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PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITLE: Trajectories and Perspectives of Activism and Resistance.

History from below and Subaltern Politics in the Middle East and North Africa

CONVENOR(S): - Patrizia Manduchi (Università di Cagliari)
- Gennaro Gervasio (Università Roma Tre)

DISCUSSANT: Lucia Sorbera (University of Sydney)

ABSTRACT:

The 'Arab Uprisings' of 2010/11 literally shook the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and challenged old paradigms in the scholarship about the Region. Consolidated practices of resistance against hegemonic powers have been reshaped since then, while new forms of activism and fresh narratives have been produced.

These dynamics are not totally new, as they form an important part of the modern and contemporary MENA's history, which since the nineteenth century has witnessed the flourishing of diverse social and protest movements, such as workers, peasants, students, women, independent intellectuals and artists, and other marginalised groups.

In spite of this, many studies - even when focused on the recent uprisings - keep a strong stress on top-down political dynamics, often obscuring emerging political subjects and new spaces of activism; or they are limited to the analysis of the present and underestimate the historical links and the long tradition of political resistance and opposition in the MENA countries.

This panel aims at filling this gap and amend this persistent perspective in the scholarship, by looking at current dynamics at play from an interdisciplinary perspective, which pairs the study of history from below with the diverse actions of civic activism against authoritarian regimes, what can be termed as 'subaltern politics', following a Gramscian suggestion.

Papers will feature case studies ranging from Egypt up to other MENA countries and will be aimed at emphasizing continuities and breaks in trajectories of counter-hegemonic practices and discourses. We welcome papers in English, French and Italian.

CONVENORS' ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Patrizia Manduchi is Associate Professor in History of the Islamic Countries at the Department of Social Sciences and Institutions of the University of Cagliari, where she teaches "Contemporary Arab World". Among her research topics: History of contemporary political thought in the Arab world; Political resistance and opposition in the MENA countries; Islamic fundamentalist thinking; Muslim migrations in Europe and inclusion policies. Among her current research projects, there is the dissemination of Antonio Gramsci's thought in the political and cultural debate in the MENA.

Gennaro Gervasio is currently teaching History and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa in Roma Tre's Department of Humanities. Previously, he has been the Director of the Centre for Middle East and North African Studies at Sydney's Macquarie University (2009-11), and he has been teaching and researching in Cairo from 2011 until 2016. His research interests include: secularism and Marxism in the Arab world, and civic activism and social and protest movements in the MENA.

PAPERS:

FIRST SESSION

1. Trajectories of dissent in Egyptian Universities (1908-1970)

Patrizia Manduchi

ABSTRACT

For a better understanding of the recent Uprisings in Egypt and in the MENA countries, it is absolutely necessary to do a step back in order to trace a history of dissent – including youth dissent- so important for the developing of a political awareness and a sense of cultural belonging. My paper will focus on youth activism in Egypt from the beginning of the 20th century (the foundation of the first public University in Cairo) until the outburst of protests in 1968. 1968 in Egypt was not as ‘mythical’ as in Europe and in the United States but maybe more important because the year before is considered the beginning of the harshest ideological and political crisis in MENA, with the Arab Defeat of 1967, the end of Nasser’s era, and the beginning of the decline of the powerful ideologies of Nationalism, Socialism, Pan-Arabism.

The paper aims at showing in historical perspective that civic activism, political dissent, resistance movements, are not today’s phenomena but they always have been part of Egyptian political life. Youth movements, not only inside schools and universities, but overall in the streets, have always been present and alive in the political history of Egypt, beginning from the nationalistic struggle against Britain until the social and political dissent against the strong and hegemonic Nasser’s régime.

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2. *Al-Badīl*, or *The Alternative*: A Collective Experience at the Crossroads of Journalism and Activist Commitment

Marianna Ghiglia

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the phenomenon of the Egyptian “independent” press that contributed to spread counter-hegemonic discourses in the country during the 2000’s. By focusing on the trajectory of the daily *Al-Badīl*, it aims to show how the journalistic field started to serve as an alternative venue for activism at the time when the “legal” political arena was getting more and more closed and could not absorb new players.

Al-Badīl was founded in 2007 by a group of leftists belonging to the *Seventies generation* who were united by a common dissatisfaction with the current situation and a shared will to forge an alternative political project; the latter was deemed to be independent both from the regime and the legal opposition, including the leftist Tagammu’ Party. Owing to the great obstacles preventing them from establishing a new party, these “subaltern” political actors decided to create a private newspaper and use it as a mean to spread their ideas. Nevertheless, they failed to ensure the

economic sustainability of their press enterprise and were forced to close it two years later due to serious financial losses.

My paper will show that one of the main reasons for this failure was the hybrid identity of the project itself: neither a private newspaper nor a party one, but something in between, *Al-Badil* was doomed from the start to an early death. This experience brings us to reflect on the limits of the media sector's ability to function as a venue for the dissemination of counter-hegemonic narratives in Egypt and elsewhere.

Marianna Ghiglia is a PhD candidate in History at Aix-Marseille University. Her PhD dissertation deals with the social and political history of Egyptian journalists from the 1940's until today. She previously conducted research on the phenomenon of the independent press that emerged in Egypt starting from the late 1990's.

3. Subaltern Resistance and the Egyptian Uprising

Gennaro Gervasio

ABSTRACT

The *question* of the relation between power and resistance runs through much of late twentieth-century Western thought and has recently again become topical in relation to the waves of social movements and unrest which have swept across North Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. This research aims to analyze processes of subjectivation for identities of resistance, focusing on the frames within which identities of those who seek to 'resist' power(s) are established, and the impact they produce.

This paper is part of a wider research project, inspired by Gramsci's seminal work on the subaltern, and based on my past extended fieldwork in Egypt. It is looking at the emergence of 'new subaltern subjects' (Chatterjee, 2004) as the protagonists of the different waves of the Egyptian Uprising, from January 2011 onwards. My main argument is that, as 'street politics' played a fundamental role in the protest movements both before and after January 2011, the role played by old and especially new form of social and political resistance needs further and deeper investigation. In particular, I am looking both at those sites and actors of resistance with an established societal recognition—such as independent trade unions, women, students and civic activists- and especially at those without a tradition of political activism, like the football 'ultras' and the self-organised resistance in the 'social nonmovements' hidden' at the margins of the large cities and elsewhere (Bayat, 2013; 2017).

Gennaro Gervasio is currently teaching History and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa in Roma Tre's Department of Humanities. Previously, he has been the Director of the Centre for Middle East and North African Studies at Sydney's Macquarie University (2009-11), and he has been teaching and researching in Cairo from 2011 until 2016. His research interests include: secularism and Marxism in the Arab world, and civic activism and social and protest movements in the MENA.

4. Securitizing the Cyberspace and Digital Surveillance in Egypt: Implications on Activism, Society and Resistance.

Bassant Hassib

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the compound implications of existing Egyptian cybersecurity legislative efforts, policing measures and surveillance technologies on democracy, human rights, economy and society in Egypt, especially after the 2011 developments including the 2018 “Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes” Law. This includes investigating the forms of civil society resistance to such measures, and their limitations. Moreover, the research explains how such practices are embedded within regional and international efforts, under cooperative frameworks. Egypt’s cybersecurity legislative, policing and surveillance measures have been approached through the lens of vetting dissent and freedoms, rather than the lens of combating cybercrimes and threats against netizens. Thus, cybersecurity in Egypt is state-centric and not society-centric. These measures have adverse impacts on political activism, citizenship, the society, and the economy, in addition to the extent of resistance to digital surveillance. On one hand, it challenges democracy, human rights and citizenship by cracking down on digital rights and activism, coupled with spreading a “technophobe culture” among the society, where citizens start practicing “self-censorship”. Thus, surveillance is state-driven, and also non-state driven. Furthermore, it cripples the potential of and deters investment in digital economy, R&D and the future of international cooperation on cybersecurity. On the other hand, civil society is resisting surveillance by either advocacy for digital rights legislations; or by “counter-surveillance” and “sousveillance” technologies to circumvent surveillance, to practice surveillance over the government “from below”. However, resistance efforts are challenged by the gap between tech activists and social activists, and by their alienation from the governance process.

Bassant Hassib is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the British University in Egypt. She earned her Ph.D. in the Euro-Mediterranean Studies, from the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, 2017. Currently, she is taking part in two book projects on Global Cybersecurity, and Counter-Terrorism and Civil Society.

5. The Affect of the Ghazwa: Islam, Nationalism, Revolution and Anti-Revolution in the Battle for Tahrir

Ahmed Saleh

ABSTRACT

The Battle of the Camel is the only violent conflict that occurred in Tahrir during its 15-day occupation that ended with the stepping-down of Mubarak. The battle has been transformative in the course of the revolution, for it started in a country divided over Mubarak, and ended in a country overwhelmingly against him. It has also witnessed the earliest appearance of the anti-revolution, which managed, two years and a half later, on June 30th 2013, to mobilize the largest protests in Egypt’s history. I work from my own notes, personally collected data, and autoethnographic account of the battle, in which I participated, in addition to primary video footage and news articles. I use a combination of theoretical perspectives, namely affect and practice theory, as well as analyses of performance, materialities and microdynamics, to argue that the Battle of the Camel has been foundational to a practice of “clashing” that eventually prevailed during the revolution, became a major medium of political participation for all parties, and was strongly perceived, and effectively served, as an alternative to, and a competing source of, revolutionary legitimacy vis-a-vis traditional national politics. The combination of theoretical perspectives, and the embeddedness of the violent conflict in an affect of an imagined premodern Islamic battle (or

the Ghazwa), along with its mythology of epic, heroism and martyrdom. The interaction of the aforementioned affect has important implications on the early, subtle and complex roles of religion and nationalism in the revolution and the historicization of both.

Ahmed Saleh is a PhD Candidate at Freie Universitat Berlin and PhD Fellow at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies.

SECOND SESSION

6. Intergenerational Resistance: The Transmission of a Counter-hegemonic Narrative as an Everyday Form of Resistance in the South Arabian Independence Struggle (Southern Yemen)

Anne-Linda Amira Augustin

ABSTRACT

At its beginning in 2007, the Southern Movement in Southern Yemen was a loose merger of different people, most of them former army personnel and state employees of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) who were forced from their jobs after the war in 1994 that the southern faction lost. More and more people joined the demonstrations, and the claims began to change to concrete political demands, such as state independence of the territory that once formed the PDRY.

To understand the specific features of the southern independence struggle, in which an answer to the vast growth of the Southern Movement in recent years lies, I propose to investigate the major everyday form of southern resistance (cp. Scott 1995). This act of resistance is the intentionally and unintentionally intergenerational transmission of a counter-hegemonic southern narrative that lead to the calls for southern independence and its intensification of demands. The act of intergenerational transmission is not a form of resistance or opposition per se. What, then, are the decisive factors that alter a ubiquitous phenomenon that, amongst others, emerges daily in every family into an everyday form of resistance? In my paper, I will discuss five distinctive factors that are decisive for 'intergenerational resistance', i.e. intergenerational transmission as an everyday form of resistance.

Anne-Linda Amira Augustin worked as a research associate in the research network "Re-Configurations. History, Remembrance and Transformation Processes in the MENA region" at the Philipps-University Marburg (Germany). She now works as a political advisor in the Foreign Representation of the Southern Transitional Council in the European Union in Berlin. She is a founding member of the Academic Forum Muhammad Ali Luqman, creating a platform for academic and scientific exchange on topics related to Southern Yemen.

7. 'Returning the megaphone to the people'. Activism and culture production for egalitarian citizenship in post 2010-2011 Morocco and Tunisia

Sara Borrillo

ABSTRACT

This paper examines new forms of activism involving artistic and creative performances in Moroccan and Tunisian public spaces after the 2010-2011 popular uprisings. It contextualizes some artistic and cultural practices with political background in those socio-political reconfigurations connected to the exclusion of young generations, groups, associations and minorities from the decision-making process after the 'revolutionary situation'. Through qualitative analysis of several interviews collected during multiple ethnographic fieldworks, this paper explores why and through what dynamics some social actors, associations and groups from Rabat, Casablanca and Tunis embody the transnational evolution of a part of the political activism into 'artivism', in an authoritarian or post-authoritarian political context. If 'artivism' is conceived as 'a way to perform and embody both aesthetics and politics, also in a festive and utopian dimension' (Lemoine and Ouardi, 2010), this paper demonstrates how art is used as a methodology for political praxis aiming at a renewed 'proximity' between political activists and the people after 2010-2011 uprisings. At the same time, art opens spaces for free expression and critical debates in the public sphere and it promotes emancipatory trajectories and imaginaries for people involved in it.

Sara Borrillo is post-doctoral research fellow in History of Islamic Countries at University of Naples L'Orientale and she has been adjunct professor in History of Islamic Countries at University of Macerata (2016-2019). Her research interests are mainly focused on history of women's movements, gender politics and Islam, and social transformations after the 2010/2011 uprisings in the MENA region, in particular Morocco and Tunisia.

8. Le dinamiche di attivismo bottom-up nelle rivolte del Bahrain contemporaneo

Luigi Giorgi

ABSTRACT

Obiettivo del presente articolo è l'analisi delle dinamiche di attivismo dal basso emerse nelle mobilitazioni politiche del Bahrein contemporaneo. Utilizzando un approccio metodologico qualitativo, le principali ondate di rivolte e gli attori sociali che ne sono stati protagonisti verranno messe a confronto seguendo lo Structured and focused comparison (George, 1979).

Un'analisi approfondita dello status e delle modalità di mobilitazione politico-sociale della popolazione dei Bahārna, popolazione sciita nativa del Bahrain, etnicamente maggioritaria ma politicamente ed economicamente discriminata, risulta uno strumento di analisi fondamentale. Di fatti la subalternità dei Bahārna è solitamente considerata come una mera conseguenza della loro appartenenza religiosa; tale lettura, eccessivamente semplicistica, non tiene tuttavia conto di una serie di altri rilevanti elementi, in primis la rilevanza delle affiliazioni tribali che legano la dinastia reale degli Āl Ḥalīfah ai clan sunniti che l'hanno supportata nel corso dell'invasione dell'arcipelago nel 1783.

D'altro canto è necessario sottolineare che tale prospettiva è sfruttata tanto dagli Āl Ḥalīfah per frammentare ed indebolire le opposizioni, quanto dai movimenti di resistenza sciiti, che hanno utilizzato il linguaggio ed il carattere anti-sistemico tipico della Ši'ah per mobilitare le masse contro il governo. Ai fini della presente analisi risulta cruciale una rilettura critica in questo senso in modo da spostare il focus della letteratura dalle sole dinamiche di attivismo top-down, dove il ruolo e l'influenza del clero sciita bahrainita (e iraniano) sulla popolazione bahārna-sciita è stato decisivo, a quelle appunto bottom-up, emerse soprattutto nella «Primavera Araba» e nelle proteste degli anni successivi.

Luigi Giorgi è Research Fellow presso il dipartimento di Scienze Politiche dell'università LUISS Guido Carli di Roma. Cura una ricerca sul ruolo dei Media nella diffusione del proselitismo islamico-sciita nelle mobilitazioni politiche. Ha maturato esperienze di lavoro e ricerca in Tunisia, Kuwait e Iraq. Le sue aree di interesse includono la storia e la politica contemporanea dei paesi del Golfo.

9. Organic intellectuals? The new generation of Syrian opinion-writers after the 2011 Uprising

Adélie Chevée

ABSTRACT

Under Bashar al-'Asad, public opponents used to express dissent in Lebanese newspapers such as *An-Nahar*. But after 2011, the launch of nearly 300 periodical titles and the creation of online forums profoundly transformed the landscape of the Syrian intellectual field. While these new forms of activism remained largely understudied by current scholarship, they permitted a new generation of critics to step in, young opinion-writers who moved to liberated areas and told stories of everyday life struggle during the war. Already struck by disillusion and malaise since the 1967 defeat, the old Syrian intelligentsia saw in 2011 a threatening – or uplifting – replacement cohort, which claimed its rightful place within the cultural field. In this paper I switch the analytical lens from established party-politicians and prison writers towards a new generation of Syrian intellectuals 'from below' better connected with a social base. I appraise the extent of the change(s) that the historical events of 2011 brought inside the Syrian intellectual field, by examining the continuities and breaks in trajectories of intellectual counter-hegemonic practices and discourses. Using life biographies and political texts published in three revolutionary publications (the magazines *Souriatna* and *Tla'na 'al-Huraya* and the website *Al-Jumhuriya*), I show how these opinion-writers resembled and worked with the elder generation, and yet constituted a distinctly new generational cohort. In doing so, I discuss Gramsci's analytical distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals by borrowing from the work of the Lebanese poet and writer Abbas Baydoun.

Adélie Chevée is a PhD candidate and teaching assistant in the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS. Her research focuses on social movements, resistance, and the evolution of the Syrian intellectual field since 2011, especially in Beirut, Istanbul and Gaziantep. She is a graduate from Oxford University.

10. Everyday Resistance: How do Palestinians Resist in Jordan Valley?

Ihab Maharmeh

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Everyday resistance and offers a reading of the dimensions and tactics of the concept, focusing on the Jordan Valley. The first part focus on the concepts of resistance, everyday resistance, and resilience (Sumud), then deals with Israeli policy in the Jordan Valley since its occupation in 1967, and the third part focus on forms of Palestinian everyday resistance that emerged to counter it. Finally, the paper looks at the impact of that everyday resistance on

Israeli policy. The paper unpacks the tactics of the everyday resistance and the assesses its importance in confronting Israeli policy. It explores deeper in the villages and residential areas of "Area C", relying on a descriptive analytical method, in addition to field interviews with residents of the Jordan Valley. The term "Jordan Valley" refers to the eastern strip of the West Bank occupied in 1967, 120 km long and ranging between 5 and 25 km wide, located within "Area C". The author suggests the concept of everyday resistance from a socio-political perspective, focusing on the resistance of the oppressed to colonization, and adding a new dimension to studies of the Palestinian resistance, which falls outside the forms of resistance accepted by the Palestinians. The study argues that in the absence of organized resistance by a political party, everyday, or hidden, resistance becomes the main unit of political analysis in Palestine.

Ihab Maharmeh is a Palestinian Researcher, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. He holds Master degree of International Relations from Birzeit University (2014) and second Master degree of Public Policy from Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (2017). He has participated in local and international conferences, and he published researches in peer- reviewed Journals in Student Movement, Social Movements and Popular Resistance.