**THE ‘MAPPING’ OF A MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

**the importance of a multi-layered spectrum to define Mediterranean heterogeneous identity**

*Luca Maicon Vinicius Bellavia*

*“I argue that the Mediterranean area represents a common ad specific ‘pool’,*

*a fount or a source of multiple and diverse ideas,*

*offering a long and deep tradition of theories.*

*This specific ‘pool’ developed over the centuries on the ground of shared history,*

 *marked by conflicts, interaction and cooperation”*

Schäfer Isabel, *A Matrix for Mediterranean (Area) Studies*

**Introduction to the Mediterranean as a ‘region’**

Defining the Mediterranean as a ‘region’ suggests a deeper and more profound reading of such definition, which has several implications. First of all, it is necessary to identify how terms such as ‘region’ and ‘regionalism’ can be defined and how these concepts are consistent with the geo-political area of the Mediterranean. An area that has always captured great interests not only among scholars of geography but also of international studies (IR) and humanitarian disciplines (sociologists, linguistics, historians, etc.) (Schäfer, 2014), whose vision encompasses that of a succession of a multitude of cultures *towards* and *within* it; where the (co)occurrence of various phenomena have manifested throughout the years. Mediterranean Studies represents a necessary instrument *de facto* to provide a comprehensive vision of the region as such. However, having tried to provide an effective definition of the Mediterranean region, the next step will be necessarily to reflect on the EU-Mediterranean relationships in order to further discover the interactions between diverse actors and events. The interest shown towards the Mediterranean region is due to the desire to better comprehend and mentally recreate a sort of mapping that highlights where the Mediterranean region begins and ends, or in other words which are its borders. As a matter of fact, the main features of the Mediterranean will emerge spontaneously, stressing how relevant and crucial the role of *diversity* is.

**Regionalism: a *laboratoire* to foster and promote political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions**

Regionalism is *in primis* a concept linked to geographical studies, which over the years has also attracted scholars of international relations, adopting and transforming the region as a key element to understand the world order. Thus, regionalism expresses the process which leads to the creation of a common sense of belonging, a common sense of identity, and a common purpose that combines in order to establish institutions that display a well-defined identity and develop a collective action within that geographical region (Gallina 2005, Fawn 2009, Bicchi 2018, Pace 2005). On the other hand, the region is the concrete transposition or the result of this process. A process that emerged, also, as a reaction to globalization, becoming a prominent feature of world politics. It is widely acknowledged that as a reaction to globalization, localism has spread in many areas of the world, to provide a valuable instrument to fight against social, cultural homogenization and to find and provide common solutions to the new security challenges and threats. In these terms, the concept of regionalism assumes the meaning of a useful instrument, if not even necessary, that allows to better portray the Mediterranean as a region, by considering a triple dimension scheme (Panebianco, 2010): the *economic* dimension (the Mediterranean area as a trade region), the *security* dimension (the Mediterranean as a security community) or *cultural* and *religious* dimensions (the Mediterranean as the cradle of civilization and the three monotheistic religions).

Nevertheless, scholars have been debating on whether a properly said Mediterranean region does exist or not. As a matter of fact, regionalism can be further described as a multi-*façade* assumption, which relies upon three main elements political interaction, economic integration, and cultural (regional) identity. Since the existence of these three major specificities, the existence of a Mediterranean region can be expressed. Besides, it is possible to acknowledge within the same area, three sub-regions: Europe, the Maghreb, and the Levant (Schäfer 2014, Affaya 2009).

These linkages between regions zoom the attention onto another pivotal element, concerning the issue: the Mediterranean Sea. Doubtlessly, the Mediterranean Sea stigmatized a ‘shaping tool’ which contribute neatly to the definition of ‘borders’ of the region (Bicchi 2018, Fawn 2009). (Re)defining Mediterranean borders, it is crucial to consider several factors, as they are continuously defined according to priorities and political interests. Taking as an example the EU-Mediterranean borders, they vary relying on the lens adopted: UfM partners are not the same as in the EMP partners, neither do ENP partners are the same. They change according to the specific policy framework taken into account. The understanding of these dynamics fosters the importance of not adopting a fixed perspective when debating on the Mediterranean region (Panebianco 2010, Barbé & Surrallés 2010).

Two paradigms that can be exploited to focus on the phenomenon are those provided by Stefania Panebianco, who suggests the existence of a ‘volatile’ regionalism; and the ‘Meso-regionalism’ approach, proposed by Andrea Gallina. According to the former point of view, in the Mediterranean basin the co-existence of several challenges weakening each of the three dimensions previously singled out, suggesting a volatile regionalism (or ‘variable geometry’). That is to link to mainly three motives: the lack of efficiency of economic regional agreements; the difficulty of identifying the ‘Euro-Mediterranean region’ – which as stated above are *in fieri* –; and thirdly the functioning of political institutions is jeopardized by contingent events (Panebianco, 2010). The latter proposes the ‘meso-regional approach’ which can be defined as an approach that sees integration, not as an end, yet instead, the *nécessaire* means through which co-development of local production systems – in their specificity and diversity – can be achieved. It identifies a system of countries or part of them, that may belong to an already defined regional integration agreement, such as, for example, the Southern countries of the EU and the Mediterranean countries, and which have ‘something in common’ and ‘something that makes them different’ from the areas outside the meso-region. In other terms, the Meso-regional system is a polycentric system of economies cooperating with each other in order to achieve the maximum distribution of benefits among the participating countries. It represents neither a block of countries nor a system based on bilateral preferential trade agreements. In this way, a group of countries can seek self-reliance through internal and external interdependencies and eliminating the negative effects of unequal patterns of power distribution. Global interdependency and self-reliance are searched for through the creation of interdependency within the meso-region based on the idea of the ‘rings of solidarity’ (Gallina, 2005).

**A dialogue between ‘identity’: the ‘self’ and the ‘other’**

Having provided a general overview of the Mediterranean region and having recognized its infinite interactions between peoples surrounding the Mediterranean and within the geographical area itself, dialogue without any doubt has largely contributed to drawing and affecting the Mediterranean ‘identity’. Identity is a central issue to take into account since assumes a broader meaning concerning the Mediterranean. According to Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean as a region has to be referred to both as a ‘bridge’ and a ‘cross-road’, an area where diversity emerges from unity (Bicchi 2018, Panebianco 2018, Affaya 2009). However, the so-known cradle of civilizations may imply the adoption of two specular narratives, i.e. the narrative of the ‘attraction’ towards this complex spiral of life and the narrative of the ‘other’, which has to be avoided if not feared (Schäfer 2014, Bicchi 2018, Panebianco 2010, Pace 2005, Affaya 2009). In determining this assumption, the European Identity contributes to the rise of a sense of both separations from the ‘other’ (*from* the Mediterranean) and of belonging (*to* the Mediterranean). Moreover, the Mediterranean itself is based and constructed on this rationale: the Mediterranean Sea divides and unites the two shores, religion splits the North and South of the area, several cultures and languages divide even further. The Mediterranean is not composed of a single and static identity. Indeed, it should be referred to in terms of ‘multiple belonging’. The important flow of people from Europe going searching for diversity elsewhere; and people coming from North Africa or the Middle East.

**Final Remarks**

What emerges from this brief analysis of the Mediterranean region and the attempt to provide a ‘mapping’ of its borders, is that when dealing with the ‘cradle of civilizations’ is hardly impossible to present a ‘stable’ and ‘fixed’ definition. A *sui generis* region that has made of its diversities, a founding pivot, and has succeeded in building a well-defined [regional] identity in its non-definiteness. An identity that transcends borders and is constantly changing, relying also upon the lens, the matrix adopted (Schäfer 2014, Affaya 2009, Pace 2005). As an area of studies, Mediterranean Studies may furnish the more profitable approach, since based and built upon its multi-disciplinarity (Schäfer, 2014). Therefore, taking advantage of the immense amount of produced research and documents, it is precisely the ‘heterogeneity’ of the area that becomes the key element of interpretation. Hence, even if perhaps there is a need to imprison the Mediterranean in concepts and definitions, the truth is that it is a ‘region’, which cannot be pigeonholed.

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