

A FLUID ARCHIVE

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The Mediterranean as method

Why the Mediterranean? Why, despite its seeming marginalisation in the overarching narrative of modern politics and culture, does it persistently return to the discussion? To raise this question is to touch a profound tension that lies at the heart of a contemporary debate. If the Mediterranean is overwhelmingly claimed as the site of the 'origins' of Western culture, at the same time there is also an increasing reluctance to be associated with its present-day realities.

Somehow, in order for it to be modern, the existing Mediterranean has to be repudiated. Sunlit sloth, civic chaos and corruption all represent the distasteful underbelly of a heritage that the incisive management of modernity north of the Alps and along the Atlantic shore has apparently overcome. Reduced to the leisurely pace of a time-out in which to entertain the senses with food, wine, sea, sun, sex and antiquated cultures, the rationality of modernity is apparently exercised elsewhere. However, if this is the repressed side of Occidental modernity, it can never really be kept at a distance; it is always destined to return and disturb the procedures of a purified rationality.

So, apart from signalling a banal escape into pleasure, the Mediterranean as a repressed alterity *within* modernity can also be re-routed into a further, and altogether more disturbing, groove. As a line of flight into another unauthorised critical space, the present and past histories of the Mediterranean propose a radical reevaluation of the very processes and powers that have led to its contemporary subordination, marginalisation and definition. Rather than simply clinging to some purported authenticity being threatened by modernity, there lies the altogether more complex issue of the latter being worked out, lived and proposed in transit and translation.

Instead of the template there is transformation; the model is mutable and comes to be modified. Modernity is not an object to be possessed, defended and imposed, but the being and becoming of a dense network of shifting, interconnected, historical processes.

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Over the last few centuries the Mediterranean has come to represent a symbolic space against which Europe and its associated modernity has often elaborated its self-identity: if it apparently came from these shores, today both Europe and modernity are considered to have escaped that space. Yet, as the site of a Greco-Roman philosophical and juridical inheritance, of the cultural and historical formation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, of the clash of the early modern European and extra-European empires of Charles V and Suleiman the Magnificent, and as testimony to the initial exercise of modern, systematic colonialism on its African and Asian shores, the Mediterranean is culturally and historically central to the structures and languages of European modernity. Suspended between the Orient and the Occident, and today increasingly between the North and the South of the planet, these multiple coordinates threaten to suck in and drown all attempts at arriving at a neat descriptive filiation.

This suggests that, beyond its geo-political and morphological definitions, the Mediterranean is, above all, a contested discursive space; that is, the political and cultural struggle for its definition and semantics reveals something about the present world order. The Mediterranean hosts a variety of cultural and historical regimes of truth, and sustains not only a desire for definition but also the perpetual elaboration of a problematic. Furthermore, if we consider the historical archive of this space as it has been elaborated by Euro-American historians, that is if we consider the heritage of Fernand Braudel, Shelomo Dov Goitien, Marshall Hodgson and the connective historical eco-systems of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, we are all the time dealing in matters that trouble the prevalent historical place holder of the modern nation state.

What precedes and exceeds the conceptual limits of the nation state inevitably queries what has come to be considered as the *natural* form of historical formations. History, however, is not only lived and narrated through the nation. To query the national narration is to question both a political order of knowledge and its direct inscription in the disciplinary protocols of modern sociology, political science, area studies, anthropology and historiography. Working in a Mediterranean web of trans-national histories suggests even more: the conceptual landscape peculiar to one of its shores, in particular its northern, hegemonic European one, can be exposed to very different understandings and unsuspected variations. If, for example, we choose to study the present-day European pre-occupation with Islam, we inadvertently find ourselves tracing a critical boomerang that ultimately reveals Europe's *own* deep obsession with religion and the latter's precise historical centrality to Europe's political and cultural formation.

It is in this space that the question of non-national communities and so-called minorities acquires its critical edge, cutting into the presumptions –inherited from European nation-building– that culture, history and identity provide a perfect, homogeneous fit with the confines of a geo-political unity. Ethnic and religious minorities, along with refugees and mass migration, cross and confuse such boundaries, proposing other, unauthorised spaces of belonging and becoming.

The dissemination of the Roma people in Europe, Coptic Christians in Egypt and Muslims in the Balkans (as well as in Bradford and Berlin), are not simply the symptoms of the past: histories that have been brushed

aside or seemingly swamped in the unfolding wave of the national narrative. On another scale of belonging, neither Arabs nor Muslims mirror the immediate concerns of a national community, whether in the Maghreb or in Europe. These are all disturbing reminders of deeper connections negated in the violence of the modern state formation which exacted (and seemingly still exacts) cultural and historical exclusion. From the programmed expulsion of ethnically and religiously identified minorities, such as the Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492, through persecutions, pogroms and population exchange across borders and continents (between Europe and Anatolia in the 1920s), and the culmination in European genocide and the Shoah, we come today to confront the return of the repressed composition of a Mediterranean modernity that precedes and exceeds its national (and nationalist) procedures and perspectives.

Nowhere is this more sharply exposed than in the present-day migrant's body, whose juridical 'illegality' exposes all the bio-political force of the European nation seeking to negate the unruly constitution of the planetary present. On the migrant's body, in her clandestine histories and cultures, there is inscribed a repressed colonial past that is daily distilled into the metropolitan mix of the modern European city. By preceding and exceeding the protocols of national subjectivity, these communities and minorities propose heterogeneous combinations that anticipate an altogether more complex sense of political society and democratic participation than that confined within the abstract legalities of formal citizenship.

The suggestion at this point is that these minor, subaltern and clandestine histories, these refused accounts of modernity, find in the Mediterranean a critical focus of unsuspected potency and significance. Where Africa, Asia and Europe overlap and intertwine in a profound historical and cultural mix, the critical view from the margins produced by the modern nation state re-opens the archive, and brings into contemporary pertinence not only the neglected shores that have been consigned to the past. Under the bright light of the Mediterranean we can now perhaps also learn to narrate a modernity that is neither simply multiple nor, as its tri-continental formation underlines, merely a European matter.

Splicing cultures and rerouting histories

If the Mediterranean is the mythical-poetical space traversed by Ulysses, homeward bound, it has also hosted those such as Polyphemus and Circe, or Caliban and Sycorax in the Mediterranean imagination of Shakespeare, who have challenged that *logos*. In particular, the Mediterranean of Shakespeare, although proposed some four centuries ago, remains dramatically actual. In the 'tempest' of the modern world, Caliban returns as the illegal immigrant, and Prospero's island, midway between Naples and Tunis in the 16th-century drama, today becomes the island of Lampedusa. Then there is the challenge of Cleopatra and the Orient that challenges the unilateral rationale of empire. The language that frames the world always remains susceptible to appropriation by monsters, slaves, blacks, women and migrants; that is, by the excluded who speak of overlooked, unexpected, displaced and non-authorised matters. Here, the ghosts of history travelling along poetical routes cre-

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ate potent and complex images that remain difficult to absorb or annul. In this simultaneously real and imaginary geography, where it becomes possible to feel and, at the same time, rethink the limits of the world and the Mediterranean that we have inherited, it also becomes possible to discover the openings into another.

There clearly exists a poetics that inhabits the languages of theatre, literature, dance, cinema, music, poetry and the visual arts that proposes a fluid and flexible transmission of Mediterranean diversity and communality. Such languages propose a journey elsewhere, in the elsewhere. It is only here, in the open and vulnerable space sustained by the arts, where aesthetics sustains an ethics, that it becomes possible to temporarily touch the experience of a shared equality: that instance of displacement before the unexpected in which the other, the stranger, is recognised as a part of our selves. This interruption, induced by the metamorphosis of politics into poetics, promotes another Mediterranean and a diverse modernity. As the great Syrian poet Adonis suggests, perhaps it is only here that it is possible to install a real dialogue between partners as equals. Here, in the dislocating excess of poetics that slips the established frame of comprehension, in the perpetual migration of language, there already exists the critique of a contemporary condition. In living language to the full lies the perpetual passage of transit and the subsequent translation that opens on to the future.

Today, rather than think of how to defend and sustain the unilateral journey of Ulysses, perhaps it is more to the point to collect the multiplicity of historical routes and cultural reasons that compose a multiple Mediterranean, one that is irreducible to a single understanding of 'home'. The seemingly sharp distinctions between Occident and Orient, North and South, modernity and tradition, now come to be dispersed in the fluid complexity proposed by the sea itself. Abstract differences, along with cultures that pretend to be clearly separated from each other, find themselves afloat in a lived materiality that bends and complicates such dualisms and the blunt reassurance of a 'clash of civilisations'.

To snap the logic of the Mediterranean as a *unicum*, as *mare nostrum*, means to disseminate differences that are sustained by currents washing an archipelago of varied histories and cultures: islands of belonging that are certainly diverse but are at the same time joined by the languages that arrive on their shores. Those Greek islands, perpetually evoked as the sites of European origins, might also suggest the geo-poetics and geo-philosophy for a new set of departures, leading us not only into the West, but also south and into the Orient. Landings are made where it becomes possible to re-negotiate the historical and cultural sense of the exclusive European route, its modernity and its version of the Mediterranean. As Massimo Cacciari has suggested:

"The idea of the Archipelago is not one that proposes a return to the 'origins', but rather a 'new beginning', or counter-blow to the history-destiny of Europe" (Cacciari, 1997: 35).

With this idea of a 'counter-blow' I would like to suggest that we liberate a sense of the past into a history that is perpetually at work in our lives, casting its shadows over the present, interrupting and interrogating it. In particular, this is a lesson drawn from the arts –from theatre to music,

from cinema to dance— that allows us to journey, both critically and imaginatively, in those spaces that are invariably excluded from the institutional narrative that believes itself capable of rendering all transparent to its reason.

Each and every culture depends on other cultures. If cultures are not fixed or stable blocks but the result of intertwining historical processes that are always at work, then the very sense of culture migrates to a terrain characterised by mobility, mutation, and *métissage*... Historically, cultures manage to survive and live on through a continual series of borrowings from elsewhere, drawing on resources that lie beyond their immediate borders. The borders themselves turn out to be porous, flexible and often illusory. In a profound, but rarely acknowledged sense, the history of modern Europe, of its rationalist cultures, its scientific organisation —that is, simply put, the overarching parable of Occidental modernity— would be inconceivable without the Arab and Muslim world. From the 8th century onwards it was the latter that transformed and translated into Europe not only the texts of Greek philosophy, but also innovations in the fields of irrigation and agriculture, in diet and medicine, along with the experiments in literary poetics and music, and the elaboration and transmission of modern mathematics. Perhaps there is no such thing as a relation *between* Islam and the West: rather, Islam is a component of the very formation of the West. Instead of the usual reference to the Judaeo-Christian roots, it might historically and culturally be more honest to speak of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim origins of the Occident.

We can begin to think in terms of the deployment of a historio-graphy and geo-graphy, a writing of time and territory, radically diverse from habitual understanding

Following this route, we can begin to think in terms of the deployment of a historio-graphy and geo-graphy, a writing of time and territory, radically diverse from habitual understanding. Employing a cartography that proposes an open and inconclusive elaboration of space and its temporal coordinates, we can here, for example, open up the multiple senses of the Mediterranean sustained in the concept of ‘migrant landscapes’ and a migrating modernity. Alongside the more obvious landscapes inhabited by the migrant, there are the rarely acknowledged landscapes set in movement and migration under the impact of mutations induced by planetary processes in which today (and perhaps for the last 500 years) the migrant is a symptom and, above all, the principal actor.

Faced with contemporary immigration, there remain few who are willing to listen to the ghosts of the past that constitute the links in a historical chain that extends from Africa five hundred years ago to the coasts of southern Europe today. This brings together the hidden, but essential, histories of migration in the realisation of modernity. To negate the memory evoked by the interrogative presence of the contemporary migrant suggests an incapacity to consider one’s own past, and its role in the realisation of the present. Among human rights perhaps it is also the case to recognise the right to migrate in order to improve your life prospects; after all, the poor of Europe —without papers, documents and passports— exercised this ‘right’ for several centuries. We now live in a world where for the majority migration is a crime. All of this suggests that we re-think the Mediterranean, and re-think modernity, in the light of the Freudian concept of *Unheimlich*, the uncanny, the return of the repressed, the disquieting doubling of the present in the light of the past. From here, there emerges the intertwined figure of the migrant and the colonial past, and their centrality to the formation of modernity.

In the refusal to recognise that our interiors depend on a colonial exterior lies the refusal to register the complex and disquieting history of modernity itself. In a hidden but profound sense, modernity is at war with itself: this is its 'heart of darkness'

When one considers modern colonialism and European imperialism, the gaze invariably travels far afield: towards Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is easily forgotten that the beginnings of colonialism –understood as the systematic military, economical, juridical, scientific and cultural appropriation of the rest of the planet– began in the Mediterranean with Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt in 1798-99, and concludes here with the French withdrawal from Algeria in 1962. From my house in Naples, I can walk a few minutes to have a coffee in a historic bar: Gambinus, on the corner of Piazza Plebiscito and Piazza Trieste e Trento. Here I can verify Hannah Arendt's observation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* on how the interiors of the European metropolis –the square, cafés, streets, housing clothes and food– depend upon an external that was once colonial and today is global: all that coffee, tomatoes and chilli, all of that Baroque art. In other words, the spaces of modernity are always at the same time colonial spaces.

In the refusal to recognise that our interiors –the substance of our cities, houses, histories, cultures and language– depend on such an exterior lies the refusal to register the complex and disquieting history of modernity itself. In a hidden but profound sense, modernity is at war with itself: this is its 'heart of darkness'. Hence, both the 'toleration' and the repression of immigration are forms of resistance; they are part of the refusal to fully accept a realised globalisation in which every story and culture is exposed and rendered vulnerable. If the violent legal, political and cultural clarity in the face of immigration reinforces the unilateral sense of identity required by the modern nation state, it also reveals, in the very same instance, the refusal to interact with the interrogation posed by a seemingly foreign body. In the best of cases, it is a case of tolerating and not repressing this body, and anyway of always regulating its presence through *our* laws and *our* political, economical and cultural needs. Here, the integration or assimilation of the foreigner requires the public abolition of all signs of identity: historical, cultural, traditional, religious. Reduced to *bare life* as Giorgio Agamben (1998) would put it, the stranger is required to strip herself of all those signs that might transmit a diversity and would disturb the culture that pretends to tolerate and eventually integrate her. It is implicit that there exists a unique reason, a unique logic: *ours*.

At this point, it becomes possible to reevaluate modernity –and with it a Mediterranean that has been framed, disciplined and explained in recent centuries by a northern gaze coming from modern Europe– in the light of those histories that have been negated and repressed in order to permit its triumphal passage. This particular framing has invariably reduced the Mediterranean –from the moment of the Grand Tour to contemporary mass tourism– to the sites of the mythical origins of Europe, now overtaken by progress and reduced to a garden of earthly delights. Perhaps the only manner in which to break this subordination and confinement is, as the Italian sociologist Franco Cassano suggests, to think less of the Mediterranean and the South, and rather to think *with* the Mediterranean and *with* the South (Cassano, 2011).

The power to design and discipline the world according to a unilateral point of view is, once again, the true 'heart of darkness' of *our* modernity, which lies neither in Africa nor in the periphery of progress, but precisely at the centre, in the so-called First World. It is here that Walter Benjamin's

insistence that every document of civilisation is simultaneously a document of barbarism acquires all of its dramatic weight. It is at this point that we can begin to consider a different Mediterranean: a Mediterranean that has historically and culturally always been creolised and hybridised in its complex formation. Here, in an interdisciplinary cartography, literary, cinematic, musical and culinary 'texts' provide testimony of another history and of another critical modality. The drift of poetics often threatens to leave politics speechless. Unfolding the artistic configuration of time and space, of our being and becoming, allows us to harvest the essential truth of the complex ambivalence of a historical constellation that does not merely mirror our passage. It is the oblique gaze, sustained in the excessive and errant languages of art, that also allows us to travel beyond the rational conclusions of the human and social sciences.

The 'interruption' proposed by the movement and mobility of language itself, this crack in the wall of our 'house', can also open up an interval in our time, and from there we can consider how the categories that sustain our world might be radically reviewed. Here, beyond an obvious sense of the unfamiliar, it becomes possible to renegotiate one's sense of identity. Such a space inaugurates the space of *translation*. Everything that is located, identified and explained in the subjective field of vision also contains the signs and symptoms of some 'thing' that potentially exists beyond the subject, elsewhere in time and space: translation introduces the possibility of *alterity*. For we encounter not only the translation produced by the subject in order to domesticate the world and render it familiar, but also the sense that the subject is transported elsewhere and becomes translatable.

This recognition of the perpetual translation of the world takes us far beyond a simply adjustment of the critical picture. Here we change direction, and abandon a route that rests on the idea of a modernity guaranteed by the linear spirit of 'progress', in order to enter the multiple routes and currents of a historical constellation that proposes perspectives that for some of us are largely unknown. This means abandoning a discourse sustained by a unilateral modernity that continues to insist on a relationship between *tradition* and *modernity* (and with it, of a relationship between *development* and *underdevelopment*, along with all the other hierarchies of truth that follow) and substitute it, as Antonio Gramsci suggested, with the connection between *hegemony* and the *subaltern* in the struggle for the sense, the direction, the becoming of the world (Gramsci, 2011).

This is a prospect that is articulated within a historical formation where for a long time, and not only recently with so-called globalisation, there co-exist a proximity of differences that continually creolise and contaminate languages, and which sound out and suggest a different Mediterranean and a diverse modernity. Here we can touch and travel with poetical languages –music, literature, cinema– that exceed the cage of nationalist myths and the rationalising frameworks of politics: from the Algerian writer Assia Djebar to the music of flamenco, from the hand that writes to the voice that sings: that ambiguous truth disseminated in works of art that, as Adorno once put it, "provide the unconscious historiography of their epoch" (Adorno, 2004). It is this ambiguous truth that carries us elsewhere, into the elsewhere, and allows us to "cultivate the atrocity of doubt" (Pier Paolo Pasolini).

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If the desire for rational transparency was itself often pioneered at sea –after all this is where much of Occidental modernity was charted and exercised– we now learn that maps are unable to contain what they apparently explain

The languages of modernity, of its cultures, no longer belong solely to the Occident. We are dealing with a syntax of belonging and becoming that is now *uprooted* as far as *origins* are concerned. These are languages that are able to speak of histories, cultures and prospects that are not necessarily authorised by 'us'. It is, above all, via the uprooting inducted by such languages that it becomes possible to enter into a state of vulnerability: the only state appropriate for a critical practice that desires to respond to the challenge of the Mediterranean and a modernity that is multiple, open, composed of languages that flee institutional arrest. In the words of the Sephardic-Algerian-French-European philosopher, Jacques Derrida, this is a language that will never simply be mine, and perhaps never ever has been. We are now exposed to a diverse Mediterranean: one still to be narrated.

The method of the sea

What these previous considerations have tried to propose is precisely a diverse modality for critically thinking the modern Mediterranean. The method employed is clearly a disposition that emerges in the journey and encounters through the historical, cultural and conjunctural formation of a problematic that shapes and disciplines lines of thought. The methodologies employed are themselves part of the problematic. How and where are we placed? What are the conditions that authorise our voice and its pronouncements? If modernity is the world today, and if 80% of the world (which accounts for only 25% of world income) does not live in New York, London or Tokyo, then the majority (not the hegemonic) version of modernity is experienced and exercised elsewhere, in the gaps between our points of reference and coordinates of explanation. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has so effectively explained, in a world contracted to asymmetrical relations of power, the recognition of limits, including our own, simultaneously provincialises and sharpens the discourse (Chakrabarty, 2007). Moving in a world that does not simply mirror our concerns and obsessions impacts directly on what we might understand to be a critical method and its accompanying methodologies. When the presumed universality of 'scientific' protocols is exposed to questions the paradigm has not authorised, it finds itself at sea. If the desire for rational transparency was itself often pioneered at sea –after all this is where much of Occidental modernity was charted and exercised– we now learn that maps are unable to contain what they apparently explain.

So, the method and methodologies are also about choosing a language that responds in the most appropriate fashion to the problematic. Its very rigour forces it to sail close to the wind, running a critical course close to capture. The shield of neutrality is no longer available, the critical distance that constructs the object and protects the observing subject from contamination is annulled. Ultimately, the critical truth cannot be measured and quantified, for it is always in process and underway. This is the reality we seek to explain while it escapes our will. Still, the passage can be narrated in the ambiguous languages of apprehension, of which the conceptual is only a part. Set loose from our habitual anchorage in disciplinary protocols and their guarantee of a conclusive homecoming, this is finally the cut, the epistemological cut, operated on the body of knowledge. This, in turn, brings us to a Mediterranean and a modernity still to be narrated.

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