

XIV Convegno SeSaMO

**PERCORSI DI RESISTENZA IN MEDIO ORIENTE E NORD AFRICA**

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**SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE**

**TITOLO: Ordinary people, resistance and the politicization of urban spaces and environment in the MENA region**

**PROPONENTE/I: RENATA PEPICELLI**

**ABSTRACT:**

The wave of protests/uprisings/revolutions arisen in the MENA region at the turn of the firsts decade of this century - labelled "Green wave" (2009), "Arab Spring" (2011) and "Gezi park resistance" (2013) - has shown the emergence of "ordinary people" as political subjects and agents of change. As a result of the process of redefinition of social movements – which started between the end of the Nineties and the beginning of this century (Bayat 2009), ordinary people are today crucial actors in performing new forms of resistance against top-down politics, neo-liberalism, authoritarian systems, patriarchy, as well as in defining counter-hegemonic narratives (see i.e. the contested use of categories such as religion or terrorism).

Boycotts, spontaneous street protests, "activism", e-activism, but also daily practices of subversion of the socio-cultural-political system in public domains are tools of individual and collective resistance which are re-defining not only the subjects and the forms of the resistance itself, but also the spaces of political dissent. Indeed, urban spaces, natural environment, heritage sites have progressively emerged as new arenas for the political debate. The occupation of squares, streets, parks, and the increasing interest for the environment, the cultural heritage, old traditions have marked a significant shift in the civic engagement and political participation in the MENA region. Moving from this theoretical perspective and grounding on empirical cases, the present panel (divided in two parts) analyses forms of resistance of ordinary people in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran within the context of the progressive politicization of urban spaces and environment.

**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I:**

Renata Pepicelli is Assistant Professor of "History of Islamic countries" and "Islamic Studies" at the Department of Civilization and Forms of Knowledge of the University of Pisa. Her current research interests include social and cultural history of the contemporary Arab-Islamic world, gender issues, youth, social movements, Islam in Europe.

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## ABSTRACTS DEGLI INTERVENTI

### First session

#### **1) Spatial encroachment and mobilizations in informal areas of Cairo**

Azzurra Sarnataro – Francesca Giangrande

Since the 2011 uprisings, urban space in Cairo has emerged as the new arena for the political debate, or a “tool” to manifest political dissent. Following this progressive politicization of the urban setting, political and civil society activists, NGOs, independent urban planners and architects, have started to focus their attention on the “contested spaces” of Cairo’s informal areas (*‘ashwaiyyat*). The cooperation between independent practitioners and grassroots based initiatives has led to the emergence of some famous cases such as the Ramlet Boulaq, the Orascom and Ezbet Khayrallah Lawyers association. The joint work of practitioners with urban communities of Cairo’s unplanned areas has therefore strengthened the debate on the “right to the city” and on the importance of supporting community based urban activism. This article will try to analyse how the spontaneous rise of grassroots practices, although not always intentionally, creates a new sub-stratum of spaces and social activities in Cairo’s *‘ashwaiyyat*. Specifically, the contribution will try to answer the following questions: what is the difference between communities’ mobilizations and informal mediation between communities and the state? Considering the role of NGOs and social/political activists supporting local communities, what is the reaction, the involvement and the expulsion/rejection of the “urban practitioners” by the unplanned neighbourhoods? The objective is to provide further reflections on the meaning of “urban citizenship” in order to analyze how, assuming it as a negotiable concept, it is shaped, re-shaped and performed through conflicts and informal negotiations, especially in contexts characterized by extreme social/spatial/political exclusion and marginality.

#### **2) The women of Tanja’s popular districts: a constellation of ordinary struggles**

Lucia Turco – Laura Guarino

The development of neoliberal processes in which the Northern region of Morocco is involved, since the enthronement of the King Mohamed VI in 1999 and the constitution of the Mediterranean macro-region, produced specific effects to the detriment of disadvantaged popular classes. Heterogeneous struggles, mainly conducted by women, are so developed in the city of Tanja, the main urban centre of the Northern region. The main issues of these struggles are linked to the house (expropriations of irregular slums as well as difficulty to obtain the authorizations for the constructions on building land), and to the workers struggles exploded in the years immediately following the Arabic Springs. The plurality of these isolated struggles that cross the city, represents a constant movement of agency that involves groups of population considered less visible in the public space: the women of the popular districts. The aim of this paper is to problematize this presence / absence through a process of re-signification of the spaces produced by the struggles of ordinary people and through the attempt to deconstruct the dichotomous categories. Finally, the contribution wants to highlight how these isolated experiences can be a key for understanding the heterogeneous composition of the grassroots movements in Morocco and the large participation at the street protests.

#### **3) Eco-resistances in post-revolutionary Tunisia**

Renata Pepicelli

In the autumn of 2017, a series of images representing figures from famous Orientalist paintings set in photos of contemporary Tunisian neighbourhoods covered by rubbish became viral on the Tunisian social media. “Zabaltuna” (“you covered us with your garbage”) was the title of the project. In July 2018, the author of this provocation, Mohamed Oussama Houij, an anonymous 26-year-old engineer who had participated in the 2011 revolution, launched another project: “300 kilomètres”, traversing 300 kilometres of coastline in order to clean up 30 beaches and documenting in internet this journey. In both cases the goal was to build awareness campaigns and denounce the environmental crisis in the country.

Despite article 45 of the 2014 constitution affirms the right to environmental protection and requires the state to fight pollution, environmental policies are yet missed in Tunisia as well as an ecological movement. Ecology is neglected by the political debate, however a series of individual and collective forms of eco-resistance against pollution and economic projects threatening environment and local traditions have been emerging. From street protests to critical masses to “artivism” these eco-resistances, which involve ordinary people from urban and rural areas, are plural and headless. The aim of this paper is to investigate these forms of resistance in the light of the growing environmental

movement that have been emerging in the MENA region and in the framework of the ongoing struggles of "ordinary people" which have been taking place in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

#### 4) **Environment, Cultural Heritage, History and Post-Gezi Patterns of Resistance**

Çiğdem Oğuz

Despite its end as a form of street protest, the Gezi "movement" continues to react several events that occurred in the past five years and shows its "spirit." Despite its unpredictability and uncontrollability, the post-Gezi non-street form of resistance shows some common characteristics among which one theme is particularly evident: Siding with the most fragile and vulnerable (women, children, animals, and the environment) to whom/which the hegemonic power of the government and its neoliberal policies are applied brutally. For instance, the Gezi uproar has begun when the police burnt the tents of about 50 protesters camping in the park to prevent its demolition the next day. Later on, as the mega construction projects keep being initiated by the government, protecting the "trees" and green spaces from demolition became the most important aim of the resistance. It is often overlooked that the emphasis of the Gezi and post-Gezi protests was not only on the importance of green spaces but also on the historical and cultural value of certain places. In this respect, historical buildings and structures and their renovations or demolitions have become the focus of interest and led to the emergence of a collective memory discourse. In my paper, I would like to look at the discourses of cultural heritage and history in the non-street form of post-Gezi protests and discuss how history, heritage, and memory discourses play an alternative unifying role in the non-street protests as the protesters consider these areas among those threatened by the hegemonic power.

### Second session

#### 5) **Real and virtual spaces: parks, cafés and social networks as places of renegotiation of gender roles 40 years after the Islamic Revolution**

Rassa Ghaffari

The present work aims to understand how the new under 30 generation of Tehran, born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, respond to the gender ideals imposed and conveyed by the government and society, and which practices and forms of resistance and reconfiguration of these models they implement in their everyday life. The goal is to show how young Iranians reshape continuously official representations and gender roles through the re-appropriation and reuse of public spaces such as parks, cafes and even road traffic, putting into practice innovative responses from below.

Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic of Iran has pinned the definition of gender roles as one of its primary purposes; together with the war against Iraq, the Revolution has led to the institutionalization of new models of femininity and masculinity which, however, are far from being fixed and immutable. It is certainly true that gender relations in post-revolutionary Iran have their roots in the social fabric present even before the Revolution and found their realization in gender segregation imposed in numerous aspects of daily life; nevertheless, we must also remember that these boundaries have become fluid and porous, so that we can speak today of a gradual redefinition of the gender dynamics that is taking on new and hybrid forms. The practices considered do not constitute an organic resistance movement, rather they establish new forms of behavior implemented -often unconsciously- by ordinary citizens, largely through mundane daily practices in public domains.

#### 6) **Spirits of Displacement: Gnawa and the Gentrification of Casablanca's Medina**

Stefano Portelli

The Moroccan Gnawa is an informal network of masters, disciples, fans and adepts of a ritual practice that uses dance and music to evoke spirits thought to cure individual and collective sufferings. Subject to both religious and secular stigma, its practitioners present themselves as descendants (real or spiritual) of subsaharian slaves brought to Morocco since the 16th century. Their rituals are symbolic devices that aggregate the diverse elements which compose the variegated fabric of Moroccan urban society, but they require physical spaces which are increasingly difficult to find in contemporary cities. I will present an ongoing research on Casablanca's medina, a crucial space for the Gnawa community, but also one many residents were forced to leave. Gentrification and displacement to the outskirts are the result of increased prices of land and of the construction of the new Hassan II mosque on the waterfront. My hypothesis is that the language of spirits and possession, and the references to forced displacement of African slaves, conveys today not only the attempt to aggregate a community dispersed by spacial transformations, but also an implicit resistance to the political and religious forces that shaped these transformations. The opposition of many young ritual practitioners to the state's policies of heritagization and control of gnawa cultural expressions,

suggests that this brotherhood keeps defending its autonomy towards central powers not by direct confrontation but through the 'weapons of the weak' of ambiguity, dissimulation, and displacement of meaning.

### **7) Ben Guerdane, the city symbol of resistance to Jihadism in Tunisia: exploring contested narratives**

Guendalina Simoncini

The events of the 7 March 2016 made the cross-border city of Ben Guerdane the symbol of resistance to terrorism in Tunisia. The active participation of citizens in the clashes between an armed jihadist group and the national security forces has been at the center of public debate for a long time. The ordinary citizens of Ben Guerdane, disarmed during the armed conflict, supported the security forces and helped the victims risking their lives during the clashes. Their contribution has been described as an act of "resistance" giving rise to an unprecedented narrative concerning the population of this city. In fact, the inhabitants of the country's border areas are often faced with the stigma deriving from the institutional and media discourse on the relationship between smuggling and terrorism. Although the events of Ben Guerdane have questioned this narrative, the courageous resistance of ordinary citizens has not always been duly recognized by the institutions, which have privileged to exalt the "heroic" role of the security forces at the expense of the civilians. The present contribution aims to explore the plurality of narratives concerning the "resistance" to jihadism in Ben Guerdane city, paying special attention to the link between population and border territory and underlining the importance of a historical legacy of "resistance" that dates back to the colonization period and has deeply marked the history of this territory even during the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali.

### **8) Mobilizing Islam in post-authoritarian Tunisia: Dynamics of political struggle in the city of Sfax**

Ester Sigillò

Islamic activism has largely developed in Tunisia after 2011. The wave of Islamic revival deals with a variegated public composed of people that perceives itself as an Islamic community regardless its specific interest into politics. This Islamic public contains the Ennahdha militants, other militants engaged in Salafi movements and a larger pious public, active in charitable and religious associations. The Tunisian front of Islamic associations has represented the most relevant institutionalization of this Islamic public: its goal is to bring together the Islamic forces to fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and the insertion of sharia in the constitution. The Front has emerged as a social force parallel to Ennahdha. However, following the recent decision of the party to separate da'wa activities from politics and its willingness to reach a deal with neo-Bourghibist/secular forces, the grassroots movement has gradually challenged the party's leadership by adopting the narrative of 'safe-keeper' of Islamic values, against the attempt of ruling parties to restore a 'regime of institutionalized Islam' under control of the state. This study analyzes how Islamic activism has gradually emerged in the urban space of Sfax, a city traditionally linked to the 'resistance' of the Tunisian Islamic movement during the authoritarian regimes of Bourghiba and Ben Ali. Notably, it highlights how the urban space has played a strategic role for the re-configuration of the Islamic network, the framing of new narratives on 'resistance' and the organization of political mobilization against secular forces since 2011.

## **Profilo accademico delle autrici/autori**

**Rassa Ghaffari** is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Milano Bicocca with a thesis on the transformation of gender roles among youth in Tehran. Her research interests are youth status, intergenerational gap and representations of gender models in the Iranian society.

**Francesca Giangrande** is a research fellow at University of Molise. She holds a PhD in Urban Planning, at 'Sapienza' University of Rome and carries out research on the relationships between "translocal" migration and territory, in the framework of spatial planning. She is also a ASF-UK member, collaborating in training in design participation and advocacy planning.

**Çiğdem Oğuz** received her Ph.D. degree from Leiden and Bogazici Universities in 2018 with her dissertation titled, "The Struggle Within: 'Moral Crisis' on the Ottoman Homefront during the First World War." Currently, she is an independent researcher and her research interests include late Ottoman social and cultural history, war studies, and gender studies.

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**Stefano Portelli** is a cultural anthropologist working on the social effects of urban displacement. He is a Marie-Curie post-doctoral fellow at Leicester University's School of Geography and an affiliate to Harvard's Department of Anthropology. He wrote "La ciudad horizontal", an ethnography of the demolition of a working-class neighborhood in Barcelona.

**Azzurra Sarnataro** recently obtained her PhD in Urban Studies at 'Sapienza' University of Rome. Her research focused on urban informality and self-built communities in Cairo, Egypt. Having studied Middle Eastern studies for her bachelor and master degrees, she is specialized in contemporary social and urban issues of the Middle East.

**Ester Sigillò** holds a PhD from the Institute of Human and Social Sciences at Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence and she is a research fellow at the Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain in Tunis. Her main research interests concern Middle East and North African studies, Islamic activism, and civic engagement in the Arab world.

**Guendalina Simoncini** is a PhD student in Political Science at the University of Pisa. Her PhD thesis studies the sociopolitical effects of the discourse on terrorism in post-2011 Tunisia. Her research interests currently include political violence, counter-terrorism policies, and democratic transitions in Maghreb.

**Lucia Turco** received her PhD degree from L'Orientale, University of Naples and currently she is a researcher at the Aix-Marseille University. She works on neoliberal processes of the Northern Morocco and, starting from a feminist and postcolonial position, she is interested in socio-linguistic exchanges among Mediterranean women, to elaborate political translations.