8 Culture and the Sea

Ranier Fsadni

Advisor to the Prime Minister of Malta on
Mediterranean and Maritime Affairs

Very Like a Fox?

In taking a step back to consider David Attard's various seminal contributions
to academe, law and the affairs of State, it is initially not easy to find an overall
discernible shape that gathers within it the diverse projects in which Prof. Attard has
been and continues to be involved. What, other than a highly personal chemistry of
indefatigable curiosity and unusual talent, could connect involvement in institution
building and academic administration, the practice of law in fields as diverse as
intellectual property and maritime affairs, counsel to the private sector and the
United Nations?

One could be forgiven for feeling like Shakespeare's hapless Polonius, being
taken for a ride by Hamlet (Act III, scene ii), and invited, in rapid succession, to see
in a passing cloud a camel, a weasel and a whale. Vigorous nodding agreement on
a shape, any shape – 'very like a whale' – is really surrender.

Some help is offered by Isaiah Berlin's famous essay that distinguishes between
two kinds of thinker. The hedgehog is a thinker who knows, as it were, only one
thing and sees everything through that lens; a fox knows many things and has
various interests. Berlin (1953) acknowledged that not all thinkers fall clearly into
one category or another; indeed, one of his principal arguments is that Tolstoy,
whose philosophy of history he explores in the essay, was a fox disguised as a
hedgehog. But could one have any doubt that Prof. Attard is very like a fox?

It is here suggested, however, that he is really a hedgehog, albeit consummately
disguised as a fox. But to make my case I need to make what might appear to be a
major digression and to discuss the cultural predicament in which maritime affairs,
widely understood, are today enveloped. It is through this detour that I hope to
show that Prof. Attard's interests are united because they address an inter-related
set of pressing challenges to law, science and public affairs.

These inter-related challenges have been charted by the 'Blue Book' on maritime
affairs issued by the European Commission (EC) in 2007. That document gives an
admirably clear exposition of a condition first delineated in 1967 by Malta's then
Permanent Representative to the UN, Arvid Pardo: the fact that 'ocean space' - as
he called it - raised a set of inter-related problems to do with security - economic,
environmental, political and military - but which were to date still being addressed

with piecemeal policies. Forty years later, the EC was charting much the same problem, from a European perspective, while making a set of tentative proposals meant to develop an integrated maritime policy at European level. Indeed, the eye is set on even wider collaboration with third countries.

Precisely because such extensive cooperation is necessary, cutting both vertically and horizontally across different levels of governance, and because any success will depend not just on good will between governments but also popular commitment and legitimacy, the Blue Book also addresses the need for Europe's maritime culture and identity to be given their due recognition and encouragement. It is assumed, though, that twenty-first-century maritime culture and identity can be developed simply on the basis of the heritage of the past (paragraph 4.5). However, to a cultural anthropologist things are unfortunately not so simple.

Historic maritime identities were profoundly shaped by a cultural understanding of land and sea as antithetical. Yet, this paper shall argue that there are several reasons to believe that the political, economic and cultural bases of this antithesis have been greatly weakened in twenty-first-century maritime affairs. No strong identification with maritime Europe is possible in our time, therefore, if it were to be based only on heritage; for the latter, while important, cannot in a compelling way capture Europe's contemporary relationship to the sea. The discontinuity between past and present includes the necessary cultural concepts needed to clarify this relationship. They have yet to be developed in a way that makes them part of popular culture. To indicate maritime heritage and identity as a way of popularizing the expert issues raised in the Blue Book is the pointing not to a solution, but rather to an unresolved problem; one complicated by the fact that ours is an age in which all traditional identities are characterised by crisis.

Culture, Identity and the Sea

To understand why requires, first, a rapid clarification of terms like 'culture' and 'identity', as well as of the social relations that, as concepts, they are meant to illuminate. For, being so often used in public discussion, for particular - and sometimes partisan - ends and purposes, and in sometimes contradictory or unsystematic ways, they might hinder thought as much as facilitate it.

What is culture? When Jane Austen used that term, she meant horticulture - a reference to whose significance I will return. Nowadays, the term usually encapsulates something of what, several decades ago, the distinguished American anthropologist Clifford Geertz sought to impart to the term: 'culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns − customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters − [...] but as a set of control mechanisms − plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs") − for the governing of behavior' (1993: 44).

Such a definition conveys that action, behaviour and practices are as bound up with culture as the web of concepts and ideas. We would also need to allow for diverse and indeed contested understandings 'within' the same culture, as well

as for the fact that culture might give rise not to conviction but to ambivalence, uncertainty and dilemmas. And while we slip easily into speaking of persons finding themselves 'within' a culture, as they do within a country, culture really ought to be understood not as an 'area' of life but rather a collective dimension of thought and feeling that is an interface between person and world.

It is a salient aspect of the contemporary world that its politics, ranging from the interpersonal to the international, is saturated with discourses about identity. The latter, it might be said, is a hotspot of concern and attention. The discourses are an outcome of economic and cultural conditions that disturb fixed images of narratives of self and community. 'As an unfolding story,' the sociologist Richard Sennett (2001: 176-77) has written, 'an identity originates precisely in the conflict between how others see you and how you see yourself. The two seldom fit...' Sennett is interested in how the globalized economy has disturbed identities based on work and 'home'. Other writers, of widely different persuasions, have sought to explain both the increasing concern with identity - 'the politics of recognition', to use Charles Taylor's (1994) evocative phrase - and to spell out the consequences for the political and ethical management of global relationships.

Such analyses are carried out to pursue questions rather removed from maritime affairs. They are worth recalling, however, as they indicate the problematic nature of contemporary identities. An appeal to 'maritime identity' based on heritage is not so much a solution – as the Blue Book might give one to think – as the locus of challenges as inter-related as some of the others that the document addresses. As Sennett points out, identity originates in conflict and it is necessarily argumentative; and there is no reason to think that maritime identity should not include within it some of the unresolved conflicts and arguments that the EC document has sought to address.

One tension within the very notion of 'maritime identity' deserves to be highlighted. The concept of culture – as the previous reference to Jane Austen indicated – is closely bound, in popular thought, to the notion of 'native soil'. Culture gives us – as a key metaphor in many Western languages has it – 'roots'. It is associated with stability. In popular discourse, a cultural identity is the centre that can hold us steady in a world of swirling change and where things often seem to be falling apart. Culture is refuge, home and familiarity in a world of strangers and frequent encounters with the 'Other'.

Being biased towards terrestrial - and horticultural - metaphors, our thinking about maritime culture might elide some of the salient features of the sea as a human environment. For the sea is associated not with roots but with mobility. And as a space, the oceans are a site intimately linked up, historically, with encounters with the Other, that is, what lay beyond cultural notions of order.

Historic Maritime Societies and Culture

Historic maritime societies internalized the twin associations of the sea with mobility and the Other. By 'maritime society' is meant a society for which life at

sea was an integral part of a form of life, inserted into the structures of power, institutions and images. Such integration did not mean, however, that the sea was somehow domesticated and tamed. Rather, the sea's wildness, lying in wait, was incorporated into organised power, rhetoric and symbols. Such incorporation was managed in various ways, ranging from how the biblical Jews pictured the sea as the home of the forces of chaos, to how, in various societies - and in memorable literary depictions such as those of Herman Melville - life on a boat or ship was subject to a harsh discipline, with a structure of authority and sanctions distinct from those of land, and considered to be necessary if order was to prevail over disorder.

The incorporation of the 'maritime Other' into traditional maritime cultures was obviously not everywhere the same. Some common broad features are often found, however. As Jean-Nicolas Corvisier (2008) shows in detail for the ancient Greeks, the life of danger on the high seas often was associated with special religious cults and votive offerings, the rituals performed at sea not necessarily the same as those performed on land. Collective identity as well as mysteries like death and suffering were often explored through mythological stories of encounters with the Other, and such encounters were often mediated by sea voyages.

Land and sea were generally antithetical worlds. In the ancient Greek mythological imagination, for example, only the world of the gods could bridge them (Corvisier 2008: 263). Within the world of Islam, the sea too marked an antithesis, whose character changed over time. According to Michael Bonner (2006: 149), it took over a millennium for the sea to acquire the status of an Islamic frontier, which is to say a boundary marking moral order from disorder, but the coastal strongholds were considered to be dens of immorality, lying in the penumbra of Islamic propriety. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the importance of the sea to a Barbary State like Algiers was beginning to receive formal recognition, the wealth from corsair activity being an important source of both the polity's income and its practical political independence from Ottoman rule. The supreme office of *dey* was sometimes occupied by a corsair captain. Prominent corsairs became members of the ruling elite, taking part in works of urban charity, while much ceremony accompanied the departure and arrival of ships: 'the sea finally achieved the full dignity of an Islamic frontier' (Bonner 2006: 150). The pomp was a powerful symbolic representation of a significant cultural threshold.

It is evident, even from these cursory illustrations, that the relationship of pre-industrial societies to the sea was far from uniform, and the cultural understandings of the sea also display a wide range. At the risk of gross simplification, however, one might point out certain common elements.

Before the rise of the nation-state, there were certain similarities of governance generated by the city-sea relationship. For example, maritime cities could rival important centres of organized power precisely because of their access to trade routes - such cities often giving priority to access rather than to military control over such routes. Certain similarities of governance can be found, in this respect, and despite the obvious contrast in other areas, between the fourteenth-century Italian republics and the cities of the Hanseatic League (as well as twentieth-century Asian maritime cities, an example that admittedly blurs the broad

distinction I am drawing between pre-modern and modern societies; however, my distinction encompasses broad patterns of culture as well as governance). Indeed, several historians and students of politics and international relations have found it useful to compare 'middle seas' across time and space, finding the comparative discussion of 'Mediterraneans' (*sic*) to be illuminating in explaining and understanding the patterns of political, economic and cultural power (see, e.g., Gipouloux 2009).

Such structural similarities need to be conjoined to certain broad cultural features, three in particular. First, the sea is associated with the Other; a net distinction was made between life on land and life at sea. Second, this Other was incorporated within shared cultural visions of an ordered cosmos. Third, such cultural visions were an integral part of a holistic form of communal life.

Crude as this simplification is, it is helpful in pointing out not just a broad similarity between societies that would otherwise seem very different. Its very crudity is useful in showing the sharp contrast between such historic societies, which might be termed traditional or pre-industrial, and a new relationship that emerges between human society and the sea when the resources of the sea become subject to industrialization and nationalization.

The Sea without Qualities

Robert Musil's great unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, is celebrated as an imaginative exploration of personal identity in a disenchanted, bureaucratic age. The separation of the different spheres of life in modernity – the separation of work from the life of the household, the strict demarcation of the public from the private - with the latter being the legitimate space to which the emotions are largely consigned - of State from society and, nominally at least, of politics from economy – creates a human condition that is lived in modular terms. Each sphere of life has a distinct logic from those of the others, and often experienced as though it were insulated from the others. The result is a form of life with several frames of reference, not integrated with each other, and unmoored from a multi-stranded community life. The experience can be liberating and the organization more instrumentally rational; but its fragmentation can also be associated with experience that seems more arid and 'soul-less'.

Whether the experience is really properly described in this manner, whether the description rides on an excessively holistic conception of the past, and other questions are, of course, much debated by social scientists. But for the limited purpose of this argument, which is concerned with sketching a paradigmatic contrast between the culture of traditional maritime societies and that of 'industrial' maritime societies, it is sufficient. For the argument here is that while the sea's importance for such industrial societies is increasingly becoming evident, that importance is being articulated in separated spheres of specialized activity, so that the culture of each sphere is divorced from community life - and indeed rarely is consciously perceived to be 'culture' at all.

The separation of the spheres of activity is not just notional. It is correlated to explicit zoning of the sea for different purposes, like the demarcation of territorial waters, fishing zones, environmental protection zones, etc. The logic of action in each zone is distinct.

To take one example, consider the contrast between the development, in the Mediterranean, of the fishing industry and the increasing tendency of States to declare various kinds of areas as national zones.

The development of aquaculture has seen fishing shift from being a predominantly 'hunting' activity, rooted in community life, to a form of farming that is capital intensive - particularly for tuna pens. The shift has seen the number of traditional fishermen dwindle, while others have become employees of capitalist fish farmers. The bureaucratic allocation of fish catchment quotas has contributed to tensions between fishermen of different nationalities, especially when one nationality suspects another of systemically cheating or poaching on one's own 'territory'. The threat of violence flaring up on occasion is real; to the extent that some large-scale fish farmers employ guards for their property – one prominent Maltese firm has employed Croatian veterans of the Serbo-Croat war of the early 1990s. Meanwhile, the armed forces of certain Mediterranean nation-States also patrol the seas, enough to make sure that their fishermen are protected.

What these developments evoke is an earlier period: that of the feudalization of land, where control over large tracts by the ruling elite went hand in hand with other farmers becoming labourers for the landowners, who in turn also employed armed specialists to protect their assets against violence or theft.

One must of course be careful not to push the analogy too far. Historically, there is no equivalent of the fish quota or the science behind it; nor can the involvement of nation-states simply be bracketed out. However, in terms of governance, the weakness of the monopoly of legitimate violence, associated with the modern state, is striking.

A different kind of logic is evident in the recent increase, this decade, of the declaration of exclusive zones - or promulgation of laws permitting this in the future - by nation-states in the Mediterranean. Hitherto, because of the small size of the Mediterranean basin, coastal States have refrained from declaring EEZs in the area, since doing so was likely to overlap with competing claims by other States and involve very complex multilateral negotiations to reach agreement over boundaries. However, there has been a spate of declarations or shows of intent, in recent years, for other kinds of zones. Libya has declared a 62-nautical-mile fishing preservation zone; Tunisia has passed legislation enabling the government to establish an EEZ; Malta promulgated legislation to enable the government to extend its fisheries jurisdiction beyond the current 25-mile fisheries conservation zone. One suspects that some of these, and other, declarations were made in reaction to declarations by other nation-states. Has a 'zone race' begun?

The purpose behind the declaration of an exclusive zone for environmental protection is laudable. But can it be effective? In imposing sanctions for infringements committed within the zone, yes; but the same zone can also be affected by damage inflicted elsewhere. For such zoning to be truly effective, the same standards must

be established throughout the basin. In some scenarios, a purely national approach may well be a sub-optimum approach, with a discernible gap between policy aim and policy outcome, especially if the 'zone race' adds to the tensions between governments.

Two kinds of modularity can be discerned in these two examples. First, there is the modularity of national zones; second, there is the modularity of the sea being addressed by policies that address different functions. These functions are addressed often by specialists with highly expert knowledge, and possibly using highly sophisticated methods of governance. However, the approaches are fragmented, even while it is evident that the problems raised are inter-related.

Comparison

The polarized distinction that has here been drawn between two kinds of society – the traditional and industrial – is obviously too simple to capture the complexity of actual historical societies. The polarity, however, has been offered as an aid to thought. It enables a comparison based on four points, which highlight the distinctiveness of certain features of post-industrial society's relationship to the sea.

First, the sea is almost certainly becoming more important now than it ever was historically, at least in the sense that it serves a wider range of functions and endeavours: from food to trade, from economy to environmental protection, from the production of knowledge to military security. Despite its salience, however, this importance has yet to be incorporated into culture, in the way that the sea permeated the culture of traditional maritime societies. Maritime affairs today are still, for the most part, a secular domain for specialists and experts.

Second, in becoming salient in a new way, the sea is also being treated in an unprecedented manner. Like land territory, it can now by law be declared to be, for example, an exclusive national zone; for economic activity or environmental protection, for example. Given the 'zone race' discussed previously, this kind of treatment is likely to become more prevalent, even if different kinds of zone would encompass a variable geometry of size, rights and duties. Given the importance for culture of the previous historical distinction made between land and sea as human environments, this transformed conceptualization of the sea in terms that approach those of land should have a significant import for culture; that is, for what 'maritime culture' would encompass.

Third, it could be said that, conversely, in some respects it is life on land that is coming to resemble that of traditional life at sea. The coastal city today, based as it is on tourism and leisure, is a magnet for travellers. That is, the culture of the coastal city has mobility at its conceptual core. Indeed, it has been noted that beaches are often sites for cultural encounters - and tensions - with the Other, as various states of undress might challenge traditional public morals. Beyond the life of the coastal city itself, however, it could be argued that contemporary culture has become much more a culture of mobility - despite the frequent emphasis on roots. The French anthropologist Marc Augé (2009) has very recently argued that we

risk misrecognizing the nature of contemporary society if we continue to neglect to think about culture in terms of mobility - the consequences of, in the terms of this article, being wedded to the traditional horticultural bias when thinking about culture.

Some years earlier, Jacques Attali (2000: 243-46) went further in a speculative though arresting argument. He characterized contemporary society and its typical technologies - the mobile telephone, the portable music player, etc. - as a society of nomads. This terrestrial metaphor must be balanced against the importance Attali gives to the sea, as source of food, communication and resources (2000: 224-25), under the governance of an Interpol of the seas charged with protecting the rights of future generations. Although such writing resembles science fiction, it can be argued that what it proposes is an extrapolation of a discernible current condition where sea and land are no longer as antithetical as they were once conceived to be. Indeed, it is striking that while Attali's notion of 'nomadism', which had been developed by 1990, has sometimes been credited with helping spark the idea for the titanium-clad Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, the architect Frank Gehry transformed the notion into a marine theme; while Attali himself points out [2000: 225] that the extraction of titanium from the sea will be one of the activities highlighting the salience of marine affairs in the future.

Fourth, not only is the sea in some respects becoming more like land and, in other respects, land like the sea, but the interface between them – the coastal zones – have become something that require expert management. The conceptual blur between the two environments is happening, therefore, not only because the previously tight categorical boundaries are being erased, but also because the interface between them has become transformed from a grey area to an explicit category in itself.

Very Like a Hedgehog

Out of this comparison emerges the lineament of a cultural crisis, that is to say, an inability to think adequately about our complex relationship to the sea in cultural terms. There are various frames of reference that can be used to think about separate domains of maritime affairs. But the fragmentation in terms of policies is reflected in - and no doubt reinforced - by our modular way of thinking about the sea.

Whatever else is needed to overcome this modular thinking, three questions appear to be prominent.

The first concerns conceptual innovation. Arvid Pardo had coined the term 'ocean space' when he first broached the subject of ocean governance in 1967. The power of that notion both to crystallize and to enable further thought cannot be doubted. But is it still enough on its own, when today land and sea are increasingly appearing to be hybrid categories? Or is hybridity without conceptual innovation more difficult to handle?

The second concerns property relations. Pardo had famously proposed the notion of 'common heritage' of humanity, a revival and development of the

medieval commons - but unlike them, under planned management. The current trend in a sea like the Mediterranean is away from Pardo's recommendation and towards increased zoning on a national basis. Even so, this trend is a movement away from the classical notion of a *mare liberum*. And is the variable geometry of joint governance that might emerge — whether it involves regional management of a commons, or something else — adequately served by existing mechanisms of decision making? Is the complex cooperation required adequately served by the existing political culture and its personnel?

The third concerns the identity of each sea. Each is particular, not only geographically and biologically, but also socially. Therefore, would the development of a contemporary maritime commitment, as an intrinsic part of a form of life, not bring with it a cultural distinctiveness, of a new kind, to each sea, identity going hand in hand with difference? And would such cultural distinctiveness not require specific modes of reflection and dialogue, so that cultural policies would be particular to each basin?

The open-endedness of these questions is characteristic of the cultural crisis, in that word's original sense of crossroads. The answers will be articulated, as with all cultural affairs, in the process of action. But such action will need to draw upon the institutional creativity of its elites, a legal framework capable of handling the emergent property relations, and, not least, personnel trained in the exploration, exploitation, utilization and conservation of maritime resources. That is a wide span of functional needs. Yet, it is striking how much of it falls within David Attard's compass of interests: in joint management of resources and innovative property relations; in the education of, and community-building among, specialized personnel; in statecraft and a liberal international order. The diverse interests turn out to be inter-related, after all, given a distinct, vivid shape when seen through the lens of the twenty-first century's maritime challenge.

Bibliography

M. Augé, *Pour une Anthropologie de la Mobilité*, Paris: Payot, 2009.

J. Attali, *Dictionnaire du XXIe Siècle*, Paris: Fayard, 2000.

I. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953.

M.D. Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrine and Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

J.N. Corvisier, *Les Grecs et la Mer*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008.

C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London: Fontana Press, 1993 [1973].

F. Gipouloux, *La Méditerranée Asiatique*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009.

R. Sennett, 'Street and Office: Two Sources of Identity', in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds.), *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, London: Vintage, 2001.

C. Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in A. Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.