that needs to reflect more on the usage of the term "culture" and the impact that this usage can have on the production of knowledge.

Engaging Semantic Disorder

The point we want to make against the backdrop of these introductory reflections is that the different theoretical approaches to culture have created significant semantic disorder in an academic field in which analytical clarity is desperately needed. The term "culture" is frequently used without any clarification or sufficient reflection about the theoretical implications of its usage. Sometimes authors use and even mix up different concepts of culture without even noticing. Moreover, there are strong indications that different authors are not talking about the same "thing" when speaking of culture. In the light of the foregoing, it is our contention that there is an urgent need to seriously reflect on the question of whether we should give up on the very idea of "Islamic culture" or "Islamic civilization" completely—in particular as it turns out that "Islamic cul-

ture" neither functions as an explanatory variable nor as a proper analytical tool. The usage of this term tells us something about the theoretical or ideological perspective of the person who uses it. Yet it does not tell us anything about the object of investigation itself.

Even if the term "Islamic culture" is used in a very broad sense and meant to not only include Muslims but basically every person who happens to be socialized in the Muslim world (i.e. in those regions of the world that have been dominated by Islam for a long period of time), an answer has to be provided to the question of what it is that finally makes Islamic culture "Islamic"—especially if we want to maintain the aforementioned critique of Grunebaum's claim of religious norms being the organizing principle of the cultural system. If we cannot provide a precise answer to this question, why then would it make sense to speak of "Islamic culture" at all? The editors' approach to culture relies in great part on the tradition of British Cultural Studies. Culture is thus understood as dynamic, fragmented, and constantly changing. Culture is furthermore seen as closely linked to communication, the crafting of practices, the ritualization of community life, and the institutionalization of normative orders as well as the resistance towards them. Culture, especially in the

latter sense, represents a terrain of political and ideological struggle in which social conventions, norms, and values are constantly being contested and (re)negotiated. In short, the cultural is perceived as the realm of the continuous struggle of humans to make sense of themselves and what surrounds them, in a way that involves social and political interaction with other humans in the shared habitat.

The present META issue aims to critically engage with the various, often contradictory concepts of culture as used in the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. In the following contributions, authors from different academic disciplines envisage a dialogue between the theoretical and the empirical dimension of research on culture. The cases studies of the FOCUS section accordingly not only elaborate on the specific theoretical understanding of culture, but also on its analytical applicability in different national and political contexts. The contributions of the META and CLOSE UP sections complement these empirical case studies by reflecting on the theoretical side of culture. **John Storey**'s contribution on "The Politics of Culture" provides an overview over the evolution of thinking about "culture" in the work of Raymond Williams. He outlines how culture, under the influence of Antonio Gramsci's contested meanings,

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and how cultural studies, on the basis of this redefinition by Williams, was able to delineate culture as the production, circulation, and consumption of meanings that become embodied and embedded in social practice. Storey's article is followed by two CLOSE UPs: one on the concept of culture in the work of Stuart Hall written by **Johanna Fernández Castro** and a second by **Olaf Miemic** on the evolution of the term culture in Terry Eagleton's writings. META's ANTI/THESIS section, this time, has been filled by the editors themselves, "battling" each other over the conceptualization and relevance of the term "popular culture."

The FOCUS section features five case studies. The discussion begins with two contributions both dealing with the politics of culture in contemporary Turkey. The political relevance of culture in a Turkish context has not only become obvious since the so called Gezi Park protests in 2013. Over the past decade, Turkey's cultural politics have been determined by the political dominance of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) and its attempt to consolidate its power through establishing cultural hegemony over the Turkish society. Today, more than ever before, culture must be seen as a site of ideological struggle and a terrain of incorporation and resistance, in which different worldviews and normative orders compete with each other. We are happy to have found two authors who, despite all political odds, were ready to share their perspectives on the politics of culture in present-day Turkey with us. **Ayça Ince**, the former Vice-President of the Center for Cultural Policies and Management at Istanbul Bilgi University, investigates the politics of cultural isomorphism on the level of Istanbul's district municipalities, thereby taking into account the context of national cultural policies, while **Oliver Kontny** in his contribution on the "Cultural Politics of Difference in Turkey" highlights the articulations of dissensus from among the vivid community of cultural producers with regard to the present *Kulturkampf* in Turkey.

Thomas Serres and **Tristan Leperlier** take us to Algeria to study representations of the Algerian population as promoted by francophone intellectuals in a context of longstanding crisis and uncertainty. In this endeavor, the authors draw on Robert Reich's category of "symbolic analysts." Serres and Leperlier claim that the political and intellectual commitments of these symbolic analysts can be interpreted through the triad concept of "Naming, Blaming, Claiming."

Nadja von Maltzahn's contribution explores the contexts and dynamics of cultural policy making in Lebanon. Based on three case studies—the National Library, Beirut Municipality and Beit Beirut—she examines how cultural policies are shaped and implemented by different actors in the Lebanese cultural scene. Contradicting the widespread notion of Lebanon as a state without any cultural policy, the author uses the concept of explicit and implicit cultural policies as a framework to show that these forms of institutional actions do exist in various settings. On a final note, Maltzahn discusses issues of cultural censorship in Lebanon.

In his article on "Arabic Rap and the Re-Creation of Hip Hop's Founding Myth," **Igor Johannsen** describes how decisive features of the founding myth and narrative of the global hip hop community are actualized and re-presented in the context of the so-called "Arab Spring." Performing and using specific cultural symbols, signs, and practices whose genesis is connected to specific social communities and whose place of origin is decidedly US-American should not be understood as mere appropriation or imitation, the author claims. Rather, the respective performances and lyrical references have to be seen as conscious and deliberate re-creations of hip hop's practices and its historiography.

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