

## ANTI-THESIS

### Is There A Youth Politics?

Asef Bayat

What is the nature of 'youth politics', if any? This article proposes an analytical lens which may help us consider 'youth' as a useful category, and 'youth politics' in terms of the conflicts and negotiations over claiming or defending youthfulness. Understood in this fashion, youth politics is mediated by the position of the young in class, gender, racial, sexual and other involved social structures. It concludes

that the political outlook of a young person may be shaped not just by the exclusive preoccupation with 'youthfulness', but also by his/her position in society as citizen, poor, female, or a member of a sexual minority.

**Keywords:** Youth, Arab Spring, politics, Middle East, youthfulness, youth activism

#### Introduction

Is there such a thing as 'youth politics' in the way we have gender politics, working class politics, or poor people's politics; and if there is, what are its attributes and modes of expression? After all, what is the significance of youth politics, if any? Even though some have expressed doubts about 'youth' as a meaningful category or considered it as a mere construct, here I would like to propose an analytical lens which may help understanding youth as a useful category with distinct politics. In this sense 'youth politics' will be viewed in terms of the conflicts and negotiations over claiming or defending youthfulness; but this is a politics that is mediated by the position of the young in class, gender, racial, sexual and other involved social structures. In brief, the political outlook of a young person may be shaped not just by the exclusive preoccupation with 'youthfulness', but also by his/her positionality as citizen, poor, female, or a member of a sexual minority. The propositions advanced here are informed by my observations on young people's lives in the contemporary Middle East, where the spectacular Arab uprisings brought youth to the forefront of politics.

A review of popular discourse as well as scholarly works on the Arab revolutions leaves little doubt about the leading pres-

ence of the young people in these momentous political episodes. Perhaps no other social group has gained as much credence in these transformative events as youth, and in no other times in its history has Middle East politics witnessed so much attention to youth—whether as victims of economic marginalization or agents of transformation. A range of writings narrates the prominent role of the young and students in the region's national movements and revolutions. They discuss how, for instance, the indignant youth suffered from the highest rate of unemployment in the world, how they moved from being passive subjects into active agents, in what way the rising 'youth movements' initiated the revolutions, or how the Coptic youth turned into a political player in post-revolution Egypt (Erlich; Sayer and Yousef; Desai et al; Abdalla; Shehata; Delgado). Indeed, the notion of 'youth revolutions' referring to the Arab Spring readily pointed to an assumed propensity of youth for radical politics.

While we have certainly learnt more about the involvement of young people in politics, much of the literature displays the perennial problem of treating youth simply as *incidental* or at best tangential to the core stories and analyses. As such, this genre of writing discusses not the youth per se, but rather such subjects of conten-

tious politics, the uprising, or activism in certain times or places in which youth happen to play a key role, such that if we were to substitute youth with a different group, it would have no significant bearings on the analyses and narratives. At the same time, in the studies where 'youth' do take a more prominent place, there are little or no discussions about the specificities of youth claims and presence in such events; youth often appears as a term to designate an age cohort rather than a conceptual category with particular analytical meanings. In fact, many of the writings on 'youth movements' are of this nature; they are not about 'youth movements' per se, but about certain political organizations, parties, or networks—such as the Kefaya, the Egyptian democracy movement of the mid-2000s—in which young people happen to be active. This kind of treatment is not limited to the Middle East, but seems to inform much of the literature on youth and politics in general. This strand of scholarship on youth then tends to examine not *youth politics* per se, but *youth in politics*. The discussions of 'youth in politics' do certainly teach us a great deal about the extent to which young people care about or get engaged in public life. But they say little about the particularities—concerns, forms, direction, pitfalls or promises—of such political engagement.

For these, we need to delve into 'youth politics'.

### In Historical Movements

There is globally a sizeable scholarship that takes 'youth politics' as its central focus. Here youth politics is construed from the sociological reality of the young in terms of their transitional position from childhood and dependence to adulthood and responsibility. While some in this genre tend to view the young as emotional, inexperienced, and potential instigators of 'youth war', most see them as creative producers of subcultures and new lifestyles, as well as carriers of revolutionary posture and politics.<sup>1</sup> In fact, here youth appear as key players in the major political movements in history all the way from Ancient Greece to the English Revolution, Protestant Reformation, the early 19th Century, and down to the momentous episode of the 1960s. In the inter-war period, youth as a distinct social group assumed such an import as to make both the right and leftist political blocks invest heavily in the transformative potential of the youth. This gave rise to myriad 'youth movements' with intimate links to communist or fascist ideologies and personas, including Mussolini, who considered youth as the "avant-garde of the fascist revolution" (Kalman 343-366;

Passerini). Indeed, the old idea of associating youth with nature, body building, and soul searching was reincarnated after the Second World War in the ministries of Youth and Sports in most postcolonial nations, where a variety of 'young movements' such as the Young Officers in Egypt or Young Turks in the Turkish Republic ascended to the political stage (Sukarieh and Tannock 81-82).

The historic events of the 1960s brought youth more than ever onto the forefront of revolutionary politics. The student revolts in Berkeley and its Free Speech Movement spreading through the US campuses, together with youth and student rebellions in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and especially the May 1968 general strike in factories and colleges presented the youth as if they possessed an inherent radical habitus. Such notions as 'youthful rebelliousness' and 'youth war' virtually linked those revolutionary moments to a youthful disposition, assumed to be shaped by a specific 'stage of life', a mix of alienation and presence, or the generation war (Matza 110; Keniston 7). While some argued that age conflict had taken the place of class conflict, others took the young as the new revolutionary class that had replaced the proletariat as the agent of political transformation (Turner 398; Rowntree and Rowntree). The idea of

'youth as class' and university as a new bastion of revolutionary politics resonated strongly with some major social theorists ranging from Jerome Ferrand, Fred Halliday, C. Wright Mills, and Herbert Marcuse. For the sociologist Alain Touraine, the university came to occupy the same position as the great capitalist enterprise (Touraine). The idea of 'revolutionary youth' also permeated into the discourse of the Arab uprisings, which young people had initiated. Some observers went so far as to describe key historical moments in the Middle East far prior to the Arab uprisings in terms of the revolutionary role of youth. As "an age group and as an educated public", youth and students are suggested to have burst into the political scene to shape nationalist movements, liberation struggles, and revolutions, as well as Islamism and liberalism (Erich x).

A longitudinal look at the young people's behavior, however, would make the claims of 'radical youth' untenable. Young people, whether in the West or in the Middle East, have also exhibited both passive and conservative orientations. It is well known that the political youth of the 1960s and 1970s in the US and Britain turned by the 1980s into Yuppies or the self-absorbed and conservative young professionals—orientations very different

from the working class punk subculture. For their part, Arab youth went through a process of hibernation for decades before joining the 2011 uprisings; young people in Tunisia were constricted by the police state under the Ben Ali, and those in Egypt showed little interest during the 1990s in any sort of civic activism let alone revolutionary politics, if they had not joined the Islamist Jihadi fringes. Large-scale surveys of Arab youth conducted after the 2011 revolutions point to an escalating apathy and aversion to politics following an earlier political fervor that marked the uprisings. In fact, some observers have concluded that Arab youth usually display apathy when it comes to the conventional politics, political parties, or elections, simply because of their deep disenchantment with formal intuitions. Yet the very same passive youth may turn political in particular political circumstances, such as during the Arab uprisings (Desai et al 165).

### **From Passive to Active**

Why and how do the young turn from passive individuals into active and even revolutionary agents? More specifically, how do we explain the widespread political turn among the Arab youth in the 2011 events? One suggestion is that youth apathy changes when their discontent rises so

high that they resort to radical and dramatic action with perceived impact on government and cost to themselves (Desai et al 165). Here the sources of discontent are invariably attributed to a series of misfortunes, chiefly exclusion and unemployment. Thus, in the common narrative, the Arab world's highest youth unemployment—25% compared to world average 14.4% in pre-revolution—meant late marriage (until 30s) and 'waithood', leading to frustration and ultimately revolt.<sup>2</sup>

There is certainly a great plausibility in these narratives, in particular when it comes to uncertainty and 'waithood', which indeed appear to be mostly youth problems. But broadly speaking, unemployment and economic and social exclusion are hardly the exclusive predicament of the young; adults have also suffered from these misfortunes. But if the focus is on youth, what type of youth we are speaking about—college students, graduates, rich, poor, those living with parents, or married young couples who must rely on themselves? The youth of the rich and privileged families are not supposed to feel social and economic exclusion, and should not, by definition, be outraged and rebellious. Studies on the economics of Middle Eastern youth show that family income has the greatest bearing on young people's educational opportuni-

ties, achievements, and eventually income; the more well-off the family is, the better chance for better degrees and opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Even those non-privileged high school or college students (in a 2016 MENA youth survey by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 37% of youth between 16-30 years of age were students) who do live with and depend on parents may not experience the hardship of unemployment or economic exclusion as long as they remain outside of job market; it is their parents who in their role as providers for these youngsters should feel the crunch of socio-economic exclusion. Unlike in, say, the US or Britain, where the autonomous youth depend mostly on themselves to subsist, in Arab societies it is the families that usually bear the burden of youths, sometimes even after their children get married.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the economic pressure falls more on parents than on their children, and thus it is these parents who should be rebelling. This might explain why a large number of the young respondents (71%) in the MENA youth survey described their economic situation as "very good" despite the relative economic downturn, because these young people were living on their parents' income. However, married couples who were responsible for

their own household did complain about the pressure of bad economic conditions. A year before the Egyptian Revolution, the veteran columnist Hasan Nafaa published a piece in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* where he suggested that new social actors were emerging onto Egypt's political scene (Nafaa). He described three occasions where young people (with work and families) approached him to start a campaign to change the political status quo in Egypt—to support the opposition leader Mohamed Baradei, endorse groups demanding to amend the constitution, and help them push the parliament to reform things. Nafaa then suggested that we are facing a new category of youth in their 30s and 40s who hold responsibilities for their nuclear families as parents and for their jobs in public and private sectors; these youth are inclined not for revolution to alter everything, but towards cooperation and peaceful, managed change. These young activists, he argued, were different from the radical students of the 1970s or those in the April 6th Youth Movement in Egypt. These youth were not simply interested in their own individual or family matters, but were also concerned about the public good. Deeply worried about the failure of the state, they wanted to do something about it; they sensed that the alarming situation could lead to an

explosion, especially when neither the regime nor the traditional opposition were able to bring about reforms. “I do not think I exaggerate in stating”, Nafaa concluded, “that the advent of this new age cohort (generation) in the political stage constitutes a turning point in mobilization for change.”

### Who are Youth?

This interesting observation raises serious conceptual questions about and complicates the meaning of youth and youth political agency. Can one consider this 30-40 year-old age cohort with marriage, work and responsibility ‘youth’? Is ‘youth’ simply an age-category? Is it simply a construction imagined and presented by others? Or is there no such thing as ‘youth’ at all? The policy circles such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) usually define youth in terms of certain age groups—some take it as those 15-25 year of age, others 15-30, while others up to 40 (UNDP 22). Even though operationalization is necessary for policy purposes, such designations with varied ranges remain inevitably arbitrary. It is therefore not a surprise that some scholars reject the category of ‘youth’ in terms of ‘life stage’ or in terms of generation altogether, considering it instead as a ‘construction’—a social identity that is imagined by others

about the young (Sukarieh and Tannock). But this is no less problematic. It is true that elders, the state, or moral authorities do intervene to construct different images of youth as, for instance, ‘rebellious’, ‘brave’, the ‘future’, or ‘dangerous’. This however does not mean that youth lack any reality of their own. Perhaps we should be asking how the young define themselves; for this can help us to identify those particular traits that, beyond external attributions, shape young people’s image of themselves and their behavior. Denying the young the ability to define their own reality, or overlooking their paradoxical positionality in the social structure, can lead to such inaccurate conclusions that, as Bourdieu put it, youth is “nothing but a word”.

I have suggested that “youth” in the sense of young persons is in part related to a particular life stage and thus a particular location in the social structure, where the individuals navigate between the world of childhood (as the time of vulnerability, innocence and need of protection) and adulthood, the world of work and responsibility. Theoretically, a young person experiences a life of relative autonomy, a kind of ‘structural irresponsibility’, where the individual neither substantially depends on other people such as parents, nor is responsible for others, such as his/

her own family or children. This seems to be in line with the perceptions of young Egyptians who, in my interviews with them, broadly described themselves as being less experienced and less responsible.<sup>5</sup> In modern times, mass schooling has played a crucial role in the production of youth and prolongation of the time in which the individual lives and operates as young. ‘Youth’ in the sense of ‘behaving young’ represents a sort of Bourdieuan habitus—a series of mental and cognitive dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself that are associated with the sociological position of structural irresponsibility. This is how young people experience ‘youthfulness’.

Of course the reality of young people’s lives is more complex and may vary across cultural, class, and gender divides. For instance, many adolescents in poor families may have to seek work to earn a living instead of attending school; girls may get married early thus assuming the responsibility of being a parent and spouse before experiencing youthfulness; unmarried girls, even in the middle class families, often take some responsibilities to help their mothers in cooking, cleaning, or caring for the children. There is also the possibility of the young couples who, once married, may appear as if they have moved out of the youth world into adult-

hood (in 2016, 29% of youth were interviewed for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's MENA youth survey either married or divorced, and 15% of 'youth' in Egypt described themselves as 'adults'). Interestingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that the youngsters who did not experience youthfulness in their young age may tend to 'experience' it years after they move to adult life. A 40-year-old woman from Lebanon stated recently that she did not want to get married and be responsible at this age, because she "had lost her youthfulness during the civil war", and "now want[ed] to experience it". In fact, there seems to be a trend of 30+ working or non-working women who do not wish to get married but desire to live independently, while we also may encounter young males who hold jobs and earn a living but remain unmarried and live with parents.

How can we account for these sub-groups of the young? Are they not youth? If they are, what make them so? Simply age? If so, what then accounts for their positionality in the social structure? The relevance of these questions boils down to the reason we strive to conceptualize 'youth' in the first place. If the purpose is to identify youth groups with particular needs and abilities in order to devise policies to address them, then the particularities of

such subgroups should be acknowledged and highlighted. However, if the purpose is, as in this essay, to understand what kind of politics youth espouse, then we should focus on their positionality in the social structure to determine if the individuals assume some sort of youth habitus or live and behave like adults even in their young age.

### Youth Politics

If we conceive of 'youth' in this fashion, youth politics then takes a different form from what is commonly perceived and presented. In this sense, youth politics is not the same as 'student politics', which is concerned with student rights, tuition cost, and educational policies, as well as contentions that are shaped by the school environment. Curricula can potentially cultivate critical awareness about, say, racism or colonialism, or a university's objectionable investments in certain countries can potentially cause campaigns of divestment, all of which are facilitated by the fact that college campuses brings students together helping collective action. The protests in Spain's universities in 2010 or those led by Camila Vallejo in Chile in 2011, concerning public spending on education and an end to the commercialization of schooling, exemplify what I mean by a 'student movement'. On the other

hand, youth politics is also distinct from such things as the 'youth chapters' of different political movements or organizations, be they Fascist, Ba'athist, or leftist. Rather, youth politics, strictly speaking, is essentially about claiming or reclaiming youthfulness; it expresses the collective challenge whose central goal consists of defending and extending the youth habitus—a set of dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself (e.g., a greater demand for autonomy, individuality, mobility, and security of transition to the adult world) that are shaped by the sociological fact of being young. Countering or curtailing this habitus is likely to generate youth dissent.<sup>6</sup>

Conceptual precision notwithstanding, real life is of course more complex. The fact is that most youth are students, most students are young, and almost all are at the same time citizens carrying broader concerns. In other words, young people's politics encapsulate contentions that derive from their multiple positionalities as youth, students, and citizens, filtering through class, gender, racial, and other identities. So even though young people often pursue their exclusively youthful claims through cultural politics (e.g. in the way that the Iranian youth followed particular a lifestyle in the 1990s), they may blend their youthful claims with other con-

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cerns in their positions as students and citizens to mobilize against corruption, political repression, or urban exclusion, as we saw during the Arab uprisings and after. Yet in their involvement in the broader political campaigns, the young often bring to them a good degree of youthful tastes and sensibilities often displayed in political graffiti, sociality, fun, and youthful energy.

The mere presence of young people subject to moral and political discipline does not necessarily render them carriers of a youth movement, because young persons (as age category) are unable to forge a collective challenge to the moral and political authority without first turning into youth as a social category, that is, turning into social actors. Youth as a social category, as collective agents, are an essentially modern, mostly urban, phenomenon. It is in modern cities that “young persons” turn into “youth,” by experiencing and developing a particular consciousness about themselves as being young. Schooling, prevalent in urban areas, serves as a key factor in producing and prolonging the period of youth, while it cultivates status, expectations, and, possibly, critical awareness. Cities, as loci of diversity, creativity, and anonymity, present opportunities for young people to explore alternative role models and

choices, and they offer venues to express individuality as well as collective identity. Mass media, urban spaces, public parks, shopping malls, cultural complexes, and local street corners provide arenas for the formation and expression of collective identities. Individuals may bond and construct identities through such deliberate associations and networks as schools, street corners circles, peer groups, and youth magazines. However, identities are formed mostly through ‘passive networks’—that is, instantaneous communications among atomized individuals that are established by the tacit recognition of their commonalities and that are mediated directly through the gaze in public space, or indirectly through mass media.<sup>7</sup> As present agents in the public space, the young recognize common traits by noticing (seeing) shared symbols, for instance, inscribed in styles (T-shirts, blue jeans, hairstyle), types of activities (attending particular sports, music stores, and strolling in streets), and places (stadiums, hiking trails, street corners). Whether the young behave in their sheer youthful impulses or respond to the broader and shifting power structures—of class, gender, race, or age—has been widely debated, but youth political behavior cannot conceivably be understood without considering the interplay of youth-

ful agency and societal structures, mediated by political culture and political opportunity. Youthful claims are articulated mostly at the cultural level and in the form of claims over lifestyle. But youth often get involved in both cultural politics as well as wider political contentions. Thus, to serve as transformative agents, the young would often have to go beyond their exclusive youthful claims to draw on the broader concerns of citizenry. Such was the conduct of the Arab youth who played the leading role in the 2011 uprisings, opening a new chapter in the history of the Middle East.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Like the US Institute of Peace, "Youth Revolt" (Amara)

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Shahata Dina. "Youth Movements and the 25th Jan Revolution", *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, edited by Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi, American University of Cairo Press, 2014; similarly Edward Sayer and Tarik Yousef ascribe the emergence of the uprisings generally to 'youth exclusion', see Sayer, Edward and Tarik Yousef, eds., *Young Generation Awakening: Economics, Society, and Policy on the Eve of the Arab Spring*, Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> See Salehi-Esfahani, Djavad, "Schooling and Learning in the MENA: The Roles of the Family and the State", *Young Generation Awakening: Economics, Society, and Policy on the Eve of the Arab Spring*, edited by Edward Sayer and Tarek Yousef, pp. 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> In 2016, 69% of youth, 16-30 year old, in the Arab world (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Yemen, including the Syrian refugees) were living with their parents in one household; see Arab Youth Survey 2016 conducted by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Berlin. Aspects of this pattern have emerged recently in the countries hit by financial crisis such as Spain and Greece, where youth unemployment has resulted in diminishing parents' pension funds.

<sup>5</sup> Bayat, Asef, Interviews I, Cairo, July 2003.

<sup>6</sup> More details may found in Bayat, Asef. "Muslim Youth and the Claims of Youthfulness", *Being Young and Muslim: Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, edited by Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> For an elaborate exposition of "passive networks," see Bayat Asef. *Street Politics: Poor Peoples Movements in Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, chapter 1.

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