Panel 08: **Faces of Displacements. Constructions of the self and discourses about refugeness across the Mediterranean region**

Thursday 17, 14-16, Auditorium Giancarlo De Carlo

Convenors: **Veronica Ferreri** (SOAS, London), **Magdalena Suerbaum** (SOAS, London)

The refugee as a legal category emerged with the bureaucratic and discursive domain of humanitarianism and state policies. Subsequently, it became the object of disparate studies that investigate refugee-ness and its social, political and cultural processes. Whereas anthropological inquiry has extensively demonstrated how refugees' past, present and future are deeply intermingled through cultural discourses and practices, the literature on refugees' political agency has to an extent complicated the bare life paradigm outlined by Agamben. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to the significance of "being a refugee" attributed by displaced people themselves. Displaced people seem to not always define themselves collectively and individually as 'refugee(s)', and as suggested by Malkki, they often adopt multiple identities that may function as a status, a weapon, a shield 1 or a fund of memories. This is strongly influenced by the individual's social and educational background, gender, religious or ethnic belonging and hopes for the future. The ways displaced people consciously use or reject the term "refugee" could be a site to further complicate the literature that deconstructs "the refugee" and experiences of forced displacement. Indeed, discourses about the construction of the self are a repository of particular life experiences, as well as cultural, social and political practices in the place of refuge and have a significance intrinsically connected to how displaced people envision "being a refugee" vis-a-vis the "international refugee regime" and the local realities they inhabit. This panel aims at exploring different constructions of the self- adopted by displaced people from Middle Eastern countries in the Mediterranean region. This discussion intends to unveil both discourses and practices forged by displaced people themselves in relation to "being a refugee" and the discrepancies between their narratives and the definition imposed by the "international refugee regime". Another objective of this panel is to scrutinize how local realities and their history of (im)migration shape particular narratives of the self-amongst displaced people. In order to understand how people 'play' with markers and labels imposed on them, the panel will also explore the role of morality and technologies of the self in the refugee-ness. Finally, the panel intends to question the connections between experience of refugee-ness, the individual's past life experiences and hopes for the future. The directors seek to attract paper proposals from all disciplinary backgrounds that deal with the situation of displaced people from Middle Eastern countries in different places of refuge in the Mediterranean, their construction of the self and interaction with the respective host society, the state and their own community.

Paper givers:

1) **Pauline Brücker (**CERI-Sciences Po / CEDEJ), *"We are refugees". Sudanese's contestations of asylum policies and the definition of refugeeness in Egypt and Israel*

   The social representations of who is a "refugee" are numerous, evolving and discretionary. Yet, a common feature remains: non-national, stranger, he is derived from political and civic

rights. Similarly, his status of 'assisted' prevents him from becoming a legitimate claimer in contentious politics. The refugee is therefore depoliticized. Yet, *a contrario* of this representation, refugees do engage in political activities. Yet, for refugees to become a political actor is a incredible challenge to overcome. Among others, they need to construct a "political identity" by collectively defining themselves as "refugees", creating hence the premises of forms of "refugeeness". This article deals with the case of the mobilization of Sudanese refugees in Egypt and Israel. They have tried to collectively address their rights, by defining a common cause, identity and faith, laying the ground for the creation of "refugeeness". This eventually created one of the necessary but fragile resources to eventually "win" in politics. The "political opportunity structures" they faced is assessed by providing a re-contextualization of the contestations, understanding those interactions as one of a global system of action, underscoring the interdependency of relationships, forces and power relations.

2) **Alessandro Forina** (Complutense University of Madrid), *Asylum policy and citizen movements. The case of the Solidarity Reception Network in Madrid*

The aim of this paper is to analyze, from an anthropological perspective, the relationship between the different levels of performance (legal, humanitarian, political and complaint) in civil organization dealing with refugee reception in Spain, particularly the Solidarity Reception Network (Red Solidaria de Acogida - RSA) of Madrid, paying special attention to the character of a "transit refugee", as an ambiguous yet emblematic character present in these policies. The RSA was established on September 3, 2015 at the Lavapies eighbourhood in Madrid as result of a meeting organized by local migration advocacy groups in response to the migration crises emphatically symbolized by the images of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler found dead the previous day in the Turkish beaches. Around 250 people participated in it with the aim to denounce the situation of refugees at European and national borders and the inefficacy of existing asylum policies. The findings of research carried out in Madrid will highlight concrete and everyday practices that both the RSA movement and refugees face in the context of European and national policies on the asylum issue.

3) **Emanuela C. Del Re** (University of Roma Tre / University "Niccolò Cusano", Rome) *Visions of a displaced future. The vision of the future of the Syrian Refugees in Iraq vis-a-vis their life in the camps and the policies of the welcoming country*

The conditions and awareness of having become a refugee, imposes on individuals a sense of immanence, annihilating projections towards the future, with little space for aspirations, planning, except for immediate needs. The young refugees' vision of the future is shadowed by a sense of impotence, with social and psychological consequences for the individual, that become a push factor for migration. A sense of humiliation pervades all refugees, who feel in a position of inferiority in the hosting country. The forced cultural encounter (in this case both Kurd) causes social, political, ideological reactions. Between international aid and hosting country policies, the space for the affirmation of refugees as individuals is very limited. The A. has conducted extensive qualitative research in Iraqi Refugee camps since

2012, being also the director of "My Future" a project designed to rebuild the Syrian Civil Society helping young refugees to develop self-confidence and awareness as citizens of a globalized world. The A. analyzes the vision of the future of the refugees, the impact of the welcoming country ('temporary' country of residence) and international policies on their trust in themselves and in the future, and the vision for the future as a push factor for migrations.

4) **Veronica Ferreri** (SOAS, London), ***Trajectories of Lebanon's "Policy of Syrian Displacement". Official documents, violence and Syrians' imaginaries of the Syrian State***

This paper aims to unfold Syrians' entangled experience of displacement in Lebanon and citizenship in Syria. By looking at the changes in the Lebanese policy of Syrian Displacement and how they affect – or do not – a particular understanding of "being displaced", Syrians living in Beirut and in the Akkar region imagine and narrate their past and present relationship with the Syrian state and their experience of citizenship/subjection. This comparison intents to define displacement not in terms of places of refuge – namely the urban context and the camp, but more in terms of life experiences and social imaginaries of the state, in which documents and the emotions they generate amongst Syrians mirror past and present life experiences and instances of state violence.

5) **Magdalena Suerbaum** (SOAS, London), ***Making gendered sense of refugeeness among Syrians living in Cairo***

This paper focuses on how Syrian men and women living in Cairo understood, rejected, identified with and made use of the externally imposed category 'refugee'. In this paper, I will argue that refugeeness is experienced differently based on one's gender and background and will discuss the different ways Syrians in Cairo negotiated the category. Being a refugee was mostly associated with loss of dignity and humanity and was often rejected as a classification for oneself. In many narratives, a new order was created in which 'refugees' were the ones who travelled to Europe because they failed to make a living in Egypt. Making sense of being a refugee was gendered. Men described it as being contradictory to their status, work position and social background, women more often described refugeeness as a bodily experience, such as a loss of beauty, pain or a disease.