

YOUTH, CIVIL SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST 1980-PRESENT

Dr. Joel D. Parker

Spring Semester

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Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, 10:30-13:30

Short description:

“The literature on contemporary ‘unrest’ is growing by the week, the day, the hour. Much of it reflects a profound unrest among adults—a traumatized state, in fact, that seeks catharsis in hurried attempts to reassert intellectual mastery over a shocking course of events.” Erik Erikson thus wrote in 1970 in his article “Reflections on the Dissent of Contemporary Youth” as American adult society was trying to figure out why all of a sudden many young people were experimenting with drugs, listening to rock and roll, and protesting the war in Vietnam. Today, scholars of the Middle East are just as baffled by disparate youth movements, ranging from the phenomenon of those who left the west to join ISIS to the ‘hilltop youth’ movements of the West Bank. This course will delve into some of the major movements in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, such as the Islamist Ennahda in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and alternative music in Iran and Lebanon—in historical context and with a grain of salt about what the ‘adults in the room’ think about them.

We will discuss a spectrum of religious and secular movements, violence and art, politics, sex and drugs, as long as such topics deal with youth finding their way in the world. We will try to discuss how to apply Euro-centric definitions of ‘civil society’ to the MENA region in specific case studies. We will also focus specifically on music as a tool of mobilization, recreation, and protest. While many types of art forms, including graffiti and film will be brought into the course—students are encouraged to explore ‘outside the box’—my personal bias towards music may influence some of our discussion, though not exclusively.

While there is no particular reason to start in the 1980s, the 1980s witnessed a notable rise in ‘secular’ regimes in many parts of North Africa and the Levant that were in part reactions to the religious revivalism witnessed from Iran to Egypt in the 1970s. The clash between religion and secularism, in particular, could be seen in the Iran-Iraq war and the rise of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, as well as in the backlash of Mubarak's Egypt after the assassination of Anwar Sada'at by Islamists. In this sense, we may find that in some contexts, ‘secular’ civil-society movements were part of an oppressive system, and pious civil groups were actually running counter to the dominant political culture of the regime—as Charles Hirschkind describes in his work on cassette tapes in Egypt in *Ethical Soundscape*, (Columbia, 2009).

Yet we are left with some room for self-reflection and perhaps questions as to why youth movements in the MENA region so often (though not always) turned towards piety whereas their western counterparts were more likely to turn to hedonistic or at least non-religious political expressions. Perhaps we don't even understand our own history, or our own parents, much less ourselves and the Middle East the way we thought?

Assessment: The final exam will be on the last day of class, and the make-up time will be scheduled for the following week, if anyone cannot make it. It will involve choosing two out of six questions that involve taking a specific example and analyzing it through one of the lenses we discuss in class.

Minor assignments:

There will be a short written assignment in the third class, due on the fifth class, in which students will be required to describe a youth movement in the Middle East using scholarly literature, supplemented by journalistic and social media sources. 15%

Mid Term:

The first written assignment will be expanded into a 3-5 page take home paper on the topic chosen in the first assignment. This will be 15% of the grade, and graded for the use of a particular analytical approach in addition to the quality of the content and use of sources. Generally, I will also grade better for organization, presentation, and having a strong argument.

Final requirement:

We will have an in-class exam where students choose two out of six questions to write a short essay on, and which will draw on the readings and examples from the class. Each essay should be approximately 400-500 words, and employ a clear structure. I will allow fact-checking using a computer, but your essay must not be plagiarized and will be hand-written (unless medical exception). This will be 50% of your grade.

Participation:

This is a very important component of the course, and will be 20% of the grade. It involves participating in the discussion, asking questions, and also doing the readings and staying engaged throughout the class.

Attendance:

Attendance is mandatory. Students are permitted a maximum of three absences without penalty. Any additional absences will affect the final grade and may result in failure of the course.

Academic conduct:

Plagiarism is taken extremely seriously. Any instance of academic misconduct which includes: submitting someone else's work as your own; failure to accurately cite sources; taking words from another source without using quotation marks; submission of work for which you have previously received credit; working in a group for individual assignments; using unauthorized materials in an exam and sharing your work with other students, will result in failure of the assignment and will likely lead to further disciplinary measures.

Additional requirements:

Laptops are discouraged. Though it is common to take notes on them, at least one often cited study reports that students tend to benefit over the long-term from traditional hand-written notes. For those who object, there will be no penalty.

See: P. A. Mueller and D. M. Oppenheimer, "The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking," *Psychological Science*, 25, 2014, 1159–1168.