

# The New Culture of Youth in the Mediterranean Region: Media, Technologies, Politics, Economy and Youth

**Niccolo Milanese**

Director of European Alternatives  
EHESS, Paris

In 2011, young people looked across the Mediterranean and saw other young people. Whatever else the Arab Spring might have achieved, the global attention it attracted created a moment of recognition between the North and the South especially among young people. This group's shared set of problems, albeit experienced at vastly different degrees of intensity, was highly visible, including among others: inequality, precarity, indebtedness, the weight of gerontocracy, failed political classes and a collapsed political system, corruption, the privatization of common goods, environmental degradation. The early victories in Tunisia and Egypt meant that a repertoire of political acts (occupation of squares, for example) and strategies (social media, for example) carried a new potency, and symbols and discourses of rage and revolution were created. *Time* magazine put an anonymous young rebel as its person of the year in 2011. The Mediterranean was once again, in some sense, the central sea of the world, and the 'youth,' whoever they are, were apparently its most potent inhabitants.

After Puerta del Sol, Occupy, Gezi park, the Colourful Revolution in Skopje, Syntagma, Nuit debout and many other such focal points of youthful rebellion, by 2018 perhaps we now have enough distance to ask whether 2011 marked the emergence of a 'youth culture' and collective generational identity across the Mediterranean with its own dynamics, or whether the idea of the youth saying 'Mare Nostrum' ('our sea') is just one more deceptive illusion for a sea that has a long history in this line.

## The Young Mediterraneans?

The emergence of any new youth culture in the Mediterranean needs to deal with its own precedents. The Springtime of the Peoples of 1848 (and its activist groups like Young Italy, Young Hegelians, Young Ottomans...) carries its own paradigms of revolution, nationhood and youth. 50 years ago this year, 'les événements' of May 1968 arguably marked the popular eruption of 'youth culture' as a socio-political force. The Algerian war, the Iranian, 'velvet' and 'colour' revolutions, all form part of what we collectively see as potential models or warnings for what could happen in different parts of the Mediterranean. Such events have shaped popular ideas of what youth *is*, scholarly cultures of studying it, models of education and policing strategies of control, all of which have been spread, sold, volunteered or imposed across the Mediterranean societies.

After all, history in the Mediterranean is contested territory, a terrain of struggle in which memory is constantly redeployed as claims over the meanings of terms like youth, equality, freedom and development. For all the ideas connected with a new birth, and the coming Spring, this cycle is not one young people are able to break out from: the movement of Mediterranean time itself seems to oblige their passage into this shadowy underworld of pasts and futures, as a common poetic tradition from Homer and Virgil to Darwish and Di Lucca has constantly reminded us. This rite of passage is perhaps both individual and collective, each new generation facing its history and getting only fleeting glimpses of what might follow it. Like Odysseus or Aeneas, the youth of the Mediterranean seems obliged to cross over into a land of memory – which may not be Hades,

the Elysian fields or Paradise – but in which they are tested in their determination to break from the past and create change in this world.

Amongst the words of warning that hang over the entry gate of this underworld of living memory, one is particularly pertinent: the idealization of youth and the dream of a united Mediterranean found its most ugly and destructive combination in fascism, and the recent surges in support for neo-fascist groups requires a strong sense of vigilance when dealing with these themes.

Some key moments of a newly emerging rite of passage in the Mediterranean, which exist simultaneously and mark the conscience of a generation, can perhaps be described sequentially as follows: youth frustrated, youth embattled, youth detained, youth violated, youth drowned and saved, youth regenerates. These moments can be thought of as characteristic for many youth in the Mediterranean, and which each young person must somehow come to terms with and face. They are not experiences each young person will necessarily have directly – in the same way that not every young person was involved in uprisings or protests – but experiences of a generation which each young person will be aware of: ghosts that will in some sense follow them, and to which they may be able to give names and faces, or which they will only see as anonymous representations of a collective condition. The unprecedented degree to which these experiences are shared across internet platforms, new media as well as 24-hour television news leads to significant levels of mutual awareness between young people, but does not in itself imply any common interpretation or reaction to what is shared. Not only is the experience of each young person informed to very different degrees, but each of the moments of the emerging youth generation creates radically different political and cultural effects in different contexts.

### Youth Frustrated

Levels of frustration in the Mediterranean region are extremely high following high expectations. Many people have a sense that the clock of progress has stalled and that their lives are now trapped in perpetual suspension. This is in marked contrast with some neighbouring regions like the Gulf states or northern Europe, where the youth tend to be more optimistic.

Many of the ‘political’ reasons for this sense of frustration amongst young people are widely known and widely shared, from military rule to unaddressed social problems to geopolitical conflict. Such blockages in the Mediterranean region are not only blockages for young people, of course, although young people bear specific costs arising from them in terms of their inability to construct their lives in a sustainable way where the State is either absent, dysfunctional or pulling back from providing public goods, where jobs are hard to come by, demand maximum flexibility and pay minimally, and where geopolitical danger is constantly present.

A couple of political experiences from 2017 may have had a greater impact on young people than other parts of the population, and so are worth mentioning: the constitutional crisis in Catalonia divided young people across the European continent around questions of nationality and identity, but also exacerbated divisions inside Podemos, which was the focus of many young people’s hopes, and poses problems for the international reputation of the municipalist movement which Barcelona’s Ada Colau champions. Nevertheless, a sign that municipalist politics and the new relationship it promises between citizens and local governments continues to inspire came from the relative success of *Zagreb Je Nas* (Zagreb is Ours!) in the Zagreb elections (winning four seats in the assembly). Nearby in Macedonia, the new government of Zoran Zaev populated by relatively young people and replacing the previous corrupt regime marked some success of the Colourful Revolution, and acts as a sign of hope for youth in some nearby countries. The feeling of frustration is not only caused by ‘formal’ politics and the institutions of state. Leading precarious lives leads to a generation of cultures and strategies which are disconnected from the staid institutions of society, and yet those same institutions of society are highly resistant to change. Dependence on parents for financial support reinforces generational power imbalances. A common sentiment is that the ambient society is hypocritical, professing one thing in public but actually maintaining the opposite through immobilism, religious conformism, patriarchy, propaganda or outright repression. The sentiment is nothing new of course, and indeed the title of the famous Egyptian novel from 1949, (and later classic film in 1968), ‘Land of Hypocrisy’ could easily be reused today in every country in the region, but the multiple interconnected causes of youth

lacking autonomy are perhaps more intractable than they used to be.

We know historically that such prolonged moments of frustration and alienation verge on cynicism and are apt for dangerous political movements.

## Youth Embattled

The idea of being involved in a war is an important one in youth culture in general. Perhaps a constant feature of masculine adolescence in particular, in today's Mediterranean it finds specific forms.

For some people, in Syria, on the borders with Iraq and Turkey for example, there is a real, military war, and Palestine and Israel are fighting their own asymmetric conflict. Many young people across the Mediterranean are following the war in Syria with some attention, and international inaction against what seem to be war crimes, whether the use of chemical weapons by Assad or the Turkish military offensive in Afrin, promotes indignation amongst a certain part of the Mediterranean youth. This has of course been the case with Israeli actions in Palestine for some time, and the recent speeches of Donald Trump related to the issue have their own effects on this issue.

These real situations of conflict have implications outside the countries and citizens directly concerned. The imagery of war is spread deliberately by terrorist organizations that occasionally find a receptive audience in young people, and also by politicians wanting to sound strong in the context of uncertainty, or justify actions of the State. Refugees escaping from conflict zones act as signifiers of war, leading to different reactions from different people. These experiences and images, reinforced by tendencies in popular culture and mass media, a sense of political impotence and ever present risk, can lead to young people conceiving themselves as somehow engaged in a war. Whilst this only occasionally leads to radicalization, the effects on the generation as a whole and the way it conceives of itself are much broader.

## Youth Detained

The large numbers of people detained, tortured and disappeared in recent years in Egypt and Turkey in particular, but not exclusively in the region, is widely

reported. In the southern Mediterranean police detention can extend not only to those protesting, but also to people going about their regular work in civil society, journalists, or workers in the informal economies who are vulnerable to exploitation or abuse by corrupt state-backed authorities. The effects of this abuse have a profound effect on not only those directly involved, but families, friends and the wider culture.

In the northern Mediterranean, perceptions of racial profiling and targeting by the police, specifically of young people, have caused outrage amongst minority populations in France, Spain and Italy over the past year.

The 'administrative' detention of young migrants in all Mediterranean states is an extreme symbol of unequal mobility rights. New cultures of camps have been fostered by young people both living in the camps and coming in solidarity from outside, establishing theatres, writing workshops, circuses, cinemas and other artistic spaces, often facing down the reticence of the authorities or, on occasion, tear gas attacks by the police.

## Youth Violated

2017 and 2018 have been marked by massive online mobilization in the #metoo protest across large parts of the world, and was met in southern Europe, like elsewhere, by a reactionary misogynist backlash, in which the mocked-up images of severed heads of female politicians, online and offline threats and acts of sexual violence failed to silence women's calls for equality and freedom.

The sexual harassment of women and gender inequality in the southern Mediterranean was an important undercurrent of the 2011 uprisings and has received more substantial media coverage and international attention since. The systematic use of sexual harassment by state authorities continues in Egypt notably, and the UN, among others, has revealed the state-sponsored use of rape against women, men and children in Syria. Despite everything, Egypt has seen some relatively high-profile judicial sentences handed down for sexual violence in early 2018 and has taken some steps against female genital mutilation, which remains prevalent in society. In July 2017, the Tunisian parliament voted a historic law against sexual harassment, and changed

the shameful law that gave dispensation in cases involving non-violent sexual relations with anyone under the age of 15, if the perpetrator agreed to marry the victim. In 2018, the French government is presenting a new law to fight against gender-related violence, and is likely to change a similar dispensation relating to 'consensual' sexual relations with minors following a public outcry.

### Youth Drowned and Saved

Whilst the Mediterranean Sea may briefly have been the symbol of youthful rebellion in 2011, it is safe to say that its global image now is one of a watery hecatomb. At least 3,100 people died trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2017 according to the UN, and whilst both sea crossings and deaths are down compared with 2015, this is the result of controversial deals between European countries and Turkey and Libya in particular, where migrants are often held in detention centres and subject to abuse. Young people have organized solidarity and welcome initiatives with migrants throughout the region: the City Plaza hotel in Athens, Baobab experience in Rome, the thousands of young volunteers on Greek islands are some of the experiences that are marking a generation. Like the Arab Spring in some countries, the lack of political change to fundamentally address the underlying issues risks creating the lasting impression among some young people that these initiatives were naive. The increased attractiveness of far-right nationalism can be partly explained from this perspective, even as other majoritarian parts of youth maintain a deeply cosmopolitan and humanitarian outlook.

### Youth Regenerates

If youth is understood as a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood, then the ways that youth reproduces is of defining importance. Young people in general in the Mediterranean increasingly find themselves in a prolonged period of transition, conditions of neoliberal precarity meaning they are unable to liberate themselves from parental dependence, and, as a consequence, delay marriage and reproduction. The current demographic 'youth

bulge' in the south of the Mediterranean may look very different in some years as a result.

The mixed results of the uprisings from 2011 onwards in terms of political and economic change, are likely to deepen processes of financialized globalization and the precarization of the economy on both sides of the Mediterranean, and do not suggest a stable ending is in store for a period of youthful transition. Where the current Mediterranean youth has had to invent strategies of survival and creation in uncertain, fragmented and shifting social and political landscapes, which are very different from the life-skills of their parents, the children of the current youth generation are likely to need exactly these kinds of skills. What the cultures of Mediterranean youth are prefiguring may therefore be a more profound restructuring of family relations, social reproduction and transnational economic interdependency than can be contained in the cultural concept of 'youth.' What values, customs and rights this new society will transmit through its reproduction over time is still very much a matter of political and cultural struggle. Whether something called 'the Mediterranean spring' starting late 2010 onwards really happened, whether it is now finished, and what it ultimately signifies is still very much our collective responsibility. Where Aeneas had the guidance of his father, and Dante the guidance of his ancestors, in the uncertain underworld of past and future our predicament may be more like that of Odysseus, relying on cryptic prophets, shape shifting sorcerers and our own wily cunning against the hand of fate.

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