



Intricacies of Mediterranean urban and regional dynamics

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Abstract

The present study delves into the intricate interplay between the historical legacies, contemporary adaptations, and future aspirations of Southern European cities, metropolises, and urban agglomerations as Mediterranean societies navigate the evolving global landscape. The analysis challenges the conventional notion of ‘modernity’ as a specific Mediterranean perspective, envisioning the ‘delayed’ condition—from multiple perspectives, including socioeconomic and environmental perspectives—as a sort of ‘alternative modernity.’ This alternative perspective acknowledges the region's unique trajectory and its intrinsic resistance to conforming to Northern European standards. Drawing from a diverse literature base encompassing ethnography, modern history, sociology, and geography, the study critically evaluates prevailing cultural norms and identity standards, highlighting the influence of localized dynamics on overarching models. Interpreting this ‘Mediterranean modernity’ through the lens of ‘delay,’ the study explores the inherent complexity within Southern European urban landscapes. The importance of transcending rigid analytical frameworks to fully grasp the region's diversity is underscored. Moreover, the analysis also extends to the evolving role of coastal cities in rejuvenating Mediterranean centrality and the convergence of cultural heritage, economic advancement, and urban renewal. Through a multidimensional lens, the study delves into the nuanced dynamics of the (residual) informal economy characteristic of Southern Europe, the transition from industry to services, and the delicate balance between short-term gains and long-term prospects. Based on a comprehensive and opinionated critical analysis of the literature examined from multiple perspectives, the research offers insights into the Mediterranean's urban dynamics, providing a multifaceted perspective on evolution, resilience, and sustainable pathways, while advocating for an ongoing exploration of the region's complexities and nuances, which will ultimately shape its trajectory toward a balanced and culturally rooted future.

Keywords Sustainability · Resilience · Urban complexity · Socioeconomic evolution · Centrality · Regional systems

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Introduction

The Mediterranean region has been the subject of studies that have investigated—using different methods—the intimate complexity of Southern European societies and economies, developing paradigmatic narratives and metaphorical discourses at the same time (Salvati et al. 2018; Vardopoulos et al. 2023a). Empirical studies on the Mediterranean region have explored a wide range of topics. Studies have examined

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the role of cities in regional development (Theodora 2020). They have also investigated the impact of globalization on Mediterranean economies (Ribas-Mateos 2017), delved into the social and cultural dimensions of Mediterranean urbanization (Scott 2012), and scrutinized the main environmental issues and concerns (Papamichael et al. 2022). Additionally, some studies have explored tourism development and its effects (Pivčević et al. 2020; Bampatsou et al. 2022), assessed the impact of repurposing historic buildings on urban regeneration efforts in the Mediterranean region (Vardopoulos 2022), and analyzed the role of Mediterranean agriculture in shaping rural landscapes and sustainable development (Zambon et al. 2018; Kitsara et al. 2021). Moreover, recent research has highlighted the pressing issue of urban soil pollution in Mediterranean cities, shedding light on the challenges of maintaining urban sustainability amidst evolving environmental concerns (Aslanidis and Golia 2022; Jiang et al. 2021; Peng et al. 2022). Many authors have seen these peculiar systems that are suspended between planning and informality as ranging between (new) opportunities for endogenous development and (old) diffused illegal practices (Fuschi 2010; Carlucci et al. 2017; Feliciano et al. 2018). How much the debate on urbanization processes in the global south can be separated from a more general debate on Mediterranean complexity (Leontidou 1993) remains a crucial element in regional studies (Carlucci et al. 2017). Elusive definitions, ambiguous boundaries, territorial heterogeneity, and cultural fragmentation make the analysis of what the Mediterranean really is challenging and demanding at the same time (Feleki et al. 2018). On the one hand, interpretative issues make the search for shared and unified definitions of geographical objects typical of the Mediterranean fleeting (Minca 2004). On the other hand, according to Conti and Segre (1998), the definition of the Mediterranean space would represent a real point of view, an act of trust in the existence of an appropriate scale for the analysis of its specificities, which is capable of identifying both physical and economic boundaries (Braudel 1987). From this perspective, the Mediterranean space emerges as a flexible concept with a territorial extent that varies according to the perspective used (Bürkner and Scott 2019).

The Mediterranean region is a complex and contradictory space (Purcell 2003) encompassing elements of both ancient and modern times (Burke 2012), unity and fragmentation (Amin 2020), transformation and resistance (Doğanyılmaz 2012), continuity and change (Paradiso 2016), migration and territoriality (Egidi et al. 2020), economic development (Carlucci et al. 2017), and ecological crisis (Salvia et al. 2023). Given this complexity, it is crucial to move beyond interpretive constraints and critically examine prevailing paradigms in regional studies. However, interpretative constraints should not limit the analysis of Mediterranean urban and regional systems; they should instead stimulate a

critique of definitions, boundaries, and geographic and cultural representations (Salvati 2014a). This critique may overcome ambiguity and evocations typical of the mainstream narrative on the Mediterranean space. These considerations justify the goal of this work, which presents itself as an opinionated critical analysis of the literature. The goal here is to provide an alternative interpretation of ‘Mediterranean’ thinking that diverges from mainstream paradigms. Rather than rigidly adhering to predefined methodological review protocols, the intention is to offer fresh insights through a comprehensive analysis of existing evidence and studies. In the quest to transcend interpretative limitations and broaden the understanding of Mediterranean urban and regional systems, this work takes into consideration alternative socio-geographic dimensions and critiques commonly held definitions and cultural representations. Specifically, this involves rejecting stadial and ‘convergentist’ interpretations prevalent in the mainstream literature and instead undertaking a critical review of the culture-economy dichotomy, which allows for the exploration of other components of the development debate.

Unveiling the nuanced dynamics of the Mediterranean

According to Minca’s early study (Minca 2004), one way to understand the Mediterranean space is as a cloud-like structure consisting of virtual networks and materials that connect people, information, services, and goods across various locations and nodes. This connection is seemingly ephemeral but highly effective in an unpredictable manner, and it is challenging to relate it back to the traditional linear methods of interpreting and measuring space and territory. The critical reference is to the simplified and reductionist economic models, to the ‘geometric’ interpretations of the relationships between society and territory, and to the partial information derived from exclusively quantitative approaches. Consider, for example, the case of Mediterranean trade routes dating back centuries. The Silk Road connecting Asia to Europe via the Mediterranean was a complex web of trade networks that linked cultures, economies, and ideas. The intricate nature of these trade routes, encompassing land and sea passages, can hardly be captured by traditional spatial measurements. Furthermore, let us contemplate the modern-day phenomenon of e-commerce and digital platforms. Companies like Amazon and Alibaba have transformed the Mediterranean economic landscape (Bengtson and Ljung 2016) by functioning as virtual marketplaces that enable Mediterranean businesses to reach global customers with ease (Speier et al. 1998). The fluidity and rapidity of these digital transactions challenge conventional

territorial boundaries and linear economic models. The critique of the usual production scales of the economic spaces that too often influence the geographical reading scale of urban phenomena allows us to recognize that the complexity and artistic elements of the Mediterranean region are what make it strong and rich and are not the weaknesses and inconsistencies that statistics may seem to imply. The traditional approach of categorizing regions hierarchically can result in the marginalization and denial of the unique characteristics of the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean spaces should not be read as 'weak' as they are not performative, because they are difficult to define through the binary spatial logic of inclusion/exclusion and according to a linear reading (Purcell 2003). For instance, consider a scenario where policymakers attempt to measure the economic performance of a Mediterranean region solely based on traditional quantitative metrics such as GDP growth. While these statistics may suggest a certain level of economic development, they overlook the intricate network of informal economies, cultural richness, and unique regional dynamics that contribute to the Mediterranean's true vibrancy. This underscores the limitations of quantitative approaches in capturing the region's multifaceted nature. There is a looming risk of disciplinary and interpretative marginalization, following the already established economic-productivist model. This marginalization is supported by excessively quantitative approaches proposed from a 'reductionist' perspective (Duster 2006). Consider, for instance, an approach that seeks to quantify the cultural diversity of the Mediterranean solely through numerical counts of languages spoken. While this approach may provide quantitative data, it fails to capture the depth of cultural interactions, syncretism, and shared heritage that characterize the region's identity. These approaches produce an anodyne interpretation of Mediterranean regionalism based on elements that are potentially comparable with those characterizing certain literature on northern urban systems but which often conceal latent phenomena that are more difficult to unravel through numbers and statistics (Salvati et al. 2013a). The concept of borders is contrasted with the idea of the Mediterranean as a shared space along its shores. Imagine the scenario where researchers attempt to delineate clear geographical borders of the Mediterranean based solely on physical boundaries. Such an approach disregards the shared historical, cultural, and economic ties that transcend these borders. The Mediterranean region is defined not just by its physical boundaries, but also by the people who inhabit it and the projects they undertake (Ribas-Mateos 2017). In this context, geography is used as a lens to seek answers about the region's social issues, but it is acknowledged that the Mediterranean is constantly changing, and any answers provided may be challenged by new

developments. This highlights the complexity and dynamism of the Mediterranean region, emphasizing the need for a nuanced perspective.

The common awareness of the immense role of statistical data, comparative procedures, and objective methodologies in understanding Mediterranean territories cannot be denied (Salvati and Carlucci 2014). But, at the end of each 'statistical' journey in all the Mediterranean regions, narratives, metaphors, and horizons are still sought, as the thirst for knowledge of the many latent factors that are difficult to define and quantify is not completely satisfied by statistics (Blondel 2006). Consider as an example the statistical analysis of migration patterns in the Mediterranean region (e.g., Ciommi et al. 2022; Vlahadi et al. 2023; Salvati and Benassi 2021). While such data can provide valuable insights into the movement of people, they often fail to capture the personal stories, cultural exchanges, and sociopolitical dynamics that underlie these migrations. These nuanced aspects of Mediterranean migration cannot be fully appreciated through numbers alone. Thus, narratives, metaphors, and qualitative research are essential to complement statistical findings and provide a more holistic understanding of the region. The awareness that a great deal has been written about the Mediterranean and its regions prevents the Mediterranean from being thought of as a preordained, distinct, partitionable region because of its borders, opening up metaphors and discourses that are potentially far from a rigidly permeable space (Paradiso et al. 2019).

A prelude to Mediterranean urban and regional analysis

As Matvejevic (1998) stated, the Mediterranean is not a sea of solitude. Its complexity continues to captivate scholars, leading to the production of analyses and consolidated interpretations. The Mediterranean cannot be defined in axiomatic or cartographic terms (Zapata-Barrero 2020); rather, it must be imaged. In order to achieve this, deterministic constructs must be relinquished and functional discourses resisted. As proposed by Minca (2004), it should be viewed as a heterotopic space that produces order and also the conditions for its deconstruction; a continuously evolving utopia that differs from modernity (McDougall 2017). The Mediterranean can be seen as a space without measures, limits, or boundaries, akin to a horizon that approaches and recedes with one's perspective. A definition that avoids determinism and functionalism can only be developed by perceiving the Mediterranean as a heterotopia (Bromberger 2006).

However, the exploration of the Mediterranean must begin from the sea (Fotiadou and Papagiannopoulos-Miaoulis 2019). The liquid plain, as Braudel (1987) and Farinelli (1998) describe it, connects the land and balances

the rugged topography of the countries that surround it. The sea serves as a vital means of communication and also as an element of friction, consolidating cultural differences and economic disparities that still exist between the northern and southern shores (Jacquet 2020). Moreover, scholars emphasize the significance of preserving the Mediterranean's biodiversity and sustainability, particularly given the ongoing threats of climate change and environmental degradation (Papamichael et al. 2022; Sebos et al. 2023). In this context, it is crucial to emphasize that the Mediterranean is confronted with mounting challenges linked to marine pollution and the accumulation of plastic/microplastics (Chatziparaskeva et al. 2022; Gkatzoura et al. 2021; Montes et al. 2022). Recent evidence paints a troubling picture, revealing a significant upsurge in plastic hotspots within the Mediterranean (Compa et al. 2019; Spedicato et al. 2020; Mancuso et al. 2023). This surge can be predominantly attributed to extensive tourism-related activities (Fig. 1) and their profound environmental repercussions (Zafeirakou et al. 2022; Zorpas et al. 2021;

Vardopoulos et al. 2023), which are exacerbated by insufficient waste management and disposal practices (Papamichael et al. 2022). Similar issues are also observed in other sectors such as shipping (Kyramargiou and Vardopoulos 2017), construction (Pavlidis et al. 2023), aviation (Tofalli et al. 2018), and more, all of which contribute to the growing environmental challenges in the Mediterranean region (Papamichael et al. 2022). Once again, the sea acts as a heterotopia where diverse cultures, identities, and ideas coexist and where both totalitarianism and resistance thrive (Campling and Colás 2018). This dynamic environment is characterized by a perpetual pursuit of progress (Minca 2004).

Much of the geographical literature, especially the urban literature, focuses on coastal regions as an opportunity for settlement and the result of public planning policies (Crawford 2019; Georgia et al. 2022). Urban development in the Mediterranean can be observed through satellite images taken at night, which reveal the extent of human activity and urbanization (Zhou et al. 2015; Kadhim et al. 2016). The physical characteristics of the Mediterranean region have common environmental features that are present within a distance of 100–200 km from the coastline (Woodward 2009). However, the human aspect of the region is shaped by the Braudelian concept of a 'Great Mediterranean' with indistinct borders that are determined not by climate but by people (Elez 2017). This idea fosters the circulation of human and non-human resources, creating concentric boundaries around the Mediterranean that form numerous frontiers (Masini et al. 2019). The implications of the Braudelian vision of the Great Mediterranean and the circulation of human and tangible assets have significant implications for the sustainability of the region, including demographic challenges such as population growth and resource depletion (Benoit and Comeau 2012).

However, even in this idealistic vision, there are limitations to and approximations in the definitions of the Mediterranean region (Concannon and Mazurek 2016). The classical view of the Mediterranean as a product of the combined action of climate and landscapes has created a stereotypical lifestyle (García Vergara and Pizza 2021) which is a trivial simulacrum of literary descriptions of every time and is practiced in bucolic landscapes for the production of sun, balance, harmony, wisdom, and tranquillity. Matvejevic (1996) critiques this romanticist vision, emphasizing that there is no singular Mediterranean culture or identity, and inviting us to grasp antagonisms and differences instead of exalting the landscape. The Mediterranean is superposition of gradients and interests that are geographically expanded but collectively concentrated (Bromberger 2006). Exclusions and inclusions coexist in the same spaces. Exclusions represent

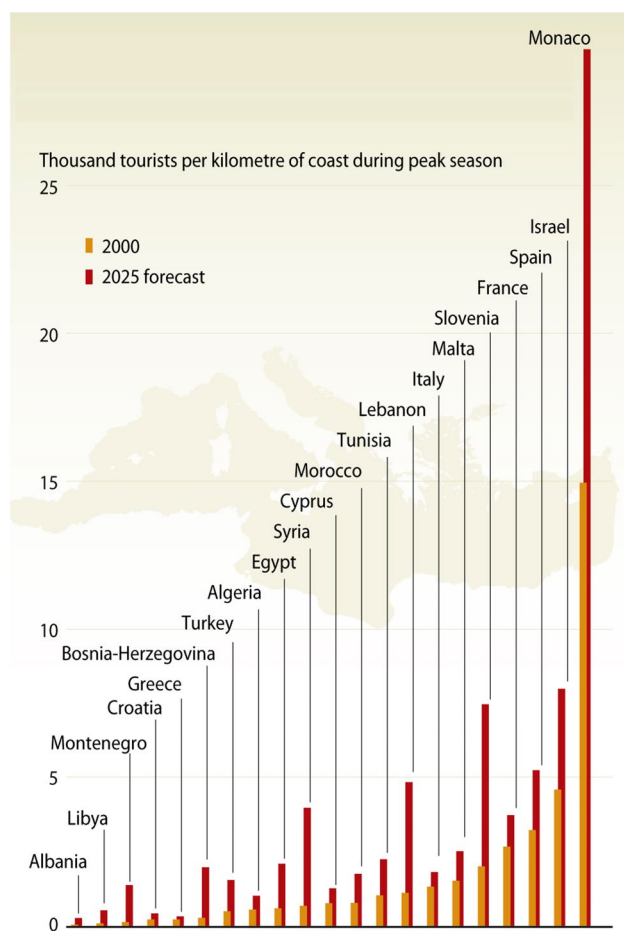


Fig. 1 Tourist pressure on the Mediterranean coast. Source: GRID-Arendal—State of the Mediterranean Marine and Coastal Environment Collection; <https://www.grida.no/resources/5922>

aspects that coexist within the same spaces but are often overlooked or marginalized, such as the multifaceted cultural identities, societal nuances, and economic intricacies across Mediterranean communities, while inclusions signify the acknowledgment of these diverse elements and the interconnectedness of cultures, even when they do not directly overlap, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of how the Mediterranean's rich tapestry and cultures refer to each other without ever overlapping (Salvati et al. 2013b).

Decoding Mediterranean realities: complexity and spatial dynamics

Gradient analysis conjures up the idea of a fracture in the quest for homogeneity, which may be achieved. Cities introduce a break in the similarity of agricultural and forest landscapes, which are poorly organized and sparsely populated (Salvati 2014b). This scale jump initially stems from demographic and economic factors but has a significant impact on local communities by creating more polarized landscape that conflicts with the surrounding areas (Modai-Snir and Ham 2018). In this context, the Mediterranean region is viewed as 'a geography of the fracture' (as per Kayser 1996), which distinguishes advanced productive regions from backward ones, i.e., commercial and industrial powerhouses from rural landscapes focused on agriculture and animal husbandry (Carlucci et al. 2017; Zafeiriou et al. 2023). This deterministic perspective, however, is being challenged in a region that is increasingly moving towards polycentric models, with many countries on the southern shore contributing actively to their development (Jordan et al. 2015), thus revitalizing the metaphor of the 'fracture' proposed by Kayser (1996).

The concept of economic spaces pertains to the global positioning of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean basin (Shavshukov and Zhuravleva 2020). This positioning involves their roles within worldwide economic systems, including trade, investment, and global markets. These countries face persistent environmental challenges, such as pollution, resource depletion, and climate change impacts (Chatziparaskeva et al. 2022; Escolano et al. 2018), which can have wide-ranging economic and social consequences (Zafeiriou et al. 2023). Additionally, marked territorial inequalities persist within the Mediterranean region, leading to disparities in development and access to resources (Giannakopoulou et al. 2020). These inequalities remain unresolved and contribute to social discrepancies, which are solidifying within a context of heightened instability (Golini et al. 2015). At times, these challenges and disparities can escalate into economic crises (Caraveli and Tsionas 2012), as evidenced by the

economic downturn experienced by several Mediterranean countries over a decade into the new millennium (Maris et al. 2022). These crises often result from a combination of factors, including economic imbalances, financial instability, and global economic forces (Ślusarczyk and Sowa 2017; Sidelnykova et al. 2019). This phenomenon predominantly characterizes countries along the southern coast, while still affecting certain regions of the northern periphery (Ziogas and Metaxas 2021). It underscores an ongoing absence of alignment in the economic advancement of rural and peri-urban territories, a trend that persists despite the passage of 10 years (Asefi et al. 2020). The ramifications of these economic fractures extend beyond monetary concerns, exerting a significant influence on the dynamics and environmental sustainability within the region (Alaimo et al. 2022). These intricate interactions not only shape the developmental trajectory of Mediterranean countries but also underscore the necessity for targeted policy efforts to address these multifaceted challenges effectively (Doukas et al. 2023).

Contemplation of the Mediterranean semi-periphery exposes it as an area marked by political upheaval, economic and social uncertainty, religious worldliness, and the presence of cultural-popular traditional values (Kurth and Petras 1994). These designations continue to find relevance across multiple regions, exhibiting minimal deviations from historical trends. This state of affairs finds succinct articulation in the notion of Mediterranean nations being ensnared within a state of being 'caught in-between' prosperous northern core regions and underdeveloped southern outskirts (Salvati 2014). This situation necessitates a relentless race to maintain their current status, creating a persistent predicament. This predicament, extending beyond purely economic confines, accentuates the imperative for a comprehensive restructuring of geographical frameworks and analytical tools that are essential for comprehending the intricate territorial dynamics of the Mediterranean (Husain and Nafa 2020; Lemonakis et al. 2023). Amidst indisputable economic metamorphoses, the influence of a unified currency, and the enduring presence of European development strategies that have disproportionately targeted peripheral areas, it is imperative to acknowledge that the disparity between these countries and their northern counterparts endures prominently (Salvatori 2008). In this context, a nuanced exploration of the evolving economic and sociocultural intricacies of the Mediterranean region becomes an indispensable endeavor.

An aspect that is interconnected with the notion of economic semi-peripherality and is currently pertinent in this era of global uncertainties is that of crises (Becker et al. 2010). The Mediterranean regions and cities, perceived as unstable and deteriorated, lack the territorial acumen required for networking, fostering innovation, and global competition (Chorianopoulos et al. 2014). They appear to

remain stagnant; unresponsive to novelty and change (Kourliouros 2003). Embedded within the global market, these areas encounter challenges in pursuing seemingly promising trajectories. Their socioeconomic structure, which is outdated in some respects and inadequate for contending with emerging countries in others, seems to hinder progress (Salvatore 2018). Does the concept of a Mediterranean crisis hold validity? Can we characterize the predicament within regions and cities, which are often perceived as the leading 'protagonists' economically? Alternatively, following Latouche's line of thought (Salvati and Carlucci 2011), might it be more apt to concentrate on the locales of crises themselves? This form of democratic crisis entails limited engagement, a prevalence of collective individualism, an erosion of values, and conceptual ambiguity (Giaccaria and Minca 2011). These conditions find expression in the 'cathartic' landscapes of suburban areas, extending to the 'new' peripheries dispersed within rural settings that have undergone transformation or dissolution. Exploring these dimensions prompts a deeper understanding of the intricate fabric of contemporary Mediterranean challenges and the evolving nature of crisis phenomena.

Navigating Mediterranean transitions: societal flux, economic realities, and the tapestry of resilience

The perceived lag in the Mediterranean's adoption of modernity has been a topic of lengthy discussion. Before us, many scholars have raised doubts about the notion of delay, replacing it with the concept of 'alternative modernity.' This notion embraces a modernity that resists easy evaluation and quantification using the standards of the northern regions. These scholars have additionally brought forth the thought-provoking notion of 'resistance to modernity' (Leontidou 1996). This resistance finds expression through critical discourse against the prevailing Anglo-American culture and concealed forms of veiled intolerance toward identity norms and objective criteria specific to the Northern European nations and their institutions. These elements have exerted a significant influence over the creation of a united Europe and the political and structural setup of the community itself. Leontidou (1993) contemplates whether the ambiguous manifestations of post-modernism perhaps had a foothold in the cities bordering the Mediterranean Sea long before being formally recognized as future-oriented spaces by the Anglo-Saxon academic world and the adaptable post-Fordist economic model.

The limitations of positivist definitions become apparent in this and numerous other contributions. According to Minca (2004), the Mediterranean offers little alignment to the reduction to a singular point of view characterized

by positivist-style mechanistic metaphors. Instead, it beckons geographers to engage with topics of spatial narration, boundaries, and horizons. This encourages a critique of schematic language and the prevailing scale, often global and polarized. These factors tend to confine the economic Mediterranean to a subordinate position. This shift in perspective prompts a reconsideration of how the Mediterranean's complexity can be better captured and understood beyond rigid analytical frameworks.

Beyond mere definitions, measurements also unveil an inherent fragility within the Mediterranean context. Leontidou (1996) deems any attempt to import classifications from the 'northern' perspective to comprehend the south as inappropriate. Indeed, these realities are perceived by certain Anglo-American literature as deviations, characterized by informal relationships rooted in pre-capitalist exchanges. This implies a delayed and postponed course of development. According to Leontidou (1996), these stereotypes stem directly from applying 'northern' or Atlantic models of urban development to our cities, with any divergence from the model's trajectory labeled as deviations. Conversely, Farinelli (1998) has also spotlighted the aberrant functionality of this model, juxtaposing it against the rational European and North American model. He views it as a "the reflection of a model that counteracts the territorial logic guiding the modern capitalist and centralized state, where urbanization is conventionally interpreted as a manifestation of the various phases of the industrial revolution". This dichotomy in perspectives serves as a reminder of the intricate interplay between the localized dynamics and overarching models in shaping urban realities. Understanding these subtleties becomes pivotal for navigating the diverse urban trajectories unfolding within the Mediterranean context.

After transcending the structured identity paradigms of the European expanse, our focus must shift to concepts that aid in reinterpreting the semi-peripheral state of the Mediterranean. Rather than necessitating the pursuit of novel definitions, metrics, or unique terminology, this approach compels the elevation of the significance of southern territories within both cultural discourse and the political agenda. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean has partially reclaimed its role as a cultural and social bridge connecting Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The fluid and diverse economic and geopolitical landscapes have played a role in reshaping this centrality. Certain regions, particularly those embracing exchanges and globalization, have crafted competitive strategies to reenter the global stage. As the emphasis on polarized strategies favoring high-yield economic endeavors and transnational political interests in Northern Europe diminishes, we shall observe how the Mediterranean's coastal regions, historically predisposed to competition and comparison, appear to have

rekindled a renewed allure—manifested through a spectrum of diverse formulations (Farinelli 1998; Garefalakis et al. 2017). This transformation underscores the intricate interplay between historical legacies, contemporary adaptations, and future aspirations as the Mediterranean navigates the evolving global landscape. The ongoing recalibration of the Mediterranean's role holds the potential to yield unforeseen opportunities and synergies across the regions it unites.

Semi-peripherality as the intrinsic strength of the system

Nonetheless, the issue of the semi-peripheral status of southern regional systems endures as a pertinent concern. The waning of centrality, evident since the sixteenth century, stems from the establishment of commercial, productive, social, and cultural linkages between northern nations and the shifting of the global economic focal point towards these territories. This transition occurred initially during the colonial era and later intensified with the advent of the industrial revolution, followed by the post-industrial economy and the globalization of the markets. This framework has yielded territorial realities that, in general, have experienced stunted or sluggish development. However, noteworthy instances of vitality and convergence can be gleaned, particularly within coastal urban systems. Moreover, the rapid expansion of the population, resulting in the relocation of the demographic center of gravity from the northern Mediterranean to the southern shores, has its epicenter within coastal areas and in cities. This demographic shift stands as a distinctive characteristic

of the region (Vinci et al. 2023). The intricate interplay between historical legacies, contemporary adaptations, and future aspirations continues to shape the trajectory of the Mediterranean, emphasizing the need for dynamic strategies that capitalize on the unique potential of its diverse regions. This evolution holds promise for reinvigorating the Mediterranean's role as a bridge between continents and cultures.

Population growth has thus positioned the northern shore (and currently the southern shore) in the midst of pressing new challenges. These challenges span the administration of substantial population movements and the substantial environmental repercussions of this migration (Ciommi et al. 2022; Vlahadi et al. 2023). Peri-urban zones, coastal regions, low-lying expanses, and gently sloping hilly landscapes have all witnessed demographic expansion accompanied by a (more or less) gradual socio-economic reconfiguration. This phenomenon is evident not only in Italy and Israel, but also in Spain, Turkey, Greece, and Morocco. As a direct outcome, the ecological predicaments tied to spontaneous urban growth are intertwined with those stemming from the rapid conversion of the agricultural land into human-made spaces with widespread settlements and moderately low population density (Fig. 2). This interplay engenders areas prone to deforestation, desertification, and irreversible deterioration of natural resources. This complex nexus between population dynamics, ecological balance, and socioeconomic adaptation underscores the imperative for strategic policies that harmonize urban expansion and environmental conservation (Vardopoulos et al. 2023a). Recognizing these interactions is pivotal for steering the Mediterranean's trajectory

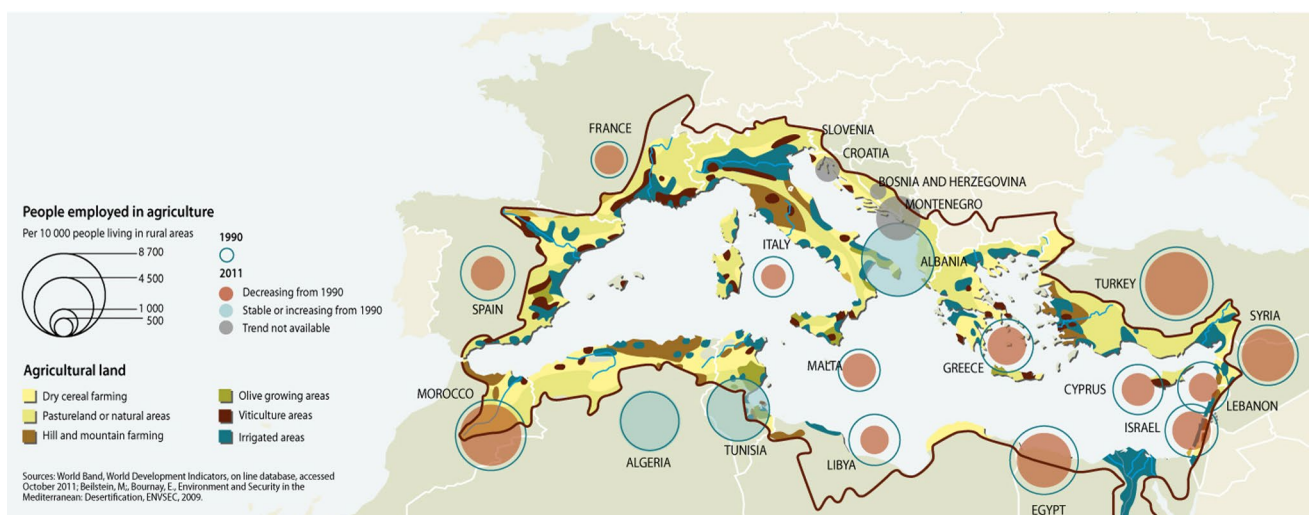


Fig. 2 Agriculture and population in the Mediterranean basin. Source: GRID-Arendal—State of the Mediterranean Marine and Coastal Environment Collection; <https://www.grida.no/resources/5906>

toward a more sustainable future where human needs and ecological integrity are reconciled.

From a societal perspective, shifts in culture that manifest as different lifestyles and consumption patterns infiltrate Mediterranean communities in various ways (Vardopoulos et al. 2023b). The fundamental components of this social transformation intersect with a deeper framework that permeates attitudes transcending religious beliefs, individual state politics, and local influences. Foundational interpretations of these dynamics can be located within seminal works reflecting shared narratives and parallel landscape forms rooted in ‘Mediterranean’ traditions. Within these contexts, reflective societal autonomy and benevolent individualism coexist with the pervasive influence of family structures. These familiar dynamics play a pivotal role in upholding and reinforcing societal unity, particularly in the face of apparent fragmentation. Unraveling the intricate interactions between these evolving cultural paradigms and deeply ingrained norms is essential for Mediterranean societies as they navigate change while safeguarding their intrinsic values. This journey aligns with the principles of cultural continuity, inviting exploration of how society can adapt harmoniously to emerging dynamics without sacrificing the essence of its heritage and the social fabric.

Coupled with demographic shifts and undeniable cultural transformations, the transition of production activities from industry to services constitutes another hallmark of the recent evolution within southern socioeconomic systems. However, this transformation is not exclusive to the Mediterranean basin alone. Instead, the trajectory of this phenomenon within southern regions must be reconsidered. In particular, the ascendancy of advanced services is increasingly viewed as an indicator of a dynamic, competitive landscape whose significance within the global economic framework is poised to amplify in the immediate future. It is especially pertinent to question the role played by the ‘advanced’ tertiary sector in the economies of local Mediterranean communities. Within this context, an exploration of the sustainability implications of this transition becomes pertinent. Assessing how this shift aligns with ecological balance, employment opportunities, and the preservation of cultural heritage is crucial to ensuring a balanced evolution of the Mediterranean’s socioeconomic fabric.

During the 1990s, it was observed that robust outsourcing, particularly within the advanced sector, was only partially manifest in southern urban systems. A distinct characteristic of Mediterranean regions is their limited and ‘non-advanced’ outsourcing, which is underscored by a partial shortfall in policies aimed at modernization, competitiveness, and the cultivation of cultural and business tourism (Karytsas et al. 2019). This dearth of progression was interpreted as a form of ‘resistance’ exhibited by Mediterranean societies towards cultural innovations. This prompts the question: how has

this scenario evolved over the past two decades? Which cities have genuinely embarked on a transformative journey toward reclaiming an international role? How many have remained confined to their ecological niches within the confines of a Mediterranean or solely national context? Amidst these considerations, the concept of sustainability arises, beckoning us to evaluate the alignment of urban evolution with ecological balance, social equity, and cultural preservation. Assessing the extent to which urban transformations contribute to the holistic vitality of Mediterranean regions is central to shaping their sustainable futures.

On the production front, the persistent significance of the informal economy remains a prominent feature, as it has been in the past. While the informal economy is a common attribute of developing nations, the Mediterranean’s distinctive aspects imbue this phenomenon with outcomes that notably differ from those witnessed in the most marginalized countries. In fact, the Mediterranean landscape exhibits a dual nature. On the one hand, there is widespread acknowledgment of the roles of the market and capital (or, at the very least, a non-rejection of market-oriented economies); on the other hand, there is a failure to recognize the state as the regulator of these dynamics. This dynamic often underpins the establishment of family structures and hierarchies. This phenomenon is not limited solely to rural areas; it extends into urban domains. Informal activities primarily (though not exclusively) targeting low-skilled occupations can thrive within a social context that is not necessarily marked by degradation or backwardness. Underlying the persisting role of the informal economy is its intricate interaction with Mediterranean dynamics. This informal economy’s unique manifestation, rooted in a complex interplay between market recognition and state regulation, serves as a reflection of the broader societal fabric, shaping family structures and urban landscapes alike.

In these contexts, the norm shifts its focus from the factory to the informal sector, shaping an environment where a potent bourgeoisie does not emerge; instead, workers in the informal sector supplant the traditional proletariat. Amidst late industrialization and infrequent Fordism, the absence of a ‘bourgeois hegemony’ is accentuated, giving rise to marked heterogeneity, versatility, and diversity (Pace 1996). From this perspective, the traits of semi-peripherality that distinguish the Mediterranean, albeit at varying paces, prompt us to interpret the role of the informal economy in a different way (Latouche 2000). Acting as a crossroads between north and south—as a synapse and junction between affluent and impoverished nations and between dominant and subordinate actors—the informal economy has evolved from merely securing jobs—a function already achieved through a satisfactory development and competitive market mechanisms. Instead, it now serves as a conduit for the social advancement of certain actors, with

the middle class—owing to its expanding demographic weight—emerging as the principal one. This class seeks economic fulfillment beyond the confines of the free market. The informal economy, from a household perspective, can be understood as a response to market inefficiencies and the 'fiscal demands' of a somewhat inefficient state. This state neglects to address youth and female unemployment, training, information deficits, infrastructure gaps, and regional imbalances. The absence of wage adjustments, particularly in specific employment sectors and predominantly in the major urban centers, where large segments of the population are more vulnerable to poverty, solidifies this paradigm. The interplay between the informal economy and the intricate fabric of Mediterranean societies unveils a complex web of influences that shape both economic structures and social dynamics.

In the realm of small and medium enterprises, the motivations are polarized yet commonly held (Stavropoulou et al. 2023; Papademetriou et al. 2023). Excessive labor expenditures, inflexible wage structures, challenges in labor acquisition, along with restricted contractual adaptability and the influence of labor unions, constitute factors that rationalize the adoption of informal employment (Floros et al. 2023; Lemonakis et al. 2017). The circle of rationale closes upon considering the social background of the two actors in the game. This scenario extends beyond the urban sub-proletariat traditionally associated with the industrial sector; it now encompasses the urban petty bourgeoisie. In pursuit of a partial redistribution of income and social equilibrium, informal occupations are not perceived as disvalue. Instead, they function as a compensatory mechanism that is deemed necessary and thus pervasively integrated within state dynamics. The bedrock of this social framework lies in the supremacy of the family over the state, with the primacy of 'clan' interests often overshadowing common welfare. In this dynamic landscape, the interweaving of informal employment practices with the intricate web of social and economic forces highlights the nuanced role they play in shaping the economic trajectory of Mediterranean societies.

Reclaiming Mediterranean centrality: urban renewal, cultural heritage, and resilient evolution

Given these premises, the outcome of aligning divergent interests (pitting workers against employers) within a post-industrial economic context where urban competitiveness reaches peak intensity remains uncertain. Within the northern Mediterranean shoreline, the informal economy, to some extent, replicates economically advanced situations rather than merely existing in a degraded and futureless

environment (Escolano et al. 2018). The distinction from other affluent nations lies not just in the economic expectations, but also in the subsequent policies for the short and medium term. A potential peril is emerging—a trade-off between the capacity to invest, strategize, foster, and engender sustainable development in the long run and the allure of short-term affluence stemming from monetary resources. Navigating this intricate relationship between short-term gains and long-term prospects has implications for the sustainability of Mediterranean economies. The challenge lies in devising strategies that harness the dynamism of the informal economy to catalyze long-term development without forfeiting the region's potential for enduring prosperity.

A relatively novel facet of development, aligned with policies for revitalizing the Mediterranean region, has notably directed its focus toward urban locales, particularly those along the coast (Talia 1998). These areas have historically served as bastions of economic advancement and pivotal social and cultural structures that ensure livelihoods and well-being. In the current evolved global context, cities across the Mediterranean are endeavoring to rekindle the allure and ambiance that, among other things, beckon tourists from around the world who are seeking a pleasing, efficient, vibrant urban portrayal (Vardopoulos and Theodoropoulou 2019; Vardopoulos 2023). Many of these cities, in response to the opportunities and challenges unveiled by globalization, have been proactively gearing themselves to strengthen or enhance their standing within the continental hierarchy. This is achieved through interventions within the urban fabric, often aligned with significant cultural events that encompass the spectrum of human creativity. In navigating this urban evolution, it becomes apparent that fostering urban allure goes beyond immediate gains and extends to the realm of sustainability. Ensuring that urban transformations are intrinsically tied to the preservation of cultural heritage, the well-being of local communities, and the responsible use of resources is pivotal to shaping a harmonious and resilient Mediterranean urban landscape (Vardopoulos 2022; Cortesi et al. 2022).

Positioning the Mediterranean regional systems at the foundation of a process aimed at reclaiming centrality necessitates attuning to the 'harmonies of the Mediterranean' (Minca 2004). Acknowledging the inherent specificities, urgencies, uniqueness, and idiosyncrasies that each Mediterranean region offers to its visitors represents a foundation upon which to establish an internationally recognized niche encompassing tourism, culture, event management (Manola and Koltzikoglou 2020), and, notably, the overall urban image (Viganoni 2007). The resurgence of centrality materializes through a strategic approach in projects that are methodically developed and progressively realized. Faith in a form of Mediterranean universality and the celebration of a shared Latin heritage engage in a complex interplay

with this strategy (Muscarà 1998). On the one hand, the expansive Euro-Mediterranean strategy, originating from early conceptualizations in the 1970s and culminating in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 while continuing to echo Braudelian concepts of a substantial ‘Northern Mediterranean,’ has yet to foster the convergence of practices and norms across a broad spectrum of political, institutional, and societal realms. On the other hand, nations of the eastern and southern peripheries remain relatively distanced from this strategy. In this context, the countries along the northern shore, operating with their regional and national frameworks, encounter challenges in harmonizing with a Northern Europe that increasingly finds itself amid the currents of global dynamics. As the Mediterranean seeks to reclaim its central position, the potential for a sustainable and resilient transformation lies not only in aligning regional strategies but also in fostering cross-shore collaborations that encompass equitable development, cultural preservation, and urban resilience (Kempton et al. 2022). The nexus between regional identity, global engagement, and sustainable growth shapes the trajectory of Mediterranean societies as they navigate these multifaceted dynamics.

The resurgence of a ‘Mediterraneanistic’ thinking

The need to relinquish a form of ‘Mediterraneanism’ that is characterized by an essentialist and somewhat exotic interpretation of individuals and Mediterranean ambiances and leads to their marginalization within static realms of remembrance (Minca 2004) is paramount. Likewise, it is vital to discard the assumption that a unified Mediterranean can be effortlessly encapsulated by a handful of defining traits, as put forth in the Braudelian framework. Instead, we must create space for diverse Mediterranean ideal types that span coastlines, hinterlands, and urban landscapes. Despite divisions, ruptures, occasional kitsch, and sentimental historicism, as well as its apparent detachment from the grand geopolitical designs of the English-speaking West, the Mediterranean remains an indispensable reference point in development strategies (Minca 2004). It continues to offer its voice in less-than-perfect English and in divergent languages, aligning imperfectly; yet, it stands as an essential referent that helps preserve the centrality of the north while tempering its singular perspectives. In this journey away from simplistic ‘Mediterraneanism,’ a broader reimagining of the Mediterranean’s intricate tapestry emerges—one that harnesses its multifaceted identities, resilient cultures, and diverse ecologies. This nuanced perspective invites collaboration between coastal communities, urban centers, and rural enclaves, where the aspiration for sustainable prosperity

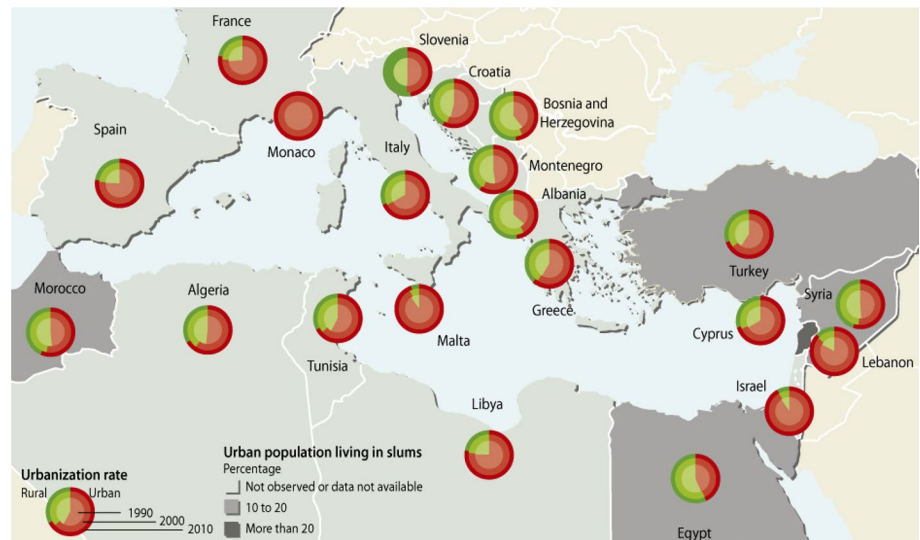
harmonizes with the preservation of the Mediterranean’s distinct heritage and invaluable ecosystems.

The emergence of north–south comparisons is a prevalent theme within regional literature. While employing these territorial frameworks as a reference points for analysis and policy objectives can yield meaningful insights, it becomes precarious to add an additional layer such as ‘good practice’ to these contexts. This notion, once a prevailing approach, has the potential to be risky (Leontidou 2020). The inclination to mold the Mediterranean regions into mere replicas of the north has been a tempting proposition, risking the erasure of cultural traditions, distinct urban fabrics, and well-established social norms. Rather than pursuing conformity, a more sustainable path lies in acknowledging the rich tapestry of Mediterranean identities and embracing strategies that harness local strengths, infuse innovation, and respond to the evolving needs of these dynamic societies. This approach safeguards the essence of the Mediterranean while steering its communities towards resilient and culturally rooted prosperity (Vardopoulos et al. 2021).

Nonetheless, a discourse on the southern and peripheral regions—which occasionally display secular tendencies, in contrast to the more industrious North-European and North-American contexts—emerges. These economically modest yet historically vibrant areas, marked by demographic dynamism and receptivity to planning practices, have maintained a hegemonic influence on the surroundings. This discourse gained prominence in the 1990s, aligning with the maturation of the ‘Mediterranean urban paradigm.’ This paradigm, characterized by a multitude of concepts and definitions, amalgamates tradition, modernism, and post-modernism, deviating from a linear interpretation of southern urbanism adhering to traditional Anglo-Saxon or ‘northern’ frameworks (Leontidou 1996). This narrative shift encourages a nuanced understanding of Mediterranean urbanity (Fig. 3), recognizing its complexity and dynamism. It underscores the need to forge sustainable urban development strategies that acknowledge these unique traits while aligning with contemporary global trends, fostering resilience, and preserving the distinctiveness of Mediterranean communities (Vardopoulos et al. 2020).

A topic of deliberation, encapsulating a synthesis of the literature, revolves around the notion of post-modernity as embodied by Mediterranean cities—a concept Leontidou (1996) characterizes as a “response to modernity.” This condition has ushered in a fresh iteration of modernity, serving as a cultural counterpoint to conventional modernism, which emanated from European centralism’s unidimensional perspective of the American sphere (Zambon et al. 2019). Over the years, South European urban landscapes have incubated this cultural shift, nurturing it through local experiences, urban vistas, and policy interventions—occasionally reverting to older paradigms but more often cultivating innovative

Fig. 3 Urban development in Mediterranean countries. Source: GRID-Arendal—State of the Mediterranean Marine and Coastal Environment Collection; <https://www.grida.no/resources/5932>



approaches (Smiraglia et al. 2015). In the context of sustainable urban development, the exploration of this post-modern perspective serves as a dynamic framework for reshaping urban environments that resonate with the specific characteristics of Mediterranean societies. By embracing this narrative, cities can better navigate the complexities of growth while preserving their cultural authenticity and contributing to the overarching goals of ecological balance and societal well-being.

The turn of the new millennium brought about two significant shifts. Firstly, there has been a revived consciousness regarding urban and regional concerns in the Mediterranean, facilitated by a systematic refinement of concepts and a departure from rigid classifications. Concurrently, recent years have witnessed a redirection of disciplinary paradigms towards a novel school of thought emphasizing established models of polycentric, balanced, and competitive territories. Notably, literature on the evolution of the 'global cities,' emblematic of modernity, efficiency, and competitiveness, has played a role in this reorientation. Additionally, the conceptual framework of 'creative cities' has further stimulated alternative interpretations of the stereotypical and traditionalist Mediterranean urban paradigm (Cerreta et al. 2021; Cerisola and Panzera 2021; Ren et al. 2023). These evolving perspectives encourage Mediterranean regions to embrace adaptable urban planning strategies that harmonize economic dynamism with cultural preservation. This intersection of progressive theories offers a platform for fostering resilient urban environments capable of thriving in the face of global challenges while upholding the distinctive heritage of the Mediterranean realm (Voukkali and Zorpas 2022).

Discussion

As the scope of analyzing geographical phenomena and socioeconomic processes expands to encompass broader regions, the Mediterranean continues to offer contemplation and insights befitting its distinctiveness. The southern regions, in particular, stand as prominent players, diverging significantly from the 'global city-regions' delineated in Anglo-Saxon literature, yet undergoing dynamic transformations. These regions shift from traditional monocentric and compact models towards dispersed, low-density settlements, embodying a polycentric paradigm (Rosa and Salvati 2016) that, while occasionally nascent, holds promise as a reference point for future investigations into sustainable urban development. Indeed, the Mediterranean's urban landscapes stand as a rich source of insights, reflecting the dynamic convergence of historical legacy and contemporary aspirations and offering a unique vantage point for advancing urban sustainability (Feleki et al. 2018).

How the Mediterranean regions integrate into this emerging discourse, the extent to which they align partly or entirely with the trends characteristic of Anglo-Saxon nations, constitutes the focus of recent investigations. The examination of approval or distinctiveness, convergence or divergence, and adaptability or resilience serves as a lens through which these territories are explored from various angles. Despite their simplified outlines in comparison compared to global counterparts, these regions remain intricate and multifaceted, marked by juxtaposed strengths and territorial vulnerabilities (Gaiser and Hribar 2012). The blend of historical fortitude and current weaknesses that shape their essence is inherent to the genetic makeup of Mediterranean landscapes. This duality fuels compelling perspectives as we delve into the study of these intricate and enigmatic entities.

Yet, to delve deeper into this, further questions must be posed, hypotheses formulated, statistical data sought, and visual and narrative aids collected, all while adopting a multidimensional approach (Longhi and Musolesi 2007).

The Mediterranean regions, conceived not as a formalized analytical paradigm but as an essential and enduring point of differentiation from the development models of the more advanced economic systems, come into focus. Their significance arises not from a unifying framework but from an awareness that a comprehensive understanding emerges through comparative analysis of diverse regional trajectories, acknowledging the inherent heterogeneity that resists conventional interpretative routes. The hypotheses and reflections presented in this study contribute to the refining, interpretation, and, when possible, management of this intricate process.

The juxtaposition of contrasts, viewed through a dedicated multidisciplinary lens, emerges as a particularly invigorating element in this exploration. As our deliberations unveil, the theme of ‘gradual’ socioeconomic evolution remains a defining thread in Mediterranean geography, particularly when measured against conceptual benchmarks and territorial frameworks of the north. This enduring narrative might be considered a unifying trait across the Mediterranean's varied geography. Alternatively, in line with a pragmatic Kayserian perspective, the concepts of delay, gradual change, and persistence could be seen as elements that revive the well-known north–south division inherent in the Mediterranean context. As Mediterranean regions embrace sustainable strategies, the study finally suggests a departure from conformity to safeguard distinct identities, infuse innovation, and respond to evolving societal needs. The emerging discourse on post-modernity in Mediterranean cities reflects a cultural counterpoint to conventional modernism, shaping urban environments that resonate with specific societal characteristics. The research underscores the significance of holistic strategies that harmonize economic dynamism with cultural preservation, fostering resilience while celebrating the Mediterranean's unique heritage. This research contributes insights into the Mediterranean's urban dynamics, offering a multifaceted perspective on evolution, resilience, and sustainable pathways.

Conclusions

Informed by an extensive, opinionated critical analysis of the literature considering multiple viewpoints, this study delves into the intricate interplay between historical legacies, contemporary adaptations, and future aspirations of Southern European cities, metropolises, and urban agglomerations within the Mediterranean region. The conventional notion

of 'modernity' is challenged, and the 'delayed' condition is explored as an alternative perspective.

Throughout this exploration, the influence of localized dynamics on overarching models is emphasized, and 'Mediterranean modernity' is interpreted through the lens of 'delay.' This approach uncovers the inherent complexity within Southern European urban landscapes and highlights the need to transcend rigid analytical frameworks to fully grasp the region's diversity.

Moreover, the current research extends to the evolving role of coastal cities in rejuvenating Mediterranean centrality and the convergence of cultural heritage, economic advancement, and urban renewal. The nuances of the (residual) informal economy, the transition from industry to services, and the delicate balance between short-term gains and long-term prospects are examined.

This exploration of the Mediterranean region underscores its unique socioeconomic and geographical characteristics. The shift from traditional urban models to polycentric paradigms in southern regions signifies the potential for sustainable urban development. However, the Mediterranean's integration into the global discourse remains a complex subject marked by divergence and resilience.

The need for a multidimensional approach that acknowledges the Mediterranean's inherent heterogeneity is emphasized. While the theme of gradual socioeconomic evolution remains a unifying thread, the region's complex contrasts defy conventional interpretative routes. Thus, it is argued that it is crucial to understand that the Mediterranean's significance lies not in conforming to global models but in its distinct identities and innovative approaches.

As Mediterranean regions embrace sustainable strategies, they depart from conformity and safeguard their unique cultural heritage. The emerging discourse on post-modernity reflects the region's cultural counterpoint to conventional modernism. Thus, this study underscores the importance of holistic strategies that harmonize economic dynamism with cultural preservation, fostering resilience while celebrating the Mediterranean's unique heritage.

The Mediterranean's urban dynamics offer a multifaceted perspective on evolution, resilience, and sustainable pathways, contributing valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on regional development. This research invites further exploration of the region's complexities and nuances, which will ultimately shape its trajectory toward a balanced and culturally rooted future.

Data availability The authors affirm that this work follows a theoretical approach and, as such, does not involve the analysis or generation of specific datasets. All relevant data generated or analyzed during this study are provided in this published article.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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