Protestation and Mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa: A Foucauldian Model

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Abstract

Michel Foucault has inspired a rich body of work in the field of critical social theory and the social sciences in general. Few scholars working in the area of social movement studies, however, have applied a Foucauldian perspective to examining the twin phenomena of social mobilization and collective action. This may stem, in large part, from the commonly held assumption that Foucault had far more to say about ‘regimes of power’ than ever about mobilization and collective action or contention politics in general. Be that as it may, a close interrogation of his work reveals the broad contours of a theoretical framework for analyzing social movements whose chief merit lies in a sensitivity to the sociopolitical context within which oppositional movements form, develop and conduct their operations. This paper aims at delineating what a Foucauldian model of social movements would entail, with specific reference to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region traditionally consigned to the margins of social movement studies. An enquiry of this kind is important because, as I argue, the leading mainstream social movement theories that have been applied to contemporary MENA cases invariably fail short of fully elucidating the phenomenon of mass mobilization. Specifically, leading mainstream theories are prone to certain universalistic assumptions and ‘West-centric’ orientations that render them incapable of accounting for the specificities of MENA cases. I shall demonstrate how a Foucauldian perspective on social movements can bypass the problem of applicability to the MENA region by mapping out a theoretical framework whose chief merit lies in a sensitivity to the sociopolitical context within which oppositional movements form, develop and conduct their operations. At the same time, I argue that a Foucauldian model transcends social movement theories with their linear conception of social and political progress, their exclusivist understanding of sociopolitical ‘development’ and ‘modernist’ assumptions by advancing an account of ‘multiple modernities.’

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Women's and gender history—in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and otherwise—has, by and large, located women's agency not only in resistance to male dominance but also in their wielding of public forms of power, sometimes equating the two. To be sure, liberal “resistance” models are of limited value for thinking through the ways of governmentalization have been more archivally rich terrains of research. Yet, much like agency, Foucauldian analytics of power require qualification in colonial and semi-colonial contexts. According to the Democracy Index 2016 study, Israel and Lebanon are the only democratic countries in the Middle East, while Tunisia (#69 worldwide) is the only democracy in North Africa. The measure of the level of democracy in nations throughout the world published by Freedom House and various other freedom indices, the Middle Eastern and North African countries with the highest scores are Israel, Tunisia, Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait. Countries that are occasionally classified asThrough an examination of global climate change models combined with hydrological data on deteriorating water quality in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), we elucidate the ways in which the MENA countries are vulnerable to climate-induced impacts on water resources. Adaptive governance strategies, however, remain a low priority for political leaderships in the MENA region. De Rosa DA (1997) Agricultural trade and rural development in the Middle East and North Africa: recent developments and North Africa. Policy Res Work Pap 1732. World Bank, Washington, DC. This report examines Internet trends and policies in the Middle East and North Africa region as they affect freedom of expression, focusing particularly on Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Tunisia. Human Rights Watch selected these four countries for closer scrutiny as much for their differences as for their similarities, and their inclusion should not suggest that their policies are worse than those of other countries in the region. The following sketch of conditions in the region shows the broader set of problems. Regional Overview. In Syria, the authorities censor information and correspondence with a free hand under the terms of emergency legislation promulgated more than forty years ago.