

Researching the Mediterranean

Why research the Mediterranean?

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Because of the academic world's differing approaches to the Mediterranean region, each world view has until now determined the way in which it is studied and understood. This diversity of starting points has compartmentalised academic specialists among those studying North Africa, the Maghreb, the Mashrek, the Middle East or the Near East, into Orientalists, Arabists, and an infinity of labels conceived according to a geographical or subjective vision in which, even in this sense, they have not coincided. I am however more and more convinced that this logic is being superseded and, beyond these fragmenting labels, new perspectives of integration are emerging, and new views, making it possible to conceive the future of a genuine Euro-Mediterranean partnership through the Barcelona Process.

Despite the rift between student and the object of study, decisive in defining the approach to research, we have over time come closer to a model whereby the Mediterranean is itself the subject of study, of which we ourselves form a part, from our own subjective standpoint, making us simultaneously "student" and "subject". Thus the Mediterranean has ceased to be somewhere for observing the others, to become a place where we observe ourselves, a space enabling us to supersede the vision of the traditional Orientalists, to abandon the magnifying glass through which an entomologist studies his fascinating object of desire, and to embark on a far more introspective and, in short, more sincere study. We no longer observe the other, but work with that other to understand ourselves too.

The Mediterranean is without doubt much more than a geographical space; it is – and has always been - from a historical, cultural and social perspective, a common place of contact and relation not always shaped by a logic of conflict. A space which can only be analysed and studied responsibly on the basis of the profound and inherent multiple similarities underlying our cultures. To see beyond the formal differences to perceive the shared patterns binding our socio-cultural roots is a good beginning in the quest for a point of departure common to experts from North and South. This point of departure refers to matters as basic as Europe's assumption that the influences and contributions passing between Mediterranean cultures follow a multidirectional logic, that the Mare Nostrum is ours equally to the North, the South and the East, and that it is

enormous to take on this heritage on an equal footing. The need for awareness of shared Mediterranean thinking can only bring our attitudes and viewpoints closer and enable us to move forward substantially in an understanding of our space.

However, to imagine that we have found the shared place to resolve our dilemmas would immerse us in self-deception. With the flow of a constantly-changing sea, the idea of the Mediterranean forming part of the past, the present and the future is constantly transformed and so deserves to continue to be researched. Thus, beyond this achievement, and without indulging in the self-satisfaction of having been able to create a notion of the Mediterranean in which we feel that we participate, the great challenge facing us is to have Europe – all the Europes, Northern Europe, Atlantic Europe, Anglo-Saxon Europe, Scandinavian Europe or Eastern Europe also become part of this common space, this community of shared interests. And this is a reason for occasions like the Spanish-British Encuentro of researchers, as we seek jointly to promote a new space of which we can all feel a part: the Euro-Mediterranean.

So the key lies in the concept of integration, which must happen not just in the shared yet plural conception of the Mediterranean as a shared space. Moreover, and as occurs in other fields of scientific knowledge, a study or analysis of Mediterranean matters, in which politics, the economy or social and cultural relations are closely bound up, cannot be complete or correct if not tackled from an interdisciplinary perspective. Promoting access by professionals from different areas of study to greater contact with other approaches implies the fomenting of a deeper and more genuine examination of key questions articulating relations between Europe, the Maghreb and the Mashrek, such as migratory flows, political and economic rapprochement, security matters, growing interculturalisation or environmental problems. All these questions make clear the growing interdependence of the three shores, and the multiplicity of factors involved in Mediterranean relations which cannot therefore be analysed or studied in isolation, since the Mediterranean is a whole, diverse but integral at all levels and in all areas of analysis.

We do have the necessary tools allowing us to implement this European-Mediterranean research project, as evidenced by aid and joint research programmes. The employment of these instruments must be a first exercise for Europe and the Arab World to resume their places to some degree, their shared point of view, the pride in study, knowledge and research, willing to speak a single language, that of the wish to transmit and, by participation, to attain the knowledge and understanding which is the heritage of all. The reinforcement of this common space will be a key to all that, where we can all share, as the space which explains our history, what we were and what we are, giving meaning to a changing reality, decisive to what we all speak about, those major items on the international agenda.

Thus alliances, partnership between study centres, think tanks, universities and the media are fundamental. A turbulent present can only be grasped with analytical instruments which are permanently dynamic, constantly interchanging. It will not be possible to observe and understand current reality when indifferent to the Mediterranean, and it

is precisely the gap between analysis and study which creates an imbalance, misunderstanding, misinformation, a great jumble where, beyond separate studies each indifferent to the others, mutual perceptions gather. Only when analysis and study go hand in hand will it be possible to overcome misunderstandings.

For example media analysis, describing and interpreting the reality short-term, runs a greater risk of decoupling study and the understanding accumulated, and to create distorted perceptions of the reality we live. Only when both, analysis and study, are structured, respect each other and communicate will we be able to influence the way of grasping the reality, promulgated in the media and experienced live on the multiple communication channels. This interrelation between experience and thought, and academic work, will enable us to share our knowledge and debate our truths, so that they are not immutable and definitive. It will help our understanding to grow, change and be enriched at the same rate as the flow of events. And our quest may allow us to find effective responses to construct the shared Euro-Mediterranean world we desire.