

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Asef Bayat**, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 320 pp. \$US 21.95 paper (978-0-8047-6924-2), \$US 60.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-6923-5)

In this book on social change within Arab and Muslim societies in the Middle East, Asef Bayat brings together the empirical cases and theoretical positions with which he has been engaged throughout his scholarship. Addressing debates about social development and democratization that are germane to the fields of social movements, Middle East/Islamic studies, and international relations Bayat argues that everyday social dynamics are altering societies in the Middle East in ways that are usually unacknowledged by onlookers in the West and undesired by authoritarian holders of power in the region. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* is provocative both for highlighting lesser discussed sociopolitical trends in the Middle East and for its prescriptive recognition of local actors as the lead authors of the amelioration of their variegated social conditions.

In the first section of the book Bayat introduces two interrelated conceptual issues that are addressed in more empirical detail in two subsequent sections: policy approaches to social development and democracy in the Middle East, and the question of how to theorize social change in societal contexts that are often viewed from the outside as being stagnant and experienced by locals as being hostile to progressive grassroots politics. Whether the focus is on top-down political democratization and economic liberalization or bottom-up mobilization of the people, Bayat argues that many scholars and stakeholders promoting social change in the Middle East get it wrong by failing to comprehend the specific fluidity of the region's people, movements, cultures, and social structures. Redressing this omission is a major goal of this book.

Considering perspectives on elite-driven social transformation, Bayat takes the widely praised 2002 *Arab Human Development Report* as his point of departure in Chapter 2. He argues that the *Report's* call for state-led processes of political reform to improve regional deficits in knowledge, freedom/democracy, and women's empowerment ignores vested interests that a range of power holders have in maintaining existing sociopolitical structures. Critiquing the selective myopia of the

*Report's* Western supporters and Arab detractors, Bayat builds the argument that the document's goals reflect, rather than subvert, the "contradictions of the very regime[s] it wants to liberate." While his discussion of the *Report* aims to explode false dichotomies that often characterize, and reduce the usefulness of Western scholarly and policy positions on state-led development in the Middle East, Bayat engages social movement theory to introduce the means for social change that he views as most viable within the region.

Against those expounding Middle East exceptionalism, Bayat uses chapter 1 to present his central argument that effective grassroots mobilization is being directed by the people of the region and that recognizing forces for change within an Arab context requires conceptualizations of agency and politics that are more sensitive to regional sociopolitical realities than traditional approaches to the study of social movements. Rather than looking for sectors of movement organizations, with recognized leaders, resources, and ideologies, scholars must be alert to the nonmovements practicing the art of presence, the "courage and creativity to assert collective will in spite of all odds, to circumvent constraints, utilizing what is available and discovering new spaces within which to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized" (p. 26). Focusing on how, in a period of globalization, people wield power in neocolonial spaces of constraint, Bayat provides broad illustrations of his social change model in the remaining chapters of the book.

Running through the discussion of the nonmovements of the Middle East is Bayat's demonstration of "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary." Through mundane practices in their day-to-day lives, regular people diminish the state's governmentality and the power of religious movements, resulting in consequential sociopolitical changes to their communities, cities, governments, religions, and selves. For example, the urban poor run their own parking services (ch. 4), Muslim women wear hijab according to their individual preferences (ch. 5), Egyptian and Iranian youth express a youth habitus balancing God, sex, and fun (ch. 6), or Muslims and Christians experience everyday cosmopolitan coexistence in an Egyptian suburb (ch. 10). From these, meaningful change unfolds, social goods and opportunities get redistributed, and the political and cultural autonomy is wrested from existing authorities. Though not currently expressive of organized grassroots collective movements, Bayat sees both the harbinger of democratic transformations and an epochal turn towards progressive post-Islamic reform within the public presence and practices of the various nonmovements that he surveys (ch. 12).

*Life as Politics* weaves together significant interrelated conceptual debates and provides a close-up look at social developments that lead

scholars of the Middle East to be among the few optimists regarding the peoples' current role and future potential in socializing their states and Islam away from their more authoritarian expressions. As a collection of previously published essays, however, at times this book sacrifices depth for its breadth. Readers may want to know more, for example, about the linkages between the practices of diverse nonmovements and the post-Islamic *refolutions* that Bayat posits they will help to hatch under neo-liberal conditions in the Middle East. Furthermore, while it is helpful to interrogate the relationship between current social movement theory and social change in the region, appropriate modalities of extant literature are underplayed and Bayat's alternate theorization could be pushed to speak cumulatively and more deeply to the wide range of empirical cases covered in the book.

The strengths of this book are numerous. Bayat successfully contributes to scholarship that situates the Arab Middle East in relation to its own specific social contexts, but also in intimate connection to world history and politics. In demonstrating how the region's people are already inducing and impelling change within the authoritarian social structures that shape their societies, Bayat neither absolves local citizens of the necessity to practice progressive politics nor fails to place appropriate attention to the externally driven economic imperatives that both hinder and help regional possibilities for such political action. Finally, in elucidating how local political agency and social change take their own shape and logic, *Life as Politics* provides an informed and hopeful voice for the position that sociopolitical alternatives to silence and violence in the Middle East will be initiated and increasingly practiced by ordinary active citizenries of the region or they will risk failing to take root at all.

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