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**TITOLO/TITLE:** Is an alternative world possible?

**Beyond neoliberalism: Mapping alternative visions and practices from the MENA region.**

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** MARIA CRISTINA PACIELLO

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

Since 2011, scholars, civil society groups and protest movements have increasingly put into question decades of neoliberal policies as being at the core of the ongoing crises in the MENA region (related to labour, water, food and environment), while calling for the need to fundamentally rethink development models in ways that promote social justice (Bogaert, 2013, 2015; Hanieh, 2013; Salam, 2017; Hamouchene, 2019; Kadri, 2016). Although there is no clear alternative model to neoliberalism on the horizon, as shown below counterhegemonic discourses and practices trying to deal with current crises appear to have emerged from the MENA region. The panel aims at exploring such alternatives with the objective to open a first space for academic debate and reflection.<sup>1</sup>

Activist scholars and civil society networks from the MENA have started advancing alternative policy proposals in opposition to dominant paradigms, building on concepts such as climate and environmental justice, food and energy sovereignty, asking for a radical or partial delinking from the world economy toward “post-extractivist development models” (Salam, 2017, pag. 137), stressing the priority of local agriculture and putting at the center the needs of local communities (as examples of scholars, see Ayeb and Bush, 2019; Kadri, 2016; Hanieh, 2015; Hamouchene and Minio-Paluello, 2015; for local civil society networks, among others, the Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment, The Arab Forum for Alternatives, The Environmental Justice North Africa, Attac Maroc etc.). In parallel with this, other scholars have revived the intellectual work of heterodox political economists (such as Samir Amin and others) on self-reliant development to dialogue with and interpret actual social struggles and crises in North Africa as well as to provide “ideological support for an alternative development model” (Ajl, 2019, pag. 1227; 2020, 2021).

Alternative views to neoliberalism are also to be found in the many popular movements protesting in marginalized areas of MENA countries. Local communities have indeed mobilized against processes of commodification and dispossession, questioning social injustice and unequal power relations, resisting against land dispossession, privatization and extractive companies appropriating national mineral resources as well as demanding national sovereignty over natural resources and reclaiming the end of foreign debt accumulated by authoritarian regimes (Bogaert, 2016; Belakhdar, 2019; Hamouchene, 2017a). While these movements have not generated a broad systemic change, they have articulated a challenge to neoliberalism at the level of political discourse by producing progressive ideas as said above and by starting developing awareness about the systemic causes at the root of the social injustice they are victims. Therefore, as Pradella and Marois (2015) argue, such movements have the potential to realize a break with neoliberalism.

Similarly, concrete micro-scale initiatives put in place by local communities, movement activists and workers, particularly when they are explicitly conceived as acts of resistance economy, can be interpreted as examples of alternative practices, or, as Iskhanian and Glasius say (2017), “attempts to construct alternative economic and

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism is here understood as “a set of ideas and practices centred on an increased role for the free market, flexibility in labour markets and a reconfiguration of state welfare activities” (Smith et al., 2008, pag. 1). At the same time, we share the position that the processes and effects of neoliberal reforms vary greatly from context to context. A context sensitive approach is therefore needed in investigating theoretical and practical alternatives to neoliberalism (Pradella and Marois, 2015).

societal models". Examples of these initiatives in the MENA region are the experience of local self-management of the Jemna Oasis in Tunisia (Hamouchene, 2017b), the various forms of agro-resistance practiced by small farmers in many MENA countries aimed at preserving biodiversity and local production against agribusiness power (Haddad, 2019) as well as the community activities based on sustainable local enterprise networks model of development implemented in the Palestinian context, built on indigenous knowledge of production, inclusive enterprises and local market-based approaches (Dana, 2014). These bottom-up experiences are driven by principles of solidarity, reciprocal assistance, collective ownership, alternative production system that values indigenous knowledge, as well as democratic forms of participation. So, although they do not alter the system, they appear to establish concrete alternatives to neoliberalism by reaffirming "the most important principles for alternative development" (Pradella and Marois, 2015, pag. 191), while challenging neoliberal principles such as individualism, private property and competitive markets.

For the purpose of the panel and in order to provide a baseline understanding of what is meant for alternatives to neoliberalism, we start from the broad idea that alternatives cannot be entirely "anti-systemic" (seeking to radically break with existing structures of power), but they may include elements of both "integrationist approaches" ("seeking small, incremental changes to the existing structure") and "non-hegemonic approaches" (focused more on "creating small-scale alternatives than changing the existing system") (Petray and Pendergrast, 2018). Even in the latter case, as Petray and Pendergrast note (2018) "while not directly challenging power structures, non-hegemonic approaches may serve as practical examples of anti-capitalist utopias" and "might challenge power structures merely by existing" (pag. 8).

Based on the above, the panel will be open to academic contributions that take into account alternative discourses by scholars, protest movements and civil society organizations from the MENA region as well as concrete bottom-up local initiatives, experiments and projects that provide examples of more inclusive, equitable, sustainable economies. This could be made by drawing on country empirical case studies, theoretical works by radical intellectuals and policy proposals/ideas developed by scholars and civil society organizations from the MENA region. In investigating such alternatives, among others, panel contributions should try to address the following questions: How do alternative discourses frame crises in the MENA region and explain them? Which kind of future/development do they want for the MENA region? Which means should be used to achieve such goals? How do they conceive the role/nature of the state vis-à-vis that of the market? Which place do they give to international trade? What do they propose to deal with inequalities, labour problems, environmental crises and the many other crises affecting MENA countries? How do they position themselves toward existing power structures at the local, national, regional and international levels? But also, when considering concrete practices, what constraints and problems hinder their potential to build up real alternatives? And what factors could sustain them?

THE PANEL DISCUSSION WILL BE HELD IN ENGLISH.

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

### SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

**Maria Cristina Paciello** is Assistant Professor at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy (Department of North African and Asian Studies), where she teaches Economic and Political Geography of Arab countries and Economic Policies of Arab countries. Her research interests focus on employment and social justice in the context of neoliberal policies. **INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:** [mpaciello@unive.it](mailto:mpaciello@unive.it)

**Brecht De Smet** is a postdoctoral researcher at the department of Conflict & Development Studies and at the Middle East and North Africa Research Group of Ghent University. He is currently a visiting fellow at the Middle East Centre of the London School of Economics (2021-2022). Brecht has done research on social movements in Egypt and the process of revolution and counter-revolution. Among his published works his book "Gramsci on Tahrir. Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt" (2016, Pluto Press) has met with broad acclaim. Brecht is currently working on a project of the Research Foundation - Flandres investigating processes of marginalization in the Maghreb.

**Giulio Iocco** is independent trained in International Relations and Politics of Asia and Africa (MA at University of Naples "L'Orientale", 2009) and Global Development and Political Economy of International Resources (PGDipl at University of Leeds, 2013). He assisted in international research projects on the Political Economy of Family Farming and Agrarian Change in the NENA, the Rural Dimensions of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, and on the Politics of Land and Agrarian Resistance in North Africa in the 2010s between Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions. With Mathilde Fautras, he co-edited the Forum on Land, Politics and Agrarian Resistance in North Africa (ROAPE, 46:162, 2019). His current research efforts focus on the political economy of the greening of Mediterranean agriculture, the politics of farm and agricultural workers and the labour question in political and social mobilisations for agrarian, environmental and social Justice.

**Discussant: Tariq Dana**, Assistant professor of conflict and humanitarian studies, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies

### PAPERS

#### **1. Prefiguration, Solidarity, and Hegemony: Overcoming and Maintaining Subalternity in Egypt**

*By Brecht De Smet*

*Postdoctoral researcher at the Middle East and North Africa Research Group, Ghent University*

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Gramsci defined subalternity as a subordinate position of a social group vis-à-vis ruling groups in society due to a lack of autonomy, cohesion, and leadership (Thomas 2018). Conversely, challenging and replacing existing hegemonies requires not only a successful political struggle, but also the development of group identities and shared projects with other groups. The notion of prefiguration serves as a critical addendum to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, emphasizing the necessity for experimentation, creativity, and imagination of alternative forms of politics and life in general. Conversely, Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps us to understand the theoretical and practical limits of prefigurative politics. During the revolutionary process during and after the 2011 uprising different subaltern groups experimented with new forms of politics in a diversity of life domains. Moreover, there were isolated attempts at bridging the chasms that separated the struggles and lifeworlds of separate subaltern groups. I briefly touch upon the experience of industrial workers and farmers in Sadat City to develop solidarity in the wake of the 2011 uprising. However, such connections remained local, isolated, and ephemeral. While the state was able to recover its unity between 2011 and 2013 subaltern groups remained fragmented, incapable to overcome historically developed hierarchies, dependencies, and internal divisions. This invites us to think of different forms of resistance not in terms of more or less fixed typologies ('anti-systemic' vs 'integrationist' or 'hegemonic' vs 'everyday'), but as dialectical moments within a larger process that is constituted and mediated by relations (1) between the subaltern group and its potential allies; (2) between the subaltern group and directive groups; (3) within the subaltern group itself.

#### **2. Food sovereignty, radical activism and the question of agricultural workers' rights in North Africa: an initial analysis of emerging trajectories of rural resistance in Morocco and Tunisia**

*By Giulio Iocco*

*Independent scholar*

In recent years, visions of food sovereignty have gained new ground in North Africa. The emerging North African network for food sovereignty is a heterogeneous camp that rallies various and diverse associations, cooperatives and trade unions active in the struggles around land, water, seeds and the advocacy of the rights of farmers, fisherfolk and agricultural workers. For some observers, food sovereignty might promote the emergence of alternative pathways of agrarian and rural social change. Yet regional movements for food sovereignty remain severely unexplored in the literature. Moreover, whether and how resistances inspired by visions of food sovereignty might offer an alternative predicament to agricultural workers remain a highly contentious and open question. In both Morocco and Tunisia, neoliberal policies have promoted trajectories of agrarian change anchored upon the growth of export-oriented agro-industrial sectors. The development of new enclaves of intensive horticulture went hand in hand with the emergence of new agricultural working classes whose predicament is characterized by precarious working and living conditions. Over the latest years, social research has increasingly exposed the gendered nature of the process of agricultural working class.

Building on initial analyses of the social conditions of agricultural workers and their everyday forms of resistance, the objective of this paper is to explore how organisations and activists inspired by visions of food sovereignty have addressed the issue of agricultural workers' precarity in export-oriented enclaves of intensive horticulture (and beyond). In particular, the paper deals with two main issues: at a first level, through an analysis of the political discourse produced by regional food sovereignty advocates, it seeks to understand in what ways agricultural workers fit within regional visions of food sovereignty; at a second level, moving beyond political discourses and centring on political strategies and struggles on the ground, it maps and analyses the political trajectories of local mobilisations for workers' rights in Morocco and Tunisia.

### **3. Struggles over social reproduction in the Arab world at the time of neoliberal capitalism: a first inquiry**

*By Maria Cristina Paciello*

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The paper builds on the theoretical framework of feminist political economists who stress: i) the centrality of women's reproductive labour (both paid and unpaid) to capitalist production, and ii) the fact that, by undervaluing it, neoliberal capitalism is undermining the capacity of the system – and society - to reproduce itself, therefore generating a profound "crisis of social reproduction" (see Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016; Federici 2020). The latter is considered to be one aspect of a broader systemic crisis entailing the economic, environmental and political spheres (Fraser, 2016). While this literature is largely concentrated on capitalist economies in the North, the paper will add to existing studies by looking at Arab countries. In fact, following the adoption of neoliberal policies (since the mid-1980s), Arab countries have been experiencing a dramatic crisis of social reproduction as a result of state retrenchment from social welfare, privatisation, spread of precarious and informal labour relations, and the decline of subsistence agriculture.

Against this background, the paper will focus on what feminist political economists call "struggles over social reproduction" (Federici, 2020), looking at a variety of protest movements and local based community initiatives that directly or indirectly question the way social reproduction is organized in the context of neoliberal capitalism (e.g. mobilizations by migrant domestic workers, protests by public teachers, campaigns by female agricultural workers to get paid maternity, women's practices to protect subsistence production against agribusiness and so on). The specific objective of the paper is to provide a first inquiry about which forms of "struggles over social reproduction" are taking place in the Arab region, if, how and to what extent they articulate a challenge to neoliberal capitalism.