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.

Promoting diversity

In order to achieve balance and diversity in terms of nationality and place of residence, MSPRM has first of all insist- ed 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 only 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 be- come 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 criti- cal issues and challenges in the regions of MENA and Europe. These meet- ings 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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