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Intercultural Complexity of the Southern Mediterranean: Arab-Mediterranean Perceptions and Outlooks

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Abstract

The present paper aims at placing the Mediterranean within the cultural perceptions and literary productions of the Arab World, particularly the Maghreb. How do collective consciousness and cultural representations in the South see the Mediterranean as a heritage of civilization? Does the Mediterranean exist at all for Arabs? Is it completely absent, or does it holds at least a marginal place in the Arab cultural and scientific productions? If the latter hypothesis were true, what are the underlying reasons for this relative marginality of the Mediterranean? These are some of the questions we will try to answer, the goal being to make some clarifications on the outlook of Southern Mediterranean countries towards the Mediterranean cultural heritage.

Keywords: Arabs, Culture, Cultural heritage, Dialogue, Mediterranean.

1. Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in the Mediterranean

Only Europe able to recognize the Mediterranean its cradle and to return to turn to the banks for too long relegated to its forgotten suburbs, could really its 'natural' (in geo-historical terms) centre of gravity, that sea in which to gaze only with nostalgic regret for the lost centrality in world history, but with the proud knowledge to be a 'great space' able to exercise its role of neutralizing conflicts avoiding the danger of a clash of civilizations (Resta, 2012: 104).

This sea, that was once "dialogue and freedom" has now become "closure and death": today there are tens of thousands dead drowned in the Mediterranean, due to the increase of migration flows from Africa and the Middle East to the shores of Europe (UNHCR, 2015). This *mare nostrum* – where the "our" is related to humans (Cassano & Zolo, 2007) and once a meeting place for knowledge as the meeting place of strangers –has now become a "border insurmountable" for many desperate. This sea, unfamiliar with juxtapositions like North / South, East / West, Islam / Christianity,

and which saw the flourishing of cultures, arts, religions, philosophies, today is no longer a 'hotbed' of dialogue, but has become a battlefield for a war fought not with weapons but with "ideologies" and where opponents are identified in Us and Them: We, the civilized (Europeans, the North), the modern ones, those who live in prosperity; Them, the other (the Arabs, the South), the desperate fleeing war and famine.

However, the Mediterranean acquires a fundamental importance in promoting pluralism, diversity, and freedom. Because becoming a place of dialogue and encounter, this sea "could turn into the peace table between the West and the Islamic world and play an important role for the initiation of a peace process on a global scale" (Horchani & Zolo, 2005, p. 7). In light of this, if the Europeans (the North) want to build and rebuild their future, they will have to review their relationship with the Mediterranean together with the other political and cultural actors bordering on the Mediterranean, starting with the Arab peoples.

It is desirable, therefore, for the Mediterranean to become a "thoughtful knowledge" promoting relationship building both between subjects and within their living environment, facilitating an encounter between the North and South and West and East with the awareness that only dialogue can make society open to the re-composition of cultural differences and the specific features of every culture. In fact, culture is not an absolute and the same goes for identity; both are dynamic: the benefits derived from culture depend on its very process of reconstruction, and the dominant discourse of culture as an immutable inheritance is just a subcomponent (often a conservative one) of a process (Buruma & Margalit, 2004; Said, 1978). It follows that multiculturalism is a new way of understanding cultural dynamics: multiculturalism does not mean the concept of culture multiplied by the number of "other cultures" in a given area, but rather a new approach for managing the cultural diversity (simultaneous presence of various cultures) introduced in everyday life by individuals coming from different areas (Hannerz, 1996).

The thoughts expressed within the debate on interculturalism and multiculturalism are based on cultural and identity issues: the great challenge faced with difficulty by society and social systems (among which we can find the European Union and the Mediterranean Basin), is whether they should be seen as closed systems (non-welcoming) or as open systems

(welcoming) towards “other cultures”; what Baumann (1999) called “the multicultural enigma”.

Laying the foundations for the construction of a real and effective interculturality cannot be separated from what happened in the past, to what is happening and what will happen even in the Mediterranean.

The championing of pluralism, diversity, and basic liberties can be found in the history of many societies. The long traditions of encouraging and protecting public debates on political, social, and cultural matters in, say, India, China, Japan, Korea, Iran, Turkey, the Arab world, and many parts of Africa, demand much fuller recognition in the history of democratic ideas. This global heritage is ground enough to question the frequently reiterated view that democracy is just a Western idea, and that democracy is therefore just a form of Westernization. The recognition of this history has direct relevance in contemporary politics in pointing to the global legacy of protecting and promoting social deliberation and pluralist interactions, which cannot be any less important today than they were in the past when they were championed (Sen, 2003, pp. 29-30).

This passage by Sen explains very well why the “Mediterranean” acquires a fundamental importance in promoting pluralism, diversity, and freedom.

This sea “that has often been set ablaze, but has also always been able to put out its fires, turning the clash into an encounter, the war-front into comparison and discussion, the *pólemos* in *diálogos*, to see, at the height of the tensest conflict, the invisible and powerful harmony that, at the bottom of each contrast, holds back the contenders” (Resta, 2012, p. 17), can find an answer to the crisis of culture and identity.

The weight of the Mediterranean component is extremely relevant in several respects throughout the South resulting in great differences in comparison with the North: European society is crossed by deep interwoven cleavages, in some cases overlapping and adding up, transforming difference into conflict (Catholics and Protestants, church and state, North and South, etc.). European identity, therefore, and its geographic map, correspond not only to the institutional divisions, but also to these complex differences (as religion, economy, politics, literacy, draw another Europe than the official one) that constitute true lines of separation, often even within the borders of the nation state (Eder & Giesen, 2001). Due to the interplay of a number of factors, a common destiny connects the Europe and the entire Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to the Golden Horn, causing the

perception of a clear civil inferiority to form / stir in the collective consciousness (Kassir, 2004).

The Mediterranean legacy is a complex *ensemble* of ideas, images and feelings which have been cultivated for centuries and are still cultivated in this “*sea* (not ocean) amidst the lands”; which was called *mare nostrum* by the ancient Romans and which the same name could be attributed again if we understand the word *nostrum* as referring to each and every one of us, as human beings.

A new conception of the Mediterranean can be built with the help of an approach that goes beyond the classical oppositions Europe/ Mediterranean, North/South, East/West, etc., which can set up a new dimension of social space that as a “container” is transformed into an “arena” where people carry out their everyday lives and construct a social reality and own “life-world”: what Barbieri (2016) defines “The Mediterranean approach” or the “Mediterranean mind”. In order to move in the this direction, understanding what it could mean, the author reflects around 3 main ideas: a) *the open concept of Mediterranean* that has been cultivated by prominent intellectuals of the past, one of them has been Albert Camus (Judt, 2008); b) the “long durée” approach to the history of *humana civilitas*: putting apart ideas like western and eastern; and re-thinking the ideas of modernity and secularization; c) the new concept of *territoriality* that can be built with the help of the geo-sociological approach to most recent changes in geo-politics and international relations.

It is necessary to rethink the “Mediterranean mind” with the political and cultural actors bordering on the Mediterranean, starting with the Arab peoples and the representations that they have of the Mediterranean (Lewis, 1993; Norman, 1960).

2. *The Mediterranean in the Arab Cultural heritage*

The Mediterranean is not just a geographical concept. Its borders are not defined neither in terms of space nor in time. We do not know how and in what way to determine them: they cannot be defined according to their sovereignty or history and are neither state nor national: they resemble a chalk-drawn circle that continues to be delineated and erased, which the waves and the winds, businesses and inspirations expand or shrink. Along the coasts of this sea passed the Silk Road, it was the crossroads for the streets of salt and spices,

oils and perfumes, amber and ornaments, tools and weapons, of wisdom and knowledge, of art and science. The Greek emporiums were once markets and embassies. Along the Roman roads power and civilization were spreading. From Asian territories prophets and religions came. On the Mediterranean, Europe was conceived (Matvejevic, 2013, p. 18).

This idea seems to have been forgotten, and along with it seems to have been destroyed common cultural identity and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1968) of these territories.

Within this perspective, the recovery of memory is the process where it is possible to steer and substantiate the territorial sense of belonging through the development and the reinforcement of consensus and social balance. To achieve this function, the social groups, which are the holders of material interests and of different exigencies and needs, have to identify and identify themselves through memory sharing, in order to encourage civil life, participation and the increase of social capital, inexhaustible source of cultural resources for a territory as its own culture and cultural heritage. This is because, broadly speaking, culture should be understood as «the expression of the totality of man's social life. It is characterized by its collective dimension. In the end, culture is acquired and therefore does not depend on biological heredity. However, although culture is acquired, its origin and its characteristics are predominantly unconscious»? (Cuche, 1996, p. 16). In other words, culture is constituted both by objective elements (tools, capabilities, etc.) and subjective ones (beliefs, roles, values, etc.) and represents one of the principal factors when evaluating the individuals' sense of belonging to a society. All the activities and the institutions are "cultural" from the moment when a meaning is required in order to operate. This does not endorse the view that social life is connected to a cultural determinism, but rather we support the position that culture is the key component for the way a person acts: «every social practice depends on and relates to meaning; consequently, that culture is one of the constitutive conditions of existence of that practice, that every social practice has a cultural dimension» (Hall, 1997, pp. 225-26). Cultural objects hold significance among the people who live within a social world and the latter, in turn, has meaning only through the culture (Griswold, 1994) with which it is observed.

Therefore, culture is a fundamental aspect of daily life and, as such, it is necessary to understand it in relation to the different situations of the social

world. Through this study, possible pathways to improve relations can be hypothesized and the forms deriving from this social world, and through which interactions between people and the other elements of the system are expressed, can be improved.

Thus, in this perspective, the cultural heritage is one of the privileged spaces to promote the “dialogue” between peoples.

The Mediterranean in Arab Historiography

The Mediterranean, after the Middle Ages, often recurred in works and manuscripts by Arab scholars and geographers as a geo-historical space. Indeed, Arab geographers have shown an early interest in the Mediterranean, by establishing comparisons between this sea and the Atlantic ocean, highlighting the power relations existing at the time between the Arabs and Muslims, on the one side, and the Byzantines, Normans and Franks, on the other. Among these men we must mention the famous names: well-known Arab geographers such as Al Idrissi and Al Bekri and, in particular, the historian Ibn Khaldoun. The latter has left us a description of the situation in the Mediterranean area, defining its longitudes and latitudes and the cities that surround it (Braudel, 1966).

Ibn Khaldoun's *Muqaddimah* (Ibn Khaldun, 1862) has inspired most of the Tunisian writers and intellectuals of the modern era. In the first part of his book the author talks of civilizations and cultures, describing a land divided into seven climates, its different districts, rivers and seas. In doing so Ibn Khaldoun paints a picture of the Mediterranean inherited by the Ptolemies and by Al Idrissi, to which he often refers.

Khaldoun's world attributes the Mediterranean (*bahr al-Rûm* or *bahr al-Shâm* – the sea of the Romans or the sea of Syria) a quality place in a third or fourth climate. The description he gives combines the observation of geographical limits and political and cultural criteria, splitting the region in two. According to him, the Mediterranean area is delimited by two straits. The first, called *zuqâq* (narrow passage, alley) connects it to the “surrounding waters” (*al bahr al-muhît*), namely the Atlantic ocean: this strait is located on both sides of Tangier and Tarîfa.

The second strait, that of Byzantium, joins the area with the sea of Nithoc and Banthoc (the Black Sea). Between these two passages, the sea expands and sprouts a series of islands, more or less large, more or less in-

habited: Cyprus, Crete, Sicily, Majorca, Sardinia. This is what he calls «*al-bahr al-Rûmi, that which is well-known*» or *al-bahr al-Shâmi* (Syrian sea). Two more seas flow out of this matrix: the sea of Nithoc (the Black Sea) and the “Sea of Venice”. The maritime space is thus surrounded by three coastal limits: the Syrian side, then the southern coast, and finally the coast of the “Maghreb” countries (from Tangier to Ifrîqiya and Barqa up to Alexandria). Ibn Khaldoun locates the third coast on the north shore: Byzantium, Venice, the Roman coast, the south of France, finally Andalusia up to Tarîfa, in front of Tangier. In short, Ibn Khaldoun's Mediterranean is the sea known by the educated men of his time, a plural sea in which gulfs and cities followed one another, but also a sea in which two large human groups could be distinguished, a north shore (west of Byzantium) subject to Christian dominance, an eastern and southern shore under Muslim dominance.

From the description of the various regions that make up the “climates”, Ibn Khaldoun derives geographical regions which blend (or soon will) with already existing political entities. Here is what the author writes about the second part of the third climate:

Sur le rivage de cette mer est située la ville de (Bône/Annaba). Du côté de l'Orient, et sur la même ligne que ces contrées, se trouvent la province d'Ifrîkiya, la ville de Tounis, située auprès de la mer, puis Souça, puis El Mehdia. Au midi, et au pied du Mont Deren s'élèvent les villes du Djerid, telles que Touzer, Gafsa et Nefzaoua. Entre cette région et le littoral sont situées la ville de Cairouan, la montagne de Ouslat et Sobeitla. Immédiatement à l'orient de ce pays, la province de Tripoli” (Boubaker & Belhaj, 2000, p. 128¹).

The Mediterranean and the Cultural Relations between East and West

The problem of contacts/conflicts between the Arab-Muslim society and civilization and the West is both ancient and endlessly renewed, because of geopolitical and historical reasons, as well as issues of political economy. It is therefore in this context that the West occupied – and occupies today – a central – that is, focal – place in the cultural productions of the Muslim

¹ On the shore of this Sea is the city of (Bône/Annaba). On the Eastern shore, and on the same line as these regions, are the province of Ifrîkiya, the city of Tunis, located nearby the sea, then Souça, then El Mehdia. To the south, at the foot of Mount Deren rise the cities of Djerid, as well as Touzer, Gafsa and Nefzaoua. Between this region and the coastline are located the city of Cairouan, the Ouslat mountain and Sbeitla. Right to the east of the country, the province of Tripoli.

elite, in the official discourse of the ruling classes, and, more generally, in the modern and contemporary Arabic-Muslim social, political, and cultural thought. From this point of view the West, rather than a geographical space and a separate “historical-religious lot”, is perceived by Arabs and Muslims – according to highly varied considerations – as a reference, a model to follow, a school, an ally, a brother/enemy, another with which Arabs and Muslims must negotiate.

Consequently, beyond the opposing pairs East/West, Islam/Christianity, Arab-Muslim Civilization/European Civilization, the existing mechanisms and unequal relationships condemn the actors to engage, in spite of themselves and against their will, in a historical process full of hope, of interests, of tensions and problems, at the same time indispensable, conflicting, complementary, strategic, for either of the actors.

The main features and key events of this process began to be known by means of the armies and the flow of goods and ideas, starting with the Crusades, but especially throughout the so-called modern period (XV-XIX century) corresponding, on the one hand, to the European expansion and, on the other hand, to the crisis of the Muslim world in the framework of the Ottoman Empire. This process of meeting, contact, collision, the “forced cohabitation” between the West and the Muslim world lies at the root of two of the most tragic and more complicated historical events, because of their experience and their parade of problems and illnesses, namely: 1) Western colonialism; 2) dependence and underdevelopment of the Arab-Muslim world.

Muslim elites of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, conscious in their own way of this double speed of universal history, will talk about the “delay” (*Attaâkhur*) of some and the “progress” (*Attaqadum*) of others, and they will ask themselves the much pertinent question: what to do? In the modern Arab-Muslim thought, this state of mind was developed by Ahmed Ibn Abi Dhiyf, one of the more actively involved personalities, and by Kheireddine Pacha in Tunisia and Rifaat al Tahtaoui in Egypt, into this process of modernity, modernization and debate on West-Islam relations (Tlili, 1974; Jdey, 1998).

3. *The Mediterranean According to the Arab Outlooks and Cultural Perceptions*

Speaking of the Mediterranean seen by the contemporary Arab eyes and through the same cultural processes necessarily means evoking the complexity of the relations that have prevailed through the far and near history, without forgetting the vicissitudes of the colonial era.

Indeed, until the independence of the Maghreb countries in the late 1950s, the Maghreb-Mediterranean cultural contributions reflected almost exclusively this confrontational and complex dimension between the Christian-European north and the Arab-Mediterranean south.

Maghreb's traditional mistrust – and, more generally, that of the Arab world – towards the Mediterranean was because the latter was regarded as a projection of the North on the South and thus perceived – at the time – as a validation for the colonial project (Hadhri, 1997a).

The Mediterranean and the Seduction of the Arab Elites

During the 1930s, some Arab philosophers and writers of great renown have brought an academic and scientific outlook on the Mediterranean. Indeed, it is mainly through reference to the pre-Islamic cultural heritage that the Mediterranean idea was investigated by some minority writers in Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia. In Lebanon, in particular, the Mediterranean has been claimed in the name of a neo-Phoenician ancestry. In this way that Christian philosophers, such as René Habachi, have dedicated many works to the Mediterranean.

In Egypt, as early as the nineteenth century, the entire Mediterranean current is created in the wake of Egypt's modernization attempts and cultural trends that favoured the historical heritage of pharaonic Egypt. The Egyptian chronicler Rifaat Al Tahtaoui attempted, in his famous work *Ta-khlīṣ al-Ila ibrīz talhīs Bārīz* (The Gold of Paris) of 1834 (Al Tahtaoui, 2012), to establish the convergence between Arab thought and European thought. In the late thirties, Taha Hussein (1938), in his book *Moustaqbal Aththaqafa fi Misr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt), attempted to place the Mediterranean at the center of the Arab-Muslim thought.

The Greek roots of Arab culture find an answer in the Arab origins of European culture, a blended heritage shaping a balanced Mediterranean thought. Just as in Lebanon and Egypt, and in the same spirit, in Tunisia

the Mediterranean has often been associated to the Carthaginian and Phoenician heritage, as well as to the Roman Empire. Prestigious names such as Elyssa, queen Dido, Hannibal, the Carthaginian general who defeated Rome, Magon, and later characters such as St. Augustine, St. Cyprian, Tertullian have often been claimed as a basis for the national history of Tunisia.

In this respect, Tunisia holds a special place in the general evolution of cultural relations with western Europe. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the dynamic and plural presence of Europeans in Tunisia seems to have exercised an obvious influence on the country's elite. These European were mainly from the Mediterranean: French, Italian, Maltese, Tuscan and Spanish. The Western image was omnipresent in the writings of Tunisian intellectuals and in their cultural and scientific productions.

In the wake of Al Tahtaoui's writings, Kherreddine Pacha's (1868) *Aquam Al Masalik fi Maarifat ahwal al mamalik* (The Surest Path to Knowledge regarding the Condition of Countries) is an essential reference in the ideological trend of the Tunisian and Arab political reformism.

Ali Douaji or the Birth of a Mediterranean Identity

In Ali Douaji's novel (1983), *Jawlat bayna hanat al-bahr al-mutawassit* (Journey through the Mediterranean bars), the young Tunisian journalist and writer of the thirties seems to have promoted "Mediterraneaness" as the theme for reflection. This novel by Ali Douaji summarizes the intellectual climate, full of passion, of the thirties in which it was written.

After the end of World War I, Tunisian literary output is marked by a multifaceted debate on *identity*. The author, apparently incompletely, narrates a voyage in the summer of 1933. His report offers to a certain youth a new perception of the Mediterranean. In the story of his "cruise" proposed by the shipping companies of the time (France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, ...) he mixes the evocation of ancient civilizations with that of a modern East. Starting from Tunis, Douaji begins his circumnavigation in France, via Corsica. The writer actually journeys to meet the three cultural basis among which he is travelling: French culture (and French as a key language during his circumnavigation), the two origins (Latin and Greek) of the European culture, traditional Arab culture, but also Turkish culture in his recent Republican version.

We must emphasize that at every stop on his trip Douaji is interested in the archaeological and architectural heritage, as if this past that founded the different cultural roots in the Mediterranean was for him the key to the present. However, at different moments in his story, the novelist insists on the communication problems experienced by the two cultural and human groups in the region. The West has a problem in understanding the East, the latter could not be satisfied with imitating Europe. According to Douaji, westernizing does not mean losing one's soul, but rather changing the relationships with Europeans. His dream was to live in intimacy with the two cultural areas, as a man could live, in his time, with two women. But he knows, in his heart of hearts, that the West denies him this bigamy, *i.e.* this double culture.

Douaji's novel is a literary creation and not a political pamphlet. However, it evokes all the misgivings felt by part of the Tunisian elite in the face of the various identities between past, present and future. This debate, concerning the relationship of national belonging with the different cultural components of the Mediterranean, took – some years later – the turning of a great political debate.

The relationship between identity and sense of belonging is, therefore, inextricably linked because the latter is an active element of affirmation and recognition of an identity: *one's sense of belonging is an active feeling of connection* that implies (emotional) affection, so it develops a kind of loyalty to something one feels he or she belongs to (Gasparini, 2000). Initially, this produces an objective integration and later a subjective one. As a result, it reinforces the identity, this means to be identical to oneself and, at the same time, to be identical to the collectivity. Due to the problematic nature of this relationship and the complexity of its ambivalent concepts, both individual and collectivity need them, the former developing into the latter in order to continue to “exist”, and the changes in identity that happen in modern society.

Limits and Weaknesses of the Mediterranean Trend in the Arab World

Considering the density of the euro-Mediterranean presence in the Arab cultural production after the beginning of the century, it is tempting to speak of a real “mindset of the two shores”. In this sense, the masterful work of some major Western orientalists – such as Louis Massignon,

Jacques Berque, André Miquel and others – are undoubtedly elements of a Mediterranean syncretism whose height was reached in the thirties.

However, we are forced to conclude that it is not so. Placing themselves outside the Arab-Muslim cultural centrality, all these neo-Mediterranean trends have led to an *impasse*. These schools of thought, which consider the Mediterranean as a surrogate of the Arab cultural heritage, are largely without future in the Arab World.

It was not until the eighties that we could witness again a development in the “Mediterranean thought” in the writings of poets – such as Adonis, Salah Stétié, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Amine Maalouf – or philosophers and theorists – such as Mohamed Arkoun, Abed Al Jabri. It is a new attempt at renewing the Mediterranean dimension of Arab culture. It is a new opening, certainly still timid and fragile, but no less likely to shape a true “mindset of the two shores”.

Intercultural Complexity in the Southern Mediterranean: The Case of the Maghreb

The Maghreb here presented as both reference and framework of analysis appears as a true intercultural laboratory. Indeed, Maghreb is located, with its cultural background, at the intersection of two perpendicular lines: 1) an Arab-Islamic (horizontal) one, going from the Atlantic to beyond Mecca; 2) a French-Western (vertical) one, going from Paris to the bottom of Africa.

If after more than fourteen centuries the horizontal Arab-Islamic culture appears as the corner-stone of Maghreb's cultural building, a complex process of “loans” and compromise seems to be also in place, through time and space, between the Arab-Islamic culture and other cultures, among which the Mediterranean and European culture.

The major challenge now for the Maghreb concerns its opening towards the Mediterranean and the West. This openness allows it to live its “accidentality” as one of the components of its civilization, but is at the same time reducing the risks of a shift to a “Westernism” that would make it smaller.

The tendencies to cultural and identity fallbacks observed in recent years in some layers of the Maghreb society stem from here, as well as the search for “shelter values” in the face of what appears to be a “Western cultural hegemony” (Hadhri, 1997a).

4. *The Mediterranean cultural heritage in the face of new data*

In the current historical and political conditions, the Mediterranean appears mainly as an intermediary world between Islam and the West. It is a territory of mediation that lays down steps and creates a possible common membership (Bedjaoui, 1994).

Briefly, the cultural realities of the contemporary Mediterranean world are undoubtedly an inexhaustible field of variations, of styles, of blended imaginaries, born from the synthesis between cultures. In other words, the Mediterranean is a complex and emblematic place of contact between cultures, a permanent hotbed of interactions and cultural sets: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the cultures of ancient Egypt and the ancient East, the Phoenician, Greek and Roman, Byzantine, Arab and Andalusian, Ottoman, European cultures. Never a region of the world has known this much mixing, synthesis and loans between cultures so diverse and rich. Hence the crucial question we must ask concerning the future of the Mediterranean cultural heritage.

This question is all the more relevant as the Mediterranean, linking area between cultures and civilizations, is at a crucial moment in its history, and this for at least two reasons. First, for the Mediterranean region, where two opposite forces are deeply working in this geo-historic space, both to make it into a junction and passage area and, conversely and at the same time, to transform it into an area of borders and fractures. Secondly, on a planetary scale, where globalization challenges the Mediterranean and Europeans and puts them a great challenge, to adapt their own cultural heritage to the invasive phenomenon of globalization, in order to preserve the opportunities of a Mediterranean permanently reconciled with itself and with its recent and remote past.

In a caustic paper entitled "*La pensée des deux rives*", published in his book *L'Héritage andalou*, Thierry Fabre wondered about future aspects of the Mediterranean, in particular on cultural level (Fabre, 1995). The future in the Mediterranean will be a new kind of reality gathering the two shores in an unusual combination, while others evoke the "Andalusian shore" to describe the new neo-Mediterranean discourse of recent years on solidarity, cooperation, dialogue between the north and south of the Mediterranean.

The culmination of this explosion of meetings and various events was the Barcelona Conference, which defined a new platform for the future of relations between the two shores (Hadhri, 1997b).

Anyway, the one-sided view of the Mediterranean – as a projection of the North on the South – long-dominant, gradually gives way to “a new Mediterranean utopia”, this time commonly shared between the two shores.

More than ever this beautiful Mediterranean utopia, carried [with]in the elites' hearts, proves to be essential to the progress of the Mediterranean and its future. Accordingly, the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies, held in Mexico in 1982, has rightly considered “that the Mediterranean has, since the dawn of human civilization, constituted a link between peoples and cultures, as a sea which is a source of creativity and of fruitful exchanges spanning millennia, and a means of communication between European and Islamic cultures” (UNESCO, 1982, p. 91).

Conclusions

This very brief study of intercultural relations in the Mediterranean as they are perceived by the South allows us to propose some deductive observations: 1) The Mediterranean suffers from a large deficit in cultural relations in spite of the efforts implemented over recent years, particularly after Barcelona; 2) The consolidation of the bases of “Mediterraneanness” also depends on in-depth work at the level of the Arab-Mediterranean societies and their elites, as well as through a North-South and South-North dialogue; 3) The great challenge of this early century for all the Mediterranean and European peoples is to synchronize their own cultural heritage in the face of globalization of ideologies, economies and cultures in order to preserve the opportunities of a Mediterranean cultural heritage, the only durable foundation for a living Mediterranean, the Mediterranean of the twenty-first century.

One of the goals to achieve would be precisely to arrive at a better perception of the other, to a rediscovery of the other in the framework of a new journey of the most sincere and outspoken cultural dialogue. It means to

dispel misunderstandings, lull passions and open the doors of hope for a better future in the Mediterranean.

In fact, if otherness is a dimension that cannot be ignored, being, today like yesterday, fundamental for the processes of identification and recognition, we must ponder the fact that the other (the difference) is not only a place of conflict and recrimination, but also a foundation on which to build a culture of tolerance and respect – an issue currently much debated. Said culture should instil, particularly into younger generations, the desire to know each other, to open up towards the other as a person from whom to learn not only new customs, habits, and new ways of being, but also as a way to re-discover ourselves, to reconsider ourselves, our values and behaviours. The cultural dimension becomes therefore crucial, as it can provide the basis on which to establish a society not merely focused on respecting “otherness”, but which also allows to explore the mechanisms created at different levels (individual, social, and cultural ones) whenever we relate to the “other”.

The problem of the North / South dialogue is not the Mediterranean – not least because in this area the most significant civilizations, religions, and philosophies, legal codes and political regiments were born, including democracy and even the sciences. All these different kinds of knowledge and cultural values born in the Mediterranean basin (southern Europe, North Africa and East) can represent strategic elements to overcome the current crisis in Europe, becoming a stimulus for the review of policies and providing a solid foundation for the growth of a genuine common euro-Arab-Mediterranean cultural heritage and knowledge, then passing it on to future generations.

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