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**TITOLO/TITLE:** Lifeworlds amidst permanent chaos and durable crises: experience, ethics and knowledge across the broader Middle East

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

The term chaos (from Greek cháos - chasm, opening) roots in Greek mythology, where it refers to the primordial condition preceding the creation of cosmos or orderly universe. By contrast, our concept of crisis has its origin in the Greek medicine. In the Hippocratic tradition it referred to the decisive phase of a sickness, in which the patient might die or survive. In social theory and modern philosophy, the term crisis signifies the moment in which the notions underlying a model, theory or discipline are put into question and shaken in their foundations, in anticipation of a systemic change or rupture. At the same time, the concept of crisis has an ethical/moral inflection, which is referred to the situation in which individuals see their models of existence or moral behaviour in contradiction with the wider order or feel their inadequacy. In such crisis moments people put into question the given moral compass and are called to rethink, decide and (re)act to a perceived chaos in social rules and principles.

Although in common parlance chaos and crisis can sometimes be used interchangeably, they have distinct meanings and can recur in each other's notion in distinctive ways: Chaos might be inchoate, unordered, unintelligible and can befall a given order by manifesting itself as a crisis, but it can also be stable and perduring, when it assumes the forms of a permanent or protracted crisis, so as to when the boundaries between normality and crisis are blurred (Kofti 2015). Classic anthropological studies focusing on crises in ritual have been stressing the existential dimension of crisis and have highlighted crises as moments of liminality, abrupt change, decisions and ruptures (as in Victor Turner 1969, see also Kapferer 2019), as opposed to more gradual transformation that is inherent to every society. Other approaches have tended to see crisis differently, by stressing that the distinction between normality and crisis (and by extension chaos) is to a large extent fictitious and crisis is latent in every social structure (Wolf 1999). Although chaos and crisis can come in pairs, or be coextensive in practice or in emic understanding, crisis can also trigger the end of chaos and mark a transition to a new, more stable order.

Recent reflections in anthropology suggest the need of looking more carefully at the ways in which crisis becomes a pervasive discourse, a mode of describing world affairs, increasingly used as a way of governing (Roitman 2014). In her words, crisis serves as a noun-formation of contemporary historical narrative, and is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out "moments of truth". As Koselleck (1988) famously argued, crisis and critique are cognates, with crisis being the basis for social and critical theory. Crisis-claims evoke a moral demand for a difference between the past and the future, and critique is necessarily grounded in the discrepancy between the reality of the institution and the world, as Boltanski (2011) has convincingly shown. But we need to pay attention to the forms of critique endangered by crisis narratives, particularly when these latter are omnipresent, durable, conditions rather than moments of exception. In this vein, crisis is to be observed as a blind spot, hence research ought to consider the ways in which crisis regulates narrative constructions, the ways in which it allows certain questions to be asked while others are foreclosed (Roitman 2014). This new disciplinary attention to policy worlds, bureaucracies and other forms of governmentality, needs to be complemented by an analysis of how ordinary people navigate crisis, debating values, and creating hope, a widely acknowledged strength of the ethnographic method that allows for minute and precise analyses focused on lifeworlds and subjective narratives (Naroztky & Besnier 2014).

The broader Middle East, here including Central Asia as in Dale Eickelman's (2002) formulation, has been full of tension, wars and forced migrations for decades, and is routinely studied as an exceptional region in which unresolved crises continue to pile up. Consequently, most anthropological work on the region tends to concentrate on what has been termed "dark anthropology" (Ortner 2015), namely the power of structures over individuals. Since the beginning of its understanding as an area, chaos and crisis have permeated scholarly commentaries of the broader Middle East. Over the last decades we have observed a crescendo of

heightened crisis narratives, while recent intensification of crisis and crisis narratives have given rise to a plethora of emic “diagnoses” and rationalisations as to possible causes and remedies. While chaos and crisis are definitely reflected in people’s everyday experiences, it is important to distinguish between the culturally and context specific ways of representing crisis, i.e. the effects and modalities of representations and instances invoking the language of crisis, vs the effective ruptures, turning points and discontinuities that crises have triggered. This perspective acknowledges the role played by multiple crises, but instead of accepting crisis at a face value, it asks instead what crisis is, who speaks of it, what are the effects of such discourses and events on lifeworlds of people inhabiting this region.

The point is thus to make crisis and crises object of research, with the aim of finding ways of countering or at least mitigating their effects, finding alternatives. Our panel attempts at addressing both points: what kind of emic rationalisations of crisis experiences and of radical transformation processes perceived by those affected from chaos are out there? And how do these representations of crisis relate to the ascending of chaos and crisis as (capitalist?) modes of domination in the region? We want to stress how the permanence or protracted condition of social, moral, economic, political crises give rise to existential reflection, subjective crisis identities, and rationalization of the status quo. In particular, we invite contributions (in English) based on empirical case studies that address these questions outside the frame of “dark anthropology” (Ortner 2015). We especially welcome papers that focus on field sites such as activist movements, labour worlds or educational landscapes, and which look not only at ruptures but also at continuities, with the goal of making the institutional dimension of crisis and crises visible, and thus challengeable. The overall goal rests to make sense of the worlds that people inhabit, and on how they cope with it.

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

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