Minorities and Politics of Minorization

Convenors:
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Abstract

The proposed panel combines an interest in the construction of minority groups within specific knowledge regimes with an attention to the politics of secularism as a practice of state sovereignty. We are interested in exploring the particular social and political imaginaries that underlie different concepts and politics of minority in various national and transnational contexts. Drawing on an understanding of secularism as a shared problem-space, we seek to analyze how cultural and religious factors inter-relate with historical knowledges and power structures to shape understandings of the minority question and politics of minoritization. The papers in this panel will tackle these questions through an engagement with various Western and non-Western contexts.

Outline

The proposed panel combines an interest in the construction of minority groups within specific knowledge regimes with an attention to the politics of secularism as a practice of state sovereignty. We are interested in exploring the social and political imaginaries that underlie different concepts and politics of minority in various national and transnational contexts. Drawing on an understanding of secularism as a shared problem-space, we seek to analyze how cultural and religious factors inter-relate with historical knowledges and power structures to shape the minority question and politics of minoritization.

In this workshop we will draw on recent debates on secularism in order to reframe the comparative analysis of minorities and minority politics. We recognize from the outset that the concept of “minority” is in many respects as problematic as it has become indispensable to contemporary debates (Cowan 2001; Raymond and Modood 2007). While the complex relations between the concept of “minority” and the categories of the modern nation-state have been the object of debate for a number of years, Saba Mahmood has recently furthered the debate by drawing attention to the geopolitical inequalities structuring it (Mahmood 2012).

The term “minority” suggests a clear-cut boundedness of human groups which often masks more complex structures of inequality - as well as complicated processes of identity formation. The term sits uneasily with complex understandings of the way power operates. “Minority” will thus be used here simply to designate a group whose difference places it in a position of inequality facing structural – legal, economic, discursive – obstacles in its attempts to achieve (more) equality. The precise processes through which these inequalities are made durable - and minorities constituted or perpetuated - are a central concern of this panel. We are interested in exploring how minorities have been constructed and what knowledge regimes and political imaginaries underlie this construction.
If one conceives secularism as a “problem-space” - i.e., an “ensemble of questions, stakes, and range of answers that have historically characterized it” (Agrama 2010: 501) - in which the dividing line between religion and politics is the central question to which fundamental rights are attached, how are the particular historical configurations specific to each national context brought to bear on the minority question? What ideas about religion underlie debates about minorities? What is the significance of culture and religion in contemporary politics of minoritization? How do they intersect with broader power relations and structures of inequality? How does the emergence of new religious minorities - following conversion, migration, etc. - destabilize established modes of governance?

In addition to the three individual papers by the organizers of this panel, we invite scholars to present case-studies that can speak to some of the theoretical questions and concerns outlined above.

Accepted papers so far:

1) Abstract and Proposal by Alexandre Caeiro, Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies / Hamad Bin Khalifa University (acaeiro@qfis.edu.qa)

"Islam, Law, and the Globalization of the Minority Question"

Abstract

Since the 1990s, when the idea of minority rights re-emerged in international political and legal discourse, critical scholarship has started to pay attention to the concept of “minority”, complicating its relationship to demography, law, and the categories of the modern nation-state. In this paper I seek to advance the debate on the relation between religious freedom, minority question and geopolitical inequality by studying the shifting valence of the concept of minority. I focus on discourses produced by Islamic scholars engaged in debates about Islam in the West. The broader interest of this paper lies in thinking about the possibilities for re-signification of the concept of “minority” when it is subjected to the varying calculations and strategies of Islamic legal actors.

Proposal

Since the 1990s, when the idea of minority rights re-emerged in international political and legal discourse, critical scholarship has started to pay attention to the concept of “minority”, complicating its relationship to demography, law, and the categories of the modern nation-state. Instead of taking the status of minority as self-evident, scholars across a range of disciplines have started to trace the processes through which minorities are constituted, reproduced, and contested – studying, in other words, the ever shifting and contextual politics of minoritization. Like the tolerated subject, the minority figure is now increasingly seen as embodying a paradoxical and intractable condition – one that is simultaneously incorporated and excluded by the modern state. In a recent contribution, anthropologist Saba Mahmood has furthered and re-directed the debate by drawing attention to the complex inter-relations between discourses on religious freedom, the minority question, and geopolitical inequalities between Western and non-Western orders (Mahmood 2012). According to the American anthropologist, “the figure of the ‘minority’ in Middle Eastern history... has served as a [key] site for the articulation and exercise of European power”. This well-documented historical fact is not merely an accident, inessential to the proper understanding of the way the concept of minority operates. Rather, Mahmood invites us to think how the “space of problematization” of the concept is “indebted to this history” (Mahmood 2012: 419). Mahmood does not want to suggest, however, that there is an
ineluctable link between the concept of minority and its fraught history. Rather, she is arguing against understandings of minority rights and religious liberty as “stable” and “universal” signifiers (Mahmood 2012: 429). In the second part of her essay Mahmood shows precisely how the case of Copts in Egypt “elaborates these earlier trends while also departing from this history” (Mahmood 2012: 420). History and power in this account are necessary to our understanding of the concept of minority, as well as insufficient. The processes and transformations deployments of the concept bring about are “unique and unpredictable” (Mahmood 2012: 429). In this paper I seek to continue Mahmood’s exploration of the shifting valence of the concept of minority in the contemporary world. I focus on Islamic discourses produced by religious scholars and public intellectuals engaged in global debates about the present applicability of shari’a, as well as in more contextualized discussions about the rights and duties of Muslim communities living in the West. I seek to understand in particular the uses and contestations of the concept of minority (aqalliyya) which structure many of these debates. The broader interest of this paper lies in thinking about the possibilities for re-signification of the concept of “minority” when it is subjected to the varying calculations and strategies of Islamic legal actors – and how those attempts at re-signification might allow us to construct the meaning of the concept of minority in ways perhaps not fully accounted for in the literature.

2) Abstract and Proposal by Markus Dressler, Bayreuth University, Religionswissenschaft (dresslermarkus1@gmail.com)

“Nationalism, Secularism, and Minority Politics in Turkey”

Abstract

The Turkish public sphere is defined and monitored by institutionalized ideas of what can be legitimate claims of ethnic and religious difference and representation. This state-centric monitoring discourse and the public spaces that it allows are legitimized and structured by interrelated secularist and nationalist knowledge regimes. Analyzing that dynamic, this paper will show how the Turkish concept of “minority” (azınlık) contributes to the objectification of notions of religious (and secondarily also ethnic) difference. The paper thus follows Talal Asad’s, and more recently Saba Mahmood’s critique of the liberal biases of minority discourse and inquires into the work of this discourse in the regulation and justification of ethnic, religious, and political hegemonies.

Proposal

Following Talal Asad's, and more recently Saba Mahmood's critique of the liberal biases of minority discourse, this paper inquires into the work of this discourse in the regulation and justification of given ethnic, religious, and political hegemonies.

Surprising for many unfamiliar with the semantics of Turkish nationalism, the assumption that a “real” Turk is a Muslim is one of its constitutive elements. The major reasons for this have to be searched for in the formative period of Turkish nation-building and, more particularly, the way this period is remembered as a struggle of Turkish (and implicitly Muslim) people against foreign and/or inimical (non-Muslim) forces. The memory of this antagonism played a constitutive role in the formation of the Kemalist ideal of ethnic and religious unity and homogeneity. In this narrative, the “others” are the non-Muslims: adversary outside forces, and enemies from within. This negative connotation has
remained attached to the concept of “minority” (azınlık) in Turkey, the political and judicial justification of which goes back to the Treaty of Lausanne. The Lausanne treaty (1923) only affirmed the protection of non-Muslim minorities. It neither acknowledged protection of ethnic or language-based minorities, nor protection of religious minorities in general. This recognition has been rather ambivalent for those (Armenian and Greek-Orthodox Christians, as well as Jews) who were granted the minority status and, as I will show, makes disadvantaged Muslim communities refrain from using the term for their own empowerment.

The othering of minorities has since the foundation of the republic in 1923 been an important tool of Turkish nation-building. Until today, the term puts those labeled by it in an ambivalent position. While it assures their Turkishness with regards to citizenship, it at the same time denies their Turkishness with regard to nationhood. In other words, the term minority (azınlık) provides recognition and certain rights to the thusly signified while locating them at the same time outside of the national body. Therefore, communities of nominal Muslims that have clear social boundaries based on either ethnic or religious criteria (such as Alevis, Nusayris, Kurds, and Arabs) normally refrain from using the term azınlık in their inner-Turkish struggle for rights and recognition - although they are labeled as minorities in international human rights discourse. From this follows that the hegemonic knowledge of what constitutes a Turkish subject needs to be at the center of any investigation into the minority politics of Turkey.

The Turkish public sphere is defined and monitored by institutionalized ideas of what can be legitimate claims of ethnic and religious difference and representation. This state-centric monitoring discourse and the public spaces that it allows are legitimized and structured by interrelated secularist and nationalist knowledge regimes. Analyzing that discourse, this paper will show how the Turkish concept of minority contributes to the objectification of notions of religious (and secondarily also ethnic) difference.

3) Abstract and Proposal by Frank Peter, University of Bern, frank.peter@islam.unibe.ch

Identifying Muslim and other minorities in contemporary France

Abstract

France is usually considered a country where the concept of minority is subject to a particularly strong criticism and hence of very limited significance in politics as well as in discourses of religious groups including those of Muslim groups. This paper argues that this perspective on usages of the minority concept in France overemphasizes semantics. While an explicit reference to the existence of minorities remains highly problematic in France, there are numerous discourses, often articulated by Muslims, which contribute to representations of the French population in terms of majority and minorities. Images of minority group status and prognostics about changes in group status are essential elements in the current debate about „Islam“, „Islamophobia“ or the „Islamization of France“. The paper suggests that the case of minority discourses in France should be de-particularized and examines the ways in which Muslim actors represent power inequalities in France through images of minority groups.
Proposal

France is usually considered as a country where the concept of minority is subject to a particularly strong criticism and hence of very limited significance in politics as well as in discourses of religious groups including those of Muslim groups. This difference is explained with reference to the dominant strands of Republicanist political philosophy which have durably marked the legal and administrative structure of the French state. The emphasis which is placed upon the notion of abstract citizenship as guarantee for the equality of all French constitutes a major obstacle for policy measures which aim at social groups defined by particular identities, notably ethnic or religious identities. The ongoing debate about the collection of „ethnic data“ and „positive discrimination“ illustrates this well (Amiraux/Simon 2006; Akgönül 2013). This holds true also for the case of French Muslims and Islamic institutions in the Republic. State attempts (since the late 1990s) to create representative institutions for Muslims have often been criticized as contrary to the letter and spirit of France’s republican constitution and legal order.

While this perspective on usages of the minority concept in France – or rather, its relative absence – is necessary, it overemphasizes semantics and is for that reason limited, as this paper will show. In brief, while an explicit reference to the existence of minorities remains highly problematic in France, there are numerous discourses directly relevant to debates on Islam, often articulated by Muslims, which contribute to representations of the French population in terms of majority and minorities. The paper will show that this holds particularly true in the current conjuncture which is characterized by a broad debate about „Islamophobia“ on the one hand and an intensifying campaign against the „Islamization of France“ form emerging identitarian groups, on the other.

The paper will argue that the central question today is not so much the struggle about the term „minority“ in France and whether it will continue to be barred from usage or not. While the usage of the term „minority“ remains restricted, French Muslims and their interlocutors often think in terms of minority-majority when addressing inequalities between Muslims and other French. Images of minority group status and prognostics about changes in group status are essential elements in a public debate where many participants aspire to establish categorical differences. The paper suggests that the case of minority discourses in France should be de-particularized and proposes to examine what can be achieved by claiming minority status.