

Report on the International Workshop “Geographies of Negligence:  
Neighborhood Cultures, Popular Activism and Citizenship in the Arab  
Region”

British Council in Egypt

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The massive political upheavals recently witnessed, not only in Egypt and the Arab region but also globally since late 2010 have been strongly allied to widespread and dynamic social and cultural transformations. These transformations often engage a wide array of untraditional actors who operate rather independently of state institutions, as well as of traditional organized opposition movements, and are intent on reclaiming their own means of representations long confiscated by authoritarian regimes. New social actors are thus utilizing alternative material at their disposal, simultaneously making this material available to yet a larger audience, thus widening the scope of citizen participation. This has also meant that the struggle between hegemonic/mainstream institutions and new actors is one over the right to, and ownership of, public space, where everyday practices both abrogate and re-appropriate state/official and other hegemonic practices, thereby constantly producing new meanings and contesting older established ones.

It is this conflict between hegemonic/state institutions and those new actors in Egypt and the region that was the focus of the “Geographies of Negligence: Neighborhood Cultures, Popular Activism and Citizenship in the Arab Region” workshop, which was held in Cairo between May 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> 2014. The workshop was sponsored by Forum for the Study of Popular Culture (FSPC), a recently-established virtual research initiative which seeks to promote the study of popular culture, and encourage and sponsor young researchers in this area, Global Uncertainties Program, a Research Councils-sponsored program in the UK which seeks to examine the causes of global insecurity and how it can be predicted, prevented and managed and the British Council in Egypt, the UK’s international organization for educational opportunities and cultural relations. The workshop brought academics from a wide array of areas and fields together, including literature, urban planning, visual culture and music.

Following the opening session of the workshop, commenced by Randa Aboubakr (Cairo University and FSPC), Walid El-Hamamsy (Cairo University), Caroline Rooney (University of Kent) and Cathy Costain (British Council in Egypt), the workshop keynote speech was delivered by Tariq Ali, British writer and filmmaker. The keynote lecture was titled “Can Democracy Co-exist with Contemporary Capitalism?” Ali’s lecture tackled the issue of the political situation in Europe after World War II, explaining that democracy was never part of capitalism. “Freedom” as a concept was used to confront

the rise of communism in the Soviet Union. This binary opposition “freedom vs. communism” provided the fuel for the Cold War and guaranteed its continuity. After the Cold War, western capitalism needed to find an enemy to justify its existence, said Ali, and this enemy was “the war on terrorism” according to him. Ali explained that democracy as a system could produce results that not everybody likes. During revolutionary times, if the results of democracy are dissatisfying, cynicism could begin to take over people. This cynicism for Ali has its dangers but also might provide new possibilities and ways of being active, regardless of the usefulness of this activity. But ultimately, unless activity tries to improve the state in which people live, this cynicism will not end. The lecture stimulated different questions related to the political situation in Egypt, the Egyptian Revolution, elections and Western media and the creation of the “enemy”.

The first panel in the workshop was titled “Urban Mobility and the Dynamics of Resistance”. The presenters tackled issues of youth culture, urban space and alternative space. Mounira Soliman (American University in Cairo) gave her presentation on youth culture in Egypt. The presentation sought to investigate how the youth movement of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution attempted to reclaim urban public space in a counter culture movement through the utilization of different forms of popular culture, while adopting the concepts put forth by Lefebvre, Harvey and others on the centrality of public space as an area for political action. Then, Ines Braune from Philipps University Marburg presented her paper on Parkour in Morocco, a sport, she argued, which contests the hegemonic order of public space. Braune’s analysis showed how Parkour re-appropriates and reuses public space, giving it meanings that are different from and even oppositional to what was intended by architects and urban planners when they constructed the said space. Jonathan Guyer from the American University in Cairo then followed with a presentation which tackled the issue of space and mainstream media and narrative. Guyer presented about adult comic books, in which subversive story lines, use of language and topics give voice to narratives that are often absent in mainstream media. Through a close reading of the comic books *Metro* and *Tok Tok*—both published during the Mubarak Era—Guyer argued that the narratives presented in those comic books back then are still relevant to the current times, as the grievances and problems presented in those books remain largely unaddressed by the government.

The second panel on the first day of the workshop was titled “Space and Representation/Articulation”. Somaya Sabry (Ain Shams University) started the panel with a presentation on a student experiment in Ain Shams University called the “*Democrateyat* black-board”. On this board, students answered the question “What does democracy mean to you?” In doing so, the board becomes a space of rehearsal, engagement and the development of a sense of public participation. This presentation was followed by a video presentation by Yazid Anani (Birzeit University) on *Cities*

*Exhibition*, a group of exhibitions and art activities in Ramallah, which transcend geography and do not succumb to political and social borders and confinements. The exhibitions espouse the idea that art is able to deconstruct the typical notion of helpless Palestinians trapped in the West Bank and Gaza, so they act as a tool for breaking the physical limitations imposed on Palestinians. Dalia Mostafa (University of Manchester) followed with a presentation on the popular Egyptian coffeehouse (*qahwa*). Mostafa's presentation highlighted the significance of the "outdoors" in Egypt, particularly after the Revolution in downtown Cairo and Tahrir Square. In her presentation, she analyzed the representations of the coffeehouse before and after the revolution by using examples from music, cinema and literature.

On the second day of the workshop, the third panel was titled "Mediated Citizenship". Caroline Rooney (University of Kent) started the panel with her presentation on the concept of the "undercitizen". The undercitizen is a concept which describes "surplus humanity" who are the products of the slums and shantytowns that grow out of the urbanization of megacities and who are excluded from mainstream economy. Rooney examined three different texts for authors who come from Cairo, Harare and Mumbai in their treatment of the disenfranchised in those respective cities. This presentation was followed by a discussion with five Egyptian Parkour athletes on their activities, the reason why they perform them and whether or not they believe they have political or social implications. The athletes showed a compilation of footage from their activities and training. During the discussion, they asserted that they do not practice Parkour for any political or social reasons, which stimulated a discussion on the definition of the "political" and "social" and the role of popular sports in disrupting established hierarchies.

The fourth panel was titled "Citizens vs. the State". The first speaker in this panel was Sophia Brown from the University of Kent and her presentation examined the mechanisms of Israeli control over Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Drawing on Rema Hammami's work, a Palestinian anthropologist living in Sheikh Jarrah as well as footage filmed by Palestinians documenting their experience in the neighborhood, Brown attempted to show how control at the political and transnational levels has had irrevocable effects on the local and the domestic. The second speaker in this panel was Mohamed Elshahed, Architect and Urban Researcher. The presentation he delivered tackled the issue of citizens' accessibility to decision-making when it comes to local administration. Elshahed argued that regimes have continued to cement previous policies of centralized municipal management and planning, turning deaf ears to revolutionary demands throughout different historical periods. Then Azzurra Sarnataro from La Sapienza University of Rome presented about urban space and possible new forms of citizenship. Sarnataro argued that the revolutionary process in Egypt led to the politicization of urban space, which directed researchers' attention to Cairo's informal

areas. It is this discourse of a more democratic system of urban citizenship that informed Sarnataro's analysis. The rhetoric of "local participation", Sarnataro argues, is affecting the preexisting system of local leadership and representation and might lead to new forms of citizenship.

The fourth and final panel was a special panel featuring Egyptian artist and musicologist Mustafa Said, Director of the Arab Music Archiving and Research Foundation (AMAR) in Lebanon. The panel was divided to two parts: a presentation on music and citizen engagement in Egypt in the past and the present and a solo oud performance. Said attempted to problematize the question of the identity of Arab music particularly during times of revolution and wars. He presented a short historical overview of classical Arabic music and how traditional Arabic music was slowly being abandoned and even mocked by some artists in the 1950s. Moving forward in time, Said argued that the music of the January 25th Revolution had the two extremes of Classical and modern music, with elements of fusion from Western genres of music. Said's performance included both Classical and contemporary compositions.

The panel was followed by the closing session where Caroline Rooney, Walid El Hamamsy and Randa Aboubakr delivered some concluding remarks and some of the workshop attendees provided their own conclusions as well. Caroline Rooney talked about popular culture and the new notion of the avant garde and her concern over Western scholars being "orientalist" when they research popular culture in the Middle East. Walid El Hamamsy followed up from this point, expressing concern over the fact that the majority of research done on popular culture in the region uses languages and paradigms that are predominantly "Western". He also asserted that attempts to define popular culture are basically futile and that it is expressed in a way that resembles a spectrum rather than a strict definition. Randa Aboubakr spoke about her definition of popular culture in political terms rather than its being defined as a reaction to industrialization or commercialism, emphasizing that the economic cannot be separated from the political. Comments from the audience revolved around their definitions of popular culture, raising the issues of positionality when it comes to definitions, the need for further conceptualizations in this area and the fluidity between what constitutes popular culture and the institutionalization of popular culture.

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