

Bridging the Academic Mediterranean

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In Europe numerous (bi) annual social science research meetings are held on the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. Among them are the French Association Française pour l'étude du Monde Arabe et Musulman (AFEMAM), the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), the German Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient (DAVO), the European Network of Middle Eastern Studies (EURAMES), the Italian Società per gli Studi sul Medio Oriente (SeSaMO), and the Dutch Vereniging voor de studie van het Midden-oosten en de Islam (MOI). While all these meetings represent important forums, a more intensive, comparative Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and European, as well as network oriented type of scholarly meeting appeared to be lacking. The Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS) at the European University Institute (EUI - Florence, Italy) set out to fill this gap through setting up the annual Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting (MSPRM). To date six sessions have been held since 2000 accounting for approximately one thousand participants. Some (75%) of workshops have focused mainly on the MENA region, followed by topics dealing with relations between Europe and the MENA (17%) and, finally, the situation of Muslim migrants in Europe (8%). Among the results of the programme have been the forging of new networks and the production of new scholarship, which addresses both ongoing and emerging issues in the social sciences and humanities.

A different academic model

Each session of the MSPRM contains up to 15 workshops, the vast majority of which are selected from 45 applications received on the Call to Run a Workshop. Each workshop is made up of between 10 – 12 participants and 2 directors and focuses each on a different topic. All participants are obliged to submit a paper (in English, French, and sometimes Arabic) well in advance of the session and workshops meet between 14 to 17 hours (as opposed to the panels of other meetings that generally meet for 2 hours). The MSPRM “workshop model,” adapted from the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research and as opposed to the “panel model” adopted by virtually all other international meetings concerning the MENA, has allowed to strike a sound balance between the to circumscribe definitions of a specific topic and, at the same time, accommodate the need to attract a sufficiently varied body of participants who would present an ample range of contributions, from theoretical to methodological, from case studies to comparative analyses, all from diverse angles of the different disciplines.

The topics covered over the 77 workshops held in the past six years (2000-2005), have varied both in consistency and diversity. Among the core, recurring themes have been those dealing with migration, gender, public sphere, political regimes, and economic reform. Other topics emerge more in response to specific contemporary developments and which necessitate new venues of analyses. Such topics include general categories as well as sub-categories of cinema, land reform, industrial relations, education, legal education and knowledge, tourism, *awqaf*, Islamic capital, territorial governance, foreign policies, intellectuals and intellectual movements, the role of the military in politics and economies, cultural productions and policies, subalterns and social protest, as well as democracy promotion, information technology, and telecommunications.

In terms of disciplines, approximately 30% of workshop participants have been oriented towards political science, political economy, and international relations, while a near equal 29% have been from fields of soci-

The Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting has become a major venue for European, Middle Eastern, North African, and American social scientists who are experts on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and on the relationship between Europe and the MENA, to exchange original research. The Meeting finds ways of overcoming persisting challenges resulting from, among other things, different levels of academic development, different schools of thought, and different language capacities.

ology and anthropology (29%), followed by economics (19%), history (9%), law (8%) and demography (5%). However, workshops tend to be multidisciplinary and attract participants from a variety of disciplines.

Promoting diversity

In order to achieve balance and diversity in terms of nationality and place of residence, MSPRM has first of all insisted that workshop directors complement each other in terms of place of residence

and nationality. The result has been that among some 160 workshop directors 53% of them held a nationality of a MENA country, 35% of a European country, and approx. 12% a US or Canadian citizenship. These percentages change when looking at their place of residence. Thus 38% resided in the MENA region, 45% in Europe and 17% in the US or Canada. In reference to their age and career stage, the majority of participants have been junior scholars (Ph.D. students and recent post-graduates (roughly 60–65%) followed by mid-career (roughly 20–25%) and, finally, senior scholars (roughly 10–20%).

The commitment to the principle of regional diversity and support to participants from the South clearly requires an equal financial commitment. The Tuscan Regional Government has contributed to the costs of the MSPRM since its first session, and important funding has come also from the general Mediterranean Programme resources (provided by a number of private and public institutions). The contribution of fellow institutions –including European Cultural Foundation (ECF, Amsterdam), the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN, Copenhagen); the Institut Europeu de la Mediterrania (IEMed, Barcelona) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC, New York)– for the organization of joint workshops has increasingly become important and the MSPRM aims at their further increase.

Despite the high degree of diversity and clear successes of the programme (measured among other things by the huge amount of applications), MSPRM also faces certain challenges, one of which has to do with outreach. The programme would like to attract more participants from underrepresented MENA countries such as Algeria, Libya, and Syria. The continued need to work towards narrowing the gap of scholarship quality between the Northern and Southern shore (and within Europe) has become more apparent. A third major challenge is to reduce the language barriers between scholars from the different parts of the Mediterranean and attempt to reduce the dominant role of English in the workshops. A fourth challenge, linked to the previous one, is to encourage more mingling among francophone and anglophone speaking scholars so that they can break out of their respective linguistic and academic boundaries.

Meetings such as the MSPRM provide critical opportunities to forge networks, talk, strategize, and pull intellectual resources to address critical issues and challenges in the regions of MENA and Europe. These meetings serve as a way to build strong academic bridges.

For more information: <http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/Mediterranean/Meetings.shtml>

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