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Università degli Studi di Cagliari
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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE:

Roundtable: Crossing disciplinary borders. Intersectionality on the move.

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s:

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Reflecting on the circulation of ideas and practices across borders and their impact on perceptions of the Middle East, this roundtable advocates for a transnational perspective to transcend insularity and exceptionalism within Middle Eastern Studies. By enriching the discourse on global cultural, political, and economic relations, we aim at contributing to discussions on the dynamic circulation of practices and knowledge—a central theme of this year’s conference, focusing on the concept of intersectionality.

The concept has been introduced in the academic field in the early 1990s by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and law professor, and a leading scholar in critical race studies. Crenshaw observed that US courts failed to recognize discrimination against Black women in cases related to labour law, showing that anti-discrimination laws focused solely on either race or gender, an approach that was insufficient to recognize the multidimensional discrimination experienced by Black women (Crenshaw 1989).

While acknowledging Crenshaw's pivotal role in theorizing and systematically applying intersectionality for academic research, scholars also underscored that the history is more complex than that, and that “intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment” (Nash 2008) that was embedded in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among Black women, Chicanas and Latinas, Native American Women, and Asian-American women (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016). In the Middle East, the complexity of different forms of oppression has also been theorized by women engaged in struggles for gender-based equality and justice, often linked to nationalist liberation struggles (for example Palestinian, Algerian, Kurdish), and by scholars working on different historical and geographical contexts (Baron 2005; El Shakry 2007; Çağlayan 2020; Hasso 2005; Käser 2021; Salhi 2010; Takla 2021)

After Crenshaw's theorization, intersectionality has evolved to encompass various axes beyond race and gender, including sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age, class, education, rural/urban etc. Moreover, it has also gained traction at the policy level, being now commonly referred to by human rights organizations, NGOs, government officials, policymakers, and international organizations. For instance, the United Nations published an *Intersectionality. Resource Guide and Toolkit* in 2021, and the current gender equality strategy of the United Nations Development Programme highlights the significance of intersectionality in addressing structures of inequality, discrimination, and exclusion.

While the relevance of intersectionality in fields of research like social sciences, contemporary legal studies, critical race studies, anthropology, and literary studies, is now a given fact, some scholars have cautioned against depoliticizing intersectionality by relegating it to a mere analytical tool (Erel et al. 2008). Moreover, especially historians have criticized the original framework for essentialising the categories of gender and race as experienced by Black women, paying “little attention to the ways in which race and gender function as social processes in distinctive ways for particular black women in varying historical moments. That is, black women’s race and gender are treated as trans-historical constants that mark *all* black women in similar ways” (Nash 2008). This would cause to think in categories that are “substantialist and mostly ahistorical” (Griesebener & Hehenberger 2013).

It is true that we should not assume that our understanding of axes of discrimination can be transferred to pre-modern sources. For example, focusing on slavery in early Islamic history, Elizabeth Urban noted that medieval sources had various categories that were racialized or had the potential to be so, showing for example that the primary racial issue did “not appear to concern Blackness and Whiteness, but Arabness and non-Arabness” (Urban 2022). Still, intersectionality seems to provide a more nuanced understanding of power structures, even when looking at the past, allowing us to bring attention not only to groups that experience discrimination on several axes, but also to those who are privileged on one axis, such as race, but not on another, such as gender (Feinstein 2007) and to groups with complex identities that are usually kept “away from the public eye” (Betancourt 2020).

Considering that Middle Eastern Studies is per se an interdisciplinary field that encompasses various disciplines, approaches, and methodologies, it does not come as a surprise that intersectionality is mostly applied by scholars coming from those disciplines where intersectionality is already well established (like sociology, anthropology, political studies, sociolinguistics, gender studies) and less by scholars working with historical or philological methods.

In this roundtable, we propose to take stock of where “we are at” and revisit the analytical benefits and challenges of intersectionality beyond the “usual suspects”. We invite short contributions from scholars from the entire range of disciplines that constitute the field of Middle Eastern Studies, interested in engaging in a critical conversation on how the concept of intersectionality has travelled across various socio-political and academic landscapes. Theories and concepts never travel in a mono-directional way, from the Global North to the Global South and vice versa, therefore we particularly welcome contributions discussing how intersectionality has been embraced, further developed, or challenged by various groups such as feminists and queer activists within the region, as well as its circulation across different fields of activism and scholarship, both within and beyond the Middle East.

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

Isabel Käser is a Senior Researcher and Swiss National Science Foundation Ambizione Fellow at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern. Her research focuses on gendered and embodied processes of militancy, (de)militarisation, feminist mobilisations, migration, art, and activism - with a focus on the Middle East, particularly different parts of Kurdistan and its diasporas. From 2021-2023, she was a Researcher and Visiting Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre where she led the project *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Post-ISIS: Youth, Art and Gender*. Isabel gained her PhD at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS, University of London, and is the author of the award-winning book *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement: Gender, Body Politics and Militant Femininities* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Other publications include *Art and Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: Feminist Fault Lines, Body Politics and the Struggle for Space* (LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, 2023, co-authored with Houzan Mahmoud), and *Beyond Feminism? Jineoloji and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement* (Politics & Gender, 2022, co-authored with Nadje Al-Ali).

Serena Tolino is Associate Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Bern, where she is also the principal investigator of the project *TraSIS: Trajectories of Slavery in Islamicate Societies. Three Concepts from Islamic Legal Sources*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and of the Starting Grant Project *TrAIL. Tracing Labour in Islamicate Legal Traditions*, also funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Her research focuses on the history of gender, sexuality and LGBTQI+ rights, Islamic law, and the history of slavery and labour in the Middle East. Her publications include *The Human Body in Islamic Law. Essays in Memory of Agostino Cilardo*, a dossier of *Studi Magrebini/North African Studies* (2022, co-edited with Carlo de Angelo), and *Sex and Desire in Muslim Cultures. Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day* (I.B. Tauris, 2021, co-edited with Aymon Kreil and Lucia Sorbera). Before moving to Bern, Serena was an Assistant Professor at the University of Hamburg (2016-2020), a post-doc at the University of Zurich (2012-2016) and a visiting fellow at the Program in Islamic Law at Harvard Law School (Fall 2013). She studied in Naples, Halle, and Cairo, and obtained her PhD with a dissertation on Homosexuality in Islamic Law and Statutory law, focusing on Egypt and Lebanon, from the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, financed by a fellowship from the Graduate School Society and Culture in Motion.

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