

Navigating the City Center: Young Street Hawkers in Algiers

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This paper explores the significance of navigating practices in the everyday life of young street hawkers in the peripheral urban areas of Algiers. The French expression *naviguer* (“navigating”) is used by young people in colloquial Arabic to describe practices of getting by and being on the move in outdoor urban spaces. By navigating the central spaces of the Algerian capital, young people re-

sist social and spatial exclusion. Based on the results of research conducted at Martyrs Square between 2009 and 2012, this paper aims to scrutinize the “politics of navigating” and argues that navigating practices both preserve and challenge the status quo.

Keywords: Algiers; Youth; Urban Peripheries; Informality; Street Politics

Introduction

The street hawkers I interviewed for my dissertation “Youth and Resistance in Algiers” live and/or work in the streets of the Algerian capital’s old town, the Casbah. The Casbah is a geographically central area and the ancient core of the pre-colonial city, which has become increasingly marginalized due to urban renewal projects since the colonial era (1830-1962). The discourses of the “contested city” and “the rebellious youth” are interwoven into the cultural texture of the Algerian capital and are closely related to the history of the Casbah. The Casbah was made famous by the Algerian-Italian film *The Battle of Algiers* by Gillo Pontecorvo (1966) and became a symbolic place of resistance for the urban poor (Whitfield). Its youth emerged as actors of resistance during the anti-colonial liberation war (Carlier).

In the postcolonial era the newly formed government of the *Front de Libération National* (National Liberation Front or FLN) considered young people to be the hope of the nation. As a result, the development of the education system was made a priority in independent Algeria.² Yet despite the efforts of the Algerian government to integrate young people into society, the marginalization of the young generation, especially in working

class areas, increased and their frustrations grew (Rarrbo; Musette). In the 1988 October riots, young Algerians took to the streets of the capital to express their anger about the *hogra* (“power abuse, injustice”) under the FLN’s government. Martyrs Square,³ a central place between the port and the hill of the Casbah in the center of Algiers, became the stage for the military’s violent repression of the 1988 youth riots. The October riots were the first serious conflict between the state and the young generation in independent Algeria (Abada; Semiane).⁴

The mobilization of young Algerians by the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front) in the 1990s has shaped the image of a youth at risk and youth as risk (El-Kenz; Vergès). This relates in particular to young people from *quartiers sensibles et difficiles d’Alger* (“sensitive and difficult areas”) which are affected by unemployment, overcrowding and poverty (Iamarène-Djeral). These young people are often represented in media discourse as “the youth from the street” and are associated with crime and disorder. They are also often excluded from the education system and formal economy and are exposed to precarious work and violence. They are considered to be at risk, and as a result of their exclusion they may develop oppositional identities, revolt or join radi-

cal political groups and thus are represented as a risk.⁵

Today the Casbah is akin to an “inner city periphery” and is highly contested due to its central position and cultural capital. Urban renewal plans include public resettlement programs, and many of the former inhabitants of the Casbah now live in the growing fringes of the Algerian capital. Thus, in addition to social exclusion they have also been placed *spatially* on the periphery of the future world city.⁶ Yet many young people refuse to be taken out of the center and continue to come back to the Casbah. They feel attached to their ancient *houma* (the North African expression for “neighborhood districts”), which has a strong notion of social cohesion and a sense of community (Lesbet; Grangaud). They also stay connected to the Casbah to secure their livelihoods. Many of the Casbah’s inhabitants, and especially its young male population, resort to informal economies⁷ to combat unemployment. The youth unemployment rate in the Casbah is, as in the rest of the capital and the country, high. According to the Arab Human Development Report from 2009, Algeria has the highest youth unemployment rate among Arab countries, at 46 percent. Many young people find it difficult to achieve the status of adulthood:

without work they are unable to purchase housing and get married.

Against the backdrop of the dominant representation of an immobile, unemployed youth, embodied by the concept of *hittistes*,⁸ the young are in fact very mobile. In order to overcome obstacles in everyday life, they are forced to navigate public urban spaces and find ways of getting by. Young people’s navigating practices transform the public spaces of their neighborhood into a large marketplace. Martyrs Square, a former symbol of the liberation war and later of the youth revolt, is now a popular venue for the informal street market in Algiers, connecting the Casbah, the port, Bab el-Oued and the city center.

Before presenting my empirical findings on the navigating practices at Martyrs Square, I will outline the theoretical field of youth and urban studies to which the concept of navigating can be related.

“Navigating” as a Concept at the Intersection of Urban and Youth Studies

The analysis of the navigating practices of young people in Algiers focuses on the everyday life of youth in transforming urban environments. In research on 21st-century cities in the MENA region, youth has emerged as a specific social category which has given insights into social change

and new forms of mobilization (Herrera and Bayat; Honwana; Gertel and Ouaisa). The expression *naviguer* ("navigating"), which was often heard in street hawkers' conversations in Algiers, caught my attention. Navigating is a term from the Latin *navis* ("ship") and *agere* ("to route, to govern") and describes the art of guiding a ship on the sea along a particular route. Today it is a frequently used expression to describe the need for orientation and direction in relation to the complexity, increasing mobility, and the economic and political transformations of the 21st century. The meaning of the word in the colloquial Arabic of young people from peripheral urban areas in Algiers is not that different and has taken on the meaning of being on the move and helping yourself to get by and make a living. Honwana uses the term "navigating" to refer to the unstable position of youth in between:

Despite being deprived of a locus of power, they are able to navigate within a multiplicity of spaces and states of being: being simultaneously children and adults, victims and perpetrators, civilians and soldiers, and so forth. ("Innocent and Guilty" 50-51)

In *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood* (Christiansen et al.) the concept of navigating is applied to analyze youth as

a position in motion: Young people "navigate" their livelihoods as well as the construction of their identities in their journey to becoming adults. The cities of the Global South have a very young population. Youth thus gains much attention within urban studies and, vice versa, the city is in the focus of many youth studies (Hansen).

In *Urban Navigations: Politics, Space and the City in South Asia*, McFarlane and Anjaria emphasize the "contingent particularities of urban transformation in practice" and analyze how "people make sense of and work their way through diverse urban environments, often in context of deep political, economic and social inequality" (6).

Instead of the dystopic descriptions of the megacities of the Global South, research that can be assembled by the term "subaltern urbanism" (Roy, "Slumdog Cities" 227) recognizes the ability of "ordinary people" (Bayat, *Life as Politics*) to "operate more resourcefully in under-resourced cities" (Simone, "Pirate Towns" 357). Subaltern urbanism brings into focus the everyday practices of those who are placed in a peripheral position (socially and/or spatially), e.g. the youth, the urban poor, or even the *majority* (Simone, "Ineligible Majority"). This paper is interested particularly in the situation

of youth in between everyday "survival" and urban protest.

The navigating practices of the young street hawkers at Martyrs Square in Algiers show many parallels to the practices that Honwana refers to as "getting by," a phrase that is used by young people in South Africa. In the same sense, Tunisian and Senegalese youth talk about *débrouillage* (Honwana, *Time of Youth* 62):

Rather than succumbing to passivity, they are constantly on the alert for opportunities, consciously plan possible scenarios, and resourcefully take action in pursuit of a livelihood. (61)

Young people in Bissau speak about *dubriagem*, which Vigh describes as "a dynamic quality of attentiveness and ability to act in relation to the movement of the social terrain one's life is set in" (52). In the context of the urban poor in the authoritarian regimes of the MENA region, Bayat introduces the concept of "quiet encroachment" (*Life as Politics*). This concept refers to everyday practices found in informal economies, e.g. the illicit construction or occupation of houses without property rights or the use of public infrastructure without paying for it. He uses the concept of "quiet encroachment" to emphasize that everyday life of the urban poor is not only about survival; people try to improve their position in the social

space. Being aware of their exclusion, they appropriate the outdoor urban spaces of the city. The state's attempts to control these spaces sometimes provoke protest and revolts, particularly in places where many people are affected by poverty and housing shortages and, as a result, are forced to use and appropriate the street as a working and meeting place.

The urban outdoor spaces such as streets, squares and parks also play an important role as places of encounter and communication for the mobilization of the urban poor (Droz-Vincent). Even if their motivation is neither ideological nor oppositional, there is a connection between "quiet encroachment" and loud revolts. Street hawkers, for example, get in the way of renewal plans, which seek to drive out informal markets from the city and exclude the urban poor to the peripheries. Thus the "city-inside-out" (Bayat, "Politics in the City-Inside-Out") becomes a "fertile ground for the expression of street politics" (Life as Politics 12). Here, "street politics" not only refers to street riots or to the actions of social movements using the street as a stage for their protests, but to all kinds of occupations of the street, which oppose the authorities and increase the autonomy of the urban poor. At the same time, the "informal" spaces may function as an out-

let for the pressure and frustrations of precarious everyday life.

The following examples from my empirical findings shed light on the functioning of navigating practices in between preserving and challenging the status quo.

Navigating at Martyrs Square

A young boy, about twelve years old, approaches two street hawkers in a central shopping street of Algiers begging for some money. "Begging is a sin. Go navigating!" one of the street hawkers answers back (participant observation, 23 Feb. 2011).⁹ Buying mobile phones and reselling them is often one of the initial navigating activities seen amongst young people. On Martyrs Square navigating can also include formal, informal and illegal practices of selling and reselling. In most cases navigating refers to those who spend their day outside walking around, meeting people and waiting for new opportunities. Even the people who have a stall in a fixed place still have to be constantly on the move in order to buy merchandise, find a place to store their wares or simply keep connected with friends in the neighborhood. Navigating may seem as an erratic way of moving through the city, but it encompasses the imagination of a "course" to succeed. Navigating can also mean "surviving," but its objective is

often to accumulate economic and social capital. The street hawkers I interviewed claimed to make better money than in formal jobs: "Before I worked in a confectioner's, but I quit. It was exploitation. On the street, I earn more than the monthly salary in less than a week" (Nazim. Personal interview. 1 Mar. 2011).

Navigating is not only restricted to economic practices, but also includes social activities, such as being around in the streets to meet people, connecting with them, and finding help or new opportunities. "I spend up to 18 hours a day outside and only go home to eat. I have to survive somehow" (Rebah. Personal interview. 10 Jan. 2011). Rebah's family had been relocated to Dar el-Beida, but he had remained with two sisters in their ancient house in the Casbah to stay in the center of Algiers.

Mehdi, a former street hawker who now owns a van and offers a transport service, explains the meaning of the street for the young:

The street is a way of making money. You can sell clothes or cigarettes. [...] A young person who owns a small car, although he does not have a license from the government, will start to work as a taxi driver without license - because the street is ours! (Mehdi. Personal interview. 5 Mar. 2011)

Markets are dense spaces of mobilities, connections and exchange. That is why central spaces such as Martyrs Square play an important role in young people's urban navigations. Due to its central position, geographically as well as within the public transport network, and the fact that it connects the city center with the peripheries, it has become a hot spot for selling. Aware of the advantage of living close by, young people from the surrounding areas identify Martyrs Square as *their houma* ("neighborhood") and take for themselves the right to sell there.¹⁰ The space at Martyrs Square is contested and places are even rented or sold to outsiders.

Especially for those who were relocated to peripheral areas, the markets function as more than just a place to work. The work at the markets keeps them connected to the center of the city. Hamada, for example, has been selling butter and marmalade at Martyrs Square for about 15 years. He navigates in order to save up money for marriage. He started working on the streets after he was relocated from the Casbah to the eastern periphery of Algiers. When he eventually gets married he hopes to stop working on the streets and take over his father's shop in his family's hometown of Ouargla, in the south of Algeria. Every day he travels between the Casbah and Bordj el-Kiffan in the eastern

periphery of Algiers. The eastern periphery of Algiers has been growing rapidly since the 1990s due to the construction of new high-rise building areas in the context of the public relocation programs.

In 2014 many families from the Casbah, Bab el-Oued and other poor inner urban areas and squats were relocated by the *Wilaya* ("city council") of Algiers to new social housing projects in the growing periphery in the south of Algiers. While the new buildings and apartments are popular among the relocated people, the more and more remote locations of the new urban districts are not. Although the necessary infrastructure has been promised, it is often underdeveloped and people are taken out of their social networks and livelihood spaces. In order to maintain their social and economic resources, young people have to increase their mobility and travel daily to the city center and back. Travelling by public transport, if available, takes too much time. This situation has created new possibilities for navigating, as anyone who owns a car can offer transport service. Taking a *taxi clandestin* ("taxi without license") is a cheaper alternative to the growing number of private taxi companies. Once they have arrived at the market, they connect with other *navigators*. They share stalls, rent out their space on the market to outsiders or

newcomers and invest the income in other businesses. They also have store rooms rented from shop owners in the narrow streets around the market. Some occupy empty buildings for that purpose. Although Hamada has been living in Bordj el-Kiffan for about 15 years, he feels attached to the Casbah. Being a *wlid houma* ("a son of the neighborhood") is important for getting a space on the market and guarantees solidarity and support from other street hawkers in the event of problems with outsiders or the police (Chabou 155-56).

Urban renewal plans have seen increased attempts to evict the informal markets from the public spaces in Algiers. Yet many of the young people—and their families—depend on the income of informal economies because of high youth unemployment rates. For this reason, their engagement in illegal navigating practices is legitimized by the majority of people, though many criticize the growing number of young people occupying the street. On the other hand, the street hawkers are critical of inequalities and their social and spatial exclusion: "We live in black-and-white areas! They are underdeveloped and there is nothing to do for us!" (Samir. Personal interview. 9 Mar. 2011). "Black-and-white areas" is an expression used by young people to criticize the lack

or decay of infrastructure and the unavailability of social or cultural activities. They also describe poor urban areas as “Third World” areas compared to the “well developed” residential areas of Algiers. Even when the street hawkers I interviewed showed no interest in formal politics or associational life, a popular protest culture shaped their sense of belonging. They expressed their anger in football fan songs or rap about the government and celebrate clandestine migration and global figures of resistance, e.g. Che Guevara or Tupac Shakur. In 2010 a police raid on the street market in the Casbah turned into a violent confrontation between hundreds of young street hawkers and the police (Semmar). After the outbreak of riots in several cities in Algeria in January 2011 and against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, the state and media focused their attention on Martyrs Square—the symbol of the youth revolt in 1988. However, there was no rioting on Martyrs Square. On the contrary, business was flourishing. In March 2011 Martyrs Square was getting cramped. It was fenced off for the construction of a new metro station, and inside the fenced area, civil guardians were holding a sit in, which resulted in increased police numbers and police vans around the square. Despite the large police presence around the square, the

street market was being tolerated again after police attempts to clear it in 2010. The lack of space did however cause tensions between bus drivers and street hawkers as well as amongst the street hawkers themselves. Yet, by using the fence to present their wares, the street hawkers were able to integrate it into the market. The police clearly tolerated the street market in order to avoid new confrontations with street hawkers: “They let us sell now. They’re afraid we will rise up!” one street hawker said in an interview (March 2011). “We profit and make money,” he said, knowing very well that the non-intervention of the state against the informal street market was just another form of control and that the tolerance would not last.

Young people from the street are aware that they are a demographic and political force. They struggle and sometimes fight for the autonomy to navigate. They constantly move between the peripheral and invisible urban areas and central spaces such as Martyrs Square that have a high capital and symbolic power. The street hawkers’ occupation of the central marketplaces (against the backdrop of the Arab Spring) can not only be seen as a sign of the demobilization of the young from peripheral areas in a top-down hierarchy. Their presence in the city center is also a political state-

ment: it is a claim to the right to the city¹¹ from those dwelling in social and/or spatial peripheries.

Conclusion

By navigating the streets around Martyrs Square, young people find a way of getting by despite the structural constraints and obstacles in their everyday lives. Using the term *naviguer*, young street hawkers evoke an unknown and changing space involved in their practices of getting by and the need of orientation in that space. In the case of these young people, this space is the street. They are constantly moving in the urban outdoor spaces looking for opportunities. Knowing that the urban space is unpredictable like the sea, they learn to negotiate rapid changes and strong currents and are always ready to alter their course. They also learn to “govern” themselves and their paths to adulthood.

On the whole they avoid direct political confrontations, with the exception of the street riots after police raids against the street market. Navigating thus does not seem to be a form of resistance in the sense of direct oppositional action (Hechler and Phillips; Raby), but rather compliant action responding to the neo-liberal culture of self-help and flexibility in the cities of the 21st century. From this

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viewpoint, navigating practices may contribute to preserving the status quo as they help to compensate for the problems and frustrations of unemployed youth. In the more open postmodern definition of resistance, navigating could, however, count as resistance. By navigating, young people increase their resources and autonomous spaces. In doing so, they sometimes resort to practices which subvert the plans of the authorities and elites. Through their presence in the central pub-

lic spaces of the city they resist social and political exclusion. The desire for a better life is the young street hawkers' main motivation for working at Martyrs Square, but, at the same time, the practices of navigation need and create communities. The street thus becomes an important venue for encounter, identification and often mobilization of the young. If navigating as a “self-help” practice is in itself not political, it is the empowering function of navigating which is a precondition for the

development of a generational conscience or oppositional identities. *Navigating* is thus a specific urban practice which can be considered as simultaneously challenging and maintaining the status quo.

Notes

¹ The data in this article come from field research I conducted for my dissertation on youth and resistance in Algiers between 2008 and 2012 during several multi-month stays. I worked with a qualitative methodology mix of mind-maps, interviews, group interviews and visual documentation. I conducted my research in different places in the Casbah and the neighboring area of Bab el-Oued, such as a public “youth center” in the lower Casbah, a library for students in the upper Casbah, a Kung Fu school in Bab el-Oued and a youth association in

Bologhine. The interviews with the street hawkers were conducted at the seaside or in a crowded coffee shop in Bab el-Oued. The interviews were translated if necessary from Arabic to French by one of their colleagues. In total I conducted about 16 recorded interviews with street hawkers. In addition I had many informal conversations and I sometimes left my camera with one of the street hawkers and he took photos and filmed his colleagues and friends. The visual material gave me an additional impression especially of the market at night time and of their journeys from home to the center, etc.

² In his writing on the *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote about the importance of integration and education of young people in the development of the independent states (171). His thoughts are echoed in the Algerian charter of 1964 (Rarrbo 66).

³ Martyrs Square is the former *Place du Gouvernement* in the lower Casbah, the center of pre-colonial Algiers. It was the first urban intervention by the French to demonstrate colonial power through urbanism (Çelik). The square connected the French quarters with the indigenous quarter, the Casbah. It was thus a meeting place for Europeans and Algerians in the divided city. Today it still has the function of a venue connecting the city center with the marginalized areas of the Casbah and Bab el-Oued. It is also an arrival place for the inhabitants from the spatial peripheries coming to the city center by public transport.

⁴ The October revolt marks the beginning of the democratization process and reforms which led to constitutional changes in 1989. In 1991, when the FIS won the elections, the Algerian “spring” ended with the withdrawal of the president and the imposed emergency rule in 1992. This was the beginning of the so-called “black decade” of civil war between the government and Islamists who were forced to go underground.

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→ ⁵ The expression *youth at risk and youth as risk* comes from the double-faced construction of a vulnerable and dangerous youth in its position in between childhood and adulthood in social sciences (Wyn and White; Comaroff and Comaroff).

⁶ With the plan "Alger 2029" the government gave the development of Algiers great importance.

⁷ For the context of urban informality in Algeria see Chabou (131-149) and Hammouda (80-85).

⁸ The expression *hittiste* is a composition of Arabic *hait* ("wall") and the French suffix *-iste*. It is used to refer to the young unemployed who lean all day on the wall watching the time pass by. The *hittistes* became well known in the 1990s through the work of the French-Algerian comedian artist Fellag (See Le Pape 42).

⁹ All citations from the interviews are translated from French/Arabic into English.

¹⁰ For the relation between the private and public space in Algiers see Lesbet; Dris.

¹¹ The "Right to the City" is a slogan that was introduced to social sciences by Henri Lefebvre in 1968. Lefebvre used it to claim the right to a radical participant urbanism including the right to centrality not only in a spatial but in a social sense. Today the slogan is mainly used in the reduced sense of "right to basic housing" or "right to affordable housing" in city centers.

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