

# Occasional Papers

*With this issue we inaugurate a new initiative on our website, where we will host occasional papers on current Greek matters. Some of these will be interviews, others will be short commissioned position papers, yet others will be short reports of collaborative projects. Please check often.*

## **Immigration and neocolonialism in Greece's European Crisis. An Interview with Aamir Mufti**

*Aamir Mufti, Professor of post-colonial studies at the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA, is an old acquaintance of the MGSA. In 2009 he was invited to be the commentator on the keynote panel of the MGSA Symposium that took place in Vancouver, Canada. In 2010 he visited Greece and embarked on preliminary research on Pakistani migration to Greece. This past summer (July 3-5, 2014) Mufti was invited to speak at the annual Anti-Racism Festival in Athens. Within the context of the visit Mufti gave two interviews to Stathis Gourgouris (Columbia University): one preceding the Festival published in the Athenian daily Efimerida ton Syntakton ( <http://www.efsyn.gr/?p=214233> and in English at <http://greekleftreview.wordpress.com/2014/07/14/stathis-gourgouris-interviews-aamir-mufti/>) and the present one following his talk. The editors would like to thank both Aamir Mufti and Stathis Gourgouris for giving the interview to the JMGS for publication on our electronic issue.*



Aamir Mufti



Stathis Gourgouris

**Stathis Gourgouris. Let's start with a short reflection on your experience in Athens this time. Various significant contexts and insights must have opened up, I expect.**

**Aamir Mufti.** It was a very productive and quite thrilling visit and helped me develop a better sense of both the Greek-Left and the Pakistani-workers' sides of the immigrant equation. It was also a pleasure to have Jalal [Mufti's 10-year old son] with me and hear his fresh take on everything we saw and experienced. I can't thank you enough for your hard work in putting the

different elements of the visit together. Developing these initial impressions will, of course, require more visits and interactions. I'm looking forward to it very much.

**SG. It's just the beginning. We'll have many more opportunities. Tell me your impression of the Anti-Racism Festival, as an institution and an environment, primarily of youth Left activism, as well as the fact that you spoke in a public setting, and an activist setting, not in the academy.**

**AM.** The Anti-Racism Festival was a very moving experience for me—the sight of all these young people coming together under the rubric of this one issue, when their own futures have been put in extreme jeopardy by the present government of Greece through the Memorandum troika. And the fact that the general spirit was one of taking pleasure in community, and was not pedantic or ascetic, is also very important. I was really gratified that you helped organize this visit through the Nikos Poulantzas Institute—a magical name for someone of my age and background. The invitation was phrased just right, asking me to link the history of colonialism in Asia with that of Asian immigration into Europe.

The struggle against racism is of course a global one and has a long history, including at the geopolitical level. The immigrants and refugees come from Asian and African societies that have participated in this struggle in various ways over the last century. It would be good to develop ways of introducing this perception in different ways in Festival activities in the future. The immigrants [at the Festival] are partners in this struggle, not recipients of goodwill. This is the most important thing I noticed, but it should be made explicitly clear. In North/South matters, solidarity always threatens to degenerate into philanthropy and so it requires constant political vigilance. How do *you* see the place of the festival in the cultural and political life of the capital?

**SG. The Anti-Racism Festival is a celebratory apex of a kind of continuous public activism that takes place daily in the communities, in the streets – a difficult struggle. There is an educational component to the Festival as well, but it's more a space of gathering and celebrating. Surely not of philanthropy, of course. It's also a space of connection, as you saw, with various organizations, the Filipino Kasapi organization, the Union of African Women, the Afghan Union, the Asante group, as well as with Javed Aslam [the President of the Association of Immigrant Workers and of the Pakistani Community of Greece] and his organization, with which you had a more direct connection.**

**AM.** In a way, the work of his organization is precisely to make immigrant workers active participants in Greek society in the struggle against fascist violence and the racism and corruption of state institutions. As everyone now knows, there are migrants in Greece working and living under slavery-like conditions, especially in the agricultural sector. I met striking orange-grove workers from Skála Lakonias who hadn't been paid in many months, with the connivance of local police and civil authorities, who abuse, threaten, and even beat them regularly. Aslam organized a workers' demonstration there and a news conference in Athens the following day. And now, with the acquittals in the Manoláda shooting of Bangladeshi workers demanding back pay, we see that even the courts cannot always be expected to provide justice to the immigrants. I was very moved to see the pictures that caught the disappointment of the victims outside the courtroom. It seems to me that Aslam's message to immigrant workers is:

you don't live alone on the moon; you are members of this society because you work in it, and therefore you should not be afraid to claim your basic rights, such as physical safety and payment of wages.

**SG. The Manoláda decision was a terrible setback. But the Chief Attorney at the Supreme Court (*Areios Pagos*) has demanded to review the decision to see whether there are grounds for reversal. Things are in flux right now more than ever and in contention. That's what it means to be in crisis conditions: an ebb and flow of resistance and setback. Aslam's organization is, of course, a crucial positive image of the crisis conditions, one that doesn't really get enough visibility – I mean this in terms of resistance to the crisis, new ways of social organization. What might be some other impressions of the “Greek landscape” (both metaphorically and literally) in this specific context? How did “crisis” register itself to you during this visit and what were perceptible differences in relation to previous visits?**

**AM.** This is my first visit since the full unfolding of the Memorandum regime. Obviously, there are signs of the crisis all over central Athens, the closed shops and half-full cafes. Purely subjectively, it seems much less crowded.

The visit was rounded off for me by my lecture and following discussion in the Department of English, at the University of Athens, where I was able to present my more literary work, from my forthcoming book on world literature. I was very happy to be able to interact with students and faculty in Greece, the first time I have done so. But it was depressing to see first-hand what is being done to the academic sector. As you know, the faculty and students are working under terrible conditions and there is evidence everywhere of the neo-liberalization of the academy, including a downgrading of the humanities. This is happening everywhere in the world now, of course, including to a great extent in the US, but seemed quite severe in Athens.

But I also sensed a determination to keep doing one's work and keep moving on. The discussion after my lecture was very engaged and enlightening for me, helping me to better understand my project. The level of discourse was impressive, despite the dispiriting conditions.

**SG. Well, the crisis creates all kinds of new parameters, negative, of course, but also conditions of affirmation, of invention. This is a wager that needs to be won. To what extent another way of life can emerge, a way of life that will discredit the clientelist ways of the past and will at the same time resist a retrenchment into nationalist palliatives. The unprecedented presence of immigrants – of people from entirely different languages, cultures, and traditions – could have a great role to play in this.**

**AM.** Yes exactly. I think the immigrant communities could play a positive and useful role in this ongoing attempt to imagine what kind of society might emerge from the crisis. You can't blame anyone for not wanting their familiar way of life to disappear. It is silly to call people racist just for that. You have to explain to them that capitalism is continuously destroying all existing ways of life, including and especially in the immigrants' home countries. As a second generation grows up that is as much Greek as it is African or Asian, and perhaps more so, some of these mediations might become possible.

**SG. I want to remain on this point for a moment more. One of the most remarkable aspects of Pakistani immigration to Greece is the level of workers' organization that has been achieved under Aslam's guidance. Obviously, this work is to a large extent credited to this very capable person, but it is also a plural – a social phenomenon on its own.**

**AM.** Aslam is obviously a uniquely talented person: charisma, energy, and seemingly a complete lack of fear. My impression is that civil and police officials who are often abusive towards immigrant workers are afraid to be so when he gets involved. So he's performing the valuable function of policing the police.

But you're right, it is these workers who have repeatedly elected him, even though he does not come organically out of their ranks—he is educated and of middle-class background. Perhaps it is the severe proletarianization of this workers' population, almost all single men living outside of any established social structures including family and kin, which has produced these strong collectivist political instincts among them and a realistic sense of what is required of their representatives in this foreign land.

However, you should understand that within the community, Aslam is a contested and controversial figure, which is to be expected, since he proposes a politics of alliance with the Left and confrontation of the Right and elements of the state. Many other middle class Pakistanis with leadership ambitions prefer the traditional colonial practice of playing the sycophant with powerful official patrons. And the government rewards such individuals with awards and such. There is actually a term for this type of person in the culture of British India—"petitioner." You know, Saloni [the art historian Saloni Mathur, married to Mufti] has actually written about one such figure, a farmer who came all the way to London to see Queen Victoria because he had a land dispute in his little village in Punjab! Some of the Punjabi migrants here remind me of this figure. Aslam utterly rejects this sort of behavior.

**SG. Religious practices may be thought to be generally a point of cohesion in immigrant communities. Studies of immigration patterns often speak of a turn toward ideological orthodoxies of some kind, but what is specifically going on here? How is the 'radical Islamist' standpoint handled by Aslam and his people, and what might be the modes of 'secular' politics that take place which run counter to this radicalization? What do we learn from this situation?**

**AM.** Aslam's natural political instincts appear to be progressive, although that does not always square with the religious element in immigrant politics. Some of the more overtly religious-themed demonstrations were not organized by his group. But their Greek Left allies should push the immigrants on this point. As I see it, the demand for a mosque is a symbolic issue that concerns a sense of dignity and religious freedom, therefore I conditionally endorse it, but what does that do to the Pakistani immigrants' secular struggle for safety and workers' rights alongside other immigrants who might not be Muslim?

If you want the right to religious freedom in a liberal constitutional state, you cannot summarily dismiss the converse liberal view that religion is a private and not a public matter. Of course, in

Greece such a view is complicated by the relative lack of the classically liberal separation of church and state.

As you have been arguing in your own recent work, for intellectuals, a certain kind of pseudo-radical thinking about liberalism, influenced by the American version of Derrida and Foucault, only leads to confusion on this point, where religiosity as such is treated as the “Other” and as a victim of liberal modernity and therefore to be endorsed a priori.

A Pakistani Leftist who is in exile in Greece because he was on a Taliban death list told me that he was approached by some Trotskyist group in Athens asking him to participate in an event that would express support for the Taliban as anti-imperialists. You can imagine that there was a terrible irony for him in this! He seemed still stunned by this turn of events. Being an enemy of the United States doesn't automatically make you a member of the international Left.

**SG. In Greece, the discussions of secularism or *laïcité* that currently overwhelm the Anglophone and Francophone space are totally absent. Surely, arguments about post-secularism (which can take place, for example, in Holland) would be nonsensical here. Greek antifascist immigration activists are unabashedly atheist, and yet this does not create the least obstacle in supporting Pakistani (or Afghan, Arab, or African) constituencies regardless of religious differences. This creates a different configuration of this phenomenon than in northern colonial Europe – what does it mean? How are we to assess it?**

**AM.** I have what is probably a counterintuitive position on this question: the secular/religious debate is so strong in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds globally, not just in Europe, because the religious identities of those former colonial societies, including especially Muslim ones, are colonial artifacts. As I have tried to show in my work, it was the British colonial state that established religious affiliation as the core of public and political identities in the Indian subcontinent. Other scholars have traced the extreme homophobia of some Anglican Christians in Africa today to the proselytization of colonial missionaries. And the French, of course, systematically distinguished between Muslims and Jews in North Africa. As you know, Derrida, who was Algerian-Jewish by origin, wrote about that painful experience in his late work.

Postcolonial immigration into Europe today is part of the long aftermath of colonization. So the Western European states' effort to identify the postcolonial migrant as the site of the crisis of the secular is a continuation of their long history of involvement in the religious life of subject populations worldwide. The immigrants haven't brought this question into European societies. The latter have been involved in it for a very long time.

**SG. Quite right, this perspective is rare in the analyses of this situation. And, of course, the Greek case makes it more complicated**

**AM.** As I see it, since Greece was never a colonial power – in fact the reverse, an occupied society for many centuries – Greek society has no tradition of a guilty liberal response towards a formerly subject people: “I belong to your victimizers and therefore have no right to question you in any manner about your beliefs and practices, and therefore even as I question my own

society's ethnocentric beliefs, I absolve you from the need to do so in your own." It is this liberal response to imperialist violence that I call "ethnographic philanthropy." It is only to the extent that Greece is naturalized as a European society that it might and does develop such a sense of historical guilt, which would of course be entirely fantastic or imaginary in nature.

So I think the Greek Left has the potential for developing a far more sensible orientation towards this question than may be possible in France or Britain: not treating the immigrant as an essentially religious person—neither foreclosing engagement with religious immigrants, in the name of feminism, for instance, nor placing their religiosity outside of political criticism in the name of culture or tradition. In other words, what we need to develop in the immigrant context is a *politics* of religiosity, not *identity* politics.

I do not mean by this term the idiotic assertion by the so-called New Atheists that belief in God is just a cognitive mistake on the part of individuals, a bad judgment about the nature of physical reality. No, a politics of religiosity in this sense would engage religious beliefs and practices on their *social* implications. What needs to be asserted is that social space always has to be shared with others, that is, with those constituted "otherwise" from us in their psychic and bodily orientations, so that no idea, concept, or belief can claim to encompass all of social reality. This is equally true of religious ideas and beliefs and of supposedly secular ones. As you and I have both argued in our different ways, such an orientation towards the question of culture and authority is what Edward Said called "secular criticism."

**SG. Definitely. Indeed, we both have learned enormously from Said's thought and, very much against insipid fashionable perspectives in the Anglo-American academy, we are perceiving increasingly how uncannily relevant his thinking is to current social-historical-political situations in various parts of the world. Uncannily, in the sense of how incisive and proximate this thinking is to situations on the ground decades after it was written.**

**AM.** Said's perceptions of the dangers of identity politics of all sorts, from classic nationalisms to religious fundamentalisms, are being confirmed daily in front of our eyes on a massive scale worldwide. His book *Orientalism*, almost forty years old now, can also be read at one level as a prophetic warning against the forms of escalation and violence that have become part of the everyday since 9/11. It is not surprising that Said has become more or less *persona non grata* in many humanities contexts in the US – the very mention of his name can cause irritation. Literary humanities in America are reverting to their traditional conservative quietism, specialization, and nothing more. Who would readily associate literary criticism with any kind of radicalism today? It was a routine accusation until some years ago. Would you agree?

**SG. Yes. The political crisis – and in many ways, the depoliticization – of literary criticism, or even humanities education in general, in American universities is part and parcel of the overall neoliberal corporatization of the university. We see it in Europe as well. But that's a discussion all its own. At the same time, while, yes, Said's name may cause irritation in certain humanities contexts nowadays, I have also discovered in young people – students who really don't know the history of Said's significance – an extraordinary response to Said's work as they encounter it afresh from the perspective of all kinds of backgrounds, languages, and cultures, precisely because it resonates with their common realities under**

**globalization. It is in this sense that I would ask, what might we find in this phenomenon of Pakistani immigration to Greece that may elucidate and be elucidated by thinking along Said's terms?**

**AM.** One interesting facet of Said's work is that against imperialism he counters not nationalism but exile. For him, imperialists are super-nationalists. So the critique of imperialism can't simply take the form of nationalism.

Said wants to say to displaced peoples, and really to all of us in modern society: "embrace your exilic experience." Exile can lead to an almost fanatical reinforcing of identity, national or religious. But it can also become the basis for a more open orientation towards society. The condition that could destroy you can be turned into an empowering condition, giving you a unique perspective on the possibility of human interaction. In effect, the politics of the Pakistani migrant workers in Greece is very similar to this.

**SG.** No doubt, and here again we have a wager – one that has to be won, although it's unclear if and how, in the sense that history has no guarantees. But the biggest problem facing this emancipatory view of the exilic – which doesn't quite exist in Said's own formative experience, at least not to this extent – is the fact that global capital has achieved an unprecedented actualization of the deterritorialized (and deterritorializing) imaginary. Exaggerating obviously, I would say that global capital has actualized the vision of Lyotard or Deleuze and Guattari in an incredibly ironic way, since, of course, their thinking is anti-capitalist. So, we have a quandary: how to respond to this onslaught of deterritorializing capital without retreating to horrific nationalist self-enclosure. Again, here, the immigrant experience in a society is crucial.

**AM.** That's right. I like your idea of the wager, whose outcome cannot be determined in advance. I would say that the political-philosophical correlate of capital's mobility is the cosmopolitan idea. Against cosmopolitanism's view from above, Said wants to draw our attention to exilic experience, which is partially horizontal, occasionally vertical, and free from the desire for a mastery of the world, including conceptual mastery. Exile does not make a fetish of the local because it is always multi-local, aware of and open to other localities. Biographically speaking, I think this emphasis in Said is a way for this child of the Arab bourgeoisie to take responsibility for the experience of the average Palestinian, the quintessential stateless refugee, and one of the most vulnerable figures in our times, as we have seen once again this summer in Gaza with brutal clarity.