BIOGRAPHY

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Researching the Middle East: Diversity or Decoloniality?

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Those opening remarks focus on diversity with regard to knowledge production, especially in relation to Eurocentrism and the associated arguments about decoloniality in knowledge production.[1]

Eurocentricism in knowledge production arises from history. The modern world is largely shaped by European colonialism and empires. Modern education systems, the curriculum, and the disciplines have canons which are shaped by this particular history. Colonialism had at its core a set of political, economic and sociocultural hierarchies.

It also constructed intellectual hierarchies which were significant in justifying slavery, appropriation and exploitation. Such racial hierarchies formed through colonialism and empires are still reproduced in how we see and approach the world, how we construct or ignore the thought systems of others, including in the field of Middle East Studies. There are erasures, epistemic violence and also an unwritten 'ignorance contract' shaping what we know, how we know, and what we do not know. The field of the Global South has aimed to challenge this, and has sought to shift the way we discuss and theorize modernity, globalization, and social justice. It draws from a variety of sources and approaches, for example critical race theory, transnational feminism, postcolonialism and decoloniality. Within this field, the epistemological interventions

of, for example, Mignolo[2] and Boaventure de Sousa[3] have revealed the epistemic violence on others, Shilliam[4] has examined anticolonial struggles, whilst Bhambra[5] and Chakrabarty[6] have criticized the inadequate understandings of European history and how it impacts our understanding of today. The focus has been on the gendered, racialized, socio-economic and epistemological inequalities. Below, I discuss why we need decoloniality of knowledge production in general, and decoloniality in the Middle East scholarship in particular. This is because '[w]e are at a point in our work when we can no longer ignore the empires and the imperial context in our studies'.[7]

Decoloniality is primarily an intervention in epistemology. It questions the one-sided and partial view of the world, deems it inadequate in its understanding of history and of today. In an attempt to undo these, there is also a growing movement seeking to decolonize the curricula and canons in disciplines across the social sciences and humanities, for example in disciplines such as history, international relations, sociology, literature and social work. Comprised of students, academics and activists, its proponents argue that through a narrow focus on European authors, histories and perspectives, existing canons and curricula reproduce a world-view where Europeans and whiteness are seen not only as morally but also as intellectually

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superior. The lack of a critical perspective not only shapes what white Europeans learn and think, but also produces a 'white gaze'[8] which comes to shape how people of colour think about themselves and history and vis-à-vis others. Any serious understanding of history, politics and arts and culture today has to unpack and circumvent the reproduction of such inherited prejudices and hierarchies. This is what the current decolonization struggle is about, and if it has not arrived at your university or discipline yet, be prepared, it is around the corner.

Scholars who demand this are at times approached with suspicion, belittled for having an axe to grind. Universities, and the disciplines and knowledges created therein are seen as somewhat different to other institutions. Academia is treated as an exception in that the best materials, books and ideas are apparently taught by the best and brightest. Similar arguments were of course offered in the 1960s and 1970s when academia was confronted by feminist critique. Decades later, there have been major transformations of the curricula in the light of feminist critique – albeit this is far from complete nor is it at a desirable level. Disciplines in humanities and social sciences have had to pay increasing attention to gender, not just in terms of subject matter but also in terms of epistemological

tools and stances shifting how we understand and explain the world .[9] Having gone through that in terms of gender, it is interesting to note the ensuing resistance to the demand to decolonize. It is telling that the simple demand for enrichment and for accuracy are at times met with hostility and resistance within and outside of academia.[10]

As with gender, it is of upmost importance, in my view, that we do not demand decolonization so that we can provide a 'diverse' curriculum. We must demand it so that the curriculum is true to history and our present; one which takes us away from one-sided and inadequate accounts. Hence it is not plurality of knowledges but injustice to knowledge (through convenient omissions) which should be the driver, the impetus here. We must challenge epistemological biases and ignorance, not create a parallel canon. Our focus should be on oppression and injustice not the celebration of difference. We should, I argue, demand epistemic justice, not diversity managerialism for the curriculum.

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Here I would like to consider two approaches which were presented, amongst others, as alternative perspectives to Eurocentrism: multiple modernities, and cosmopolitanism. These two approaches have been extremely influential in amongst the disciplines which feed the Middle East Studies scholarship, especially disciplines such as international relations, politics, sociology and history. In the rest of this paper I would like to discuss the limitations of both the multiple modernities paradigm and the cosmopolitanism scholarship and argue that neither have the potential to take the rest of the world into consideration in a way which would move us from Eurocentrism to decoloniality.

From 1990s onwards, the multiple modernities approach began to challenge the 'one modernity' thinking which dominated the modernization theory of the previous decades. It was argued that scholars should not look at the rest of the world from Europe, but instead accept different trajectories and modernities, diversifying and multiplying our understanding of modernity and progress. European/Western modernity was presented as one model among many other possible different routes, for example different to the ones Turkey, Russia or China followed [11][12] . The multiple modernities paradigm, however did not do away with Eurocentrism. In fact, as has been challenged by Bhambra[13], the literature on multiple modernities in fact does not address the problematic constructions of modernity or the way in which such reconstructions are continuing to have consequences for our understanding of the present. It fails to see modernity as product of complex engagements between different parts of the world, including Europe and elsewhere, and thus as a collective good, belonging to humanity. The literature on multiple modernities sees the rest of the world as external to the 'Miracle that is Europe'. As a consequence, when it examines the Middle East, it does not show enough awareness of colonial roots and context nor reflect adequately on colonization and its consequences on what followed in the Middle East and in Europe. In a typical fashion to International Relations scholarship, it considers Europe and the Middle East separately, not interconnectedly.[14] It leaves the dominant way in which Europe is understood as sacrosanct and untouched, and thus produces a problematic construction of the Middle East, be it Turkey or Iran. In summary, it neither acknowledges the legacies of colonialism, nor the contributions of 'others' to modernity and to Europe. Europe and the Middle East are left to live in different worlds. Within such a Eurocentric context, for example, it is no wonder that the 2011 Arab uprisings were wrongly constructed as mainly an uprising against the autocratic and 'failed' regimes in those countries. The narrative that the protesters were contesting the global order and also the West was not recognized or effectively reported.[15]

The second influential approach I would like to consider is cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is typically conceived as a normative stance against nationalism. It demands the expansion of the sphere of identification and belonging beyond national boundaries.

Cosmopolitanism, through the challenge it brought to nationalism and state-centric discourses dominant in political science, international relations and sociology, could perhaps lead the path out of Eurocentrism? Scholars of cosmopolitanism have been successful in terms of providing a normative criticism of nationalism, and also of naïve universalism, something welcome in Middle East Studies. The antagonism which some scholars of cosmopolitanism adopt towards multiculturalism, however, is telling. In fact, multiculturalism is used as a foil against cosmopolitanism by some of the leading cosmopolitanism scholars.[16] For example:

'Multiculturalism means plural monoculturalism. It refers to collective categories of difference and has a tendency to essentialize them... multiculturalism perceives cultural differences as -so to speak- "little nations" in one nation'.[17]

'cosmopolitanism is not a generalized version of multiculturalism where plurality is simply the goal' [18]; '[m]ulticulturalism, too, often results in an increase in cultural differences as opposed to being a means to secure autonomy and justice'.[19]

'ours is an effort to move beyond multiculturalism', and to go beyond the 'ultimately essentializing nature of culturally and ethno-religious-based paradigms'.[20]

If non-hierarchical acceptance of, and engagement with, others is central to cosmopolitanism, such caricatured criticisms of multiculturalism are difficult to follow, if not rather uncomfortable. The adversary of multiculturalism is monoculturalism and assimilation; it is not cosmopolitanism. Multiculturalism, in its aspiration to allow minoritized groups to participate as equals in civic and political life, and to enhance their claim-making capacities within nation-states is essential for a cosmopolitan order as it also disrupts nationalism and naïve national narratives. After all, multiculturalism was never purely about diversity and difference; it was

about questioning the upper hand that the hegemonic national subjects held, allowing minoritized groups to make claims and participate on an equal footing as civic and political citizens. Multiculturalist demands of protection from racism and rejection of assimilation support, if not overlap with, cosmopolitan aspirations. A cosmopolitanism which is too quick to engage in swift dismissal of multiculturalism, and one which does not effectively recognize multiculturalism's historical struggles against the assimilationist policies of the old older, including its alliance with anti-racist movements in Europe and North America, could not be an ally of decolonialism. Nor can it purport to be anti-Eurocentric if there is curiously little said in the work of scholars of cosmopolitanism about cultural plurality being woven into the fabric of European history and society due to colonialism and empire.

In summary, the multiple modernities paradigm and also some of the cosmopolitanism perspectives, dominant in fields of, for example, history, sociology, politics and international relations, have failed to move us away from Eurocentricism or towards decoloniality. Lessons can be learnt here about how not to deploy diversity in the field of Middle East Studies. In our attempts to decolonize, we have to ensure that by paying attention to non-western perspectives, scholars, the Global South and the periphery the

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field of Middle East Studies does not end up running parallel stories to those told at the core of the field. Instead we need to question, and shift problematic categories and understandings of the world. We need to shift the canon to more adequate accounts rather than create yet another form of peripherilization.[21]

Last but not least, I would like to end by highlighting that in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the issue of diversity and the battle of epistemology will not go away anywhere soon. In fact, we are probably going to see an ever-increasing friction between those who accept diversity and the obligations which arise from that (for example, the loss of privilege) and those who resent and resist this loss, lost in their failure to understand that cultural plurality is woven into European history and today. The questioning of privilege in epistemology needs to be conducted through a defence of accuracy and adequacy, not through a defence of multiplicity and diversity. The convenient exclusions are not only unjust to those whom the canon excludes, but also frustrating for those who hold the upper hand as it leaves them with an inadequate and inaccurate vision of history and of today, unable to deal with the complexity and diversity in which we find ourselves.

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[1] This paper follows from the opening keynote I gave at the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS) Conference at Durham Castle, University of Durham, on 19 September 2017. I would like to thank the audience and the organizers for the opportunity for intellectual exchange and discussion.

[2] W. D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26:7-8 (2009), 159-181.; W. D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Latin America Otherwise). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

[3] S. Boaventure de Sousa, *Epistemologies of the South*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014.

[4] R. Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity*, London: Routledge, 2010.

[5] G. K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.; G. K. Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

[6] D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[7] E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994. 5.

[8] Similar to 'male gaze' where male perspectives and patriarchy are adopted by women.

[9] e.g. L. Alcoff, *Feminist Epistemologies*, London: Routledge, 1993.

[10] See for instance the recent debate surrounding the demand to decolonize the curriculum at the University of Cambridge: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/telegraph-lola-olufemi_uk_59f1fe0fe4b077d8dfc7eaf9; https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/13893.

[11] S. N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*, Daedalus, 129:1 (2000), 1–29.

[12] P. Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the Present*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

[13] G. K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[14] For a criticism see B. Gruffydd Jones, 'International Relations, Eurocentrism and Imperialism' in *Decolonizing International Relations*, edited by B. Gruffydd Jones. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 1-19.; R. Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity*, London: Routledge, 2010.

[15] O. Goksel, 'Eurocentrism Awakened: The Arab Uprisings and the Search for a "Modern" Middle East' in *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring* edited by H. Isikal and O. Goskel. New York and Heidelberg: Springer, 2017. 33-51.

[16] The backlash against multiculturalism in wider political debates and European public policy and discourse is also worth noting. It could also be captured in the Brexit debate. When surveyed, 80% of those who voted Brexit said they saw immigration as a social ill. However multiculturalism topped their 'dislikes' list, with 81% of them seeing multiculturalism as a social ill. See http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/.

[17] U. Beck, 'Multiculturalism or Cosmopolitanism: How Can We Describe and Understand the Diversity of the World?', *Social Sciences in China*, 32:4 (2011). 54.

[18] G. Delanty, 'The cosmopolitan imagination : critical cosmopolitanism and social theory', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 57:1 (2006). 35.

[19] G. Delanty, 'Cultural diversity, democracy and the prospects of cosmopolitanism: a theory of cultural encounters', *British Journal of Sociology*, 62:4 (2011). 650.

[20] N. Glick Schiller; T. Darieva and S. Gruner-Domic, 'Defining cosmopolitan sociability in a transnational age. An introduction', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34:3 (2011). 401.

[21] In my own area of specialism (Kurds, Turkey and Kurdish diaspora), for example, I have resisted creating an alternative story of Turkey, an indigenous perspective, some sort of a parallel universe. My aim has been to unsettle Turkish modernity's self-image (the story it tells itself) and to enable the rethinking, reconstruction and retelling of the story of modernity in Turkey which pierces homogeneity claims but is also confident enough to carry the perspectives of those whom it erased or attempted to silence (Demir, 2014). I move from a mere focus on identity claims to a focus on oppression and injustice. In a similar vein, my most recent work, I tilt the axis of the Global South scholarship towards the Middle East and the Kurds, and discuss the epistemic interventions they make, the way in which they expose links between their predicament and Europe, and highlight how they advance a transnational indigenous movement (Demir, forthcoming 2018).

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