

“Braudel’s La Méditerranée (1949): Paradigms and Possibilities after Seventy-Five Years

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History,” argued Fernand Braudel in the preface to *La Méditerranée*, “can do more than study walled gardens. If it were otherwise, it would surely be failing in one of its most immediate tasks which must be to relate to the painful problems of our times.”¹ For this reason, Braudel insisted in his 1950 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, it was necessary to escape the shackles of “narrative history,” the same history that he had taught in Algeria at the beginning of his career between 1923 and 1932. Adherence to Leopold von Ranke’s injunction to relate “things just as they really happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*),” had, in Braudel’s view, led historians to focus merely on history’s gleaming surface:²

It is precisely our task to get beyond this first stage of history. The social realities must be tackled in themselves and for themselves. By social realities I mean all the major forms of collective life, economies, institutions, social structures, in short and above all, civilizations—all aspects of reality which earlier historians have not exactly overlooked, but which with a few outstanding exceptions they have all too often regarded as a backdrop, there only to explain or as if intended to explain the behavior of the exceptional individuals on whom the historian so complacently dwells.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 1:22.

² Fernand Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” in *On History* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 11–12. On the colonial roots of Braudel’s historiography, see Manuel Borutta, “Braudel in Algier: Die kolonialen Wurzeln der ‘Méditerranée’ und der ‘spatial turn,’” [Braudel in Algiers: The colonial roots of the ‘Méditerranée’ and the ‘spatial turn’], *Historische Zeitschrift* 303, no. 1 (2016), 1–38.

Few if any other books of the immediate postwar period continue to generate such intellectual vibrations within the humanities and social sciences as *La Méditerranée*. Indeed, the last quarter-century has seen Braudelian themes flourish as never before: Mediterranean history, spatial history, environmental and big history, world-systems theory, studies of historical networks, communications, diasporas, slavery and forced migrations—themes that loomed so large in Braudel’s work all emerged, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, as central areas of research in historical scholarship. As exemplified by both recent large-scale histories and the proliferation of journals and conference volumes, Mediterranean studies are thriving.³ Moreover, the increasing availability of primary sources through digital databases has enhanced the return of the Braudelian *longue durée* and made it easier for scholars to work across extensive time scales of multiple centuries.⁴

To be sure, Braudel’s work has met with both admiration and fierce criticism. Indeed, *La Méditerranée* found critics from its first appearance, and its influence has inspired controversies and reappraisals ever since. The great Americanist Bernard Bailyn was merely one of the earliest (and most sharp-tongued) of the many readers who have been disappointed, or perhaps disenchanted, by the awkward relationship between the book’s three main sections: in Bailyn’s judgment, while “The parts of his ‘world’ are all there, . . . they lie inert, unrelated, discrete.”⁵ In Italy, too, Braudel’s work initially met with resistance. Delio Cantimori, the prominent Marxist historian known for his *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento* [Italian Heretics of the Sixteenth Century], told the Italian publishing house Einaudi in 1948 not to translate *La Méditerranée*, labelling the work “the *Gone with the Wind* of historiography, which tickles everything but satisfies nothing,” adding that it was full of “empty neo-positivism and neo-sociologism.”⁶ It is easy now to dismiss Cantimori’s response, but it shows just how controversial and innovative was Braudel’s approach, especially in a country whose historiographical culture was profoundly shaped by the legacy of Benedetto Croce and neo-Hegelian historicism. In any case, Einaudi ignored Cantimori’s recommendation. The Italian translation appeared in 1953, marking the beginning of the work’s international reception, long before *La Méditerranée* became available in English.⁷ Later, Einaudi further contributed to Braudel’s success in Italy, publishing his long and influential essay “L’Italia fuori d’Italia”—later translated also in English as *Out of Italy: Two Centuries of World Domination and Decline*—in the influential *Storia d’Italia* [History of Italy] edited by Ruggiero Romano

³ See especially Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Wiley, 2000); David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Allen Lane, 2011); Guillaume Calafat and Mathieu Grenet, *Méditerranées: Une histoire des mobilités humaines (1492–1750)* [Mediterraneans: A History of Human Mobility (1492–1750)] (Éditions Points, 2023).

⁴ David Armitage and Jo Guldi, “The Return of the *Longue Durée*.: An Anglo-American Perspective,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 70, no. 2 (2015), 289–318; Dan Edelstein, Paula Findlen, Giovanna Ceserani, Caroline Winterer, and Nicole Coleman, “Historical Research in a Digital Age: Reflections from the *Mapping the Republic of Letters* Project,” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 2 (2017), 400–424.

⁵ Bernard Bailyn, “Braudel’s Geohistory—A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Economic History* 11, no. 3 (1951), 277–282.

⁶ Delio Cantimori, *Politica e storia contemporanea. Scritti 1927–1942* [Politics and Contemporary History: Writings, 1927–1942] (Einaudi, 1991), 795. On Braudel’s reception in Italy see John Marino, “Braudel’s Mediterranean and Italy,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010), 1–19.

⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Civiltà e imperi del mediterraneo nell’età di Filippo II* [The Civilization and Empires of the Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II] (Einaudi, 1953).

and Corrado Vivanti.⁸ Italy proved in every respect crucial for Braudel's work and career. As Maurice Aymard has noted, the systematic exploration of Italian archives led Braudel to reconceive *La Méditerranée* and to move in the second edition "from Spain to Italy, and from the western extremity to the center of the sea," focusing less on Philip II's foreign policy and more on the economic history of the Mediterranean.⁹

More recently, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Guillaume Calafat, and Mathieu Grenet, among others, have challenged Braudel's vision of Mediterranean history, arguing that it is in fact Eurocentric and centers on the northern Mediterranean and its archives, marginalizing the southern shore.¹⁰ Ian Merkel has also shed new light on Braudel's colonial view of the non-European world and on his relationship with French cultural politics in both Algeria and Brazil.¹¹ In another important volume, Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed Salah Omri have investigated Braudel's maritime legacy, showing that the Mediterranean did not lose its centrality after the Spanish-Ottoman truce of 1580, but remained in fact an essential element of intra-European power and hegemony throughout the early modern period and beyond.¹² Such criticism has also enabled scholars to recover alternative and less familiar historiographical approaches to the Mediterranean, starting with Shelomo Dov Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society*, a large-scale reconstruction of cross-confessional trade networks between the ninth and the nineteenth centuries, based on the manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah.¹³ While Braudel and Goitein are usually seen as opposite paradigms, in their possible collaboration as in its failure, one can see the slow emergence of "thalassography"—in Peter Miller's formulation—and its potential today for future research.¹⁴

There is no need to rehearse here *La Méditerranée's* other well-known gaps and limitations, whether the absence of religion and religious life, beyond a struggle between Christianity and Islam that was painted in overly broad strokes; or the near invisibility of women, aside from queens Catherine de Medici and Elizabeth I; the lack of interest in art and visual sources; or Braudel's rather monolithic vision of Islam and the Ottoman Empire, which the flourishing of Ottoman studies in recent decades has decisively rejected. As Lucette Valensi has noted, some of Braudel's assessments would be strongly criticized today for essentializing people and reifying civilizations.¹⁵ One example is his treatment of the Moriscos, the descendants of Iberia's

⁸ Fernand Braudel, "L'Italia fuori d'Italia: Due secoli e tre Italie," in *Storia d'Italia*, eds. Ruggiero Romano and Corrado Vivanti (Einaudi, 1974), 2:2092–248. English translation: Fernand Braudel, *Out of Italy: Two Centuries of World Domination and Demise*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Flammarion, 1991).

⁹ Maurice Aymard, "One Braudel or Several?" *Fernand Braudel Center*, 24, no. 1 (2001): 17.

¹⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *On the Origins of Global History*, inaugural lecture, Collège de France, November 28, 2013, transl. by Liz Libbrecht, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cdf.4171>; Calafat and Grenet, *Méditerranéennes*, 1–28.

¹¹ Ian Merkel, *Terms of Exchange: Brazilian Intellectuals and the French Social Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

¹² Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omri, eds., *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy* (Tauris, 2010).

¹³ Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (University of California Press, 1967–1993).

¹⁴ Peter N. Miller, "Two Men in a Boat: The Braudel-Goitein 'Correspondence' and the Beginning of Thalassography," in *The Sea: Thalassography and Historiography*, ed. Peter N. Miller (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 27–59.

¹⁵ Lucette Valensi, "The Problem of Unbelief in Braudel's Mediterranean," in *Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World, 1600–1800*, ed. Gabriel Piterberg, Teófilo F. Ruiz, and Geoffrey Symcox (University of Toronto Press,

Muslim population who were first forced to convert and then expelled by Philip III between 1609 and 1614. Considering their clash with the Spanish monarchy an example of “conflict between religions, in other words a conflict in the very strongest sense between civilizations,” Braudel controversially referred to the Moriscos in *La Méditerranée* as “an unassimilable population.”¹⁶

Over the past two decades, thinking “with and beyond Braudel,” scholars at California institutions have produced a wealth of scholarship on Braudel’s oeuvre while also pushing studies of the premodern Mediterranean in new and exciting directions.¹⁷ While historians have initiated and traditionally dominated such conversation, innovative work by literary scholars such as Barbara Fuchs, Sharon Kinoshita, and Roberta Morosini has shown how fruitful a Mediterranean paradigm can be for rethinking the history of languages and literary traditions.¹⁸ To carry forward this tradition, we gathered twenty-one roundtable speakers at a symposium jointly organized by Berkeley and Stanford in November 2024 and invited them to comment on *La Méditerranée*’s impact and legacy within their subfields, reflect on current disciplinary trends, or share their vision for future directions.¹⁹ Eighteen of the resulting reflections are included in the volume. Fittingly, their topics range widely across time and space: from classical antiquity to the twenty-first century and from the Caribbean to the Red Sea (and beyond). Given *La Méditerranée*’s discipline-crossing approach, it seems equally fitting that the essays in this issue embrace an unusually broad range of methodologies and disciplinary perspectives, from cultural poetics to historical geography and from social history to geo-aesthetics.

We have organized the essays into four thematic clusters, building on the topics and approaches that emerged most prominently both during the symposium and in the resulting written contributions. Nearly all of the contributions deal with more than one of these themes, however, and some even straddle all four. We accordingly encourage readers to read through the essays in orders different from the one we have proposed, in the hope (or even certainty) that other productive connections and cross-currents will emerge.

We extend our deep thanks to everyone who made the Symposium such a stimulating and convivial gathering: to our keynote lecturers, Barbara Fuchs (UCLA) and Alessandro Stanziani

2010), 28.

¹⁶ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 2:780. On Braudel’s view of the Moriscos see Lucette Valensi, *Ces étrangers familiers. Musulmans en Europe (XVI-XVII siècles)* [These Familiar Foreigners: Muslims in Europe (16th to 17th Centuries)] (Payot & Rivages, 2012).

¹⁷ Piterberg, Ruiz, and Symcox, *Braudel Revisited*, 4. See also John A. Marino, ed., *Early Modern History and the Social Sciences: Testing the Limits of Braudel’s Mediterranean* (Truman State University Press, 2002); Cavan Concannon and Lindsey A. Mazurek, eds., *Across the Corrupting Sea: Post-Braudelian Approaches to the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* (Routledge, 2016); Brian A. Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita, eds., *Can We Talk Mediterranean? Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (Palgrave, 2017).

¹⁸ Barbara Fuchs, *Knowing Fictions: Picaresque Reading in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Sharon Kinoshita, *Marco Polo and His World* (Reaktion Books, 2024); Roberta Morosini, *Il mare salato: Il Mediterraneo di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio* [The Salty Sea: The Mediterranean of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio] (Viella, 2020). See also two influential works by Karla Mallette: *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100–1250: A Literary History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) and *Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); together with Ayesha Ramachandran, *Lyric Thinking: Poetry, Selfhood, Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

¹⁹ The symposium was held at Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley on November 15–16, 2024, and was hosted jointly by Stanford’s Center for Medieval & Early Modern Studies (CMEMS) and UC Berkeley’s Designated Emphasis in Renaissance & Early Modern Studies (REMS). In addition to two keynote lectures and two graduate paper workshops, the symposium featured a series of six roundtables: “The Mediterranean,” “The Mediterranean World,” “The Age of Philip II,” “Time and Space,” “Scale,” and “Mobility.”

(EHESS/CNRS); to the roundtable chairs (Déborah Blocker, Cathryn Carson, Sharad Chari, Marisa Galvez, Roland Greene, Fiona Griffiths, Laura Stokes), speakers, and audience members; to the participants in the graduate paper workshops; to our marvelously efficient workshop coordinator Jenny Smith; to our generous hosts at the Stanford Humanities Center and UC Berkeley's Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities; to the ever-patient and ever-resourceful staff members at our respective institutions; and to CMEMS, REMS, and all of our cosponsoring units, programs, and centers.²⁰ Above all, we are grateful to the authors for agreeing to share their work in this venue and to the editorial team at *Republic of Letters* (especially managing editors Poornima Rajeshwar and Claire Sauter) for steering it to publication. A

²⁰ The conference was organized through the support of many departments, programs, and institutions. At UC Berkeley we are grateful to Sara Guyer, the Irving and Jean Stone Dean of Arts and Humanities, and the Departments of French, History, Italian, Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, and Spanish and Portuguese, as well as the Modern Greek and Hellenic Studies Program. At Stanford University we would like to thank the Department of French and Italian, the Department of History, the Early Modern Iberian Worlds Research Group, the Europe Center, the Stanford-France Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, and the Stanford Humanities Center. Additional thanks to David Do Paço, higher education attaché at Villa Albertine, the French Institute for Culture and Education.