

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Imperialist Wars and Liberal Peace

The Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS) held its fourth annual Canadian Regional Conference in Toronto at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) on 1 November 2008. This event, which was cosponsored by the Department of Adult Education and Counseling Psychology (OISE) and the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto, was coordinated by Jasmin Zine (Wilfrid Laurier) and Maliha Chishti (OISE). The keynote address was presented by Ann Russo (DePaul University).

The theme of this year's conference, "Imperialist Wars and Liberal Peace," brought together a group of scholars to critically engage the nature of the new imperialist wars that are being waged on a smaller scale. From the "war on terror" to the various forms of intra-state warfare, participants sought to address how a viable peace and prosperity can be achieved for a majority of the world's people, rather than just for an elite minority.

During the morning plenary session, "Imperialist 'Obsession' with Hate: A Critique of the Film 'Obsession: Radical Islam's War against the West,'" conference chair Shahrzad Mojab (OISE) questioned the means by which social institutions contribute to violence in our society. Shirley Steinberg (McGill) recalled receiving the film in her issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Learning*. For her and other scholars on the panel, the Clarion Fund's distribution abroad in the film was a clear example of the rampant Islamophobia of the post-9/11 world. Referring to this as an "exoticizing and terrorizing" of the Islamic and Arab peoples, she proposed a letter writing campaign to mobilize against Islamophobia. Amir Hassanpour (Toronto) warned against the ideology of hate prominently displayed throughout the film, highlighting the similarities with historic fascism. Jasmin Zine problematized the discursive tropes employed by the film's creators, which served to "close minds, not open them." To move past this "pedagogy of fear," she called for a shift toward a pedagogy of hope rooted in anti-imperialist thought.

The conference was divided into three major subthemes. In the first of these sessions, "State, Civil Society, and Media: Encountering Imperialism

in Canada,” panelists examined the role of civil society actors in perpetuating an imbalance of power and representation. Mahdi Tourage (Michigan) focused on inter-religious dialogue and transnational peacemaking between the Mennonite Central Committee and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, arguing for a “defetishized” and rehumanized approach to transnational dialogue. In her paper, Shaista Patel (OISE) questioned the place of the racialized Muslim in the Canadian context. Her approach employed a critical understanding of colonially derived myth of whiteness on “stolen” settler lands. The final panelist, Patricia Molloy (Wilfrid Laurier) provided a contextual analysis of the “War Resisters” movement vis-à-vis a discussion on the dehumanizing effects of military violence. Describing peacemaking as a civilizing mission with imperialist connotations, she outlined cases of American military persons who sought asylum in Canada after feeling compelled to leave the army. In her concluding statement, she drew attention to the institutional failure of domestic law in protecting those who do not wish to break international law.

Commencing the afternoon discussion, keynote speaker Ann Russo (DePaul) spoke on the troubling convergences between “western” liberal feminism and the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism.” Problematizing the approach taken by key groups that advocate for women’s rights, she addressed the synchronicities between “western” liberal feminism and right wing women’s groups that have taken on the imperialist agenda. Critiquing the current framework, which normalizes violence, she suggested developing a strategy that would counter the imperialist lens.

During the afternoon’s second panel, “Critical Responses to Imperialism and Peace,” panelists examined the question of representation as found in the imperialist model. Alirezah Asgharzadeh (York) argued for a subalternist approach to the study of democracy and peace in Muslim-majority and global South contexts. In her discussion of post-conflict rebuilding programs in Afghanistan, Maliha Chishti (Toronto) critically examined how the women’s rights agenda can partake in the imperialist rule and cautioned against the possibility of an uncritical acceptance of a “masculine-imperialist peace.” Husein Khimji (Wilfrid Laurier) provided a historical account of Muslim reactions to “western” imperialism, arguing that the response of the last century was rejectionist and revolutionary in nature.

The final panel, “The Multitude Imperialism: Colonialism, Occupation, and War,” presented an alternate discourse on the project of international peace and security missions. Deborah Gordon (Wichita) examined the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the perspective of Palestinian women, identifying the complexities of a peace that is constructed as a non-reciprocal

gift. Drawing upon Foucault's notion of truth, she identified the necessity for "western" feminist to reapply the critical lens of anti-colonial thought when examining this issue. Tariq Amin Khan (Ryerson University) presented his paper on the perceived threat of "Talibanization" in Pakistan, arguing that the imperialist response to target militant Islam perpetuates violence and does not promote peace in the region. In his multi-layered approach to analyzing the phenomenon, he concluded that the Taliban's social base of support has diminished and thus, this threat is perceived as part of an "Orientalist re-mapping" of prominent Muslim-majority countries.

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