



Kohstall | Richter | Dhouib | Kastner [eds.]

# Academia in Transformation

Scholars Facing the Arab Uprisings



Nomos



Florian Kohstall | Carola Richter  
Sarhan Dhouib | Fatima Kastner [eds.]

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**Nomos**



ARAB-GERMAN YOUNG ACADEMY  
OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES



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## 1 A Note from the Editors

*Florian Kohstall, Carola Richter, Sarhan Dhouib and Fatima Kastner*

On 17 June 2017, Egypt’s Ministry of Education announced its decision to remove references to “the revolutions of 25 January 2011 and 30 June 2013” from schoolbooks. This decision came in response to the major controversy that had emerged over a question in the general high school exam of Egypt’s *thanawiyya amma*: “How would things be if (Abdel Fattah) Al-Sisi had not given the June 30<sup>th</sup> speech?”. Whereas the 25 January 2011 marked the start of the uprisings against President Hosni Mubarak, mass demonstrations on 30 June 2013 against the elected President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood paved the way for his ousting through the military and the later election of President Al-Sisi. While several parliamentarians and education experts, pointing to the importance of understanding both uprisings, opposed the education minister’s decision, those responsible for teaching in the classroom — educators — might have welcomed the decision that relieved them of having to teach two of the most controversial events in recent Egyptian history. The controversy that erupted suggests that it may be too early to open the debate in the classroom and underscores the difference in perceptions within and beyond Egypt regarding the uprisings and their limitations.

As early as at the first conference of the newly established Arab German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) in October 2013, a “transformation” working group was established. It was widely recognized by all AGYA members, regardless of their disciplinary background, that the consequences of the popular uprisings that had affected various Arab countries since 2010 would be a key aspect of exchange and activities within the recently created Academy consisting of 25 Middle Eastern and North African scholars and 25 German scholars. Addressing transformation issues was considered to be just as important as addressing those associated with education, energy and the environment, cultural heritage, health and innovation — each of which were the focus of other working groups. This notwithstanding, the term “transformation” became subject to considerable debate within the working group. Discussions involving what we expected to be a quick look at the core countries of the

uprisings in the MENA region (i.e., Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria) evoked mixed feelings on how to approach the uprisings and their consequences. Would transformation apply primarily to changes in the Middle East and North Africa, thus eclipsing important developments in Germany and Europe? Would we focus on political developments exclusively or include the legal, social, cultural and economic aspects of the developments? And how would we address the issue of transformation as both a historical development and normative aspiration? In other words, how might an exploration of transformation enable a deeper understanding of events from a historical perspective while, at the same time, foster the pursuit of such change from one stage to the next?

This publication is not about transformation *itself*. It focuses rather on how the uprisings have affected and to what extent they have transformed the field of academia — which includes a variety of academic disciplines such as political science, Arabic studies, communication studies, philosophy, socio-legal studies, computer sciences and archaeology. The contributions featured here present a unique opportunity to foster open dialogue — across disciplines and cultures — on the recent transformations underway in Arab countries and how these transformations interact with changes in other parts of the world. Each author brings his or her specific disciplinary background and geographic origin but also unique personal experience to this dialogue. As individuals, the authors represent different perspectives in terms of observation and engagement, empathy and distance, sympathy and skepticism. While the 2010/11 uprisings in Arab countries are our focus, we nevertheless aim to contextualize these events and their developments within the variety of academic disciplines featured. Rather than viewing “Arab countries” as objects of study in themselves, we see them as already changing cultures within the context of broader global trends. Indeed, we claim that many of the developments underway in the region at once reflect and accelerate extant global trends. From our transcultural perspective, ideas, norms and concepts do not travel linearly and in one direction, but are rather diffused in a context of mutual exchange. Thus, the transformations of academic disciplines we emphasize here should also be seen in the light of long-term changes that are not bound to one region. Indeed, “Academia in Transformation” became the terrain upon which scholars from various disciplines and geographical and cultural backgrounds debated their positions and reflected upon their own work and that of their colleagues.

During several meetings, and amid the presence of the renowned Tunisian scholar Amal Grami and the German legal philosopher Hans Jörg Sandkühler, we developed a deeper understanding of each discipline's dominant and marginalized debates, the research carried out by each working group member and, sometimes, the impact of personal biographies on research and knowledge production. During this exchange, we explored each discipline's explicit and implicit assumptions and the tools they work with. The exchange also helped us reflect on the spectrum of positionalities held by each contributor during the Arab uprisings and how these positionalities affect our research foci. The perspective of those of us who were directly subject to the violence and emotional rollercoaster of the political turmoil was different from those who observed the events from a distance. Each contributor has emphasized the importance of distance in being able to reflect on the events of 2010 and 2011 as well as the significance of personal engagement and empathy in shaping individual perceptions.

The present volume features nine contributions from scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds who explore the ways in which the Arab uprising entered their discipline's discourse and molded the relations of power within the discipline. Contributors addressed this common theme in terms of an open-ended question, because the extent to which political and social events taking place at a critical historical juncture will have a lasting effect on a given academic discipline is unclear. And for those events that do leave a lasting mark, the nature of their impact differs from discipline to discipline. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the terrorist attacks of September 2001 are widely seen as epochal marker events. In the context of the Arab uprisings, Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation in December 2010 and the Tahrir square protests that began just one month later mark points of departure for developments that cannot be reduced to a single date.

The shared observations reflected in the various contributions presented here are the product of our long, often intense, discussions and our writing exercises. One theme found in all the contributions is that the Arab uprisings urged scholars in the Middle East and Europe alike to revisit their analytical frameworks and theoretical approaches. This is apparent in Florian Kohstall's contribution, in which he argues that the uprisings prompted us to concern ourselves less with regime change — the traditional focus of democratization theories — and look instead for evidence of continuity and change with respect to the uprisings. Such an approach also calls for

new forms of cooperation between the different sites of knowledge production in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Similar shifts are also observable in the discipline of communication studies. Most scholars in the field, when focusing on the Middle East, emphasize the role played by new media and its political impact, but when examining the media in the West and other world regions, concentrate on daily events instead. Carola Richter and Hanan Badr provide a thorough review of foreign and local scholarly communications literature, thus shedding light on the often obscured complexity of media reality in the Middle East.

Two further contributions also explore concepts, norms and ideas that are being revisited but not fundamentally rethought as a result of the Arab uprisings. In her contribution, Fatima Kastner examines the extent to which political transitions initiated thus far in post-uprising Arab countries have affected the socio-legal discourse on transitional justice. After presenting the crucial steps of developments that have shaped today's understanding of the normative concept of transitional justice, her article illustrates some alterations that do in fact result from the transitions experienced in some Arab countries, which might have the potential to serve as innovative sources for future attempts at transitional justice. In their contribution, computer scientists Tobias Amft and Kalman Graffi present how the Arab uprisings accentuated the shift in and rebalancing of the use of technology, particularly in terms of circumventing government control of internet access and content. As they demonstrate, the uprisings may not have affected the discourse on technological development and innovation, but they have provided an opportunity to subject certain assumptions to a real-world test.

Other contributions show that in the context of the Arab uprisings, we see an increased focus on daily life and micro-level analyses — which mark turning points in the respective disciplines. Barbara Winckler and Christian Junge's examination of Arabic literary studies and revolutionary forms of expression makes the case that the emphasis on everyday language celebrates a revival of Arabic. This requires not only new and innovative teaching methods, but also new formats for research cooperation that build on, emphasize and convey new materials, ranging from wall paintings to revolutionary and anti-revolutionary songs. Similarly, Bilal Orfali, Rana Siblani and Maha Houssami examine the content and methods of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in Beirut. They point to the fact that even countries like Lebanon, which have remained in the shadow of the uprisings, are recasting their Arabic language curriculum. As a recent

target country for students of Arabic, the country and its universities have become learning hubs and sites of critical reflection for students and social scientists. Academic life in other countries mired in war and conflict has been subject to utter destruction. In his contribution, Ammar Abdulrahman documents how archaeological research and the protection of cultural heritage sites in Syria have collapsed under the destruction of war. And while protecting Syria's cultural heritage has become an issue taken up by the international community, local archaeologists and those otherwise tasked with protecting such sites have either been forced to flee or risk losing their lives.

While the uprisings have had an impact on the use of analytical frameworks, materials used and teaching methods applied, they have also prompted many to reflect on the changing relations within the scholarly community. Two of our contributions provide personal accounts of how transformations underway in academia have affected the personal experience of individual scholars. Jan Claudius Völkel charts the manifold changes in student–professor relationships and classrooms that he witnessed while teaching political science at Cairo University in Egypt before, during and after the uprisings. Drawing comparisons to his experience as an instructor in Germany, he underscores the tragedy of Egyptian students and professors with great potential who suddenly suffer a new cycle of censorship and restrictions. The importance of transformative learning and transcultural exchange are also emphasized in Sarhan Dhoubi's contribution, which highlights the value of philosophy in navigating the shift from an authoritarian to a post-authoritarian context. This involves engaging in a *dual critique* that acknowledges and explores the cultural features of authoritarian contexts in the Arab world while also questioning perceptions of the “other” in the West as essential to facilitating transformation.

Most contributors to this volume emphasize in one way or another the shifting positions of domestic and foreign scholars in the disciplines featured here as well as the hierarchy of knowledge production in Arab and Western institutions. Of course, boundaries have blurred as a result of scholars' increasing mobility and the emergence of technologies enabling interaction across vast geographical distances. We remain unsurprised by the fact that knowledge production on the Middle East and North Africa continues to be shaped by Western universities, research institutes and think tanks. Yet it is astonishing that this continues to be the case in periods of rapid change when local scholarship is clearly in a better position to

provide critical insights into events as they unfold. Foreign scholars have drawn criticism for what has been decried as “sightseeing the Middle East” in times of revolution. The authors of this volume argue that local scholars, who often work in an unsafe environment, must be afforded due respect if the disciplines featured here are to be advanced.

The themes addressed in this publication — reflecting on dominant theoretical approaches, interests in micro-analysis and the relationship between foreign and local knowledge production — must be linked to the changing conditions for conducting research in the countries focused on. The uprisings did not precipitate a sustained improvement in research conditions in loosened political and social environments. Instead, after a short period of opened access to archives and reconsiderations of dominant theoretical approaches, the windows of opportunity have since been quickly shut down again by the return of the security state. This is true even in Tunisia, where social science research can once again be subject to political constraints.

The contributions to this publication draw on a range of forms, from traditional academic approaches to personal observations to essayistic variations on the common themes. They thus reflect both the transformations we describe and those we are undergoing. Our conclusions are tentative as they are reached in a specific moment and shaped by the specifics of our individual and communal experience(s) that are linked to our professional positions, our proximity to the events in a given country and our personal backgrounds vis-à-vis the societies we study. The scholars of this volume share “des regards croisées”, different perspectives that interact with each other. While the writing of some of our German authors is informed by their long-term residency in an Arab country, authors with origins in an Arab-speaking country have pursued a long-running academic career in German or European universities. The publication also includes contributions by “academics in exile” who look back on debates within a specific discipline in their home country. Interweaving scholarly observations with the aim of giving expression to voices otherwise unheard, these contributions resemble the work of what Tahar Ben Jelloun referred to as the “public writer”.

It is our sincere hope that this book offers at least two added values. For one, we aim to foster a broad-based effort to integrate the events of 2010 and 2011 and the subsequent developments in different Arab countries into our respective disciplines which, by definition, share a universal vocation. The region has been stigmatized for its presumed exceptionalism for



far too long. Some scholars of the Middle East and North Africa have claimed that 2011 marked an end to this presumed exceptionalism, as political apathy gave way to powerful political leadership. Seven years later, the cruel reality on the ground in many countries across the region has dimmed this optimism, demanding that we consolidate our knowledge about these events and develop further our understanding of the macro-debates, micro-processes and scientific traditions that abound. Questioning dominant approaches, accounting for the intimate dynamics of daily life and questioning the hierarchy in knowledge production are at the core of the transcultural and multidisciplinary perspective we aim to promote. Adopting such a stance involves acknowledging the universal importance of the events of 2010/11. Indeed, the impact of the uprisings on specific academic disciplines may have a longer reach than the uprisings' social and political effects, given the return of authoritarianism in countries such as Egypt or the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq.

A second added value involves leveraging the opportunities for academic cooperation that have been generated by the various transformations unleashed and rendered visible since the events of 2010 and 2011. We are strong advocates of the need to strengthen and advance cooperation across disciplines and institutional and national boundaries. The contributions presented here illustrate the extent to which we depend on detailed observations of unfolding events as well as transcultural perspectives which juxtapose observations from the field against scholarly debates on the region. As Hans Jörg Sandkühler argues, this transcultural perspective is essential to recognizing the plurality of different cultures of knowledge and framing questions within their temporal and regional contexts, which represents a form of human freedom. Ultimately, this perspective requires a willingness to debate and the space to carry out debate. But this space is too often constrained by restrictions that are placed on academic freedoms as well as de facto power relations that are present in different funding schemes and instruments of cooperation. Whereas these instruments should have the potential to foster a transcultural perspective, they often reproduce current power relations, which limits opportunities for debate. Different forms and instruments of cooperation must be part of the debate and should ultimately be conceived by those who animate the debate. AGYA is one of many initiatives and forms of cooperation that has the potential to contribute directly to this debate. This volume represents a first step in forging a way forward.



## 2 Introduction: Academia in Transformation — Testing the Paradigms of New Knowledge

*Amal Grami*

The Arab uprisings created a window of change and transformation, thus becoming an event with considerable intellectual as well as political impact. Eventually, they succeeded in changing researchers' perceptions of the "Arab world", leading to the development of alternative forms of knowledge and challenges to the dominant Western systems of representation. People in Arab countries are today no longer considered to be vulnerable "docile citizens" or "resilient bodies" unwilling and/or unable to challenge the status quo and their authoritarian rulers. Scholars from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are for the most part no longer represented as silent, passive and incapable of resolving conflicts regarding the relationship between power, knowledge, action and thought.

Hence, the Arab uprisings had a deep impact not only on societies in the MENA region, but also on academic disciplines in European and Arab countries, and scientific relations between them. Emerging post-Arab uprising paradigms have brought about changes in the perception and evaluation of institutions, with universities being no exception to this trend. Since the outbreak of the uprisings, scholars from a variety of disciplines have demonstrated renewed interest in protest, contestation and cultural forms of expression and discourse. There have been attempts to understand how the "disciplined society" became aware of its rights and staked a claim to political and economic change. For such scholars, the dominant question was how to theorize political, social and cultural change in societal contexts that have often been viewed by the West as stagnant and hostile to progressive politics.

In fact, academic literature on the Arab uprisings has proved that transformations, regardless of their rapidity and whether they are ongoing, continuous or structural, superficial or complex, visible or invisible, are of great importance to a large number of scholars and analysts who believe that the process of transformation is a vital topic to study. The academic community has thus begun to interpret actions in the region and analyze the new realities. While some scholars have continued to work on tradi-

tional issues, showing little or no interest in questions raised by non-academics, other Middle Eastern studies, Islamic studies and international-relations scholars have imported analytical tools that have previously been applied to other regions of the world, such as Latin America, Europe, Eastern Europe and East Asia.

Indeed, we have witnessed a proliferation of academic articles, university seminars and conferences devoted to exploring the nature and contours of political and social transformation. However, transformation within the academic setting itself has remained largely hidden and marginalized as a subject of study. This prevailing state of blindness has motivated some scholars to focus on various aspects of transformation in the academic milieu. Some believe it is important to develop new modes of inquiry and forms of knowledge able to help them understand this new historical conjuncture and the nature of transformation. This group of scholars' preliminary focus has been on paradigms and concepts, analytical tools, methodologies, theories, narratives and perspectives. Some have attempted to criticize Western misinterpretations of the rest of the world, along with the respective academic discipline.

The members of the Transformation Working Group at the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) have attempted to improve their understanding of issues related to transformation in post-Arab uprising societies by taking a transcultural perspective. This book is one of the results of the working group's attempts to grasp the complexities that arise from these issues. Over a period of months, members of the working group reflected on how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange, and how scientific relations between Europe and the Arab world can be improved. There is evidently a shift underway to a focus on understanding the meaning of what others "communicate concerning values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy" (Mezirow 2003 a: 204).

Coming from a wide range of disciplines, from Arab countries as well as from Germany, the contributors to this volume have sought to reflect together on current challenges. On the one hand, this combination of different disciplines and their respective research objects, methods and overarching theories has provided an excellent foundation for transdisciplinary work. However, we should note that this discussion forum has also led to confrontation and compromises. The participating scholars have started to learn how to think differently, while becoming more self-critical. Their

goal has been to address major issues confronting today's societies, while simultaneously thinking critically about how best to construct a form of collaborative knowledge. Through both theoretical observations and personal experiences the key objective of the interdisciplinary group has been to demonstrate that the organization of knowledge has changed, not only in countries affected by the so-called Arab Spring, but also in Europe, the United States and Asia.

### *Overview of articles*

The book includes 9 articles that build on and communicate with one another and present a general reflection at the end. In his article "*Middle East Studies and Academic Cooperation in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings*", Florian Kohstall sheds light on the field of Middle East studies, a very interesting area. Since 2010, as coordinator for research and teaching programs at the Freie Universität Berlin's Cairo office, he has engaged critically with a number of issues such as "inequalities, especially between researchers working on the ground and those observing the events from the outside". Positioning himself simultaneously as a witness, observer and scholar, Kohstall describes "the role of students and professors in Egypt's uprising", along with that of other new actors. In addition, he criticizes various concepts and theoretical tools, and highlights new paradigms used to analyze transformation processes.

While seriousness is presented in academia as the normative standard of all critical thinking and writing in the humanities, Kohstall in contrast argues that expressing one's emotions (empathy, joy, fear, discomfort or disorientation, for example) during the Arab uprisings was a "liberating experience". After analyzing cases of transformation, Kohstall "suggests new avenues for cooperation and proposes employing a more comparative approach in the further development of the field of Middle East studies".

In his article "*Political Science in Egypt: Talkin' Bout a Revolution*", Jan Claudius Völkel explores the conditions for researchers teaching political science or social sciences under authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, and particularly in Egypt. He points out that if "political science in Germany is to a substantial extent understood as 'democracy science'", this field of research is "dangerous" and represents a risk in other countries. In fact, many scholars in the Arab world remain under state control and suffer under a lack of academic freedom. Although they participated

in the transition process and engaged in critical teaching and research, such scholars are no longer able to contribute to forming democratic societies. According to Völkel, “the current developments in Egypt represent a missed chance to develop political science further into a meaningful discipline that would not only prepare students for the job market, but also contribute to improving the overall quality of Egypt’s academic landscape”.

Despite such challenges, the “exchange of faculty and students through workshops and conferences [has] helped trigger fresh ideas about modern teaching methodologies”. There is no doubt that scholars and students alike will struggle to establish a new environment in which academic freedom is respected. We should bear in mind that one of the rights people ought to seek is the right to knowledge, as this is essential to democratic citizenship.

In their article “*Opening Up the Text. Arabic Literary Studies on the Move*”, Barbara Winckler and Christian Junge highlight the relationship between art and literature in times of political and social transformation. They demonstrate how Arab writers revisited the societal roles of art and literature in a time of political upheaval. Additionally, Winckler and Junge discuss the involvement of Arab literature scholars in teaching “new text forms (e.g., blogs, graffiti and slogans) and explor[ing] their sociopolitical conditions and the socio-cultural practices of writing”. Winckler and Junge further show how writers and scholars have been involved in “the unleashed creativity of the uprisings”. While scholars in the West often neglect “research conducted at universities in the Arab world, particularly if published in Arabic or by an Arab publisher...and exclude Arab scholars in the region from contributing to internationally acknowledged knowledge production”, the authors note that new initiatives and programs promoting the exchange of perspectives and experiences between scholars from universities in Germany and in the Arab world are being implemented today. The Arabic language is, as a consequence, increasingly being practiced as a living language of knowledge production and academic communication.

In consideration of the situation of Syrian refugees, Winckler and Junge suggest that “to study Arabic literature at German universities, selected seminars and lectures should be conducted in Arabic. As a positive side effect, this would also improve the language skills of other students of Arabic”. Moreover, Winckler and Junge think that it is urgent to encourage Syrian “authors to gain more visibility and improve their reputations within the German cultural sphere”. In this regard, activism and academia can be combined in a creative process of writing symbiosis, creating the

possibility of collaborations that facilitate the development of new skills, and helping to introduce different understandings of literacy.

In their article *“An Uprising in Teaching Arabic Language”*, Bilal Orfali, Rana Siblini and Maha Houssami draw from the field of education to explore another case of transformation involving language, thinking here in terms of “transformative pedagogy”. They describe the motivations of students traveling to the Middle East today, who show an interest “both in the events surrounding them as well as in the ongoing transformations, not only of political regimes but also of the surrounding culture and values”. Aware that Arabic has become a language of change, protest and revolution, Orfali, Siblini and Houssami discuss recent developments in teaching the Arabic language from different perspectives (exposing students to the language by having them listen to native speakers, participate in community social work, attend clubs focusing on Arab culture or listen to folk music, for example). These scholars focus on new teaching techniques created by a Lebanese institute that teaches the Arabic language, including colloquial speech, to foreign students. According to Orfali, Siblini and Houssami, the “Summer Arabic Program already provides some models that can be emulated and developed further when dealing with the refugee crisis in various Arab states and in Europe”.

In her article *“Justice in Transformation: Rethinking Theory and Practice of the Global Transitional Justice Model”*, Fatima Kastner analyzes the socio-legal studies discourse on transitional justice, focusing on the evolution of the global transitional justice model. After studying the emergence of several related concepts and discussing different ways of understanding them, Kastner analyzes the complex factors involved when governments attempt to develop and promote lasting periods of peace, or sustain processes of democratization and reconciliation in post-uprising societies. It is clear that resolving crisis situations requires critical decisions that balance the conflicting claims of established systems and possible future outcomes. Kastner highlights the changes arising from the “Arab Spring” transitions, such as “the demand to include economic and financial crimes within the liberal normative concept of transitional justice”. She argues that “there is a strong demand to widen the present liberal understanding of transitional justice both in the direction of local notions of justice and toward economic accountability”. Her article argues that instead of maintaining its precarious critical role, the humanities should become a creative laboratory for future forms of intellectual labor. There is no doubt that the passage from authoritarianism to a new order of society