

## **Civil society and cultural heritage in the Mediterranean - Introduction**

### **Civil Society, Culture, Cultural Heritage and the Cases of Two European Commission TEMPUS Projects**

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#### Part 1

#### **Introduction**

Being called and organised by the European Commission's EUROMED HERITAGE Programme, one of the underlying concerns of this conference is clearly the relationship between Europe and the Mediterranean. Our particular task here is to consider the specific relationship between the 'institutional Europe' of the EU authorities, including those in the EC, on the one hand, and Mediterranean civil society on the other. What, we may then ask, do the two parties to this relationship exchange? What would we like them to exchange? Or, to put it in a slightly different way: given the amount of social, cultural, and intellectual inspiration that Mediterranean civil society in all its forms has historically given to Europe, what can Europe give in return? We might agree that the best gift institutional Europe could give would be a commitment to listen more closely to the plurality of the voices of Mediterranean civil society – and then absorb these voices into European thinking and policy. In this view, a substantial part of the theme of "mobilising civil society around cultural heritage" in the Mediterranean involves thinking about how Mediterranean civil society might mobilise the structure, processes, and attention of institutional Europe - for we would certainly all agree that our conference is about a type of mobilisation that needs to be both mutual and reciprocal.

The topic of my own talk, "civil society, culture, and cultural heritage", starts with some general conceptual and definitional ground clearing. Once that is done, however, we will use the cases of two recently completed three/two year long EC TEMPUS (defined below) projects that I co-ordinated with my colleague Jonathan Karkut - one in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the other in Palestine – in order to anchor these preliminary generalities to the more knowledgeable voices of those postgraduate students who participated in the two projects, both of which were focused upon Mediterranean civil society, culture, and cultural heritage. Both projects involved the delivery of Master degree courses. I will focus in particular detail on a selection of the graduates' final dissertations as these pieces of work give as clear a vision as we could wish for about the subjects and themes of our discussions today and tomorrow.

To start, though, with an opening consideration of the three main terms of the conference: civil society, culture, and cultural heritage.

#### **Civil Society**

Our conference agenda lists at least 11 examples of organizations and/or social categories that belong to what we would recognize as 'civil society' ranging from the people and activities of this research centre itself and schools in Palermo, to architectural associations and women's groups. Why then, you may ask, is it necessary to say much more at this point? We already know what civil society means. Possibly: but do we always appreciate its significance? Ideas about 'civil society' have been around for over 2000 years. In classical Greece writers including Plato and Aristotle associated civil

society with that sphere of 'good society' in which order would be achieved and conflict resolved through negotiation, agreement and lack of violence. In Rome, Cicero's linked the idea of '*civilis societas*' to participation by civilised citizens in a 'civil life' to be found beyond the boundaries of the political community. The notion was picked up with enthusiasm by thinkers of the Enlightenment. Jean Jacques Rousseau, for example, found in civil society a social space in which individuals and collectivities could *both* find freedom from the constraining demands of state *and* exercise their innate senses of order and justice in their relations to each other. Coming closer to our own time the early twentieth century thinker, Antonio Gramsci (whilst acknowledging that they overlapped) distinguished between *political society* consisting of state bureaucracy, army, police, legal system, and so on, and *civil society* made up of institutions such as the family, workers unions, voluntary associations, and so on. Recently, the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics built on all of the above writers, defining civil society in terms of a diversity of social and political spaces, actors and institutional forms populated by organizations such as those we have already listed and many more – libraries, religious associations, advocacy groups, trade unions, and so on. In one of the few specifically anthropological discussions of the subject, Chris Hann associates the sphere of civil society with "ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life".

We may take from the above that civil society may be found outside and/or beyond the level of the state in a social sphere that is simultaneously voluntary, relatively free, flexible, and given to peaceful and negotiated alliances, including cross border and international ones.

## Culture

'Culture' is a slippery and complex term with a potentially huge scope. Thus in 1924 the anthropologist, Edward Tyler, defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". This broad definition retains some value because it suggests that we can find culture both on the widest imaginable canvass as well as in the smallest detail. Culture is everything and everywhere: as much in the way we perform the most intimate personal actions as to the ways we conduct our trade and foreign relations. Moreover, in the global society in which we are all members, culture flows from one end of the world to the other and round again, disdaining any inconvenience from national frontiers. Culture and passports, however authentic these latter may be, are not congenial bedfellows.

Acknowledging the value of Tyler's Olympian view, I would like to come down to earth with a slightly more prosaic definition: namely that culture consists of the ways and means *we communicate about identity*. On this subject there is no finer authority than Amin Ma'alouf. Eschewing any type of singular identity, Ma'alouf tells us that he thinks of himself as French, Lebanese, and Christian. He adds "the fact that my mother tongue is Arabic, the holy language of Islam, creates bonds between me and all those who use it every day in their prayers". He also insists that identities routinely encompass a myriad of allegiances, associations, and solidarities associated with family, neighborhood, village, country, religion, political disposition, personal and collective history, and so on. It is an approach mirrored throughout the Mediterranean. Henri Lefebvre, the celebrated French social geographer, observes that the fact that "in all large cities of the Mediterranean everyone from childhood hears several languages" commenting that this is just one of several features of Mediterranean urban culture that makes it fundamentally "polyrhythmical" - that is to say open to the distinctive rhythms of individuals, groups, families, languages, religions, and histories. In Lefebvre's view the Mediterranean city thus appears as a sort of musical polyphonic score.

## Cultural Heritage

Associated as it is with *inheritance*, 'cultural heritage' is a term that sounds benign enough. It speaks of shared identity, belonging and inclusion within a group or category of persons with the right to 'inherit' this or that bit of culture. However, as we know very well, in the real world, it is also a notion that often becomes entangled with contention and outright violence as groups and individuals dispute who is the proper and legitimate 'owner' of a given piece of cultural heritage site, object, or representation. After all, as family members from the bible onwards have occasionally if routinely discovered, there are times in life and death when the price of our *inclusion* and/or my *inheritance* is their *exclusion* and/or my brother's *disinheritance*.

Some might argue that the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean has often appeared, both historically and more recently, to be marked by fracture and contention. Nevertheless if we build on the work of Ma'aluf and Lefebvre and think of the works of other writers such as Claudio Magris on cosmopolitan Trieste, Amitav Ghosh's re-reading of the *Geniza* - that collection of texts about Jewish life in the medieval Islamic world - Amiel Alkalay's "Beyond Arabs and Jews", Charles Tilly's work on Mediterranean contention itself, not to mention much earlier writers as such medieval Arab travelers as Ibn Batuta, one comes face to face with a region described by these and others as one whose cultural heritage lies fundamentally in the capacity of its cultural sites, spaces, objects, and representations to express the multiple, complex, layered, trans-frontier cultural identities of its inhabitants. These and other comparable texts speak with the same cultural intonations as the TEMPUS projects we will now come to.

Before turning to these projects, however, there is one final preliminary point, namely that there are no such animals as 'history' and/or 'cultural heritage' to be found 'out there' in some way independent of what we make of them. We could echo Marx's observation that "men make their own history albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing" by saying that *we* make our *heritage* albeit (also) not in the circumstances of our own choosing. Which is one way of saying that when we come to a topic like cultural heritage we need to be aware that it comes into existence only within the political and economic contexts in which it is found. Even if cultural heritage is not quite politics in disguise, no-one could sensibly take issue with the fact that cultural heritage runs to a considerable extent on fuel labeled politics and economics and/or that our discussions here involve asking not only 'what is the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean' but also 'how do we understand the political economy of cultural heritage in the region?'

## Part 2

### The EC TEMPUS Programme

TEMPUS is the acronym for **T**rans-European **M**obility Programme for **U**niversity **S**tudies. Its aim is to move universities within and outside Europe into the forefront of development and to embed their work within layers of civil society in the countries in which its projects operated. Our own task was to educate and train cadres of experts (about 35 in all) capable of carrying forward institution building and development in the field of civil society, culture, and cultural heritage in BiH and Palestine. We worked in several partner universities: Sarajevo, Banja-Luka, Bologna, and London in the Bosnian case, Bethlehem, Joensuu (Finland) and London in the Palestinian case and studied 6 central topics: cultural histories, pilgrimage and tourism, natural and cultural capital, cultural policy and planning,

imagery, regional and cross border cultural heritage, and the sustainable development of cultural institutions.

As already noted I concentrate here on a small selection of the final dissertations. Recalling that we have framed the definition of culture in terms of expressions of identity, the account is structured in terms of four particular ways in which culture and cultural heritage is represented and organised, namely: through the construction and management of space; in the writing of cultural histories; in the uses of art/literature/music; and in the ways that culture and cultural heritage are shaped and managed politically and economically.

### **Cultural Identity, Cultural Heritage and the Spheres of their Symbolic Expression and Organisation**

#### ***Space***

A Bosnian thesis examined the role in the country of natural/national parks, emphasising four main points about their importance to the cultural heritage of the country. It explored the organisational, political, and cultural implications of building the parks as spaces that celebrated regional, including Yugoslavian, identities rather than ethno-nationalist Bosnian Muslim, Serb, or Croat ones. Thus, for example, memorials to the partisans and to Tito spoke of former Yugoslavia whilst the numerous *stecci* or medieval tombs in the parks were presented as symbols of the cultural unity of BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia – all of which countries have such tombs (which are now all due to join the UN World Heritage list).

A Palestinian thesis took up this rural *motif* and examined the possibilities, implications (including to the tourism offer) and practicalities of thinking of Batir, a village a few kilometres from Bethlehem, as a site in which visitors might encounter Palestinian rural heritage. Apart from being a very beautiful village, with natural springs and pools, and agricultural terraces originating from (at least) Roman times, and good vantage points for bird watching, Batir has a lively and effective local council and civil society. The convincing argument was made that the village could support and derive benefit from a particular type of tourist (and the market is undoubtedly there to be tapped) interested in Palestinian culture and nature. It could also be the ideal location for a state of the art museum concerned with Palestinian rural culture. Fully aware of the challenges of such rural heritage tourism, she tells us rightly that “there is a need for public and private partnerships to develop and manage tourism in rural areas. The local community has to feel it has ‘ownership’ of the industry in order to accept and support tourism activities on its land”.

A third thesis in the group brought us back to our home territory of Bethlehem. The thesis concerned the recovery of one of Bethlehem’s ancient streets, route of the Latin patriarch and his followers to the Nativity church on Christmas Eve, and formerly a working street of artisans and craftsmen. The author traced the work of Bethlehem’s Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP) as it attempted to retrieve the fortunes of the street and its former residents in the run up to the Christian millennium celebrations in 2000 – partly by opening up the street to new types of cultural tourist. It examined the complex relationships between the private, public, and intermediate actors and institutions, including foreign donors, and demonstrated that such a scheme could only work within a framework of tightly drawn policy that ensured that the public good was assured in the face of unregulated private sector operations



## Histories

One of the Palestinian theses examined the work of the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) – particularly in relation to its organisation of tours for foreign university students, diplomats, and backpackers – and its production and use of the best overall historical tourist guidebook we have of the country, namely Palestine and the Palestinians. Starting with a view of Palestine as the source of the three Abrahamic religions, the book covers the tragedies of the Palestinian *naqba*, the uprooting of villages and the creation of refugees in 1948, the place of Palestine in the various cultural regions it straddles, including the Arab and Muslim worlds, Europe and Christian worlds, as well as the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian populations in Israel. As the ATG's guidebook tells us, in co-operation with appropriate Israeli partners, the group organizes tours in Palestine and Israel along with “encounters with Palestinians and Israelis” and “interfaith meetings with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish personalities”. The first time I personally visited one of the illegal Jewish settlements on the West Bank I did so with the ATG who at that time had a good working relationship with a rabbi in a settlement near Bethlehem.

A second largely historical thesis was by a graduate from Banja-Luka, the main city of the *Republika Srpska*, the Serbian ‘entity’ in BiH. Here the aim was to compose a national curriculum to train Bosnian tour guides and to start up a tour guiding school in two locations, Sarajevo in *The Federation* and Banja-Luka in *The RS*. The school was to be founded on the history of religious and cultural pluralism within which contemporary BiH was a part. Less than a decade after a bloody civil war in which eternal primacies of ethnic histories, identities, and boundaries were being trumpeted from all corners of the country, the thesis contained a quiet but determined proposal to set up a practical cultural tourist related institution not only to address head on the ethnocentric ideologies that had underwritten the war but also to engage staff and students in co-ordinated co-operation across entity boundaries, thus making a seminal contribution to national and regional peace processes. Additionally, such a proposal as this *precisely* fulfilled the exhortations of the TEMPUS Programme to find ways of fitting private and public sector initiatives together and so enhance socio-economic development.

## Art, Literature, Music

One Bosnian thesis focussed on the National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina situated near the old Ottoman city centre of Sarajevo with the main aim of identifying and describing why this institution represented the heart of the cultural heritage of the city and BiH itself.

Before the Balkan wars this was one of the great libraries of the world – housing a unique collection of books and manuscripts in many languages including Arabic and Hebrew and being a potent symbol of Bosnia's Bosniak, Croatian, Serbian, Jewish, Latin, Western European, Persian, Turkish, and Austrian cosmopolitan identity. The author quoted the Bosnian writer Jasna Samic on how in the Ottoman period some Bosniak literature was written in Turkish, Arabic and Farsi, whilst using many Bosniak words, and how a particular poetic genre (of *Alhamijado*) was written in Bosniak - by Bosnian Muslims using Arabic script and by Bosnian Jews using Hebrew script. And it was, precisely, the building that housed this library that was the first building to be incendiary bombed in the siege of Sarajevo, burning in the process the majority of priceless manuscripts, books, and archives. Thus was destroyed one of the greatest testaments not only to the cosmopolitan heritage of BiH and the region, but also to Europe, Mediterranean, Middle-East, and to the common histories and literatures of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The thesis argued that the restoration of the library would enable the city once again to assume its former role as cultural crossroads between east and west.

A Palestinian thesis considered the role of the dance form *dabke* in Palestinian culture. The writer described the historical transformations of *dabke* as it moved from being associated primarily with rites of passage of Muslim families to becoming one of the cultural forms of mobilisation during the first *intifada*, spreading in that context to Christian neighbourhoods. Now it is increasingly becoming part of the repertoire of cultural events/offers on which contemporary Palestinian tourism is based as well as being taken to foreign dance and music festivals. The author was careful to point out that *Debke* was only one out of many Palestinian musical developments – including the emergence of the well known genre in the schools of Syrian refugee camps of ‘refugee rap’.

### **Political Economy of Cultural Heritage**

One Palestinian thesis in this group spoke of the need for the establishment of a Palestinian Tourism Board. The argument here was that this institution would have the capacity to bring coherence to Palestinian tourism strategy by introducing the dynamism of the private sector into planning without losing the containing organisational structures of the public sector in the shape of the Ministry of Tourism. A Bosnian dissertation mirrored very similar concerns and was concerned with administrative arrangements needed to organise the cultural industries sector at the level of state rather than the existing fractured landscape of “2 ‘entities’ and ‘three peoples’”, two and a half governments in the same country. A Palestinian thesis took up these and other issues by constructing a publicly available web site [[www.visitpalestine.ps](http://www.visitpalestine.ps)] covering both necessary practical information needed by the traveller as well as comprehensive lists and reviews of Palestinian cultural life and cultural events, enabling in the process the independent traveller to navigate his/her way around a field that tends to be dominated by large tour operators.

Another Palestinian thesis examined the possibilities and modalities for the town of Beit Jala, close neighbour to Bethlehem, to take a leading role in introducing tourism to the municipality. Here the role of the Palestinian diaspora, especially in Chile and Latin America, was examined in the light of its importance to the future economy and society of the town. The writer, a practising architect, and advisor to the Municipality of Beit Jala, drew our attention to the importance to the residents of the municipal park, the music academy, the new library, and other such developments, stressing the links between domestic and foreign leisure and tourism.

### **Summary**

What do these thesis tell us? How do they link with the way we framed the topics of civil society, culture, and cultural heritage in the earlier part of this talk? Here are three suggestions:

Firstly, nearly all of them are concerned with expressions and representations of ethnically plural and cosmopolitan cultural identities. Most place the cultural heritage of BiH and/or Palestine within the wider cultural frameworks of the Balkans, Middle-East, Europe, and/or the Mediterranean itself. The approach lends itself happily to cross border co-operation involving Bosnians and civil society groups in all the states of former Yugoslavia, Palestinians with Israeli and Jordanian civil society groups.

Secondly, as already noted, many of them take care to stress in detail the links between the cultural heritage sector in fields such as cultural tourism, museums, dance, design, libraries, and so on, and specific and relevant civil society groups in the two countries concerned – such as the women’s group

in Batir village, the municipality of Beit Jala, families who host the independent tourists of the ATG, and so on.

Thirdly, all are concerned with very practical issue of how culture and cultural heritage may be used to contribute to economic self-sufficiency and the kind of policy arrangements needed to advance this. In each of the cases in this field there is a clear recognition that cultural heritage can thrive in a political economy in which the private and public work together.

### Part III: BiH and Palestine post TEMPUS

Using the eyeglasses of our two TEMPUS projects, we may now look out across the contemporary landscapes of BiH and Palestine, reflecting on what they look like, and then return to institutional Europe.

Starting with Bosnia, the most recent report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) (2009) reports 40% unemployment that is inevitably accompanied by heightened nationalist/ethnic rhetoric. The former High Representative, Lord Paddy Ashdown, has recently written gloomily about the country sliding backwards into conditions comparable to those of pre-war days. Our TEMPUS graduates spelt out clearly how a tightly organised cultural tourism sector operating at state and regional level could be the engine of an emerging post-war economy, but little action followed – and many of personnel and departments in the institutions of the EU, UN, World Bank, and other bodies have moved on. The result is that the door remains wide open for a type of frontier capitalism that pays scant attention to the demands of the Bosnian environment, society, or culture. Sarajevo hotels have been added to the portfolios of property investment houses, but the national library remains empty and unused. Mostar remains as divided as ever, despite the re-building of the bridge. Religious competition is rife between mushrooming Saudi funded mosques and ever-larger Catholic and Orthodox churches.

As for Palestine, its natural and cultural assets and heritage are being stripped and degraded by the day. The winner of the 2008 Orwell prize for Literature, Raja Shehadeh describes how “The hills (on which I started walking as a child) were like one large nature reserve with all the unspoiled beauty and freedom unique to such areas”. Now, however, the region is promoted to would-be settlers in terms of the desirability of its biblical landscape. But, as the Israeli architects Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman have observed: “that which renders the landscape ‘biblical’ - its traditional inhabitants, cultivation in terraces, olive orchards, stone building, and the presence of livestock - is produced by Palestinians whom the Jewish settlers came to replace. The very people who cultivate the ‘green olive orchards’ (of the brochures) and render the landscape biblical are themselves excluded from the panorama. The Palestinians are there to produce the scenery and then disappear”. Indeed, the suffocation of Palestinian towns, cities, and villages, continues apace. In two days time, for example, settlers led by a group called *Women in Green*, protected by the Israeli army, will continue moving inexorably towards establishing a settlement on the very borders of Beit Sahour, neighbour to Bethlehem, thus closing the circle of settlements around the city.

Our TEMPUS graduates invite us to look towards a future in which the kind of Mediterranean cultural heritage described by Ma’aluf, Lefebvre, Ghosh, Magris, Ibn Batuta, Alkalay, Shehadeh, and many more - not to mention Fernand Braudel himself - could be recovered in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Palestine with the active participation of universities, cross-border associations, and other civil society groups operating in the region precisely in the moulds set out by writers from Cicero to Gramsci and more recent writers and scholars. The voices of our graduates speak of a Mediterranean



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culture of open borders and free flows across them of goods and people. For BiH and Palestine, not to mention the peoples and states of the wider regions, the beneficial economic consequences of such openness would be immense.

But what we actually have in BiH and Palestine is quite different: in Bosnia rising unemployment, ethno-nationalism and religious particularism; in Palestine deepening occupation, ghettoization, ethnic cleansing – and the Wall. So where, we might ask, as a way of ending this talk, is institutional Europe? What is our response to those Mediterranean voices that we hear habitually in our projects – exemplified as they have been here in relation to two particular countries but nonetheless relevant to the region more generally? We may begin to address this question only after we acknowledge the painful fact that, in crucial respects (some of which have been alluded to here) both conventional states and the European Union itself have failed the Mediterranean. But in its framing and construction we may hope that this conference opens the windows to another and more open landscape in which Europe establishes, not before time, a truly reciprocal tryst with Mediterranean civil society and cultural heritage.