

The Middle East from below – Dynamics of subversion

Veranstalter: Albrecht Fuess, Islamwissenschaft / Rachid Ouaisa, Politikwissenschaft / Friederike Pannewick, Arabistik, Centrum für Nah- und Mittelost-Studien (CNMS), Universität Marburg

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This international workshop represents a prelude to a series of workshops that will be hosted over the coming years within the framework of the Marburg University research group, „Triumph of subversion? The end of mass ideologies, and new oppositional dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa.“ It forms part of interdisciplinary research focusing on processes of individualization and new forms of oppositional dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa. Conveners were Albrecht Fuess (Islamic Studies), Rachid Ouaisa (Middle Eastern Politics), and the laureate of the Leibnizpreis, Friederike Pannewick (Arabic Studies), of the CNMS in Marburg.

The apparent absence of organized mass ideologies in the ongoing social upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa is remarkable. Nationalism and Islamism were not the driving forces behind the mass protests. Instead, a new ideational orientation of actors, emphasizing individual desiderata – such as freedom, human dignity, and social equality – has figured prominently in the midst of the new developments. Processes of individualized opposition have been taking place under the surface in these regions for years. Various groups of social actors including intellectuals, artists, youth, and women have been engaged in subverting the dominant political, social, and cultural conceptions. In contrast to previous mass movements based on a collective consciousness, recent dynamics of resistance are characterized by individual, non-hierarchical, spontaneous actions and behavior.

This workshop aimed to address issues of

individualized opposition – which is constantly subverting not only political, but also social and cultural authoritarian systems – through providing theoretical lectures and discussions in connection with presenting empirical case studies.

The workshop started with a keynote speech entitled „The Arab street as political sphere“ by ASEF BAYAT (Urbana-Champaign, IL). Based on his book „Life as politics“ (2009), he sketched out the main questions of the workshop. The Arab street is considered to be a space of deliberate political action (as we have seen during the Arab Spring), a space of everyday life (leisure activities, consumption, etc.), and a space of artistic intervention (graffiti, street art, etc.). He shed light on various meanings of the political street, and street politics especially of women, youth, and the urban poor.

The first section focused on the political as a term much discussed in contemporary political and cultural theory. Referring back to these approaches, it was highlighted that the notion of the political must be understood as a dynamic of collective dissent that criticizes the prevailing order. Thus, the term is directly linked with other terms such as opposition, resistance and subversion. It is therefore of distinct interest for the recent developments in the Middle East in that it offers an analytical dimension for (a) everyday practices of resistance, and (b) aesthetic resistance.

As theoretical input, OLIVER FLÜGEL-MARTINSEN (Bielefeld) presented a paper on the notion of the political rooted in the philosophical thought of Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort and Jacques Rancière, with a special emphasis on the emancipatory perspectives they offer and the problems following from their attempts to understand emancipatory politics and democracy as modes of radically transforming institutions.

In the case study that followed, LISA WEDEEN (Chicago) provided critical insight into one topical example of dissident unrest. Her argumentation emanated from international astonishment as to why the populations of Syria's two major cities, Aleppo and Damascus, have yet to mobilize in significant numbers, except to publicly demonstrate their support for the president. Recognizing the

problems with notions of „legitimacy“ undergirding analyses of Syria and elsewhere, she considered the role ideology plays in generating support and managing the terms within which much dissent does take place.

In her contribution, HANAN TOUKAN (London) focused on how „the political as dissent“ is reflected in contemporary Arab art, and the role international funding institutions play in processes of cultural production. Taking the Lebanese art scene as a paradigmatic example, Toukan showed how protest, resistance and conceptions of freedom sometimes end up being shaped by hegemonic forces. This, she argued, is especially true of those groupings most celebrated by the circuits of global capital – a phenomenon with far-reaching implications in considering the aesthetics of resistance emergent from the Arab world in its current revolutionary moment.

The second session was dedicated to „individualization as opposition.“ In the Middle East, the term „individualization“ is hardly ever used when talking about societal or political transformations. Even though a number of studies deal implicitly with the matter (e.g., in the field of gender), these are not embedded into a broader theoretical framework on individualization. This session shed light on several aspects of Western individualization theory and discussed the concept's usefulness in relation to the Middle East.

MONIKA WOHLRAB-SAHR (Leipzig) reminded the audience that individualization theory constitutes a strand of modernization theory and as such, it is important to disentangle it from related concepts such value change and social differentiation. She distinguished between individualization on the levels of structure (social differentiation), person (detaching the person from a determining context), and culture (change of ideas, values, and ideologies). Monika Wohlrab-Sahr noted that the wave of individualization theory since the 1980s, in which Ulrich Beck has featured prominently, in many points referred to arguments that were developed by sociological classics in the early twentieth century. Summing up the different approaches to classifying aspects of individualization, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr differentiated between two di-

mensions of individualization: first, individualization as differentiation and pluralization, and second, individualization as a change in modes of ascription.

In her anthropological study, KATHRIN SHARAF (Freiburg) examined everyday Internet usage among young Cairenes. They use the Internet for information, entertainment and social interaction, which takes place largely within already existing groups of friends. It was only after the beginning of the mass protests in January 2011 that respondents began to use the Internet to express explicitly political views. Another notion concerned the use of Facebook by individuals who do not have an account themselves, but nevertheless stated that they received certain information through the platform. In these cases, peers who had learned about the information online had continued to distribute it orally.

The third panel's main interest was to have a closer look, both theoretically and empirically, at the very dynamics unfolding from below in the Middle East and aiming at social change. On the one hand it was questioned to what extent theories of contentious politics – such as social movement theory – are at all adequate to illuminate processes and strategies of opposition in the Middle East, with its setting of multiple constraints. To understand the historical basis of the current uprisings and to enrich mainstream social movement theory, which mainly studies dynamics in the unrestricted environments of political opportunities, the concern was also to study social change occurring within restricted contexts.

DIETER RUCHT (Berlin) gave an introduction into social movement theory by comparatively elucidating the major strands of discussion. He explained, for instance, structuralist theories as the „resource mobilization approach“ and constructionist theories as the „framing approach,“ while also describing the role of psychological factors of collective behavior.

DIMITRIS SOUDIAS (Erlangen) addressed specific notions of the previous speech – such as the dynamics of tactical repertoires – that presented themselves on the Egyptian streets as a space of negotiating power relations be-

tween 2000 and 2011. He argued that the uprising that occurred on January 25, 2011, represents the current and final episode of negotiating power relations in a series of five consecutive cycles of contention since 2000, and illustrated how each included a predominant protesting actor that brought along particular tactics, from which other actors were able to learn.

SOPHIE RICHTER-DEVROE (Exeter), highlighting understandings, practices and framings of everyday resistance – topics typically not covered by social movement theory – argued that Palestinian women, although framing their acts of crossing Israeli-imposed physical restriction as political acts of resistance against the occupation, use them also as an opportunity to subvert patriarchal Palestinian forms of control.

The last panel focused on youths and the specific conceptualization of youth in the Arab world. What renders youth a meaningful empirical category? With regard to our workshop issues, we concentrated on questions like: Who are the young people involved in social movements, and in non-movements? Who are the young people enacting individualization processes? At which point do their day-to-day actions turn political? And as it is always revealing to consider what remains unmentioned, we should add: Which young people are included, and which excluded when we are discussing Arab youth?

LINDA HERRERA (Urbana-Champaign, IL) a social anthropologist, turned the attention to new media and the revolution, addressing the intersection of youth, communication technologies and changing political culture in Egypt. She suggested a generational approach to grasp the dynamics triggered mainly by young people. The contemporary generation labeled as „Generation Rev“ is differentiated by new mental structures and a new political cognition and due to use of Internet, she argued.

In the second presentation, ALI SONAY (Marburg) shed light on politically engaged young people. His presentation about the „April 6 youth movement“ as a liberal-oriented youth organization with a significant mobilizing structure related to questions of being politically active in social movements

in a non-hierarchical, individualized manner. He embedded the local action of the „April 6 youth movement“ into a global discourse.

ALBRECHT FUESS (Marburg), who has a background in Islamic Studies, drew attention to musically engaged young people, and to subversive practices in the field of music. He provided insight into the history of French Banlieue hip-hop, which is connected to Islam, and outlined how hip-hop on both sides of the Mediterranean is used as a tool to criticize social conditions and national governments, as well as to articulate young peoples' demands for participation.

In conclusion, the gathering of renowned scientists and young researchers has proven itself to be a very inspiring and enriching endeavor. A critical factor thereby was its conception as a workshop, which allowed time for in-depth discussions.

The central finding has been that concepts illuminating dynamics of social change, as elaborated in Western settings, are applicable in the Middle East and North Africa to only a limited extent. This can be demonstrated by examples of processes of individualization, which are developing differently in the analyzed region than in Europe or North America. Another illustration would be the central social movement theories themselves, which implicitly exclude dynamics of collective action in contexts with a restricted opportunity structure, like those unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa.

The discussions during the workshop have shown that we are now being faced with the end of organized mass ideologies applying in the region, but not with an end to ideologies themselves. In this sense, neo-liberal ideology can be seen to enable new forms of subversion, and at the same time attempt new ways to manage those forms of subversion.

The workshop underlined the significance of the *subversive* and *political* in grasping societal articulations of dissent. Implementation through an interdisciplinary approach revealed the simultaneous relevance of these dynamics in fields such as political activism, art, literature, and music. Based on these findings, the workshop to follow shall focus on one of the above-mentioned fields.

Conference Overview:

The Middle East from below – Dynamics of subversion

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Keynote

Asef Bayat (Urbana-Champaign, IL), The Arab street as political sphere

Panel 1: The political as dissent

Oliver Flügel-Martinsen (Bielefeld), Considerations on the political. Emancipatory perspectives and conceptional problems

Lisa Wedeen (Chicago), Abandoning 'legitimacy'? Order, disorder and ideology in Syria

Hanan Toukan (London), Making the invisible visible? Disaggregating art and the public sphere in contemporary Lebanon

Panel 2: Individualization as opposition

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Leipzig), What is individualization and how can we research it? Some conceptional considerations on the strengths and weakness of a widely used concept

Kathrin Sharaf (Freiburg), Etisalat. Local appropriation of the internet in middle class Cairo

Panel 3. Movements as collective actions

Dieter Rucht (Berlin), Theories on social movements and political protest. An overview

Dimitris Soudias (Erlangen), Resistance is a learning process. Tactical repertoires and the Egyptian street: 2000-2011

Sophie Richter-Devroe (Exeter), Palestinian women's everyday resistance. Between 'normality' and 'normalisation'

Panel 4. Youth as social actor

Linda Herrera (Urbana-Champaign, IL), The rise of Generation Rev. Conceptualizing Arab youth in the digital age

Albrecht Fuess (Marburg), „La guerre des prenomms“. Migrating Hip Hop between France and North Africa

Ali Sonay (Marburg), Being young and political in Egypt. The case of the April 6 movement