



Rethinking Political Agency in the Middle East | Workshop Abstracts

written by Allegra
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Over the next two days, Allegra will be busy reporting on the international workshop *Rethinking political agency in the Middle East: Engaging political anthropology* which is taking place in Fiesole at the [European University Institute](#). The workshop intends to bring ethnographic research in the Middle East into conversation with anthropological debate on political agency. To know more about the ideas that are feeding this discussion, have a look at our previous post [here](#). And to give you a foretaste of the conversation about to unfold, below



is the list of abstracts. For those interested in the topic, you can get some soundbites of the workshop on Allegra's [Twitter](#) account by following the hashtag #PolAgency today and tomorrow!

Alessandro Monsutti

Beyond the Middle East: The Moral and Immoral Economy of Migration among Afghans in Europe

The current mass influx in Europe of people fleeing violence and poverty is framed in public discourses in terms of 'crisis.' This narrative tends to obscure both long and recent social, political and economic dynamics that have led to such a situation. Forced displacements of populations – be they Palestinians, Afghans, Iraqis, or Syrians – that marked the broader Middle East have to be situated in the *longue durée* of colonisation, decolonisation and the Cold War. Afghans have consistently constituted during the last decades one of the single largest groups of asylum seekers in European countries. They are embedded in a subtle mix of competition and moral economy. On the one hand, trying to find protection in Europe is conceived as a school of life where only the fittest will succeed. On the other hand, mobility and dispersion are seen as a means to spread risk; it represents a kind of social, economic and political insurance. Mobile people are invested in the double mission to prove their individual value and prepare a better future for their community. Twenty-five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new hierarchies have emerged in a global landscape of exclusion. Can transborder mobility be conceived as a political act, a subversion of the state order of things, a way of contesting the growing level of inequality that characterize today's world?



[Antonio De Lauri](#)

Systems of dependence, atomization and the absence of political action among Pakistani brick kiln workers

Moving beyond the isolated-victim paradigm typical of most modern slavery discourses, this paper takes into account the “voice” of both the bonded workers and the kiln owners in order to understand the social nature of debt bondage. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the Pakistani Punjab, this paper explores how, under conditions of extreme dependence, workers end up to (paradoxically) think at their future in individualistic terms. Brick kiln workers generally recognise a significant absence of freedom over their whole life, due to cycles of debt. Such a perception of “absence” is, however, very rarely translated into participation in concrete action for labour rights or into the production of any political commitment to collective social emancipation. Indeed, in the Pakistani Punjab there seems to be a profoundly rooted overlap between the absence of freedom and the absence of social and political action (unless it is promoted by external actors such as NGOs or, to a lesser extent, labour unions) aimed at subverting the dynamics of bondage. In this paper, rather than addressing such an important topic in terms of (the lack of) social class consciousness – something that may be useful but is somehow alien in the Punjabi brick kiln context – I focus on the relationship between “free choice”, dependence and atomization. I will show how dependence may be seen as a social system of survival in conditions of poverty and, simultaneously, as a social mechanism that enables human exploitation.

[Deniz Gökalp](#)

International State-Building in Iraqi Kurdistan: Contention, Protest and



Government Retaliation

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of state failure and political contention amidst international attempts to introduce neoliberal reforms to liberate and democratize a region following a military intervention. It is based on the findings of a fieldwork and sociological analysis focused on the international parallel state-building in Iraqi Kurdistan. As the two dominant Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq have been forced into an uneasy collaboration to convince the international community of the possibility of an independent democratic Kurdistan with safe and open markets, the unequal distribution of economic resources, competition for rent, nepotism and privileges granted to the foreign businesses have introduced new dynamics of oppression and resentment into the Iraqi Kurdish society. Concomitantly, in the relatively peaceful environment of Iraqi Kurdistan, the optimism associated with the American occupation and the increasing popularity of the western discourses about human rights and democracy have opened an imaginary political space for the freedom of expression. Political and social issues such as the two-party domination, tribal conflicts, corruption, and political and gender-based violence that plagued the region since the 1990s started to be discussed in the increasingly diverse media outlets whilst street protests have become a part of the routine politics practiced by ordinary people including industrial workers, university students and women. Drawing on the insights extracted from the literature dealing with the international state-building experiences through military intervention and the recent revolutions and political turmoil in the Middle East, this paper provides a provisional examination of the wide-spread political contention and the government retaliation against it in Iraqi Kurdistan.



Marriage “shariah style”: decolonizing public life and ordinary ethics in the UK

In England, the visible presence of Islam in public has triggered popular anxieties around identity and the place of religion in the political and social life of the country. The British government’s current policies toward refugees and Muslims reflect the broader upsurge of nationalism and islamophobia noticeable across Europe. In this presentation, I use ethnographic data collected during 12 months of fieldwork in London to document the various ways in which 2nd and 3rd generation “post-migrant” Muslims contribute to the emergence of a new public culture which is neither anchored in Western liberal tradition nor in reading of Islam imported from ‘the Middle East’ or elsewhere. I use the examples of a Muslim speed-dating event and other Muslim matrimonial services to unpack some of the social dynamics through which moral categories dictated by the shariah are transformed into cultural and identity labels visible in public space. In counterpoint to recent studies on Islamic morality that focus on the “ethical formation” of the subject through the pursuit of virtuous dispositions (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Agrama 2010), I envision young British Muslims’ quest for the “good ethical life” as a decolonizing project which involves finding a balance between values that are not all necessarily dictated by faith. These embodied practices reveal the fragmented and ambivalent nature of modern subjectivities based on the coexistence of contrasted motivations, objectives, identities and de-territorialized moral imaginaries. It is this “moral flexibility” grounded in “ordinary ethics” which, I argue, best characterizes Islamic modernity. As Ghassan Hage suggests in a recent article published in *American Ethnologist* (2016), and in light of the practices that I describe in this paper, the rise of racist right-wing politics in Europe could be interpreted as the last reaction of a “dying domesticating colonialism”.



[Latif Taf](#)

Turkish-Kurdish Conflict, Nationalism and the Role of Diasporas

Based on the findings of multi-sited qualitative research with and amongst Kurdish communities in Turkey, Germany and the UK, the chapter challenges the conventional concept of diaspora by highlighting experiences of diaspora conditions, whether living in the so-called homeland (Turkey) as internally displaced or international migrants in Europe. Set against a long history of repression and various forms of statelessness, the Kurdish population's insecure relations with existing nation states (whether Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran or 'host societies') means that depending on where they live, Kurds have become nationalists as they focus their attention on the establishment of a safe and livable homeland. In recent decades, large numbers of Kurds have migrated from rural peasant conditions to become middle-class urban dwellers, and these migrants are especially influential as late-coming, but internationalising nationalists. While some Kurds favour plural democratic approaches, others think that Kurds need to become stronger nationalists if they are to escape from the hegemonies of existing nation-states. From tribal, local nationalism to the collective, constructive and plural nationalism has taken place with the help of the PKK movement in Turkey and Syria.

[Luigi Achilli](#)

Arab Spring in Jordan: a soft breeze or a prelude to the perfect storm?



In 2011, the Arab Spring has stormed over Jordan leaving the country apparently unharmed. Many political commentators and scholars of the Middle East have sought to solve this puzzle. But what if a political change has actually occurred?

The lack of a sustained protest does not mean that nothing happened. Lured by the spectacular clarity of political demonstrations and acts of violence that have dramatically upset other Middle East states, scholars and political analysts have, with few exemptions, missed the reverberation of the Arab Spring in Jordan. In particular, the Arab uprisings have given rise to al-Hirak— an array of locally based popular youth groups encompassing mainly, but not only, activists from tribal areas of Jordan. Unlike established legal opposition, many Hirak protesters have fiercely criticized the Hashemites, demanded the monarch's abdication, and called for the regime's end.

Even though al-Hirak did not generate the massive levels of mobilization seen elsewhere and vanished into a number of isolated and spontaneous protests, the political transformations it prompted may have introduced minute displacements in the way people imagine the state. This imagination may eventually pave the way for radical transformations in the near future. With my presentation, I will investigate the impact of Arab Spring in Jordan, its demise, and the new forms of political agency that it has elicited.

[Martyn Egan](#) (EUI RSCAS)

Bourdieu in Beirut: Wasta and Political Agency

The presentation will draw upon my research into the phenomenon of wasta (the use of connections to obtain scarce goods or services) within the Lebanese context, and will attempt to establish a specifically Bourdieusian approach to



political agency within the Middle East. I will attempt to demonstrate how the ways in which agents use *wasta* to achieve concrete goals in their social reproduction strategies represents a form of political agency specifically adjusted to structural aspects of the Lebanese state. Moreover, variance in mastery over the use of *wasta* can be related to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, and to the specific demands placed upon agents, which differ according to their location in Lebanon's social space. Analysis of *wasta* as a form of political agency thus provides an opportunity to transpose Bourdieu's own approach to overcoming the structure/agency dilemma to a contemporary Middle Eastern setting, providing a framework for understanding certain kinds of agency without falling back on culturalist explanations, and yet still rooted in an understanding of the historical trajectory of the state within the region.

[Mjriam Abu Samra](#)

Assessing Palestinian Youth Political Agency: Historical Achievements and the New Challenges of the Arab Spring

This paper focuses on Palestinian transnational student movements in different periods of the Palestinian struggle. It aims to analyse how Palestinian transnational student activism has contributed to the development of the political vision and discourse of the struggle in different times of Palestinian history, investigating the changes in the student movements' roles, contributions and strategies. This historical excursus serves to address the current weakness of the Palestinian transnational youth mobilisation and examine some of the recent efforts to revitalize youth political engagement in *shatat*. Taking the Palestinian Youth Movement as a case-study, this paper aims at highlighting the impact of the Arab revolutions on contemporary Palestinian youth's articulation of political



discourses and goals.

While the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) was the first Palestinian popular organisation established in the post-Nakba period, with solid grassroots bases, its role changed in the 1980s. Indeed, the PLO centralized structure and the gradual shift of its political vision formalised by the Oslo accord, negatively impacted on student contribution to the struggle and youth lost the role of “vanguard”.

However, the recent Arab revolutions have impacted on the strategies of contemporary Palestinian youth, which have articulated their discourses, vision and demands more “radically”. The most significant example of this re-founded political agency is the experience of the Palestinian Youth Movement.

Paul Anderson

Order and Disorder: The Politics of Everyday Life among Traders in Pre-Conflict Aleppo

This paper analyses the everyday practice of traders in Aleppo in 2008-09 as a form of civil and political life and agency under conditions of authoritarian rule. Many residents of Aleppo experienced authoritarian rule in this period as a “lack of order”, which they were conscious of themselves as embodying and reproducing in their own “chaotic” (*fawdawi*) navigations of urban, bureaucratic and political space. Conditions of disorder and informality were frequently understood to be one way in which the governing regime sought to reduce urban residents to non-citizens, and subjects of authoritarian power (Anderson forthcoming). This is in contrast to analyses of everyday life in the Middle East, such as Asef Bayat’s, which posit informality as a mode of resisting or



encroaching upon the state. Against this background, this paper analyses everyday practices which sought to perform spatio-moral “order” (*al-nizam*) – in shops and in relationships with customers and trading partners – as enacting a kind of civil agency. I document urban merchants’ conscious attempts to embody “order” and “civility” and theorise them as “performative and moral dimensions of citizenship” (Holston and Appadurai 1998), noting that they enact membership in an alternative moral and political community to one regulated by a state-centred bureaucratic order. While few urban merchants sought to enlarge the space for such forms of citizenship by taking part in uprisings against the Syrian regime in 2011, nevertheless, enactments of spatio-moral order may be relevant to understanding the forms of civil life and agency that emerge in Syria cities after the conflict.

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