

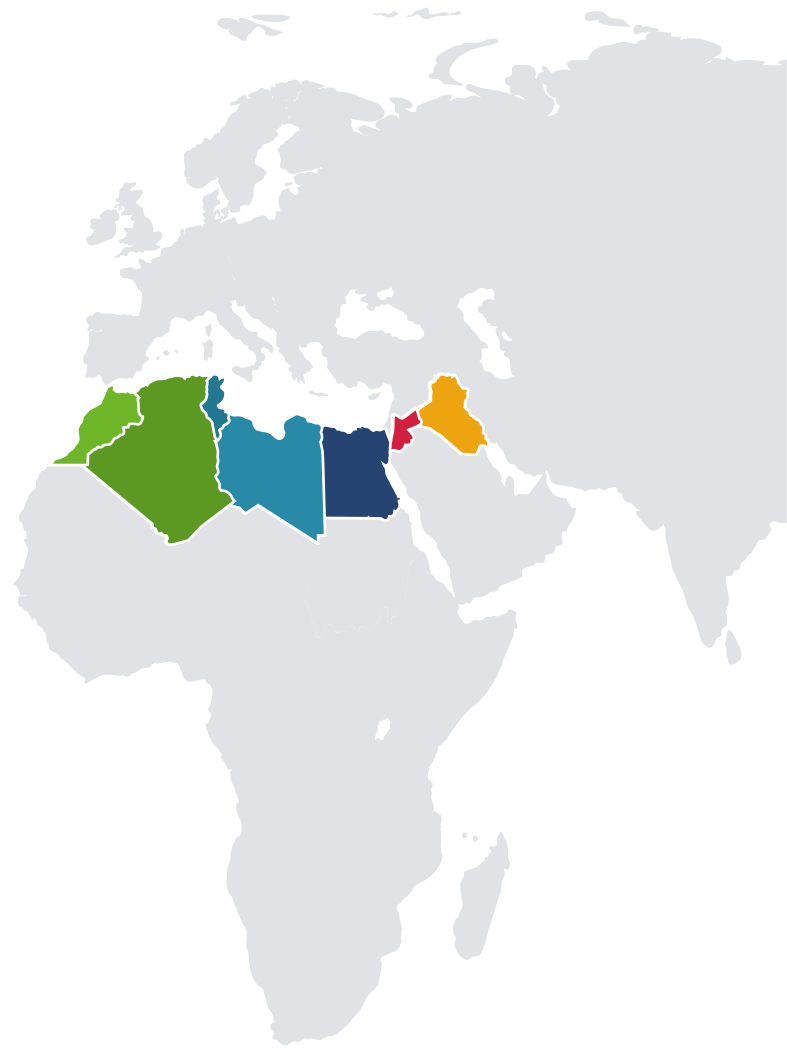
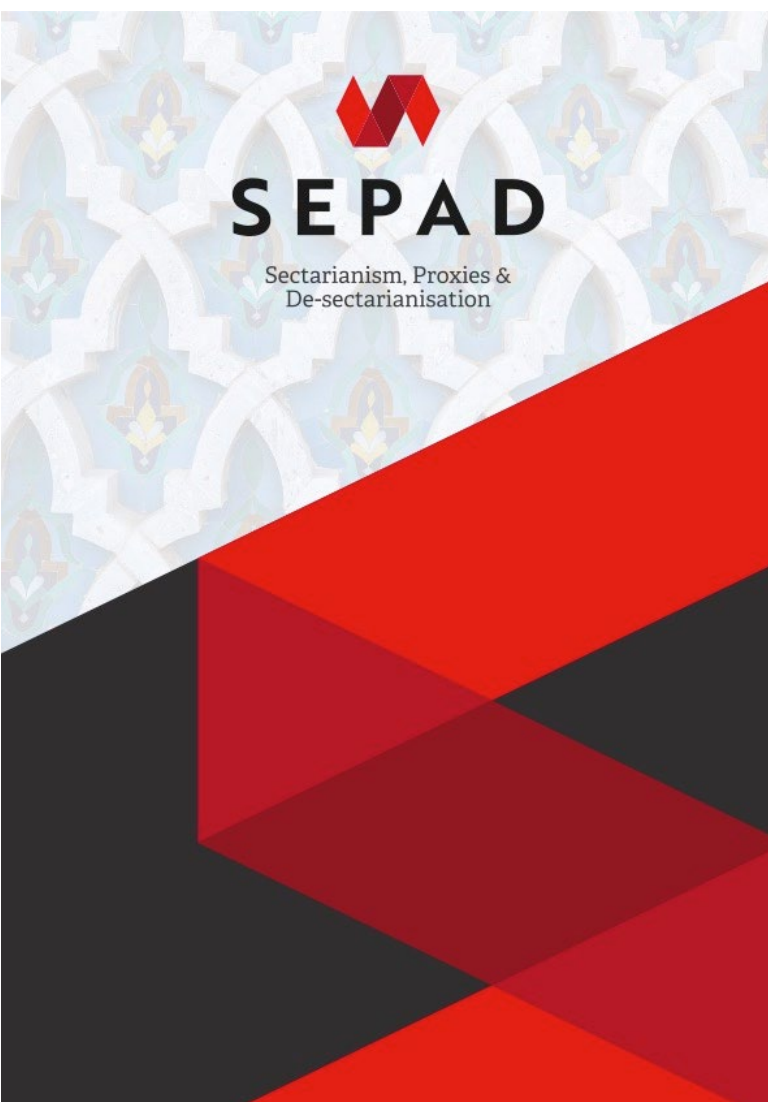
The Arab Transformations WORKING PAPER SERIES

NUMBER 22

Sovereignty and its Discontents

Editors:

Simon Mabon, University of Lancaster & Andrea Teti, University of Salerno





SEPAD

Abstract

This report brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to critically reflect on ideas of sovereignty and the state. This report draws on a workshop held at Lancaster University in the spring of 2023. We would like to thank all the participants in that workshop for their insightful engagement.

Acknowledgements

This collection of Working Papers is published in collaboration between the SEPAD Project and the Arab Transformations Project Working Papers Series.

SEPAD has been generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. We would like to extend thanks to Hillary Weisner and Nehal Amer for their continuous support in all ways imaginable.

The **Arab Transformations Project** was coordinated by the University of Aberdeen (UK) and included the following partners: Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin, Ireland; Análisis Sociológicos Económicos y Políticos (ASEP), Madrid, Spain; Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), Milan, Italy; Universität Graz (UNI GRAZ), Graz, Austria; Societatea Pentru Metodologia Sondajelor Concluzia-Prim (Concluzia), Chisinau, Moldova; Centre de Recherche en Économie Appliquée pour le Développement (CREAD), Algiers, Algeria; Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research (BASEERA); Cairo, Egypt; Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies (IIACSS), Amman, Jordan; University of Jordan (JU), Amman, Jordan; MEDA Solutions (MEDAS), Casablanca, Morocco; Association Forum Des Sciences Sociales Appliquées (ASSF); Tunis, Tunisia.

Copyright

The Authors alone remain responsible for the content of this report. It cannot be taken to necessarily represent the views of the EU, the Court of the University of Aberdeen or any of the project partners.

© Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The report may be copied and used in whole or part and adapted for non-commercial use subject to the original publication being acknowledged.

The Authors assert their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as authors of this work. The *Arab Transformation Working Paper Series* (ISSN 2398-9106) is published by The University of Aberdeen (Aberdeen, UK).

Recommended forms of citation

Mabon, Simon. Ed. (2024). "Sovereignty and its Discontents." *Arab Transformations Working Papers*, n. 22. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen. <https://doi.org/10.57064/2164/23201>

Teti, Andrea. (2024). "Simulacra of Sovereignty and Statehood: The Biopolitics of Deferral, Simulation and Subalternity," in Simon Mabon. Ed. *Sovereignty and its Discontents. Arab Transformations Working Papers*, n. 22. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen. <https://doi.org/10.57064/2164/23208>

About the Authors

Simon Mabon is Professor of International Politics at Lancaster University, UK.

Andrew Delatolla is Lecturer in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Leeds, UK.

Hannes Baumann is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Liverpool University, UK.

Guy Eyre is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at Edinburgh University, UK.

Ruba Ali Al-Hassani is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at SEPAD/Lancaster University, UK.

Andrea Teti is Associate Professor at the University of Salerno, Italy.

Gönenç Uysal is Lecturer in International Political Economy at Lancaster University, UK.

Simulacra of Sovereignty and Statehood: The Biopolitics of Deferral, Simulation and Subalternity

Andrea Teti

The Implications of the Performativity of Orthodox Paradigms

Reflections on categories such as the ‘state’ and ‘sovereignty’ must be conducted on at least two inextricably intertwined levels: the articulation of concepts and taxonomies on the one hand, and their role in actually-existing politics on the other. Unfortunately, the epistemic framework within which orthodox liberal Political Science operates favours Weberian (1919) approaches which conceive of formal institutions within a broader series of ontologically fixed and ‘independent’ domains: sovereignty, the political sphere, the social sphere, the economy. While Skocpol and others refine this framework rendering more complex, and thus more realistic, such refinements do not ultimately transcend the logic underlying these concepts and the broader taxonomical framework they are formulated within.⁷ This limitation comes back to haunt orthodox approaches in ways that undermine them.

As Foucault (2008) noted, this taxonomical system emerges concurrently with a particular set of transformations in the forms and techniques of politics – the ‘*Birth of Biopolitics*’ – which among other things are predicated upon the taxonomical, epistemological and ontological distinctions between a series of domains – state/sovereignty, politics, society, economy – presenting themselves as objective. Upon those cornerstones, claims are built about ‘natural’ forms of everything from individuality to ‘proper’ social order, including claims in a positivist vein to the possibility of discovering the ‘laws’ governing social reality as much as those governing the physical realm.

One of the radical difficulties with this approach – which is still hegemonic in Political Science – is that these categories are not merely *descriptive* of political reality but are also *constitutive* of that reality. Indeed, *as categories* they are inextricable from such constitutive political practice, whether through their assertion or contestation, as the extensive literature on the waves of reciprocal contestation of autocratic regimes and progressive civil society actors shows (Abdelrahman 2004; Camau 2002; Carapico 2002). The literature on contestation and state-making also effectively demonstrates as much.

Weberian ideal-types cannot capture this ‘second life’ of concepts and categories, their ‘meta-causality’: those categories are **designed to measure the distance between ideal type and**

⁷ Serious consideration of the less-frequently commented on aspect of Weber’s definition, i.e. the claim over a *legitimate* monopoly of the use of force, give rise to a series of analytical possibilities usually not taken, save by historical sociologists.



SEPAD

concrete reality, but precisely for that reason they have no way of accounting either for the *constitutive* effects of the distance they measure (e.g. interpellation, making possible claims to increase/improve surveillance, centralisation, etc.), or for the deployment of those categories in concrete political practices. As such, both the assumption of the ‘reality’ of these ‘objects’ or their ideal types (Mitchell 1991) and/or the simple *omission* of this dimension in itself has constitutive effects (Teti 2012) that liberal approaches remain necessarily blind to.

Consequently, just as for classical Orientalism, claims explicitly asserting or implicitly assuming orthodox liberal positivist categories – claims to (the ontological distinctiveness of) statehood, sovereignty, etc. – must be understood as not just taxonomical but also *performative* insofar as they elide or marginalise the generative role/function such signs take on. For example, Talal Asad’s observation that the state “independently of the entire population, embodies sovereignty” is an observation applicable to the *claim* to represent, or rather of the Saussurian or Piercean *sign* of representing a population, but a claim that inevitably falls short of reality and insofar as it does so, is performative, is attempting to establish a reality it claims to merely represent. As such, the ontology of liberal concepts and categories is in fact closer to Debordian spectacles or Baudrillardian simulacra than it is to Weberian ideal types.

These performances variously include “the state [as] the embodiment of sovereignty, the vehicle through which power over life emerges,” the state as vehicle of modernity or progress (e.g. during decolonisation and the apogee of Arab Nationalism(s)) or indeed of a return to some Golden Age (e.g. ‘ultraconservative’ Islamists, primordialist nationalists), etc. These *categories/kinds* of performances – and often the specific roles-functions claimed, such as guarantor of justice, law, or order – are not so different between Global North and Global South (the contrary position risks an ultimately Orientalist ‘methodological regionalism’).

For example: if the MENA state is routinely understood as ‘fragile’ or ‘unconsolidated’ and its sovereignty ‘contested’, can the ‘state’ and its ‘sovereignty’ truly be considered complete/established in states otherwise classified as consolidated liberal democracies? This problem is of course not limited to the MENA. Italy and the UK, for example, both score 10/10 on the ‘Polity IV’ scale since the end of WWI. Yet Italy is riven with the interrelation of clientelism, corruption, tax evasion, politics, and organised crime, with a decade of terrorism splitting the country (the 1970s, or *Anni di Piombo*), various attempted coups d’état, not to mention a deeply pervasive cultural and political influence of the Catholic Church undermining secularism. For its part, the UK is the world’s largest centre for money-laundering, which the entire structure of its financial sector (roughly 12% of its GDP) gravitates around, with inevitable consequences for the democratic credentials of its political system. An analogous point can be made about the Netherlands’ fiscal framework which allows it to be turned into a *de facto* tax haven, permitting other companies based in the EU to elude national taxation, undermining states’ ability to undertake redistribution, one of the core functions of a modern state.

Like many European countries, these states also display declining voter turnout, declining trust in ruling class legitimacy, and are increasingly riven with xenophobic politics. Also in both cases most politicians choose to ‘surf’ that xenophobia rather than challenge it, not least

because any serious challenge would require addressing those countries' true structural problems: the rise of precarious/'indecent' labour, tax evasion and elusion increasingly embedding indebtedness and vulnerability to international financial markets and global lenders, reversing cuts to education, to social services, and to health, seriously challenging organised crime, redressing a taxation structure that favours the wealthy while extracting increasingly from impoverished dependent labour, the systematic exploitation of abandoned labour/modern-day slavery by 'illegal' migrants/refugees whose employers are rarely even reprimanded, and so on. Nor are those states and their 'leading' political classes addressing the structural causes that facilitate wealth extraction from the bulk of the population in Global South (e.g. countries of net migration, which is increasingly including some Global Northern states such as Italy or Spain). None of these are issues that politicians or privileged classes in Europe or the Global North are prepared to seriously countenance. Leaderships in the Global South generally fare little better.

It is no coincidence that labour, taxation, corruption, welfare – i.e. social justice – are increasingly similar to the *kinds* of **cleavages** observed in postcolonial contexts / MICs-LMICs / the Global South. Nor does it seem coincidental that parallel to such cleavages are also socio-political **grievances** that are also increasingly similarly handled by local elites through a combination of surveillance, coercive repression and racist propaganda. Indeed, recent developments in Tunisia, the neo-authoritarian Saied regime's turn to xenophobic politics – in this case, anti-Black – mirroring Europe's and the US' own anti-immigrant 'great replacement' narrative, provide a stunningly clear example of this discursive and praxeological convergence. The cleavages and their discursive articulation perhaps do not often align as evidently as in the current Tunisian European case, but this is not necessary for the general point to hold.

From this point of view, it seems more appropriate to think of the evolution of political forms in both the Global South and the Global North as converging around a few characteristics: 1) increasing socio-economic polarization involving the precarization of lower and middle-income classes (with an attendant decline in social mobility); 2) a response to consequent disaffection (declining political legitimacy, participation, etc.) which does not address structural causes of that disaffection, but to various degrees and in various ways deploys discursive and coercive repression (with its attendant 'lawfare') and ideological distraction (blaming 'foreign fingers' and especially immigrants), 3) the consequent increasing precarity and brittleness of 'backsliding' liberal democracies and their ever-more-autocratic counterparts (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018).

Understanding 'identity', 'sects' and 'sectarianism'

In a postcolonial context such as the MENA/SWANA, 'the state' and/or sovereignty are often defined as 'eroded', 'fragile', 'unconsolidated' or otherwise somehow incomplete, precarious, contested or in any case not 'full'. Representations of non-Western statehood and sovereignty are 'Orientalized' through being defined by *lack* and in contraposition to the supposedly 'consolidated' Western state.

In most cases, this can come inadvertently through apparently innocent claims by scholars who note that “claims to sovereign power are [instead] found in religion, tribe, ethnicity, economic capacity, authenticity, and other forms of legitimacy” as well as gender, and likewise, conversely, that claims contesting the state are similarly diverse. As a taxonomical exercise in semiotic articulation these observations are not necessarily incorrect. But if these claims about/sources of ‘lack’ are attributed to specific ontologies, epistemologies and causal drives, they miss the broader and more important dynamic: these ‘identities’ and their attendant series of societal divisions and semiotic-material articulations should instead be understood as a series of dimensions or axes not just as forms of *identity* but of what Gramsci called *pregiudizi* (prejudices/pre-judgements). This shift in perspective is crucial because as evident in Gramsci’s analysis of Italy’s ‘Southern Question’, the polarisation of political debate, practices and ‘identities’ is linked to these prejudice axes with the effect of ‘disgregating’ subaltern classes in the Gramscian sense, i.e. producing a constant yet ever-incomplete fragmentation *both between and within subaltern classes*. This constantly fragmenting force provides the base upon which different ruling elites – often metamorphosing from one ideological commitment or identity to another – achieve the effect of (re)producing divisions between and within subaltern/marginalised groups and the resilience of inequalities through *different* means. In short: various incarnations of nationalisms, of articulation of religion and politics (e.g. ‘political Islams’, ‘political Christianities’, etc.) while appearing different, disparate and irreconcilable, actually perform very similar functions in dividing subaltern groups and/or masking the failures of dominant classes (Gervasio and Teti 2023).

By contrast, treating these identities/divisions as ontologically independent is in this sense not merely inaccurate but misses the broader play between these identities/claims and signifier/materiality, and in so doing, facilitates the (re)production of these very disgregative, polarising dynamics, bolstering rather than undermining exploitative effects.

In both senses, then, identities are best viewed not in isolation nor in simple dialogical counterposition. Rather, attention is best focused on the whole field of the distribution of these identities and their interplay, to which it is not at all obvious that state boundaries are relevant *a priori*. This distribution of identities is better understood as part of the ‘field’ of power, the manner in which a particular form of power distributes material and semiotic characteristics in relation to each other – what Foucault called a *dispositif* (Bussolini 2010).

It is therefore misleading at an ontological and especially at an epistemological level to focus on the specificity – and thus ‘distinctiveness’ – of local contexts. Whether through Gramscian or Foucaultian processes, this focus generates a kind of ‘methodological regionalism’ with its attendant Orientalisms – Said himself famously defined Orientalism precisely as a “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said 2014, 2).

The reliance on ‘identity’ and an emphasis on ‘sectarianization’ therefore risks being one such avenue to re-Orientalization. Treating these ‘identities’ and their attendant socio-political formations and processes as distinct/distinctive reifies those identities and divisions, and insofar as it does, it can also lead to falling into methodological nationalism and

methodological ‘regionalism’, the *a priori* assumption that phenomena in specific locales are the result of causes and processes only or primarily within that locale.

Identities and their attendant political expressions should instead be understood as *modulations* of/in an established form of power or challenges to it (e.g. resistance in Foucault, revolution/war of position-movement in Gramsci) assessed for their role in reproducing or challenging the established form of power (Marchi 2021).

Such modulations, however, are also not independent across state lines (i.e. crossing the signs of territorial sovereignty) but rather are interconnected whether through similarities or counterpositions. Well-established examples of such entanglements include the similarities between Pan-Arabism and Bismark’s or Mazzini’s nationalism, or between the US ‘Christian Right’ and ‘ultraconservative’ Islamists. Latterly, the case of the xenophobic turn in Tunisian politics provides such a demonstration. The new Tunisian regime’s xenophobic rhetoric parallels its ‘Western’ far-right counterparts’ ‘Great Replacement Theory’, just as its economic strategy and its attendant impasses mirror Europe’s and the West’s own.

What is to be done?

How then should the state, sovereignty and space – particularly territoriality – be conceived?

1. Sovereignty and the (sovereign) state are to be understood as ambiguous/paradoxical *signifiers* under the rubric of which concrete political practices are undertaken at two levels 1) the exercise of power in its immediate sense as authority, constriction/coercion (Foucault’s *pouissance*) and domination (Gramsci’s *dominazione*), 2) a lynchpin of power in the more general sense (Foucault’s *pouvoir*).
2. The analytical question becomes how to conceive of 1) *sovereignty-as-signifier* and the *state-as-signifier*; 2) the elision between that representation and the (lack of) its ‘reality’ (such as posited in liberal political theory); and 3) the *interplay* between these two.
3. The same goes for each core category of liberal political analysis: the ‘civil sphere’, the ‘economic sphere’/the economy, the ‘political sphere’ (cf. Mitchell 1991).
4. Each of the relations above must be understood as an articulation of a) *discursive-semiotic* practices and b) *material* practices (assuming for ease of exposition the possibility of distinguishing between/decoupling these two dimensions, whereas of course these are inextricable domains).
5. As such, and given the limitations of orthodox liberal positivist approaches, state, sovereignty, and space/territoriality and their intersection / interrelation / articulation are better understood as *effects* – which gain their own independent causal power, but effects nonetheless (Debordian spectacles, or better simulacra in Baudrillard’s sense).

6. The same can be said about how state, sovereignty, and space/territoriality affect lines of inclusion and exclusion such as they are articulated in contemporary contexts (e.g. sect, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, political ideology, etc.).

How can such a perspective be translated into practice? There are of course many possible alternatives, several of which hinted at above. Amongst these are the following key points, from which emerge more general and on more analytically convincing explanations than those offered by conventional approaches currently hegemonic in Political Science:

- retrieving a Gramscian perspective (e.g. more convincing perspective on state civil society-political society relations; Ayubi on regime brittleness, which overcomes the rigid democratization/authoritarian resilience debate (Ayubi 1996); Marchi on the ‘everyday molecularity’ of socio-political transformation (Marchi 2021));
- assessing events and political change on the basis not of their ‘face-value’ identitarian ‘presentation’ (thereby contributing to reifying the same), but of whether they move towards transcendence of material (socio-economic) processes of exploitation of and polarisation between subaltern groups, i.e. the ‘structural’ causes of polarisation;
- keeping in focus the mutually constitutive relation between claims to knowledge and forms of power (Foucault’s power/knowledge, i.e. the fact that forms of power today entail ‘regimes of truth’).

These standpoints/starting points help bring into focus not only specific dimensions of inclusion and exclusion – gender, ethnicity, class, religion, ideology, etc. – but also their possible channels and effects such as state institutions, elections, informal activism, social movements, violent and non-violent contestation, as well as whether these ultimately challenge or reinforce the state/status quo (Challand 2014; Schwedler 2012; Serres and Thomas 2019).

References:

Abdelrahman, Maha. 2004. *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Ayubi, Nazih. 1996. *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Bussolini, J. 2010. “What Is a Dispositive?” *Foucault Studies* 10(10): 85–107.
<https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i10.3120>

Camau, Michel. 2002. “Sociétés Civiles ‘Réelles’ et Téléologie de La Démocratisation” *Revue internationale de politique comparée* 9(2): 213–32.
<https://doi.org/10.3917/ripc.092.0213>

Carapico, Sheila. 2002. “Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World.” *The Middle East Journal* 56(3): 379–95.

- Challand, Benoit. 2014. "Revisiting Aid in the Arab Middle East." *Mediterranean Politics* 19(3): 281–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2014.966983>
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gervasio, Gennaro, and Andrea Teti. 2023. "Gramsci's 'Southern Question' and Egypt's Authoritarian Retrenchment: Subalternity and the Disruption of Activist Agency." *Review of African Political Economy*.50(175):26-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2023.2174691>
- Marchi, Alessandra. 2021. "Molecular Transformations: Reading the Arab Uprisings with and beyond Gramsci." *Middle East Critique* 30(1): 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2021.1872862>
- Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics." *American political Science Review* 85(1): 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962879>
- Said, Edward W. 2014. *Orientalism*. New York: Doubleday.
- Schwedler, Jillian. 2012. "The Political Geography of Protest in Neoliberal Jordan." *Middle East Critique* 21(3): 259–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2012.717804>
- Serres, Thomas. 2019. "After the Apocalypse: Catastrophizing Politics in Post-Civil War Algeria." *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 5(1): 55–87. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20398573v5n1p55>
- Teti, Andrea. 2012. "Beyond Lies the Wub: The Challenges of Post-Democratization." *Middle East Critique* 21(1): 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2012.658495>
- Teti, Andrea, Pamela Abbott, and Francesco Cavatorta. 2018. "Conclusions: Resilient Authoritarianism and Frustrated Expectations." In *The Arab Uprisings in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia*, eds. Andrea Teti, Pamela Abbott, and Francesco Cavatorta. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 123–40. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69044-5_6