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TITOLO/TITLE: Class, a Useful Category for Ethnography? Case Studies from Egypt and Morocco.

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Since the 19th century, social classes have been a core element in the analysis of crises. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have famously interpreted history as a result of the class struggle over the means of production (Marx and Engels 1848). The inner conflicts regularly erupting in Arab countries have undeniable links with the strong social inequalities plaguing the societies of the region. In the two countries that make up the focus of this panel – Egypt and Morocco – riots have regularly ignited. Even if there is no mechanical causality at play here, the great gaps between different segments of society in their access to resources certainly play a role in their recurrence. The 2011 uprisings, the success of Islamist parties, and the unruly urbanisation of great cities have all been described by analysts as outcomes of social inequalities (Armbrust 2011; Zemni and Bogaert 2011; Bono et al. 2015) or as the result of unexpected alliances beyond social divides (Goldstone 2011). They echo more subtle forms of hierarchies which infuse everyday settings. In continuity with the reflections of the EGYCLASS network (CNRS), which attempts to renew the study of social classes in Egypt, and of a long-time reflection by the conveners of the panel on the ethnographic appraisal of change (Berriane, Derks, Kreil and Lüdeckens 2021), this panel seeks to interrogate class as a major conceptual tool to describe and analyse social inequalities, and to reflect on the best manner in which it can be made relevant for ethnography.

Marxist approaches have been influential beyond Europe and North America. Through communist organisations and later on state socialism, conceptions of class influenced by Marx and Engels gained momentum in Arab countries and had a strong impact on the way intellectuals in the region conceived the social ladder ('Adlī Rūmān 2001). At the political level, analyses in terms of social classes have always had to compete with other manners of describing social collectives, such as the 'nation', *ash-sha'b* (the people) or '*umma*' (Lockman 1994; Valensi 1990; Zolondek 1965). Within class approaches influenced by Marxism, the different types of ownership of the means of production acted for a long time as a central criterion for determining class belonging. These readings of society cohabited with more statistical ones dividing society according to wealth and levels of income. Other interpretations of society stressed the importance of the 'middle class' as the upcoming group shaping society or assessing the signs of its decline (Halpern 1963; Amin 2000; Basti-Hamimi 2011). What all these analyses have in common is the central role they attribute to state institutions in Arab countries as the main purveyor (or denier) of access to class privileges, even during periods of liberalisation. More recently, in anthropology, some have started to consider class primarily as a matter of social imaginaries, shaping people's expectations and allowing them to assess each other's position in society (Schielke 2012).

This panel aims at developing an ethnographically informed approach to class distinctions. The issue of class is a complicated one for researchers working with ethnography. Based on small-scale observations and on a limited number of interviews, this method of inquiry seems ill-fitted for the study of large collectives, such as social classes. The capacity to generalise findings at a structural level seems particularly at odds with the limitations of ethnographic research. However, ethnography also has strong assets compared to inquiry methods working on a broader scale. It allows, for instance, a close reading into when and how inequalities are made meaningful for people. The critique of social inequalities can occur both as a comment on the general state of society or during practical encounters with no ambition to generalise about the situation (Boltanski 2009), a reality which is difficult to apprehend through questionnaires, for instance. Likewise, ethnography is best suited for exploring the emic categories people employ to name, acknowledge, resist, and enforce social inequalities. Above

and beyond its discursive dimensions, ethnography also gives keys to understanding the material and affective dimensions of the class issue.

In light of this assessment, we invite papers that engage in methodological reflections on the ethnographic study of social classes in Egypt and Morocco. Combining case studies from these two countries seems particularly relevant, as there are strong contrasts between their political institutions, social history, and economic infrastructure, which have a direct impact on the ways people assess power and prestige in each society. To better understand the specific contribution of ethnography to the understanding of the issue and to avoid blindly abiding to theoretical or statistical schemes elaborated through other methods, it is crucial to take a close look at the empirical data on social inequalities which ethnography can bring forward and to reflect upon how to best make this data relevant for the purpose of description and analysis. Indeed, the panel's primary goal is not to give examples of the class issue at work, but to focus on how the researcher conducting his/her inquiry came to know what he/she has discovered about it and the limits and assets of his/her assessments. It aims to tackle the following key questions: where, when, and how should researchers look at society in order to be able to say something about class? It implies temporarily keeping out of sight what can be learnt through the secondary literature (and the class categories it conveys) or at least problematising the relation we construct with it explicitly.

The presenters can interrogate the concept of class in its structural, processual, or situational features. The objects of their inquiry may include, among others: how class relates to state institutions; how discourses about class can be critical resources for our interlocutors (Boutaleb and alii 2002); how class, comfort, and material expectations are interlinked; what are the different existent sources of prestige (Bourdieu 1979); what are the sometimes competing manners of naming, assessing, and mobilising social hierarchies in everyday situations; in which spaces does class distinction matter and in which doesn't it, etc. Through the joint reflection that the panel will allow us to have, we intend to find at least a partial answer to the following questions: Is class a useful category for ethnography? And if it is, what can we know about it through ethnographic methods of inquiry?

Please, note that the only language accepted in our panel is English.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

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Yasmine Berriane is Permanent Researcher at the CNRS in France (Centre Maurice Halbwachs, Paris), trained in Political Sociology and Middle Eastern Studies. Her research examines political and social transformations in North Africa and the Middle East, with an empirical focus on Morocco. Her publications deal with women's political participation, the making of spaces of participation, and the sociopolitical impacts of newly emerging land right claims. She recently co-edited *Allying Beyond Social Divides. Coalitions and Contentious Politics* (Routledge, 2020), *Archive and Gender in North African Societies* (Hespéris-Tamuda, Vol.56, 2021), and *Methodological Approaches to Societies in Transformation. How to Make Sense of Change* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

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