

Life as Politics

How Ordinary People Change the Middle East

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PREFACE

THE ESSAYS compiled in this volume are about agency and change in the Muslim Middle East, the societies in which religion seems to occupy a prominent position. More specifically, they focus on the configuration of sociopolitical transformation brought about by internal social forces, by collectives and individuals. Here I focus on the diverse ways in which the ordinary people, the subaltern—the urban dispossessed, Muslim women, the globalizing youth, and other urban grass roots—strive to affect the contours of change in their societies, by refusing to exit from the social and political stage controlled by authoritarian states, moral authority, and neo-liberal economies, discovering and generating new spaces within which they can voice their dissent and assert their presence in pursuit of bettering their lives. The vehicles through which ordinary people change their societies are not simply audible mass protests or revolutions, even though they represent an aspect of popular mobilization; rather, people resort more widely to what I will elaborate as “nonmovements”—the collective endeavors of millions of noncollective actors, carried out in the main squares, back streets, courthouses, or communities. **This book, then, is about the “art of presence,” the story of agency in times of constraints.** The essays constitute the core of my reflections for the past decade or so on the social movements and nonmovements that are seen through the prism of historical specificity of the Muslim Middle East, yet ones that insist on both critical and constructive engagement with the prevailing social theory. By so doing my hope has been not only to produce rigorous empirical knowledge about social change in this complex region, but in the meantime to engage with and

x PREFACE

contribute to social theory in general. My wish is that this book might offer a Middle Eastern contribution, however modest, to scholarly debates on social movements and social change.

politics of dissent in the Muslim Middle East particular characteristics. Notwithstanding its characterization as “passive and dead” or “rowdy and dangerous,” the “Arab street” exhibited a fundamental vitality and vigor in the aftermath of 9/11 events and the occupation of Iraq, despite the Middle East’s regimes’ continuous surveillance of political dissent. However, much mobilizational energy is spent on nationalistic and anti-imperialist concerns at the expense of the struggle for democracy at home. Even though street politics in the Arab world has assumed some innovations in strategy, methods, and constituencies, it remains overwhelmed by the surge of religio-nationalist politics. Yet it is naive to conclude a priori that the future belongs to Islamist politics. The fact is that Islamism itself is undergoing a dramatic shift in its underlying ideals and strategies. Thus, while Islam continues to play a major mobilizational role, the conditions for the emergence of Iranian-type Islamic revolutions seem to have been exhausted. I suggest that the evolving domestic and global conditions, namely, the tendency toward legalism and reformist politics, individualization of piety, and transnationalization (both the objectives and the actors) among radical trends, tend to favor not Islamic revolutions, but some of kind of “post-Islamist refolutions”—a type of indigenous political reform marked by a blend of democratic ideals and, possibly, religious sensibilities. Given the continuous authoritarian rule that curbs organized and legal opposition movements, the social *nonmovements* of fragmented and inaudible collectives may play a crucial role in instigating such a transformation.

SOCIAL NONMOVEMENTS

What are the “social nonmovements”? In general, *nonmovements* refers to the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations. The term *movement* implies that social nonmovements enjoy significant, consequential elements of social movements; yet they constitute distinct entities.

In the Middle East, the nonmovements have come to represent the mobilization of millions of the subaltern, chiefly the urban poor, Muslim women, and youth. The nonmovement of the urban dispossessed, which I have termed the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” encapsulates the discreet and prolonged ways in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by

quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful, and on society at large. It embodies the protracted mobilization of millions of detached and dispersed individuals and families who strive to enhance their lives in a lifelong collective effort that bears few elements of pivotal leadership, ideology, or structured organization. More specifically, I am referring to the mass movement of rural migrants who, in a quest for a better life-chance, embark on a steady and strenuous campaign that involves unlawful acquisition of lands and shelters, followed by such urban amenities as electricity, running water, phone lines, paved roads, and the like. To secure paid work, these migrants take over street sidewalks and other desirable public spaces to spread their vending businesses, infringing on and appropriating popular labels to promote their merchandise. Scores of people subsist on turning the public streets into parking spaces for private gains, or use sidewalks as sites for outdoor workshops and other businesses. These masses of largely atomized individuals, by such parallel practices of everyday encroachments, have virtually transformed the large cities of the Middle East and by extension many developing countries, generating a substantial outdoor economy, new communities, and arenas of self-development in the urban landscapes; they inscribe their active presence in the configuration and governance of urban life, asserting their “right to city.”

This kind of spread-out and encroachment reflects in some way the non-movements of the international illegal migrants. There exist now a massive border check, barriers, fences, walls, and police patrol. And yet they keep flooding—through the air, sea, road, hidden in back of trucks, trains, or simply on foot. They spread, expand, and grow in the cities of the global North; they settle, find jobs, acquire homes, form families, and struggle to get legal protection. They build communities, church or mosque groups, cultural collectives, and visibly flood the public spaces. As they feel safe and secure, they assert their physical, social and cultural presence in the host societies. Indeed, the anxiety that these both national and international migrants have caused among the elites are remarkably similar. Cairo elite lament about the ‘invasion of fallahin’ (peasants) from the dispersed Upper Egyptian countryside, and Istanbul elite warn of the encroachment of the ‘black Turks,’ meaning poor rural migrants from Anatolia, who, they say, have altogether ruralized and transformed the social configuration of “our modern cities.” In a strikingly similar tone, white European elites express profound anxiety about the ‘invasion of foreigners’—Africans, Asians, and in particular Muslims—who they see as having overwhelmed Europe’s social habitat, distorting the European

way of life by their physical presence and cultural modes—their hijab, mosques and minarets. Truth is, rhetoric notwithstanding, the encroachment is real and is likely to continue. The struggles of such migrant poor in the Middle East or those of the international migrants constitute neither an organized and self-conscious social movement nor a coping mechanism, since people's survival is not at the cost of themselves but of other groups or classes. These practices also move beyond simple acts of everyday resistance, for they engage in surreptitious and incremental encroachments to further their claims. Rather, they exemplify a poor people's nonmovement.

It is often claimed that radical Islamism in the Middle East voices the interests of the poor as the victim of the urban ecology of overcrowded slums, where poverty, anomie, and lawlessness nurture extremism and violence, of which militant Islamism is a variant. But this view finds less plausibility when it is tested against the general reluctance of the urban poor to lend ideological support to this or that political movement. A pragmatic politics of the poor, one that ensures tackling concrete and immediate concerns, means that political Islam plays little part in the habitus of the urban disenfranchised. The underlying politics of the poor is expressed not in political Islam, but in a poor people's "nonmovement"—the type of fluid, flexible, and self-producing strategy that is adopted not only by the urban poor, but also by other subaltern groups, including middle-class women.

Under the authoritarian patriarchal states, whether secular or religious, women's activism for gender equality is likely to take on the form of non-movement. Authoritarian regimes and conservative men impose severe restrictions on women making gender claims in a sustained fashion—establishing independent organizations and publications, lobbying, managing public protests, mobilizing ordinary women, acquiring funding and resources, or establishing links with international solidarity groups. In the Iran of early 2007, for instance, women activists who initiated a "million-signature campaign"—to involve ordinary women nationally against misogynous laws—encountered constant harassment, repression, and detention. Many young activists were beaten up, not only by morals police, but in some cases by their own male guardians. Recognizing such constraints on organized campaigns, women have tended to pursue a different strategy, one that involves intimately the mundane practices of everyday life, such as pursuing education, sports, arts, music, or working outside the home. These women did not refrain from performing the usually male work of civil servants, professionals, and public ac-

other passively and spontaneously—through “passive networks”—by sensing their commonalities through such methods as recognizing similar hairstyles, blue jeans, hang-out places, food, fashions, and the pursuit of public fun. In sum, just as with women and the poor, theirs was not a politics of protest, but of practice, a politics of redress through direct action.

While the battle over “fun” brings the globalizing urban youth to the center stage of political struggle against fundamentalist movements and regimes, youth nonmovements as such—those whose major preoccupation revolves around reclaiming youth habitus—should not necessarily be seen as the harbinger of democratic transformation, as it is often hoped. Youth may become agents of democratic change only when they act and think politically; otherwise, their preoccupation with their own narrow youthful claims may bear little impetus for engaging in broader societal concerns. In other words, the transforming or, in particular, democratizing effects of youth nonmovements depend partly on the capacity of adversarial regimes or states to accommodate youthful claims. Youth nonmovements, just like women’s nonmovements, follow a strong democratizing effect primarily when they challenge the narrow doctrinal foundations of the exclusivist fundamentalist regimes.

LOGIC OF PRACTICE IN NONMOVEMENTS

How do we explain the logic of practice in nonmovements? Social movements, especially those operating in the politically open and technologically advanced western societies, are defined as the “organized, sustained, self-conscious challenge to existing authorities.”²³ Very often, they are embedded in particular organizations and guided by certain ideologies; they pursue certain frames, follow specific leaderships, and adopt particular repertoires or means and methods of claim making.²⁴ What, then, differentiates the type of nonmovements that I have discussed here so far? What are the distinct features of nonmovements in general?

First, nonmovements, or the collective actions of noncollective actors, tend to be action-oriented, rather than ideologically driven; they are overwhelmingly quiet, rather than audible, since the claims are made largely individually rather than by united groups. Second, whereas in social movements leaders usually mobilize the constituencies to put pressure on authorities to meet their demands, in nonmovements actors directly practice what they claim, despite government sanctions. Thus, theirs is not a politics of protest,

but of practice, of redress through direct and disparate actions. Third, unlike social movements, where actors are involved usually in *extraordinary* deeds of mobilization and protestation that go beyond the routine of daily life (e.g., attending meetings, petitioning, lobbying, demonstrating, and so on), the nonmovements are made up of practices that are merged into, indeed are part and parcel of, the *ordinary* practices of everyday life. Thus, the poor people building homes, getting piped water or phone lines, or spreading their merchandise out in the urban sidewalks; the international migrants crossing borders to find new livelihoods; the women striving to go to college, playing sports, working in public, conducting “men’s work,” or choosing their own marriage partners; and the young appearing how they like, listening to what they wish, and hanging out where they prefer—all represent some core practices of nonmovements in the Middle East and similar world areas. The critical and fourth point is that these practices are not carried out by small groups of people acting on the political margins; rather, they are *common practices of everyday life* carried out by *millions of people who albeit remain fragmented*. In other words, the power of nonmovements does not lie in the unity of actors, which may then threaten disruption, uncertainty, and pressure on the adversaries. The power of nonmovements rests on the *power of big numbers*, that is, the consequential effect on norms and rules in society of many people simultaneously doing similar, though contentious, things.

What effect do “big numbers” have? To begin with, a large number of people acting in common has the effect of normalizing and legitimizing those acts that are otherwise deemed illegitimate. The practices of big numbers are likely to capture and appropriate spaces of power in society within which the subaltern can cultivate, consolidate, and reproduce their counterpower. Thus, the larger the number of women who assert their presence in the public space, the more patriarchal bastions they undermine. And the greater the number of the poor consolidating their self-made urban communities, the more limited the elite control of urban governance becomes. Second, even though these subjects act individually and separately, the effects of their actions do not of necessity fade away in seclusion. They can join up, generating a more powerful dynamic than their individual sum total. Whereas each act, like single drops of rain, singularly makes only *individual* impact, such acts produce larger spaces of alternative practices and norms when they transpire in big numbers—just as the individual wetting effects of billions of raindrops

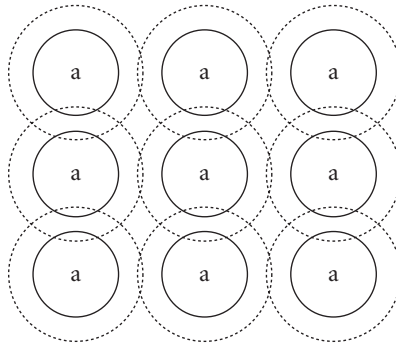


Figure 1.1. Power of big numbers: Exponential outcome of merging individual acts.

join up to generate creeks, rivers, and even floods and waves (Figure 1.1). Thus, what ultimately defines the power of nonmovements relates to the (intended and unintended) *consequences* of the similar practices that a “big number” of subjects simultaneously perform.

By thinking about nonmovements in this fashion, are we not in a sense conjuring up Hardt and Negri’s concept of *multitude*, which they define as “singularities of social subjects that act in common”? At first glance, the enormous magnitude as well as the fragmentation of social subjects associated with *multitude* reminds one of nonmovements and the “power of big numbers.” But the resemblance stops there. Unlike the categories of *working class*, *people*, or *mass*, which are marked by sameness and shared identities, *multitude* is made up of “singularities,” or dissimilar or nonidentical social subjects, a mix of different social groups, gender clusters, or sexual orientations that are ontologically different (Figure 1.2). Their apparent similarity, in Hardt and Negri’s view, lies in their producing “immaterial labor” and standing opposed to the “empire.”²⁵ Thus, whereas *multitude* is assumed to bring together singular and ontologically different social subjects (men, women, black, white, various ethnicities, etc.), nonmovements galvanize members of the same, even though internally fragmented, groups (e.g., globalizing youth, Muslim women, illegal migrants, or urban poor), who act in common, albeit often individually. While in nonmovements, collective action is a function of shared interests and identities within a single group, especially when confronted by a common threat, in a multitude, it is not clear precisely how the singular components are to come and act together, and how these different groups (e.g., men and women, native working class and migrant workers, or dominant