

Mediterranean Scenarios: Weathering Storms

The Mediterranean is a permanent laboratory in which thousands of scenarios have developed for centuries, a place that has been the origin of nations, kingdoms and empires which emerged and disappeared behind often very persistent frontiers, where the oldest cultures still survive. A place full of myths, heroes and heroines, emblematic characters that have yearned to make their mark, who we remember thanks to school lessons or oral culture, and that we see, depending on the moment, as stimulating icons or as characters whose long shadow hangs over diverse ideologies and approaches.

Each period creates its moments of glory or failure, later judged by the reinterpretations of historians and analysts in the light of contemporary events. Sometimes, these moments vanish amid the stereotypes of each period. Current analyses suffer from readings that are characteristic of our contemporary civilisation, whose clearest feature is the rapidity of information and communication technologies.

What can we say about the 25 years since, in the late 1980s, a profoundly Mediterranean writer, Baltasar Porcel, convinced the then President of the Government of Catalonia Jordi Pujol to create an Institute for Mediterranean Studies? At that time, after the vast desert of the dictatorship, not only in Catalonia but also in Spain, the image of the Mediterranean was not an esteemed model. Instead, and especially for Catalonia, models were found further north in Sweden or Holland. But with Spain now a democracy and member of the European Union, the writer convinced the politician that our country was in the south of Europe, our neighbours were the northern and southern Mediterranean countries and that the Mediterranean could be reborn. In fact, at that time several important factors converged: on the one hand, the southern European dictatorships had disappeared, and the Latin Mediterranean arch emerged as the second great focus of development from Valencia to Rome, trying to compete with the main European focus that went from Rotterdam to Milan. Moreover, there was a growing interest in southern Mediterranean countries, which some decades earlier had left behind colonialism and emerged, with their expanded population, with great potential, albeit not free of risk. All this led to the idea in the 1990s that by 2010 the Euro-Mediterranean area could begin to have free trade, and that investing in women's education slowed down birth rates.

In the early years of the then Catalan Institute for Mediterranean Studies, we were the only Spanish representatives to participate in the forums held in the southern Mediterranean, along with the French, who had never stopped economically advising these countries. Above all, we attended the meetings focused on cities, a concern that has been deeply rooted in our sea. In this issue, José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec, coinciding with another 14th century historian, Ibn Khaldun, argues that the emergence of the city entailed and fostered economic and technological innovation, decent work and the inclusion of art as a pillar of this innovation. Moreover, beauty became a fundamental component of the urban ecosystem.

The year 1995 was a milestone in bringing together the interests of Mediterranean countries, given that for the first time the Barcelona Declaration proclaimed the need for civil society to participate in all the countries involved. From the early 1990s, decentralised cooperation projects were developed and civil society was seen as the primary tool for peoples to implement realistic development projects and shake off authoritarian fundamentalisms, which were not necessarily religious. Enthusiasm for human rights and democracy cooled after the 2001 attacks, which meant that dictators who sought to fight against Islamic terrorism in Muslim countries were treated more indulgently. In the first decade of this century, during visits by European leaders to conclude economic agreements in the South, democracy was no longer discussed, and the issue of human rights was treated with kid gloves to avoid offence. However, some analysts set out their ideas on the right of every people to choose their system of government, or on Islam's incompatibility with democracy. This idea has been refuted in different works by important analysts from the southern Mediterranean such as Fatema Mernissi, Abderkader Zghal and Abdou Filali Ansari.¹

In this respect, the publications of the IEMed in general and *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* in particular, since its appearance in 2000, have aimed to report on the multiple thought strands present on both shores and highlight the importance of new information technologies and civil society in Arab-Muslim countries, long before they rose up as key pieces in the Arab revolts. Our areas of interest have focused on those aspects that could contribute knowledge and serve as a reflection on the Mediterranean panorama, and have been written by renowned intellectuals or by specialists and members of associations with a direct and contrasted view of the issue in hand. On many occasions we have anticipated the debates forged around ministerial conferences, proposing new visions resulting from seminars or meetings. We have also started necessary debates throughout the 21 published issues of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* and have produced dossiers on women, youths, migration and creativity, the media, ecology, intangible heritage or spiritualities. Since 2011, we have published several analytical pieces and direct testimonies of the Arab uprisings that you can also find online: www.iemed.org/quaderns.

1. See *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, "Pensar el Magreb contemporáneo", no. 2-3, 2001.

The issue “Mediterranean Scenarios” uses the word “scenario” in the sense of “framework, circumstance and context”, but also expresses a forward-looking vision. In this respect, we believe that cultures do not clash with contemporaneity, even though some can be dogmatic. We anthropologists know that cultures are not static and that they adapt to and invigorate their different environments over time.

Why only focus on some southern countries and not also on those in the northern and eastern Mediterranean? In his article, Cengiz Günay describes the convulsive period through which the Mediterranean region is passing. Many of the riparian Mediterranean countries have been shaken by protests, riots and agitation. Diverse youth movements have brought down governments and dictators, while social protest movements question the neo-liberal austerity programmes. The region has become the epicentre of a global social and political crisis, and a laboratory of new forms of social and political mobilisation. As professor Günay argues, curiously there has been very little analysis that has attempted to link the discontent in the Arab world with events on the northern shore of the Mediterranean. However, the reasons for the protests in Tunisia or Egypt were not very different from those that took the people onto the streets in Madrid, Barcelona, Sofia, Nicosia, Tel Aviv or Istanbul. Thus, Cengiz Günay argues that the events on both shores of the Mediterranean indicate a common systemic crisis.

The articles we present in this issue, prepared by diverse writers and analysts, consistently warn about the storm clouds over the region, while explaining the factors that are a danger for the events taking place, whether political, ecological or social. We could say that Mediterranean countries now find themselves weathering storms, like some of their more representative mythical figures, Ulysses and Sinbad, without forgetting the biblical Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a whale. Although their stories are bitter and their adventures full of danger, these characters do not cease to fascinate us. Moreover, they all reach land safe and sound, which is a metaphor for continuity and rebirth.

The literary critic Harold Bloom affirms that the hero of *The Odyssey* is the great survivor, unspeakably skilled and astute. Ulysses is also a magnificent teller of stories and all his listeners fall under his spell. Sinbad, for his part, is an astute and inveterate traveller, with an enormous interest in getting to know countries and islands, and despite his misfortunes, when he risks his life he always comes out better than expected. The stories of Sinbad are a collection of popular Arab tales of Persian and Indian origin, and were narrated by the no less mythical and enchanting Scheherazade. The purpose of this youth, the narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, was also to stay alive, which seemed very difficult considering how her predecessors had ended up. Scheherazade’s sophistry was to keep interest in the stories alive and interrupt them at dawn, a delaying tactic that puts an end to the murderous yearnings of the king. Do these stories, as suggested by the psychoanalyst Bruno Belteheim who wrote an interesting analysis of *One Thousand and One Nights*, perhaps serve to warn and encourage us, giving us certain keys to events that seem unpredictable?

Women and popular culture, creative elements of civilisation was the title of an epigraph that formed part of the introduction I wrote for the proceedings of a seminar held in 1992 featuring, among others, the presentations of Tahar Ben Jelloun and Fatema Mernissi, who also contribute to this issue. Tahar Ben Jelloun explained how in his childhood his illiterate grandmother, just like most women of her generation, told him stories that led him to become a writer and that, thirty years later, when he read *One Thousand and One Nights*, he realised that most stories told by his grandmother came from this masterpiece.

In the interview with Fatema Mernissi, the Moroccan writer and sociologist claims oral culture as the main source of her creative genius, and affirms that walking in the streets of working class neighbourhoods in Rabat sharpens her dialectical skill, which she uses in her writing. In fact, Mernissi has used Sinbad and Scheherazade metaphorically in several of her current publications. Although the writer's heroes are modern, their weapons are also linked to the power of communication. These youths, anonymous heroes, are better prepared thanks to information and communication technologies. I consult one of Mernissi's publications, the result of a writing workshop led by her, and read in the introduction: "Those astute Amazigh Sinbads from the Morocco of 2004 have an overwhelming advantage over the heroes of *One Thousand and One Nights*. While the hero of Bagdad sailed the Indian Ocean on fragile boats of primitive technology, the youths of the High Atlas and Zagora discover the world without a visa or passport, skilfully surfing cyberspace and becoming active in the most dynamic civil associations."

When we talked to the writer about the participation of Arab-Muslim women in the Arab uprisings, the vision of the mythical Scheherazade is also dwarfed: "Since 2000, women have invaded the satellite television channels and have ended men's monopoly in the public arena." Mernissi has an image of Scheherazade as an obedient invisible woman, albeit no less astute, who went silent at dawn to obey the law imposed by her husband, King Shahryar: "This no longer exists. Armed with the new technologies, modern Scheherazades, like the Al Jazeera commentators or the young women who created the Network of Women Journalists in Morocco to achieve greater visibility and improve their presence and representation at all levels of responsibility in the media, speak and send their messages 24 hours a day."

New technologies are allies of freedom of expression and knowledge, resources that can be used positively but also negatively, depending on the factors of the current scenario. In order to achieve positive scenarios, we need to change our mentalities in relation to ourselves and our neighbours. We must first know ourselves to recognise ourselves in the mirror that reflects our old and at the same time unique sea. One of the stumbling blocks we must overcome is the degradation of the environment. Sensibly sharing our natural resources will help strengthen our communities. Doing the opposite, as set out by the analysts who explore this subject (in other words, squandering ecological wealth, landscapes and water), will unleash even more conflicts. As the ecologist Jérémy Fosse

argues, if we use the social networks and new technologies intelligently, citizen initiatives will make a sustainable improvement possible.

Let us strengthen the values begun twenty-five years ago in this tempestuous sea of which Homer spoke and be actors of change. Let us be guardians of human rights and encourage the development of sustainable scenarios.

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