**Panel 14**

**The Arab Springs and the West**

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Since the beginning of the so-called “Arab Springs” (late 2010), ‘The People want the fall of the Regime’ has become a widespread political motto, one that emphasizes clear-cut borders for the political arena and a peculiar interpretive framework for the analysts. The ‘People’ have been constructed as a ‘collective agent’ in opposition to dictatorial, oppressive regimes. People's quest for social equality, freedom and dignity has been described as an ascending, liberating movement: a movement from tyranny to democracy and development.

The focus on this dyadic model − the one opposing people and regimes, democracy and dictatorship − clarifies much. Yet this panel argues that a deeper insight into the Arab Springs can be obtained widening the borders of this political arena and focusing on the dialogical relationship between the West and the Arab Springs. This relationship is overwhelmingly influenced and shaped by political and economic factors, which nonetheless do not exhaustively account for it. Hence this panel aims to trigger a critical dialogue on the meanings and poignancy of the constructions of the ‘Occidental Other’, as part of a broader reflection on abiding ideas and forces shaping people’s imaginations and their existential quests.

We encourage contributors to this panel to link the micro-study of lived experience, cultural meanings and practices with the analysis of linkages and broader historico-political processes. The papers could focus on two antithetical strategies that entangle knowledge and power in the construction of the relationship with the ‘imagined Other’: 1) borrowing knowledge from the ‘Occidental Other’ through historical and local reinterpretation; 2) producing knowledge of the Occidental Other through essentialist and timeless images and representations.

1) Western ideas about democracy, development, human rights and so on, are often conveyed via political and economic channels, thus ensuring their hegemonic function and their univocal interpretation. Yet, during the Arab Springs, these very same ideas have undergone a process of transformation, acquiring new meanings within the historical experiences and practices of the social actors who ‘borrowed’ them. This process can be exemplified through the notion of ‘civil society’ and the way it has been rephrased in the politico-religious context of the da‘wa activism. Many forms of democratic participation can be clustered around the broader definition of “civil society”. This concept has been thoroughly debated in anthropology, and studies from North African and Middle Eastern contexts have contributed to the deepening of its complex definition. Although several studies about Near East civil societies focus mainly on the activities and discourses of secularist organizations, we invite contributors to this panel to focus also on the activities of democratic participation of non-secularist associations and movements. Following this lead, participants to this panel are invited to discuss such concepts as ‘civil society’ and ‘public sphere’ through reference to different forms of democratic participation, such as the youth activism in social media debates, the street demonstrations, the struggle for political freedom conducted by traditional secularist and Islamic political parties, the middle-classes involvement in the movements for change, the popular struggles for labour rights, social justice and equity, the role of the army in the revolutionary process. Through comparison and categorization of these practices under the broader category of democracy, the latter is going to be deepened in its complexity and through reference to the explicit formulation of social actors, that in some cases refuse this concept or discard it as a Western neo-colonial ideology and rather use such concepts as hurriya (freedom), karama (dignity), ‘adl (justice).

2) Edward Said's Orientalism has sparked a heated debate about the image of the Orient that Western academics have produced and presented. Two points are central to Said's criticism: Oriental studies stress the Orient's radical separation from the West and they invest the Orient with timeless essentialism. Moreover, these orientalist representations need to be understood in the wider framework of the political and economic relations between the West and the Near East. As many scholars have noted, a formal structure underpins the ‘grammar’ at work in the long historical process of Westerners representing ‘the Orient’ to themselves. Basically, this grammar opposes two essentialised entities in a process of self-definition by opposition with the Other. This very same grammar is reversed in a specular way in what we will call Occidentalism: the process of Orientals representing the West in timeless and essentialised ways. This process is not merely a ‘formal’ or a ‘structural’ one. Rather, it is inherently political, involving a complex cluster of relationships between the West and the Middle East, and within the Middle East contexts themselves. Moving a step forward, we argue that these images and representations of the West are always constructed in light of local political structures and debates.

This panel calls scholars to contribute papers that focus on the concepts and practices of Occidentalism, emphasizing the social, political, economic and religious factors that lead to Occidentalist constructions of the Other during the Arab Springs and their aftermath. How has the West been constructed and represented within different Islamic traditions and theological currents, within different political ideologies and social media debates, within the so-called ‘civil society’? How are images of the West employed in processes of selfing / othering? How do people contextually mobilize these images of the West for political or religious purposes? How do these images and representations emerge as the product of an internal field of political forces and struggles?

Following the conference, contributors are invited to develop their papers into publishable articles, that are going to be submitted to specialized journals that could be interested in publishing a special issue on the topics of the conference. The journal Antropologia, whose publishing management is located in Milan-Bicocca University, could be chosen to this end.