

The Mediterranean between hostility and hospitality. A school project realized by the classes II A, and II B, Scientific Lyceum, Istituti Medi Italiani, Istanbul

by *Davide Dodesini**

Abstract

What can the history of the Mediterranean Sea teach a group of Turkish students attending an Italian school? Hospitality and hostility are the two philosophical concepts underlying this project and research. What connects and divides the peoples and cultures living along the Mediterranean shores? How can the results of a school research be transformed into an iconic language, which can be displayed at an exhibition? In studying history, it is very important not only to focus on conflicts, but also to find links between cultures. The Mediterranean Sea is particularly suitable for such an approach, and the need to work on connections rather than divisions is quite urgent, especially given the many contradictions still shaping this area.

Keywords: Europe, Mediterranean Sea, Hospitality, Crossroad, Hostility.

1. The project

As a history and philosophy teacher, working at the Italian School of Istanbul, a context in which most of the students are non-native speakers, I often ask myself what kind of teaching activities can be engaging and, at the same time, make students learn meaningful contents and concepts. How can learning be encouraged, and help practice the use of a vehicular foreign language, in my case Italian, which is still difficult to master?

This question is always present in my daily activities and, in order to find viable solutions, I sometimes try to take different paths from the traditional lesson, proposing group activities, aimed to encourage peer research, and exchange of information.

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The choice of the theme to explore is linked to my reading of Caterina Resta's book, *Geofilosofia del Mediterraneo* (Resta, 2013). The book revolves around the invitation to think, starting from the place in which we find ourselves. In my specific case, the fact of living in Istanbul for work reasons, is in itself a displacement, which has imposed the need to carefully consider this fact, in order to connect my teaching activity – in an Italian school – with the Turkish context in which I work and where my students belong to.

The basic idea, underlying this work, was to get in touch with the complexity of the Mediterranean Sea history, carefully considering the concepts of contact and conflict, that have crossed it and which, still today, cross this sea where so many populations, cultures and historical facts have developed.

My purpose was to stimulate the students to try to imagine the Mediterranean Sea:

to see it with the eyes of a man of the past: as a limit, a barrier that extends to the horizon, as an obsessive, omnipresent, wonderful immensity, as enigmatic. Until yesterday [...] the sea remained boundless, according to the ancient standard of sailing, and boats always at the mercy of the whim of the winds, which needed two months to go from Gibraltar to Istanbul and at least a week, but often two, to reach Algiers from Marseille (Braudel, 2017, p. 33).

The current speed of movement of goods and people, if the attempt is to approach the past, needs to be set aside. This requires a considerable imaginative effort, which should lead students to understand the complexity of historical phenomena, and also approach the idea of “long duration” in the construction process of the variegated and ever-changing cultural identities, that have built the history of this “Sea among lands”.

2. Aims and purposes

Considering and analyzing the history of the Mediterranean Sea, what emerged is how difficult it is to draw clear borders between civilizations, populations, countries, languages, traditions and cultures. The awareness of how rich, and troubled, the history of the Mediterranean Sea is, needs to be seen as an opportunity to rethink its history, abandoning the devastating idea of rigid identities, that characterized its past, and focus, instead, on what is common and connecting, rather than dividing.

The Mediterranean Sea has indeed separated and still divides very different territories, which certainly have measured themselves:

through conflict, but, more often, confronting each other in dialogue and knowledge of the other, settling, over time, even common words, like that of

hospitality, which crosses the whole Mediterranean Sea, from the Greek *filoxenia*, to the *hospitality* of Abraham and his God who loves the stranger, to the *respect* due to the guest inherited from Latinity (Resta, 2013, pp. 21-2).

Considering the fact that, in our times, there is no lack of signs of a new, and dangerous hostility, I was anxious to favor the fact that students – especially my current students – could consider the possibility of reading history from a different perspective.

3. Organizing students' work

The two classes have been divided into groups. The composition of the group, chosen by the teacher, was made on the basis of their command of the Italian language, in order to have in each group students with a good mastering of Italian, who could, in some ways, act as peer tutors, especially in the reviewing phase of the final product.

Each group freely chose to develop a topic inspired by the key words that guided the entire work: “Hostility” and “Hospitality”.

The medieval period was their background and time frame, although some issues, especially the ones related to religious differences, different philosophies and numerous linguistic exchanges led to chronological encroachments.

The activity of the group was monitored by the teacher and, moreover, in its development was witnessed by a logbook. The research activity was developed at home, while the comparison and exchange of information, and the structuring of the presentation took place during class hours.

In one class, the work was developed according to the established deadlines, while extra time was required for the other class, due to some coordination difficulties among the group, and also a quarantine period due to the ongoing pandemic.

As a teacher, I tried to provide suggestions and evaluate together with the students the consistency of their research with the chosen topic. Some groups immediately identified the path to explore during the first “meeting”, for others, however, it was necessary to wait a while. Each member carried out the research activities independently, and then socialized it. The construction of the synthesis – expressed mostly through a PowerPoint – in many cases, but not in all, was the result of collective work.

4. Logbooks

Group activities often lead to complex and fluid dynamics, that the teacher is not always able to adequately supervise. This is the reason why I required the “logbook”; the logbook is a self-reflective tool, that

involves narrating oneself in a situation, and can be prelude to self-assessment. It is a tool, widely present in the pedagogical literature, and recommended in support of active and cooperative teaching. Each student in the group was given the task of filling in a page of the logbook, reporting, in addition to the objective data (date, attendance, etc.), also dynamic and subjective elements, such as the discussion that took place in presence and online (WhatsApp groups), the status of the work, and any encountered complication. The completion of these logbooks has been quite complicated, because the students are unfamiliar with the hermeneutical aspect of self-reflection, which requires a selection of the events to be reported, based on their significance and, therefore, it requires that each student should implement a personal and conscious interpretation of what is going on in the group.

The many difficulties that emerged were of great interest to me, especially in view of redesigning future similar experiences. In the first place, it became clear that even narrative and diary writing, an expression of a reflective and amnesic thought, suffers the linguistic barrier: to think and write in a non-familiar language isn't at all an easy task. In second place, an aspect that emerged from the writing of logbooks was the lack of "creativity" in their realization, especially in the integration between verbal and iconic languages to build their story-telling in a personal way. My direct instructions for the completion of the logbook page explicitly invited the student to use different means of communication, but for some reason, the results were dull.

5. The themes

The researched topics have been many, and all very interesting.

- The reading of Braudel's text and shared articles was the pretext for various insights such as, for example, the importance of the founding myths of civilizations, up to a critic reflection on the Iliad and the Aeneid.
- Others have explored the theme of the Crusades, with all their hostility and, at the same time, inevitably, as a form of exchange. By reading this controversial phenomenon, the students were able to reflect on the complex economic and political motivations, which were hidden behind the religious ones. In particular, the students, being citizens of Istanbul, were very interested in the IV crusade (1204), described as one of the bloodiest, the one that:

surpassed even the previous ones in terms of dishonesty, duplicity, brutality and greed. In the Twelfth century Constantinople was the most refined metropolis in the world from an artistic and cultural point of view and the main repository of the classical European heritage, both Greek and Roman. Its pillage entailed a loss

for Western civilization greater than the one caused by the sack of Rome by the barbarians in the Fifth century, perhaps the most catastrophic loss in all of history (Norwich, 2020, p. 253).

– The conflict between the powers of Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire also aroused a lot of interest, especially following the conquest of Constantinople, in 1453:

On Sunday April the 22nd, the Genoese colony in Galata stood looking stunned by the seventy ships Turks pulled slowly by countless oxen on a hill 60 meters high, and then gently made to descend into the Golden Horn [...]. On the last Monday in the history of the Empire, the inhabitants of Constantinople, and their emperor, left their homes and gathered for a last collective intercession. [...] When the procession ended, dusk was falling. From every part of the city, as if by instinct, people began to make their way towards the church of Hagia Sophia, the church of Saint Wisdom (Norwich, 2020, pp. 403-5)¹.

And again, on the triumph of Sultan Mehmet II, we can read the words told by Tursun Beg, a direct witness, who celebrates the power of his emperor when he enters Hagia Sophia:

The Sovereign of the Universe, after enjoying the spectacle of the marvelous and shocking works of art present in the concave part, rose on the convex surface of the dome. [...] When he saw desolation reigning all around, and the annexed buildings lying in rubble, he meditated on the inconstancy and inconsistency of the world (Tursun Beg, 2016, p. 158).

– Another particularly stimulating theme was the one related to food, and the continuity between territories in the use of certain ingredients such as the triad of olive, vine and wheat; even recipes that seem distant, however, refer to each other; it is, for example, the case of Spanish *tapas*, which can be directly linked to the Turkish-Greek *meze*.

– Another issue, explored by both classes, was the theme of language exchanges. Words, which travel from one shore to the other of the Mediterranean, become unwitting witnesses of a particular form of “friendship”; from east to west: zero, sugar, caravanserai etc.; from west to east: route-rotta, vase-vaso, theater-teatro, etc. Someone else dwelt on the concept of the Mediterranean *lingua franca*, one of the oldest hybrid languages, the traces of which are still visible today in many cultures.

– Other tracks explored were the stories of the maritime cities, and the centrality of harbors for the development and wealth of the Italian peninsula: Amalfi, Genoa, Pisa, Venice, are the signs of the centrality

1. On the last phases of the Byzantine Empire, see Ostrogorsky (2014, pp. 509 and ff.).

of this territory during medieval time; alongside the history of the Italian harbor cities, there is the history of Antalya, on the southern Mediterranean coast of present-day Turkey which, like Constantinople/Istanbul, is a contended city precisely because of its position. Once the Latin Empire fell (1261), it was occupied by the Seljuk Turks, who built a shipyard in Alanya, thus opening a new maritime perspective for the history of the Turks. In 1423 Antalya was incorporated by the Ottomans, and this fact led them to be new protagonists of the navigation of the Mediterranean Sea, a presence that leads to new conflicts, and exchanges.

These harbor cities are also the main protagonists of the immensity of exchanges of precious goods, languages, traditions, objects and habits, which traveled from the Far East to the Mediterranean Sea along the Silk Road. «Ships from Italy loaded their goods in the ports of Trebizond, Constantinople, Alexandria of Egypt and in the other ports of the Levant; they were mostly very precious and rare goods from various areas of Asia: sugar, cotton, medicines, perfumed essences, incense, precious Chinese silks, gold and silver threads, beautiful Persian carpets, African ivory, Chinese porcelain, Indian pearls and gemstones, and many other rare commodities» (quote from one of the students' presentations).

– A particularly interesting work was the one on cultural institutions of both the Islamic and the Christian civilizations. Stimulated by the history of the birth of universities, in particular the one of Bologna, students wondered if there were similar institutions in the Islamic world as well. Of course, such a comparison is a very slippery one, given that universities were born in the developing medieval cities, which somehow signals a first disconnection between the needs of a new society – the bourgeois society – and the ecclesiastical control of cultural production by the Church. In the history of the Islamic society, a similar phenomenon cannot be traced. However, an interesting fact emerged, with respect to the question about cultural institutions – albeit of religious origin – in the Islamic world. The interesting fact that caught the student's attention is that the first Madrasa was founded (859 AD) by a woman: Fatima El-Firhi, who had inherited money from her merchant father, and decided to use these resources to build a place of study.

Considering now the relationship between Western and Middle-Eastern philosophies, the differences in approach were highlighted, but also numerous exchanges emerged, especially in the Late Middle Ages. These exchanges are due to the "coexistence" between the Arab world and the Christian world in the Iberian Peninsula, and in Sicily.

The most significant areas of reflection on the cultural contamination between East and West are the following ones.

- If we consider, for example, the Iberian Peninsula, where alongside the *Reconquista*, which is a hostile war, that leads to the expulsion of Muslims and Jews, there is also the fact that Islamic culture, and even some texts of Greek philosophy, have reached the West from the East, and could be consulted by Christians because of this exchange.
- Islamic philosophy stems from a religious need; however, at the beginning, it enjoys greater freedom, therefore, to use the simple expression of a student, it is “more progressive” than the Christian one, because it is less institutionalized. The Islamic path brings towards Europe different forms of knowledge, which the Christian West looked upon with suspicion. The names of the Islamic tradition mentioned are: Ibn Sina, Farabi, Ibn Arabi, Mevlana, Hacı Bektaş Veli.

Direct contact with Islam broadened the horizons of the Iberians and also led some European intellectuals to Spain: Gerbert d’Aurillac, the future Pope Sylvester II, was not the only scholar to go beyond the Pyrenees attracted by the thirst of a knowledge that could not be drawn elsewhere on the continent. Mathematics, medicine, geography, the natural sciences were still viewed with suspicion in the Christian world; in the Arab world, on the contrary, they had developed to levels that had no equal since the days of ancient Greece (Norwich, 2020, pp. 161-2).

As a matter of fact, this presumed greater freedom is drastically reduced with time, and the scepter of innovative reflection passes, then, to the West in the early Modern Age.

- Regarding the aesthetic contamination between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea, represented by architectural and artistic exchanges, one student focused his attention on the city of Palermo during the Norman period. Norman art borrows, and readjusts the canons of Islamic architecture and Byzantine mosaics, an art whose presence is not new in Italian territory. This form of art, in Sicily, finds a new and very refined realization. Palermo, one of the crossroads capitals of the Mediterranean Sea, transforms contamination and exchange in its wealth, and it finds its triumph of “tolerance” under the emperor Frederick II. «Since the time [of Frederick II’s grandfather], Palermo was the most cultured court in Europe, a place where scholars, geographers, scholars of science and mathematicians, Christian, Jewish and Muslim, met» (ivi, p. 275).
- On the mutual support and reflection between East and West, the group that should have worked more deeply on the philosophical exchange between the Muslim world and the Christian world, was captured by Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, which emerged during a discussion:

I start from the assumption that the East is not a given natural entity, something that simply exists, just as the West is not. We must take Vico’s observation, that

men are the architects of their history, very seriously, and that what they can know is what they have done, to transpose it on a geographical level: as geographical and cultural entities, as well as historical, “East” and “West” are the product of man’s material and intellectual energies. Therefore, just like the West, the East is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, images and language that have given it reality and presence for the West. The two geographical entities support each other, and to a certain extent mirror each other (Said, 2020, pp. 14-5).

Chronological limits have been transgressed to deepen Said’s thought, but this research has allowed to take these results to be projected into the present, also highlighting how, even a certain Western celebration of the Middle East and its culture, can hide prejudicial forms. This fact necessarily needs to be considered, if we would like to open a new dialogue on and within the Mediterranean Sea.

6. The socialization of research, and the production of “thoughts on display”

The results of the students’ researches were socialized, and shared with the help of a PowerPoint. The presentations were an opportunity for further study of the topics, and to exchange points of view. The conclusion of this project, however, included a further step: the iconic transposition of what was understood and learned, in order to make it visible to a public.

The goal was bold and motivating at the same time: the aim was to transform the thoughts and concepts of the students’ researches into something, that could be exhibited during the XLI National Congress of the Società Filosofica Italiana.

After discussing with students, the possible graphic creation of maps as a background, in order to show the movement of people, goods, words, we opted for a more traditional form of billboards, which would collect part of the information and images that they gathered. The common thread that was used to connect the billboards is wrapped around the concepts of hostility and hospitality. Four posters (70x100 cm) were created, each of which alternated images, quotes, information chosen from those expressed by the groups in their presentations.

– The first billboard tells the story of how the work was carried out, its goals, and it implies the identity and starting point of the two classes, that is related to the fact of being students of Turkish citizenship studying in an Italian school. This condition gives rise to the interest and desire to investigate the ties and conflicts that ran/run across the Mediterranean Sea. The students write on the billboard as follows: «We are students of Turkish nationality, who attend an Italian school. This is a fact that makes the need to focus on exchange (hospitality) rather than conflict (hostility) urgent

and alive. The Mediterranean Sea is a *mare nostrum*, of all the peoples that overlook it, it is a sea of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and, despite the differences, and the diffidence, what we have discovered is that there are more things that unite us, rather than those that divide us».

- The second poster focuses on the concept of hostility between the ancient past and medieval history. Here the viewer could find some quotations on the Crusades, on different wars, on the distant past of this area crossed by many civilizations, which have “inhabited” its shores.

- The third billboard focuses on hospitality, which includes the exchange of goods, concepts, art and thoughts, that cross places and took root in languages, architectures, objects and cuisines.

- The last one, entitled *Mediterranean Sea: yesterday, today, tomorrow* wanted to testify, once again, the complexity of the relationships along this sea, which unites and divides, and the hope for new forms of dialogue between what we continue to call East and West.

7. The evaluation

Cooperative work always presents the crux of evaluation: what should one evaluate? The product or the process? And again: should one evaluate it as a collective or as an individual performance? When I was thinking of the areas to consider for my evaluation, I kept in mind the golden rule of cooperative learning: to promote personal and social responsibility for what needs to be done, therefore I set the goal of individually evaluating the students’ performance, keeping in the background an evaluation of the group work. One of the requirements that I explicitly set, was that each member of the group should present the part he/she developed, and that each one of them should speak for at least five minutes. The speaking part is very important, in order to unlock their active use of the language, something that they usually don’t practice much during regular lessons.

The Turkish system does not provide for oral exams, and even written exams are rarely structured with open answers or word processing, therefore it is necessary to gradually introduce this type of tests, so that students can achieve the right skills, in order to face the exams required by the Italian school system.

The overall evaluation was, therefore, the result of an average of: a score for the group activity (compliance with deadlines, consistency and collective review); an individual score for the logbook page (correctness and completeness of the information), and the oral presentation to the class (clarity, linguistic autonomy, correct choice of the images that accompanied the information).

8. Personal considerations by way of conclusion

A history and philosophy teacher, who teaches at the Italian School of Istanbul, cannot ignore the need for a critical reflection on European identity, which too often is structured against its own other. The interest, shown by the Turkish student, who presented the work on Said – obviously attracted by this concept – also stimulated in me the need to critically reflect on the way in which we tend to accumulate stories, cultures and narratives by conveying them through oversimplified categories, that so many times can build fences.

And, therefore, the hope, underlying the work I am presenting in this article, is that we all can try to find the bonds between the populations living in a specific and complex area, in order to enhance a new way of looking at a present history, basing it on friendship, as a basic human passion, and as a «dialogue [...] that interlaces the common world» we all live in, because «[w]e humanize what happens in the world and in ourselves only by talking about it and, in this speaking, we learn to be human» (Arendt, 2006, pp. 84-5).

I am personally convinced that it is an urgent necessity to tackle the very concept of Europe, and the fact that the idea of «Europe was born from this sea of differences, from this irreducible pluriverse of peoples and languages, forced to dialogue with each other, forced to an incessant effort of translation and distance», raises the need for a new question – which we must ask ourselves without pretense and rhetoric, and without hiding the many contradictions of our time – that is whether «this ancient sea surrounded by lands can be a model for a configuration that is not universal, but pluriverse of the world?» (Resta, 2013, pp. 74-6).

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