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The Mediterranean Question: Thinking with the Diver

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Abstract

How and why to interrupt and redirect our understanding of the histories and cultures of the Mediterranean? As a result of temporal and spatial relations, its geographies and histories are never neutral. They are the outcome of contestations, and are elaborated and practiced, above all, by those who have the power to impose their maps and chronologies. Reasoning with the historical and cultural impact of the mobile, migratory and mutable configurations of the Mediterranean, the prospects proposed here seek to dismantle the authority of the established archive. In its place the authors propose a series of interdisciplinary and transcultural considerations that would permit another Mediterranean – subaltern, repressed and negated – to emerge and interrogate the habitual narrative.

Keywords: Mediterranean, Archive, Migration, Temporality, Geography.

The Mediterranean question: clearly the reference is to Antonio Gramsci's incomplete essay of 1926, later known as "The Southern Question" (Gramsci, 2015)¹. In Gramsci's considerations, geography traces a system of power. The structural subordination of the south to the northern component of Italy, and its presumed distance from modern Europe, constituted a cartography in which the Mediterranean and the diverse "Souths" of the world have been rendered structurally inferior and subaltern. The presumed scientific neutrality deployed in measuring space confirms a distance that guarantees the hierarchy of powers and their location within modern spacetime. Gramsci's observations on the potentiality of geography to render explicit the spatiality of power propels us to comprehend how the Mediterranean is culturally and politically produced; it is never simply a geographical or historical 'fact'. The Mediterranean emerges historically from the terrestrial coordinates of thought (Ekers et. al., 2013). Seeking to respond to the Mediterranean

¹ This essay is the English translation of the Introduction to Chambers & Cariello (2019)

question means then to register the relations of power that require the Mediterranean to be narrated specifically and differently from other historical-cultural formations. Indeed, the fact that this body of water was named by those who thought they possessed it emerges in its very name: for whom is the Mediterranean the 'Mediterranean', and not *bahr al-Rum* (the sea of the Romans), or *al-Bahr al-Shami* (the Syrian Sea)?

The juxtaposition of the specific configurations of the different vectors of time makes it impossible to reduce time itself to an abstract, universal measure. Perhaps understanding historical time today cannot be isolated from considerations that have been developed in the field of modern physics. Space time is elastic, it is subject to the curvatures of differentiated forces, it is composed of distances and dynamics. Imposing an exemplary rule and a single narrative implies reducing the complexity of a constellation made up of open and never completely determined processes to a metaphysical cage. To put it in more obvious terms, it would mean accepting only the history of those who want to arrest (and thus refuse) history in order to impose their point of view as the only acceptable one. "The events of the world do not form an orderly queue, like the English. They crowd around chaotically, like Italians" (Rovelli, 2018).

Assembled materially in historical processes and analytical practices, the Mediterranean has been captured within contemporary European culture in a combination of judgments and geographies. Today, it is suspended between its presumed ancient roots now in ruins, and the leisure activities of modern vacations. The recent arrival of 'illegal' immigrants, accompanied by the ghosts of thousands of bodies strewn on the sea bed, has dramatically pierced this image of the Mediterranean, breaching the complacent surfaces of its history. Its repressed complexity now resurfaces in all its force. The non-authorized arrival of the modern migrant has reopened that archive, torn the maps that had once confined such strangers in precise locations – elsewhere, on the other side, certainly not in Europe – and has exposed the Mediterranean and modern Europe to a series of unexpected prospects and voices.

This present-day interruption overlaps and interconnects with other interrogations. The recent revolts against authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that have challenged the status quo, the deadly conflicts in the Balkans, and the colonial war of the State of Israel against the Palestinians, ongoing since 1948, all deepen questions arriving today from the renewed

and unexpected centrality of the Mediterranean. Such prospects insist not only in geopolitical terms, but also in definitions of citizenship and the rights of residence. It is precisely along these borders, with the emergence of other maps of belonging, that the constrictions of a preceding, strictly European frame fall apart. The cartography of our geopolitics, claiming to manage this complex formation and explain its development, now appears inadequate.

This is not simply about acknowledging the 'others', their histories and cultures; it is rather to register the limits of our own apparatuses of knowledge. Opposed to searching for yet another 'neutral' and detached academic explanation (which would inevitably reproduce the universal 'superiority' of its language), we want to try to draw from the Mediterranean, its narratives and its multiple archives, the imperative to receive a multitude of historical and cultural conditions that can take us on an innovative critical path. In the wake of the perspectives laid out by cultural, postcolonial and decolonial studies, the proposition is to reorient the question of the Mediterranean in a series of new registers. This re-mapping and re-narrating of the Mediterranean clearly evokes the plastic geographies of de-territorialization and re-territorialization; an uprooting and re-orienting of given interpretations. Posing the question of by whom, how and why the Mediterranean is explained leads to a critical evaluation of the current political economy of knowledge (and power). Listening to the languages used to narrate the Mediterranean, and crossing the spaces in which such languages are transmitted and translated, means folding and crumpling the received structure of sense (without erasing it), thus creating a historical and critical depth that proposes a different Mediterranean, one still to come.

Thinking with the diver. A male body, clearly dark skinned, defies the modern European version of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Greek heroes: all white and Aryan. A body that two thousand five hundred years ago descended gracefully through air, eyes fixed on the future. This famous figure is painted on the inner side of the lid of a sarcophagus (the Tomb of the Diver) and was therefore destined to invisibility (Carter, 2015). It is, however, visible to us now, since it was unearthed and opened fifty years ago, and it sheds light on the present through an emerging reconfiguration of the past. The supple figure, in mid-flight, is surrounded on all four sides of the interior of the tomb by reclining men gathered in a symposium. It

comes from the Greek site of Poseidonia, better known by its Roman name, Paestum, situated on the Tyrrhenian coast south of Salerno, close to the mouth of the river Sele.

As a Greek colony, Paestum was part of the expansion of the city-states of the Peloponnese peninsula that extended across Homer's "wine-dark sea" to Asia Minor, north through the Black Sea to the steppes, and West through Sicily and southern Italy to the coasts of modern-day France and Spain. As with all colonialisms, there was the conquest, submission and enslavement of indigenous populations. The land was never empty. Control had to be wrought from local authorities; blood shed; lives arbitrarily terminated (Zuchtriegel 2017). This involved an uninvited political imposition on the territory, the import of foreign memory and culture. Today, most of these details disappear, lost in the myths of a European nostalgia for the presumed purity and nobility of its origins. The recall of this white-washed past in modern imperial ambitions is continually exposed in the architectural grammar of contemporary Occidental capitals: from London, Paris and Berlin to Washington and Rome. The authority of these neo-classical buildings proposes an invented past: the buildings of the Ancient World they seek to emulate were in fact decorated in vivid colours.

Such anachronisms also open up other possibilities: less about seeking to correct the record and rather to brush existing accounts against the grain. To open the tomb, to open the archive, is also to suggest a set of connections and coordinates with which we could choose to navigate the African-Asian-European matrix of the Mediterranean. While not abandoning the disciplinary competences that have brought this past to light, it means refusing to reduce this material to a single inventory of time. We can adopt a more ironic relation to origins. In a sort of archaeology of archaeology, the invitation is to try to unearth another genealogy, one that does not simply reflect a European will to power. Drawing from the heart of so-called 'European civilization', from its Greek and Mediterranean 'origins', while raising another set of questions, we encounter other geographies of comprehension, other lines of interpretation, that render that apparently distant past proximate and potentially disruptive. The flat taxonomy of time, in which everything is in its chronological and cultural place, is brusquely interrupted and fractured, ready for another assemblage of comprehension. Like the painting of the diver, executed for unseeing

eyes but now recovered and exposed, we too can take into consideration the hidden and sedimented elements that suggest other measurements of time and space. There are questions of entitlement: who has the right to narrate and why? According to what type of genealogy is memory possessed and authorized? Trying to answer these questions leads to shifting the very premises of the existing humanities and their rule on such questions and perspectives. In breaking apart the philological imperative to re-assemble its elements in another configuration, we assume a deeper responsibility. This is to acknowledge the precariousness and constant vulnerability of that language to a past we can never fully recover nor possess. A past that in still being assembled and registered traces and shapes our future.

This also implies returning objects to the thickness of their cultural lineage and to the resonance of their historical memories in archival connection to their possible future. The aim then is to return history itself to another history, and disband the automatic link with scientific neutrality as the guarantee of our language and knowledge. This, to repeat, is to take responsibility for both language and memory. If, for instance, we read Greek colonization in the Mediterranean not only as a thalassocracy, but also as evidence of the diasporas and migrations from the Greek cities that inaugurated the colonial enterprise, then a gap in time is opened up, rendering that past close to contemporary concerns. Establishing an emporium, practicing colonization, disciplining a territory according to a specific cultural order, experimenting, contesting and absorbing hybridisation: these were all central elements in the experience of Paestum some two and a half thousand years ago, just as they were to modernity. In this perspective, an archipelago is outlined which is not simply spatial and geographical, but also temporal. It allows us to jump across time. In the undeniable specificities of each history and locality, we can also acknowledge commonalities that compose a constellation, whereby the past becomes comprehensible to future projections.

If the diver in the tomb is proof of a migratory and hybrid culture – the Greek settlements of Magna Grecia bordering Tuscan, Roman and Lucan cultures – it also points us to a migrating Mediterranean. This sea has clearly offered hospitality to many peoples travelling in many different directions: Phoenician, Greek, Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, Genovese, Catalan, Venetian, Ottoman... To think in such terms,

means, again, to open up the archive and insist on a fluidity that spills over the borders of what today is largely a collection of the national narratives of this complex geo-history. Furthermore, it implies bringing into today's symposium, inebriated by the deterministic liquor of neoliberalism, deeper debates that remove the question of modern migration from its frequent marginalization in socio-economic terms to its role as the driving force of Mediterranean cultures and modernity itself. More extensive claims of belonging here cross our legal, cultural and historical borders, and remain unanswered. The access to citizenship, the right to narrate, the right to have rights, disturb the existing political order (Arendt, 2017). The migrant becomes a cypher, a non-person whose practices and presence decodifies the asymmetric relations of power that orchestrate the arbitrary violence of the present (Dal Lago, 2005).

This approach is part of a critical perspective according to which the making and meaning of space is history (Carter, 1996). This does not simply mean that history happens in a specific place, but rather that the place itself bestows shape and substance to temporal processes. Chronology and scales of temporality are intersected by material ecologies: geography is history (Farinelli, 2016). Thinking of, and with, the historical and cultural formation of the Mediterranean, trying to define and configure it, we are struck by the necessity to overcome not only disciplinary and national borders (and here the challenge of cultural and postcolonial studies come forcibly into play), but also to disorient and reorient the epistemological coordinates that we are used to applying. In this manner, the study of the Mediterranean provokes the chance to experiment with a series of arguments that challenge the rationalising representation of reason as being capable of making the world fully transparent to its will. To insist on the historical and political valence of the forms of life and culture that escape the rational cage where everything is reduced to the grammar of a single mode of thinking means to propose both another Mediterranean, and another manner of operating in the world. Here, the visual, musical and literary arts teach us something. They offer different languages through which we can map and see a Mediterranean that escapes a monothematic definition, confined in an academic and disciplinary logic, to propose unexpected and innovative critical passages. Here the presumed dialectics of historical progress comes undone, not in an erasure of history, but in the interruption of its abstract linearity. It leads to reconfigurations

in the material and temporal stratifications that assemble the presence of history in the present. In this key, the Mediterranean becomes a laboratory, leading to new interpretation of modernity itself.

We are working with the material available to us – the historical evidence, concepts and definitions of the Mediterranean that we have inherited – within our specific linguistic and cultural limits. Here we find ourselves adopting a certain critical scepticism, fostered by the knowledge of the colonial construction and historical invention of the Mediterranean, in turn largely supported by the *mare nostrum* myth of a Latin imperial order. The question of the definition of the Mediterranean's historical, political and theoretical borders becomes almost always an exclusively European issue. In other words, the space that is geographically defined as 'Mediterranean' does not coincide with a historical or cultural unit; it is over determined by a European perspective. We think that this friction between a shared space and differentiated histories produces a significant problematic. Without seeking to close the gap, the Mediterranean then floats without immediate definition. It supports a critical horizon still to be fully acknowledged. If, given the current relations of power, the Mediterranean is an integral part of the modern European and Western order, it also exposes the profound colonial undercurrents of the current political arrangement. Recognising the crossing of the Mediterranean by subaltern histories and subordinated cultures we begin to plumb the darker depths of this geo-historical and critical constellation.

Elsewhere we have insisted on the disruptive heresy of the essay form as a necessary antidote to the stultifying premises of the scientific paper (Chambers 2017). A unique rationality ruling the world, cultivated and extended by Occidental hegemony across the globe, results in an absolutism that historically coincides with precise geo-philosophical and cultural coordinates. Against the claims of the universal Subject, and what Sylvia Winter calls the 'coloniality of being', the persistence and resistance of other bodies in diverse localities shatters such a metaphysical frame (Wynter, 2003). Reduced through a racialised hierarchisation to anthropological footnotes, the silenced histories of those other practices and lives nevertheless live on. They consistently return to interrogate the purported transparency and inevitability of modernity's 'progress', deviating and destabilising its premises (da Silva, 2007). Rather than fighting toe-to-toe with the scientific claims of the existing social and

human sciences, the choice is that of a deliberate detour through the languages of the arts. This means recognising and unpacking in the aesthetic attributes of the self-determination of Man and his sensibilities the 'regulative discourse of the human'; in other words, the very constitution of the Western subject (Lloyd, 2019). It is precisely what, sustained in music, the visual arts and the poetics of language, escapes capture by such reasoning that disseminates the dissonance of an alternative historical order and cultural score.

In such intervals and interruptions European 'historicity cannot dissipate its own effects of power; it cannot institute subjects that signify otherwise' (da Silva, 2007). Registering such limits and playing on the edges and in the interstices of authorised space time – what we call modernity – our inherited conceptual frame is robbed of its conclusions. Interrogating this regime of representation, and its presumed distance from the felt heterogeneity and differentiated materiality of the world that guarantees its neutrality and universality, challenges its will to categorise, classify and pathologize the rest of the planet. To reintroduce what in mapping the Mediterranean has been excluded, in order to permit a singular reason to conduct its historical and cultural explanations, is to query and, ultimately, snap the chains of causality that always confirm our hands on the wheel and our lines on the map. In the terrible world we inhabit something always breaks through and threatens to take us elsewhere. It is precisely here, in this political and cultural sublime that remains intractable and refuses to confirm me, us, them, as stable and formed, that we propose to develop our analyses and trace our critical discourse.

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