Political Temporalities of Youth

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The uprisings of 2011 challenged many hegemonic assumptions about 'youth' in North Africa and West Asia. In the years before, Western publics and international policy makers discussed young people mainly as a 'youth bulge' – a demographic, quantitative problem, even a potential terrorist threat, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.[1] In this regard, the first Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*) marks an important intervention, since it shifted the focus on young people's social situation, particularly on youth unemployment and the concomitant psycho-social suffering. However, in problematizing social exclusion this way, the report also catered to stereotypical representations of its own. Youth and young adults were hardly described as political subjects, but rather as objects of policies that had to change. They were portrayed as passive victims of an eroding social pact between former generations and authoritarian regimes. At the same time, international organizations and think tanks in the region promoted an ideal of the 'young, innovative entrepreneur'. This ideal on the one hand apparently aimed to 'empower' youth and end their suffering, while on the other hand it individualized and depoliticized their risks of failure in pursuing their life projects.

Four stereotypes dominate perceptions of youth around the world. First, youth are feared as dangerous, violent, fanatic, and hostile. Second, youth are seen as helpless, vulnerable, disoriented, paralyzed, and in need of protection or help from outside. Third, youth are appreciated as an innovative human resource, as talented, dynamic, inspired, and productive. Fourth, youth are admired as heroic, altruistic, idealistic, courageous, lionhearted, and visionary.

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Then, in the course of the 2011 events in the MENA region, a new idol emerged, which might be best described by a quote from the Financial Times:

He is the young Egyptian who occupied Tahrir Square, and awakened a sleepy population. She is the young Libyan defying the madness and brutality of Muammer Gaddafi. He is the empowered Bahraini and Yemeni youth raising his voice in a resolute call on governments to listen to their people instead of oppressing them. Each revolt has drawn in swaths of its own society, but it is the young Arab who is the driving force; the unassuming leader. (Khalaf)

In Western publics, the 'young Arab protester' was largely perceived as a heroic vanguard against fossilized autocratic regimes ruled by old men. For many, this figure seemed to embody certain democratic ideals and practices that apparently had lost impetus in the established democracies of the West, especially in the wake of the global economic crisis, and the Euro crisis in particular. Here, new social movements like the Spanish *indignados* were highly inspired by the events on the southern coast of the Mediterranean. The fact that authoritarian regimes that had appeared stable for decades were suddenly shaken to the ground seemed to prove the hidden potential of an awakening citizenry – and who could better embody this general trope of the 'Arab Spring' than youth?

The term 'Arab Spring' was coined in the West and surely reveals more about the expectations of those who employed it than about the events on the ground. Such a seasonal analogy obviously matches generational semantics and the widespread hopes that are often associated with 'youth', hopes that seem to be the flipside of a common fearful rhetoric of youth as a violent menace to society. In contrast to terms like 'Days of Rage', as many protestors in the MENA titled their rallies, a 'spring' analogy implies that something will come to fruition, that heretofore hidden potentials will be realized. At the same time, it implies the idea of a natural course of the development. And to be successful against the forces of cold and darkness, this development might need helping hands, guidance and care from experienced experts.

As a consequence of the 2011 protests and uprisings, young people in the MENA region were also increasingly given credit as protagonists in the cultural field, which was often directly related to their political mobilizations. Western media started to show interest in their creative productivity, be it in literature, music, their use of new media and ICTS, or everyday practices like football and its respective fan cultures. Those young people who before were mainly represented by statistics and demographic numbers suddenly were given credit as individuals. Their faces had made it onto journal covers and TV documentaries, often in a posture of defiance and optimism. Journalists aimed to 'zoom in' and get closer to these young people in order to capture personal stories and portraits. Most prominently, Time magazine declared 'the protester' the person of the year 2011, showing on its cover the face of an apparently young, determined-looking person wearing a knit cap and a cloth over mouth and nose. In this case, hiding the subject's face obviously was used to neither hint to a specific gender or ethnic identity, nor to possible identifiers of a local context. Instead, the aim of this graphic was to highlight the commonalities of the pictures that photographers delivered from scenes of protests in very different contexts, in the sense of a global 'protest generation' – "From the Arab Spring to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow" as the subtitle went. And many activists made strategic use of this generational narrative. In Madrid, an

indignados activist explained to one of the editors that his political group – Juventud sin Futuro ('Youth without a Future') – had deliberately chosen a 'youth frame' as a mobilization strategy precisely because of the 'Arab Spring', which in Spain was perceived mainly as a legitimate youth revolt. As such, even conservative media had made positive reference to it. For this key group within the *indignados* movement, framing their demands as 'youth issues' was a strategy to avoid the typical political divisions in the post-Franquist context.

Again, we are confronted with a flipside dynamic. While in public discourses young people and children are often not taken seriously as political subjects, since they are thought to lack the experience necessary to be responsible political actors, it is precisely the naivety and innocence ascribed to them that makes them particularly powerful witnesses of injustice. The first Palestinian Intifada and its spectacular images of Palestinian children and youth confronting Israeli tanks with stones and slingshots is a telling example (Collins). For a long time, these were almost the only young people from North Africa and West Asia who were taken into account as political subjects in international media and academia on a regular basis. On an iconographic level (Lachenal and Leube),

the violence and injustice suffered by young people delivers particularly outrageous images and narratives that are likely to become key elements in political protests. The case of the 26-year-old Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who is said to have sparked the Tunisian uprising when he immolated himself after his goods were confiscated in a humiliating act by the police, is a prime example. But also at the Eastern side of the Mediterranean, in Syria, the 'Days of Rage' protests began after teenagers had been arrested and tortured by Assad's secret police because they had written anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their school. Later, 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib was tortured to death by the secret service, who then returned his body to his family, an act that many interpreted as the regime's annulment of "the unwritten pact that at least those who do not pose an essential threat to its power would be spared" (Scheller).

One reason for Bashar al-Assad's persistence was that he managed to convince many decision makers and Western publics that he was the 'lesser evil' and represented 'stability' in the face of an archaic threat, namely Daesh (ISIS). Daesh's propaganda, on the other hand, made heavy use of certain images of 'youth as a men-

ace'. The images and videos of bearded young men in turbans and their acts of extreme violence wielding a gun or sometimes a sabre appear like the worst Western Orientalist projections of Muslim masculinity come true. Daesh triggered such projections, and for many Western recruits they apparently were attractive since they promised direct access to patriarchal power.[2] The young Jihadist's closest iconographic counterpart appears in the heroic Kurdish female fighter as an idealistic, committed, and highly trained warrior beating back the terrorists. It was this icon that managed for the first time to mobilize certain European publics to show solidarity while heretofore they had preferred not to take a stance in the Syrian conflict.

However, the term 'Arab Winter' had appeared in journalism and academia long before Daesh took center stage, not even a year into the uprisings of 2011. Whereas analogies of 'spring' seemed to emphasize common ground with the West, and, as already mentioned, indicated a certain benevolent identification, the use of the 'winter' analogy indicates the 'cooling off' and increasing distance on behalf of Western publics. In consequence, the image of the people in the MENA region again is one of either

stagnation, acquiescence, or sectarian violence, so often associated with a forlorn, anachronistic culture. Such seasonal analogies indicate a particular form of 'temporal othering' – much in parallel to 'spatial othering' (Fischer-Tahir and Soudias) – and youth as a trope seems to be at its center. Political mobilization and security discourses, as well as Jihadist recruitment, each make ample use of these stereotypes, each according to their own logic.

To critically examine such youth discourses and generational semantics, their flipside-dynamics of 'peril or promise' (El Shakry), does not intend to relativize youth's preeminent role in the uprisings of 2011 and in the production of new forms of speaking about their societies' future, nor young people's destructive potential. Instead, it is precisely the crypto-normative aspects of hegemonic assumptions about youth that prove the need for a thorough conceptual discussion, across national and regional borders. In academia, the sudden public attention given to young people in the MENA was echoed by a boom in 'youth research' on the region. Here, like in the media, studies now aimed to find more personal stories and intended to 'give a face and a voice' to young people by including more qualitative methods such as ethnographies

and open interviews that aimed to portray them as individual cases illustrating a more general positionality. But many of the studies and policy papers hardly involved critical theoretical approaches to 'youth'. Again, young people were represented mainly as members of an age cohort, defined in quantitative terms, although now with different expectations. And on the other hand, critical discussions regarding the empirical significance of youth in reproducing social inequality and catalyzing processes of social exclusion continue to revolve around the situation of young people in 'the West', i.e. in sociology, youth studies, etc.

The four stereotypes mentioned in the beginning are not reserved to youth in the MENA region, though they are surely exacerbated by Orientalist projections. But in youth discourses in most contexts, there is a tendency to regard male youth as deviant and dangerous menaces to society, irrespective of whether they constitute real threats (Oettler). Likewise, youth's 'political apathy' as well as their 'radicalization' have been an issue of concern in 'Western' societies for a long time. On behalf of critical youth studies there has been a constant argument to reflect upon the more open notions of politics regarding young people's participation,

and to understand their relations to politics and their understanding of 'participation' (Vromen; Farthing).

For the MENA region, it seems fair to say that those expressions of political agency that did not fit in any of the four stereotypes mentioned above hardly received any attention in Western or international media or academia. Take the case of the Moroccan or Tunisian unemployed graduates, who had been protesting 'apolitically', negotiating their employment with authoritarian regimes since the early 1990s (Emperador Badimón; Schwarz, "'Generation in Waiting' or 'Precarious Generation'?"; Hamdi and Weipert-Fenner). In addition to these organized and visible street protests, there were 'youth non-movements', as Bayat (Bayat, "From 'Dangerous Classes' to 'Quiet Rebels'") had termed some of the everyday activities of young people who were 'reclaiming youthfulness' as a certain form of generational self-positioning and a particular representation of political discord. Based on passive networks, these proto-movements were less visible to the public, but, in many places, turned out to be crucial for the uprisings of 2011 (Bayat, *Revolution without revolutionaries*). And finally, instead of imagining agency exclusively from a perspective of

romanticized 'resistance' or, on the other hand, threatening 'terrorism', research should also take into account that in every context there were and are many young people who exercise political agency in adapting to the current state of affairs or even in actively supporting authoritarian rule as long as it benefits them and as long as the respective regime abides by a certain social contract (Rodgers and Young; Schielke).

In discussing such conceptual research gaps and regional asymmetries, we – both sociologists, one with a regional focus on MENA and Southern Europe, one with a regional focus on Latin America – decided to further engage with these debates. As a first step, in December 2016, we invited scholars from different disciplines to an international workshop in order to foster a conceptual debate between area studies (of the MENA and other regions), sociology of youth, education, critical youth studies, and social movement theory. On this occasion, we want to thank all participants for sharing their insights and thoughts: Yakein Abdelmagid, Abdulsalam AlRubeidi, Eyob Balcha Gebremariam, Asef Bayat, Myriam Catusse, Blandine Destremeau, Jörg Gertel, Linda Herrera, Vera King, Mayada Madbouly, Emma C. Murphy, Rachid Ouaissa, José Luís Rocha Gómez, Dennis Rodgers, Jonas Röllin, Magdalena Suerbaum and Ann-Christin Wagner.[3] As this list of participants already indicates, there is a vibrant academic community working on 'youth' in the MENA region and beyond. Currently, there are several ambitious comparative research projects underway or that have recently concluded, and to which some of the workshop participants and authors of this issue have been contributing, namely the upcoming study funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (Gertel and Hexel), the EU-funded projects Power2Youth (power2youth.eu), and SAHWA (sahwa.eu).

All of these studies contribute to deeper theoretical and empirical understanding. How do the concepts of 'youth' and 'generation' help to understand the larger social and political developments in North Africa and West Asia in recent years? To what extent does social age, a habitus of 'youthfulness', or generationality matter when we discuss power relations, social inequality, and actors' agency in the region? Does it suggest different policy interventions when we frame a certain phenomenon, such as political violence, class or gender relations, unemployment, social exclusion, or inequality, as a 'youth' issue? How do actors position themselves in intergenerational relations and refer to generational narratives, on which grounds, and to what purpose?

In this issue, we propose a relational and regionally contextualized understanding of youth. By 'relational' we dismiss notions of youth that are based on a de-contextualized and previously defined age-range; instead, we suggest looking at interpersonal intergenerational relationships, societal intergenerational relations, as well as class or gender relations, understood as structural, interdependent power relations. In addition to the local contextualization of these relations, research should embed their findings on youth in the macro-economic structures and the global relations that shape the existence of youth in a transforming social world.

How can we position ourselves as researchers in this wider agenda? What do we lose and what do we gain if we apply one notion of youth or the other? Our ANTI/THESIS section opens the debate and presents two complementary arguments in this regard. In turning to the specificities of youth claims, Asef Bayat discusses if there is a particular 'youth politics'. He revisits his earlier conceptualizations of youth against the background of the uprisings of 2011, highlighting the complexities of young people's lives and

their positionality in the social structure. Cultural, class, and gender divides determine if young people can act as 'youths'. Bayat thus follows an understanding of youth as the experience of 'youthfulness' that is related to 'behaving young' as a "a sort of Bourdieuian habitus—a series of mental and cognitive dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself that are associated with the sociological position of structural irresponsibility". Whereas Bayat focuses on youth's political agency, Jörg Gertel highlights the prolonged socio-economic dependency of young people on parents, kin, and social network – a dependency that is exacerbated by economic ruptures, political instability, and insecurity. His contribution presents a challenging argument. As a break with the rules and moralities of their parents becomes increasingly difficult, a "contained youth" emerges. Therefore, according to Gertel, "the renewal and regeneration of society is endangered; out-dated value-sets are artificially prolonged".

The contributions in our META section take two terms, the precariat and social entrepreneurship, as points of departure to rethink conceptual approaches to youth. Linda Herrera argues that "any meaningful conceptualization of, and engagement with, youth and generations in North Africa and West Asia should incorporate the notion of precariat and the condition of precariousness." Drawing on the work of Guy Standing and others, she describes precarity as a condition of alienation, anxiety, and insecurity connected to economic structures, policies, and norms, and confronts these with hegemonic discourses on youth participation, agency, peacemaking, education, and 'empowerment' in the region. From this perspective, the recent Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*) is a case in point and obscures actual power relations and a neoliberal agenda (see also Sukarieh in this volume). In a globalized economy, the image of young people as consumers, workers, and entrepreneurs supports the normalization of market-oriented neoliberal subjectivities. In a nutshell, Herrera concludes that "entrepreneurship is not the solution". Shana Cohen, in turn, engages with a particular type of entrepreneurship – social entrepreneurship – as a specific form of agency that connects individual activism under the conditions of global capitalism with maneuvering for local political influence. Referring to the Moroccan case, Cohen proposes a novel approach to youth and demonstrates how social and economic agency reconnect to new forms of citizenship beyond the nation-state. In doing so, Cohen goes beyond a narrow conceptualization of youth as either a passive or protesting age cohort. She conceptualizes youth as a socio-historically specific category at the crossroads between economic opportunity, political expression, and social status.

In the CLOSE-UP section, Helena Nassif draws a portrait of Ahmed Abdalla, the former leader of the Egyptian student movement, later community worker and founder of the Markaz al-Geel ('Generation center'). This youth center was one of the first to do social work with young people in a disenfranchised neighborhood in Cairo, and to campaign against child labor. The turning points of Abdalla's biography and of his thinking on the one hand represent the trajectory of an entire generation of intellectuals, while on the other hand they call attention to youth issues and generational dynamics back then, as well as in the events of 2011 and in the current political situation of authoritarian rule in Egypt.

The FOCUS section represents a collection of articles that explore different analytical options of dealing with youth in the MENA region. While some articles shed light on the power of prominent youth paradigms in international organizations and NGOs, others focus on both the

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constraints in realizing youthfulness and the possibilities of agency in difficult times. Mayssoun Sukarieh presents a critical analysis of the 2016 Arab Human Development Report to demonstrate that the youth paradigm is currently mobilized in a way that is connected to a "whole set of problematic analyses and responses that are prejudiced against and harmful" to youth. Youth became the kernel of a "new historical revisionism", obscuring the role of other social groups in the "Arab Spring" and its bloody aftermath. In a similar vein, Ann-Kristin Wagner picks up the issue of youth as a key security and development concern in analyzing NGO youth politics in the Jordanian town of Mafraq. These politics tend to turn "disenfranchised non-youthful youngsters into model refugees of a certain kind, i.e. a neoliberal refugee youth". Importantly, Wagner points to neoliberal refugee subjectivities, constantly keeping themselves busy in a condition of insecurity. Refugees are also the subject of Magdalena Suerbaum's article on Syrian young men in Cairo. From a largely socio-psychological perspective, Suerbaum portrays forced migrants as on a difficult path into masculine adulthood in a "situation of utter despair, instability and liminality". Bruno Lefort turns once again to stories of agency and describes how students of the

American University of Beirut, as members of a postwar generation – and in their relationships with the war generation – manage space and social relationships, taking a distance from sectarianisms, corruption, and gender inequality, often ascribing a new subjective meaning to these spaces. Jakob Krais then takes us back to colonial Algeria, and describes generational conflict and the importance of play communities and sports clubs in creating and fostering anti-colonial nationalism in French Algeria from the 1930s until independence in 1962.

Finally, the REVIEW section discusses two recently published works that do not directly engage with youth questions, but are surely enriching for anyone engaging in the questions raised above. Igor Johannsen introduces Armando Salvatore's book "The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility", the first volume of a forthcoming trilogy that critically discusses the paradigmatic limitations of Western sociology in its view of MENA societies, and proposes alternative concepts in order to self-reflexively enrich the discipline as a whole. Sultan al-Maani reviews "Knowledge Production in the Arab World: The impossible promise", by Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis, who shed light on the institutional and structural

conditions of academic research in North Africa and West Asia.

The multifaceted picture of youth presented by the authors of this issue thus denotes a historically grounded and contextualized approach to youth. In our view, there are three main aspects related to the political temporalities of youth.
Firstly, the dimension of space deserves further attention. Youth in one place might 'mean' something very different from youth in another, particularly if we deal with center-periphery relations, where very different regimes of time and lifetime might reign. In consequence, some youth in the MENA might in fact act as members of a transnational 'wired generation' (Herrera), while other data indicates that, subjectively, they hardly identify with 'the youth in other countries' (Schwarz, "Family and the Future"). If we understand 'youth' as a socially constructed and historically embedded category, it is obvious that diverse cultural, social, political, and economic contexts on local, national, regional, and transnational levels shape the position of youth. In this regard, the main challenge for future research is to build theory without surrendering the adequate representation of a myriad of contexts, subjects, and practices along this spatial dimension of the political temporality of youth.

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Secondly, youth is at the center of the political and moral economy regarding the temporalization of a society's present. This concerns how societies structure the biographical temporality and life courses of their subjects, how subjects negotiate these questions, and how subjectivities in different positionalities make different sense of time and lifetime. Institutional and socio-economic regimes of structuring subjects' lifetimes are key to understanding the reproduction of social inequality, social exclusion, and discrimination. For the MENA region, Diane Singerman's concept of waithood is a case in point, since it was the first to systematically call attention on the temporal dimension of the social exclusion of the young, problematizing a 'stalled transition to adulthood'. Its intent was to point to the social suffering provoked by this and to the underlying political problematic (i.e. the 'political economy of marriage'). However, in tendency the concept was appropriated by a de-politicizing and individualizing neoliberal discourse that catered to the stereotype of youth as passive victims who should be 'empowered' by becoming young entrepreneurs, when in fact much their struggles might be better described by precarity and the concomitant social accelerated, hectic temporalities (Schwarz, "'Generation in Waiting'

or 'Precarious Generation'?"). Some contributions in this issue point to negotiations in this regard and highlight less visible forms of agency and collective strategies.

Thirdly, in order to understand young people as subjects of history, we argue for a notion of youth that takes intergenerational relations and processes of intergenerational transmission as a point of departure in order to understand how individuals and collectives make sense of the past and attribute meaning to the future. In this sense, concepts such as generation as actuality (*Generationszusammenhang* in Mannheim's sense) or generational consciousness appear highly relevant when it comes to social and political change. As some of the contributions to this issue demonstrate, the intergenerational transmission of narratives and historical memories, their appropriation, actualization, or rejection by the younger generations, are key to processes of reinterpreting a collective past as well as to the projection of collective future projects. Likewise, the intergenerational transmission of material and symbolic resources is key to the reproduction of social inequalities and social exclusion, as well as to strategies of social mobility. To conclude, we argue that 'youth' tends to be used in public discourse to de-politicize social rela-

tions and transpose them to other discursive domains. But youth is an essentially political category, tied to questions of change and persistence of power structures in dynamic societies, and it should be discussed as such.

Notes

[1] Most prominently Huntington: "Finally, and most important , the demographic explosion in Muslim societies and the availability of large numbers of often unemployed males between the ages of fifteen and thirty is a natural source of instability and violence both within Islam and against non-Muslims. Whatever other causes may be at work, this factor alone would go a long way to explaining Muslim violence in the 1980s and 1990s. The aging of this pig-in-the-python generation by the third decade of the twenty-first century and economic development in Muslim societies, if and as that occurs, could consequently lead to a significant reduction in Muslim violence propensities and hence to a general decline in the frequency and intensity of fault line wars." (Huntington 265)

[2] Such pictures prove even more irritating when the perpetrators address the audience in some local Belgian, English or German accent. For the first time a terrorist organization had managed to actually recruit thousands of combatants from Western countries, most of them young men. As Benslama highlights for the French recruits, there are hardly any other commonalities between these persons, Muslims and converts alike, than their young age. Another unique feature of Daesh that is important when it comes to intergenerational relationships was the display of male child soldiers in propaganda, i.e. as executioners. The military deployment of underage combatants is widespread among other factions in the war in Syria, but usually it is a practice that the factions deny or aim to conceal. Daesh, in contrast, exploits it as a mediatized rite of passage; the fact that recruits are able to impose a masculinity project on children acts as proof of the patriarchal power they have attained (Schwarz ("Die Macht aus Jungen Männer zu machen"))

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