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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:**

Tamara Taher (University of Turin and University of Florence)

Francesco Vacchiano (University Ca' Foscari of Venice)

**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 years, 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.

**Chairs:**

Francesco Vacchiano (University Ca’ Foscari Venice), Tamara Taher (University of Florence/University of Turin)

**Speakers:**

- Raquel Carneiro (Centro em Rede de Antropologia, Universidade Nova de Lisboa), **“Margins, Peripheries, and Preconceptions: Doing research in Morocco from Portugal”**

Abstract:

How does the place where we come from affect our research and modes of relationship with our interlocutors in the field? This communication entails a reflection on how nationality, gender, and age influence our interlocutors’ perception on us and the perspective we have on them. While I conducted fieldwork in Morocco ten years ago, I felt that my Portuguese nationality saved me from being associated with Morocco’s (post) colonial dynamics. I was coming from an unknown country for most of the people, not situated in the local cosmologies of powerful and dominating countries. I thought to share common cultural and socioeconomic traits with my interlocutors; and, for sure, I navigated an orientalist perspective on the supposed shared cultural Mediterranean landscapes. I was coming from a country with no tradition in Arab or Islamic studies. There was no “validated genealogy” behind me, since not coming from the centers of anthropological production about Morocco. That gave me freedom to think across and beyond disciplinary approaches and loyalties. In this communication, I propose a reflection on how these multiple dimensions – nationality, world economies of knowledge and personal and localized preconceptions – inform the relationships fieldwork entails, and the kind of knowledge that it is consequently produced.

- Ihsan Mejd (University of Exeter), **“The Meaning(s) of Research as Relationship: Ethnography, Revolution, and the Politics of Post-Uprisings in the Middle East”**

Abstract:

This paper discusses the meanings of research as relationship by unpacking the process of field encounters in ethnographic research. I particularly examine the ways in which ethnography becomes a ‘revolutionary praxis’ in the

context of the post 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The paper draws on concrete ethnographic instances relating to Tunisia's ongoing political transition from dictatorship to democracy where politics is lived and practiced not only in the centre and within institutions such as the parliament, but also in the streets, roundabouts, cafes and the margins of the state. Tunisia offers an example where people moved from resisting authoritarian political structures to participating in an ambiguous political transition. This juncture in Tunisia's modern history can be easily labelled as a 'transition to democracy' and understood through democratization theories. However, unlike the normative, and at times reductionist, analyses of periods of political transition, this paper shows how ethnographic fieldwork, which 'takes the lives of people seriously', can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of politics. The field, in this context, becomes a site of relationships where researchers can test their understanding of reality and theories against the lived experiences of actors. The implications of taking seriously the lives of the people and engaging in a participatory two-way exchange of knowledge and worldviews are many. This paper, however, will focus on how making sense of research as 'relationship' in anthropology can change the way we deal with events such as revolutions and moments of political transitions in the Middle East and north Africa.

- Salvatore Morra (International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, Rome and University of Tuscia Viterbo), **"Me and Marzouk, Musical Encounters from Tebourba to Naples"**

**Abstract:**

This paper examines ways that the 'ūd, the most fundamental instrument of Arab traditions, may foster and shape ethnographic practices. A central claim is that a musical instrument provides a rich vehicle through which to examine the dynamics of ethnographic research (Barz, Cooley, 2008) in both domestic and national settings. The argument draws on Sara Ahmed's theory of "strangers" (2013), setting the work of the multicultural band Fanfara Station in the context of popularized musical traditions in Italy, and interweaving it with its front man Marzouk Mejri's own attempt to reorientate mālūf's revival in Western Mediterranean societies, and interweaving it with my own attempt—as a stranger—to learn the 'ūd. I present it in the spirit of what Ahmed terms a "getting closer to others in order to occupy or inhabit the distance between us" (Ahmed 2013:179), and it allows me to reflect more broadly on what kinds of knowledge can emerge when musical instruments travel to encounter others on the way.

- Chiara Pilotto, **"Beyond nationalist frames: ethnographic wanderings around Palestinian politics, ethics and affects in the world of Israeli settler colonialism"**

**Abstract:**

The paper questions the ways nationalist frames are debated and reconfigured through ethnographic encounters with Palestinians living under the Israeli military occupation and settler colonization of Palestine. Reflections are based on my fieldwork experiences between 2011 and 2014 in an area under total Israeli control in the occupied West Bank. Considering the power asymmetries and also the affective attachments that defined my ethnographic relations, the paper is based on the analysis of shared reflexive work around Palestinian politics, which ethnography as a constitutively intersubjective ground brought out. The discussion shifts analyses on the "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" from "resistance" as the main figure to depict the Palestinians' political subjectivity according to national discourse, to their daily efforts for managing work and personal relations with Israelis in the context of Israeli settler colonialism. An ethnography of the everyday highlighted how precariousness and asymmetric interdependence are not only fundamental dimensions of social life in conditions of structural uncertainty and political violence, but also constitute the main matter to define what a "life lived in dignity" is. Thus, the paper attempts to grasp the link of ethical and political subjectivation in the Palestinians' contingent but enduring effort to oppose Israel's "colonization of the mind".

**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).

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