

International Summer and Winter University (FUBiS) Islam & the West



Islam & the West

For the first time Freie Universität Berlin International Summer and Winter University FUBiS and the foundation Avec et pour Autres jointly organized the course “*Islam & the West: Deconstructing the Other – Going Beyond the Clash of Civilizations and Intercultural Dialogue*”. The course took place from July 19 – August 16, 2008. Thanks to scholarships provided by the foundation Avec et pour Autres, students from the Middle East and Western countries were able to participate in this class.

Through selected readings – theoretical and methodological essays as well as short ethnographies – this special class explored the changing locus and the significance of the “cultural other” in the constructions of *Islam* and *the West* in the contemporary world. *Islam* and *the West* have become powerful connotations, discursive realities and influential constructions beyond their mere terminological meaning. They inform people’s behaviour and have become inscribed in everyday social and political practice. The class addressed and analyzed the implications of these powerful discursive constructions on politics as well as the role and function of the ubiquitous notion of intercultural dialogue. Approaches taken from postmodern theories formed the theoretical backbone of the course. Grouped around the notions of culture, identity, public spheres, performativity (speech acts) and migration, the theories were critically assessed and put into the context of *Islam* and *the West*. The course also included an exploration of *Islam* in Berlin through various excursions and debates with people occupying the spaces in between *Islam* and *the West*.



Behind the curtain of *Islam* and *the West*

Carmen Becker, instructor of the course, has a degree in Political Science from Freie Universität Berlin and is currently a PhD fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in the Netherlands. She conducts research on the transformation of Salafism in the modern media.

Her first day of FUBiS was as intriguing as it was sobering. Listening to the introductions of the students and their motivation to look beyond the dialogue and clash of civilisation meant 21 participants, 21 ideas about the course and eventually also 21 cultures. As for her, she was faced with the challenge of satisfying the needs of all participants, but also plain curiosity of how the course would develop.

The course was not designed to find out who is right or who is wrong, *Islam* or *the West*. Rather, the task was to deconstruct commonly assumed ideas about the other and to look



at the historical development within the specific context of abstract ideas like secularity, religiosity, gender, human rights, freedom, and many more. But does this mean that the controversial debates, the so-called war on terror and the very identities of *Islam* and *the West* are just virtual and all constructed without having any real substance?

The answer is neither yes nor no, as the students have taught Carmen Becker. The ways conflicts are framed in public might be constructed, distorted or simply made up. However, conflict exists. Within and across societies different ideas about what constitutes a good life emerge and coin the debates – a natural social dynamic, it seems. But what should we do when ideas, standpoints, and behaviours become irreconcilable and lead to violence? Whose ideas have the right of way? What happens to people who are neither *Islam* nor *the West* or who are both? The class discussions touched the question of power and the instrumentalisation of politics for the interest of a few. *Islam* and *the West* turned out to be concepts that have developed their own dynamic, are used as a template reconfiguring current discourses and still develop their own reality.

The answers to all these questions were complex, contradictory and sometimes painful when our own convictions were put into question. That we were not discussing mere abstract ideas became clear when visiting mosques or Kreuzberg, an area of Berlin known for the diverse backgrounds of its residents. Since no clear answers to all the questions are to be expected, is a course like this worthwhile? Carmen Becker is convinced more than ever that it is, “unless we are satisfied with answers that propagate ‘black-and-white’/‘good-and-evil’ solutions which can breed violence”.

Impressions from course participants

Hermeen Adam (UAE)

... about Berlin

“I see the lives of Muslims in Berlin as part of a diverse reality that allows for a multitude of ways to practice religion. There might be a popular way to practice religion but at least there is a choice to be made, there are options...”

... about the course

“The variety of nationalities is probably one of the better aspects of the course. I think I benefited greatly not only because people came from different geographical backgrounds which in turn in some ways formed their perspective, but the varying academic background also added to the discussions. It brought in great view points.”

Anselm Ibing (Germany)

... about the West and Islam

“My idea of the West and Islam has changed. Mostly, I realised how diverse we all are and how dangerous it is to generalise and that in fact, we must try as hard as we can not to do so. As Alexandre Dumas already said: „All generalizations are dangerous, even this one.“ It was amazing to hear views from Afghanistan, from the Gulf, from Iran and all other places. Especially the Gulf was important for me, because it very often didn't fit our ideas of an „Islamic society“, when we were trying to generalise... things are quite different there, it seems.”

... about Berlin

“I think Berlin is an excellent place for this course. So many immigrants. You can find someone who speaks Arabic on every corner. And you can see all levels of integration, all of the problems associated with it and all the beauties, too, of course!”

Tom Verde (USA)

... about nationalities

“The variety of participating nationalities tremendously added to the course in that we had the opportunity to discuss topics from various perspectives and gain insight into other cultures. This should always be an element of this course.”

...about Berlin

“The fact that there are Muslim immigrant communities here, and that they are accessible to us as students, added much to the overall direction and dimension of the course.”

Nancy Demerdash (USA)

... about Berlin

“I have learned a great deal from both the environs of Berlin, its Muslim communities, and colleagues in my class during this period here. The excursions to Kreuzberg and the Museum of Islamic Art in the Pergamon were especially informative and insightful.”

... about the course

“I don't know if my perceptions or outlooks are radically different after this course, but I can say that my peers have contributed to my intellectual growth and understanding of what it means to live in the „Muslim world,“ and what it means for them to be Muslim, living in a transnational, globalized world. It was interesting to hear about their upbringing and backgrounds and their experiences growing up in the Middle East, and their hopes for the future.”

Rohullah Esmatti (Afghanistan)

... about the course

“Although there exists a negative image of Muslims in the West, I think that establishing this course is very useful for understanding especially among the young generation to remove this kind of discrimination and misunderstanding and have a peaceful society without discrimination and war.”

Dina el-Sharnouby (Egypt)

... about the course

„Islam and the West are harder topics to approach than I would have thought. On the other hand it seemed to me at times that we are discussing topics all and over again without reaching anything, not even tolerance towards the „other“ which was at times disappointing. Yet I have discovered myself and how I am standing towards Islam and the West. I have also realized the importance of not complicating issues at times and not being too aggressive about them to be able to have a discourse.”

Nora Derbal (Germany)

... about the course

„What I especially liked about the course was the combination between theory and praxis. To watch documentaries in the class having media theories in mind or visiting an exhibition on gender in Iran combined with theories on gender have enriched my understanding of certain topics. I'll try to incorporate the use of “new media” and the combination of theory and praxis in my further studies.”

FUBiS – Freie Universität Berlin International Summer and Winter University

FUBiS is the largest multi-disciplinary summer and winter university program in Germany. Every year about 500 students from more than 60 countries attend the FUBiS academic classes. It is FUBiS' mission to provide international students with a premier study abroad program delivering the highest academic quality and furthering the development of intercultural competence. FUBiS sessions run for 4 to 6 weeks and take place both in summer and winter. FUBiS' goal is to provide a stimulating and rewarding experience – academically, culturally, and personally.

FUBiS also provides a cultural program and social activities. Students have the opportunity to go on excursions to Dresden, Hamburg, and Weimar; visit the federal parliament, go on a Berlin Wall tour, go on a river boat tour through downtown Berlin, or watch popular German movies with fellow students during the FUBiS Movie-Time.



Curriculum

FUBiS offers intensive and semi-intensive German language classes at five different proficiency levels. In addition FUBiS offers subject classes on various topics. Most subject classes are held in English by distinguished German and international faculty. In many cases courses and credits may be counted toward a major or minor at a student's home institution.

Program Structure

The FUBiS program offers students many choices:

- Combination of language and subject classes. This allows students to improve their language skills as well as further their knowledge of a subject matter.
- Combination of two subject classes
- Intensive German language classes. These classes meet every weekday and allow students to focus on and thus considerably improve their German skills.
- Participation in either one semi-intensive German class or in one subject class.

Freie Universität Berlin

Freie Universität Berlin is a premier destination for research and education in Europe. It is ranked nationally and internationally among the top research universities in Germany. In 2007 after an intense, nation-wide competition, Freie Universität Berlin became one of nine German universities to be awarded an Elite status by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In the Excellence Initiative competition Freie Universität Berlin won the highest number of grants and was selected for its outstanding graduate programs, excellent research clusters and successful internationalization strategy.

The university campus is located in a charming and mostly residential section of former "West-Berlin". Yet – thanks to Berlin's superb public transportation network – it is within easy reach of the city's downtown areas.



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