It's Time to Talk about Youth in the Middle East as *The Precariat*[1]

Linda Herrera

In 2011, the year of the Arab uprisings, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* by Guy Standing hit the bookstands. The concept *precariat* describes the condition of life and labour among educated urbanized youth in the twenty-first century more lucidly and persuasively than the key policy literature on the region, as exemplified in *The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2016:*

Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality. This paper argues that any meaningful conceptualization of youth in North Africa and West Asia going forward should incorporate the notion of *precariat* and the condition of precariousness.

Keywords: Youth; Precarity; Arab Uprisings; Policy; Dignity

Today's youth have been cast in a condition of liminal drift, with no way of knowing whether it is transitory or permanent. (Bauman 76).

In 2011, the year of the Arab uprisings, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* by Guy Standing hit the bookstands. Standing, a labour economist and Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), gives a name and policy context to a new global class of people who labor in circumstances of extreme structural insecurity, whose lives are "fleeting and flexible, opportunistic rather than progressively constructed" (Standing, *The Precariat* 223). Like Standing, the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman was weary of the destructive effects of globalized modernity on the world's youth. He wrote about youth as being cast into an ocean of "liminal drift" (Bauman 76), a metaphor which unfortunately has taken on a literal meaning as growing numbers of young people risk perilous journeys across seas and land in search of a tenable and dignified life.

Drawing on decades of work at the International Labour Organization (ILO), Standing identifies the precariat as a growing global class who suffer from "the

4 A's—anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation" (*The Precariat* 33). He recognizes that precarity is a condition that afflicts women and men across generations, but emphasizes its particular toll on youth ("Why the precariat"; *The Corruption*). We should stress that Standing's ideas particularly pertain to *educated, credentialed* and to some degree, *urbanized* youth. This demographic cohort often gets subsumed under the title of millennials, born roughly between 1982 to 2002. We might very well call emerging generations, *the precariats* or *the precarious generation*. A large swath of these under-35s have played by the rules of supposed meritocratic systems of education, often at great cost and sacrifice to themselves and their families. Yet at the end of long, expensive and laborious educational journeys, they "are not offered a reasonable bargain" (Standing, *The Precariat* 112).

Standing, while by no means a specialist on the Middle East region, what I prefer to designate as North Africa and West Asia (NAWA), describes the condition of life and labor among educated urbanized youth in the twenty-first century more lucidly and persuasively than the key policy experts on the region. The main argument here is that any meaningful conceptualization of, and engagement with, youth

and generations in NAWA going forward should incorporate the notion of *precariat* and the condition of precariousness.

Precarious—an Evolution

The word precarious has undergone a significant shift in meaning and usage since it first entered the English lexicon in the 17th century (Gilliver). Precarious derives from the Latin word *prex* or *prec* (prayer). In its early usage in the 1640s, *precarius* [*sic*] referred to something "obtained through prayer or supplication," such as the right to occupy land or hold a position. These favors were "given 'at the pleasure of' another person, who might simply choose to take it back at any time" (Gilliver). In this sense, people who were neither protected by laws, nor afforded rights of citizenship and due process, had to turn to God and the propertied and positioned class to secure some degree of security. By 1680 the word evolved to mean "dependent on the will of another." This element of dependency carried an inherent association with a "risky, dangerous, uncertain" situation (Online Etymology Dictionary). From the 20th century, the meaning of precarious shifted away from human relations of dependency and whim, to refer to insecurity resulting from physical danger. For instance, precarity would result from an "unsound, unsafe, rickety" structure

(Oxford English Dictionary). In the post-9/11 period in the United States, the term entered critical social theory, most notably with Judith Butler's work, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Butler looks at how the 9/11 terrorist event unleashed a transnational chain of precarity for victims and perpetrators of violence. In 2011, Guy Standing brought the term into the realms of social policy, political economy, sociology and labor economics. Over the course of three decades, Standing has observed the gradual closing of the commons, the disenfranchisement of workers and demise of citizen rights and due process. These changes have occurred in a global context in which unions and other forms of organizing have faced growing assaults. He has watched the nature of work fundamentally change with the spectacular spread of digital technologies and automation. Taking all these transformations into consideration, Standing merged the words *precarious*, the overwhelming feature of work in the 21st century, with *proletariat*, a class designation, into *the precariat*. That term was evidently coined a decade earlier in Italian as *il precariato* following the 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa (Breman), but Standing substantiated it with reams of economic data and political and historical context.

Standing's critics have taken issue with his notion that the precariat might constitute an emerging global class. They argue that he misunderstands the nature of *class* and that he is too Eurocentric since he draws considerably—though not exclusively—on data from the *Global North* (Breman; Munck). Theses critiques have some validity, but they tend to miss the point. Standing is not talking about class in a traditional Marxian sense. Rather, he provides a language to make visible a widespread pattern of insecurity and anxiety connected to changing structures of work and rights. As more people recognize precarity as a common condition, as they understand the structures, policies and norms that perpetuate it, they can potentially build movements and tools to collectively confront and change it. Standing insists that the precariat "is a classinthe-making, is the first mass class in history that has systematically been losing rights built up for citizens" (Standing, "Why the precariat"). His observations and arguments are especially germane to the study of youth in the 21st century.

Youth and Precarity
The first reason for the need for a reconceptualization of youth to *include the precariat* has to do with ideology and the ubiquity of the idea that "there is no alternative" (TINA) to the market. In the past three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the language and logic of markets has seeped into all forms of social and economic policy, crowding out other ways of imagining and organizing the world. States, civil society, Islamist movements, non-governmental organizations, global finance organizations, United Nations bodies and even youth activists, have all more or less reinforced policies that steer children and youth into a neoliberal global order. They support policies of consumerism, marketing, and economic growth over more sustainable and fairer alternatives. In areas of citizenship and democracy, they advocate the individual's right to express herself and to self-identify with discreet gender and ethnic categories as a sort of substitute to building public culture, deliberating across lines of difference and organizing for political and social change. In other words, a range of actors support the fragmentation of the polity into micro sub-groups and the normalization of market-oriented neoliberal subjectivities.

In the MENA region, two major events have generated tensions within a market and individualized discourse and policy on youth. First, the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, ushered in a more explicit security orientation towards Muslim youth, particularly in the Muslim majority countries of the Middle East and West Asia. Young people became matters of containment and security, in addition to retaining their positions as consumers, individuals and workers in a globalized economy (Bayat and Herrera; Sukarieh and Tannock). In the ensuing years, it was common to read about young people as the *Generation in Waiting* (Dhillon and Yousef).[2] The logic was that while young people were waiting for jobs and opportunities, they were in need of interventions to offset the potential lure of extremism and radicalization. Ironically, there was little acknowledgement of the effects of western-led wars, arms sales, and foreign occupations on the lives, emotional development, political orientation and opportunities for young people. Instead, a spate of policies from the international community and NGO sectors insisted on programs for democracy promotion, volunteerism and entrepreneurship, which were connected in various ways to youth lifestyles and consumerism.[3]

Second, and apparently without warning, in 2011, millions of people poured into streets across the Arab states demanding "bread, freedom and social justice." Young people led the calls against their auto-

cratic rulers. Together with other segments of the population—factory workers, members of professional associations, women, the elderly, children, the retired—they demanded justice, the rule of law, the right to live with dignity and to secure livelihoods. The western media and scholarly community initially celebrated the *Arab Spring* and rebranded young people in the region as "non-violent champions of democracy" and the tech savvy and liberal "Facebook youth."[4] However, as counter-revolution set in in Egypt and several states spiraled into war, with Syria, Yemen, and Libya becoming sites of proxy wars, unbridled violence and failed states, the initial enthusiasm for the uprisings abated. The old paradigms for youth containment and development quickly made a comeback.

Business as Usual: The 2016 Arab Human Development Report on Youth

The international community continued its development agenda as if the uprisings, the most momentous grassroots political event in the region in over a half century, had not even occurred. *The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, stands as a case in point. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has produced The

Arab Human Development Reports every five years since 2002. These reports, authored by groups of experts from and on the region, are designed to build partnerships with local stakeholders and to serve as the "instruments for measuring human progress and triggering action for change." They specifically provide guidelines for "region-specific approaches to human rights, poverty, education, economic reform, HIV/AIDS, and globalization" (UNDP).

The 2016 AHDR report on youth, released roughly six years after the start of the Arab uprisings, was an opportune moment for development scholars and policy experts to reflect on the seismic shifts occurring in societies across the region. The uprisings were a clarion call from millions of people, and especially young people, that *business as usual* can no longer be an option. Unfortunately, the opportunity was missed, and the AHDR 2016 instead put forward the old prescriptive model of development, amidst overwhelming evidence of its decay and failure.

The concepts, *participation, empowerment* and *youth agency,* frame the policy conversation on youth. These concepts derive from a human development and human capabilities approach which dates

to the 1990s. A passage from the introductory chapter reads:

> Like its predecessors, this sixth AHDR is grounded in a concept of human development that embraces human freedom as a core value. […] A central cross-cutting concept in the AHDR 2016 is youth empowerment […] Key to this concept is a sense of agency, whereby Youth themselves become resolute actors in the process of change. The concept is embedded in self-reliance and based on the realization that young people can take charge of their own lives and become effective agents of change. (25).

By borrowing the market language of choice and individual agency, this definition obscures the notion of *power,* the very core of the word *empowerment*. In fact, it excises politics and *power relations* from the act of empowerment. Instead, the report places the *individual* at front and center, relegating the *collective, the social, the community*, to the shadows. The authors further obfuscate the potentials of youth collective struggle by using the terms *youth* and *young people* interchangeably. The term *young people* denotes human beings of a particular age with no especial relation to history. *Youth*,

on the other hand, signifies a social collectivity similar to a social class or an ethnic group. A group by definition harbors a consciousness of itself as sharing certain features and interests, and thereby occupies a distinct place in the power structure and the historical process.

The message to young people is that they should pull themselves together, become more self-reliant and take charge of their individual lives. In other words, they should become effective agents of change irrespective of structural impediments, lack of support by governments or other institutions, and without turning to politics and organizing. This skewed framing of empowerment advances a model of development in which young people are nudged to break their collective bonds with each other in exchange for facing the future as competing individuals.

Who, we might ask, are the experts who are perpetuating and reproducing these ideas? The production and editorial processes of these reports are murky at best. After the 2016 youth report was released, three of the authors of Chapter 4, "The new dynamics in the inclusion and empowerment of young women," wrote an essay expressing their misgivings about the editorial process. They were

concerned after long passages of their chapter on young women were removed from the report without explanation, thereby altering the meaning and spirit of the chapter. They explain:

> Large sections of our text had been excised, including one in which we gave examples of ways in which young women transgress norms surrounding marriage and heteronormativity; another dedicated to young women as producers of culture; and a further section about online activism. …[O]ur chapter ended up in an obscure editorial process that lacked any proper consultation or transparency. …It is our understanding that several Arab ambassadors were involved in the process of reviewing the report. (Al-Ali, Ali and Marler).

These authors draw attention to the politics and hierarchies of knowledge production in a multilateral institution. They also help to clarify why a reader of the report encounters contradictory positions and perspectives. In total, 74 people are listed as contributing or advising on the report in some capacity, broken down as follows: 14 members of the core team, 18 background paper authors, 8 members of a readers group, 13 UNDP regional bureau

representatives, and 21 members of a youth consultative group. This collection of people reflects a diversity of opinions, ideological positions and disciplinary differences and priorities.

Despite the din of so many voices, one can distill the big ideas that underpin the major policy priorities around youth. The first pertains to the persistent security concerns, translated to the idea that youth should be the peacebuilders and peacemakers. The second big idea relates to education and its connection to markets and economic growth. The third big ideas pertains to youth entrepreneurship, the seeming panacea for all forms of economic, social and political reform.

Wars and Repression are not Compatible with Youth Peacemaking
The 2016 youth report grew out of the August 2015 UN Global Forum on Youth Peace and Security in Amman, Jordan. Following this event the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2250 of 9 December 2015, which urges "Member States to consider ways to give youth a greater voice in decision-making at the local, national, regional and international levels." The resolution highlights, "the threat to stability and development posed by the rise of radical-

ization among young people," and calls for more youth representation as *peace builders* (UN Resolution 2250).

Policies that position youth as so called "empowered peace makers" without addressing massive arms sales, the proliferation of militias and weaponry across the region, contexts of extreme insecurity, the repressive policies of government and occupying regimes, disregard reality in favor of decontextualized ideology. The section of the Security Council Resolution 2250 that deals with prevention of youth violence is a case in point. The resolution stresses:

the importance of creating policies for youth that would positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts, including social and economic development, supporting projects designed to grow local economies, and provide youth employment opportunities and vocational training, fostering their education, and promoting youth entrepreneurship and constructive political engagement (Article 11).

What, for instance, does "constructive political engagement" mean in states where young citizens lead exceedingly politically precarious lives; where they get arrested, disappeared and tortured for as little as retweeting a comment, standing in a public space to protest an injustice, posting a political joke on Facebook, or dancing in public?[5] On a different but related note, how can young people find a real place at the table of peace negotiations and peace-building during times of extreme destabilization and militarism, as in Syria, Palestine, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan, to name just some of the countries being decimated by warfare, conflict and extreme forms of surveillance and repression? In the absence of any real recognition of geopolitics and pressure on the actors who are creating the situation of violence and repression, the idea of youth empowerment and youth peace-making rings hollow.

Education is Not About Markets

For decades, the mainstream international policy community has been relegating education and formalized learning to a domain of the market. It has focused obsessively on educational outputs, testing, privatization and related goals such as youth entrepreneurship. In this conceptualization, young lives become themselves market commodities and a survival-of-the-fittest mentality reigns (Giroux). For critical and engaged educators, it has been a matter of great dismay to witness the ways in which research and policy have narrowly reduced educational institutions to supposed sites of job preparation and markets. The AHDR 2016 follows a pattern of un-problematically correlating education with jobs and the demands of the labor market. The authors of the report reveal ways in which they are driven by an ideology of markets and accountancy principles of inputs and outputs, rather than respect for the dignity of children, youth and concern for the well-being of their communities and societies. They write:

Overcoming education system failure must be a priority for policymakers and educators, who should strive to achieve a good fit between the output of educational institutions and the demands of the labor market. This would involve a survey of the distribution of enrolments across subjects, skills and disciplines, upgrades in technical education and a review of curricula to promote problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial and management capacity and the value of self-employment (UNDP 184).

Putting aside the reductive understanding of education illustrated in this passage, we must begin by asking, "What are the

demands of the labor market to which schools and universities must answer?" Currently, the market favors flexible, short-term, disposable and cheap labor. In other words, corporations and global capital needs an unlimited supply of young energetic people who are willing to intern, volunteer, work long hours, work remotely, work with weak or no contracts, continuously retrain, and not make demands for unions, benefits or job security. This growing class, *the precariat*, are people who are

> living through unstable and insecure labor, in and out of jobs, without an occupational identity, financially on the edge and losing rights. (Standing, *The Corruption* xiii).

Regrettably, the authors of the AHDR seem to have no problem advocating even more than before on outputs, testing and market style approaches to education. They disregard, indeed implicitly support exploitative and unstable work conditions for young people that ultimately contribute to personal insecurity and politically and socially destabilizing societies.

Schools and universities should decidedly not be institutions that normalize and reinforce precarity. Educational institutions should certainly play roles in preparing young people for adult roles in work and society. However, the proponents of market-oriented education policies display a callous disregard for the ways in which schools and universities can strengthen social solidarity and nurture a diverse array of human talents and abilities. They do not regard educational institutions as places for young people to develop bonds and understanding across lines of difference, where they can think and work together to find creative solutions to the enormous challenges of contemporary life. Instead, as the mainstream policy community focuses obsessively on outputs, testing and short-term rewards, it proselytizes its big idea, youth entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is Not the Solution

North Africa and West Asia is a region with a disproportionately high percentage of young people, a situation known as a *youth bulge*. It is not clear what percentage of the one hundred million 15-29-year-olds in the predominantly Arab countries, a third of the population, are supposed to become self-employed entrepreneurs. Such a push is reminiscent of the late 1980s and 1990s, when UN agencies, global finance institutions, and non-governmental organizations joined forces on a massive scale to promote microfinance to alleviate poverty. After more than three decades of experimentation and data collection, the evidence overwhelmingly points to that fact that microfinance does not cure poverty, and indeed has been a *debt trap* and a *disaster* for many. Economists who have traced the adverse effects of microfinance have argued that in actuality, according to the evidence, microfinance

> constitutes a powerful institutional and political barrier to sustainable economic and social development, and so also to poverty reduction. […] [C]ontinued support for microfinance in international development policy circles cannot be divorced from its supreme serviceability to the neoliberal/globalisation agenda (Bateman and Chang 13).

Small-scale, temporary-income-generating activities should not be conceived as a substitute for stable work, social protections and due process of the law. Likewise, evidence is mounting that youth entrepreneurship, while it can certainly benefit some people in the short term, is more likely to lead the young to a debt trap, precarity, and/or a cycle of failures. The debt trap is already in clear evidence with the

Linda Herrera

is a professor in the department of
Education Policy, Organization and
Leadership at the University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign and director
of the Global Studies in Education
program. A social anthropologist with
regional specialization in North Africa
and West Asia, her research is at the
intersection of critical education, youth
and media studies. Her books include
Cultures of Arab Schooling (with C.A.
Torres), Being Young and Muslim (with
A. Bayat), Revolution in the Age of Social
Media and Wired Citizenship. She has
a monthly column in openDemocracy,
"Critical Voices in Critical Times."
email: lherrera@illinois.edu

student loan epidemic in which growing
numbers of students carry debilitating
debt (Kamenetz).

While youthful drive and ambition are
positive qualities to be nurtured and
encouraged, it is unfair and disingenuous
to propagate the myth that anyone with an
idea, grit and determination can be a suc-
cessful entrepreneur. Economist Mariana
Mazzucato has written extensively on how
companies in the *new economy*, such as
Apple and Google

that like to portray themselves as the
heart of US 'entrepreneurship', have
very successfully surfed the wave of US
government-funded investments.

The Internet, GPS, touchscreen displays
and Siri are among the startups that ben-
efitted from steep US government fund-
ing. If Arab governments and businesses
in the NAWA region are serious about
youth entrepreneurship, they should pro-
vide resources and support organizations
to guide and support young talent, not
lead them down a road of borrowing and
debilitating debt.

Conclusion: Youth Studies and Precarity
Change is happening faster than ideas
and policies to deal with it. As students

and scholars, as members of international
development and policy communities
who want to sincerely advance security,
dignity, livelihoods and democracy, we
must acknowledge those misguided poli-
cies that have contributed to the current
detrimental state of affairs. We collectively
face the daunting task of forging an alter-
native future.

If we listen to, respect and take seriously
the voices of youth that rang out during
the 2011 uprisings, we will hear that these
old ideas that have informed education,
employment and youth policies are not
working. Those of us working in the NAWA
region, in youth studies, and education
and social policy need more than the tools
of critique to move forward. We need to
reclaim research and scholarship as a col-
lective means to better understand the
current realities and challenges. Our work
should aid in understanding the structures
of precarity and the responses to them.
Standing posits that since youth "make up
the core of the Precariat" they are the ones
that "will have to take the lead in forging a
viable future for it" (*The Precariat* 113). A
more rigorous and engaged scholarship
can guide the young towards a road of
opportunity, security and dignity, rather
than push them further along a perilous
path of precarity.

Notes

1 Earlier versions of this paper were published in *MadaMasr* (Herrera, "Precarity of Youth") and in *The Middle East in London Magazine* (Herrera, "Middle East Youth").

2 The concept "generation in waiting" shares features with an older concept in youth studies, "generation on hold" (Cote).

3 For an example of democracy promotion programs that combined youth lifestyles and consumerism with forms of youth political engagement "Cyberdissident Diplomacy," chapter 2 in Herrera's *Revolution in the Age of Social Media.*

4 For examples, see the cover story of *Time Magazine*, "The Generation Changing the World" and Wael Ghonim's *Revolution 2.0.*

5 See the Middle East and North Africa section of the online platform, *Global Voices*, for reporting on a wide range of issues pertaining to censorship, arrests and intimidation of youth activists and social media users.

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