Call for Proposals

Islam in secularized democracies:
Issues of the over-politicization of a research topic

Panel at the 7th Annual Conference of the European Academy of Religion
Palermo, Italy, May 20-23, 2024

Chair: Corinne Torrekens, Professor in political sciences, Director of the Group for research on Ethnic Relations, Migration and Equality (GERME), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

This panel seeks to foster a dialogue on researching Islam in secularized democracies. By bringing together the field of social research on Islam with epistemological frameworks for social sciences, this assembly aims to explore the conditions of possibility for producing knowledge on an over-politicized research topic.

The first research current mobilized for this panel is structured by the numerous studies focusing on the integration of Muslim populations in Europe and the associated public debates. The "Islamological" current, if defined as Leyla Dakhli (2006) does, is now well established in social - and particularly political - sciences (Amiraux, 2012). It gives rise to a rich literature of which there is no question of establishing a synthesis here. This "Islamological" research current seems faced with two major challenges regarding fieldwork and the production of knowledge:

- The **securitization** of Islam, which is analyzed as the tendency to treat Islam as the major variable explaining contemporary conflicts and insecurities (Alles, 2021). This perspective results in concrete measures of administrative and police surveillance and the categorization of "good" and "bad" religiosity (Fadil, Ragazzi, de Koning, 2019; Cesari, 2013; Hajjat, 2010). Securitization raises the crucial concern as to how these surveillance mechanisms (Laurens and Neyrat, 2010) impose themselves on research domains and constrain the work of researchers in areas thus rendered sensitive.

- The **over-politicization** of Islam as a research subject, which can be defined as a reconfiguration of public debates from primarily technical discussions into major symbolic issues (Lascoumes, 2009). In this politicized context, researchers investigating Islam are often urged to take a stance "for" or "against" (Musso, 2008) their subject and interlocutors.

However, apart from a few essays with biographical dimensions (Burgat, 2016; Roy, 2009; Kepel, 2023), this line of research gives little rise to a reflexive critique on the conditions of (im)possibility of field research.

The second current mobilized here consists of studies that bring new perspectives on the epistemology of research. Since the 1960s, a "reflexive turn" (Hamati-Ataya, 2013) has been encouraging researchers to display not only the conditions of production of their research, but also the positionality issues they face and their potential impact on scientific results (Aldrin et al. al., 2022). Since the 1990s, under the joint impact of feminist and gender studies (Behl, 2017) and decolonial research (Shilliam, 2021), a new

generation of researchers has come to question their contribution to the reproduction of social hierarchies and power dynamics, whether based on gender, race, sexual orientation, or social class (Aldrin et al., 2022). However, it appears that political scientists, with notable exceptions (see Boumaza and Campana, 2007) are less accustomed than sociologists and anthropologists to share a comprehensive account of the production conditions of their research: access to the field, data collection, the researcher's positionality toward their respondents, constraints in restituting results, and so on. This observation encompasses studies on Islam, a realm extensively explored by political science.

Nevertheless, in the wake of post-colonial studies striving for the development of indigenous ways of knowing (Tuhiwai, 1999) and driven by citizen activism advocating for a voice "by and for" those primarily concerned, a proposal seems to be gaining momentum in social and political sciences. In response to a prevailing pattern in media, politics and academia, that leads to a general underrepresentation of voices from minority groups on issues that directly affect them (Delphy, 1977 ; Abu-Lughod, 2002), the notion that only researchers sharing social and cultural traits with their research subjects are capable of accessing their profound meaning and drawing accurate interpretations, is increasingly debated in academic as well as activist contexts. In European secularized democracies, Islam is both a minority religion and the object of diverse hybridations and multiple cultural affiliations (Göle, 2015 ; Torrekens, 2016). How do the assumed positions of "insider" or "outsider" operate for researchers in the field as they develop complex and analytical knowledge about a phenomenon, whether new or well-known (Favret-Saada and Isnart, 2008)? How do researchers address the pitfalls of speaking in the name of subalterns (Spivak, 1985) on the one hand; of reifying culture and essentializing individual's experience on the other, while navigating Islam as a research topic?

Alternative responses could be drawn, for example but not exclusively, from feminist epistemology (Brooks, 2007; Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa, 2013; Clair, 2016) and experiences of practical adjustments (Trier-Bienek, 2012). Incorporating emotions (Memmi and Arduin, 1999) more extensively into – political - analyses, as well as mobilizing comprehensive and clinical methods for approaching Islam on the field, could also be explored as potential strategies to tackle the issues discussed above.

This call invites any communication that initiates a reflection on these major challenges and encourages researchers to share theoretical reflections as well as creative practical strategies anchored in field experiences, which can be made of successes, uncertainties, blunders and also, sometimes, failures.

Proponents are invited to send:

- An abstract (300 words) indicating title, name of the authors and discipline
- A short bio (100 words) indicating position and institution

to julie.minders@ulb.be **before February 23**, 2024

The panel will take place during the 7th EuAre Conference in Palermo, between 20 and 23 May, 2024

The panel will host 5 speakers in addition to Chair and reader(s)

A list of the conference's panels is available here.

Selected speakers will need to register for the conference – fees apply, please read carefully

FSCIRE – Fondazione per le scienze religiose, host of the EuARe 2024 Annual Conference, offers 50 travel grants to students, Ph.D. students, post-docs, and early career scholars participating in the Conference.

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. American Anthropologist, 104(3), 783-790.

Abdelnour, Samer, Abu Moghli, Mai (2021), "Researching violent contexts: A call for political reflexivity", *Organization*, 0(0).

Aldrin, Philippe, Fournier, Pierre, Geisser, Vincent, Mirman, Yves (2022), *L'enquête en danger. Vers un nouveau régime de surveillance dans les sciences sociales*, Paris, Armand Colin.

Alles, Delphine (2021), « Religions et sécurité internationale. De la victoire implicite d'Huntington à la sécuritisation des religions », L'Académie des sciences morales et politiques éd., *Annuaire français de relations internationales,* Paris, Éditions Panthéon-Assas, pp. 775-789.

Amiraux, Valérie (2012), « État de la littérature. L'islam et les musulmans en Europe : un objet périphérique converti en incontournable des sciences sociales », *Critique internationale*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 141-157.

Behl, N. (2017), "Diasporic researcher: an autoethnographic analysis of gender and race in political science", *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 5(4), pp. 580-598.

Boumaza Magali, Aurélie Campana (2007), « Enquêter en milieu « difficile » », *Revue française de science politique*, 57(1).

Bracke, Sarah, Puig de la Bellacasa, María (2013), « Le féminisme du positionnement. Héritages et perspectives contemporaines », *Cahiers du Genre*, 54(1), pp. 45-66.

Brooks, Abigail (2007), « Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment Through Women's Lived Experience ». In *Feminist Research Practice*, par Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber et Patricia Lina Leavy. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Bucerius, Sandra Meike (2013), « Becoming a "Trusted Outsider": Gender, Ethnicity, and Inequality in Ethnographic Research », *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* 42(6), pp. 690-721.

Burgat, François (2016), *Comprendre l'islam politique. Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973-2016.* Paris, La Découverte.

Clair, Isabelle (2022), "Nos objets et nous-mêmes : connaissance biographique et réflexivité méthodologique", *Sociologie,* 3(13).

Dakhli, Leyla (2006), « L'islamologie est un sport de combat. De Gilles Kepel à Olivier Roy, l'univers impitoyable des experts de l'islam », *Revue du Crieur*, 3(1), 2016, pp. 4-17.

Delphy, Christine « Nos amis et nous. Fondements cachés de quelques discours pseudo-féministes », Questions féministes, N° 1, novembre 1977

Fadil Nadia, Ragazzi Fransesco, de Koning Martijn (2019), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London, United Kingdom.

Hajjat, Abdellali (2010), « « Bons » et « mauvais » musulmans. L'État français face aux candidats « islamistes » à la nationalité », *Cultures & Conflits*, 79-80 (3-4), pp. 139-159.

Hamati-Ataya, I. (2013), "Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism: IR's 'reflexive turn' — and beyond", *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(4), pp. 669–694.

Hanique, Fabienne (2007), « De la sociologie compréhensive à la sociologie clinique », dans : Vincent de Gaulejac éd., *La sociologie clinique.* Toulouse, Érès, « Sociologie clinique », pp. 91-113.

Kauffman, J. (1996), *L'entretien compréhensif*, Paris, Nathan.

Kepel, Gilles (2023), *Prophète en son pays*, L'Observatoire.

Lascoumes, Pierre (2009), « Les compromis parlementaires, combinaisons de surpolitisation et de sous-politisation. L'adoption des lois de réforme du Code pénal (décembre 1992) et de création du Pacs (novembre 1999) », *Revue française de science politique*, 59(3), pp. 455-478.

Laurens Sylvain, Neyrat Frédéric (2019), *Enquêter : de quel droit ? Menaces sur l'enquête en sciences sociales*, Éditions du Croquant.

Memmi Dominique, Arduin Pierre-Emmanuel, 1999, « L'enquêteur enquêté. De la "connaissance par corps" dans l'entretien sociologique », Genèses.

Sciences sociales et histoire, vol. 35, 131-145.

Musso, Sandrine (2008) « A propos du « malaise éthique » du chercheur : Les leçons d'un terrain sur les objets « sida » et « immigration » en France », *ethnographiques.org*, no. 17.

Roy, Olivier (2009). *L'Islam mondialisé,* Paris, Le Seuil.

Shilliam, Robbie (2021). *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge Polity Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1985), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, Columbia University Press.

Torrekens, Corinne (2016) « La Communauté musulmane n'existe pas », (Re)penser l'Islam, Mediapart.

Trier-Bieniek, Adrienne (2012) *Framing the Telephone Interview as a Participant-Centred Tool for Qualitative Research: A Methodological Discussion*, *Qualitative Research*, 12(6), pp. 630-44.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, London.