

## MECAM's Conference

# "Imagining Futures - Dealing with Disparity"

17-19 March 2023

### Abstract

Established in April 2020, the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) has become an integral part of the Tunisian and Maghreb academic landscape. Based in Tunis, the MECAM is a Tunisian-German research centre that intends to be a platform for interdisciplinary, transregional, and intergenerational research based on humanities and social sciences.

MECAM explores the connection between multidimensional disparity and the possibilities of building and negotiating future-oriented ideas and models in the societies of today's Maghreb, as launched by the "Arab Spring". Therefore, it focuses on complex social, political, cultural and economic processes and issues of common interest and concern that divide and connect the Maghreb, the Middle East and Europe historically and in the modern time— e.g. beliefs, distribution of resources, cultural transformations, migration, rule of law, socio-economic conflicts, and (transitional) justice. These exemplified pressing issues converge in the central theme of MECAM: "*Imagining Futures - Dealing with Disparity*". Under this label, MECAM is planning its Closing Conference at the end of March 2023 in Tunis.

The Arab Spring has shown that we are dealing with fermenting societies. For example, behind the institutional façades of some countries in the Maghreb, there are constant social shifts toward new constellations of actors and their sometimes-competing agendas. Within MECAM, we assume that different manifestations of disparity determine these shifts to a considerable extent. And each new formation is associated with certain visions or perceptions of the future or/and specific models of society.

### \*Imagining Futures\*

This concluding scientific gathering of MECAM's preliminary funding phase aims to reflect on the complex processes by which models and visions for the future of society are (re)negotiated (imagining the future) in the region. Crucially, this process of (re)negotiation has to be seen in the context of the deep inequalities (disparities) that can characterise the Maghreb. In the sense of François Hartog (*Régimes d'historicité*; 2003), an anticipated future always suggests a projection into



history – thus the future can be understood as a construct built and imagined on the basis of everyday and past realities. At the scholarly level, the concept of "Imagining Futures" has found its way into a number of debates in various disciplines, including geography (Gregory, 1993, Harvey, 2000), economics (Lanier, 2014, Beckert, 2016), ethics (Bowles, 2018), and cultural studies (Appadurai, 2013), from which MECAM has generated its academic point of departure.

### **\*Dealing with Disparity\***

"Disparity"- refers to various forms of inequality, including its spatial and temporal dimensions. Disparity is an expression of unequal power imbalances within societies, but also of different norms and ways of life. The term refers to inequalities as "avoidable, morally unjustified, hierarchical differences" (Therborn, 2002) in income, social status, gender and race relations, cultural dominance, and access to social resources, (such as education, work, and health). Inequalities exist in all societies but the Tunisian or Maghreb perspective may offer new or different perspectives and experiences, and perhaps models for thinking about issues of inequality and the future.

Against this background, the main objective the Closing Conference is to trace the complex processes by which the societal models of the future are developed and (re)negotiated (imagining the future), while maintaining an awareness of the profoundly unequal conditions from which these models are derived (disparity). For this purpose, it considers different societal actors as well as respective contexts of time and space, which define the disparate starting conditions for models of the future. Thus, the Conference will explore the impact of multidimensional disparity on models, visions and imaginaries of the future within the framework of MECAM's five thematic clusters, which represent pressing issues of common interest and concern: "Aesthetics and Cultural Practice", "Inequality and Mobility"; "Memory and Justice"; "Resources and Sustainability" and "Identities and Beliefs". All analysis will proceed from a comparative historical perspective and will deal with the following two overarching research questions:

- *How does the multidimensional inequality of Maghreb societies affect different social spheres and spheres of life (Bourdieu, 2012; Gana, 2012; Salehi-Isfahani et al., 2014)?*
- *What are the implications of existing inequality for the scope of these future models that coexist and compete both inside and outside the Maghreb?*

The three-day closing conference will be an opportunity to bring together researchers from different career stages, academic disciplines and world regions to discuss these issues and to build and strengthen scientific networks. At the same time, this conference is also an opportunity to thank and bring together all those who have always provided MECAM with start-up support since its first hour of birth.

We are pleased to welcome at this conference not only researchers from the Maghreb, the Middle East, and Europe, but also researchers from our partner Merian Center, ICAS:MP, based in Delhi,

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**ميكام**  
مركز ميريان  
للادراسات المتقدمة  
في المنطقة المغاربية



**MECAM**

Merian Centre  
For Advanced Studies  
In The Maghreb

India. Together with ICAS:MP, we aim to add interregional perspectives to MECAM's research. In addition, a round table discussion will reflect on the academic contribution of the Merian Centers, ICAS:MP and MECAM, to Germany, their respective partner regions in the Maghreb and India, and the internationalization of the social sciences and humanities.

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