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Lost in the Mediterranean: Theories, Discourses, Borders and Migration Policies in the 'Mare Nostrum'*

For quite some time the Mediterranean region has become a prime arena for political action and reflection. As a consequence, there has been growing debate on its particular history, culture and anthropology. However, a good deal of this debate has proved incapable of successfully describing and analyzing the contemporary Mediterranean. Taking migratory movements, policies and bordering practices as its perspective, this article aims to shatter the postcard image of *Mare Nostrum*. Engaging with interdisciplinary studies, it highlights the stark contradictions operating within current theoretical and socio-political debates on the Mediterranean.

Keywords: borders; cultures; Mediterranean; migrants; multiversalism.

1. The Look Upon the /Mediterranean/

In his book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson highlights how in the analysis of semantic content linguists use a peculiar scheme which “can mark a given word as either ‘word’ or ‘idea’ by alternating slash marks or brackets” (Jameson, 1991: 260). This scheme, of which Jameson regrets the absence within ideological analysis, could turn out to be very useful in our journey, although a brief and synthetic one, around the Mediterranean. Hence, it is necessary to distinguish what the word /Mediterranean/ describes – with all its etymological roots and different declinations throughout the centuries – from the meaning of the term “Mediterranean” as assumed within the present cultural and political debate. Separating these two levels of analysis, that is, the symbolic from the real level, could be useful to prevent the analysis from getting swamped by vague and dim views, where the “Mediterranean” as image, vision or metaphysics takes over, sometimes to the point of making the solid /Mediterranean/, intended as physical and temporal space, vanish.

At first, such a separation of the analytical process may come across as an easy method of research that could clarify all the theoretical contradictions and magically solve many of our doubts. Nonetheless, as soon as we consider the significantly broad and diverse recent literature on the Mediterranean, we realize that the path is anything but simple. The cultural and political “Mediterranean” widely described in the texts of the ‘Mediterraneanist’

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scholars draws on and claims to obtain its strength, validity and justification right from the physical /Mediterranean/. One of the cardinal points in the interpretative compass of each of the main participants in this debate is constituted precisely by the analysis of the physical features, the nature of the /Mediterranean/, conceived as a primary ontological reality on which (almost) everything, humankind included, depends. In fact, Mediterranean anthropology is often considered as a direct and necessary consequence of the physical /Mediterranean/.

Fernand Braudel was one of the first scholars to suggest this special connection. Braudel's Mediterranean, at first described as a multifarious and irregular landscape ("A thousand things together. Not a landscape but countless landscapes..." – Braudel, 1999: 7), expands and becomes elaborate to the point of becoming a "system," a system in which nature and humankind reconcile, offering a "good chance" to approach history in a different and original way.

The characteristics of the physical environment represent, for Braudel, the essential and (almost) sufficient basis to construct certain features of a historical-social formation. Later on other important scholars followed this trend of thought. To them too the Mediterranean appears marked by this special convergence of *nature* and *spirit*, as derived from the Mediterranean philosophical tradition. This connection apparently gave birth to a different anthropology, opposed to the one produced by modernity, which – allegedly – conceives of the dominion over nature by a privileged human subject only as far as the sense of "seeing" and "knowing" is concerned. According to these theories, the man produced by modernity, entirely devoted to rationality and scientific progress, and "deprived" of all the other bodily senses, is thus forced to produce an abstract, mechanistic and quantitative vision of life:

Thanks to the tradition of the Mediterranean philosophies – which does not stop with the "turning point" produced by modernity – we learned that there is a spiritual dimension of the cosmos; that this dimension expresses itself in the *bios* and through the *bios*; that, finally, the prodigious creativity of life forges and toughens the forms of consciousness. (Alcaro, 2006: 203)

The nature, the geographical position, the geophysical configuration and the climatic status of the Mediterranean represent therefore the *sine qua non*, "the necessary premise," the "force that feeds" (Cassano, 2007: 79) the cultural and political discourse on the "Mediterranean":

Three continents have always been facing the Mediterranean, and such a meeting of theirs in just one place has dissolved the differences, started a hybridization of the different, the great antidote against fundamentalisms and ethnic purges. The physical unity of the Mediterranean is not a touristic invention, but a common anchorage against divisions, the physical and material anchorage of a great common homeland, a root made of stone and sea, which is stronger than the differences of the shores, than the continental drift, than religions and ethnic prides from which the fundamentalist temptation endlessly arises. (Cassano, 2000: 19)

The physical unity of the /Mediterranean/ turns then into ideal unity. The fact that many people face just one place “dissolves the differences” and forces, almost spontaneously, “hybridization,” leading to reciprocal acknowledgement and acceptance of the “differences.”

The current academic debate on the “Mediterranean” is centered on this particular connection between *human being* and *nature*, which has developed there throughout the centuries. It is believed that this tight and immediate relationship gave birth to a social and historical development which is “different,” “original” and founded on “reasonableness,” as opposed to the social and historical formations of the North, which, fatally influenced by the harsh climate and by geography, have been founded mostly upon (self)destroying “rationality”¹ (Latouche, 1999).

Thus, the “Mediterranean” has become a fertile land where new ethical-political theories are being produced:

The Mediterranean is an elusive space with contours one often fails to grasp. The Mediterranean is more than just a sea in between land masses or a maritime ‘continent’ whose traces could be easily followed on a map, confounding all attempts at geographical reductionism. It appeals to the imaginary, forming a world composed of multiple narratives, inspiring as well as stirring political angst. A geo-cultural ensemble whose coordinates shift according to historical time and the rhythms of memory, the Mediterranean world defies established rules and entrenched discourses which turn it into a mere border of Europe or even a blurry neighbourhood. (Bechev and Nicolaidis, 2010: xi)

The presence and “coexistence” of many cultures that characterize the Mediterranean region has become a typical *leitmotif* of the contemporary debate. In other words, the Mediterranean is represented as a real “multiverse of civilizations, cultures, languages, symbolic and expressive universes to be opposed as a cultural and political alternative to

¹ Serge Latouche underlines that “[t]he reasonable, *phronesis*, implies a certain degree of craftiness (*metis*) and necessarily makes room for rivalry (*agon*) since it thrives on debate and conflict while rationality assumes to impose itself without discussion. Nonetheless, the reasonable is not the search for success at any price, it is not pure technique. The drive towards the good is always present there. Precisely because of this, the rediscovery of the reasonable, of *phronesis*, is particularly useful to get out of the contemporary crisis. Prudence (*phronesis*) is undisputedly Mediterranean, from Aristotle to Cicero; it implies an acute awareness of the tragic condition of man and, at the same time, an always alert sense of the limits of every situation” (Latouche, 1999: 53).

the ‘oceanic’ drifts of globalization” (Cassano and Zolo, 2007: 17).

These representations of the Mediterranean (although described here in a necessarily synthetic manner, and therefore running the risk of not doing them full justice) meet with some evident logical difficulties once we consider that the concept of “nature” on which they are founded remains closely anchored to *primeval nature* only, to *naturalistic*, extra-human and extra-historical nature, that is, the realm of pure chance, lacking consciousness and intentionality. In fact, there is no concern for what, in a historicist-dialectical perspective, or in a Hegelian-Marxist perspective, is “nature” as “second nature,” that is, all those social automatisms – such as the market and the accumulation of capital – which, in the contemporary age, constitute something that precedes, shapes and influences the conscious social action of individuals, while escaping their control.

The methodological and epistemological premises of these particular representations of the Mediterranean also fall short when the concept of “geography” or “space” they refer to is considered. The “Mediterranean space” is often disconnected from social and historical dynamics, in other words, no emphasis is given to the material bonds between the Mediterranean geography and political-economic processes. Actually, there is no due consideration of the fact that “neither time nor space can be assigned objective meanings independently of material processes, and that it is only through investigation of the latter that we can properly ground our concepts of the former” (Harvey, 1989: 204). Thus, the /Mediterranean/ should be observed and analyzed on the basis of this materialistic conception of the cognitive categories, according to which the “objective conceptions of time and space are necessarily created through material practices and processes which serve to reproduce social life” (*ibidem*).

The ‘original’ connection formulated between Mediterranean nature and humankind, between *bios* and *spirit*, and therefore the subsequent link between the symbolic “Mediterranean” and the physical /Mediterranean/, shows different and significant fractures as soon as the look upon the /Mediterranean/ gains the necessary historical and social perspective. Soon, the light and floating “Mediterranean” turns out to be only an ideological addition, a luxury or decorative representation of the concrete /Mediterranean/.

2. Policing the Mediterranean Borders

In fact, instead of being a place for a meeting of differences, the Mediterranean has turned

into a permanent, mobile and enveloping border, preventing meetings and separating people, especially the rich from the poor, the “haves” from the “have nots,” the “white” from the “colored,” Europe from Africa. The contemporary Mediterranean looks more like a military zone than a happy place or a lab for new and inclusive political practices. Military patrols using live ammunition against unarmed men, women and children scaling barbed wire fences, captains dumping their human cargo in the sea after being detected by the navy, left-to-die boats and mass deportations in the high seas: these are scenes not from the Second World War, but from the modern-day Mediterranean. While the global economy and corporations encourage the seamless transfer of goods and money around the world, and members of the international elite feel equally at home in Rome, Lisbon, Cairo, Marrakesh or Tunis, those who have the misfortune of being born on the wrong side of the bay, or simply belong to the “have not” part of humankind, face high barriers to their freedom of movement.

The Mediterraneans’ everyday lives – especially those of Africans – are caught in a permanent borderland existence. This space is now populated by those who are not allowed to get into ‘Fortress Europe’, facing mobile borders that “may be found anywhere” (Guild, 2003: 103).

The universe of borders is the best prism through which one may view the contemporary Mediterranean in all its complexity. As Pierre Vilar (1985: 23) points out, the “history of the world can be best observed from the frontier” because “borders reveal political, military, cultural and economic phenomena” (Pradeau, 1994: 17); in other words, borders provide deeper information on that (Hegelian-Marxist) “second nature” with which we need to deal in order to understand the Mediterranean’s and Europe’s “nature.” Thus, it is by observing and analyzing what happens in the Mediterranean that we can explore the new dimensions of inequality, domination and exclusion in Europe and the Mediterranean region.

The creation of *Frontex* (European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union) in 2004, and more recently of *Frontex Plus* (the new police operation of the Agency in the Mediterranean), bespeaks Europe’s obsession with border control and its incapacity to find different solutions to social problems (Jorry, 2007). The externalization of borders is a result of this policy. Partnerships and cooperations between EU and non-EU countries are formed “in a diverse spectrum of areas including interdiction, border control, readmission,

protection capacity building, and even negotiating the idea of ‘offshore processing centres’” (Betts, 2006: 2). The non-EU countries are essentially asked to hold back irregular migrants and prevent their entry into European territories in return for financial aid. Thus, border control goes well beyond Europe’s physical borders. As Balibar points out, “borders are no longer at the border” (1998: 217-218); rather, they are “dispersed” (Balibar, 1999). However, for Balibar, the fact that borders have been blurred does not mean that they tend to disappear. On the contrary, they tend to become ubiquitous (Collucello *et al.*, 2007; Paoletti, 2009).

Agreements on border management have been at the center of Mediterranean politics in the last decades: Italy-Libya, Italy-Tunisia, Italy-Egypt, Spain-Morocco, France-Algeria, France-Tunisia and Greece-Turkey are among many to participate in this trend, which reproduces the North-South divides in the Mediterranean.

Political and public rhetoric portrays migrants as endangering European health, security, identity and welfare, an inhuman presence gathering at the southern frontier of *Fortress Europe*. Hostile feelings towards migrants are politically constructed in a delicate strategy of social manipulation. Throughout Europe, migrants are being scapegoated as the cause of national unemployment and, hence, they figure as a national pollutant. The gut reaction to social insecurity and economic crisis is thus fostered by media prejudice and public discourses (Basso, 2010).

In this scenario, borders and frontiers inhabit the realm of crisis and emergency, surveillance and control. The state of exception is the dominant paradigm of government in crisis or emergency contexts. Through the state of exception, migrants are no longer considered as subjects of rights, they are simply reduced, in Agamben’s terms (2005), to bare life, becoming permanently banned:

The relation of the exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. (Agamben, 1998: 28)

Indeed, migrants crossing the Mediterranean have often been indiscriminately ‘pushed back’ (very often to the places where they suffered abuse, prison and torture) or simply left to

die² on the high seas. In some cases, this happened while, paradoxically, in the name of human rights, several European navies were waging war (such as that against Gaddafi's regime), or conducting military operations, just a few miles away. The words pronounced by Tineke Strik, member of the Council of Europe, perfectly summarize this tremendous paradox:

We can talk as much as we want about human rights and the importance of complying with international obligations, but if at the same time we just leave people to die – perhaps because we don't know their identity or because they come from Africa – it exposes how meaningless those words are. (*The Guardian*, March 28, 2012).

3. Conclusion: Is the Symbolic “Mediterranean” a Real Alternative?

After this brief but clarifying journey around the /Mediterranean/, time is ripe to tackle again the contradictions between the real and the symbolic “Mediterranean.” As stated previously, the “Mediterranean” has become a site where new ethical-political theories are produced and these need to be confronted. Despite the fact that the Mediterranean has practically turned into a postmodern cemetery, and despite the fact that the everyday life of the Mediterranean people is actually marked, year by year, by disparities (between north and south Mediterranean shores) concerning infant mortality, life expectancy, illiteracy rates, individual health-care expenses, the proportion of the population living below the threshold of poverty, and unemployment rates, in part of the cultural studies on the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean region is still considered to be a privileged place where differences and pluralities peacefully coexist, as the site where different “civilizations” triumph over space and time, creating thus a cultural “multiverse.” Many authors today look at the Mediterranean as a place where “in the same field many games are played at the same time” (Cassano, 2007: 95), a political-cultural lab which cannot be reduced to universalisms, and therefore able to draw the lines of the social, political and anthropological model that could save humankind from “intolerance” and “colonialism.”

Such an aversion to universalism, indeed, is one of the major tenets of the theoretical

² One particular event provides an insight on the tragic and disconcerting conditions that African migrants have to face crossing the Mediterranean Sea. In the case of what is now referred to as the “left-to-die boat,” 72 migrants fleeing Tripoli by boat on 27 March 2011 were left to drift for 14 days, with no water or food on board, until they landed back on the Libyan shores; 63 of them died, despite the significant naval and aerial presence in the area due to the military intervention in Libya. The migrants' distress calls, received by Italy, went unanswered for days. A nine-month investigation by the Council of Europe has brought to light the human and institutional failings that condemned the boat's occupants to their deadly fate.

discourse on the “Mediterranean.” The Mediterranean attitudes of “resistance,” repeatedly highlighted and brought up in the literature, are essentially two: the “communitarian” and the “dialogical.” The first approach is theoretically grounded on an essentialist concept of culture and on the defence of “local culture,” of folklore, as “heteronomous” and “resistant” to “Atlantic globalization,” and as the paramount expression of the autonomy of the subject. Apparently opposed to the first, the “dialogical” approach has as its keywords “hybridization” and “melting of identities,” which can only be achieved, however, if “cultures” are freed from power relations, that is, “from the dilemma of the subordinate acceptance of, and the allergic and intolerant reaction towards, the other” (Cassano, 2007: 93).

Both approaches deserve several remarks. First of all, if we consider the concept of “culture” and social “harmony” on which they are founded, they look much less distant than they are usually assumed to be. In both cases, “culture” is mainly considered as a given or already constituted essence, and in the “dialogical” perspective (which remains, however, *un-dialectical*) “cultures” only “hold a dialogue,” and “harmony” is sought (almost) exclusively in the field of culture.

Lately, the theoretical movement supporting the “dialogical” perspective, which enjoys larger diffusion than the “communitarian” perspective (which seems to tend towards “cultural closure”), has strongly developed and over time has gained increasing importance within the public debate. The system founded on the “dialogue” between – almost equivalent – cultures, or on the dialogue among different “symbolic universes,” does not seem, however, to constitute a real alternative to “Atlantic universalism” for it seems to reproduce, although on a smaller scale, the same conditions it opposes. In fact, within the local “cultures” – whether holding a dialogue or not – there is a structure of power in place that enacts an analogous dialectic of normalization, discipline and self-discipline of the subjects included therein, leading to a consequent radical exclusion of all the other subjects. Moreover, it appears evident that a view founded on “cultural dialogue,” namely on the *tolerance* of the *other* (a classic concept of “Atlantic liberalism,” by the way), cannot but conceal the existing asymmetries and conflicts, without solving them in any possible way. It has been observed, in fact, although with reference to a different analytical perspective, that “tolerance is not given without skepticism and perhaps cynicism; or without accepting a state of conflict, even in a tragic sense, that is to say, an *internalized intolerance*” (Fortini, 1990: 88).

Thus, Mediterranean “multiversalism,” rather than offering an “alternative” model that “resists” the Atlantic/liberal process of economic and cultural globalization, seems to match it perfectly. In fact, if a particular regime of accumulation needs a coherent schema of reproduction in order to exist, and therefore requires “a materialization of the regime of accumulation taking the form of norms, habits, laws, regulating networks and so on that ensure the unity of the process, i.e. the appropriate consistency of individual behaviours with the schema of reproduction” (Lipietz, 1986, cit. by Harvey, 1989: 122), Mediterranean “multiversalism” (intended as a system gathering many autonomous “symbolic universes”) appears as a necessary element of such a schema of reproduction. The current reorganization of capitalism – with the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism and the decentralization of enterprises – is actually enhanced not only by the fragmentation of the productive units but also by the segmentation of the “cultural” into separate and scarcely (or superficially) communicating sections. The economic model of late capitalism takes advantage, therefore, of political practices and cultural forms that enable it to preserve its extreme dynamism and, at the same time, to acquire features sufficiently organized to work in a coherent way. In other words, the Mediterranean “multiversalist” theories mentioned above seem to support – thanks to the substantial impermeability of the conceptual scheme on which every culture (although holding a dialogue) is allegedly founded – precisely those molecular processes of the endless accumulation of capital.

“Multiversalism” radically denies, then, the universal structure of human experience since experience is always considered as depending on a particular vision of the world, which in turn originates from the “culture of belonging.” Insofar as “multiversalism” erases from the theoretical (and practical) horizon the possibility of a unitary claim, by all human beings, to a different global economic and social system, the collective issues disappear. Human experience is considered to be organized on the basis of a conceptual scheme that actually makes its translation into another scheme impossible, because the experiential data of one might lack their equivalent in the other. On the basis of this theoretical approach, therefore, there is no world, but only manifold representations of it, each one irreducible to the other.

It appears necessary, then, to dwell on a further aspect of the “multiversalist” theories: the relationship between the individual and the “culture s/he belongs to,” and the relation between the individual and the various other subjects belonging to different cultures. The

denial of the existence of a common horizon (which might be more or less wide, but not totally absent) undermines any chance of agreement and interaction among individuals. Their relationship, in fact, would always be deeply influenced by the cultural systems constituted by the “culture of origin” (unchangeable in time and space), and therefore there would be no real chance of recognition through individual relationship structures.

What is denied, or not considered, is the way subjectivity itself is defined through that particular dialectic of recognition/nonrecognition of the *other that is not I*. In fact, this is overlooked because the subject

is never a *presupposition*, as claimed by the metaphysics of liberalism – through the vision of the individual as original subject of freedom – or by Christian metaphysics – through the vision of the human being as ‘created creature’; the subject is rather a *position*, i.e. the result of a becoming, and specifically the outcome of a series of structures of relations. (Finelli, 2005: 26-27).

The *subject* emerging from the theoretical ‘Mediterraneanist’ productions – notwithstanding the therapy of “cultural dialogue,” which melts the identities and mitigates the aggressive and callous expressions of the “culture of origin” – remains an *assumed subject*, unable to escape the conceptual “scheme of origin” that necessarily informs him/her, and consequently incapable of establishing a dialectical relationship with other individuals. From this perspective, Mediterranean “multiversalism” does not represent at all a real alternative to the “Atlantic tsunami.”

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that any reference to social class disappears in the ‘Mediterraneanist’ theories, although the issue of the “dialogue among cultures” does not appear to be raised for the subjects belonging to the dominant upper classes. This latter group has created a transnational social class, irrespective of national, religious and “cultural belonging,” and is able to substantially enjoy the same standards and ways of life, the same level of consumption and education, and the same amusement and meeting places. Briefly, it is a class that lives entirely separated from the everyday life of common people in their countries.

It is exactly at this point that the current debate on the “Mediterranean” reveals its unbridgeable distance from real life and its mere belonging to the world of superstructures, while the reality of the /Mediterranean/ remains the concrete responsibility of economists, politicians, professional entrepreneurs and, *ça va sans dire*, the army. The gap between the

concrete /Mediterranean/ and the symbolic “Mediterranean” does not allow us to grasp and then analyze the reality of the Mediterraneans.

Revised by Teresa Tavares

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