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POWER2YOUTH

Youth in the South East Mediterranean Region and the Need for a Political Economy Approach

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Maria Cristina Paciello and Daniela Pioppi¹

Abstract

The paper is the authors' own elaboration of the Power2Youth research results and research experience. The authors argue for the importance of placing both the problems of youth in the South East Mediterranean, as well as the construction of the youth category itself and the narratives associated with it, within the broader political economy processes of the region. The first part of the paper concentrates on the political economy behind "youth problems", whereas the second part critically analyses "youth" in relation to social change and mobilization.

Keywords: Youth | South Mediterranean | East Mediterranean | Political economy | Domestic policy | Employment | Family | Migration

INTRODUCTION

Power2Youth was conceived to answer an EU call for cooperative research projects on youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM).² The call came out in 2012 and was strongly permeated by the post Arab uprisings mainstream narratives, in which two somehow contrasting themes were prevalent. On one side, the exceptional wave of protests in several countries of the SEM, which was largely represented as a youth-led revolt, renewed the world's attention towards the conditions of youth in the region. In fact, most analyses of the uprisings identify the region's exceptionally high rates of youth unemployment, and in general, the unsustainable economic, political and social exclusion of youth (exacerbated by a dramatic demographic bulge) as the main causes of diffuse discontent and anger. On the other, young people were identified as a potential engine for long-needed change in the region. The rapid and unexpected mass mobilizations, anticipated by the development over the last decade of youth-based activist groups and by the spread of new communication technologies favoured by youth, have been described as the coming on the scene of a new generation united by the shared experience of the economic, political and social failures of post-independence regimes and by new ways to protest and act.

Power2Youth's object of study was therefore on one side the root causes of youth exclusion in the region and, on the other, the potential for youth-led change with a focus on six country case studies (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Turkey).

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² Theme SSH.2013.4.1-2, *Facing Transition in the South East Mediterranean Area: Empowering the Young Generation*.

As the project got underway, however, the researchers involved started to discuss and deconstruct a number of relevant concepts (youth, youth exclusion/inclusion, youth agency) and mainstream approaches in youth studies (Paciello and Pioppi 2014, Destremau and Catusse 2014, Catusse and Destremau 2016, Salih et al. 2016 and 2017). Our starting point was to consider youth as a differentiated and socially constructed category. In fact, the expressions, ideas and experiences of being young vary across cultural, class, gender, ethnicity and other divides. Young people from different social strata experience important social changes in different ways and have different needs and demands. Moreover, while “youth” is often implicitly used as shorthand for “young man”, the experience of being young is profoundly gender differentiated. No less important, the meaning and experience of being young is subject to social and historical processes. Individual or group experiences of what it means to be young are influenced by social constructions that are time- and space-specific. That is why any project on youth should start from acknowledging and critically analysing the growing importance of youth to contemporary global political discourse, how youth are defined and perceived as a result, and the consequences for youth themselves (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014).

There is no doubt that when studying processes of social change and continuity, in the SEM or elsewhere, “youth” constitutes a significant object of study. In fact, “the youth phase” or “youth transitions” can afford a privileged vantage point for observation, as youth are “at the crossroad of social reproduction” (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). So, for instance, it is more likely that we will see change/continuity in working conditions and work ethic, family forms, patterns of social inequalities *first* in the youth phase, as young men and women with different backgrounds make their transition into adult life, although these changes and continuities would certainly have an impact on the wider society (MacDonald 2011). At the same time, we also realized that it was equally or even more instructive in terms of social continuity and change to focus on the way the youth category itself was being reframed/reconstructed following changes in global capitalism, and more precisely to investigate the reasons behind what Sukarieh and Tannock (2014) call the “neo-liberal embrace of youth”.

What follows is our own elaboration of the Power2Youth research results and research experience, enriched by the many fruitful discussions with all the project partners and advisory board at the various project meetings. In general, we argue for the importance of placing both the problems of youth in the South East Mediterranean, as well as the construction of the youth category itself and the narratives associated with it, within the broader political economy processes of the region (Côté 2014, Sukarieh and Tannock 2014).

In the first part of the paper, we will concentrate on the political economy behind “youth problems”, whereas in the second part we will analyse “youth” in relation to social change and mobilization.

1. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF YOUTH PROBLEMS AND OF “YOUTH AS A PROBLEM”³

Prevailing analyses have so far framed youth problems in the SEM region in terms of exclusion from the labour market (generally presented purely as a matter of unemployment among the educated) and of consequent delayed marriage (as young people face obstacles to family formation posed by unemployment, high costs of marriage and lack of access to affordable housing). Recurrent mainstream explanations for such problems lie in emphasizing supply-side factors, such as the youth bulge (“the severity of demographic pressures” in Dhillon and Yousef 2009: 2), and lack of adequate skills to meet market requirements (the so-called education-employment nexus), the latter based on the idea that the education system fails to train youth in the skills required by the marketplace (for a more in depth analysis, see Paciello et al. 2016a and 2016b).

Our reflections attempt to go beyond prevailing analyses by setting our understanding of youth problems in the SEM region within the context of a broad analysis of the political economy dynamics of the last three decades. While our proposal is not exhaustive, we stress here the importance of looking at the following intertwined factors that have significantly shaped the political economy of the SEM region, with serious implications for the labour market, family structure and role, migration patterns and collective mobilization:

- the adoption of neoliberal reforms, which have dramatically reconfigured state-labour-capital relations;
- the exposure of the region to prolonged or alternate periods of war, which is particularly relevant for two Power2Youth case studies, namely the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and Lebanon;
- the progressive securitization of migration policies in both the EU and the Gulf (particularly since the early 2000s); and
- the persistence of authoritarian regimes, which have increasingly become more coercive and violent, particularly in the post-uprising period.

Since the 1990s, young people in the SEM region have been living in a political economy context that has significantly changed compared to that of previous young generations.

Post-independence regimes in the 1950s to 70s pursued a state model of development that ensured universal food subsidies and free access to education, thus making considerable efforts to improve education and living standards among large strata of population. Mass education systems set up in most Middle Eastern countries were certainly catalysts for real social mobility, at least at the earlier stages, while university graduates, both women and men, were offered jobs in the public sector thus allowing incumbent regimes to contain levels of unemployment. The welfare system, albeit with differences across countries, was also central to consolidation of authoritarian regimes. The social pact based on the state’s commitment to full employment for educated youth was conducive to mitigating social conflicts and youth political dissent: in exchange for regime loyalty, youth were provided with education, employment opportunities and social mobility.

³ Catusse and Destremau 2016.

With the end of the oil boom since the mid-1980s, however, SEM countries have progressively reoriented their policies in line with the global neoliberal orthodoxy, thus prioritizing, as a core model of development, the reduction of barriers to trade and financial flows, as well as encouragement of private sector-led growth through measures such as privatization and the deregulation of the labour market. Contrary to the prevailing view that it is a *selective* implementation of economic liberalization reforms to explain the region's job deficit and the persistence of authoritarian regimes, neoliberal reforms appear to have profoundly shaped the political economy dynamics in the SEM region: they have reconfigured state-labour-capital relations in ways that have transformed the landscape of work at both the national and the regional level, the role of family vis-à-vis the state and the market as well as the modes of state intervention and control (see Hanieh 2013, Bogaert 2013, Tsourapas 2013, Bergh 2012a and 2012b). Moreover, while pressure on youth to migrate has deepened under the drive of neoliberal reforms and of war, the securitization of migration policies in the EU (particularly since the 2000s) and the Gulf has significantly constrained their opportunities for mobility, enhancing insecurity and pathways to irregular migration (De Bel-Air 2016a). Furthermore, when looking at the political economy implications of the persistent exposure of SEM countries to war and conflict, it is important to acknowledge that, beyond its geopolitical effects - largely covered by the literature - for decades such exposure has been profoundly shaping national and regional labour market dynamics (through forced migration, for example), as well as affecting the family sphere/structure and reorganizing state power configurations in complex and dramatic ways.

So, as shown below, all these factors, albeit with context-specific dynamics, have adversely affected SEM societies, with youth being at the epicentre of the economic, political and social crisis generated thereby. It will be shown how, alongside exacerbating precariousness of life for the majority of young people, such a political economy context has reinforced fragmentation and inequalities among youth themselves across racial, gender and geographical lines.

1.1 Neoliberal Policies, Labour Precariousness and Fragmentation

With the adoption of structural adjustment policies, incumbent regimes have abandoned the policy of offering a job to university graduates, reducing the public-sector workforce through early retirement schemes and lowering its wages/social benefits, while increasingly delegating the responsibility for designing and providing jobs to private or semi-private actors. In an attempt to attract investment, incumbent regimes have made a number of reforms in favour of the private sector, by revising labour laws to deregulate the labour market (ensuring freedom of hiring and firing, restricting the right to strike and allowing the use of fixed-term contracts), pushing for privatization and establishing free trade zones (for example, for Morocco see Paciello et al. 2016a; for Tunisia see Paciello et al. 2016b).

Contrary to the prevailing narrative that interprets current labour market problems as mainly concerning educated youth, as if they were specific to an age group and purely circumscribed to a matter of skills, neoliberal reforms have significantly undermined the economic security of traditional working classes, namely post-independence workers employed in the public sector, with dramatic impact on their wages and the security of employment (see Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, Beinin 2009 and 2011). Since youth are entering the labour market in larger numbers, they can be considered at the epicentre of the employment crisis generated

by neoliberal reforms. As governments abandoned the policy of offering a job to university graduates, unemployment among qualified youth went up, particularly among those with a baccalaureate/university degree (Paciello et al. 2016a for Morocco; Paciello et al. 2016b for Tunisia; Sika 2016 for Egypt). Labour market deregulation, the spread of free trade zones and privatization have been particularly damaging to youth, increasing precariousness and informality. In Tunisia, for example, since the regime adopted amendments to the Labour Code in 1994 and 1996, fixed-term contracts (*contrats à durée déterminée/CDD*) and part-time work have become the most common types of contract among young people (Hibou et al. 2011, Meddeb 2010).

The integration of most SEM countries into the international market, rather than creating good quality job opportunities for educated young people, has been based on low-cost outsourcing of unskilled activities, often tapping into a reserve pool of young female labour. In Morocco, for example, the spread of free zones such as the Tangiers Zone, the expansion of agro-export production (e.g., in the coastal area of Gharb and in tomato-producing regions such as the Souss-Massa region) and the off-shore regime in the service sector (particularly call centres), all based on cheap labour, both unskilled and skilled, have also been a source of exploitation of young labour, particularly among unmarried women (Paciello et al. 2016a). Since 1984, the increase in labour-intensive, export-oriented activities in the clothing/textile industry has been made possible thanks to the employment of a large number of women - mostly youth and teenagers from poor and vulnerable households - in very bad working conditions and for low wages (Joeques 1986, Cairoli 1999, Bourqia 2002, Labari 2006). Young unmarried women with no professional experience who migrated from rural areas or lived in the *bidonville* close to the factory were preferred by foreign companies because they were always available to work, including during the night (as they were not yet absorbed by reproductive and family work), and were more easily submitted to male authority and available to accept low salaries. On the opposite side, export-oriented firms generally refused to employ graduated young women as they were considered politically dangerous, bringing trade union ideas and threatening social peace in the firm (Labari 2006). After the mid-1990s, however, when the clothing industry entered a deep economic crisis owing to international competition leading to job loss, employment opportunities decreased and working conditions for young women further worsened.

Alongside spreading precariousness, the selective and uneven implementation of neoliberal reforms across space and time has heightened labour fragmentation along the lines of race/ethnicity/age and gender, and has reinforced and reproduced existing inequalities among workers and youth themselves. Thus, while living a precarious existence, youth are today increasingly divided and differentiated along numerous cleavages: geographical, racial and gender. For example, in the context of economic restructuring, inequalities between different regions, and between coastal cities and interior cities have increased as governments have generally given priority to the city and urban areas for the promotion of capital accumulation (for Morocco, see Zemni and Bogaert 2011, Bogaert 2013; for Tunisia, Ayebe 2011; for Jordan, Schwedler 2012).

The case of Tunisia serves to illustrate how neoliberal reforms have generated a variety of employment relations that have produced very different experiences of "being young" and trajectories to adulthood, exacerbating inequalities and fragmentation among youth. Ben

Ali's policies concentrated on the capital Tunis, the Sahel, some big coastal cities, such as Bizerte and Sfax, where free trade areas were established, and tourist zones, including Djerba and Hammamet-Nabel (Ayeub 2011, Belhedi 2011). Here, the tourist industry, mainly dependent on foreign tour operators, and the off-shore regime in the service sector (particularly the call centres) became major sources of low-paid and precarious jobs for unemployed youth (Meddeb 2010, Hibou et al. 2011), while young uneducated female workers from the lower classes came to constitute the largest proportion of the workforce in export-oriented industries such as clothing, at the expense of wage pressure and security of working conditions.

In parallel to what was going on in coastal and urban areas, in the interior regions the restructuring of large public companies - such as the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC) where, since 1985, 10,000 jobs were suppressed, with dramatic effects on job creation - caused increasing levels of youth unemployment and compelled many young people to emigrate (Allal 2010). In addition, again in the interior regions, the growing liberalization of agricultural pricing and the commodification and dispossession of land, together with a focus on export-oriented agricultural growth led to marginalization of local food-producing agriculture to the advantage of big farmers/agribusiness, thus largely contributing to the rural exodus of many young men toward urban areas (Ayeub 2011, Hibou et al. 2011). This often offered low-cost manpower on which city firms could draw, further increasing labour insecurity conditions in such areas (for Tunisia see Ayeub 2011, Hibou et al. 2011, Hanieh 2013, Beinun 2009, Bush 2011). While men migrated from rural areas, women, including young women, increasingly took the place of young men working on family farms and in agribusiness companies at very low wages.

The plethora of job creation programmes established in the 1990s-2010s in many SEM countries have completely failed to cope with youth unemployment problems. They have in fact been instrumental to the neoliberal model: they delegate the responsibility to provide jobs to youth themselves through self-employment; and they have further deepened precariousness and labour fragmentation, by offering very low wages and temporary contracts and by specifically targeting a particular subset of youth, the educated unemployed. During the 1990s and 2000s public authorities in the SEM region implemented job creation programmes mainly targeted to the graduated unemployed, with measures essentially aimed at improving the employability of young people, such as training, internship programmes in private companies (provided with public incentives in the form of reduced taxation) and incentivising youth enterprise creation through micro-credit schemes and other methods. These responses failed to provide youth with long-term and good quality jobs as the companies were not obliged to recruit the trainees at the end of the programme and were interested in taking state subventions rather than inserting young people into long-term contracts. Similarly, income-generating programmes provided youth with unsustainable and low-profit activities (Paciello et al. 2016a and 2016b). The limitation of such measures is even more evident in the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), where job creation programmes aiming at improving the marketability of young individuals make no sense if we take into account the real structural constraints behind employment problems such as the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the high dependency of the Palestinian economy on the Israeli economy (Musleh 2016).

1.2 The Crisis of Social Welfare and the Changing Role of Family

In the post-independence SEM countries, states developed an extensive and generous social welfare system, albeit with cross-national differences. In addition to ameliorating the welfare of the population, the state development model also had the function of making society less stratified and more mobile through ensuring free education, public-sector job guarantees and strong support to the family in the forms of subsidies. Children of the urban working class and lower-middle classes could thereby gain access to university education and then to a job in the public sector. Education was thus an important factor in mobility. However, in the context of neoliberal reforms, with the gradual dismantling of the welfare state system, the reform of the educational system has gone in the direction of favouring privatization of universities, with the effect of reinforcing key structural inequalities, for example by increasing the gap between elite education in *grandes écoles* and mass education in public universities, as in the case of Morocco, and excluding poor, rural and lower class youth, as in Egypt (Paciello et al. 2016a, Kohstall 2012).

So, by threatening state support toward social services through cuts to subsidies, health and family allowances, neoliberal reforms have put increased pressures on family (for Tunisia see Ben Romdhane 2006, Destremau 2010: 162). This is happening at a time when the family has gained a new centrality, acting as a safety net to cope with the labour market problems experienced by youth. As many young people delay marriage owing to lack of resources, difficult access to affordable house and rising cost of living, they have to reside with their family longer (De Bel Air 2016b). In the OPT, support from family has become even more important owing to the general lack of human security associated with the Israeli occupation, the limited functioning capacity of the Palestinian Authority and the division between Hamas and Fatah (Birzeit University 2016: 6).

However, while it is true that over the last few decades, family solidarity has become central to fill the gaps in the public social support system, nonetheless, given the dramatic increases in poverty, declining purchasing power and overall worsening labour market conditions in the context of neoliberal restructuring and war, many families in SEM countries are less and less able to ensure protection to their offspring. Delayed marriage is therefore only one of the possible options open to youth in the SEM region today. Indeed, as De Bel-Air (2016b) shows, the reality is more complex as we can observe

the concomitance of several models of family formation, from late marriage, high rates of celibacy and low fertility levels, to increasingly earlier marriages and higher fertility levels. These models coexist in each country, as suggested by the data and as confirmed in press accounts and field experience. (De Bel-Air 2016b: 16-17)

So, alongside delays in marriage, the 2000s started showing increases in teenage marriage and in early fertility (De Bel-Air 2016b: 11).

Such differences are likely to reflect how differently, according to class, geographical areas and ethnic groups, families cope with the current socio-economic crisis. In Morocco, for example, single mothers are mostly very young and come from the lower classes, generally with no means to abort (Kreutzberger 2009). In Tunisia, Salafist groups are promoting the spread of

urfi marriages as a remedy to high wedding costs and premarital sex, in poor neighbourhoods of Tunis. The observed coexistence of several models of family formation therefore appears to fragment rather than unify the experience of being young in the SEM region.

In addition, in the context of state retreat, private and kin-based networks appear to have acquired particular relevance for distribution of resources such as jobs, but these opportunities, as the case studies in the Power2Youth project show, are mainly accessible to men (Salih et al. 2017).

The social welfare crisis thus has complex and contrasting implications for the patriarchal family model depending on class, gender, area of residence and country: on one hand, as the economic situation worsens and young people are faced with difficulties in transitioning to adult life, family is acquiring more centrality as a social safety net; on the other hand, neoliberal reforms, conflicts and migration are threatening the reproduction of family and the existing moral/social order (De Bel-Air 2016b). The spread of *urfi* marriage, the increase in abortion rates and the growing numbers of unmarried single women are all signal of youth engagement in premarital sex that deviates from the heteronormative model of family.

1.3 Illegal and Forced Migration

Over the last two decades, migration processes mainly driven by neoliberal reforms and war have further exacerbated labour insecurity and fragmentation among youth. Immigration policies in the EU and Gulf countries (particularly since 2000) have been increasingly tailored toward containing and controlling migration inflows, making migration for young Arabs and Turks increasingly difficult (De Bel-Air 2016a). To shorten the duration of young migrants' stays in the EU, temporary and seasonal labour migration programmes for low-skilled workers have expanded, thus furthering employment precariousness and insecurity among youth (as shown in the Mobility Partnership and in the legal provisions regulating movement between EU member states and the SEM countries) (De Bel-Air 2016a).

Moreover, by excluding certain nationalities and prioritizing specific groups of migrants (highly skilled workers, researchers and business professionals), securitization of migration policies in the EU and the Gulf also appears to have reinforced labour market fragmentation among youth within countries and across the region.

As channels for regular migration narrow, the only option for many youth is to emigrate illegally and to accept very low paid and exploitive working conditions in a labour market already highly segmented across gender and ethnic lines. In addition, control of unskilled manpower through the temporariness of stay and the strong constraints imposed on legal mobility not only reflect security concerns but are functional to neoliberal development as they foster a highly flexible labour force kept in irregular and precarious positions (De Bel-Air 2016a, Harb 2016a).

Within the SEM region itself, the arrival of foreign workers and war refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Libya and the Gulf countries over time has fragmented the landscape of work, exacerbating inequalities among youth in these countries. In Lebanon, labour markets are highly segmented across ethnic lines - for example, between Lebanese and non-Lebanese

youth, but also between Palestinian, African and Syrian youth. Here, Palestinians, even after several generations, are officially interdicted from a number of occupations and excluded from social rights, while Asian and African workers are forced to pay high fees to obtain a work contract before entering the country and are subject to the *kafala* system. Syrian workers are instead allowed to work without a work permit (Longuenesse and Tabar 2014). More in general, war appears to significantly worsen the quality of employment in neighbouring countries (e.g., Lebanon and Jordan) that host large numbers of refugees (e.g., Palestinians, Iraqis and Syrians) (Longuenesse and Tabar 2014, Turner 2015). While the complex labour implications for host countries of such massive flows of refugees are little known, the recent arrival of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has significantly increased competition between low qualified Lebanese and non-Lebanese, causing a further decline in already low wages and poor working conditions (Longuenesse and Tabar 2014).

1.4 Governing and Managing “the Problem of Youth”

As several studies point out, while the neoliberal state has retreated from certain functions, it has not decreased control over society, rather it has reorganized modalities of control (see, for example, Hibou 2006, Bergh 2012a, Zemni and Bogaert 2011). As Adam Hanieh (2011) argues, authoritarianism in the region should not be seen in antagonism with free market reforms but as functioning to deepen capitalist development in the Arab region. Authoritarian regimes in the SEM region have been using a variety of strategies to control and supervise youth as well as to contain their dissent, politicization, frustration and deviation from normative behaviour.

In Morocco, the opening of “civil society” in the 2000s was a tool to penetrate society and control youth politicization. As a part of the new rhetoric of “good governance” and participative development and pluralism, the king took a number of measures to favour the participation of youth in civic and political life in the early 2000s (Bono 2010 and 2013). Given the high electoral abstention of the young population the voting age was lowered to 18, while the 2002 amendments to the law of associations apparently allowed more space for the creation of youth organizations. However, regulation and supervision of youth associations remained under the Minister of Interior, while those with a political agenda were subject to heavy sanction or excluded from the distribution of resources (Berriane 2010, Desrues 2012). Similarly, in an attempt to contain the influence of Islamist movements among youth - particularly after the Casablanca attacks - public authorities tolerated and encouraged other forms of youth dissent, such as those voiced by hip-hop culture rappers and Sufism, which was conceived as a moderate alternative to militant Islam (Bekkaoui and Larémont 2011, Maddy-Weitzman and Zisenwine 2013).

In Tunisia, under Ben Ali, the strict control of the regime over access to job creation programmes and legal migration channels was instrumental to manage youth discontent (Cassarino 2014, Hibou 2006). For example, negating the delivery or renewal of passports to Tunisians who were not members of the ruling party, or were suspected of opposing the regime, was aimed at discouraging social protests, particularly among unemployed youth in poor marginalized regions (Cassarino 2014: 105). Given the discretionary power of the judiciary and the ambivalence of the 2004 migration law, those left behind could also be easily accused of “participating in” or “preparing for” illegal border crossings if they were not acquiescent to the regime (Cassarino 2014: 106).

Military enrolment in the national army and police forces has also been used by incumbent regimes to pacify anger and extend control over youth. For example, in Lebanon, where it is associated with political parties and militias across sectarian groups, this opportunity gives young men access to a secure job option and large clientelistic networks (Harb 2016a). In the OPT, the main tool in the hands of the PA to deal with the unemployment problem has been to draw youth into the Palestinian Security Services, a body that is currently thought to number close to 65,000 (Birzeit University 2016: 5).

Incumbent regimes have tried to silence voices of discontent and opposition by adopting a depoliticizing approach to youth and their problems. For instance, the reduction of labour market problems to a matter of individual responsibility and skills, as if it were a “problem *with* young people” (MacDonald 2011), serves to hide structural explanations that might threaten incumbent regimes, to avoid any public discussion of the negative effects generated by decades of structural adjustment programmes, and to conceal issues of class inequalities and social conflict. In Lebanon, Mona Harb notes that youth “are marginalized in a peripheral ministry - the Ministry of Youth and Sports - where youth issues are reduced to social and cultural concerns, and divorced from politics, under the fake narrative of separating politics and conflict from society” (Harb 2016b: 4).

Donor interventions in the SEM region have also promoted youth depoliticization and demobilization, thus becoming a key tool for controlling youth groups and maintaining the status quo (Salih et al. 2017, Harb 2016b, Musleh 2016). In Lebanon, NGOs are

strategic partners of both the sectarian/political elite and international organizations determined to involve the third sector in a governance model based on neoliberal structural adjustment and state retrenchment. Dependence on foreign aid consequently has skewed civil society’s discourse in favor of reform and accommodation within the existing sectarian system. (Salloukh et al. 2015: 53, quoted in Harb 2016b: 17)

In the OPT, during the post-Oslo period, with the rise in new donor-dependent youth organizations and the introduction of new concepts such as “empowerment”, there has been a move from a collective self-help approach to a development/liberal approach that is mostly based on enhancing individual capacity, leadership and entrepreneurship (Musleh 2016: 7). This kind of approach has therefore reinforced atomization and individualization, discouraging collective responses to Israeli occupation. Similarly, donor interventions to deal with youth employment problems are mainly related to developing soft skills and the creation of SMEs, which have contributed to keeping the status quo as they do not deal with the Israeli occupation, the major structural barrier to youth participation in the labour market (Musleh 2016: 17).

Public action in the SEM region has exacerbated “segmentation, intersections and fragmentations” among youth, generating, reproducing and legitimizing inequalities between different groups (Catusse and Destremau 2016: 11). In Lebanon, “youth means Lebanese youth, and is exclusive of the large numbers of other non-Lebanese youth in Lebanese cities and towns” such as Palestinian youth (Harb 2016b: 3). Incumbent regimes have pursued tactics of “divide et impera” toward opposition groups that have fed divisions and conflicts among

them, thus weakening their capacity to mobilize massively (for Egypt, see Abdelrahman 2012; for Morocco, Bogaert and Emperador 2011). The politics of fragmentation - territorial, political, economic and legal - that has reached its apex in the OPT since the 2000s has significantly divided Palestinians, weakening social solidarity and national unity, thus preventing broad political mobilization. In Lebanon, the particular political economy configuration revolving on sectarianism reinforces fragmentations among youth, with all major sectarian political groups having their own institutions serving youth and "youth wings", which socialize youth through sports, leisure and cultural events (Harb 2016b).

Among other strategies to control internal dissent, regimes have increasingly resorted to criminalizing youth, accusing them of being immoral and threatening security (for Lebanon see Harb 2016b, Salih et al. 2017, Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). In Egypt, for example, during and in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, women protesters have been not only sexually assaulted both in public and in jail, but also constructed as "prostitutes" (Salih et al. 2017: 15). In Morocco, due to ambiguities that exist in the legal system, journalists, members of the Justice and Charity Movement and activists from the February 20 movement have been accused of sexual abuse, adultery or molestation (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016: 16).

Alongside these strategies of defamation/delegitimation and diffuse surveillance, authoritarian regimes in all six country studies have increasingly made use of violent strategies to repress dissent, from sexual harassment and arbitrary detention to crackdown on opposition groups (for OPT, Birzeit University 2016, Musleh 2016; for Lebanon, Harb 2016b; for Egypt, Abdelrahman 2015).

Finally, states everywhere in the region have intervened to discipline youth in the sphere of sexuality in an attempt to fight behaviours of deviation from the existing moral order (e.g., youth celibacy and divorce), seen as a threat to social stability. So, since the 2000s, public policy discourse in all six SEM countries has encouraged early marriage and polygamy, as well as the remarriage (with young women) of men who are divorced or whose wives have died, in an attempt to reinstate the heteronormative model of family (De Bel-Air 2016b).

As shown in the next section, the political economy context highlighted here, characterized by overwhelming state violence and repression, increased inequalities and social fragmentation, has been shaping dynamics of collective mobilization and youth activism in particular.

2. YOUTH AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

In contrast with the bleak picture described above, when thinking about the issue of youth and social change in relation to the South East Mediterranean region, a number of positive associations do also come to mind. These are related to the narrative of "youth transformative power", "youth revolutionary potential" and generally to the idea of an identifiable "youth agency" or youth as actors of social and political change that reached its peak following the 2010-2011 wave of popular uprisings in the Arab region that were largely read as being "youth-led revolts". This narrative is well represented in the post-Arab Spring literature, but it is also and foremost spread by global actors such as the US, the EU and international organizations.

As well illustrated by Sukarieh and Tannock (2014), there are a number of problems related to that narrative. The first is that the use of an undifferentiated category of youth in relation to social and political mobilization could have a strong depoliticizing effect as it hides other more relevant and certainly more challenging social divides, first and foremost class (but also gender, ethnicity, etc.) that are becoming more salient in increasingly unequal and fragmented societies. Also, the emphasis on youth has the effect of downplaying the role of adults and of adult led-organizations and of interpreting rising social conflicts as *intergenerational* at the expense of more challenging issues of political economy. If it might be true that, generally speaking, the current generation is facing a more difficult transition into adult life owing to growing unemployment, informality and insecurity compared to the previous generation, however, we should not neglect the fact that the crisis these societies are facing is much larger and that it involves all of society; nor should we neglect the role of adults in the recent wave of mobilization.

The labour movements or labour-related protests can serve as an example of the distortion effect caused by overemphasis on the youth category when dealing with mobilization. As analysed in the first part of this paper, the reconfiguration of capital-labour-state relations in the last decades had a tremendous impact on the landscape of work in the SEM region, and worsening labour conditions and unemployment became a central issue of political mobilization at least as far back as the 2000s, as testified by the re-emergence of labour movements in many countries of the region (Beinin 2016, Chalcraft 2016, Abdelrahman 2015).

The post-2011 overemphasis on “youth mobilization” had a first effect of moving the spotlight away from labour movements in favour of other, mostly urban, middle-class forms of mobilization that are normally labelled as youth-driven. More importantly, however, the prism of the youth category dangerously portrays labour conflicts as intergenerational. Youth are not normally associated with organized labour movements, as the youth category is mostly linked to the “unemployed” or the “graduate unemployed” while, following the same narrative, the previous generation instead strenuously tries to protect its “privileges” with defensive and anachronistic forms of protests, draining scarce resources away from the new and more dynamic generation. This narrative hides issues of political economy of labour that concern the entire society, as worsening labour conditions and high unemployment are the two sides of the same coin. Moreover, it further divides the already fragmented working classes along generational lines, hindering the potentiality for organized labour to build alliances with the less organized unemployed and the precariat.

A second problem that is also related to the a-critical appraisal of youth’s role as well as more widely to current approaches to the study of mobilization, is the liberal overemphasis on individual agency or “atomized masses of individuals” over structure and over the importance of organized struggle and mass organizations. This leads to a general underestimation of the structural constraints highlighted in the first section of this paper and of the strength of power structures. The widespread interpretation of the 2010-2012 wave of protests in the Arab world as youth-led revolts goes, in fact, hand in hand with the idea that progressive change could be brought about by the simple presence of masses of (young) individuals in the streets, thus conveying an interpretation of authoritarianism as a residual, exceptional phenomenon ready to tumble like a house of cards, instead of highlighting its resilient and functional character as a necessary corollary of a very unequal political economy system

both locally and globally. This idea of easy, almost joyful, youthful change conveyed also by the very term “Arab Spring” is the latest edition of the democratization theories applied to this region after the end of the Cold War and of their procedural and technical (rather than substantial) approach (Bicchi et al. 2004, Guazzone and Pioppi 2009). This is also the parallel political version of the economic recipe of youth self-entrepreneurship as a solution to unemployment and worsening labour conditions.

Post-2011 development discourse ascribes to young *individuals* an enormous potential (and related responsibility) as actors of (progressive) change through individual processes of empowerment (World Bank 2014, UNDP 2016). But also the most recent academic literature on youth and social change concentrates on individuals. Bayat and Herrera, for instance, highlight how young people challenge, react or adapt to their perceived marginalization in a number of ways (Bayat and Herrera 2010: 15), exerting their *individual agency* by for instance appropriating public spaces and claiming their rights to it. The same goes for most of the Power2Youth research on youth and political mobilization which tended to concentrate more on the micro level, on individual paths of young activists, rather than on the dynamics of collective agency.⁴ However, structural inequalities cannot (and should not) be addressed by individuals alone. Individuals can and do act against inequalities, but their impact is limited and they might pay a high price for their actions. That is why collective solidarity is fundamental and mass organizations have an important role to play in creating the conditions for change and reducing the costs for individual action (adapted from Kabeer 1999: 457; see also Paciello and Pioppi 2014: 9-12).

The general neglect of structural constraints and power relations is also influencing research on social change and political mobilization that generally tends to concentrate more on certain selected aspects of reality. In this respect, it is interesting to note that while there has been a large enthusiastic debate following the Arab uprisings on the social media as facilitating tools for mobilization against the regimes (and on youth as their main utilizers), too little has been investigated about the new technology revolution in terms of its atomizing effects, its power dynamics, or the regimes' enhanced capacity of surveillance and more efficient and sophisticated use of state coercion. Thanks to the new technologies we might live in an epoch in which there is a historically unprecedented capacity for capillary control of which we might not yet have seen the full-scale effects.

As stated above, in the last decades authoritarian regimes in the SEM (with the tacit approval of their global partners), albeit with differences among countries, have tightened control over opposition movements and society as a whole, through a variety of strategies that have significantly shaped the dynamics of collective mobilization (forms, types, capacity to mobilize and to effect change).

Paradoxically, the recent focus on *youth* in the global political discourse also functions to justify the need for such a control, with a paternalist approach. A few years after the enthusiasm of the Arab Spring, we witness the emergence, parallel to the “positive” narrative on youth “transformative power”, of a growing concern and narrative by governments, global powers

⁴ See Youth Collective Agency (Meso-Level), Power2Youth Working Papers: [http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Youth Collective Agency \(Meso-Level\)](http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Youth%20Collective%20Agency%20(Meso-Level)).

and international agencies about the need to control youth restlessness and potential deviance, i.e., the need to control the “bad youth”, those “unsupervised” (unemployed, unmarried) young men, potential illegal immigrants, from marginal social strata (living in slums, etc.) who are potential recruits for radical groups, organized crime, terrorist organizations, etc. Under the guise of “protecting” youth, such an approach justifies the need for increased social control and repression on certain (redundant) classes (mostly unemployed or precarious urban under-proletariat), but also and more importantly it portrays social conflict as transitional, a problem related to a specific life-stage (Sukarieh 2012, Bersaglio et al. 2015).

Despite repression, however, a broad view of the region in the last two to three decades reveals a clear overall increase of various forms of protest in which young men and women are participating in various ways. In fact, the burning social question, the breaking of the post-independence social pact and the ensuing crisis of regimes’ legitimacy have generally provoked - national differences aside - rising popular resentment and have solicited different social constituencies to protest and to act.

At the same time, increased social fragmentation and repression pose enormous obstacles to the emergence of political collective identities and organizations capable of sustaining the long-term struggle with entrenched local, regional and international power structures.

Besides the general globally reduced bargaining capacity of labour vis-à-vis capital, recent protest waves have been characterized by the prevalence of localized, issue-based or particularistic forms of protest, revealing the difficulties of building larger forms of cooperation and solidarity and sustainable alternative agendas.

Of course, as many scholars have demonstrated, at least in some countries, local and even particularistic forms of protests during the 2000s laid the groundwork for the building of larger protest movements in 2010-2011 (Abdelrahman 2015). However, broader coalitions quickly collapsed after the revolutionary momentum, demonstrating how the political economy context and the increased social fragmentation made it more difficult to attribute responsibility to concrete targets beyond the common enemies identified with the heads of state.

According to Beinin (2016), and unlike Egypt, in Tunisia in the 2000s the cooperation between unemployed degree-holders demanding jobs and middle-level leaders of the *Union générale tunisienne du travail* (UGTT) in many struggles over wages, working conditions, marginalization of the interior regions, and lack of employment opportunities reinforced the effectiveness of labour action against the Ben Ali regime. However, those coalitions also proved to be short-lived and crumbled in the post-revolutionary political transitional phase.

Recent forms of mobilization in the region (and beyond) have been described as non-institutional, popular, diffused and atomized, taking place both in the street and in cyber space, through social media and blogs (Khalil 2014: 131-32, quoted in Salih et al. 2017: 7). Much has been written in Power2Youth research reports and elsewhere on the youth, urban and middle-class movements that attracted the attention of scholars more than other forms of mobilization. Those are the so-called new social movements, better described as loose networks of urban, middle-class, techno-savvy individuals in perpetual self-redefinition, which

stress the multiplicity of identities, positive diversities and cosmopolitanism. Power2Youth research reports (and meso-level database) focus almost exclusively on these forms of “youth” mobilization, highlighting the role they played in different national contexts in bringing to the fore issues of political rights and personal civic liberties.⁵

Their horizontal and loose character coupled with their spontaneity constituted a novelty and a value added in confronting the coercive apparatus of regimes, making it almost impossible to anticipate their mobilization potential, to arrest their leaders or to freeze their assets - as they had none. At the same time, the new social movements’ horizontality and atomized character is also clearly undermining their chance to engage in long-term battles, to build larger alliances and to form a solid political alternative to the regimes (Chalcraft 2012).

Recent forms of political mobilization associated with youth, or youth self-labelled, are also characterized by a critique of old-style politics. Power2Youth research reports emphasize general youth disaffection with traditional political institutions and NGOs.⁶ The NGOization of the political field and party pluralism since the 90s without a real enlargement of political participation contributed to void these institutions of political significance and to further fragment/segment the political scene. Recent waves of protests are thus mostly located outside formal institutions (Sika 2017: 12).

The critique and general disaffection towards traditional political institutions is to be found among very different social constituencies, as also in the Islamist/Salafi milieu, generally more attractive for disenfranchised urban youth, we can find a harsh critical stance coming from the new generation with respect to traditional, mainstream Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia or the Justice and Development Party in Morocco (Cavatorta and Merone 2016).

The juvenile characterization of movements/organizations with a critical stance towards old ways of doing politics is reinforced by the self-definition and self-perception of the movements themselves, which often consciously or unconsciously utilize the “innovation” denotation of the youth category even if, strictly speaking, their participants might not (or no longer) fall completely into the age cohort normally defined as youth.

The potentiality of these new atomized forms of mobilization, and of the general critique to institutional politics, is an open question. Whether they actually constitute at least in certain instances a laboratory for future mobilization and/or “radical experiments of direct participation” (Della Porta 2015) that could be built on and enlarged to a broader constituency is still to be verified. What is sure, however, is that they are the expression of a political crisis and of the difficulties of building more structured/collective political organizations in fragmented societies.

⁵ See Youth Collective Agency (Meso-Level), Power2Youth Working Papers: [http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Youth Collective Agency \(Meso-Level\)](http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Youth%20Collective%20Agency%20(Meso-Level)).

⁶ See Youth Individual Agency (Micro-Level), Power2Youth Working Papers and Youth Survey: [http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Youth Collective Agency \(Micro-Level\)](http://www.power2youth.eu/publications/publications-for/Youth%20Collective%20Agency%20(Micro-Level)).

CONCLUSION

Any analysis of youth problems and of the forms and dynamics of youth political mobilization needs to be placed in the broader evolving political economy context of the last decades that has been profoundly shaped by the implementation of neoliberal reforms, the exposure to war, the growing securitization of migration policies and the persistence of authoritarian regimes. This is in contrast to the narrow prevailing approaches that have so far stressed the “challenges of the youth bulge” or, paradoxically, “the enormous potential of youth collective mobilization”, while underestimating – and sometimes hiding – existing power relations and political economy processes. It cannot be ignored that the profound reconfiguration of state-labour-capital relations in the last three decades has been having important implications for the population at large and youth in particular, significantly deepening processes of socio-spatial fragmentation. This means that, in the context of neoliberal restructuring, war and migration, the experience of being young, in addition to being characterized by insecurity and precariousness, has become even more differentiated across gender, geographical and ethnic lines within and between countries.

In the post-independence state-centred phase, different devices were created to co-opt or control the youth through public sector employment programmes, but also through different social and political institutions such as public education schemes and state-controlled student unions, juvenile sections of regime parties, youth centres, scout organizations and the like. All these institutions were fundamental in forging the national culture and consciousness of the new generation, in defining predetermined paths to adulthood and also, more broadly, in rallying different social strata behind regimes’ policies in an inclusive and corporatist fashion.

The last decades are instead characterized by a reduced state co-optation capacity compensated by an increase in resorting to pure coercion. As illustrated in this paper, not only do general worsening labour conditions, high unemployment and diffuse precariousness have an impact in undermining the predetermined path to adulthood, especially for medium to lower social strata, but also the privatization of education and dismantling of state political and social institutions are enhancing social fragmentation and provoking a *de facto* privatization and segmentation of the mechanisms of social reproduction as more and more private and often ethno-communal, formal or informal institutions are substituting for the state in providing social aggregation, identities and allegiances.

In this context “youth” mobilization should be situated in a much larger geography of protest (and conservative reactions to it) in which “youth” appears to be more of a “constructed” category, than a political actor in itself.

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POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.

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