

Culture in the Mediterranean and the Arab Spring

Giovanna Tanzarella

Director General,
Fondation René Seydoux, Paris

A memorable year, 2011 marked a radical rupture with the balances that characterised the post-colonial Euro-Mediterranean Region. The countries of the south shore went into action, each in its own way and at its own rhythm. Nevertheless, the underlying theme of recovered freedom and dignity spread from country to country, drawing a totally new Mediterranean landscape. At the heart of current political issues, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, the matter of freedom of expression, creation and conscience is one of the focal themes of cultural and artistic actors in the Arab world.

What about the cultural dimension in this new horizon? Has culture, a sphere of freedom par excellence, played a role in activating Mediterranean Arab societies? And how can relations be stepped up between the North and South shores of the Mediterranean from a cultural point of view after the major upheavals underway?

The replies to these questions can only be prudent, for the situations are diverse and unstable. Now more than ever, an attentive look at the specificities and the differences is in order, for considering the Arab world as a monolithic whole should be avoided. Two levels should also be taken into account: that of the actors in the cultural sector, with their initiatives, aspirations and needs, and that of institutions, with their phases, constraints and progress.

The past few years have witnessed a sort of transfer of Mediterranean issues, until recently in the hands of the

European Union, to national governments, a loss of leadership of the EU in Euro-Mediterranean relations and the desire to renationalise border management. In contrast, culture – a domain that has always escaped EU competence – is now considered a strategic sector and an essential component of EU foreign policy.

Culture at the Heart of the Arab Revolutions: Cultural Revolutions?

The Arab revolutions of 2011 took the world by surprise: from diplomats to the military and from researchers to the media, everyone was taken unawares by the events. Everyone, except, perhaps, artists and cultural agents. Indeed, the first tangible signs of the changes on the horizon appeared in literature, cinema and the arts. Indeed, the Arab world has experienced a groundswell of change on the cultural level over the past few years, thanks above all to the circulation of cultural productions throughout the Arab world. The role of the contemporary Arab novel, with its transgressions (religion, politics, sexuality), has been decisive. By the same token, the mobility of Arab writers, artistes and intellectuals has contributed to the constitution of a unified Arab cultural sphere,¹ including the facet of calling into question the authorities and censorship.

On the artistic front, wholly unprecedented, daring initiatives have been emerging for some years now in the very heart of countries with a highly restrictive system insofar as freedom. Consider experiences such as *Dream City*,² a multidisciplinary expression of contemporary creativity taking place in Tunis since 2007; or that of Studio Emad Eddin in Cairo,³ which

¹ This expression was coined by Farouk Mardam Bey, publisher and writer, at conferences and meetings in 2011 and 2012.

² Dream City – Tunis: www.dreamcitytunisie.com

³ Studio Emad Eddin – Cairo: www.seefoundation.org

has been an independent art space and a space for citizenship and freedom since 2005.

The Arab revolutions of 2011 took the world by surprise. Everyone, except, perhaps, artists and cultural agents. Indeed, the first tangible signs of the changes on the horizon appeared in literature, cinema and the arts

These cultural and artistic actions opened breaches and helped the revolts of 2011 develop, like a series of “small Tahrir Squares” that made the gatherings in the large Tahrir Square possible. Art and culture anticipated and interpreted the ferment of society and its younger generations.

Are we therefore dealing with cultural revolutions? The expression does not evoke good memories of the past. However, in their form as well as content, the Arab popular uprisings of 2011 had a strong cultural and artistic dimension. Of course, this can be attributed in large part to the participation of a great number of intellectuals, writers and artists in these movements, together with a significant part of educated urban youth, the spearheads of the revolution.

Tunisia, pioneer of the revolutions, also broke the ground towards a new type of freedom of expression visible in public spaces, in streets and on city walls: since the uprising, graffiti has become omnipresent, thanks to young activists and artists such as Hafedh Khediri (Sk-One) or Mouin Gharbi (Meen One). The people have left silence behind and the freedom they have won has become synonymous with street art. Graffiti has now earned its spurs on the Tunisian cultural and urban scene, together with the cartoon or caricature, an expression of cyber-dissidence by young caricaturist bloggers.

In Egypt, culture has long been an engine of change. It is therefore not surprising that, despite the suffering and oppression, the revolutionaries have adopted humour and derision as a form of ex-

pression. “It is currently quite difficult in Europe to understand how culture can change a society, but in our societies, where everything needs changing, it is extremely obvious,” states Ahmed El Attar, a Cairene involved in theatre and culture.⁴

Another place, another experience: in Libya, rap music was one of the protesters’ forms of expression. MC Jdoub, leader of the “Brothers in Freedom” band from Tripoli and lmed Abbar from Benghazi, for instance, expressed the hopes of liberation of young Libyans in their lyrics, but they were also borne by the events, which boosted the popularity of the hip hop music scene. The issue obviously has a political connotation, considering that under the Gaddafi Regime, music was combated, and not just Western music but also *maalouf*, traditional Arab-Andalusian music.⁵

Even in Syria, the tragic and unbearable coexist with creativity and a sense of humour. Throughout 2011, before the situation intensified, the revolutionaries demonstrated great imagination in inventing pacific forms of protest such as dying the water red in Damascus fountains, or using ping pong balls with slogans against the regime, dropped by the hundreds on the Damascus avenues descending the slopes of Mount Qassioun.⁶ Theatrical creativity also participated in the resistance, as illustrated by the marionette troupe “Masasit Mati,” whose 15-episode series ridicules President Al Assad.

Recently as well, on Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, a very particular protest was called via social networks: a protest against the attacks on the right to protest. Hundreds of people thus occupied the famous avenue, a book in hand, in a silent protest by readers to defend cultural as well as political rights.⁷

These wholly unprecedented forms of political expression recall the role played by culture as one of the weapons of resistance against dictatorship. But they also bear the traces of a significant change in the contents of political engagement itself. What has struck all observers is how the Arab uprisings in their diversity have inaugurated a new manner of “doing politics,” one that is freer, more libertarian, less ideological, more inclusive, more mixed (men and women, young and old) and non-violent.

⁴ EL ATTAR, Ahmed. “L’heure est au combat culturel.” *Transeuropéennes*, 2011

⁵ BEN BOUBAKAR, Youssef. “Libye, quand le rap devient une arme.” *Babelmed.net*, 31/12/2011

⁶ ABBAS, Hassan. “Créativité de la révolution syrienne.” *Babelmed.net*, 17/01/2012

⁷ ABID, Zohra. “Tunisie. Le livre, arme suprême contre l’obscurantisme”. *Kapitalis*, 18/04/2012.

Arab Culture and Revolutions as Seen by European Institutions

The new context constitutes a challenge for Europe. Since the revolutions, how have Euro-Mediterranean cultural relations been renewed? What instruments dedicated to culture have been imagined by the EU to rise to these new cultural challenges in the Mediterranean Region?

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership launched in Barcelona in 1995 inaugurated a new stage in relations between the two shores by lending the cultural dimension a significant place for the first time. It was a welcome novelty which lent depth and a long-term vision to Euro-Mediterranean policies.

Euro-Mediterranean cultural relations enjoy European political and operational tools that are nevertheless often considered inaccessible to actors in the field due to their complexity

Since then, the role of culture has become consolidated across European Union policies, in particular in its foreign policy. Indeed, by projecting itself beyond its borders, the EU also projects (exports?) history and values and cannot ignore the traditions, history, mindsets and lifestyles of others, in a word, their culture. For a decade now, this awareness has progressively found its expression in EU policies of development aid and their attendant thematic programmes, such as the Social and Human Development Programme, which expressly mentions the key role of culture in development, insofar as a springboard for growth and a tool for social cohesion.

With regard to geographic instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the image is more complex due to the multiplication of mechanisms that coexist and sometimes overlap in the Euro-Mediterranean Region. But there as well, culture is an integral part of the EU's external relations. In late 2007, the Council's resolution on "A European Agenda for Culture" confirmed the existence of international cultural issues and opened a vast field of action to the cultural sector.

It must also be recalled that the Culture Programme is open to participation by cultural organisations from the South Mediterranean, as is the case with "Creative Europe," which will replace it as of 2014 and which emphasises culture as a means of promoting growth, employment and social cohesion. Euro-Mediterranean cultural relations thus enjoy European political and operational tools that are nevertheless often considered inaccessible to actors in the field due to their complexity.

Culture and the ENPI South

Though the Euro-Mediterranean cultural sector can now avail itself of classic EU mechanisms in order to find political and financial support, specific frameworks and ad hoc tools for the Mediterranean Region have also emerged over time.

Since the Euromed crisis, in Brussels, the "Mediterranean" is now referred to as the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) South. It lies along the southern flank of Europe and in this regard, it is part of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This political framework, essentially based on a bilateral logic, does not have a cultural component, in contrast to the Barcelona Process. Nevertheless, the cultural dimension can be included in the Action Plans that each country establishes with the European Union and that constitute the roadmap of Neighbourhood relations. Other possibilities also exist. For instance, Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) between regions sharing a land or sea border, a priority domain of the ENP, provides a framework for two bilateral programmes (Spain-Morocco and Italy-Tunisia) and a multilateral programme, all of them including Mediterranean projects for the promotion of dialogue, creativity, mobility and training in the sphere of culture.

In addition to these little-known tools, the European Neighbourhood Policy has inherited regional programmes that were the pride of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The most important of them, Euromed Heritage, is in its fourth edition and has a substantial allocation of 17 million euros for the 2008-2012 period that has allowed twelve projects to be funded having to do with cultural heritage at the service of inter-Mediterranean dialogue.

The general outcome is nonetheless disappointing: culture does not occupy a central position, neither in the ENP nor in the Union for the Mediter-

ranean (UfM), which has superbly ignored its role. Will the revolts of 2011 encourage EU institutions to fill the gap?

The Mantra of Intercultural Dialogue

For a decade or so, the issue of culture in the Mediterranean has been progressively displaced from concrete cooperation between cultural operators in different fields, including the performing arts, music and dance, towards the much vaguer field of intercultural dialogue. The tension between these two approaches is always at work today. On the one hand, cultural circles, often with young, independent artists at their heads, have created spaces, festivals, platforms and networks in order to work and create together; on the other hand, the public institutions, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the mass media have produced a voluntarist discourse on the need for dialogue among cultures in the face of the temptation of isolationism and rejection of the Other in the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

Recall that among the most fervent advocates of “dialogue” were the official representatives of authoritarian regimes and predatory actors of the South Mediterranean, a factor that has contributed to discrediting this overly consensual incantation.

The theme of dialogue, now predominant, thus has very little power to mobilise professionals of culture due to its indeterminate nature insofar as content, especially since the Arab revolts have revealed the gulf existing between the societies of the two shores insofar as culture, as well as the inequality of material conditions of cultural production. Now, the demands expressed by the young revolutionaries have allowed the concrete needs of the sector to be measured, not only insofar as freedoms, but also in terms of infrastructure, training and employment in the cultural sphere.

Generally speaking, there is a discrepancy between these two approaches that correspond to different aspirations, more general among the champions of dialogue, more professional among youth and artists.

This debate directly concerns the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), an institution whose reason for existence is precisely the promotion of dialogue among

cultures. And it is precisely up to the ALF to rise to the challenge of strengthening ties between the North and South shores at a time when the Arab revolutions have clearly revealed the limitations of the Euromed in its UfM version. Hard hit by the wave of revolt in Egypt due to its location in Alexandria, the ALF has demonstrated a certain responsiveness in convening two meetings since spring 2011, in Cairo and Tunis, with the aim of listening to the needs of civil society on the South shore amid revolutionary fervour. In autumn, a new strategy for the 2012-2014 period was announced to address the new situation. Four key words sum up the perspectives: intercultural dialogue, diversity, open and plural democracy and human development (the 4 Ds). It is too early to tell whether these strategic choices will prove meaningful for Euro-Mediterranean societies.

The perspective of seeing a coherent strategy emerge in the field of cultural policy seems pertinent with regard to the context created by the 2011 uprisings

Another, more political perspective has raised a great deal of expectations among the cultural sector in the Mediterranean Region. Launched in Athens in 2008 at the Euromed Conference of Ministers of Culture, the Euromed Strategy for Culture had the ambition of coherently and globally responding to the aspirations of Euro-Mediterranean societies in the cultural sphere. A report drafted in this regard by independent experts furnished an invaluable inventory of the capabilities of the cultural sector and its needs, on the economic potential of culture and the creative industries and finally, on the conditions for intercultural dialogue in the Euromed area and its difficulties.⁸

The perspective of seeing a coherent strategy emerge in the field of cultural policy, one that indicates sectors where efforts need to be made, seems particularly pertinent with regard to the context created by the 2011 uprisings. In fact, the interest of culture in terms of employment is incontestable and

⁸ BOUQUEREL, Fanny and EL HUSSEINY Basma. *Towards a Strategy for Culture in the Mediterranean Region*. Brussels, November 2009

could partially meet the immense need for jobs. One can therefore only wonder about the reasons for this promising dynamic to come to a halt, apparently bogged down.

Culture in the New ENP

At the outset of 2011, with the radical questioning of European realpolitik in the Mediterranean, it was asserted in Brussels that “the EU must not be a passive spectator” since “there is a shared interest in a democratic, stable, prosperous and peaceful Southern Mediterranean.”⁹ The European Neighbourhood Policy has thus been the object of a revision that has led to a new approach.¹⁰ It is based on providing greater support to processes of democratisation in terms of financial means, unprecedented mechanisms and above all, contents.¹¹ The most remarkable aspects reside in the new emphasis on civil society as a decisive agent of change and on the mobility of people, now considered an indispensable component of exchange in the Mediterranean.

This change of direction seems to go beyond the simple announcement effect, although it may be difficult at present to assess the actual terms of implementation and above all, what implications and prior agreements with the stakeholders concerned will accompany these measures.

In any case, what is surprising is the complete absence of references to the cultural dimension and the role of culture in the current context. The foundational document of the new Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern

Mediterranean ignores the subject, with the exception of a vague reference to the need to “further develop cultural initiatives with the South Mediterranean region.”¹² Naturally, the two components emphasised, those of civil society and mobility, are topics dear to stakeholders in the Euro-Mediterranean cultural and artistic sector, who have been advocating them for years. Yet the complete absence of recognition of the importance of culture remains inexplicable. The texts and plans published over the course of 2011 seemed to break radically with the presence of culture, which is now part of the *acquis communautaire* as an essential element of public policies both inside and beyond the EU. This disregard is regrettable.

The year 2011 ended in a climate of concern due to the results of elections in a number of countries in the South Mediterranean. These countries are now faced with choices of society that concern the entire region. More than ever now, the pursuit of cultural exchange between the North and South shores is necessary in the interdependent Mediterranean Region. This entails political choices in terms of financial means dedicated to the cultural sector, but also and above all in terms of mobility, namely: the lifting of the unbearable constraints to the circulation of people in the Mediterranean Basin. This requires radically rethinking the Euro-Mediterranean model. Finally, placing culture at the centre of inter-Mediterranean relations means placing the human dimension at the core of policies and contributing to the establishment of relations as equals among countries sharing the same values and facing the same challenges.

⁹ Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy COM(2011) 200 final, of 8.3.2011: “A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean.”

¹⁰ Joint Communication COM(2011) 303, of 25.5.2011: “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood.”

¹¹ See the new EU SPRING programme (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) – € 350 million for 2011 and 2012, launched in September 2011; the Civil Society Facility – € 26.4 million for 2011; and the European Fund for Democracy, being created.

¹² COM(2011) 200 final, of 8.3.2011, page 11.