Looking South: What can Youth Studies in the Global North learn from research on youth and policy in the Middle East and North African countries?

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Abstract

Connell's 'Southern Theory' calls for intellectuals in the 'Global North' 'to start learning in new ways, and in new relationships' (2014) with and from scholars in the 'Global South' in order to better understand the subjects of our research. This, exactly, is the motivation of this paper. In working with, and drawing, on a large, comparative research programme about young people and youth policy in some of the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (the POWER2YOUTH research project), we explore what can be learned for sociologically-oriented Youth Studies in the 'Global North' through collaborative research in the 'Global South'. The paper brings together research and theory from different disciplines/fields as well as from different regions/states so as to consider how we might better research and theorise about 'youth' (as a socially constructed life-phase) and about the empirical realities of young people's lives (as they play out in social, political, cultural and economic contexts). Consequently, the paper discusses five themes or issues that we see as important for Youth Studies in the 'Global North': the variation in dominant state/social constructions of 'youth'; the plurality of social divisions amongst youth; the different meanings of insecurity for young people; the flaws in human capital-based youth policies; and the significance of informal and non-standard work for young people. In conclusion, we summarise our arguments and underscore the value of a political economy perspective in Youth Studies.

Introduction

This paper is about what those who practice youth research and youth policy-making in the 'Global North' might learn from recent, comparative studies of young people and youth policy in Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. Empirically, it is rooted in a bringing together of our own extensive experience of youth research and scholarship in the UK and others' recent, comparative research based on the POWER2YOUTH (P2Y) research project in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Turkey and Lebanon about youth exclusion and citizenship[1]. Theoretically, it is located in an upswell of writing and critique about the politics of academic scholarship that is dominated by 'the view from the Global North', Youth Studies included. Here we 'look South' to see what 'we in the North' might learn (albeit that we recognise, of course, that theorising in terms of a simple North/ South binary can sometimes imply too great a degree of similarity between countries on the same side of this divide and too great a degree of difference between countries on opposite sides[2]).

We write as trespassers. Our academic field is not politics let alone Mediterranean politics, nor Area or Regional Studies. Our careers as social scientists as yet have included no *direct*, face-to-face research with young people in MENA countries, nor even any locations in the wider Global South. We are keen students, not expert scholars, when it comes to questions about how the social, cultural and economic conditions of these countries shape (and are shaped by) the lives of young people. Nor are we known for our previous engagements with post-colonial, sub-altern or Southern theory. It is important to stress these caveats and the tentative and exploratory nature of our paper. We offer our arguments and observations in a spirit of open enquiry knowing that we might be getting things quite wrong[3].

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[1] This programme of research is described in detail in the introduction to this Special Issue. Our paper draws heavily in its middle section on the work of Emma Murphy, Jo Phoenix, Mark Calder and Drew Mikhael for our POWER2YOUTH project (Calder et al, 2017).

[2] Having acknowledged this, hereafter for stylistic reasons we will not place inverted commas around Global North or Global South.

[3] And we are grateful to the editors and reviewers for their helpful, critical comments on our draft paper.

What we can claim, however, is some experience and standing in that academic sub-field called Youth Studies (which we turn to shortly)[4] i.e. we have each made our academic careers in the UK, drawing on sociology, criminology and social policy to investigate young people and youth issues, particularly in respect of inequality, social exclusion and the labour market. This paper is inspired by the opportunity enjoyed by one of us (XXX) to participate in a major programme of EU-funded comparative youth research; the P2Y research project[5]. The work package (see Calder et al., 2017) sought to identify policy conclusions and recommendations from the multiple research projects that constituted the programme.

Our aim here is to set out what the field of Youth Studies in the Global North (specifically the UK) might learn from studies of youth and young people in the MENA countries. Without wishing to claim too much, our motivation exactly reflects Raewyn Connell's call for Northern intellectuals 'to *start learning* in new ways, and in new relationships' (2014: 219, original emphasis). In working with and drawing on the P2Y project we seek to explore what can be learned for the Global North through collaborative research in the Global South. The paper is organised in four parts. First, cognisant that our readership here is likely not to count this as their academic home, we briefly say what we mean by 'Youth Studies'. Secondly, we sketch the very live challenge to Youth Studies, dominated as it is by scholarship from the Global North, offered by recent critics writing from the perspective of the Global South. Thirdly, in response to this challenge, and as a way of moving these debates forward, we suggest five lessons that we here 'in the North', can learn from studies 'there', in the South. This leads into the conclusion of the paper which – echoing many of the themes of the introduction to this Special Issue - stresses the value of political economy approach to understanding young people's lives and experiences; an approach that can expose the falsity of dominant ideologies that individualise and blame young people and can reveal the neo-liberal, structuring forces that create the conditions young people face.

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[4] For instance, XXXX is… and XXXX is….
[5] We are indebted to the research teams that undertook the various projects; see
https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/185536/reporting/en

Defining terms and setting the scene

What is Youth Studies?

'Youth Studies' is a relatively new field (no more than one hundred or so years old) and it draws on several disciplines (such as sociology, cultural studies, psychology, criminology, education, social policy, and social geography). The leading international journal is the *Journal of Youth Studies* (JYS) (see MacDonald et al., 2019: 2 for a recent editorial statement on the field). JYS is 'devoted to a theoretical and empirical understanding of young people's experiences and life contexts' and the way that those in the 'second and third decades of life' experience 'contexts, such as education, the labour market and the family' (ibid.). It is interested in how inequality and marginalisation are reproduced and the way that social, economic and political processes and institutions shape the meaning of, and narratives about, youth. This, then, is a sociological, critical form of Youth Studies that is distinct from more psychologically-oriented approaches that tend to stress individual-level issues of adolescent development (these are popular in the US and can sometimes merge into normative 'positive development' approaches to 'youth problems').

Whilst never completely separate, it has long been argued that two, broad traditions of Youth Studies exist in the UK (MacDonald, 2011): firstly, a y*outh cultural studies* approach, originating in the 1970s, that theorises the interaction of class and age-based inequalities in the generation of stylistic, working-class youth sub-cultures; and, secondly, the study of *youth transitions* to the labour market and adulthood which, since the 1980s, has dominated in terms of academic and policy influence. Ironically, Cooper and colleagues (2019: 33) – in their stinging criticism of the flaws of a Global North dominated Youth Studies – decry its lack of attention to 'the urgent material problems of unemployment'. This allegation betrays ignorance of this extensive tradition of youth transitions research in the UK and elsewhere which has had, as a staple feature over several decades, the problems of unemployment for young people (MacDonald et al, 2001).

So, what are the core questions for Youth Studies? What is its main purpose? The most persuasive answer, we think, is that the youth phase of the life-course offers a privileged window on social change or continuity (e.g. of family forms, gender roles, class positions), and therefore studying youth allows us to ask and answer questions of wide social scientific significance (MacDonald, 2011). A second answer, of which we have become even more convinced because of the P2Y project, is that by studying youth we can see how powerful social forces construct narratives and policies about 'youth' that then serve the interests of the powerful. In sum, the *empirical realities of young people's transitions* to adulthood can reveal wider social change and continuity and the *dominant social constructions of youth* can reveal the motives and strategies of the powerful.

'North', 'South', and Sociology's imperial heritage: a brief note on some terms

We are acutely conscious of the politics of labels. Older and newer terms – 'Third World', 'Developing World', 'Periphery', 'Subaltern' and even 'Global South' – all position a great swathe of heterogeneous countries in relation to, against, an also uniform, wealthy, 'developed', 'First World', 'North' or 'West'. 'Global South' continues to be used by the UN and typically refers to economically disadvantaged nation-states that have been 'negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalization', often through processes of capitalist colonialism (Mahler, 2019). It is a concept that draws attention to countries' 'interconnected histories of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained' (Dados and Connell, 2012: 12).

Butler (2019) reminds us that 'no name is perfect and neither the North nor the South is geographically precise'. Lists of those countries that fall within the Global South/Global North occasionally differ and economic development can mean countries shifting, over time, from 'South' to 'North'. In the same vein, the broad-brush strokes of 'Global North versus Global South' can hide finer details of difference within the 'South' and within the 'North'. For instance, rates of young people being 'not in education, employment or training ('NEET') vary drastically *within* Europe. In April 2019, nearly 29% of young adults in Italy and 27% in Greece were in this situation with only 8% of young Swedes and 8.6% of young Dutch

people being NEET (European Commission, 2019). Müller (2018: 1) is also concerned with the 'geopolitics of knowledge' and how a simple North/ South split has erased what he calls the 'Global East': 'those countries and societies that occupy an interstitial position between North and South'. A similar example might be the wealthy 'Gulf Cooperation Council' countries of the Middle East (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates). The life-worlds of young adults in Kuwait (with average annual per capita income of nearly US$25,000) are likely to be different to those of young Ethiopians (with an equivalent rate of US$522) even though both states are nominally within the Global South[6]. Keeping with the Kuwaiti example, Alnaser (2018) shows how young Kuwaitis' experiences do not fit with either the 'typical story' of the Global South (e.g. they are far from economically disadvantaged) *or* the Global North (e.g. Kuwaiti youth unemployment is largely voluntary). Rather, she says, Kuwait is 'located somewhere between the northern and southern norms… with some aspects similar in both contexts and others which are totally different' (ibid: 59). It is not our purpose to engage in a full critique of terms and definitions. With these cases we are simply indicating our awareness of some of the limitations and problems of an incautious approach to conceptualising 'the Global South/ North'. We do see enormous value in trying to draw comparative lessons through empirical insights, for research and policy in the UK (and more widely in the Global North), from the experiences of young people in these MENA countries which, broadly speaking and for the purposes of our paper, we call part of the Global South[7] (notwithstanding the differences that we know exist between these countries and between them and other parts of the Global South).

These problems of categorising, dividing and naming remind us of how 'the long shadow of colonial history falls across whole domains of knowledge' (Connell, 2017: 29). Even some brief acknowledgement of this colonial heritage within Sociology (and therefore Youth Studies) is necessary. Postcolonial theory shows us that colonialism continues today through neoliberal globalisation, critiques the structures of dominant western discourse and develops 'indigenous' concepts and knowledge. The colonial past of European Sociology is

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[6] Figures from the World Bank (n.d.). The equivalent figure for the UK is around US$34k.
[7] Turkey, one of our six sites, tends to be classified as Global North despite the historic significance of Istanbul as cross-road between Asia and Europe and its listing by the OECD as an 'ODA country'.

rarely uncovered and, Bhambra argues (2007, p.143), a post-colonial Sociology should rework the basic assumptions of our descriptions and theories to develop post-colonial, 'connected sociologies'. For Chakrabarty (2000), this requires Sociology to 'decentre' and 'provincialise' Europe, allowing some remedy of the neglect of societies outside the Global North. Some examples of this include scholarship on the autonomous social-scientific developments emanating from the Arab world, and south and south-east Asia (Alatas, 2006), and the argument that, in the current climate of economic instability in the North, ways of theorising in the Global South, particularly in Africa, may show the way forward (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011). What a post-colonial Sociology should be and do is hotly contested (see, for example, Aravamudan, 2012; Ferguson, 2012; Obarrio, 2012), and Mbembe's (2012) argument, for instance, that an inward, Afro-centric model should not simply replace a Euro-centric one.

Connell (2007)'s *Southern Theory* is one of the most influential works here. Much core social theory 'embeds perspectives on the world that arise from the social formations of the global North, because of their historical position in imperialism and their current core position in the neoliberal world economy' (Connell 2018: 402). The impact of this, according to Connell, is fourfold: 'the claim of universality'; 'reading from the centre'; 'gestures of exclusion'; and 'grand erasure'. In the post-colonial world, this structural inequality is sustained by disparities in wealth and institutional support. Instead, Connell argues, we need an approach that champions voices, experiences and theory *from* and *for* the South. Ultimately, the knowledge economy must be considered through a historic lens, one dominated by *ongoing* struggle and transformation, exemplified recently, for instance, by the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement at the University of Cape Town[8] to the media heat over University of Cambridge students' calls to decolonise their English curriculum[9].

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[8] https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/nov/18/why-south-african-students-have-turned-on-their-parents-generation
[9] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/27/decolonise-elite-white-men-decolonising-cambridge-university-english-curriculum-literature

[The concepts of] Youth Studies must mean something tangible to the teenager in Delhi or Nairobi or Bogota, not just to the academic sitting in London or Melbourne or Manhattan (Everatt, 2015: 77).

Our interest in a more global, inclusive Youth Studies is not a completely new nor original one. Over the last two decades or so, there have been several occasions of this same call for a more global perspective in Youth Studies. Perhaps ahead of its time, the first-ever UK undergraduate degree in Youth Studies (at Teesside University in 1998) contained a core module that explicitly compared youth experiences in 'more' and 'less economically developed countries'. In 2004, writing of Australia, Wyn and Harris urged youth researchers to engage with their country's distinctive, colonial history. In the same year, a special issue of *Youth and Society*, based on an earlier research symposium in which one of the authors participated, had the express intention of analysing 'young people's transitions from the perspective of both the First World and Third World [sic]' (Jeffreys and McDowell, 2004: 131). Shortly afterwards, Nilan and Feixa's *Global Youth?* (2006) described subaltern 'youth landscapes' which had previously been invisible in 'Western' youth cultural studies. In 2014, the Newcastle Youth Studies Group held the symposium *Youth Outside the Northern Metropole* to 'articulate some of the key concerns for urban, regional and rural young people in Australia, Asia and the Pacific'. More recently, Phillips (2018) and Cooper et al. (2019) have each argued that scholars outside of the North should develop their own methods, knowledge and theories specific to the contexts in which they research and, at the time of writing, two new editions about youth in the Global South are on the verge of publication (Cuervo et al., forthcoming; Swartz et al, forthcoming).

Thus, Youth Studies is already a global field of scholarship, but institutionalised knowledge remains skewed towards the Global North, reflecting material inequalities, the globally uneven power of universities and the hitherto flow of global cultural influence (Côté, 2014 see the critique by Cooper et al, 2019; MacDonald et al, 2019). Predominantly, key texts, journals, and leading theories have been based on youth research carried out in, and reflecting epistemologies and methodologies developed in, the Global North and published

with an implicit 'claim of universality' (Connell, 2007), ignoring the history and context-specific nature of that knowledge *and* that the histories and contexts of the Global South might generate quite different understandings of youth. Woodman and Wyn (2014: 35) suggest, however, that Connell's critique does not necessitate the abandonment of Northern-based theories; 'we may be able to enrich and rework those we have'. In this vein, Phillips argues for greater attention to the voluminous research literature on 'African Youth' and that post-colonial theory and Area Studies scholarship can be both 'a corrective and a source of inspiration for Youth Studies [and] can thus be a fruitful starting point to develop more inclusive concepts and understandings of youth' (2018: 12).

We welcome and agree with much of the challenge offered by Global South researchers and are keen to imagine and practice more inclusive, global studies of youth. Patently, there is much Youth Studies and youth policy in the Global North can learn from the experiences and contexts of young people in the Global South; this is the prime aim and core of our paper. As we have described, however, we are anxious to avoid overly homogenising depictions of the life-worlds of young people on one side or the other of a hard North/South divide. One of the contributions of Youth Studies (in the North) – and a feature of our own work – has been to show how inequalities *between* young people in the UK are reproduced, against changing social and economic conditions and according to multiple, intersecting lines of division (by class, gender, ethnicity, place, sexuality, dis/ability and so on). This exact fact is also revealed in relation to youth in the MENA countries, as we discuss later in the paper.

Despite the mounting agreement about the necessity and possibility of a more global Youth Studies, we agree with Joschka Phillips that the debate remains 'nascent' (2018: 12); it often does not go much beyond criticism of the current state of affairs, a re-statement of the need for a more global perspective or sketched at the level of 'hints' for what might be done As Global North scholars, our commitment in the longer term would be towards comparative scholarship that would engage energetically with studies of youth and young people from the South in order: firstly, to be able to see better the global economic, social, cultural, and political processes that have created and continue to shape the national and regional contexts in which young people, in the North and in the South, live their lives;

secondly, to reveal not only the undoubted differences but also the potential parallels between contexts, state discourses about youth and young people's experiences in the South and the North; and thirdly, going beyond the limits of a simple binary division, to investigate the differences that might exist *within* and *between* the countries categorised together as the Global South, or as the Global North. That is all a longer-term project. In the meantime, we offer something that we hope helps move this debate beyond the 'nascent' by outlining what we learned, in practice, from one comparative study of youth.

What can 'we' learn from studies of young people and youth policy in MENA countries?

We now turn to the core of the paper; five lessons that we suggest we can learn for Youth Studies in the Global North from the P2Y research[10].

Dominant discourses of youth vary, reflecting different regional/state settings and histories

As we noted earlier, dominant social and political discourses frame how we understand 'youth' – in youth policy, youth welfare practice and in academic Youth Studies. Since the emergence of 'youth' as a recognised age category in the North's early industrial era, social commentators have constructed young people as a vulnerable group in a hostile world and, simultaneously, as an uncivilised presence requiring discipline (Pearson, 1983). Twin discourses of 'care' and 'control' have shaped the governance of this social category through successive waves of state intervention in the UK (Griffin, 1993).

In these MENA countries, there are also two dominant representations of youth, also often operating simultaneously and in contradiction, but they are of a different character. Youth become presented as either as 'the hope of' or 'threat to the nation'. Studies of national youth policies and strategies 'show that [these] archetypes of young people are created and promoted by the state institutions' (Calder et al, 2017: 10). Consequently, for countries

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[10] The list is not meant to be exhaustive.

emerging from colonial oppression and struggles for independence, 'youth' are implicated in the process of nation-building (reminiscent of the way that Nazi or Stalinist totalitarian regimes in the mid-20th Century constructed their youth political organisations as the vanguard of the future). The State 'looks positively' upon young people who conform to the patriarchal, authoritarian practices and conservative outlooks promoted by governments, for instance, as evidenced by membership of regime political parties. The State 'looks negatively' upon and seeks to control, discipline and criminalise those young people who dissent politically or engage in youth cultural activities deemed to be at odds with traditional, conservative values (Swedenburg, 2017).

The P2Y research demonstrated how these discourses of 'youth as hope of/threat to the nation' are manifest in the prime functions of youth ministries and institutions; i.e. to corral, incorporate and subordinate young people, dulling the possibility for dissent and conflict. For example, planning policies and practices in MENA countries sometimes actively pursue a policy of 'containment', spatially restricting young people to areas where they 'are invisible' and 'can do no harm', excluding them from spaces where their presence is 'not required for business to progress' (Calder et al, 2017: 14). This tendency has been accentuated since the youth-led protests of 2011 ('the Arab Spring'); a moment that was emblematic of young people's refusal, across the region, to be subservient to such state repression. Subsequently, international political attention led to a burgeoning of policy investment in youth-targeted state agencies. Yet many such agencies are 'little more than shells, lacking proper data and information about youth, remaining heavily politicised and lacking serious resources to address priority areas' (ibid.). Formal state institutions are often 'riddled with patrimonial modes of behaviour at best, and outright corruption at worst, and young people have little or no trust in them' (ibid: 23).

The politics of 'youth' representations plays out in the practice of youth work[11]; again, with differences between the MENA countries and the UK. In its 1970s heyday at least, UK youth work was a force for social welfare and, at times, even carried a radical imperative for

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[11] We use 'youth work' to mean youth services and workers who engage with young people to support their personal and social development. This should not be confused with work (labour) undertaken by young people (youth).

progressive social change, shared across left-wing public sector workers, under the motto 'in and against the state' (The London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979). Conversely, in some MENA countries, youth work now is sometimes perceived as another arm of Althusser's 'Repressive State Apparatus' (Buchanan, 2010), working against the real interests of young people. This is one instance of the challenges that faced us as Global North academics designated the complicated job of devising youth policy recommendations for the EU. Currently in the UK, a sensible policy suggestion vis-à-vis numerous youth problems (especially after years of austerity cuts to youth services) might be 'invest in youth work and youth services'. Not so in some of our MENA case study areas, where 'youth work' acts as part of the punitive State.

Popular concepts in the Global North, such as 'insecurity', can have qualitatively different meanings in the South

That young people's lives are increasingly insecure and risky is one of the dominant motifs of Youth Studies research in the Global North. Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1990) had an enormous impact, sparking debate about the extent to which old social structures of social class were relevant in young people's lives. 'Insecurity' has predominantly been discussed in relation to youth transitions from school to work and how these have become less predictable and more individualised (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

The P2Y studies also concluded that, overall, 'insecurity – physical, political, economic and social – was the dominant motif that emerged from the research across these countries' (Calder et al, 2017: 26). Clearly, globally, young people are experiencing insecure transitions that continue to be shaped by structural inequalities, most often connected to class, gender, race, ethnicity and place. Nevertheless, the P2Y programme revealed some quite different experiences. Young people regularly reported 'a sense of not belonging, and of being separate from the rules and structures within which they live their everyday lives' (ibid: 25). State narratives of 'youth as hope of the nation' have little resonance for them and the 'cultures of conservative patriarchal society' in which they are immersed 'are at odds with their evolving and globally connected identities and their need to move beyond the confines of the family' (ibid.). More profoundly, in their daily lives, young people in MENA countries

often endured extreme levels of political and personal insecurity manifest in physical, not just symbolic, violence. This was reproduced and exacerbated by the State and its security services and institutions and was of a different magnitude to that found in much of the Global North. For us, as newcomer researchers, it was this which most strikingly differentiated the lives of young people here from the lives of those in the Global North. Calder et al. comment as follows (2017: 21):

> Young people are constantly aware of implicit and explicit 'red-lines', which if crossed, can result in violence even in everyday settings. Examples include: young women, who are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence; Palestinian youths, travelling to University, having to face armed soldiers at an Israeli check-point; or Egyptian bloggers arrested and tortured in prison.

Public space is contested and short victories for young people after the 2011 uprisings have been reversed, with public transport and urban spaces (even youth-oriented spaces, such as university campuses) commonly now being sites of physical insecurity, risk and danger, especially for young women. As we note later, often women's experiences of marginalisation are qualitatively different to those of men, particularly in relation to issues of insecurity and safety. Physical and sexual harassment is common-place. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, sexual assaults on women protestors have been rife, with those attacked often constructed as 'prostitutes' (Salih et al, 2017: 15), and those who might support them (such as journalists, activists and charity workers) facing accusations of sexual abuse (Zerhouni and Akesbi, 2016: 16). Freedom of movement and association is curtailed. One Lebanese young woman interviewed in the P2Y research (Calder et al, 2017: 21) described how she and her friends had to steel themselves to go out (against the anticipated risks) and would only do so in groups of at least four people. In some MENA countries, the majority of respondents to the P2Y surveys preferred to spend most of their leisure time in the safety of the home (55% of respondents in Morocco, 73% in Palestine Occupied Territories), often because they feared the threat of state police and security forces. A young Palestinian woman said: 'my neighbours make me feel secure. The Israeli soldiers come to the home and we do not feel safe. Girls on the street also do not always feel safe in the street, I mean

at night because of harassment. Girls cannot go freely anywhere at night' (Calder et al, 2017: 21).

It is true that young people in the Global North sometimes also have cause to fear for their personal safety, as the US *Black Lives Matters* campaign has well demonstrated. Some groups of young people in the UK are also subject to unjust, racist policing. Street crime and violence, too, disproportionately impacts on young people. The *extent* and the *severity* of the risks faced by young people in MENA countries (including to their existential safety and security) seem, however, to be of a different order of magnitude. This was particularly true for countries in or moving away from conflict. As one young Lebanese man said: 'You don't know if a bomb will explode in the road and kill you' (Calder et al., 2017: 26).

'Youth' is heterogenous and socially divided; the variety and depth of social divisions appears to be greater in MENA countries than in the Global North

Well-known social divisions continue to structure young people's lives and transitions to adulthood in the Global North, regardless of individualizing tendencies that enable *apparently* greater personal agency (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Nevertheless, there has been *some* weakening of gender inequalities, in *some* respects, for young people in the UK. This is apparent, for example, in patterns of educational achievement at school and at university. The relative success of young women has fed discourses about 'a crisis of masculinity', focused especially on young white, working class men.

This does not seem to be the case in the MENA countries studied by P2Y, where inequalities by gender are deep and pervasive. The P2Y programme looked closely at the complex intersectionality of myriad sources of difference between young people, i.e. by nationality, gender, social class, ethnicity, religion and other factors. Thus, the research was alive to the 'multiple marginalisations' that structure the experience of being young in the MENA countries (Calder et al, 2017:16). Amongst these, gender was often to the fore in experiences of inequality (to be clear, in describing this we are explicitly *not* arguing that young women in the Global North are free of the constraints and pressures of Patriarchy). This could be felt in the direct threats to security that women face in public space (as noted

above) and, indirectly, in the increasingly conservative approach to family and personal status policies implemented by several MENA states since the turn of the century. These have included legal restrictions on women (e.g. the right to pass on their nationality, in Lebanon), the reduction of female reproductive rights and the endorsement of patriarchal social norms (for example, in Turkey, the state has instituted financial support for women to stay at home and take care of children) (Catusse and Destremau, 2016). Family law is strongly influenced by religious law which enforces 'heteronormativity' and gender-based ideologies. This means that young women are more likely to be obliged into marriage (legally from the age of 9 in some states) as a means of reducing 'the burden' they place on the family home. A young Egyptian woman explained that 'whenever she discusses the rights of women, people take it from a religious perspective and hence, they turn feminism into anti religion' (Sika, 2016: 13). Such gendered experiences are not exclusively cultural and/or religious and early marriage, for example, is embedded within class and economic conditions.

Superficially, there are similar trends here, as in much of the Global North, towards the prolonged dependence of young adults on their parents and the parental home (across the MENA countries studied, at least two-thirds of survey respondents were still living at home). The key difference is that here that dependence is maintained in a strongly patriarchal context where seniority spells privilege (for men) and young people (especially young women) are required to defer to traditional, unequal gender roles (including of strict limits, because of honour codes, on sexual activity). Here there is none of the sexual freedom and identity experimentation associated with North American versions of 'Emerging Adulthood' (Arnett, 2001). The unequal impact of marriage and the ensuing burden of care also amplifies the gender gap in education and employment. For instance, UK rates of being 'not in education, employment or training' ('NEET') for young men and women have converged but in MENA countries the rate is often much higher for young women (41% compared to 14% for young men; Erdoğan et al, 2017: 8). Calder et al (2017: 22) conclude that:

> the reality for young women is that – despite being more likely to achieve a higher
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> level of education than their mothers – they continue to be under-represented in the
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> labour force, to be subordinated to patriarchal norms and practices in both home

and the public sphere, to be vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse, to face sexual harassment in employment or public social spaces, to be poor and to lack financial and bodily security.

Investment in human capital (extended education, university qualifications) does not guarantee labour market success

In the EU, with the UK being a perfect example, perhaps the predominant 'youth problem' perceived by governments has been social exclusion, manifested most clearly as non-participation in the labour market. This is true for much of the Global North despite wide variance in levels and experiences of youth unemployment between countries (as we noted earlier). UK policy makers coined the term 'NEET' ('not in employment, education or training') as a short hand for this situation. The proposed solution has been to re-engage 'NEET' young people in education and training courses. The underlying premise is this is a problem of underdeveloped human capital; a shortage of the education, skills and qualifications needed by the economy. One of the authors (XXXX) has described it as 'voodoo sociology'; a form of magical thinking that shifts the blame for the deep, entrenched, structural problems of the labour market onto the supposed deficiencies of young people. The findings of the P2Y studies help to confirm this critique of the policy orthodoxy.

Compared with the welfarist policies of the post-war period, employment policy in MENA states is no longer about the public provision of employment but is occupied in the neo-liberal project of transferring to individuals greater responsibility for their own economic welfare (Calder et al, 2017). Converging with countries across Europe, policy has come to focus on equipping potential employees (young people) with the skills, capacities and attributes said to be required by employers in the private sector or for establishing their own small businesses. Such approaches, ignoring as they do pre-existing inequalities and the structural causes of youth unemployment, have the potential to deepen the problems that young people face. Most small businesses started by young adults fail (MacDonald and Coffield, 1991). In hostile conditions (associated with corruption, over-regulation, lack of

capitalisation, access to markets etc.), few are likely to succeed. The financial and psychological costs can be heavy (ibid.). A fundamental problem is that most MENA economies remain weak, have underdeveloped private sector industry and governments (pursuing or embracing increasingly neoliberal agendas) have often only been able to encourage inward investment from multinationals that provide lower skilled work. In short, these economies have weaknesses in the quantity and the quality of employment opportunities available to young adults. This is coupled, however, with a strong cultural tradition and memory of the availability of better-quality employment for university graduates, stemming from the decades of post-war state welfarist investment in education and the economy. There is still an *expectation* that educational qualifications will bring employment success and security.

Yet it is sometimes the *most* educated and qualified who face the greatest chances of unemployment (Boubakri, 2017, in Salih et al., 2017). This really is a *very* striking difference to much of the European context. In the UK, for instance, university degrees no longer guarantee a graduate job – but they do provide greater protection against unemployment. Despite differences in youth unemployment rates across Europe, *more or less*, the higher the level of qualification the lower chance of unemployment. Thus, in 2017 the UK government estimated 4% of graduates were unemployed (ONS, 2017). In comparison, in Lebanon 51% of those who had completed higher educational qualification had had no work or employment in the preceding 12 months, in Morocco it was 49%, in Egypt 47% and a staggering 70% in Palestine (Calder et al, 2017: 17-18). Craig Jeffrey (2009, in Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015) has commented that:

> one of the most unsettling paradoxes of contemporary social change in the global south is that at almost the precise moment that people formerly excluded from schooling have come to recognise the possibilities held out by education for individual improvement, opportunities for these groups to benefit economically from schooling are disintegrating.

A further aggravating factor is the lack of any form of social insurance (Calder et al., 2017). Young unemployed people in MENA countries are more likely to materially depend on

family or experience poverty. With food subsidies and anti-poverty interventions in the region targeted at the poorest, middle-class young people – including university graduates - face increasing precarity and spiralling private debt. These contexts have generated, in Global South research, the important concept of 'waithood'. Aspirations raised by global consumer culture and cultural memories of state-provided employment post-university are blocked by declining opportunities resulting in prolonged, frustrating dependency and under-employment. Murphy (2018: 34) describes this as an 'acute form of ontological insecurity' and 'a potentially permanent state of hyper-precarious living'. Honwana (2019), amongst others, demonstrates how experiences of waithood differ by class, gender and education and far from merely 'waiting', young people are improvising, surviving and rebelling in myriad ways. This is a far cry from North American, psychology-research depictions of a new optimistic life-phase of 'Emerging Adulthood'; of possibilities and experimentation, of 'high hopes and great expectations' (Arnett, 2001).

This pattern of employment/unemployment by educational level is extraordinarily important. It lays bare the fallacy of the dominant youth policy orthodoxy that operates in the UK, EU and more widely. The implications of this for young people, for social mobility and inequality, for the success of these economies and the cohesion of MENA societies are enormous, as they are for youth in the Global North.

'Non-standard', 'precarious' employment is not a new development in the Global South

Especially since the global economic crash and ensuing austerity programmes in many Northern states, high unemployment, an informalised economy, entrenched poverty and material inequality - once considered the preserve of the South - are increasingly evident in countries in the North (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011). Thus, one of the most significant trends in labour markets in the Global North has been the growth of casualised, informal and non-standard forms of working (MacDonald and Giatzogalu, 2019); features which have long-dominated economies in the Global South. The International Labour Organisation observes: 'in advanced economies, the standard employment model is less and less dominant… wage and salaried employment accounts for only about half of global

employment' (2015a, quoted in Herod and Lambert, 2016: 1). These trends towards de-standardisation and work insecurity are a key focus for Guy Standing's influential thesis about the rise of a new global class, at the bottom, called *The Precariat* (2011). In Northern Youth Studies we have come to emphasise the precarity and insecurity of young people's lives; yet for decades research in the South has often been undertaken in conditions where 'relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise' are the norm (Bennett, 2008: 7).

Underemployment – not complete unemployment – is a key concept here. This can refer to: workers working in jobs for which they are patently overqualified (such as 'GRINGOS' - graduates in non-graduate occupations); part-time workers not being able to get enough hours; and, a longer-term experience of churning between insecure jobs and unemployment. Getting decent data on these trends in EU states is difficult, for many reasons. Unemployment tends to be the focus of labour market analysis not underemployment. This is even more true of the MENA economies. It is likely, however, that there are high rates of underemployment (in the sense of overqualification for the job) given the high rates of graduate unemployment that are evident; many such workers may 'trade down' to lower level jobs. The MENA region displays lower employment and higher unemployment rates than any other region in the world; it has by far the highest youth unemployment rates (ILO, 2015b). Like the Global South as a whole, these countries have high levels of informality (in respect of work and working conditions) compared with countries in Europe (but less than compared with some other Global South regions). A typical country in MENA produces about one-third of its GDP and employs 65% of its labour force informally (Gatti et al, 2014). Job growth has tended to be in low-skilled and lower value-added sectors that have high rates of informality (such as construction, commerce and transport). The World Bank estimates that on average 32% of employment in MENA countries can be classified as informal self-employment (compared with around 13% in 'developed countries') (Gatti et al, 2014).

The situation for younger workers in these economies is particularly difficult. Neo-liberal economic policies are pursued by government, led down this route by international partners and organisations, which means a declining role for the state and public-sector employment

and a greater role for the private sector. This has also meant that some of the formal and legal protections and advantages of state sponsored employment are lost or are in decline. As noted, however, the private sector remains weak. One result is that those (older) workers currently occupying 'better jobs' in the public sector hang on to them. Competition is extremely fierce for decent private sector jobs, and inequalities to do with age, education, bilingualism, urban location, family and other connections, determine who is successful and who is not. Overall, younger workers as newer entrants to the labour market lose out to older workers and get lower wages, fewer work-related benefits and weaker job security. Neo-liberal policies in the Global North further increase the precarious nature of employment for young people in the MENA states. Over the last twenty years, EU (and Gulf countries') immigration policies have become increasingly hostile, curtailing migration for young Arabs and Turks (De Bel-Air, 2016). To shorten the duration of their stays in the EU, temporary and seasonal labour migration programmes for low-skilled workers have expanded, thus increasing employment precariousness and insecurity among young migrants (Paciello and Pioppi, 2017: 10).

Unlike the typical experience for their counterparts in the Global North, for some young people in MENA economies this informality and insecurity is intensified by the fact that 'access to any employment (precarious or otherwise) is often… dependent on *wasta* (that is, personal connections) or formal political affiliation' (Calder et al, 2017: 17). Young people resent this system, recognising that it is bad for social and economic life, but at the same time use it when necessary to improve their own lives. Strikingly, over 90% of P2Y survey respondents felt that 'wasta' was by far the single most important factor in accessing employment (Boubakri, 2017). As a young Palestinian interviewee commented, 'if they [people] don't think wasta exists, they're benefitting from it' (Giacaman et al., 2017: 24).

Through studying the experiences of MENA states and the Global South more generally where informal work has been normal and widespread for decades, there is a clear opportunity for scholars in the Global North to better understand the social, political, psychological, and economic experiences, processes and outcomes of this precarity and informality (see Cooper et al, 2019: 29). Ken Roberts' (2009) book *Youth in Transition* makes the critically important point that patterns of youth transition in Eastern Europe might be

indicative of the direction of travel for youth transitions in Western Europe (e.g. in respect of high rates of university participation, graduate underemployment, prolonged dependence on parents for housing). With the example given in this section, we may have another case that runs counter to orthodox assumptions of development theory; in respect of the informality and insecurity of young adults' working lives, the Global North may be on a 'path of development' towards the social and economic experiences typical of the Global South.

Conclusion: the value of a Political Economy perspective

With this paper, we have joined in with the growing effort in Global North Youth Studies to better engage with research, scholarship and theory from the Global South in order to provide more global, convincing accounts of youth and of young people's lives. We hope to have approached this task with some humility, seeking to learn – as newcomers to debates and research in/of/for the Global South – what some important lessons might be. From collaborative research in the MENA countries (the P2Y research project) we have identified five themes or conclusions that we think are particularly relevant. These are that:

- dominant discourses of youth vary, reflecting different regional/state settings and histories;
- popular concepts in the Global North, such as 'insecurity', can have qualitatively different meanings in the South;
- 'Youth' is heterogenous and socially divided; the variety and depth of social divisions appears to be greater in MENA countries than in the Global North;
- Investment in human capital (extended education, university qualifications) does not guarantee labour market success; and,
- 'Non-standard', 'precarious' employment is not a new development in the Global South.

In the remaining paragraphs, we make one wider, final conclusion; that the sort of political economy perspective that is typical of the P2Y programme and of much research about young people in the MENA countries could be of great value for Youth Studies in the Global North.

In the past five years, a lively debate has played out in the pages of the *Journal of Youth Studies,* about the value of, and what might be meant by, a political economy perspective (see Côté, 2014 and 2016; France and Threadgold, 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Kelly, 2018). There is not space here to give a detailed assessment but one observation that we would make is that there seems to be a wider tendency in our field to *create* theoretical 'debates' and 'arguments' where, in reality, there may be a good deal of consensus behind some of the position-taking. There can be more heat than light. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015: 1281-2) put it, regardless of the arguments, most commentators would surely agree with Côté (2014) in the general value of paying more attention in Youth Studies to political economy. Conversely – and importantly – Sukarieh and Tannock also argue that fields of scholarship that have 'long-established traditions of political economy' can benefit from importing work from Youth Studies so as to better understand the 'significance and meaning of youth… within the broader context of society, culture, politics and the economy' (2015: 1288). For us, one of the most important theoretical trends in Northern Youth Studies is this move towards a political economy perspective. A critical component of this would be a more determined analysis of the role of the economy and the state in creating the social category of 'youth', and designating its membership, and the conditions wherein youth 'can be subordinated to the changing needs of the labour market' (Murphy, 2017: 1); in the current conjecture, that is, to the needs of a neo-liberal, global capitalism. We can see the promise of this across the work of the P2Y programme and more widely in analyses of the situations of young people in the MENA countries, which have an advanced understanding of the complex and nuanced dynamics of a political economy approach (e.g. Sukarieh and Tannock, 2016; Murphy, 2017).

Specifically, we agree with Côté (2014) that liberal Youth Studies scholars have not adequately addressed the question of who or what has *caused the conditions* that lie behind the trends and situations described. This criticism runs parallel our own disapproval of 'weak

versions' of the concept of social exclusion (XXXX) and the 'voodoo sociology' of current policy thinking (XXXX). Part of the problem here can be traced back to methodological and theoretical preferences in Youth Studies (in the North). Imagining that young people's 'voices' have epistemological superiority, often there has been a privileging of *direct* research with young people, through interviews and surveys etc, as *the* way 'to do' Youth Studies (see Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). A broader political economy perspective helpfully widens the cast of characters 'in' Youth Studies; drawing attention to the actors and processes that create the social, economic, political, cultural conditions of youth. In Youth Studies in the North, we are heavy on studies of young people and light on studies of employers, policy makers, state welfare professionals, educators, politicians, the police, corporate leaders, and so on. A particular theoretical risk in prioritising 'young people's voices' is that youth research can inadvertently repeat the 'epistemological fallacy' often found there; i.e. young people sometimes voice individualised, neo-liberal, meritocratic perceptions of the world that fail to see how their lives and worlds are socially structured. In turn, this academic research can then lend a hand to government policy 'solutions' for 'youth problems' that focus at the individual rather than the social structural level.

A political economy perspective is a valuable corrective to this overly individualised, liberal approach. Through its application in the MENA countries, as we have shown, it can document how discourses of youth as 'hope of/threat to the nation' are created to serve state interests. For instance, US-originated 'youth bulge' theories have gained much traction over the last three decades, driving international policy in the MENA countries. Associated statistical and econometric models were used to demonstrate and 'predict' that the higher the youth population, the greater the risk of violent conflict. This has legitimised repressive 'youth policy' in the global South (Imoh and Ame, 2012) in general and, as Murphy (2017) describes in relation to Tunisia, has fed moral panics which see young people as 'a political and security threat, a social and economic burden' where it could have been interpreted as 'a "demographic gift" of dynamic, working-age, lower-dependency ratio individuals who can contribute to the productive and savings sectors of the economy' (Murphy, 2012: 9). The shift from post-war state welfarist policies towards the embrace of neo-liberal governance has *not* meant the withdrawal of the State. Authoritarianism is not at odds with neo-liberal reform but serves to deepen capitalist development. In the context of high rates of

unemployment, underemployment and precarious working, authoritarian regimes use a variety of strategies 'to control and supervise youth as well as to contain their dissent, politicisation, frustration and deviation from normative behaviour' (Paciello and Pioppi, 2017: 11). This is also true of the UK context, where the neo-liberal state simultaneously reduces the welfare state and governs at a distance whilst intensifying authoritarian social policies (King et al., forthcoming).

In agreement with the overall conclusions of the P2Y programme, we suggest that we cannot seek to understand the way that youth is constructed in the MENA countries, the conditions that young people experience and the opportunities open to them in their transitions to adulthood and wider lives, without grasping the political economy of the recent decades, particularly 'the implementation of neo-liberal reforms, the exposure to war, the growing securitization of migration policies and the persistence of authoritarian regimes' (Paciello and Pioppi, 2017: 18). In this period, 'state-labour-capital relations' have been profoundly reconfigured with very important implications, particularly for young people. It has intensified experiences of insecurity and precariousness and made 'youth' even more 'differentiated across gender, geographical and ethnic lines within and between countries' (ibid.). A similar approach to understanding young people's lives in the Global North is, we believe, not only desirable but necessary.

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