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Seeking the Individual in the Mediterranean Muslim World

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Citation

Deguilhem, R. (1999). Seeking the Individual in the Mediterranean Muslim World. *Isim Newsletter*, 2(1), 34-34. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17159>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17159>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

European Science Foundation
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This past July, Istanbul’s Topkapi Palace welcomed the second plenary gathering of the international research programme, Individual and Society in the Mediterranean Muslim World (ISMM), a European Science Foundation (ESF) programme headquartered in Strasbourg. Initiated and chaired by Robert Ilbert, professor at the University of Provence and founder/director of the MMSH (Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l’Homme) in Aix-en-Provence (France), ISMM represents a four-year (1996-99) research programme whose major objective is to study pre-defined aspects of the individual within the Mediterranean Muslim context.

The overall intellectual framework for the research was initially articulated largely around the ideas expressed by Norbert Elias, among others, that the process of individuation allowing a person to differentiate him or herself from others, presupposes a certain liberty in ideological, religious, political and economic choice which only began to arise on a large scale in the post-Gutenberg and Enlightenment era. Yet, this liberty of choice, which purportedly made possible the prevalent appearance of unique individuals, was simultaneously tempered by unconscious and conscious communal, societal and political influences exerted upon the individual. Taking this supposition as its theoretical point of departure, the programme founders and participants theorized whether the process of individuation in the Mediterranean Muslim milieu is comparable to that of the European experience. Despite the oft-repeated concept in the West that the very essence of Islam personifies a unified community of humans intimately and inextricably associated with one another in the pursuit of religiously oriented objectives, research in this programme (and elsewhere) as based upon the abundant and highly diverse primary sources dating from the early centuries of Islam to the present day, has shown that throughout its more than fourteen centuries of existence, the Islamic world has fostered a society of differentiated individuals who pursue their own personal itineraries as well as taking part in their immediate and larger environments. In order to uncover and define the individual in the Mediterranean Muslim context, not only mainstream members of society – men, women and children alike – but also marginals and nonconformists, emphasis is particularly put upon micro-historical and case study approaches.

Nearly 100 papers were presented at the July plenary by participants coming from all over Western Europe as well as Eastern Europe (in particular, from Poland), Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa. Editorial Board and Steering Committee meetings prefaced and closed the Istanbul plenary. Similar to the previous plenary held in Grenada in May 1996, which officially opened our programme’s activities, the July 1998 Istanbul plenary provided the venue for an across-the-programme gathering for researchers who have been working, for the past three years, within the framework of the separate seven research teams:

- Team 1:** Forms of belonging and modes of social integration, subthemes: sources of history for the Arab and Turkish woman, child-woman relations in Middle Eastern Muslim societies, intellectual and social education of the individual; team led by Klaus Kreiser, Bamberg University, seminars also organized by Manuela Marin, CSIC (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), Madrid and Avner Giladi, Haifa University;
- Team 2:** Norms, oppositions and marginality, subthemes: marginality and exclusion, the emergence of individual ownership, customary law and individual expression; team led by Walter Dostal, Vienna University, seminars also organized by

- Eugene Rogan, St. Antony’s College, Oxford University, Huri Islamoglu-Inan, Ankara University, Martha Mundy, London School of Economics and Baudouin Dupret, CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) at CEDEJ (Centre de Documentation et d’Etudes Juridiques) in Cairo;
- Team 3:** Power relationships, subthemes: individual identity and power relationships, the individual and power in the colonial experience, individual paths in Egyptian, Syrian and North African societies; team led by Paul Dumont, Strasbourg University, seminars also organized by Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi and Mohamed-H di Cherif, Tunis University and Michael Ursinus, University of Heidelberg;
- Team 4:** Modes of production, subthemes: the individual and his relation to finances in the Mediterranean Muslim world, the individual’s place within the political economy and economics, the individual’s relation with wealth and poverty; team led by Zafer Toprak, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, seminars also organized by Nelly Hanna, American University in Cairo, Jean-Paul Pascual, CNRS, IREMAM (Institut de Recherches et d’Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman), Aix-en-Provence, and John Davies, All Souls College, Oxford University;
- Team 5:** Images and representations, subthemes: individuation in literature and art, the poet and the writer’s mission as seen by himself, subversivity of the individual in art; team led by Robin Ostle, St. John’s College, Oxford University and Remke Kruk, University of Leiden;
- Team 6:** Religious activity and experiences, subthemes: political action, language and religion in the Mediterranean Muslim basin, conversion to and from Islam; team led by Mercedes García-Arenal, CSIC, Madrid, seminars also organized by Knut Vikor, Bergen University and Jan Hj rpe, Lund University;
- Team 7:** Muslims in contemporary Western Europe, subthemes: current Islamic discourses in Europe, conversion to Islam in contemporary Europe, team led by Felice Dassetto, Catholic University of Leuven.

As the Istanbul event marked a bit more than the midway point through the programme, emphasis was especially put upon analysing the progress made towards reaching the three major goals expressed at the outset:

- Producing original analytical research within the European context on chosen aspects of the above seven topics with the participation not only of established scholars but also of recent doctorates so that the programme will contribute towards the training of the next generation; this is one of the principal reasons for holding the great majority of our seminars, workshops and symposia in accordance with university calendars and very often, within university premises (between the university years 1996-1999, ISMM has hosted some 50 events within over 30 different university locales held in approximately 130 sessions with more than 550 presentations);
- Encouraging the participation of specialists from the Mediterranean Muslim world not only as paper givers but also as event leaders such as the seminars organized and led for the past three years in Cairo by Nelly Hanna, within the framework of group four and in Tunis by Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi and Mohamed-H di Cherif in group three;
- Preserving the results of the research and circulating it within the larger scientific community by means of a three-tiered publication programme:
 - working papers which, with permission of the individual authors, are copied and circulated among team and other members of the programme;

- publication *hors s ries*; the first one of this nature appeared just in time for the July plenary: *Individual and Society in the Mediterranean Muslim World: Issues and Sources*, directed by Robert Ilbert, edited by Randi Deguilhem, Paul Roubaud Printers, Aix-en-Provence, 1998; the second which is edited by Felice Dassetto, will appear in spring 1999 in the form of an issue of *The Social Compass* (academic journal published at the Catholic University in Leuven) devoted to New Islamic Discourses in Europe; the third and fourth hors s ries volumes are currently being edited by Stephen Guth, *The Author’s Mission in the Mediterranean Muslim World*, German Oriental Institute in Beirut Press and by Robin Ostle and Remke Kruk, *Individuation in Literature and Art: Marginal Voices*, Paul Roubaud Printers, Aix-en-Provence, with both books appearing at the end of 1999 or during 2000, additional volumes are being prepared by seminar leaders;
- creation of two new publication series consisting of 5-7 books each; ISMM Editorial Board is headed by Leila Fawaz and Manuela Marin, other members are Paul Dumont, Ulrich Haarmann, Robert Ilbert and Remke Kruk, publication series editor is Randi Deguilhem:
 1. Maisonneuve et Larose, Paris (final contract is signed) for French language or mixed French-English books; the first volume in the collection which concerns ‘Contemporary Islam in Europe’ is now being edited by Felice Dassetto;
 2. SUNY Press, New York (final negotiations are underway) for English language books; the first volume scheduled to appear: *Historical Sources for the Arab Woman*, has been edited by Manuela Marin and Randi Deguilhem; the second book on *Individual Behaviour and Economics in the Mediterranean Muslim World* is currently being edited by Nelly Hanna.

Now into its fourth and final year, ISMM seminars, workshops and symposia taking place throughout 1999 in Vienna, Strasbourg, Heidelberg, Oxford, London, Leiden, Madrid, Leuven, Sarajevo, Salamanca, Cairo, Tunis and Aix-en-Provence have the overall objective of consolidating results of research conducted in the programme over the past three years. Apart from concluding the study of each team’s separate topics, a final research objective in 1999 is to further identify and deepen the analysis of transversal themes which cross through the work of the different groups. A special brainstorming session is being organized for the end of 1999 for this specific purpose where programme participants will meet with invited outside scholars to develop transversal themes. One such theme which has particularly emerged from the teams’ research concerns the role of the individual Mediterranean Muslim woman in the cultural, social, religious, political and economic spheres from medieval Andalous to contemporary Europe as well as modern Middle East and North Africa. This very theme was the leitmotiv of the Istanbul plenary session where speakers, including two Turkish female professors from Bosphorus University, Yesim Arat and Binnaz Toprak, developed this issue in relation to contemporary Turkey.

Research on the European level regarding the individual’s place and role in society within the Mediterranean Muslim world is vital to the understanding of this most highly complex multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual region. While studying a problematic very much in the forefront of current humanities research in Europe, the focus of the ISMM programme is quite innovative in that members of the seven teams have been researching the individual in the Mediterranean Muslim world – man, woman and child – through his or her ‘private life’ by delving into primary documentary sources. Even if the objective is to go beyond this aspect, this approach highlights the value and brings to the fore persons who are not necessarily studied under the classical approaches normally used in research on Islamic societies, namely, children, women and those living on the fringe of society. It is therefore possible in this way to undertake the research and writing of the history of these neglected spheres in the Southern Mediterranean basin, that is, the history of the family and socialization processes. Over and above the individuals themselves, new light is shed on social and economic behaviour which may therefore be looked at in a new way. The processes of enrichment of the individual, the creation and formulation of property wealth and career profiles are currently the objects of study in the programme, even if not all researchers agree on the use of macro and micro-research procedures. By investigating religious (Sufism and conversion), cultural and artistic experiences, researchers have gone beyond the habitual schemata in studying Islamization processes. New questions have emerged from this approach such as, for example, the question of creativity, which goes right to the heart of studying the conduct of each individual.

Although ISMM’s scientific events are scheduled to formally conclude at the end of this year, the intellectual life of the themes studied within the programme will certainly outlast the four years allocated to it through the formal and informal networks which have been woven among the more than 150 participants of the programme, seniors and juniors alike. Individual and Society in the Mediterranean Muslim World has taken its place in the academic landscape. In years to come, researchers associated with our programme will no doubt be involved in projects undertaking comparative analyses for the purpose of studying the specificity (if such be the case) of both the Islamic world and that of the Mediterranean. Although research on the question has been advanced via the ISMM programme, investigation into the processes of individualization as related to the Mediterranean Muslim world is by no means terminated. ♦

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