

The Mediterranean: international region and deadly border

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Abstract: Anssi Paasi's research has contributed significantly to how political geographers understand the interrelated concepts of region and border. Paasi argues that regions and borders are both territorial and relational in that they are based on material practices in the landscape but also are created, reproduced, and contested through narratives. This article applies these ideas to the Mediterranean, a region with a long history of connection but with a current discourse and practice of division as the European Union attempts to limit the movement of immigrants through the sea, to argue that the idea of regions and borders are produced through 1) the iterative process of material interactions with the landscape and other humans and 2) symbolic representations of these spaces and relationships.

Introduction

The Mediterranean is a region that has connected people for millennia and is the site for international region building efforts in the form of the Union for the Mediterranean. It is also a border that divides Europe, Asia, and Africa and serves as a barrier to prevent the poor from reaching the European Union. From 2004 to 2014, 20,000 people died while attempting to enter the EU, the majority of them losing their lives as their ships sank on the passage through the Mediterranean Sea (Brian & Laczko 2014).

Anssi Paasi's contributions to the field of political geography, which have focused on the interrelated concepts of region and border, provide the perfect theoretical lens for understanding the conflicted space of the Mediterranean (Paasi 1996; 1998; 2003; 2004; 2009; 2011; 2012). Rather

than thinking of regions and borders as fixed things that exist in the world or as relics of the past that are superseded by a world of flows, Paasi asks us to focus on the complexity of the mutually constituted nature of these terms, and their contested practice in the world. On the concept of the border, he writes:

“One important change in research has been the abandonment of the view of borders as mere lines and of their location solely at the ‘edges’ of space. This has helped to challenge the strictly territorial approaches and to advance alternative spatial imaginations which suggest that the key issue are not the ‘lines’ or ‘edges’ themselves, or even the events and processes occurring in these contexts, but non-mobile and mobile social practices and discourses where borders – as processes, sets of socio-cultural practices, symbols, institutions, and networks – are produced, reproduced and transcended.” (2012, 2304)

Similarly, for regional identity:

“Rather than as an empirical entity defined in terms of its inherent qualities or as the product of the identification of its inhabitants, regional identity is understood in this paper more generally as a social construct that is produced and reproduced in discourse. The discourses of regional identity are plural and contextual. They are generated through social practices and power relations both within regions and through the relationships between regions and the wider constituencies of which they are part.” (2013, 1208)

Paasi does not reduce border and region to maps nor does he fix them at any location or time. Instead, they are always in process, contested, and practiced in relation to conceptual ideas and material places. This paper considers the uneasy and shifting relations surrounded the Mediterranean Sea to analyze the process through which the idea of the Mediterranean as a region and border is produced.

The Mediterranean as a region

The Mediterranean is perhaps the human world’s earliest region. It served as a highway linking early civilizations whose expansion was facilitated and limited by its extent. Maps of the Greek, Roman, Islamic Caliphate, and Ottoman civilizations only make sense in relation to the Mediterranean. The Romans called it *Mare Nostrum*, our sea, and others referred to it as the Roman Lake. The trading powers of the middle ages in Venice, Genoa, and Aragon (Barcelona)

were based on the networks these cities developed throughout the Mediterranean. Given the sea’s central role to successive civilizations, who used the sea to connect cities and populations and spread economic, cultural, and political systems, it would seem likely that there were be common threads of identity tied to it. However, there are not.

The question of why a regional identity did not coalesce is often as interesting as why it did. Despite the long history of movement, economic and cultural exchange, and connection around the Mediterranean, today it is not thought of as a single space, or even as a point of connection, but rather as a point of division. Instead of a single region, it is where three continents meet and has no less than twenty-three different sovereign states along its shores. In the past thirty years, there has been a renewed effort at international region building in the Mediterranean, not to overcome the boundaries that separate the states and continents, but to reinforce them.

As the European Union was established, leaders described the Mediterranean as an area of concern based on non-democratic governments and the possibility for population movements (Jones 2006). The EU sensed instability in the region, which of course played out in 2011 with the Arab Spring, and planned to create economic and institutional ties that would shore up the states of the region. Alun Jones (2006, 416) argues “Region building thus involves the maintenance and construction of geopolitical, institutional/legal, transactional, and cultural boundaries in which relations are defined and institutionalized and the material frames of political action determined.”

Two outcomes of the international region building were the Euro Mediterranean Association Agreements and the Union for the Mediterranean, which was established in 2008 with 43 member states.¹ The idea of the Union was championed by former French Prime Minister Nicholas Sarkozy as a Mediterranean Union, with a similar structures and institutions as the EU, but was scaled back after resistance from many EU member states. The mission statement for the Union describes the vision as “a multilateral partnership aiming at increasing the potential for regional integration and cohesion among Euro-Mediterranean countries. The Union for the Mediterranean is inspired by the shared political will to revitalize efforts to transform the Mediterranean into an area of peace, democracy, cooperation and prosperity” (Union for the Mediterranean, n.d.). The union is largely a failure, however, because several of the governments that joined it—Syria, Egypt, Tunisia—went through major political upheavals only a few years later. Additionally, the Union works on a principle of consensus, which is difficult with 43 members, including several that are directly in conflict with each other (Palestine-Israel, Cyprus-Greece-Turkey, and Algeria-Morocco over Western Sahara).

The Mediterranean as a border

Despite the rhetoric of region building and connection, the most significant change in the Mediterranean over the past decade has been the militarization of border enforcement (Van Houtum, & Pijpers 2007; Van Houtum 2010). The EU established Frontex in 2004 to coordinate border enforcement between the member countries and the Mediterranean states, Spain, Italy, and Greece primarily, have been hardening borders and increasing monitoring of the region. Both Greece and Spain, who have land borders with Turkey and Morocco respectively, have built fences and walls to prevent movement. Furthermore, the EU has created neighborhood agreements with other Mediterranean countries that funnel EU money to the internal immigration enforcement practices of the states. Morocco was the first country to sign a bilateral mobility and migration agreement with the EU in June 2013. The press release from the EU states:

“As regards irregular migration, the EU and Morocco will work together in order to combat the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings and to provide assistance for victims of these crimes. They will work closely together in order to ensure that Morocco can establish a national asylum and international protection system.” (European Commission 2013)

In response to a 2013 wreck off the coast of the island of Lampedusa in which more than 360 people died, Italy reused the Roman term *Mare Nostrum* to refer to

¹ The members are the twenty-eight EU members and Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Turkey. Syria self-suspended its membership on 22 June 2011 and Libya is an observer state.

a rescue operation for immigrants and a military operation targeting the smugglers who ferry them to Europe. Despite these rescue operations, the International Organization of Migration reported that over 3,500 people died in 2014, and the rate is sadly increasing with 1,727 deaths through early May 2015 (International Organization of Migration 2015). At the same time, in the EU there were 626,000 asylum applications in 2014, 33% more than 2013 and an over 300% increase from the number of applications in 2006 (Eurostat n.d.).

The Mediterranean also demonstrates the unevenness of the concept of the border (Mountz & Loyd 2014; Paasi 2011). While smugglers and immigrants are scolded for not respecting borders and for violating the immigration laws of the EU and their member states, those same member states were preparing a military operation to violate the borders and sovereign territory of Libya in order to destroy the infrastructure of the smuggling operations. In essence, the plan is to drop bombs on the boats used by immigrants, so they do not have a means to attempt the crossing into Europe (Bilefsky 2015). Raeymakers (2014, 165) argues

“Rather than mitigating the critical emergency in the Central Mediterranean, its perpetuation at a subjective, human level has become a key element in the justification of a forceful border regime that is officially aimed at curbing irregular migration but which, through its effects, enhances a system of interests and relationships that has almost become an end in itself.”

Indeed, the bordering in Mediterranean and the pushing away of the people on the other side is a critical facet of the EU project (Bialasiewicz 2011; 2012; Collyer & King 2015). As the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (2015) wrote in an Op-ed in the *New York Times*

“European Union naval operations in the Horn of Africa have successfully fought piracy — and a similar initiative must be developed to effectively fight against human trafficking in the Mediterranean. Trafficking vessels should be put out of operation. Human traffickers are the slave traders of the 21st century, and they should be brought to justice.”

By framing the movement of people through the Mediterranean as a human trafficking issue, it hides the role played by EU immigration policies, reduces the pressure for providing haven for asylum seekers, and instead suggests the issue is created by criminal networks of human trafficking (Pallister-Wilkins 2015).

Conclusion

Anssi Paasi’s lasting influence on the literature on regions and borders is his insistence that we understand both concepts as processes that are always in flux and subject to validation and reinterpretation. They not fixed things, but ideas—with material consequences to be sure—that are reshaped and reimaged through human actions, just as the idea of the Mediterranean has been for millennia, and continues to be. Paasi writes (2011, 6), “Political borders are processes that emerge and

exist in boundary-producing practices and discourses, and they may be materialized and symbolized to greater or lesser extents.” The narrative of a border can change, and those changes have material effects on the lives of people in these spaces. Similarly, the idea of a region can coalesce, or not, as humans represent their relations with the landscape and other humans.

The power of changing discourses is evident in the EU response to immigration in the Mediterranean. Rather than focusing on helping immigrants, who are often fleeing conflict in their home countries and risking their lives in their attempt to enter Europe, or establishing infrastructure to allow asylum claims closer to the immigrants’ home countries, by framing situation through the lens of human trafficking, the EU justifies excluding the immigrants and conducting a military operation in Africa to attack the immigrant camps in Libya. There are material facts in the world and physical geography makes a difference as humans make places and regions. However, more significant is the process through which these ideas are negotiated, contested, and redefined as the symbolic and discursive framing of the world shapes human relations with it.

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