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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Multi-sited research methodologies for decolonial research: food entanglements and encounters across the MENA region and beyond

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Various disciplinary studies have long approached the Middle East and North Africa as a separate region, characterized by specific dynamics which made it exceptional and different from all other areas and continents around the world. Historically rooted in structures of colonial knowledge production and domination and in Western imperialism in the region, the very definition of the “Middle East” area has limited and directed what can and should be taken into consideration when analyzing it. In recent years, other names for the region have been developed, widening the scope and horizon of contexts and relations included in such definitions, such as MENA, WANA and SWANA.

Studies on the region have developed a critique of their basic assumptions to some degree. The identification of “cultural areas” has been questioned, and their utility should be redefined avoiding culturalism and allowing for a vision focused on field practices, the integration of local histories, and the recognition of contextual knowledge production. While theoretical critique has been advanced in this direction, research in the region hasn’t always been able to effectively practice methodologies that develop alternative research perspectives and practices, thus reiterating the categorization of the MENA region’s social, political, cultural and economic dynamics and worlds within limited concepts and (neo-)orientalist tropes that interpret them in somewhat essentialist terms. This has often led to adopting a narrow vision and perspective on local and national contexts in the region, falling into sectarian readings, failing to perceive the wider regional dynamics or to place them within the global context and its interconnected crises.

Specific epistemological interpretations, in particular - focusing on orientalist understandings of religious categories and concepts (and often practicing epistemic violence over the experiences and lives of communities and societies), on the colonial heritage, or solely on the geopolitical perspective - have been historically preferred to read social, political and economic dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa, and they have been identified as privileged angles from which to conceive the region as a whole. The naturalization of geographical borders and disciplinary perspectives, in this sense, has produced a limited interpretation of the complex panorama of the region and has corroborated an approach focused on its “exceptionality”.

In the past decade, scholars in the Middle East and North Africa studies from across the world have developed critical understandings and approaches. Some have called for developing a comparative methodology able to identify specificities and valorize them through theoretical elaboration (Bayart, 2016). Others, embracing Southern Thoughts (Ferretti, 2023), for instance, offer alternative perspectives from the Mediterranean basin, which they have understood as a place, a concept and a relational system, challenging European centralities and questioning the structural separation and hierarchization of the Northern and Southern shores. The entangled pluriverse of the Mediterranean, in this kind of literature, questions the flatness of traditional maps or the chessboard logic of international relations, inviting us to listen to and represent the specificities of unrecorded, rejected voices through multiple mappings and narratives (Chambers, 2019). Researchers from

and in the region have had an important role as well in developing critical, Marxist, indigenous and decolonial approaches (Tartir, Dana and Seidel 2021) in questions and analyses concerning their societies and worlds.

We believe these developments call for more **multi-sited research** design and practice that builds fieldwork and questions across regions and contexts.

This panel, developed within the project “Post-development geographies of Local Food Systems: Community-based networks addressing food insecurity” (FOod Communities Empowerment - FOCE), calls for theoretical, methodological and study case contributions that speak of multi-sited research that reveals connections between contexts from the region and across the world. We are particularly interested in contributions that focus on the movement, encounter, dialogue, comparative similarities or differences of food practices, foodscapes and material cultures, as well as epistemologies developed around food. We encourage submissions that explore both dominant dynamics in food production, distribution and consumption, as well as alternative networks and traditional, local, indigenous foodways.

Food has historically been, and still remains, a space of great movement and encounter of multi-layered social, economic, political and cultural dynamics on various levels, from local to regional and continental contexts and relationships. Analyzing multiple contexts through food material and symbolic practices allows for a space of conversation and learning where the material, intellectual, cultural and symbolic dimensions of the contexts we approach speak to one another.

We seek to learn together, from study cases and research designs engaged in analyzing multiple locations and contexts across the region and outside of it, how multi-sited research methodologies contribute to decolonizing approaches, research questions and analyses of the region, and how such scholarship can better focus the interconnections and entanglement between local and regional dynamics and international and global crises, politics, economies and changes.

We welcome contributions on:

- Multi-sited methodologies (such as forms of critical and decolonial mapping, relational and participatory approaches, visual methods, and others)
- Relational and decolonial epistemologies and methods
- Case studies of multi-sited research that link contexts in the MENA region, across the two shores of the Mediterranean basin, and in other continents/areas/regions.
- Case studies that criticize definitions and delimitations of MENA region dynamics and that present alternative understandings and readings of local and global dynamics through multi-sited research.
- Critical reflections on the epistemological, political and geographical role of the “scale” tool in multi-sited research: how does it affect the knowledge we produce, how we perceive and move in space and the political and economic relations between actors who define the “scale”?

The working languages of the panel are: Italian, English, and French.

References

Chambers, I., & Cariello, M. (2019). *La Questione Mediterranea*. Firenze: Mondadori Università.

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Tartir, A., Dana, T., Seidel, T. (2021), *The Political Economy of Palestine. Critical, Interdisciplinary, and Decolonial Perspectives*, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

Beatrice Ferlaino is a Fellow Researcher at the University of Turin. Her research interests focus on the study of agriculture as an instrument of government. She has developed an interdisciplinary approach to the subject, ranging from the historical sociology of political processes to historical and political geography. Agriculture is the "place" where to understand how political proposals are imagined and constructed, and how the definition of symbols and representations of reality orient the choices that are implemented in order to establish processes of social change.

Ginevra Montefusco is a Ph.D. Student in Historical, Geographical and Anthropological Studies (Geography Curriculum) at the University of Padua and Ca' Foscari, Venice. Her PhD project, *At the margins of urban foodways: critical and visual analysis of food, identity and resistance in Tangier and Naples*, discusses processes of marginalization in two Mediterranean cities through the lenses of food and spatial injustice with a trans-scalar and multi-sited approach. Past research experiences involve [Gaza Foodways](#) (internship at CAWR - Center For Agroecology, Water and Resilience; Coventry, UK), [Food in The Margin](#) (Master's Thesis). Her research interests include: food and spatial Injustice, Mediterranean cities, urban food sovereignty and agroecology, visual and participatory methods, decolonial and feminist approaches.

Tamara Taher is a Fellow Researcher within a project on "Post-development geographies of Local Food Systems: Community-based networks addressing food insecurity" at the University of Turin. She has attained a PhD in "Social and Political Change" at the University of Florence in 2022, with a research on Palestinian decolonial material cultures, epistemologies and temporalities. She collaborates with Maydan. Journal of studies on the Arab, Semitic and Islamic worlds. Her research interests include: radical learning, epistemic justice, relational epistemologies and methodologies, social and political theories, material and vernacular cultures.

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