

Political Economy Project

ARAB STUDIES INSTITUTE

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The Political Economy Project (PEP) is an evolving project of the Arab Studies Institute, with research, pedagogic, and advocacy objectives. Our founding workshop took place on April 24-25 at the [Arab Studies Institute](#) in Virginia (George Mason University). The workshop served as a launching pad for this project, and it will be followed by other workshops, conferences, research projects, resource building efforts, and other activities. We have been discussing this project for many years now. The idea behind PEP was essentially the impetus for what became [Jadaliyya](#), but, at the time, we opted for a broader approach to the online publication, assuming that PEP might grow out of it. The Arab Uprisings then consumed us shortly after launching [Jadaliyya](#), and the various projects associated with the *Arab Studies Institute* have since kept us busy. Today, we have consolidated most of our projects, tied many loose ends, regrouped, and set our eyes anew on what we hope will be a lifetime project that will begin with a series of meetings/workshops.

We have identified dozens of academics and writers in the region and beyond who may be interested in this project, and who would eventually form the broad network that we are seeking to build. In the meantime, however, we need to start building the framework, the launching pad, for all that is to come. We could not possibly invite everyone to this first meeting, so we are inviting primarily those with whom we have discussed the idea over the past few years and others who will help us broaden representation across disciplines, frameworks, geographical foci, and more. This initial meeting will be followed by subsequent ones, where we will try to involve as many interested parties as possible and collaborate with various like-minded organizations, groups, networks, and efforts.

A cornerstone of this project is to connect with analysts from the region, who often produce knowledge in their own language—mainly Arabic, but Persian and Turkish as well. Efforts will be made to avoid making this a Levant- and/or Egypt-centric endeavor, as we intend to cover the Arabian Peninsula, the countries of the Maghreb, as well as Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The comparative nature of the project will gradually draw in those working on other regions globally, many of whom are already in our database and have been approached by us.

Indeed, as is discussed below, we are not trying to confine our efforts to holding workshops and producing publications: we are aiming to create a broader but active network of individuals under the rubric of critical political economy, which will involve various components to be determined consensually at this first meeting. This means that the project can develop various pockets of interest within it based on discipline, geography, or framework, and then proceed to create synergy among them. There will, and should, be room for difference in approach, methodology, and, politics, to the extent that keeps the network functional.

Our network of individuals interested in critical political economy will be complemented in due time with a similar network of organizations and research centers, though this might proceed at a slower rate.

Though the network will not adopt stringent criteria, this is not a free for all, lest it becomes meaningless. We thus have basic guiding principles that will be developed more collectively as our meetings proceed:

- (a) We are committed to developing critical, non-mainstream approaches to political economy (which requires further definition and elaboration in due time);
- (b) We consider this project both intellectual and political (i.e., we do not pretend these realms can be separated as such), and thus, we are not limiting our ambition to producing books and articles. Thus, we hope to create networks of like-minded individuals, influence pedagogical approaches, and, for those interested, advocate for organic alternatives to existing dominant notions of “development,” growth, redistribution, power relations, and social justice;
- (c) Finally, we are committed to expanding the scope of this project beyond the “Middle East” for comparative as well as intellectual/political purposes.

These basic principles are subject to further discussion and refinement, but they are not up for elimination.

Governance

Having said that, we are not trying to establish a political party: there will, and should, be room for difference within our expanding group, so long as the difference is constructive and consistent with the very basic principles/preferences above. This calls for addressing the question of governance among many other things, which we would like to discuss at the subsequent meetings. As a project of the *Arab Studies Institute*, however, it will be initially governed by the principle of consensus and collective decision-making of those most readily available and committed to moving the project forward in a consistent manner.

Naturally, administrative and organizational matters at the outset will be the initiative of ASI’s Board, in conjunction with those who are putting this workshop together, including the authors of this invitation. Subsequently, we must progressively devise a governance principle and style that are commensurate with the stated parameters. The preliminary

thinking arising from ASI's longevity and collective principles is that we have to strike a delicate balance between providing folks with the opportunity to take ownership of this project (i.e., there should not be a restrictive "central command"—it will become a disincentive for expanding the network and creating buy-in); but we are keen on devising some direction/consistency/parameters to avoid letting the project/network fall into irrelevance—these are best discussed collectively. Though the home of this project is ASI (in particular its research arm, [FAMA](#)), and to some extent the logistics (administrative, financial, etc.) will be disproportionately lodged and emanating from within, we wish to create a diverse and representative body of advisors for the project, or a steering committee-like body. These decisions will have to be made collectively at our initial meetings (as it is not financially or logistically possible for most network members to attend any one single meeting for the time being). Shortly, an internal management website (IMW) will be built to facilitate cyber-discussion/collaboration/communication/planning. It will be password protected and will serve as our collective cyber-office at it were.

Until we all meet and make more specific collective decisions regarding how to move forward, our sense is that we need to start slow and small, then expand gradually and carefully, for we are not planning to stop or reverse course. The question then becomes: start what?

Preliminary Objectives

We are entertaining the following set of objectives, plans, and ideas, which we are happy to expand and refine as more individuals join the project:

1. We would like to bring research and production in political economy to the center of research endeavors to the extent possible.
2. We would like to address network building among folks, between and across disciplines and geographical focus, so as to build synergy and not make efforts mutually exclusive.
3. We would like to encourage collaborative projects/analysis/texts.
4. We would like to consider building a platform (electronic and beyond, on *Jadaliyya* or elsewhere), maybe eventually a training institute, which can be lodged in one or more of the universities where we teach. It is ambitious, but we can decide the pace and contours later.
5. We would like to build a resource base that is truly useful and user-friendly for folks doing research in political economy.
6. We would like to carve out time and funds for empirically non-pressing analytical/theoretical treatments/conversations (and not let the "moment" consume our efforts).
7. We would like to ask our colleagues to nominate other folks who might be interested in this project, so we may invite them.
8. [Additional suggestions are welcome]

Clearly this is an ambitious list, but it allows us to share some of the material that we would like to address and discuss without foreclosing other suggestions.

The First Workshop (Just a start)

The purpose of the inaugural meeting was to think out loud about a set of crucial issues that we can determine ahead of time, including those listed above, but also the question of “What is Political Economy?” and how it figures in our own research agenda.

Additionally, we drafted a provisional statement and a basic agenda for moving forward with building a network and for moving forward with regard to subsequent meetings here in the United States as well as in Europe and the region. We also discussed the meaning, utility, and mechanism of building a Political Economy Network, a platform, and a resource bank/base.

We also established a provisional Steering Committee that will be in charge of moving the project forward in the coming months as we build a broader network and reconvene to establish a more long term steering committee.

A word on resources: the Arab Studies Institute (ASI) provided the funds for this initial workshop and it will be engaged in raising funds to continue our work. However, given the nature of this project, we will also be relying on the efforts of various members of the network as well as their respective academic institutions and/or affiliate organizations. For its part, ASI will also be drawing on funding awarded to both George Mason University and ASI for various purposes. One source of funding is related to promoting scholars, especially Arab scholars in the region, and political economy. In that vein, we have been thinking about a major research-based conference in the region that includes scholars, practitioners, and sharp journalists on **“Development”: Where From, Where To?** (i.e., in the context/aftermath of the uprisings). Bridging theory and practice is at the heart of our concerns and will resonate beyond “political economists,” attracting lots of stellar, local scholars/talent.

Collaboration

Other workshops/efforts are likely to be held in Europe, the United States, and the region. We are open to collaborating with these efforts if other parties wish to do so. We are keen on collaborating with institutions interested in political economy solely, or with institutions with interests and research agendas that intersect with political economy (related to gender, environment, urban studies, etc.). Collaboration can range from:

(a) Simple co-sponsorship (co-sponsorship of existing efforts for purposes of reporting/dissemination and assisting with producing deliverables when desirable by both parties. PEP would not have to make a commitment beyond the respective event), to

(b) Levels of organic collaboration (joint planning with other parties, often involving substantial funding/support/reporting/dissemination/deliverables and, notably, supporting the cumulative nature of a given effort through some engagement under PEP’s broad umbrella. Projects started elsewhere can and sometimes should remain independent, even if PEP makes a commitment to continue to support the respective

effort).

In all cases, PEP aims to support its message through collaboration and co-sponsorship, rather than attempt to influence projects unduly. We do not have the interest or capacity to pursue such counter-productive goals, considering our preference to entertain various approaches. Significantly, though there are no limits to mutually desirable organic collaboration, we also would like to focus on nurturing the lowest common denominators that enhance engagement with critical political economy frameworks. We do have a preference for synergy rather than mutual exclusivity.

Other Efforts in View

One of these workshops will be held at SOAS this summer on the subject of “Arab Uprisings: Class Formations and Class Dynamics.” We are already involved in the planning of this effort. Another is the political economy research workshop (part 2) associated with a number of colleagues, mostly historians, which took place at NYU last year and will resume in February 2016. We are also involved in conversations with three more groups/efforts/institutions that share similar interests: one at AUB (American University of Beirut, specifically, the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship) and one in Ramallah (Al-Marsad). Both will be unfolding in the coming months, and others will follow.

We look forward to hearing from you regarding your interest in joining this project/network. For the time being, we are asking members-to-be to share with us some basic biographic information and a list of publications. We will follow up with you regarding these materials once we receive your response.

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