Reconfiguring the Past: Politics of Memory in the Middle East and North Africa since the 1990s

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In recent years, history research has increasingly focused on the ways in which historical memory is canonized, contested and transformed over time. As far as the Middle East and North Africa are concerned, such issues still remain largely understudied, in spite of their obvious importance for politics. The few existing case studies in the field clearly suggest that even within the framework of the predominantly authoritarian regimes in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, memory and history can be fruitfully analysed as sites of contestation and bargaining processes between various political actors. This workshop (29–30 May 2008) explored the potential of concepts of collective memory, historical cultures and cultures of politics of remembrance for research on Middle Eastern and North African societies, and focused on a number of relevant developments in countries including Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Israel/Palestine, Egypt and Morocco.

Since their inception, the post-colonial nation-states in the Middle East made use of more or less clearly conceived cultural devices to advance the project of nation-building. In most cases, sponsoring a certain kind of nationalized historiography and iconography and the introduction of a national curriculum in schools was an integral part of these strategies. During the first decades following World War II, efforts to impose more or less official representations of the nation were strongly influenced by the respective political choices of state elites. Due to international, regional as well as domestic pressures, beginning in the 1970s, most of the region’s regimes experienced a phase of social as well as ideological ‘disengagement’ of the state. This, eventually, led to a remarkable strengthening of civil-societal activities and socio-cultural pluralism in many countries of the region despite the continuing authoritarianism of the regimes.

The workshop aimed to comparatively scrutinize the role played by the so-called soft areas of history and memory for processes of negotiating political change beyond the level of regime change. It mainly focused on the period since the 1990s when the existing regimes came under growing national and international pressure and asked the following questions: How did the politics of memory pursued by Middle Eastern states change? How do official narratives and the politics of history react to the emergence of competing versions of the past? How far are they responsive to socio-cultural change and related politics of memory ‘from below’? To what extent is the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of each society taken into account and what political meaning is attached to these diversities? How are external or internal ‘others’ represent-
ed? To what degree is the often painful political history of inter-community strife being accounted for in official as well as oppositional historical narratives in the respective countries? Can reform efforts in the areas of historiography and politics of memory be considered more than just decorative measures designed to re-stabilize the existing authoritarian order?

The workshop was organized by the Asia-Africa-Institute at Hamburg University in cooperation with the GEI and the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO), Berlin. The topics raised here will be further explored in a follow-up conference to be held at the ZMO in 2009.

**ARBEITSBEREICH**

»SCHULISCHE BILDUNGS-MEDIEN IM ZEITALTER DER GLOBALISIERUNG«

»Parallelgesellschaften: Wie viel Wertekonsens braucht unsere Gesellschaft? Für eine kluge Politik der Differenz«

Werner Schiffauer spricht mit Susanne Schwalgin über sein neues Buch

— Schwalgin: Mit diesem Buch richst du dich dezent gegen Vertreter, die vor der Entstehung bzw. Verfestigung von Parallelgesellschaften warnen und außerdem eine neue Leitkultur fordern, die ja sehr stark national grundiert ist. Andererseits forderst du in dem Essay eine kluge Politik der Differenz. Was ist damit genau gemeint?

— Schiffauer: Also das Problem mit dem Begriff Parallelgesellschaft scheint mir zu sein, dass wir uns von Bildern leiten lassen, die unser

Prof. Dr. Werner Schiffauer hat den Lehrstuhl für Vergleichende Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie an der Europa-Universität Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder inne. Er ist Autor und Herausgeber von Büchern zur ländlichen und städtischen Türkei, zu türkischen Migranten in Deutschland und zur Anthropologie der Stadt.

Dr. Susanne Schwalgin ist Ethnologin mit Forschungsschwerpunkten auf Fragen von Migrations- und Bildungsforschung. In diesem Bereich hat sie bis Oktober 2008 am Georg-Eckert-Institut gearbeitet. Für die Zukunft will sich Susanne Schwalgin freiberuflich neuen Herausforderungen stellen.