An Archaeology of the Verticalist Mediterranean: From Bridges to Walls

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Abstract

In modern Europe, the Mediterranean Sea has become an abridged or forgotten sea. At present, under the pressure of “Fortress Europe”, it risks its waters being turned into walls. Nevertheless, the vision of the Mediterranean as a uniform, monolithic European sea melts away as soon as we remind ourselves of its history, a history of encounters and clashes, and of continuous dislocations (F. Braudel). This essay aims to survey this abridging historical process, which stretches back to the Mediterranean colonial history dominated by northern modernity, from postcolonial (I. Chambers) and meridian (F. Cassano) perspectives. Only from these standpoints can one deconstruct the verticalist northern ideology that sees the “modern” north sitting above the “backward” south, and as a consequence the Mediterranean as either a European lake or a forgotten sea: a sea that is good at reminding Europe of its ancient origins but not at building a bridge between the Europeans and the other peoples sitting around the same pond.

Keywords: Mediterranean, Europe, postcolonial thought, meridian thought, verticalism

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1. The Geo-Historical Borders of Civilisation

In his *Politics* Aristotle states:

The nations inhabiting the cold places and those of Europe are full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill, so that they continue comparatively free, but lacking in political organization and capacity to rule their neighbors. The peoples of Asia on the other hand are intelligent and skillful in temperament, but lack spirit, so that they are in continuous subjection and slavery.¹

It goes without saying that the Greeks – whose territory lay in the Mediterranean and thus occupied the middle geographical position – were both spirited and intelligent, and as a result free and capable of ruling mankind.

Let us skip ahead in time and listen to the 14th century Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun. To him the known world, from the equator to the northernmost lands, could be divided into seven regions by climate. The northernmost and the southernmost regions represented the coldest and hottest extremes, while the middle ones were more temperate both in climate and in people, who were moderate in their character and their general conditions.

Such are the inhabitants of the Maghrib, of Syria, the two Iraqs, Western India, and China, as well as of Spain; also the European Christians nearby, the Galicians, and all those who live together with these peoples or near them in the three temperate zones.²

The Arab historian, borrowing the climatic Aristotelian hermeneutic tool, repeats that scheme, enlarging it towards both the Orient and the Occident, and confirms that the temperate zone is more propitious to civilisation. Five centuries later, Hegel also thinks that in the extreme zones cold and heat are too powerful to allow Spirit to build up a world for itself.

The true theatre of History is … the temperate zone; or rather, its northern half, because the earth there presents itself in a continental form, and has a broad breast, as the Greeks say. In the south, on the contrary, it divides itself, and runs out into many points.³

To the German philosopher, the real theatre of world history is still the temperate zone, but no longer the region from Spain to Syria, etc., rather the more homogeneous and compact region of continental Europe, since Mediterranean Europe is too heterogeneous and fragmented to form coherent nations and civilisations.

À propos of theatre, it is clear, then, that geo-cultural reality is merely a representation depending on from where one chooses to see it. Even the climate may be warmer or colder according to one’s geographical perspective: to Khaldun the temperate zone was exactly what Hegel regarded as an extreme hot zone. It goes without saying that our conventional, verticalist, north-south mode of representing the world influences the way we perceive geographical reality. If you look at it through the world-wide habit of orienting maps north-south, the perception is that the north sits above the south, reinforcing the vision of the latter’s subaltern position.

But if we were to follow the representation of the world at the time of the Arabs’ rule, when Spain and Sicily were the periphery of their empire, their *imago mundi* was upside down. In the map that the Arab cartographer Al-Idrisi made for Roger II, it is hard for us to recognise the Mediterranean sea. It is that blue elephant taking shape down on the right. It is an estranging reversal of the common north-south representation that upsets our modern cartographical and mental habit of looking at the planet.

That is why Ferdinand Braudel, in his second issue of his great study *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, through the famed cartographer Jacques Bertin, suggests turning the map upside down⁴ and seeing, contrary to European (grown-idle) common sense, how much the Mediterranean is African, with the huge mass of the Saharan desert hovering above it – much as this satellite image conveys.

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2. Liquid Borders, Solid Sea?

Ancient sages maintained that those lands where the grapevine, the fig-tree and above all the olive-tree cannot grow is not to be considered Mediterranean. A definition in negative terms that Braudel tries to give in positive ones: “the Mediterranean climate lies between the northern limit of the olive tree and the southern limit of the palm grove”.5 Predrag Matvejevic, in turn, responds:

[Mediterranean] boundaries are drawn in neither space nor time. There is in fact no way of drawing them: they are neither ethnic nor historical, state nor national; they are like a chalk circle that is constantly traced and erased, that the winds and waves, that obligations and inspirations expand or reduce.6

So, to him, “the Mediterranean is not merely geography”. It is not geography, indeed, but multiple history, echoes Iain Chambers, to whom

The space of the Mediterranean, both as sea and combinatorial territory, remains elusive: a perpetual interrogation. The sea is not something to possess … If there is a unity in the Mediterranean, it is perhaps a hidden, critical “unity” where the sea itself, as the site of dispersion and drift, exposes the fragility of inherited configurations.7

It is the fragility of our shared western received ideas, mistaken for solidity when the Mediterranean Sea is seen at its best as a European lake, at its worst as a forgotten sea, which is remembered only when the Europeans cruise across it or when it solidifies, corpse after corpse, because of the death of other species of travellers, the migrants.

Our solid vision of the Mediterranean as a uniform, monolithic European

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sea melts away as soon as we remind ourselves of its history, a history of encounters and clashes, and of continuous dislocations. Braudel in his preface to the English translation of his key book claims,

> I retain the firm conviction that the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, that the whole sea shared a common destiny, a heavy one indeed, with identical problems and general trends if not identical consequences.\(^8\)

Thus, the Mediterranean is a hybrid unity. Above all, it was, and still is, not only a Christian lake: a self-evident but forgotten truth. And think of Lucien Febvre – Braudel goes on to say – imagine how astonished Herodotus would be (as well as an average educated Mediterranean person) if he were to see the flora which we think of as typically Mediterranean today:

- orange, lemon and mandarin trees imported from the Far East by the Arabs;
- cactus from America;
- eucalyptus trees from Australia ... cypresses from Persia;
- the tomato, an immigrant perhaps from Peru;
- peppers from Guyana;
- maize from Mexico;
- rice, 'the blessing brought by the Arabs';
- the peach-tree, 'a Chinese mountain-dweller who came to Iran', the bean, the potato...\(^9\).

Or we could recall Braudel's passage titled "The indispensable immigrant" and imagine how astonished a contemporary xenophobe European would be if he were to read that

- At Marseilles the typical immigrant was the Corsican ...
- At Seville the standard immigrants ..., the permanent proletariat were the Moriscos?? ...
- At Algiers the new arrivals were Christians, who swelled the ranks of the corsairs and prisoners: Andalusian or Aragonese fugitives ..., artisans, and shopkeepers...\(^10\)

Notwithstanding the evidence that the Mediterranean has always been "a

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continual interweaving of cultural roots and historical routes\textsuperscript{11}, its hybrid nature has, more often than not, been forgotten in favour of a specific perspective. It is thought, for instance, rhyme in poetry cannot owe its origin to the Muslim poets of Arabic Spain, or that the \textit{chanson de geste} could not borrow from Islam. It is beyond our common faculty of perception. Tariq Ali does not fail to emphasise how much the Normans, who conquered both England and southern Italy, owed to Islamic culture. In his novel \textit{A Sultan in Palermo}, he has Philip al-Mahdia, the Norman king Roger II’s counsellor in Siqilliya (Sicily) – born a Muslim, enslaved and baptised as a Christian – say, before he is sentenced to death to please the Bishops and the Barons:

\begin{quote}
We [the Arabs in Sicily] were your strength, we gave you the courage to be independent, our learning, our language, our culture enabled you to boast that you were superior in every way to your poor cousins in England\textsuperscript{12}.
\end{quote}

Finally the only possible conclusion is, after Braudel, that “in the Mediterranean to live is to exchange – men, ideas, ways of life, beliefs, or habits of courtship”.\textsuperscript{13} That is why, according to authors of \textit{The Corrupting Sea}, Mediterranean “connectivity” was always there even when the Mediterranean world seemed at its most fragmented\textsuperscript{14}.

3. The Abridged Mediterranean

The question therefore is: when did this truncated vision of the Mediterranean, a sort of European lake, begin to arise? When did this plural, ‘liquid’ region, where three continents meet and many civilisations blend, turn into a monolithic unit? Historians say that it was when the Great History moved from sea to ocean. But this process, which began with the discovery of

\textsuperscript{13} Braudel, \textit{Mediterranean}, vol. II, 761.
\textsuperscript{14} P. Horden and N. Purcell, \textit{The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History} (London: Blackwell, 2000).
America in 1492, the English victory over the *Invincible Armada* in 1588, and the Portuguese rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in 1596, was a long process, as Braudel shows. Surprisingly, it had already started within the Mediterranean, when the northern ships (English and Dutch) began to pass by force the Strait of Gibraltar and the historical paradox of an English-dominated Mediterranean began to arise. According to the French historian, the actual process of the ‘decadence’ of the Mediterranean started around the middle of the 17th century, when the Protestant Reformation and the primitive accumulation of northern capitalism occurred. If so, what is the reason for Samuel Johnson’s declaration:

> A man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see. The Grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean.

The reason is that in the 18th century the northerners needed to touch the ancient Mediterranean past but, at the same time, they also needed to measure the distance between the past, still dwelling in the Mediterranean present, and modernity, whose nationality was above all English. So, if the object of travelling was to visit the Mediterranean shores, another object was to become aware of the change northern Europe was experiencing, when it became the centre of gravity in the making of European history.

After the Russians won the war against the Turks in 1771, Voltaire wrote to Catherine II: “C’est du nord aujourd’hui que nous vient la lumière”. Also Herman von Riedsel, roaming through Magna Graecia in 1767, lingers over the same thought, with a prophecy:

> Power, commerce, naval and military sciences, and the improvement of human understanding, all seem to go northward. In time, the European will be obliged to look for protection, education, manners and the

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cultivation of the intellectual powers in America\textsuperscript{18}.

So, according to the north-Eurocentric perspective, progress was apparently following the route of the sun (Voltaire)\textsuperscript{19}, that is to say, from despotism towards freedom (Montesquieu)\textsuperscript{20}. Once this direction has been detected, the next step is to transform progress into a teleology. Hegel, who claims that “the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom”\textsuperscript{21}, also claims, after the Philosophes, that it “travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning”\textsuperscript{22}. It goes without saying that “Africa is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature”\textsuperscript{23}.

If so, no wonder that the Eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean began to be “neglected”, and at the end of the 18th century the northerners began to look for the correct southern border where History stopped; to look for the threshold through which one passed from progress to backwardness, from civilisation to barbarism, in short, from proper Europe to the first flickers of Africa\textsuperscript{24}. Thus Napoleon’s official Creuzé de Lesser wrote: “L’Europe finit à Naples et même elle y finit assez mal. La Calabre, la Sicile, tout le reste est de l’Afrique”\textsuperscript{25}.

If the Frenchman cuts Italy and the Mediterranean around Naples, Samuel Taylor Coleridge does it further south. While working as an official from 1804 to 1808 in the formerly British protectorate of Malta, he writes:

\textsuperscript{18} Riedesel, \textit{Travels through Sicily and that part of Italy formally called the Magna Grecia}, cit. in N. Moe, \textit{The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question} (Berkeley: California U.P., 2002), 59.
\textsuperscript{20} Montesquieu, \textit{Esprit des lois} (Paris: Gallimard 1748).
\textsuperscript{21} Hegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History}, 19.
\textsuperscript{22} Hegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History}, 103.
\textsuperscript{23} Hegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History}, 99.
\textsuperscript{24} See L. Cazzato, “Questione Meridionale and Global South: If the Italian South Meets its Global Brother”, \textit{Italian Studies in Southern Africa} (21) 2008.
It is interesting to pass from Malta to Sicily – from the highest specimen of an inferior race, the Saracenic, to the most degraded class of a superior race, the European”\(^{26}\).

That part of the Mediterranean sea is exactly where the waters of the superior civilisation of Europe and the non-civilisation of Africa mix or clash. Sicily belongs to European civilisation but at the cost of being classified as the most degraded part of it, “wretched” as its people and “foolish” as its government are.

But this is not surprising if we recall that in 1812, while protecting the Bourbon King Ferdinand on the island from Napoleonic invasion, the English wanted to promulgate a constitution based on the English model, hoping to turn the most important island in the Mediterranean into a British protectorate. The Congress of Vienna decided differently. Indeed, the Italian islands had long attracted the colonial attention of England and France for their strategic position in the Mediterranean along the routes towards the East, especially after 1854, when Ferdinand de Lesseps obtained a concession from Egypt to construct the Suez Canal. Around 1860, Sardinia, which Cavour regarded as a Piedmontese “third Ireland” (the other two were Savoia and Nice), took the risk of being devolved to France or England in order to receive help in the unification process. Mediterranean Italy emerges as a sort of colony whether one sees it through Anglo-French or Piedmontese eyes.

4. Verticalism: from Bridges to Walls

Therefore, at the end of 18th century a disconnected *verticalist* view of the Mediterranean came into being. It was a sea that was no longer a bridge between civilisations but a sea that erected a wall between Europe and non-Europe, progress and backwardness. Everything that disturbed the march of European modernity as a single dominant condition was pushed beyond the southern frontier, while everything that followed the northward march of

progress was called Europe. The rest was the non-modern Other. To Franco Cassano, the advocate of “meridian thought”, the south has always been seen and judged in the light of modernity, and it is time for him to overturn this model and see modernity in the light of the south\textsuperscript{27}. The multi-dimensional Mediterranean was erased in favour of a uni-dimensional and truncated Mediterranean, precisely for that reason. According to this verticalist modernist vision, for example, the history of slavery concerned only the Islamic or the Ottoman shores, not Valladolid or Genoa, where Turkish or Arab slaves regularly performed the domestic duties in the aristocratic Spanish and Italian households\textsuperscript{28}. The past is silenced to domesticate the present.

It is our task then to recognise that the contemporary political walling of the Mediterranean goes back to the verticalist ideology that caught on at the end of 18th century, when Napoleon Bonaparte’s unprecedented expedition to Egypt in 1798 took place (four years before the expedition to subdue the Black Jacobins’ revolution in that tropical Mediterranean called the Caribbean Sea) and the British military ascendancy on this sea started as a reaction to French ambitions. From that time until 1956, when the President of Egypt, Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean had become a colonial lake (the entrance, Gibraltar, and the exit, Suez, were directly controlled by the English) and its northern shores were the last fringe of modern Atlantic Europe.

Separating the Mediterranean and denying the creolised inheritance of this sea is functional to the denial of the contemporary middle passage from south to north, which, as happened with the Atlantic passage, corpse after corpse, is solidifying the waters. The present migratory movements are a further instance of creolisation, a familiar and yet forgotten dimension, that the Mediterranean is again undergoing, as has happened many times in its history: with the so-called barbaric invasions, the medieval Arab rule over Spain and Sicily, and the expansion of the Turkish empire towards the West.

If “history is ethically always ‘now’”,\textsuperscript{29} as Chambers claims, then the


\textsuperscript{29} Chambers, Mediterranean Crossings, 7.
horizontal historical hybridity of this pluriversum called the Mediterranean should teach us how to deconstruct the verticalist vision of the present world, be it Mediterranean or Oceanic. Chambers strikingly points to the moments both when the complexes of the Mediterranean multiverse have been razed to the ground and when they have revived again:

These networks have been rudely disrupted on three momentous occasions in the last two and a half thousand years, each time through the imposition of monocentric visions arriving from the north. The Punic wars, the Crusades and the Reconquista, and European modernity are traumatic moments in which multilateral networks were torn apart by pitiless force and the imposition of the unities and hierarchies of Rome and Europe with their monotheistic and imperial sense of mare nostrum. Contrary to the sedimented consensus of the Pirenne thesis (Mahomet et Charles Magne, 1937), according to which a Mediterranean “unity” was destroyed by the advance of the Arab world, it was perhaps the vibrant intrusion of Arab conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries that actually restored and revitalized this possibility, permitting a peripheral Europe to establish contact with the Middle East and subsequently with a world system of commerce and culture orbiting in Asia along the multiple axes between Baghdad and Beijing\textsuperscript{30}.

If so, then it is quite natural to consider today’s “illegal” immigration across the waters as another moment of networking, now performed within the planetary capitalist order but belonging to the antique imperium of the Mediterranean passage. On the other hand, the current militarisation of the Mediterranean, which is trying to prevent the horizontal movement of migrants, is precisely a cruel (and probably pointless) attempt to impose “unity” again, transforming “bridges” into “gates” controlled by one side only. On the contrary, the “intrusion” of the global south into Europe may be a chance for southern Europe to be seen as no longer a periphery, but the centre of a new creolizing world, in which the Mediterranean may retrieve its ancient role of a cultural and economic crossroads. Paradoxically, thanks to the traffic (king) of human beings towards Europe, the northern Mediterranean (that sort of imperfect Europe), after a long time has the chance to re-experience its

\textsuperscript{30} Chambers, Mediterranean Crossings, 325.
geo-social plural and dynamic dimension, since the many people of the Mediterranean are incurable mongrels: their identity is full of alterity.

Therefore, it is possible for the Mediterranean to live its contradictions again, as a horizontal bridged multi-space and not as yet another vertical walled mono-space. None of this is to propose that this sea is a sort of idyll. On the contrary, according to the Italian sociologist, the Mediterranean is the sea where, precisely because one encounters the others there, the real and hard game starts: “Mediterranean today means putting the border, that line of division and contact between people and civilizations, center stage … We do not go to the Mediterranean to seek the fullness of our origins but to experience our contingency”. 31 In short, Cassano recommends that the Mediterranean sea follow its great historical epistemological force, the political and cultural program contained in its adjective, which describes a sea between lands (*medi-terranean*), “belonging exclusively to any of them”,32 its condition being that of a border sea which “allows to deconstruct any fundamentalist claim”.33

Sadly, European immigration policy is not following that force at all. *Mare nostrum* (the proprietary Latin expression for “our sea”) which could be assumed in a new way if “pronounced with conviction and in many languages at once”,34 is turning into *mare monstrum*, a monster sea, on the verge of barbarousness. Therefore, Darko Suvin urges, Europe has to choose between civil cohabitation and apartheid, that is to say, between civilization and barbarism. To him,

we are most probably facing both apartheid and mass revolts including terrorism and urban guerrillas. My proposals bet on the chance, even if small, of a radical democracy.35

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