



Lebanese Association for
Sociology
الجمعية اللبنانية لعلم الاجتماع

KNOWWHY GLOBAL RESEARCH

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Call for Abstracts

International Conference

Social Sciences in Arab Countries Facing a Scientific Multi-Versalism: Pathways, Challenges and Constraints

July 8/9, 2011

American University of Beirut

Organizing Committee:

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**Abstracts (should be 1 page maximum) and CV
Language: English or Arabic**

Send to:

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Deadline: 15th March, 2011

Rationale, Topics for Papers and Tentative agenda sections

1. Rationale

1.1 Social sciences in the era of globalization - Facing a scientific multi-versalism

The era of globalization has created new needs for social science knowledge. Beyond the need to produce new knowledge about more ‘foreign’ societies and policies, the arrival of a “multi-polar” world makes knowledge about different regions indispensable. This reflection goes far beyond the understanding of social realities of individual nation states: the “global” has become a new social reality for each nation-based society, across all these societies.

Social sciences do not only need to contribute to an understanding of ‘foreign’ social realities and provide the analytical categories that allow conceptualizing international change and its effects - such as “modernization”, “globalization”, or “multi-polarity”. They also need to simultaneously incorporate the international dimensions required to seize the effects of globalization on the historically nationally constructed societies, and produce knowledge that integrates this new international social reality.

However, due to emergence of categories used by the social sciences in the context of nation-states, namely in Europe/North America, any international collaborative knowledge production is confronted with the fact that these categories have strong conceptual ties with particular nation-states and their societal cultures. This worldwide spread of Western categories created the international standards of a scientific universalism. Social sciences in countries beyond the West, to which the concept of nation-state had been exported, rarely gained a sufficiently powerful tradition to interrogate the original concepts and categories of the social sciences that emerged in the context of the European societies.

Up to a certain point, Western social scientists have themselves reconsidered the Western categories claiming to universally explain the world. In addition to this internal erosion of scientific universalism, the increasing production of social science knowledge in non-Western societies has brought about a new strand of critiques. These question the fundamentals that were built by Europeans with the creation of modern scientific knowledge and its historical emancipation from religiously governed mindsets since the Enlightenment.

The emergence of a multi-polar science world with many emerging and strong science communities in East-Asia, India and Latin America and, last but not least, in the Arab countries, indicate the end of the exclusive reign of Western social sciences and the beginning of a new era of international social science collaborations.

In order to observe the reconfiguration of space and power through globalization, we need to allow conflicting interpretations of globalization, open to the plurality of cultural realities and schemes of interpretation, as a pre-requisite to the construction of truly universal social sciences and humanities. This process will very likely need numerous reformulations and multiple dialogues and interactions among the individuals, groups and institutions that generate knowledge on social realities. This creation of a new multi-polar global social science will inevitably have to go through a phase that we might call “*scientific multi-versalism*”: Incorporating conceptual contradictions in an epistemological paradox of a pluralism of universalism.

In the process of internationalization of the social sciences, the social sciences in the Arab countries have been less visible than one might expect, when considering their political relevance in the context of globalization. This apparent riddle needs to be understood by

questioning the process of institutionalization of science in Arab countries, and by reconsidering the contributions of the Arab social sciences to the newly emerging international social science knowledge production system. If multiple approaches to scientific knowledge are to be integrated beyond a simple universalisation of Western interpretations, the Arab social sciences will have to play a key role in setting agendas for scientific knowledge. The concepts that can potentially be mobilized for an increased participation on the global level, as well as the analysis of the institutional frameworks of social science knowledge in Arab societies, will constitute the main topics of this conference.

1.2 Fragmentation and conceptual alienation of the Arab academic communities

The analysis of Arab societies in the globalization era will need to question social science thinking and practices in the Arab world, in order to understand the institutionalization of science practices, the relations of social scientists with their own societies, their interaction with foreign social scientists and with Arab social scientists with established careers abroad. Ultimately, we need to understand in how far social science thinking and practices in the Arab world are products of both local needs and the universalization of the Western categorical and theoretical scientific hegemony. The translation of local priorities or concerns into social sciences has been rarely looked at in the context of the Arab world. The role that Arab academic communities have played will constitute the main question for this conference.

For this conference, we assume that teaching and practicing social sciences in the Arab world are, amongst others, confronted with the following challenges:

- a) The teaching and practices of social sciences in the region are highly fragmented amongst the various linguistic and academic communities. Taught in different academic contexts and languages, amongst them Arabic, English and French, social studies are shaped differently by each specific background of thought, scientific history, and methods applied.
- b) Not only do Western scholars concerned with the region rarely take into account Arabic academic sources due to their lack of language skills, but Arab institutions themselves sometimes deliberately ignore them. At Anglophone or Francophone universities for example, Arabic sources are a subject of analysis, the use of Arab academic references however is rarely encouraged, due to self-imposed citing practices or institutional evaluation mechanisms. While there is still no factual assessment of the scope of this process of self-imposed “erasure” of Arab social science knowledge, it is certain that many Arab academics are tuned to the approaches and concepts of Western social sciences.
- c) If we claim that the social sciences to a certain extent both reflect and shape how we see and interpret the world, it remains to be critically discussed how the Arab social sciences have been influenced by the thematic foci of Western social sciences. Western studies of Arab societies have partly evolved in the context of colonialism, and are even today - although Orientalist practices have been extensively reviewed and scrutinized - centered around certain issues that have historically crystallized “Western” academic and political interest in and experience with the region: religion, gender, tribalism, ethnicity, Bedouins, conflict, etc. To what extent do choices depend upon the influence of an international agenda, on institutional policies pertaining to the evaluation of academic careers or on the international academic labor market? In any case, the very setting of research priorities is an important aspect to be considered.

- d) The limits imposed on freedom of expression in many Arab countries also take their toll on academics and in particular the social sciences. When for example the attempt to introduce Hebrew language courses in the framework of comparative religious studies at Sousse University in Tunisia develops into a contested political issue, or when an Iraqi sociology student at Baghdad University is prevented from researching prostitution because her supervisors deny the existence of such a phenomenon in Iraqi society, a question arises as to how far it is possible to seriously conduct social sciences in such a constrained academic and intellectual environment. Moreover, have international collaborations to a certain point helped Arab researchers to circumnavigate imposed taboos and tackle forbidden issues?

2. Topics for Papers and Tentative agenda sections

The conference is designed as an *international conference* with a focus on the social science communities in Arab countries on which it will reflect from a global perspective.

- The contributions should, if possible, be grounded in empirical research discussing *the below topics either from the perspective of individual country* or in a comparative perspective, focusing on social science communities in Arab countries.
- The conference invites in particular papers from different social science and humanities disciplines in Arab countries.

Estimated total number of papers: 12 to 18

Speakers from Arab countries: 10- 12

Speakers from non- Arab countries: 4 to 5

Conference and paper languages are English and Arabic (with simultaneous translation). An abstract (maximum 1 page) and CV should be sent **before 15th March 2011**, to the Organizing Conference Committee addressed to the following email address:

Lebanese Sociology Association: sociologylb@hotmail.com and

KNOWWHY GLOBAL RESEARCH: michaelkuhn@knowwhy.net

The organizing committee will review the abstracts and invite participants to the conference, if they can deliver a paper by June 20. Travel and/or accommodation costs for invited speakers may be covered by the organizers.

Preparatory Discussion Forum

The conference will be prepared by an online discussion forum about the issues to be debated, so that the papers can pick up some of ideas developed through the discussion forum. The World SSH Net Forum (<http://worldsshnet.org/forum/>) will offer an opportunity for such a preparatory discussion forum.

Tentative agenda sections

Section 1: Introduction: International social sciences in the era of globalisation from a global and an Arab perspective

Two papers:

- 1) Challenges for international social sciences in the globalisation era
- 2) Reflections about internationalisation in the Arab world

Section 2 Facing internationalisation: Challenges to the social sciences in the Arab world

The papers in this section should mainly reflect on three aspects:

- the epistemological, theoretical and methodological challenges Arab social sciences are facing in international collaborations in the era of globalisation, as well as direct and indirect censorship
- how alternative scientific knowledge and methods on and from the Arab world, could contribute to an international knowledge production beyond Western mainstream knowledge.
- The challenges of multiple instances of censorship

Section 3 Higher education (HE) in the Arab academia that prepares for international collaborations

Whatever the scientific and infrastructural conditions as well as power structures of policies of international collaborations might be (see below), scientific success or failure ultimately depends on the individual and collective abilities of academics for “poly-centric” knowledge production. This section reflects on the particular conditions and educational efforts of HE in the Arab University system in equipping - or not equipping – (young) academics with capacities needed for international collaborations.

Section 4 Concepts and strategies of science policy

The notion of science policies in this context ranges from any sort of institutional to political interventions, and actors may be universities, funding organisations, or non-governmental and governmental bodies. The papers in this section should discuss the existing concepts of science policy for framing international social science activities in the Arab world and the existing science policy approaches towards international collaborations, and should reflect on how they intervene into and shape international academic collaborations.