



*MUBIT* Inter-University Doctoral Cooperation in Islamic and Middle Eastern  
Studies Basel/Zürich  
&  
Near and Middle Eastern Studies  
The Graduate School of Social Sciences (G3S)  
University of Basel

## Call for Applications

*8<sup>th</sup> Annual MUBIT Doctoral Workshop in Late and Post-Ottoman Studies in Basel*

# Arab Marxism: The Global History of Revolutionary Movements in the Middle East in the Twentieth and Twenty- First Centuries

*A Workshop with*

PD. Dr. Manfred Sing (Leibniz Institute of European History) and  
Miriam Younes (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung)

September 25-26, 2020



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## *Arab Marxism: The Global History of Revolutionary Movements in the Middle East in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*

The struggle for political participation, social justice and legal equality was a key element of radical socialist and communist movements that emerged in Arab countries before and after World War I. These movements mobilized the masses, organized the workers, formed political parties and called for political demonstrations or, in some instances, for armed revolution. The spread of radical ideas among workers, the middle class, and intellectuals mirrored the growing integration of Arab societies into a globalized economy from the nineteenth century onwards.

Ideologically, the main domestic opponents of Marxist/Communist movements in many Arab countries were Arab nationalist and Islamist movements both of whom connected citizenship rights to national and/or religious identity and strove to establish a homogeneous nation. In contrast, the radical left recruited followers from all sectors of Arab societies, especially from religious and ethnical minorities as well as members of foreign nationalities. Women participated also in communist/Marxist movements, but sources reveal the male-dominated cultures inside these movements and the little attention they gave to the struggle for women's rights.

In spite of the political differences, communists throughout history formed part-time alliances with nationalist, Islamists and authoritarian states, often with detrimental results. Moreover, the rigid structures of communist parties did not favour internal democracy. After 1990, the communist movement lost influence and many former supporters moved onwards to liberal or Islamist ideas, as part of an often bitter learning process. The remaining as well as newly emerging leftist groups are experimenting with new forms of organisation, mobilisation, action, and ideological mixture. A higher sensibility for questions of citizenship rights is characteristic for the post-Communist left. In the recent civil uprisings of 2010/11 and 2019/2020 in many Arab countries, many leftist movements are present, but they represent mainly one contested ideological current among others.

*PD. Dr. Manfred Sing (Leibniz Institute of European History)*

Manfred Sing is a Senior Researcher at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz, Germany. He received his doctoral degree in Islamic Studies from Freiburg University and the *venia legendi* from Basel University in 2019. His research interests focus on the multi-religious history of Islam, secularism, and Arab Marxism in a transnational and transcultural perspective. In a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2008 to 2012, he worked on post-communist transformations in Arab countries. He has extensively





published on Arab Marxism, most recently “The Tempestuous Affair between Marxism and Islam: Attraction, Hostility, and Accommodation since 1917”, in: Béatrice Hendrich (ed.): *Muslims and Capitalism – An Uneasy Relationship?* (Baden-Baden: Ergon 2018), 51–101. Contact: [sing@ieg-mainz.de](mailto:sing@ieg-mainz.de)

## *Miriam Younes (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung)*

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Miriam Younes is the Regional Director of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Beirut Office, responsible for the foundation’s work in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Iran and Saudi-Arabia. She is also a research fellow at Lebanon Support. Currently, she is finishing her PhD thesis entitled “Living leftism in Lebanon. A historical anthropology of leftist intellectuals in Lebanon, 1930-1990” at the University of Roskilde, Denmark under the supervision of Sune Haugbolle/Samer Frangie. Her research interests are modern intellectual and transnational history, theories of ideologies and collective action as well as concepts of revolution, leftism and post-colonial resistances.

Contact: [miriam.younes@rosalux.org](mailto:miriam.younes@rosalux.org)





## Organization

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The 8<sup>th</sup> Annual MUBIT Doctoral Workshop in Late and Post-Ottoman Studies in Basel, "Arab Marxism: The Global History of Revolutionary Movements in the Middle East in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries" is a two-day intensive seminar (from September 25, 14:00 pm to September 26, 13:00 pm, 2020) organized by Dr. Ali Sonay at the Program for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Basel.

**If the Coronavirus regulations of the University of Basel do not allow workshop participants to meet in person, it will be held online.**

## Application

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PhD and MA students who wish to attend the workshop are asked to write an email to Dr. Ali Sonay ([ali.sonay@unibas.ch](mailto:ali.sonay@unibas.ch)), with a biographical abstract explaining their research interests and projects as well as their academic background (max. 400 words, in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, in English) in addition to a Curriculum Vitae. *The deadline for the application is July 10, 2020.* Applicants will receive an answer regarding their participation by July 15, 2020.

## Requirements for Successful Participation

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Participants are entitled to 3 ECTS points for successful participation. Participants will receive a list of readings, to be completed prior to the workshop, by July 31, 2020. Successful participation at the workshop is subject to the mandatory completion of the required readings in advance and active participation in the workshop discussions.

## Contact

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Dr. Ali Sonay  
MUBIT Coordinator  
[ali.sonay@unibas.ch](mailto:ali.sonay@unibas.ch)  
Universität Basel  
Seminar für Nahoststudien  
Maiengasse 51  
CH-4056 Basel, Switzerland



## Related questions that this workshop will explore include:

### *1. Socialist and Communist Movements before and after World War I*

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The spread of communist and Marxist ideas in the Arab world started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly through the growing integration of Arab societies into a globalized economy and the emergence of a middle and working class but also due to growing transregional networks and connections. This led to the emergence of embryonic labor movements as well as socialist and anarchist groups, mainly operating underground. The Bolshevik revolution and the stabilization of Soviet power led to the quick establishment of communist parties in many Arab countries as well as the further spread of communist ideas. These parties were mainly organized as offshoots of Western communist parties and attracted many foreigners and minority groups. The establishment of radical leftist groups was reinforced by the founding of the Comintern that aimed to impose its authority on the emerging global communist movement. Between the two World Wars, the communist parties in the Arab world mainly fought against colonialism and imperialism. With the beginning of WW II, these priorities shifted, and many parties engaged in the anti-fascist struggle.

1. How can we define these emerging leftist/communist movements? How do they relate to the global history of leftist movements?
2. What was the role of minorities within these movements? Why was the communist/socialist movement so attractive to them?
3. What ambivalences did the integration of the Communist parties into the Comintern create?
4. How can we look at the anti-fascist ideas/struggles of the communist parties?

### *2. Women Participation and Women Rights in Marxist/Communist Movements*

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The participation of women in the Marxist and communist movements in Arab countries is still highly under-researched. The same holds true for Arab Marxists' take on women's rights and gender questions. The history of radically leftist movements is mainly written as a history of men, although throughout the history of these movements, women played a vital role in forms of resistance and radicalism. In countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Egypt, women have been at the forefront in strikes and demonstrations and were engaged in political activism at least since the 1940s, in most cases in cooperation with the communist parties of the respective countries. The communist parties declared themselves as the vanguard of the struggle for women's rights. Still, these were mainly lip services, whereas in



reality there was little interest in topics such as women's oppression or gender equality in their own rank and file. The established women organizations within the parties rather reinforced traditional gender relations; in Marxist parlance, the question of women's rights was postponed until after the revolution, seen by the communists as part of the liberation of the whole society. In the recent uprisings, especially in Iraq and Sudan, the high level of involvement of women has received a lot of attention. Many of the women activists have been very outspoken about social oppression, inequality and violence against women and likewise complemented their ideas with a change of daily life practices as well as new forms of mobilization and political action. The question of how the newly emerging and established leftist movements incorporate gender inequalities into their political practice is, however, an open and unanswered issue.

1. How can women's ambivalent experiences be incorporated into the historiography of communist/leftist movements?
2. How did the experiences of women in leftist movements in the Arab resemble the experiences of women in leftist movements globally? How can we relate feminism and Marxism?
3. Can we decipher fundamental changes in today's uprisings and the emergence of a new generation of leftist women activists?

### 3. *Communist/Marxist Movements and Religion*

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The relation between Marxism and religion has been complicated and ambivalent, theoretically as well as practically, ever since Karl Marx stated in 1844 that “the *criticism of religion* has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.” Although Marxists have a long record of being atheistic and anti-religious, it is striking that academic discussions often deal with Marxism as something religious or rather similar to it and even use categories from the studies of religions. Marxism has been described as a “political religion” staging “quasi-religious rituals,” as a “messianic religion” seeking for inner-worldly salvation, or the mother of “fundamentalism”. Religion is not a neutral concept, especially not in this context. Christian opposition to socialism and communism saw them as a “deadly plague” or “Godless threat”. The pro-Marxist camp saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a world historic event, even as the aim and end of history, famously expressed in Ernst Bloch's saying: “Ubi Lenin, ibi Jerusalem.”

This panel sheds light on the relation between Marxism/Communism and Islam. Under the umbrella term of “religion”, Islam is often neglected, although its relation to Marxism is important and somewhat different from Christianity's. A focus on the relations between Marxists and Muslims contributes to our understanding of Marxism as a global movement and sheds light on understudied parts of European, Russian, Chinese, Asian,



African, and Arab histories; it also helps us understand the emergence of Arab socialism and Islamic socialism as political rivals of communism. Against a post-colonial critique that depicts Marx and his followers as Westernizers importing a foreign ideology and Orientalist lexicon (pace Edward Said), a historical overview can sketch different forms of adoption and adaptation of socialism and Marxist ideas by different Middle Eastern groups. The panel thus aims to show the multi-faceted and ambivalent relationship between Marxism and Islam.

1. Why was the communist option attractive for members of religious and ethnical minorities in Arab countries? What were the main arguments of Muslim scholars against communism?
2. How did communists on the one side and Arab or Islamic socialists on the other side differ in their view of the history of early Islam?
3. Why was the co-option of Muslim scholars by socialist regimes only successful for short periods?
4. Why does post-colonial criticism accuse Western and Arab Marxists of deforming the image of Islam?
5. Why has Islam/Islamism become an option for renegade Marxists since the 1970s?

#### *4. Leftism in the Recent Uprisings in the Arab World*

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In the recent civil uprisings of 2010/11 and 2019/2020 in many Arab countries, many leftist movements were or are still present. These include the “old” communist or Marxist parties—many of whom revived their popularity in light of the uprisings—, but also new and alternative leftist groups. Other ideological trends are also present within the ongoing protest movements, often representing Islamic or rather liberal ideas and values. The rising popularity of leftist movements in countries such as Iraq and Sudan represents a new global trend that challenges the capitalist neoliberal world order and its dislocations. Many protestors and activists are rejecting the emergence of any leadership or forms of party organizing within their uprising. This trend poses many until now under-researched questions and topics as:

1. What are the ideological pillars of new leftist movements? What about their class and gender constituencies and their relation to the established “old” Left?
2. What is their answer to the present multi-faceted and complex economic and political crises?
3. What realistic perspectives do these movements have within their political and social contexts?

