



## **CEDEJ Tuesday Seminar**

### **Beyond Nostalgia, Histories and Archives of Italian Subalterns in Colonial Egypt (1864-1937)**

Presented by

**Francesca Biancani, Costantino Paonessa, and Costanza Lisi**

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**On May 27, 2025 at 2pm at CEDEJ**

**23 Gamal Eldin Abou El Mahassen St., Garden City – Cairo**

Scholarship on modern Egyptian cosmopolitanism mostly unquestioningly accepted the ways in which this historical period has been memorialized by a number of former members of diverse diasporic foreign communities since the advent of postcolonial nationalist politics in the 1950s, representations rife with eurocentrism, elitism and nostalgia (Ilbert 1996; Hamoudi 2006 ; Aciman 1994). In contrast to this, the PRIN 2022 project VERNACOSM, History and Archives of Italian Subalterns in Colonial Egypt (1864-1937), which this talk showcases, endeavours at reorienting the focus away from elites' to subalterns' experiences of cosmopolitanism, focusing on the concrete circumstances and narratives of those ordinary men and women, mostly subsistence migrants, who constituted the bulk of the Italian "colony" in Egypt at the turn of the XX century. In revisiting and pluralizing the elitist canon of much historiography of the Italian communities of Cairo and Alexandria (Branca 2000; Rainero e Serra 1991, Petricioli 2007), this project deployed a vernacular micro-historical approach to the exploration of virtually untapped sources whose archival retrieval and enhancement constitute its technical core, the post-unitary fonds of the Italian Consulates of Cairo and Alexandria of Egypt from 1864 until the end of the Capitulations in 1937.

These sources, it is argued, constitute an invaluable source about a specific case of late imperial cosmopolitanism and extraterritorial legal regime. In this context, everyday interethnic relations remain one of the least explored themes in the historiography concerning the European foreign communities in Egypt, especially when it comes to the analysis of how ordinary social practices both undermined *and* reinforced the social hierarchies the imperialist enterprise relied on (Shahla 2018).

Among the several ASDMAE collections and series documenting the history of the Italian community after the Unification of 1861, the Penal and Civil Consular Courts Papers are key in deepening our knowledge about the imbrications of class, space, gender, identity in a colonial cosmopolitan setting.

While the nature of the sources clearly conjures up realms of highly contentious social interaction, they also depict a shared vernacular cosmopolitan ecosystem where capitulary prerogatives could have been manipulated to advance strategic agendas of intra-subaltern cooperation among local and foreigners. We can then plunge into the exploration of how the juridical and normative categories which were productive of imperial cosmopolitanism were appropriated and acted upon from below in a quest for survival and subsistence that subaltern Italians shared with their local counterparts.

Speakers:

- **Francesca Biancani** is Associate Professor of History and Institutions of the Modern Middle East at the ALMA MATER STUDIORUM, University of Bologna
- **Costantino Paonessa** is a historian and postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bologna
- **Costanza Lisi** is an archivist and post-doctoral researcher at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia