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CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds
Studies

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Panel 12

Middle classes, social classifications and scientific categories in the Arab world

Recent economic studies have revealed the “dual social structure” of societies in the Maghreb and the Middle East (Alvaredo et al. 2017, Assouad et al. 2018): an extremely rich minority and a vast poor or impoverished majority, whose middle classes would be virtually absent. However, the latter has historically been perceived, both in social and scholarly representations, as the central segment of Arab societies: mystified as engines of development and as pillars of regimes, they were then erected as the leading agents of the Arab Spring. Most citizens also “classify” themselves as “middle classes” - an extensive category that allows the projection of multiple social imaginaries - regardless of their real income.

This workshop aims to explore this paradox of the subjective omnipresence of the middle classes and the difficulty of specifying their objective conditions of existence. The papers will analyze: 1) the methods and scales from which scientific and/or expert classifications of social stratification are constructed; 2) the ordinary classifications by which social groups construct their positions and those of “others”; 3) the possibilities of objectivizing the material conditions of existence of the middle classes, their evolutions and their upward/downward trajectories.

People in charge : Boutaleb Assia (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, CESSP) and Vannetzel Marie (CNRS, CEDEJ)

Discussant : Catusse Myriam (CNRS, IREMAM)

Program

Assaf Laure (New York University, Abu Dhabi)

Is There a Middle-Class in the United Arab Emirates?

Gulf societies have often been analyzed through the divide between citizens and non-citizens: while the former benefit from economic and social privileges, the latter hold the precarious status of “temporary workers”. However, this dichotomy fails to describe the complexity of social hierarchies in the region: neither does it account for the gap separating ruling families from ordinary citizens, nor for the social and spatial boundaries segregating working-class employees housed in labor camps from other foreign residents. Between these two poles thus exist highly heterogeneous “middle classes” who cross paths in Gulf cities. Based on the case study of Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, this paper attempts to build an ethnographic definition of these middle classes. It notably explores how the notion of lifestyle – and its subtle intersections with class, ethnicity, and religion – is often mobilized by residents themselves to portray the internal stratifications of this population.

Dufresne Aubertin Laurence (Université Aix-Marseille, Cherpa/Iremam)

To be classified and to classify oneself in an apparatus of social housing in Algeria

In Algeria, housing has been displayed since the end of the civil war as the priority of the public authorities. Financed by dividends from oil revenues, the distribution of housing is emblematic of how the state's economic aid is channeled. As a «public good», housing distribution refers to power arrangements in which the state is required to ensure forms of subsistence for the population through access to the property. In other words, the acquisition of these patrimonial resources constitutes a mainspring of social mobility for different social groups.

Based on research carried out in Algiers and Oran among political and administrative officials on the one hand, and applicants for social housing residing in precarious conditions on the other, this paper intends to explore the struggles for classification that take place within a social housing program. It will first examine the production of public action that proposes, through different programs, a categorization of social groups and sometimes a competing definition of rights holders. Then, I will analyze the cross-assessments of these different actors in the objectification of the material conditions that proceed from the insertion in the operations of rehousing.

Hmed Choukri (Université Paris-Dauphine PSL/ IRISSE)

Remembrance of Classes Past. Stratification, Division of Social Labor and Production of Symbolic Capital in Post-2011 Tunisia

Since the 1980s, the problem of social classification in Tunisia had remained, like in all the Arab worlds, a sociological non-object. The economist Baccar Gherib thus pointed out in a 2011 article that “the scarcity, not to say the absence, of scientific investigations on social classes, especially the middle classes, in Tunisia, is strikingly concerning” (Gherib, 2011). According to him, some work published in the 1980s excepted, “the field has been abandoned, left fallow, so to speak”.

This paper aims at reopening this issue, by proposing both an epistemological and methodological reflection on the scientific apparatus that allows us to think about social stratification in contemporary post-2011 Tunisia. Three questions will thus be raised. First, to what extent is the Bourdieuan grid – which still constitutes the widespread theoretical reference for the construction of social space in France (with two axes representing cultural and economic capital) – applicable, mutatis mutandis, to contemporary Tunisia? Secondly, the objectification of the middle classes presupposes to raise the central issue of the division of social work (Durkheim, 1893) and the composition of social groups within a non-Western society. Finally, the paper proposes to adopt a processual approach to sociologically figure out the constitution of the middle classes, by questioning the activity of interest groups, especially the production of symbolic capital and representation.

Ramzy Farah (IEP Bordeaux, Centre Emile Durkheim)

French Catholic schools in Egypt: Between elitist dreams and “middle” condition

In Egypt, schools created by catholic missions to teach French and English have for a long time been considered locations for distinguished education symbolizing an elite status. Nonetheless, with the privatization and increasing internationalization of primary and secondary education, such schools came to occupy a place in the “middle” of the hierarchy of the education offer: in terms of enrollment prices, quality of education and the value of diplomas. Still, alumni of such schools hold on to the idea that they represent a distinguished group, with different manners and value systems from the rest of society, even though they admit that their schools might no longer be “what they used to.”

This paper proposes a preliminary reflection on francophone catholic schools and their transformation from markers of elite status to the very expression of middle or at best an upper middle-class position. Drawing the outlines of a study of educational, familial, residential and professional trajectories of Egyptian Upper Middle-Class households, the purpose of this paper is to trace the differential integration of individuals in the global neoliberal economy that sees the value of their resources continuously changing and with it their modes of consumption and their value systems.