Introduction

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Ten years after the 2010–11 uprisings that led to a huge wave of protests in all the countries of the MENA region and to the fall of authoritarian regimes in the North Africa and Middle East, this special issue of *Studi Magrebini/North African Studies* analyses the impact of these uprisings in reshaping patterns of social and political mobilizations on the local level. From a research perspective, the uprisings of 2010–11 made visible the everyday battle that “ordinary people”¹ wage against power structures, therefore imposing a theoretical and analytical shift from macro-political categories to the micro-level.²

By focusing on the emergence of “ordinary people”³ as central political actors, this special issue of *Studi Magrebini/North African Studies* explores how the political subjectivities emerging from the 2011 uprisings paved the way to grassroots political mobilizations whose political role requires further analysis and research.

In particular, the contributions underline the centrality of space in the resistance of subaltern social classes. This centrality is best expressed in the micro-processes of everyday experience. Squares, streets, remote countryside villages, peripheral neighbourhoods as well as other strategic and symbolic spaces emerge as the “battlefields” where different forms of dispossession and

¹ Bayat 2013.

² Rao 2006; Roy 2011; Tripp 2013; Volpi - Jasper 2018.

³ Bayat 2013.

power abuse are resisted locally.⁴ Resistance, therefore, is carried out through space and for space.

Despite growing authoritarianism and repression, the political heritage of the 2010–11 uprisings continue to inspire people, to mobilize them, and to create local alternatives to dominant political narratives.⁵ The wall of fear that for years limited and censored political and social movements was finally torn down in 2011 and, as a consequence, protests and civic engagement continue to cross the MENA region.

The persistence of the ideals of the 2010–11 uprisings is visible in the number and variety of mobilizations that are shaping political confrontations in North Africa and the Middle East up to today. National and international observatories, such as Arab Barometer (2019), Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Économiques et Sociaux (2020), and Amnesty International (2020) report constant social tensions in the whole region. The quest for the right to work, for adequate housing conditions, for social justice as well as for health and gender equality is therefore foundational to the demonstrations (sit-ins, spontaneous demonstrations, riots, occupation of factories and public spaces, boycotts) taking place in different countries.

Moreover, in the period between 2019 and 2020 in four countries of the MENA region – Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon – there have been significant mobilizations calling for democracy, political freedom, and social justice: demands that were at the core of the 2010–11 uprisings.

During these recent mobilizations as well as during the wave of protests/uprisings/revolutions that arose in the MENA region at the turn of the first decade of this century – labelled “Green wave” (2009), “Arab Spring” (2011) and “Gezi park resistance” (2013) – “ordinary people” emerged as central political subjects and agents of change. Indeed, in the framework of the process of redefinition of social movements – which started between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of this century,⁶ ordinary people are today crucial actors in performing new forms of resistance against top-down politics, neo-liberalism, authoritarian systems, and patriarchy, as well as in defining counter-hegemonic narratives (see, i.e., the contested use of categories such as religion or terrorism). Boycotts, spontaneous street protests, and e-activism but also daily practices of subversion of the socio-cultural-political system in public domains therefore represent tools of individual and collective

4 Ismail 2013; Tripp 2015.

5 Guesmi 2020.

6 Bayat 2013.

resistance that redefine subjects and forms of resistance,⁷ while reshaping and recreating spaces of political dissent. Urban space, natural environment, and heritage sites progressively emerged as new arenas for political confrontation and as analytical categories for the study of political and social movements in the MENA region.⁸

Moving from these assumptions, the contributions presented here – focussing on Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt – analyse forms of resistance that, happening on a micro-scale level, engage with national and global policies as well as power structures in order to fight social inequalities, spatial displacement, and land dispossession. These mobilizations often represent a local response to the global neo-liberal policies that, since the 1980s, have been adopted in the MENA region. The impact of these policies has been especially visible in urban transformations. As shown in the contribution of Guarino and Portelli, the consequences of the neoliberal urban development on people's lives in Casablanca led to the rise of a protest movement and to the articulation of an explicit anti-authoritarian language. As the authors stress, the mobilization of the ordinary people who had been displaced by the neoliberal restructuring of Casablanca led to the articulation of a political discourse challenging the traditional power structures dominating Moroccan public discourse. On a similar note, the contribution of Sarnataro focuses on how urban issues shaped political activism in post-revolutionary Cairo. Starting from the debate on the right to the city that emerged after the 2011 uprisings, the contribution also analyses the role of community-based urban projects in activating forms of civic engagement.

Turco's contribution focuses on women's protest movements in working-class neighbourhoods in Tangier. In doing so, it explores how domestic, micro-scale forms of resistance can articulate forms of dissent against neoliberal urban policies, shaping new boundaries between the private and the public sphere. Here, women's struggles against the privatization of electricity provision are analysed through the lenses of the "house", one of the places where the political dissent of the women is displayed.

The struggle against neoliberal policies is also central in Tunisia, as Pepicelli analyses in her chapter on eco-resistance and environmental protests. The chapter focuses on the relations between social movements and the environment and explores how political struggles for the environment, climate change, and health intersect with local issues of spatial justice and injustice. These environmental resistances, despite being marginal and not clearly

7 Scott 1989.

8 Hasso - Salime 2016.

interconnected, demonstrate the centrality of the environment in people's lives. They also raise questions about an economic and political model that, from colonial times to the current post-revolutionary period, has continued to be based on the unequal exploitation of territories and on an inadequate project of nation-state.

The role of local territories in re-articulating identity discourses is also central in Simoncini's work on the south-eastern Tunisian border. Southern citizens have been alternately included and excluded from Tunisian national identity discourses and prevented from accessing material resources. The article explores the political dynamics of allegiance and dissidence, exclusion and participation as well as political radicalization and resistance. The dominant discourse about the city of Ben Guerdane promoted by the Tunisian government in the past is challenged by the stunning organization of the residents of the city in response to an ISIS terror attack in March 2016. After their strong mobilization against the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, the Tunisian government developed a new discourse on Ben Guerdane: no longer the city of smugglers and terrorists but the city of heroic protectors of the country. In Ben Guerdane, as in other cases presented in this volume (Portelli and Guarino, Turco, and Pepicelli), local politics and grassroots movements embrace and challenge global ones.

Moving from specific and local cases at the margins of the big protest movements that happened in the last ten years, the contributions of this special issue analyse forms of resistance that are often invisible in the mainstream narrative on social movements in the MENA region. These movements are often considered not to have complex political assets and organization and therefore are not discernible through classical political categories. Despite this, it is in their apparent marginality that the cases presented here show the vitality of the "Arab Street"⁹ and the plurality of forms through which they are expressed. The contributions in this volume therefore display emerging political subjectivities that could be defined as forms of "insurgent citizenship"¹⁰ and the centrality of space. Starting from an analysis of the margins¹¹ of cities, of urban and rural spaces, of the post-independence nation-state model as well as of the literature on social movements, the present special issue aims to show practices and discourses that are redefining the political scene of North Africa, its power and gender relations and the dichotomy between the public and private sphere.

9 Bayat 2003.

10 Holston 2007.

11 Hooks 1989.

Note on the Transliteration of Arabic Terms and on the Images

We have chosen to use a simplified transliteration system. The names of authors already known internationally are not transliterated, while other words, excluding expressions from national Arabic dialects are transliterated in accordance with the *Studi Magrebini/North African Studies* journal's transliteration system.

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