

Let's Collaborate with Wesam on approaches to social movement theory in Jordan

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Wesam Wekhyan, Catherine McDonald

Catherine McDonald 00:01

Hello, and welcome to Let's Collaborate a podcast from the Southwest Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm your host, Catherine McDonald. And joining me for this episode is Wesam Wekhyan from the University of Bath. Now Wesam's research is looking at approaches to social movement theory in Jordan. Tell us more about that Wesam.

Wesam Wekhyan 00:22

Thank you for the introduction. Yes, so my research is a study of critical decolonial approaches to social movement theory. What I noticed, as an organiser before I started my PhD was that a lot of the work that was being done in the, in the rural areas, and on the grassroots level, a lot of that work was critical of institutionalised or colonial systems, as they argue that are kind of carried down, or it's a legacy from past experiences with colonial presence in the region. An interesting thing that came up in my research, and I think really relevant to mention on this show, could be that there's one very prominent move in social movement theory, and that's renaming the region. So the region in the past was known as the MENA, Middle East and North Africa. Whereas now a lot of decolonial scholars call it the SWANA, which stands it's an abbreviation. And it stands for Southwest Asia and North Africa. So SWANA Yeah, so my research is just looking at all of these organisations and these movements and these community leaders and the work that they've done, similar to the work that I did before my PhD, to challenge the challenge colonial systems. And these could include challenging policies that are implemented without taking into account indigenous or local experiences, their lived experiences. And

Catherine McDonald 01:43

for a non specialists listener, what how would you define social movement? Or that's a good? That's

Wesam Wekhyan 01:48

an excellent question. And I get this question a lot from annual, you'll see, and I'll say in the literature, it's quite split, you'll have a lot of perspectives that come from institutions where they would argue a social movement is actually just kind of like a period of time in which a lot of people argue or fight for a particular form of change, whether that's a social change, or it's political or economic, as long as it's a

shared ideal or value by mass groups of people in the literature that I've noticed social movement as a concept is challenged. So it's this idea that the way we understood social movements chronologically, right, so the study of the women's movement that is kind of like fit within a timeframe, or the suffragette movement, and the right for voting, this is a very colonial approach to the study of social movements. So to understand it, within a period of time is quite problematic, because the argument stands that the organic human experiences is constant questioning of power dynamics and hegemonic institutions. So I guess from a decolonial perspective, a social movement would be an alternative approach or an alternative method to the way we understand the world. So epistemologically speaking the way we know and how we know. But it's also the practice. And it's the, it's the demand for looking at alternative ways of being as well. So that can be in a social movement and the way that we understand social movements, but that understanding of a different epistemic and practical approach is also decolonial. In other regards, so not just within social movements, but it's also within I've been looking at some of the sessions, biodiversity and biopiracy, and the idea of the environment. And so that was maybe too much into other fields, but it's very much linked to our understanding of social movements from a decolonial perspective.

Catherine McDonald 03:31

And what made you want to do this research, am I right in thinking you've got a personal and professional connection

Wesam Wekhyan 03:36

100%. And I am actually really interested in not just pursuing the research for the sake of your career in academia, because that is something that I've always kind, I've always been in academia. And I've always enjoyed this kind of exchange of knowledge. But I think the importance of an approach that is decolonial, within an institution, or within a within any academic institution in the West, I think it's the recognition and the appreciation of alternative voices. And so I could do, I could definitely do research on social movements in general, and just kind of do what a lot of academics have been doing in my field for years. And that's just kind of very prescriptive, very descriptive, and I just tell you, what's been happening, I kind of put it within a timeframe, very scientific, very, you know, logical in the way that we understand. But the indigenous approaches or these kinds of critical approaches is so necessary, and I come from an indigenous community. I actually challenge the concept of whether or not my tribe is indigenous, but it is a community of people that have struggled to maintain their ways of life, after the colonial presence of the British Mandate system in Jordan. And so again, it's not only personal to me because of my work experience as a community organiser, it's not only important to me, because I feel like decolonial approaches have such a, you know, they have such a wealth of knowledge to share, you know, with the modern and Western centric academia, but also I come from a community of people whose Yeah, my grandmother's and my, you know, for mothers, their stories, their narratives are not included in mainstream academic literature. And I think that really makes me very passionate to kind of find alternative means as well. So it's quite why I wanted to do this, to see how I could fare with presenting research and just a different way and seeing if there are other people interested to engage with me and what it is that I'm interested in. So day

Catherine McDonald 05:24

to day, how are you conducting this research? What methods are you using?

Wesam Wekhyan 05:28

And that's hard, I'm actually in the phase of my confirmation. So I'm looking at applying a methodology that speaks to my my values, and I'm adopting a participatory action, research approach or methodology. And it's the idea of being consciously reflexive as an academic aware of my positionality, where I come from and what it is that I'm doing. And you asking, these questions are so relevant, where I come from, and why am I impassioned to do the research. So that's my lived my day to day lived methodology is being an activist and a researcher simultaneously, I'm not just one or the other, it's kind of they're part and parcel, I think. And another another aspect of my methodology that I think I live in my my research processes have now is also the creative element. So I do believe in Artspace methods to kind of engage with communities and to see so because participatory action research is I'm sure, maybe you've heard of or you know, but it's it's a type of methodology where the researcher no longer perceives themselves as being kind of the top down approach to research in academia. But rather, I sit with communities and we collect data, collectively, we co create methods and ways in which we create that data, whether it's artistic, through theatre, or through pieces of, you know, music or drama. But in the in the end, I also analyse my data with the community and that empowers I don't like the word empowerment, but it also gives the community the same level or air of importance as an academic. And I think, yes, those are the those I think would be the primary, two methods or approaches. And then the last I would just say is I don't identify, but a decolonial feminist approach is the one that speaks I think most to me, because again, I look at gender and I look at race, and I look at the implications of the systems that we live in, and, and their impact on people who come from particular positions in society. Ultimately,

Catherine McDonald 07:26

what do you want this research to do? What would you love to see achieve or inform or change

Wesam Wekhyan 07:33

being in the UK for the last three years, I've noticed that there is this rift between academic work that comes from the Global South, and academic worth work from the Global North. And I feel like I think it's wishful thinking, but I do pray that my research will have some, you know, contribution in bridging that gap. And trying to see how we can adopt practices and methods that have that have been, you know, very, you know, very powerful in the south, that academics have been using or activists on the street have been adopting whether it's storytelling, or narrative approach these kinds of really creative processes for understanding social phenomenon. And, and bringing that and bringing that to the front, in Western institutions and universities that have a very rich or very, I don't want to say radical, but just a very inclusive approach. It sounds

Catherine McDonald 08:24

absolutely fascinating. It really does. And then as you you've, you've made very clear research that's absolutely come from the heart. What would your advice be to someone who is thinking about doing a PhD? And isn't sure whether to take it on or not? Is

Wesam Wekhyan 08:39

a good question. I think something I've been telling a lot of people is a PhD is a very unique social experience. And this is something that you'll hear it you'll hear many people say this to you, but really, you don't know it until you're in the process of, I don't know, waking up and organising your day and

finding out that you actually don't have a structured, you don't have, you don't necessarily have the skills to prepare you for something so unique. So I would just say it's quite isolating. And it's a very, it's a very different process to research than anything I've ever done, whether a master's or an undergraduate and I would say, to just come with that knowledge, but also to be very aware that the thing that provides you the the sense of community and security or other PhD students and reaching out to your community, whether that is through your department, or it's a small group of like a PhD students that meet in the office regularly or you do, I don't know, like writing retreats, I have a friend Natalie and she's in the programme with me and we have scheduled every two days in a week we kind of meet up and we do writing together and goal setting and it's kind of our own little writing retreat, but those connections, those collaborations are very decolonial in my opinion, and it's the best way for you to to feel more embodied and more grounded and you know, and to feel that sense of community. Tea, because you don't want to you don't want to experience a PhD, where you're just coming into the office sitting in an empty room, scribbling and typing away and then heading home. So my My piece of advice would just be reach out to your community, find your community, and appreciate that, that love and support that you get.

Catherine McDonald 10:18

It's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for your time today. And thank you for listening to this episode of Let's Collaborate from the Southwest Doctoral Training Partnership. This was recorded in collaboration with research podcasts, and recorded at the SWDTP conference in 2023. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts.