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To the kind attention of professor Tomasz Korol and the PhD
committee of Politechnika Gdańska

Doctoral thesis:

“Social Protection in Muslim Countries: an Islamic Welfare Regime”, by Fabio Coriolano

The thesis offers a solid scheme that succeeds to rethink common historical and economic-related narratives and dynamics about welfare systems in a selected number of Muslim-majority countries. In doing so, the candidate proposes meaningful objectives which challenges a few well-established beliefs about both these countries and their welfare systems.

The candidate clearly knows what he was writing about (and is able to independently conduct scientific work) and offers a convincing employment of trans-disciplinary approaches, research tools and analysis. The works by Esping-Andersen, Gough/Wood and Pierson are indeed quite useful in that respect (and well used by Mr. Coriolano). Particularly credible is the way the thesis shifts research away from relatively widespread univocal understanding of the role of social protection in some “Islamic societies”. Equally convincing is the candidate’s use of a class-based analysis to identify the incidence and the factors which lead to the shaping of social policies in the case studies analysed in the thesis.

Overall, by resorting to a comparative approach, the thesis shows a significant capacity both to advance original knowledge on the impact of social and economic dynamics (and divisions) in the Middle East and to inform future decision making.

More specifically, there is ample space for innovation in the way the dissertation creates a solid thinking base for alternative approaches to welfare bargain in countries which are

not easy to be studied and accessed. Needless to say, sources in (and knowledge of) languages such as Arabic or Farsi might have provided additional, meaningful, perspectives and elements.

Overall, this reviewer believes that the doctoral dissertation meets the conditions set out in Art. 187 of the Act. I would nonetheless propose some suggestions, which are briefly outlined below:

- There are some parts that would benefit from a few additional considerations. “Islamic culture” (like “Islamic societies”), to use an expression which runs throughout the thesis, is not fully addressed. Even more so considering the rich literature available. Just to provide 3 among many other examples, Lila Abu-Lughod pointed out that scholars should oppose the very concept of “culture”, because it “enforces separations” (L. Abu-Lughod, *Writing Against Culture*, 137). Stanziani noted that “by emphasizing more or less monolithic entities called ‘cultures’ or ‘civilization[s]’, historians tend to overlook the cross-pollination and reciprocal influence that occur between ‘cultures’, which are never monolithic entities” (A. Stanziani, *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History*, p. 11). Tomoko Masuzawa highlighted that “the term ‘culture’ is dangerously capacious, semantically vague and confused, and finally, taken as a whole, inconsistent”. T. Masuzawa, *Culture*, p. 71).

- Same applies to “sub-Saharan Islamic societies” (beginning in 1950, “Sub-Saharan Africa” experienced an urban population growth rate of approximately double the average of the rest of the world). It might be reminded that North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (“Black Africa”) first appeared in the historiography on the Mediterranean at the end of the 19th century. James McDougall shed light on the way in which “Mediterranean Africa (as part of the Mediterranean, or Arab and hence non-African world) has often been excised” from the rest of the continent, as well as on the way that “the Sahara has correspondingly been seen – or, rather, unseen – as an empty space in between”. Moroccan historian Hisham Aïdi reminded us some of the roots of all this: “*Kant and Hegel were equivocal about the racial status of North Africans (alternatively called Moors, Arabs, Berbers), but they did see them as different from the people below the Sahara. European racial scholars could never agree on the specific criteria for defining race let alone the correct order of the hierarchy. Whether emphasizing “skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry” or public sentiment and political opinions, the exact racial position of North Africans was always contested. It was generally agreed that they sat below the European and above the Black African. These racial distinctions would then inform colonial patterns of rule. Segregating races according to their presumed racial-civilizational capacity became the logic of 19th century colonial governance. [...] The colonial conceptual separation of the North African (Moorish, Berber, or Arab) from the sub-Saharan (Negro), would make its way across the Atlantic. On the American plantation for instance, whether a Muslim slave was of North African or Sabelian origin and Arabic speaking, or from “Black Africa” and not Muslim, determined their place in the plantation’s pecking order.*”

- The exclusion of a country like Indonesia (the most populous Muslim-majority country, with approximately 231 million adherents) is explained, but it’s not entirely addressed nor convincing.

- Regarding “Le pouvoir”: Agadir is a “Berber/Amazigh city” in Morocco Arabic term “makhzen” مخزن is a translation of the original Berber word “Agadir”. Makhzen literally means “warehouse”: in Moroccan Arabic became synonymous with the elite. “Le Pouvoir” in Algeria mirrors the “Makhzen” in Morocco (on that section please note that only one-sixth of the Algerians killed were members of the Front de Libération Nationale or other independentist factions).

- The thesis contains one sentence in which it is acknowledged that “Islamic societies have long-lasting traditions concerning social protection”. And, while it is accurate to claim that “the concept of welfare state is an idea born and developed in the West”, it would be important to provide more historical context from Ancient Egypt (which had a “doctor tax”, that assured everyone in the kingdom had access to medical care) and Ashoka the Great up to modern times: West countries are, at least in some respects, late-comers when we discuss welfare. This holds true, to a certain extent, also in relation to states. Many states and nations (in the sense of cultural communities, or, to borrow a term from the Indian context, *Rashtra*) are more ancient and ‘rooted’ than several present in the West. Countries such as Oman (where a state was established in 751 ce with its first Ibadi imam), Yemen (a state founded in 900 ce by a descendant of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib) or Egypt (a state rooted in the ancient Naqada II culture of Upper Egypt), to name a few, remind us of a millenary and often-neglected ‘statual’ background. Same applies to “sub-Saharan Africa”. A number of communities in Africa, including the Igbo of Nigeria, practiced inclusive, participatory, and representative democracy (with systems of “proto-welfare”) well before colonial times. In the words of Nigerian historian Elizabeth Isichei: “One of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igboland was the extent to which democracy was truly practiced. An early visitor to a Niger Igbo town said that he felt he was in a free land, among a free people. Another visitor, a Frenchman, said that true liberty existed in Igboland, though its name was not inscribed on any monument”.

While of course the thesis focus on welfare according to modern standards (modern is also a term that should be discussed), it would be important to make more visible the fact that many “ancient” and “modern cultures” did feel the need to provide some (at times well developed) support systems.

- “Developing countries”, an expression commonly used in the thesis and elsewhere, might be better explained. How can we further problematize concepts like “developing countries”, that is concepts that, ultimately, remain a bit caught up with a colonial legacy (this is even more the case for “Third World” and “Global South”) which has never completely disappeared? It is necessary to be specific, eschewing problematic and generic expressions as much as possible. If scholars want to analyze the ten poorest countries in the world, they should refer to them directly instead of using a generic label such as “Global South”. In the words of University of Leiden professor Dimitar Toshkov, “if you mean technologically underdeveloped countries, say that and not countries of the Third World. If you mean rich, former colonial powers from Western Europe, say that and not the Global North. It takes a few more words, but it is more accurate and less misleading”.

- The candidate lingered on the role of “Western modernity”, which “precluded the return to the past”. Again, this would require some more analysis. Afro-Jewish scholar Lewis Gordon noted for instance that “there is a tendency to equate ‘modernity’ with

Europe. This renders invisible other kinds of modernities. All modernity means is this: Through belonging to the future, one's presence becomes legitimate, which legitimates one's past. In short, it means where humanity is going. Where people have no future, their present lives collapse into the opposite: illegitimate, their past is transformed into a mistake. Colonialism and racism do this through making such people 'belong' to the past in the concepts of 'tribe' and 'primitive'. Talk by L. Gordon at the University of Connecticut, 10 Dec. 2018. Available on-line: <https://www.phil.uga.edu/events/content/2018/lewis-r-gordon-four-kinds-invisibility-euromodernity>. Amitav Ghosh noted that "Modernity was not a 'virus' that spread from the West to the rest of the world. It was rather a 'global and conjunctural phenomenon' with many iterations arising almost simultaneously in different parts of the world. That such a possibility might exist had long been obscured by one of the distinctive features of Western modernity: its insistence on its own uniqueness". A. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017, p. 95. Eric Vanhaute focused on what he defined "a Eurocentric modernization perspective with universalistic presumptions". See E. Vanhaute, *World History: An Introduction*, Routledge, London 2013, p. 18.

- In the section on "The Muslim headscarf", it should be mentioned that the so-called "veil" is not imposed in any sura of the Koran and by any of the five major legal schools of Islam. In the Koranic passage "33.59 the wives of the Prophet are advised to cover their hair, in 24.31 women are invited to "not show their [...] ornaments "in the eyes of foreigners; but the obligatory practice of the Higiab which covers the head and, still less, that of the litham which covers the lower part of the face from the eyes downwards, are not canonical".

This somehow reminds also the issue of polygamy There is only one verse of the Quran in which polygamy is mentioned: "And if you have reason to fear that you might not act equitably towards orphans, then marry from among [other] women such as are lawful to you - [even] two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [only] one - or [from among] those whom you rightfully possess. This will make it more likely that you will not deviate from the right course". (Surah an Nisaa - Women 4:3).

This reference to polygamy, or having multiple wives, was discussed as a response to a specific social situation of war-torn society in seventh-century tribal Arabia. The purpose was not on multiplicity of wives but on social justice in the context of the social structures prevalent at that time. Polygamy was meant to be viewed as a component of justice in the treatment of widows and it was mainly to offer fair care to orphans. Its functional purpose was to allow widows and orphans to be taken care of in a social structure in which women usually did not have independent means of financial support and orphans did not have any legal status to exist as responsible beings. On the role of "Muslim women" it would have been more useful if the thesis would have shed light also on the proactive role. See, inter alia, <https://wiisitaly.org/donne-passive-la-formazione-del-medio-oriente-moderno-da-una-prospettiva-di-genere/>

- The sections on the so-called "Arab Spring" might consider/discuss more rural areas and a number of related aspects. A relevant percentage of the most meaningful episodes that paved the way to the January 2011 and June/July 2013's uprisings in Egypt were



linked to women initiatives, notably also in rural areas. Women have been behind dozens of strikes and worker protests organized throughout Egypt in the past decade as in the December 2006 Mahalla Textiles's strike, when 3,000 women marched to protest against the unsafe and degrading conditions in which they were forced to work. 'Women are here, where are the men?' was written on the signs that they held in many of such occasions. Mahalla's strike paved the way for dozens of other protests, including the national protest called on April 6, 2008, the founding event for the 'April 6 Movement'. As Manar El-Shorbagy has argued, 'at no point in the struggle for Egypt's freedom did women take the role of followers. It was never the case that men took the initiative and women 'joined'.

Also, in Tunisia, the uprisings started among marginalized groups in rural areas such as Sidi Bouzid. First signs of a potential major shift in the local societal and political equilibrium could be seen already two years earlier, when the small town of Redeyef, situated 350 km south of Tunis, witnessed months of bloody protests at the Gafsa Phosphate Company. The turmoils were triggered by a phenomenon that was anything but new: the open call for jobs organized by that state-run enterprise was rigged and the available job positions were offered and filled by supporters of then-president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The Syrian uprising of 2011 was also ignited in an agricultural area, the province of Dara'a, where reportedly more than 100,000 people attended an anti-government demonstration on March 25, 2011. Despite having been for decades a stronghold of the Syrian regime, Dara'a was one of the many areas that suffered most from the neoliberal economic reforms that reached their climax in March 10, 2009, with the launching of the Damascus Stock Exchange and the cut in economic support for agricultural areas implemented by Bashar al-Assad soon after succeeding his father in 2000. Due to the lack of transparency of the Syrian regime, the revenues of these neoliberal policies have essentially gone to the Assad clan and its associates only. On the other hand, Syrian markets were open to cheaper agricultural imports and, as a result, farming communities were increasingly unable to rely on agriculture as a source of stable livelihoods.

The exclusion, marginalization and peripheralization of these and other areas and sectors of the local populations triggered some of the main conditions for the 'revolutionary moment' and the 'epistemological break' of the past decade. One of the main reasons why these aspects have passed largely unnoticed and the Arab uprisings came as such a surprise are likely connected to the fact that many observers spent (too) much time on understanding the dynamics of (apparently) resilient regimes, while largely ignoring the marginalization of certain areas and sectors of the local populations which set the roots for social protests and dissent.

This research focus has arguably been rather comfortable for Europeans. Seen from this perspective, it was the 'resilient regimes', not the Western neoliberal market agenda imposed on the region, which was largely responsible for the socio-economic malaise of the area. But there is something that goes even deeper than this. Until a recent past the countries analyzed in this special issue were not 'worlded', but instead othered, atomized, and delegated to a hinterland as the others of a civilized humanity that is exclusively coded as the liberal West (Dabashi 2012, 43). Liberal values have been promoted as universal standards by both the US and the EU in the region and this approach has not been called into question, despite the Arab uprisings call for social justice, social and economic rights, and fair development. Todorov defined this persistent attitude as 'the



unwarranted establishing of the specific values of one's own society as universal values'. In light of this persistence, this collective volume joins into the call for a paradigm shift that not only 'decentres the study and practice of Europe's international relations', but also decentres the study of the Arab world as it is still often currently pursued in "the West". In order to reshape the mental schemes and the related terminology through which to analyze the historical processes unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa, it would be important to take into account on the local agency of individuals and groups that are located outside of institutionalised power, paying a particular attention to the spaces for discursive contestation of those who, because of their constructed otherness, are placed outside mainstream society, politics, media, and education. See for instance <https://www.routledge.com/Arab-Spring-and-Peripheries-A-Decentring-Research-Agenda/Huber-Kamel/p/book/9781138393226>

- The thesis discusses "tribal landowners" and "private land":

- 1) The modern and contemporary use of the concept of the tribe—tied to classical and biblical/quranic images, and with minor points of connection with Ibn Khaldūn's original understanding of *'aṣabiya* (the term was already familiar in the pre-Islamic era) – has often been erroneously used to refer to autonomous, uncompromising social units, loyalty to which relies solely on family and blood-ties. It conveys a negative connotation—like, for that matter, the abovementioned concept of 'awakening', which implies that someone was sleeping—associated with primitiveness and conservative backwardness. Historically, this has been functional from the perspective of European powers. Indeed, for colonialism to take root it was deemed important that African peoples and others would think of themselves in terms of small clans and tribes without any collective, or more 'elaborated', identity.
- 2) still in 1951 only 0.3 percent of the registered land in Iraq (50 percent of the total land was registered) was private property. "Private property" in relation to land in the Middle East is an issue that requires more analysis. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2013.878518?tab=permissions&scroll=top>

- Nuri al Said is addressed in the thesis as a "skilled politician" in as much as "the Iraqi gov kept a pro-Western attitude": this might be reconsidered or better explained

- On the Iraq-Iran war, the thesis should consider that while Iran was almost completely isolated, Iraq was heavily supported by the US, Saudi Arabia and a few European countries. Recently declassified CIA files prove that the US helped Saddam Hussein with intelligence, while being aware that he was using nerve agents, including mustard and sarin gas, against Iranian soldiers and civilians. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/26/exclusive-cia-files-prove-america-helped-saddam-as-he-gassed-iran/> <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/1/19/soleimani-and-the-weight-of-history> In the section on Iran, it might be relevant to stress that even a figure like Ali Shariati, a firm oppositor of the Shah and considered by many as the

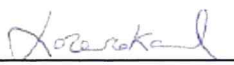
'Revolution's ideologue', was largely influenced by the anti-imperialist policies of the global left and perceived Islam as a theological tool serving a purpose ('the liberation'). It should also be added that the lay and secular component of the revolution was present right from the start while its (however prevalent) 'Islamic' character became an all-encompassing element only later, in particular as a consequence of the occupation of the American Embassy in Tehran (4 November 1979–20 January 1981) and the outbreak of the war with Iraq (22 September 1980): two historical events which played a crucial role in paving the way to the most extremist of the revolutionary groups. In the words of Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, 'revolution came first, and "Islam" followed'.

- The section on Libya would require some more historical background on the Sanusiyya, which is indeed crucial to address some of the roots of the later Libyan state. Some members of the Sanusiyya, which had branches from Hijaz to Central Africa, acted as collaborators with the Italian colonial administration. Calchi Novati has emphasized that, at the time of the Italian conquest of Libya, the Sanusiyya was not a deeply-rooted African religious phenomenon; rather, it was a modern Islamic movement, not appearing in Cyrenaica until the mid-19th century. See G.P. Calchi Novati, *L'Africa d'Italia*, Carocci, Rome 2011, p. 301. In the two decades prior to the 1884-5 Berlin conference, the Libyan area suffered a famine that made it particularly vulnerable to external influence. See T.A. al-Zawi, *Wulāt Tarābulus min bidāyat al-fath al-'Arabī ilā nihāyat al-'abd a-Turkī* [The governors of Tripoli from the beginning of the Arab conquest to the Turkish era], Dār al-Fath lil-Tibā'ah wa-al-Nashr, Beirut 1970, p. 250. Mostafa Minawi was the first historian to demonstrate that, "well before 1885", the Ottoman authorities and the movement of the Sanusiyya Sufi brotherhood operated in today's Libya and surrounding areas in a "complementary, cooperative and at times even synergetic" way. See M. Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016, p. 36.

- On "political Islam": the books by Olivier Roy and others have shown that "Muslim societies" have produced their own forms of secularization and until the contemporary period, secularization in Muslim countries had taken place routinely, with no tension between secular and religious authorities.

I will be glad to communicate with you further on all this should you require.

Sincerely,


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