

Learning from the Mediterranean: the return of the political and an education in hope

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the author's experiences as an educational researcher in the countries of the Mediterranean, and on the impact that the adoption of a regional lens has had on his own formative journey as an academic, and as a person. The author weaves into this account the narratives of other critical educators from the region, highlighting their efforts and struggles to install more democratic forms of life in states and territories where the civic voice has often been silenced by colonial and post-colonial regimes. In this manner, the paper invites the reader to 'learn from the Mediterranean', a task which requires considerable effort in that it engages political, epistemological, and ontological dimensions. The paper concludes that it is by listening to the global South, as a metaphor with which to refer to all those population groups excluded from the benefits of neoliberal globalisation, that we can open up new spaces of dialogue around 'other educations' and 'education otherwise'.

Keywords: Education and the Mediterranean, comparative education, education and democracy, critical education, educational innovation.

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History says, don't hope/ On this side of the grave,
But then, once in a life-time/ The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up, / And hope and history rhyme.

The Cure of Troy,
Seamus Heaney, Nobel Laureate for Literature, 1995

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In this paper I would like to recognize the Mediterranean as a space worthy of attention. Our focus, needless to say, is not only, in the manner of Braudel (1992), on the Mediterranean as a geographical theatre, where human dramas have unfolded over millennia “from the northern limit of the olive tree to the northern limit of the palm tree”. Rather, our focus is on the Mediterranean as a ‘social imaginary’, in the manner of Franco Cassano’s brilliant *Il Pensiero Meridiano* (2007), a book and an author that recognise that creative and symbolic dimension of the social world through which we, as human beings, create ways of living together and of representing our collective life.

As several authors have been pointing out - among them Predrag Matvejevič, (1992) who wrote one of the most moving testament to the Mediterranean on the eve of the 21st century, but also Ian Chambers (2008) - here is one of the ‘in-between’ places where the global North meets the global South in the new ‘space of flows’. This is one of the ‘rims’ (Cowen, 1998) - for there are other ‘medi-terras’ - which provide us with a lens through which we can refract experiences, helping us think through the complexities of our lives in new, provocative, perhaps even startling ways. A focus on our Mediterranean - which, by definition, requires some sort of ‘crossing’, and indeed multiple crossings - is timely for educators and educational sociologists everywhere, especially if we still define our role in Socratic terms as ‘gadflies’, that is, an *assemblage* of networked individuals who ask uncomfortable questions, and who, despite all our personal limitations - intellectual, physical, but above all moral - nevertheless still strive to engage with the world as it is, in order to imagine a world as it could and should be.

A colleague of mine, Zelia Gregoriou from the University of Cyprus - a philosopher and artist with a keen interest in other sorts of crossings in our region, those of the new 'boatpeople' - captures nicely why a focus on the Mediterranean is important, today perhaps more than ever before. A few days after the Revolution that rocked Egypt on the 25th of January last year, she wrote to me saying:

Up to a week ago, the major kinds of visual images that would come to my mind of the Mediterranean would be olives and half empty, half dry, half populated Mediterranean landscapes... the colours of Matisse and the Fauves [...] and then maps of asylum seeker detention camps aligned on the coasts of the Mediterranean basin [...] Today, when I try to visualize the Mediterranean as an idea - and not as a geographical or cultural entity - what comes to my mind is Tahrir square: is it possible that today, after Empire [...] after the end of the political, the political is staged again in places which were exempted from the European cartographies of political theory? Could the Mediterranean, as an idea, symbolize the return of the political and the other of Europe (because it is already 'other' within, in a way that Europe will never be, cannot be)? What is the place of education in this reclaim of the public sphere as a site for transformation, contestation, revolt, hope?

Deep insights by this philosopher/artist - and perhaps it says much about our discipline that, at least as far as I know, there are so many fewer sociologists than philosophers who are also artists - deep insights and prophetic words, then, seeing that, as I write these words, the BBC has announced that the leaders of the popular protests in Wall Street cite Tahrir Square as their inspiration.

What I'd like to reflect on in this paper is my own journey through this changing, forgotten or oft-misrepresented Mediterranean landscape - what is, in fact nothing less than a unique 'ideoscape' where the global and the local intersect so that social practices, such as education, are negotiated, contested and transformed. In another context, at another Mediterranean education conference organised by the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education (MESCE) held in my birthplace, the island of Malta (Borg, Mayo & Sultana, 2009), I shared with participants details of my own personal odyssey, and the

painful emancipation - never truly or fully accomplished - from a mind-set steeped in colonial hegemony - the 'colonised mind' that Paulo Freire writes so forcefully about - in order to find a voice that speaks of, and to, our own realities in the 'semi-periphery', as the Portuguese social theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to it (Sultana, 2009).

I revisit and push forward that narrative in order to highlight the ways in which the Mediterranean has been for me, during the past two decades, an education in politics, and in hope. I will here focus on my academic efforts as a sociologist and comparativist in education, first outlining some of the work that we have been doing in the region, and then showing how this work profoundly challenges epistemological and political convictions, and opens up new spaces and opportunities for thinking and being. My claim is that it is precisely the atonal, ultimately dissonant character of our region that holds out an emancipatory pedagogic promise, disrupting as it does the global and predatory effort to impose a unitary discourse that disciplines, and that has even arrogantly and foolishly claimed the end of history.

Let me first start with some reflections on my scholarly engagement with and in the region. Seventeen years ago, together with the support of colleagues from the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta, and in collaboration with, among others, the Community of Mediterranean Universities based - based, coincidentally, in Bari - we established an extensive network of educational researchers from all over the region. Different members of this network met annually at small, intimate conferences in Malta, Florence, Cyprus and elsewhere, where we focused on such issues as educational innovation, teacher education, science education, power and education, higher education each bringing the experiences of his or her own country, and sharing them in intensive debating sessions that increased our knowledge of each other and provided us with new opportunities for understanding how our respective education systems were marked, for instance, by shared Mediterranean colonial and post- or neo-colonial histories, by the nature of the relations between state, religious power and formal schooling, by cultural traditions that shaped gender boundaries and life-chances in particular ways, and so on. In ways that were initially intuitive rather than carefully articulated in philosophical, sociological or other terms, we strove, as a group, to develop our understanding of

education and its myriad intersections with power as these play themselves out in our region, situated and grounded in structural and cultural specificities that would enable us to generate fresh analytical insights, rather than remain captivated by the theoretical lenses that had been developed in, and legitimated by, other knowledge interests elsewhere. The title of a recent volume edited by de Sousa Santos (2007), *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, would have nicely captured our early efforts.

Different members of this same network also supported the launch of an international journal with a regional focus, the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*. Now in its 17th year of publication, the journal has established itself as a unique venue for scholarship reporting on educational issues in the region, and promoting analysis of a range of issues and problematics. We have recently reached out to more academic communities by turning it into an open-access journal on line, particularly as over the years we noticed that those who we most want to engage in our region are the ones with the least resources to subscribe. Special issues, which are also published in book format, are currently in preparation in such areas as private tutoring and its implications for learning and equity, the representation of teachers and educators in the literature of the Mediterranean, the politics of Mediterranean art and education, the social construction of childhood and education in our region, and a volume on Dewey, democracy and education in the Mediterranean. We also offer a Masters degree focusing on comparative education in the Mediterranean - to our knowledge, the first Masters of its kind.

Over the years, too, the Centre's experience in working in the region was tapped by such organisations as UNICEF, UNESCO and by agencies of the European Commission. I myself have been privileged to carry out qualitative research that has taken me to Albania, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon and Morocco. Some of these studies have a single country focus. Others - like the recent study of career guidance across ten countries and territories in the MEDA region (Sultana & Watts, 2007, 2008), and to which I will refer in greater detail later in my paper - are comparative in scope. Most involved writing case-studies of educational innovation, which served partly as evaluations, partly as testimonies to education success stories in the region. As I have argued elsewhere, we need these stories of success, not least as a way of

‘writing back’ to an international community that has tended to see education in the region almost exclusively in deficit terms, as illustrations of ‘underdevelopment’ (Sultana, 2001).

We have published studies on efforts to integrate low achieving students in state schools across the poorest regions in Albania (Sultana, 2006); and documented how girl-friendly community schools are managing to overcome traditional prejudice in remote, rural areas in several governorates in Egypt, where Muslim and Coptic parents now agree to keep their daughters in education rather than marrying them off on the onset of puberty (Sultana, 2008). In another study, I have described how some brave teachers and schools in Syria have dared to go against the grain, adopting critical pedagogies in order to ensure that their students experience - and develop a taste for - democracy (Sultana, 2001). In Tunisia, I have tried to capture the rise of mastery learning as a movement to guarantee access, for all children, to a minimum standard of education, even when they live in the remotest villages on the borders with Algeria, in the desert-like environment in Kef and Kasserine (Sultana, 2005). In a comparative study I have recently carried out, I looked closely at the education policy implementation process in Albania, Kosovo and Turkey, in an attempt to understand how reforms change schools, and more importantly, how schools change reforms (Sultana, 2008).

The place I have gone to again and again remains Palestine - a country that I always approach with hope, but from which I increasingly depart with a heavy heart if not despair, as I see people walled in, communities fragmented, and human rights trampled underfoot with impunity. In Palestine I documented the setting up of a most impressive Education Management Information System, meant to support the efficient implementation of an ambitious and sound education plan as well as a new ‘national’ curriculum - not an easy task in one of the few territories in the world where communities live in areas that are not contiguous to each other, and where separation is both inflicted and self-imposed (Sultana, 2002). In another study, I tried to capture the ingenuity of the Palestinian people in Hebron, in their effort to ensure that their children retained access to education, despite the curfews, attacks on schools, and mobility restrictions imposed by Israeli forces after the second Intifada (Sultana, 2006). Later, in response to an invitation by UNESCO and UNRWA,

I met with students, teachers and parents in refugee camps in the West Bank, in Jordan and in Lebanon - including those living in the infamous Sabra and Shatila camps - in order to evaluate the quality of education that is available to Palestinians born in exile (Sultana, 2007).

All of these studies have involved field work, school and classroom observations, interviews with policy makers, teachers, students, parents and other educators - a close and personal engagement with the policies, systems and actors that constitute the key focus of this conference. All these incredibly enriching, but also deeply moving and troubling human experiences have had an especially formative influence on me, shaping my perceptions of the educational challenges in the region, as well as of the resources that the region has in meeting such challenges. Key among these resources, in my view, are educators, who often remain unacknowledged and invisible, given the global politics in the production and circulation of knowledge. This is precisely why I have recently interviewed twenty critical educators from each country or territory in Southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, asking them to speak to the global village, and to share with us their experience of promoting critical democracy in countries which in many cases, until literally 'yesterday', have been under despotic or near-totalitarian regimes. These interviews have featured as a special issue of our journal, and have just been published in book format by Sense for international distribution (Sultana, 2011). These twenty men and women are 'prominent' in that they 'stand out' for their critical intellectual engagement in pushing the boundaries of knowledge of educational dynamics, in working in and through education to establish more democratic and more equitable structures and practices, and, perhaps a rarity in our region given that not only fortunes but also lives are often at stake, in critically speaking truth to power.

Let me dwell a little bit longer on this project. For these twenty educators' narratives are more than merely valuable in 'academic' terms: they are the lifestories - the 'bio-academic narratives', as I refer to them - of a group of individuals who, formed and shaped as they have been by their experiences in their country of birth and in the region, have not only acknowledged the weaknesses and limitations of schooling and education more generally as they have lived them, but have also struggled to devise personal and professional

responses to those challenges, moving beyond critique to praxis. Some occupy, or have occupied, positions of responsibility, such as presidents of a university, or deans of faculties, directors of research centres or education programme coordinators of major regional and international organisations. Others have been actively engaged in community-based education initiatives, promoting access to learning to groups that have hitherto been excluded and even forgotten by the powers that be. All have, in one way or another, striven hard to draw on theoretical perspectives from a range of disciplines - and especially from the social sciences - in order to articulate deeper understandings of the interaction between education and society, in ways that challenge power and try to open up spaces for more democratic and equitable forms of life. Many of our interviewees lived through keen struggles for freedom from colonial rule, and from home-grown despots that critiqued foreign oppression only to reproduce indigenous versions thereof in the wake of independence. Some remained 'at home' living the discomfort that is common among critical intellectuals who never really feel 'at home', never really 'belong'. Others took flight, but still look back at their native countries with distressed but still hopeful eyes, hankering as they do for social relations that are more humane, less exploitative, and less marked by inequity and injustice. Indeed, such desires appear particularly salient and arresting given the developments that we have witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria - developments that remind us, once again, that people's aspirations for freedom and self-determination cannot be extinguished, and that authoritarianism, in all its forms, ultimately sows the seeds of its own destruction though history also reminds us that, as the Polish saying wryly remarks, when people pull down the statue of 'the great', they tend to leave the pedestal - intimating, of course, that the task of emancipation is never complete, and that the educator's job is never done.

The bio-academic narratives of these educators - the milestones in their lives as they grew up in a world that was as exciting as it was threatening, in which they often felt they could not 'fit', and from which they sometimes felt obliged to flee, and yet to which they retained a loyalty and commitment, and to which they ultimately and painfully return, again and again - these stories are important narratives that deserve to be told. For here are testimonies of individuals trying to make sense of the world around them - to 'read the world',

as Freire - the most often cited educator in these interviews - would say. We see, above all, the efforts of individuals trying to lead a life that lives up to ideals that can be expressed and achieved through education.

These educators tell us much about the schools in which they grew up, and about the achievements and failings of the education systems that developed in their countries over the past decades. They tell us about the key challenges confronting education in different Mediterranean countries, and the region more generally. As we read through these interviews, we witness seasoned thinkers and doers drawing dexterously and skilfully on a range of theoretical frameworks in order to peel layer after layer of social realities that assume a common sense quality about them, to show how power operates in ways that distort the real meaning of education, and which subverts education's mission of ensuring that every single person is accorded the conceptual and other tools to live a life that is marked by freedom and dignity.

We also learn much about some of the most promising initiatives, as well as some of the remaining, intractable problematics that bedevil the different education systems that, geographically, politically and culturally border on the Mediterranean. But perhaps most importantly, my intention in interviewing these critical educators was not only to be informed but also to be inspired, in the process of coming up close and personal with scholars from our region, who are engaged not only in a search for knowledge, but also for 'being'. For these interviews bear witness to genuine efforts on the part of individuals who have striven to live up to the ideal of active citizenry, where the identities of scholar, educator and citizen merge together in ways that recall the classical Greek term 'phronesis', a term that reminds us that 'understanding' carries with it a responsibility 'to be' and the challenge to act in accordance with what we now see to be the best - in terms of the most virtuous - course of action. For education has, since its ancient beginnings, been associated with the search for the 'good life', a life worth living in accordance with principles that connect with and promote the common good and therefore a far cry from the current travesty that would equate education with a private, consumer good that responds to the market-driven, possessive imperative.

In their search for 'answers', the educators we have interviewed raise several questions that can enlighten this assembly of Italian education

sociologists. Which education structures and which education systems are most appropriate for the region, and what kinds of responses should one make to the challenge of globalisation? How can we develop education practices that are responsive to economic realities, without being narrowly defined by a vocationalist ideology that panders to corporate interests at the cost of fairness and equity? How can one transform age-old pedagogies that 'normalise' authoritarianism, and reproduce in miniature undemocratic forms of life rampant in wider society? How can education be at one at the same time embedded in and 'speak to' local specificities, yet connect individuals to wider national, regional and global communities? Which language to use as a medium of instruction, given the dynamics of both centrifugal and centripetal forces in today's complex world? In which ways can we integrate the new technologies in our pedagogies, without falling into the trap that would confuse means with ends, and gadgetry with knowledge, wisdom, and uprightness? How can we provide an educational experience that is meaningful, relevant, and useful to groups that are differentially located in socio-geographical spaces, yet ensure that differential provision does not sell any group short? To what extent can the deeply-felt religious sentiments of a group be permitted to define what counts as education in a free society, and how can one arbitrate justly and wisely among competing groups and claims in order to develop an educational system that is inclusive of difference? How can one resist, contest, and offer alternatives to the fundamentalist, predatory orthodoxy of neo-liberalist and managerialist forms of education, when these have become so globally entrenched, and so terrifyingly hegemonic? What does one do, and how can one act nobly and with honour, in the face of unjust practices, without engaging with violence that risks stripping us of that very humanity that we wish to defend? In which ways can education help citizens move beyond a blind identification with clan, canton or country, in order to recognise and practice solidarity with a species - and a world - in danger, while still remaining rooted in an identity which is, at one and the same time, specific and universal?

These and a myriad other thorny questions run through the interviews with leading educators from our region, where respondents struggle to illuminate the issues by drawing on their personal and political struggles as scholars and

citizens. Here then is an attempt to go beyond the quest for information and the search for knowledge to the deeper pursuit of wisdom that is the true end/beginning of an authentic education, through narratives that inspire and stimulate action, proving to be a spur to virtue.

In these ways, therefore - that is, through my field work and scholarly activity in the region, and through my engagement with exemplary educators such as the ones I interviewed for our recent volume - the Mediterranean has been a 'school' for me, in deeply personal, political and intellectual ways. The choice of the title for my address - 'Learning from the Mediterranean' - is therefore not merely an attempt to find a catchy title, but has, well and truly, become the leitmotif of my academic life. Allow me to consider in some more detail and depth the nature of this learning, and its intersections with political, epistemological, and even ontological dimensions that I attempt to capture in the second part of the title of this paper. I do this by reflecting on my experience in carrying out research in eight Arab states on the transition between school and work, and specifically on the role of career guidance in supporting those transitions. This is a significant area of research, especially if we recall that the so-called 'Arab spring' riots were triggered in Tunisia by an unemployed graduate, Mohamed Bouazizi, who, having gone through all the hoops and hurdles of a competitive education system that promised meritocracy, immolated himself in protest at his loss of human dignity, thus physically, viscerally, dramatically and horrifically acting out and experiencing the fate that hundreds of thousands of other graduates in the region enact daily and metaphorically. What matters here is not the substantive focus on career guidance - which, important though it might be in terms of the sociological analyses it can generate, is probably peripheral to the academic and research interests of many if not most of you. What does matter is the broader issues that our consideration of this area provokes, in relation to the theme of this conference, and of this paper.

The research that I have been involved in, which also involves policy-oriented work, has raised a number of very challenging issues for me. I have, for instance, reflected at some length in another context on the political implications of working on behalf of the European Commission and UN agencies in the Arab states, wondering about the extent to which their agendas

participate in the new circuits of imperialism that have constituted themselves in the post-Cold War era. I have also thought long and hard on the complexities of policy lending and policy borrowing, even if the policy learning that I have witnessed is not brazenly enmeshed in ‘conditionalities’, i.e. agendas that, as if often the case with the World Bank, for instance, require countries to steer their policies in particular directions if they want to benefit from technical or financial support.

The reflection I would like to pursue here relates to the epistemological, ontological, and necessarily and inevitably political complexities that one gets caught up in when one works with the ‘Other’, be it in the Mediterranean or elsewhere. In the course of my research, meeting as I did with policy-makers, educators, NGO representatives, and students, an uncomfortable question that kept hounding me was: What *on earth* are we trying to do here? When promoting a social practice such as education or career guidance, are we pushing a way of ‘doing’ and, more importantly, ‘of being’, that has little if any cultural and social anchorage, particularly among the poorer sections of the population which, incidentally, make up the vast majority in both the urban and rural areas? To what extent is career guidance at all meaningful - or appropriate - in environments where labour markets are dramatically segmented into a small, regulated sector and a large, informal even underground sector where regulation is minimal, if it exists at all? How do notions of career guidance, deeply rooted in particular understandings of labour market theories and models, connect with situations where workers find employment on the strength of who they know, with family, political and religious networks being the main credential that has currency and force?

In such contexts, the very notion of ‘choosing a career pathway’ is not just a luxury, but a cruel taunt for people whose main concern is to get some food on the table for that day. Has the shoeshine boy ever thought of his occupation as a ‘career’ or a ‘calling’ - in the way we understand such words to mean - and has he ever thought of ever doing something different, or that doing something different was at all an imaginable option? What does career guidance mean to a girl in a small hamlet in Bani Sueif, Sohaag or Fayyoun, who grows up in what, from our worldview, would epitomise a conservative Muslim or Christian Copt environment, one which defines her future very narrowly in

gender typified ways? Centuries of socialisation into specific male and female roles render any challenge to the gendered division of labour not only problematic, but highly disruptive of intricately and tightly connected social practices that extend beyond the world of work into the intimacies of family life, and one's ethical convictions as to what is appropriate and what is '*haram*' forbidden. How does one engage young people and adults in a discussion about choice, options, opportunities, self-determination when, in many cases, and especially in relation to the deprived social classes, life is generally experienced as a stream whose course has been set by others whether that course-setting is engineered by God, nature, or powerful others such a father or the elder of the clan?

Key building blocks of the career guidance 'gospel' - and indeed of much of what in the 'West' we have learnt to name 'education' - include individualism, self-determination, the centrality of work in the project of self-construction, autonomy in the face of authority, priority to self-actualisation, the striving to define and realise a life project. One and all seem somewhat out of phase with reality in, say, the conflict-ridden occupied Palestinian territories where the largest group of non-citizens in the world finds access to options and opportunities severely restricted by limited mobility and rights. How does our almost 'missionary' zeal in proclaiming the western liberal dream of the self as primordial, and democracy as both a manifestation of that self, and a context for its realisation, translate into contexts such as the ones we encounter in Egypt, in Palestine, and in several parts of the developing world generally, and our region specifically?

One answer to such questions and challenges is that it is *precisely* through career guidance - as through education and other concatenated social practices that form part of the master-narrative of the Enlightenment - that we can support a country's development project in responsible ways - particularly if the model of career guidance (and education) that we employ is firmly embedded in emancipatory impulses, i.e. when it strives to ensure freedom from external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, and when it tries to realise an autonomous will, one generally shaped by the dictates of 'universal reason' or 'self-interest', and hence unhindered by the burdens of tradition or a transcendental will. Indeed, those who invite us, as well as those we work with

in the field, generally share a view of guidance (and of education) that is enabling, in terms of opening up options and opportunities for the economy and the individual alike.

So perhaps what we are doing when we are in places like Palestine and Egypt is to plant a seed that, in time, will grow deeper roots into a society, consolidating efforts to re-organise their economy, their labour markets, their cultures and traditions so as to make them more compatible with a western-type economy and polity. In other words, career guidance - from the perspective of the administrative élite becomes one facet of the development agenda, encapsulating values and worldviews that reproduce, in miniature, the secular liberal model that, presumably, developing countries aspire to copy.

But is western-type democracy and are free market economies the only form of life that can be envisaged, which all human societies aspire to and will eventually, and in the fullness of time, ineluctably metamorphose into? This would not explain the contestatory movements we see across the planet, and the vigorous, even military attempts by the west to appease, co-opt and ultimately control those who will not buy into the liberal narrative. What I have witnessed in my work in the region is the desire to subject to critical scrutiny our liberal notions of justice, autonomy, tolerance, individual rights and so on, from the standpoint of the majority tradition/s – Islam -. Here, the pressing project is not to consider how, in this case Muslims, can become better liberals, but rather, how the world can be lived differently, in the face of the homogenising, globalising force of modernity that will brook no arguments for an alternative vision. From the point of view of devout Muslims - as it is for many others - it is modernity and its Siamese twin, economic liberalism, that represent the fundamentalist threat, given their universalising, even predatory logic.

We are so enmeshed in our own life worlds that it becomes almost impossible to make the leap of imagination that is required to cross our 'horizons of prejudice'. As a person whose work has entailed constantly crossing boundaries in our region, the greatest challenge has been to consider what a practice might mean not in relation to the system of values and related practices with which I am so familiar, but rather in relation to that of the country hosting me. This entails a process of 'making the familiar strange',

something that anthropology, despite its origins in colony and empire, is particularly adept at doing.

In my effort to problematise my own research in the region, I have found the work of the Pakistani anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) particularly useful - not in resolving the issues we are discussing and will be discussing at this conference, but in ensuring that we render them their complexity. Between 1995 and 1997, Mahmood carried out ethnographic work among three classes of women who attended three different mosques in Cairo. Despite their diverse social locations, all three groups were part of a grassroots pietist movement, another manifestation of the Islamic revival which, while focusing on ethics rather than on radical activism that seeks to seize or transform the state, nevertheless has a strong political dimension to it. What Mahmood does brilliantly and bravely in her acclaimed book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, is to understand the meanings that the women she interacts with give to their actions, resisting the facile ploy of filtering them through the secular-liberal principles that are usually employed when the west attempts to hold Islamist movements to account.

Needless to say, such attempts at 'going native' are not only doomed, given the sheer epistemic impossibility of total empathy with other lifeworlds, but also dangerous, in that, as she herself states, "to render unfamiliar lifeworlds into conceptual or communicable forms is to domesticate that which exceeds hegemonic protocols of intelligibility" (p. 199). Having said that, however, Mahmood's account does provide us with a sensitive portrayal of women who, though from diverse social class backgrounds, nevertheless opt to adhere to the patriarchal core of the movement they belong to, effectively decentring and displacing key assumptions within liberal and feminist theory about freedom, agency, authority and the human subject. In other words, these women consider the self not as referencing a pre-existing identity whose potentiality needs to be freed from the social constraints of tradition which would be the redemptive narrative encouraged by liberal feminist thought, and the task of career guidance conceived as an emancipatory project. Rather, Mahmood shows how, for these women, the 'self' and the body are schooled into reproducing such core Muslim values as modesty, shyness, diffidence, sincerity, fear and awe, as well as *sabr* or forbearance, in a lifelong process of ethical formation, thus

learning how to be pious in their everyday lives not just through wearing the veil, but through other forms of bodily enactments of piety.

The study, though obviously not written with formal education or career guidance in mind, has major implications for those of us grappling with alternative visions for what we do. For, for the women in the mosque movement, their life project is neither to find themselves nor to express themselves through work. Rather, it is to construct a virtuous self through performative behaviour that shapes inward disposition. Here, action does not result from natural feelings but creates them, and it is “through repeated bodily acts that one trains one’s memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 157). What Mahmood tries to capture, therefore, is how, from within the lifeworld of the women in the mosque movement, the question of individual freedom is rethought in ways where “the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be so easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for the self to achieve its potentiality” (p. 149).

The contrast in the approach to the self is nicely caught in the corresponding contrast between two women that Mahmood introduces us to in her narrative. Both Sana and Nadia are married and cannot bear children, a fact that causes them much personal suffering. Sana faces up to this pain and disappointment by privileging a strong personality and self-empowerment through self-esteem, a psychological capacity that, in her view, enables one to pursue self-directed choices and actions unhindered by other people’s opinions. She is not interested in virtuous patience and fortitude, such as that demonstrated by Ayyub - the equivalent of the biblical Job - whose *bravura* lay not in his ability to rise above the pain, but rather in the manner in which he *lived* his pain. “Where does *sabr* get you?” Sana asks Mahmood. “Instead of helping you to improve your situation, it just leads you to accept it as fate passively” (p. 172). Here, then, is a woman after our own hearts, resisting destiny, acting as a ‘free agent’, defining her own projects in line with her own desires, values, and goals, and not those of others.

Nadia, on the other hand, values *sabr*, not because it alleviates her suffering, but because it is a quality that helps her live her pain in a virtuous way. This is

not defeatism or fatalism in the grips of the inertia of tradition, as inscribed in the meanings attributed to it by Sana, where virtues such as humility, modesty, and shyness “have lost their value in the liberal imagination and are considered emblematic of passivity and inaction, especially if they don’t uphold the autonomy of the individual” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 174). Rather, *sabr*, in the sense described by Nadia, does not mark a reluctance to act, but is “integral to a constructive project: it is a site of considerable investment, struggle and achievement” (p. 174).

Mahmood’s work is therefore helpful in reiterating and underscoring the key point that I have tried to communicate in my address, namely that it is precisely the polyphonic quality of our region - a quality that is increasingly present not only across but within nation states - that is the school which challenges us at the core of our being. In our travels and work across the region, in our encounters with the ‘Other’, and in the process of culturally translating other lifeworlds, our own certainty about how the world should proceed cannot remain stable. Needless to say, this lesson is not a prerogative of our region what we have captured here are just a few voices from the South. But, as de Sousa Santos argues, it is by listening to the South, as a metaphor with which to refer to all those population groups excluded from the benefits of neoliberal globalisation, regardless of their geographical location, that we have the possibility of discovering the terrain for the reconstruction of social theory, which is nothing less than the reconstruction of social emancipation. It is by listening to this metaphorical South that we can hope to reconstruct a new critical theory, rooted in alternative knowledges, histories and experiences. We are not here dismissing the potential utility of the knowledge and epistemologies that many of us have been brought up in, despite the fact that these epistemological traditions ran alongside the military and financial missions of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Rather, what we are suggesting is that different arguments, knowledges and perspectives - including indigenous and localised knowledges - can come into contact with one another in a process that can lead to new forms of ‘emancipatory knowledge’. Where this new ‘ecology of knowledges’ will lead to exactly is uncertain. But it is precisely this uncertainty that is the quintessence of the Mediterranean experience, whereby experience signifies at one and the same time a crossing, a

journey, and an ordeal. May our encounter with the Mediterranean, in all the meanings that I have explored above, be one such crossing, stimulating our research imagination, and opening up new spaces of dialogue around ‘other educations’ and ‘education otherwise’.

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