

# Language, Science and Aesthetics

## Articulations of Subjectivity and Objectivity in the Modern Middle East, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia

Report of the Summer Academy in Beirut, 11-19 September 2014

Organizers: Orient-Institut Beirut/Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin

Between 11-19 September 2014, the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) and the Berlin-based research program Forum Transregionale Studien organized an international Summer Academy in Beirut entitled “Language, Science and Aesthetics - Articulations of Subjectivity and Objectivity in the Modern Middle East, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia”.

The Summer Academy explored debates about modernity, its preconditions and its aftermath by focusing on the multifarious processes and often unique ways in which societies outside Europe have adopted, translated, rejected or produced the global, the modern and tradition. A specific focus was placed on the notions of subjectivity and objectivity, the individual and the subject as key concepts of modernity. The Summer Academy also engaged with the debates on the writing of a more global history by paying particular attention to changing textual, aesthetic, and language-practices and other modes of knowledge-making.

The Summer Academy gathered around 35 international [participants](#) from various disciplines such as literature, philology, philosophy, history, art history, cultural anthropology, and history of science to discuss questions of modernity from a ‘transregional’ perspective, incorporating West Asian, South Asian and East Asian experiences. The Summer Academy was run by an interdisciplinary group of scholars, which included **Monique Bellan** (Orient-Institut Beirut), **Nadia Bou Ali** (American University of Beirut), **Dahlia Gubara** (Orient-Institut Beirut), **Hans Harder** (University of Heidelberg), **Bodhisattva Kar** (University of Cape Town) and **Stefan Leder** (Orient-Institut Beirut).

A number of other scholars also took part in the Summer Academy, including **Hussein Abdelsater** (American University of Beirut), **Nader el-Bizri** (American University of Beirut), **Ray Brassier** (American University of Beirut), **Monica Juneja** (University of Heidelberg), **Ertuğrul Ökten** (29 Mayıs University, Istanbul), **Samir Mahmoud** (American University of Beirut), **Kirsten Scheid** (American University of Beirut) and **Malek Sharif** (American University of Beirut).

During the ten days of the Summer Academy the participants presented and discussed their research projects in various formats: There were daily meetings in small groups - **project presentations** - which were divided into three parallel working groups (language, science, and aesthetics). The participants presented and discussed ongoing research projects. The **research seminars** were a platform for the tutors to present their current work and research questions to the plenum. In addition, there were multiple **thematic discussions** where questions concerning the overall framework of the Summer Academy were discussed. These formats were complemented by a series of **lectures** that took place at the Orient-Institut Beirut and

the American University of Beirut. These addressed various themes and problems such as the textual and artistic genres; modernity and governmentality; renewing *falsafa*; global history and conceptions of the local; language, universalism, and Enlightenment; modernity and misplacement; and situating science. For a detailed schedule please follow this [link](#).

With the exception of the lectures, all formats were restricted to Academy participants, which created a concentrated and at the same time friendly atmosphere, enabling constructive, focused discussions.

Despite the disadvantages that the separation into three parallel groups necessarily entailed (the presentations of fellow participants in other groups were inevitably missed), the discussions within the disciplinary confines also provoked the questioning of the very confines themselves. At the same time, the arrangement enabled the elaboration of a common ground as well as of disciplinary specificities. Whereas both science and aesthetics were perceived as domains that are able to create a certain homogeneity within a heterogeneous field, the diversity of practices and concepts explored in the language group remained a challenge due to the amalgamation of local linguistic and literary registers and global formats. The group focused on productive theoretical debates based on studies of specific localities and contexts.

The key questions that were at the core of the Summer Academy – modernity, the relation between subjectivity and objectivity and the intrinsically linked discursive processes; the usefulness of a ‘transregional’ perspective that entails a reassessment of Eurocentric perspectives and foregrounds processes of translation/mistranslation, of transfer and resistance in the fields of language, science and aesthetics – were intensively addressed. Discussions revolved mainly around the disentanglement of key notions and concepts such as:

- Center/peripheries, global/local, national/transregional, universal/particular
- Modernity/modernities/entangled modernities, tradition, anachronism, as well as the epistemic frameworks they support and engender
- Translation, mistranslation, originality and authenticity, vernaculars and national standardization

The following is a summary of the final plenary discussion in which the three working groups – language, science and aesthetics – outlined the most important points arising from their discussions over the course of the ten days of the Summer Academy:

### *Aesthetics*

One of the research questions that was formulated at the outset was whether and to what extent subjective approaches (such as the gaze, perception, taste) and the emergence of new artistic formats and practices affect the development of categories (i.e. art history, canonization of knowledge) and of institutional sites (i.e. academies or art schools). Art history and art academies as two major agents of Western artistic hegemony were a common

point of debate in many discussions. The normative effect of Western art history on non-Western art provoked the disappearance or the shift into the realm of non-visibility of art forms that did not correspond to the new standards. This eventually led to the distinction between indigenous and vernacular/traditional art versus modern art. Anachronism as an analytical term and as a tool to define power came into play to describe the relationship between the center and its peripheries. An important perspective on the issue was shed through the participants' decision to shift the frame of the discussion away from the national and to adopt the regional as a category of analysis, probing its transgressions and unexpected geographies. Part of the working group's discussions on the articulations of modernism, the aesthetics of protest and the notion of aesthetic citizen in India, Cambodia, Iran, Tunisia, and Thailand revolved around the question of what can be gained from national frameworks. How can these approaches be nuanced enough to integrate other categories of analysis such as the interrogation of artistic and cultural networks that overstep national boundaries? This question is intrinsically linked to the economy of aesthetics and the need to redefine the interrelation of creative practices, global economies, and the nation as a category. The power of national institutions to demarcate boundaries of artistic and cultural production as an elevated intellectual and moral endeavor was considered. This power is often exercised at the expense of modes of expression that are seen to be lodged in traditions that are backwards or inauthentic. Other points of discussion included the processes of translation, sometimes also mistranslation, from one cultural context into another, reception, as well as the issues pertaining to indigeneity and tradition. To summarize the main strands of the discussions, one can say that these focused on the identification of entanglements from multiple discursive and geographical practices and their interconnections with national frameworks.

### *Language*

The language group faced the particular challenge of defining a common ground as it embraced very different research fields, perspectives, languages and regions. It is because language is not in fact a discipline that allowed the debates in the group to touch on pertinent theoretical engagements with modernity based on concrete research projects. These covered: the heterogeneous temporalities of modernity, discourses of revolution, the commodification of language, language and nationalism, literature and ideology, print capitalism, and the philosophy of language. With the onset of modernity in its distinct political economic project, language as a subject of inquiry and practice underwent processes of reassessment, innovation, and normalization in all of the regions examined. Moving away from representationalism, the various participants recognized language as the vehicle that produces meaning and knowledge. This was indicated by the role of language in making and unmaking communities. Translation emerged as a central subject of discussion in the group. Translation not only encompasses the transition from one language or from one semiotic system into another, but also occurs within the structure of language itself. Translation is therefore a process inherent to the development of language and is at once conceptual and material. Language mediates the relationship of the individual to the group and the particular

in relation to the universal. Relationality and translation were intensely discussed in the working group sessions. Translation was identified as a concept that could be useful in global and interdisciplinary conversations as a way to think through rather than resolve this impasse of the particular and the universal. Translation is not a linear process and therefore it annihilates the binary dichotomy of original/copy and authentic/inauthentic.

### *Science*

The group spent considerable time interrogating the concept of modernity and its various definitional instances. The idea of alternative or plural modernities, as opposed to a singular Modernity, was debated. For instance, does the plural rendition in and of itself analytically counter-balance the signification of homogeneity as is often professed (usually with the charge of Eurocentricism hovering in the background), or does it, rather, foreground the idea of otherness? How do similar notions of modernity produce alternatives or differences - depending on the context? The diverse perspectives discussed in the group presentations form a picture of modernity that is not homogenous but stands for a certain continuity. These differences are to be found within modernity itself and not in opposition to it. Modernity, it was suggested, must therefore be conceptualized and apprehended as a continuous, if disjointed, space, rather than being perceived as a concept that is rigid with regard to time and place. The analytical value of notions of different or alternative modernities was, then, ultimately rejected.

The idea of process entered the discussion in connection with the debate around the binary division of subject and object and its direct link to modernity. Process was perceived as something incomplete that is not yet an object, though it may ultimately become one. Participants felt that the processual aspect of the concept of science, in and of itself, has to be re-thought. The group thus focused on related notions such as *uncertainty*, *becoming*, *experience*, and *sensibility*, which can imply a certain resistance toward the production of something fully formed. These terms point to forms of movement that need not necessarily be prefigured through the teleology of progress. Modern science may have a very clear stance on the dichotomy between subject/object and subjectivity/objectivity, but is science the same everywhere? When viewed from the perspective of process or localized practice, the terrain may be less stable than is claimed by the self-assured idea of Science. This point too was debated at length.

Another point raised was the tension between conscription and agency: to what extent can modernity be considered an attempt to colonize the future? Or as an empty space that can itself be conquered?

Finally, the idea of the body as a key concept in modernity was discussed. Questions were raised in relation to how we might rethink the role of the body vis-à-vis the objectification of the word, which causes a loss of bodily experiences and sensibility. Group members also discussed how politics seizes hold of the body, opening up further questions on the current

debates on discursivity and biopolitics within modernity. The relations between science, politics, and the body are of course crucial for the perception of the latter as a place where political endeavor and true science can take place. A point for future inquiry, it was agreed, was the analysis of the body as both an instrument as well as a medium of resistance to modernity.

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