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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Iran after Woman Life Freedom: Domestic and international politics

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s: PAOLA RIVETTI (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY), RASSA GHAFFARI (UNIVERSITY OF GENOVA), SHIRIN ZAKERI (UNIVERSITY OF ROME LA SAPIENZA)

Discussant: PAOLA RIVETTI (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY), RASSA GHAFFARI (UNIVERSITY OF GENOVA), SHIRIN ZAKERI (UNIVERSITY OF ROME LA SAPIENZA)

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

This panel investigates the international and domestic politics in and of Iran before and after the 2022 Woman Life Freedom uprising. The panel asks whether the WLF uprising represented a point of rupture in Iran, both domestically and transnationally, and how, for who, and why. While the WLF uprisings was the biggest political mobilisation in Iran and the most important domestic challenge to the Iranian state since the 1979 revolution, it has not come out of thin air. The WLF uprising is part and parcel of a longer historical trajectory of negotiations with and resistance to the state which has unfolded since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, if not before. In continuity with the uprisings of 2010-2013 and the Kurdish liberation struggle, transnational political lineages of revolt also have played an important role in informing and shaping the WLF uprising. However, since 2022, the security and geopolitical context has significantly changed regionally and internationally, with a severing of borders, of armed and ideological conflicts (Israel's assault on Gaza, continuing conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, just to name a few examples that are particularly relevant to Iran's international politics, along with ideological crusades, such as the one against migrants, women's reproductive rights and "gender ideology"), and of neoliberal authoritarian violence against forms of liberation from below and transnationally. Have such changes inaugurated a distinct era, of which the WLF uprising is a manifestation? Considering the stiffening of authoritarian politics in Iran and elsewhere in the world, methods and methodology should also be discussed at a time when fieldwork methodologies have become riskier for researchers and research participants.

Interrogating the issues above, the panel seeks submissions that speak to the questions of state-society relations; diaspora politics; political activism and social movements; Iran's diplomatic, security and international politics; the domestic and transnational gender politics in and of Iran; cultural production and counter-hegemonic cultural expressions; ethnicity and race politics in Iran and the Persianate world. More generally, the panel invites submissions focusing on any field related to Iranian politics and society both domestically and transnationally, and in history.

The panel aims to bring together papers that showcase new research findings, new approaches to well-established bodies of scholarship in the social sciences, as well as papers that voice new interpretations, positionalities and methodologies. The papers will be considered for publication in an edited collection.

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

Paola Rivetti is Associate Professor in Politics and IR in the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University. She has been working on Iranian politics and social movements for almost two decades. She has widely published on these topics, including *Political participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement* (2020), numerous journal articles and edited volumes. Paola Rivetti is Associate editor of the journals *Iranian Studies* and *Partecipazione e conflitto*. She is a member of the Council of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, the Mentorship Committee of the Iranian Studies Association, and the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies SeSaMO.

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Rassa Ghaffari is a sociologist working mainly on migration, gender and Middle Eastern studies. She has a Master's degree in African and Asian Studies from the University of Pavia and a PhD in Sociology at the University of Milano-Bicocca. She currently works at the University of Genova in the ERC SOLROUTES project, where she focuses on migratory routes through Turkey and the so-called Balkan route. Her work has been widely published on international journals such as *Partecipazione e Conflitto* and *Anthropology of Middle East*. She authored *Strade di donne in Iran. Generi, generazioni, proteste* (2023).

Shirin Zakeri has different teaching experiences in the University of Rome La Sapienza and University of Pisa. Previously, she was a Research Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London in 2016-2017 and Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law in 2013-2014. Her area studies are the MENA region and the Persian Gulf countries. She also works on issues related to women and immigration. She collaborates with various research institutions and civil society organizations for her research. Zakeri has published on Islamic law (Shari'a), civil society in the Middle East and Iran, social and political analysis in the Middle East and on cultural diplomacy.

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“The Moral Clarity of the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ Challenge to Iran’s Islamic Republic and the Moral Maze of Ensuing Human Rights Contestation”

Shadi Mokhtari, American University

The September 2022 killing of Jina Mahsa Amini while in custody for a minor infringement of Iran’s mandatory hijab law epitomized the subjugation Iranians and particularly Iranian women had long endured, sparking a wave of stunning protests and other mobilizations against gender-based discrimination, state violence, and the repressive state, with “Woman, Life, Freedom” as their initial animating slogan. The moral clarity displayed in iconic images of women’s defiant stances, slogans, and poignant artistic productions put forth a powerful indictment of the state and its violence. Soon however, the rights claims at the fore of the protests became entangled with a whirlwind of counterclaims, polarizing political discourses co-opting rights, and challenges to the allegiances of activists, producing a terrain in which human rights was ubiquitous, yet endlessly contested. Driven by political forces waging ideological battles and Iranian state disinformation campaigns designed to sow division and doubt, the moral clarity of the initial protests was quickly overtaken by moral ambiguity and fragmentation.

The paper provides a composite of the politics of the Iranian and Iranian diaspora mobilizations spurred by the killing of Jina Mahsa Amini. The episode is framed through and placed in the “Human Rights as Mockery of Morality, Manifesting Morality and Moral Maze” typology of non-Western popular experiences of human rights in practice developed in previous research (Mokhtari 2023). A central theme developed in the paper is the role of the Iranian state’s “anti-imperialist victim” brand. Specifically, the paper lays out how anti-imperialist politics muddled the regime’s moral transgressions against its own population as part of their human rights as mockery of morality experience, how the “manifesting morality” experience of the Women, Life Freedom mobilizations inside Iran and in part of the diaspora mobilizations allowed for a moment of international moral clarity on the regime’s subjugation of its own population, and how right-wing diaspora actors tapping into Iranians’ frustrations with the ways anti-imperialist politics obscured their experiences of suffering in the international realm contributed to the creation of a diaspora-driven polarized moral maze terrain, resulting in opportunistic actors capture and co-opting of the stunning Women, Life, Freedom movement.

The Holy Family: Iranian Leftists and the Kurdish Movement

Kamran Matin, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Department of International Relations, Sussex University

The Jin, Jiyan, Azadi (Woman, Life, Freedom) revolutionary movement has exposed the ideological solidity of Iranian nationalism, based on Persian supremacy, not only within right-wing reactionary groups but also within certain segments of the Iranian left. Indeed, some leftist intellectuals have gone as far as condemning the Kurdish

movement for national rights and recognition as divisive, reactionary, and particularistic. And yet, the same intellectuals have displayed no scruples in supporting the Palestinian anti-colonial nationalism. In this lecture, I argue that this political inconsistency is symptomatic of Marxism's inability to provide a social theory of nationalism. I argue that the roots of this inability, which Tom Nairn has famously described as Marxism's 'great historical failure', lie in classical Marxism's ontologically singular conception of the social. And I offer a solution through a critical application of Leon Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' (UCD) to Benedict Anderson's seminal account of nations and nationalism. I conclude by reflecting on the political and strategic implications of adopting a UCD-informed approach to nations and nationalism for radical left's quest for hegemony in Iran.

Language, Difference, and Identity Construction of Queer Iranians, Pre and post Jina Uprising

Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi, honorary researcher, School of Law, Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex

In a country where direct confrontation with the power structure is neither comfortable nor easily accessible, Iran is a place where language is deployed to create new forms of life and resistance. In this regard, linguistic strategies have been deployed by various social movements, with Iranian queer activism emerging as one of the most dynamic and productive. From the early 20th century, marked by pioneering affirmations of transgender and intersex identities, to the tumultuous post-revolution era, linguistic creativity has been central to the quest for recognition and visibility on social changes. A critical analysis of speech-acts and linguistic normalisation strategies reveals the profound impact of language on shaping the identity of Iranian queers. Notably, the use of "othering" linguistic tactics, such as distinguishing between derogatory terms like "Hamjensbaz" (literally "same-sex player") and the more affirming "Hamjensgara" (homosexual), underscores the struggle for acceptance and dignity. I briefly overview these linguistic tactics in the historical transition of queer communities in Iran since the early 20th century onwards. Drawing on examples spanning multiple linguistic and historical contexts, this presentation highlights the ways in which queer Iranians employ language to amplify their visibility and challenge societal stigmatisation before the Jina uprising. I will show how after the courageous moment of the Jina uprising, these conservative strategies among queer literature turned to be more direct towards gender expression and sexual identification. Finally, I will illustrate my observation of the Iranian queer community by screening some moments of the documentary I produced for a research project in relation to Iranian queer migrants living in diaspora. These moments of the documentary are related to the effect of the Jina movement on the Iranian queer community.

The Fajr Film Festival 2023: The Showcase of Iranian Cinema after Jina Mahsa Amini's Death.

Carlo Licheri, MA, University of Cagliari

The Fajr Film Festival was established in 1982 by the Ministry of Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It represents the main showcase of Iranian institutional cinema. The festival is held annually in February. Through its films, interviews and media production, the festival unveils a portrayal of Iran during the recent decades, providing an interesting point of view of the national film industry, shaped by historical and political milestones.

The 2023 edition of the Fajr Film Festival took place between 1st and 11 February, as scheduled. However, since September 2022, protests surged across various regions of Iran, following the killing of a young Kurdish girl, Jina Mahsa Amini. Many stars of the Western movie industry strongly empathised with the protests, sharing through their social media the Kurdish phrase *zan, zendegi,*

azadi ("Woman, Life, Freedom"). On the other hand, it would be interesting to understand the attitude of Iranian institutional cinematic industry, about these troublesome facts. Consequently, focusing on the Fajr Film Festival events and contents could be helpful to get a more comprehensive view about this historical transition.

This paper aims to analyse the digital and audio-visual contents produced during the 2023 edition of the Fajr Film Festival. The goal is to understand the point of view of Iranian institutional cinema industry about the September 2022 crisis and its aftermath. Focusing on this avatar of the Iranian cultural industry, we could critically decode some of the programmatic strategies of the Islamic Republic, during this historical-political juncture.

The sources include selected and award-winning features, articles and interviews from the festival's official website and catalogues. This work will focus especially on significant declarations, instances of censorship, omissions, and recurring motifs. This approach could lead to a comparative interpretation of the facts, in prevision of a more layered research work.

Law and society in Iranian Diaspora's Graphic Novels

Deborah Scolart, Associate professor of Islamic Law and Law of Islamic Countries, University of Napoli l'Orientale, Department Asia, Africa and Mediterraneo

How can someone learn something about a legal system? An informal way is by reading books: not scientific legal books, but romances, short stories, even graphic novels. The 'representation' of law in arts is a new field of study: Law and Humanities (Cinema, Art, Pop Culture, Literature etc). Since it is a representation, it might not be completely true, whatever truth means when we speak about law, but it gives some clue on how the system works, what are its pillars, what are the rules followed by authorities, what is the understanding of the law by characters.

Iranian Diaspora is quite active in representing the problems of Iranian legal system. I will focus on some author of graphic novels published in Europe (Parsua Bashi, Marjane Satrapi, Majid Bita, Mana Neyestani, Nassim Honaryar, Amir & Khalil). Since the authors do not live any more in Iran and have often been forced to leave their homeland to escape the persecution of political authorities, one might expect that their opinion about Iranian legal system will not be friendly or impartial. Nonetheless: are they also false? Through some examples taken from the graphic novel I will discuss the relation between law and society in Iran.