

The Mediterranean Metaphor in Early Geopolitical Writings

ROLF PETRI

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Abstract

The article focuses on the view of the Mediterranean in early geopolitical writings. Through this lens, it looks at the space metaphors and imaginative geographies that defined the core meanings of the Middle Sea over the last 200 years. The author discusses the role that the Enlightenment philosophy of history had in the shaping of classical geography. Moving on similar grounds, early geopolitical writers believed in the 'force of history' as a generator of spatial order. They used episodes of the Mediterranean past as a parable for the spatial articulation of contact, conflict and power in the overall 'process of civilization'. In their writings recurs an idea, which resonates also in later key texts regarding the same maritime space. It is the idea of a 'greater Mediterranean' that after the fifteenth century was destined to gain worldwide importance thanks to transoceanic expansion. In doing so, geographers, historians and philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed the Middle Sea into a metaphor for the universal mission of Europe and the West.

The Mediterranean policies put forward for almost half a century by the European Union and its predecessor institutions have continued to go back and forth between inclusive and exclusive versions.¹ Overall, the Global Mediterranean Policy, the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean, Medgovernance, and other attempts, oscillated between 'developmental policy' approaches, security policies for the protection against tensions in the area, and renewed rhetoric underpinnings of alleged commonalities, in order to create a common space for markets and mobility. In 2007, Mohieddine Hadri from Tunis University was confident that 'the South and the North Mediterranean, more than ever before, are confluent in terms of identity, culture and economy'.² This was before the 'Arab Spring', the western military intervention in Libya, the Syrian war, the intensifying of mass migration, and the further spread of terrorism occurred, and provoked

¹ The present research is part of the 'Spaces of Expectation' Project funded by Swedish Östersjöstiftelsen. Based at Södertörn University Stockholm, the project is run in cooperation with Ca' Foscari University of Venice. I thank Östersjöstiftelsen and the project partners for their support.

² Mohieddine Hadri, 'A confluence area to prosper', *The Bridge: A Quarterly Review on European Integration*, 6/3 (2007), pp. 63–5, at p. 65.

other changes in the approach. According to the opportunities and necessities of the day, European powers seem to reinforce or attenuate their discourses on Mediterranean unity. What hardly changes is the asymmetrical relationship between assistants and assisted, teachers and pupils, protectors and protégées, that the EU headquarters postulate, apparently imagining Europe always in the role of the former, North Africa and the Middle East in the role of the latter. However exclusive or inclusive, their perception of Mediterranean unity seems not to foresee a symmetric number of ‘commonalities’ that would require European countries to adapt to so-called ‘backward’ standards.

My hypothesis is that the bias in the representation of the region belongs to a long tradition. Nor was the political evocation of Mediterranean unity new in the late twentieth century. During the ‘long’ nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries’ national and imperialist struggles, rhetorical references to Greek–Latin civilization and classical philosophy, as well as Christianity, already supported both intra-Mediterranean solidarity in the effort to smash ‘anachronistic’ empires and helping the birth of new nation-states,³ and the later conflicts among nationalist interests, of which these states were an expression.

Over the last twenty years, many historians have scrutinized the uses of the Mediterranean discourse. A conspicuous number of space- and time-related variants have emerged from their analyses.⁴ My intention is certainly not to deny either the importance of variety or the effort to contextualize and differentiate regarding each of these different imaginings. The reasons why, for example, the German imagination of Mediterranean-ness remained focused on Greek antiquity, the Italian on the Roman empire, while the French was more multifaceted, have to do with the specific contexts in which these national views developed. Similar variants in the view of the Mediterranean past were also markers for competing national ambitions in the then present. However, people can also fight each other using the same type of weapon. We should historicize, so to say, not only the fighting, but also the armaments technology. After all, the competing actors agreed that the Mediterranean is a unique, somehow unitary and ‘historically meaningful’ partition of the earth’s surface, even if they adapted these assumptions to their own specific beliefs and interests. The purpose of this article is not to allow, for once, the variants and contingencies to obstruct our view of the long-term conceptual core constituents of ‘the Mediterranean’.

A decade ago, two major specialists in Mediterranean studies, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, noticed that we ‘have no comprehensive

³ Maurizio Isabella, Konstantina Zanou (eds), *Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long Nineteenth Century* (London, 2015); Gilles Pécout, ‘Philhellenism as a Political Friendship: Italian volunteers in XIXth century Mediterranean’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9/4 (2004), pp. 405–27.

⁴ See the chapters in Thierry Fabre and Robert Ilbert (eds), *Les Représentations de la Méditerranée* (Paris, 2000) and issues 16/2 (2001), 17/1, 17/2 (2002) and 18/1 (2003) of the *Mediterranean Historical Review*.

historical and ethnographic study of “the idea of the Mediterranean”⁵. As a humble contribution to a discussion that may lead to the removal of this lacuna, in the following pages, I will focus on the Mediterranean as a metaphorical blueprint for modern geopolitics. What interests me here is the *longue durée* of imaginings of the Mediterranean that emerge from early geopolitical writings, and from the comparison of these writings with later scholarly and political efforts to make sense of this region. I shall develop my argument loosely borrowing from the methods of conceptual history and profiting from geographers’ critical reflections regarding the earlier scientific statute of their own discipline.

The first section reflects on spatial metaphors and argues in favour of the concentration of my analysis on those discursive elements regarding the Mediterranean that have seemingly remained unchanging over the last 200 years. The second section offers a synthetic overview of the tides of geopolitical and historical reflections on the Mediterranean. The following sections will scrutinize the core dimensions of the Mediterranean metaphor by considering the way early geopolitical writers related to sea and power, how they conceived of the maritime space as a space of contact and contrast, and why they believed in the force of history as a generator of spatial order. Finally, I will discuss their idea, according to which a ‘greater Mediterranean’ has emerged since the fifteenth century, as a metaphor of the universal mission of Europe, of ‘civilization’ and ‘modernity’. I will conclude by underlining the role of western philosophy of history in defining a certain place in history as ‘the Mediterranean’.

I

The Greek word *μεταφορά* refers to physical transport, for example, of people and goods by ship, but also to the transfer of significance. From both points of view, the Mediterranean can be considered a perfect metaphor, as it is ‘a place of lively communication, trade and seafaring, but it also carries a strong figurative power, embodying a multitude of ideologies and imaginings’.⁶ What interests us in the present context is the transport of meaning.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, ‘metaphor can be briefly defined as thinking of one thing (A) as though it were another thing (B)’. Goatly goes on to explain that in the conventional terminology of his discipline, ‘A is the Topic or Target and B is the Vehicle or Source’.⁷ Take a physical portion of space, for example, a water mass and the

⁵ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, ‘The Mediterranean and “the new thalassology”’, *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), pp. 722–80, at p. 729.

⁶ Rolf Petri and Anastasia Stouraiti, ‘Raummetaphern der Rückständigkeit: Die Levante und der Mezzogiorno in italienischen Identitätsdiskursen der Neuzeit’, in Frithjof Benjamin Schenk and Martina Winkler (eds), *Der Süden: Neue Perspektiven auf eine europäische Geschichtsregion* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), pp. 151–74, at p. 152.

⁷ Andrew Goatly, *Washing the Brain: Metaphor and Hidden Ideology* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007), p. 11.

surrounding lands that develop, roughly, from 30 to 47 degrees north, and from 5 degrees west to 40 degrees east, and make of it a vehicle for philosophical targets such as ‘civilization’ and ‘history’. This is what happens when one elaborates a myriad of physical and written data, and transforms them into the sources for a target concept. According to my hypothesis, something similar has occurred to the geographical partition, called *Middle Sea* or *Mediterranean* since ancient times when, at a certain point of modern history, it became a metaphorical vehicle of philosophical concepts, such as ‘civilization’. Braudel’s oeuvre is the most prominent example of this operation, but it is neither the only nor the first of its kind.⁸

Metaphorical speech is a recurrent element in the construction of conceptual systems. Consequently, all writing on history will comprise metaphorical elements. I myself used the metaphor of fighting and weaponry above to target a difference between rapid and slow changes. However, not all targets involve the same degree of abstraction that distinguishes a concept such as ‘civilization’, let alone ‘history’. As Kövecses points out, target domains ‘are abstract, diffuse, and lack clear delineation; as a result, they “cry out” for metaphorical conceptualization’.⁹ Given the level of abstraction of ‘civilization’ and ‘history’, one may argue that they call particularly loudly. They situate the Mediterranean in the case group of ‘imaginative geographies’ described by postcolonial theory, in particular by the seminal work of Edward Said.¹⁰ According to Derek Gregory’s comment, ‘geography is about more than the will-to-power disguised as the will-to-map’. It is also part of the generalized practices of ‘construction of identity through the poetics of space’, which are more complex cultural practices than a crude top-down exercise of power would be, even if they remain ‘inseparable from determinate modalities of power’.¹¹ This is where metaphors step in: borders, regions, maritime spaces and similar categories constitute a socio-cultural phenomenon ‘that transports symbolic attributions of meaning through material media, creating a nexus between *physis* and the social making of sense’.¹²

Certainly, ‘the Mediterranean’ stands for more than ‘civilization’ or ‘history’ *tout court*. Rather, it represents a more complex metaphor system¹³ formed by a number of single metaphors, among which we find allegories and parables. ‘The Mediterranean’ is a metaphor for ‘civilization’ in so far as this very idea constitutes the imaginary backbone

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* [1949] (2nd edn; Paris, 1966).

⁹ Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (2nd edn; Oxford, 2010), p. 23.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978).

¹¹ Derek Gregory, ‘Imaginative geographies’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 19/4 (1995), pp. 447–85, at pp. 448, 456.

¹² Marc Redepenning, *Wozu Raum? Systemtheorie, critical geopolitics und raumbezogene Semantiken* (Leipzig, 2006), p. 27.

¹³ Kövecses, *Metaphor*, pp. 149–52.

of regional unity as such. At the same time, it is an exemplary place where the story of an encounter with an older civilization is situated, which then gives rise to a new, 'higher' and more conscious one. This is not just one chapter in a bigger 'world history' narrative, which elects the Mediterranean as the central stage of a crucial period. It is also a parable, meant to teach us that civilization is a process, and that a transcendent meaning of history gives that process a direction and makes sense of it. Not only this; according to the narrative it was, again, in 'the Mediterranean' where for the first time people discovered that the purpose of history can be understood. Finally, the 'greater Mediterranean' is a metaphor for the universal mission of Europe and its 'passage to the West',¹⁴ which both manifested themselves through maritime and colonial expansion. These are, in my view, the core meanings of the Mediterranean metaphor over the last two centuries. Borutta and Lemmes consider Napoleon's expedition to Egypt of 1798–1801 as the starting point of the invention of the Mediterranean as a region situated in a colonial context.¹⁵ As Gregory comments, before the French army engaged the Mamelukes at the battle of the pyramids, Napoleon 'dismissed his immediate entourage with the instruction to "... think that from the heights of these monuments, forty centuries are watching us"'.¹⁶ Napoleon, who evokes 'history' to sanctify his action, is an excellent mouthpiece of the Mediterranean metaphor in the making to which I am referring in this article.

As already mentioned, Mediterranean imaginings serve different political purposes, especially to deliver historical legitimization to a wide range of space-related national and imperialist power projects. An even greater multiplicity possibly holds for local and sub-regional situations. Claudio Fogu is therefore right when observing that 'the flow of metaphors around the theme of Mediterranean-ness is virtually infinite'.¹⁷ I maintain, nevertheless, that the general western narrative on history, which assigns to this sea and its rims a central supporting function, confers on the metaphors, which have circulated since the eighteenth century up until the present, a common paradigmatic structure, even when they are part of competing narratives and serve conflicting interests. Since the late eighteenth century, we do not only observe this *longue durée* of ideas about the Mediterranean, we also see that the ideas of Europe¹⁸ and the Mediterranean are intimately and inextricably interwoven. For an

¹⁴ Giacomo Marramao, *The Passage West: Philosophy after the Age of the Nation State* (London and New York, 2012), p. 10.

¹⁵ Manuel Borutta and Fabian Lemmes, 'Die Wiederkehr des Mittelmeerraumes: Stand und Perspektiven der neuhistorischen Mediterranistik', *Neue Politische Literatur*, 58/1 (2013), pp. 389–419, at p. 390.

¹⁶ Gregory, 'Imaginative geographies', p. 477.

¹⁷ Claudio Fogu, 'From *mare nostrum* to *mare aliorum*: Mediterranean theory and Mediterraneism in contemporary Italian thought', *California Italian Studies Journal*, 1/1 (2010), pp. 1–23, at p. 1.

¹⁸ Mikael af Malborg and Bo Stråth, *The Meaning of Europe: Variety and Contention Within and Among Nations* (Oxford and New York, 2002); Rolf Petri, 'Europa? Ein Zitatensystem', *Comparativ*, 14/3 (2004), pp. 14–49.

appropriate understanding of these ideas, we cannot refer to variants and differences alone, but must also consider semantic structures that remain stable over the period of observation.

This does not mean that similar structures never change. Of course, the basic underlying assumptions of the Mediterranean metaphor also have a history. Building on the humanist elaborations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they substituted the state of nature for the Garden of Eden and the teleology of redemption from savagery and barbarism for the theology of the redemption from sin. The new promise of the heavens consisted of a progress towards a society capable of deploying a ‘humanity almost resembling God’ and finally to open the bud that encloses ‘the true form of mankind’ inherent in its original nature.¹⁹ In short, the Christian mission was translated into a slightly diverse eschatological narrative, which can be summarized by referring to the eighteenth-century neologism ‘civilization’, although it also took other names. This genealogy leads some scholars to derive the overall arrangement and political paradigms of western society ‘from Christian theology’.²⁰ What interest me here are the ideological consequences of this heredity. As Karl Löwith pointed out, what characterizes the very core of the western philosophy of history is not so much the question *what* meaning is attributed to history, but *that* it is attributed a meaning at all. It is a purpose or end of history that transcends the present and explains it in the light of the past and the future, even in its most secularized and atheistic versions.²¹ According to John Gray, this is still the apocalyptic backbone of western thinking today.²²

Napoleon, protagonist of the above-mentioned event, condensed the western pathos of history into one sentence. He knew that from the top of the pyramids ‘history’ would oversee Frenchmen fighting and dying for the unity of the Mediterranean under the sign of a ‘civilization’ that would use this unity to spread ‘true humanity’ over the world. This is why in the present context I prefer to speak of the Mediterranean metaphor in the singular form. The virtually infinite flow of Mediterranean metaphors seems to form a maelstrom around this one, singular idea.

II

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when humanist elaboration made its first steps towards what, in retrospect, we would characterize as the secularization of eschatology, ‘Christianity’ was, for the first time, geographically located.²³ A ‘Christian Europe’ was conceived

¹⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* [1784–91] (Berlin, 1914), p. 53.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford, 2011), p. 1.

²¹ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago and London, 1949), pp. 4–5, 84.

²² John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London, 2008), pp. 7–11.

²³ Petri, ‘Europa?’, pp. 19–25.

to be projected towards the future and unknown exotic spaces, and retrospectively extended to past times when in fact the thinking of mundane *finis christianitatis* was theologically interdicted.²⁴ When the sense of mission was gradually secularized during the following centuries, Europe remained the geographical centre for the avant-garde of human progress. The atheist Enlightenment philosopher Condorcet underlined that this continent had been assigned the task to plant ‘in Africa and Asia the principles and example of the freedom, reason, and illumination of Europe’.²⁵

According to geographer Hans-Dietrich Schultz, the continents of classical geography were all but derived from describing the naturally differentiated space partitions of our planet’s surface. They descended from a previously conceived teleological programme, from which geography adapted its interpretation of physical conditions. To each of the continents, this programme assigned a role in the universal ‘relay race of culture’.²⁶ The author further points out that:

[E]vidently Europe is seen as a naturally grounded ‘object per se’ which just has to be discovered and named. This approach hides the fact that the object Europe is depending on time and culture, that in the course of history it had greatly diverging extensions, and that knowledge about it is no neutral cognition but a collectively shared attribution of a meaning, which to other cultures remains senseless.²⁷

The modern reinvention of the Mediterranean as a meaningful unitary space seems more recent than the fifteenth-century humanist resumption of ‘Europe’. The Mediterranean metaphor was most likely in the making since the late seventeenth century, when mainly Venetian, English and French seafarers, travellers, explorers, merchants and officials shaped a new Mediterranean geography with their descriptions, reflections and reports to their governments. During the second half of the eighteenth century, these ‘pioneers’ probably kept Gibbon’s lesson in mind, according to which, after the fall of the western Roman empire, its former territories and waters were newly traversed by the antique east–west divide, with Constantinople protecting ‘the wealth of Asia’ and commanding ‘the important straits which connect the Euxine and Mediterranean seas’.²⁸ On a more comprehensive level, the Mediterranean was probably not described as a ‘naturally and culturally unitary space’ before the end of the eighteenth century, when biologists, geologists and climate researchers

²⁴ Franco Cardini, *Le radici cristiane dell’Europa: Miti, storia, prospettive* (Rimini, 1997), p. 11.

²⁵ Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia, 1796), p. 255.

²⁶ Hans-Dietrich Schultz, ‘Die Platzierung der Türkei: Ein Fall für den Geographen?’, *Geographische Revue*, 9/1–2 (2007), pp. 17–48, at p. 20.

²⁷ Hans-Dietrich Schultz, ‘Halbinseln, Inseln und ein “Mittelmeer”: Südeuropa und darüber hinaus in der klassischen deutschen Geographie’, in idem (ed.), *Metropolitanes & Mediterranes: Beiträge aus der Humangeographie* (Berlin, 2006), pp. 129–88, at p. 132.

²⁸ Edward Gibbon, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire’ [1776–89], in Gibbon, *History of Rome: The Works of Edward Gibbon*, VI (New York, 1906), p. 292.

started seeing the similarities of fauna, landscape and climate, while geographers and cartographers 'separated the Mediterranean from Africa and Asia for being a part of Europe, and archaeologists and historians depicted it as the cradle of European civilization'.²⁹

In tracing the contours of continents and world-regions, the founders of classical geography were following Enlightenment traditions. For example, Voltaire already claimed that 'three things incessantly influence the spirit of men: climate, government and religion'.³⁰ Herder made the point that 'seas, mountain chains, and large rivers are the natural separation lines of lands as well as of peoples, customs, languages, and kingdoms; even in the greatest revolutions of human affairs they constituted the directing axes and borders of world history'.³¹ Since the late eighteenth century, scholarship has based these holistic concepts on the distinction of, and interplay between, human historical time and nature's timeless presence or circularity. This approach supplanted the former official geography based on sovereign state boundaries. It brought to the fore 'in varying combinations layer and natural boundaries, climate, history, economy, culture, and politics; this approach was suggestive of differences between geographical partitions that were extracted from reality instead of being guided by human *purpose*'.³² The romanticist concept of 'space individual' and the later pseudo-biologist metaphor of nations and states as living organisms were variants of, rather than opposites to, the holistic and teleological concept of late Enlightenment geography.

Early geopolitics also adhered to the same understanding, since it pretended to highlight the difference between space-related human achievements which were in harmony with nature and history, and those which were not and thus, according to another basic axiom of western philosophy, lacked legitimacy. The same understanding also remained common to almost all spatial conceptions of the Mediterranean throughout the twentieth century. At the beginning of that century, German geographer Theobald Fischer (1846–1910) maintained that the Mediterranean was an anthropologically and geographically distinguishable

part of the earth's surface characterized by ever-recurring peculiarities which emphasize its difference or even contrast to each of the confining continents. These peculiarities are so sharply defined that its separation from the related continents and its resumption as a geographical space in its own right is not only possible, but appears necessary for its full comprehension.³³

²⁹ Borutta and Lemmes, 'Die Wiederkehr', p. 390.

³⁰ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* [1756], in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, XXI (Paris, 1785), p. 243.

³¹ Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie*, p. 14.

³² Schultz, 'Halbinseln, Inseln', p. 130.

³³ Theobald Fischer, *Mittelmeerbilder. Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Kunde der Mittelmeerländer* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1908), p. 32.

After the Second World War, Fernand Braudel (1902–86) popularized this vision of ‘a very special climate similar from one end to the other of the sea, which amalgamates landscapes and ways of life’.³⁴ Conceptually, these visions leaned on that of earlier French geographers, especially Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918), who had been ‘sympathetic to Ratzel and his persistent organicism’.³⁵ Therefore, it seems that this understanding of the Mediterranean was shaped during the nineteenth century, remained predominant over the twentieth century, and is still influential today.

At the start of the twenty-first century, a proposal for a ‘historical ecology’ of the Mediterranean was made by Horden and Purcell, an approach that according to Michael Herzfeld offers ‘novel and interesting heuristic options’.³⁶ It relies on the ‘frequent invocation of the natural ecologist’s terms’, paying nevertheless ‘sustained attention to what is distinctively historical about the place of humanity within the environment, and particularly to the complexity of human interaction across large distances’.³⁷ The authors’ concept of Mediterranean space abandons the traditional ideas of a natural and cultural unity in favour of a more complex and sophisticated unifying principle, that is connectivity, seen as a property of structurally similar and similarly changing ‘micro-ecologies’. The authors claim that:

We can never hope to come to an understanding of what can usefully be said of the Mediterranean-wide human or physical landscape until we are fully sensitive to the enormous variety and diversity of environments within the basin of the sea, not just to the constants that apparently underlie the chaos.³⁸

Overall, the ‘spatial turn’ in the realm of historiography reinforces the attention to the social, economic and cultural production of space, and to historical ecology.³⁹ At the same time, many geographers engage with a historicizing deconstruction of the conceptual foundations of the underlying spatial categories. Schultz states that human action needs the establishment of orders, and that spatial orders are particularly efficient in this respect. Nevertheless, he also points out that all of these orders, however detailed and differentiated,

are only abstractions, not images of reality. This makes it spurious asking whether such spaces are ‘real’ or not. What is at stake here is rather whether

³⁴ Fernand Braudel, ‘Mère méditerranée’, *Le Courier* (UNESCO) 38 (1985), pp. 4–12, at p. 7 (excerpted from *La Méditerranée, l’espace et l’histoire* (Paris, 1985)).

³⁵ Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge and Oxford, 1994), p. 49. On Vidal’s influence on Braudel, see Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, ‘The Mediterranean alternative’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 35/3 (2010), pp. 345–65, at pp. 348–9. See also Paul Vidal de la Blache, ‘Les grandes agglomérations humaines. Troisième article: Régions Méditerranéennes’, *Annales de Géographie*, 147 (1918), pp. 147–87.

³⁶ Michael Herzfeld, ‘Practical Mediterraneanism: excuses for everything, from epistemology to eating’, in William V. Harris (ed.), *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 45–63, at p. 50.

³⁷ Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000), p. 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁹ See Angelo Torre, ‘La produzione storica dei luoghi’, *Quaderni Storici*, 2 (2002), pp. 443–76.

they do what they are expected to do, and which chances, problems or even dangers are conveyed by certain conceptions of space, by those who proffer them, and by those to whom they address.⁴⁰

In my view, the search for answers to these questions of a geographer represents an almost archetypal task also for historical inquiry.

III

The Mediterranean is a fact, anthropologist Herzfeld observes, specifying that ‘factuality itself is always a constitutive act’ and implying that claims for the Mediterranean to exist ‘do not so much enunciate facts as create them’.⁴¹ If ‘power’ means the ‘ability to act or do’, this certainly holds for geographical facts, which at least put forward an intention or, at best, its successful implementation. When a physical portion of space, for example a sea and its rims, is declared to be a ‘region’, we should remember that the ‘term region derives from *regere fines*, that is to govern/mark out borders’.⁴² Whenever we look at particular cases of region-building, these display a complex ‘state of becoming, assembling, connecting up, centring, and distributing all kind of things’, that ‘brings together various forms of power, varying from coercive to immanent, from power that bounds spaces to power that opens them up’.⁴³ On a more general level, however, it remains the case that any ‘region’ brings power and might to the fore. This is why the term ‘geopolitics’ can be seen, at least to a certain extent, as a pleonasm. Classical geography was already geopolitical since ‘every project of regional mapping or region building is nothing but a political project translated into space(s)’.⁴⁴

Geopolitics proper, that is, the specific field of investigation of a distinct academic discipline, developed after 1890, from a triangular liaison between geography, political sciences and history. The latter remained more on the background of disciplinary definitions, but was fundamental, since the typical geopolitical approach of the time argued with the past to single out the rules, assessed the present with those rules and, on this basis, formulated proposals for the future. The founding texts of geopolitics paid great attention to the sea as a political and strategic asset and operated a fundamental differentiation between land powers and sea powers. The United States Navy captain and historian Alfred Mahan popularized this debate. His ideas were promptly used in political and military realms (for example, by Kaiser Wilhelm II to legitimize his *Flottenpolitik*) and influenced Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, Karl

⁴⁰ Schultz, ‘Halbinseln, Inseln’, p. 47.

⁴¹ Herzfeld, ‘Practical Mediterraneanism’, p. 50.

⁴² Luiza Bialasiewicz, Paolo Giaccaria, Alun Jones and Claudio Minca, ‘Re-scaling “EU” rope: EU macro-regional fantasies in the Mediterranean’, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 20 (2013) pp. 59–76.

⁴³ Anssi Paasi, ‘Regions are social constructs, but who or what “constructs” them?’, *Environment and Planning, A*/42 (2010), pp. 2296–301, at pp. 2299–300.

⁴⁴ Bialasiewicz et al., ‘Re-scaling “EU” rope’, p. 71.

Haushofer, Carl Schmitt and Nicholas Spykman, the most outstanding scholars of early twentieth century geopolitics, some of whom retain a certain influence even among present-day American geopolitical think tanks. This does not mean that everyone agreed with Mahan. On the contrary, Mackinder, for example, opposed his idea of the predominance of sea powers; by affirming the predominance of land powers, he nevertheless acknowledged the importance of Mahan's fundamental distinction.

What interests us here, however, is not the specific content of the geopolitical debate, but the question why the Mediterranean within this debate emerged as the 'mother of all examples'. To open a geopolitical treatise with observations regarding Mediterranean history, for example, on the Roman empire and its 'maritime control over the entire shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea',⁴⁵ has apparently become an unbroken tradition for over a century – a tradition that Mahan inaugurated. In his 1890 book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, the author, in an effort to show that in history 'sea power had a strategic bearing and weight which has received scant recognition', started his demonstration with a Mediterranean example, the Second Punic War. Notwithstanding a lack of 'full knowledge necessary for tracing in detail its influence', he was left in no doubt that sea power 'was a determining factor'.⁴⁶

Other seminal texts of geopolitics selected the Mediterranean as an exemplary case: in *Das Meer als Quelle der Völkergröße*, published in 1900 by Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), the Mediterranean even becomes a specific analytical category which he distinguishes from the open sea on the one hand, and closed waters on the other. He detects similar natural properties for two other 'Mediterraneans', the Caribbean and the Australasian ones. As he saw it, in the future, these other two Mediterraneans would converge with the geopolitical features of what he called 'our Mediterranean'.⁴⁷ While several authors later adopted his open sea, middle sea and closed sea taxonomy in other cases, the description of the Mediterranean as a vanguard of history should be underlined.

In the same book, the Mediterranean also serves, as in Mahan's pioneering work, as the exemplary case, which has the privilege of offering the first demonstration of the thesis that the author puts forward. The thesis is basically the same as Mahan's, but here it is not the Phoenicians, it is, besides Venice, the Greek example that must illustrate it. 'The war plan of Pericles – the author writes at a certain point – demonstrates full awareness of the natural force of a sea power'.⁴⁸ Moreover, it is again in the

⁴⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York, 1997), p. 10.

⁴⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston, 1890), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Ratzel, *Das Meer als Quelle der Völkergröße: Eine politisch-geographische Studie* (Munich and Leipzig, 1900), pp. 19–25.

⁴⁸ Ratzel, *Das Meer als Quelle*, p. 59.

Mediterranean, again in Greece, where Mackinder, in his 1919 publication *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, fires back at sea power supremacy. He selects the same geographical example, but he does it to demonstrate the exact reverse: 'No Greek of full blood but looked upon a Macedonian as a sort of bastard! But his position in the broad root of the Greek peninsula enabled the Macedonian to conquer the Greek sea-base'.⁴⁹ For Mackinder, the Mediterranean was not necessarily a springboard for worldwide expansion. On the contrary, before the Suez channel was inaugurated its waterways detached Europe from the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Mediterranean rather resembled the southern moat of the European fortress, or part of a 'natural provision for the intimacy of a family of nations'.⁵⁰

As we have seen, Ratzel, Mahan and Mackinder arrived at contradictory conclusions regarding the importance of the maritime space for the development of military force and political power. Does it make sense, then, to refer their work to a common Mediterranean metaphor? It does, in so far as 'the Mediterranean' represents a complex of meanings that embraces different and sometimes contradictory single metaphors, allegories and parables that nevertheless all rotate around the same idea of 'history' and 'civilization'. Accordingly, for the above-quoted authors, Mediterranean antiquity served as a model case for their geopolitical deductions regarding land and sea power, and other questions, of their own present and future. It was the place 'where it all began', whether 'civilization' used the maritime space to gather its forces necessary for moving another step in the predetermined direction of historical fulfilment, or used it on the contrary as a moat to secure a flank of its continental or Atlantic development. Consequently, it was up to Pericles' fleet on the one hand, to Alexander's land army on the other, to deliver a parable for the principle that, according to the authors, had been proven right time and ever again. No other place in the world seemed to possess the same persuasive authority to stage such a universally valid demonstration. All scholars of geopolitics agreed that it was the birthplace, both of Greek and Roman antiquity and of 'the Christian community as a universal system',⁵¹ to use Rudolf Kjellén's expression. Similarly, Fischer spoke of 'an area of Mediterranean culture where the origins of our European culture lie and which consist of Christianity and classical erudition. Since the 19th century they have become an oceanic, and even a world, culture'.⁵²

⁴⁹ Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York, 1919), p. 61.

⁵⁰ Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, p. 62; for older views on the Mediterranean as a barrier, see Matthew D'Auria, 'Protean boundaries: Montesquieu's Europe and the Mediterranean world', *French History*, 29/1 (2015) pp. 31–45.

⁵¹ Rodolf Kjellén, 'What inspires a League of Nations', *The Living Age*, 17 (1920), pp. 137–9, at p. 138.

⁵² Fischer, *Mittelmeerbilder*, p. 1.

IV

Hence, at the time when geopolitics ‘proper’ took its first steps, the Mediterranean had definitely become the name for the place ‘where it all began’. It may be worth taking a closer look at the historical value that the authors attributed to this geographical partition. If Ratzel’s references to history in his 1900 treatise were apparently more ‘technical’, in his lecture manuscript fragments conserved at the Leipzig Archiv für Geographie, he reveals a more explicit teleological view. He discussed the role of the Mediterranean in a lecture on political ethnography under the title ‘The Oriental Question’. Apparently, the Leipzig professor drafted and revised the related notes between 1895 and 1903. Ratzel states: ‘Because the culture of Central Asia expanded to the West through the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean countries acquired earlier a position of historical importance than those of Northern Europe. This is why they until today conserve their characteristics of an old historical age.’⁵³ Similarly, one of Fischer’s statements, ‘While the Mediterranean as a focus of culture had few connections to Africa either as a donor or as a beneficiary, to Europe it has almost exclusively given, from Asia almost exclusively taken’,⁵⁴ the passage in Ratzel’s text fragment situates the Mediterranean within what Schultz characterizes as a culture teleology. We should keep in mind here that *Kultur* was at the time the German pseudo-opposite and de facto synonym to the French concept of *civilisation*. As the concept of *Kulturstufen* signals, German scholars saw history likewise as a progression from lower to higher stages, almost in the same way suggested by the concept of civilization. That the more or less convincing differences discussed by Kant, von Humboldt, Nietzsche and others were in the late nineteenth century translated into an unbridgeable opposition,⁵⁵ and *civilisation* supplanted by *Kulturentwicklung* as the core process of history, apparently had more to do with refuting the intellectual primate of the ‘French enemy’ than with other reasons.

Of course, there were national differences regarding details that were of great political, but little conceptual, relevance. Each nation legitimized its existence with a particularly central part in Europe’s universal mission and shaped the related Mediterranean images in its own way. In 1876, a French geographer, Élisée Reclus, wrote:

The march of civilization has long operated in the direction of southeast to northwest: Phoenicia, Greece, Italy, France, were successively the great homes of human intelligence. The main reason for this historical phenomenon is found in the same configuration of the sea that served as a vehicle for people on the move; the axis of civilization, so to speak,

⁵³ Archiv für Geographie (AfG), Leipzig-Institut für Länderkunde, Leipzig; Nachlass Ratzel, box 155, shelfmark 348, Die orientalische Frage, fo. 23.

⁵⁴ Fischer, *Mittelmeerbilder*, p. 1.

⁵⁵ See Pietro Rossi, ‘Civiltà’, *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali*, I (Roma, 1991), pp. 793–808, at pp. 800–2.

superposed the central axis of the Mediterranean waters from Syria to the Gulf of Lion.⁵⁶

It is difficult to imagine that an Italian or a German geographer, let us assume an anarchist one as Reclus was, would have used a similar wording. If they shared the *same* vision of history, one that is capable of inventing metaphors such as ‘human intelligence on the move’, they would have at least slightly ‘corrected’ civilization’s geographical itinerary according to their own national traditions. What interests us here is not such national or personal variants of the same narration, but the coinciding origins of Europe and the Mediterranean which it always contained, depicting both as products of an original transmission of culture or civilization from the east to the west. The degree of culture defines the ‘historical importance’ of a place, that is, how far or close ‘this place’ is to the teleological fulfilment of history. Northern Europe now stands higher in this hierarchy, argued Ratzel, but the Mediterranean conserves the dignity of an old respectable age. It also conserves the footprints and ambiguities of the original encounter between the west and the east: a geographical ‘finding’ that sounds much like a popular commonplace, but is a commonplace because it is insistently repeated by the western master narrative of history.

In the same lecture manuscript, Ratzel explains to his students that ‘the Mediterranean’s central geographical position between Europe, Asia and Africa transformed it, since the dawn of Antiquity and up to our days, into an arena where the west-eastern contrasts ... are disputed and compensated’. After some additional wording inserted later, the phrase went: ‘an arena where the west-eastern *contacts are established and* contrasts ... disputed and compensated’.⁵⁷ His later insertion appears to reflect the back and forth in western descriptions of places where civilizations are supposed to ‘hybridize’ and/or clash. Within this range of possibilities, both cooperative and conflicting, political strategies can thus be confident of finding experts who explain the scientifically unquestionable, geographical and historical, necessities of either peace or war.

What Schultz means by the adaptation of the planet’s surface to the needs of a teleological narrative can also be seen when we consider ‘the Mediterranean’s central geographical position between Europe, Asia and Africa’ asserted by Ratzel. For the author the latter centrality is visibly not a question of changeable perspectives according to variable parameters, which would make of centre and periphery categories that are more ephemeral. Rather, it is a geographical property carved in stone, i.e. geological formations, and determined by land masses, waters and climate. One may ask why, if physical properties determine centrality,

⁵⁶ Élisée Reclus, *Nouvelle géographie universelle*, I (Paris, 1876), p. 47.

⁵⁷ AfG, Nachlass Ratzel, box 155, shelfmark 348, Die orientalische Frage, folio 20; inserted words highlighted.

the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Caribbean Sea, Lake Michigan, or any other ‘middle seas’ or water masses encircled, or almost encircled, by land masses, were considered less ‘central’ than the Mediterranean. The most likely answer is that, in the Mediterranean case, the surrounding lands were divided into continents and labelled Europe, Asia and Africa according to their hierarchical position in teleology.

V

As early as 1845, a liberal Austrian leader, Franz Schuselka (1811–86), wrote a book on the Mediterranean, the Baltic and the North Seas. He stated that: ‘The World Spirit strives to lift the magic ban under the spell of which the Mediterranean countries have been lying in chains for centuries now. Should the antiquated and obsolete world really rejuvenate, it will necessarily be in the same place where humanity lived its most beautiful and vigorous youth.’⁵⁸ This was a rather pathetic Hegelian vision of the Mediterranean’s historical and geographical fate. It nevertheless represented one of the roots of Ratzel’s political geography. Moreover, it included a concept of the state as a historical subject, which would be central to future geopolitical approaches. As Schuselka noted, ‘in the Mediterranean statecraft in all its variants and degrees faces its most magnificent challenges’.⁵⁹

It is certainly true that the nation-state’s role was further exalted by Ratzel’s and others’ reference to Haeckel’s and Darwin’s evolutionist theories. They pretended to apply them by interpreting states and nations as living organisms, which more or less successfully deal with the purpose of history. As I see it, the trick is not so much in the use of organic metaphors than in their teleological interpretation, as teleology, if not lacking at all, is a quite intricate and disputed aspect of evolutionary biological theories.⁶⁰ Therefore, pseudo-biological interpretations were not the decisive trait of political geography, but represented just one of the branches that, over time, were grafted onto the teleological trunk of western philosophy of history. As we have seen, Schuselka, in his vulgar-Hegelian version, did not need biology to make the state the principal agent for the fulfilment of history.

The concept of ‘geopolitics’ was famously first used by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922), in his 1899 *Introduction to the Geography of Sweden*. Influenced by Ratzel’s political geography, he defined geopolitics as an analysis of the impact that geographic factors have on international relations.⁶¹ With the state seen as the principle subject of history, his concern was for ‘the relationship between the

⁵⁸ Franz Schuselka, *Mittelmeer, Ost- und Nordsee* (Leipzig, 1845), p. 195.

⁵⁹ Schuselka, *Mittelmeer*, p. 205.

⁶⁰ See the dispute in *Biology and Philosophy* between James G. Lennox, ‘Darwin was a teleologist’, 8/4 (1993), pp. 409–21, and Michael T. Ghiselin, ‘Darwin’s language may seem teleological, but his thinking is another matter’, 9/4 (1994), pp. 489–92.

⁶¹ See Bertil Häggman, ‘Rudolf Kjellén’, *Nationalencyklopedin*, XI (Höganäs, 1993), p. 67.

anatomy of power and its geographical foundation'.⁶² Relying on both Ratzel and Kjellén, the political scientist Karl Haushofer (1869–1946) would later claim that geopolitics determines 'which transformations are only apparently due to mere cultural and power motivations, but actually depend on geographically determined causes, and which others instead depend only on human will, which asserts itself independently of environmental and physiographical factors or even against them'.⁶³ Regarding the German school of geopolitics and its connection with the Nazi movement a long debate has developed in reaction to post-1989 attempts of rehabilitation.⁶⁴ Several authors, while polemical towards the 'German school', accredit the scientific value of the 'Anglo-Saxon' one;⁶⁵ others conclude that some scholars exaggerate the differences in order to protect newly booming international geopolitics from blame.⁶⁶

In fact, the renewed interest in geopolitics during the late twentieth century was not confined to neo-conservative 'think tanks' and 'realist' or 'liberal' scholars of international relations who apparently relied on Mackinder and other early traditions. Among political geographers, a branch of 'critical geopolitics' developed, the promoters of which defined geopolitics 'as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft "spatialize" international politics',⁶⁷ placing themselves 'within the post-modern debate concerning territory, boundaries and sovereignty'.⁶⁸ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, a leading figure of this branch of geopolitical research, underlined that the earlier geopolitical writers, albeit coming 'from quite different national backgrounds', made it possible with their writings 'to retroactively invent a geopolitical tradition with Mackinder and Ratzel as its "founding fathers"'. They were not only all 'invariably imperialists of one sort or another', they also had in common 'a philosophical approach to reality grounded in Cartesian perspectivalism'.⁶⁹ They likewise accepted, I would add, the basic axioms of the western philosophy of history, and shared on these grounds a

⁶² Silviu Costachie, 'German school of geopolitics: evolution, ideas, prospects', *Revista Română de Geografie Politică*, 8/2 (2011), pp. 264–76, at p. 274.

⁶³ Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans: Studien über die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Geographie und Geschichte* (Berlin, 1924), p. 4.

⁶⁴ See Frank Ebeling, *Geopolitik: Karl Haushofer und seine Raumwissenschaft 1919–1945* (Berlin, 1994); contra: Werner Köster, 'Der "Raum" als Kategorie der Resubstantialisierung: Analysen zur neuerlichen Konjunktur einer deutschen Semantik', in Robert Stockhammer (ed.), *TopoGraphien der Moderne. Medien zur Repräsentation und Konstruktion von Räumen* (Munich, 2005), pp. 25–71, at p. 48.

⁶⁵ Nils Hoffmann, *Renaissance der Geopolitik? Die deutsche Sicherheitspolitik nach dem Kalten Krieg* (Wiesbaden, 2012), p. 34.

⁶⁶ Wiebeke Böge, *Die Einteilung der Erde in Großräume: Zum Weltbild der deutschsprachigen Geographie seit 1871* (Hamburg, 1997), pp. 160–4.

⁶⁷ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, 'Geopolitics and discourse: practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy', *Political Geography*, 11/2 (1992), pp. 190–204, at p. 190.

⁶⁸ David Newman, 'Geopolitics renaissance: territory, sovereignty and the world political map', in David Newman (ed.), *Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity* (London, 1999), pp. 1–16, at p. 1.

⁶⁹ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London, 1996), pp. 22–3.

similar vision of the Mediterranean, even if the details of that vision varied according to their different national and personal backgrounds.

This holds, for example, for the Swede Kjellén who, in his 1905 work *Stormakterna* defines the Mediterranean as a European sea, although he does it from a northern European perspective. He shares Schuselka's view on the Mediterranean's relapse into lethargy but seems not to believe that it could easily recover and become again a driving force behind universal political change. Instead, he characterizes the Strait of Gibraltar as the European access point 'to both the small and great Orient'.⁷⁰ His formulation not only confirms Ratzel's mixed contact and conflict zone theory; it also underlines that 'the classical Mediterranean is no longer in the foreground of history'⁷¹ and that consequently the 'historical importance' of Europe has shifted away from its ambiguous Mediterranean origins, towards the Atlantic rims of the continent. It means that from a more 'true' European viewpoint, which by definition is always the most 'modern' or 'advanced' one, the Mediterranean has to be accessed through the Atlantic Ocean, besides of course France and Spain which have both options, and Italy, which Kjellén sees relegated to a merely 'internal' position.⁷²

In the descriptions of the time, however, the Strait of Gibraltar is not only a way in; it is also a way out. This holds, at least, for the age of Philip II, as for example Fischer underlines in his 1908 book:

around the time which we usually refer to as the early modern period of history, seafarers who acquired their skills in the Mediterranean instruct the European peoples living on the ocean's rim and extend the space of action of the Mediterranean culture to the whole of Europe. By doing so, they create the conditions for European dominance over a world already made wider by Italians.⁷³

The same line of reasoning is taken up by German historian Paul Herre (1876–1962), in his work on *The Fight for Dominance in the Mediterranean* published in 1909. He underlines the decisive contribution of Mediterranean knowledge and experience in seafaring, its mariners and naval technology, to European overseas expansion:

The people of the Mediterranean offered a groundbreaking contribution to the formidable effort to exploit the world. They did this even though it moved their own space away from the focus of historical life. Obeying an instinctive impulse, these people put the achievements of their sea area at the disposal of universal human progress. This is a particularly strong and clear proof for the intrinsic force of history ...⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Rudolf Kjellén, *Stormakterna: konturer kring samtidens storpolitik* (Stockholm, [1905] 1912), p. 22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷³ Fischer: *Mittelmeerbilder*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Paul Herre, *Der Kampf um die Herrschaft im Mittelmeer* (Leipzig, 1909), p. 77.

VI

As Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca remind us, the influence ‘of French geography (in particular, the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache and Lucien Febvre) is explicitly laid out by Braudel in the opening pages of his opus magnum on the Mediterranean’.⁷⁵ Thomas Schippers has even drawn a link between the German geographers of the early nineteenth century, such as Karl Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt, and later French geographers, such as Elisée Reclus (a student of Ritter’s), ‘and even later historians like Fernand Braudel, for whom various degrees of cultural “continuity” and similarity existed among peoples living around the interior sea although they refused any form of (over)-simplifying Ratzelian determinism’.⁷⁶ If these scholars are right, we may conclude that, despite the undoubted originality of Braudel’s corpus of historical investigation, earlier historians as well as geographical and geopolitical writers anticipated important conceptual traits of his *Méditerranée*. We have also seen that this commonality was not limited to the alleged socio-anthropological peculiarities of the ‘Mediterranean peoples’, but likewise regarded ‘civilization’ as a world-historical process. For example, Herre’s emphatic underlining of the Mediterranean’s ‘instinctive’ projection towards the oceans of the entire world anticipated Braudel’s idea of *une plus grande Méditerranée*, where Christopher Columbus and others play the role of Mediterranean torch-bearers of Europe’s universal mission.⁷⁷

This is why Amir Husain, who in 1508 led the Egyptian sea expedition to India, was a less suitable candidate for Mediterranean torch-bearing in the world, although Braudel inserts Islam among the ‘three cultural communities, three huge and perennial civilizations, three cardinal ways of thinking, believing, eating, drinking, living’ which ‘make’ the Mediterranean.⁷⁸ What comes to the fore here is not only the world-historical role assigned to Europe, but also the European role within the Mediterranean area and its behaviour towards the Mediterranean ‘other’. One has to acknowledge Braudel’s effort to be inclusive, but also that a hierarchically ordered inclusivity was not alien to French national and colonial interests.⁷⁹ Braudel, whose Mediterranean vision had ‘received a decisive imprint during his Algerian sojourn of almost ten years’, accepted the thesis of earlier writers that ‘the Arab conquest of North Africa represented the decisive breach of the originally “Latin” Mediterranean unity’.⁸⁰ However, he turned this breach into a claim for inclusivity, which,

⁷⁵ Giaccaria and Minca, ‘The Mediterranean alternative’, p. 349.

⁷⁶ Thomas K. Schippers, ‘Nice to think, hard to find’, in Dionigi Albera, Anton Blok and Christian Bromberger (eds), *L’anthropologie de la Méditerranée* (Paris, 2001), pp. 725–9, at p. 725.

⁷⁷ Braudel, *La Méditerranée*, I, p. 155; idem, ‘Mère méditerranée’, p. 10.

⁷⁸ Braudel, ‘Mère méditerranée’, p. 11.

⁷⁹ John Strachan, ‘The colonial cosmology of Fernand Braudel’, in Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind*, I (Lincoln, NE, 2011), pp. 72–95.

⁸⁰ Jan Jansen, ‘Die Erfindung des Mittelmeerraums im kolonialen Kontext’, in Schenk and Winkler (eds), *Der Süden*, pp. 175–205, at pp. 177, 203.

at the time, was functional to the colonial project, at least as long as teleology legitimized its hierarchal structure.

Earlier German writers, who underlined the same breach but looked at the Mediterranean from a diverse perspective, had come to a different conclusion. According to Fischer, 'the conflict between Christianity and Islam stretches out over the whole of the Mediterranean area like an electric tension'. Arabs and Turks, the driving forces behind the alien 'flooding' of the Mediterranean rims, never became truly Mediterranean since 'these originally pastoral tribes and inhabitants of the steppe, while still dwelling in the driest zones of the Mediterranean, remain inland-oriented and sea-phobic'. Fischer concluded that 'to the life and cultural development of the confessors of Islam who live in the Mediterranean area the sea is irrelevant'.⁸¹ Stereotypic assertions such as these may be referred to as the exclusivist standpoint.

A third version was offered half a century before Fischer and one century before Braudel by the Austrian Schuselka, who differentiated between the earlier 'revolutionary' Islam put forward by the 'imaginative Arabs' against a spiritually decaying Christianity, and the institutionalized later Islam, 'the symbol of honour of which became the horse tail of the dull Turks'.⁸² This was, so to say, the half-inclusive and half-exclusive version of Mediterranean-ness, interested in establishing a sense of Mediterranean commonality between the Europeans and those who were 'oppressed' by the Ottoman empire, which the European powers were eager to dismantle. Later also the Turkish nation-state was most of the time excluded (or spared) from *la Méditerranée*, more than the Arab countries which at least could 'enjoy' a certain degree of subaltern inclusion.⁸³

That the Mediterranean had been 'originally' united under 'Latin', that is 'European', rule, formed a common ground of belief among all authors, whereas the consequences that were to be drawn from this 'historical fact' differed according to diverging scholarly interests, political projects and contingency. Depending on time, place and context the solutions oscillated between inclusive and exclusive versions, and various mediations between these two extremes. Still, in present political discourses on the Mediterranean, it is not difficult to find elements that resemble past hierarchies and oscillate within a similar range of inclusion and exclusion. In 2014–15, for example, political leaders hypothesized a new western military mission into Libya.⁸⁴ Some of these policy promoters took into consideration 'a real military presence the direction of which

⁸¹ Fischer, *Mittelmeerbilder*, pp. 405, 407–8.

⁸² Schuselka, *Mittelmeer*, p. 200–1.

⁸³ Edhem Eldem, Feride Çiçekoğlu, *La Méditerranée turque* (Paris, 2000), p. 16.

⁸⁴ Ian Traynor, 'EU draws up plans for military attacks on Libya targets to stop migrant boats', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/10/eu-considers-military-attacks-on-targets-in-libya-to-stop-migrant-boats> [accessed 28 Aug. 2015].

could, or actually should, be Italian'.⁸⁵ The recommendation expressed by the second modal verb, however practically motivated, is underpinned by a long discursive tradition.

In the 1870s, Bohemian writer Eduard Rüffer (1835–78), who in 1860 had served with Garibaldi's volunteer troops who conquered the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, noted that England was already in almost complete possession of Egypt. He called on Spain not to lose time but 'accept its cultural mission on Africa's north-western coast, because should it miss prompt intervention in Morocco, another power will exploit the opportunity of taking possession of this area destined for a splendid future, and open it to the blessings of civilization'. Italy, he meant, would better leave alone Alger and Tunis, which were well off in French hands. 'An Italian expansion to the African coastland, however, where it is imperative to gradually extinguish or civilize the half-savage Mohammedan tribes, would certainly be an honourable assignment for the young kingdom'.⁸⁶

Whenever heirs of the Roman empire come to North Africa, it is, so it seems, a homecoming. As early as 1811 the reader of another book could learn that 'the Mediterranean Sea, like the Baltic Sea, are the inner spaces of European cultural life, and at least a part of the North African coast has to be considered Europe from a physical and ethnographical point of view. Africa in its proper meaning lies beyond the Saharan desert.'⁸⁷ It was neither a historian nor a geographer who wrote these words, but the philosopher Karl Friedrich Krause. This was for good reason, because defining European and Mediterranean borders, which in Krause's view perfectly superpose each other in the south, is ultimately a philosophical question.

VII

Thomas Schippers has argued that through the 'perspective elaborated by human geographers and historians of the early twentieth century, the Mediterranean has become a metaphor of a particular form of "civilisation"'.⁸⁸ As I tried to show in the present article, the metaphor extended also to the concept of civilization in its more general, i.e. teleological and world-historical, meaning. These writers operated the extension by assigning to the Mediterranean a crucial place in history, not only as the cradle of a 'European civilization' that descends from the encounter with earlier 'civilizations', but also as the trigger of 'modernity'.

⁸⁵ 'Libia, Latorre (PD): subito missione onu a guida italiana', *askanews*, 4 June 2014, http://www.askanews.it/esteri/libia-latorre-pd-subito-missione-onu-a-guida-italiana_711450029.htm [accessed 31 Aug. 2015].

⁸⁶ Eduard Rüffer, *Das Mittelmeer und seine Seestrategie: Aus dem Nachlass des Verstorbenen* (Prague, 1879), pp. 71, 75–8.

⁸⁷ Karl Friedrich Krause, *Aphorismen zur geschichtswissenschaftlichen Erdkunde* (Berlin, [1811] 1894), p. 23, quoted from Schultz, 'Halbinseln, Inseln', p. 171.

⁸⁸ Schippers, 'Nice to think', p. 725.

Through the description of civilization on the move across the Middle Sea, from the eastern to the western spaces, from Asia to Europe; through the assumption that these moves correspond to a progression from 'lower' to 'higher' historical importance; and, finally, through the 'passage to the west' by the conquest of the oceans and a 'new world', this particular 'civilization' showed itself to be the selected one that would leave behind all geographical limitations to become 'universal'.

Classical geographers in general, and authors of early geopolitical writings in particular, as well as many historians of their time, tried to show what geography contributed to Mediterranean and world history. What they actually did show was how philosophical assumptions about history shaped Mediterranean geography. Their texts suggest that the Mediterranean metaphor's core paradigm remained stable over time. They give us an idea of how the most frequent commonplaces of the western philosophy of history delivered the raw materials for the making of political geography and early geopolitics. The centrality of the Mediterranean, which the authors unanimously stated, meant centrality in the historical narrative. It was not about climate, waters and rims, it was about meaning in history.