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Anthony Jones

- 1 In 2006, a group of scholars from Spain and the United Kingdom gathered in Barcelona to discuss the state of research on the Mediterranean region and to look for ways to integrate academic research more fully. The impetus for this came from the fact that scholarly activities were fragmented along a number of dimensions, and that as a result their impact was less than was either possible or desirable.¹
- 2 Although the amount of research has increased substantially since then, the degree of fragmentation has not noticeably changed, and the cumulative payoff of research efforts remains less than it need be. The urgency of this issue has been highlighted by both the volume of research findings that are now available, and by the events of the recent past; from the Arab uprisings to the crisis in Southern Europe; from the devastating effects of civil war and massive displacements of populations to the increasing threats of terrorism; and from the collapse of the European Neighborhood Policy in the East and the South to the reemergence of conflicts that had long been thought superseded by new dynamics. Just as scholars of the Soviet Union were caught by surprise by the collapse of the USSR, and were unprepared for the resurgence of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, scholars of the Mediterranean are having to deal with surprising events and an uncertain future. In a way, this is to be expected of any field of study that deals with unfolding events, since the very nature of current history is the unexpected ways in which events develop. The complexity of factors and the multiple ways in which they interact makes prediction not only difficult, but often foolish. There is no reason, however, why probabilistic evaluations should not be attempted; in fact, they are a good way of testing our knowledge and understanding. What this requires, though, is a more holistic approach than has so far been achieved.
- 3 As we think about these issues and of how the field of Mediterranean studies might respond, it will be necessary to take stock of what we have been doing so far, and to see

what resources there are that might be put to use more effectively. In looking back, it may be useful to consider the patterns of research strategies that characterize the field, and to look for ways to connect them more firmly to each other. Is there a need for more cumulative outcomes of these strategies, and if so, how might they be achieved? And lastly, what practical steps might we take to integrate the field more closely, so that differing research foci contribute to the overall understanding of the Mediterranean.

- 4 Seven years after the formation of the *Encuentro* group, le Centre de la Méditerranée Moderne et Contemporaine in Nice and Sciences Po in Menton convened a meeting to consider how the events of the last two or three years have affected the research agenda of Mediterranean scholars. At this meeting, many questions were raised about what the field has accomplished to date, and what changes might be made in the light of recent events.
- 5 Some thoughts on these questions are offered in what follows.

Patterns and Goals of Research

- 6 Why do we study the Mediterranean? How do current events, academic interests, and political forces shape what is studied and the interpretations we make of research data? As Thomas Kuhn and others have pointed out, research can be seen as having two main states, a period of “normal” science in which there is a high degree of agreement on what should be studied and what the theoretical apparatus driving research should be, and another period when such agreement breaks down and the basic approaches are reconsidered and amended in radical ways. Although the notion of paradigms remains controversial, it can be argued that the study of the Mediterranean has taken place within a set of widely shared assumptions; it can also be argued that the field is facing a number of challenges to the way it operates, and that now is an opportune time to rethink how we conceive of the purposes and conduct of our work.
- 7 A major reason why research on the Mediterranean geographic region is facing new challenges and opportunities is the series of events there in the last four years. Prior to the Arab uprisings, the agenda was more or less set, and while there were differing points of view the issues addressed were more or less agreed on by analysts. A second major reason is the recognition that attempts to engineer a more integrated, democratic, economically developed region have not succeeded, and that the future of this part of the world is uncertain and unstable.
- 8 In looking for ways in which research can adapt to the new challenge, we need to look at how scholarship has been organized up to now. This is a complex task that requires serious thought, but at the risk of a huge oversimplification I would suggest that, in general, research on the Mediterranean can be divided into four very broad categories.
- 9 First, there are those studies aimed at getting the long-term historical record established for the Mediterranean geographic region, of devising useful periodizations, and identifying trends. This work deals with the big picture, focusing on long term issues by synthesizing the results of studies dealing with specific places and times. The goal of these surveys is to search for long term trends, identifying the rise and fall in global significance of the Mediterranean rim, the rise and fall of empires, and the reasons for the eventual and continuing marginalization of the area.

- 10 Second, there are studies of specific countries with a focus on their domestic political, economic, cultural, and social characteristics. The emphasis can vary from establishing the structures and interplay of forces, to coverage of specific events, to attempts to identify trends and to predict possible futures. These studies are generally concerned with medium and short term issues.
- 11 Thirdly, there are considerations of the extent to which the Mediterranean can really be seen as a region in any meaningful sense beyond that of geographic proximity to a shared sea. Work on the cultural anthropology of the Mediterranean has sought to establish characteristics that were specific to the area, while in more recent times this has been replaced by the search for ties and relationships that are strong enough and integrated enough to justify defining the Mediterranean space as a region. This category would also include a large number of studies of multi-lateral and bi-lateral economic and political relations (either through choice or by force), and their national and regional implications. This research has been dominated in recent years by analyses of the regional integration efforts of the European Union, looking at the range of programs and initiatives that have been developed during the last half-century or so. In addition, there are studies of the role of actors from outside of the Mediterranean area (such as the USA, Russia, and more recently China) in influencing regional dynamics. While much of the literature has been generally aimed at the medium term, more recently the focus has been on attempts to construct regional ties through European Union sponsored programs during the last two decades.
- 12 The fourth and last category overlaps in various ways with the other three, but has some characteristics that make it worth considering in its own right. It consists of attempts to identify a set of factors that have a widespread influence on affairs in the region, such as geographic (physical and geo-political) conditions, ecological problems, patterns of migration, and more generally a wide range of political and military security issues. By their nature, these studies are generally long or medium term in scope.

The Issue of Cumulative Understanding

- 13 In each of the four categories, research has established an astonishing wealth of data, and our understanding of the structures and dynamics of the Mediterranean during the last few thousand years has been greatly advanced because of it. At the same time, this success has created new challenges, especially regarding the present time and the recent past. The amount of research has been escalating quickly, but to a large extent it has moved ahead of our ability to synthesize it, to see how the parts fit together. In this sense, the fragmentation of the field has not only continued, it has become worse. As studies have become more detailed, our understanding of the big picture has become more blurred. A consequence of this has been a tendency to become fixated on the topic of the moment, and to even over-simplify what are very complex and often contradictory processes. There is too much to deal with, too many literatures to master, and no single scholar is equipped to deal with all of the specialized fields of research. It is easier to engage in synthetic research when dealing with long-term, historical analyses since one does not have to deal with the twists and turns of daily events and the new research data that complicate the picture further.

- 14 As is true of any attempt to study developments in a geographic area, research tends to split into two separate strategies.
- 15 One is to follow the area studies approach, which looks at a specific nation or area in depth, searching for basic characteristics of culture, mentality, and social structure. This is an important path to understanding why a particular group of people might do what they do, and it has the advantage of giving an in-depth and culturally-founded view of a people and their world view. The danger is that this can also turn into an exercise of defending the “uniqueness” of a people, and thereby getting in the way of looking at commonalities of thought, action, and interests. The result of this is to emphasize those things that set the society apart from other parts of the world, and to thereby miss the ways in which they are subject to similar processes.
- 16 The other approach is to follow the disciplinary path, looking at elements of the society from the point of view of, say, political science or economic theory. In this case the focus is not on uniqueness, but on the extent to which structures and dynamics are shared with other societies. The goal can be either to apply what is learned from the study of other societies to a particular case, to unravel its dynamics and potentials, or to test a discipline’s theories in a new context. The disciplinary approach has the strength of bringing to bear on a topic the experience of a variety of peoples, cultures, and contexts, of applying what has been discovered through the analysis of one context to new places and situations. In this way, not only can the basis for generalizations be created, but questions may be asked that might not be apparent from the purely area study approach. The negative aspects of disciplinary studies, however, are that conclusions drawn from one context may easily be misapplied, used in contexts that are inappropriate and from which misleading conclusions can be drawn. In addition, the disciplines involved can easily become silos, resisting influence from outside and refusing to work with variables and concepts that they consider the bailiwick of “the other” disciplines.
- 17 In either case, the analysis stays within disciplinary boundaries, and is not systematically concerned with how institutional spheres dealt with by other disciplines are interacting. Unlike area studies, the danger here is not to miss commonalities between cultures and nations, but to assume too great a similarity.
- 18 Both the disciplinary and area studies strategies are limiting; the former because systemic dynamics are not dealt with, and the second because there is too much attention given to these dynamics. If these two strategies are not systematically connected, we can be lead into the twin errors of assuming that certain institutions are incompatible with a specific culture or that all cultures are equally receptive to particular institutions.
- 19 The challenge is to find better ways to combine the local differences uncovered by area studies with the insights gained through the comparative approach of discipline-based research. This is needed not only to better deal with a nation’s domestic dynamics and possibilities, but also to see how national dynamics fit into those of their regional neighbors. In the case of Mediterranean studies, this becomes especially important.
- 20 In sum, lack of integration of research is a major barrier to cumulative progress in the field, and the cumulative understanding that does occur tends to be within specific fields, rather than of the Mediterranean as a regional space. This inhibits the degree to which we can understand and explain trends and events that are the result of an

interplay of many diverse factors. Developments that (in principle, at least) might be able to be foreseen are missed, and we are caught unprepared. Likewise, post hoc analysis tends to emphasize one or another factor rather than the interplay of factors. Fragmentation, therefore, continues.

Practical Steps to Increase Integration

- 21 To identify a problem is a necessary step, but finding ways to solve it is difficult. There are a number of paths, however, that may improve the situation even if they do not solve the problem. A few possibilities would include the following:
- 22 a) More systematic collaboration is needed between researchers working in different fields. For example, there are very few cases of economists and political scientists working together to see how these two spheres affect each other. Many issues are dealt with in isolation or are connected in only limited ways. In addition, there could be greater connections between studies of short and medium term trends. While many studies are informed by a sensitivity to how they fit into longer term issues, many studies of medium term trends could be mined for insights into more recent issues.
- 23 b) Many of the trends and problems of the region are connected with what is happening elsewhere in the world, in particular the need for the Mediterranean nations to adapt to a global economy and to the spread of specific ideas and institutions. All of the research shows that the region is poorly connected to the global system, and that both the northern and southern shores are in their own ways finding adaptation difficult and painful. Systematic research on how the need for, and lack of, adaptation is affecting relations within the region is greatly needed. This applies to the countries of the Northern rim as well as those to the South, since they are experiencing serious difficulties in adapting their way of life and expectations to the demands of competitive survival in a global age. Finally, greater attention needs to be given to the role of external agents, a topic of even greater importance than before given the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the reactivation of the Black Sea as a militarily strategic area, and the increasing presence of China in the Mediterranean and in Africa more generally.
- 24 c) More attention needs to be given to the issue of neighborhood effects. Virtually all of the research on neighborhood is from a European perspective, either looking at the European Neighborhood Policy and its goals and outcomes, or at the ways in which developments on the southern shores affect Europe. What is missing is a sense of the Arab neighborhood, of how what their neighbors are doing influences specific Arab nations and populations. The only time when there seemed a possibility of this perspective taking off was during the Arab uprisings, when the notion of contagion began to be taken seriously. Also, we need to know more about the influence of place and distance in both domestic and regional dynamics. How does place and distance affect public opinion and the views of leaders? This has not developed into a specific area of research, however, and so our understanding of how the Arab neighborhood operates on a regular basis is very limited.
- 25 d) In the same way that more attention needs to be given to the Arab neighborhood, more research is needed on how the MENA nations view the region. Of necessity, studies of the EuroMed programs are highly Eurocentric in content and vision, and this is not surprising given that they are essentially European products in content and

vision. There has been a move toward having the MENA nations as partners, but unlike Europe's neighbors to the East they are not given the status (yet) of possible EU membership. We need to know about the details of how MENA populations feel about this and how they view the region in general.

- 26 e) Much has been written about the failure of the Barcelona process and attempts to breathe some life into it, but there has been insufficient research on what effects its various components might have had. For example, have programs aimed at training local officials, inspectors, police, accountants, etc., had any effect? Have programs like this changed people's views of Europe or the region in any way? In sum, what can be learned from experience so far? There is a great deal of commentary on the big issues of attempts at region-building, but little data on the details at the local level. A major contribution that scholars could make would be to make a stronger connection between the studies of region-building in the Mediterranean and the large literature on region-building elsewhere.
- 27 f) A major barrier to the integration of research, and of cooperation across disciplinary boundaries in general, is the difficulty of accessing the results of research. For people who are entering the field for the first time, and even for more seasoned scholars, the literature is so scattered that locating it is not only time-consuming but a hit and miss exercise. A lot of excellent work goes unnoticed, and the field suffers as a result. While there has been a recognition of this problem for many years, we are still lacking the means to overcome it. What is needed is a clearing house, a website that will give access to all of the work being done on the Mediterranean or that is relevant for the interests of Mediterranean scholars. One of the things that becomes clear in any survey of the literature is that much research of great value is under-utilized. For example, the publications of the FEMISE network, or those of Plan Bleu, are not widely referenced outside of the field of economics and environmental studies, even when their findings are central to a topic being discussed. It is surprising how often postgraduate students studying the Mediterranean, or even researchers, have not heard of them or are unaware of what they do. The many institutes and foundations and other organizations that publish important research need to be connected via a website, and just as importantly need to be more liberal in their willingness to allow free access. While there may be some small loss of income if they do this, the use of their publications and references to their institutions will show their funders that they are being taken notice of and making valued contributions both to knowledge and to the thinking of policy makers.
- 28 g) In addition to a clearing house for information, there is also a need for more sites to connect researchers. While there are many networks that connect institutions and programs, and while individual scholars have their own networks of colleagues, it is still difficult to know exactly what work is being done. This means that the possibility of cooperation or collaboration is left to chance encounters or to staying within one's own network. While the realities of the academic world make people wary of losing control of whatever rewards or recognition come from research and publication, there needs to be more collaborative work if the fragmentation of the field is to be reduced. A clearing house that provides information on research projects either contemplated or in process would enable people to connect and find ways to combine disciplines or interests. Since there are limits to how much an individual can do, collaboration is the only way that the breadth and richness of knowledge can be synthesized.

- 29 h) Finally, and possibly most controversially, we need to be more involved in policy-relevant research. It is understandable that scholars might be resistant to this since they fear loss of control of their research agenda, but fears about this can be exaggerated. One of the strong arguments made by the *Encuentro* group is that the fruits of research has had little impact on policy-makers engaged in region-building, and that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership programs had suffered as a result. This is a point that cannot be made too strongly. The amount of effort and money spent on region-building and democracy-promotion over the last twenty years or so has been staggering, and whatever one's views on the desirability of these efforts it is clear that the results have been (as far as we know) a waste of resources. In addition, the lack of results may have created new problems, such as a loss of interest on the part of funders in going any further, and a loss of hope on the part of those who may have benefitted from the programs. Scholars can contribute significantly to rethinking the regional challenges in the Mediterranean, and to helping to design any future programs in a way that makes sense given what research has uncovered about national and regional dynamics. An example of this would be the issue of region-building mentioned above, since many of the mistakes of the European Neighborhood Policy could have been avoided if the planners had been more cognizant of the experiences of other parts of the world, and less confident that they could use the same approach in the South and the East that they had used to create the EU itself.

Conclusion

- 30 The meetings convened by le Centre de la Méditerranée Moderne et Contemporaine and by Sciences Po Menton were intended to open a dialogue on the implications of recent events in the Mediterranean for the conduct of Mediterranean Studies. The discussions at those meetings ranged over a wide array of issues, and many participants addressed the ways in which their own thinking and approach to research could be adjusted to deal with the new realities. Many also raised questions about how these events had thrown into doubt many of the assumptions underlying the field, and about the changes that need to be made. While no clear consensus emerged from the debates, what was clear was the commitment of participants to being open to new directions for research.
- 31 It was also clear that they see the study of the Mediterranean not as just an effort to understand a particular geo-political space but as a vitally important element of our attempts to understand the global forces at work in the Twenty First Century. All of the issues of our century meet on the shores of this sea. This is where three very different continents meet, where competing cultures interact, where differing kinds of economies and politics are neighbors, where rich and poor are in contact, and where aspirations and opportunities collide. What we can learn by studying this area has significance well beyond its shores, and what scholars can contribute to improving the lives of people around this and other seas can be of real value.
- 32 While it is impossible here to do more than hint at the richness of the debate in Nice and Menton, it is hoped that it contributes to the continued health and importance of Mediterranean studies.

NOTES

1. Richard Gillespie and Ivan Martin (eds.), *Researching the Mediterranean*, Second edition, Barcelona, CIDOB edicions, 2009. The *Encuentro* of Spanish and British scholars that provided the ideas for this report created a daunting list of challenges that need to be overcome if the study of the Mediterranean is to move ahead as it should. The discussions took place before the Arab uprisings, and so were dealing with the state of Mediterranean studies under “normal” conditions. While I refer to some of the issues raised by the *Encuentro* scholars, my purpose here is to emphasize how recent events have made the need to rethink research strategies even more urgent, and to offer some additional suggestions for change.

ABSTRACTS

Although the amount of research in the field of the Mediterranean Studies has increased substantially since 2006, the degree of fragmentation has not noticeably changed, and the cumulative payoff of research efforts remains less than it needs to be. Seven years after the formation of the *Encuentro* group, le Centre de la Méditerranée Moderne et Contemporaine in Nice, and Sciences Po in Menton convened a meeting to consider how the events of the last two or three years have affected the research agenda of Mediterranean scholars. At this meeting, many questions were raised about what the field has accomplished to date, and what changes might be made in the light of recent events.

Même si le nombre de recherches relevant des études méditerranéennes a significativement augmenté depuis 2006, la dispersion du champ de recherches n’a pas significativement changé, et le bilan cumulé des efforts de recherche demeure inférieur à ce qu’il devrait être. Sept ans après la formation du groupe *Encuentro*, le Centre de la Méditerranée Moderne et Contemporaine et Sciences Po Menton ont organisé une rencontre pour analyser la manière dont les deux ou trois dernières années ont affecté l’agenda de recherches des chercheurs en *Mediterranean Studies*. Lors de cette rencontre, beaucoup de questions ont porté sur ce que ce champ a réussi à faire émerger, et sur les réorientations à envisager à la lumière des événements récents.

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