

The Mediterranean and educational challenges. A comment

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The focuses of the current paper are the Mediterranean and education. Cassano has masterfully expressed all his capacity of analysis as well as his ability to interpret reality and to propose new scenarios about the Mediterranean. Following the methodology adopted by Sultana, and in some way due to Paulo Freire, it is my intention to start with a biographical – maybe autobiographical – hint.

1. The concept of “Mediterranean”

Four days ago, I came back from a long trip, during which I mostly spoke languages different from those we are using right now and in my daily life I usually speak five or six different languages. I am referring to a trip across Latin America, during which I went from South America to the Mediterranean, going through intermediate countries². This personal anecdote is directly relevant to the present paper because I have brought with me a different meaning of “Mediterranean” from Paraguay, toward which I travelled last week.

What do they mean in Paraguay by “Mediterranean”? They mean the very Paraguay, considered as a land among lands. Indeed, the very etymology of “Mediterranean” is “surrounded by lands” and Paraguay is a land among different rivers – which are, of course, the Rio Paraguay, Rio Picolmayo, and the Rio Parana –. Paraguay is nothing more than rivers and lands

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² These intermediate communicating territories were: Africa, the Atlantic, Atlantic and Mediterranean islands.

among other lands. Nonetheless the Paraguayans feel themselves Mediterranean people. Of course we are not referring to the Mediterranean Sea, but to a conception of a Mediterranean land. However, it is particularly interesting that this is the term used by the Paraguayans to define themselves even during the celebrations of 200 years of independence. Independence that, according to doctor Francia, the proclaimer and the creator of this event, was anti-colonial.

Colonialism is a challenging condition, affecting cultural, political and psychological dimensions, which referring to the Mediterranean have been pointed out by Franz Fanon. It should be noted that we could wonder about the meaning of the outburst of domestic “anti-colonialism” against governments recently highlighted by the so-called “Arab Spring” or by other movements in the Southern Mediterranean. The current paper does not explore these recent events due to the fact that some case-by-case research seems to be required, although it is commonly held that the phenomenon of “Arab Spring” can be described through generalizations. Such a claim is on the increase in many parts of the world and particularly all around Europe. In my opinion, however, it should be pointed out that our Europeanness – or, more generally, our Westernness – heavily affects our way of thinking. This point of view may lead us to a negative perception of other people and negatively influence the perception that other people have of us.

The references made above to Paraguay and Paraguayan concept of “Mediterranean-ness” concern the development of a resistance, conceived as a “Mediterranean” resistance, which have been taking place for a long period in that country. This is the very problem this paper seeks to investigate: “Mediterranean-ness” as a feeling of common resistance.

Paraguay was the first independent country in South America, but it was also a country that somehow struggled not only against Spain, but also against an inner colonialism. In fact, Paraguay gained independence also against Buenos Aires, which wanted to aggregate it to Argentina. Moreover, the process whereby Paraguayan independence was gained involved the United Kingdom – which was the very colonial power at the time –, Brazil and the small Uruguay – which took part in a bloody war of extermination together with the UK, Argentina and Brazil –. As a consequence, this way of interpreting “Mediterranean-ness” as a real strength in resisting to foreign occupation may perhaps be considered a good example of what “Mediterranean” means as a whole.

The concept of “Mediterranean-ness” is very interesting, because the definition of “*mare nostrum*” is part of the worldview shared by the great powers of an area, as for example the Roman Empire. Thinking it over, in German or Danish language the Baltic Sea is still called the East Sea. It is the contention of a – German or Danish – speaker that the Baltic Sea is east of his proper land: referring to Lithuania or Latvia – or Finland or Russia – it would properly be the “West Sea”. So why is it called the East Sea? Because for Germany and the Hanseatic League cities, that “*medi-terras*” – i.e. “surrounded by land” – sea was east of the North Sea, which lies west of the Scandinavian countries.

Then, it would be clearly of interest to focus on the fact that our perception of the Other is based on the comparison between his power and ours, it is always self-centred. It is not perhaps by hazard that the French and Germans are presently considering the rest of Europe at the disposal of the “Rhenish alliance”, forgetting that at the end of II World War, when Europe was prostrate, Europe itself sowed the seed of a united continent, politically feasible and not only idealized, thanks to three men born and living among lands and borders – i.e. Adenauer, De Gasperi and Schumann –. Further, the idea of a united Europe had been already sketched out before, during the 19th century or even in the writings of important authors lived in the 14th and 15th century.

So, at the end of the introductory paragraph it could be assumed that “Mediterranean resistance-ness”³ is a fruitful perspective for our research.

2. “Our” Mediterranean

Before turning to the central issue of education, two aspects are noteworthy.

First, this conference takes place in a room full of traces of Bari’s presence in the history of East Europe. On the walls around us there are two important inscriptions: behind us, over the apse of the stage, there is written “*Ars Scientia Humanitas*”. This phrase encodes the Western knowledge of the Enlightenment and Positivism, combining but also distinguishing between art, science and humanity. This is not the only classification of

³ I propose this definition of some people’s ability to resist to any event conceiving a common Mediterranean identity despite the geographical collocation of the Mediterranean sea.

knowledge existing throughout the whole Mediterranean world, which often has different ways of classifying and interpreting knowledge. However, in the so-called Western – or European or Christian – interpretation, this division is rather obvious. If these are the tangible and intangible assets of knowledge, we can ask where wisdom lies. Some other papers in the present session refer to it and maybe wisdom resides in the Arabic word cited by Sultana when he talked about the women's role, that is "patience" (Sultana, in this issue).

On the other side of this hall we have a very clear and succinct inscription: "Libertas". Another major hoax, perhaps modernist: freedom. But, what does it mean to us? How can we achieve it? Through what means? Do we try to possess freedom? It is necessary not only to theorize freedom – as it is well known – but also to combine it with all the factors of reality. It must be experienced, it should become part of our lives and be practised by those who substantiate, live and govern it. Dealing with freedom, however, requires specific capacities and especially autonomy. In other words, it requires the ability to perceive oneself as an active and original individual, not necessarily subordinated to the messages of cultural, economic and political powers; in a word, a person aware of his own peculiarities and able to manage them.

Second, some evidence of the importance of these issues comes also from the speech done this morning by the Apulian Councillor of "Policy for the Mediterranean area". First of all, it is interesting that Apulia has a Councillor of Mediterranean Policy. Sardinia, from where I come from, does not have a similar institution⁴. In addition, it could be pointed up that the concepts expressed by the subtitle of this conference refer to a variety of actors, systems and policies conceived as a whole. Further, this coherent whole may be complemented by other tacit elements, such as, for example, the ability of autonomy, also applied to training and educational processes. This autonomy, to which I refer, is therefore the capability to play out

⁴ Some decades ago, speaking about the Mediterranean in terms of a common cultural action, of a co-development policy, as well as of a regional policy's proposal, seemed to be inappropriate. In this respect it is worthy of note that forty years ago the *Institute for Mediterranean Studies and Programs* (ISPRM) was established in Sassari, in a para-university context. ISPRM had the first two local branches in Sardinia (Sassari and Cagliari), and subsequently established two more branches in Bari and Malta. Thanks to ISPRM a stream of initiatives dedicated to Mediterranean and Euro-Mediterranean issues have been set in motion.

dialogue, cooperation and respect for diversity. As a consequence, Mediterranean relations should be based on equity instead of following an asymmetric power distribution. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the great powers of the world do not share this view.

3. Education in the Mediterranean

Moving toward the other focus of the present paper – i.e. education – in my opinion it is important to develop a concept of “education to education” in the Mediterranean as well as elsewhere. In fact, up to now we have probably failed to face this question.

From this point of view, education may become a new social service. “Education” may be a comprehensive label used to refer to a socio-educational service which includes: education to learn; education to develop creativity; education to produce culture and not only to transmit or passively absorb it; education to respect other people; education to produce material, symbolic and relational goods; education to civic engagement and responsibilities; finally, education to educate, enhancing again the role of school as a factor of social cohesion and an agency of civic education. It is interesting to note that the *Educational Section* of the *Italian Sociological Association* does not take into considerations only school, but all other educational agencies. Nevertheless this approach should not allow to underestimate the role of school, because school is still an important piece of the whole educational process.

Along Mediterranean shores there is a state of ferment, even though it is not so evident in other European countries. In fact, some school-working alternating systems have been experimented to balance several dimensions of life, e.g. work and the ability to preserve local culture and knowledge. This perspective implies a new role of school, which is considered in coexistence with its own community. In this respect it is worthy of note that school must not be considered a rigid institution placed outside or on the margin of social community, but a public service involved in community-based processes. As a consequence, school should be linked to third sector initiatives, as well as open to exchanges with other institutions in the world. Therefore, the very problem is whether the Mediterranean as a whole would be able to follow this path. Mediterranean wide and various

resources could allow the achievement of this goal, but only if we stop new conflicts, such as those based on religious identities.

If school was considered as a place where people can learn to share experiences and values, the Mediterranean could be genuinely shared instead of being divided among great powers, even from a political point of view. As a result, co-development should be considered at the same time mutual education, since setting up a co-development project means to set up a process of education for mutual understanding of each community, each culture and each people, as well as a process of technical education. Then, probably it would no longer be enough to just do a job and know how to do it or even to teach how to do it, but it would become important to know how to produce together both tangible and intangible goods.

So, accordingly to Angela Mongelli, it is nowadays relevant to consider the Mediterranean outside of standardized models; and the Mediterranean man's project becomes very important: a man that does not only collect formal educational credentials but is able to interpret his own life too.

Finally, I want to focus on the idea of school-working alternating systems, which exist in sixty countries worldwide. In these schools teachers are called "monitors", because they can monitor the learning process together with the trainees. Moreover, compared to traditional schools relationships between teachers and students operate on a level of greater equality and there is a wider exchange of experiences between schools and families, job training institutions and the whole community. So, beyond policies, regulatory procedures and didactic techniques, the interaction between the actors involved in educational processes is increasingly important. In fact, despite their different roles, they are stakeholders but – for the same reason – they play an active role in educational processes too, even though they have been considered as mere spectators, passive objects or dormant subjects by previous educational theory for a long period.

In conclusion, a reflection on different meanings of "Mediterranean-ness" seems to be required and future research would be well advised to investigate educational and socio-educational aspects without taking them for granted and adopting a wider perspective than the Eurocentric point of view.