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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:

ISABEL KÄSER – SERENA TOLINO

CONCEPT

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 late 1980s 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”, bringing together 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 will also reflect on 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.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Gianluca Parolin, Agha Khan University

Masār Igbārī. Intersectionality in contemporary Egyptian legal theory.

Crenshaw introduced what she later termed a 'metaphor'—namely, that of intersectionality—as a means to elucidate scenarios where the mere coexistence of legal categories, individually protective, could paradoxically result in depriving individuals of the protections afforded by those categories when considered in isolation (Crenshaw 1989). The widespread adoption of the concept beyond legal scholarship has led to its original meaning being frequently stretched, sometimes beyond recognition. This study aims to examine the use of the 'prism of intersectionality' within contemporary Egyptian legal theory. To achieve this, it will initially explore the potential integration of intersectionality within Egyptian law schools, followed by an assessment of whether 'grounded theories' (J&J Comaroff 2012) offer enhanced prospects for identifying and addressing instances of intersectionality.

Paola Rivetti, Dublin City University

Moving in-between disciplines and approaches. Some reflections from conducting fieldwork across two decades.

In my intervention, I would like to offer reflections on my own experience of moving between disciplines and sub-disciplines and deploying intersectionality as a lens to study political campaigns and social movements. As a political scientist interested in the state and authoritarian politics in Iran, I embarked on my fieldwork experience nearly two decades ago with a rigid understanding of what I had to look for. In the course of these two decades, I have dramatically transformed my approach by deconstructing ideas about “the field”, my role as “the researcher” as well as about my topic of research, understanding that I could “see” and observe much more by enlarging my focus beyond “the obvious”. I will explore how intersectionality helped me diversifying and enriching my focus, and how I moved in-between disciplines and sub-disciplines. I will also reflect on what happens when access to the field is severed and creative strategies have to be employed, including re-inventing your research agenda and how the lesson learned may help moving between geographical areas, too.

Nijmi Edres, University of Bern

Intersectionality in Palestinian contexts: Unveiling Complex Dynamics in Feminist Research.

In this intervention I will reflect on the use of intersectionality in Palestinian feminist scholarship and debates, on the basis on my scholarly work. Through my own work on socio-legal debates in the field, I have found that it is almost impossible to properly address debates involving Palestinian feminist research and Palestinian women’s rights, outside of an intersectional framework. Intersectionality, which considers the overlapping

and interconnected nature of social categorizations such as ethnicity, class, and gender (Crenshaw 1989), is essential for understanding the complex dynamics at play and the way spaces of agency are framed by Palestinian actors. This approach is crucial for comprehensively analyzing and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Palestinian women, especially in the Israeli context. Palestinian women are confronted with multi-faced discrimination, and this influences their strategies and struggles in different ways. As women, they confront the patriarchal society they live in, at both national level and within their religious communities, as Palestinians they face ethnic and national discrimination by Israeli actors. Through this reflection, this intervention aims at highlighting the importance of intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, in enriching our understanding of feminist discourses within Palestinian contexts.

Giulia Macario, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan
Intersectionality is not a Metaphor.

While anthropological studies dispel notions that women in Islamic movements are powerless or trivial in their political engagement (e.g., Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013), Islamist women often remain excluded from debates on intersectionality and decoloniality. Nonetheless, they are a major political force and represent one of the core sources of resistance and activism, particularly since the Arab Uprisings. Islamist women are often reduced to a binary: either as ‘feminist’ in their own Islamist way – despite many rejecting this label, or, as “bad”: patriarchal, anti/feminist, flattened into anti-gender essentialism and reduced to their anti-queerness, obliterating their work.

Instead, intersectional thinking teaches us that marginalization and privilege are not mutually exclusive but coexist and mutate. My contribution to the round table endeavours to transcend reductionist feminist/anti-feminist binaries. In my research, I engage with intersectionality as a notion that teaches us that categories like subalternity, queerness, labour class, womanhood, indigeneity, colonization, and racialization may not intersect neatly. On the contrary, they show a “imperial teleological progressivist” tendency that is problematic too. Embracing these complexities is essential for understanding indigenous liberation and dissent beyond Eurocentric paradigms. This does not entail flattening criticism or accountability; but rather centring indigenous political movements instead of further marginalizing them.

Serena Tolino, University of Bern
Reimagining Historical Narratives: Intersectionality in Islamic Studies.

While intersectionality has been widely explored in contemporary Middle Eastern studies, particularly with regard to gender in Muslim-majority societies, its implications for scholars working with historical sources have received much less attention. Historians have often been skeptical of its use in the study of pre-modern societies, both in the Middle East and beyond. Although ‘strategic essentialism’ can be useful for mobilizing around shared identities, historians have been concerned that looking at historical sources through the lens of intersectionality might lead to essentializing and depoliticizing categories such as gender and race, overlooking their dynamic, context-specific nature. In this paper, I will share preliminary reflections based on a research project I am leading at the University of Bern, *TraSIS - Trajectories of Slavery in Islamicate Societies. Three Concepts from Islamic Legal Sources* (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation), in which I argue that intersectionality is a valuable analytical tool for revealing nuanced historical realities even in the analysis of pre-modern societies, as long as it is accompanied by an openness in thinking (and rethinking) our categories of analysis.

BIOS AND EMAIL ADDRESSES

CONVENORS

Isabel Käser, University of Bern. Roundtable Convenor and Chair

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? Jineolojî and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement* (Politics & Gender, 2022, co-authored with Nadjé Al-Ali).

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Serena Tolino, University of Bern. Roundtable Convenor and Speaker

Serena Tolino is Associate Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Bern, where she also leads the project *TraSIS: Trajectories of Slavery in Islamicate Societies. Three Concepts from Islamic Legal Sources*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Starting Grant *Trall. Tracing Labour in Islamicate Legal Traditions*, both founded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and co-leads the project *The Flow: From Deep-Learning to Digital Analysis and their Role in the Humanities Creating, Evaluating, and Critiquing Workflows for Historical Corpora* with Tobias Hodel (Bern), Silke Schwandt (Bielefeld) and Angela Huang (Lübeck), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and German Research 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 *Wissenskulturen muslimischer Gesellschaften. Philosophische und islamwissenschaftliche Zugänge. islamwissenschaftliche Zugänge. Festschrift für Anke von Kügelgen* (2023, ed. with Kata Moser) *The Human Body in Islamic Law. Essays in Memory of Agostino Cilardo*, a dossier of *Studi Magrebini/North African Studies* (2022, ed. with Carlo de Angelo), and *Sex and Desire in Muslim Cultures. Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day* (2021, ed. with Aymon Kreil and Lucia Sorbera).

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SPEAKERS

Nijmi Edres, University of Bern

Nijmi Edres is Assistant Professor in Islamic Studies at the University of Bern. Previously, she held post-doctoral positions at the Universities of Bergen (where she was part of the project CanCode), Exeter and Göttingen (where she joined the international team working at the project *USPPIP, Understanding Sharia: Past Perfect Imperfect Present*) and at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media (GEI), in Braunschweig. She obtained her PhD from the University of Rome, Sapienza. Her scholarship looks at Palestine and Israel in the 20th and 21st centuries, paying special attention at Palestinian minority rights, Palestinian women's rights and at the legal debates developed by Palestinian Muslim judges with Israeli citizenship. Her research also looked at political Islam and the Islamic Movement inside Israel, at the connections between Islam, Arabic language and national (Palestinian and Jordanian) identity, and at educational policies in Jordan, in relation to gender inclusion and representation.

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Giulia Macario, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan

Giulia Macario is a PhD student in "Institution and Politics" (History track) at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. Her doctoral project focuses on the history of women and women's work in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, relying on a combination of archival research and ethnography. Her work is at the intersection of history and socio-anthropology and aims at writing a history from below on Jordanian nation building. She has been living and working in Jordan for more than three years.

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Gianluca Parolin, Agha Khan University

Gianluca Parolin is a comparative lawyer working on constitutional design, State-Islam relations, citizenship, shifting semiotics of law, and images of law in popular culture. – He holds a PhD in Public Law from the University of Turin and is Professor of Law at the Aga Khan University in London, where he also leads the Governance Programme. – From 2008 to 2015 he taught constitutional law at Cairo University and the American University in Cairo. – He is the author of *Citizenship in the Arab World* (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), and is currently working on a new book on the law's imaginaire in Egyptian television drama.

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Paola Rivetti, Dublin City University

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; political authoritarianism in global politics 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

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