LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

This edition of the Journal is dedicated to the ubiquitously relevant concept of change. While it is from the ancient times of Heraclitus that humanity has recognised change as being the only constant in life, it is in our times that the need to take a step back and reflect upon the perpetually fluctuating state of the world appears to be most urgent. With multiple forces shaping and defining our uncertain times, it feels particularly urgent to explore contemporary political, economic, cultural, aesthetical and philosophical realities and their past and on-going reconstructions.

Debates around the nature of social change (or the lack thereof) have intrigued thinkers from time immemorial. Karl Marx, Arnold van Gennep and Pierre Bourdieu, who studied the concept of change in view of economic structures, personal life cycles and society respectively, are only some of the innumerable intellectuals theorising change, making them popular across a wide number of disciplines. Rather than concentrating on theories of change—conscious of the fact that even the metaphysics of theory and theorising are being questioned in our times—we have aimed in this Volume to explore and illustrate change in practice, by observing and illustrating how it operates, succeeds and fails in a variety of domains and analytical levels. In doing so, it is our aim to capture the multi-dimensional 'happening' of change in the topography of embodied, social and discursive subjects simultaneously.

In engaging with the theme "Exploring fluid times: Knowledge, minds and bodies" the current Volume presents works from a wide array of knowledge fields, such as digital media and technology, gender studies, human rights and law studies and historical and aesthetical disciplines. In proposing the theme of flux, our intention was to create room for papers engaging with different time periods, geographies and subject matters. Nonetheless, while the contributing authors come from various disciplinary frameworks and examine a multitude of topics in diverse regions, the majority have chosen to assess change within contemporary scenarios. Even those authors who engaged with eras long gone, made their analyses of change pertinent to current times by outlining the evolution of paradigms and the decentring of knowledge salient in contemporary philosophical conversations. All works are therefore relevant to our times, illustrating shifting realities also where they have not been articulated before.

It should also be noted that in line with our commitment to attract papers from diverse disciplines we felt that imposing a strict set of writing guidelines would be not only infeasible, but also stall author's creativity and particular objectives for their papers. Therefore, we did our utmost to keep the papers in the originally submitted form. While there is general consistency in the layout of the Volume, referencing styles vary according to author preference.

Karishma Mehrotra's article is undeniably one of the most relevant contributions to this Volume in terms of its engagement with change in fluid times. The author centers her attention on social media providers, and specifically Facebook, to argue that they are not merely platforms of connectivity that widen the possibilities of choice for users, as they are

conventionally depicted, but are also increasingly constructors of reality, absorbing new responsibilities equivalent to those of news agencies with the ability to shape presentations of the world for their users. Metrotha's argument combines gatekeeping theory with conventional (romanticised) and revised understandings of technology 'to expose how social network companies and their dissemination activities are powerful *media* actors in the construction of reality'. She exposes the accepted thinking among scholars that technology is almost synonymous with progress as being naive, since it ignores too hastily the rising gatekeeping role of such social media platforms. The author uses the example of Facebook to illustrate this rationale and attempts to show how this company has warped into a news distributor with great power over reality construction, an identity that it has yet to disclose for reasons that likely include a desire to avoid responsibilities associated with news distribution. As a concluding remark the author warns that: 'As technology ebbs and flows, media research must keep its eye on who controls the reality presented to the public, especially when technology has taken on the character of an objective and inherently-good middleman'. In a world of decentred knowledge, overcome claims of objectivity, multiple interpretations and representations, the plea of the author seems salient and urgent: be aware of who constructs the world each time, a construction that is not limited to the physical social realm, but extends increasingly to the digital world and the new paradigm-setters of the era, including the social media-tech company hybrids of the like of Facebook.

Simon Forbes' article is especially salient to our times of change and the theme of this issue. The author concerns himself with the controversial issue of homosexuality in Iran, which under the penal code of the country is still a prohibited and punishable act. Forbes relates the current situation in Iran to the conditions around homosexuality that existed in the UK and the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, homosexuality was considered a state curable through medical means. Being associated with the mental self-identification of the individual, the solution was to change the body in order to align it with one's internal gender identity. Forbes analyses the current penal code, newspaper and public discourse and human rights evidence in Iran to assess the situation of homosexuals. He shows that while executions and mandatory penalties have been contained, homosexuality is still considered a crime and punished strictly in Iran. In addition, as it happened in the 1950s and 1960s in western societies, there is a tendency to resort to medical solutions, most often through sex change operations. The author's account suggests convincingly that the current state and appraisals of homosexuality in the country may not reflect only local religious traditions and beliefs, but may have equally been influenced by 'pre-modern' and 'modern' paradigms of homosexuality imported from abroad. Albeit continuous intolerance in the country, the historical progression in western societies from intolerance to acceptance leads the author to conclude that perhaps change is eminent also in Iran.

Jonathan Beloff's paper may also be approached through the framework of fluid times and change, as he presents an increasingly unstable situation within the realm of research. The paper deals with the challenges that foreign researchers face in Rwanda as a result of a polarisation within scholarly circles around the Rwandan government's public policies. As the author shows, most academic accounts about post-genocide Rwanda and the government of Paul Kagame have been almost absolutist in their stances, with the majority tending toward a negative opinion. On the other hand, scholars who have produced more positive accounts are often suspected or defamed by fellow researchers on the premise of receiving benefits from government officials. There seems to be no middle-ground in

appraising government public policies. The author argues that this puts much pressure on new and upcoming researchers, who encounter this polarisation and must decide where they will choose to stand on the spectrum. What makes research by foreigners in Rwanda even more challenging is Rwandans' (government and public alike) distrust of foreign researchers. Many have little faith in foreign scholars, remembering their abandonment of the country during the 1994 genocide. Government officials in particular do not appreciate it when scholars interview them with hostility, already preconceiving the country and the state in the most negative terms. The author calls for less biased research that is based on empirical findings and avoids suspicions, and notes as a more positive result of this distrusting situation the increasing emergence of Rwandan researchers.

Asma Azhari's paper on the complex relationship between Islamic Law, International Human Rights Laws and the *kafāla* 'sponsorship' system and how these affect the diverse foreign working force that has been, and continues to be, attracted to Saudi Arabia, is particularly relevant in view of the changes that the author suggests in this domain. By providing numerous examples and skilfully juxtaposing the three regulatory systems, the author demonstrates that the *kafāla*, in placing disproportionate authority in the hands of the sponsoring employer over the migrant worker, fails to provide those basic securities and liberties to the employees that are instead stipulated by both, Islamic Law and International Law. Azhari not only argues that the *kafāla* subjects immigrants to substandard living conditions that are incongruent with International Human Rights Laws; she also shows that the sponsorship system, in not guaranteeing basic freedoms and protections to the worker, violates the values expressed by the Qur'an. Moreover, the author shows that Islamic Law and International Law are compatible with each other with special reference to migrant workers. Azhari calls for an immediate reformation of the migrant workers' policies in Saudi Arabia that not only foresees the abolition of the *kafāla* system and the alignment with Islamic and International Law, but also the promotion of increased awareness of human rights through an improved education system.

Sareh Javid presents a philosophical analysis of Iranian filmmaker Kiarostami's *The Traveller* by applying a Deleuzian framework. Filmed in 1974, *The Traveller* is set in a time during which major socio-political and economic changes pervaded Iran through programmes of modernisation and westernisation on the one side, and the forbearers of the Revolution (1979) on the other side. These, according to the author, 'resulted in a shattered and plural identity'. Films, Javid suggests, were one of the principal means for Iranians to rediscover the world from the perspective of shifted identities. As in many of Kiarostami's films, also *The Traveller* revolves around a child, giving Javed the opportunity to effectuate a wider exploration of the theme of child in Kiarostami's works. Applying Deleuze's idea of the cinema of seer, she examines how *The Traveller*'s protagonist Qassem, as he moves from his familiar small town to the modern and unknown capital Teheran, becomes a 'seer' rather than a 'doer'. The disoriented protagonist observes, in order 'to rediscover the space he inhabits', and 'wanders around to find a new way, a new link to the world'. Resorting to Deleuze's idea that it is the role of modern cinema to make viewers rediscover and believe in the connection between human beings and the world, the author efficiently demonstrates that one of the functions of Kiarostami's first feature film is that of guiding, through the eyes of the protagonist, disoriented spectators along the complex processes of shifting identities that result from the forced modernisation pervading the country.

Kerman Daruwalla's article on the evolution of Zoroastrian priestly rituals in Iran is the last, but certainly not least, research paper of this collection and is equally salient to this volume's theme. The author captures and articulates changes that occur steadily in the performance of archaic priestly rituals in the Zoroastrian community. He observes that with globalisation and development, consequences of which have included emigration and exposure to foreign ideals and practices, the original priestly rituals have undergone changes. Priests have had to cater to a changing body of believers, but there has also been a steady decrease in the number of priests who are equipped to perform the original rituals, or those who are in the capacity do not have the necessary knowledge/level of training. With modernisation and development, sons of priests do not necessarily follow the path of their forefathers (as used to be the case), but are attracted to new professions and geographies. The author argues that in response to such and other changes, requirements for ordination have been loosened and rituals have been adapted, modified, or entirely replaced by innovative practices. The continuum that the author uses to describe the different extents of change in association with specific practices is enlightening and a coherent way to try to depict the inherently multidimensional mechanisms of change. The article not only manages to articulate on-going adaptations in the practised Zoroastrian tradition, but it also contributes toward a preservation of millennia-old rituals by describing what is currently being altered too fast, before it is for ever lost.

In addition to these articles revolving around the theme of change, an opinion piece, a book review and a translation make this a particularly fruitful and exciting volume.

Hassan Ould Moctar's opinion piece touches on similar themes as Mehrotra's, perhaps taking a step further in problematising models of the self in a world constructed by social media platforms driven by capitalistic interests. Hassan observes that with the rise of social media, a new'model of commoditised selfhood' has emerged whereby one's individuality is based on the objectification of oneself through these platforms, turning oneself from consumer to commodity, and vice versa. The author sees this progression as a threat to the conventional understandings of a democratic polity, whereby class antagonism serves as a balancing factor to the inherently exploitative structure. Now the individual, perhaps unconsciously, willingly renders her/himself as a data source for digital companies whose only interest is profit maximisation. This process of commoditisation is of course disguised, he argues, which may explain why it succeeds. As Hassan notes, companies need 'a euphemistically legitimising narrative' in order to trap the individual into a constant cycle of posting private details about oneself on social media without feeling the inherent commoditisation of the self. This comes in the form of an invitation to 'share' information and liked materials with others, a subtle hollowing of the individual as consumer (and agent) and relegation to a commodity. Hassan concludes that "[w]e have now moved beyond the manufacturing of desire, to include broader and more fundamental modes of selfhood", facing us with a disturbing reality whereby the mythical agent as power-holder has disintegrated in the face of a new socially constructed individual, this time largely shaped by digital capitalists. His article overall alerts us to the subtle progressions in the ways the self is constructed discursively by processes larger and wider than the self, processes that might fundamentally threaten the democratic world as conventionally envisioned.

Rudder Jenkins reviews a recent publication dedicated to Christians and other non-Muslim communities in the early Islamic state. The author's choice to review this volume seems to be underpinned by his belief that it departs from more absolutist conventional views that failed to recognise the cultural and religious plurality of the early Ummayad state, and provides more pragmatic and realistic accounts of the life of non-Muslim populations in the early Islamic state. The volume consists of eight contributions, through which Rudders takes us step by step, summarising the different arguments and approaches and noting their strengths and weaknesses. The author concludes that this volume is worth studying by students of disciplines that cover 'Islamic, Christian, Art Historical, Archaeological, Historical studies' as it not only showcases new methodological approaches, but it also accounts with more thoughtfulness for the controversies, lacunae and ambiguities related to the subject matter, approximating better the multidimensional realities that characterise the studied society and period.

Heba Albeity's translation of Mansour Rahbani's poem "At the dawn of the third millennium" is reserved as last because of its more aesthetic touch. Moreover, it adds a twist to the present collection of works around the theme of change: dealing with a persistent *lack* of change in people's understandings and perceptions of each other, the poem exposes racism, repression and poverty as hindrances to the rising of a sentiment of universal human brotherhood. While maintaining the poetic sensitivity of the original text, the author convenes the urgency, expressed by the poet, to look beyond different creeds and colours, in a scenario where the encounters of different cultures are steadily on the rise. Situating the poem within the contemporary Lebanese and larger Arabic context, the author convincingly argues for the need to translate Arabic poetry in order to counter the dehumanisation that Arab subjects have undergone in western narratives ever since the 9/11 attack. Furthermore, Albeity notes that since much fine poetry, such as that of Mansour Rahbani and his brother, is written in colloquial languages, scholars have not devoted due attention to it, leaving it often untranslated or, when translated, misinterpreted. Lay audiences and scholars alike will benefit from a wider spread of translated Arabic poetry, not only in view of a much needed rectification of various current misrepresentations of the Arabic world, but also in view of the appeal to freedom and justice that is advocated in the works of the Rahbani brothers.

All in all, we feel that the contributions of this Volume provide innovative frameworks to understand, articulate and trace processes of change, opening new spaces for research and critical discussion. We hope that the present collection of papers will ignite reflections and discussions across a variety of disciplines that will prove to be as enriching and satisfying to the readers as it was for us the Editors to invite, select, review, edit and publish these essays.

With best wishes,
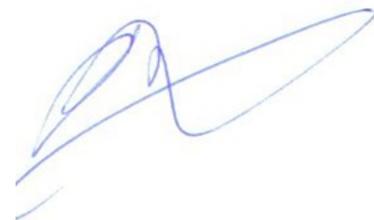
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