

# Cultural Dialogue in the Mediterranean Region

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My doctoral thesis defence in last century's pre-digital era, marked the end of almost half a decade of leapfrogging between the four corners of the Mediterranean. Today, you can complete a digital thesis without leaving the comfort of your Wi-Fi zone. But, that practice of amassing photocopies and reports whilst out on the road, however outdated, slow, primitive and environmentally-unfriendly it may have been, somehow forced one to find a balance between the translation of what people wanted to appear in texts and what was inadvertently pulsating in the street. Equally, you could perceive the colours and smells of places; things that weren't to be found in the books. In short, you experienced, first-hand, the "countryside and countrymen." The conclusion I would like to reach is that the Europe and the Arab world of the 1980s, once you were in them, were much less different to each other than each of those past worlds differ from one another today. As this is the first idea I would like to highlight in this text, I will try to be a little more specific: Europe in the early eighties, pre-Erasmus and low-cost flights, was an expanding hive of old folk; happy for having left behind their old suspicions and distrust and expanding and gaining strength because of the clear perception that problems, from now on, would always come from outside. But it was a hive, as I said. With its separate compartments. The youth were yet to pull down the walls and reach today's plain-to-see uniformity after decades of university exchanges, low-cost weekends away and clothing at bargain prices, all bearing the same labels.

Across the water, that Arab world in the eighties was still just that, the Arab world. The Arabness rhetoric was at its lowest ebb, although, at the time, no one knew anything about that. You could find Tunisians or Algerians in the eastern Arab universities. Iraqis in Cairo. Lebanese and Palestinians everywhere. All the Moroccan academics were trying to get published in the Lebanese magazines *Al-Adab* or *Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, whose issues were on sale on the streets of Tangier, Sfax or Algiers. In contrast, its youth still lacked today's surprising uniformity; surprising after decades of border closures, distrust, unexpected wars in places where Arabness most prospered, such as Iraq and Syria. And I say today's surprising uniformity, above all aesthetically speaking, because it does not come from personal exchange and contact, as it was with the aforementioned, equivalent situation in Europe. The wings were clipped of any kind of Arab exchange between people, and, instead, today's uniformity stems from a costumbrist and social Islamization that has been emptied of any kind of reference to Arabness. The Arabs of the past, therefore, are no longer seen today as nationals of a country or Arabs in general, but as Muslim men and women. It has been widely stated that everything that is not tradition is plagiarism. The Arab world of the eighties and nineties ceased to follow the path it did in the sixties and seventies, instead deciding to inhabit the new replacement ideology of Islamism. This brought about a real change in cultural paradigm, plagiarized, very probably, from Iran's revolutionary Islamic aesthetic and the no less revolutionary Wahhabi petro-Islam.

As Fernando Broncano reminds us, culture is how a society reproduces itself.<sup>1</sup> Equally, it is not a natural

<sup>1</sup> The author talks about "individual plasticity" in our relation with culture, as compared with the stereotype of the "collective slab of culture" (Broncano, 2007).

legacy, but rather the product of generational narration. To put it another way: a single generation is enough to put together a complete, cultural narrative of social belonging. In the case of the region in question, the Mediterranean, represented here by the complementary pairing of Europe and the Arab world, it could be said that in the two generations that separate the present day and that European-ness / Arabness of the seventies, what has triumphed has not been the conviction of a common future (probably derived from a no more distant past), but rather the ancient and romantic model of culture, as a watertight compartment, visceral and non-rational. Created from a reservoir, not a sea. So, the second idea I would like to highlight here is that all Mediterranean cultural dialogue is today condemned to failure because of the exclusionary, communitarian narratives and reverberating monologues, which are a common plague to the North and South shores of the Mediterranean and a complete novelty to this generation.

The aforementioned pre-digital thesis went under the title *El Diálogo Euro-Árabe (The Euro-Arab Dialogue)*,<sup>2</sup> the story of the old institution known as the EAD (1973-1991) in which institutional Europe took its first steps towards a common foreign policy (one of the major milestones of the Venice Declaration in 1980) and in which the Arab League, to make it easy for Europe to sit down with it face to face, withdrew the identification of “Egypt” or “Palestine” (the crux of the issue) to present themselves as Arabs. What was interesting about the EAD was that it was prohibited to speak about what actually concerned Europe (oil) or what really made the Arabs sit up in their seats (Palestine), and yet enormous progress was made in both camps thanks to their speaking exclusively about how much the EAD could unite the two. No less interesting was that every time there was an awkward silence in the permanent dialogue, it was through references to history that they were able to get back on track; a debate, publication, university meeting on the Mediterranean’s shared Arab legacy, and especially that unusual European Arab space of Al-Andalus or Sicily. Quite a contrast to today’s essayism, which is apologetic, brotherly and draws on the most violent of histories.

So, let us focus on how much it characterized the biggest Euro-Arab bridge in history: little was put down in writing, only the positive was spoken about and troubles were not stirred up. Discord was accepted, as it was politely understood that dialogue did not mean fusion. Incidentally, I would also like to point out that if historical accounts (Euro-Arab, Mediterranean, Andalusian...) formed the narrative cushion on which everything rested in terms of the relations between these neighbours, what really put paid to the EAD was the continuous presence of Atlantic contamination (the excessively early Gymnich compromise, which allowed for North American interference) and its correlative political venom: the EAD died when the diplomatic mechanisms that had been expropriated were politicized and nationalized. Culture serves to level the political playing field, but mixing these two areas can be lethal.

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The life of the Euro-Arab Dialogue and the causes of its failure are clear proof of two factors that have to be considered: firstly, how right Broncano was – we saw it – when he defined culture as the way in which society reproduces itself. Because the vision held of the Mediterranean culture has radically changed in a short space of time. Two generations have been focused exclusively on controversy, on the forging of a chain of identities. And this has been embedded in the exclusionary cultural narratives, no longer between Europe and the Arab world, but between the nations of Europe and Islam, the new actor disguised as the old one. The second factor, which stems from

<sup>2</sup> Later published in two submissions: (1997) *El Diálogo Euro-Árabe: la Unión Europea frente al sistema regional árabe*. Madrid: Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (1997) *Documentos del Diálogo Euro-Árabe*. University of Seville.

this, points at the fact that if we want to generate a Mediterranean culture of open societies, the key lies in the narrative we want to offer. If, generation after generation, we continue to reproduce the idea that our culture is that of my group and me, so far as it represents me today projected narratively into the past, then we will advance towards a scattered Mediterranean. If, however, we minimize the absurd tellurism of Mediterranean communitarianism (pernicious narrative blockade), we could compose a Mediterranean culture of the future that is operative and realistic. But let's stop to take a look at that, because it is the third and central idea of these pages.

The Mediterranean is affected by the changing avatars specific to global geo-strategy (resources, populations) and those of more general geopolitics deriving from relevant natural factors, which range from the fusion of Atlantic-Mediterranean waters in Gibraltar, to Suez with the Red Sea and the no less complex connectivity with the Black Sea in Istanbul. Not to mention the tempestuous Great Sand Sea in the south. But, besides this, certain factors should also be considered which exclusively and directly affect Europe and the Arab world: that is, the geopolitics of history, that idea of culture as a natural resource (Peter; Dornhof & Arigita, 2013) which can be exploited, shared, reforested or, to the contrary, used up. In this concept of culture to which we have referred – again: generational narration in which a society reproduces itself -, it is clear that, seen from a global perspective, the 20th century did very little to compile a Mediterranean culture, while, on the other hand, it fell into a frenetic cultural compilation based on the most closed form of communitarianism.

Amos Oz, in this regard, considers who could have imagined that after the 20th century would come the 11th century again (Oz, 2012); a time of programmed, religious-based conflicts (unprecedented in the 20th century) and the current end-of-days cloning of an exclusionary model of identity, of which we were given warning in the Yugoslav Wars in the nineties, but which would only grow in size. "Captivated and spellbound by the mirages of communitarian ideologies" in its most reductionist sense (writes Georges Corm, 2006), the Mediterranean culture has been divided and compartmentalized into a kind of atypical cellular gemmation whose roots are sunk deep not only in European nationalisms – born, as we said, from the damaging, romantic notion of cul-

ture -, but which has been unexpectedly projected, transforming the conventional colonial divisions into self-fulfilling prophecies.

In today's Mediterranean culture, in the generational narrative that we have decided to reproduce, there is no longer the right to equality but rather to difference. This is the sole basis for the identitarian definition on both shores and undoubtable colonial imprint, which in no way improved the (surely) more open *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire: it is common knowledge that the French High Commissioner in Lebanon (1936) left a legacy consisting of deep communitarian division, which not only could not be dissolved (although this was attempted) in the Taif Agreement of 1989 (Castaignède, 2014) after its bloody civil war, but rather was exported: as a general framework of reference, confessional, communitarian representation, would, some time later, serve to patent a similar division in civilian society after another war, that of Iraq, whose bizarre "modern" constitution suddenly Islamized parliamentary life and forced confessional groupings for any party that wished to rise to power. So, confessional parliaments on the one hand (with their tried and tested conflictivity and which hold back national and, by association, international development) and political Islamization on the other, are, ultimately, the oil slick spilt from an Arab space whose 20th century was completely removed from these developments, perceived, as of today, as tradition thanks to this logic of "culture as generational narration."

I said at the beginning that the most credible, palpable and feelable Europe is not the Europe of treaties, but rather one of a certain population homogeneity which today is at risk of regression. However, and this serves by way of a conclusion: in the same way, the most credible Arab world would be that of a sustainable common culture (Al-Rodhan, 2009), which can link perfectly with Europe in a common Mediterranean culture. The mechanisms of that sustainable common Mediterranean culture are clearly evident: on the one hand, there are the horizontal ones; the return of exchanges of young people, workers, families, professionals between Arab countries who, today, have protected their borders and only mix with refugees. And on the other hand, we have the vertical mechanisms: the narrative plot of a collective identity based on open societies and the right to equality, and not difference. The opposite option is the ghettoization

of the Mediterranean. In this respect the previously cited Amos Oz also has some timely reflections, as he explains how, around the social formation of the State of Israel, a strange myth has arisen about “Western” exclusivity, while most of its inhabitants come from a population redistribution of the Arab and Islamic world resulting from communitarian demands, given that thousands of Jews formed part of the old Arab, Turkish, Iranian etc. Mediterranean societies. There was no need for collective identification and today the coexistence of these people seems increasingly unlikely. And this is not to mention the similar ghettoization of the many Arab Christianities, in this oil slick of collectivization.

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The reality is that if one wanders today through the streets of Jerusalem, Amman, Beirut, Alexandria, Tangier, Madrid, Paris or Brussels, there is the perception that the big cities of the Euro-Arab oval are perfectly prepared, socially speaking, for a cultural narrative of open citizenry. Their youth, for better or for worse, are increasingly homogenous, whether because of the profusion of Muslim veils and beards, hipsters with tracksuits and caps, tattoos, or the aforementioned trend of sporting the same clothing brands. Because they are the real fulfilment of what universal history has always been: the contagion of humanity in movement. The sociologist Alejandro Portes, winner of the Princess of Asturias Award for Social Sciences, speaks coherently of the social sustainability of populations that need each other mutually, which, naturally, tend towards fusing. Although it would be a different story if it were left to polemic to write out this Mediterranean culture. In that regard,

the permeability of social media and the immediacy of fashions and tastes tend towards homogeneity because of the sum of the contributions. I thought about this whilst preparing these lines and listening to a song of Marc Anthony “Vivir mi vida”, the Spanish version of Cheb Khaled’s “C’est la vie.” And I thought about how, during the *Gilets Jaunes* protests in Paris, Les Saltimbanks composed the Arab-style anthem, “On lâche rien,” or TiBZ wrote the song “Nation” (claiming the Europeanness of those who came from the South), among a multitude of possible examples with a certain shared aesthetic of cultural fusion. At the end of the day, this is what marks a generation, in whose hands it is to decide if they want to write out a Mediterranean culture or one of sealed compartments.

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