

Vulnerability and agency in Mediterranean

Mutations en Méditerranée (MeM)
Call for papers for the issue 3 | 2025



Venise underwater, 28 octobre 2012, © Trombetta

Mutations en Méditerranée (MeM) is a multidisciplinary research journal that focuses on the transformations taking place in the Mediterranean region. Managed by PhD students (doctoral schools 67, 354 and 355), it is supported by the [MESOPOLHIS](#) laboratory (Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS and Sciences po Aix). It offers a publication space for young researchers by publishing in open access one thematic issue per year. The journal welcomes articles in English and French.

This issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée* will focus on the question of vulnerability. The Mediterranean, as a historical, geographical, socio-political and cultural space - both shared and conflictual (Dupuy 1994 and Bedjaoui 1994) - is an open-air laboratory for analysis of this issue. Three angles are considered: territorial and heritage-related; political, legal and religious; social and bodily.

Vulnerabilities in the Mediterranean are part of a global context marked by natural and man-made phenomena with sometimes disastrous consequences. The floods in France and Spain at the end of 2024, the earthquake in Morocco in September 2023 (magnitude 6.9 on Richter scale) and the increase in flows of forced migrants (Wihtol de Wenden 2018) are just a few recent examples. As an area of movement and flux, both shores of the Mediterranean are subject to many natural risks, as well as social, political, economic and cultural ones (Lazzeri and Moustier 2010).

How do we approach the notion of vulnerability in this space and context? Vulnerability is commonly understood as a situation of weakness from which the integrity of a person is or risks being affected, diminished or altered (Liendle 2012). From the perspective of social sciences, this concept can be used to describe 'vulnerable populations' as groups subject to abnormally high risks in a given geographical and historical context (Brown and Scodellaro 2023): Serge Paugam's work on new poverty comes to mind (1991). Environmental sciences and the management of natural phenomena have also taken up the concept of vulnerability, considering the unequal impact of natural disasters on human groups (Martin 2019). Being vulnerable therefore means being exposed to external threats that put a certain number of resources to the test (Martin 2019). But is vulnerability only synonymous with weakness?

While etymologically vulnerability invites us to consider the undermining of both natural and social environments, interpreting the Mediterranean region only in terms of risks and weaknesses is too reductive. For example, a long tradition in Sociology has focused on the notions of dignity, contempt, suffering and lack of recognition in studies of protest and democratic resistance by disenfranchised people (Thompson 1963, Scott 1985, 1990, Paugam 1991, Honneth 1992). Every day, dominated persons use forms of resistance, the 'powers of the weak' analysed by the authors of the Subaltern Studies school (Chatterjee 2004, Chakrabarty 2000, Spivak 1988). For this issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée*, contributors are invited to question vulnerabilities in terms of the capacity of individuals to be affected and to affect in return (Gilson 2014). This issue proposes an interdisciplinary approach to vulnerability, in order to address the challenges and changes in the Mediterranean region and the specific risk factors associated with it, using both social and life science approaches. By considering people's ability to take action, including people most exposed to risks, contributors are invited to reflect on the notion of agency (Garrau 2021). Agency involves questioning different power relations (environmental, socio-political) and their effects on the individual and his or her place in the world, as well as the different possibilities for reinvestment and reaction. This approach proposes to rethink the notion of vulnerability through the prism of resistance, critique (theoretical, political, social) and autonomy.

Contributors are therefore encouraged to address this theme through several dimensions, ranging from territorial vulnerabilities to political, legal and religious issues, and including the use of bodies in the face of risks and their cumulative effect in the wider Mediterranean area. The journal encourages comparative approaches, theoretical discussions of main concepts and studies based on strong empirical research. Published in open source, future contributions will be able to draw on large data sources.

Axis 1. Territory and heritages vulnerability

We first aim at studying territories and heritages vulnerable to natural and man-made phenomena. These phenomena lead to both population and environmental vulnerability.

Natural hazards and man-made factors: territories and heritage at risk

Rising sea levels, due in part to water thermal expansion and melting glaciers, raise the question of how to preserve our material and natural heritage. Coastal erosion, over-urbanisation of shorelines and the booming tourist industry in the Mediterranean basin (Plan Bleu 2022) are threatening cities home to priceless cultural heritage, such as Venice, Istanbul and Alexandria. In spite of this, labelling certain sites as heritage to protect them increases their attractiveness, which in turn contributes to their vulnerability through overtourism. Examples include the Calanques National Park in Marseille and the Regional Park of the Camargue. Areas such as the Rhône Valley, Occitania and the Nile Delta are also prone to flooding (Pasikowska-Schnass 2024). Causality between human activity and climate change is one of the challenges we are currently facing. Past climate disruptions can provide us with information on how to deal with changes that have shaken up entire civilizations and are evidence of a recurring phenomenon (Kuzucuoğlu 2011). This theme invites us to examine past and present human activity, urban and regional planning policies and their effects on Mediterranean heritage. How are territories and their heritage exposed to natural phenomena and anthropogenic factors? To what extent can the population and players in these vulnerable areas take action?

Exploiting resources: environmental and climate challenges

Human activity has led to coastal development and the over-exploitation of marine, fish and fossil resources with consequences including soil impoverishment, water stress and advancing desertification, especially in North Africa and Southern Europe. These phenomena raise questions regarding the sustainability and viability of our systems of production, consumption and exchange, and their influence on the landscape of these territories. Mediterranean regions are faced with unequal access to resources, overexploitation of the seas and threats to biodiversity from fishing activity, intensive maritime farming and water pollution (Cuttelod, Garcia, Abdul Malak *et al.* 2008). Political and economic instabilities affect access to energy and food resources in different ways. In Syria, the civil war has greatly weakened the agricultural sector, which accounted for 40% the workforce before 2011. In Egypt, food fragility is strongly linked to market fluctuations and price rises (Soffiantini 2020). In countries with an arid or semi-arid climate, the exploitation of subterranean water resources leads to their quantitative and qualitative deterioration (Chkir, Trabelsi, Bahir *et al.* 2008). What policies are being implemented in both the northern and southern Mediterranean? How do political and individual players adapt their behaviour to tensions over access to limited resources? How can these resources be distributed and conflicts prevented?

Axis 2. Political, legal and religious vulnerabilities

Not all risks emanate from natural phenomena – some are specific to human societies. This second theme focuses on the political, legal and religious vulnerabilities of minority groups in the Mediterranean region.

Minorities' movement and cohabitation

Freedom of movement is a non-binding fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 13), but it is not uniformly applied. As a result, the establishment of categories whose terms are constantly changing (foreigners, refugees, travellers, unaccompanied migrants) serves political objectives (Pettenella 2019, Genonceau, 2024) and conditions access to certain rights (freedom of movement, right of protection, right of asylum) depending on causes of displacement (wars, work, resources, better quality of life). Through forms of coexistence, hosting, rejection and xenophobia (Baby-Collin, Clerval and Talpin 2021), this theme invites us to think about the vulnerability of migrant populations and minorities (religious, demographic, political). However, minorities also foster solidarity; the minority becomes a body and structures group-belonging (Khilllo 2024) to defend presence and rights. Migration, as a search for an alternative to a situation of vulnerability, leads to a reconfiguration of belonging (de Gourcy 2018, Cuzol 2018). Politically and legally, the Mediterranean is an object of covetousness, with states seeking to impose their rights and sovereignty on this area and its inhabitants (Calafat and Grenet 2023). Countries with access to the sea, a frequent clandestine route (Sargenti 2021), are particularly exposed to the presence of migrants (Agier 2022).

Social climate and political participation on both shores of the Mediterranean

In the twentieth century, Mediterranean states were laboratories for major institutional changes, whether in the context of armed struggles for independence (e.g. Algeria) or democratic transition processes (e.g. post-fascist Spain and Italy). The political participation of populations and in particular of the most vulnerable groups is a multidimensional issue that covers the possibility of expression through both protest and the ballot box. In Greece, for example, mobilization linked to the socio-economic consequences of the 2008 economic crisis led to the emergence or strengthening of a protest tradition of general strikes associated with the Indignados movement (Tsiridis and Papanikolopoulos 2011, Kotronaki 2013). In the Mashreq and the Maghreb, the protest movements which, after the Arab Spring, gave rise to glimmers of hope of major political upheavals did not produce the effects expected by protestors (De la Messuzière 2020). Furthermore, in Europe, the meaning of voting seems to raise concern across sections of the population who feel a lack of political representation (Pisani and Occansey 2022). So how do vulnerable groups mobilize to reinvest the political arena, and what remains of the legacy of these protest movements?

Axis 3. Social and physical Vulnerabilities

To avoid reducing our understanding of the Mediterranean region to an approach based on risks and weaknesses, this section examines vulnerability in terms of the capacity of individuals to be affected and to affect in return.

Caring for and reclaiming bodies: plural minorities

Within Mediterranean societies, there are struggles over representations and power struggles over the determination of a dominant norm that can vary from one State to another, and which consequently assigns certain social groups to stigmatising categories, thus scarring bodies and behaviour patterns. We need to understand the agency of these social groups and their ability to play with these categories. For example, regarding sexual minorities, cultural productions on both sides of the Atlantic are part of a process of recognition that runs counter to dominant frameworks (Ncube 2014). In the same way, gender undermining to which women are subjected is challenged through the prism of agency. This is the case of young girls who 'go out' in Tangier or elsewhere,

and who recompose transactional practices linked to intimacy or entertainment (Cheikh 2020). Starting from a critical look at the symbolic composition of a social minority (Foucault 1999, 2004) and the body, in particular through gender categorisation (Butler 2018), contributors are invited to reflect on the ways in which re-appropriation and agency are exercised by these groups. Agency, the ability of an individual or so-called minority group to act, opens the door to the reinvention of imposed norms, and protest to these norms (Garrau 2021). How are these categorisations challenged? What forms of solidarity and concern exist within these groups? How can we protect our bodily integrity in a context of repression of specific identities?

Mobilization as a vulnerable person, shifting the perspective and representing fragility in a different way

Art and cultural practices are particularly well-suited for mobilization and outreach. In this context, recognising that we are vulnerable means offering an experience of sensitivity to an audience by presenting them with a meaningful environment and organizing flows of social, political and philosophical representations (Dewey 2010). These representations concern bodies (Brenez, 2019), insofar as the artistic image constructs in its own body a representation that lives and gives life, whether in its aesthetic reality per se or in the sense of its reception. Anchoring aesthetic representations in a specific socio-cultural reality makes it possible to restore agency and to create a space for contestation (Ouardi and Lemoine 2010, Abdel Hamid 2017). Comes to mind popular Kabyle songs that lament a certain fatality imposed on the experience of exile (Mohia 1997), or the reinvestment of horrific and fantastic figures in film productions from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to illustrate social and gendered inequalities, such as *A Girls Walks Home Alone at Night* (dir. Ana Lily Amirpour 2014) or *Sayyedat al-Bahr* (dir. Shahad Ameen 2020). Contributors are then invited to question agency in the Mediterranean from a cultural point of view, in the wake of the re-appropriation of bodies through art. In particular, active practice (Cyrułnik 2018; Arnaud 2008), spectatorial practice (Caune 1996, Jójczyk 2018, Maigret and Mace 2005) and institutionalized representation in museums (Lambert and Rasse 2019, Soulier 2015, Ferloni and Sitzia 2022) may be examined.

Submission requirements

Proposals for contributions should be between 2500 and 5000 characters (including spaces, excluding bibliography). They must contain a title, keywords and the bibliography used. Consult editorial norms. Proposals should be sent, in Word format (docx), to the following e-mail:

mesopolhis-revue-mem@univ-amu.fr.

Please confirm your status and affiliation in the email.

Prospective agenda

Deadline for the submission of article proposals: **20 January 2025, 5pm**

Proposal selection results: **end of January 2025**

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