

The Mediterranean is Always Coming Back

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The title strikes a chord with the 'Cimetière Marin' by Valéry: "Mer, toujours recommence", and, thereafter, is a memento to the work of Fernand Braudel: "What is the Mediterranean?" The Mediterranean is no less than thousands of things together. Not merely single sceneries, but countless ones. Not a single sea, but a succession of seas. Not a mere civilization, but heaps of civilizations piling on top of each other. The Mediterranean is a historically old crossroad: for several millennia, everything centered around it, muddling, yet enriching its history. Although much has been said and retold about the 'Mare Nostrum', it is fortunate that there is always something new to add about its unity, divisions, transparencies and obscurities. We have known for long that it is neither 'a given reality' nor a 'constant', for the Mediterranean is composed of several subsets that defy or refute several ideas received.

Perceiving the Mediterranean solely on its past is a tenacious and occasionally noxious habit encountered both on the coast and inland. Our Sea, and ourselves along, wish to have a new present-day reality. It might be useful to learn how to get rid of certain inveterate repertoires. The tendency to confound the representation of reality with this reality harms the discourse about this sea as well as its poetic setting: the image of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean itself never come in tune. An 'identity of being', very powerful in our 'basin' and its lifestyle, does not always find a corresponding 'identity of doing' – the latter being idle and aimless. Thus, retrospective ends by winning over prospective.

The Mediterranean is facing modern life with delay. It has not known secularity on all its shores. Each of its coasts has lived its own contradictions reflected on the remaining part of the basin or other spaces, sometimes far. The realization of 'convivial living' or 'convivance' (a French term that seems to better fit the circumstances than conviviality) at the heart of multinational or multiethnic territories, where various cultures and diverse religions encounter painful experiences: the Mediterranean deserves a better destiny.

Can this Sea be seen as a set without considering fractures dividing it and conflicts tearing it apart: Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus, the Maghreb, the Balkans, former Yugoslavia, and so on? 'Does the Mediterranean exist elsewhere than in our imaginary world?' A question as often asked in the South as in the North, in the Ponant as in the Levant. Yet, there are common or close ways to live, despite the numerous scissions and conflicts.

Today, several definitions that are part of our heritage are still dubious and questionable. In fact, there is nothing called a single Mediterranean culture: there are rather several cultures within a unique Mediterranean. Such cultures are characterized by traits that are a mixture of similarities and dissimilarities at the same time, rarely united and practically never identical. Their similarities are due to the proximity of a common sea and the meeting of nations and neighboring expression forms along its shores. Their differences are marked by facts of origin and history, beliefs and customs that are sometimes irreconcilable. Neither similarities nor differences are absolute or constant and, more often than not, the former win over the latter.

'Elaboration of an inter-Mediterranean alternative culture' and bringing such a project to life does not seem imminent. A more modest approach would be rather 'to share a differentiated vision', though this would still remain in the realm of difficult tasks to achieve.