Workshop 2
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Social Movements and the Politics of Neoliberalism:
International Perspectives on the MENA Region

directed by

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Workshop abstract

Social movements have been defined in terms of the organization, mobilization, and participation of the “have-nots” of a society: those who stand in opposition to or outside existing power structures. In emphasizing the popular-social constitution of these movements and the fact that they are not orchestrated by power structures of the state, they are also described as “grassroots” movements.

In the present neoliberal conjuncture however, a somewhat different alignment of social, political, and cultural forces has come to occupy the movement space across the countries of the MENA region. Similar developments may also be observed in other world regions as well. This is best described as the phenomenon of “elite revolts,” or social movements comprised primarily of individuals and groups who presently do command access to (some form of) resources and power, and whose demands and claims are consequently framed not in terms of inclusion, redistribution, and recognition, but their opposite: either exclusion and/or status maintenance. Examples include ethno-majoritarian movements involving the mobilization of majority communities that already enjoy social, economic and political privilege; the proliferation of “middle class activism” among white-collar professionals; movements that support the state, the military, the religious clergy, and other establishment forces;
vigilante activism; and movements coordinated and funded by organized national and transnational NGOs.

At the same time however, the “politics of the dispossessed” has assumed a new urgency and a new visibility in the present context. From public rallies of illegal immigrants in the United States to mass protests by dispossessed peasants in Asia against state and corporate takeovers of their land to create “special” economic zones for global capital, the new modes of exclusion and disempowerment produced by the neoliberal order have also created different opportunities and new practices for political engagement and assertion by marginalized populations. These and other instances call for sustained comparative and theoretical reflection on the conditions of possibility—as also the obstacles that attend—efforts to move beyond the violence and inequality of neoliberal order.

Through a comparative, cross-regional investigation of such phenomena, the workshop will chart the complex movement politics of neoliberalism, and will develop a fine-grained understanding of the dynamics of continuity and change in social relations.

**Workshop description**

**Overview**

The present era is marked by the globalization of neoliberalism as a distinct policy process and a normative ideology. In both the global north and the south the ascendance of a new form of “flexible” and “global” capitalism, and sustained efforts to restructure economic relationships along *laissez faire* market principles have ushered in not just an “open economy,” but have reconfigured political, social, and cultural structures and practices in fundamental ways. State sovereignty, citizenship rights, national identity, the public/private distinction, and in fact the very meaning of the political itself have all undergone significant transformation.

This workshop examines these transformations from a comparative, cross-regional perspective. Through a specific focus on social movements and how they respond to and reflect the changed priorities and structures of the new political and economic order, we are interested in documenting how the politics of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodor 2002) in the MENA region both resembles and departs from neoliberal politics in Latin America and Asia.

**Description of Workshop**

Charles Tilly (2004) defines social movements as contentious performances, displays and campaigns that bear collective claims. In the MENA region as in other parts of the world, social movements may be further specified as the organization, mobilization, and participation of the “have-nots” of a society: those who stand in opposition to or outside existing power structures. In emphasizing the popular-social constitution of these movements and the fact that they are not orchestrated by power structures by the state, they are also described as “grassroots” movements.

In the present neoliberal conjuncture however, a somewhat different alignment of social, political, and cultural forces has come to occupy the movement space across the countries of the MENA region. Similar developments may also be observed in other world regions as well.

This is best described as the phenomenon of “elite revolts,” or social movements comprised primarily of individuals and groups who presently *do* command access to (some form of) resources and power,
and whose demands and claims are consequently framed not in terms of inclusion, redistribution, and recognition, but their opposite: either exclusion and/or status maintenance. Examples include ethno-majoritarian movements involving the mobilization of majority communities that already enjoy social, economic and political privilege; the proliferation of “middle class activism” among white-collar professionals; movements that support the state, the military, the religious clergy, and other establishment forces; vigilante activism; and movements coordinated and funded by organized national and transnational NGOs.

At the same time however, the “politics of the dispossessed” has assumed a new urgency and a new visibility in the present context. While elite revolts of the kinds described above are familiar and influential presences in the political arena, they are not alone. From public rallies of illegal immigrants in the United States to mass protests by dispossessed peasants in Asia against state and corporate takeovers of their land to create “special” economic zones for global capital, the new modes of exclusion and disempowerment created by the neoliberal order have also created different opportunities and new practices for political engagement and assertion by marginalized populations. As scholars from Latin America and the MENA region have suggested, social movements do have the potential to create alternatives to the seemingly “impersonal” market forces that impose themselves globally through neoliberal politics and structures. There are numerous important examples of such “experiments in freedom” that are presently taking place in locations as varied as Diyarbakir, Turkey and Chiapas, Mexico. Alternative movements seem to create spaces (rather than institutions) in which new modes of relating can prosper. These and other instances call for sustained comparative and theoretical reflection on the conditions of possibility—as also the obstacles that attend—efforts to move beyond the violence and inequality of neoliberal order.

Through a comparative, cross-regional investigation of such phenomena, the workshop will chart the complex movement politics of neoliberalism, pinpoint similarities in the modified conditions under which grassroots action takes place across the globe and develop a fine-grained understanding of the dynamics of continuity and change, i.e. whether and how the mobilizational strategies, organizational structures, cultural practices, and political-ethical goals and implications of social movements in contemporary contexts differ from the movement politics of earlier historical moments.

**Relevance to MENA Scholarship**

There are two main contributions that this workshop seeks to make to scholarship on the MENA region. First, we direct attention to the study of social movements in the region, a topic that has been surprisingly undertheorized in the existing area-studies literature. While the workshop focuses on the present conjuncture of neoliberalism and the kinds of “new social movements” that are emerging in the current context, the assessment of the distinction or novelty of these movements requires an engagement with the historical trajectories of social movements in MENA countries. Differently put, the present context of neoliberalism is a prism through which participants will be invited to examine the historical constitution and transformations of social movements in MENA countries.

Reliable research on social movements in MENA remains limited to monographs on particular movements, disproportionately focusing on Islamic groups over the past decade. They have often proceeded under other—and very separate—rubrics, for e.g. “the rise of political Islam,” or “nationalist mobilization” or “secessionist/autonomy movements”. Although several publications focus on civil society associations (NGOs), they do not extensively cover social movements. Democratization studies also tend to focus on state-society or state-citizen relations only. Neither do individual studies of different movements in different countries have a broad-based or theoretical
engagement. In short, there is a lacuna in academic research on social movements other than the Islamic movement in the MENA. For theoretical and empirical reasons, it is important to bring these all together in a common discussion, since with the advent of global neoliberalism, these formations/phenomena now seem interrelated.

Second, we bring comparative, cross-regional perspectives to bear on developments in the MENA region. In particular, we focus on world regions such as Latin America and Asia that are not usually referenced in MENA scholarship. The object here is not simply to introduce novelty and variation into the discussion, but to illuminate through “defamiliarization;” i.e. to see how a comparative engagement with social movements from Latin America and Asia can provide fresh insights about the dynamics of social change in the MENA region.

Research Themes

- Institutionalized groups (NGOs or other) and social movements
- Middle class activism, vigilante politics and establishment groups in the neoliberal era
- Violence, new social movements, and prospects for peace
- Neoliberalism and grassroots spaces of action: types of spaces of relation, organization and communication opened up by social movements
- Inequality and new social movements
- Local vs. international dimensions of new social movements
- Alternative political, social or economic structures emerging from new social movements: forms of organization, discourses, modes of relating, producing and exchanging
- Relation between states and social movements in the neoliberal era: conflict, manipulation, co-option, silencing?
- Modes of belonging, leadership and exclusion within social movements
- The role of religion in the formation and expansion of social movements

Anticipated Participation

We expect the workshop to appeal to scholars who are interested in engaging in comparative and cross-regional exchanges of knowledge across the MENA, Latin America, and Asia world regions.

In terms of scholarly background, we expect the workshop to attract scholars and researchers from a wide range of social science and humanities related disciplines, since the topic under discussion lends itself to multi-layered analysis. Thus, sociology, anthropology, political science, history, communication, cultural studies, geography, urban studies, and gender studies among others have significant contributions to make to the discussion at hand.
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**Directors’ individual paper abstracts**

**Middle Class Activism and the Politics of Neoliberalism**

Srirupa Roy

This paper explores the new practices, aspirations, and meanings of political agency in the era of economic liberalization. Through a specific focus on middle class youth movements in urban India, I chart how the emergence and consolidation of the “new middle classes” in the context of neoliberal economic reform in India has restructured democratic political practice and reauthorized political agency in unanticipated and ultimately adverse ways. I argue that the ascendancy of such “middle class activism” has meant a gradual but unmistakable devaluation of the politics of mass representation and the legitimization of a new form of non-representative, and “anti-political” politics. Transformation is a central theme in this essay. The task at hand is to map the new political landscape of economic liberalization. But like the category of youth itself, new India is both a sociological fact and a performative claim. Although there is plenty of evidence of social, political, economic, and cultural change throughout the country, there are also many reminders that we are traveling down well-trodden paths. Accordingly while documenting disjuncture and change this essay also concerns itself with the continuities of political discourse and practice—the fact that middle class youth movements are embedded within and informed by old and familiar structures and practices of inequality, violence, and exclusion.

While based on primary ethnographic research material from India, the paper situates the experiences of middle class youth activism in India within a broader framework. I draw upon analogous formations in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America to develop a comparative account of the relationship between economic liberalization and democratic praxis.
Grassroots Movements and Politics of Place in Turkey and Mexico

Zeynep Gambetti

This paper will explore two examples of collective action and participatory democracy that have attracted much attention in academic as well as alternative circles: the Zapatista autonomous administration in the Chiapas region and the recent mobilization of teachers and locals in the city of Oaxaca, both in Mexico. The aim is to compare these cases with various forms of grassroots democracy in Turkey. The example set by Diyarbakır, where an urban space ravaged by fighting and ideological colonization was re-appropriated and reinvested by local cultural elements and where a public space of action and communication was created among a plurality of actors, lends itself particularly well to this type of comparison. The study is expected to shed light on the mechanisms, forms of interaction and institutional dynamics through which a city or a region can possibly become an alternative political space in which differences are “translated” into communalities instead of hostilities, and in which individuals form other kinds of alliances than those dictated by nationalist or ideological discourses. The study is also likely to reveal the limits of collective action, as well as the possible pitfalls and obstacles in the way of participatory democracy in the present neoliberal era.