# Canals & Clans: Mediterranean Infrastructures[1]

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Infrastructures made the modern and contemporary Mediterranean. This chapter highlights their impact on the imagination and transformation of the region, their appropriation by local actors, and also sheds a light on the resilience of cultural practices and structures. Questions of relationality, generativity, and agency are crucial: How were imaginaries, transformations, and appropriations of infrastructures related? In what ways did infrastructures enable the emergence of political and economic configurations such as empire, capitalism, and organized crime? To what extent did they contribute to the transformation of Mediterranean societies? How did local groups in turn use them for their own interests? What served as infrastructure for what? In the following, I will first illuminate an early nineteenth century vision of infrastructural connectivity and transformation of the Mediterranean, then, using Marseille as an example, shed light on the material and cultural impact of the implementation of this vision, and finally focus on Corsican appropriations of French infrastructures in the (post)imperial age.

## Infrastructuralist Vision: Chevalier's *Système de la Méditerranée*

Infrastructures have been defined as "material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space. They are the physical networks through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance are trafficked."[2] Yet before they can be built, they must be conceived. French Saint-Simonians were key 'infrastructuralists' of the early and mid-nineteenth century, in theory and practice. Even though the term "infrastructure" was coined later,[3] they were among the keen observers, active lobbyists

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1    Section 1–2 are based on my forthcoming book *Mediterrane Verflechtungen. Algerien und Frankreich zwischen Kolonisierung und Dekolonisierung*, while section 3 outlines a new research project on *French Connections: A Global History of Corsica*.

2    Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327–343.

3    Dirk van Laak, "Der Begriff ‚Infrastruktur' und was er vor seiner Erfindung besagte," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 41 (1999): 280–99, 280.

and determined entrepreneurs of infrastructural connectivity and transformation. Underlying their infrastructure projects were new utopian forms of social organization and human cohabitation, which were tested in shared housing experiments and projected onto entire societies such as Algeria, Egypt and France.[4] At the same time, large-scale Saint-Simonian projects such as the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal directed and intensified global flows of goods, ideas, and people, reinforcing the perception of 'time-space compression.'[5] In this way, they contributed to the project and process of 'globalization.'[6]

The Mediterranean played a key role in the Saint-Simonian project to transform the world by building new infrastructures. In 1832, the *polytechnicien*, mining engineer and economist Michel Chevalier developed his *système de la Méditerranée* in the journal *Le Globe*: The vision of an integrated Euro-Mediterranean system consisting of canals, railways, steam ships and telegraph lines that would pacify the world. According to Chevalier, the age of war which had devastated Europe in the wake of the French Revolution was over. A new age of "universal association" had begun: "the organization of a system of industrial works that embraces the entire globe." In his view, "industry" had a pacifying effect because it created mutual interdependencies between formerly hostile societies. It was composed of production centres joined together by "a relatively material" and "a relatively spiritual bond," i.e., by transport routes and banks. A tightly interconnected industrial network would enable the "best exploitation of the globe."[7]

The new imperial order of the Mediterranean determined by European powers formed the geopolitical context of Chevalier's intervention: While Britain controlled the sea and France conquered Algeria, Russia supported Orthodox Christian movements for autonomy and secession within the Ottoman Empire. At this point, Muslim rulers in Cairo, Istanbul and Tunis adapted Western ideas and technologies to initiate ambitious projects of imperial self-strengthening. Under the rule of Muhammad Ali, the "industrial pasha," Egypt became a laboratory of infrastructural modernization and social change: Here the expansion of the irrigation canal system with the help of French engineers and forced labour enabled the rise of an export-oriented cotton industry and a capitalist state monopoly economy. Chevalier wanted to use this momentum to turn the Mediterranean into a laboratory of universal association where a joint infrastructure policy would pacify formerly hostile societies.

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4    Pamela M. Pilbeam, *Saint-Simonians in Nineteenth-Century France: From Free Love to Algeria* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

5    David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989).

6    Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

7    Michel Chevalier, *Religion Saint-Simonienne: Politique industrielle et système de la méditerranée* (Paris, 1832), 32–33, 107, 131.

Since the dawn of history, he argued, the region had been a "battlefield" between Orient and Occident. Now it was to become the "wedding bed" of East and West, "a vast forum on all points of which the hitherto divided peoples will commune." A "peaceful policy" of association around the Mediterranean "of peoples who for three thousand years have been clashing" would be the first step towards universal association. The region would become "the center of a political system which will rally all the peoples of the old continent, and would allow them to harmonize their relations between themselves and with the new world."[8]

Chevalier's 'Mediterranean system' was also aimed at transforming a region which he saw as falling into lethargy. To awaken the Mediterranean from its slumber, it was to be linked by faster means of communication to the dynamic northwestern European financial and industrial production centres. Capital and technology would be transferred through these channels creating an industrial mentality within the region, driving cultural change and economic development. A dense network of canals and rivers, railways, steamships, and telegraph lines, jointly funded by banks and governments stood at the heart of his project. According to Chevalier, this integrated network of fluvial, maritime, and terrestrial connections would not only multiply and intensify relations between former enemies, but also enable a "political revolution": the "uniformity" and "instantaneousness" of these faster means of communication would make it easier to "govern" these areas.[9]

Within a few decades Chevalier's vision was largely realized. In 1876, the geographer Élisée Reclus depicted the Mediterranean Sea as a "sea of junction" and "great mediator" of cultural and economic exchange. Since the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) it had become a "highway" of steam navigation between Western Europe, India, and Australia. Within the region, the "regularity" and "speed" of steamships, railroads, and telegraphs had made trade grow in the region and had even promoted visions of its "unification."[10] This was, of course, a harmonizing view that ignored intra-European rivalry and growing asymmetries between Christians and Muslims. While native Muslims were repressed and discriminated in French Algeria, the Muslim regimes in Cairo, Istanbul and Tunis had to pay tribute to their expensive infrastructure policies which had been pursued as projects of westernization: In the 1870s they all went bankrupt and had to submit to an international debt regime. The 'spiritual networks' established by banks were not cut, but the balance of power shifted: Tunisia and Egypt became (official) French and (veiled) British protectorates, while the Ottoman Empire allied itself with the German Empire to undertake infrastructure projects such as the Baghdad and the Hejaz Railway.

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8    Chevalier, *Religion*, 122–124, 126, 131.

9    Chevalier, *Religion*, 133.

10   Élisée Reclus, *Nouvelle géographie universelle: La terre et les hommes*, vol. 1: *L'Europe méridionale (Grèce, Turquie, Roumanie, Serbie, Italie, Espagne et Portugal)* (Paris: Hachette, 1876), 33, 48.

In this sense, the infrastructural revolution of the nineteenth century contributed to a Europeanization of the Muslim Mediterranean: to the partial adaptation of Western models and lifestyles; the opening of markets and land for European products, merchants, and settlers; and the loss of financial and political autonomy. In the interwar period, after the violent dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the Mediterranean seemed to have become a European *mare nostrum*. This immediately fuelled new infrastructural fantasies to merge Europe and Africa into one continent: *Pan(eu)ropa*, *Atlantropa*, *Eurafrica*. In these visions, infrastructures were assigned the task of providing Europe with African *Lebensraum*, energy and raw materials enabling Europe to survive in the alleged global power struggle with America and Asia. As in the 1830s, infrastructural transformation again took its departure from cultural imaginaries and ideas of gender and race. The Mediterranean was understood as both a medium and an object of colonization.[11]

## Transforming Marseille: The Politics of Infrastructure

Infrastructures also transformed Southern Europe. Chevalier's 'Mediterranean system' envisioned ports as nodes of terrestrial, fluvial, and maritime connections. In Marseille, he saw the key to French domination of the Mediterranean. In the 1830s, he promoted an infrastructural modernization and linking of the city. Since the old port was overburdened by the swelling maritime trade and the well- organized corporation of the *portefaix* kept slowing down the flow of goods, a new port with docks and machinery was to be built and connected to other seas and rivers via canals and the regulated Rhône. The construction of a direct railroad to Paris would give France direct access to its colonies Algeria and Corsica, which still had to be wrested from "barbarism," and allow domination of the Mediterranean.[12]

Supported by the grand merchants of Marseille, Chevalier's plan was largely implemented in the 1840s and 50s: The direct steamship connection with Algiers accelerated the transport of information, goods, troops and settlers and closely intertwined the local with the colonial economy: a new port was built at *La Joliette*, docks opened where the *portefaix* were replaced by immigrant workers and machines, and the Paris- Lyon- Méditerranée (PLM) express train service connected the capital with the Mediterranean sea. As Marseille became a major hub for the movement of goods

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11    Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Philipp N. Lehmann, "Infinite Power to Change the World: Hydroelectricity and Engineered Climate Change in the Atlantropa Project," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 1 (2016): 70–100.

12    Michel Chevalier, *Des intérêts matériels en France: Travaux publics. Routes. Canaux. Chemins de fer* (Paris: Gosselin et Coquebert, 1838), 42; Michel Chevalier, "Lettres du Midi," *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, November 9 and December 10, 1838; February 5, 1839.

and people between the Mediterranean, the Indian and Pacific Ocean, and the Chinese Sea, the city moved from the margin of the nation to the centre of the empire: the first national colonial exhibition took place in Marseille in 1906.[13]

A driving force and great profiteer of Marseille's infrastructural transformation was the Saint-Simonian Paulin Talabot, who as founding director of the PLM and the dock company not only controlled the new port and the rail connection to Paris, but also trans-Mediterranean traffic by running and financing steamships, railways, forests, mines, and infrastructural works in Algeria. Talabot's logistics empire personified the integration of terrestrial and maritime transport systems that Chevalier had called for. And as envisaged, this 'Mediterranean system' of connectivity drove the re-globalization of Marseille and thus of France: In the 1850s, Marseilles steamships began crossing the oceans to destinations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Mediterranean connections were followed by global ones, and Marseille became their nodal point.[14]

Yet one problem with this centring was Marseille's simultaneous colonization by Paris. The headquarters of the banks and companies controlling the local infrastructure and movement of capital, people, and goods were located in Paris. In the course of its infrastructural connection, Marseille was degraded to a place of transit and became an object of investment and speculation for Parisian capital: it was transformed from a *subject* to an *object* of colonization.[15] Another problem was the strong population growth, mainly by immigrants, first hired from Italy and Corsica, then from Africa and Asia. As these immigrants competed with natives for jobs and housing, socioeconomic conflicts became increasingly violent and expressed in a language of cultural and racial difference.[16]

In addition, conflicts arose over Marseille's cultural identity. On the one hand the city's new diversity was celebrated at the 2,500th anniversary (1899), the second national colonial exhibition (1922), and the cosmopolitan magazine *Cahiers du Sud*. Gabriel Audisio depicted Marseille as the capital of a "liquid continent" that did not belong to any single nation or race, but rather merged them.[17] On the other hand, external observers such as Joseph Roth and Albert Londres described the

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13    Paul Masson, *Marseille et la colonisation française: Essai d'Histoire coloniale* (Marseille: Barlatier, 1906).

14    Jean Lenoble, *Les frères Talabot: Une grande famille d'entrepreneurs au XIX$^e$ siècle,* (Limoges: Souny, 1989).

15    Marcel Roncayolo, *L'Imaginaire de Marseille: Port, ville, pôle* (Lyon: ENS, 2014).

16    Laurent Dornel, "Cosmopolitisme et xénophobie: Les luttes entre français et italiens dans les ports et docks marseillais, 1870–1914," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 67 (2003): 245–267; Céline Regnard-Drouot, *Marseille la violente: Criminalité, industrialisation et société, 1851–1914* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

17    Gabriel Audisio, *Jeunesse De La Méditerranée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935).

city as a Moloch of globalization or as a part of North Africa.[18] Marcel Pagnol, who was born in nearby Aubagne, portrayed the town's transformation as a threat to its Provençal tradition. In his bestseller theatre play *Marius* (1929), he juxtaposed the cultural traditions of the old port and the modern infrastructures of the new port. While César's bar in the *Vieux Port* seems to be located in a Provençal fishing village untouched by change, the sirens of the steamships of *La Joliette* threaten to separate the wanderlust-stricken Marius from the love of his life Fanny, because he wants to sign on an ocean liner. Pagnol staged modern infrastructure as a threat to happiness and origins.[19]

## Cultural Infrastructures: Corsican Networks

Due to the rise of the local mobsters Paul Bonnaventure Carbone and François Spirito, interwar Marseille gained the reputation of a 'French Chicago.' While Spirito's family was of Italian origin, Carbone was born in the Corsican port town Propriano and had grown up in Marseille's *Le Panier* district at the old port where most Corsicans lived.[20] He had first sailed on steamships to the Middle and Far East and then opened a brothel in Cairo with Spirito. Upon their return to Marseille, they took control of the local and Parisian underworld and used their 'material' and 'spiritual' infrastructures—the port of Marseille and their friends and compatriots aboard ocean liners—to smuggle women (white slave trade), weapons, and opium between the Mediterranean, South America, and East Asia. It was a precursor of the postwar *French Connection*, which would monopolize the US heroin market until the 1970s. The rise of Carbone and Spirito was only possible because of a close alliance with right-wing populist politician Simon Sabiani. Like Carbone, Sabiani was from southwestern Corsica. As deputy mayor of Marseille (1931–35), he acted as a patron to the 60,000 Corsicans living in the city, who formed his loyal electorate and who in return received posts in the administration. Carbone's and Spirito's henchmen were given access to the prefecture, and thus exempt from prosecution.[21] This mix of clientelism and gangsterism made Marseille a European capital of organized

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18    Joseph Roth, "Marseille [1925]," in *Orte. Ausgewählte Texte*, ed. Heinz Czechowski (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990): 199–205; Albert Londres, *Marseille, port du sud* (Paris: Les éditions de France, 1927).

19    Marcel Pagnol, *Marius: Pièce en quatre actes* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2009).

20    Marie-Françoise Attard-Maraninchi, *Le Panier, village corse à Marseille* (Paris: Autrement, 1997).

21    Paul Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration: Simon Sabiani and Politics in Marseille, 1919–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Jacques Follorou and Vincent Nouzille, *Les Parrains Corses* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); Grégory Auda, *Bandits corses: des bandits d'honneur au grand banditisme* (Paris: Éditions Michalon, 2005).

crime. The case illustrates not only another 'dark side' of globalization, but also the virtuoso appropriation of infrastructures by subaltern Mediterranean actors, as well as the resilience and flexibility of supposedly 'backward' cultural structures and practices such as clans and patronage.

The same dialectic can be observed on Corsica itself. The island had been annexed and conquered by France in 1768, but not fully integrated until the Second Empire (1852–70). Napoleon III, who staged himself as the father of the Corsican 'family,' provided Corsican elites with important offices in Paris and drove the infrastructural modernization of the island. As a result, however, Corsica was flooded with industrial foodstuffs from Marseille, so that local agriculture collapsed. Due to strong population growth and failed industrialization, young Corsicans were forced to emigrate. Some signed on with steamship companies, most settled in Marseille, Algeria, and the French overseas colonies, where they took on posts in the army and administration. In a way, they formed a human infrastructure of the empire, which struggled to mobilize people from the mainland.[22] Yet they also imposed their own cultural logic on the empire which ran counter to the French 'civilizing mission' and the Republican imperative to 'assimilate' settler colonies like Algeria. By using the resources of the colonial state to distribute land and labor to compatriots, Corsicans flexibly adapted cultural practices of the island to a new context. Instead of mixing with other French overseas, they preserved their linguistic and cultural identity. They founded newspapers and associations that cultivated Corsican traditions, represented Corsican interests in the colonies, and lobbied for the island's infrastructural connectivity. In 1958, pro-colonial Corsicans used their contacts and connections to prevent the secession of Algeria and overthrow the Fourth Republic.[23] After decolonization, when France tried to develop Corsica in terms of infrastructure,[24] clan chiefs tried to redirect these resources to their clientele on the island. In France's former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa, Corsicans played a central role in *Françafrique* (sometimes called *Corsafrique*) networks. By maintaining good relations with postcolonial African elites, they helped the French state, the Gaullist party, and oil companies such as *Elf Aquitane* to develop cheap energy sources and launder money.[25] Whereas the French state had colonized Corsica, Corsicans colonized the latter's (post-)colonial infrastructures and repurposed them to their own avail.

22    Antoine-Marie Graziani, ed., *Histoire de la Corse des révolutions à nos jours: permanences et évolutions* (Ajaccio: Éditions Alain Piazzola, 2019).

23    Francis Pomponi and Ange Rovere, "1958. La Corse à l'heure des événements d'Algérie," in *Le mémorial des Corses*, vol. 5, *De l'histoire à l'actualité 1945–1980*, ed. Francis Pomponi (Ajaccio, 1982), 42–65.

24    Raymond Lazzarotti, *SOMIVAC et développement économique de la Corse: L'apport d'une société d'équipement a l'essor d'une région* (Bastia: SOMIVAC, 1982).

25    Thomas Borrel et al., eds., *L' Empire qui ne veut pas mourir: Une histoire de la Francafrique* (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

Conversely, their networks served the French state and business as a cultural infrastructure whose informal channels and personal contacts could be activated to achieve subversive political goals or to facilitate illicit business. In this way, canals and clans served as complementary infrastructures in/of the modern and contemporary Mediterranean.