

ANTI-THESIS

Arab Youth: A Contained Youth?

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Young people in the Arab world increasingly have to struggle with economic hardship and difficulties to start their own lives, although the majority is better educated than ever before. The problematic labor market situation combined with weak public schemes to support young careers force large sections of young people to postpone their ambitions to marry. This period of delayed marriage is captured as 'waithood'. I will argue that this term is misleading. Two points of critique apply: The social dimension of waiting exceeds the status of remaining inactive until something expected happens; the ever-changing present continuously generates new realities. Simultaneously uncertainties and insecurities have dra-

matically expanded since 2011 and further limit livelihood opportunities and future perspectives, particularly of the youth. Young people are hence becoming both, increasingly frustrated and disadvantaged the longer they "wait", and even more dependent on parents and kin networks. This hinders them to develop their personality - they rather have to accommodate with values that are not always suitable to master the present requirements of a globalizing world. In this paper I will inquire, in how far young people of the Arab world have thus to be considered as a "contained youth".

Keywords: youth, waithood, contained youth

Introduction

Alongside progressing industrialization and modernization, youth has emerged as a social group. Originally being a mere *rite de passage* between childhood and adulthood, adolescence has become a more or less fixed period, both delineated and fragmented by various transitions, such as from completing education to starting work, from living together with parents to moving into independent housing, and from being single to finding a partner to marry and take over responsibility for others. More recently, the time of adolescence has been further extended in Arab countries (but not only there), as marriage increasingly is postponed. Diane Singerman (7) captures this phenomenon as 'waithood', emphasising that delayed marriage has become the norm, mainly for economic reasons. I will argue that the term 'waithood' is no longer able to capture the deep social transformations the current generation of Arab youth are experiencing. 'Waiting' more generally suggests that after a period of delay things will go on; it connotes a status of remaining inactive or of being in a state of repose until something expected happens. This is misleading, as the ever-changing present continuously generates new realities. Moreover, the current situation is particularly dynamic and problematic Three

points are crucial: (1) After decades of neo-liberal restructuring, including the world financial crisis (2007/8), and after the so-called Arab Spring (2010/11), widespread insecurity and uncertainty prevail in most Arab countries. Severe economic problems, political instability, war, and complex emergencies have dramatically reduced public transfers, while voluntary institutions offering social support have also been weakened, with severe repercussions. (2) Dependency on parents, kin and social networks are ever more increasing. Insecurities and status transitions of young people have almost entirely been buffered by family help and solidarity. (3) Liberation from family bonds thus becomes almost impossible, a break with parents often unthinkable. Young people have to accommodate themselves with the rules and moralities of their parents; a large section has hence to be considered a 'contained youth' - one that is enclosed and embedded in family configurations. The consequences are far-reaching: frustration about problematic economic prospects, sublimation of sexual desires, and half-hearted alignments with adult values all constrain juvenile identity formation. If the questioning of social norms and of established thinking is not disentangled and somehow released from kinship ties and innovation are not empowered dur-

ing adolescence, the renewal and regeneration of society is endangered; outdated value-sets are artificially prolonged. Under the global condition—where no one is any longer outside of far-stretching articulations and rather part of global competition—this does not qualify as a solid position from which to master the future. My argument in this essay unfolds in three steps: I inquire about the relations between youth and society, revisit the properties of waithood, and discuss the characteristics of a contained youth.

Youth and Society

Youth, of course, is just a word (Bourdieu). But what does it represent? A short rite of passage, a period between childhood and adulthood, a status of not yet being married, or rather a still uncompleted achievement of not being a father or mother? With on-going processes of globalization and financialization, the notion of youth has changed during the last decades within and between societies. Three rather rhetorical questions open up the context: How did Arab society change more recently, how is the concept of family related to these transformations, and how did youth emerge as a social category representing specific segments of recent Arab societies? To address these questions I will juxtapose some key criteria

from the Arab world with some insights from German youth studies and inquire about the (changing) properties of youth within different societies. This is not to say that Arab or European societies, such as the 'German,' contain only one type of youth, one type of family or one coherent society. Obviously, the following statements will entail great generalizations. It is thus neither a search for singularity nor for uniformity, but rather an attempt to create abstract positions that open up a spectrum of possibilities to capture different notions of youth.

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea reflects on the shifting notions of childhood in the Middle East. She explains:

In the predominately agrarian societies in the past, the primary social unit in the Middle East was the extended family, which might range in size from 20 to 200 persons, related on both sides of the marital connection. Within this kin group, each child received identity, affection, discipline, role models, and economic and social support, ideally from birth to death; in exchange the family required conformity and loyalty from all members, beginning in early childhood. The crucial test of allegiance came with the time of marriage,

when the man or woman either acceded to or rebelled against the wishes of the family in preparing to extend the family unit into another generation, for marriage in the system was not officially perceived as an emotional attachment between individuals [but] as an economic and social contract between two family groups, a contract that was to benefit both. Although marriage was a crucial step in tying individual members to the group, it was the birth of children that conferred full adult status on both the man and the woman. Only after the birth of children were the newly married man and women considered full members of their particular family unit and adult members of the wider society (Warnock Fernea 5).

In agrarian societies, youth as period thus hardly existed.¹ Children were incorporated into the labour regime of extended families and local communities and only after marriage achieved the status of being adult, though they only became a full member of society after children were born. This requirement can be comprehended as a necessity of social reproduction, but also as a condition to achieve social security: Children were expected to assist parents throughout their lives, as no other institutions or systems of welfare

offered an alternative source of security. Indeed, even today the disposable male labour reservoir largely determines the livelihood security of nomadic families (Gertel and Breuer). With the ongoing transformation of agrarian societies, profound changes through the monetarization of labour relations, rapid urbanization, public education and lately driven by the expansion of wireless communication opened up spaces for the formation of youth as a social group. Warnock Fernea continues her argument and further quotes Mohammed Soufani from the Ministry of Education in Morocco, who emphasises still in 1988 that children are situated between two worlds: “that of their illiterate, unambitious, resigned parents and of their ‘modern’ educated, highly aspiring peers.” He continues:

At a time when old absolutes are crumbling and old values are disregarded, what are young people to do? They are endangered because they are, in terms of values at least, at sea (Mohammed Soufani in Warnock Fernea 4).

To comprehend the massive ruptures that are fragmenting Arab societies and contribute to the formation of youth as a social category, a closer look into economic developments is helpful.

The initiative of James Côté (527) for a renewed understanding of youth from a political economy perspective recently opened up a contested debate about the relations between the situation of young people and the dynamics of the wider economy. Based on the observation of a (systematic) ‘proletarianization’ of youth, Côté demands identifying the root causes for this development. He assumes that the deterioration in material conditions is linked to the global economic depression, representing one of the most severe crises of capitalism, expressed, for example, in unemployment, social exclusion and serious wealth inequalities. Subsequently, he asks to further inquire into how far neoliberalism impacts on the prolongation of youth and thus contributes to the diminished economic prospects of young people. Sukarieh and Tannock (1), referring to Côté and his critics (e.g. France and Treadgold 612), argue for realigning youth studies in order to capture a wider social field. This corresponds to the various studies undertaken to comprehend social insecurity in the first place. One strand of research, originating from studying marginalization, poverty, and vulnerability in the global south, is largely linked and connected to development discourse. Another, second strand, addressing the impact of neoliberalism in dismantling

welfare states in Europe and elsewhere, is connected to the inquiry into changing conditions of labour and increasing precarisation. In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007/08, the two fields experienced a conversion and also a joint interest in studying and comprehending the role of young people (Gertel "Ungewissheit" 39).

Global South: Expanding

Although the development discourse was able to highlight historical causes of inequality, scrutinize the impact of the new international division of labour in the 1970s, analyse the consequences of the debt crisis for Arab economies in the 1980s, and also tackle the social consequences of structural adjustment measures, youth were almost never identified as a target group. Youth as a social group only appeared on the social surface in struggles for political independence, as an anticolonial revolutionary generation. But increasing poverty, combined with severe cuts in public subsidy systems, caused recurrent IMF or bread riots and widespread insecurity (Walton and Seddon). An increasing 'strata of the insecure' (Elwert et al. 284) emerged, particularly among the growing masses of city dwellers. Semsek offers an implicit positioning of youth when he describes a

potential successful 'modern' agent in urban Cairo:

The individual becomes a free-floating agent, acting daily, in different spheres, with different keys of action. To achieve prosperity people have to be successful on all occasions. [A]n individual who tries to integrate all such different ways of being into one frame of action has not understood that modernity demands a lot, not least a multiplicity of human actions (Semsek 283).

Bennani-Chraïbi captures related identity constructions for Moroccan youth as 'bricolage culturelle' (102). It is from here, from the multiplicity of lifestyles and the contestation of traditional role models, that student protests in Arab countries and youth subcultures developed, rendering youth newly visible in society. Bayat (115) comprehends this as the 'claim of youthfulness', cumulating in the so-called Arab Spring when young people initiated mass protests (Gertel and Ouaisa).

Two trajectories are crucial: On the one hand, 'youth' emerged as a social category in the Arab world only recently. From the very beginning, though, different groups and various subcultures developed, structured by gender, age and confessional

lines, but also subdivided by interests in music, sport and clothing styles, consumption patterns and political provenience (Herrera and Bayat). This development has been compounded by rapidly spreading communication technologies starting in the 1990s, such as the introduction of SAT-TV, mobile phones, Internet infrastructure and smart phones. Alternative lifestyles became visible and lived distinctions between Arab youth, as a social category beyond the family, and local communities became possible. On the other hand insecurities – economic, political and cultural – expanded, while coping strategies to buffer transformations and insecurities were not able to follow the pace and depth of changes. Whereas their parents, particularly men, had been able to enter into secure labour conditions in still-existing Arab welfare states until the mid 1980s, young people – the newly forming youth – grew up in neoliberal times, experiencing both insecurity for their own life trajectories and dependency on their families.

It is from this disjuncture where the argument of 'waithood' unfolds. Marriage has become increasingly costly, not only for young people and their families; its economic scope has stretched beyond kin networks and impacted on national economies. In Egypt, for example, its total eco-

conomic significance exceeds the amount of economic aid, of all foreign remittances, and almost equalled total tourist revenues in 1999 (Singerman 11). Practices of marriage are thus thoroughly embedded in society and not easy to change. Young people and their families have to save money for years in order to be able to accumulate the capital needed to marry and start a family. Ten years ago Singerman emphasized the consequences:

Throughout the Middle East, the family not only financially supports the children until they marry, but it also supervises community norms and morality. Families are intimately and extensively involved in nearly all realms of social, political, moral, and economic life such as educating children, childrearing, securing employment, negotiating the bureaucracy and engaging with the political elite, establishing and maintaining businesses, saving money, promoting morality and status, distributing resources and information, securing credit, organizing migration, and policing sexuality (Singerman 36).

This all comes together as a “family ethos” that while creating security for young people in the midst of expanding uncertainty is “supporting the status quo” (Singerman,

37). From here my critique starts, challenging this notion of a fixed reality of a conserving status quo.

Over the last decade insecurity has largely expanded in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly after the Arab Spring. Not only do armed conflicts dominate everyday life in Libya, Yemen, and Syria today, but for many other countries the situation is also extremely problematic. Millions of refugees live in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey; revenues from tourism, an important pillar of national economies, have collapsed in Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan, while at the same time investments are declining, with few exceptions, due to political instability. Accordingly, the latest Arab Human Development Report states that the Human Development Index—a measure of a country’s level of development—has fallen substantially since 2010, and inequality in Arab countries has increased (AHDR, 1.2). This is not to say that these problems are generated exclusively internally. Given the colonial past, asymmetric exchange systems, and extensive deregulation and privatization, together with the expanding impact of the international financial system, external and internal causes of inequality are highly articulated on a global scale. Young peo-

ple live in the midst of the turmoil of a further polarizing world.

Global North: Shrinking

Changes are also occurring north of the Mediterranean. Based on Robert Castel’s observation of expanding social insecurity in Europe and on Klaus Dörres’ insights on the working society, the debate on precarity and a renewed social question took off, particularly after the financial crisis. As a consequence of neoliberal restructuring, dissolving welfare states, flexibilization of labour regulations, and increasing insecurities, disparities have expanded. According to Castel & Dörre, precarity shows four features: (a) In cases when employees or workers fall below a (local) common standard of income, of protection or of social integration, they are considered to live in precarity. (b) The subjective dimension of precarious labour entails the loss of making sense, deficits in appreciation, and uncertainties in planning ahead. (c) Precarity is thus comprehended as a relational category, depending on the social delineation for common standards. (d) Subsequently, the precariat is not a homogeneous class. Resulting from the erosion of common standards, different societal zones of integration, precarity and decoupling emerge. Marchart extends the argument and stresses that precarity—in all

its different forms—has already expanded into general society, transgressing the field of labour relations, shaping as well the spheres of reproduction, generating fear, and constituting a society of precarity. North-South differences, as a consequence, have further been blurred.

Particularly young people in Mediterranean countries, such as Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal, have more recently been hit by expanding insecurities such as youth unemployment (Bush et al.). Transitions from school into higher education and vocational training, and also from higher education into the labour market, became increasingly problematic; even for young people with university degrees easy transitions are no longer a given. Limited labour contracts, part-time employment, contracted and temporary work, and precarious self-employment contribute to a prolongation of adolescence far into adulthood. While European youth do comply with the requirements for social upward mobility (education, flexibility, work experience), the official promises of accessing formal, stable and well-paid jobs and being integrated into society are no longer fulfilled everywhere (e.g. for Greece, see Grekopoulou; and for Portugal, see the protest song of Deolinda). These uncertainties in an increasingly frag-

mented world have to be navigated by young people, but what about their internal insecurities?

Youth, including German youth, live in a liminal world, as the huge corpus of literature reveals (cf. Mansel and Brinkhoff; Flammer and Alsaker; Albert et al.). Physical and psychical processes of restructuring urge young people to disentangle the bonds of family dependencies and to detach and free themselves from the 'embodied parents' (Schröder & Leonhardt). Becoming a member of the world of adults and thus of society requires an adolescent to re-evaluate emotional and social ties, to break with unwelcome parental determination, and to appropriate self-experienced and adjusted sets of values. The simultaneous desires for recognition and appreciation on the one hand and for autonomy and individuation on the other conjoin in the longing to be accepted as a responsible person that, however, still needs space to develop. Adolescence is thus marked by the concurrence of different aspirations: biological, cultural and occupational identity fragments develop and mutually constitute the subject. This is not a linear process; progressive ambitions are rather often accompanied by regressive tendencies.

To sum up: Uncertainties and insecurities of young people conjoin and interfere with each other, both in the Arab world as well as in Europe (cf. Albert and Gertel, 357). What does this encounter entail for the respective societies and different groups of young people? Every society with an interest in renewal and regeneration should create conditions to allow the questioning of its norms and of established thinking and should develop the capacity to empower the creativity and innovation that is released during adolescence. This idea comes, of course, not uncontested, as it threatens authorities, and it is realized only to certain degrees and in specific times. The European youth of the 1920s and 1960s are, for example, valued as a development model that has to be protected by society (Schröder & Leonhardt). In these periods, youth have been recognized as strategic social groups oriented towards education and experimenting with new lifestyles and new ways of thinking.

Contained Youth

The majority of Arab countries are recently shaped by a loss of employment security, expanding precarity and a failed promise of education enabling social mobility. With few suitable jobs for qualified young people and limited mobility opportunities,

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the juvenile phase is, as a consequence, extended for many as they lack the necessary resources to start a family. Young adults can hardly liberate themselves from the bonds of their families to become emotionally and financially independent, which increases the potential for individual frustration and forms new collective moralities. A longitudinal study in Rabat (Gertel, "Jugend(t)räume und Alltag", 26) juxtaposes the situation of about 400 young people in 2002 and in 2012; it compares the importance of family support and current anxieties among young unmarried people (aged 15-34 years) one year after 9/11 and one year after the events of 2011 (Arab Spring). Two findings are crucial: Firstly, although the general self-assessment of the economic situation increased considerably during these ten years, the most frequent fear of young people, namely that of "being not as successful as one wish" also increased. The pressure of being successful under any circumstances is deeply felt. Secondly, the largest increase of fears was "to break with the parents". Hence, parents and kin relations offer support to an extent that the role of the family can hardly be called into question. A more recent study from 2016/17 of 9,000 young people (aged 16-30 years) capturing nine Arab countries reveals that the majority, more than two-

thirds, would indeed raise their children 'about the same' or even 'in exactly the same way' as their parents raised them (Gertel and Kreuer, 80). Young people in the Global South are increasingly becoming a contained youth, a group that has to cope with the bifurcation of increasing economic and political insecurities preventing long-term life plans on the one hand, and of growing dependencies that are entangled with moral standards of former generations. These have often been not developed to handle the demands and norms of modernity. They rather continue to unfold as a series of almost uninterrupted valued interventions into the everyday lives of young people who are simultaneously exposed to accelerating exchange relations, expanding consumerism, and omnipresent visual images of alleged needs. Both are shaping personal imaginations, aspirations, expectations and encounters – entailing, at times, dramatic potentials of severe collisions.

What follows

One of the foundational questions in youth studies still remains whether the category of 'youth' represents a group by itself, with shared or unifying properties, or rather in how far it constitutes a catch-all category, containing different and varying subgroups, depending, for example, on

age, marital status, income and peer group. For the group of contained youth this question has to be extended: A contained youth does not exist by itself. It is best comprehended in relation to parents, as they mutually depend on each other. The family constitutes the unit of reproduction that decides about female and male obligations, options, careers, and perspectives. This holds true for identity formation, educational careers, the entry into labour markets and marriage options. As a consequence, adolescents should be addressed together with their family as a unit of analysis in post-Arab-Spring youth studies.

Notes

¹This is not to say that we should assume a stable secure past of youth in the Arab world, living in homogeneous agrarian societies with functioning and uncontested social structures. Rather, socio-economic differences, including a variety of political conflicts, also prevailed in Arab countries throughout the last century.

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