Turkey, Europe, Mediterranean: “A common destiny”? Cultural interactions in a comparative perspective from the second half of the 19th century

Since the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (1453) there have been continuous political, economic, commercial and cultural contacts and mutual representations between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Several works have been published concerning the cultural interactions between the Turks and Europe, focusing on the mutual influences in different fields such as theater, literature and the arts. In particular, historians have devoted much attention to the study of the European representations of the Turks and their culture. Since the second half of the 19th century the European experience of a constant evolution and still continues to influence the political and cultural dynamics between Turkey and Europe. The rule of the Islamic-rooted AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), and the last harshly repressed public protests in many Turkish cities after Gezi Park, brought back on the agenda the debate about Turkey’s inclusion in the European Union, and the legitimacy of Turkish participation in Western culture. However, in this growing corpus of studies analyzing different aspects and constantly opening up new research perspectives, the Turkish imaginary about Europe has been largely neglected. While the European representations of the Turks have been numerous, the images that Turks developed about Europe and the Mediterranean, though scantier, are certainly not less relevant. This is shown by a new and productive field of research which has emerged in the last years analysing various texts produced in the Turkish-Ottoman context, that seems to indicate that Turks were anything but disinterested in the Christian world.

More recently, an increasingly growing number of scholars, building on Fernand Braudel’s belief that “the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, [and that] the whole sea shared a common destiny”3, re-established the importance of the Mediterranean as a privileged space of encounters, mobility, interactions and renegotiation of identities among different actors coming from both shores of the mare nostrum 4. Within the framework of this new dialogic approach, a growing number of studies have begun to challenge the traditional notion of a fundamental separation between Turks and Christians as well as dealing with the image of the Turks developed in contexts outside Western Europe. This emerging field of research, questioning the antagonism so far implied in categories such as East and West, forces the historians to rethink thoroughly the nature of the cultural, political and religious relationships in the Mediterranean basin.

While several studies concerning these Mediterranean relationships in the Early Modern period have been published in the last years, for what concerns the more recent history, the relationships between the Republic of Turkey and Northern Europe have been heavily studied – mostly considering the Turkish migration in countries such as Germany, France or The Netherlands. Instead, almost uncharted are the relationships between Turkey and Mediterranean Europe. These mutual relationships, even if still mostly unexplored, could represent a profitable standpoint through which to observe the “South” with a “Southern gaze”. A tool allowing scholars to re-establish how linguistic, literary, and artistic interactions, as well as popular culture, contributed to a mutual cultural development and important social interconnections in the Mediterranean.

Promoting an interdisciplinary approach in this issue, Diacronie proposes the collection and comparison of mutual cultural, linguistic, and religious representations developed in the Turco-Ottoman context, in Europe and in the Mediterranean, from the second half of the 19th century. The “gaze” of the “Other”, therefore, is here presented as a hammer to break the conventional image of two worlds in constant conflict with each other; a gaze interpreted as a tool of identification, recovery and discovery, of common features, without ignoring the inevitable contrasts and differences.

Using these approaches, this issue aims to analyze the mechanisms of circulation and spread of knowledge in disciplines such as language, literature and translation, geography and cartography, gender studies and the arts.

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