

FORUM

APPROACHING THE MEDITERRANEAN

FIVE NOTES ON ANTHROPOLOGY, EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

• HENK DRIESSEN •

1. A janus-faced discipline

Cultural and social anthropology is a double-faced discipline. It maps human diversity around the globe (culture in the plural, ethnography) and also aims at making general statements on human culture in the singular vis-à-vis other primates. There has always been an inherent tension in anthropological research between the local, particular, detail as opposed to the global, general and large. In other words, anthropologists are tightrope walkers, performing a balancing act between the particular and the general. In the light of this ambiguity it is understandable that they have tried to probe a middle ground between the local and global, and it is here that ethnographic areas come in.

2. Anthropologists in and on the Mediterranean area

A brief, necessarily highly selective, overview of what anthropologists have been doing is due here. Since the establishment of anthropology as an academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century, anthropologists have been interested in this area. The first generation of armchair evolutionists (Tylor, Frazer, Robertson Smith) only had an antiquarian interest in Greek, Latin and Semitic societies and cultures. They were not at all interested in contemporary Mediterranean peoples. Edward Westermarck was an interesting transitional figure. He was an evolutionist but also a collector of stories and a folklorist who received Moroccan informants in his Tangier villa (the two-volume *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* [1926] is a landmark in early Mediterranean ethnography). In the Interbellum, anthropology became the discipline of prolonged fieldwork in distant places. One of the founding texts of the fieldwork doctrine, Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) was inspired by ancient Greek mythology. As a young man he often visited the Mediterranean with his widowed mother on vacations, partly for health and educational reasons, though it never occurred to him to do fieldwork in Italy, Spain, Algeria or Egypt. It took another forty years before ethnographic fieldwork in the circum-Mediterranean really took off, 1954 being an important year when Julian Pitt-Rivers' *People of the Sierra* was published. Personal experiences during the Second World War of later British and American anthropologists in North Africa, Greece and Italy, the process of decolonisation, the arrival of so-called guest workers from Mediterranean countries in Western Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, all played a role in the rise and acceptance of Anglophone Mediterranean ethnography as a field of regional comparison. Robert Redfield in the USA and Edward Evans-Pritchard were key figures in this emergence. Of course, there were

already folklore studies in the different countries that bordered the Mediterranean Sea. They were largely ignored by anthropological fieldworkers.

Roughly between the 1950s and 1970s ethnography in the Mediterranean area was dominated by village studies, mostly of a descriptive, realist, (quasi-)holistic, and ahistorical nature. The 1980s saw a shift from ethnographic studies *of* local communities to more problem-oriented fieldwork *in* local communities; an increasing use of history and oral historical sources; more attention to wider settings of fieldwork localities; a rise of urban ethnography; the emergence of gender perspectives and 'native' ethnographies as necessary corrections to mainstream studies. Moreover, there were experiments in ethnographic writing and some attention to the development of a pan-Mediterranean view. But such shifts also occurred in anthropology at large and in other regional specializations.

More recently, we have seen increased attention in Mediterranean ethnography to global processes and transnational connections; to identity issues; and research in megacities. Much of the fieldwork is now driven by theoretical eclecticism. But again, these trends are not specific to Mediterranean ethnography.

3. Boundaries and the danger of stereotyping

The inevitable issue of borders and boundaries has to be addressed. Where does the Mediterranean region begin and where does it end from an anthropological point of view? According to Fernand Braudel the Mediterranean is thousand things at the same time. After fifty years of anthropological research, we may conclude that there are neither clear-cut and easy definitions nor simple generalisations to be made about a region as diverse and dynamic as the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean is in fact an in-between or transitional region between the three old continents of the ancient Greeks. It is very important to emphasize that 'Mediterranean' is not a politically neutral geographical concept (as used in secondary education, politics and the media) but rather a loaded cultural category that emerged out of a field of power differences between north and south. The same is true for the Euro-centred notion of the Middle East that was *not* coined by the inhabitants of the region but by nineteenth-century European imperial strategists. One of the problems involved in defining the Mediterranean area as a discrete cultural unit is the danger that we end up with a string of stereotypes. The mother of all stereotypes is the Mediterranean as cradle of Western civilisation also evoked by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy when he launched the idea for a Mediterranean Union at the beginning of 2007.

Since the 1950s some anthropologists have attempted to develop an anthropology *of* the region, claiming the region to be a discrete cultural unit(y) and pretending to bring to the fore cultural similarities/commonalities at the regional level. What then about pan-Mediterranean anthropological (cultural) characteristics? What exactly is Mediterranean? This seems to me the wrong question since it asks for essences and invites looking for the Holy Grail of Mediterranean super traits. During this period the following characteristics have been mentioned again and again, partly on the basis of ethnographic monographs and partly also rejected as stereotypical constructions: the honour-and-shame syndrome as the core of supposedly pan-Mediterranean gender constructions and practices; a deeply rooted urban way of life; patronage or patron-client arrangements (often a euphemism for corruption); a history of violence; the persistence of a family or clan ethos ('amoral familism');

hospitality (a key term in the tourist industry); and more obvious clichés such as agoraphilia coupled to a jealous seclusion of the private domain; sensuality, spontaneity, *dolce far niente*, the *mañana*, *insjallah* attitudes of the *uomo mediterráneo*. This is ‘Mediterraneanism’ as a branch of Said’s Orientalism. Such culture traits are too static, neither general enough at the all-Mediterranean level nor specifically Mediterranean as compared to other regions in the world to be of any use in defining the area as a cultural entity.

Other, empirically more down-to-earth, general observations have been proposed concerning socio-economic and cultural processes in the Mediterranean countryside on the basis of dozens of community studies between 1960 and 2000. They include the increasing marginalisation of small farmers, agricultural labourers, shepherds and artisanal fishermen; rural exodus; more and more state and EU intervention in local affairs; incorporation of local economies into global networks; the growing impact of mass tourism; the expansion of the service sector; improvements in formal education; an overall rise in the standard of living; the emergence of ethno-nationalist and regionalist movements; and the impact of largely illegal ‘new immigration’ on former emigrant countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece. These characteristics in the recent history of the Mediterranean countryside are however neither distinctive nor general enough within the Mediterranean area given the north-south, east-west divisions in the region which have deepened over the past decades.

In my view, and I am roughly following here the position of Anton Blok and Dionigi Albera (2001), we should avoid a definition of the Mediterranean area as an *object* of study. Instead, we should prefer to consider it as a field for doing comparative anthropological research on interesting topics such as (clandestine) migration, tourism, fresh water depletion, gender inequalities, local politics, religious confrontations and accommodations, the problem of ethno-religious minorities or coastal overdevelopment. Coasts represent slightly more than ten per cent of the total surface area of the countries bordering the sea and contain one third of their total population (apart from millions of tourists). This fact has far-reaching consequences in terms of uneven development in the region and enormous pressure on this ecologically fragile environment.

4. Interdependencies

There is an undeniable Mediterranean influence on Western European ways of life both past and present in the domains of law, agriculture, architecture, science, politics, cinema, fashion, gardening and food ways. In fact, there has been a rapidly increasing interdependency between Western Europe and the circum-Mediterranean region since the Second World War. Western Europe has been ‘Mediterraneanized’, and immigrants and tourists have been agents of change, while at the same time large parts of the Mediterranean world have been ‘Europeanized’ given the impact of colonialism, mass media, market and tourism.

5. The many faces of the Inner Sea

One of the most fundamental facts is that the Mediterranean is an area of mixed populations and a melting pot of ideas, religious notions and practices, meanings and artefacts. The key terms here are movement, connectivity, confrontation and exchange. This in fact is the core of my most recent book on the Mediterranean (2008) in which I probe a maritime

approach instead of, or at least as a supplement to a land-based approach. It deals with how people past and present related to, dealt and deal with this 'sea of seas'. The sea-focus serves to counteract the terra-centrism of the vast majority of Mediterranean studies. Chapters include the connecting sea with special reference to transport of people, goods, meanings, ideas, travel, warfare, piracy, and trade. There is a chapter on amphibian towns as hubs in networks, symbiosis of sea and urban space, porosity as a vital condition, anti-structure, the maritime port as cradle of globalization and Mediterranean 'cosmopolitanism'. We have the dividing, devouring sea, the unpredictable sea of migrants, seamen and fishermen. There is of course the benevolent sea of tourists and the false image of the feeding sea, most fishermen always having to combine fishing with other ways of making a living. And a final chapter on imagining the Middle Sea with sections on painting and poetry, songs and filmmaking, a sea that has become an inseparable part of Western civilization with image-creating icons such as Dali and Fellini, Renoir and Kafavis.

The Mediterranean is indeed thousand fascinating things at the same time. It is an area and a sea that invites multi-disciplinary research and should be part of a truly global anthropology.

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SOUTHERN QUESTIONS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF EUROPE

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The title above refers to the questions raised in/about the anthropological study of Mediterranean Europe. Browsing through the literature, one could easily get the impression that Mediterranean anthropology peaked at the time of its formation (from the 1950's into the 1970's), soon became an easy object of intense epistemological and political criticism of 'Mediterraneanism' (in the 1980's) and was then practically replaced by the topical anthropology of Europe (in the 1990's). The anthropology of Europe was in fact partly