

# 15 THE MEDITERRANEITY OF AQUITAINE: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Defining what is Mediterranean and what is not has been subject to much debate among botanists since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and geographers later on. To the presence of certain plants which sufficed to outline a Mediterranean space for the former, the latter have added criteria of climate, light, geomorphology, relief, altitude, distance to the Mediterranean Sea, etc. to include more recently fauna, man's action and cultural aspects such as language or architectural practices (Fesquet, 1997). The question remains partly unsettled. Our purpose here is not to discuss the validity of acknowledged criteria but to develop some aspects of the cultural dimension of mediterraneity: why should a region try to enforce a Mediterranean image of itself? This paper outlines the extent to which a landscape can be considered to be Mediterranean through an anthropological approach of the Moors of Gascony and Aquitaine (South West France). The study of the shift of emphasis from natural traits to cultural ones from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to present days will evidence the stakes of a discourse on the Mediterraneity of this region whose mediterraneity is not obvious at first sight.

In previous works I have evidenced the relationship between radical modifications of the landscape and reconstruction of identity (Ribereau-Gayon, 2001). Following Cosgrove (1998) I am concerned here, in turn, with the projection of the constructed feeling of belonging to a Mediterranean ensemble unto the landscaping of public spaces and, in particular, that of roundabouts. As newly invested places where identities are staged, roundabouts have recently attracted attention from social sciences (Lieutaghi, Roux, Durand, 2004): small in size but highly visible and consciously planned they offer a remarkable concentrate of intentions and meanings.

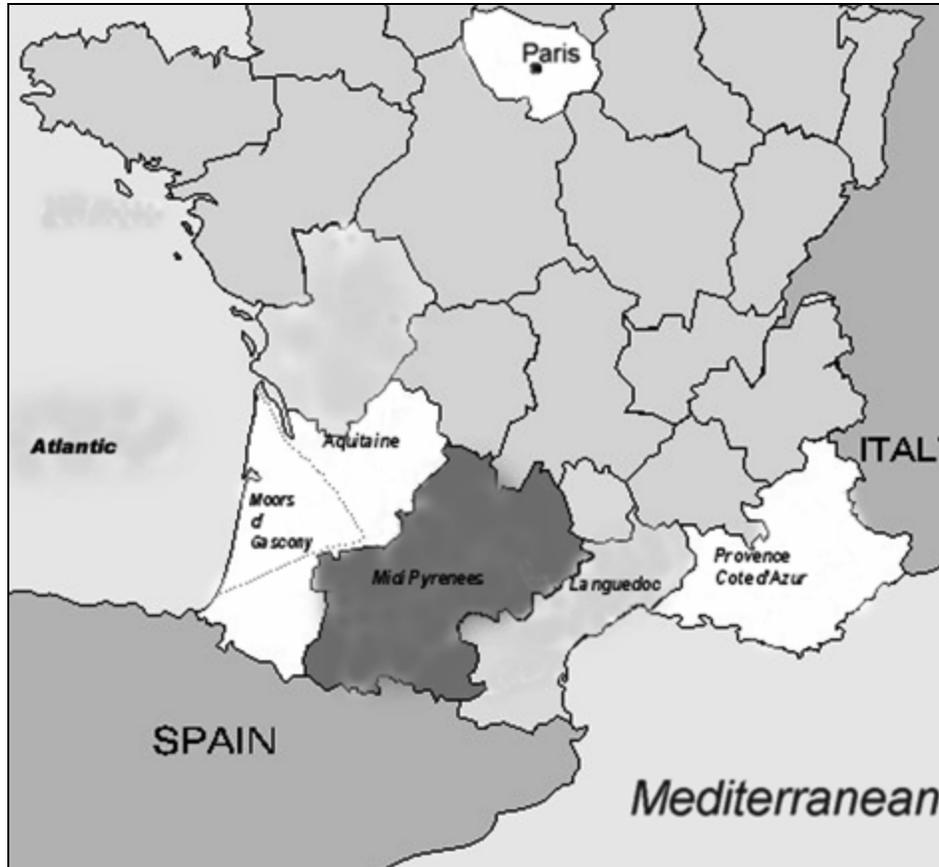
After a general presentation of the context in which the mediterraneity of Aquitaine has been constructed, it will be shown that a cliché Mediterranean model prevailed in the choice of ornamental plants of roundabouts in order to reify some mediterraneity within the landscape until a dramatic event reoriented this social construction of identity towards a certain conjunction of indigenous and exotic Mediterranean elements.

The research method combines ethnological fieldwork, document analysis (press, archives, iconography, oral and written literature, political leaflets, etc.), participant observation and semi-structured interviews with directly concerned actors.

## THE CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION OF AQUITAINE'S MEDITERRANEITY

What is Mediterranean about Aquitaine?

Aquitaine is situated on the Atlantic coast; obviously then it is not on account of a proximity with the Mediterranean Sea than it can be considered Mediterranean (Fig.1). In fact, we owe the first recorded mention of Mediterranean elements in Aquitaine's landscape to early 19<sup>th</sup> century botanists (de Saint-Amans, 1818): about 150 species of plants then and/or nowadays considered Mediterranean *stricto* and *largo sensus*, indigenous or acclimated, have been listed. Among the plants now acknowledged as markers of Mediterranean vegetation (*Quercus ilex*, *Viburnum tinus*, *Smilax aspera*, *Ruscus aculeatus*, etc.), olive tree alone is lacking in Aquitaine (Fesquet, 1997; Koechlin, 1991).



**Figure 1:** Aquitaine has no direct contact with the Mediterranean Sea. It has a border with Spain. The Moors of Gascony form the heart of Aquitaine.

Though this had been known for long, the notion of mediterraneity, coined by geographers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was not applied as such to Aquitaine until the late 1970s when Bordeaux geographers put forward the idea of Aquitaine as an "Atlantic mediterraneity" because of its soil (mainly sand all over the Moors of

Gascony), mild climate, vegetation and avifauna (Papy & Barrere, 1982; Papy, 1994). The notion then received support from ethnologists and linguists for whom the mediterraneity of the region relies on its cultural affinities with Provence and above all Spain – an undisputedly Mediterranean country – of which a Latin-based language and relation to animals (bullfights, hunting and cattle raising practices) are staple markers (Saumade, 1994; Traimond, 1996).

The period when this move was taken is not indifferent: since the 1980s, roughly, the construction of the European Union has motivated a renewed interest for national and regional identities (Fabre, 1996) similar in many respects to the one experienced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the context of imperialist conquests (Ribéreau-Gayon, 2000). Then, if the discussion about the identity of Aquitaine takes place within a general debate, there remains to be understood why it took the form of mediterraneisation.

Another general contextual element to be taken into account is the widespread taste for the south and the Mediterranean fashion. For the French, the region which, alone for the time being, incarnates all the attractions of the south is the French Riviera, the Mediterranean coast of Provence and in a lesser way its hinterland (Fig.1). It has been so since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when artists discovered there "exoticism at home" (Claval, 2004). Provence is endowed with all the traits of the south which are considered positive: sun, warm sea, relaxed way of life, quality food, song of cicadas, profusion of flowers, holidays, etc. No wonder then that it served as a model in the process of mediterraneisation of Aquitaine in so far as vegetation is concerned. The parallel process concerning the cultural dimension mainly refers to Spain or, rather, a hispanity which impregnates most of the French Mediterranean coast, Provence and Aquitaine in particular, thus bringing those spatially discontinuous regions into cultural continuity (Saumade, 1996).

### **The local context: a reaction against intrusion of "foreign" powers**

In the 1980s the debate on the cultural identity of Aquitaine was roused by European Union regulations that restricted hunting rights. Hunting plays a central part in the local representation of man, society and nature. Also, in local political life hunters play a part out of proportion with their number. Let us briefly say that their legitimacy as heralds of identity is neither questioned by environmental activists, nor scientists or institutional actors (Ribéreau-Gayon, 2001). The hunters' reaction was radical because the intrusion from a foreign power into the region reactivated very painful memories. The population manifested its disapproval by widely supporting the political party (CPNT) created in 1989 by Aquitaine hunters to oppose European institutions and defend rural identity (Ribéreau-Gayon, 2006).

We have to give a few guidelines as to the past which was then brutally recalled. Aquitaine, a non-French-speaking region, was ruled by England until the 16<sup>th</sup> century and managed to retain some independence from French governments until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Napoleon III launched a vast program of drainage in order to

transform the 1 million ha of the Moors of Gascony, which form the heart and main part of Aquitaine, into a monospecific forest of *Pinus pinaster*. The drastic transformation the landscape underwent and the deep socio-economic changes it brought about induced fierce opposition and stimulated a painstaking process of reconstruction of an identity which relied heavily on representations of man's relations to the environment (Ribéreau-Gayon, 2001). It also induced fierce resentment and defiance towards external powers and a long lasting nostalgia for pre-19<sup>th</sup> century landscapes that symbolise freedom. All this was reactivated in the 1980s within the framework of the Construction of Europe.

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before the realisation of the forestry project, Aquitaine had, like Provence, been discovered as an exotic territory at home but there ends the similarity: their respective exotic images were completely antagonistic. The perception of vegetation played a major part in the opposition. When Provence was celebrated for its luxurious vegetation, the Moors of Gascony were rejected for their monotonous dry vegetation and their vast flatness. The numerous treacherous unhealthy marshes and the sand (which form the major part of their soil) impeded transports, the low population density and the stifling summer heat rebuked visitors. Outsiders used the word "desert" to describe the Moors as early as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Under the influence of France's colonial experience in Africa they soon became known as "French Sahara" or "French Libya". So powerful was the image that farming camels and peanuts was experimented.<sup>1</sup> Napoleon's program explicitly treated the region as an internal colony to which classical colonial management patterns were applied, including total disregard of local population.

Consequently, while Provence had a positive mild Mediterranean image, the Moors shared a negative arid south Mediterranean image with the hinterland of North Africa.

The image of Aquitaine was not homogenous, though: the area around Bordeaux was already famous for its vineyards and the Pyrenees attracted romantic visitors. Because of the "desert" in the middle, the south of Aquitaine had more contact with Spain than with Bordeaux and the rest of France.

### **20<sup>th</sup> century mediterraneisation process**

The 1980s redefinition of identities was confronted with a delicate problem: given that the European Union had by then become an inescapable reality how could Aquitaine reassert its cultural and historical distance from Paris and Brussels while relinquishing its established marginality which was bound to hinder its development?

Let us say, to be short, that, without any concerted plan, the discourses and practices of various groups have been converging towards one and same "solution": integrating Aquitaine within a more obviously Mediterranean ensemble. The construction is still under way, but two major forms are already apparent: on the one hand, a transformation of the negative mediterraneity into a positive one by setting up patches of luxurious

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<sup>1</sup> This failed because winters can be damp and cold. Those experiments resulted from sheer ignorance of the climatic reality.

Mediterranean vegetation at the most conspicuous public places and in accordance with a *cliché* Provence model; on the other hand, a development of research in most social sciences in order to evidence the cultural continuity with Spain which offered a spatially close Mediterranean model.

Since the former form will be developed below in the paper, in order to illustrate the latter one I will just briefly mention a variety of situations where research is interpreted and appropriated by some interest groups and the relation to Spain substantiated by the importation of practices. Defenders of Occitanian and Basque languages linked up with traditionally more active defence groups from the south of France and north of Spain. Defenders of bullfighting followed the same aggregative movement thanks to a disputable amalgam between the Spanish tradition of bullfights and the Moor tradition of cow races. Conservationists engaged in the conservation of rare "native" breeds created the concept of "Iberian population" to qualify Aquitaine local breeds, deliberately ignoring the actual interbreeding with northern breeds. Hunters synthesised the whole to support their self-appointment as loud speakers for local culture, traditions and identity that they consider threatened by the European Union. Town twinnings now favour Spanish towns more than British ones; *bandas* (musical groups) are now inescapable in any "traditional" celebration; bars offering *tapas* and outdoor terraces decorated with Mediterranean potted plants have soared.

In the course of the process, sub-regional differences were smoothed away thus producing a more homogenous image that Aquitaine needs to assert itself with some efficiency (Ribéreau-Gayon, 2000).

### **LANDSCAPING IDENTITIES**

Among the public places where the first form of mediterraneisation of local identity is evidenced I now wish to focus on roundabouts. They have become significant public places since the 1990s when their number has immensely increased in rural and urban areas and a new landscaping style has been developed. Unlike most of the signs of mediterraneisation mentioned above they are highly visible (all the more so as French roundabouts tend to be huge): they are seen by thousands of people everyday and thus widely contribute to the diffusion and appropriation by large sections of the population of a positive Mediterranean image of Aquitaine.



**Figure 2:** Oyster shells, oyster-farmer's hut and boat: those emblematic elements of Arcachon Bay set on a roundabout mark for the visitor the passage from *Pinus pinaster* forest to the coast line (photo MDRG).

All over the country roundabouts are now widely used as epitome of local identity in order to promote an attractive image of the place. This is achieved by setting up symbols of a local product or characteristic and picturesque elements (Fig.2). Artwork is also quite common in France but even rarer in Aquitaine than the other types: instead, a vast majority of roundabouts present a mini-Mediterranean landscape (Figs. 3, 4 and 5).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There exist technical rules for the construction of roundabouts but none for aesthetic aspects. Decision level varies from town level to department level. There is no concerted action at region level so that the choices made in Aquitaine result from a general representation.



**Figure 3:** One of the typical Mediterranean associations found on roundabouts: cypress, lavender, rosemary, *juniperus* (photo MDRG).

### **A cliché and opportunistic image of Mediterranean vegetation**

We will review here rapidly the main characteristics of roundabouts landscapes. The first thing worth noting is that the number of varieties used is restricted to a few plants considered as emblematic of Mediterranean landscapes and which, luckily, agree to grow in Aquitaine: rosemary, cypresses, lavender, palm trees, *juniperus*, genista, *Pinus pinea*.<sup>3</sup>

The major model is the French Riviera and, in a lesser way, its hinterland. But the plants are mixed without any desire to represent one type of Mediterranean landscape or the other: no distinction is made between sea side vegetation and hinterland vegetation, for example. Representing the ecological diversity of Provence is clearly not the objective. What is actually presented is a synthetic and *cliché* postcard of the Mediterranean landscape in which the man in the street can recognise familiar elements. To the notable exception of mimosa and laurel, of which we will say more later on, the same varieties form the basic stock of plants used on roundabouts by cities along the Mediterranean coast to express their own identity. The distribution of those summary Mediterranean landscapes from Bordeaux to Nice contributes to the construction of, so to speak, a dotted line linking Aquitaine with Provence.

<sup>3</sup> Some find it difficult to adapt, though: lavender, for example, grows well once planted but doesn't reproduce spontaneously.



**Figure 4:** Palm trees have been aggregated to Provence Mediterranean model thanks to their long time of acclimatisation there. They are very common on roundabouts; this one is situated in a suburban *Pinus pinaster* wood (photo MDRG).

It must be noted that palm trees are not more indigenous to the French Riviera than they are to Aquitaine. But they have been acclimatised to Provence for such a long time that they now are central in the *cliché* image. Other plants are undergoing the process at the moment: sickly banana trees and shy olive trees have made an appearance in Aquitaine. This brings about three remarks. The first one is that time "naturalises" exotic species, all in all. The second remark is that the species used in Aquitaine are often different

from those used on the Riviera because the winter can be cold. So what is taken into account to substantiate the Mediterranean image are not species but genders or even families. We can thus say that it is a generic mediterraneity, a Mediterranean character and general atmosphere that are staged in Aquitaine. The third remark is that a large majority of the plants that are now considered by the average Frenchman as Mediterranean have travelled from North Africa and Latin America *via* the French Riviera where they automatically acquired a positive quality. So, one can say that the Riviera operates as an interpretative filter of mediterraneity for the rest of the country. In that respect, a landscape is considered to be Mediterranean when plants that grow on the Riviera are conspicuous in it, conspicuous either by their number (a large bed of lavender for example) or by their size (palm trees for example).

The introduction of olive trees on roundabouts at the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks a renewed effort to further comply with standard representations of mediterraneity but the lateness of this new move reveals that the incentive was not so much the wish to abide by scientific criteria (since the presence of olive trees was the original criteria used by scientists to delineate a Mediterranean area) as the desire to jump onto the bandwagon of health food since the growing vogue of what is commonly termed "Mediterranean diet" has established olive oil as an important asset for health. Beyond the fashion effect this is locally understood as a meaningful sign that the region, downcried for its unhealthy environment until the achievement of the drainage program, has completed its mutation into a positive south, attractive to its inhabitants as well as tourists. There remains to be seen if, as we have reasons to suspect, some future move in the setting up of roundabouts will manage to combine the image of the aesthetic Mediterranean diet with South West renowned but not so dietetic gastronomy.

### **The absence of indigenous Mediterranean plants: a meaningful paradox**

Until about 2002 the pattern described so far was so totally prevailing that it was detrimental to indigenous Mediterranean plants, even those that were perfect for aesthetic arrangements and adapted to the conditions of life on roundabouts like tamarisk or arbutus. One may wonder why a stereotyped Mediterranean model has been followed when another one was available and more adequate to express local identity. The ready answer is that landscapers all have the same education and follow fashions. This is certainly not indifferent. However, it would neither account for the neglect of two plants in fashion and typical of the Riviera *cliché* (mimosas and laurels) nor the sudden change that took place around 2002.

In fact, the absence of laurels and mimosas is most intriguing and urges further analysis. Technical explanations can be discarded straight away: according to a landscape planner, *Acacia dealbata* is over invasive for roundabouts cultivation, but *Acacia retinodes* could easily be substituted (like on the Mediterranean coast). Besides, both species as well as laurels thrive in private gardens and are anyway far more adapted

than banana trees. Why then should they be neglected in public places when they are widely enjoyed in private ones?

The paradox resolves in the cultural dimension: mimosas and laurels were imported to Aquitaine from French North African colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century along with the model of development applied to Aquitaine at the same epoch. They were originally introduced in the gardens of the Algerian villa and the Moorish Casino built on Arcachon Bay in the 1880s. The names of those two buildings, and the plants they introduced, are unpleasant reminders of the negative representation of the region that prevailed at the time. In the same way as camels or peanuts they were meant to consubstantiate the "desert". Consequently, it is only when it comes to staging a positive local identity on roundabouts that laurels and mimosas are disruptive, however pretty and easy to grow they may be.

### **Recent evolution: towards reconciliation with the past and today's environment?**

About 2002 indigenous Mediterranean plants made a sudden and massive appearance on roundabouts: *Quercus ilex*, *Quercus suber*, *Pinus pinea*, tamarisk and even *arbutus* in 2004. (Fig.5). At the same period mini vineyards associated with rose bushes appeared on roundabouts in Gironde and Lot et Garonne; they are now quite common.<sup>4</sup>

Vine and rose bushes used to be systematically associated in vineyards for technical reasons rather than aesthetic ones: roses being more sensitive than vine to mildew the appearance of the disease on the bushes warned wine growers to treat their vines preventively. When the habit of systematic chemical treatments became general, rose bushes were uprooted to make room for more vines. But, in the 1980s, roses were planted again in wine *chateaux* which produce Grand Cru wines and receive tourists: they symbolise the (supposed) respect of traditional know how and quality.<sup>5</sup> Previous to their introduction on roundabouts, vines and roses were also used at Bordeaux airport, out of place then, as regional identity markers.

*Pinus pinea* also had a specific place in old times' landscape: in Moors of Gascony, *Pinus pinaster* forests and Gironde vineyards it traditionally marked the limits of land estates and communal territories. Since the extension of *Pinus pinaster* industrial forest in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they also mark the entrance of wealthy houses built by foresters (Ribéreau-Gayon, 2001).

*Quercus ilex* and *suber* recall the original forest biodiversity which was considerably reduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a biodiversity now advocated even by some foresters after the disaster of the Christmas 1999 hurricane which devastated 200000 ha of *Pinus pinaster*.

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<sup>4</sup> Gironde and Lot et Garonne are two of the five departments constitutive of Aquitaine. Gironde is the only one to produce Grand Cru wines.

<sup>5</sup> They are now developing in lesser-quality vineyards.

Parallel to this, roundabouts presenting artificial sand dunes with gramineae and *Pinus pinea* as an evocation of *Pinus pinaster* (too tall and fragile to wind gusts when isolated, it is not adequate for roundabouts) have also multiplied.

The various forms of diversification all evidence a new intention to stage an identity more in keeping (though just as constructed as the previous one) with ancient landscapes, plants and practices, as well as present day landscapes. As a man in charge of roundabout design and advocate of the change said: "We are in the South West and it's a pity to disfigure our reality. (...) There are many indigenous plants that we often forget about because we have lost our origins. (...) People want *juniperus*, Provence cypresses, I am not against it but we shouldn't forget that we are from the South West".



**Figure 5:** Following the 1999 hurricane and the renewed identity reflection which ensued, a pine tree was added to the former association of lavender, rosemary, cypress, *juniperus* and *cistus*. The props for pine trees are usually more sizeable than on this roundabout. In other places, *Quercus ilex* and *arbutus* have been introduced (photo MDRG).

The hurricane has been the determining factor in this radical change: the ugly damage and the upset landscape once again provoked an identity reaction which took a remarkably limited number of years to find expression in roundabouts and roadside landscaping. Concretely, the hurricane trauma is manifested by the unusually elaborate props around newly planted *Pinus pinea* (Fig.5).

More recently still, some of the largest and most sophisticated roundabouts combine a Mediterranean styled landscape (including some indigenous Mediterranean plants) with vineyard and rose bushes. This impressionistic superposition of identitarian layers evidences the existence of two parallel movements of conjunction: a conjunction between the Riviera Mediterranean model and a more local one, and a conjunction between northern and southern Aquitaine sub-identities (Fig.6). In fact, beyond a

reference to renowned local products, vineyards on identity-oriented roundabouts serve a broader purpose: they consubstantiate the idea that Aquitaine, as a leading wine producing region, legitimately belongs to north Mediterranean wine culture.

Consequently, if so much attention is dedicated to vegetation in the process of reconstruction of self-esteem through a positive mediterraneity it is because the disparaging representation outsiders had of local environment was what had motivated its drastic transformation in the first place. Relationship to environment is also what is felt to be threatened again by the European Commission. The hurricane that somehow symbolised the frailty of present day environment spurred an affectionate move towards pine trees. Compelling with a strict Mediterranean *cliché* thus appears to have been the necessary transitory stage between, on the one hand, a negative Mediterranean image that went along with marginality within the French nation and, on the other hand, a specificity which seems all the more easily assumed as it is shared by a broad Mediterranean community.



**Figure 6:** Recent trends. This roundabout, completed in 2003, elaborately stages the conjunction of both identity models: on the left, a large bed of lavender with *Pinus pinea* at the back and, conversely, on the right, rows of vines and rose bushes set against a line of cypresses.

## CONCLUSION: THE CULTURAL BENEFITS OF MEDITERRANEISATION

The evolution in roundabout landscaping shows that the (temporary, maybe) identification with a *cliché* Mediterranean is an elaborate social construction serving several goals. Firstly, the genuine but limited Mediterranean character of Aquitaine was originally negatively connoted, but *via* its identification with the Riviera the region gave itself a positive Mediterranean image - not only for tourists but also for natives. It is supposed to contribute to the healing of wounds caused by past contempt.

Secondly, the contrast between the poor moor "desert" and the rich wine land is symbolically reduced. Roundabouts staging identity now sprinkle the territory thus offering frequent reminders of a homogenous internal identity. Or, rather, they argue in

favour of the construction of such a homogeneity more than they express an existing one.

Lastly, the process of construction and the models in reference also testify to a wish to inscribe the region within the Mediterranean arc. Being included within this cultural niche allows Aquitaine to relinquish its relative marginality while benefiting from the support of a potentially powerful ensemble to reassert its cultural distance from (and defiance towards) French and European institutions. All this has less to do with the preservation of genuine indigenous Mediterranean features than with the rejection of cultures and state powers whose interventions are continuously felt as threatening to the local representation of man's relation to the environment.

Consequently, the mediterraneity of Aquitaine is constructed in two manners: first, positively and concretely by consubstantiation of acknowledged Mediterranean models; secondly, negatively and symbolically by distancing from the obviously non-Mediterranean counter models that Paris and Brussels embody. In that respect, the Mediterranean space thus constructed is not a spatial territory endowed with indisputable tangible and stable characteristics but rather a counter-territory aggregated from concrete data and reinterpretations in order to ward off the risk of dilution of sub-national identities within a new political entity (Depaule, 2000).

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