

The Political Economies of Social Science Research in the Arab World

Seminar series organized by Simon Mangon (Aix-Marseille University / Ifpo), Candice Raymond (CNRS / Ifpo) and Sbeih Sbeih (IREMAM)¹

Presentation

Social science research² is subject to multiple constraints. While some of these constraints are due to epistemological and methodological factors, other factors lie in the weakening of its autonomy in the global context of neoliberalism and the current resurgence of authoritarianism. In most Western countries, this field of research has seen its subordination to the economic and political fields increase as a result of the reforms implemented from the 1980s onwards (Duval and Heilbron, 2006). These reforms have profoundly transformed the institutional and social conditions of scientific activity resulting in a decline in public funding for the social sciences, the generalization of project-based funding, the increased instability of research teams and individualization of researchers' careers, and the transformation of universities into veritable "academic enterprises" (Chamblard, 2020).

Similar dynamics are at work in the Arab world, where the massive spread of higher education in the 1980s, and then the proliferation of private universities since the 1990s, have undermined social science disciplines (Bamyeh, 2015). The injunctions to integrate the Arab world into a globalized "knowledge economy" militate for the linking of social science research to the needs of the market economy (Arvanitis and Hanafi, 2015). At the same time, the massive intervention of international organizations has fostered the development of a large market for expertise to which many local academics turn (Kabbanji, 2010), while independent research centers or those linked to private universities, think tanks and specialized NGOs have multiplied in response to growing social and political demands.

Aiming to grasp what these socio-institutional transformations are doing to the social sciences in the Arab world, this seminar series proposes to question the "political economies of research" that affect the conditions of the production of knowledge today. By political economy of research, a formula already used by O. Roy (2001) and J.F. Bayart (2013) in particular, we refer to the set of social, political and economic relations that govern the market of scholarly activity and organize the production of scientific knowledge. The aim here is to account for the power relations that run through these socio-institutional configurations composed of multiple actors, in order to understand how they frame research practices and trajectories. These political economies of research are, of course, unique from one country to another in the Arab world, due to the specificities of each national trajectory. The specific history of each national higher education and research system, the political and economic model of the country (determining, in particular, the place occupied by public and private institutions), and the degree of authoritarianism or relative liberalism of the regime in place are all factors to be considered. Thus, the study of the different political economies of research in the Arab world contributes to an analysis of the "globalization of science" in the South (Kleiche, Dumoulin Kervran, Quet, 2017), while highlighting - through the specific case of the research sector - certain social, economic and political transformations of the societies and states of the region.

¹ This seminar continues a reflection begun in 2019 with Marie-Noëlle Abi Yaghi in the form of a call for papers to a journal thematic issue (<https://calenda.org/665878>). This call has generated a limited number of responses, while its issues seem fundamental to us. We hope that this seminar will allow us to mobilize the scientific community more broadly around questions that concern it most.

² Which we broadly conceive as any form of research adopting a scientific approach and tools in order to produce knowledge about society supported by empirical data.

Several lines of thought can be identified, which specify the expected contributions:

Institutional configurations: how is social science research organized in the Arab world?

Understanding these new political economies of social science research requires first of all an effort to describe the actors involved, their own logic and the systems of relations that are established between them. The first step is to answer the rather trivial question of who finances what, and thus to question the demand (social or political) for social sciences in a "market of intellectual services" (Granier, Ould-Ferhat and Thobois, 2018). The respective roles of states, international organizations, political parties and civil society organizations in the production of knowledge may be discussed, as well as the new alliances that are being forged between them (Raymond, Catusse and Hanafi, 2021). In the face of the hybridity of the new actors invested in the field, it is also important to study the (re)structuring of the profession, and in particular the place occupied by the university in this space. Finally, the expected contributions may help decipher the new modalities of controlling research. In the Arab world and beyond, research is subject to a "new regime of surveillance" (Aldrin, Fournier, Geisser and Mirman, 2022), which combines managerial supervision, control by security services, digital surveillance and self-censorship practices.

Practices, methods and priorities: how is social science crafted in the Arab world?

The political economies that govern scientific activity today are not without effect on the hierarchy of research objects, as well as on the practices and methods of researchers. The contributions will therefore focus on issues of defining the scientific agenda and of the framing of research questions (Bourdieu, 2001), in order to highlight the political struggles that run through these processes. How have research priorities evolved in the Arab world, for example under the "proposal effect" (Currie-Alder, Arvanitis and Hanafi, 2018) of donors allowing them to place certain themes on the agenda? It is also a question of questioning the diversity of ways of practicing research. Depending on the professional and political contexts in which researchers work, what transformations can be observed in the practices of investigation, analysis or writing? For example, contributions could pay attention to the "journeys" of research practices and paradigms (Kienle, 2010), by placing the analysis of the national context within a global knowledge market characterized by asymmetrical relations. Finally, a last issue concerns the competition of research methods, which reveals the political struggles between actors for the definition of what is scientific and what is not. In the face of injunctions to conduct shorter, more "participatory" or more "impactful" research, what changes can be observed in the relationship of researchers to their field and their tools, as well as to the temporality of the survey or to the role of their respondents?

Trajectories, careers and positions of actors: who produces research in the Arab world?

Finally, a last set of questions concerns the actors in the production of knowledge, paying particular attention to their trajectories, the construction of their careers and their circulations between different fields. Firstly, the diversity of research trajectories needs to be highlighted in order to overcome the traditional distinction between the figures of the scholar and the expert. What are the forms that researchers' careers in the Arab world take, and what do they tell us about the logics that run through the sector (internationalization, labor casualization, privatization)? Contributions may also address the crucial issue of the autonomy of researchers in the face of systemic constraints on their careers. How are researchers' trajectories constructed between the fields of university, expertise, and the associative or political world? What strategies do academic researchers put in place to preserve their independence and maintain their position within the overall competition in the scientific field? Finally, the expected contributions could question the moral economy of research, which is the counterpart of its political economy: in a context of increasing monetization of scientific activity, what remains of

the specific incentives and benefits that produce this "interest in disinterestedness" (Bourdieu, 2001) specific to scholarly fields? What new forms, in these socio-institutional configurations, can the political or social commitment of the researcher take? Do these political economies of research necessarily condemn the critical ambition of the social sciences, and in what way can it nevertheless be manifested?

Calendar and format of the seminar series

The seminar series will be held online from January to December 2023, with a monthly session of one and a half hours organized around a 45-minute paper followed by a discussion. Our working languages will be Arabic, French and English. Priority will be given to papers based on fieldwork, using a specific case study and adopting a critical approach. Speakers are expected to place their paper within a solid theoretical framework and in response to the axes of this presentation, and to provide the organizers, in advance of the session, with a draft of their text in view of a collective publication to be issued at the end of the seminar.

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