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Workshop 7

Social Movements in the Middle East and North Africa:

Shouldn't we go a step further?

directed by

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Workshop abstract

Social movement theory has rarely ventured beyond the terrain of the USA and Europe or narrow understandings of the “political” based on case studies drawn from the global North. Consequently, it often misunderstands activism in the South, which sometimes occurs as silent resistances, bypassing of authority, day-to-day forms of resistance or evading practices of power. Social movement studies are commonly framed by disciplines other than political science, which tends to minimize or obscure the political meanings of those movements.

Except for riots and revolutionary moments, contentious politics has been little studied. More recently the notion of “Islamism” has marginalized the Middle East as a land of “ugly movements,” off the maps of “mainstream” social science. The best-known studies of Islamic mobilizations are either little affected by social movement theory or, despite their empirical richness, limit themselves to asserting that these cases confirm its predictions. Another category of work, research on the associational revival in the Middle East, typically falls into the teleological trap of regarding the “awakening of civil society” as a sign and a condition for democratization.

The Middle East and North Africa are excellent sites for studying collective action in authoritarian settings and can enrich our understandings of comparative politics and social movement theory. To complement the literature focused on structural processes at the state or regime level, we propose to

concentrate on “politics under the threshold” which might threaten authoritarianism: opportunities and constraints for collective action in authoritarian regimes and their effects on the reconfiguration of such regimes. The objective is to understand regime transformations through the social and political relations that underlie them and not through binary categories of democracy-authoritarianism.

Workshop description

Despite having produced a rich set of comparative tools (Tarrow 1998; Mc Adam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001) social movement theory has largely not ventured beyond the geographical terrain of the USA and Europe where it was first elaborated. To the extent that it has been universalized, this is due to scholars’ validating its tools and analysis based on empirical work which has not sought to develop the theory itself. Consequently, social movement theory has seldom taken into account the internationalization of social movements and contexts beyond the global North.

Social movement theory should venture beyond narrow understandings of “political” emanating from political science and which are based primarily on case studies drawn from the global north. Activism in the South sometimes occurs as silent resistances or bypassing of authority. Existing social movement theory does not account for this, thereby marginalizing day-to-day forms of resistance, evasion of practices of power, or behavior that does not fit neatly the categories of resistance/collaboration (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003).

Many discussions of Middle Eastern political participation are based on a binary categorization focusing on elections and riots – “hot” political moments with opposing logics and legitimations, but both directly related to the state. This leads to understanding Middle Eastern politics through the prism of “a culture of rioting” (Badie 1992) or “a culture of deference” (Hopkins, 1995). Until recently, except for riots (Bennani-Chraïbi 1994) and revolutionary moments (Kurzman, 1996) contentious politics aroused little interest. This trend has been reinforced by the fact that social movement studies have often been relegated to disciplines other than political science: social history, urban sociology, social anthropology, etc. which have tended to minimize or obscure the very political meaning of those movements.

Until the birth of movements framed in an Islamic lexicon, the Middle East was mainly a “paradigm consumer” (functionalism, developmentalism, modernization theory, etc.). The new notion of “Islamism” has prolonged the specificity of the Middle East as a land of “ugly movements” (Tarrow 1994), far from mainstream social science. Therefore, some of the best-known studies of Islamic mobilizations are little affected by social science theory (Kepel 2000).

When applied to Islamism, social movement theory is unsatisfactory, not only because there is an insufficient link between theoretical questions and empirical findings, (e.g. Wiktorowicz 2004) but also because it tends to emphasize very prosaic reasons to mobilize and rarely moves beyond validation of concepts developed on the basis of Northern case studies (Hafez 2003). Despite the empirical richness of many such works, they tend to limit themselves to asserting that Middle Eastern cases fit the theory’s predictions. Thus Clark notes, “According to social movement theory/ resource mobilization theory... these findings are confirmed in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen” (Clark 2004: 21, 25). Moreover, the less promising elements of this theory – such as the concept of “political opportunity structure” – do not explain how human agency can alter contexts and actively create opportunities.

Research on the associational revival in the Middle East world has too often fallen into the trap of regarding the “awakening of civil society,” as a sign, a factor and a condition for democratization (Al-Sayyid 1995; Qandil 1995; Hudson 1996; Ben Néfissa et al. 2005). Research ought not to be framed to satisfy a fashion fostered by the international expertise mechanisms of “the unholy trinity” (Peet 2003) – the IMF, World Bank and WTO – or the UNDP. In many cases, the democratic passion of researchers has prevailed over observable reality and has gone so far as to substitute for it. Works based on the theme of civil society have not always avoided the pitfalls of “transitology” and its teleological biases which link the awakening of civil society to a transition to democracy. As Jillian Schwedler notes,

One limitation of the focus on transitions to democracy is that political change is assessed almost exclusively in terms of progress along a continuum, with many processes characterized by stagnation (in the case of stalled transitions) or a return to autocratic practices (in aborted and failed transitions). This focus often obscures the complex ways in which political institutions and practices are restructured even in cases where political openings do not progress very far. That is, even limited openings may produce considerable dynamic change in the public political space – the practices and locales of political struggle – and these multidimensional restructurings demand systematic analysis. (2006:6).

Preliminary Observations

Space permits us to give only two brief examples suggesting the advantages of the approach we advocate.

In Morocco, the institutionalization of a contentious space tells us a great deal about the political adjustment trajectory of authoritarianism characterized by an increase in the forms and means of political participation and public expressions of dissent. The tradition of street demonstrations was renewed during the 1990s with large, peaceful demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinians and Iraqis followed by a huge mobilization around the *Plan d'intégration de la femme au développement*, numerous sit-ins in front of the secret jails of the “years of lead”, against inflation, the poor quality and increased price of privatized public services. These movements cannot be understood only as “a survival strategy of a regime that did not go far beyond the introduction of a mechanism for venting popular political dissent” (Schlumberger 2000).

In Egypt, the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada led to the formation of the Egyptian People’s Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, comprised mostly of leftists and Muslim Brothers. The large demonstration they organized in Tahrir Square in September 2001 was followed by demonstrations in the greater Cairo neighborhoods of Giza, Heliopolis, Ma’adi, Bulaq, Doqqi and 6th of October City, as well as Alexandria and many regions of the Delta and Upper Egypt from March 29 to April 2, 2002. The American-led invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003 led to the occupation of Tahrir Square “from the very start of the bombing” as the watchword sent by SMS directed. Egypt has not witnessed a social movement of this magnitude since the 1972 student movement calling for democracy and people’s war against Israel. These demonstrations around foreign policy issues led to a redefinition of the objectives of protest, apparent in the Kefaya “Declaration to the Nation” (Al-Haraka al-misriyya, 2004), from foreign to domestic issues. Actual threats perceived by the contentious actors seem to better explain the launching of collective action than more nebulous “opportunity structures.”

However, the awakening of civil society has not been accompanied by a transition to democracy. The presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005 were the high water mark of the widely-lauded democratic opening of 2002-05. Despite the political closure perhaps 500,000 industrial and white-collar workers have participated in an unprecedented wave of strikes and protests since 2004 and achieved significant economic gains. This social movement has not (yet?) affected the basic structure of Egyptian authoritarianism. But, with a much broader base than Kefaya, it has implanted a culture of protest and contestation which the regime is reluctant to crush violently, unlike its previous responses to striking workers.

The Middle East is an excellent site for studying collective action in authoritarian settings. It allows us to discuss new trends in comparative politics and social movement theory. To complement the literature focused on structural processes at the state or regime level, we propose to concentrate on “politics under the threshold” (Heydemann 2002) which might threaten authoritarianism: opportunities and constraints for collective action in authoritarian regimes and their effects on the reconfiguration of such regimes. The objective is to understand regime transformations through the social and political relations that underlie them and not through the democracy-authoritarianism lens.

Objectives of the Workshop

The workshop seeks to produce an edited volume. We will welcome original contributions from scholars and researchers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds including sociology, anthropology, history and political science. Papers should have both strong empirical foundations and engage with the theoretical literature on social movements.

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