

Summary

Futures Interrupted: Social pluralism and political projects beyond coloniality and the nation-state

Late modern and contemporary history are marked by civil wars and extreme violence which in the current era occur mostly in formerly colonized countries. These conflicts are often related to borders inside the former colony, separating different groups from one another, rather than to external borders. What Mahmood Mamdani calls the **politics of define and rule** (Mamdani 2020) has had a profound impact on many societies, generally enduring after the formal end of colonial domination. This is particularly true for the Arab world,ⁱ where it has been an important cause of civil strife, ethnic cleansing attempts and political instability. Mamdani asserts that the challenge is “to reimagine political community without colonial categories and reform politics on this basis.” (Mamdani 2020). This project starts with the premise that the **definition of the demos** (the commons, the people) precedes every political project, though often implicitly, and therefore has to figure in the analysis of those projects.

In a region marked by intense foreign intervention, it is particularly urgent to focus on *local* social and political projects and imaginaries, in order to understand current conflicts and think about possible solutions to them. In this project, I propose to concentrate on **paths not taken** and on **unimplemented plans** that had been devised by **local actors** from the 1830s (the French invasion of Algeria) until the 1960s, a period by which the vast majority of countries in the region had attained independence. This period marked the long and uneven transition from the age of empires to the age of nations, but this **interstitial moment in history** was also rife with alternative imaginaries and approaches to political community. Many of these imaginaries lay beyond the nation-state and articulated belonging and citizenship in different ways.

The focus on unimplemented projects will entail the application of a type of historical analysis and historiographical method which has thus far not been largely employed for the region: the exploration of **past futures** in the sense in which Reinhart Koselleck (2015) proposed it and the writing of a **history of possibilities** which “restitutes the dignity to each time-space position” and emphasizes what Hans Blumenberg calls the radical potentialities of humankind.ⁱⁱ One of the key categories developed by Koselleck is the **horizon of expectation** (*Erwartungshorizont*). This metahistorical category designates that which is not yet, but is expected. It is the horizon for political projects, projecting the ultimate goal, but also for daily practice in times of change. The horizon of expectation is an element that is largely absent from many historiographic works on the Arab world. This horizon of hopes and plans needs to be contemplated in the context of its time and from the perspective of the people living during that period, as part of a **reassessment of the region’s past** centering on local social and political imaginaries. The renewal of perspectives proposed in this project is opposed to the notion of a dead-end in history. It will be based on a rigorous historical methodology with a strong emphasis on archival work, in the spirit of Jacques Derrida’s conception of the archive as a

store for the future (Derrida 1996), supplemented by an extensive analysis of self-narratives and oral history inspired by Alessandro Portelli's approach (Portelli 1997).

The chronology of this project extends from the early 19th century into the 1960s in order to examine the contribution of the past futures perspective to a wide range of historical situations and assess its heuristic value for the region's history. This timeframe also corresponds to Koselleck's thesis that the difference between the horizon of expectation and the space of experience (*Erwartungsraum*) has become increasingly important with the **advent of modern times**, due to the acceleration of chronological rhythms and political events (Koselleck 2015). Indeed, this project is based on the assumption of a distinct regional modernity which was the result of the local experience of the late Ottoman reform period in the Arab provinces and of the Arab cultural renaissance known as the *Nahda*. This has been convincingly shown for the Mashreq by Ussama Makdisi (2019), but it can also be asserted for North Africa, with an adjustment of the timeframe imposed by the earlier intrusion of colonialism namely in Algeria.

Exploring interrupted futures is a unique way of making the agency of the defeated visible and of rendering their voices audible. As Koselleck pointed out, history may be made by the victors in the short run, but ultimately, **historical gains in knowledge stem from the vanquished**.

Details about the research focus of the project

The sub-projects of the *Futures Interrupted* project have been chosen because they offer good possibilities for comparison and for bringing to the fore similar dynamics and shared references, while also offering sufficient dissimilarities in terms of geography, demography and regional entanglements. The following **four moments** form the research focus of this project and will be defined more precisely with the future team members:

1. The short-lived Syrian Arab Congress and the interruption of its **non-sectarian definition** of political community, along with the echo its defeat provoked in Iraq in the summer of 1920,
2. The **local anchoring** of alternative anti-colonial projects in what became Algeria, each framing **belonging** in different ways, with none of them ultimately influencing the model of national liberation,
3. The patterns of living together and alternative state-building projects in **Mandate Palestine**, all of which were marginalized when **partition** was decided,
4. The **local and transnational** underpinnings of the Hashemite Kingdom of Hijaz that was run over by Wahhabi expansionism in 1924.

What all of these interrupted projects have in common is their **relative distance from nation-state approaches to political community**, were they pan-Arab, Islamic-reformist, republican or constitutionalist-monarchical in inspiration. Indeed, the nation-state model has been contested in the region from the day of its inception until today: from the United Arab Republic of Syria and Egypt (1958-1961) until the challenge that the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) presents to the existence of the nation-states created as a result of the Sykes-Picot agreement. While the more recent dramatic developments are beyond the scope of this project, its findings will also prove relevant for understanding the **deeper dynamics underlying current events** in the region. In dealing with polities that became nation-states after

independence, this project will seek to avoid methodological nationalism, which presupposes “that national independence is the necessary form of colonial emancipation” (Wilder 2015).

This research project intends to use **the Arab world as an observatory** of these alternative imaginaries and to derive research strategies and concepts from it which could then be tested and further improved in other parts of the formerly colonized world. The project will be based on **an interdisciplinary approach joining history, critical theory, sociology and political science**. It will connect the Arab world with the rest of the formerly colonized world by comparing the trajectories of Arab countries with African, Caribbean, Latin American and Asian countries, and by paying close attention to transcontinental influences and alliances.

Methodology

This project will not provide another top-down political history of the region, but will follow a **bottom-up approach**, proceeding from **daily life and practice** and moving up to social and political movements. It will be **source-driven**, not theory-driven, while engaging critically with existing social and political theory. Its objective is to enrich the pool of concepts at the disposal of political science and sociology through a **grounded historical analysis** of social and political imaginaries in the Arab world.

This implies the search for **new types of sources**, specifically in order to document non-elite experiences and imaginaries. The crossing of a great variety of archival sources (imperial, state, press, consular, community, family, private, petitions to League of Nations, King Crane commission etc.) will bring into dialogue the different levels of discourse, activism and constraint linked to political action. As mentioned earlier, **oral history** will occupy a particularly important place within the research strategy, since it allows access to narratives of social groups which rarely leave written sources. Given the chronology of the project, this will entail the analysis of existing oral history archives, in addition to interviews with the remaining witnesses of the last two decades under study (1940s to 1960s). **Poems, songs, ego-documents and self-narratives** will constitute another source for the analysis of idioms of belonging, community and political action.

In terms of chronology, the focus will not only be on moments of rupture, but also on the **moments of hesitation**, when several alternative projects were under discussion. Spatially, it is not the nation-state that will constitute the frame of reference, but rather the region as a whole with its important level of mobilities, circulation and interconnection. The approach will thus be **transnational** and will draw on connected history and on comparison.

ⁱ I use this term to refer to all countries in which Arabic is the main language.

ⁱⁱ Hannes Bajohr, « Hans Blumenberg's History of Possibilities », *Journal of the History of Ideas* blog, 8 July 2019, online: <https://jhiblog.org/2019/07/08/hans-blumenbergs-history-of-possibilities/>. One of Blumenberg's most important works is *The Genesis of the Copernican World*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987.