

SOLIDARITY IS NOT ENOUGH!

SOUNDWORKS OF SOLIDARITY

CHRISTOPHER NORTH

MUSICIAN & PRODUCER. POLITICAL SCIENTIST

Introduction

“To create a common area of peace and stability in the Mediterranean region”², that was the goal declared in Barcelona in 1995 as the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership between the then 15 member states of the European Union and the 12 partner states of the so-called Middle East and North Africa. 25 years after the launch of Euro-Mediterranean relations, however, this goal seems more distant than ever given the current situation in the Mediterranean Sea region. The normative claim of European states to promote democracy and human rights³, which underlies the Barcelona-Process, can be questioned at the latest with the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring.⁴ The example of Euro-Mediterranean relations instead shows how the EU, as a foreign policy actor, has been highly inconsistent in its rhetoric for years, mainly acting in its own interests and thus lacking any political credibility.

¹ A speech given during the seminar “The Mediterranean. Twenty-Five Years After Barcelona (1995-2020). A Regional Ambition to Be Built? How to Create Innovative Cultural Gateways and Bridges?”, organised by the Stiftung Wissensraum Europa-Mittelmeer Foundation (WEM) e.V., the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen and the European and Ibero-American Academy of Yuste Foundation on 24 and 25 May 2021. Recordings in original language are available here: <https://youtu.be/K9CDlw4jsBc> and https://youtu.be/wPt___Omm74g

² Euro-Mediterranean Conference, “Barcelona declaration”, 27-28 November 1995, 3.

³ See *ibidem*, 2.

⁴ See Harders, C., Jünemann, A. und Khatib, L. (2017). Europe and the Arab World: Neighbours and Uneasy Partners in a Highly Conflictual Context, *International Politics* 54, no. 4, 439.

This is particularly evident in the current European border and asylum policy. By not reforming the Dublin Regulation, by allowing physical borders to be built up again at Europe's external borders to “ward off refugees”⁵ and by mistreating and illegally returning those who nevertheless manage to cross them⁶, the EU accepts that human beings are subject to inhumane conditions at its external borders.⁷ These conditions are also reflected in the ongoing and never-ending disaster in the Central Mediterranean Sea, where in the first six months of this year alone, more than 740 people have already drowned.⁸ However, while the EU continues to act according to its interests of “securitization, surveillance and militarization”⁹ it can only be perceived contrary to its initial normative ambitions from 1995.

View on the Euro-Mediterranean

To counter the disillusioned view on Euro-Mediterranean relations this “cultural intervention” will deal with the medium of sound in respect to its potential

⁵ See Pap, Norbert und Reményi, Péter. (2017). Re-Bordering of the Hungarian South: Geopolitics of the Hungarian Border Fence. *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 66, no. 3, 235-50.

⁶ See Human Rights Watch Letter to Frontex. *Human Rights Watch*, Juli 15, 2019, abrufbar unter: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/15/human-rights-watch-letter-frontex>.

⁷ See Amnesty International. (2014). The Human Cost of Fortress Europe: Human Rights Violations against Migrants and Refugees at Europes Borders. Amnesty.org, 9. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR05/001/2014/en/> (letzter Zugriff 23.01.20)

⁸ <https://www.iom.int/news/deaths-maritime-migration-routes-europe-soar-first-half-2021-iom-brief>

⁹ See Franko Aas, Katja und Gundhus, Helene O. I. (2015). Policing Humanitarian Borderlands: Frontex, Human Rights and the Precariousness of Life. *British Journal of Criminology* 55, no. 1, 1.

in reinvigorating a cross-cultural exchange beyond borders, as a chance to overcome regional challenges in the Mediterranean Sea region.

Sound, as it is known, can function in different ways. For example, the casual day-to-day sounds such street noise, traffic, different languages, laughter, sorrow, wind, water, waves etc., will most likely unleash an imagination on how those things “sound like” without having to be surrounded by them in the very moment. Just based on memory and experiences, an image associated to the sounds can be swiftly envisioned. While thinking of traffic, the sound of cars might be associated; thinking about laughter, sound of people in bars will appear and so on. The bigger the memory of a sound, the more precise the image will be when thinking about it.

However, when it is about sounds that one has simply never heard or not heard enough (of)- which can be called the “inaudible sound” (or alternatively: “invisible sound”) - mids struggle with coming up with precise images. How does the sun sound? How do flowers sound? How do thoughts and ideas sound? How does pain sound? Or less abstract: How does a certain language or a dialect sound that one has never heard of?

But instead of admitting that there is no information or at least not enough information in the brain on this “inaudible sound” in order to create a sufficient image, own images are created by mixing lack of memories with already existing memories which inevitably leads to skewed images and thus false imaginations. All

just, because society cannot imagine to admit that there is simply not enough knowledge and information about this sound to actually be able to think, let alone talk, about it.

This train of thought leads back to the different ways sound can and should function as. Sound in one way can be understood as the actual transmission of noise to something, such as used in music production, with using claps and snaps to build up percussive elements or the mouth to create lyrics. But on the other hand, sound can be understood as the voices of the unheard as silence must certainly be considered a sound. And instead of concealing the silence with other sounds and thus building skewed images just for the sake of having any sound at all it should simply be acknowledged that there is none.

In respect to the Mediterranean Sea region it could be referred to the sounds and music that are associated with it, for instance artists and music of the region. In regards to electronic music, the Moroccan artist and music producer Amine K¹⁰, or of the DJ Yasmean from Casablanca¹¹ could be mentioned.

While other very concrete projects reveal¹² existing (and audible) structures of sounds, proving the promising cross-cultural synergies that were and are set free

¹⁰ With whom I have shared releases on the same label, called *Bar 25*.

¹¹ <https://soundcloud.com/y-asmean>

¹² Furthermore, one could refer to a collaboration with internationally renowned DJ and producer Khaled Bess, known as Underher, who has been contributing two remixes to my upcoming album as well to an *exhibition of soundworks* that I am conceiving at the moment in Berlin on the issue of sea rescue.

with music and sound, the focus of discussion should be on the absence of sounds; on the necessity to question the “inaudible sound” such as seen in the lack of representation of voices and ideas in “Western” discourse when talking about the region. Too often, during supposedly “superb” European and North American university-education it is experienced how it is being talked about the Mediterranean Sea region, rather than looking for an actual engagement with actors of the region. Too often, an actual lack of knowledge was concealed by preconceived and false statements. Too often, it was arrogantly assumed that certain voices would not exist just because they would not be seen or heard, when the only thing they really only needed was an amplifier. Their voices exist, but the privileged classes need to step down to create corridor of safe spaces for sound to appear and develop in directions that might be challenging but necessary.

While sounds or music will always be one the most powerful tools of dialogue beyond borders to create new cross-cultural potential, most dialogues are pointless if these are not based on the people with voices that no one hears. Instead of giving those voices a sound, too often own privileged sounds are reproduced. Sound and space, like a reverb, must be given to voices and the opinions of the subaltern since they are the ones that should be the basis for a progressive discourse. While in these moments concerns should be especially with the many people that have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea over the last years - people that will never speak again, people that will never have a voice again - likewise thinking of musicians and other artists in

the region that have yet to find their ways of expressions is mandatory. This discourse should definitely not be based on voices of people like the author of this paper, as a privileged white European male, but of people that actually live and work in the concerning region. However, it would yet again mean making use of own privileges by not using this opportunity of writing down ideas to argue for a vision of a future Mediterranean region.

Conclusion

What is needed is to add sound to the region; more sound by financing and promoting regional artistic collaborations; more sound by supporting educational and cultural institutions; more sound by supporting cultural and social actors in the region; more sounds by creating platforms with the help of which those actors then can enter into a constructive exchange with one another. And finally, more sound by decriminalizing life-saving NGOs in border regions such as sea rescue organizations. All in all, what is needed is to add more sound to the region in order create genuine and sustainable “soundworks (and networks) of solidarity”.

For a Mediterranean region to find gates and pathways for a new generation of cultural dialogue and exchange more sounds must be added to voices of ideas and opinions that too often are being made silent. Only then the the “inaudible sound” will transform clear images. Only then more and more precise images of the region’s future in our cross-cultural minds will be able to be conceived together.