

14th SeSaMO Conference

PATHS OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITLE: Becoming activists in North Africa and the Middle East. Paths of political subjectivation during and after the Uprisings

CONVENOR(S): - Francesco Vacchiano (Institute of Social Sciences – University of Lisbon)
- Alice Elliot (Goldsmiths, University of London)

ABSTRACT:

The events that shook the Arab-majority countries in 2011 have been scrutinized under a variety of angles: as a result of economic stagnation and authoritarianism, as an outcome of youth bulge, unemployment and frustration, as a response to old and new neoliberal experiments, as an effect of the new web-based social media, as a new cycle in a series of recurring revolutionary moments, as the cumulative upshot of a patient grass-roots construction, and more. While such perspectives are certainly relevant, each of them spotlighting some specific feature of the events, they focus mostly on social, economic and political dynamics, being individual motivation and choice often treated as mere consequences of structural factors. Far from dismissing the significance of historical and political dynamics, we aim to explore also the forms in which people understand the events and decide to step in and commit for a change. This is important to introduce a reflection on freedom and choice within a theorization often marked by social determinism.

Our panel welcomes contributions that illuminate the individual experience of activism, social and political participation and personal commitment in North Africa and the Middle East during and after the revolts of 2011. We are particularly interested in exploring people's motivations and decisions, continuities and discontinuities in their life experience, as well as their own understanding of activism, resistance, rebellion, engagement and politics. We ask in particular what are the events that trigger a change on a personal level, what are their consequences on a longer term and, more generally, how a new political subjectivity can emerge within a specific social context.

CONVENOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Francesco Vacchiano is an anthropologist and a clinical psychologist with interests in migration, medical and psychological anthropology, European borders and boundaries, bureaucracies and politics of citizenship, and societies and institutions in North Africa. He has made research in Morocco, Tunisia and in Southern Europe and is currently studying the expectations related to activism and political participation in North Africa as the principal investigator of the project "Globally Sensitive: Revolt, Citizenship, and Expectations for the Future in North Africa", funded by the Portuguese research council ("Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia") (2015-2020).

Alice Elliot is a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she convenes the MA Migration and Mobility programme. She has been

conducting ethnographic research since 2006 between North Africa and Europe on the social and intimate dimensions of migration and, more recently, on those of economic crisis and Arab revolutions. She works in Morocco, Tunisia, and Italy on themes of gender, kinship, and intimacy, Islam and theological/political imagination, hope and indigenous conceptions of movement. She is co-editor of *Methodologies of mobility: ethnography and experiment* (Berghahn 2017), and *Anthropologies of destiny: action, temporality, freedom* (HAU 2018).

PAPERS:

FIRST SESSION

1. Today's Tunisia political subjectivities. The emergence of new local movements and actors.

Giovanni Cordova

ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I would like to relate on Tunisian local political movements and actors that have grown up after 2011. Their main characteristics are the rootedness in local contexts such as specific quarters or municipalities, and the claim for active citizenship.

Furthermore, their relation to bigger national organisations and ideologies is dim and not clearly defined.

The recent empowerment of Tunisian civil society goes together with the emergence of local committees and various associations in several quarters and municipalities. This innovative dimension constitutes a multi-sited democracy lab, locally based, breeding ground for a new political subjectivity, which has to be intended as a complex of perceptions, actions, thoughts, fears regarding politics and society. Tunisian youths are the main actors engaged in this panorama. They are looking for new original political languages provided with social and cultural legitimacy, with which they try to involve ordinary people. By presenting the life stories of some of these new political actors, the paper will take an in-depth look at the individual subjectivities of young Tunisians who are currently engaged in defining and achieving the common good.

From the partial results of an ongoing ethnography sited in the urban area of the Grand Tunis, attention will be paid to the individual experience of new young activists. The germination of their political engagement, the perception of continuity and transformation of their Self, affinities and fractures within the peer group and the family, their adherence to shared norms and values will be all subjects of reflexion.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA PROPONENTE:

Giovanni Cordova is PhD candidate in Ethno-Anthropological Disciplines at 'Sapienza' University of Rome.

He is currently junior-researcher in the cooperation project 'PINSEC' (Parcours d'inclusion sociale et économique) in Tunisia, where he has been studying the cultural frameworks of citizenship among Tunisian youths. His interests include migration in the Mediterranean region.

2. Resistance and Resilience: Syrian civil society activism in Lebanon

Antea Enna

ABSTRACT:

This study is part of a more comprehensive research on the Syrian crisis effects in Lebanon.

The direct observation of refugees camps, through an ethnographic approach, and the knowledge of different realities, brought a reflection about leadership in the diaspora and its impacts in terms of resistance and civil society response to a conflict.

The question behind all these considerations is: how leadership in Syrian diaspora communities in Lebanon can influence the resistance and resilience, trying to construct a positive response from civil society to the conflict?

The difficult situation faced by refugees at the daily live base and, the need for support and encouragement to face complex and challenging situations can be influenced by leading figures. In specific cases, these important roles can determine and triggering a positive resistance and resilient movements. The creation of co-operative and resilient communities is the key to meet those needs.

This study is going to analyse Syrian civil society in Lebanon and its activists' response to the conflict in their homeland.

First, it will shed light on refugees their background and social structure in Lebanon.

Furthermore, a focus on the relationship with community leaders and their trust bonds will be presented in order to explore deeper the leading figures and their influence on the refugees' daily life considering their interactions with the Lebanese host communities.

Finally, the study will focus on concrete and real positive leadership figures and their impact on the diaspora community as a civil society actor in the Syrian civil war.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Antea Enna Is a Ph.D. candidate at the Catholic University of Milan. She is conducting an extensive field research in Lebanon as a case study for her research on the definition of Conflict Risk Reduction. She is part of Operazione Colomba and is currently living in a refugee camp in Akkar.

3. Being a “young leftist” in contemporary Morocco: strategies of visibility and construction of subjectivity in a student left-wing group.

Eleonora Landucci

ABSTRACT:

Through an ethnographic fieldwork conducted within a left-wing activist group in the University of Meknes (Morocco), this paper explores the meaning that young people give to their political affiliation and the way they describe themselves as “young leftists” in an autocratic country such as contemporary Morocco. What is the social and cultural category of “youth” (in Arabic “shab”) and which strategies of

visibility and negotiation these young activist develop to contrast the pejorative discourse that are produced on them as “leftists”? What does it mean belonging to a left-wing affiliation in a context of fluctuating political identities, sometimes on the border of other types of membership? What is the place, then, in the current context, of a “leftist identity” which has its origins in a partly different history and motivations, but whose meaning and concern for recognition are renewed under new forms? These questions assume more and more importance in a historical and political context in which we witness the emergence, although often repressed, of a concern for democratization and moral and political liberalization, under the effect of the “Arab Spring”; it also happens in conjunction — and not in contradiction — with the return, in new forms, of the “Islamist” issue. Thus, this study shows that political participation allows young people to reconfigure their status in a society where the process of democratization was conducted along with the neoliberal transformation of the Maghrebi countries, underlining how political commitment can become an important instrument of social mobility, in a country where social policies put in place by the institutions seem ineffective. Finally, the paper highlights the importance of the anthropological method — characterized by the long-term and in-depth study of particular social realities — as a privileged instrument of analysis of an extremely blurry category such as “youth”, whose intension is cut across legal-institutional frameworks and cultural, social, and political constructions.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DELLA PROPONENTE:

Eleonora Landucci is a Master’s degree student in Social Anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales of Paris. She's interested in issues concerning social movements, forms of resistance in a globalized context, and youth's social protests in democratic and hegemonic institutions. During the undergraduate studies in Anthropology at the University of Bologna she did her first fieldwork experiences in activists groups dealing with common goods and ethical consumption. In 2016 she took part in a joint research group coordinated by EHESS and Centre Jaques Berque (Rabat) where she investigated the possibilities of political activism for young people in a context of social exclusion. As a graduate student in Social Anthropology at EHESS, Eleonora has conducted an in-depth ethnographic research on youth political mobilisations in Moroccan University. She is currently working on her PhD project aiming to deepen her studies on Moroccan youth social movements.

SECOND SESSION

4. Spatial Disruptions and the Constitution of Revolutionary Selves in the Syrian Uprising and its Aftermath

Charlotte Loris-Rodionoff

How have Syrians been reshaped by and through the 2011 revolution? And how have their sense of personhood and subjectivity been inflected by this on-going and shifting event? This paper analyses how my interlocutors - Syrians displaced at the Syrian-Turkish border as a result of their involvement in the Syrian revolution - became *thawar* (revolutionaries) or *nashati* (activists) as they were (self-)designated by exploring their

genealogy, life-story and political thought-practice. It argues that rather than the result of temporal rupture created by the revolutionary 'events', becoming a revolutionary was linked to a series of spatial disruptions, decisions and positioning. The splitting of the Syrian territory between rebel and regime controlled areas and mass displacement to Turkey led to the creation of a novel cartography and the emergence of new horizons that had major effects on the constitution and maintaining of Syrians as *thawar* and *nashati*. The paper claims that becoming a revolutionary was primarily linked to being in a specific space - "*juwwa*" (inside) that could be a liberated or besieged area – and maintaining one's involvement in the revolution after enforced displacement to Turkey entailed movement from this outside to *juwwa* (the inside) that was defined as the space and place of revolution. Through this analysis of the spatial constitution of *thawar* and *nashati* the paper's main aim is to describe the ways in which the Syrian revolution runs through Syrians' selves creating new kind of subjects and amounting to an ontological transformation.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Charlotte Loris-Rodionoff is a PhD student at UCL anthropology researching the Syrian revolution's transformative effects in its aftermath. She has conducted 18 months fieldwork with Syrians displaced in Gaziantep (Turkey) between March 2014 and April 2016. She is part of the ERC project Comparative Anthropologies of Revolutionary Politics.

5. The understanding of peaceful methodology of Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt and its affect on eliminating Jihadi groups

Saif Alislam Eid

ABSTRACT:

This paper tries to give a reasonable explanation to the tendency of Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt who took the peaceful path to resist the military regime after the coup took place in 2013, as it was a huge polarization among generations of Islamic youth towards Jihadi groups.

It tries to connect between the political decision of remaining peaceful in resisting the military coup in 2013 and condemning the members from taking the approach of violence against the new military regime, it tries also to give a realistic explanation to the main question "why didn't the members of Muslim brotherhoods take the violence approach to resist the military coup? And the reason why there are not many Jihadists came out of ex-members of Muslim brotherhoods?"

This paper also draws a map of the Islamic groups acts' after 2013 based on my personal experience of being an activist in launching Jan 25 2011 revolution since its day 1 and the peaceful resistance path I believed in till the moment of writing this paper, I'm an Ex member of Muslim brotherhoods and got jailed for 1 year (Jan 2014_Feb 2015) in addition to be a junior political researcher these give me unique way of writing about the Arab spring and methodologies of resistance.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Saif Alislam Eid

Bachelor's degree in political science, Faculty of Economics and political science, Beni Suef University, Egypt. Junior freelance political Researcher, and Egyptian political activist.

6. Social Media, Protest, and Political Trajectories: Exploring Accounts of the Egyptian Uprisings

Matthew Wootton

ABSTRACT:

A number of commentators on the Arab uprisings (some more cautiously than others) have suggested an important role for social media in enabling political participation, for example highlighting its potential to nurture activist identities, create a sense of involvement with politics, function as a space of free communication which leads to autonomous subjects, and/or facilitate rhythms of affectively-charged communication which culminate in street protest. Yet these hypotheses have not been fully grounded in empirical research at the micro-level, meaning that it is difficult to confirm, or distinguish the relative merits of, the various competing theorizations of social media's impact on the uprisings, or to fully dismiss those who are sceptical that they had any impact whatsoever.

This paper contributes to the debate by providing evidence from personal accounts of Egyptian Facebook users, exploring personal and political trajectories which led to involvement in the eighteen days of uprising, in which Facebook and Twitter are prominently featured. These accounts offer an important window into key areas for attention concerning the uprisings, such as the development of the political self, the role of political relationships, and decision to expose oneself to serious personal risk.

Furthermore, such accounts enable us to better theorise the role of social media in the uprisings, and to emphasize individual agency, local conditions, and particular affordances as crucial to outcomes. Rather than seeking a true essence of social media, politically constructive or otherwise, its impacts are seen to be local, contingent, and highly variable.

ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Matthew Wootton holds a PhD in Human Geography from Durham University (2016), for his ethnographic study of social media use among middle-class Cairo residents. He is currently a Research Fellow of the Future Food Institute, Bologna, working on issues surrounding political participation within the alternative food movement.