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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** The Sociology of Crisis and Critique: Reading the *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of the Middle East*

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** ARMANDO SALVATORE

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

This panel, which will be conducted bilingually (in English and Italian), will provide reflections and generate discussions through the impulse of various chapters of the *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of the Middle East*, a collective work of more than 40 chapters, which is already available online (37 chapters)

<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190087470.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190087470> and whose complete printed version will be published during 2022.

The speakers and the moderator, belonging to the volume's editors and contributors, are:

Moderator:

Armando Salvatore (McGill University, Montreal)

Speakers:

Benoit Challand (New School, New York)

Gennaro Gervasio (Università' Roma Tre)

Setrag Manoukian (McGill University, Montreal)

Kieko Obuse (Kobe University of Foreign Studies)

Andrea Teti (University of Aberdeen)

Themes articulating the trope of crisis permeate several chapters, including the three chapters authored by the editors. In the panel, we will bring these themes to the fore and analyze them critically, beginning with the volume's overture, where we raise the fundamental question of how and why sociology has contributed to the construction of the "Middle East" as the region of crisis par excellence through a process of geocultural mapping—but also, and conversely, how this fiction has influenced the formation of crucial coordinates within the dominant paradigms of Western sociology. We explore how the Euro-American fiction of the Middle East (often supported by the Western orientalist essentialization of Islam) has contributed, through various twists and turns, from the late 19th to the beginning of the 21st century, to paint the Middle East in a contrasting chiaroscuro to the Western self-image as the harbinger of social progress and secular culture. We argue that the Middle East provides a theoretical borderland in the history of sociological thought, given that the Western fiction of the Middle East as a region is integral to the historical role that sociology has played in the Western construction of modernity.

We discuss how this mapping was facilitated by a burgeoning yet protean crisis discourse, which unfolded in parallel to the rise of critical diagnoses and investigation. In 1963 the Egyptian sociologist Anouar Abdel-Malek diagnosed a crisis of Orientalism as the primary historical paradigm for the construction and knowledge of the region. He equated the crisis with the collapse of the colonial system. The 1970s provided a watershed in establishing a discourse of crisis, which became the master narrative providing simplified explanations of the October War, with the ensuing OPEC oil embargo, in 1973 and the Iranian Revolution in 1978-79. The decade brought to a culmination the

trajectory through which the idea itself of the Middle East conjured up an ad hoc, uncritical, and power-prone sociology, even at the stage it started to be ambivalently porous to more critical perspectives linked to European 'continental' theory. The crisis discourse coincided with the gradual fading out of the descriptive and predictive plausibility of modernization theory and the onset of globalization thinking. The overarching notion of crisis further strengthened the view of the region's societies as frail and fragmented and, with it, their manipulability through foreign interventions. Crisis called for a more consistent critique.

We argue that in parallel to Said's indictment in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1981), it was Michel Foucault's coverage of the revolution in Iran that implanted new ambivalent seeds of diagnosis and criticism. The leading French thinker interpreted the revolutionary process in Iran by tracing a trajectory of displacement of the revolutionary impetus of modernity, which, exhausted by the West, reappeared in (for the West) unfamiliar guises in the Middle East. This diagnosis was an ingenious, as questionable, remixing of the motives of fading modernization, incipient globalization, and crisis scenarios—for sure, one creating a new dimension of Western empathy with the oppressed people of the Middle East and the extent to which some groups were keen to retool Islamic ideals as triggers of popular aspirations for justice and democracy. With his undeniable talent for discovery, Foucault was able to invest a kind of neo-orientalist fascination into his observations of (and dialogue with) the rebelling people, which resulted in giving them back an original dynamic subjectivity that the fundamental paradigm of Western modernization theory had denied them.

We will conclude by analyzing some dire diagnoses by non-Western authors on the negative tradeoff of crisis and critique in response to the optimism expressed by Abdel-Malek in the early 1960s. Abdallah Hammoudi, the principal author of the Second Arab Social Science Report (2018), pointed out the revival of the crisis discourse under the influence of the Arab uprisings. The revolts of 2009-2012 ignited a new wave of sociological neo-Orientalism that elicited the ire of the late, leading Egyptian sociologists Mona Abaza, who put the finger on an even deeper wound, a dimension of direct exploitation in the production of academic capital sustaining the new wave: "[W]e" as "locals" have been experiencing a situation, time and again, of being reduced to becoming at best 'service providers' for visiting scholars, a term I borrowed from my colleague, political scientist Emad Shahin, at worst like the French would put it, as the *indigène de service*, for ironically the right cause of the revolution" (Abaza 2011). It is noteworthy that before Abdel-Malek's rosy diagnosis, the founder of the Middle East Institute of Japan in 1956, Hajime Kobayashi, following the Asian-African Bandung Conference of 1955, had lucidly recognized the fragility of postcolonial states in the region and the need for a forward-looking solidarity movement. He saw the Middle East as a fiction hostage of the Cold War and its opposing modernization myths. Kobayashi even intuited how the category of crisis (at the time still latent in Western depictions of the region) was crucial in keeping together the fiction. He prophetically stated: "As long as a Middle Eastern nebula state continues, the ambiguity related to the appellation of the Middle East will not disappear" (Usuki 2007). The panel will assess the extent to which the post-Arab-Spring sociology of the Middle East is still hostage of this historical and political dilemma, whenever it tries to deploy critical power.

#### References

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

Armando Salvatore is an interdisciplinary scholar, but his methodologies rely primarily on historical-comparative sociology, social theory, and the sociology of knowledge (combined with intellectual history). He is the Barbara and Patrick Keenan Chair in Interfaith Studies and Professor of Global Religious Studies (Society and Politics) at McGill University. Salvatore has held professorial and research positions at Humboldt University Berlin, University of Naples 'L'Orientale,' National University of Singapore, Leipzig University, and Australian National University, Canberra. His most recent single-authored book is *The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016). Among his other recent publications are the chief editorship of the multi-authored works *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam* (Wiley Blackwell, 2018) and *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2020-21 online edition, 2022 print edition).

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