Within scholarship on contemporary Islam, one of the issues that has generated considerable discussion (and often perplexity) concerns the accuracy or validity of Muslim historians. Many scholars have pointed to a discrepancy between what Muslim activists today invoke as belonging to the traditions of Islam and the actual historical record of Islamic societies. It is argued that historical reality is ignored or rejected, while a false, distorted, or selective version of the past is affirmed in its place. In attempting to characterize and explain this use (or misuse) of history, scholars have recourse to a variety of concepts, some of which merit a re-examination, especially in light of recent work within historiography. A brief review of these concepts suggests a need for new analytical approaches to the styles of historical argumentation prevalent within Islam today.

A common current argument is that the Islam invoked by contemporary activists is an “invented tradition”, which is founded by a sort of historical sleight-of-hand, positing ancient roots while actually being of recent origin. As Al-Azmeh notes, this view is also held by non-Muslims, such as Aziz ibn-Basawm and Ranger. Thus, the question of whether things are ancient or a recent invention is a matter of knowledge: “Who is right?” The historian and the sociologist must take into consideration the context of the research in which they work. It is observed that the modernist approach (which, in contrast, simply accepts the resources of 19th-century anthropology) is frequently biased toward the ongoing impact of this scholarly approach. In many ways, Habermas’ work, Historical Approaches, which was published in 1984, bears this out.

Notes
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