XV Convegno SeSaMO

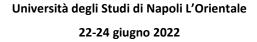**Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale**

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Lifeworlds amidst permanent chaos and durable crises: experience, morality and knowledge across the broader Middle East and Islamic world

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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, unorderly, 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 MENA region. 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 papers that address these questions outside the frame of "dark anthropology", by focusing on uneventful field sites such as 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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Chair: Prof. Tommaso Trevisani, L'Orientale

Paper Abstracts

Shared Anxieties in Late Modernity: Between 'Weak Thought' and Salafi Islamism
Massimo Ramaioli, Al-Akhawayn University

This paper seeks to juxtapose and contrast two systems of thought: on the one hand, a philosophical movement born in Italy in the early 1980s, which has gained famed in the academia as 'Weak Thought' (Pensiero Debole); on the other, a socio-religious trend within Sunni Islam, known as Salafism (Salafiyyah), whose origins are more nebulous, but that has earned prominence roughly from around the same time in various loci of the Muslim world. In establishing this pairing, I wish not to presuppose Weak Thought philosophy as a representative of 'western' way of thinking staked against a Salafi ideational system performing as the token 'eastern' counterpart. Rather, I intend to frame both of them as instances of reflection on the crisis unfolding in (late) modernity, a time they both inhabit, and the chaos ensuing from such condition. I submit that this unlikely juxtaposition may in fact reveal parallels and similarities when it comes to common anxieties that the crisis of (late) modernity aroused in both movements. First, both movements recognize and appraise the progressive erosion of metaphysical grounding, which we can read as an instantiation of chaos. Second, they both veer away from the tools provided by modern epistemology to provide answers to such an issue: Weak Thought embraces this development, by turning to a purely rhetorical and discursive truth, while Salafism antagonizes it, by reverting to a revealed truth. And last, they both regard the past as a repository of potential remedies in addressing crisis and confronting chaos: Weak Thought by proposing a different attitude towards the past (the idea of 'pietas' or 'compassion') capable of allaying modernity induced anxieties; Salafism by framing a past golden age to serve as template of virtue for the current times.

Crisis, activism and kom'iuniti. The new feminist movement in Kyrgyzstan
Judith Beyer, University of Konstanz

In this paper I shall focus on the ethical side of the concept of crisis as outlined by the panel convenors. In particular, I am interested in investigating how a young generation in their twenties creates their everyday life – both in terms of work and in terms of leisure – under a situation of recurring crisis. I neither want to celebrate their resilience nor concentrate on their at times clearly discernible disillusion as in no human, these two capacities dominate at all times. Instead, I want to highlight how exactly the young generation makes do with growing up in a society that has been marked both by political upheaval and a resurgence of patriarchal values in the public arena.

Over the last years, I have followed a number of young feminist actors from Kyrgyzstan online via their social media channels. For this paper, I draw on virtual ethnographic data as well as secondary sources. This is, on the one hand, due to the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has no allowed for in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in the last two years. On the other hand, the world of social media is itself one of the key chosen outlets where feminist actors carry out their activism and where they celebrate kom'iuniti.

Managing crisis through entrenchment: Industrial labour between kollektif and loneliness in Kazakhstan

Tommaso Trevisani, L'Orientale

This paper addresses how chaos and crisis are understood and dealt with by multi-ethnic industrial workers in a Kazakhstani steel town. Since early post-Soviet years of disruption and hardship, industrial workers' sense of crisis over time became a protracted state of discomfort with their social conditions and work identity. Based on interviews, observation and narratives collected over longitudinal fieldwork conducted inside and outside the premises of the steel factory at Temirtau, in this paper I focus on how workers confront growing precariousness and pressure on the workplace as a consequence of privatization and labour restructuring. Besides changing labour policies, workers are also experiencing growing marginalization as a result of a state-sponsored Kazakhification in society and economy, while hostility against organized labour is no longer concealed and even backed by the state. In workers' experiences, crisis appears to be as a threat to the security of one's lifeworld at home and at the workplace. In this context, I observe how workers often understand the ever-changing crises they are confronted with as an anticipation of loss. By looking at the strategies adopted by workers for coping with the perceived threats to their lifeworlds, aspirations and (political) imaginations, I focus on how protracted crisis, in workers' understandings, is undermining the cohesion and solidarity of the Soviet-era work collective (kollektif). Workers shaped by the legacy of the Soviet factory struggle to hold on to the "thick" ethos of the workplace sociality and sense of purpose of the kollektif and retreat into their private spheres of mutual support and relatedness as a way of managing new pressures at work and at home.

A very durable crisis; education and social change in Egypt

Daniele Cantini, MLU Halle

It is difficult to underestimate the importance that education has for the Egyptian society, as a lived space for most of its young population, as a pillar in the articulation of the desired relation between society and the state at least since the 1952 revolution, and as a considerable component of economic and social life in a constant growth since decades. Since almost half a century, however, the educational system is routinely discussed as being in crisis at multiple levels, and this creates both the need and the space for reforms, whether real or imagined. The proclamation of crisis has strong consequences for how citizens perceive the role of the state, their affective belonging to it, and how to make sense of transformations in the broader society.

In this paper, I focus on two contested aspects: the privatization of education, linked with the material decay of public structures, to the restructuring of urban space and of the very value of education from one side; and the role of educational institutions in producing acceptable knowledge and at the same time in contributing to changing its meaning, from the other. The paper aims at discussing the consequences of the discourse of crisis and the impact of multiple crises in the everyday lives of those inhabiting educational spaces, and to show how the experience of education and its affective value are transformed in the process. The paper thus proposes to consider crisis as an object of analysis, central in understanding how the Egyptian society is transforming, and how people make sense of these changes.