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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE:

Uprooting, identity, assimilation: the evolution of the Kurdish question in contemporary Middle East

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:

Nicola Degli Esposti, Sevgi Doğan, Alessandro Tinti

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

For decades, the existence of a large Kurdish population in Upper Mesopotamia without a state or even autonomous administrative institutions has represented a source of political and social conflict with wider regional and international ramifications. In the past few years, 'Kurds' and 'Kurdistan' have been the object of political projects, mass and armed movements, alliances, and military action.

But who exactly are the modern-day Kurds? In which political, cultural, social conditions do they live? What dynamics affect their experience of collective identity?

To answer these questions, this panel aims at developing an original interpretative framework to understand the complex dynamics of Kurdish societies. Far from being a static ethnic or linguistic body, Kurdistan is today the theatre of violent conflicts between Kurdish movements and regional powers but also between classes, political parties, cultural and religious groups within Kurdish society itself.

We thus invite papers addressing both the cohesion and fragmentation of Kurdish society, from different disciplinary perspectives and regarding all regions inhabited by Kurdish communities in the Middle East. We will prioritize contributions focused on the most recent developments with the aim of updating our understanding of a people that is often subject to symbolic exploitation, erasure, and historical denial. From the flooding of Hasankeyf to the destruction of Sur and Nusaybin, from the massacre of Shingal to the military occupation of Afrin and Serekaniye, from the retreat from Kirkuk to executions and protests in Tehran and Kirmaşan, we are witnessing dynamics of geographic, archaeological, and cultural erasure that are accompanied by physical expulsion, destruction, and repression.

Through which forms of solidarity and identity building? To what extent are religious communities, political parties, social groups, feminist movements, and the cultural institutions of Kurdistan able to realize the idea and the reality of a 'national community' which transcends the plurality of occupied and dispersed national 'communities'?

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

Proponents:

Nicola Degli Esposti is a research fellow at the University of Padua and a Visiting Fellow at the Middle East Centre of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He holds a PhD in international relations from LSE and works on the politics and political economy of the Middle East.

Sevgi Doğan took her doctorate degree from Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. She is conducting the research on gender balance in illiberal democracies, focusing on Turkey, in the University of Siena. She is a collaborator in the internationalization office at the Scuola Normale Superiore as the person responsible for the SAR (Scholars at Risk Network) in Italy.

Alessandro Tinti is a post-doctoral research fellow at La Sapienza University of Rome. He holds a PhD in international relations from the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa. Ethnographic in approach, his doctoral work explored oil politics in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Proponents are all founding members of the **Italian Network of Kurdish Studies**.

Chair: Alessandro Tinti, Sapienza University of Rome

Discussant: Emrah Karakuş, Junior Research Fellow, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University.

Panelists:

- **Diren Taş**, PhD Candidate of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Turkey's new military urbanism and neocolonial architecture in Kurdish cities

In this paper, I focus on how the Turkish state facilitates military urbanism as revanchist and racialized mechanisms of collective punishment to suppress decolonial mobilization, oppositional politics, and grassroots

resistance in Kurdish cities. Based on my ethnographic case study in Sur, Diyarbakır, I show how neocolonial policies are fostered to annihilate, displace, and dispossess Kurdish urbanities, while replacing them with standardized and bordered architectures of state security and control. Mass scale destructions, militarized policies, and coercive restructuring in Kurdish cities reveals the state's emergent spatial strategy to recolonize the region in an urban scale. The neocolonial state dominates, frames, and reconfigures Kurdish urbanities to eliminate any forms of alternatives, opposition or challenge to its existing and deepening hegemony.

- **Cemil Boyraz**, Associate Professor, İstanbul Bilgi University, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Political Science and Public Administration

Political Economy of the Kurdish Question in Turkey

This paper aims to analyze the Kurdish question in Turkey. With a particular focus on the sources of the closure of the Kurdish Opening process in 2015, paper investigates political and economic reasons on the denial of the Kurdish demands. Differently than the mainstream literature considering the Kurdish question within the mere culturalist explanations or reducing it to the underdevelopment of Kurdish regions; it is argued that a closer historical-material analysis of the denial of the Kurdish identity, its debasement and domestication as well as securitization in different contexts reveals the vitality of anti-Kurdish policies in the reproduction of political and economic inequalities, as well as power relations in Turkey. Within this perspective, the paper highlights that the egalitarian and democratic autonomy demands of the Kurdish politics since the 2000s directly and historically challenge the contradictory features of the Turkish republican nationalism and its political-economic ethos. Thus, closure of the democratic opening process in general cannot be simply explained by the changing electoral considerations of the ruling party. Or in particular, aggressive centralization of the ruling party as seen in the recent practice of removing pro-Kurdish mayors and appointing trustees in their place without new elections needs to be analyzed within its neoliberal-authoritarian project to developed in those regions. The paper will lastly discuss the prospects derived from such challenge will not also shape dynamics of democracy and egalitarian ideals in Turkey, but also future in the Middle East.

- **Sevgi Doğan**, Postdoctoral Fellow, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

Philosophical reading of Kurdish Question through different perspectives: Self-Determination Issue

This presentation seeks to read a revolutionary movement in the light of Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci and Fanon. The author tries to argue the revolutionary Kurdish movement through a lens of Lenin's, Luxemburg's, Gramsci's and Fanon's thoughts on liberation and self-determination. As Ernst Vollrath claims at the beginning of his article ("Luxemburg's Theory of Revolution, Social Research", 1973, p. 83), "every political theory contains a theory on the nature of action," these all philosophers and political revolutionaries have grounded their theories on actions, or "the nature of action." According to Vollrath, political theories includes two important moments: 1) starting and 2) continuing. He tries to explain Luxemburg's theory of revolution in these two contexts. Additionally, he claims that political theory serves to the solution of political action. In this respect, the article targets to reveal and argue the political theories built around Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci and Fanon's thoughts. I believe that Luxemburg and Gramsci's theories hold a special place among all other Marxist theories in terms of revolution or theory of action. What is the point of revolutionary activity? What is the aim of revolutionary movements or more precisely social movements? The basic aim is to constitute a true realm of freedom, that is "freedom from" and therefore "freedom to"; this means a movement from liberation to realization. According to Ernst Vollrath, the realm of freedom "can be maintained only by continuing activity in freedom" (Vollrath, p. 105). This means the continuation of struggle to maintain freedom alive over which evil is ready to dominate.

The question, here, is whether still these theories will tell something about the Kurdish revolutionary movement or how we can evaluate the Kurdish movement through their different point of views. The question is not whether the Kurds must have a state, independent from any sort of repression and domination but how self-determination and liberation can be re-evaluated in relation to this particular movement. The Kurdish movement, like other political movements, made use of political theories such as Leninist and Marxist one at the beginning of its foundation. Freedom is at the center of their writings and political actions. Marx, in 1844 Economic Manuscripts mentions three forms of liberation: liberation of wo/man from alienated labor (which leads unhappiness) and therefore freedom of "physical and mental energy" (Marx, 1844, p. 76); liberation of society and nature (Marx, p. 76) from all forms of exploitation; liberation of species from alienated forms of production and actions. Similarly, Kant talks about three principles that civil state as legal state is based on: "1.

The freedom of each member of society as a human being; 2. The equality of each member with every other member as a subject of the state; 3. The independence of each member of the community as a citizen” (Kant, 1974, p. 69). The political actions through theoretical bases target to realize these principles in a free society. Both Kant and Marx consider these principles are only laws that makes it possible to found a fair society or for Kant a state in accordance with the rational principles of human dignity and law (Kant, p. 69). In this presentation, Luxemburg’s conflict with Lenin on self-determination, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Fanon’s theory of self-consciousness in relation to Hegelian understanding of the term, will be at the center of the argument in relation to the Kurdish question. These philosophical debates around freedom, liberation and self-determination will be discussed in relation to the Kurdish movement.

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- **Delal Aydin**, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Duisburg-Essen

Kurdish Mobilization in the 1990s: A Struggle over Life and Death

This presentation will discuss the Kurdish mobilization in Turkey in the 1990s when the main pillars of today’s Kurdish struggle were formed. In the 1990s, a new form of state-society relation was constituted in Turkey’s Kurdistan. While Kurdish subjects appeared as a threat to be eliminated for national security and the continuity of state power, the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) called on them for political resistance to reclaim control over their lives. Within this turmoil, Kurdish resistance in Turkey gained substantial momentum. Kurdish mass mobilization manifested itself in the streets, mountains, and Turkish legal politics, including the Turkish parliament. This was also a new form of political community, and Kurdish youth and Kurdish women have been one of the main carriers of this community. In this presentation, I will focus on the community building processes of the Kurds in the 1990s. I will specifically discuss the construction of national symbols (such as Newroz, the Kurdish New Year’s festival), Kurdish youth mobilization, and empowerment of Kurdish women in the Kurdish resistance. The evidence for the discussion is derived from my dissertation field research in Kurdistan and my activism experience in the Turkish metropolises.

- **Cansu Sonmez**, PhD Candidate, Urban Studies and Regional Sciences, Gran Sasso Science Institute
Enriching or Violent? Ambivalent Experiences throughout Displacement and Resettlement in South-eastern Turkey

Most of the literature on displacement and resettlement due to hydropower dam developments have extensively focused on macro-scale geopolitics, governance, the socio-economic costs, and loss. However, rethinking the ordinary people as the main geopolitical actors in the local development together with local conflicts has been neglected in the critical geography of resettlement. To this end, in the presence of Turkey’s Kurdish question within the contested territory of South-eastern Turkey, the paper aims at analysing personal embodied experiences, struggles and vulnerabilities of forcibly displaced and resettled Kurds and Arabs in the wake of the construction of Ilisu dam. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of affective geopolitics, the paper examines in what ways residents experience and embody infrastructural contestations (dam, displacement, and resettlement) through their identities, and existing ethno-territorial contestations and imaginaries (Kurdish question). By reflecting the positions of the displaced and resettled communities, the paper questions: in what ways does the implementation of Ilisu dam intersect with Turkey’s Kurdish question in the embodied experiences of displaced residents in the resettlement of Hasankeyf? A qualitative empirical case study was carried out in Hasankeyf town, Batman city before the submergence in 2020 and after in the resettlement of Hasankeyf 2021. Experiences are felt and embodied through the practices of resettlement housing and compensations (both material and immaterial) in the resettlement of Hasankeyf. Different forms of territorial contestations (due to hydropower development, resettlement and ethno-territorial) are intertwined by illustrating ambivalent nature among them. The paper argues that there are no straightforward binaries in people’s experiences of the infrastructure, but inbetweenness that opens the discussion of ambivalent experiences and manifestations. The infrastructure (referring both the hydropower dam and resettlement) under overlapping contestations has become a medium or an instrument to encounter and embody ambivalences by experiencing both retraumatisation, violence, coercion and inclusion,

affirmation, and negotiation. The aim of this paper is to complement and extend ongoing debates on critical geography of resettlement.

INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:

Italian Network of Kurdish Studies – rete.italiana.studi.curdi@gmail.com