

**Student-Led Seminar:
Contemporary Graduate Research on the Middle East**

25 June, 2007
University of Manchester

Abstracts

KATHERINE PRESCOTT:

To What Extent does Fatima Mernissi Challenge Modernisation Theory in 'The Veil and the Male Elite'?

In 2004, The Praemium Erasmianum Foundation awarded the Erasmus Prize to Fatima Mernissi (jointly with Abdulkarim Soroush and Sadik Jalal al-Azm) for her "contributions to the societal and intellectual debate on the topic of Religion and Modernity".¹ The debate surrounding the compatibility of religion and modernity has been simmering for over fifty years and there are still many ideas about how the two should co-exist. So, in what ways has Mernissi contributed to this debate? To what extent has her work, focussing on women in Islam, challenged the paradigm of modernisation? This paper firstly examines modernisation theory briefly examined, then undertakes a close analysis of one of Mernissi's works, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, in order to see how they relate to modernisation theory. The ways in which her ideas emulate modernisation theory will be highlighted, as well as the ways in which she has contested it. This paper therefore questions the relevance of modernisation theory as well as looking at women's rights in Islam and how these relate to modernisation.

PAUL ANDERSON:

Modernity and the Transmission of Knowledge in Islam: Can Words be Gifts?

This presentation is a thought experiment: it attempts to apply ideas from the anthropology of commodity exchange to the anthropology of Islam, and to see what happens. First, I briefly outline the changing ways that Islamic religious knowledge was transmitted in the Arab world in the pre-modern and modern periods. Then I outline a theory: anthropologists from Marcel Mauss onwards have drawn, criticised and redrawn a distinction between gift exchange (where the transaction creates and maintains personal relations, and is part of an ongoing chain of reciprocity) and commodity exchange (where the transaction is impersonal, transient, and often anonymous). Then, in the spirit of experimentation, I attempt to apply this distinction to the exchange not of things but of words. In summary, I suggest that recited Quranic words circulate as gifts; that the advent of printing brought a "commoditisation" of the word; and that new technologies of communication are associated with changing concepts of knowledge, ethics and agency. In conclusion, I ask how words circulate in the contemporary piety movement in Egypt, focusing particularly on the phenomenon of listening to recorded sermons on cassettes: do they combine aspects of commodity and gift, and what might this mean for our own categories of "modern" and "pre-modern"?

¹Praemium Erasmianum Foundation Website:< <http://www.erasmusprijs.org/eng/index.htm>> [accessed 16/01/07].

TOM APLIN:

Abdelrahman Munif and Rewriting the Nation

Abstract: Following on from the pioneering work of those such as Benedict Anderson, recent years have seen increasing attention turned toward the relationship between the Arabic novel and the nation. How does Munif articulate his preoccupation with creating a national novel form and his concern for history and its discourse, one of the most important and recurring themes in his novels and essays, and how does this relate to the representation of the nation in his novels. Where do we situate Munif in relation to the nation given that he lived most of his life in exile and the difficulty of identifying the places in his novels with a particular Arab state?

FATIMA PATEL:

Contemplating the Qasida: The Insan al-Kamil in the Diwan of the Sufi, Shaykh al-Alawi (d.1934)

The importance of Sufi poetry cannot be understated both within the context of the Sufi *turuq* and its important terms of its contribution to a universal literary output. This paper is part of a larger project in examining roles attributed to the prophet in Sufi discourse. The focus here is the *Diwan* of the Shaykh al-'Alawi as an inheritor of Akbarian monorealism and more specifically of the notion of *al-insan al-kamil*.

AFSHIN SHAHI:

The conditions of civil society in Egypt

The paper examined the role of class-consciousness in enhancing collective responsibility and accordingly contributing to the development of associative and mobilising agencies in Egypt. The paper provided analysis to demonstrate the importance of collective identity for constituting a dynamic private sphere beyond family and tribal ties. However, as it was demonstrated the state's monopolisation of the economic and political infrastructure have prevented the formation of larger associative agencies such as labour union, professional syndicates and political parties which potentially could constitute a power collective consciousness beyond tribes and families. The paper also examined the theoretical dilemmas for conceptualisation of religious mobilising agencies as agents of civil society in Egypt.