

The Mediterranean as an anthropological laboratory

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1. A FIELD OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Research done in the Mediterranean area by anglophone anthropologists has a long tradition, which spans five decades. The explorations of the beginning were followed by a period of success; then it was the turn of theoretical self-criticism and of a relative decline.

Many controversies about the anthropology of the Mediterranean are implicitly concerned with the notion of “place”. Are the “places” studied by anthropologists representative or even meaningful? Is the Mediterranean Basin a convenient unit of anthropological study? The concept of “place” is vital in anthropology but it has often been taken for granted (*cf.* Appadurai, 1986; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). The discipline developed the practice of going elsewhere to study “others”. But “place” also provided the link between microanalysis and comparison or generalisation through notions like cultural area, region, nation, society, and civilisation (*cf.* Appadurai, 1986). When, how, and why did the Mediterranean become a convenient place for ethnographic fieldwork and the construction of anthropological theory?

The development of anglophone anthropology of the Mediterranean over the past decades rests on the growth of “modern” ethnographic research in this area. “Modern” stands for research done with the intensive fieldwork method established in the first decades of this century for university-trained scholars in British and American anthropology. After World War II, cultural and social anthropologists writing in English came in growing numbers to the Mediterranean area. Several reasons have been identified which help account for the rise of this field of research.

There are, on the one hand, some developments inside the discipline. The focus of attention shifted from the study of tribal peoples towards the study of peasants, in Asia, in Latin America and elsewhere. This transition began already before the World War II, in the 1920s and 1930s. A second development inside the discipline took shape in Britain in the 1950s, when in Oxford, students of Evans-Pritchard and

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Peristiany (e. g. Pitt-Rivers, Peters, Abou Zeid, Stirling and Campbell) turned to the study of rural communities in the Mediterranean region and became more open to historical approaches and more critical towards the dominant a-historical structural-functional paradigm.

The growing success of this field of research is also connected with forces that lie in the historical landscape surrounding the discipline. The expansion of anthropological work in the Mediterranean was related to transformations in the world political economy in the decades following World War II, and mainly to the process of decolonization. As Eric Wolf observed: "... the pacific or pacified objects of our investigation, primitives and peasants alike, are ever more prone to define our field situation gun in hand" (1974: 257-258). The restrictions for the opportunities for research in many corners of the globe helped the shift of anthropological research interests towards the Mediterranean area. Several anthropologists turned to one of the few areas still open to them, the nations of Europe, and especially to Mediterranean Europe (Cole, 1977). The southern shores of the Mediterranean became also a refuge for ethnographers in quest of less difficult fields. Clifford Geertz recently spelled out the reasons for moving from Indonesia to Morocco when the situation in the former country had become explosive in the 1960s. Due to the risks and to the lack of freedom to move in Indonesia, he was reduced "to that most pitiable of conditions: an anthropologist without a people". Thus, he was looking for another place, "writing retrospectively about Indonesia, thinking prospectively, and not very exactly, of all sorts of elsewhere: the Philippines, Uganda, Suriname, Bosnia, Madagascar" (1995: 116). This indecision was resolved by a possibility wholly unforeseen that materialised during a conference in Cambridge in 1963. A rather casual discovery of Morocco was at the origin of a research project that involved four other anthropologists who worked in this country between 1965 and 1971.

The growth of ethnographic work in the Mediterranean region went along with the development of a comparative perspective. The timetable of anglophone anthropology in the Mediterranean shows, after the beginnings in the 1950s, the legitimisation of the field in terms of "Mediterranean study" during the 1960s.

In several works, Eric Wolf promoted a comparative perspective on the Mediterranean (e. g. Wolf, 1966; 1969). At the beginning of 1960s he co-organised with William Schorger, a specialist on Morocco, a research seminar at the University of Michigan on "Peasant Society and Culture", devoted to a comparison between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. This seminar was followed by several conferences between 1961 and 1967 in Ann Arbor, in Aix-en-Provence and in Canterbury. The results appeared in 1969 as a special issue of *Anthropological*

Quarterly (vol. 42, n.º 3). At the same time, Wolf and Schorger formed the University of Michigan Mediterranean Studies Group, and initiated a Project for the Study of Social Networks in the Mediterranean Area. This project aimed at a comparative investigation of social, economic, political and religious networks mediating between different levels of group identification, and supported the fieldwork of not less than fifteen anthropologists in both shores of the Mediterranean until the late 1960s (Silverman, 2000).

The path of British anthropology toward a Mediterranean sub-speciality starts in the fifties. The informal comparison done at Oxford by a number of anthropologists back from fieldwork in Spain or Greece (Pitt-Rivers, Peristiany and Campbell) then flowed in a number of important international conferences organised by Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, starting with Burg Wartenstein in 1959. *Mediterranean Countrymen*, the collection of papers (partly presented at Burg Wartenstein) edited in 1963 presents in its subtitle (*Essays in the Social Anthropology of the Mediterranean*) an explicit statement concerning the construction of a pan-Mediterranean speciality in anthropology. In his introduction Pitt-Rivers offers some reasons behind the choice of a comparative framework that juxtaposed Southern Europe and the Middle East. Here a technological homogeneity is associated with cultural and ethnic diversity, and a long history of contacts. Then he questions “the popular conception which assumes at the same time, that peoples can be studied under the titles of their national flag as geographical entities, and explained in terms of their history. The communities of the Mediterranean possess both more similarities between different countries and more diversities within their national frontiers than the tenets of modern nationalism would have us believe” (1963: 10).

The communities studied in the essays do not assume to be representative of different countries and the comparison Pitt-Rivers advocates “is not the formal comparison of cultural features but the implicit comparison between different instances of similar phenomena. Therefore those who would seek to establish a cultural unity are entitled to question whether Kharga Oasis, the Anatolian plateau or Portugal really belong” (1963: 11).

This loose definition of the Mediterranean and the implicit comparison have marked the important works written or edited by Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany throughout more than 30 years (Pitt-Rivers, 1963; Peristiany, 1965; 1968; 1976; 1989; Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, 1992). The focus has constantly been on certain unifying themes like social values (honour and shame, hospitality, friendship), kinship and family, and the relation of local communities to the larger social units. An implicit form of comparison was also present in several ethnographic monographs, which were conceived by

the authors as contributions to the study of the Mediterranean (e. g. Campbell, 1964: V; Boissevain, 1969: 1), and referred to anthropological literature on the region. In a different perspective, Lisón-Tolosana's analysis of the political constitution of Belmonte de los Caballeros was nourished by a careful comparison, focused on both differences and similarities, between the *pueblo* and the Greek polis (1966 : 251-58).

The seventies witnessed some attempts to construct a more distinct definition of the Mediterranean as an anthropological category and a more explicit form of comparison (Schneider, 1971; Black-Michaud, 1975; Gellner and Waterbury, 1977). This tendency had its climax in Davis's polemic survey of anthropological studies concerning the Mediterranean (1977). Davis does not delineate or define precisely the term "Mediterranean". The cohesiveness of the Mediterranean entity derives in his view from a long history of "perpetual and inescapable" contacts (1977: 255). For him the area is but a field of interaction, commerce and conquest over the millennia. Boissevain (1979) and Gilmore (1982) completed this rather diffusionist approach. For the former, Davis "has missed the most obvious materialist parameters that together give the region its distinctive signature: sea, climate, terrain, and mode of production" (1979: 83). The latter determines several criteria by which the Mediterranean may be demarcated geographically and culturally. Mediterranean distinctiveness is, for him, the product of geographic, ecological, political, economic and cultural factors. "Each dimension is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for defining the Mediterranean construct. In my view, the 'much heralded unity' of the Mediterranean emerges both synchronically and diachronically from an analysis of the unique concurrence of all these multiple factors" (Gilmore, 1982: 184).

The 1980s saw further work informed by a circum-Mediterranean comparative perspective (e. g. Blok, 1981; Gilmore, 1987). Yet, these efforts have been principally made by anthropologists working on the northern shores (see Hopkins, 1980). Concerning the Southern and Eastern shores, the comparative perspectives tended to be developed in a Middle-Eastern framework (e. g. Gulick, 1976; Eickelman, 1981; Gilsonan, 1990). Furthermore, the 1980s have witnessed the growth of critical discussion on the very notion of Mediterranean in anthropology. Some criticisms arose in the debates generated by Davis's (1977), Boissevain's (1979) and Gilmore's (1982) attempts to define a social anthropology of the Mediterranean. Several authors further developed this critical scrutiny and seriously brought into question the "Mediterraneanist construct".

During the 1990s, in spite of some attempts to renew the perspective (Sant Cassia, 1991; Magnarella, 1992), the discussion on the category of Mediterranean progressively lost its force. In the same period one witnesses a relative eclipse of

“Mediterranean” as a comparative category in anthropological discourse, in favour of an “anthropology of Europe” and of “an anthropology of the Middle East”. One cannot help notice that this shift seems to be related to some far-reaching events which have deepened existing divisions and turned the Mediterranean sea into a remarked frontier: on the one hand the resurgence of political Islam, on the other hand the consolidation of the European Union (see Driessen 2000). Moreover, in many cases it is a national framework that implicitly organises the construction of anthropological theory concerning the countries around the Mediterranean basin.

Is the crisis of Mediterranean anthropology bound to be definitive? Should we accept its premature death after a relatively short period of considerable success? In order to answer, let me start with a discussion of some issues related to the debate on the feasibility of a Mediterranean anthropology.

2. THE SHORTCOMINGS OF MEDITERRANEAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Firstly, there is a problem of scale. Several authors would agree with Aceves (1979: 85), who asked “whether something so broad as the Mediterranean can be included in any perspective save one so equally broad to be useless for analytical purposes”, arriving to the following conclusion: “Mediterranean history, yes; Mediterranean social anthropology, not yet, maybe never”.

For many critics of the notion of Mediterranean, in fact, this category is too broad and too vague. On several occasions Herzfeld has stressed that a priori assumptions of a Mediterranean cultural unit can subvert “the dialectic between particularistic ethnography and comparative analysis” (1984: 443). This issue was also at the centre of a paper written collectively by the members of the Southern European Research Group (the group included Anne M. Bailey, Annabelle Black, Victoria Goddard, Olivia Harris, Josep. R. Llobera, Jill Mortimer, Brian J. O’Neill, Sandra Satterlee and Nukhet Sirman), which jabbed at the anthropologists who consider the Mediterranean a unit for comparative study. Looking at the Mediterraneanist literature, the authors isolate two unsatisfactory notions of the Mediterranean as a unit of study. The first, that they call “metaphysical”, should be best illustrated by the work of Julian Pitt-Rivers, whose view of the unit of the Mediterranean would be founded “upon certain common cultural traits which are assumed (rather than demonstrated) to have survived from some time in the past, be it the Roman Empire or the sixteenth century analysed by Braudel” (SERG, 1981: 56). The other conception, that they call “atomistic”, is exemplified by Davis (1977), for whom the anthropology of the Mediterranean would equal “the sum total of the ethnographies of the Mediterranean

which have been judiciously apportioned between the traditional categories of anthropology, i. e. kinship, political organisation, religion, etc.” (1981: 56).

Since a large part of anthropological research in the Mediterranean area took place in rural communities, it has been contended that these ethnographies would be scanty representatives. Several authors, pointed out an inclination to tribalize, to seek out the most marginal areas of the region (Davis, 1977; Boissevain, 1979; Kenny and Kertzer, 1983). Moreover, the tendency to reify monochromatically a highly heterogeneous Mediterranean area would not have been an innocent exercise. According to Llobera, for instance, “it is largely due to the needs of Anglo-Saxon anthropological departments, that the idea of the ‘Mediterranean’ as a cultural area has been constituted” (1986: 30). The same argument has been developed further by Pina-Cabral, who observed that “the notion of the Mediterranean Basin as a ‘culture area’ is more useful as a means of distancing Anglo-American scholars from the populations they study than as a way of making a sense of the cultural homogeneities and differences that characterise the region” (1989: 399).

In particular the pertinence and even the existence of the “honour and shame complex” as a factor of cultural unit of the circum-Mediterranean area has been the object of intense criticism (e. g. Herzfeld, 1980; 1984; 1987; Fernández, 1983; Wikan, 1984; Pina-Cabral, 1989). Herzfeld has directed the attention towards a critical appraisal of the methodological difficulties in the comparative analysis of social values (1980: 339). He argued that generalisations on honour and shame have become counterproductive because they prematurely conflate a rich ethnographic diversity. Moreover he suggested that this enterprise had strong ideological implications. He coined the term “Mediterraneanism”, on the model of Said’s “Orientalism”, to suggest the reification of the Mediterranean area as a zone of cultural difference through an ideologically motivated representation of otherness (1987: 64). In his view, survivalism, exoticism and ethnocentrism permeate much of the Mediterraneanist literature.

In an influential article, Fernández (1983: 170-171) warned of the risks of projective reading which derive from “a long tradition of giving our deepest psychological impulses a Mediterranean embodiment”. He pointed out that there is a symbolic ordering to north-south negotiation, which roughly follows human anatomy: “the south is assigned the emotive, visceral, genital, spontaneous qualities and the north the cognitive, cerebral control, and management qualities [...]. The question is, does the study of the ‘south’ at deep levels of interpretation serve as a projective device for self-discovery by confirming this symbolic geography?”. In his discussion of Gilmore’s and Brandes’s ethnographic works on Spain, he argued that ethnographic description “may ascribe to his subjects the set of traits —of such a generally negative

quality as to amount to a stereotype— that lay in wait for the Mediterraneanist”. The stereotyped and ethnocentric vision of southern man implicitly exalts the values of the northern core countries, while at the same time justifies the subordinate condition of the southern peripheries. Thus Gilmore’s book “can be read as an exaltation of the values of the core culture to which he belongs. It risks being part of the problem and not part of the solution” (1983: 168).

In the same vein Pina-Cabral pointed out his dissent with the idea of a Mediterranean cultural distinctiveness concerning male status. He argued that the gender-specificity of moral values seems to apply “to the whole of pre-modern Europe and to continue to apply to many areas of the so-called Western world”. After remembering that pub and bar behaviour is far more agonistic and violent in England or Germany than in Andalusia, he concludes: “One is therefore tempted to think that one of the reasons middle-class and upper middle-class young Anglo-American scholars are so deeply impressed with the agonistic display of malehood among southern European peasants is that they are so ignorant of working-class behaviour in their own countries of origin” (1989: 402).

Several scholars have criticised the monological character of Mediterranean anthropology. For instance Llobera (1986: 30) has affirmed that Anglo-Saxon anthropologists present their work on Mediterranean Europe “as the first serious attempt to investigate these societies. This creates a problem for the existing native discourses which are usually defined as ‘folklore’ —a well-known way of downgrading their status as knowledge”.

Significantly, some criticisms concentrated on the genealogy of the Mediterraneanist speciality. Aceves (1979) and Esteva-Fabregat (1979) contest Boissevain’s affirmation that Pitt-Rivers’s monograph marked the birth of the social anthropology of the northern shore of the Mediterranean. Aceves asks: “In English, maybe, but what about European studies? In Spain, for example, we find the marvellous work of Julio Caro Baroja as well as earlier works by scholars affiliated with the Ateneo de Madrid” (Aceves, 1979: 85). Esteva-Fabregat (1979: 407) observes that “the concept ‘social anthropology’ has been taught in Spain since at least 1877” and that “practitioners of this field discipline can be found by consulting the ‘Biblioteca de las Tradiciones Populares Españolas’ collection”. Moreover there are other works “which, although called ‘folklore’, are in some cases social anthropology”. Esteva-Fabregat criticises the “complete disregard for the writing of the others” (408) which would characterise British and North American anthropologists, in the “naive conviction of being the only professional students of the Mediterranean world in social anthropology”. Given their tendency to ignore non English bibliographies, “social

anthropologists give the impression of possessing a certain professional self-sufficiency which frequently masks a lack of academic training and of intellectual internationalism” (1979: 408).

Papadopoulos affirms that the social anthropology of the northern shore of the Mediterranean is not born with Pitt-Rivers: “This is tantamount to ignoring a considerable volume of bibliography of anthropological import under the heading of disciplines differently styled according to national scholarly traditions. For instance, under the term *laografía* Greek scholarship has treated a number of topics of socio-anthropological import” (1979: 408).

Looking retrospectively at the debate on the Mediterranean anthropology, now that the dust has settled on the battle field, it is possible to have a more balanced view. Several criticisms call attention to shortcomings that are real. Yet the latter were hardly specific to Mediterranean anthropology and seem on the contrary to have been typical of the discipline as a whole: many problems of the Mediterraneanist branch of learning were common to its anthropological main trunk.

Moreover, some critics tend to indulge in exaggeration for the sake of polemics: they present a too monochromatic view of the field, and arrive to caricature the positions of some founding fathers, like Pitt-Rivers or Peristiany. Finally, meticulous examination of the diseases of Mediterranean anthropology has produced very pessimistic diagnosis, but did not result in efficacious therapy. In several cases the criticisms suffer the same limitations they impute to the advocates of a pan-Mediterranean perspective. In order to argue this position, let me analyse more in detail some vexed questions of the debate around this field of study.

3. ETHNOCENTRISM, EXOTICISM AND STEREOTYPES

There are huge deposits of symbols and meanings concerning the Mediterranean in European literature, assuring the conditions of reception of stereotypes. An important tradition attributes to the South a great emotional strength and a maieutic role. The Mediterranean has a liminal position —emphasised by the *rite de passage* of the Grand Tour, and perpetuated by more prosaic contemporary tourist journeys— which makes possible an immersion in the past (in *our* past) by visiting archaeological sites and being in contact with a way of life which is perceived as more emotionally free. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud cites the association *gen Italien* (towards Italy) / *Genitalien*. Moreover, we know the importance of the Mediterranean (mainly of Italy) in his work and in his life. The elaboration of the psychoanalysis, in which

the Greek myths are used to label the deepest psychological impulses, went along with and was partially nourished by a great number of travels to the South (about 20 times to Italy).

Considering this state of affairs, it is not surprising that a number of biases influenced anthropological investigation on the Mediterranean area. Some works artificially accentuated the contrast between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. They “orientalized” the latter. Moreover, some forms of ethnocentrism and exoticism partially oriented anthropological theorising on the Mediterranean, defining a set of dominant themes of interest.

On the other hand, we should not forget that this aspect has been the object of a reflexive scrutiny by one of the founding fathers of Mediterranean anthropology. Some years ago, discussing his long-standing collaboration with Peristiany, Pitt-Rivers has argued that their respective visions of the Mediterranean were complementary rather than identical. Peristiany’s “anthropology was founded upon his African experience, yet his vision of the Mediterranean contained a great deal of introspection as well, for he was himself a very ‘Mediterranean man’”. Pitt-Rivers’s anthropology, on the contrary, “was that of a convert who found in the Mediterranean a critique of, and thus an escape from, the society in which he had been born and bred”. Thus identification was at work in Peristiany (“... one may discern in Peristiany’s orientation a certain tendency to take Greeks as the essence of Mediterraneans and to ignore those who do not measure up to the Hellenic yardstick”) and contrast in Pitt-Rivers (“... my own vision of Mediterraneans [...] contained a somewhat naïve attempt to identify them by the ways in which they differ from those who peopled my English childhood”) (1994: 25).

It is possible to apply the same scheme of interpretation to the criticisms to a pan-Mediterranean perspective. The vision which accentuate the division between Europe and the rest of the Mediterranean has a long tradition in European thought (for instance one may mention Pirenne) and is very influential in contemporary political rhetorics. It is not difficult to detect the presence of ideological and ethnocentric biases in the refusal to put European and Arab peoples in the same comparative field. Some Southern European anthropologists, like Llobera and Pina-Cabral, when criticising a pan-Mediterranean perspective seem to claim the full “Europeaness” of the northern shores of the sea. Even a rough semiologic analysis shows some traces of a suspicious look on the Arab world. Take for example this quotation: “If Gilmore and Delaney had not begun by compare an Andalusian town with a remote Central Anatolian village, with Qadhafi’s Libya, with Cretan shepherds and with the warring hill tribesmen of eastern Morocco and, instead, had compared it with its Portuguese,

Spanish, and Southern French neighbours, then the results might not have proven so ludicrous” (Pina-Cabral, 1989: 404).

The use of expressions like “Qadhafi’s Libya” or “warring hill tribesmen”, opposed to European “neighbours”, does not seem devoid of ideological resonance. Should we conclude that “he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him”? I think that mutual excoriation in the search of ethnocentric bias is far from being productive, and I would plead instead for a more balanced attitude. There have been many “Mediterraneanisms”, just like there have been many “Orientalisms”. The presence of shortcomings and ideological bias does not justify a reject in bulk of a vast corpus of intellectual work.

I should immediately add that the field of “anti-Mediterraneanism” is far from being homogeneous (in contrast with what is perhaps suggested by its condensed description that I have sketched in this paper). In fact, there exists an intermediate ground between the two fields, in which it would be possible to work together and capitalise on the contributions of different positions in order to attain a higher level of analysis. This means to adopt an epistemological position that conceives the construction of anthropology as an endless attempt to resist exoticism and ethnocentrism, with the awareness that the result is always bound to be partial. Yet, as it has been argued by Herzfeld (1987: 18), it seems “a good deal less productive to vilify the discipline for its inevitable bias, than to insist instead on the provisionality of all its apparent escapes from ethnocentrism and hegemony. A perspective that recognises anthropology as the symbolic elaboration of collective identity necessarily also acknowledges its ethnocentrism”. In a similar vein one can find inspiration in the work of Ernesto De Martino, who defined the anthropological enterprise as a “critical ethnocentrism” (1977: 396-397).

4. MONOLOGICAL AUTHORITY OF ANGLOPHONE ANTHROPOLOGY

Even from this point of view, one should carefully avoid falling into the trap of over-simplification. For instance, we should not underestimate the role played, since the beginnings of the construction of a Mediterranean speciality in anthropology, by “insider” scholars, like Caro-Baroja, Peristiany, Abou-Zeid. It is a paradox that the accusations of ethnocentrism concentrated over the study of honour and shame that was initiated and encouraged by a “native”.

Peristiany’s assumption of the role of a “native” anthropologist was not fully appreciated in Oxford. Although he was not the first to do it—one can cite many pre-

vious examples in British social anthropology, like Kofi Busia, Jomo Kenyatta, M. N. Srinivas, A. M. Abou-Zeid, H. Fei and Hsu— according to Campbell, “this decision to work in Cyprus was seen in Oxford as an almost heretical initiative since the validity of an anthropologist’s perceptions were believed to lie in the very act of studying, and immersing oneself in, the thought processes of a culture entirely different from one’s own”. It seems that Evans-Pritchard was particularly irritated at this “deviation” of John Peristiany’s interests from the social anthropology of East Africa. Thus, “despite John Peristiany’s personal affection for Evans-Pritchard, this negative attitude towards Mediterranean studies in the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology at this time played its part in persuading him to move to Greece after he had received an invitation from UNESCO to establish a social sciences centre in Athens” (Campbell, 1994: 18). Peristiany’s commitment to the dialogue between “the view from beyond” and “the view from inside” was present not only in his efforts to develop social sciences in Greece, but also in the organisation of a series of international conferences concerning the anthropological study of the Mediterranean. In this context, as it has been observed by Pitt-Rivers, he insisted on the necessity “to consider the views of Mediterranean scholars of Mediterranean countries with the preferential status they should have” (Pitt-Rivers 1994: 26).

In spite of these efforts, the dialogue has been limited. As a metropolitan sub-speciality in anglophone academia, Mediterranean anthropology has remained quite impermeable by works done in different, peripheral anthropological styles, like several critics have pointed out in relation to Iberian and Greek traditions of research. To add a claim from another peninsula, one can argue that there is a bulk of ethnological work done for several decades in Italy under the definition *demologia* or *studio delle tradizioni popolari*. That work has been widely neglected in the international arena.

Why this lack of intellectual internationalism, to use the expression of Esteve-Fabregat? This seems mainly related to the reliance on the methods of “modern” anthropology and to the focusing on a limited number of topics. For instance Davis (1977) sees the Mediterranean as a rather dusty museum of pre-modern techniques of research in anthropology. The landmark is for him the “modern” strategy of research that combines structural analysis and intensive fieldwork. Thus it is not surprising that the works that are discussed at some length in his comparative analysis are almost invariably those produced within anglophone anthropological tradition. This insularity was also a strength, permitting to the new speciality to affirm its rights to exist. Yet this sort of epistemological protectionism has limited the scope of the Mediterranean as an ethnological field of study. The lack of communication with scholars working in the Mediterranean within different scholarly traditions has also

concerned French ethnology, which can hardly be defined as “pre-modern”. French ethnology, in fact, has remained for the most part alien to the construction of the social anthropology of the Mediterranean and then it has watched the controversies that have shaken the Mediterraneanist sea as a somewhat bewildered spectator.

Moreover, the emphasis on the, study of a restricted number of topics (honour and shame, clientelism) contributed to the insularity of anglophone anthropology of the Mediterranean. The tendency to see whole societies through some particular conceptual vantage point has been a common trait of the anthropology of complex civilisations. Thus, as Appadurai observed, “a few simple theoretical handles become metonyms and surrogates for the civilisation or society as a whole: hierarchy in India, honor-and-shame in the circum-Mediterranean, filial piety in China are all examples of what one might call gatekeeping concepts in anthropological theory, concepts, that is, that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region” (1986: 357). On the other hand, concentration on gatekeeping concepts had the effect of delaying the study of other issues.

Even the international debate on the legitimacy of Mediterranean anthropology has showed the same insularity. The inadequacy of a pan-Mediterranean perspective has been mainly argued on the basis of the discussion of research on honour and shame. Other themes for which there exist longstanding traditions of anthropological research outside British and North-American anthropology (e. g. material culture, technology, food, magic and religion, world views, and healing practices) have been completely neglected. Nor have been mentioned the comparative perspectives with a pan-Mediterranean focus of authors like Jacques Berque, Ernesto De Martino, André-Georges Haudricourt or Charles Parain. A discussion of the prospects of a pan-Mediterranean approach in anthropology is bound to be limited without an examination of this much wider corpus.

5. WHAT KIND OF “PLACE”?

The crisis of the Mediterranean as a convenient “place” for the construction of anthropological theory raises the problem of alternative delimitation of regional categories of comparison. In this respect one cannot help notice that some authors link the rejection of the notion of “Mediterranean” with suggestions that show a certain variability. It is not impossible to see the same scholar successively defending three different comparative perspectives opposed to the “Mediterranean”.

Generally alternative units of comparison (be they the “Middle East”, Europe, nations or ethnonations) suffer from the same ills attributed to the notion of Mediterranean. Whatever the scale one adopts, there are risks to be metaphysical, atomistic, ethnocentric and essentialist. Moreover, in the discussion on the requirements a unit of comparative analysis a great stress has been put on cultural continuity and uniformity. The category of “Mediterranean” is rejected because this area lacks these characteristics, which should be present in smaller homogeneous units. I would contend, on the contrary, that a circum-Mediterranean focus could make comparison very fruitful precisely for the presence of a complex interplay between similarities and differences.

This point was made by Evans-Pritchard, who argued that anthropologists studying Mediterranean peoples should be less concerned with likeness than with differences between them (1965: 25). As stated by Schorger and Wolf (1969), the Mediterranean “appeals to the anthropologist as a universe for internal comparison in consequence of the cross-currents working between the basic similarities deriving from common ecological circumstances and an inextricably shared history, and the regional differences such as those superficially identifiable as contrasts between economic regions, or between Eastern and Western Christianity, or, at the most general level, between the Christian and Muslim zones” (1969; see also Pitt-Rivers, 1963). Integrating both sides of the Mediterranean in the same comparative framework can allow a better analysis of the level of practice and force the discussion “of the very necessary question as to what in this area is actually uniquely or even significantly Christian or Muslim, Greek or Turkish, Spanish or Moroccan” (Schorger, 1983: 542-543).

From this point of view the Mediterranean is certainly not a cultural area; it could be better conceived as a concept of heuristic convenience (Pitt-Rivers, 1977: IX). It represents an area of anthropological work; a *field* of study and not an *object* of study; a context in which it is possible to adopt a plurality of levels of comparison. In Wittgenstein’s terms it can be described as a network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. In Derrida’s terms, it can be conceived as a tissue of differences historically constituted (see Albera and Blok, 2000).

Certainly, even if we adopt a sophisticated approach, the local dimension given to culture in anthropological theory exposes the analysis to the risk of essentialism. We should be aware that the model of cultural areas is often implicitly at work and that we need a constant epistemological vigilance against a tenacious and widespread tendency to essentialise the relationships between culture and place. The remedy can be a reflexive and modest posture which I would propose to call “critical essentialism”.

6. A LABORATORY

Despite many obstacles described on the foregoing pages, my own view on the prospects for the anthropology of the Mediterranean can be defined as a (moderately optimistic) voluntarism. It seems to me that not only is it now possible to recompose the field on a new epistemological basis, but also that it is worthwhile to work in this direction, and this for several reasons.

A first reason is the great richness of this area of research. The Mediterranean can be characterised as a space where historical and geographical characteristics offer situations of both diversity and similarity which allow fruitful comparisons on a whole range of themes.

A second reason is the existence of a large amount of valuable anthropological work on a wide range of issues. The problem in this case is mainly one of communication: intricate fields of interest, various intellectual traditions, linguistic divides, places of publication set too far apart are as many factors limiting the exchange and the development of the field.

Thirdly, there are now increasing spaces for cross-fertilisation and dialogue. On the one hand, the last decades have witnessed the development of an autonomous anthropological profession in many Mediterranean countries of both shores. There exist different forms of autochthonous anthropology, but in general scholars are well acquainted with anglophone tradition. On the other hand, the crisis of modern paradigm makes cultural and social anthropology less distant from the domain of “folklore studies”, which is also undergoing parallel transformations.

Fourthly, the prospects that the Mediterranean region holds for anthropological theory also stem from its position in the symbolic geography of the discipline. As a “place”, the Mediterranean has occupied a liminal position in the history of anthropology. With the downfall of evolutionism, anthropology became a metonym of “going elsewhere”. The rise of the modern paradigm led to the conception of the world as a discontinuous assemblage of separated differences (Geertz, 1988: 148). The Eurocentric ideology then took the form of a dichotomy between “here/us” and “there/not-us”. In this context the Mediterranean maintained an embarrassing position: it remained between “here” and “there”, between “us” and “non-us”. It was neither exotic nor wholly familiar (Herzfeld, 1987: 6-7). Now, in a globalizing world, the Mediterranean may have a paradigmatic value since it exemplifies and anticipates the blurring of distinctions between “us” and “not-us”. Mediterranean anthropology suffers in an acute fashion some epistemological ills with which anthropology as a whole is confronted. Yet, it is possible to put the accent on the reverse. The

Mediterranean can then be conceptualised as a laboratory where anthropologists of different cultural and scientific traditions can explore a new form of collective identity and work towards a new significance of *place* in anthropological theory.

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