On Comparison: A workshop on concepts and methods

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Venue: Room 1.1062 Institute of Islamic studies, FU, Fabeckstrasse 23-25 14195 Berlin

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Brief Concept Note:

Though it has lost its innocence as a value-free method in recent years, comparison as a concept and method remains central to the human sciences. Historical comparison is intimately connected with the emergence of the modern social sciences, for instance, the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, and later, of area studies. However, the inadequacy and ubiquity of comparison as a method, too, have become a central area of inquiry and include: querying hierarchical normative orders and forms of universalism that enable comparative work; the processes of decontextualization and entextualization comparison affords; and the forms of affinity and solidarity it enables. We see here that comparison as a method can be both politically necessary and methodologically insufficient. Insufficient because comparison introduces the idea of a developmental norm against which objects are compared, but enabling because comparison enhances social and political perception: when we compare two things, we ask about origins, about the apparent convergence of divergent processes, as well as place of comparison across the disciplines. Our workshop reflects on the work of comparison across three distinct domains: 1) comparison across aesthetics, text, and genre as this relates to forms of life and worldmaking; 2) focus on the concepts and keywords that enable comparison across geographies and histories of the global South; and 3) comparison in the age of global technological mediation. We will be especially attentive to questions of reading and the relationship between the textual and the social in our convening.