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**TITOLO/TITLE:** Class, a Useful Category for Ethnography? Case Studies from Egypt and Morocco.

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** AYMUN KREIL AND YASMINE BERRIANE

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

Since the 19th century, social classes have been a core element in the analysis of crises. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have famously interpreted history as a result of the class struggle over the means of production (Marx and Engels 1848). The inner conflicts regularly erupting in Arab countries have undeniable links with the strong social inequalities plaguing the societies of the region. In the two countries that make up the focus of this panel – Egypt and Morocco – riots have regularly ignited. Even if there is no mechanical causality at play here, the great gaps between different segments of society in their access to resources certainly play a role in their recurrence. The 2011 uprisings, the success of Islamist parties, and the unruly urbanisation of great cities have all been described by analysts as outcomes of social inequalities (Armbrust 2011; Zemni and Bogaert 2011; Bono et al. 2015) or as the result of unexpected alliances beyond social divides (Goldstone 2011). They echo more subtle forms of hierarchies which infuse everyday settings. In continuity with the reflections of the EGYCLASS network (CNRS), which attempts to renew the study of social classes in Egypt, and of a long-time reflection by the conveners of the panel on the ethnographic appraisal of change (Berriane, Derks, Kreil and Lüdeckens 2021), this panel seeks to interrogate class as a major conceptual tool to describe and analyse social inequalities, and to reflect on the best manner in which it can be made relevant for ethnography.

Marxist approaches have been influential beyond Europe and North America. Through communist organisations and later on state socialism, conceptions of class influenced by Marx and Engels gained momentum in Arab countries and had a strong impact on the way intellectuals in the region conceived the social ladder ('Adlī Rūmān 2001). At the political level, analyses in terms of social classes have always had to compete with other manners of describing social collectives, such as the 'nation', *ash-sha'b* (the people) or '*umma*' (Lockman 1994; Valensi 1990; Zolondek 1965). Within class approaches influenced by Marxism, the different types of ownership of the means of production acted for a long time as a central criterion for determining class belonging. These readings of society cohabited with more statistical ones dividing society according to wealth and levels of income. Other interpretations of society stressed the importance of the 'middle class' as the upcoming group shaping society or assessing the signs of its decline (Halpern 1963; Amin 2000; Basti-Hamimi 2011). What all these analyses have in common is the central role they attribute to state institutions in Arab countries as the main purveyor (or denier) of access to class privileges, even during periods of liberalisation. More recently, in anthropology, some have started to consider class primarily as a matter of social imaginaries, shaping people's expectations and allowing them to assess each other's position in society (Schielke 2012).

This panel aims at developing an ethnographically informed approach to class distinctions. The issue of class is a complicated one for researchers working with ethnography. Based on small-scale observations and on a limited number of interviews, this method of inquiry seems ill-fitted for the study of large collectives, such as social classes. The capacity to generalise findings at a structural level seems particularly at odds with the limitations of ethnographic research. However, ethnography also has strong assets compared to inquiry methods working on a broader scale. It allows, for instance, a close reading into when and how inequalities are made meaningful for people. The critique of social inequalities can occur both as a comment on the general state of society or during practical encounters with no ambition to generalise about the situation (Boltanski 2009), a reality which is difficult to apprehend through questionnaires, for instance. Likewise, ethnography is best suited for exploring the emic categories people employ to name, acknowledge, resist, and enforce social inequalities. Above

and beyond its discursive dimensions, ethnography also gives keys to understanding the material and affective dimensions of the class issue.

In light of this assessment, we invite papers that engage in methodological reflections on the ethnographic study of social classes in Egypt and Morocco. Combining case studies from these two countries seems particularly relevant, as there are strong contrasts between their political institutions, social history, and economic infrastructure, which have a direct impact on the ways people assess power and prestige in each society. To better understand the specific contribution of ethnography to the understanding of the issue and to avoid blindly abiding to theoretical or statistical schemes elaborated through other methods, it is crucial to take a close look at the empirical data on social inequalities which ethnography can bring forward and to reflect upon how to best make this data relevant for the purpose of description and analysis. Indeed, the panel's primary goal is not to give examples of the class issue at work, but to focus on how the researcher conducting his/her inquiry came to know what he/she has discovered about it and the limits and assets of his/her assessments. It aims to tackle the following key questions: where, when, and how should researchers look at society in order to be able to say something about class? It implies temporarily keeping out of sight what can be learnt through the secondary literature (and the class categories it conveys) or at least problematising the relation we construct with it explicitly.

The presenters can interrogate the concept of class in its structural, processual, or situational features. The objects of their inquiry may include, among others: how class relates to state institutions; how discourses about class can be critical resources for our interlocutors (Boutaleb and alii 2002); how class, comfort, and material expectations are interlinked; what are the different existent sources of prestige (Bourdieu 1979); what are the sometimes competing manners of naming, assessing, and mobilising social hierarchies in everyday situations; in which spaces does class distinction matter and in which doesn't it, etc. Through the joint reflection that the panel will allow us to have, we intend to find at least a partial answer to the following questions: Is class a useful category for ethnography? And if it is, what can we know about it through ethnographic methods of inquiry?

**Organisers: Yasmine Berriane (CMH, CNRS) and Aymon Kreil (Ghent University)**

**Chair: Daniele Cantini (Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg)**

**When Class Enters the Body: Reflections on Ethnography, Masculinity, and Embodiment in Cairo – Carl Rommel (Uppsala University)**

This paper will ponder on how social and economic class is inscribed in, lived through, and performed by male bodies in contemporary Cairo. Taking off from the question, "How can the embodiment of class be studied ethnographically?", the paper presents findings from a collective book project-in-the-making, which examines how economic, political, and social structures and expectations impact on and materialize in non-elite, Egyptian male bodies. What can ethnographic research on bodies that work, eat, exercise, play, have sex, take medication and do drugs tell us about class as a lived category-turned-flesh in Egypt today? What facets of classed bodies do different ethnographic methods – participant observation, interviews, social media analyses – elucidate, and how do such close-up methods allow us to expand and nuance already existing statistical studies that quantify classes and bodies in terms of weight, height, blood pressure, life expectancy, nutritional intake etc? And where, finally, do we encounter the limits of ethnographic research about class bodies? As gestured to by its etymology, *ethno-graphy* is ultimately aimed at written recording. What hurdles do we encounter when we attempt to translate embodiment into descriptive writing? How more specifically do such translation problems manifest when class as a category-turned-flesh is once again meant to metamorphose into language?

**Out of Place: Class Aspirations and Mobilities Among Contemporary Egyptian Fiction Writers – Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė (Oriental Institute, Czech Academy of Sciences)**

Since the mid-2000s, as a result of the expansion of private publishing industry, the generalization of the access to the Internet, the multiplication of literary prizes, and the decline of traditional gatekeepers of literature, such as literary magazines and criticism, literary careers became more accessible to the large parts of the Egyptian population. Since literary worlds are commonly associated with the elite culture, for writers coming from families with little inherited cultural capital, pursuing literary careers might produce a feeling of being out of place. Departing from a long-term ethnography conducted in Cairo's literary clubs, which consisted of biographical interviews and participant observation in literary

events, this contribution aims to untangle the material and affective dimensions of class identities as they are expressed by writers through their emic categories. Considering literary fiction as a subjective claim of a class position, it presents literary texts and biographical interviews as two complementary genres of fictional self-narration. Departing from the study of subjective experiences of tension between different social worlds, it aims by this means to contribute to the reflection about class from an ethnographic perspective.

### **May the real working-class please stand up? Ethnographic Approaches to Class through Space in Contemporary Morocco – Cristiana Strava (Leiden University)**

Drawing on research conducted since 2013 with communities inhabiting marginalized and criminalized urban spaces in Casablanca, this paper explores how social and economic struggles and grievances have become increasingly displaced onto new markers of difference – dress, ways of being in (public) space, consumer choice, tastes, and education (or the perceived lack thereof). By ethnographically exploring the ways in which in contemporary Moroccans articulate affective and discursive notions of social difference, the aim of this contribution is to revitalize debates on class and its usefulness for a historical anthropology of lived neoliberalism in North Africa. The research starts from the premise that ethnography is particularly well suited for studying social stratification, because it regards social organization as contingently produced, and humans as social beings mutually shaped and constrained by their local contexts, whose everyday relationships predominantly revolve around the securing of livelihoods. Specifically, my contribution will argue that examining the (re)organization of social life through the lens provided by ethnographic approaches allows for an analysis that considers space, and its structuring at the hands of various actors and processes, as a major factor in the production of social relations and broadly defined classes in contemporary Morocco.

### **The Task of the Ethnographer: Vernacular Art Communities and Precarious Social Classes – Farouk El Maarouf (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen)**

This ethnographic research project revolves around visual art and art communities in contemporary Morocco. It is pertinent to cast a magnifying lens at how precarious communities make sense of themselves and their living experiences. As such, by focusing on the marginalized, poverty-ridden communities that dwell in hidden unsightly Moroccan markets and informal transaction locations, this contribution attempts to come to an understanding of how such communities conceive of art in the absence of the most basic forms of decent living. Further, this research is a reflection on the task of the ethnographer, as a carrier of experiences: by focusing on members of a special vernacular art community in Morocco as a case in point, this contribution endeavours to make a statement for and about the importance of conducting highly focused ethnographic research projects to understand how different social agents make art meaningful for them. In fact, it is only after coming to terms with the nuances of the lived realities of marginal communities that can begin to fathom how a society stands towards art and develops across cultural folds and social pressures.

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

**Aymon Kreil** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Faculty of Art and Philosophy of Ghent University and the codirector of the Centre for Anthropological Research on Affect and Materiality (CARAM). Kreil has graduated in anthropology in 2012, jointly at the École des Hautes études en Sciences sociales (EHESS, Paris) and at the University of Neuchâtel. Kreil has conducted most of his anthropological research in Egypt, where he studied the topics of love, sexuality, art politics, and religious authority. He is the coeditor of the books *Reinventing Love? Gender, intimacy and romance in the Arab World* (Peter Lang, 2018), *Making Sense of Change: Methodological Approaches to Societies in Transformation* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021) and *Sex and Desire in Muslim Cultures: Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day* (IB Tauris, 2021).

**Yasmine Berriane** is Permanent Researcher at the CNRS in France (Centre Maurice Halbwachs, Paris), trained in Political Sociology and Middle Eastern Studies. Her research examines political and social transformations in North Africa and the Middle East, with an empirical focus on Morocco. Her publications deal with women's political participation, the making of spaces of participation, and the sociopolitical impacts of newly emerging land right claims. She recently co-edited *Allying Beyond Social Divides. Coalitions and Contentious Politics* (Routledge, 2020), *Archive and Gender in North African Societies* (Hespéris-Tamuda, Vol.56, 2021), and *Methodological Approaches to Societies in Transformation. How to Make Sense of Change* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

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