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Developing Images of a Region through Education:
Identity and Otherness in the Mediterranean

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In modern nation states education has been used, among other things, to reinforce the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991), to consolidate and reproduce and, at the same time, to preserve, transmit and enlarge what was/is conceptualised as "national culture". To this end, clear-cut boundaries shaping the national narratives of identity and otherness are constructed, often based on shallow stereotypes and prejudice.

Although nation states still remain the basic organizational units of the international order, they suffer major changes which redefine or sometimes mutate their established roles. The globalisation of economic activity and cultural expression, the voluntary resignation of national sovereignty to supranational structures (such as the European Union), can be counted among the things which have resulted in the emergence of discourses on regional/post-national (or, in some cases, sub-national) integration/fragmentation, on the recognition of a syncretic/interactionist rather than a mono-cultural regional tradition. These processes produce new types of identities and reinforce new aspects of otherness in cultural, but also in economic and political, terms.

National identities are usually complicated; outcomes of a synthesis of social, economic, political and cultural narratives. They are deeply bound with the territorial dimension of the state, or as the Greek poet Elytis (1991) said, they are "the orthography of people on the territory they inhabit", and they are constructed from religious, ethnic, racial and gender factors. We tend to agree with Edgar Morin (1987), who described identities as "multiple unities" consisting of different concepts and levels of belonging, developed in the course of life of a person.

The Mediterranean has been for centuries the medium, which both brought closer and divided diverse civilizations, which marked the boundaries of the West and the Orient, of (geographical but also, economic) North and South. Its different shores have represented, on many occasions, the "other" against whom European identities were opposed. In this paper we investigate which are the "images" of the Mediterranean and the different people who live in the region, and which are the ways they are constructed and projected through the Greek education system. We emphasise the role of education and school knowledge vis-à-vis the construction of significant discourses about the national "self" and the "other" since, as it has been stated, "the understanding among the peoples is fostered by the knowledge of the Other", and the school "holds an important place in construing the image of the other, in preventing prejudice and in combating racism" (Euro-Med, 1997), the opposite being true as well.

We have attempted this by:

a. Analysing the content of the official textbooks which are used in Greek primary schools and,

b. Analysing a large number of interviews with Greek primary school teachers.

Our analysis has focused on:

- How are the Mediterranean region and/or the Mediterranean people presented in the textbooks?
- What are the teachers' views of the Mediterranean space and/or the Mediterranean people?
- How do these affect/influence the discourse of regional integration/fragmentation?
- How do these construct aspects of identity and otherness among people living in the same region?

We have chosen as the main focus of our analysis the views projected in the textbooks and in the perceptions of teachers, since these two significant factors of education can affect in many ways the learning process in schools, not only in an explicit, officially anticipated manner, but also through latent procedures. Since our research project is still under way, this paper will be more a preliminary statement of our findings than a fully-fledged report of research.

The Mediterranean – Images and Realities

Paul Ricoeur describes "areas" as accounting for "specific model of connection between places". Different disciplines define areas in different ways, according to their intellectual inputs. In our project we do not necessarily seek an educational account of the Mediterranean, we rather seek to grasp the meaning of the region as it permeates the Greek system of education. We need to go further than the geographic definition, which describes the region as "stretching from the northern limit of the olive tree to the northern limit of the palm tree" (Braudel, 1972). We need to see how cultural similarities and differences, social myths and realities, distanciations and nearings, voiced and silenced discourses, realise the visualisation of the Mediterranean in education.

Taking a first look at the region, it is easier for the researcher to envisage the differences than the similarities. As Braudel argues "it would be difficult to recognise any unity in this dense, composite and ill-defined world … other than that of being the meeting place of many peoples, and the melting-pot of many histories" (op.cit., 1972). Sultana (1998) clearly points out that in order to examine the Mediterranean, the researcher has to invent it first, to construct it as a regional entity.

Following the facts, we can start by saying that the geographic area of the Mediterranean covers about 3 million sq. kms and includes 20 nation states (with the addition of Portugal). On its shores live about 450 million people, with 2/3 of this population living on the southern (Arab) shore. The demographic trends indicate that the Arab population will continue to grow faster in the future than the European. Among the Mediterranean people there are significant differences in financial status - per capita GDP varies from less than 500 to more than 22000 dollars - as well as in division of labor, as the Middle East has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. There are significant differences in political situation (from dictatorships and religious fundamentalist regimes to young and established democracies), and the stability of the territory, with the Arab/Palestinian – Israeli dispute over the Gaza strip being a major "hot issue" of international politics. There are vast differences in the quality of life (the Middle East again is one of the least food-self-sufficient areas in the world), in infant mortality, in

literacy rates (from 34% to 99% of the population), in fertility rates, in religion etc. These differences apply both to the North (European) – South and to the East – West axes, making it even more difficult to see any uniting features in the area.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the American President Theodore Roosevelt declared "the death of the Mediterranean Era", predicting the shift of power from Europe to the U.S. and to the Pacific powers (Barraclough, 1966). Today, such a statement clearly underlines a situation where the Mediterranean struggles between a glorious past and a dubious future.

Despite all these seemingly insuperable divisions, today there are significant attempts to construct/invent the Mediterranean coming both from within and from outside the region, with the European – Mediterranean countries, especially those which are members of the European Union, playing the leading part. In the last decade, a number of conferenceshve been organised stressing the need for Intra- and Euro- Mediterranean cooperation in financial, political, social and cultural issues, and most European institutions (such as the EU, the Council of Europe, the OSCE) have declared a Mediterranean policy. The MEDA (I and II) Initiatives are a good example of these policies as perceived by the European Union. Much emphasis was placed on "the external and internal causes of the shortfall in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and the prospects and means of restoring a balance along the lines of partnership" (CSCM, 1995).

What is the message from these activities? For many, it is an attempt to secure what is perceived as the "soft belly" of Europe, a time bomb of poverty and overpopulation along the Union's Southern border. Europe has to do more about these neighbors, or else Europeans will find them besieging "fortress Europe". Some see these initiatives as attempts of the EU "not to assist in the creation of a trans-Mediterranean network but to consolidate a European sphere of influence" (Calleya, 1995, c.f. Sultana, 1998, Joffe, 1998).

If this gives us a picture of what is the situation today, we have to keep in mind that in the course of history, the Mediterranean has been viewed by the Westerners/the Europeans both as the cradle of the European civilization which flourished (according to the majority of the European historiographers – accused of "Eurocentrism") on its northern/European shore, from Ancient Greece to Rome, and as a representation of the "other" in racist (the "Mediterranean Race"), in religious (the "unfaithful"), and in value terms. Different epochs produced different discourses about the Mediterranean and its people, dictating the distance of the region from the European political, economic and cultural hinterland.

Building on the concepts of the Mediterranean as the land of the "other", some intellectuals, such as Samir Amin, accuse Europe of constructing a European past which denies its Oriental "ancestry" by starting the narratives of the history of civilisation from Ancient Greece, which is perceived as detached from its Mediterranean/Oriental milieu. Such a vision of things, they argue, promotes racism, annexes Christianity to Europe while it was born in the Near East (Amin, 1989), and gives rise to arguments which have been pursued by others like Bernal (1987), Said (1979), etc.

However, from this diverse region some anthropologists have, over the past 30 years, identified certain "traits" that would account for the people of the Mediterranean. As Gillmore wrote, such traits include "a strong urban orientation; a corresponding disdain for the peasant way of life and for manual labor; sharp social, geographic, and economic

stratification; political instability and a history of weak states; 'atomistic' community life; rigid sexual segregation; a tendency toward reliance on the smallest possible kinship units (nuclear families and shallow lineages); strong emphasis on shifting, ego-centered, non-corporate coalitions; an honour-and-shame syndrome which defines both sexuality and personal reputation; ... intense parochialism and inter-village rivalries; communities which are marked off by local cults of patron saints identified with the territorial unit; a general gregariousness and independence of daily life characteristic of small densely populated neighbourhoods where patterns of institutionalised hostile nicknaming abound, where belief in the evil eye is widespread, and where religion plays an important institutionalised political role, as do priests, saints and holy men. Marriage patterns, while superficially varied, signal the unity of the Mediterranean through the practice of the dowry. And there are important similarities in politics also, with weak bureaucracies at the national level leading to unstable democratic regimes, often alternating with dictatorships of both Right and Left. At the micropolitical level, this emphasis on informal personal power rather than formal institutions is reflected in the reliance on patronage, with clientage being the preferred form of adaptation to the social inequality of the region." (Gilmore, c.f. Sultana, 1998).

The general themes of this account, namely the the institutional deficiencies, the economic/financial and political/bureaucratic particularities, and the socio-cultural realities, are the main axes for the contemporary construction of the Mediterranean (see for example the proceedings of the Conference on "Constructing Mediterranean Region" (1999) organized in California).

But one can increasingly discover less scholarly images of the Mediterranean, developed by the tourist industry (the "Club Med" is a current example) or lifestyle approaches, such as the "Mediterranean Cuisine". Since these images are easily disseminated through the mass media, we can be sure of their influence on how people think about the Mediterranean and its people.

The Mediterranean in Education

1. Educational initiatives

The last twenty years a number of initiatives have been launched, dealing with the cultural/educational dimension of the Mediterranean. One of the first agencies that took interest in the area was UNESCO, which recognised the significance of the Mediterranean as a "sea of human civilization". In 1995 Unesco launched the "Mediterranean Programme" aiming at the promotion of cultural cooperation, peace and international understanding in the region.

The European Union launched the Med-Campus and MEDA Programmes and the institutions of higher education in the area formed the Community of Mediterranean Universities.

One of the initiatives which deserves to be mentioned is that called the Mediterranean Education Programme, which originated from the University of Malta, with the support of many of the above mentioned international bodies. This aims at the establishment of specific measures concerning the development of educational studies in the region (Sultana, 1998).

While there are many projects attempting to grasp the totality of the area and to study its various aspects as a whole, not many focus on education. As Sultana points out, while there are about 600 journals and periodicals dealing with issues about the Mediterranean, only one, the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies,* focuses on education.

2. The images of the Mediterranean in the textbooks – some remarks about the images of the other in education

School textbooks can tell us much about the degree of ethnocentrism in a system of education, and the representations of the national "self" and of the "other" in wider society (in the case of Greece, see e.g. Fragoudaki – Dragona, 1997).

The literature reveals that the European and American textbooks used in education from the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th located virtually everything significant which had happened in the world on the European continent, with the addition of the African and Middle East shores of the Mediterranean - the birth of civilisation, and the "Bible Lands". It was only after the World War II that the westward course of civilisation (from Greece to Rome to Western Europe) continued its advance to the USA. As Blaut (1993) argues, textbooks are an "important window into a culture". On many occasions they also serve as "semi official statements of exactly what the opinion-forming elite of the culture want the educated youth of that culture to believe to be true about the past and present world".

3. The case of Greek textbooks

The Greek education system accepts one and only one official textbook. The Law 1566/85 "Structure and Function of Primary and Secondary Education" defines absolutely what is a textbook, who can produce it, who approves it and who decides on its dissemination.

The usual procedure is that a textbook is entrusted by a ministial decision to a group of authors, under the auspices of the Greek Pedagogical Institute. These authors, who in most cases come from within the GPI, are given detailed information about the content of the textbook and of the pedagogical principles it should follow according to the official curriculum. Unlike many European countries, Greek curricula are very detailed documents, describing not only the goals to be fulfilled but also the procedures to be followed. Textbooks are usually accompanied by teachers' books, which dictate approaches to different learning units and include sources for further elaboration of the contents of the textbooks.

4. The textbooks we chose for the research

For the purposes of our research project, we investigated every textbook used in primary education for the school years 1997–98 and 1999-2000. We attempted a content analysis to determine the qualitative and the quantitative characteristics of the content of the textbooks around themes connected to the Mediterranean (the geographic entity, the people, the cultures, the economies, the politics). We reviewed the relevant scholarly literature to identify the traits which are referred as characterizing the Mediterranean in order to conceptualise how "identity" and "otherness" appear in various disciplines, and we then selected several thematic axes and we pursued them qualitatively and quantitatively in the textbooks. A small sample of our content analysis, concerning the textbooks used in the area of Greek literature and language – learning for the 5th grade of the primary schools (9-10 year-olds) is presented in Annex.

5. Perceptions/Views of Teachers. Identification with Mediterranean stereotypes

We have chosen to study the views of teachers because through the prescribed and the hidden curriculum teachers play an important role in the development of ethno-cultural concepts, values and attitudes. It is well documented, however, that teachers contribute greatly to the formation of the hidden curriculum by expressing directly or indirectly their views and attitudes. The interviews used in our research project were conducted from May 25 to June 15 1998. The interviewers made use of a questionnaire, with both closed and open questions, to interview primary school teachers. The questions addressed the particular characteristics of the investigated population on the one hand and their knowledge, their attitudes and their perceptions and views on the Mediterranean and its peoples.

Some of the findings of the interviews were:

- Teachers identify themselves more with the Mediterranean people than with other Europeans, Balkanians, or people from the Orient.
- The Greeks had more significant cultural exchanges with other European Mediterranean people (e.g. Italians) than they had with other Europeans, Balkanians, Mediterranean non-European.
- We Mediterraneans perceive ourselves to be: declarative, open, optimistic, insincere, easily adapting, anti-racist, dialectic, individualist, consistent.
- When teachers are asked to distinguish between three types of Mediterranean people (the European, the Asian and the African) the traits mentioned above fit the European type.
- Problems of the Mediterranean are considered to be: violation of human rights, racism, poverty, insecurity, centralism, low levels of industrialization, environmental problems.
- When it comes to the three Mediterranean regions, these can be further categorised as (a) European Mediterranean - environmental pollution, unemployment, bureaucracy, violence and crime, alienation of people, low birth rates, (b) African Mediterranean and (c)Asian Mediterranean - low industrialization, economic recession, high birth rate, unemployment, lack of quality in everyday life, violence and crime, a widening gap between poor and rich people, insecurity, political instability.

Some Concluding Thoughts

In the course of time and history many different images of the Mediterranean have been developed. The most persistent was of the Mediterranean as birthplace of civilization, but even then people, and especially Westerners, tended to ignore the contribution of the Orient. Greek textbooks present only the Mediterranean of the past, virtually the image of a Greek sea, or a sea where Greek civilization, culture, money, ideas and order prevailed. They do not give a current picture of the region, and they tend to ignore the non-European people of the area. Greek teachers identify themselves with a certain type of the Mediterranean; one who has the qualities of the Europeans but who prefers a more relaxed, joyful view of life.

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ANNEX

Content analysis – A small sample

Greek Language/Literature – 5th Grade/Primary Education
Textbook Title: "My Language", 4 Books, and 94 Units

<u>Thematic</u>:

- The Sea, Ships, Sea People
- Travelling, Explorations
- Ancient Greek Myths, Plays
- Contemporary Tails, Stories, Plays, Greek and Foreign Writers
- Greek Nature, City and Countryside, Seasons, Climate Phenomena
- Greek Folklore Tradition, Social Events, Emigration of Greeks
- Family Life, Human Relations
- School Life and Ceremonies
- National History and Life
- Religion, Religion Art, Religious Life
- Technology, Space Age

<u>Units with direct reference to the Mediterranean</u>

- The Passion of Andreas
  A little boy who dreamt of travelling across ancient Mediterranean, the routes of Ulysses.
- Don Quixote
  Two units on the adventures of Quixote and Sanco.
- Explorers of the Past
  Kid Archeologists, learn about the excavations on Pompeii and Egypt, Tunis, Rome.
- Arion
  The myth of the ancient singer who travelled on a dolphin in the Mediterranean.
- The Birth of Jesus in the Byzantine Art
  A description of the birth of Jesus, the places, the people, the epoch, through Byzantine icons.
- Old Michalis Kasialos
  The biography of a Cypriot painter, events from the contemporary history of Cyprus (Colony, independent state, divided island after Turkish invation).
- Machines in the service of Man
  Referring to the Ancient Civilizations of the Middle East, where metals were first deployed to make equipment.
- Cape – Cat
  A tale from Cyprus featuring cats travelling from Asia Minor to the Island.
- The Children of Cyprus
  The children in the Cypriot fight for Independence.
- The Greek Mediterranean
  Ancient and contemporary Greeks travelling for commerce, settling, adventuring in the Mediterranean.