

## A Day of Reimagination

In early December a group of young scholars and motivated participants met at the University of Copenhagen sharing an ambitious objective – to reimagine Pakistan outside of the dominant discourse of war and terrorism. As the workshop progressed two different approaches to this challenge seemed to crystallize – one providing alternative, unknown or suppressed narratives; the other directly challenging and destabilizing the existing master narrative.

### Alternative voices

Within the “alternative narratives” approach, Markus Daechsel (Department of History, Royal Holloway, London) presented an interesting work-in-progress on planned cities. Daechsel takes the planning of Karachi, Karangi and Islamabad as an entry into “making sense of the Pakistani state”. He thus writes up against the present imaginary of Pakistan as the paradoxical combination of a strong state (external, military) and a weak state (internal, governmentally). Daechsel takes the planning of the three cities as a certain kind of state decisionism displaying sovereignty in temporally limited actions, but afterwards leaving the townships in an absence of government.

Mikkel Rytter (Anthropology, University of Copenhagen), in the following lecture provided another alternative narrative by focusing on the imaginaries of a “homeland” among Pakistani immigrants living in Denmark. Through metaphors such as the “myth of return” he conveyed a somewhat tragic picture of the nostalgic and utopia-like shine sometimes given to this imaginary. A shine that rarely holds true if the return to the homeland does take place.

Two further examples of an alternative narrative followed when Rune Selsing and Ida Sofie Matzen (both from Anthropology, University of Copenhagen) presented each their work on Sufism in Pakistan. While different in focus, both studies provided a different take on religion in Pakistan. Recently returned from their field-work, a common challenge for the two seemed to be how to treat spirituality in a way which can depict its (sometimes political) roles in society while not reducing it to such a “sociological role”. With an increasing academic interest in religion and spirituality, one might expect this to be a major theoretical challenge for time to come.

Rounding of the first section of the presentations, Iram Asif (Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen) provided an alternative narrative of a usual suspect in the context of Pakistan – Islamism. While this phenomenon enjoys a central place in the contemporary discourse on Pakistan, Asif turned it on its head by asking more sociologically oriented questions than what we are used to. Within the case of the Jamia Hafsa, and with the use of theatrical metaphors she illustrated how Islamism is enacted in order to mobilize the participants.

### Critique and Destabilization

In the second section of the workshop program we enjoyed the presence of Tariq Ali (senior author and editor *New Left Review*), who brought not so much an alternative narrative of Pakistan as a critique and destabilization of the present imaginary. He introduced his lecture by describing the popular image of Pakistan as “*a country where lunatic fanatics are running wild and unless they are brought under control they will capture the Pakistani nuclear weapons and then who knows who they will use them against*”. Subsequently, throughout the rest of the lecture, Ali undermined this popular image by providing a broader historical framing of the present situation with a distinct critical sting towards the American influence in the region.

Following Tariq Ali’s lecture, a public debate took place in which discussants from inside as well as outside academia participated.

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