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## Nature

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## N – NATURA/NATURE

*Federico Ferretti and Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg*

### **Introduction: a ‘grand old word’ for the third millennium**

Fernand Braudel, in his classic work on the Mediterranean (1949), does not refer to a ‘Mediterranean nature’; he refers to peninsulas, mountains, highlands and plains, to sea, climate and cultures, but not to nature.

Coming from a different perspective, Aldous Huxley defines the Mediterranean area in terms of its climate, vegetation, and culture: “The Mediterranean lies on the fringes of this desert belt and the olive is its tree – the tree of a region of sun-lit clarity separating the damp of the equator from the damp of the North. It is the symbol of a classicism enclosed between two romanticisms” (Huxley 1936, 287). Again, for Predrag Matvejevič it is difficult to recompose the ‘mosaic’ that is the Mediterranean; in his breviary he tells of names, seagulls, smells, salt marshes, palm trees, and buoys:

Images of the sea and all that is found along it, its various states, the reflections of sky, sun, and clouds in it, the colors of the sea bed in the depths of the abyss as well as where the water is shallow, the stones, sand, and algae on the sea bottom, the dark and translucent patches along the coast or far out from it, its transitions, the morning sea and the evening sea, the sea of the daytime and the sea of the night-time, everyday and eternal [...] everyone feels – or at least this is how it is on the Mediterranean – that they have something to say about the sea and what it looks like and that what they have to say is truly important. (Matvejevič 1993, 56).

But nature? This term does not appear, perhaps on account of its ambiguity, in either Matvejevič’s breviary or Huxley’s essay. The concept of nature – whether understood as other than, or as one with, the human condition – occupies a central place in the geographic debate (Williams 1983; Worster 1994; Harvey 1996; Cronon 1995; Soper 1995; Castree and Braun 1998; Whatmore 2002; Castree 2005; Ginn and Demeritt, 2009); it underpins the enquiry into the existence of a hypothetical original state of nature, into the nature/culture dualism along with its ethical and epistemological implications and into the role of humankind in

creating/constructing/modifying the living world (Schmidt di Friedberg 2004). The issue of how to reach a consensus about what nature is, whether an objective external reality or a cultural construction, is resolved in different ways within physical geography, human geography, and numerous other disciplines: “Human geography is by no means alone in finding itself at an important juncture in its efforts to escape the dialectical vortex of nature-society relations and the environmental refrain of the ‘outside’” (Whatmore 2002, 2). Thus the theme of ‘nature’ is at the heart of heated interdisciplinary debates, but the term often takes on an overly obvious meaning, synonymous with ‘environment’, ‘planet’, ‘ecology’: “One common definition of nature is that it is the non-human world. According to this definition, the word ‘nature’ is more or less synonymous with the word ‘environment’. [...] But [...] nature means ‘the essence of something’ as well. Using this second, broader definition we see that nature also encompasses humans too” (Castree 2005, 8). In his account of the history of geography starting precisely from the ancient world of the Mediterranean, Clarence Glacken observes that words in common use, such as ‘nature’ but also ‘physical environment’, ‘design’, ‘final causes’, ‘climate’, etc. often appear to be self-explanatory and not to require further definition; yet they are the product of a slow and complex historical evolution during which they have acquired several different – and frequently vague – superimposed meanings:

[t]he word ‘nature’, as everyone knows, has many meanings in Greek and Latin and in modern languages. With all of its failings it is a grand old word. [...] When Marsh wrote *Man and Nature* in 1864 he described the earth as modified by human action. Sometimes the word is synonymous with the physical or natural environment; sometimes it has a more philosophic, religious, theological aura than those more matter-of-fact terms express. Occasionally, it attains grandeur as in Buffon’s reference to it as ‘the exterior throne of Divine magnificence’” (Glacken 1967, XIV).

The interpretation of natural as contrasting with human, within an anthropocentric perspective, while already featuring in the Greco-Roman view of the world, is at the very center of the Judaic-Christian tradition. The latter is charged with having set off humankind’s indiscriminate exploitation of nature based on the belief that “man and nature are two things, and man is master” (White 1967, 1205).

Underpinning the ‘environmental despotism’ of the Bible is the imperative: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1: 28). According to White, this interpretation of nature – which began to take a strong hold within Christianity

during the Middle Ages – has given rise to contemporary science and technology as well as to the current environmental crisis; furthermore, the destruction of animist paganism and its *genii loci* has fostered indifference towards other living beings, reducing them to the status of mere consumer objects. Thus modern technology is seen as the intentional putting into practice of the Christian notion of rightful human dominion over nature, on the basis that humanity transcends nature because it is created in the image and likeness of God. White concludes: “Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (White 1967, 1207).

However, remaining within the Christian-anthropocentric perspective, the Mediterranean landscape is also linked to a different interpretation of nature, understood as a “garden to work and take care of” and not to exploit, a key theme within environmental ethics. God has conferred dominion over nature to the just and faithful, while transgressors will be punished with every kind of environmental catastrophe. The focus is on looking back to the Earthly Paradise, to the golden age in which creation was still unspoiled and the air and water uncontaminated.

Nature thus becomes, as proposed by Kay, an instrument of justice: a beautiful landscape (the Promised Land) is a divine reward. This attitude seems to have carried over into some contemporary environmental catastrophe theories. The creation of pollution is an immoral act, punished by respiratory illnesses, acid rain, the hole in the ozone layer, desertification, mass extinction, the exhaustion of resources, and even the spread of AIDS (Kay 1989). The present day increase of catastrophic events in the Mediterranean world, attributed to climate change (flooding, landslides, drought), lends fresh interest to the notion of human ‘transgression’ in terms of ignoring the ‘laws’ of nature.

To uncover the ambiguity of ‘nature’ as a concept, it suffices to attempt to define it. Humboldt, in his *Kosmos*, declares: “Nature is a unity in diversity of phenomena; harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar with regard to form, attributes and the forces animating them, into one great Whole, penetrated by the breath of life” (Humboldt 1845, 5–6). However Humboldt’s extraordinary insight regarding a harmonious unity of nature becomes problematic when one seeks to analyze and interpret the components of such a united whole. An apparently impossible task; Torsten Haegerstrand wonders with dismay: “How can any sane person dare to confess a hope that he can say something about how to view Nature as wholeness?” (Haegerstrand 1976, 329).

Finally, Raymond Williams considers that “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language”, distinguishing between three different areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings (Williams 1983, 208). Williams’ analysis regards human history, but its geographic positioning cannot be overlooked (Ginn and Demeritt 2009); the shores of the Mediterranean, since ancient times, have been stage to the enquiry into the meaning of such an important term, a keystone of Western geographical thinking: “As well as changing over time, concepts of nature [...] also vary from place to place. Within the discipline of Geography, conceptions of nature are closely wrapped up with different ideas about the nature of Geography as a science and subject of study. For both those reasons nature is perhaps the most important concept in Geography” (Ginn and Demeritt 2009, 308). At this point we cannot but retrace the historic development of geographic thought in order to clarify the terms of the debate in the Mediterranean context. For Castree:

Geography is one of several subjects devoted to the study of natural phenomena. Nature is not, of course, the only thing that geographers study. But it’s long been recognized as a major disciplinary preoccupation. [...] The ‘geographical experiment’ consisted of trying to bring society and nature ‘under the one conceptual umbrella’ (Castree 2005, 10).

### **Nature and geography in the thinking of the ancient Greeks**

The birth of European geographic thought is generally held to have taken place on the shores of the Aegean Sea. While the first geographical map of the known world is attributed to Anaximander of Miletus, a scholar from the 5th century B.C., the ancient Greeks themselves considered the mythical Homer to be the first writer of geographical tales. As stated by Strabo, geography was essentially born as a philosophical science with most of the leading geographers of the ancient world defined as *andres philosophoi* (Strabo, *Geographia*, I, I, 1). The concept of nature was central to Greek philosophy, so much so that *On Nature* was the title chosen by Anaximander for his treatise, of which unfortunately only a fragment has survived. It is clear nonetheless that throughout the different stages of Greek thought, the search for the laws of the physical world that characterizes the natural sciences today was always a key focus; indeed European philosophy is believed to have originated from early reflections on the *physis*. Within this broader quest, geographers undertook a key task: the

measurement and representation of the Earth both in its own right and in relation to the heavenly bodies. This branch of enquiry reached its highest point with Eratosthenes of Cyrene, the first scholar to measure the circumference of the Earth in the 4th century B.C.

The results of Eratosthenes' measurements and his map of the world were deemed valid for several centuries, to the extent that Strabo – in the course of his methodological revolution of geography in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. – did not find it necessary to significantly modify Eratosthenes' map, as has already been noted by Germaine Aujac (Aujac 2001, 111). The innovative aspect of Strabo's contribution was his 'invention' of a geography which was not limited to drawing maps and measuring astronomical differences but had as its primary focus the study of the peoples inhabiting the different regions of the world in terms of their diverse cultural and political characteristics. The relationship between humanity and nature, in this perspective, helps to explain history, because the harmonious relationship that develops between a given region and its inhabitants, known as *pronoia*, means that the layout of mountains, seas, and rivers is not arbitrary but corresponds to a design; the role of the geographer is to interpret and understand the links between this pattern and human society. For example, Strabo himself was the first to develop the principle of the highly indented nature of the Mediterranean coastline – to become popular during the 19th and 20th centuries – which attributes the flourishing of European civilization to the variety of its forms and the indentation into the land by the sea. Similarly, at the time of the Roman Empire – albeit in the Hellenistic cultural context of 2nd century Alexandria of Egypt – the famous Claudius Ptolemy continued Eratosthenes' work and laid the base for the rediscovery of geographical knowledge in the modern era.

### **The idea of nature in classical geography (end 18th – beginning 20<sup>th</sup> century)**

In the Age of Enlightenment the concept of nature was pivotal to all branches of thought. This was particularly true of philosophy, due to its links with the rational sciences, which Enlightenment thinkers saw as gradually piercing the darkness of superstition and ignorance. In France, between the 17th and 18th centuries, thinkers such as Montesquieu and Bodin considered nature to be the key to understanding the various peoples of the earth. They believed that the environmental and climatic conditions of a place strongly influence the character of the peoples that live there. This was due to the principle of so-called 'geographical influences', a trend that went down in history as 'environmental determinism'

(Febvre 1981, 4–20). At that time, European geographers were becoming increasingly interested in natural systems and the laws governing them; in the mid 1700s the Frenchman Philippe Buache developed a theory of river basins that was to remain popular until the first decades of the following century, when his lack of mechanistic understanding became apparent (Broc 1974).

It was in German-speaking scientific circles that applying the study of nature to geography became important to defining the discipline. Polycarp Leyser's essay on a 'true geographical method', published in 1726 in Helmstedt, is considered the first real affirmation of the 'geography of natural regions', which Franco Farinelli has seen as an implicit political strategy of opposition to what, in the absolutist German states of the time, were called *Staatsgeographien*. In brief, this idea "was effectively the only possible form of political criticism not within geography, but through geography" (Farinelli 1992, 113).

According to this interpretation, acknowledging that geography was entitled to represent the world as divided into natural regions meant acknowledging that science was entitled to ignore any obligation to represent state boundaries as defined by the principles of the geography of states and marked on its main tool, that is to say, geographical maps.

At the beginning of the 19th century, this tradition of critical geography came up against the concept of nature typical of the Romantic age. On his return from a 5-year voyage (1799–1804) to the equinoctial regions of the New World, Alexander von Humboldt proposed publishing the more popular parts of his travelogues in the form of *Aspects of Nature* (*Ansichten von Natur – Tableaux de la Nature*), thereby introducing European readers to the luxuriant tropical vegetation and spectacular mountain ranges of central and South America.

Prompted by Oken and Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, the other 'leading light' of German geography in the first half of the 19th century, Carl Ritter, developed his idea of geography as the study of the binary dialectic between man and nature. For Ritter, the dynamics between the two terms was constantly evolving, with each remaining essential and consubstantial to the other as in Ionic philosophy. From a practical point of view, this translates into a geographical discipline steeped in the historical, that is to say human, element, as Ritter explained in 1836 in a letter to the then president of the Paris Geographical Society, Baron Pelet. "Although I have no plans to make great discoveries on the surface of the Earth, my research does involve walking step by step, if not to all corners of the Globe, at least all round the Ancient World, in order to compare what nature has bestowed with what history has done and what geographical science still has to do to rank as a discipline alongside History and

Philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most celebrated European geographers of the second half of the 19th century, a student of Ritter’s in Berlin, explicitly took inspiration from Humboldt for his first monograph, entitled *Voyage à la Sierra Nevada de Sainte-Marthe, paysages de la nature tropicale*. We are referring to Élisée Reclus (1830–1905), who, at the end of his career, invented a motto that aptly summarizes the aforementioned Ritterian ‘dualism’, writing in the exergue of his latest work, *L’Homme et la Terre*, that “man is nature that becomes aware of itself” (Reclus 1905, 1). This future anarchist geographer also shared with Ritter the rediscovery of classical authors such as Strabo and Herodotus. The latter,

incomparably superior to those specialists of our day – who in order to adhere to who knows what official programs, have turned geography into an object of disgust and derision – successfully made it more attractive than poetry itself, because he did not separate man from nature or customs nor institutions from the environment in which they developed (Reclus 1872, 1).

Nature was central to the educational ideas of geographical anarchists such as Reclus and his colleague and friend Pëtr Aleksejevič Kropotkin (1842–1921); in their political criticism of authoritarian teaching methods, they even suggested teaching geography in the open air in order to stimulate the students’ independent powers of observation, starting from primary school. This strategy was mainly inspired by the experience of the Yverdon school, directed by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), the Swiss educationalist whose strong influence on the ‘fathers’ of modern geography has long been noted (Guillaume 1890, 223). Ritter’s own references to the Earth as the home of human education appear to be of Pestalozzian origin as does his insistence on the importance of personal observation, the method today defined as ‘fieldwork’ in geographic research (Schmidt di Friedberg 2010). The aforementioned James Guillaume reported the testimony of a former student of Pestalozzi’s who recalled taking nature walks along the valley with his teacher, a method that was to anticipate numerous themes in Reclus’s *Histoire d’un Ruisseau* and Patrick Geddes’s (1854–1932) *Valley Plan of Civilization*.

This does not, however, imply any defense of Rousseau’s ‘state of nature’ or rejection of the instruments of progress: among 19th century socialists, anarchists, and free thinkers, the study of nature took on political overtones, because it furnished arguments to refute numerous

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<sup>1</sup> National Library of France, Maps and Plans Department, *Manuscrits de la Société de Géographie*, 4373, 347, *lettre de Ch. Ritter à M. le Président de la Société de Géographie*, 6 août 1836.

religious beliefs about the Flood, biblical chronology, and creationist theories, and this greatly interested the likes of Reclus, Kropotkin, and Metchnikoff (Ferretti 2007).

The enquiry into nature originated in fact in the natural sciences, which since the 18th century had been dealing with mechanical systems that had no need of divine intervention. Nature became an alternative to religion, dealing with earthly materiality rather than metaphysics; this too explains the interest in material sciences and the ‘love of nature’ expressed by authors such as Reclus even at the end of the 19th century.

Furthermore, Kropotkin clearly likens the evolution of science to that of revolutionary thinking in his century. Whereas numerous evolutionists of the time refused to accept a methodological parallel between biology and social sciences, Kropotkin proposed applying ‘naturalistic’ methods to society. By this he meant that evolutionism should no longer be seen as competing with the so-called Social Darwinists, but rather as demonstrating that the key evolutionary feature is mutual aid, which the Russian geographer had in fact started to study, initially between animals and plants, then in the context of human history:

Anarchy is a conception of the Universe, based on the mechanical interpretation of phenomena, which embraces the whole of nature, not excluding the life of societies. Its method is that of the natural sciences, and according to this method every scientific conclusion must be verified (Kropotkin 1924, 56).

This idea clashes with the classic concept of the Hobbesian ‘state of nature’, according to which, given the natural perversity of the human race, societies not regulated by some form of institutionalized authority will live in a state of war with everyone fighting everyone else; in this view, the only way to avoid full-scale civil conflict is to recognize a sovereign power as holding the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The knock-on effect of the Hobbesian perspective, according to Kropotkin, was that judgments about man in the state of nature were not limited to past eras but were also applied to the so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ peoples: “the whole philosophy of the 19th century continued to think of primitive peoples as packs of wild Beasts, who lived in small isolated family groups and fought each other over food and females” (Kropotkin 1924, 50). Kropotkin saw this prejudice simply as a legacy of the ideas of original sin or original guilt promoted by the various churches, while the study of primitive societies, which engaged other geographical anarchists and anthropologists such as Léon Metchnikoff (1838–1888) and Élie Reclus (1827–1904), showed that man in his natural state is not simply a wild beast ready to tear his fellow men to pieces, but rather one who seeks to

develop strategies for adapting to his situation, above all by means of cooperation with his fellows.

Another geographer brought up on Ritter's writings, the German Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), developed a model based on close interaction between man and nature. His *Anthropogeography* is introduced by a *Biogeography*, i.e. he considers the territorial dynamics that govern the distribution of vegetable and animal species as a preamble to the dynamics of the human race, which indeed are often presented using naturalistic metaphors. Although Ratzel was a geographer, he had received naturalistic training inspired by the ideas of the Darwinist Ernst Haeckel, inventor of the term 'ecology', and he based his idea of human geography on the discipline's inseparable link with nature. Ratzel himself likened the law of the expansion of peoples to those underlying the expansion of plants. "Nature does not allow a people to remain inert for long; it either has to advance or retreat" (Ratzel 1914, 216). In classic French geography – the *Géographie Humaine* school inspired by the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918) – natural settings dictated the decisions taken by geographers with regard to regional delineation or *découpage*; such decisions were pivotal in a field that paid close attention to natural regions; in fact, regional monographs and studies of the pays would be the classic products of Vidal de la Blache's students. But it was obviously difficult to define and delimit such units; in this sense the monograph on the Île-de-France published by Vidal's 'deputy', Lucien Gallois (1857–1941), is considered emblematic. Here too there was a political implication that consisted of claiming the right for geography to be independent of administrative divisions: "One of the challenges is to discover 'natural' entities that oppose the arbitrariness and the contingencies of administrative divisions, as Vidal de la Blache, Reclus and Gallois like to say" (Robic 2004). This approach was to be the norm for the French geographical sciences until well into the mid-1900s and included the revival of concepts such as the valley section, thanks to the work of followers of Vidal de la Blache, such as Jean Brunhes (1869–1930). In France, this concept would also foster the spread of the image of a 'section' or 'crosssection' as a natural metaphor in the social sciences (Robic 2001).

Another development of this idea is the acceptance of the Mediterranean basin as an entity with its own natural and human constants; while the influence of post-Vidalians such as Jules Sion and Albert Demangeon on the construction of 'Mediterranean' expressed by Fernand Braudel is well known, over the last few years further light has been thrown on the more distant geographical roots of that 'invention' of the Mediterranean. The work of Florence

Deprest among others has shown that the Braudelian construction owes much to the French geography of the 19th and 20th centuries, which in turn drew inspiration from studies of nature conducted by botanists around the Mediterranean with a view to identifying the unifying elements of this basin also in terms of human history. According to the French scholar in fact, naturalistic expeditions into Egypt and Syria in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century showed that vegetation on the other shores of the Mediterranean was very similar to the species growing on its Northern shores. This contributed to the development of a ‘Mediterranean’ discourse that had not existed before and the first universal geography volume in French, by Conrad Malte-Brun, was to become its vehicle: “[o]n this subject, an analysis of the expedition materials showed developments starting from the 1830s. But the theme of the natural unity (of the Mediterranean) was already present in the first ‘Universal Geography’” (Deprest 2002, 77). By the time of Reclus and the Vidalians, the Mediterranean debate was well under way and, depending on the period, focused on either the unifying function of the sea or on the comparison between the different areas of land and their respective kinds of life. In general, according to Deprest, the fundamental contribution of human geography to the construction of a Mediterranean geo-history is clear: “Although Braudel follows the Vidalian paradigm to the letter, he nonetheless includes the sea as a fundamental element of his object of study [...] The Braudelian construction thus presents both inherited and innovative material in relation to the geographical debate of the Vidalians. One could, however, hypothesize that Reclus’s ideas reached right down to Braudel, also inspiring the other authors referred to” (Deprest 2002, 88).

### **Nature and culture in the Mediterranean landscape**

The Mediterranean then became a focus of interest for that group of geographers who, after the well-known works of Marc Bloch and Roger Dion, produced a sizeable body of writings on rural landscapes between the forties and sixties. In Italy, this same current inspired numerous contemporary works by people such as Lucio Gambi and Emilio Sereni (Ferretti 2011). The road had been mapped out, in this sense, by the geographers who “under the impulse imparted by Vidal de la Blache and under the direction of Albert Demangeon especially, described and classified types of landscape in terms of their remote origins” (Juillard et al. 1957, 7). The succeeding generation considered such initial works to be too limited to the central-Northern regions of France, hence their analysis of the more

Mediterranean aspects of the French landscape. Xavier de Planhol, among others, states that in the South, Dion, Bloch and Roupnel “felt far less at their ease than in the regions of the North and West where distinct sets of open fields and wooded countryside [*bocage*], despite all their internal nuances, appeared to be more clearly defined” (Juillard et al. 1957, 98). Interest in Italy also ensued. Jules Sion was one of the geographers who had started to take an interest in the Italian peninsula in the thirties. Author of the chapter on Italy in the *Géographie Universelle*, he immediately afterwards became interested in the land structures of Southern France, attributing the historic weakness of the commons to “a fundamentally individualistic spirit” (Juillard et al. 1957, 101). Similarly, De Planhol mentions Maurice Le Lannou’s monograph on Sardinia as a “vigorous and remarkable overall interpretation of one of the Mediterranean countrysides” (Juillard et al. 1957).

De Planhol’s essay concludes with a series of considerations on human settlements in the Mediterranean area, which were taken up by Sereni in his paper on the “little village perched on a hill” (Sereni 1961, 88–91); the agricultural structure of Sereni’s village features what Demangeon had termed the ‘separated field’ system. In this scenario, the distance dividing the commercial and residential centers from the agricultural land cannot be explained by economic or environmental factors, but by security problems linked first to the Barbarian invasions and then to piracy. In this sense, for De Planhol, “the concentrated Mediterranean habitat is certainly for the most part an artificial habitat. It is generally associated with both conditions of insecurity and systematic external influences during the colonization of the land” (Juillard et al. 1957). Centuries later, visible traces of this historic situation bear out what Sereni called the “law of inertia of the landscape” (Sereni 1961, 88), a notion which clearly seems to have developed from the idea of the ‘persistencies’ characterizing both the geography of the Vidalians and the history of the *Annalistes*.

Another aspect of the discussion concerns terracing in the Mediterranean area, which poses various problems: the issue is understanding the historical genesis and the social functions of the various kinds of terraces, tiers, and strips, and distinguishing between them. Jean Despois tried to define a series of physical and human constants in this type of arrangement, such as the availability of slopes accessible to irrigation techniques suitable for the tree-growing methods used on the terraces. In general, this form of agricultural work is linked to periods of demographic excess, since “it is always painful and not simple to carry out. Furthermore, it seems to only exist in those regions in which the demographic pressure has remained such that the small farmers cannot make do with the plains or the valley bottoms” (Despois 1959,

109). One part of the debate focuses, without reaching any definitive answer, on the issue of the individual or collective nature of these arrangements, a question on which, according to Daniel Faucher, “we have little or no testimony. Observation would suggest to me more the idea of a type of work carried out by individual families than of collective community projects” (Despois 1959, 113).

Turning again to the definition of ‘artificiality’ in reference to the Mediterranean landscape, it is important to mention slash-and-burn agriculture and the resulting Mediterranean scrublands. The Italian scholar Sereni borrows a term from the literature in French, the Provençal word *marrelo* meaning “diamond-shaped patches of land, accessible for stubble grazing [that] are emblematic of the agricultural landscape of Mediterranean France and Cisalpine Liguria and strongly in contrast with the more typically ‘Gallic’ landscape of Central and Northern France” (Sereni 1955, 516). This brings us back to the ‘degradation’ of the natural landscape in the Mediterranean, mainly attributed to the fires of the ‘slash-and-burn’ technique, in French known as *brûlis*. Sereni himself in his famous essay *Terra nuova e buoi rossi* [New Land and Red Oxen] undertakes a geohistorical study of how the Mediterranean scrub has developed due to human intervention by fire. His treatise opens with a Calabrian folk-tale conveying a very simple moral: to renew the fertility of the soil, new land must be seeded, but this new land must be ploughed with red oxen; in other words, fires are used to supply phosphates to the new fields that are taken from the woodlands in a rudimentary form of pluriennial crop rotation. In Sereni’s view, the data he reports on recorded fires from as late as the beginning of the 20th century, for the most part deliberately started to clear land for agriculture and grazing, should be sufficient to excite the interest of agrarian historians in techniques such as slash-and-burn, and not just in Calabria, were it only on account of their key role in shaping the agrarian landscape of our country, almost up to the present day and quite certainly even more so in the past” (Sereni 1981, 5).

This aspect is critical when evaluating the extent to which a landscape is ‘natural’ or ‘artificial’; today it is taken for granted that in Italy, and in Southern Europe generally, there are no ‘natural landscapes’ because from ancient times onwards settlements and human work have left their mark, but in the mid-20th century this was still a subject of debate. Sereni also examines the growth of different types of ‘Mediterranean scrub’, considering even the thick scrub to bear the indirect traces of the passage of fire centuries beforehand, in that different species would have emerged and become dominant during regrowth due to the altered morphological and pedological conditions of the soil. He upholds the principle that the thicker

scrub, or *fratta* in Italian, is not to be viewed as a primary plant formation but “more frequently as a secondary plant formation”, that is to say, the result of a progressive degradation of the primeval Mediterranean forest, due to the expansion and repeated cycles of burning practices by herdsmen and crop-growers, and further accelerated by excessive grazing especially by goats (Sereni 1981, 15). The original Mediterranean forests, dominated by oak woods, were gradually taken over by pinewoods and other species that grew back faster after fires, such as the mastic, the strawberry tree, and other plant species that are more resistant to fire and subsequent grazing. However, Grove and Rackham present an alternative theory to the stereotype of the ruined landscape as a ‘lost paradise’ destroyed by human activity, contending that natural landscapes across most of the Mediterranean have always been semiarid.

If we are not in favor of attributing a moral value to the notion of ‘degradation’ advanced by Sereni and post-Vidalians, it may be said that scholars of human geography have generally not fallen into this trap and that their studies are progressively lending more and more support to the view of the two British geographers: “The Mediterranean is no place for facile generalization” (Grove and Rackham 2001, 12).

### **Searching for a new language**

Thus the Mediterranean mosaic leads us back to the complexity of the term nature and the problems associated with the “tendency in discursive debates to homogenize the category ‘nature’ (and discuss its social meaning and constitution as a unitary category) when it should be regarded as intensely variegated – an unparalleled field of difference” (Harvey 1996, 183). The idea of nature, as we have seen, does not so much correspond to a demonstrated truth as to a point of view and a cultural stance. “Nature – writes Donna Haraway – cannot preexist its construction” (Haraway 1992, 296). Nature on the one hand has been transformed into an object of study with its own laws, which we may decipher through the filter of science; on the other hand, as scientific enquiry has progressed, humans have lost their ancient sense of community with the remainder of living beings, while increasingly occupying a position of dominance over them. For the scientist Daniel Botkin, the Western notion of nature is principally based on ancient conceptions of it, which have nothing to do with scientific truth:

[t]he potential for us to make progress with environmental issues is limited by the basic assumptions that we make about nature, the unspoken, often unrecognized perspective from which we view our environment. [...] We have tended to view nature as a Kodachrome still-life, [...] but nature is a moving picture show [...] continually changing and complex (Botkin 1990, 5–6).

For Kate Soper:

In this sense, nature may be viewed as a register of changing conceptions as to who qualifies, and why, for full membership of the human community, and thus also to some extent as a register of Western civilization's anxieties and divisions about its own qualities, activities, and achievements (Soper 1995, 73–74).

Amongst those who have been considered 'inhuman' or less than human at different junctures of Western history, Soper counts barbarians (i.e. those who do not speak one's own language), slaves, negroes, women, Indians, savages, 'wild men', witches, sorcerers, dwarfs, and idiots. Nature, when stripped of its aesthetic and mysterious qualities and of its sympathy towards human beings, becomes a 'mythical' object, distant from our daily experience and thus progressively banished from our cities – the very heart of our settlements – as well as from the rhythms and calendar of human activity, to end up being relegated to the laboratory and to 'protected areas': "This ontological separation of the natural and the social has, since at least the European Enlightenment, been associated with other dualisms organizing our thoughts, such as rural-urban, country-city, and wilderness-civilization" (Castree 2001, 6). Nature has been relegated to the margins of scientific discourse, yet we are left with the sensation of having forgotten or lost something of our conception of it, something qualitatively indefinable that has to do with beauty and a sense of connection with human sentiment. To use the words of the poet Emerson:

[t]he greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown (Emerson 1836, 17).

The French historian Serge Moscovici, one of the first to recognize the *question naturelle* as amongst the fundamental problems of the century, with the potential to mobilize its vital forces, starts from the assumption that scientific progress – rated "amongst the most

revolutionary events in human history”, comparable to the spread of writing and of language – continuously calls for a revision of our conceptions of time and space and the natural laws: humanity is today, the leading agent of transformation on the planet with regard to climatic, biological, and geomorphological equilibrium as well as energy transformations. However, humankind itself is not immune to the consequences of these transformations but is in turn modified by them; it would seem that the peculiar characteristic of the human race is not so much its rationality or technical ability as its capacity to self-create and to combine itself with other living beings, in short, to generate its own natural state; humanity is not viewed as the product of cosmic energy or of animal or vegetable vitality, but as together both creator and subject of nature. Only in this way, by considering nature both as a given and as a human creation, can we break out of the vicious circle of the irreconcilable contrast humanity-nature: “Nature, as we know it, has humanity as its distinctive trait: that in fact is its nature” (Moscovici 1977, 32). Moscovici’s work became a cult book for the French green movement from the 1970s; since then he has continued to explore environmental themes, recently focusing on the Weberian concept of the ‘disenchantment of the world’ caused by the scientific vision at the heart of industrial and technological civilization. For Moscovici, one of the key tasks of the contemporary environmental movement is to ‘reenchant’ the world; this does not imply a return to magic or to the religion of miracles, but a newly invented nature: Re-enchanting the world is not a cult but a practice of nature. It is not brought about by remedying the malaise associated with our way of life, but by trying out new ways of bringing into being a new way of life (Moscovici 2001, 140).

### **Conclusion: a challenge for the geographical discipline**

This historical and philosophical excursus illustrates how analysis of the interaction between humanity and nature has been part of human thinking since antiquity and how the Mediterranean has always been a key laboratory for this line of analysis. Furthermore, although geography may not today enjoy the highest profile as a discipline, it has contributed to thinking in this area throughout the enquiry to date, offering original elaborations that have influenced the other human sciences, such as the case of the history of *Annales* and Fernand Braudel in the 20th century: “However, in a world of genetic engineering and global warming, geographers are increasingly skeptical of even using ‘natural’ and ‘social’ as categories of analysis” (Ginn and Demeritt 2009, 307). Although in recent decades – in line

with the development of critical thinking in geography – the idea of nature has taken on a social dimension, drawing on Marxist, post-Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, poststructuralist, post-colonial, and actor-network-theory-inspired interpretations, it has not lost any of its ambiguity (Castree 2001). Demeritt ponders:

After all, ‘nature’ is frequently taken to mean the totality of everything that is not humanly constructed. In what sense can the land we see or the water we drink be called ‘constructions’? And yet, an increasing number of human geographers now insist just this: that ‘nature’ is a social construction” (Demeritt 2001, 22).

Today, the profound question of ‘what is nature’ has transcended both the boundaries of the Mediterranean and disciplinary barriers to take its place as a ‘contested concept’ at the heart of international and interdisciplinary critical enquiry. In the words of Philippe Descola: “All was untamed – it goes without saying – that which issued from the *silva*, the great European forest that Roman colonization was little by little to nibble away [...] everything conspired to classify humans and nonhumans under one and the same register of hierarchical subordination of which the relationships within the extended family represent the complete model. Along with the terminology expressing it, the Romans bequeathed us the values associated with this antithetical pair whose fortunes were to grow ever brighter. For the discovery of other forests, at other latitudes, was to enrich the initial dichotomy without altering its fields of signification” (Descola 2004, 29–30).

Ecology and physical geography are often inclined to draw back from such a key theme in favor of dissecting it into its environmental, morphological, climatic, fauna, and vegetation components, expressed in terms of flows and quantitative data. Nonetheless, “Ideas about nature are as important as the realities they purport to describe and explain. [...] Our experience of nature is rarely direct. Rather, it is thoroughly mediated for us. [...] ideas about nature have a materiality every bit as real as the living and inanimate things those ideas represent” (Castree 2005). It is important that human geography, currently called to address increasingly critical global environmental issues, should renew its awareness of its own roots as a modern science in the tradition of Humboldt, Ritter, Reclus, etc., maintaining the capacity to elaborate its own independent view of the world and to offer original solutions, not only for the problems of science but also for those of politics, culture, and society.

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