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Special issue introduction:

New Directions in the Study of Popular Culture and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa¹

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What is the relationship between popular culture and politics in the Middle East and North Africa? Historically, the region's popular culture has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention. However, the flourishing of popular creative expression as part of the mass protests and uprisings from the end of 2010 onwards has increased interest in popular culture and, particularly, in its role in mobilizing and articulating resistance to hegemonic power.² Whilst

¹ The papers in this special issue were selected from a workshop held at the University of Warwick, UK, in May 2019, entitled, *Politics and Popular Culture in the Middle East: Power and Resistance Post-2011* and funded by a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Council (AHRC), AH/N004353/1: 'Politics and Popular Culture: Contested Narratives of the 25 January 2011 Revolution and its Aftermath'. We thank all the workshop participants for creating a supportive, stimulating and very enjoyable intellectual space in which to explore the intersections of popular culture and politics in the MENA region. The editors would also like to thank all those who agreed to review the articles in this special issue.

² Amongst others, see, Mona Abaza. 2013. Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 30 no. 1: 122-139; Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman (2013) The aesthetics of revolution: popular creativity and the Egyptian spring, in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, eds. London and New

building on this body of work, this special issue investigates the relationship between popular culture and politics in the Middle East and North Africa more broadly. Whilst some articles focus on episodes of mass mobilisation and anti-regime confrontations, others explore the multiple ways in which popular culture and politics intersect in the lives of the region's residents, which cannot be reduced to 'the people' versus 'the regime'. In particular, there is a concern to go beyond understanding popular culture as positioned either in resistance to or as complicit with hegemonic power. The articles here demonstrate that such binary frameworks are unable to capture the complex ways in which popular culture is entangled with power relations shaped by gender, sexuality and class, as well as hegemonic meanings of national modernity and cultural authenticity. Significantly, the special issue examines the question of the *aesthetics* of popular culture and its relationship to politics and power, a question that is often overlooked in much of the existing literature on popular culture in the MENA region, which has tended to focus more on the political messages communicated through popular culture rather than the significance of its creative innovations.

As we commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the Arab uprisings, it is a good time to take stock of how popular culture has evolved in relation to the massive socio-political changes

York: Routledge, pp. 246-260; Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe, eds. 2014. Special Issue: Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond, *Arab Studies Journal* vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 8-27; Ted Swedenburg. 2012. Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha, *Middle East Report*, vol. 42, no. 265, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer265/egypts-music-protest>, accessed 5 September 2016; Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia S. Mostafa. 2014. Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. *Popular Music and Society* vo. 37, no. 5, pp. 638-659.

that have unfolded not only in the wake of those momentous events but also in relation to longer histories of dissent, dispossession, violence, repression and survival. This special issue presents fine-grained, in-depth case studies, based on cutting edge research, highlighting some of the innovative directions in which scholars—several of whom are early career researchers and first-time authors—are taking the field of MENA popular culture studies, as well as the imaginative and creative ways in which artists, activists and everyday people engage with popular culture despite the risks they face from authoritarian governments. The major aims of the special issue are twofold: 1) to theorize the relationship between popular culture and politics; and 2) to outline a new, interdisciplinary research agenda for the study of popular culture and politics in the region. Significantly, in considering ‘politics’, the contributions to this special issue are not limited to the realm of political institutions and formal political actors but rather adopt a broader notion of ‘the political’ that incorporates everyday struggles over cultural meanings, identities and emotions that are no less important to the imagining and construction of relations of power and the enacting of new political projects and political subjectivities. They highlight the multiple ways in which ‘the political’ and political identities, including the notion of ‘the people’, are constituted through popular cultural practices as well as the complex relationship between popular culture, aesthetics and power. In exploring the intersections of popular culture and everyday politics, the proposed special issue demonstrates the significance of popular culture as a site of struggle over gender, sexual, and national identities, as a means for building political solidarity and reimagining citizenship, as an avenue for creative opposition, as a space for the production of new artistic expressions as well as an instrument for reinforcing social and political hierarchies.

The special issue breaks new ground in terms of its breadth of treatment of popular culture, assembling a collection of contributions that engage in close readings of a wide variety of

forms, including film, TV drama series, comedy and satire, street theatre, pop music, protest songs, raves and webzines, and in different locations across the Middle East and North Africa. We have not tried to form a consensus over what constitutes popular culture. The concept continues to be debated from different theoretical positions, both within and beyond the field of Middle East studies. Indeed, these debates are brought to the forefront in Charles Tripp's contribution to this special issue, which proposes an alternative term, 'cultures of the public' in order to avoid some of the problems posed by the use of the term 'popular culture'. What unites the articles in this special issue is the exploration of the ways in which creativity is used to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the meanings of 'the people' and their rights in relation to hegemonic notions of identity, belonging, gender, sexuality, and in contexts of human rights violations, political repression and socio-economic inequalities.

Moreover, together they represent a pluralistic and inclusive approach to the subject matter, deploying diverse methods (including, ethnographic, critical discourse analysis and visual analysis) alongside a range of disciplinary-theoretical tools, drawing on, amongst others, work from British cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, media studies, queer theory, feminist theory and decolonial/postcolonial theory in order to understand the relationships between politics and popular culture in the MENA region. Whilst the articles approach popular culture in various ways, overall, they reveal three ways in which popular culture is political and which are not necessarily mutually exclusive 1) as a means of disseminating particular political ideas and political projects with the aim of mobilizing publics for their cause or aims; 2) as a site for struggles over the politics of identity and belonging; and, 3) as constitutive of politics, in that popular culture constructs, subverts and resignifies cultural meanings and dominant aesthetics that are vital to the (re-)production of power relations,

irrespective of whether artists/cultural producers intend or do not intend to be political.³

Below, we discuss in further detail how each article sheds light on particular aspects of popular culture and politics in the context of the MENA region.

1) Popular Culture as a means of disseminating political ideas and projects

Several articles examine in detail how popular culture has been used by leftists, liberals and Islamists to disseminate their political ideas, often in opposition to the ruling regime but also to rival political groups. In this respect, Alessia Carnevale's article examines the emergence and development of protest songs (in Arabic, *al-ughniya al-multazima*) in Tunisia in the last decade of Bourguiba's rule. During this period, the Islamist movement was on the rise and leftist movements were losing influence. Protest songs were used by leftist activists and artists to raise awareness amongst students and workers and to mobilise them in support of a leftist worldview. Their songs celebrated the struggles of workers and students, called for social justice and freedom from oppression, supported the Palestinian cause and commemorated victims of regime repression and violence. The article demonstrates how the aesthetics of the music were equally as important as the messages of the songs' lyrics. Protest songs drew on musical traditions from rural and peripheral areas, styles of music which were marginalised by the state's monopoly over the cultural field, and used references to the everyday, 'folk' culture of the masses in their lyrics in order to resonate with working people,

³ See also, Nicola Pratt (2020) Essential Readings: Politics and Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa, Middle East Pedagogy Initiative, Jadaliyya, 27 May, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41188>

who were the intended audience. The article highlights an important history of creative resistance in Tunisia, which long precedes the uprising of 2010-2011.

Sara Borillo's article examines the intersections of politics and popular culture through the concept of 'artivism', that is, political activism that intentionally deploys arts and creativity. Her anthropologically informed examination of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Morocco adds a 'thick-grained' dimension to this collection of articles, revealing how cultural actors conceive of their relationship to the political arena in the wake of the political disenchantment and social exclusion that emerged from the failure of the 20 February Movement. By embedding audience participation in their creative performances, Borillo demonstrates how the group views art as a 'transitional instrument of civil society empowerment', opening up space for free expression and critical debate through the creation of 'subaltern counterpublics.' Their theatrical productions propose an 'artistic methodology' pursuing 'renewed proximity' between activists and ordinary people in service of a 'new collective imagination for an egalitarian citizenship.' By 'returning the microphone to the people', challenging hegemonic discourses and 'making visible the voice of subaltern subjects', public space is reconfigured, and new possibilities for political critique, and citizen participation thereby emerge.

Catherine Cornet focuses on an almost ignored political actor within the cultural scene, that is, the Muslim Brotherhood. Contrary to common assumptions, she argues that the Muslim Brotherhood have historically viewed culture as an important vehicle through which they could disseminate their ideas and attract people to join their organization. In her article, 'The Cinema of the Young Muslim Brothers,' she focuses on the initiative of *Ikhwān Cinema*, which came into being after the election of the first Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed

Morsi in June 2012. Cornet situates this cultural output within a broader view of the Muslim Brotherhood's approach to art, poetry and cinema that has positioned the organization as the 'true representatives' of Egyptian aesthetic tastes, in contrast to what they perceive as the 'vulgarity' of commercial Egyptian cinema. Cornet further explores the aesthetic content of *Ikhwān Cinema*'s video productions, specifically created for social media consumption. She engages with several videos which were posted online and had numerous viewers, in order to show the ways in which the group attempted to create *al-fann al-hadif* or 'purposeful art' and thereby carve an Islamist space in Egyptian popular culture as part of their efforts to create cultural hegemony for the Muslim Brotherhood.

2) Popular Culture as a site of struggle over the politics of identity and belonging

Several articles illustrate the political significance of contemporary struggles over identity and belonging, particularly in youth culture. Nadine El-Nabli's article examines the music of Mashrou' Leila, a critically-acclaimed, contemporary indie-pop band from Lebanon. The article is dedicated to the memory of Sarah Hegazy, an Egyptian queer feminist activist arrested for flying the rainbow flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert in Cairo in 2017, and who took her own life in 2020, whilst living in exile in Canada. Unlike mainstream Arabic pop, Mashrou' Leila is unafraid to address politically and socially sensitive issues and the lead singer openly self-identifies as gay and agender. El-Nabli undertakes a close reading of their lyrics to understand how the band renegotiate, subvert and resist hegemonic notions of identity and belonging, often through a play on references to Arab culture, both historical and contemporary. However, they do not aim to construct an 'authentic' Arab identity, but rather to deconstruct it, taking a critical position against its heteronormative and patriarchal underpinnings. El-Nabli treats the band's lyrics as a form of knowledge about the lived

realities of those citizens positioned at the margins of the nation because of their non-conforming identities, arguing that the band ‘utilizes creative expression both to cope with and make sense of their belonging, as well as negotiate and challenge the conditions of that belonging’.

Exploring similar themes, Ebtihal Mahadeen’s article ‘Queer Counterpublics and LGBTQ Pop-activism in Jordan’, focuses on the case of MyKali, launched in 2007 as the first LGBTQ webzine/platform in Jordan, arguing that it represents a ‘queer counterpublic’ within the Jordanian context. Mahadeen explores the negativity of mainstream Jordanian media and the wider public towards this initiative and how, throughout its 11 years of production, MyKali has resisted these attacks through pop-activism, defined as ‘a concerted effort to deploy forms, traditions, and practices that are traditionally inscribed as “popular culture” for the advancement of a specific social, cultural, or political cause’. The author illustrates how pop-activism has been used to subvert hegemonic Jordanian national identity whilst claiming queer identities as part of the nation and resisting homophobic discourses, particularly through the choice of images promoted. The article underlines how the creative use of popular culture, online media and images are significant to the struggle over identity formations.

Lisel Hintz shifts the focus to Turkey, examining the cultural battleground of popular culture from ‘above’ as well as ‘below’. Her empirical case study reveals how identity struggles are intrinsic to political dynamics between the AKP and Turkey’s citizens. Government opponents seek to subvert the AKP’s attempts to construct soft power and ‘cultivate a conservative society’ through a combination of policing and promotion of particular cultural

narratives. Building on Marwan Kraidy's notion of 'creative insurgency',⁴ Hintz examines how activists, artists and everyday citizens repurpose popular culture to express grievances, exploiting the symbolic resonance of song lyrics, visual icons and other intertextual references to create 'hidden transcripts' of resistance. This is particularly crucial in a context in which overt forms of dissent are increasingly constrained. Interestingly, her article also underlines 'the thorny relationship between humour, resistance, and identity-related criticism,' identifying the class-based power relations that often lie at the heart of culture wars.

3) *Popular culture as constitutive of politics*

Similar to Hintz, Jessica Winegar's article also draws on Kraidy's notion of 'creative insurgency' in addition to Jacques Ranciere's notion of the 'distribution of the sensible' to examine how two of the most influential comedic cultural productions in recent Egyptian history, the *al-Limby* films (pre-2011) and Bassem Youssef's talk show (2011-2014), undo the common sense meanings that authoritarian regimes attempt to impose on society. Her work makes a novel contribution by revealing the subversive dimensions of slapstick humour in the Limby films and their subtle political and social critiques. Hence, Winegar argues that, despite being ostensibly apolitical and ambivalent towards the authorities, these films may have nonetheless laid the foundation for tangible political change. By contrast, Bassem Youssef's satirical show was overtly political and oppositional. Yet, as the article demonstrates, it is essential to go beyond the direct political values and messages expressed

⁴ Marwan Kraidy. 2016. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. Harvard University Press.

by Youssef in light of the **dual power** of comedy to render ‘non-sensical’ regime narratives whilst also reinforcing hierarchies of class and gender that underpin hegemonic power. In other words, she shows how revolutionary art can be simultaneously counter-revolutionary, or at least serve counter-revolutionary goals.

In his article ‘Political Thinking Performed: Popular Cultures as Arenas of Consent and Resistance’, Charles Tripp proposes three key lines of argument in relation to the politically constitutive effects of popular culture. Firstly, he argues that identifying the central subject, ‘popular culture’, is not simply a definitional exercise but is also purposeful and performative. Secondly, he contends that ‘popular cultures’ are always implicated in power relations, with varied significations for conformity or contention. He opts to use the term as a plural suggesting an examination of their varied conditions of production. Thirdly, he underscores that the use of a performative lens can add to our understanding of the political dimensions of popular cultures. In doing so, Tripp engages with examples from across the Middle East and North Africa (for example, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Tunisia), to illustrate the links between the political and the performative, understood both as acting out (theatrical) and bringing into being or constituting (effective). Tripp proposes that the term ‘cultures of the publics’ is a more appropriate unit of analysis than the politically charged and abstract term ‘the people’. This is important, as he argues, because the idea of the ‘publics’ is captured here as a plurality of active citizens who claim the space of popular culture as their right, which can prove threatening to authoritative regimes in power.

Polly Withers also questions the existence of a unified culture of the people through her examination of the electronic dance music (EDM) scene in Palestine. Whereas Palestinian culture has been overwhelmingly studied through a national resistance paradigm, Withers approaches EDM in Palestine by simultaneously problematizing the nation and the concept of

resistance. Based on observations and interviews with EDM party goers, the article explores the ways in which dance parties are constitutive of a neoliberal politics of self and consumption. On the one hand, rave parties provide liminal spaces in which young women and men can enact alternative gender and sexual identities through clothing and stylistic choices, drug taking and alcohol consumption, eschewing hegemonic norms of idealised femininity and masculinity, as well as momentarily escaping from settler-colonial oppression. On the other hand, Withers demonstrates how the rise of EDM is entangled with the rise of a neoliberal political economy in the post-Oslo era, which has impoverished many whilst enabling the emergence of new leisure hubs that are accessible to those with sufficient financial resources. Hence, participants in rave parties simultaneously resist dominant gender and sexuality norms whilst reproducing class hierarchies as a result of their privileged access to certain forms of leisure. In this way, like Winegar's work, Withers makes an important contribution to highlighting the contradictions and ambiguities in the relationship between hegemonic power and creative and artistic practices.

The complexities of the relationship between hegemonic power structures and artistic practices remains an important avenue for further research: not least as a means of understanding how counter-revolutionary momentum has developed across the region since 2013. Explaining these dynamics simply in terms of regime censorship or repression belies the important ways in which individuals and non-state actors, through popular culture, have participated in constituting the conditions for both old and new socio-political hierarchies. Moreover, subjecting these dynamics to the kind of comparative perspectives evoked by the case studies of this special issue allows for deeper theoretical insights into the reconstitution of authoritarianism across the Middle East and North Africa. This should also be complemented by a greater focus on the historical context of these dynamics, situating contemporary relations between popular culture and politics in longer-term perspective. As

the public realm continues to shrink in many of the countries of the MENA region and authorities clamp down on dissent in the cyber sphere as well as on the streets, it seems clear that culture wars will become an increasingly important object of study for scholars interested in understanding the dynamics of political contestations and transformations, and that these need to be examined both from ‘above’ and ‘below’. Many of the articles in this special issue have demonstrated the significance of social media as a source of data, which undoubtedly will continue to grow, and have pointed to some of the ways in which the theoretical, methodological and ethical challenges of exploiting social media data can be overcome by researchers.