

ENSAIOS

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND ITS CULTURE
The construction of an image by the North



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Mediterranean Sea in Marseille, Endoume neighborhood, 2019.

Picture by the author.



On 22nd May Albert Memmi, a great name for Mediterranean culture and postcolonial studies, died. It is for him that I rewrite this text, originally written in French – but not published –, in July 2019.

When we speak about the Mediterranean it automatically comes to our minds the image of the construction of a cultural field – to bring here the classic concept of Pierre Bourdieu (2001)¹ – and other issues such as masculinity, food, the relation between religion and colonialism as well as the sea. There is an imaginary about a “Mediterranean culture”. However, an issue remains to be debated and explored throughout the years in the discipline of anthropology: the construction of the Mediterranean by the North as an epistemic heuristic subject. When I bring here the category of North, I mean to place myself beside the postcolonial domination that reinforces a subaltern relation between imaginary and reality. This text comes as a key to rethink how this geographical area is understood by authors from the North and how the academic discourse turns into a political tool for the aforementioned domination.

The first question to be explored follows: could the Mediterranean be perceived as a “cultural field”? This region of the globe has been in the center of social sciences debates since the beginning of the 20th century when it comes to the contact of cultures, especially after the wave of decolonization during the 1960s. The first discussed issues concerned about the Arabic world and its relationship with Europe and the colonies: how could one approach of the identity construction of these nations of northern Africa and the influence of the colonial power?

The idea of Mediterranean was thus built through travel narratives and images surrounding a common element, the sea.

¹ For Pierre Bourdieu, a field is an important definition to all his approaches. According to his theory, a field is a space where the controversies are lived by the agents who are inserted in that space, giving a sense to all the values which are shared by these individuals. The significant are then created and organized by the habitus of these people in a sort of construction of the values, norms and all the social organization of that group. In this sense, the habitus concerns the practices of the daily routine lived by the agents, whereas the field is the space where all these social movements take place. The habitus edifies the order and the positions of these agents in the center of this relationships by taking the symbols as a power which is respected by people.

The Mediterranean became a representation. Albert Camus' well-known book *L'Étranger* (1942) is as an example of a text throughout which a narrative is centered on the story of a character and the Mediterranean space. The scientific writing associated to ethnographic narratives are not restricted but extended to a "visual writing" nourishing a particular imagination on the category of the Mediterranean as a cultural environment in itself.

According to Dionigi Albera (2006), the Mediterranean has been designated as a fruitful source for ethnological analysis by the Anglophone centers of Social Sciences in the 1950s. He emphasizes that a narrative written by the center – in this case, English and American universities – was used for the development of comparative approaches, placing a homogenous structure of values and technologies on one hand, religious particularities on the other. In this sense, Michael Herzfeld (1980) reinforced that the use of this region as a comparative field for ethnographic and cultural analysis is a key to turn invisible the richness of certain groups who had based a historical path on the contact of cultures. All this epistemological construction is a face of discursive power and cannot be considered only as a neutral engine for the construction of the American anthropology. As we can see, many famous anthropologists uplifted their theories standing on Mediterranean fieldworks such Clifford Geertz and Michael Herzfeld. As it is explained by Albera (2006), this region was used as a subterfuge for the conflicts that emerged in continental Africa and Asia, which ended up precluding the research that was being conducted at that time.

The postcolonial power is present in the everyday life of the citizen of these countries that normally considered as the center of Earth in terms of geographical localization. Cities like Marseille, Alger, Naples, Tunis, Barcelona, Marrakech and Faro are the open gates to the sea where nature can be located as the path traversed by migrants from many countries to achieves the wealth of Mediterranean exchange. In this context, there is always a relation based on a sentiment of so-called "oppression". As it is explored by Albert Memmi (1973), *colonisateurs* and *colonisés* establish a link through oppression forces that might be perpetuated beyond the power of the State, being extended till the habitus of everyday life. This is also an epistemological oppression.

According to the French anthropologist Christian Bromberger (2018), the Mediterranean should be seen as a space of diffusion where several value systems (such as honor, shame and masculinity) are spread throughout the globe. This would be thought as a space where religious diasporas took place all over the development of the differences between East and West. The sea is hence the intermediary which provides the circulation and the contact between objects, people and values. It is a space where sea unites North and South in such a heuristic category for cultural studies. Jean Boutier (2018) affirms that since the end of the 18th century the Mediterranean may be conceived as a historical construction whose relationships established between North and South are based on the edification of a common identity that is called “Mediterranean” nowadays. But how could we think about a common identity if we don’t take into account the political differences that come along with a postcolonial reality? Should the concept of Mediterranean be observed as an old-fashioned theory that tries to approach different culture like one homogenous system of cultures on behalf of an Anglophone academic discourse?

The Mediterranean is a place in the center of an intra-religious dialogue, being conceived as a field where various subjectivities are expressed in a sort of a negotiation to place their subjective authorities of the sacred, a space where religion may be externalized on landscapes, through narratives, no matter what perspective we look from. For this reason, a discourse coming from these communities – taking into consideration the fact that the majority of the available ethnographies concerns rural communities of the countryside – themselves, having a scientific background and authority could be crucial for the valorization of cultural differences, leading the debates beyond a comparative framework of different neighbor communities. Citing Albera (2006: 119), “voices that were not in English had no impact on the international scene”. The imperialist leading of the researches about the Mediterranean area is definitely an epistemic oppression to all those voices.

Since the 1980s, there has been a conflict concerning the Mediterranean as either an object or a context. The concept of Mediterranean itself is in crises and has been reformulated since then. Although the presence of non-Anglophone works rises up, native voices remains unheard: “they are only an infinitesimal part of a polyphony that is still unheard” (Albera 2006: 120). The

dialogues between central and peripheral anthropology still are kept as non-explored dialectics.

Pina Cabral (1991) states that the Mediterranean is then a myth. As defined by him, this area reinforces an incertitude about the national identity of the countries who are placed before European borders, on the other side of the sea. Willing to think about the political place where this region is placed before the greatest economies of the North, Pina Cabral defends that even if Italy, Portugal, France and Spain belong to the Old Continent, they are always observed as the periphery of the other potencies such as German and England. In fact, he affirms that it is necessary to rearticulate an image of a common Mediterranean identity, since there are many degrees of insertion of these countries in the center of contemporary political forces. Likewise, as explored by Memmi (1973), if we bear in mind the relations engendered by the colonialism, there will always be a place for both privileges and degrees of power. In this sense, there would be privileged voices that echo louder than others. For that reason, from the 1970s on, many “natives” acceded to an anthropological authority aspiring to spread their values. It is time for the southern citizens to write their ethnographies about the places where they belong.

As a result of that, another issue comes to de discussion: the self-ethnography. As stated by Marilyn Strathern (2017), the construction of a “self-knowledge” apparatus by the social scientist who have their cultural background based on their own fieldwork is an alternative to explore culture as an object of analysis itself. Moreover, a social relation, as it is conceived as an interaction amongst individuals in a certain space, can be turned into a solid heuristic object of Social Sciences, specially anthropology, displacing the authorship from the Other to a Self. The challenge of this battle is to edify an authority for this southern anthropologist who study their own “homes”. In this case, the researchers must become authors of their own background, becoming specialized authors of the structures they belong to. Writing is then developed into a strategic postcolonial and resistant device of resistance in face imperial anthropology.

In short, the debates provoked by the discussions about how the Mediterranean is constructed in the imaginary of people all over the globe must be addressed from the viewpoint of an analytical category for cultural studies, not forgetting to take into account both the postcolonial present and the repressed past of

these groups which engage new problematics for the development of a new cultural and economic perspectives. Religion, literature and daily life in urban contexts must be interrogated as eternal games of political forces that make desires invisible before Europe and the main potencies of the global economy. Therefore, the puzzle mixing culture and State is another factor that must undeniably be considered in the construction of specific representations of the cultural differences of the Mediterranean. Would cultural and ethnical diversity be a secondary issue when we think about the imaginary surrounding the values shared by these nations? Speaking about the Mediterranean means to take an epistemic category forged in the middle of the 20th century, a time when the game of powers was based on repression, oppression and homogenization of culture worldwide, a time where a bipolar global order urged to be seen as the one and only two options for the development of global order. Actually, it is required for now to think and explore the applicability of this category which implicated the renunciation of many fundamental particularities for the autonomy of ethnical groups who make these spaces a religious diversity and symbolic power. Voices that come particularly from these cultural structures aren't worth being listened as original authorities that might be focused on the particularities of each group, its beliefs and representations?

« Celui qui a été démesurément écrasé et humilié est obligé de
s'opposer démesurément »
(Albert Memmi, *L'homme dominé*)

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