

International Workshop: Commitment and Dissent - Transregional Perspectives. CNMS, Marburg
23-24 January

What makes someone a political, a "committed" writer in Latin America, Kenya or Iraq? How is form political? Are there genres which are more political than others?

These questions and many others have been explored by the researchers who came to Marburg for the workshop "Commitment and Dissent - Transregional Perspectives". Part of the activities of the Turning Points [link to <http://www.uni-marburg.de/cnms/research/turning-points>] research group, funded by the DFG, the workshop gathered specialists on Latin American, Sub-Saharan African and Berber literature, as well as a number of scholars specialised in the literature and intellectual history of the Middle East.

The workshop is part of a series of activities which began with the summer school "Aesthetics and Politics: Counter-Narratives, New Publics, and the Role of Dissent in the Arab World", held in September 2012 at the American University in Cairo in cooperation with the research programme "Europe in the Middle East - the Middle East in Europe" (EUME), and continued with a conference in Marburg which dealt with political commitment in Arabic literature from the 1940s to the present. [Link <http://www.uni-marburg.de/cnms/research/turning-points/activities>]

In their introductory note, Friederike Pannewick, head of the research group, and the group's coordinator Felix Lang emphasised that only an interdisciplinary approach taking into account the relationships between politics, everyday culture, art and the media will help to adequately understand the processes of social transformation currently taking place in the Middle East and North Africa.

The first panel of the conference featured two specialists on the Arab world. While Richard Jacquemond (IREMAM) related the notion of commitment in Egyptian literature to changes in the literary field in the aftermath of events of the Arab spring, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab (Bonn) opened up a broader comparative perspective. In her paper entitled "The Commitment to Critique in Post-Independence Arab World, Africa and Latin America" she drew parallels between the development of critical and political thought in the post-independence countries of the global south which opened up avenues leading beyond an Arab exceptionalism and its concerns with cultural decline and modernity.

The keynote speech by American-Iraqi writer and academic Sinan Antoon (NYU) added yet another perspective on political commitment in Arabic literature by emphasising the authors' point of view. Tracing the possibilities and ways of engaging the sphere of politics in the troubled history of Iraq since the 1980s, from the Iraq-Iran war to the US occupation, Antoon gave a very tangible idea of what commitment can mean in an author's daily life.

The second panel began with a talk by Clare Davies (Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin). Referring to Egyptian feminist and anti-colonial activist Hoda Shaarawi she showed the links between her ceramic workshops, the Indian arts and craft movement and the blossoming market for interior design in 1920s France.

Daniela Merolla (Leiden) proceeded to talk about Berber literature pointing out the political commitment lying in the mere choice of Tamazight as a literary language given the absence of a unified, national literary field.

The next speaker Susanne Klengel (Institute for Latin American Studies, FU Berlin) turned

attention towards a literary form which has left its mark on many Arab writers: Her account of the history of Magical Realism in Latin America and the politically committed Boom generation of the 1960s and 1970s showed many parallels and links to developments in the Arab world.

Finally, Randa Aboubakr's (Cairo University) paper focused on the question of the choice of language for a number of writers in post-independence Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka or Dennis Brutus. Whether writers chose to write in a colonial or an indigenous language, their choices were invariably informed by notions of political commitment.

Across all papers, the question of language as a main concern of committed writing in post-independence societies, as well as the contrast between the committed writers of the 1950s and 1960s and the young writers of the 1990s emerged as important themes. The notion of literature as an alternative mode of historiography was also found to be important in various regional and historical contexts. In the final discussion participants widely agreed that the many similarities and parallels between the different literary spaces called for further, more specifically focused collaborative research in the future.

[Link to the programme: <http://www.uni-marburg.de/cnms/forschung/denkfiguren-wendepunkte/aktivitaeten/konferenzen-workshops/commitment-dissent-2015/commitment-dissent-2015.pdf>]