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Vulnérabilités et agentivités en Méditerranée

Vulnerability and agency in the Mediterranean

Forward

Editorial

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Forward

Editorial

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OUTLINE

The Mediterranean as a space of social vulnerabilities: gender, class, and age in crisis

Minorities in search of emancipation

Nature(s) and territories in conflict

TEXT

- 1 This third issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée* examines socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and political dimensions of vulnerability, how they are often intertwined. In addition, it explores the agency that these situations give rise to, acknowledging that vulnerabilities are part of a global context marked by natural and anthropogenic phenomena with sometimes disastrous consequences.
- 2 As a space both of and in movement, the Mediterranean and its shores are subject to a variety of risks, whose analysis is essential to understanding the dynamics of vulnerability at work there. To talk about vulnerabilities is, first and foremost, to speak of risks; it is precisely the nature of these risks that renders the analysis of vulnerability so necessary.
- 3 Academic research in environmental sciences and in the management of natural phenomena has embraced the concept of vulnerability, taking into account the unequal impact of natural disasters on different human groups (Martin 2019). This perspective is reflected in the work of Wisner et al. (2003), who emphasize that natural disasters often result from a combination of physical hazards and social, economic, and political vulnerabilities. Being vulnerable, therefore, entails exposure to external threats that test and potentially destabilize available resources (Martin 2019). Vulnerability reflects a situation of weakness in which a person's integrity is - or risks

being - affected, diminished, or altered (Liendle 2012). It is therefore possible to distinguish between so-called social vulnerabilities and those linked to natural phenomena. In social sciences, this concept allows us to describe as “vulnerable populations” the groups that are subject to abnormally high risk situations in a given context (Brown and Scodellaro 2023): notable examples include Serge Paugam's work on new poverty (1991) and social attachment (2023), Robert Castel's research on disaffiliation (1995) and Hervé Glevarec's analysis of the vulnerability of social ties (2024). Yet, is vulnerability solely synonymous with weakness? Another sociological tradition analyses it from the perspective of the domination of a social minority (Thompson 1963; Scott 1985, 1990; Paugam 1991; Honneth 1992). The concepts of dignity, contempt, lack of recognition, and suffering are invoked in the study of ordinary resistance or democratic protests carried out by dominated people suffering from deprivation of rights. There are forms of everyday resistance by the dominated, a “power of the weak” studied by authors of the school of Subaltern Studies (Chatterjee 2004, Chakrabarty 2000, Spivak 1988).

- 4 In this third issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée*, the authors examine vulnerabilities in terms of individuals' capacity to be affected and, in turn to affect others (Gilson 2014). By considering the capacity of populations to act, including those most at risk, the authors also engage with the concept of agency (Garrau 2021). This notion entails questioning environmental, socio-political, or economic power relations, their effects on individuals and their position in the world, as well as the various possibilities for reinvestment and response. This approach therefore seeks to renew the notion of vulnerability through the prism of resistance, critique (theoretical, political or social) and autonomy, and invites us to shed new light on the social dynamics at work in the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean as a space of social vulnerabilities: gender, class, and age in crisis

- 5 The vulnerabilities examined in this dossier primarily concern the social characteristics of groups, particularly those related to gender,

class and age. The Mediterranean is an area of tension in which states seek to regulate mobility. The dynamics of acceptance, rejection and xenophobia reveal the vulnerability of populations that are invisible, stigmatized, or exposed. The contributors present these populations while interrogating the limits of public policy, highlighting the forms of mobilization deployed by vulnerable groups and the way in which they occupy public space.

- 6 In his study of early childhood professionals, Paul Luciani compares vulnerabilities among staff working in a nursery in France and a kindergarten in Tunisia. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, his analysis highlights the suffering associated with arduous working conditions, exacerbated by the financial precariousness of institutions and their highly hierarchical organization. Luciani demonstrates how vulnerabilities intersect with gender issues, which are central in a sector that remains predominantly female. This profession, often associated with “love labor” is undervalued, demanding, and sometimes perceived as degrading (Bertron et al. 2021; Unterreiner 2018). Similarly, this article shows how the organization of work, internal hierarchies and available resources shape the resilience of professionals in both contexts, revealing that, although the work is demanding everywhere, national contexts strongly influence how professionals can cope with difficulties.
- 7 Llewella Malefant examines the effects of population aging on the coastlines of the Gulf of Lion, highlighting a growing mismatch between demographic dynamics, public policies, and territorial adaptation capacities. In this seaside region of southern France, accommodation initially designed for summer tourism now hosts a significant proportion of the elderly population, whose needs are evolving towards forms of dependency that were not sufficiently anticipated. Local actors, particularly coastal communities, face increasing pressure without the tools or resources necessary to manage the demographic transition underway. This situation calls for a reconfiguration of territorial policies on aging, integrating health, housing, mobility, and social vulnerability in a more coherent manner. Coastal areas thus emerge as privileged observation sites and testing grounds for renewed forms of governance in adapting to aging.

Minorities in search of emancipation

- 8 Vulnerability can also affect populations who identify as, or are identified as, subordinate groups. While struggles over representation and power plays over the shaping of dominant norms exist within Mediterranean societies, these in turn produce stigmatizing categorizations. In this context, forms of agency emerge, whether community-based, political, or religious, through which the groups concerned divert or contest discrimination and labelling. Through cultural and social practices, they assert their identity by challenging and reinventing imposed norms in order to obtain recognition.
- 9 From a micro-historical perspective, Emma Duteil highlights the *cagots'* capacity to influence their own destiny. By organizing to defend their rights in the Pyrenean region between France and Spain, the *cagots* negotiated prevailing norms and redefined, at their own scale, early modern power relations. Although their vulnerability was characterized by deprivation of rights and oppression by the dominant population, the article reveals their acute awareness of their subordinate status and the strategies they deployed to counter it; what Paugam (1991) refers to as the resilience of dominated groups. In a context of increasing centralization of royal power in the 17th and 18th centuries, Duteil argues that the *cagots* bucked the trend and emerged as a community “forged in action rather than exclusion”.
- 10 The example of the Corsican autonomist movement between the two world wars, analysed by Vincent Sarbach-Pulicani, illustrates another complex dynamic of agency. Sarbach-Pulicani focuses on the Muvrists who, faced with French centralization and their political marginalization, adopted an ambivalent stance in their quest for emancipation, combining identity-based resistance and dependence on external support, notably from the Italian fascist regime. This alliance reveals the structural vulnerability of a political minority which, while seeking to subvert dominant norms, exposes itself to ideological and political compromises likely to heighten its isolation. Sarbach-Pulicani thus demonstrates that identity construction and struggles for minority recognition are marked by internal tensions

and geopolitical contingencies, underscoring the difficulty of navigating between autonomist assertion and external instrumentalization.

- 11 Vulnerability can also be approached through the lens of spirituality. In her study on the contemporary resurgence of ancient polytheistic cults in Greece and Italy, Néphélie Skarlatos examines the YSEE (Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes) and Pietas groups. She analyses minority religious dynamics and the forms of agency involved in both accessing public space (legal recognition for access to ancient sites considered tourist attractions; and combating stigmatization through mediation) and developing alternatives in the private sphere (privatized spaces for constructing religious sites; development of an interpersonal space), with strategies that fall under the category of “ spiritual bricolage ”.

Nature(s) and territories in conflict

- 12 The study of vulnerabilities can also be extended to living organisms. Here, we use the concept of vulnerability as proposed by Wisner et al. (2003, p. 11): the “ ability to anticipate, respond to, and recover from danger ”. As early as the 1970s, geography sought to address vulnerabilities and potential risks by emphasizing “ the degree of damage due to exposure [to risks], and by extension, the degree of [potential] exposure [to these risks], which amounts to emphasizing the spatial aspect of the issues ” (Veyret and Reghezza 2005, p. 64).
- 13 In the Mediterranean, coastal erosion, over-urbanization, and mass tourism contribute to the fragility of coastlines. Certain areas, such as the Camargue, the Nile Delta, and the Rhône Delta, are highly exposed to flooding risks. In his article, Benjamin Hetherington examines the impact of past and present human activities, development policies and resident mobilization on the resilience of these areas in the face of climate threats. The “ nature-based solutions ” (NbS) framework, central to his analysis, is presented as ambivalent: while it can help restore ecological functions at lower cost, it may also be perceived by some as a form of abandonment of the territory, since it does not in itself resolve social issues such as industrial decline in the Camargue and the social and economic isolation of the

region and its inhabitants. Thus, the different stakeholders define the notion of “ vulnerability ” differently: as species and habitats for environmental advocates, and as economic activities and local identity for local residents and salt producers. This thematic focus highlights transformations in landscapes and land use, particularly on the French Mediterranean coast, where tensions are high. This final article examines these tensions through the case of the Camargue, revealing the competing demands of economic attractiveness and environmental preservation. The balance of local usage rights appears to be a key factor in managing these fragile areas, as such rights are frequently at the centre of conflicts between residents, state authorities, and environmental groups.

- 14 The subject of renewed academic and scientific attention, vulnerability and its associated agency are eminently contemporary themes. This third issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée* demonstrates the extent to which the multifaceted concept of vulnerability cuts across multiple perspectives: social, political, identity-based, territorial, and environmental. Whether it concerns early childhood professionals or elderly people living on overexposed coastlines, stigmatized minorities seeking political, religious, or cultural recognition, or coastal territories threatened by climate change and conflicts of use, the contributions show that situations of vulnerability should not only be understood solely as states of weakness, but also as potential tipping points for action, protest, or the reconfiguration of power relations. They highlight how vulnerabilities often generate forms of individual or collective agency that enable actors to resist, adapt, or redefine the norms and spaces in which they operate. These approaches thus invite us to rethink the Mediterranean as a living territory, traversed by sometimes imperceptible dynamics of struggle, protest, and reinvention.

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