

Conceptualizing Generations and Protests

Mark Muhannad Ayyash and Ratiba Hadj-Moussa

This book examines the relations between generations and protests in the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) and the Mediterranean. Most of the work on recent protests in these regions insists on the newness of their expressive forms but leave unexplored the various links that exist between them and the social, historical and political configurations that preceded them. The articulation between generations and protests, we argue, relies at once on historical ties and their rejection. It is, indeed, precisely this tension that the chapters of the book will address in documenting several case studies that highlight the processes by which generations and protests are connected.

The recent events in the MENA and the Mediterranean brought to the forefront the question of youth engagement and the development of new forms of protest. In public discourse, social media has been regarded as the principal means through which various groups with opposing interests have aggregated and represented a novel way to entice and maintain popular mobilizations. While the academic focus on information technology in 21st century protests has been discussed and sometimes criticized (Tilly and Wood 2009, 98; Kluber 2011; Ayari 2011), the demonstration of the interconnectedness between different protest ‘moments’ or constellations on a diachronic axis remains extremely thin if not absent. The aim of this book is to inquire and problematize the relations that exist between different periods of protest, the type of actors they mobilize and the processes of memory they generate in the MENA and the Mediterranean regions. Although there is no clear line between these periods, as will become evident in the following chapters, we contend that forms of legacies and relations are at play in the configuration of popular protests, each with its own temporal and spatial specificity. Whether it is the legacy of early twentieth century anarchist thought in Spain, the legacies of the Iraq War in Syria or the monumental history in Algeria, we argue that legacies and relations across complex temporal and spatial standpoints are not a given and that their actualization require a close analytical scrutiny. Indeed, whether accepted or adopted, legacies are sites of contention, formulation and reformulation.

The focus on the MENA and the Mediterranean is not incidental and requires much attention in so far as the countries of these regions have been described as dominated by neo-patrimonialism, tribalism as well as by

totalitarian and authoritarian regimes that quashed contestation in its embryonic state, thus repressing and oppressing the populations for long periods of time. The extents to which this view predominates for each specific state and region discussed in this book will of course vary, but the general gist of this view nevertheless prevails, and always in relation to Western Europe and North America as the measure or standard against which these regions and states are judged. Such an interpretation partially faded with the events of the Arab Uprisings, but has arguably returned to its full force with more recent events, such as the discourse around the austerity measures in Italy, Spain and Greece, and the rise of Da'esh in the MENA. However, even when the Eurocentric and dominant interpretation of these regions did partially fade, it effectively called in reverse for the term 'generation' to explain this 'sudden awakening' of these regions.

Far from considering the term generation as a buzzword, there is a need to reassess it in light of the recent popular protests and conversely to analyze the latter through its lenses. What does the use of (new) generation bring to scholarly understanding of the protests and the ability to articulate them? The social sciences have been reluctant to limit the concept of generation to its integrative function and to factors such as age, location or historical conditions, nor have they totally accepted that the notion of 'contemporaneity' (Mannheim 1964 [1927]), which putatively federates specific groups of social actors, to be a strong analytical tool. However, without neglecting or refuting the contemporaneity that may (re)unite dispersed groups belonging to the same age cohorts or otherwise divided by their age but sharing the same 'spirit,' or the historical conditions that are constitutive in the production of a generation, considering the shared experience of various groups seems to provide a more complex understanding of the phenomenon. Indeed, not only does the shared experience refer to the contextual historical conditions but it also points to the reflexive capacity of actors who identify themselves (even marginally) as pertaining to the same generation (Eyerman and Turner 1998).

Based on both empirical and theoretical categories, the experience through which a generation is produced and maintained is thus located in opposition to intergenerational continuity and memory. This begs the question as to whether the closure that defines a generation configures the flux of social change or constitutes an analytical category in which recede unceasingly 'memories,' 'lessons from the past,' 'genealogies of remembrance,' 'ways of thinking,' and 'ways of doing.' If social change is inevitable, then how are histories of contestations and protests understood by the 'now' or 'new' generation? What roles do such histories play in the process of generational formation? Is the process of anamnesis, of selective forgetfulness of the past, a strategic recalling which