

## Talking 'bout my Generation: Concepts of Youth and Generation in Research on the MENA region, five years after 2011

International Workshop

Wednesday, November 30 – Friday, December 02, 2016

Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS), Philipps-Universität, Marburg, Germany

The uprisings of 2011 challenged many predominant concepts of 'youth' in the MENA region. Before, youth and young adults were often merely discussed as a 'youth bulge' – a demographic, quantitative problem, even a potential terrorist threat. In other stereotypical representations, youths and young adults hardly appeared as political subjects, but rather as passive victims of a failed generational contract signed between former generations and authoritarian regimes. Movements that contradicted both stereotypes, like the Moroccan and Tunisian unemployed graduates, who had been protesting 'apolitically', negotiating their employment with authoritarian regimes for over a decade, hardly received any attention.

The 2011 uprisings in the MENA region were soon denominated 'Arab spring' – a term that was coined in the West and went well with generational semantics. A new idol emerged: the 'young Arab protester' was acclaimed 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 economic crisis. Here, new social movements like the Spanish indignados were highly inspired by the 'Arab Spring'.

Consequently, social research on 'youth' in the MENA region boomed. But many of the studies and policy papers hardly involved critical theoretical reflections of the term 'youth' or 'generation'. Instead, they simply researched youths and young adults as members of an age cohort, defined in quantitative terms. Other interventions identified a neoliberal discourse on youth: they criticized the tendency to imagine youth as a 'dynamic force' associated with free markets, and to employ generational narratives for a specific political agenda. Meanwhile, most international debates on 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'. Conceptual discussions here often seem oddly disconnected from the social reality in the MENA region - a region that empirically has been inseparable from 'the West' throughout long histories of colonialism and migration, and in which young people constitute, after all, the majority of the population.

Now, five years into the 'Arab Spring', certain parts of the region – like Syria, Yemen or Libya – are facing civil wars that transgress national borders, producing millions of refugees. In other countries like Egypt, authoritarian regimes have been reinstated. Moreover, for the first time a Jihadist organization – Daesh (ISIS) – has managed to recruit thousands of young men, but also young women, not only from the MENA region, but also from Europe and other Western countries.

Against this background, we suggest a conceptual reflection: How do the concepts of 'youth' and 'generation' help to understand these recent developments? To what extent does social age, a habitus of 'youthfulness' (Bayat 2011), or generationality (King 2010) 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, 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? Last but not least: What can we learn from discourses on youth and generation in re-configuration processes in other regions, such as Europe or Latin America?

This international workshop aims at a critical reflection of the concepts of youth and generation employed in former and current research. By bringing together renowned scholars and academics from different research fields, we aim to foster a debate between area studies (of the MENA and other regions), sociology of youth, education, critical youth studies, and social movement theory.

The predominant aim of this workshop is to provide a space for an intensive conceptual discussion in order to inspire new questions for further research.

We invite contributions by experienced scholars, early career researchers and PhD candidates. Selected participants will be notified by the end of June 2016. Participants can present their work either as a paper (approximately 5.000 to 8.000 words, and to be submitted by November 1st 2016 for distribution among the workshop participants), or as a poster (followed by a roundtable discussion). When submitting your abstract, please state in which format you would prefer to present. Plans for a joint publication will be discussed among the organizers and the paper presenters of the workshop.

The workshop language is English. Please send your abstracts, around 400 words in English, together with a short biographical summary, including thematically relevant publications and research interests, in one pdf document, no later than *June 1st, 2016* to

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Travel costs and accommodation for the participants will be covered by the Research Network "Re-Configurations".

### ***Organizational Committee***

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