Workshop Report

Sufism as an Alternative Philosophical Foundation for a Global International Relations Theory

Duisburg, 16–17 October 2017

Workshop organized by:
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Participants at the two-day workshop ‘Sufism as an Alternative Philosophical Foundation for a Global International Relations Theory’ were welcomed by the Centre’s Executive Director Markus Böckenförde and the Centre’s Fellow Deepshikha Shahi, who also initiated the workshop. In her introductory remarks Shahi stressed how the workshop would be the first important step in the assessment of whether Sufi philosophical thinking could serve as a non-Western contribution to the discipline of international relations (IR). Being of multidisciplinary format, the workshop was to be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity at the same time for the endeavour of creating the first comprehensive book project on the matter. The edited volume ought to be soundly based in theory and substantiated by case studies in order to pave the way for a new stream of ground-breaking IR thinking. Producing an exceptionalist discourse as opposed to a comprehensive theory, therefore, would be counterproductive and lack the universalist spirit needed to achieve such an ambitious goal.

The workshop was organized in one opening session and three consecutive thematic sessions, each of which were in reference to one of the guiding topics proposed in the opening session.

Monday, 16th October 2017

Opening

To set the stage, Deepshikha Shahi opened the workshop with her thoughts on ‘Introducing Sufism to IR Theory: A Preliminary Inquiry into Epistomological, Methodological and Ontological Pathways’. She outlined the essential principles which are at the basis of Sufism as a philosophical tradition and which need to be considered when suggesting a theoretic model for IR. Especially, threefold attributes of Sufism were identified as relevant to a conceptualization for IR, namely epistemological monism, ontological immaterialism, and methodological eclecticism. Owing to those qualities, Sufism has the potential to constitute a truly global IR theory of universalist character and bridge the gap between non-Western and Western IR, thus avoiding the shortcomings of Eurocentric scholarship. In sum, Shahi argued that the monist approach in Sufi thinking, which stipulates oneness of reality and—in contrast to Western IR—merges subject and object in knowledge situations, promises new theoretical concepts and an ethical alternative to what existed before. Still, she stressed this did not mean that Sufi monist theory was to be seen in opposition to dualist thinking but
that it would assimilate the dualist proposition, and thereby expand the horizons of thinking.

Some points were raised by the workshop participants in response, such as the allusion to a risk of utilizing Sufism as a sort of ‘vaccination’ for the darker and more vicious displays of liberal Islam in Western conceptions since this would take it back to being used for Eurocentric purposes and consequentially make it unsuitable for the project. Another criticism concerned the problem of conceiving Sufism as a complete theory. Similarly, to avoid oversimplification of a very complex and fluid cultural practice that may not as such meet the necessary criteria applied to a philosophically grounded theory of global IR, terminological exchange was suggested from Sufism to monism.

**Session 1: Debating Sufi Epistemological Monism: Connected or Disconnected Realities of IR?**

**Fait Muedini** presented his input on ‘The Oneness of Reality in Sufism and Other Mystical Traditions: Prospective Application to International Relations’, which highlighted that all mystical traditions—deviating from most monotheistic religions—have one thing in common: They are marked by a distinct non-dualism. That is to say they practise oneness or monism which helps to conceive of the world as a very inclusive and connected reflection of divinity instead of an egotistical construction of humans. Sufis, Muedini went on to explain, are often able to connect to God by connecting to every other human being and by detaching from the self of their own being, so divinity becomes reflected in everyday life. In Sufi philosophy, Muedini continued, identity and self are closely interrelated, which clearly hints at the idea that oneness is deeply rooted in the individual. Conversely, when reality is seen in terms of separateness and me-centeredness, as it is often depicted in much of the currently dominant theoretical thinking, it appears like an illusion to a Sufi. Such revelations does not only exist in Eastern traditions but can also be found in versions of Western religious thought such as Judaism (Kabbala) or mystic traditions of Christianity, Muedini explained. Moreover, traces of such circular principles can be found in science and nature, for example in Quantum Entanglement theory which assumes that particles are not just related but highly interconnected or in the hive-mind detected in bee colonies where common goals trump particular interests. Based on the capacity of Sufism to see the self in others, it is possible to construe global ideas from it which explain how actions by one affect all other interconnected beings.
This thought was taken up by one participant who pointed out how Europe in its current situation with several crises would very much profit from Sufi thought of oneness. Additionally, the question was raised whether any risks could ensue from converting the current system’s foundation from a parallel structure to a circulatory one. One risk that came to mind was the possibility that actual diversities that guide people’s realities could be shut out by realizing that all is one. Similarly, another participant raised doubts whether monism could be classified as an all-encompassing theory and asked what it could do to a complex world that is essentially based socially on individualism and differentiation. It was further remarked that if one intents to work with the idea that human beings are connected and basically all the same, it has to be shown first before searching how this kind of thinking is represented in religion.

The session ended with the screening of a documentary about ‘Sheikh Bedreddin – A rebellious Sufi from 14th Century Anatolia’ in which the Centre’s Fellow Ayşe Çavdar had been involved and could therefore share some details on the film and its development process. The film portrays people following in the tradition of former Sufi charismatic preacher Sheikh Bedreddin. It reveals that there are still numerous groups who consider the Sheikh their spiritual leader scattered throughout Anatolia but they are quite dispersed and have little interaction among each other.

Tuesday 17th October 2017

Session 2: Exploring Sufi Methodological Eclecticism: Toward Extra-Causal Ways of Theorizing IR

For Ali Balci who spoke on the topic of ‘A Sufi Alternative to Causation: In Search of a Method for Studying Power/Knowledge in International Relations’, there is a visible split in the way European researchers produce knowledge in comparison to oriental theorists. While the former seem to rely on figures such as Marx, Kant or Weber for theory-making without having to historicize them, the same would not be accepted for studies investigating oriental theories. The latter would always have to contextualize the initiators of their theories. This, as Balci underlined, is uncalled-for since scientific knowledge can just as well be produced based on non-Western theories. An important aspect of much oriental thinking, however, is that it is not based on assumptions of causation but instead takes an interpretative approach. According to some oriental writers, e.g. al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, God contradicts causation because causation between events and the relationship behind this causation are based on judgements.
which subsequently create knowledge. So the insights, usually gained by science, are not given in nature but are inferred by humans employing causation. Ontologically, Arabi therefore introduced the idea that nothing is ever deliberately repeated in the cosmos (as would be necessary according to the logic of causation); rather everything is always re-created by Allah/God in any given moment and thus the cosmos is a divine reflection. By proposing this, he shifted attention from the truth to the conditions under which knowledge is produced. So basically he asserted that power relations emerge from knowledge production and that functionality exists between knowledge and power. In a nutshell, this is a similar argument to what Michel Foucault put forward in his post-structuralist theory, which claims that people are continuously bound within a framework of power in their social relations.

Balci concluded that non-Western thought can provide as much insight as established Western philosophy and therefore those two strands of theory should not be treated as mutually exclusive because otherwise the dominant theoretical position is reproduced over and over again. Combining those findings on the other hand would indicate the common ground they share and the formulation of a hybrid theory with both oriental and Western theoretical elements would be a very Sufi way of doing science.

In the discussion that followed it was pointed out that the distinction of Western vs. non-Western thinking creates a sort of dichotomy erecting artificial walls and problematic dualities. Because dividing the West and non-West ends up reproducing newer European discourses, this pitfall will be very hard to avoid. Another response hinted at the possible danger of suggesting a derivative discourse in which the already described power-structure-nexus is reframed only in other terms.

Session 3: Examining Sufi Ontological Dimensions: Inspirations from Africa, Asia and Europe

As part of the third session a Käte Hamburger Lecture on ‘An Alternative Vision of Peace in International Relations: Learning from Sudanese Sufi Theologian Mahmud Muhammad Taha’ was given by Meir Hatina. In the public lecture Hatina traced the influence of Taha’s work on contemporary and current lines of thinking about a peaceful and modern Islam. Considered by some as the ‘Gandhi of Sudan’ and a moderate martyr, Taha (1909 or 1911–1985), a liberal thinker of Islam, outlined a cosmopolitan vision of life partly based on Sufism, though in essence he went even further than this: The main principles of his teachings
were freedom and democracy, resting on the foundation of an inclusive reading of Islam and incorporating humanistic and ethical aspects of religion into his general ideology.

As Hatina described, Taha drew his main arguments from the earlier of the two different versions of Islam practised by the Prophet during his own life: the enlightened and benevolent Meccan period (612–622) and not the harsh and coercive time that followed in Medina (622–632). By identifying a gap between those periods and thereby deconstructing Islam, Taha broke a seemingly sacred taboo and antagonized a broad Muslim audience. Further source for controversy were his comments on how the conflict between the Arab world and Israel could be overcome. Namely, by returning to a peaceful path of Islam, thus enabling the Arabs to improve their relationship with the Jews and realize the conflict as an opportunity to re-establish the once close ties between the two sides. The trial that led to his death sentence, however, was about his final publication in which he openly criticized the Sudanese government for their application of shari’a law. In much of what he argued, Taha went further than most other liberal and Sufi philosophers. Even though his exegesis of Islam and his theories of political thinking were not endorsed by fellow liberal thinkers, his practice of de-politicizing Islam was considered useful and his arguments helped to invent something like a utopian vision of Islam.

The second part of session 3 began with the presentation on ‘An Alternative Conceptualization of Conflict Resolution in International Relations: Damascene Sufism and the preservation of pre-2011 Syrian Spiritual Identity’, given by Omar Imady. Imady took it upon him to look at Sufism not from a philosophical or historical point of view but from an organizational one. Studying Sufi communities as organizations is useful, he argued, because it shows how they behave in action, at what times they decide on acting or retracting from action and how they communicate. This can be documented by looking at Syria during the 1970s and ‘80s when the country was faced with an uprising of Islamist political groups (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood) against the secular Ba’ath regime and an unfolding power struggle.

Throughout this conflict, Sufis, while having to withdraw from active politics, remained close to the people and continued to offer community services and spiritual teachings. So, essentially they played a big part in influencing people’s opinions and helped to shift the odds in favour of the state. By retreating into silent Dhikr sessions, which could not be recorded by intelligence services, they offered something akin to a conflict resolution mechanism. Since spirituality in silence was something very natural and was practised voluntarily, these sessions
served as a silent countermovement to the violence outside those gatherings. Thus, the Sufi communities had a good overview of the support on the ground and basically practised the art of creating spiritual red lines with this form of organizational Sufism.

By the mid-1990s the state had consolidated its hold on power mainly by use of force and virtually expelled the Islamist movement from Syria. This allowed the Sufis to come out of hiding in silence and to resume their spiritual traditions more openly. So basically their strong organizational foundation allowed them to survive a time of outmost turmoil because in contrast to a political party, their expressionist core gave them a purpose even when interaction within society was no more possible other than in silence. In this sense, there is much to take away for current Syrian society from the use of Sufi organizational influence and how it helped to heal society and provided a clandestine resistance movement in troubled times.

Lastly, Ayşe Çavdar in her presentation entitled 'What is Left of Sufism? The Political Legacy of Islamism in Turkey' dealt with the downsides of Sufism and its practice in Turkey today. Sufism, Çavdar stressed, like any other social practice underlies transformative tendencies in the modern market dynamics of today. So, while originally it may have been ‘only’ a spiritual religious tradition based on a certain philosophy, nowadays it is far from being unpolitical as it makes specific assumptions about human beings and gives directions about how human beings should behave. Therefore, this prescriptive character cannot be isolated from Sufism as a whole. Çavdar then proceeded by pointing out how boundaries are created within certain Sufi communities and how this prevented the idea of Sufism as such to be an inspiration for an open and peaceful theoretical concept. She underlined her argument with cases of people in the military and in sports who were in some way or the other obstructed by Sufi beliefs. This goes to show that there are power mechanisms, hierarchies and submission embodied in Sufi thought and these social inequalities would subsequently be inherent in any other theory derived from this. Therefore, Çavdar expressed reservations against building a pacifist Sufi theory of IR on that basis if such repressive power relations and religious fanaticism could not be satisfactorily excluded from the basic philosophical underpinnings of the project.

In the comments to Çavdar’s presentation, it was stressed that she rightly pointed out how Sufism might not live up to illusionary standards if judged by the shortcomings of some groups practising it as a spiritual tradition. Sufi orders, however, are not all alike and such criticisms do not apply to the whole range of Sufi communities. The potential of Sufism as a foundation for IR theory is not
refuted by the simple fact that people identifying as Sufis can be corrupt, abusive or in other ways misbehaving. People are susceptible to such behaviour because they are human not because they are Sufis. Yet, it was conceded that even though this may not be Sufi-specific behaviour, those cases in which Sufism is misused for people’s private purposes need to be problematized.

Conclusion

The workshop was a first step in the long assessment process of whether Sufism can be established as the foundation not of a Western, but global IR theory. Overall, the participants were confident about the endeavour and mostly agreed that Sufism appeared to be a promising source for new conceptions of theory-based research. As outlined above, especially the monist character inherent in Sufi thought was identified as a valid point of departure for further innovation of the still Eurocentric field of IR. In the methodological session, it was conveyed that Sufi-inspired research is not necessarily far off from the mainstream tracks of social science. The cases presented in the last session, on the other hand, were proof of the diversity and wide range of different topics that allow application of Sufi positions. All in all, Sufism can open up the field and thus allows a truly global understanding of international relations to sink into the academic discourse. Moreover, the workshop was a good indicator of the remaining to-dos, leading to discussions not only about possible adjustments of the different underlying arguments but also a refinement of the approach as a whole.

Report written by Tobias Schäfer