

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

22-24 giugno 2022



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:**

Deconstructing Chaos in Iraqi Studies:

What Research Paths Beyond Essentialisation and its Counter-Narrative?

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:**

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**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

If the Middle East and North Africa are often portrayed as a region of disconcerting chaos both in the media and academic literature, Iraq is frequently seen as the epicentre of this chaos. Since the 2003 US-led invasion, the country has often been depicted as unspeakable chaos and ungovernable violence (Bashkin 2015; Harling 2012; Visser 2008). The long history of coups and wars in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> has undoubtedly facilitated the entrenchment of this vision.

Starting from the first Gulf War and moving on with the invasion of Kuwait, the second Gulf War, the heavy UN sanctions during the 1990s, the 2003 US-led invasion and the following 18 years of unrest have crafted a situation that seemed impossible to unravel and describe, if not through overreaching generalisations (Hinnebusch 2003). Wars, migrations and local mobilisations paved the way for a context that seemed to escape rational explanations. At the same time, the political interests enmeshed in knowledge production about Iraq have contributed to the diffusion of simplistic and essentialistic approaches to the study of this country.

Contrary to these simplistic and essentialistic narrations, the present panel aims at investigating the political, social or cultural phenomena that emerged in Iraq in recent years, providing reflections and analysis that can help us go beyond the double notion of chaos and crisis. To counter essentialisation, this panel intends to approach Iraq from different perspectives and fields of study. Our aim is to focus on social actors, the context they are formed and operate in, and the power relations they are involved in. In doing so, the contributors are invited to deconstruct the notions of chaos and crisis and propose possible models of analysis based on this deconstruction and the trajectories of the actors and phenomena they analyse. Moreover, they are encouraged to investigate and deconstruct the duality between chaos and order, often opposed as totally negative or positive forces and frequently used to maintain the political status quo. In this sense, the panel also welcomes contributors reconsidering the notion of crisis as a creative force and not only as a destructive one.

The panel calls on contributions from different fields, including anthropology, history, literature, and political science, starting from these broad questions. Contributions should focus on a vast period of Iraqi history, encompassing the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. They should focus on political actors, social movements, activists, writers, artists, thinkers and philosophers and analyse their paths beyond the notions of chaos and crisis. These notions could be explored by focusing on the ideas and theories produced by the actors themselves, which may be seen not only as an object of study, or “afterthought” as stated by El Shakry (2021), but also as systems capable of producing frameworks of analysis. The panel also welcomes contributions adopting bottom-up perspectives and approaches to answer these questions.

Furthermore, the actors and phenomena of the Iraqi crises should be analysed within their context. Contributions should explore the field of action of these actors, understanding how it shapes them and how, at the same time, they shape their field(s). In Arab cultural studies, the concept of “field” has been fruitfully

applied to the Egyptian, Lebanese and Algerian literary milieus by eminent scholars such as Richard Jacquemond (2003, 2008), Felix Lang (2016) and Tristan Leperlier (2018). Moreover, the “cultural turn” that has recently taken place in the study of Arabic literary texts has allowed us to pay unprecedented attention to the context of production and reception of the latter, contributing “to demystifying the literary terrain” and “rendering often excluded and marginalized practices more important” (Pacifico 2020). In political studies, the “interpretative work” of actors in describing their fields has recently been explored by Jasper and Volpi (2018). They, for instance, argue that social actors create their fields of action by shaping them with an interpretative work of external events. In this way, political opportunities are transformed from objective situations into perceived ones, paving the way for a conception of the field shaped by the actors themselves.

By setting actors in their relative field or more fields at once, the analysis can look at subjects as embedded and formed by the context, overcoming all those approaches that see the actors and their cultural, political or philosophical productions as abstract objects of study. This perspective has been explored, among others, by Beinin and Vaire (2013, 8-9), who proposed a “relational approach” to social actors, emphasising the subject’s perception of opportunity and threat in relation to its environment and thus developing its discourse and actions in relation to it.

The actors should also be considered within the web of power relations they are entangled with. Since they are part of a specific context, they are also part of a web of relations that determine their background, trajectory, and struggles in their respective field(s) as well as their actions and productions.

By focusing on actors within their contexts and the power relations they shape and are shaped by, this panel hopes to concentrate on their creativity. This creativity is expressed both in confronting the crisis they face and casting themselves as more than mere subjects or witnesses of these crises, but as players in the different fields of the Iraqi context. The notion of “creativity” is explored by John Chalcraft in his work on popular politics in the Middle East, arguing for its problematic interpretation as well as its central role in bringing new social actors into the political arena (Chalcraft 2016). The idea of creativity, proposing new ways of shaping power relations by introducing new groups and new repertoires of contentions to the political field, can help contributions explore actors’ perspectives on the notion of crisis and themselves. Drawing on these notions, contributions could try to answer several questions: Who are these actors? How are they formed and how do they create their fields of action? Or, also, how do they conceptualise the notion of crisis, if they do at all? And if they do, how do they overcome this notion?

Finally, the panel also aims at addressing some methodological and theoretical issues. Looking at the actors’ multiple histories, political ideas, or cultural productions with a specific focus on the context and power relations, contributions could also try to answer the following questions: What research paths can we build beyond the constant need to provide a counter-narrative to the aforementioned forms of essentialisation and simplification? How do Iraqi actors position themselves within their social space? Moreover, what is their role and impact in the Iraqi crises?

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**

Pietro Menghini is a PhD candidate at the Scuola Superiore Meridionale in Naples. His research interests include Contemporary Islamic Thought, Contemporary History of the Arab World, with a focus on Iraqi History. In particular, his project focuses on the History of the Sadrist Trend in the 1990s, providing a Social Movement Theory approach to the history of the Trend and a new bottom-up perspective.

Antonio Pacifico is a PhD candidate at the Institut of Transtextual and Transcultural Studies (IETT) of the Jean-Moulin University of Lyon III. He obtained his MA degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Naples "L'Orientale". In his project, he focuses from a sociological perspective on the (re)writing of national history carried out by a number of Iraqi novelists, playwrights and poets since the 1990s. His research interests include contemporary Iraqi literature, the relation between literary and historical narratives as well as Arab intellectual and cultural history.

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