

Daniele Cantini: Report on fieldwork in Amman

15.01.2012 – 22.02.2012

During the first months of this year I spent almost five weeks in Amman, Jordan. The main aim of this fieldwork has been the one to update the data I had collected mainly during my PhD, with my last stay in Amman being dated 2006. This period then is to be considered as rather crucial in the research that I am pursuing at the Graduate School, namely the one on the politics of higher education and the everyday life of the youth in Jordan, and I had this necessity quite clear in mind when I started this research project.

Thanks to my previous stay there as an associated doctoral student between 2003 and 2005 and thanks to contacts accumulated in the coming years, I was granted the permission of staying at the Ifpo (Institut Français du Proche Orient), both as an associated researcher, which gave me the opportunity to present a paper as a part of their lecture series, and at the same time using the center as a place of accommodation – this latter aspect was all the more convenient, for the center has one of the best libraries in Amman, which I could access freely, and offers some office spaces that were quite important for my daily routine.

The main goals of this research period were that of collecting new data, building on the ones that I had collected during the PhD period, both at the institutional level – recent reforms in the higher education sector, the role of international agencies and of the government in these reforms, changes in the ruling body of the University of Jordan, in the students' admission policies, in the curricula and in the students' participation – and at the level of the people whom I had met in the past years, students, professors and administrators alike. At the same time I tried to explore the main changes that the Jordanian society had undergone in the past six-seven years, in order to situate my analysis in the changing political and economic context. The last objective of my stay was to discuss the findings of my research with Jordanian and Jordanian-based scholars in order to render my research more open and more accountable.

The first goal, that of refreshing the data relevant to the university at the institutional level, was mainly accomplished through field visits to the University of Jordan, the oldest public university of the country and the one on which I focused my fieldwork during the work on my PhD thesis, a field visit to the Department of Anthropology – the only one existing in the country, and one of the very few in the whole region – at the University of Yarmouk, the second biggest and oldest university in Jordan, public as well, and through visits to the Delegation of the European Union office and to the Tempus program office at the Higher Education Ministry, both located in Amman, to understand better the perspective of the reformers, the ruling side as it could be labeled. Field visits to the University of Jordan were quite frequent and involved meetings with professors, on some occasions different from the ones I used to meet during my PhD research, with administrators and with students, especially young activists whom I mainly met outside the university campus.

The second goal, that of re-establishing the personal ties I had enjoyed while doing fieldwork in 2003-05, was mainly accomplished through individual meetings, more or less formal depending on the personal relationship that I was able to re-create, normally in public spaces like cafes or restaurants or in the private houses of the former students, now in most cases young professionals

who started their own family lives. Needless to say some of them were not physically in Amman during my stay, some now live abroad and some others were not willing to meet me again, but in general I can say that I was surprised by the quantity and quality of the contacts, some of which established more than eight years ago, and by the richness and profoundness of insights that I was able to gather from these meetings, not only relevant to the political and social situation of Jordan but also focusing on more personal issues, like shifting gender roles and the weight and importance of the education received – or the disillusion following long years of un- or under-employment in the less fortunate cases.

The third goal, that of refreshing my understanding of the recent social and political changes – I am particularly interested in understanding the latest evolutions of the debate on youth, education and citizenship, in a country that has been heavily affected by the recent turmoil in the region yet without showing many signs of a real political change – was greatly enhanced by my stay at the Ifpo and the contacts I had with other scholars, both Jordanians working in the two public universities mentioned before and foreigners, be them residents or visitors at the Ifpo, independent scholars or associated with other research institutes in Amman, mainly the British Institute (CBRL office in Amman), the Columbia University Middle East Research Centre (CUMERC, also located in the capital city), and the Centre for Strategic Studies within the University of Jordan. Especially at the Ifpo I was able to attend some conferences and lectures, to profit from the library resources and in general to benefit from the scholars present there. This gave me a unique opportunity to maximize the profit of my not too long stay, by having a daily prolonged contact with most of the researchers currently working on social issues in Jordan. In addition to this I spent an afternoon at the archives of the Jordanian daily newspaper in English, the Jordan Times, which is the one that more frequently gives space to discussions of the educational reforms and of the social and political movements in the campus.

Lastly, the goal of making the results of my research available to a Jordanian audience, even if mostly constituted by academics or young scholars, was accomplished by personal contacts and mostly by the lecture that I gave at the Ifpo on February 8, 2012 in the lecture series “séminaire contemporain” with the title “The University in Jordan: reforms and participation.” The lecture was attended by around thirty people, researchers at the Ifpo or the other institutions mentioned above or professors at some Jordanian universities. This originated quite a fruitful debate that helped me in developing a clearer idea of the actual debates in Jordan and in deepening some aspects of my argumentation. At the same I achieved making my research somehow accountable at least to some of the people that are directly involved by it.

As a conclusion, I would say that the fieldwork has been quite successful, even though had it been longer it would definitely have been richer of insights and directions for future research. I was especially surprised by the relevance granted to my research by most scholars involved in the fieldwork, even when this attention involved some critical remarks, and by the quality of useful contacts made. The first expected outcome of this fieldwork has already materialised, that of checking the validity of the argumentation that I am presenting in an article that is now published by REMMM. More far-reaching goals, namely that of establishing contacts for future research projects and that of completing a book, are still in the making and will need more time to be evaluated.