

*Sonja Hegasy*

## **Empirical Youth Studies in the Arab World**

Berlin, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2003

The *Centre for Modern Oriental Studies* in Berlin held a workshop on “Empirical Youth Studies in the Arab World” on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2003 convened by Dr. Sonja Hegasy. Primarily intended as an introductory reflection on comparative surveys of political attitudes among young adults in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it brought together sociologists, Middle East scholars and anthropologists who study youth throughout the world using quantitative methods. Both the topic and the methodology are rare in Germany, as are efforts to compare the Arab world with other world regions.<sup>1</sup>

Sociologists and anthropologists working on youth in Germany (Prof. Richard Münchmeier, FU Berlin), in Latin America (Dr. René Bendit, Deutsches Jugend Institut, München), Sub-Saharan Africa (Prof. Erdmute Alber, Universität Bayreuth) and Morocco (Prof. Mokhtar el-Harras, Université Mohammed V, Rabat) assembled for the first time to discuss the feasibility of quantitative surveys and their methodological and analytical challenges. The round table addressed two main topics:

- a) the study of young adults’ political attitudes and
- b) the feasibility of quantitative research in the Middle East.

Some scholars argue that it is not possible to carry out quantitative surveys in the Arab world, deploring the lack of a “culture of inquiry”. Admittedly, there is strong suspicion of scholars – whether local or foreign – and their motives for posing certain questions. However, this is an issue with most quantitative studies on the contemporary Middle East, as a conference in Ifrane (Morocco) illustrated. Held just prior to the Berlin workshop, it highlighted comparable problems regarding enquiries into the transfer of knowledge, civil rights, women’s empowerment and human development. The study of young adults’ is still an underdeveloped area of research despite growing awareness of its vital significance since September 11<sup>th</sup>. As politics in the Middle East are usually perceived as being implemented by a gerontocracy that miraculously seems to live forever without budging an inch to make room for the next generation, September 11<sup>th</sup> became a turning point as a result of the young, successful, upper-class Arab faces that featured so prominently in the attacks. May 16<sup>th</sup>, when 14 young suicide bombers attacked five different areas of Casablanca in 2003, could be defined as the next turning point. From then on at the latest, it became evident that the ideology of *al-Qaida* was attractive to upper middle-class as well as uneducated, impoverished youth. Both politicians and scholars gradually began to explore the biographies of these young adults and the motivation that led to terrorism. “Explosive force or

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1 With respect to the Middle East, this domain is more common in the USA. See e.g., Suleiman, M. W., 1989: *Morocco in the Arab and Muslim World: Attitudes of Moroccan Youth*. In: MR 14, pp. 16-27 or Tessler, Mark, 1993: *Alienation of Urban Youth*. In: I. William Zartman; W. Mark Habeeb (eds.) *Polity and Society in Contemporary North Africa*. Boulder, pp. 71-101. Nedelcovych, Mima; Palmer, Monte, 1984: *The Political Behaviour of Moroccan Students*. In: *Journal of Arab Affairs* 3, pp. 115-129.

creative potential” is the title of a recent article on German foreign policy and youth in poor countries (Richard Meng in: Frankfurter Rundschau 16.7.2003). The author remarked that demographic changes, especially in the Arab world, had now become an issue relevant to the structure of power and thus worthy of attention.

Middle Eastern Studies have long since neglected the study of youth, so that little is known about how young adults judge their own regimes or indeed the rest of the world. There is, however, an urgent need to orient ourselves towards the majority of citizens in the Arab world, i.e., people under the age of 35.

“A generation ago, the years immediately following independence, the young people of North Africa were seen as the solution to many of the region’s most pressing problems; now there does not appear to be any solution on the horizon, and young people are often regarded as a major source of the difficulties confronting the Maghribi countries.”<sup>2</sup>

The round table began with a presentation by Prof. Münchmeier of the 13<sup>th</sup> German *Shell Jugendstudie* carried out in 2000<sup>3</sup>. *Shell AG* has been financing quantitative surveys on youth attitudes in Germany at regular intervals since 1953, at which time the studies were regarded as a contribution to the democratic reconstruction of Germany after WW II. Using a sample of 4546 young adults, 648 additional samples with foreign youth, 30 qualitative explorations and 32 biographical interviews, the 13<sup>th</sup> such study was the most substantial *Shell* has ever carried out. A budget of 750,000\$ allowed for a wide coverage. In cooperation with *Psydata Frankfurt* and the *Institut für Marktforschung* in Leipzig, Prof. Münchmeier and his colleagues embedded the survey in its political context and concentrated on two focal points:

- a) personal concepts and biographical perspectives in the era of globalization and
- b) European unification. Foreign youth were included for the first time, recreating the topic as youth in Germany rather than German youth. However, this is not to say that the 13<sup>th</sup> *Shell Study* is designed as a migrant study.

The survey explored the question of how young people feel and think at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. Münchmeier stressed that “modern youth” is not a universal category and that each youth study must define its own theoretical characteristics clearly. Age alone is not sufficient as a definition of “youth”, since it is more than a purely biological category. There has been talk in industrialized countries, therefore, of a new biographical phase between youth and adulthood known as “post-adolescence”.

Dr. Sonja Hegasy presented her work about the attitudes of 650 young Moroccans between 18 and 35 who participated in her survey in May/June 2003. As part of the project entitled “Changing Concepts of Political Legitimacy in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Morocco” (with Dr. Bettina Dennerlein),<sup>4</sup> she researches the attitudes of young adults towards the authority of the Moroccan King. One well-established theory on the stability of regimes in the Middle East is the concept of “durable authoritarianism”. Several pillars of authority are examined here, all of which include elements of violence,

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2 Tessler 1993, p. 71.

3 Fischer, Arthur; Münchmeier, Richard et al., 2000: *Jugend 2000*. Opladen.

4 <http://www.zmo.de>.

repression, the paternalistic use of modern policies, the image of the *pater familias*, head of the tribe etc. When Hassan II died in 1999, many observers had doubts about the ability of the inexperienced and shy Mohammed VI to acquire sufficient political authority as head of state, spiritual authority as commander of the faithful and theological authority as the highest religious scholar to be accepted by his citizens. The issue of the acceptance of royal authority in a case where 75% of the population are younger than 35 and thus of the same generation as the king himself is at the heart of the study. More striking than this biological fact is the monarchy's new political iconography. The sub-message of the humanized king is a recurring theme in contemporary royal self-depiction. With the growing social disparity in Morocco and increasing social unrest since the 1990s, it is understandable that the King wishes to portray himself – at least rhetorically – as a social reformer and “King of the poor”. Less comprehensible, however, is the declining virility and authority of his image. Many citizens were shocked by his public marriage, which they regarded as middle-class. Others expressed their admiration for the King's choices on how to stage the marriage.

The survey started from the hypothesis that strategies for legitimizing royal authority are changing under Mohammed VI from patriarchal, authoritarian means to more rationally established arguments and that this change creates acceptance especially among young citizens and moreover among young women. Dr. Hegasy's questionnaire was developed together with local sociologists over the course of one year to ensure comprehension in the local context. It was based on an initially open questionnaire tested with 40 Moroccan students whose answers were then clustered together for the multiple choice answers of the survey. When it was translated into Arabic, it was again discussed in length with Moroccan graduate students of sociology. Dr. Hegasy's contribution at the ZMO-Workshop concentrated on the preparation for and implementation of the survey. The data analysis was still under way. She addressed three main problems of quantitative research: urban bias, middle-class bias and censorship. She circumvented these by including urban and rural areas (the survey was carried out in eight different places) based on a random sample but introducing quotas. She worked with accepted partner organizations to access the different communities under review in urban as well as rural areas, with whom she had built up a relationship of trust over the course of ten years of research in Morocco. Though the circumstances were not favorable in 2003: Three major simultaneous domestic events intimidated the young adults in their response to the questionnaire: the Casablanca attacks of May 16<sup>th</sup>, the case of the journalist Ali Lmrabat, who was on hunger-strike at the time, and the case of the hard rockers, referred to as “Satanists” in the Moroccan press. Dr. Hegasy stated in conclusion that it was high time to increase awareness about the shortcomings of quantitative research in the Arab world and to lobby Arab governments into cooperation.

The following discussion showed that for obvious reasons the Moroccan study could not rely on a comparable research design nor data collection (access problems, denial of research permit, different budget sizes). In addition to these shortcomings there is a lack of systematic, quantitative surveys in the Arab world that would allow for comparative statements on e.g. inter-generational change in society or cross-country comparisons of young people's attitudes in the region. The *Shell Study* has the advantage of looking back on a history of 50 years.

Still, it is not futile to carry out quantitative surveys in the Arab world. Most importantly, Hegasy showed that the written questionnaires made it possible to approach such a sensitive subject matter as the authority of the Moroccan King, which would otherwise be hard to tackle. Furthermore, the questionnaires opened up long discussions of up to three hours with a number of chosen individuals. This supplementary information was noted and allowed for a contextualisation of the quantitative answers. Indeed, in the majority of cases only the anonymity of the written questionnaire, which was filled out in the presence of the interviewer, allowed the subject to be tackled.<sup>5</sup> Last but not least, such minor quantitative surveys prepare the ground for future studies. It was concluded that a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods is needed especially in the Arab context to secure the validity of the results and to minimise the risk of misinterpretation.

Dr. Bendit talked about his experience of empirical youth studies in Latin America. In contrast to the Arab world, many Latin American countries have administered national youth surveys within the last ten years.<sup>6</sup> Youth research in this world region has made some key contributions to the theoretical and empirical analysis of groups of young people such as “popular urban youth” (marginalised youth), “young women” of different social origins, working class youth, et al. Introducing his presentation with Bourdieu’s phrase “la jeunesse n’est qu’un mot”, Dr. Bendit provided some background information on demographic developments and the quantitative relevance of youth in the structure of the population. Youth in Latin America should be seen in the frame of urbanisation, the duality of Latin American societies and the extreme social polarisation (concentration of wealth vs. expanding poverty). In this context, Dr. Bendit discussed migration processes from rural to urban areas and the creation of “mega-cities” over the last 30 years. These developments changed the classic social construction of youth as “student youth”. Dr. Bendit presented a summary of the historical development of theoretical reflection and empirical youth studies from 1930 to the present day. Four main periods were identified:

- 1) Between 1930 and 1960, although philosophical and psychological essays on adolescence and youth were produced, there was no development in empirical research.
- 2) In the period from 1961 to 1980, a predominantly Latin American perspective prevailed, based on macro-sociological analysis, and the first empirical studies on youth were published.
- 3) The period between 1985 (UN International Youth Year) and 1992 saw the emergence of sociological approaches with a stronger link to European and US theoretical concepts.

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5 Indeed many questionnaires were handed back with the comment that respondents feared they would go to prison for answering questions on their acceptance of Mohammed VI. Hegasy felt that would the respondents have had time to take the questionnaire home and hand it in the next day, most of them would probably not have participated.

6 Like the first national survey on youth in Uruguay 1990 (published in 1992); the Chilean youth surveys from 1993, 1997 and 2000; the first youth surveys in Bolivia (1996) and in Venezuela (1998) and the Mexican National Survey on Youth (Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud – Centro de Investigación y Estudios sobre Juventud (Eds.): Jóvenes Mexicanos. Encuesta Nacional de Juventud. Mexico F.D., 2002.)

- 4) In 1992, the first extensive national youth surveys were finally launched, accompanied by the expectation that findings would throw some light on the development of Latin American societies in general during their critical transition to democracy.

Dr. Bendit closed with a description and analysis of some of the main features of the Mexican Youth Survey (organisational aspects, construction of the sample, field work strategies, data analysis and interpretation in the context of cooperation between the Mexican Youth Institute and several universities). The key question here is whether some of the experience in implementing the Mexican Youth Survey and similar surveys elsewhere in Latin America can be transferred to other world regions. Dr. Bendit pointed out that it was not absolutely necessary to begin youth research on a large scale. Indeed, in his view, a good starting point is always an analysis based on secondary literature, which provides a great deal of information in the Latin American context.<sup>7</sup>

Prof. Mokhtar el-Harras<sup>8</sup> presented his findings from a recent survey on street prostitution in Morocco. The study was commissioned by the *Association de lutte contre le SIDA* (ALCS) and is in progress until December 2003. El-Harras used qualitative and quantitative methods to study young female sex workers. In his presentation, he evaluated the two methodological techniques that were used: closed questionnaires and focus groups. The questionnaire included topics such as sex workers' personal and familial status, sexual practices, their relationship with clients, STI prevention methods, knowledge of STI, sex workers' internal group organisation, and future prospects. It was administered to 316 sex workers in the cities of Casablanca, Essaouira, Marrakech, Tangier and Tetouan. As for the qualitative part, ten focus groups were held in the above-mentioned cities (two in each) to discuss topics already raised in the questionnaire as well as issues such as the spatio-temporal framework of "street prostitution" in Morocco, the relationships of sex workers with their families, their economic behaviour and their recommendations for the future.

El-Harras stressed that although the questionnaire was a theoretically appropriate tool to study young sex workers, it needed to be adjusted in practice to the sensitive nature of the subject in order to minimise doubts and suspicion raised by the interview per se and by the personal and familial questions in particular. El-Harras advised that the researcher adopt an anthropological attitude in dealing with the quantitative method. With regard to the focus group, a methodological adjustment to the Moroccan socio-cultural context would be required in relation to participant invitation, focus group composition, moderator roles, tape recording methods and the wording of questions. Here, too, a comprehensive and vigilant attitude on the part of the moderator was indispensable, since most of the issues discussed have been extracted from personal lives and experiences. He concluded that a good focus group technique is a prerequisite but by no means sufficient. To create a successful focus group, the researcher must be in a position to inspire trust, and bring to the work a sound and cultural understanding.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. CELAJU: First Latin American Youth Report. Montevideo, 1992; CEPAL: Segundo Informe Latino Americano de Juventud. Santiago de Chile, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See also his important study *Famille et jeunesse estudiantine: aspirations et enjeux de pouvoir*. In: Rahma Bourquia et al. *Les jeunes et les valeurs religieuses*. Casablanca 2000, pp. 167-216.

During the final discussion, Prof. Asef Bayat (ISIM, Leiden) cautioned against overemphasising the problem of representativity. For example, he questioned the need for a representative quantitative approach for gaining insights into the life of sex workers in Morocco. Thus, he argued that such a study did not require a countrywide investigation and, more generally, suggested that qualitative works held greater value.

The difficulty of defining youth, however, remained a common denominator of the discussion. What does youth mean in the Arab context? Do thirteen year-old children still fall into the category of youth if they have been working since the age of six? Can they be compared to 18 year-olds in Germany who have never experienced responsibility for the family income or well-being of individual family members?

Prof. Alber added that civil wars were linked to the mobilization of young men. Or as Dr. Winrich Kühne recently stated with regard to sub-Saharan Africa:

“With a youth unemployment rate of 60% we see the yellow card; with a youth unemployment rate of 80 to 90% we have civil war – as in Liberia.”

However, when studying youth we should not just concentrate on a “sociology of crisis” but look further into processes that allow for an in-depth and long-term understanding of the Middle East. A recent scholarly work that sheds some light in this direction is a volume edited by Ali Akbar Mahdi on *Teen Life in the Middle East* (2003).

Another question that arose frequently during the round table discussion was the use of quantitative in addition to qualitative methods. Prof. Alber stated that quantitative findings could confirm the results of qualitative studies. When applied correctly, they allow for comparison of soft data and hard facts, e.g., social norms can be verified. Prof. Alber underlined that since science is an open process, data always contains surprises that can only be discovered in the course of statistical evaluation. Prof. Freitag emphasised the complementary aspects of both methodological approaches and recommended continuing with a combination of the two. Participants agreed that qualitative approaches still enjoyed greater credibility in the scientific community of social scientists than quantitative ones.

The Centre for Modern Oriental Studies ([www.zmo.de](http://www.zmo.de)) invites interested scholars to contact Dr. Sonja Hegasy ([sonja.hegasy@rz.hu-berlin.de](mailto:sonja.hegasy@rz.hu-berlin.de)) for cooperation in developing her proposed wider study of youth in the Arab world.