

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** Revolutionary contaminations. The Arab revolutions of 2011 and their methodological ramifications

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**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

Presentation:

More than a decade since the Arab revolutions of 2011, a majority of commentators have focused on the nature of the regime that « must fall », describing it as autocratic and archaic in comparison with the Global North's political modernity. Contamination happened as a domino effect from one failing regime to another. The focus of this proposed panel will not be so much on what is left behind, but rather on the novelty that was revealed by the revolutions that sought to overthrow regimes. It proposes to explore contamination as a collective horizon during the Arab revolutions, bringing together diverse people and societies from all over the Middle East and North Africa. We propose to investigate revolutionary contamination through the unique perspectives of scholars involved in the revolutionary moment, as reconfiguration of politics, knowledge, and methodologies has occurred because of the surge of "people" and their "will." As we examine the past decade, we aim to capture the multiplicity of researchers' positions and their epistemological and methodological responses to the revolutionary contamination that did not fail to reach them. We often improvised, mixing methods to reach one goal: a willingness to reflect on the time of revolutions. In this regard, the proposed panel aims to bring to light the contradictions and gaps we encountered during the research process. Now that the Arab Spring has cooled down without lessening its impact, we invite our panelists to reflect on their positions, perspectives, and representations of the world during and after the event. Our objective is to evaluate the methodology of social science research in the context of what we conducted in 2011: for whom and for what purpose?

In accordance with Kim Hopper's suggestion, this issue will explore ethnography's blind spots, namely the notion of exteriority often associated with social science research (Hopper 2002). Research conducted by the young researchers in 2011 required them to remain committed and involved with participants at all times. Therefore, we believe it is necessary to reverse the reasoning that suggests ethnographers should refrain from becoming too involved in their fields (Cefaï, 2010: 450). The position of pure exteriority does not allow the investigator to examine the internal logics that shaped the actions of those affected by the revolution. As a result, the researcher practices a form of observational participation, in which he or she acts as a reflexive actor in his field of investigation, contaminated by the times he or she is contaminated by revolutionary time, thereby opening up new methodological perspectives and challenging the ethnographer's position. In this panel, we propose to investigate the presence of investigators who are actively engaged in their fields of study. This posture forces the ethnographer, in the words of Hopper, to develop the ability to "look elsewhere." Accordingly, "looking elsewhere" implies two essential things: historicizing ethnographic studies and

making the ethnographer an expert translator, capable of speaking several languages to a variety of audiences. Both of these methodological postulates aim to ensure that ethnography is not restricted to descriptive fieldwork, but also able to explore and evaluate alternative approaches that are emerging during a time of great change. Such a perspective aims less to use social science research as a tool for political action than to ensure that its political implications are taken into account. It is not intended to suggest that all research should involve engagement, but rather to encourage ethnographers to become aware of the frameworks within which their research takes place, especially during revolutionary times. In a nutshell, it refers to reaffirming that respondents are products of historical processes that should also be taken into consideration. This posture of engaging the respondents was particularly important to our generation of young scholars in 2011 in order to challenge the dominant media and academic discourse of 2011 describing the Arab uprising as an "Arab awakening" (Hmed and Jeanpierre, 2016).

The panel we are proposing therefore aims to re-examine an epistemological question which, although it was deeply felt in 2011, continues to permeate the diversity of our research paths: how can we produce knowledge that respects historical singularity and people's thoughts (Lazarus 1996)? It is necessary to demonstrate that the revolutionary event has compelled social scientists to avoid overly rapid modelling in favor of allowing for novelties produced by lived politics of historical actors. The participants in this issue examine their research paths and methodologies in relation to the contemporary political context in which they operate. Bringing together researchers who have been influenced by the 2011 revolt, we propose a fundamental and critical reflection on our improvised research methodologies, as we have all been motivated to conduct research without having a preconceived methodological toolbox, driven by a shared desire for justice, dignity, and freedom. For many of us, engaging with these revolutionary moments resulted in experimental, but honest and well-positioned, situated work and engaged methodologies. We would like to clarify the various ways we went about this and reflect on how we are formed by the very revolution we were supposed to analyze. Additionally, we will consider where we stand 10 years later, how we will continue our work, and how we can make improvements. We know now what we did not know then.

#### References:

Cefai, Daniel, & al. 2010. *L'engagement ethnographique*. Paris: EHESS.

Hopper, Kim. 2002. *Reckoning with Homelessness. The Anthropology of Contemporary Issues*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hmed, Choukri, Laurent Jeanpierre. 2016. « Révolutions et crises politiques au Maghreb et au Machrek », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 211-212, no. 1-2, 2016, pp. 4-23.

#### Papers:

### **Investigating at home. Methodological and Ethical perspectives on ethnography during revolutionnary times**

*Séliima Kebaili*

Whether in anthropology or sociology, ethnographic relationships, and the methodological and analytical issues they entail have been at the heart of the reflexive process (Rabinow 1977). However, most accounts of ethnographical work often illustrate the difficulties of being faced with the unknown, leading the researcher to question his or her access, and to use various strategies to neutralize the difference (Le Renard, 2016). But what is at stake while investigating at home? What are the ethical and methodological particularities of sharing a common history and experience? These are the questions that this paper aims to answer. While this theme is not new, this paper

postulates that it involves singular issues in the post-revolutionary context of political uncertainty and saturation of affects shared by both the anthropologist and her interlocutors.

This paper is based on the micro-sociological analysis of an ethnographic vignette during a fieldwork conducted within the context of the post-revolutionary establishment museum in recognition of the women victims of the dictatorship in Tunisia. In contrast to a reflexivity that would be satisfied with naming the discomfort, the argument proposed here is not limited to questioning the parameters of the investigative relationship and the researcher's position, which would have to be compensated for by interview "techniques", but takes seriously the limits of the investigation in terms of what it allows to say about the memorialization mechanisms in progress in the region.

### **Writing with who? Writing for whom? Dilemmas in times of revolution**

*Youssef El Chazli*

Writing about the Arab uprisings and activism raises questions about axiological relationships to research and the impossibility of 'neutral science'. It also raises questions about the safety of respondents and the need to protect their anonymity. Scholars of social movements and revolutions have discussed these issues extensively, as has the anthropological literature. In the research worlds of the North, these discussions sometimes take on the label of 'difficult terrain' or 'foreign terrain'. What happens, however, when the researcher is seen (and sees him/herself) in the field as 'indigenous' while being inserted into the logics of the academic fields of the global North? With whom (and against whom) does one write in these contexts? And, above all, for whom do we write? Based on a long term investigation of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and its dismal aftermath, this article explores the dilemmas posed by autochthony on a social science investigation.

### **Looking for revolution. Comparison in the wake of 2011.**

*Hamza Esmili, Montassir Sakhi*

In Morocco, the official narrative is that the wave of the 2011 revolutions did not reach the country very far. It is only conceded that a series of demonstrations - during what became known as the February 20th Movement - took place, which *logically* led to the historic speech made by the king on March 9<sup>th</sup>, where he announced legislative elections and constitutional reform. Although the revolutionary sequence in Morocco was in fact linked to important negotiations between a variety of social actors, the fact remains that it was closed almost as soon as it was opened.

As activists in 2011, our engagement with academia after the defeat of the Morocco spring follows the course of the investigations we subsequently carried out in search of the confiscated revolutionary intensity. This journey has taken us among postcolonial and working-class immigration in France, to the Turkish-Syrian border and in Iraq, where the aim in each case was to question the forms of politics following the Arab revolutions.

The proposed paper will therefore aim to take a fresh look at the comparative method in an investigation that we envisioned as political. This first thread of analysis will be redoubled by a reflexive questioning of our link to our interlocutors. Beyond cultural and linguistic proximity, the complicity that allowed the shared investigation was thus constituted by the fact of *having experienced 2011*.

### **Becoming visible. A camera to fight against erasing.**

*Soraya El Kahlaoui*

My first meeting with the inhabitants of the *douar ouled dlim* took place on 26 March 2014, when they were gathered on the highway linking Casablanca to Rabat. While holding a banner, the women at the front of the stage were chanting various slogans related to their revendication for rehousing. Suddenly, one of the women noticed my camera. She said: "Can you film us? - Yes, of course."

This is how my investigation began, and the camera accompanied each of my meetings with the inhabitants of the *douar ouled dlim*, who were fighting for their right to re-housing. The

introduction of this new ethnographic tool, made at the request of the inhabitants, shape da new way of approaching the field. It opened up new research perspectives both in terms of reflection on the ways in which the inhabitants are staged and in terms of a reflexive analysis of the role of the researcher, who becomes a producer of images and, at the same time, a key player in the strategies for publicising social struggle. This paper will deal with blurring the boundaries between an investigator who is at the same time an actress - on the fringe - of a struggle. This position, if it is specific in that it raises numerous questions at the methodological level, also opens up new perspectives on the ways of conducting an ethnography and even more so on the way in which a researcher can in a reflexive manner analyse the ways in which his or her own methodology conditions the collection of data. Thus, the status of the researcher who becomes an actor in the investigation must be considered as a stakeholder in the analysis of the social situation in progress.

### **How to improvise methodologies, in search of a language to speak nearby? On becoming a passionate researcher during the Tunisian Revolution.**

*Joachim Ben Yakoub*

“The people want the fall of the regime!” Indeed, the direct irruption and collective affirmation of a non-negotiable popular will, proved its effectiveness, at least in Tunisia. After the dictator fled, during the struggle for a new constitution, this historical poetic phrase transformed into the bottom line of countless imaginable variants and served as a discursive vehicle to numerous, at times contradicting, political demands. “The people want!” In my research on the aesthetic of the Tunisian revolution however, I was not interested in the enunciation of peoplehood, but in the ways the revolting body politic united under nationalist imagery and overcame its postcolonial inferiority complex, regaining their pride to be Tunisians through the successful diversion or reappropriation of spectacular power. In this contribution I want to look back at my methodology, at my own process of becoming –what Frantz Fanon called - a passionate researcher. I was confronted with a double consciousness, but also a double absence, in the improvised ways I made sense of the sensible way subjectivities were formed, through the way the authoritarian spectacle was reversed and turned against itself. “But What do I want?” Not properly speaking Tunisian Darija or Arabic generated an important gap and distance towards my interlocutors in particular but also to my case study and field of research in general. As reminded by one of the artists I interviewed, the knowledge I built during this research is therefore necessarily partial, so I needed to find ways to speak nearby. Along my research, I convinced myself it was the very language barrier that compelled me to precisely delineate my subject and thus to look specifically into the aesthetic, (in)visible and more embodied dynamics of revolt, analytically opposing the concept of aesthetics to that of culture. Maybe admitting my laziness to learn the local language properly would have been more productive. During my research process, I nevertheless ceaselessly reiterated a double critique, slowly moving and still moving from the constitutive and inferiorized other inherent to my subjugation as a postcolonial object in academia, to a searching and researching self, subject of my own story.

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

**Joachim Ben Yakoub** is a writer, researcher and lecturer operating on the border of different art schools and institutions. He is affiliated to the MENARG (Middle East and North Africa Research Group) and S:PAM (Study in Performing Arts and Media) research group of Ghent University, where he is conducting research on the aesthetics of revolt and revolted aesthetics somewhere in between Tunis and Brussels. He is lecturer at Sint-Lucas School of Arts Antwerp, where he is also promotor of the collective action research ‘The Archives of the Tout-Monde’.

**Séli<sup>m</sup>a Kebaïli** is a sociologist whose research focuses on gender, transitional justice, social suffering, islam, and victimhood, mainly in the MENA region and Europe. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the EHESS in Paris in 2021 and has degrees in gender studies and political science. Using a qualitative approach, she explores the shaping of female victims' status and subjectivity with regards

to political violence. She asks how, in post-conflict contexts, certain forms of suffering tend to be recognized, promoted or otherwise marginalized by political actors and international organizations. She analyzes the effects of such processes on female victims' everyday life and collective memory. Her current book project deals with transitional justice and the making of the category of "female victim" in postrevolutionary Tunisia. Sélima is currently co-editing a book on *Women in revolts. Mobilizations and political imaginations in the Middle East and North Africa (1960-2020)* and has published articles on gender and authoritarianism, islamic NGOs and transitional justice. She recently joined the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lausanne as a Senior Researcher for a project supervised by Prof. Eléonore Lépinard entitled *Shaping the Legal Consciousness of Intersectional Subjects. Accommodating, Negotiating and Contesting Regulations on Islamic Veiling in France, Switzerland, and the U.K.*

**Soraya El Kahlaoui** holds a PhD in sociology from EHESS. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Conflict and Development Research Center at Ghent University. Her research focuses on the analysis of the mechanisms of dispossession and the formation of property rights in the MENA region. More specifically, her project aims to offer an innovative re-reading of the dynamics of post-2011 social and political transformation in North Africa (Morocco and Tunisia). She is also the author of the documentary *Landless Moroccans* and numerous articles such as "Claiming their right to possess. The Guich Oudaya tribe's resistance to land grabbing" published by JNAS. She is also the principal investigator of the Traab project ([www.traab.com](http://www.traab.com)), which aims to map and visualize property conflicts in North Africa. Starting from 2023, Soraya El Kahlaoui will be a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral researcher on a comparative project in Morocco, Tunisia and Palestine.

**Hamza Esmili** is a postdoctoral researcher at ULB (Belgium). His work revolves around the themes of persecution, hope, and the feeling of history amongst marginalized communities. He is especially interested in how historical consciousness comes to interplay with religious experience within Muslim societies. Alongside Montassir Sakhi, he has conducted long-term fieldwork in Morocco, France, Belgium, the Syrian-Turkish border, and Iraq.

**Montassir Sakhi** holds a PhD in anthropology (Université Paris 8, 2020). His research focuses on the transformation of the state under the effect of utopian and violent politics, social protest movements, the anthropology of the religious and the politics of struggle against borders. He has conducted multi-site research (Morocco, Iraq, Syrian borders, France and Belgium) on contemporary issues related to the state, religion, immigration and social movements. In 2021, he joined the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology- KU Leuven as a postdoctoral researcher.

**Youssef El Chazli** is a Lecturer at the University of Paris 8 (UFR ERITES) and associated researcher at the CEDEJ in Cairo. He received a dual Ph.D. in Political Science from the Universities of Lausanne (Switzerland) and Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (France) in 2018. His research explores contentious politics and protest dynamics in North Africa and the Middle East, with a particular focus on Egyptian politics.

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