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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Is an alternative world possible?

Beyond neoliberalism: Mapping alternative visions and practices from the MENA region.

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Since 2011, scholars, civil society groups and protest movements have increasingly put into question decades of neoliberal policies as being at the core of the ongoing crises in the MENA region (related to labour, water, food and environment), while calling for the need to fundamentally rethink development models in ways that promote social justice (Bogaert, 2013, 2015; Hanieh, 2013; Salam, 2017; Hamouchene, 2019; Kadri, 2016). Although there is no clear alternative model to neoliberalism on the horizon, as shown below counterhegemonic discourses and practices trying to deal with current crises appear to have emerged from the MENA region. The panel aims at exploring such alternatives with the objective to open a first space for academic debate and reflection.¹

Activist scholars and civil society networks from the MENA have started advancing alternative policy proposals in opposition to dominant paradigms, building on concepts such as climate and environmental justice, food and energy sovereignty, asking for a radical or partial delinking from the world economy toward “post-extractivist development models” (Salam, 2017, pag. 137), stressing the priority of local agriculture and putting at the center the needs of local communities (as examples of scholars, see Ayeb and Bush, 2019; Kadri, 2016; Hanieh, 2015; Hamouchene and Minio-Paluello, 2015; for local civil society networks, among others, the Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment, The Arab Forum for Alternatives, The Environmental Justice North Africa, Attac Maroc etc.). In parallel with this, other scholars have revived the intellectual work of heterodox political economists (such as Samir Amin and others) on self-reliant development to dialogue with and interpret actual social struggles and crises in North Africa as well as to provide “ideological support for an alternative development model” (Ajl, 2019, pag. 1227; 2020, 2021).

Alternative views to neoliberalism are also to be found in the many popular movements protesting in marginalized areas of MENA countries. Local communities have indeed mobilized against processes of commodification and dispossession, questioning social injustice and unequal power relations, resisting against land dispossession, privatization and extractive companies appropriating national mineral resources as well as demanding national sovereignty over natural resources and reclaiming the end of foreign debt accumulated by authoritarian regimes (Bogaert, 2016; Belakhdar, 2019; Hamouchene, 2017a). While these movements have not generated a broad systemic change, they have articulated a challenge to neoliberalism at the level of political discourse by producing progressive ideas as said above and by starting developing awareness about the systemic causes at the root of the social injustice they are victims. Therefore, as Pradella and Marois (2015) argue, such movements have the potential to realize a break with neoliberalism.

Similarly, concrete micro-scale initiatives put in place by local communities, movement activists and workers, particularly when they are explicitly conceived as acts of resistance economy, can be interpreted as examples of alternative practices, or, as Iskhanian and Glasius say (2017), “attempts to construct alternative economic and

¹ Neoliberalism is here understood as “a set of ideas and practices centred on an increased role for the free market, flexibility in labour markets and a reconfiguration of state welfare activities” (Smith et al., 2008, pag. 1). At the same time, we share the position that the processes and effects of neoliberal reforms vary greatly from context to context. A context sensitive approach is therefore needed in investigating theoretical and practical alternatives to neoliberalism (Pradella and Marois, 2015).

societal models". Examples of these initiatives in the MENA region are the experience of local self-management of the Jemna Oasis in Tunisia (Hamouchene, 2017b), the various forms of agro-resistance practiced by small farmers in many MENA countries aimed at preserving biodiversity and local production against agribusiness power (Haddad, 2019) as well as the community activities based on sustainable local enterprise networks model of development implemented in the Palestinian context, built on indigenous knowledge of production, inclusive enterprises and local market-based approaches (Dana, 2014). These bottom-up experiences are driven by principles of solidarity, reciprocal assistance, collective ownership, alternative production system that values indigenous knowledge, as well as democratic forms of participation. So, although they do not alter the system, they appear to establish concrete alternatives to neoliberalism by reaffirming "the most important principles for alternative development" (Pradella and Marois, 2015, pag. 191), while challenging neoliberal principles such as individualism, private property and competitive markets.

For the purpose of the panel and in order to provide a baseline understanding of what is meant for alternatives to neoliberalism, we start from the broad idea that alternatives cannot be entirely "anti-systemic" (seeking to radically break with existing structures of power), but they may include elements of both "integrationist approaches" ("seeking small, incremental changes to the existing structure") and "non-hegemonic approaches" (focused more on "creating small-scale alternatives than changing the existing system") (Petray and Pendergrast, 2018). Even in the latter case, as Petray and Pendergrast note (2018) "while not directly challenging power structures, non-hegemonic approaches may serve as practical examples of anti-capitalist utopias" and "might challenge power structures merely by existing" (pag. 8).

Based on the above, the panel will be open to academic contributions that take into account alternative discourses by scholars, protest movements and civil society organizations from the MENA region as well as concrete bottom-up local initiatives, experiments and projects that provide examples of more inclusive, equitable, sustainable economies. This could be made by drawing on country empirical case studies, theoretical works by radical intellectuals and policy proposals/ideas developed by scholars and civil society organizations from the MENA region. In investigating such alternatives, among others, panel contributions should try to address the following questions: How do alternative discourses frame crises in the MENA region and explain them? Which kind of future/development do they want for the MENA region? Which means should be used to achieve such goals? How do they conceive the role/nature of the state vis-à-vis that of the market? Which place do they give to international trade? What do they propose to deal with inequalities, labour problems, environmental crises and the many other crises affecting MENA countries? How do they position themselves toward existing power structures at the local, national, regional and international levels? But also, when considering concrete practices, what constraints and problems hinder their potential to build up real alternatives? And what factors could sustain them?

THE PANEL DISCUSSION WILL BE HELD IN ENGLISH.

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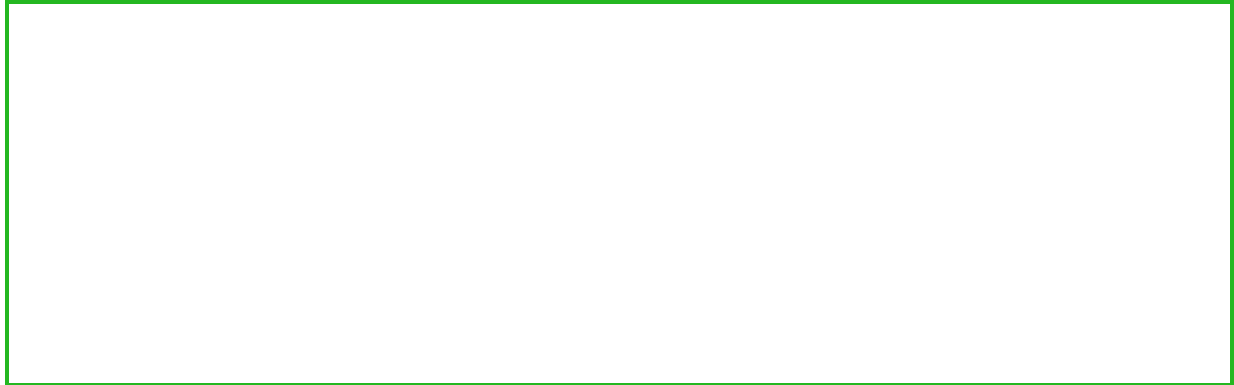
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