



## **Oriental Institute**

The Czech Academy  
of Sciences

### **Call for Contributions**

## **International Conference “Talking about “Arabs”. Echoes from different *Europes*”**

**27-28 May 2016**

**Prague**

The immigration emergency, the Cologne attacks and other reports on the Arab populations in Europe continue to generate commentaries across the continent. The concentration of generally unwelcoming attitudes towards Middle Eastern newcomers in Central and Eastern Europe is seen by some as the evidence of ‘a split of mentalities’ between the ‘old Europe’ and its ex-communist states. Publicly expressed critical stances regarding populations fleeing wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan by some Central and Eastern European officials was commonly interpreted as ‘the fear of the unknown Other’. In the political, media and even academic discourse, these reactions were attributed to the Central and Eastern European ignorance of Arab cultures, and difficulties the region has in coming to grips with its own multi-ethnic heritage. As a consequence, some Central and Eastern European countries were labeled parochial, xenophobic and not fully ‘European’. Whereas, these countries themselves claimed to act as barriers of Europe, protecting its borders and values.

These dichotomies are understood as an expression of contrasting experiences of apprehending the Other in different parts of Europe. There is a need, however, to complexify these all-too-easy dichotomies by looking into how concretely knowledge on the Middle East is produced in different countries. While speaking about refugees, two kinds of discourse could be identified across the continent: one that employs the language of human rights, and another that rests on the assumption of cultural specificity, and the related ‘cultural incompatibility’ between European and Middle Eastern countries. In this particular case, it is relevant to ask how the ‘Arab culture’ is defined and by whom. How, by contrast, ‘the culture of the majority’ is delineated and argued for? On what concrete grounds these two discourses on Arab newcomers to Europe intermingle and collide? To provide an answer to these questions, one needs to look into the ways knowledge on the Middle East is produced and disseminated in contemporary Europe.

The Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences is organizing a workshop on this issue, bringing together researchers and experts from diverse disciplinary and national backgrounds. On the basis of concrete empirical studies, conducted in different European countries and from diverse disciplinary perspectives, the workshop seeks to investigate the nexus between three different fields of knowledge production and diffusion in today’s Europe: media, academic/intellectual and policy-making. The goal is to examine the ways in which different scholarly traditions, journalistic cultures and political interest (or disinterest) affect knowledge on the Middle East in different parts of Europe. The subject of knowledge production on Oriental cultures has been extensively treated within the framework of post-colonial studies, inspired by the famous work by Edward Said. Hence, the incorporation of countries largely devoid of colonial heritage into the debate is crucial, as it could lead to question some implicit binaries in postcolonial studies. Today, when universities worldwide are seen as being isolated, media is suspected of enforcing stereotypes and politicians are blamed for turning a deaf ear to newest academic findings on social issues, the question of interactions between academia, media and policy-making is as relevant as ever.

**We are particularly interested in the following dimensions:**

- Cooperation between academic institutions and media (what scientific disciplines dominate in the academic inquiry on the region, and how they affect the construction of public knowledge on the Middle East? What type of expertise is sought after by media outlets in news commentaries? What is the role of academic and intellectuals when participating in the public debate on the Middle East?)
- Autonomy of academic research with regard to other fields (economic, political and journalistic). In the light of important debates on Orientalism, one could ask how Middle Eastern studies operated in the absence of a clear political interest in the region.
- Differences and similarities of journalism cultures across different European countries and their role in reporting on Middle Eastern countries and issues (What are the networks of information diffusion on the issues related to the Middle East? What foreign sources, experts, blogs or social media posts are regarded as reliable?).
- The main stakeholders determining in what light the region and its people will be portrayed: tourism agencies, ministries, security experts, NGOs, businessmen, etc.
- The ways knowledge in the form of *lay theories* and “common sense” travels across European countries.
- The relation between academic research and civic engagement

There is a limited budget for covering the costs of travel and/or accommodation for selected participants. Participants will be asked to send the text of their presentation to organizers and discussants prior to the workshop. The papers will be proposed for a publication in a journal yet to be identified to a collective volume.

**Guidelines for application:**

- Abstract of approx. 500 words
- Short bio, including the list of publications

**Deadline for abstract submission:** February 21, 2016

**For further information and to send abstracts please contact:**

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