

14th SeSaMO Conference

PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

University of Turin (Italy)

31 January–2 February 2019



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITLE: *RESISTANCE AND SCHOLARSHIP. WHAT RESISTANCE FOR ACADEMICS?*

CONVENOR(S): - Nicola Perugini, Gabriele Proglione, Paola Rivetti.

ABSTRACT:

The academe has historically played an ambiguous role vis-a-vis the state and other centres of power. While it served as a site of state reproduction, it has also been a site of contestation, where generations have developed critical skills to protest and mobilise against national as well as international policies, ranging from war intervention to the commodification of higher education. This panel asks what resistance - and what academic freedom that can protect the right to resist -, if any, can survive interlocked financial and political pressures. The panel has an interest in contextualising and discussing campaigns such as the boycott of Israeli universities (BDS's PACBI), the role of academics and the scholarship in anti-authoritarian mobilisations for peace in Syria and elsewhere, as well as the unionisation of precarious lecturers in private universities in the region, with the goal of putting in conversation different struggles located in different temporalities and geographies. The panel looks for empirical papers that contribute real experiences and theoretical papers that connect mobilisations and political imaginations. In particular, we are interested in reflecting at the intersection between the panelists' experiences, their engagement with Middle East politics and their educational philosophy.

CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Nicola Perugini is a Lecturer in International Relations in the University of Edinburgh (UK).

Gabriele Proglione is an FCT researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (University of Coimbra). He is an Oral and Cultural Historian. His research specializations include History of the Mediterranean, mobility and borders, migration and diaspora studies, subjectivity and memory studies, postcolonial theory and decolonial thought, colonial heritages in Europe.

Paola Rivetti is an Assistant Professor in Middle East Politics and International Relations in the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University (Ireland).

PAPERS:

1. The Academic field must be defended” Excluding criticism of Israel from campuses

David Landy

ABSTRACT

This paper examines strategies deployed by supporters of Israel to repress critical speech on Israel/Palestine in academia. The paper draws on Bourdieu’s idea of fields of practice, in particular that each field operates in its own language and seeks to defend this language as a means of defending its autonomy. Following from this, it argues that supporters of Israel seek to repress criticism of Israel on campus through discursive strategies that assert that such criticism does not belong in the academic field. In this way, they represent their censorship practices as being a means of defending academia.

The paper examines a concrete example of these strategies, taking as a case study the controversy surrounding the conference on “International Law and the State of Israel” originally scheduled for Southampton University but cancelled and held in UCC in March 2017. It looks at the rhetoric and the practices of those who sought to cancel the conference – how the conference was rhetorically framed as being ‘non-academic’ or even ‘anti-academic’, as well as how twitter, newspapers and other non-academic sites and practices were used to enmesh the conference within other discursive fields, thereby signifying that it was somehow non-academic and thus should not take place. The paper argues that this discursive strategy has proven partially effective in repressing academic freedom of speech with regard to Israel/Palestine.

Dr David Landy is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, and director of the MPhil in Race, Ethnicity, Conflict, Trinity College Dublin, His main research interests are race and ethnicity, and social movements particularly with regard to Israel/Palestine. He is the author of "Jewish Identity and Palestinian Rights: Diaspora Jewish Opposition to Israel", and co-organiser of the 2017 conference Freedom of Speech and Higher Education: The Case of the Academic Boycott of Israel"

2. Creating and practicing resistance: academics in Turkey after the 2016 attempted coup

Fazila Mat

ABSTRACT

Turkey’s authoritarian turn in recent years has heavily affected freedom of expression and academic freedom. This paper aims at providing a description of the state of universities and academics in Turkey, focusing on the period following the 2016 attempted coup. It gives an insight of the resistance strategies developed by the academics, with special regard to the experience of the so-called “Academics for Peace”. Against the backdrop of previous resistance experiences in Turkey, including the Gezi Park Movement in 2013, the paper explores the practices and ideas that led to the creation of the “solidarity academies”, the alternative education initiatives launched in different parts of the country since 2016. The study also looks into the solidarity nets created both within the country and abroad to provide academics in restraints support, including financial and legal. Finally it considers the action of expatriate Turkish scholars in contributing to this net.

Fazila Mat has been working since 2008 as a journalist covering Turkish politics and society. She co-authored a book on the Gezi Park movement and participated to a research on press freedom in Turkey. She currently works for OBC Transeuropa as Turkey contributor and researcher on media freedom in Europe.

3. Academic resistance and the Regeni case

Michela Pusterla

ABSTRACT

Last summer, representatives from several British universities went to Cairo to develop strategic academic partnerships with the Egyptian higher education system. Shortly after, 200 British academics published an open-letter in the Guardian, “question[ing] the wisdom and legitimacy of this move to do business as usual with an authoritarian regime” and accusing the delegation of a “cynical branding exercise.” In 2016, the torture and murder of Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge PhD student, seriously put into question the purported academic freedom and safety enjoyed by Western scholars in Egypt; his murder kick-started a process of re-thinking the mutual implications and limitations between the right to research and that to survive – a process which was soon dismissed by the main institutional actors. In this presentation, I will show how international academia addressed the Regeni case and appropriated his memory, pointing out the internal difference between institutional behavior and scholars’ personal or collective choices. I will argue that – despite several personal and collective efforts in the opposite direction – global neoliberal academia failed to *take care*, disowning one of his scholars (thus potentially any of them) and reaffirming its highly competitive, market-dependent, neoliberal nature. Considering the minor role played by academia in the public debate on the Regeni case and the distorted portraits of academics in the Italian media, up to now, the Regeni case has represented a huge missed opportunity to start a critical conversation about scholars’ safety in politically dangerous environments and to create a solidarity network with scholars and students coming from or living in a regime.

Michela Pusterla is a PhD candidate in Italian literature at the Universities of Trieste and Udine. She studies the construction of Italian identity during the first Italian colonialism. Since 2016, she has co-authored with Franco Palazzi several articles on the Regeni case.

4. Academic voices for Palestine

Progetto Palestina Collective

ABSTRACT

University plays a central role in our academic training. It is the place of knowledge, where theoretical dimensions clash with practical dimensions through the construction (and deconstruction) of discourses, notions and backgrounds. Progetto Palestina is a student group based at the University of Turin that comes up against attempts of defamation and intimidations from external actors that are intended to delegitimize and repress this new voice born in the name of Palestinian rights and demands for justice. The academic environment has systematically attacked the activities of the group that, through the analysis of the contemporary Palestinian reality, aims to engage practical actions such as the boycott of academic ties with Israeli institutions.