



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 9

Quotidian Youth Cultures in the Gulf Peninsula: Changes and Challenges

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Abstract

The youth bulge registered in the Middle East in the past decade reveals how youth is becoming a crucial resource in the area. Described in world media primarily in terms of radicalisation or political mobilisation, youth is ambivalently torn between opportunity and challenge. In the Gulf Cooperation Countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) young people enjoy an extensive welfare system, can access the latest technological advances, live in a globalised culture and display international consumption patterns. However, they have been affected by the drop of oil prices, have been hit by unemployment, and are experiencing challenges in terms of education opportunities and housing availability. Their demands for social and political change display potential instability, as evidenced by the uprisings in the region. Moreover, governments have alternated increased security measures and tighter provisions with *ad hoc* youth programmes to foster creativity, entrepreneurship and inclusiveness.

The workshop intends to interrogate quotidian youth cultures in the past decade, seeking to contribute to Gulf Studies by complicating and questioning the continuity with the literature; investigating the implications on *Khaleeji* identity construction and wider social, cultural and political processes; examining from a multi-disciplinary perspective the relationship with dominant narratives in a globalised society; complicating the framework of opposition and resistance. In so doing, the workshop

will bring a critical perspective on quotidian youth cultures in the GCC, unpacking the ambiguities and contradictions, and contextualising an under-researched topic.

Description and rationale

Youth studies as an interdisciplinary field focuses on young people's cultures and their relationship with society at large (Benasso, Helve, Merico, 2018). Classical contributions like Karl Mannheim's *The Problem of Generations* (1952 [1928]) link youth with political cultures of the past, stressing the important role the new generations might have in social and political change as a 'latent resource'. Moreover, their flexibility allows them to adapt more rapidly to new societal and cultural patterns. Talcott Parsons further investigated youth culture as motivated by opposing forces, namely independence (from the previous generations) and conformity (to peer groups) (1942). Stuart Hall, then, operated an important link between cultural and youth studies, concentrating his scholarship on youth culture and subcultures (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Traditionally, youth studies have investigated primarily youth in North American and European societies, while youth in the Middle East has attracted a growing sensationalistic interest in terms of terrorism, uprisings and protests, religious extremism, and migration emergencies. The effects of globalization on youth have been addressed by Zygmunt Bauman as a condition of liminal drift (1976), a finding further reiterated by Guy Standing with the notion of *precariat* (2011) and precariousness, while Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat have addressed Muslim youth challenges and political cultures in the Global South with their seminal work (2010). Last year, Linda Herrera convincingly called for a new engagement of scholars and researchers "as a collective means to better understand the current realities and challenges" facing youth in the Middle East (2017, 37). In a way, the present workshop seeks to take up the challenge to investigate this issue further.

Objectives and scope

Demographics in the Middle East have shown a substantial population growth at an unprecedented rate in the past 70 years, and have increasingly highlighted the numerical significance of the youth population. In the Arabian Gulf, 60% of the population is below 30 years of age. Numerically significant and occupying an ambivalent social position, youth poses challenges to traditional Gulf societies. Official rhetoric recognises youth as the future of these countries and invests young people with great hopes of carrying on the Gulf way of life into the future. Gulf governments, thus, have increasingly promoted youth initiatives and creativity, like the Emirates Foundation Award for Arabian Gulf Youth or the Kuwaiti Youth Project. At the same time, the technologically savvy, better than ever before-educated, globally connected youth bulge presents problems and shows signs of a potential for instability in the demands for social and political change, as illustrated vividly in the course of the Arab Spring events. The fluctuation in oil prices in the past decade challenges the extensive paternalistic welfare systems put in place in these countries, evidenced by housing shortages, unemployment, education challenges, lack of direct political representation, gender divides, social and political exclusion. Demographic age group markers aside, however, Gulf Arab youth are far from constituting a homogeneous population. Youth cannot be disjointed from their socio-economic and ethnic background, their sectarian affiliation, gender and sexual orientation. In political terms, such diversity is expressed

in the way demands for reform can favour liberalisation or Islamisation, greater inclusiveness and tolerance or radicalisation and (re)tribalisation.

There is a need for a deeper understanding of Gulf youth beyond the much-discussed protests inspired by the Arab Spring, or momentous events that are given great visibility in world media. Such deeper understanding can emerge from studying the quotidian lives and struggles, opportunities and contributions of youth who, in the process of developing their personal identities, are also actively contributing to the construction of a renewed *Khaleeji* identity. It is in the domain of everyday life that social relations are given routine expression and youth identities are shaped and negotiated. Focusing on the everyday, moreover, makes possible the exploration of micro-changes that are incrementally shaping relations in Gulf societies. By studying the quotidian, thus, larger social, political and cultural issues are brought into focus and can be explored from new perspectives.

The aim of the present workshop is to provide a comprehensive overview of the shifts that have occurred in youth cultures and youth identities in the past decade in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). We aim at analysing the implications of quotidian practices and formations in the framework of growing social, cultural and political transformations.

Contribution to Gulf studies

The proposed workshop builds upon and contributes to youth studies in the Middle East (Herrera and Bayat, 2010; Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag, 2007; Bonnefoy and Catusse, 2013). In line with this literature, we interrogate the formations and manifestations of youth cultures in the everyday GCC countries, focusing on the developments and evolution of youth studies in the Middle East in the last decade.

In particular, we seek to:

1. Assess and complicate the continuity with classical theories while focusing on a specific geographical area, the GCC countries, in the past decade. Postcolonial and decolonial frameworks of analysis will contribute to a broader understanding of youth quotidian cultures.
2. Investigate the implications of youth cultures and quotidian practices in the GCC on identity construction and wider social, cultural and political processes. Our goal is also to expand these themes beyond the reach of the Arabian Peninsula. With a few exceptions, the topic remains largely under-researched.
3. By employing a holistic perspective to youth quotidian cultures in the GCC, the workshop opens up the thematic field to a multi-disciplinary approach, interrogating the ways youth identities and cultures conform and confront dominant narratives in a globalised society.
4. Focusing our thematic workshop on research developments and debates that occurred in the past decade, we intend to examine quotidian youth cultures in post-contention societies, complicating the framework of opposition and resistance. In so doing, the workshop will contribute to unpacking the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding youth and youth cultures in contemporary GCC countries.

The workshop directors intend to foster dialogue and discussion on the thematic issues, contributing to the field of Gulf Studies with the publication of an edited volume.

Anticipated participants

The workshop is intended to attract a variety of papers from the social sciences and humanities from a wide range of topics relating to youth in the Gulf. Research works based on fieldwork in the area are particularly encouraged. Topics examining youth cultures and identities in the past decade include, but are not limited to, the following:

- youth cultures and subcultures
- processes of *Khaleeji* identity construction
- socialisation processes and new socialities
- youth and social media
- participation, online (and offline) activism
- youth and civil society in the post-Arab Spring era
- youth and migration, nationals and non-nationals
- gender and youth
- family formation and divorce
- youth, identity and nation-building prerogatives
- demographics and economic challenges
- the right to the city and the built environment
- leisure and consumption
- youth and religion
- youth and disability
- challenges of education

We welcome qualitative and quantitative papers focusing on GCC countries, both as country-specific studies or in comparative perspective. Moreover, we seek to include theoretical contributions and practitioners' experiences on the topic.

Workshop Director Profiles

Emanuela Buscemi teaches at the University of Monterrey (Mexico). She holds a doctoral degree in Sociology from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. She is affiliated as a research associate with CEFAS, Kuwait. She taught at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) and was a research fellow at the Center for Gulf Studies in the same institution. Her research interests include social movement theories, informal political activism and resistance, youth, gender and identity politics, narratives of communities and belonging, political transitions. Her geographical focuses are the Gulf countries and Latin America. Her publications have appeared in *AG About Gender-International Journal of Gender Studies*, *Contemporary Social Science-Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (forthcoming), and in edited volumes (New York University Press, in print).

Ildiko Kaposi is a social scientist whose work focuses on issues of democracy from the perspective of media and communication. She holds a doctoral degree in Political Science from Central European University, Budapest. She has studied the roles of the press and Internet in fostering participation in emerging or transitioning democracies in post-communist Europe and the Middle East. Employing mainly qualitative but also quantitative methods she specializes in in-depth explorations of the intersections of democratic principles and their interpretations in specific social, legal, political, and cultural contexts. She has nine years of teaching experience at private universities in Kuwait. Currently she is Assistant Professor at the Mass Communication and Media

department of the Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait. Her most recent publication is the co-authored book *Media Law in Kuwait* (2018).

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