Meditteraneans. North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900

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The importance and relevance of this book cannot be underestimated. It demands a reassessment of the relationships between the different regions and countries surrounding the Mediterranean. Although this study is concerned with the wider themes suggested by the title, it is essentially about their specific impact on social, political and economic life in Tunisia during the 19th century. The title does not immediately make clear that the book focuses on Tunisia, which from the perspective of 2011 is a pity as Tunisia has become the catalyst for a string of (as yet unresolved) political changes all along the Mediterranean shoreline. As a result, interest in the Tunisian experience, Tunisian history and its place in the Mediterranean environment is becoming of interest to the wider public. Tunisia deserves, as this book argues, to be seen as a significant player in the creation of the modern Mediterranean. That Tunisia has been neglected has been due to the dominance of Algeria in the imagination, a consequence of the length of the French colonial presence there and the influence of its unwinding on France itself. Furthermore, the centring of agency on Tunisia in Clancy-Smith’s book becomes a useful corrective to the idea that the last 200 years is to be read in terms of a triumphant West. That period, as this book illustrates, is much more complex and Clancy-Smith has produced a study that not only stands on its own but should serve to open up myriad new ways of thinking about the region.

In situating the study’s importance, it is useful to turn to both the epilogue (pp. 342–8) and the previous chapter: Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi and a Mediterranean community of thought (pp. 315–41). Reading the epilogue with its account of a fateful attempted boat migration in January 2009 from Tunis to Italy that ended with the tragic drowning of several occupants, which is placed alongside a late 19th-century tale of Sicilian migrants to Tunisia, it is impossible not to be struck by the irony of events that today sees an ongoing dispute between France and Italy over responsibility for Tunisian displacements in 2011.

Clancy-Smith’s final reference (pp. 347-8) to how the 20th century reversed the historically north-to-south migratory pattern of impoverished Europeans from the Italian islands and Malta to Tunisia to one that was south-to-north is pertinent. It shows how the fluidness of natural migratory movement takes on a more permanent aspect after colonization which created fixed relationships that then come to dominate the imagination. Following colonization, and also after independence, rather than north-south migration, it has, as Clancy-Smith indicates, now become a south-north migration comprised of ‘temporary labourers,
impoverished Arab or Berber men’ who having been displaced by European colonisation are to be perceived as the norm for Mediterranean migration. It is also a norm that has to be feared, as the acrimonious debate in 2011 between Italy and France over the territoriality of migrant origins illustrates.

The previous chapter examines the varied career of Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, who held a variety of posts in Tunisia, including that of Prime Minister as well as that of Grand Vizier to the Sultan in Istanbul. His career raises numerous questions about the very different ways in which one needs to read colonization’s legacy given that it is the outcomes of colonization that have shaped European states’ perceptions of what North Africa is and therefore was. It seems reasonable, given the breadth of his career, and his different journeys, to describe Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi as both a cosmopolitan and a progressive. Furthermore, given that Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi provided Tunisia with what was the oldest constitution in the Arab world, in 1861 (p. 330), a major shift in European Union (EU) mindsets is required. The various failed institutional arrangements embodied in the EU’s current Mediterranean policy might be read as reflecting an anachronistic view of the historical character of north-south relations. Furthermore, if the work of Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi was better known then the 2011 movements for democratic change could claim historical antecedents in their own back yards. Whatever one’s starting point, this whole chapter makes the reader wish they were more familiar with Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi’s writings.

Other themes that emerge from Mediterraneans include the pivotal role of Malta, which acted as a point of contact in a number of spheres between different corners of the Mediterranean; how Tunisia was a pole of attraction in general for migrants from the poorer parts of Europe, for Europe’s political dissidents (especially during the long process of Italy’s unification), and for those however displaced by Algeria’s colonization; and finally the considerable flexibility of Tunisia’s ruling family, the Husaynids in coming to terms with the rapidly changing environment of the 19th-century Mediterranean. Indeed what does become evident is that Tunisia’s politics were sufficiently stable and its economy was developed enough that the country offer economic opportunities to the rural poor of several southern European states. This included the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, as well as those of Malta and Corsica. What of course makes this interesting is that it turns upside down the image of there being a historic European advantage. What changed the picture was the end of century colonization by France which seems to have been more about closing off Tunisia as a dissident refuge and competitor than about any intrinsic economic disparities between Husaynīd Tunisia and French Algeria.

This is an important corrective to over a century of image-making in which a narrative was created that embedded a knowledge structure of western power that justified economic disparities between north and south, as well as the associated political arrangements that maintained this relationship and which today the street protests have begun to challenge.(1) This challenge begun on 17 December 2010 in Tunisia when the immolation of a street trader brought people on to the streets of Tunis which led to a series of street protests that have threatened MENA governments across the region, even if only Egypt’s President Mubarak fell in a parallel manner. Nevertheless, other countries such as Jordan and Morocco have had to make some political and constitutional changes while in others, most notably Libya and Syria, the outcomes are less certain. The reactions from the Mediterranean’s northern shores in the personification of the European Union have been mixed as they try to reconcile welcoming political change with their inbuilt fear of increased south-north migration flows.

Another interesting aspect of Mediterraneans is the three chapters that focus on different aspects of how migrants from mainly Europe, made a living in Tunisia. These chapters are respectively: ‘Domestic service and other forms of employment’; ‘Petty commerce, places of sociability and the down-and-out’; and ‘The sea, contraband and other illicit activities’ (chapters three, four and five). They are interesting not only because they show how diverse economic activity was but also how varied the experiences of individual migrants were. In addition, they challenge a further stereotype, as the discussion is not just of male migrants but of women migrants and more significantly, independent women migrants. From the accounts in these chapters, women’s employment was exceedingly diverse encompassing the expected domestic employment but also less savoury employment areas such as the contraband trade. One such woman is Giovanna Tellini.
who first appears in chapter four (p. 139) and then in chapter five (pp. 189–93) when her trial in 1868 for ‘grand larceny’ is discussed in detail. There is a short summary at the end of chapter five (pp. 195–8) titled ‘Making a living in three acts’. This summary focuses on the question of ‘contraband’ that Clancy-Smith argues ‘raises significant issues for the Maghrib’s modern history’ (p. 196). More particularly that ‘it reveals the nature of, and the complex processes leading to, a greater commercial and financial entanglement with Europe and a concomitant reduction of economic ties with the Ottoman Empire’ (p. 196) and parallel to this because ‘contraband’ represented an aspect of ‘informal economy’, it could also be seen as ‘globalization from below’ and therefore interpreted as ‘a form of resistance to the intrusions of centralizing states or imperial formations’ (p. 196). As a statement of social processes, it demands serious thinking about in terms of the wider relationship between the nature of the clandestine and the state-centred political and economic structures that were put in place at the time of independence and which the continually unfolding events of 2011 have so comprehensively challenged. Furthermore, another of Clancy-Smith’s recurring themes is that of ‘networks’. The ‘network’ in the above might have been family or clan or common experience, but whatever the particular character origins of the network during this period, new and old networks remain an enduring influence. One of the core accusations against former President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi was the concentration of economic power within their family network. As this reviewer is interested in the future political economy of the region, these three chapters and Clancy-Smith’s conclusions also pose questions about the post-colonial settlements as well as the various European Union initiatives in the region including the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean.

If the three chapters on economic activity are a useful corrective to one’s understanding of Tunisia’s political economy, chapter six (pp. 199–246), which examines questions of ‘justice, order and legal pluralism’, also raises important questions about the origins of the knowledge frameworks that are used to interpret legal practice in Muslim countries. The section titled ‘As is the custom in this country’ (pp. 209–11) opens with the remark that much of what one thinks one knows about law in North Africa during the 19th century came from legal treatises written by colonial officials working in Algeria who needed politically to put as much distance as they could between French legal practice and Muslim/North African legal practice. Clancy-Smith argues that in Tunisia ‘there existed considerable (although not always acknowledged) overlap in consular and beylical justice in terms of customary norms and procedures’ (p. 209). Given the sometimes hysterical debate that circulates in countries where there are Muslim populations, it would seem that the practice of creating distance between the legal systems to justify policy objectives has continued.

The diversity of women’s activities that were encountered in chapters three, four and five are extended in chapter seven, ‘Muslim princes and trans-Mediterranean missionaries’ (pp. 247–87) when the work of the Sisters of Saint-Joseph of the Apparition in both education and health care are highlighted. While the earlier chapters focused on the economic activities of women migrants, this chapter examines the role of the female religious. Once again, women are agents as the account of the life of the founder of the Sisters of Saint-Joseph, Emilie de Viallar illustrates. However, it is the work of two of the movement’s other members that was to be honoured in Tunisia by the Beys: Sister Céleste Peyré for her teaching and Joséphine Daffis (in 1890) for her medical work. Not only does it seem that the women were pioneers but their work was not challenged by the Bey but rather by the Catholic religious hierarchy established in Algiers, especially during the period after 1866 when Charles-Martial Lavigerie was Archbishop of Algiers.

Clancy-Smith gives the reader a privileged insight into the history of Tunisia and there are instances when this deep knowledge can disconcert, particularly when reading after the toppling of the regime of former President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011. For example, in chapter eight, ‘Where elites meet’ (pp.288–314), which is a discussion of the development of new forms of sociability associated with the sea during the 19th century. The growth of ideas throughout the century linking the therapeutic benefits of sea bathing (as well as drinking mineral waters) with concepts of sociability is described, and this growth is seen to be partly the result of improvements in transport generally but more especially the development of railway networks that made travel both easier and open to greater numbers of people. It was the 19th century that saw the emergence of modern tourism and one of its core features, the seaside. These developments involved both men and women but as Clancy-Smith shows, it also required an accompanying architecture of modesty
To enable women to be beneficiaries of the new therapy – see the illustration of the ‘Women’s bathing pavilion, La Marsa beach’ (figure 15, p. 289). The chapter also has a discussion of the culture of ‘beachside socializing between Tunisian and European notables’ (p. 313) that had grown up during the benign climate of the 19th century but which would unravel after 1900. The unravelling began when at the beginning of the century ‘a right-wing colonial lobby [that] looked to Algeria as a model’ (p. 313) sought separation as a method of gaining control of land and property; and it was completed when mid-century Tunisian nationalism under both Presidents’ Habib Bourguiba and Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali sought to erase Tunisia’s own past in favour of a delocalized future. Clancy-Smith illustrates the processes involved using the example of the Hotel Zephyr. As a grand hotel, it had been one of these sites of sociability, but Clancy-Smith writes (p. 314) that ‘Nationalist fervor and personal vendetta conspired to bury much of a princely seaside culture under its own ruins. In 2001, Tunisia’s ruling family (2) seized the Hotel Zephyr, levelled it, and constructed an American-style shopping mall in its place’. It is perhaps fitting that when Tunisians forced President Ben Ali from office the interim government seized the ruling family’s assets.

To conclude, the book went to the publishers in 2009. Little could the author have known that over the period 17 December 2010 to 14 January 2011 Tunisia would be at the forefront of events that would see a new generation reject the past that had been created by Presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali and other rulers in the region. While the future is still to be determined, there are lessons for all in this book and if there is some way that the word Tunisia could added to the title, its audience could be far wider than previously envisaged.

Notes

1. This should be viewed in terms of the theoretical framework articulated by Michel Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. (London, 1972). It needs to be noted that although Foucault’s theories are of value here, his actual comments on the Muslim world reflect disdain for it. Back to (1)

2. This should be interpreted as the joint families of former President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi. Back to (2)

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