

PRECARIOUSNESS AND THE ERASURE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

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When Malta joined the Euro zone on January 1, 2008, the billboard shown here was all over the place - and nobody found cause to complain. An important general election was in the air, and the ruling party was keen to show that the historic move would benefit the Maltese Islands greatly. The text in Maltese reads, “*Malta fil-qalba ta’ l-Ewropa*,” and the English version, “Malta in the heart of Europe,” appeared in newspapers and magazines.



The billboard makes at least two significant statements: first, that entry into the Euro zone placed Malta, which is clearly on the margins of Europe, in the heart of the continent. This anomaly between political claim and geographical fact is perhaps best typified by the failure of the metaphorical ripples made by the Maltese Islands to get anywhere near the throbbing heart of Europe. It is almost as if the Maltese ripples, which just about manage to leave their mark on Sicily, a couple of other islands, and southern Italy, are being completely ignored by the continent.

The second statement is that Malta's relocation in the heart of Europe means the erasure of the Mediterranean. When I look at a map of the world, I search for the Mediterranean and then locate our Islands at the heart of it - presumably many Maltese do the same. But this billboard reshapes our geographical and cultural imaginary. Now it is no longer a matter of locating the Mediterranean to find Malta in the centre of it, but rather that of locating Europe to spot Malta at the edge, which the billboard actually claims to be the heart, of the continent. Now the obvious objection to this unkind reading of the billboard is that it is all metaphorical: Malta may be at the geographical edge, and no map can deny this, but it is also, as a member of the EU's Euro zone, at the political and economic centre of Europe, “where are all the big decisions are taken,” as our politicians often remind us. The objection to this objection is that the erasure of North Africa (read “Mediterranean,” but more on this later), even though the northern parts of Tunisia and Algeria, and perhaps even a tip of Morocco, lie further north than Malta, is not just a metaphorical ploy but a significant omission. Being at the heart of Europe, with the Maltese emblems on its coins circulating freely in Paris, Brussels and Berlin, means that Malta has finally managed to erase its Mediterranean birthright. This geographical and cultural legacy is only acknowledged when it comes to selling Malta as a Mediterranean destination for tourists. In that case Malta returns to the heart of the Mediterranean, as in the advert promoting the iconic Maltese soft drink Kinnie in *Skylife*. *The In-flight magazine of Airmalta* (March 2008) as “The Taste of the Mediterranean. Naturally!”



The northern part of the map, all draped in euro coins and notes, is an indistinct mass of land that includes countries which are not in the Euro zone or even in the EU. This is hardly precise, of course, but understandable, given the focus and message of the design. However, I can't see why the southern Mediterranean was wiped out. Of course it is not part of Europe, but that does not justify replacing land with sea and changing the shape of the Mediterranean Sea. Wasn't the Mediterranean meant to be the birthplace of Europe?

There were certainly other ways of understanding and celebrating Malta's triumphant entry into the Euro zone. The billboard could have highlighted Malta's potentially unique role in the EU: "*L-Ewro fil-qalba tal-Mediterran*" (The Euro in the heart of the Mediterranean). But the fact is that for many Maltese, despite the fact that all human activity on the Islands "has been determined by the sea that surrounds them,"¹ Malta lies not between Europe and Africa, but rather between Europe and the Mediterranean, because the Mediterranean is Africa, with its problems and backwardness; the Maltese look towards the North, towards Europe, and want to erase the South from their mental map.²

In a survey carried out by sociologist Prof. Anthony M. Abela in 1995, the Maltese were asked which of the following they felt most part of: their village or town, their district, Malta, the countries of the Mediterranean, Europe, the Western countries and the world. The results were then compared to the results of a similar survey held in Spain. While 22% of the Spaniards felt that they were citizens of the Mediterranean, only 2% of the Maltese identified themselves with the Mediterranean. Moreover, 6% of the Maltese and 2% of the Spaniards thought of themselves as citizens of Europe. According to the survey, most Maltese people, 65% of them, see themselves primarily as citizens of their country. Perhaps it is a (quite understandable) symptom of insularity.

In 2001, Prof. Abela published the results of research he carried out in 1999.³ "In Malta," he wrote, "younger respondents," that is people between the age of 18 and 34, "have a sense of belonging first to their locality or town, followed by their country and region. Their next belonging is to Europe, followed by the Mediterranean and least of all to the world as a whole." Most respondents identified mostly with their town or locality, their region within Malta, or their country itself, but they combined a predominantly local affinity with a global, foremost European, sense of belonging. When asked, "Which of these geographical groups would you say you belong to first of all?" 3% of the respondents replied Europe and 5% replied the

¹ Laurence E. Attard, *Beyond Our Shores. A Panorama of Maltese Migration* (Malta: PEG, 2007) 15.
² See also Adrian Grima, "Being Mediterranean is a Decision You Make. Malta, the Mediterranean and the EU," 2003. www.adriangrima.com.
³ Anthony M. Abela, *Youth Participation in Voluntary Organizations in Malta: A Comparative Analysis of European Values Studies* (Malta: Parliamentary Secretariat, Ministry of Education, 2001).

Mediterranean. But when it came to their second choice, 17% chose Europe and only 6% chose the Mediterranean.

Abela found that next to their local identity, youth members of associations, especially voluntary workers, were more likely to have a sense of European belonging than their non-involved counterparts. The most significant difference over European sense of belonging, however, was observed for materialist and postmaterialist younger respondents. Forty-five percent of postmaterialists, that is respondents who are more highly educated, more articulate and politically more active than materialists, in contrast to fifteen percent materialists have a sense of European belonging. Conversely, less than forty percent postmaterialists compared to over seventy percent materialists felt no sense of European belonging. "These findings suggest that postmaterialism is one of the most important predictors of European belonging and identity."

The generally unwelcome phenomenon of immigration in Malta has also had a negative impact on the idea of the Mediterranean, because it is Malta's geographical position in the centre of the Sea that exposes it to these waves of immigrants. According to the Caritas report on *Poverty in Malta* for 1998,⁴ years before the immigration issue came to a head with a string of racist arson attacks in 2006, a good number of Maltese respondents "considered the presence of immigrants and refugees in the neighbourhoods as a threat to their security. It somehow down-classed their neighbourhoods and brought abnormality into their otherwise normal lives." The *Poverty in Malta* report for 1996 linked immigration to the physical and relational types of poverty.⁵ "For Malta, it was a new form of poverty introduced by the recent influx of refugees from Iraq and ex-Yugoslavia and immigrants from Africa." For immigrants, it took the shape of a diffuse sense of precariousness, as they waited for visas to other countries or for work permits for Malta. The report talked about "the indifference, prejudice and silent hostility that the local population showed in their regard." This negative attitude caused stress, frustration, ill health, weak communication and language skills, and solitude. The immigrants faced "old forms of poverty like inadequate housing, work problems and economic stress." The report noted that many non-Europeans requested refugee status "in order to acquire financial assistance. Many immigrants had large families. They often were employed illegally," and, it goes without saying, were savagely underpaid.

The arrival of drifting boatloads of immigrants heading for Italy over the past ten years or so has caught Malta and the Maltese unawares. From lands of emigration, the Maltese Islands suddenly found themselves receiving refugees and other immigrants themselves. Protest marches against "illegal immigration" in the main streets of Valletta in 2005 and 2006 drew hundreds, possibly thousands of people, and fanned racist discourse. The Mediterranean was inevitably, if not openly, associated with these bad feelings, as in the common belief that there are millions of Africans waiting to cross the Mediterranean and invade Europe, presumably also the Maltese Islands.⁶

According to an EU report published in 2007,⁷ almost three-quarters of EU citizens believe that people with a different background (ethnic, religious or national) enrich the cultural life of their country. The highest levels of disagreement with this assumption were found in Malta, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania. However, even in these countries, more than half of the citizens think that people with different cultural backgrounds (ranging from 52% to 57%) do bring benefits to everyday life. The report found that a well articulated minority in a number of countries (mostly in the old member countries) have a very outspoken view on the potential benefits of the year dedicated to intercultural dialogue. A totally sceptic viewpoint (i.e. those not interested at all) was provided by 28% of UK respondents; 24% of the Maltese; 22% of the Swedes and 21% of the Dutch.

⁴ Quoted in Adrian Grima, "Reopening the Fortress" (2000) on www.adriangrima.com. Originally published in *The Sunday Times* of Malta in January 2000.

⁵ Quoted in Grima, "Reopening the Fortress."

⁶ See also Adrian Grima, "Hidden Away from the Public Eye - Irregular Immigration and the Press," Babelmed, 2005. <http://www.babelmed.net/index.php?c=153&m=&k=&l=en>.

⁷ *Intercultural Dialogue in Europe*, Flash Eurobarometer 217. Published by *The Gallup Organization*, Hungary, upon the request of DG Education and Culture of the European Commission. December 2007.

A Precarious Life

Fernand Braudel's description of life in the Mediterranean, especially on the islands, as precarious seems to partly justify the unfavourable image of the region in Maltese minds. Although it is true that the Sea in the Maltese psyche, to use an uncomfortable cliché, must be associated with the arrival of much-needed provisions, it is also synonymous with isolation, tempests and the loss of human lives, and the unwelcome arrival of cruel invaders and thieves. "A precarious, restricted, and threatened life, such was the lot of the islands, their domestic life at any rate."⁸ According to Braudel, neither the lands nor the waters of the Mediterranean waters are particularly productive. The much vaunted *frutti di mare* are only moderately abundant, its fisheries provide only a modest yield.⁹ The islands faced the great problem, never or only partly solved, of how to live off their own resources, off the soil, the orchards, the flocks, and if that was not possible, to look outwards. All the islands, with a few exceptions (Sicily in particular) were lands of hunger. In the sixteenth century, those that suffered most were the Venetian islands in the Levant, Corfu, Crete and Cyprus,¹⁰ but food was short on Malta too. "In spite of the many privileges permitting the island to import wheat from both Sicily and France, Malta was always in difficulties, so much so that in the summer the galleys of the Knights would stop grain ships coming from the Sicilian *caricatori*, exactly like the corsairs of Tripoli."¹¹

To add insult to injury, foreign rulers imposed the cultivation of cash crops on many Mediterranean islands. Grown for export only, these crops regularly threatened the equilibrium of the islands' economy.¹² They also made the islands more dependent on the importation of food and other necessities from other lands. On the other hand, the arrival of these provisions was subject to the whims of the weather and the vessels that sailed the seas ready to grab whatever they could lay their hands on. The periodical occurrence of heavy mortality in the second half of eighteenth century Malta prompts Ciappara to think that "famine must have been prevalent." In 1783, for instance, the cotton-crop failed and a grievous hunger afflicted the island from August till the end of that year.¹³

This precariousness and insecurity affected the people of the Mediterranean profoundly. Even the labyrinthine quality of the typical Mediterranean village layouts seems to reflect this precariousness and quest for security. In his work on Mediterranean vernacular architecture, Pierre Micallef draws attention to the sense of closure and hiding in the typical Maltese village. The small houses are somehow hidden away inside the quiet alleys. The small openings, originally meant to keep out the blazing sun and the pirates who regularly hit the island, give the impression that the village dwellers find much of the security they lack in their own confined, private spaces. The narrow and curving village streets, and introvertedly designed dwelling units reflect a people's need to defend itself, to shield itself from outside threats.¹⁴

Because of the lack of resources, especially on the islands, the Mediterranean region has had to live with the burden of its dependence on outside help. But in the 20th century, this dependence on outside resources also created a defensive attitude that is depicted, amongst others, by Dun Karm Psaila's poem "Lid-Dielja," in which he encourages his compatriots to draw their resources from within, and to refuse what reaches the shores of their islands from without.¹⁵

Another very important issue in the region and how it is perceived by the Mediterraneans themselves and by outsiders is that of environmental degradation and most notably desertification. There is also increasing awareness about the effects of global warming and climate change on the Mediterranean (and Malta). The Nationalist Party (the Maltese Christian Democrats) mentioned the effect of global warming and climate

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 1, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (London: Fontana, 1972) 154.

⁹ Braudel 138.

¹⁰ Braudel 152.

¹¹ Braudel 153.

¹² Braudel 155.

¹³ Frans Ciappara, *Marriage in Malta in the Late Eighteenth Century (1750-1800)*, (Malta: Associated News, 1988) 44.

¹⁴ Pierre Micallef, "When Space Sings: On Architecture and Music." Unpublished B. E. & A. (Hons.) dissertation, (Malta: University of Malta, 1991), 104.

¹⁵ Adrian Grima, "*Dgħajjes Qodma u Maħmuġin*" - *Dun Karm, id-Dielja u l-Barranin* (Malta: Kumitat Festi Nazzjonali, 2004).

change on the Mediterranean and Malta in its electoral manifesto for the 2008 general Elections.¹⁶ A “bleak report” on climate change and tourism published by Deutsche Bank Research in 2008 estimated that, “by 2030, the region will have a noticeable increase in the number of days with temperatures above 40 degrees C.”¹⁷ According to the highly respected Maltese ecologist and physicist Edward Mallia, there is “general scientific consensus that temperatures in the Mediterranean are already approaching the limit of what can be considered as comfortable for ‘seaside and beach holidays.’ After 1995, summers have had numerous periods with air temperatures above 35 degrees Celsius. Such conditions are bound to become increasingly uncomfortable for holiday makers on our small and crowded beaches.”¹⁸

The Mediterranean Basin’s sensitivity to human impact through pollution and resource depletion came to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century. Ecological issues in Malta were picked up passionately by post-Independence Maltese literature. In a way this concern with the frailty of the natural environment and the side effects of modernity in general, with the inevitable reduction in quality of life on the Maltese Islands, has “replaced” the pre-Independence theme of economic poverty. This literary environmentalism is also the result of a shift from a purely descriptive rendering of the physical environment of the Maltese Islands to a more critical dialectic that raises serious doubts about how the Maltese in particular and humankind in general relate to the environment.

Carmel Cassar notes that for the peoples of the Mediterranean, food was a matter of survival, not preparing “sumptuous banquets;” the Mediterranean has never been a garden of Eden. The “frugality of the Mediterranean peoples was in essence a forced choice, the consequence of habitual rationing.” Neither wheat, nor other grains like barley or corn, were always and everywhere in abundance and their supply was the perennial preoccupation of entire populations. “Recurrent crop failures, insufficiency or complete lack of staple food products gave rise to typical pathologies of malnutrition, high death rates, malaria, plague and other chronic diseases. Food shortages often led to a precarious and fragile equilibrium since food consumption often fell below nutritional requirements.”¹⁹

Braudel describes the Sahara desert as the second face of the Mediterranean. On three sides the Mediterranean touches the great chain of deserts stretching uninterrupted across the entire width of the Ancient World. He argues that Mediterranean history “has the pull of its desert pole as well as that of its European pole.”²⁰ This second face is characterized by immensity and emptiness, by poverty and destitution; it is a poor land, without water, and there are few springs, streams, plants, or trees;²¹ the situation in the “privileged cities,” like Cairo, was “always precarious.” Apart from the oases, which rarely covered a large area, people in the Sahara have only been able to survive in small groups.

Juan Mamo and the Mediterranean

The negative perception of the Mediterranean in Maltese minds comes across powerfully in Juan Mamo’s controversial novel *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930-31) (*Grandma Venut’s Children in America*). In a cheeky satirical tone, Mamo tells the story of how a group of uneducated and unemployed Maltese rural villagers emigrate to the US in order to get rich quick and return to Malta to sit on their wealth. The emigrants return to their island poorer than and as stupid as ever, only to be murdered in an absurdist denouement, ironically, by a jealous fellow villager. The novel sees the poverty and backwardness of the Maltese population in general as a result of the exploitation and lack of opportunities granted to them by the local professional elite, but it also suggests that this backwardness stems from the fact that the Maltese Islands lie in the Mediterranean, which is compared to the far more advanced societies of (northern) Europe and the USA.

¹⁶ Partit Nazzjonalista, *Iva, Flimkien Kollox Possibbli. Programm Elettorali 2008-2013* (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2008) 72.

¹⁷ Karl Schembri, “Boiling Point: How Malta’s summers will soon turn people away,” *Malta Today*, Wednesday, 16 April 2008. <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/2008/04/16/t1.html>.

¹⁸ David Darmanin, “Can Maltese tourism take the heat?” *Malta Today*, Sunday, 20 April 2008. <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/2008/04/20/n14.html>.

¹⁹ Carmel Cassar, “*The Culture of Food in the Mediterranean.*” (Malta: Mediterranean Cultural Encounters, 2007) 10.

²⁰ Braudel 171.

²¹ Braudel 174.

The first reference to the Mediterranean appears when the Maltese arrive in the USA and their unruly behaviour draws the attention of the New York police. The Police commissioner summons his detective, McHmairy, and asks him to keep an eye on these immigrants from Malta, “in the Mediterranean.”²² It sounds like an innocent geographical note, but subsequent references suggest otherwise. In the same chapter, the commissioner tells his detective that New York has already had to face a lot of problems of crime, especially “brigandage,” perpetrated by Albanians, Yugoslavs and other people from the “Eastern Mediterranean.”²³

In a chapter, “*Il-Mostru-Fatat*” (the monster-ghost), about how the superstitious Maltese emigrants see ghosts and demons where there are only shadows and this causes a great commotion in the middle of the night, the narrator notes that the New York police officers who were present “realized that this matter” was a case of “Mediterranean chaos.”²⁴ A few paragraphs further down, at the end of the chapter (each of which is a bit like a scene from a play), the narrator highlights the “fanatism and superstition” of the Maltese. When he refers to the police officers, he also says that each one of them was as intellectually able as the very best Maltese lawyers, which is Mamo’s way of highlighting the vast superiority of the Americans over the Maltese.

The identification of the Maltese with the Mediterranean and talk of “Mediterranean chaos” means that for Mamo this is a region of unruliness, backwardness, intellectual inferiority, superstition and fanatism, prejudices that are still present in many contemporary Maltese representations of the region and have deep roots in colonial representations that have been adopted by the colonized. Pre-Independence Maltese literature sets the Maltese and the “outsider” (“*il-barrani*”) against each other, idealizing the locals and demonizing the “other” in order to cultivate the Maltese national imaginary. According to Bertu Armaġużarma’s mother, “Foreign lands are full of flying freemasons.” That’s what her mother told her.²⁵ Mamo attacks this binary opposition by poking fun at his Maltese characters, calling Malta, among other things, “the land of swearing and holiness” and identifying the Maltese with a host of other sins;²⁶ he also pokes fun at his foreign characters, like the naïve McHmairy and the worthless Sicilian agitator Luretu Nullo. But he reserves his biting sarcasm for the Maltese and the Mediterraneans, including someone like Nullo. In another comic scene in which the Maltese emigrants unwittingly gate-crash a scientific debate among top American scientists, the narrator tells us that for Americans, or perhaps some Americans, “the Mediterranean is a sea of dirt, scum of the world, beetles, fleas, spiders, etc.”²⁷ It couldn’t be any more eloquent.

The social conditions on the Maltese Islands throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were poor, often verging on starvation, and this situation was generally attributed to British colonial policy.²⁸ The British looked at the occupation of Malta solely and entirely as an important fortress colony and were “indifferent towards the interests of its inhabitants.”²⁹ To the British, the island was a strategic base necessary for the domination of the Mediterranean to guard the sea-routes to India. “Few cared about the real needs of the people: education, health, and a stable economy that was not wholly dependent on the strategy of Imperial policy planned in London.”³⁰ Juan Mamo himself shared the fate of Malta’s poor throughout his life: Mamo, his wife and his nine children are said to have lived from hand to mouth. In a letter he wrote from Rome in 1922 he described himself as “one of the poorest people” of Malta.³¹ Most of the European islanders, like the Sicilians and the Maltese, who emigrated to different parts of the Mediterranean were poor and illiterate and continental Europeans like the French tended to look down upon them. Some had a criminal record too and they tried to carry on with their way of life in other parts of the Mediterranean where

²² Juann Mamo, *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (Malta: Dipartiment tat-Taghrif, Partit tal-Haddiema, 1984) 87.

²³ Mamo 88.

²⁴ Mamo 99.

²⁵ Mamo 89. “*Barra kollu mimli mażuni li jtiru.*”

²⁶ Mamo 143. “*Malta, art id-dagħa u l-qodos.*”

²⁷ Mamo 196.

²⁸ Carmel Cassar, “Everyday Life in Malta in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in Victor Mallia-Milanes, (ed.) *The British Colonial Experience 1800-1964: The Impact on Maltese Society* (Malta: Mireva, 1988) 101.

²⁹ Carmel Cassar, “Everyday Life in Malta,” 91, quoting Frenchman Frederick m. Lacroix writing in 1848.

³⁰ Lawrence E. Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration (1900-1914)* (Malta: Gulf, 1983)

17. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

³¹ Oliver Friggieri, *Gwann Mamo: Il-Kittieb tar-Riforma Soċjali* (Malta: Mid-Med Bank, 1984) 36.

their names were not publicly known.³² Charles Price estimates that in the late 1880s the number of Maltese living abroad, mainly in the Mediterranean - numbering roughly 50,000, with many in Algeria (15,000), Tunis (11,000), Egypt (7,000), Tripoli (3,000), Constantinople (3,000), and the Ionian Islands (mainly Corfu and Cephalonia, 1,500) - represented 25% of the total Maltese population.

In his foreword to *Early Maltese Emigration (1900-1914)*, written with a readership of Maltese emigrants living beyond the Middle Sea and non-Maltese people also in mind,³³ Lawrence E. Attard starts with a reference both to the Sea and to the region, precisely because he feels the need to locate his historical narrative about the Maltese in the Mediterranean region. The author presents what he perceives as the two sides of this reality: The Mediterranean is a sea associated with “sunshine and history,” with “memories of swimming and fishing, of warm beaches and clear moon-lit nights.” Fr. Attard was born in the Maltese town of Birgu in 1936 where “most of the inhabitants were able to enjoy the good things of a Mediterranean civilisation.” Then he moves on to the other, less glorious side of the story. “However the Mediterranean has also been a very unstable area of our globe and wars have often tarnished the beauty which nature has so generously bestowed upon it. During the years immediately following the Second World War the people of Birgu and of many other towns and villages used to witness a peculiar sight which had little to do with beauty or sunshine: large passenger ships leaving Maltese waters with hundreds of migrants on board.”³⁴ For Attard, like for the Americans in *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* and for many whites in the host countries, from Algeria to Australia, the Mediterranean was plagued by war and emigration, by poverty and disenchantment, something one could easily say about Europe in general and about many European countries in particular. In this sense, Attard doesn’t question the stereotyping and prejudice that so many emigrants from the region had to battle with in the host countries both within and far beyond the Mediterranean.

When they arrived in the receiving countries, immigrants from Southern Europe and the Mediterranean littoral “were particularly scrutinized,” not only because of prejudices held against Catholics and Latins in English-speaking countries at the turn of the twentieth century but also because of diseases like cholera, fever and trachoma. Attard claims that the Maltese generally enjoyed good health, but the “prevalent poverty which preceded the First World War and the primitive standards in hygiene” contributed to occasional scares of cholera and fever, and trachoma was very common. In 1911 a number of emigrants from Malta were refused entry into the USA and were left stranded on Ellis Island because their eyes were infected with trachoma: they were all sent back to Malta. This disease, which was widespread in Malta for many years, was only eradicated in the late 1940s.³⁵ Very often, migrants who carried with them official certificates which stated that they had had their eyes examined by Maltese doctors, were found to be suffering from trachoma,³⁶ and this can’t have inspired much faith in the Mediterranean Maltese among the immigration officials of the receiving countries.

In another scene in the *Nanna Venut* novel, Juan Mamo writes about one Indri Debono, a Maltese from Senglea born in 1821 to a Maltese sea-captain, who emigrated to Egypt, and became a great traveller and explorer. According to Mamo, although he was illiterate, he managed to travel to the heart of Africa among the “savages” where no Europeans had been before, “neither Livingstone, nor Stanley or even Cameron.” He spoke European, Asian and mostly African languages, which he learnt through his travels.³⁷ Like the “savages” (in Maltese “*slavaġ*,” a word which occurs also in prominent places like pre-World War II

³² Lawrence E. Attard, *The Great Exodus (1918 - 1939)* (Malta: PEG, 1989)

26. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/exodus/chapter3-4.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415200234-11BF9>

³³ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, vi.

³⁴ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, v. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

³⁵ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 3. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

³⁶ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 4. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

³⁷ Mamo 214. Mamo writes that Debono was born in Alexandria, but Charles Catania’s biography shows otherwise (*Andrea De Bono. Maltese Explorer on the White Nile (1848-65)*. Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2000). In Catania there is also no trace of Mamo’s claim that Debono was illiterate. On the contrary, Catania notes that Debono wrote the story of his Makedo Expedition of 1853 in Italian (71, 78).

newspaper headlines³⁸) Debono was illiterate and uneducated, but he compensated for this serious liability with his sense of endeavour and his courage, outdoing even the superior British. In this sense, the “subaltern colonist,” the Mediterranean (or Southern European) foreign settler of a lower class status, managed to reach beyond his prescribed place in society. Mamo implies that the elite’s seal of approval of the achievements of this inferior being arrives when Jules Verne, “the great, wise Frenchman” himself, wrote about Debono. If colonized people crave for recognition from their colonizers it is a measure of how they perceive themselves as subordinate and inferior.

In her work about Maltese Settlers in Algeria and France, Andrea Smith writes about how the Maltese *pieds-noirs* she interviewed “proudly proclaimed the Maltese immigrant’s aptitude for assimilating to new cultural norms,” but then told her that this assimilation was necessary to avoid the discrimination that had plagued them and their parents and grandparents. These men and women of Maltese origin “proclaimed their Frenchness without question,” but at the same time they referred to a distinct group in the colony, “the French,” and discussed this group with awe and reverence.³⁹

The Mediterranean for a “Liminal Population”

Lawrence Attard argues that “racial prejudice” was behind the Canadian decision taken in 1910 through the Immigration Act to effectively exclude immigrants who were considered to be “inferior because of their way of life.” These were people from Southern Europe who “were likely to live in congested urban areas and create ghettos which, in turn, would debase the standard of Canada’s national life.” The Maltese knew very little English, or none at all, and they were Roman Catholics at a time when the Orange Lodges were not very favourably inclined to accept Christians of the Roman tradition. Moreover the Maltese did not look particularly Nordic “because of their Mediterranean stature and complexion.”⁴⁰ In the USA the approval of the Literacy Test Act in 1917 “effectively barred” large numbers of Southern Europeans (and practically all Asians) from entering the country.⁴¹ In early twentieth Sydney, people “looked disdainfully on these foreigners from an unfamiliar Mediterranean island colony who spoke an impossible language, went about in groups with one of them trying to make himself intelligible, while others walked about without any shoes.” The Maltese, who “threatened” the workers in Australia because they were seen as cheap labour,⁴² came from one of the most Southern outposts of Europe “having as their immediate neighbours the Sicilians to the north and the Arabs to the South. At best they were thought of as Italians; because of their Semitic tongue very often they were taken for Arabs.”⁴³

In the hierarchy of colonist ethnicities in “French” Algeria, the French settlers were the elite, while the Maltese, and eventually the naturalized Algerian Jews, were situated at the bottom. The French and other northern Europeans in Algeria found the Maltese the most difficult to define, and often described them as a “liminal population, a hybrid boundary-defying people uniting West and East.”⁴⁴ Smith argues that Malta’s position in the Mediterranean Sea “is implicated in Maltese colonial liminality.” According to Marc Donato, until 1801, when it was redefined as belonging to Europe, geographers categorized Malta as part of Africa. However, in his 1888 publication, Gabriel Charmes wrote that he found it difficult to say whether Malta

³⁸ *Il-Berqa*, Tuesday, 10th July, 1934. “It-Taqbida mas-Slavaġ tat-Tribù ta’ Lumbwa fil-Kenja. Mrs. Semini tirrakkonta grajja li tkexkex. Imhedda li tiġi mniffda b’lanza. Ippruvat thares lil żewġha.” Another article about this case, which deals with an attack on an Englishwoman and her Maltese husband on a farm in Kenya, and which appeared in *Il-Berqa*, on Friday, 6th July, 1934, also talks of “savages.” “Wara l-Attakk fuq il-Familja Semini.” Part of the article reads as follows: “*li l-oqasma mwarra ta’ l-Ewropej jiġu mharsa biżżejjed minn nies tat-tribù slavaġ ta’ dawk l-inhawi.*”

³⁹ Andrea L. Smith, *Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Europe. Maltese Settlers in Algeria and France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 98.

⁴⁰ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 37. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁴¹ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 31. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁴² Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 52. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁴³ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 48. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁴⁴ Smith 21.

should belong to Europe or Africa, but with its sterile earth, burnt by the sun, it “seems more African than European.”⁴⁵

When the Maltese, who were themselves colonized, arrived in Algeria in the early nineteenth century they were among the poorest of the Europeans to migrate across the Mediterranean, some arriving with no possessions whatsoever, not even shoes, hence their occasional appellation “*va pieds-nus*”.⁴⁶ The reception that they got by the elite colonists, where they “occupied a unique, and uniquely stressful, status position,” only reinforced the prejudice against their Mediterraneanness that they must have already picked up from their own status as bottom-of-the-rung citizens in their own, colonized country. “Ironically even their strong adherence to their Catholic faith marked them as less ‘European’ for many of the French elite.” But perhaps their most “questionable” trait in racial terms was that they spoke a Mediterranean language par excellence that sounded so much like Arabic and allowed them to communicate relatively easily with the Algerians. This “dubious vantage,” as Smith calls it, “only reinforced uncertainties about their origins and loyalties;” in their mind, many Maltese saw themselves as the elite colonists saw them: more southern than northern, more Mediterranean (and Arab) than European. If among the colonists in “French” Algeria, and elsewhere, the Mediterranean was synonymous with cultural and racial inferiority, the poor, uneducated Maltese, despite being “indefatigable workers,” “*increvables*” (impossible to defeat) and incredibly thrifty,⁴⁷ were often considered the epitome of this Mediterranean or Southern European backwardness.

When they arrived in Algeria, extremely poor, most Maltese realized quickly that to advance, they were better off working first on improving their economic status, rather than focussing on improving their social or linguistic capital. From her interviews with Maltese *pieds-noirs* Smith concludes that the Maltese in Algeria “may have been sensitive to the racism inherent in the early French anti-Maltese attitudes, and perhaps felt too “marked” either racially or culturally to attempt political or social assimilation. Instead, they calculated that they could more reliably attain a certain level of comfort through economic success.”⁴⁸

Being Mediterranean made the Maltese hard to categorize. As the issue of immigration in the 21st century (in Malta, Europe and elsewhere) shows us, liminal social groups “are often viewed as especially polluting or dangerous.”⁴⁹ In Algeria French officials and fellow European settlers accused the Maltese of manifesting “un-European, ‘Oriental’ business practices and cultural traits.”⁵⁰ In *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* it is clear, as it must have been in the colonies, that the Maltese were as close as you could get to the European Mediterranean Other. In a scene from the novel that probably reflects the views that Mamo picked up from the colonists whose ways he admired so much,⁵¹ Thomas Edison is speaking about how electricity will replace animals. Donkeys, he says, will become a rarity and one would have to go to a Zoological Garden to see them. “In fact, they have already disappeared from America: to see one or to hear it bray, you have to travel to Egypt, or Tunes, or Mediterranean Malta, but not, not ever in New York!”⁵²

There is one other direct reference to the Mediterranean in the novel that gives an indication of the stereotypes that shape the concept. The Sicilian political agitator Lureto Nullo wants the Maltese to rise up against the British so that Malta can then “come under” the rule of Italy. The ridiculous surname Mamo gives him shows that, pro-British and opposed to the local elite that identifies itself with Italy and its culture as he was, he is not particularly keen on his ideas: “We have agreed to start a revolution on the island of Paul,”

⁴⁵ Smith 21-22.

⁴⁶ Smith 22.

⁴⁷ Smith 124. “Arriving in Algeria extremely poor, many Maltese came to quick conclusions about what it would take to advance. While some undoubtedly focused on improving their social or linguistic capital, the majority seem to have worked first on improving their economic status.” From her interviews with Maltese *pieds-noirs* Smith concludes that the Maltese in Algeria “may have been sensitive to the racism inherent in the early French anti-Maltese attitudes, and perhaps felt too “marked” either racially or culturally to attempt political or social assimilation. Instead, they calculated that they could more reliably attain a certain level of comfort through economic success.” (Smith 125-6).

⁴⁸ Smith 125-6.

⁴⁹ Smith 23.

⁵⁰ Smith 23.

⁵¹ I deal with this issue at some length in “Juan Mamo u s-Sigrieti ta’ Wlied in-Nanna Venut,” *Il-Malti* (LXXIX, 2007) 81-103.

⁵² Mamo 241. The Maltese word used in the text for donkey, “*ħmir*,” is very often used to refer to ignorant, foolish, silly, unintelligent persons.

says Nullo, “that sweet rock in the middle of the Mediterranean that is like Paul’s boat, and this for the sake of Italy, our mother.”⁵³ This analogy with St. Paul’s boat seems to highlight the precariousness of Malta’s political, economic and cultural life.

When the Suez canal was opened in 1869, Maltese harbours flourished and Valletta became the chief bunkering station in the Mediterranean. The presence of the British empire contributed greatly to the economic boom that Malta experienced; Admiralty works in the Dockyard kept many workers busy and in 1905 the number of men employed by the Naval Establishment was no less than 9,175.”⁵⁴ This situation, with full employment provided by British expenditure in the island, exacerbated the heavy reliance of the Maltese on imperial policy which itself was bound to fluctuate according to the international political situation. It also meant that the prosperity of the Maltese no longer depended on the amount of trade they were able to create with other Mediterranean lands. “As the Imperial link grew stronger,” writes Price, “it weakened the traditional initiative of Maltese private enterprise.”⁵⁵ It also weakened the relations between the Maltese Islands and its neighbours in the Mediterranean. When the Imperial Garrison, both naval and military, was reduced by six battleships and two battalions in 1902, Malta started to experience a gradual decline in revenue.⁵⁶ During the first fifteen years of the twentieth century unemployment increased, not only because of the decrease in Imperial expenditure, but also because the Grand Harbour was no longer the busiest port in the Mediterranean. Whereas in the past every steamer passing through the Mediterranean was practically obliged to call at Maltese ports for coal and provisions, the initial years of the 20th century saw the construction of larger ships that would bypass Malta and this led to a serious decline in bunkering. Malta’s links with the rest of the region were also weakened by the fact that competition from other Mediterranean ports challenged the former superiority of Malta’s position as the favoured island in the middle of a very busy sea.⁵⁷

The Other Side of the Mediterranean

Official French colonial discourse about the relations between the various ethnic groups and accounts of colonial Algeria from the late nineteenth century to this day have used metaphor and the Mediterranean imaginary to tell another story. Algeria is described as a “melting pot” (*creuset*) in which the various European ethnicities “melted together” (*se sont fondues*), underwent “fusion” (*la fusion*) or “blended together” (*se sont amalgamés*). In 1906, the demographer Victor Demontès wrote about “a new people forming on the sunny shores of the Mediterranean,” and discussed the “mixing, or better yet fusion” of different European races in the “African melting pot” (*creuset africain*). A publication by Gignoux and Simiot that came out in 1961 described the popular Bab-el-Oued neighbourhood of Algiers, where most working class European colonists in the city lived, including many Maltese, as “a miraculous melting pot at the bottom of which are slowly melted [...] all of the ethnicities of the Mediterranean.”⁵⁸

The dominant official memory was forged through these one-sided accounts with their simplified representation of the assimilation process. The melting pot metaphor served as “almost a formula of erasure, a figure of discourse that aids in the production of silences in historical narratives.” In his history of contemporary Algeria published in 1979, Charles-Robert Ageron sees the “fusion” of the non-French in the Algerian “melting pot” as a straightforward process not worthy of historical examination or focus. “These European communities didn’t just cohabitate in Algeria, they began very early to mix together.” And he assumes complete assimilation to have occurred through involvement with such French institutions as obligatory military service for men, public school and the electoral and legal systems, and through intermarriage and daily interaction with French citizens.⁵⁹

⁵³ Mamo 269.

⁵⁴ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 1. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁵⁵ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 1-

2. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁵⁶ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 2. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁵⁷ Attard, *Early Maltese Emigration*, 2. <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/earlymigration1.shtml?s=C1BC2EFE-7D8415171927-ED84>.

⁵⁸ Smith 100.

⁵⁹ Smith 101.

A very good example of how a radically different official discourse about the Mediterranean served the colonial purpose is that of architecture. In “Mediterraneanism: the politics of architectural production in Algiers during the 1930s,”⁶⁰ Sherry McKay writes about how the concept of “Mediterranean architecture” in Algeria in the 1930s was constructed to strengthen French cultural colonization. “*If imperialism is about capturing foreign lands, then it is also about managing the resultant and juxtaposed identities within its expanding frame, the contents and discontents. Marking a Mediterranean spirit in Algeria was one such management device.*”⁶¹ In the texts that identified the essence of this Mediterranean architecture published in the 1930s the writers were committed to presenting “*defining characteristics, legitimating precedents, a formal genealogy and shared cultural attributes.*” Algiers was meant to become the very expression of the Mediterranean synthesis.⁶² The fabrication of the Latin origin of the Mediterranean world gave the “*vainqueur gaulois,*” the Victorious Gaul, the right to proclaim themselves its rightful heirs.⁶³ However, “*While synthesis was emphasized - of modern technique with local climate and topography, of indigenous forms with European spatial planning - elision was practiced.*”⁶⁴ While the “Mediterranean villa” freed itself from the alienating effects of modern universal civilization by “claims to a pedigree for its volumetric complexity, climatic controls and landscape sensitivities in the interior ambiance of the Arab and ultimately Roman house, it also displaced the *maison indigène,*” and confirmed to the French and the Europeans what they saw as their right to be there.

The Mediterranean region assumed a poignant role in the negotiation of modernity in architectural discourse and its presence is threaded through the ideology of the Modern Movement as the “emotive, poetic and lyrical antidote to an overemphasis on reason and technology.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, geographers, historians and sociologists portrayed the Mediterranean, to quote Anne Ruel, as “an autonomous object, a historical, economic and cultural space inhabited by a Mediterranean people,” thus throwing off both nationalist sentiments and the rootlessness associated with a more international and cosmopolitan modernism.⁶⁵

McKay believes that “the idea of the Mediterranean rests on the paradox of frontiers, permeable and impervious, a place to traverse and a point of stopping, a space and a place.” According to Gabriel Audisio in his *Jeunesse de la Méditerranée* of 1935, as a permeable space the Mediterranean held out a future of *mélange*, a place of *métissages culturels*, the divisiveness of nations replaced by a *patrie*, a home and country. However, this idealistic or perhaps utopian idea of the Mediterranean contrasted with the ideology and concerns of the powerful colonialist project; as geographical space was annexed to political ambitions, conflicting claims to alternative cultural borders emerged. “The presence of rival assertions haunts the very description of the Mediterranean utopia of *métissage* in the 1930s.” Writing in Algeria in 1937, Albert Camus protested that the Mediterraneanism of Maurras, Mussolini and Latinity was not the Mediterranean that “our ‘House of Culture’ lays claim to.”⁶⁶ So although it was claimed that a number of buildings in Algiers (like the Government Offices, the Orphanage at Beni-Messous, the Algiers City Hall, and private villas) designed by the colonialists and built by the colonists were examples of “Mediterranean architecture” and that a “Mediterranean spirit” infused the new buildings,⁶⁷ local materials were largely replaced by “that greatly universalized material, reinforced concrete,” and imported construction companies employing European colonists, including many Maltese, displaced local craftsmen. In their quest for an authentic Mediterranean architecture, the new breed of architects who had left a decadent, old Europe for a “new” land “would dredge more deeply than the recent colonial accumulation, to the bedrock of classical occupation and an apparently untrammelled landscape.”⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Sherry McKay, “Mediterraneanism: the politics of architectural production in Algiers during the 1930s,” *City and Society* 2000, XII (1):79-102, American Anthropological Society.

⁶¹ McKay 84.

⁶² McKay 86.

⁶³ McKay 87.

⁶⁴ McKay 87-88.

⁶⁵ McKay 82.

⁶⁶ McKay 83.

⁶⁷ McKay 84.

⁶⁸ McKay 85.

In his article on “*Le temps du mépris ou la légitimation de l’oeuvre civilisatrice de la France*,” Bruno Étienne observes how colonization legitimizes itself by using the ideals that dominate in the metropolitan societies of the “Centre.” The example of Algeria illustrates better than any other how “*un universalisme peut atteindre ses propres limites*,” how a universalism can reach its own limits.⁶⁹ The majority of the French writers of the 19th century seemed convinced of the “universal law” that the whole of the Earth was by right owned by the civilization of the Whites. When Marshall Bugeaud, who defeated the Algerian hero Abd el-Kader, doubted whether France should keep Algeria, Hugo protested: “*Mais nous lui apporterons la civilisation!*”⁷⁰

The subtext of the colonial “Mediterranean” discourse in Algeria, with its big ideals of bridging cultures, or even of looking beyond borders and individual cultures to a common heritage and a common future, and its rejection of the local (what may have been interpreted as the “real” Mediterranean), was that the Mediterranean was inferior, not up to the great ideals of the European visionaries; that the Mediterranean could only become great by rejecting the Mediterranean, the Southern European, Arab and Berber. Various texts of the 1930s, like an anonymous one published in 1933, talked about how “Algiers can and ought to become the living expression of the Mediterranean synthesis,” offering “a typical example of Mediterranean architecture which by a very rapid but nevertheless sure evolution (revolution) has attained today a new form.” Cotereau, Murat, Seiller and Lathuillière (1930) agreed that “What the Algerian atmosphere imposes is an architecture to be determined, a Mediterranean architecture.”⁷¹ McKay believes that the search in Algeria (and the Mediterranean) for a single authentic model was inspired by the idea, quoted from Lucas and Vatin (1975), that “The Mediterranean could be a model for the unity of Europeans, especially southern Europeans - Spanish, Italians, French of the Midi; a new nation of people of European provenance who might re-establish European if not French demographic superiority as well as counter the dis-aggregation of colonial society.”⁷² This imperial Mediterranean “essence,” while mediating the Arab presence, would also clearly be, in Guilhaume’s words (1992), “the destroyer of autochthonous society.”⁷³ It was the imposition of a European (colonial) project on the (Mediterranean) Other. The western writers of the 1930s dismissed and demolished the *maison indigène* because they considered it outdated and decaying,⁷⁴ they described the plan of the Moorish house as “inefficient” and “time-consuming,” and predicted that, with its “dark and fetid interiors,” it would eventually die out. But their view was blinkered, because in fact it was a living and evolving vernacular form.⁷⁵ “It was also, in its acceptance of people from non-coastal areas of Algeria, the Kabyles from the rugged hilly areas of the Djurdjura to the east or Mozabites from the rocky plateau of the M’zab to the south, as Mediterranean in its mélange as any fusion of people from Spain, Southern France and Italy.”⁷⁶

The construction of the Mediterranean imaginary occurred also in Italian colonial discourse about architecture. Mia Fuller outlines how Italian architects have used the idea of the Mediterranean “as if it were a purely natural domain, an obvious set of indisputable cultural and formal commonalities.” She argues that this idea of the Mediterranean started to emerge in Italian political culture in the late 19th century, and “became a real instrument in Italian architectural vocabulary as of the colonization of Libya,”⁷⁷ which began in 1911. The Italians used the idea of the Mediterranean to lay claim to Libya. They argued that since the Roman empire had subjugated North Africa, it had left “immanent traces” on it; and the Mediterranean Sea had served as a vessel, a container for Italy’s spirit and history.

⁶⁹ Bruno Étienne, “Le temps du mépris ou la légitimation de l’oeuvre civilisatrice de la France,” *La pensée de midi* (mai 2008) 47.

⁷⁰ Étienne 49.

⁷¹ McKay 86.

⁷² McKay 89.

⁷³ McKay 90.

⁷⁴ McKay 95.

⁷⁵ McKay 87.

⁷⁶ McKay 95.

⁷⁷ Mia Fuller, “Mediterraneanism,” *Environmental Design: Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre* (1990): 8.

The political strategy involved not only assigned Italy precedence and the right to conquer, but it also annulled difference: the history of North Africa became an Italian history. And “the Mediterranean” became like a large mirror, in which Italy could find ghosts and premonitions of its own *civiltà*, past and future.⁷⁸

When the Italians began to build, they needed to distinguish their constructions from those of the locals, and at the same time be inspired, even if partially, by their forms, environment and climate, “also for reasons of political domination.” This soon led to discourse among Italian architects about “Mediterranean architecture.” The creation of “an absolute Mediterranean ‘essence’” abolished from the official narrative any North African history, or cultural difference. At this point, discourse about the Mediterranean became more than a means to an end, or a vessel: “it developed into a full category in its own right.”⁷⁹

In his testament *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), dictated while in Tunis battling leukemia, Frantz Fanon, the author, essayist, psychiatrist and anti-colonial revolutionary from the Caribbean island of Martinique (then a French colony), is unforgiving in his critique of European colonial discourse about the Mediterranean. He writes about how the “colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course.” The native intellectual, he Fanon, “accepted the cogency of these ideas, and deep down in his brain you could always find a vigilant sentinel ready to defend the Graeco-Latin pedestal.” But when, during the struggle for liberation, the native intellectual reconnected with “his people,” this “artificial sentinel” was turned into dust.

All the Mediterranean values - the triumph of the human individual, of clarity and of beauty - become lifeless, colourless knick-knacks. All those speeches seem like collections of dead words; those values which seemed to uplift the soul are revealed as worthless, simply because they have nothing to do with the concrete conflict in which the people is engaged.”⁸⁰

In a particularly insightful and in many ways prophetic chapter on “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in which he deals with the under-developed national middle class that takes over power at the end of the colonial regime and fails to include men and women “on a vast scale in enlightened and fruitful work,”⁸¹ Fanon writes about how colonialism and the religious tension it brought with it was responsible for a division of Africa into Black (south of the Sahara) and White (north of the Sahara). This divisive discourse used the Mediterranean in order to link, and subjugate, a “superior” North Africa to Europe, and depict Black Africa as “inert, brutal, uncivilized - in a word, savage.” But Fanon also denounces the unpleasant remarks among sub-Saharan Africans about veiled women, polygamy and the supposed disdain the Arabs have for the feminine sex. These remarks by the national (local) bourgeoisie “are reminiscent in their aggressiveness of those that are so often heard coming from the settler’s lips” and are therefore, at least partly, attributable to white, European colonialism. In North Africa, writes Fanon, “it is affirmed that White Africa has a thousand year old tradition of culture; that she is Mediterranean, that she is a continuation of Europe and that she shares in Graeco-Latin civilization;” and therefore, that being “Mediterranean,” in the European, colonial sense, she is superior.⁸²

Fanon published these words in 1961, almost half a century ago, and yet today, as we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, they still provide much food for thought, not least when we consider the European origins of the construction of “the Mediterranean,” or the Mediterranean Other, and the hierarchy among human beings that it, sometimes unwittingly and unwillingly, forms part of.

Un Espace Dépendant, Fortement Hiérarchisé

Yassine Ferfera asks whether the Mediterranean Sea will be destroyed by the onslaught of pollution and by the loss of culture caused by the invasion of mass tourism.⁸³ He also asks whether some of the countries

⁷⁸ Fuller 8.

⁷⁹ Fuller 8-9.

⁸⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trad. Constance Farrington (Londra: Penguin, [1961] 2001) 36.

⁸¹ Fanon 165.

⁸² Fanon 129-30.

⁸³ Yassine Ferfera, “Avant Propos,” in Youcef Benabdallah, Mourad Boukella, Yassine Ferfera (ed.), *La Méditerranée occidentale. Entre régionalisation et mondialisation*, (Bejaïa, Algeria: CREAD, Université Abderrahmane Mira, [2000]) 5.

bordering the Sea are condemned to live in fear of the demographic explosion of their neighbours while the others feel threatened by the pitiless economic and cultural domination of the richer countries. The gap between the North and the South is widening and any initiative to start a true dialogue gets stuck in the “logomachy of good intentions.”⁸⁴ In the next twenty years the population difference between the developed countries and the Southern and Eastern ones shall increase. The Mediterranean shall be in proportion more Arab, Maghrebin and Turkish.⁸⁵ Today, the population in the developed countries is much older than in the South and East. In 2003, throughout western Europe the number of people over 65 years of age was similar or even superior to those who were under 15; in the Maghreb and Machrek states, there were many more youngsters (from 27,5% to 46%) than elderly people (2,3% - 8,7%). In the year 2003, in Algeria 48% of the population was less than 19 years old, in Egypt 42% was under 18, in Tunisia 30% was under 14, and two thirds of Moroccans were under 30 years old.⁸⁶

The physical cohesion of the Mediterranean arena resembles a shadow theatre where experiments are made with dreams and tendencies;” Fayçal Yachir calls it “*un ensemble virtuel*” which makes no real positive contribution to the everyday lives of people in the region.⁸⁷ The difficulties and contradictions of the Mediterranean basin are to blame. The demographic imbalance between the coastal and the inner areas is having a negative effect on the region. “*La littoralisation aspire les forces vives des campagnes, appauvries par une dégradation rapide des sols.*” The cities, that were the soul of the Mediterranean civilization, are disappearing, being eaten away by desertification or the competition within and between megalopoli that are overflowing into uncontrolled suburbs and accumulating social and political problems. “*Ici, on rêve de repli. Là, on pense ouverture. Ici, on imagine la renaissance des Andalousies perdues refuge des traditions. Là, on envisage des technopôles.*”⁸⁸ There seems to be a strong feeling, among people on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, that things are going from bad to worse in the South and that life prospects on the northern, European shores are significantly better.

Nourredine Abdi from the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique believes that in its relations with the Maghreb, Latin Mediterranean Europe has taken far too long to give up its colonial practices and to contribute effectively to the promotion of a system that favours integrated development.⁸⁹ Both before and after World War II the Mediterranean was unified by the colonial, and subsequently by the neo-colonial system, but now it risks slipping towards greater opposition rather than greater syncretism between its various parts.

En effet, au niveau de l'opinion publique, il n'existe pas vraiment de mouvement fort que l'on pourrait qualifier de méditerranéiste. La dynamique méditerranéiste étant relativement limitée, la perception de la Méditerranée y compris occidentale reste ambivalente sur ses deux rives. Même si une évolution se dessine dans certains milieux pour sa nouvelle reconstruction, la façon de la percevoir est plus ou moins marquée par certains isolationismes au Nord comme au Sud.

Nourredine Abdi argues that there are three ways of looking at the Mediterranean. In terms of history, the identity and personality of the Maghrebin-Latin-Mediterraneans has been shaped by the maritime dimension even though, in the current situation and more so in everyday life, its presence is hardly felt, except by those who live on the coast and by tourists. On a more pragmatic level, the Mediterranean is essentially seen as an expression of the preponderance of Europe, but also of the E.U. in collaboration with Israel. A third perception of the Mediterranean is more “virtual.” It corresponds to the aspirations of restricted groups which see the Mediterranean as a common space of peace and progress.⁹⁰

After they were gradually “evicted” from the region when the Crusades started in the 11th century, the Maghreb and the Arab world in general have occupied an increasingly marginal place in the Mediterranean.

⁸⁴ Ferfera 5.

⁸⁵ Laura Davì and Claudio Jampaglia, *First Medlink Report*, (Rome: Medlink, 2006) 11. www.medlinknet.org.

⁸⁶ Davì and Jampaglia 12.

⁸⁷ Ferfera 5.

⁸⁸ Ferfera 5. Technopoles are high-technology industrial agglomerations.

⁸⁹ See Omar Barghouti and Adrian Grima, “An Alternative Bridging Project. Re-Thinking the Mediterranean,” *Counterpunch* (September 9 / 11, 2005). <http://www.counterpunch.org/barghouti09092005.html>.

⁹⁰ Nourredine Abdi, “De la Méditerranéité à un Méditerranéisme,” *La Méditerranée occidentale. Entre régionalisation et mondialisation*, 17-18.

Abdi believes that there is still, among the Mediterranean Arabs “*un interdit plus ou moins conscient à s'engager et à risquer de se dissoudre dans une mer, somme toute étrangère,*”⁹¹ and points to the profound disparity in development between the two shores of the Mediterranean.⁹² He argues that solidarity between the different states in the Maghreb can only develop with the weakening of the militarism fuelled by income from the oil industry, and that this solidarity is vital for the creation of a true rapprochement between the two shores. The Mediterranean can be constructed through regional co-development, “*en la saisissant à travers ses évolutions les plus profondes, y compris au niveau de ses mouvements sociaux et du mouvement naturel de sa population.*”⁹³

With respect to the Crusades and the Mediterranean imaginary in the Europe, Bruno Étienne argues that in France, the main prejudices against the Other, the Mohammedan, the Oriental living under the yoke of despotism, stem from a reading by French historians of the Crusades that ignores the many writings of the Arabs on this subject.

L'Orient, civilisation figée, soumise au fanatisme religieux et aux techniques traditionnelles, sans capacité à l'innovation, sert à l'homme des Lumières (occidental, moderne) à dessiner son identité collective légitimant son hégémonie. Un imaginaire rappelant sans cesse l'ère des croisades contribua à mettre face à face l'Orient et l'Occident. Bien plus que l'Égypte de Bonaparte, l'Algérie et le désert du Sahara ont contribué à la mise en forme de nos préjugés, dont nous subissons encore aujourd'hui les effets pervers...

Unfortunately, writes Étienne, this negative reading was confirmed by all French travellers, even those among them who were held in high esteem, like Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Pierre Loti, and Gérard de Nerval.⁹⁴

Although the Mediterranean is a geographical and historical reality, “*qui a bien constitué une aire civilisationnelle relativement homogène dans un passé lointain, mais toujours sous la contrainte politique et militaire,*” today it is a region that is largely dependent on extra-Mediterranean powers; and there are no characteristics that give it a certain unity. In terms of development, it represents a “fault line” between southern European and Arab countries. Having ceased to be the centre of the world a long time ago, the relative decline of the Mediterranean has been accentuated by the appearance of new zones of economic expansion in Eastern Europe, South America and Asia and also by the renewed dynamism of capitalism in the North Atlantic.⁹⁵ Apart from its dependence on outside powers, the Mediterranean also presents itself as a “highly hierarchized region;” intra-Mediterranean exchanges are characterized by verticality, because there is unequal capitalist development of the countries in the region and because the countries of southern Europe have been more dynamic in their industrial development.⁹⁶ As in colonial times, in the hierarchy that characterizes the development and fortunes of the Mediterranean countries, France and Italy, with their strong industrial tradition, are at the top of the hierarchy. A second group of southern European countries occupy an intermediary position, while at the bottom of the ladder are the Arab countries of the southern Mediterranean.⁹⁷

This is probably one of the main reasons why the Maltese and other Mediterraneans look towards the EU and the north of Europe rather than the Mediterranean, which is identified with the perceived backwardness, here acknowledged by North African experts, of the southern shore. The bilingual writer Francis Ebejer (“Mediterranean-Maltese and English,” as he defines himself) argues that in the 1970s and 80s, with “the rapid encroachment of ‘modernity’” - mass tourism, high-rise buildings, commercialism and consumerism: fast technical and technological advancement; the breakdown, or at least the radical reappraisal, of certain traditional codes and values; “the hard sell and the fast living;” the development of the islands’ infrastructure; the emergence once again of social confrontation; and the implementation of educational and

⁹¹ Abdi 19.

⁹² Abdi 39.

⁹³ Abdi 39.

⁹⁴ Étienne 51.

⁹⁵ Mourad Boukella, M. Djenane, Mohamed Yacine Ferfera, “La Méditerranée, l’Europe et le monde arabe dans l’oeuvre de Fayçal Yachir,” in Benabdallah, Boukella, Ferfera (ed.), *La Méditerranée occidentale. Entre régionalisation et mondialisation*, 46.

⁹⁶ Boukella, Djenane, Ferfera 47.

⁹⁷ Boukella, Djenane, Ferfera 47.

social reforms - the “old, colonially-disposed Malta-London axis” began to wobble a bit, and it became apparent that there was “more to the world than London; and, equally, more to the Mediterranean than just Malta.”⁹⁸ Perhaps it was a time when other Maltese people, like Ebejer, were captivated by “the interlocking beliefs which have always defined the wildly complex Mediterranean.”⁹⁹ Former socialist prime minister Dom Mintoff, who coined the “Malta Żvizzera fil-Mediterran” metaphor in 1959 (that survived till 1998),¹⁰⁰ and more recently leading writer and intellectual Oliver Friggieri, with his frequent reference to Malta’s Mediterranean “soul,”¹⁰¹ were two of the main proponents, albeit separately and in different ways, of a (short-lived) rediscovery of Malta’s Mediterranean dimension in public discourse.

Ebejer describes the Mediterranean as a “long-troubled, tortured idea, yet one which is forever reaching out to, ultimately, the desired syncretism.” This oneness is the best possible result of the bringing together of the old and the new, of tradition and progress, spirituality and material benefaction, technology and humanity, racial and national divisiveness and friendship, wealth and humanitarian concern, man and woman.¹⁰² Ebejer’s perception of a renewed Maltese openness towards the Mediterranean was overly optimistic, no doubt because of his deep attachment to the Sea and the region. “I have never wanted to live anywhere but in the Mediterranean.” Although he was tempted to live abroad, he chose to stay in Malta. “No recognition is worth such a sacrifice. My roots, including the inspirational, are on the Island and in the Mediterranean, and they are thick and they strike deep.”¹⁰³

Conjuring Up Switzerlands

Between 1996 and 1998, when the Maltese Islands were debating what relations they should have with the EU, the Malta Labour Party used two rather different, though presumably complementary, slogans. In the run-up to the 1996 general elections the Party projected its vision of Malta as a “Żvizzera fil-Mediterran” (“A Switzerland in the Mediterranean”), a throwback to a slogan Dom Mintoff had coined in 1959 and used insistently in the 1970s. The metaphor refers to Mintoff’s plan for an independent Malta, which was then a British colony, with its neutrality guaranteed by the United Nations.¹⁰⁴ In the electoral campaign for the general elections held two years later, after the same Dom Mintoff had caused havoc by not toeing the party line on an important issue and thus challenging the new leadership, the Party articulated its position vis-a-vis the EU by seeing Malta as “*Id-Dar Maltija fl-Ewropa*,” the Maltese House/Home in Europe.

It must be said that political slogans rarely manage to capture the complexities of life and the policies that tend to shape and get shaped by it and these two slogans are no exception; political metaphors are designed to simplify what the public potentially views as highly complex issues, making them tangible and understandable. But at the core of political communication, writes Mio, echoing Edelman, is “the ability of the politician to use metaphor and symbols that awaken latent tendencies among the masses.”¹⁰⁵ The Switzerland slogan omits the definite article “*l-*” and therefore refers to *a* Switzerland, prompting the Maltese mind to conjure up the real and stereotypical images of an idyllic land of natural beauty, well-being and untainted wealth that have been brought home by popular discourse and generations of Maltese visitors to Switzerland. This is what Mio means when he says that political metaphors “can resonate to underlying symbolic representations in its recipients.” We’re not supposed to think of the “other” Switzerland, with its homeless, its drug addicts, its dubious chemical industry and its secretive banks - no country is perfect. It is the same construct that gave birth to the metaphor of Lebanon, and Beirut, as the Switzerland of the Middle East. The metaphor prompts us to revisit the popular, albeit worn-out postcard of a country wrapped in the magical aura of its immaculate neutrality and all the rest. Saying “*L-Iżvizzera tal-Mediterran*” might have attracted the objection that Malta was trying to identify itself literally with another country, and that would

⁹⁸ Francis Ebejer, *The Bilingual Writer (Mediterranean-Maltese and English) as Janus* (Malta: Foundation for International Studies, 1989) 27-28.

⁹⁹ Ebejer 33.

¹⁰⁰ See Grima, *Being Mediterranean is a Decision You Make*. 2003.

¹⁰¹ See Oliver Friggieri, *Il-Kuxjenza Nazzjonali Maltija - Lejn Definizzjoni Storika-Kulturali* (Malta: PEG, 1995) and “L-Istorja tal-Poeżija Maltija,” in his anthology of Maltese poetry, *Il-Poeżija Maltija* (Malta: Malta University Publishers, 1996).

¹⁰² Ebejer 32.

¹⁰³ Ebejer 20.

¹⁰⁴ Edith Dobie, *Malta’s Road to Independence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967) 193.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey Scott Mio, “Metaphor and Politics,” *Metaphor and Symbol*, 12:2, 1997.

not have been a very inspiring, or inspired choice, because the indefinite “a” gives to “Switzerland” the quality of a model, a type; but perhaps, in this context of sloganeering, this is an irrelevant linguistic nicety. The point is that in the first slogan, the Mediterranean, which in the second half of the 20th century was much more part of the discourse of the Labour Party than that of the Maltese Christian Democrats (Nationalist Party), although it is present, it is dwarfed by an idealized “Switzerland,” which in many ways represents in our consciousness the Europe that the Mediterranean is not: rich vs. poor, affluent vs. precarious, clean vs. dirty, advanced vs backward, cold vs. warm, punctual vs. late, efficient vs. inefficient, and so on. “Switzerland” seems to erase the imaginary of the Mediterranean and render it simply a geographical space, bringing Andrea Smith’s words about Malta’s position in the Mediterranean Sea implicating Maltese liminality back to mind. This is confirmed by the second slogan about the Maltese House/Home in Europe, created with the issue of EU membership in mind, that left the Mediterranean out altogether, even because it didn’t reflect the aspirations of the Maltese voter. In its 1998 electoral manifesto, the Labour Party talked about the “Maltese road to Europe,” a road that would consolidate Malta’s focal position at the centre of the Mediterranean; the Maltese are European and Mediterranean, note the order.

In its 68-page electoral manifesto for the 2008 general elections, the Malta Labour Party mentioned the Mediterranean twice, once in relation to the Malta shipyards, and once to state that Malta must strengthen its political and economic initiative in the Mediterranean and the Gulf and create a Mediterranean-Arab Gulf Business Forum, suggesting that the manifesto was identifying the Mediterranean with the Arab world.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, in its 72-page manifesto, the Nationalist Party that eventually won the 2008 elections referred many times to Malta’s “creative” role in the Mediterranean in areas such as research, the environment, trade, health services, tourism, immigration, fishing, agriculture, music, and IT, very often in the context of its role as a member of the EU. The document talks about how “We need to stick to the path we have chosen, by participating actively at the heart of the European Union, as a Mediterranean country which is always ready to come up with creative proposals in the international scene.”¹⁰⁷ But political discourse is notoriously fickle and there is little in 21st century Malta, and elsewhere in the region where they have turned their backs on the Mediterranean,¹⁰⁸ that suggests that the identification of the Mediterranean with precariousness, with the ills and evils of poverty, environmental degradation, social, religious and cultural conflict, the democratic deficit, economic shortsightedness, and neocolonial practices is on the way out.

Fanon’s denunciation of the lifelessness of so-called Mediterranean values - the triumph of the human individual, of clarity and of beauty, seems as relevant as ever, because this narrative has nothing to do with the concrete conflicts in which the people is engaged. It is not only images like the Euro changeover billboard in Malta that erase the Mediterranean imaginary; it is also the empty discourse that is meant to construct it in the consciousness of people but inevitably erases it.

When over one hundred civil society activists from all over the Mediterranean and beyond met in Rome to renew their commitment against war and colonialism and to discuss ways of working towards peace, democracy, human and civil rights, justice, peaceful coexistence, and freedom, Omeyya Seddik presented himself as a Tunisian, Arab, Muslim, migrant, and, more importantly, as an activist engaged in favour of oppressed people.¹⁰⁹ “This rather strange web of elements makes me what I am, but not only in an ideal way, because it also determines precisely, concretely my individual, political praxis, my way of thinking, my way of acting. In this web that constitutes me the Mediterranean is not present.” He goes on to say that “For the people to whom I feel I belong, the Mediterranean is something that divides. It is a sea where our brothers and sisters die every day because there’s a colonial relationship that has existed for a long time and is becoming stronger. The name of this relationship is ‘the Mediterranean.’” He describes this sea as a “spatial segregation.” Europeans “can visit us whenever [they] want; we cannot. This stops the Mediterranean from being something clear.”

¹⁰⁶ Partit Laburista, *Pjan għal Bidu Ġdid. Xogħol, Harsien, Dinjità. Manifest Elettorali* (Malta: Partit Laburista, 2008) 20, 55.

¹⁰⁷ Partit Nazzjonalista 71.

¹⁰⁸ Tonino Perna talks about the “progressive escape” of the Mezzogiorno from the Mediterranean Basin. “Se sulla carta geografica il Sud d’Italia sta al centro del Mediterraneo, dal punto di vista economico e culturale quest’area è lontana mille miglia dagli altri paesi del Mediterraneo.” *Lo Sviluppo Insostenibile* (Napoli: Liguori, 1994) 183.

¹⁰⁹ See also Adrian Grima, “The Mediterranean as Segregation,” *ZNET*, 2007. <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=74&ItemID=12069>.

Omeyya Seddik argues that for him, and for Arabs generally, the issue is not “What is the Mediterranean?” but rather “Why isn’t the Mediterranean present?”

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