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*in*

Camarda D. (ed.), Grassini L. (ed.).

*Local resources and global trades: Environments and agriculture in the Mediterranean region*

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 57

2003

pages 393-396

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=4001990>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Sardar S. **Rethinking the future: diversity and alternative Mediterranean futures.** In : Camarda D. (ed.), Grassini L. (ed.). *Local resources and global trades: Environments and agriculture in the Mediterranean region.* Bari : CIHEAM, 2003. p. 393-396 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 57)



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# RETHINKING THE FUTURE: DIVERSITY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDITERRANEAN FUTURES

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## 1. SHAPING FUTURES

We cannot think about futures, multiple diverse futures, in vacuum. Shaping desirable futures requires vision: visions of the future we intend to create, visions of what we hope for or even nightmare visions of the world we do not want to inhabit. Where do visions come from? Almost always we derive our future vision from history. We need these visions not because we want to look back in the sense of basing our future on a fixed, recoverable past but to go forward. If our hindsight, our view of history is blinkered, perverse or otherwise defective our future vision will be compromised. Thinking fruitfully about the future requires taking account of the present - we are going to create desirable futures from *a priori* givens - and we have to take these into account.

## 2. MEANING OF DIVERSITY

Diversity is probably the most overused term in today's chic circles. There are many concepts of diversity, many types of cultural diversity that are invoked and bandied about. I am only concerned with my own.

- a) Diversity is an integral part of any civilization, in the sense of varieties of interpretations, schools of thought, trends, groups, organisations, ideological brand names and so on. This is the surface layer of diversity, an epiphenomena of culture.
- b) Cultural Diversity is the existence of whole cultures within one context, whether it is a nation state, a region of one country or a region that spans a number of countries. Whole cultures can be minority national cultures, like the Welsh or the Scots. Such cultures may be tributaries of the civilisational whole, as are the Welsh and the Scots - parts of European civilization but distinguishable by language, history, traditions and customs from, especially, the English, but also everyone else. Or they can be radically different cultures and civilizations - such as the native peoples of the Americas, or now immigrant populations in European nations.
- c) Cultural Diversity is the interconnection at the boundaries of nations, cultures and civilizations. This is often the most fertile, though least theorised, recognised and studied area of diversity. We talk of one world as if it were a new invention, a historic truth only of and discovered by modern times. In reality, it has been an enduring part of world history. It raises questions of commensurability, inter-communication, mutual understanding, ideas of power and territory, translation, as a process of mistranslation or not, transmission - the what, how, where and when - of exchange, influence, diffusion and innovation between diverse entities, and the often forgotten question of who the agents of transmission are and have been - eg. The role of nomads, traders and pilgrims in carrying ideas from place to place. Pilgrimage is as much an institution in Christian society as in the Muslim one though not in the same way.
- d) Diversity is also a state of cultural readiness, a definition of willingness or unwillingness to engage beyond the narrow confines of one's own assumptions, understanding and conventional knowledge.

What we mean and understand by the word diversity is not self evident, it must be defined and in turn it defines our vision of both the past and the future.

## 3. WHERE IS THE MEDITERRANEAN?

As a region, the Mediterranean is most often examined in two parts - the north and the south that we by our political illogic have made into the West and the East. From the earliest times the Mediterranean has been a sea of connection. It has been home to many civilizations since ancient times.

Ferdinand Braudel spent a lifetime of enormous scholarship exploring the Mediterranean world as an

integrated, diverse, inter-related and interactive whole. His great achievement is to remind us that the fragmentation and separate compartments conventional history offers us have never been watertight, exclusive or entirely separate.

Going beyond the connections of political history, the history of interconnection whether peaceful or not, he pointed to the need to understand history in the 'longue duree', the long rhythms and influences of ecological factors, environment and landscape as the context and constraints that have affected all civilizations that have existed in this region.

#### **4. EUROPEAN MEDITERRANEAN HISTORY**

The problem with the vision of European Mediterranean history is that it is founded on a myth. The myth begins with Europa, daughter of Zeus carried away on the back of a bull. This eponymous Ancestress, who gave her name to the continent, is taken as proof of the lineal descent of all things European from its only true progenitors the ancient Greeks. Fairy tales belong to the nursery. This fairy tale has become the bedrock of western scholarship, the endlessly repeated doggerel on which all educational careers in Europe are based.

Greek civilization, a nasty lot of grubby self satisfied merchants who ran slave societies and called them democracies, would have been impossible without the impetus and learning it derived from Anatolia and the Levant, as well as Egypt.

The rise of civilization as urbanisation, writing, settled agriculture all began to the east of the Mediterranean and straggled westward. The Mediterranean has been recipient of influence in ideas, technology and trade that all came from and had alternative centres to the east of the Mediterranean.

Mediterranean-centred history, Braudel excepted, has been severely and disproportionately northern-sided, European-centred and exclusionary - exclusionary of all the rest of the world. In short it has been the enemy of diversity. It is the mythic creation we have to dethrone and decentre if we are to embrace diversity and defuse the great tensions within European society today that are the product of migration across the Mediterranean from the South and into Europe from the East.

The limited version of European history calls the Mediterranean the Middle Sea, but it neatly manages not to definite what this sea is the centre of. Once you exclude what shaped Greek civilization you have a narrowly defined, territorial world with no sides except the north around its centre.

You cannot reach a whole world vision from such a basis.

#### **5. AN OTHER CENTRE OF THE WORLD**

The Mediterranean is not my Middle Sea. My view of the world has another centre, an alternative Middle Sea. My Middle Sea is The Indian Ocean the centre of a world system to which the Mediterranean was tangential, though interconnected throughout history.

The rich diversity of the Mediterranean world has no meaning without the East, the Levant, that was its open door to the other world system, the Indian Ocean world.

My interest is not in fighting about priority. It is about recognition of co-existence, the "longue duree" of co-existence and mutual influence without which we can not appreciate anything of world history, our world today or the true meaning of diversity.

It is no good just looking at the Mediterranean without seeing the connections the southern pole of this sea has maintained with the Indian Ocean world. Islamic civilization has its feet firmly planted in the Indian Ocean World, not a Mediterranean centred world. The legacy Europe owes to Islamic civilization, and Spain has played a vital part in this legacy, is unimaginable without the wider horizons of the Indian Ocean World of trade, ideas, inter-connection, inter-relationships from China to the shores of the Atlantic.

#### **6. THE POSTCOLONIAL PRESENT**

Both sides of the Mediterranean, with their different ideas of where the centre is and what is centred,

share common problems today. Both are dealing with the problems of post coloniality - differently experienced problems coming from different experiences in history, but nevertheless intimately involved inter-connected problems out of which future visions have to be made.

### **6.1. Post coloniality of the coloniser**

Losing an empire has not been regaining the world - the Americans have done that. European nations have been confronted with the need to redefine their role in the world, their connections with former colonies that are now independent nations, supposedly equal members in the world community of nations, yet often having and making legitimate claims over former colonial powers. Europe, that riddled war torn continent, must also make peace and come to terms among itself, both within and between nations. The creation of the European Union is one part, still only vaguely defined, of a future vision.

The late coloniser must also come to terms with the history of colonisation and all the erroneous notions of superiority that were fabricated to justify the unjustifiable. To move forward former colonisers must re-evaluate their culture and the delusions, optical illusions and misconceptions that have taken firm root within it. The openness of the coloniser is out of step with the open world of postcoloniality.

### **6.2. Post coloniality of the colonised**

The colonised too must re-evaluate their history both the legacy of colonialism and now of independence as well as what remains of the legacy of their own indigenous culture or cultures, civilization or civilizations. Most former colonies are complex states, patchworks of nationalities, ethnicities that had more cohesion under colonial rule because they all had a common enemy, the coloniser, than they have been able to achieve as an independent state.

The colonised mind is the most enduring legacy of the age of empires. It has been a dubious and deforming legacy that has further fragmented the fabric of nation states, cultures and civilizations.

Finding stability - political, social, cultural and civilisational - has been and remains an enormous challenge for former colonies. Negotiating a place within the shifting alliances of the age of independence, the Cold War era, has had its own pernicious distorting effects within newly independent nations. The end of the Cold War has renewed rather than ended the problems.

Revitalising their cultural identity is the greatest challenge of newly independent nations. In importance, it ranks alongside solving the problems of poverty, economic and technological deficit, brain drain, education and health and environmental dilemmas. It is perhaps the most critical factor in recovering from the global social experiment that failed: development.

There can be little real prospect of the problem of post coloniality being resolved for the colonisers unless it is also done by the colonised, and vice versa. And that realisation might just be the foundation and birthplace of genuine cultural diversity for the future.

## **7. THE GLOBALISED PRESENT**

What does globalisation mean in the world of post coloniality? Is globalisation a movement for homogeneity? In which case cultural diversity is destined to go the way of the dodo. There certainly is homogeneity. Yet, paradoxically it is prompting new emphasis on culture, identity. Supra national states, rising living standards across the developed world are all fostering rather than undermining local, regional, minority national identities. Devolution to Scotland and Wales or Catalonia would have been unthinkable without that wider context.

In the face of facelessness we all want to cling more firmly to the basic sources of what rather shapes our identity. We are offered eclectic total relativity and most of us prefer to know who we are and where we come from.

When national self-determination is compromised by real government, when real power belongs to private corporations, identity becomes problematic. The nation state in and of itself is not sufficient identity for anyone. So culture, or civilization, grow in importance as sources of self-definition of citizens. We are

more ready to question who we are when so much we thought we were has passed out of our control. This process is both a counsel of despair, a retreat from unpalatable reality, and the most hopeful source of future visions and the impetus to change, to taking control of the meaning of globalisation. If we stand content with nation state definitions of identity we will definitely be steam-rolled by globalisation. The only source of resistance and dissent lies in culture, alternative concepts and ideas within our civilisation repertoire. Culture and civilization are more amenable, plastic and extensive concepts than the nation state as a source of identity. Culture and civilization contain meanings, concepts and possibilities that have been excluded, downgraded by the nation state as the vehicle of modernity and its instrumental rationality its fitness as the carrier of totalitarian or fascist ideology.

## **8. DIVERSE FUTURES FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN**

Our visions of the future must take into account these presents as well as our problematic pasts. Cultural diversity has always been part of our world, even the world of the nation state. The challenge of the future is to make a rediscovery and recovery of all the extensive, potential and possible meanings of culture(s) as the path to genuine and equitable cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity is not without its problems. The greatest problem is precisely that it can only be recovered from the past and comes complete with the grievances and desire for redress of past injustice. To be fit for cultural diversity we have to make peace with the past by curing its greatest problem and that is ignorance, the kind of ignorance that bred hostility, antipathy, misunderstanding and hatred. We have to re-examine all the wide repertoire of our cultures and civilizations for concepts and ideas that will allow us to recognise and interact across cultures in new ways, to create *modus vivendi* and openness, not wield our different identities as weapons against one another.

On the basis of new sources for mutual understanding, dialogue between and across cultures and civilization can provide a new circumference for the Mediterranean. An urgently needed circumference of diversity that finds solutions to the ecological and environmental problems that will damage its delicate balance piecemeal to everyone's detriment.

In the dialogue of civilizations we can produce new routes of diffusion and innovation through discovering alternate means of discussing and thinking about our problems. Transmission of ideas across cultural boundaries has promoted flowering of culture, science and human thought many times in the past, it can do so again but it requires recapturing in a new way the talent for *convivencia*. Diversity demands that we change in perceptions on all around.

To be able to shapes different and better futures we have to be able to envision what those futures should consist of. Most of all we have to be able to articulate the values, concepts and ethos on which we could work together to shape futures we all desire. These are cultural principles and that is why embracing cultural diversity is an essential part of arriving at futures we most desire.