

Mediterranean Studies: Diversity, Interdisciplinarity & the Study of the West

An Academic Futures White Paper

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The Challenges

Three challenges threaten the relevance of the study of the West and the emergence of Modernity in higher education today.

- 1) Humanities, Art, and Social Sciences approaches to the culture, society and history of the West and the emergence of Modernity remain deeply rooted in post-Enlightenment models which presume the central role of the nation-state, and racially-inflected national identities and the protagonism of English, French, German and northern Italian societies in the evolution of the modern West. This teleological approach represents a historical distortion that is rooted in Eurocentric cultural bias rather than data. Even for the modern period, the dominance of the paradigm of ethno-national state identity and the cultural hegemony of northern Europe have served to obscure and distort our understanding of cultural and social processes.
- 2) Academic disciplines within the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences remain siloed to a significant extent, both as a result of lack of effective strategies to promote interdisciplinary collaboration, a paucity of venues for such interaction, and disciplinary prejudice and orthodoxy.
- 3) The narrow view of the West or of Modernity reflected in point 1 (above) does not correspond to our increasingly culturally-diverse student bodies, faculty communities, nor our larger public constituencies. Consequently, the study of the origin and development of the West is in danger of being seen as “irrelevant” by a public that does not identify with or feel engaged with the either regions emphasized in the established historical narrative or the notion of a essentialized ethnic and national pedigree that this approach embodies.

Mediterranean Studies

Mediterranean Studies has emerged in recent years as a significant trend in Humanities and related disciplines, both in terms of reshaping historical narratives and as a model for collaborative work. Prior to the Modern period it was the Mediterranean region, not the European continent which was the epicenter for the developments out of which European (and African and West Asian) modernity emerged. Re-centering discussions on the Mediterranean provides a fresh-perspective in which processes that otherwise appear to be anomalous are demonstrated to be normative.

For Mediterranean Studies “the West” is the broad culture that emerged in pre-Modern times in the territory spanning the Indus and the Atlantic, from the northern zone of the Sub-Saharan to the near-Arctic. It was in this a zone of communication, trade, and movement, out of which Islamic, Christian and Jewish religious cultures emerged out of a common ferment of Nilic, Helleno-Persian, Near Eastern, Hebrew and Roman models, together with currents originating as far afield as Central Africa, South Asia, and northern Europe.

As such, Mediterranean Studies has emphasized exchange, cultural influence, trade, and focused on questions of identity formation and expression cultural evolution and interaction, transmission and adaptation of technology and ideas, and the development of policy and institutions. It, thus, lends itself naturally to comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, that are by necessity strongly collaborative in nature. Indeed, Mediterranean Studies not only fits in with, but inspired similar approaches, including Atlantic Studies and Indian Ocean Studies; reflecting a general turn towards studying cultural and political entities in terms of interconnections.

It is not an ideological response to Eurocentrism, but rather a data-driven empirical approach, which simply dispenses with or critiques paradigms that have up to now been regarded largely uncritically and as a valid *a priori*. It may be described as an Aristotelian approach, as opposed to the Platonizing tendencies of the established disciplinary model.

Finally, it is an approach that resonates with our increasingly diverse student and faculty bodies, and that students of the 21st century tend to grasp intuitively, reflecting as it does the fluid identities and cosmopolitan environment they identify with. Its growing influence is reflected also in the increasing number of faculty positions, research projects, books series, journals and conference cycles that focus on Mediterranean Studies.

Mediterranean Studies at CU

Mediterranean Studies already as vibrant presence on campus through the CU Mediterranean Studies Group, which for the last seven years has been carrying out an active program of visiting scholars, conferences, workshops, outreach events, and other activities involving scores of faculty and graduate students from a range of departments and programs. Up to now the Group has been funded through donations raised annually from contributing CU programs, as well as two Innovative Seed Grants, as well as other intramural and external funding. The mission, organization and programming of the Group can be found at www.cumediterranean.info.

Among its most notable accomplishments, the Group has hosted four of the quarterly workshop-conferences of the Mediterranean Seminar (see below), co-sponsored a 4-week NEH Summer Institute in Barcelona, and launched an innovative program, the Summer Skills Seminar. The Summer Skills Seminar, a self-supporting, revenue neutral program held twice so far, over the course of a week in May brings in faculty, graduate students and professionals who attend a hands-on workshop in which they are given instruction in some technical aspect of Mediterranean Studies.

The CU Mediterranean Group has also impacted undergraduate and graduate teaching as well as individual faculty research in a number of ways. Members of the group have developed new comparative Mediterranean-oriented courses for undergraduates and graduates. Graduate students and faculty have benefitted from attending the various events, including workshops, conferences, guest lectures and the Summer Skills Seminar. The group activities have enriched faculty research and helped faculty obtain grants and invitations to conferences, to present papers and collaborate with external research institutions in the US and abroad. Through all of this it is an initiative that has enhanced the reputation and standing of CU Boulder, particularly in the Humanities.

Finally, both through organized events and the individual work of core members, the Group has made significant bridges with the Boulder, Front Range, and Colorado non-academic communities. Individuals have been very active giving talks at senior centers, places of worship and community spaces, to alumni groups, and at university-sponsored public events (e.g.: CU on

the Weekend). Further, the CU Group regularly organizes out-reach events in conjunction with scholarly activities, whether concerts or public lectures. For example, the public talks that inaugurated the two Summer Skills Seminars had capacity ticket “sales” of ninety.

The Mediterranean Seminar

The CU Mediterranean Studies Group is integrated in the Mediterranean Seminar (www.mediterraneanseminar.org), the leading forum for the promotion of research and pedagogy relating to Mediterranean Studies. The Seminar is based currently at CU Boulder, and has a membership of approximately 1300 scholars worldwide. Funded by CU Mediterranean Studies Group and partner institutions, the Mediterranean Seminar’s main activity revolves around the quarterly workshop-conferences it organizes at universities around North America. These workshops provide opportunities for CU faculty and graduate students to engage with scholars from across the continent and beyond, and a forum for networking and a platform for collaborative ventures.

Action and Implementation

With active faculty participants in several departments, Mediterranean Studies at CU has a solid foundation and a proven track record. The Group should continue its established program of conferences, colloquia, workshops and visiting scholars, as well as hosting one of the three annual Mediterranean Seminar Workshops.

The colloquia, workshops and visiting scholars have directly impacted faculty research, graduate education and undergraduate education (through undergraduate attendance at events, and in-class guest lectures by visiting faculty).

Transitioning to from being a Group to a university-supported Center would consolidate Mediterranean Studies on campus, enabling us to integrate scholars in Social Sciences and Sciences (much in the spirit of the CU’s current “Origins” initiative).

The Humanities program would provide an ideal program to develop a Mediterranean Studies minor/major or “stream,” something which we would like to begin exploring next year. At the graduate level we would like to develop a certificate which could be added on to a PhD or MA degree in any relevant discipline (eg. RLST, HIST, CLAS, PHIL, JWST, HUMN, ARTH, ALC, FRIT, SPAN, etc.). Currently the Humanities program is in the process of proposing an MA program; once launched, this too would be well-suited to have a Mediterranean Studies component.

The consolidation of this initiative and the development of an undergraduate program and graduate stream would encourage the development of additional course by faculty teaching these streams and would further enhance the initiative. By their comparative approach to the study of culture and society, these courses mesh well with the diversity requirement of the new “core” curriculum (“...designed to provide students with the necessary understanding and analytical skills to successfully function and lead in a multicultural, multiethnic, transnational, and global society...”).

In short, this is an established initiative with proven track record, and a demonstrable impact on several levels.

Cost / Benefit

Currently the CU Mediterranean Group has no fixed funding source, and depends on yearly contributions from on-campus units. A commitment for core funding would enable to the Group to make the transition to a Center, would anchor the Mediterranean Seminar at CU Boulder. In other words, cost in terms of financial investment is modest by university standards, particularly in view of the benefits Mediterranean Studies has and will continue to bring to the campus.

These benefits include:

- 1) addressing the 3) challenges to the Humanities outlined above,
- 2) providing a forum for faculty exchange and making a much-needed contribution to intellectual life on campus,
- 3) attracting outstanding faculty recruits, and graduate students,
- 4) increasing the reputation and visibility of CU Boulder by bringing in outside scholars to our events, conferences and seminars,
- 5) providing CU with a unique and innovative Humanities and Arts program which will distinguish the university from higher ranked R1 competitors,
- 6) providing crucial networking and professionalization opportunities for graduate students,
- 7) enriching undergraduate studies.

Current CU Mediterranean Studies Group Board Members

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