

Book Reviews

Dimitar Bechev and Kalypso Nicolaidis (eds.) *Mediterranean Frontiers: Border, Conflict and Memory in a Transnational World*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010, pp. 251).

Reviewed by Eyüp Özveren

From the Acknowledgements, we understand that this book is the product of RAMSES2 Network of Excellence on the Mediterranean funded by the European Commission. A workshop on the politics of memory in the Mediterranean convened in Aix-en-Provence in June 2007, and a conference on "Mediterranean Unions?" which took place in June 2008 are listed as among the major steps that led to the fruition of this project. In his Preface, Thierry Fabre, the Academic Coordinator of RAMSES2 Network on the Mediterranean and the host of the Aix-en-Provence workshop, notes "The universe of frontiers is the best prism through which one could view the Mediterranean in all its complexity." (p. xii) In his view, the Mediterranean is a "geo-cultural ensemble," (p. xi). He put the objective of the book-project as follows: "The book seeks to rethink concepts such as 'border', 'boundary' or 'frontier' and revisit the relationship between 'Self' and 'Other'. In so doing, *the authors hope to evoke a sense of 'we' around the Mediterranean*, which distinguishes without merging, separates but at the same time links—this is what animates the book which carves out a new field of inquiry." (p. xii; emphasis added). In Thierry's mind, the unity of the Mediterranean can even be discerned where it is most split, that is the borders. Moreover, a consciousness of a collective identity and destiny waits to be recovered by reading and writing about the "kaleidoscopic Mediterranean world." If only Fernand Braudel, the eminent historian of the Mediterranean world, saw this Preface, he would be much moved indeed.

In contrast, the editors appear far less enthusiastic about this end, as manifest in their Introduction. Bechev and Nicolaidis quote post-Braudellian Mediterraneanists Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (of the 2008 conference) as their momentary point of departure to which they return after a long detour by characterizing the Mediterranean as the '*liquid continent*' (p.8). They opt for the fragment over the totality as when they speak of the homogenizing constructs such as 'tyranny of oneness' as an attribute of the Mediterranean (p. 7). They feel on home ground when they step to EU policies, Barcelona Process, and the Union for the Mediterranean. They claim: "This book seeks to examine the current policy discussions about security and cooperation in the Mediterranean from a deeper historical, sociological and anthropological perspective." (p. 2) In other

words, we are in the domain of international relations supplemented with a depth, thanks to neighboring social sciences. Fortunately, rather than targeting exclusively mainstream Europeanist policymakers and shunning everyone else, they acknowledge “advocates of a truly post-colonial, decentred EU” who might have lessons to infer from the Mediterranean experiences (p. 8).

The editors in their Introduction score considerably better than standard international relations specialists insofar as they recognize the need for scholarly depth as would befit interdisciplinary—if not exactly transdisciplinary—Mediterranean Studies. On the other side, they score poorly when compared to Mediterraneanists who adopt a truly transdisciplinary approach with a strong and critical background in one or more of the social sciences and in history. It is paradoxical that their discourse, in close connection with the Union for the Mediterranean initiative of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, comes to be reviewed here at a time when the same president took his most concrete Mediterranean initiative by initiating the bombing of Libya. Unlike what the title implies, the Editors do not engage in a discussion of either what their own original conception of the Mediterranean is, or what they see as ‘transnational’ about this ‘world’. Had they been able to do this, the book would have measured up to the expectations raised by its title.

Whereas the book does not measure up to its ambitious title, it is to the merit of the book that individual essays are on the whole above the average of existing literature in their respective subfields.

In Part I entitled ‘Constructing Borders and Memories’, there are three articles. Kerem Öktem’s “The Ambivalent Sea: Regionalizing the Mediterranean Differently,” fails to regionalize the Mediterranean differently and succumbs to the historical survey of the regions that come to mind at a first guess by recourse to a flamboyant and occasionally obfuscating language. Occasionally the author draws outrageous conclusions such as when he summarizes the Turkish experience of modernity: “It turned on itself in an often reckless and violent project of social and demographic engineering to create—ultimately unsuccessfully—a homogenously Turkish and Muslim, yet formally secular nation-state.” (p. 27)

Fatma Ben Slimane’s “Between Empire and Nation-State: The Problems of Borders in the Maghreb” offers a valuable incursion to the history and conception and ultimately fixation of borders in the region. Nora Fisher Onar’s “Turkey in the Post-Ottoman Mediterranean: Transcending the ‘West’/‘Islam’ Binary?” is an above the average overview of Turkey’s identity by way of overusing the concept of ‘creative adaptation’. Finally, Dimitar Bechev’s “The Uses of Empire: Myths and Memories in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean” focuses on the consequences of a transition from a

world of empires to one of nation-states. Bechev speaks of "Turkish free thinkers" noted for their "criticism of the rigid nationalism of the republic" (p. 76) who seek inspiration in the Ottoman paradigm. One cannot help wishing to have known some of these "free thinkers"!

Part II consists of three articles on 'Revisiting Memories to Transform Conflicts?' Marie Claire Lavabre and Dimitri Nicolaidis, in their "Can we Act on Memory...in the Mediterranean? The Case of Algeria", dwell upon on how memory functions on the ground among the real people along an axis that links France with Algeria. Because it is an in-depth study, its commitment to the Mediterranean remains in the title. Bojan Baskar's "'That Most Beautiful Part of Italy': Memories of Fascist Empire-Building in the Adriatic" is yet another impressive case study. It weaves past with present in a balanced account of the Italo-Adriatic axis. The third piece is Franziska Brantner's "Memory, Conflict and Gender: *Women in Black* in Israel/Palestine and Former Yugoslavia" This piece stands out as a comparative study that relates two cases within the Mediterranean context. Its gender-conscious perspective casts old conflicts and the way to come to terms with their memory in a new light.

The last part of the book is entitled 'Crossing Borders, Confronting Memories'. Raffaella A. Del Sarto's "Borderlands: The Middle East and North Africa as the EU's Southern Buffer Zone" pairs nicely with Fatma Ben Slimane's essay in Part I. It explores the border regimes of Fortress Europe by recourse to flexibility and rigidity as well as to the idea of a neo-medieval empire. The lucid mind and exposition of the author leave little to be desired. Henk Driessen's "Borders Besieged: A View on Migration from the European-African Edge" is a case study with a strong feel of the historical formation of 'enclaves' and of the unfolding of successive practices of border permeability and rigidity. Cedric Parizot's final piece, "Hardening Closure, Securing Disorder: The Israeli Closure Policies and the Informal Border Economy between the West Bank and Northern Negev (2000-2006)" is again an excellent case study demonstrating how borders undermine their very own logic by cultivating networks that operate across them.

On the whole, the case studies are of better quality than the Introduction, and among the former, anthropological studies outperform historical studies in general. If the editors and authors had had another chance to go over the papers in a workshop, a mutually beneficial exchange among parties concerned would have helped develop the book into a tightly knit piece within the domain of Mediterranean Studies proper. A final chapter or an epilogue by editors would have drawn conclusions that pull pieces together and formulate arguments of relevance to the Mediterranean at large. Without this being done, the readers are left on their own to move beyond the singular pieces and to get to the whole picture. In short, as it

stands, this edited volume remains a useful book to consult for the sake of disparate individual articles.

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