

Braudel, the Sorbonne Early Modern Seminar, and the Fabric of Another Mediterranean History

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Few historians have shaped their discipline as profoundly as Fernand Braudel did in the second half of the twentieth century. His influence extended far beyond the *École des Annales*, reorganizing historical research in France through institutional leadership—notably as a founder of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS)—and by championing regional studies, interdisciplinary methods, and history’s maturation as a social science. An entire generation of early modern European historians trained under his guidance bears witness to his intellectual reach.

Among Braudel’s monumental contributions, *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* stands apart, not only for its scholarly ambition but for the extraordinary conditions of its creation.¹ In 1940, Second Lieutenant Braudel, refusing the armistice with Nazi Germany, continued fighting until his capture. Imprisoned in Mainz and Lübeck—without notes or archives—he drafted his doctoral thesis through correspondence with Lucien Febvre and negotiated access to German historiography. The resulting work, published after the war, redefined historical practice. Its interdisciplinary scope pioneered regional studies, while its *longue durée* framework embedded human events within the slow rhythms of geography and ecology.²

Yet today, Braudel’s *Mediterranean* is regularly reduced to a pedagogical tool—a text that introduces undergraduates to regional chronology rather than the paradigm-shifting force it once represented. As new social science methodologies ascend, does Braudel’s vision still hold relevance? Reflecting on my education and early career experience in historical research at the

¹ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Armand Colin, 1949).

² Peter Schöttler, “Fernand Braudel, prisonnier en Allemagne: Face à la longue durée et au temps présent,” *Sozial Geschichte* 10 (2023): 7–25; and Paule Braudel, “Braudel en captivité,” in *Autour de Fernand Braudel*, ed. Paul Carmignani (Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2002).

Sorbonne, this paper argues that *La Méditerranée* endures as a catalyst for interdisciplinary dialogue and transregional thinking.

A Millennial's Late Encounter with Braudel

As graduate students of early modern history at Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in the 2000s, we were trained in the exacting methods of microhistory. Our education centered on a rigorous research seminar—collectively led by faculty and connecting us with Europe's foremost early modernists—where multilingual debates and comparative thinking were the norm.³ Under mentors like Christine Lebeau and Wolfgang Kaiser, we learned to see how a seventeenth-century study of Tabarca could illuminate sixteenth-century confessional policies in Cologne or Vilnius.⁴ The “Lebeau-Kaiser seminar” aimed to forge a cohort of scholars whose tightly focused case studies might resonate transregionally.⁵

Ironically, my first substantive engagement with Braudel came through Samuel Huntington's controversial appropriation of *La Méditerranée* to legitimize his “clash of civilizations” thesis.⁶ Like many early-career scholars post-9/11, I rejected Huntington's model as reductive and politically hazardous—yet without critically examining whether his reading of Braudel was itself sound.⁷

This changed when Wolfgang Kaiser, as my thesis committee president, remarked, “Vienna is the Mediterranean without the Mediterranean.” His comment led me to Braudel's own admission in volume 2 of *La Méditerranée*:

*I could do no more than take cognizance, from a distance, of the German, Austrian, and Polish archives (...). The best collection of archives in this central European region which looked to the Mediterranean is in Vienna, at that time a political centre rather than an economic cross-road, but it made for political or dynastic reasons, an excellent listening-post (...). Circumstances prevented me from making this trip from which I had hoped to obtain information about the Mediterranean.*⁸

³ Originally established by Daniel Roche, the seminar was run at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne's Centre de recherche en Histoire Moderne by Nicole Lemaitre and Alain Canbantous, then later transferred to Christine Lebeau and Wolfgang Kaiser.

⁴ Sadok Boubaker, “Les Tabarkins: Une communauté de frontières,” in *Les sociétés de frontière de la Méditerranée à l'Atlantique (XVI–XVIIe siècle)*, ed. Michel Bertrand and Natividad Planas (Casa de Velázquez, 2011), 231–42; Mathilde Monge, *Des communautés mouvantes: Les “sociétés des Frères chrétiens” en Rhénanie du Nord (Juliers, Berg, ville de Cologne, v. 1530–1694)* (Droz, 2015); Laurent Tatarenko, *Une réforme orientale à l'âge baroque: Les Ruthènes de la grande-principauté de Lituanie et Rome au temps de l'Union de Brest (milieu du XVI–XVIIe siècle)* (École française de Rome, 2021).

⁵ David Do Paço, Mathilde Monge, and Laurent Tatarenko, eds., *Des religions dans la ville: Ressorts et stratégies de coexistence dans l'Europe des XVI–XVIIIe siècles* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁷ The Lebeau-Kaiser seminar intersected with many other programs in which the two organizers or their guests were involved, such as *Transméditerranées*, run from the EHESS by Jocelyne Dakhli, that has notably resulted in Jocelyne Dakhli and Bernard Vincent, eds., *Les Musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe, vol. 1. Une présence invisible* (Albin Michel, 2011), and Jocelyne Dakhli and Wolfgang Kaiser, *Les musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe, vol. 2: Passages et contacts en Méditerranée* (Albin Michel, 2013).

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 2:1259–61.

At the very moment I read these lines, I was deep in the Austrian State Archives, grappling with 700 boxes of documents (70 percent in Gothic script) on eighteenth-century Trieste. These records—spanning trade, diplomacy, and everyday life—forced me to reconsider my initial model of Viennese society.⁹ More profoundly, they revealed how Mediterranean paradigms could intersect with broader social-scientific frameworks, as explored in the sections that follow.

Understanding Migrations Beyond Legal Categories

The study of early modern mobility in central European Habsburg history has long been constrained by a particular interpretation of diaspora studies—one that often amounted to little more than a rebranding of traditional “trading nations” narratives, adapted to contemporary identity politics. This approach found superficial justification in the Habsburg administration’s own categorization of minorities, a practice mirrored in the Holy Roman Empire and Mediterranean states, where confessionalization policies seemingly reinforced rigid group boundaries. Historians, in turn, have frequently portrayed Central European cities as mosaics of state-regulated, identity-based corporate bodies.¹⁰

The Lebeau-Kaiser seminar demanded we challenge these assumptions. Trained in micro-history, we learned to reconstruct communities through observed practices rather than imposed categories.¹¹ Our research revealed these groups as sites of perpetual negotiation—between internal heterogeneity and external authorities—where belonging was fluid and multilayered.¹² This lens exposed how historical actors navigated multiple, overlapping “circles of social belonging” to advance their agendas—or simply survive.¹³ Most crucially, it forced us to confront those whom the administrative framework rendered invisible: unincorporated populations like Muslims in Christian-ruled territories. Lacking institutional protections, these individuals strategically diversified their social resources and affiliations, operating beyond—and often in spite of—the state’s classificatory logic.¹⁴

⁹ David Do Paço, *L'Orient à Vienne au dix-huitième siècle* (The Voltaire Foundation, 2015).

¹⁰ David Do Paço, “Migrations and Super-Diversity in Eighteenth-Century Trieste,” in Christoph Cornelissen, Beat Kümin, and Massimo Rospocher, eds., *Migration and the European City. Social and Cultural Perspectives from Early Modernity to the Present* (De Gruyter, 2022), 213–31.

¹¹ Johann Petitjean, *L'intelligence des choses: Une histoire de l'information entre Italie et Méditerranée (XVI–XVIIIe siècles)* (École Française de Rome, 2013); Fabrice Micallef, *Un désordre européen* (Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2014); Guillaume Calafat, *Une mer jalouse: Contribution à l'histoire de la souveraineté (Méditerranée, XVIIIe siècle)* (Seuil, 2019).

¹² Examples of particularly influential research introduced by their authors at the Lebeau-Kaiser seminar: Natalia Muchnik, *Une vie marrane, Les pérégrinations de Juan de Prado dans l'Europe du XVIIe siècle* (Honoré Champion, 2005); Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, *Une société hors de soi, identités et relations sociales à Smyrne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Editions Peeters, 2005); Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (Yale University Press, 2009); and Roberto Zaugg, *Stranieri di antico regime: Mercanti, giudici e consoli nella Napoli del Settecento* (Viella, 2011).

¹³ Simona Cerutti, *Étrangers: Étude d'une condition d'incertitude dans une société d'Ancien Régime* (Bayard, 2012).

¹⁴ David Do Paço, “Muslims in Christian-ruled Europe, Fifteenth to Nineteenth Century,” in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (Routledge, 2022), 89–104.

Complexifying Mediterranean Geography

A practice-driven approach to historical analysis compels us to rethink the Mediterranean’s spatial logic. Braudel—writing *La Méditerranée* as a former teacher in colonial Algeria—privileged North-South dynamics reflective of his era’s geopolitical framework. Samuel Huntington, by contrast, imposed an East-West dichotomy informed by Cold War ideology and Orientalist assumptions, distorting Braudel’s vision while foreclosing his nascent interest in Central Europe’s Mediterranean connections.

My research on Ottoman traders’ social lives—their economic networks, knowledge transfers, and the territorial unities these created—demands a radical reconfiguration. The Danube Basin emerged not as periphery but as one of Braudel’s “*petites mers*.” Akin to the Sahara, it was part of a connective subsystem, binding the Mediterranean world through decentralized yet interdependent ecosystems. Like the desert’s trans-Saharan routes, the Danube’s currents facilitated cultural and economic homogenization, revealing a Mediterranean far more spatially elastic—and intellectually capacious—than either Braudel’s colonial lens or Huntington’s bipolar geopolitics allowed.¹⁵

The Mediterranean as Zomia

The Lebeau-Kaiser seminar did not invite us to transpose Mediterranean models to other regions but sought to *de-mediterraneanize* the Mediterranean itself. In one provocative intellectual experiment, Wolfgang Kaiser proposed reimagining the region through the lens of the Zomia region—invoking James C. Scott’s work on Southeast Asian highlanders’ “art of not being governed.” This conceptual pivot resonated with trans-imperial historiography, where the Mediterranean world emerged as a space where states and empires appeared as outsiders rather than central actors.¹⁶

Here, mobility functioned as a tool of emancipation—not only geographic, but also socio-economic, linguistic, religious, and even existential. Historical actors compensated for their lack of institutional protection by cultivating layered relational communities, exemplifying what might be termed a history of escape from the state.¹⁷

Yet Central European urban case studies complicate this narrative, revealing an unexpected dialectic: where Scott and Foucault emphasized administrative consolidation,¹⁸ I also identify an “art of not governing.” Faced with limited capacity, authorities often tolerated—even exploited—unincorporated populations whose activities destabilized traditional corporate bodies. These

¹⁵ David Do Paço, “Tempo, Scales and Circulations: The Lazarets in Eighteenth-Century Trieste,” *Ler Historia* 78 (2021), 61–84.

¹⁶ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ David Do Paço, “In the Blind Spot of the State: Trieste in the Eighteenth-Century Trans-Imperial Adriatic Society,” in *The Power of the Dispersed: Early Modern Global Travelers beyond Integration*, ed. Cornel Zwiwerlein (Brill, 2022), 365–88.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *La Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au collège de France (1978–1979)* (Seuil, 2004)

groups, far from being marginal, were sometimes co-opted as imperial agents or aristocratic protégés, becoming integral to the very power structures they appeared to evade.¹⁹

These examples, explored at Fernand Braudel's invitation, facilitated a dialogue between Mediterranean and Central European histories. Though Braudel's interpretive model may have dulled with time, *La Méditerranée* endures as a foundational work, its authority rooted in unparalleled scholarly rigor, literary brilliance, and its transformative impact on global historiography. Its relevance persists not only through its unshakable coherence and narrative power but also in its footnotes and source analyses, which unveil fertile ground for research beyond the Castilian-centric lens of Philip II's reign.

Also, today, humanity's relationship with the environment stands among the most urgent questions of our age. Braudel's holistic vision—his interplay of climate cycles, trade routes, and societal-ecosystem dynamics—resonates in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in their regional frameworks and the conceptual scaling of the Mediterranean to spaces like the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, or Micronesia. The Mediterranean is thus a work of *longue durée* that implicates us all, challenging contemporary approaches to ocean governance. Yet Braudel's Mediterranean remains a human-centric construct: a dynamic, polycentric ecosystem narrated from the shore. Perhaps the next frontier of Mediterranean history lies in writing it not from the land, but from the sea itself, in line with the blue humanities. A

¹⁹ David Do Paço, "A Case of Urban Integration: Vienna's Port Area and the Ottoman Merchants in the Eighteenth Century," *Urban History* 48, no. 3 (2021), 533–51.