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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

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** BEATRICE FERLAINO, GINEVRA MONTEFUSCO, TAMARA TAHER

**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.

Ferretti, F. (2023). Geography, Pluriverse and ‘southern thought’: Engaging with decoloniality from the Mediterranean. *Political Geography*, 107, 102990. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102990.

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

PARTICIPANTS:

- **Gabriele Proglio: “Food and Southern Epistemologies in the Mediterranean. Reflections and considerations for methodological approaches”.**

My intervention is to approach food in a cultural/theoretical perspective in order to describing possible new methodological approaches. My aim is to work on what Iain Chambers called interruptions: namely, gazes from the South which are able to open up new possible visions, imaginaries, and geographies of the Mediterranean. Using decolonial thought in order to analyze food as a combination of material/empirical forms of power and resistance, the first part of the paper will be dedicated to deal with colonialisms in North Africa and the Middle East and their legacies.

In the second one, then, I would like to pay attention to the role of food both in shaping forms of oppressions (colonizations) and resistance. I will bring three main examples: Tunisia, Algeria, and Palestine. In particular, food is a lens for describing the environment, society, and from an intersectional point of view multiple situated power relations.

The last part of the paper, then, will consider food from a transnational and diasporic point of view. During one of my last research projects in the field of oral history, I collected interviews with Arab/Muslim people and their food habits. Many interviewees mentioned ghurba as a feeling affecting people far from homeland, and a global vision of the diaspora echoing W.E.B. Dubois’ reflections. Many respondents affirmed to face ghurba cooking for other people so-called “traditional dishes”, in order to experience and share together the same taste of home. I would like to approach all these topics combining case studies to theoretical references.

- **Fidaa Abuhamdiya: “Preserving Palestinian culture and decolonizing food. Recipes and stories as a space of research”**

Palestinian cuisine can be addressed as a rich archive of histories that speak of relationships between Palestine and the Mediterranean, and of practices of indigenous resistance to colonial violence, control, and repression. Palestinian recipes and dishes carry names and ingredients that speak of popular collective memories that illuminate how Palestinians have resisted throughout the history of the colonial process in the past century. By carrying out interviews and researching Palestinian cuisine from my positionality, gastronomic knowledge and education, and within my movement across the shores of the Mediterranean (between Palestine and Italy), I explore the stories and relationships of Palestinians with their cuisine, food, and communities, and how they reclaim their existence and presence against cultural appropriation and the colonial logic of elimination. By relating to their collective memories and practices, Palestinians also reclaim sustainability, food sovereignty and autonomy. Reflecting on my research and on my relationships with multiple contexts where I present my work on Palestinian cuisine, I will point to how food can represent both a decolonial epistemological space and an important element in the struggle for justice, autonomy and freedom.

- **Beatrice Ferlaino, Ginevra Montefusco, Tamara Taher: “Multi-situated research: searching and learning within contexts and relationships”**

We are three researchers in geography working together within a project on four different contexts: Morocco (Agglou and Tangier), Naples (Italy), and Amman (Jordan). This is a process in which we are constantly weaving the similarities and differences we encounter in spaces and areas across the MENA region and beyond. We often think together of how multi-situated research can question epistemological and methodological practices and geopolitical definitions conventionally used to speak of areas across the Mediterranean, revealing the multi-scalarity of the economic, political and cultural/epistemic processes of our present. Carrying out research with food communities in different areas is also calling on us to think critically of our positionalities and movement between spaces and of how research practices and concepts change in connection to context, language, gender, bodies, identities, and knowledges. While we interact with shared visual methods across different contexts, we think of how the personality and positionality of each researcher, and the meanings attributed to our presence by surrounding contexts, inform our work. Relationality is emerging as the main lens through which we attempt to practice research in embodied and thoughtful terms. Food, on the other hand, is a flexible space that allows for the reconfiguration of questions on sustainability, ‘development’, and alternative local ways of knowing and learning. In this panel, we will share some of our fieldwork experiences and collective reflections on these matters.

#### SHORT BIOS OF THE PARTICIPANT PANELISTS:

**Gabriele Proglia** is an Associate Professor of modern and contemporary history at the University of Gastronomic Sciences (Italy). He is an oral and cultural historian. His topics of interest include the history of the Mediterranean; memories and heritages; and the colonial past and postcolonial conditions. His publications include: *Black Mediterranean* (2021); *Debordering Europe. Movements and Control Across the Ventimiglia Region* (2021); *The Horn of Africa Diasporas in Italy. An Oral History* (2020); *Mobility of Memory Across European Borders* (2020); and *Decolonising the Mediterranean* (2017).

**Fidaa Abuhamdiya** was born and raised in Hebron. She has studied at the Notre Dame cooking School in Jerusalem, and has a degree in “Sciences and Culture of Gastronomy and Catering” from the University of Padua. She also has a Master in “Community Nutrition and Food Education”. After relevant experiences in Italy, including a collaboration with the 3-Michelin-star restaurant Le Calandre, Fidaa went back to Palestine, where she wrote and published the recipe book “Pop Palestine Cuisine” together with Silvia Chiarantini, documenting gastronomic journey from her city Hebron to Jenin. At the moment, Fidaa is in Palestine, where she teaches and works as a sworn interpreter. She carries out research and promotes Palestinian and Italian culture and gastronomy.

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

**Beatrice Ferlaino** is a Postdoctoral 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 Postdoctoral 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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