

Panel 04: **Migration and the Making of National Identity in Modern and Contemporary Egypt**

Thursday 17, 11-13, Aula 254

Convenors: **Francesca Biancani** (Bologna University), **Giuseppe Acconcia** (University of London)

Discussant: **Francesca Biancani** (Bologna University)

Based on participants' expertise on the history and historiography of various migrant communities in Egypt and Egyptian diasporic communities and migration studies more broadly, the proposed panel aims to create an occasion for discussion and debate on the role that migrations played in the formation of national identity in modern and contemporary Egypt. Especially at a time when the combined effects of al-Sisi' neo-Nasserism and the polarization between secular and Islamist allegiances are monopolizing the debate around national identity in the country, narrowing it down to more or less sciovinistic forms of nativism, we all share the need of thinking critically of the genealogy/ies of Egyptian identity, as a complex matrix of relations of identity and difference shaped by historically-specific local, regional and global phenomena and forces. Identity politics in Egypt during the liberal age (1922-1952) were largely defined by the debates articulated by different constituencies around the meaning of *asalah*, or cultural "authenticity" in a cosmopolitan environment structured by quintessentially colonial relations of power. By historicizing these debates, and critically discussing notions of cosmopolitanism, nostalgia and memory in liberal historiography, is it possible to re-conceptualize the history of inter-communal relations in inter-war Egypt in a way different from the all-too-often invoked "mosaic" model? Did concepts of class, race, gender affect the ways in which Egyptians and local capitulatory communities thought about themselves and their mutual relationship? How was post-revolutionary Egyptian identity reconfigured, and through which means, within a regional pan-Arab context? In the attempt of stressing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and methods in exploring the staggering complexity of the migratory experiences, attention will be devoted also to issues of transnational and trans-local identity and socio-spatial reconfigurations of rural Egyptian migrants.

Paper givers:

- 1) **Marina Romano** (Bologna University), *The Italian Community of Egypt through "Il Giornale d'Oriente" (1930-1940). Revisiting the Historiography of Inter-Communal Relationships in Interwar Egypt*

Il Giornale d'Oriente, which was published from 1930 to 1940, represented the newspaper of reference for the Italian community of Egypt, which was mostly centered in the urban areas of Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said. This paper aims at analyzing the history and contents treated in *Il Giornale d'Oriente* in order to draw a social portrait of the Italians resident in Egypt and their relationship with Egyptian locals. If and to what extent they mutually perceived themselves as belonging to a shared material and cultural environment?

- 2) **Najat Abdulhaq** (Friedrich Alexander Universität Erlangen – Nürnberg), *Rethinking Narratives: Competing, Complementary or Contradictory? Insights, Narratives about and from Egyptian Jews*

This paper opens a discussion about the above raised questions, by presenting systematically Israeli and Egyptian/ Arab nationalistic narratives about Egyptian Jews. These narratives are captured in the political understanding of the post 1948 Middle East and influenced the perception of reading the long history of the Egyptian Jewry. An analysis of their creation reasons, how and why they are –despite of their difference- important for understanding the history and an analysis of their interrelation on political level. Furthermore, the contemporary perception (in the last few years) of these narratives which is widely reflected in diverse novels by Egyptian and other Arab authors and in the latest Egyptian TV dramas on the Egyptian Jews, will be discussed. Najat Abdulhaq holds a PhD in Middle Eastern Studies from the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nurnberg.

- 3) **Giuseppe Acconcia** (University of London), *Syrian and Palestinian migrant communities in contemporary Egypt. Positive and negative conceptions in building-up a national identity*

This paper disentangles negative and positive conceptions in building-up a national identity in contemporary Egypt in reference to Syrian and Palestinian migrant communities. Drawing upon some of the insights of the literature on minorities and interviews with Palestinian-Egyptians and Syrian refugees, this article will examine the consequences of 1919 and 1952 uprisings, along with Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat's foreign policy, on Syrian and Palestinian communities in Egypt. Privileges and discriminations in reference to citizenship and rights for the two migrant communities will be analysed in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the formation of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961). Furthermore, insights of the effects on the formation of trans-national antagonism, post-Islamist identities and migration fluxes, along with a xenophobic political discourse, will be provided in reference to the recent upheaval witnessed by the region.

- 4) **Gerasimos Tsourapas** (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), *Agents of Nationalism: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptians Abroad and the Cold War*

Does population mobility aid regimes in advancing their political ideologies? This paper focuses on whether a state's citizens abroad strengthen its ability to broadcast and disseminate political messages. It examines Nasserite Egypt, which spearheaded ideas of Arab nationalism in the 1952-1970 era. Discounting the prevailing view that regional migration only became a socio-economic priority for Egypt after 1973, this project argues that the organised dispatch abroad of thousands of teachers, doctors, and other professionals allowed the regime to project its prevailing political vision across host states in Africa and the Middle East. Using previously unavailable data, it goes beyond discussions of remittances or development, in order to theorise migration as buttressing states' normative influence and to underline the importance of non-elite populations in the dissemination of nationalist ideas.

5) **Francesca Giangrande** (University of Rome La Sapienza), *Redesigning socio-spatial relations through migration: the case of Kafr Kela el Bab*

Studies on transnationalism and translocal geographies (Brickell, Holloway, Datta, 2011) are posing important questions about how a theory of society can be elaborated, whereby mobility is normalized and seen as an integral, rather than in opposition to the social relations based on territory and spatiality. Contemporary scholars describe the society as more and more "glocal" (Robertson, 1992; Bauman, 2005), and mobility is increasingly assuming different forms. Diverse "sending" and "receiving" countries offer to migrants dissimilar political, economic and social opportunities / constraints, and it is «what transmigrants do with them that will (and should) occupy the field of transnational urban studies in the decades ahead.» (Smith, 2000) My interest is the emergence of new interest groups and cultures multiplying the "questions of the city", redesigning the spatial relationships between regions, and the consequent need for re-reading of the dynamics of urban production (processes, policies, resources). This paper contributes to a greater understanding of this debate, by presenting a specific case study about the socio-spatial impact of migration in the Delta village of Kafr Kela al Bab (Gharbiyyah province), whose population has a history of migration to Rome.