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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** Research as relationship: exploring the epistemology and practice of encounter in fieldwork

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s:**

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

The Middle East and North Africa region is no exception to the global conditions of crisis on the political, economic and ecological levels today. Major changes and processes have been deeply reformulating societies and the material conditions in which people live and think, as well as the ways in which they perceive themselves and the worlds they inhabit everyday. The Covid-19 pandemic and the ecological and climate crises in the past two year, as well as the unprecedented outreach of movements for social, political and climate justice and equality are also calling, all around the world, for a rethinking of the ways in which we know the world, learn it and relate to it. This has relevant implications for the questions of knowledge production and research, as these activities are reclaimed and reformulated by people in organic connection with their lived conditions and the development of technologies and virtual spaces of encounter and interaction. All of these issues, in the specific context of the MENA region, require that we address the question of research in radical (rooted) terms, i.e. by acknowledging and focusing on the relationships that shape and inform every research process and experience.

The notion, definition and practices of modern research have historically been linked to the structures of European colonialism and settler-colonialism around the world. "Research" has exercised a central function in influencing the very notion of modernity and the forms in which Western – and then globalized – academia has framed the world and the people who inhabit it. This has shaped the modern world not only symbolically (in terms of identities and cultures), but also in its economic and political dynamics.

Questions such as "Who carries out research?" and "How is research done?" still prove unsettling in a world governed by and designed around the structures of modernity: capitalism and its expansion through different forms of colonialism and power relations. These dynamics have also shaped the modern Middle East and North Africa and are involved in its present conditions. Asking such questions contextually, in each and every experience of research around the world (not only in the Global South), interrogates both the historical unbalance made legitimate through research and the self-assuring deconstruction of theoretical critique.

While it is true that anthropology and the social sciences have attempted to deconstruct and criticize the role and function of research by developing multiple methodologies that focus on the reflexivity and responsibility of researchers, on the agency of their interlocutors, and on the importance of local priorities, the ways in which we establish a relation with our interlocutors remains central for the decolonization of knowledge production and for the same nature of meaning-making today. Problematizing fieldwork and its hegemonic dynamics means questioning our form of relation with other human and non-human beings, considering the expectations, motivations, fantasies and desires that are at play in our encounters. Rather than being an accessory facet, forms of relation with fields and people are embedded in wider processes influenced by history and geo-politics, as the wide literatures stimulated by Orientalism (Said, 1978) have discussed in the past decades.

Confronting hegemonic notions and practices of research – and the forms of relation that are implicit in it – is a crucial issue in the contexts of the Middle East and North Africa.

Rather than representing only processes of destruction and chaos, the ongoing crises in the region and around the world are also proving to be spaces in which people are constantly reclaiming their role and voices in knowledge production and dissemination about their own contexts, and where they are practicing the re-imagination of their realities. These elements too have a major influence on the question of how research is done and carried out in the MENA region today.

This panel aims to address the question of research in these multiple directions, problematizing forms of “extractive research” and opening a conversation on the need to rethink research as relationship and interdependency. The panel is ethnographically oriented, choosing to focus on cases and situations which inspire critical insights and new possibilities of engagement with our interlocutors (whoever they may be).

We welcome proposals (in Italian and in English) that address the following issues:

- What do we mean with “relationship” and which dimensions are at play in it? How do our priorities and expectations as researchers interact with those of the people that we encounter?
- How are research questions formulated when we position ourselves “in relationship with” the people and contexts we interact, learn and construct meanings and knowledge with? How does centering the notion of relationship in research change the way we think of and practice it?
- How do researchers (and their questions) too change within the processes of research and in the interaction and relationship with their interlocutors? How do we think of researchers as an integral part of the field?
- Experiences (inside but also outside of academia) in the MENA region (or in diasporic communities around the world) that focus relationship in the practice of research and knowledge construction, production and sharing. These include cases and situations in which researchers have been called upon to reformulate practices, models and ideas within the relationship with their interlocutors.
- Radical and decolonial epistemologies and research methodologies in and on the MENA region.
- Theoretical and practical perspectives on navigating the relationship between lived experiences, material conditions and contexts and knowledge production in the MENA region.

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

Tamara Taher is a PhD student in "Mutamento sociale e politico" at the University of Turin and at the University of Florence. Her studies concern history, memory and epistemic decolonization in Palestine. She is a member of the editorial board of the journal "Maydan. Rivista sui mondi arabi, semitici e islamici".

Francesco Vacchiano is a researcher and non-tenured assistant professor at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice and an adjunct researcher of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. His work encompasses psychology and anthropology in the study of societies of North Africa; migration, borders and boundaries in the Mediterranean; and local therapies in North Africa and Mozambique. He is the author of "Altri corpi. Antropologia e etnopsicologia della migrazione" (with Simona Taliani, Unicopli 2006) and "Antropologia della dignità. Aspirazioni, moralità e ricerca del benessere nel Marocco contemporaneo (Ombre Corte 2021, in press).

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