

Nordicum-Mediterraneum, the scholarly journal where this article is published, has an interesting and almost paradoxical name. It explores the ties between the Arctic and Mediterranean regions. When thinking about these two areas, it is almost guaranteed to have blended glimpses of cold, white and snowy landscapes immersed in dark skies full of dancing northern lights with warm and sunny afternoons by the seashore while enjoying the view of an historic town. However, the concept of mixing these two somewhat opposite geographical sites is not a pioneering idea coming from the creators of this journal.

Without any hostile intention towards the editors, this article presents another academic who dedicated his life attempting to shift inaccurate and misconceived ideas about the Arctic by “fostering the awareness and the understanding concerning the common origins, ... intertwining and shared elements” [1] between the Arctic and the Mediterranean.

At first sight it seems almost illogical, or at least contrived, to find meaningful similarities between the Arctic region and any other southern regions of the globe, especially the Mediterranean basin. How can a frozen and inhospitable territory be connected with such a historical region, which is considered the cradle of European and Western civilization? What could be the possible relations between a peripheral zone of the globe, distant from the largest and most influential urban centers, with a central socio-economic and political hub?

This paper intends to introduce a different imaginary about the Arctic and its potential, an imaginary capable of facilitating the comprehension of the Arctic and its multiple players, especially as regards the Southern and Western populations with scarce information and outdated ideas about the North.

The concept of the Polar Mediterranean Imaginary (hereafter PMI) is the chosen one, mostly because it utilizes creatively and insightfully the famous Mediterranean region, which is well-known for its history, culture, economy, and long-lived political reality, but also to establish intriguing relations and parallelisms with the Arctic's present and future. In fact, this paradigm, proposed almost a century ago, is not particularly well-known by today's societies, nor is it well-established in academia. However it offers an accurate and rather positive approach regarding the potentialities of the Arctic under a great variety of perspectives.

Arctic Social Imaginaries

The concept of “imaginary” has been gaining more and more influence in research and studies belonging to many different branches within the social sciences [2]. Social imaginaries rely upon individual imagination and require intersubjective interactions, all within a specific socio-environmental context, i.e., an historical people and their actual environment. Hence, social imaginaries are built to help in the organization of communities in a never-ending meaning-giving process [3].

Collective imaginaries are never completely irreplaceable nor universal, since they are the result of dynamic relations and can be rearranged in time. As a matter of fact, the 20th - century philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (hereafter CC) offers a very interesting insight regarding the “Social Imaginaries” [4].

Metaphorically, and quite aptly in the Icelandic context, CC compares the incessant flow of images, thoughts, ideas, and conflicts thereof, that any given socio-cultural imaginary exhibits in history with “successive formations of volcanic lava that almost never entirely solidify”, for each imaginary may seem to “preserve itself”, but in fact “it never ceases to alter itself.” [5] [6] .

The relationship between human imagination and the imaginary is the present article’s starting point to understand how the Arctic has been variously conceived of, i.e., imagined or comprehended, especially by Western and Westernized societies throughout the centuries, i.e., as a remote and distant territory with very reduced contact with the southern regions.

For most of its history, information in the West about the Arctic was scanty, especially when compared with other parts of the globe. The remoteness of the location, its harsh weather and geographical setup made the North a hard place to reach. On top of that, the information available was chiefly from reports by ancient sailors and old manuscripts [7]. Those sources helped to identify the existence of a northern region, by providing some clues of what the Arctic could be – the West’s (Arctic) social imaginaries.

Arctic Social Imaginaries are a set of ideas which were a product of collective efforts, not just individual ones. These ideas, consequently, may spread and, above all, are *created* through communication networks [8]. Thus, the Arctic itself has often been seen as a frozen wasteland and as being utterly inhospitable, according to the meanings produced and projected by southern and, culturally speaking [9], Western/ized societies [10].

For much of Western recorded history, governments and educated communities never looked to the Far North as an obvious opportunity to prosper. In other words, their specific and decisive imaginaries were interiorized, and fictions were embedded, turned into rules or “truths” that took the Arctic as a region of the world without significant potential, and despite the fact that certain human communities had actually managed to survive there for numerous generations [11].

Yet, the contemporary Arctic reality is marked by enormous socio-economic potentialities, just like the Arctic’s own history and legacy, i.e., the imaginaries developed by its native communities. As we will explain, the West’s interest in the northernmost region of the planet has shifted quite abruptly, especially during the last two centuries. Thus, in keeping with CC’s own metaphor, new layers of lava have been erupting and modifying the composition of old imaginaries, engendering eventually new ones.

Unveiling of the *Arktos* from a Mediterranean Perspective

The Arctic is a region characterized by unique features, such as its geographical remoteness from the world’s centers of global socio-cultural power, harsh weather conditions, richness in natural resources, and extraordinary biodiversity.

Composed politically today of 8 recognized States, the northmost territory of the globe can also be named “the Circumpolar North”, since the region includes, in the shared imaginary of contemporary experts and key local actors, the Arctic and Subarctic zones [12]. In truth, the Arctic itself does not have clear borders, because any such geographical determination results from the combination of geophysical, political, and social factors and conceptions [13]. All these culturally mediated forces have contributed to the construction of cultural

ideas that define the historical Arctic imaginaries and determine the global understanding of the region as a region.

As a result, the Arctic can be seen from many different perspectives. On the one hand, the northernmost region of the globe is the home of different Indigenous Peoples [14]. Indigenous populations have established themselves in it many millennia ago, each group possessing their own perspectives and cosmologies regarding their living place [15] [16]. On the other hand, due to its remoteness and distant location from other civilizations and socio-economic hotspots, the Arctic has been an almost unreachable/impenetrable place that led many southerner cultures to “forget” altogether about its existence and focus on their proximities instead [17].

To begin with, as regards the prevalent imaginary in Western culture, we should observe that the etymology of the name “Arctic” derives from the Greek word *arktos*, which means “bear”, because the *Ursa Major* (“the Great Bear”) is the constellation that applies to the polar region in the northern hemisphere, at least according to classical Graeco-Roman astronomy. It was during the apogee of the Greek Era that the Circumpolar North started to be imagined by important scholars and philosophers, who characterized the northernmost territories as inaccessible and remote places connoted with a mythical and mystical background [18].

Centered in the Mediterranean region, Classic Antiquity played an important role in determining the Western conception of the Arctic as an essentially unknown zone located at the outer limits of the human world. Reportedly, the first known contact with the Circumpolar territories was achieved by the Greek merchant and explorer, Pytheas of Massilia, who went sailing over the north Atlantic. His odyssey culminated with the discovery of the Island of Thule, “the most septentrional of the Islands of Brittany.” [19] Pytheas’ new description of the northern region had a large impact on his contemporary intellectuals (mainly cosmographers), who contributed to shape a more detailed Arctic imaginary.

At the apogee of the Roman Empire, especially through the migratory fluxes to and from the ‘barbaric’ regions of the North, a few more mysteries were uncovered. More populations were made contact with, and an increase in the knowledge about the septentrional areas of

Europe was facilitated [20]. Nevertheless, the conception of the Arctic as an essentially unknown zone located at the outer limits of the human world persisted, to a great extent.

For many centuries, the West's prevalent Arctic imaginary inherited from Greek and Roman times remained stable, up to the Renaissance, i.e., the so-called "Age of Discovery", when long sailing explorations took place. Navigators such as Columbus, Vasco da Gama and Magellan opened the trend of maritime routes to new continents ready to be explored and, more often than not, plundered. The economic drive, combined with the renewed interest in the knowledge accumulated by Classic Antiquity about these regions of the world, and the legacies from older scholars and intellectuals, led to considerable improvements in the cartography of these regions. Thus, a more exact geographical grasp about the Arctic was built and, eventually, about the local inhabitants as well [21]. The Western imaginary of the Arctic started to change, as a result.

After the 16th century, on the basis of the European trends in navigating the oceans and, from Europe's point of view, in exploring entirely new regions of the globe, the one surrounding the North Pole got on the spotlight too. Explorers started trying to sail and study those seas, in order to understand what economic and scientific potentials and other opportunities there could be in the Arctic. For instance, the possibility of a transpolar route that could connect the North Atlantic to China gained considerable traction. This theory, despite being very ambitious, was eventually proved to be beyond reach, due to the very harsh weather conditions and the many geophysical obstacles encountered, above all, by Mercator. Likewise, other navigators could not successfully prove the existence of a north-west passage to the Pacific Ocean [22].

The last steps of Arctic exploration were marked by the discovery of the Spitzbergen archipelago by Wilhelm Barents, while navigating over the northern seas. The inclusion of newfoundland territories had a tremendous impact in Westerners' understanding of the septentrional regions. After the 19th century, reaching the North Pole became the main goal for the leading European Powers. Important expeditions were made in order to reach it and unveil the most 'mysterious' parts of the Arctic region. Many explorers (Captain Perry, Fridtjof Nansen, to mention few) attempted this feat, without success, but their contributions helped to modify the perceptions of the North and how it was imagined. It was only in 1909, when Robert Peary reached the pole by dog-sledge, that this long-sought goal

was fulfilled.

All such endeavors contributed to a parallel evolution of thought in the 19th and 20th century, such that the focus moved onto crossing and exploring the Arctic *qua* valuable and possibly profitable destination *in se*, rather than as an instrumental route capable of facilitating the access from the Atlantic regions to the Orient [23].

Vilhjalmur Stefansson - The Mission and Roots of a New Imaginary

The Icelandic-Canadian-American explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson (hereafter VS) introduced the concept of “Polar Mediterranean” in 1920, whereby he highlighted how the Arctic Ocean was a relatively navigable central space that united diverse coastal peoples in commerce and productive interaction. In other words, his perspective was a friendly one, based on a historically successful case of international human transactions at many levels, thanks primarily to a shared navigable sea. VS’ perspective stood in opposition to the ones that had been embraced by previous Arctic explorers, who had seen the region as merely hazardous for human survival, and certainly most dangerous from the point of view of navigation [24].

To understand the relevance of PMI, it is necessary to consider VS’ ideas and the way he perceived the North, along with its key players. His mission and focus were to clarify ideas and reeducate the southern communities (European and American) about the Arctic. VS was more than an anthropologist. He was a man on a mission. As a matter of fact, the scholarly literature about him often states that his work as an adventurer overshadows his anthropological career and personal life [25].

VS’ explorations were essential to establish a seminal yet stable contact with some isolated Arctic communities, and to discover new places that were unknown by the Western nations. Additionally, detailed descriptions and reflections exposing wrong Arctic ideals such as “The eternal polar silence” [26] and “The Polar Ocean is without life” [27] helped his readers to better understand the Arctic’s biodiversity, climate, and many other aspects that were not very clear until then to both specialists and non-specialists.

The preoccupation of introducing to Western nations new conceptions of the Circumpolar region was a fundamental step for a more accurate understanding of it. A transformation of old imaginaries was central for VS in both his field research and writings. VS even jokingly suggested the creation of a “National University of Polite Unlearning”, a concept created by one of VS’s teachers (Samuel Crothers) at Harvard University [28]. It was meant as a place where people could go to clear up the wrong ideas acquired in school, at the university, or through the mass media. Despite the sarcastic tone of this concept, its critical focus was very precise. VS himself wanted to help the dissemination of a new Arctic imaginary. He intended it to be his legacy.

Therefore, it was no surprise that throughout his career, VS gave numerous lectures and conferences throughout the US, Canada and Europe. These talks were a good opportunity to share his discoveries and experiences to audiences that had only a rather primitive idea about the Arctic. Even after his campaigns, VS describes his mission as one of shifting mentalities: “I wanted to remain south to continue my campaign of education with regard the Arctic sections of geography textbooks, and in general to influence school and university teaching” [29].

VS published numerous notes that reveal some rather interesting and curious reflections about many Arctic exploration topics. These transcripts offered, among other things, a first-person report about the diet in the North, the advantages of snow when compared with rain, and the importance of sled dogs in the northern communities [30].

As a matter of fact, throughout his books and diaries, and whilst always keeping a visionary and pedagogical mindset. VS approaches issues that are elemental for life in the North and, parallelly, are not trivial for most of the southerners either – as he wondered: “is the Arctic region barren and its nature hostile to life or is it hostile merely to life of a southern type and to men who live like southerners” [31]?

PMI

As mentioned above, VS emphasizes the necessity of introducing new data essential to

create a solid structure of knowledge regarding a largely unknown territory. The remodulation of ancient socio-cultural imaginaries assumes for him a central role that can be achieved if and only if there is new data and a capacity for transmitting a message effectively. However, this a lengthy and complex process of demystification of well-established ideas: “If the average American or European university graduate has 10 ideas about the North, 9 of them are wrong. So far as the victims of American education are concerned, I know from experience. As to the Europeans, I judge them by their books and conversation” [32] [33] .

It was with this aim of fighting back the general ignorance about the Arctic and outdated social imaginaries that VS devised the concept of “Polar Mediterranean”. By presenting the Circumpolar North, not as a remote and inaccessible place, but rather as a friendly center connecting different cultures, territories, and resources, capable of making human flourishing a concrete possibility in this region [34] — “[VS] visualized the Arctic Sea as one great Mediterranean, not only in the sense that is a rather small ocean surrounded by populated lands, but also in the sense that it could be useful to the world as quick and relatively easy transportation route between import cities” [35] .

VS adopts a positive posture regarding the upcoming events by comparing the discovery of circumnavigation of the globe with the new understanding of the Arctic that he promoted: “When the world was once known to be round, there was no difficulty in finding many navigators to sail around it. When the polar regions are once understood to be friendly and fruitful, men will quickly and easily penetrate their deepest recesses” [36].

Contemporary academics have been taking this imaginary very seriously in order to understand the Arctic and its potential development in the upcoming decades. Indeed, in his works, VS writes of the advent of his day’s new transportation technologies (airplanes, submarines, ships and zeppelins) [37] that would facilitate the movement of people and goods, integrate diverse communities, enhance navigation across the ocean, and allow the region to emerge as a new epicenter of civilization [38] .

In particular, VS focusses on those means of transportation that can act as facilitators in the achievement of an Arctic Mediterranean, even if official governments and Western society had not realized that such a process could be occurring: “Although realizing the

applicability of both aircrafts and submarines to commerce and warfare in our own latitudes, we have not adequately realized their significance in solving after four hundred years the problem of the northwest passage and giving us at last a short route from Europe to Far East” [39].

Moreover, his emphasis on the different economic activities that are possible to develop in the Arctic region suggests that the Far North is bound to become an indispensable economic, infrastructural, and socio-cultural center for the South too [40]. Hence, based on all the above-mentioned aspects, one of the core references about PMI was so written by VS: “A glance at a map of the northern hemisphere shows that in the Arctic Ocean is in effect a huge Mediterranean. It lies between its surrounding between Europe and Africa. It has in the past been looked as an impassible Mediterranean. In the near future it will not only become passable but will become a favorite route, at least at certain times of the year, safer, more comfortable, and much shorter than any route that lies over the oceans that separate the present-day centers of population” [41].

VS intended with his paradigm to send a clear message: transpolar corridors assume a front role in the development and accessibility to the North (as mentioned/cited above); furthermore, the Arctic is not a wasteland, a resourceless region without capacity to prosper.

VS’ concern with offering a more accurate vision about the Circumpolar geography and culture ends up with his prophetic visions about the future potentialities of the Arctic Sea: “Whoever has any grasp at all of the great natural resources of the polar regions and of the conditions under which they are about to be developed, will have fascinating dreams about any number of other transpolar routes destined to come into common use whenever air travel itself becomes a commonplace in the more dangerous but already speculatively accepted routes between Liverpool and New York, San Francisco and Hawaii and Japan” [42].

Hence, economic activities and the available resources of the North were diligently highlighted by VS. His appeal for economic investment all around the far North is economically justified by the geostrategic location of the Arctic Ocean, insofar as it connects three different continents and two oceans.

However, to be ethically, legally and politically justified, global connections and profit-maximization by exploitation of the Arctic resources must also be able to secure the local populations' first needs, such as food and health-care services, as well as many secondary ones, lest they meet opposition and resistance [43]. Remarkably, VS developed arguments on this subject in an almost prescient chapter devoted entirely to "Arctic Industries" and focusing on the economic future of the region. He declares that economic development largely depends on the solid development of local infrastructures: "Local food production is fundamental in every permanently occupied land. It furnishes a basis for a stable population, it makes easy the development of industries which, although based in minerals, cannot well flourish when all the food needed has to be brought from a great distance" [44].

In spite of being mere predictions (some of them rough, of course), he opened the window to a new Arctic region capable of being connected with the southern and global hubs. In other words, PMI can still bring a fresh perspective towards the general understanding of the Arctic, and the interactions among its human and institutional players. In particular, as VS depicts this reality in 1922: "the polar sea is like a hub from which continents radiate like the spokes of a wheel" [45].

An Eventful Century

Since PMI's first reference in 1920, a little more than a century has passed. During this period, the way to understand the Arctic and its social imaginaries have changed drastically. In fact, the first 100 years since PMI's initial proposal were marked by many historic events that helped to shape international relations in the Arctic region and, haphazardly, push it in the direction envisioned by VS.

Two global wars, World War II (WW2) and the Cold War, were conflicts mirroring opposite political ideologies, using the world as a battlefield. The control of larger strategic territories became fundamental for the security of the different States. The Arctic was no an exception, and several States realized the geostrategic importance of the northernmost regions for their security and access to other parts of the globe [46].

‘Thanks’ to WW2 and the Cold War, the Arctic became a vital place for Arctic States such as the United States, the USSR and Canada, which aspired to influencing, if not controlling, all intercontinental movements of goods and peoples in the region.

Simultaneously, the North experienced exponential scientific, technological, and infrastructural advancements as a direct outcome of these global conflicts, which also improved accessibility and services around the region [47]. The warlike atmosphere also gave space to the natural sciences across different areas (e.g., oceanography, geology, and geography) to generate new knowledge and new perspectives about the Arctic. Inevitably, with the development of better aerial and aquatic transportation vehicles, and with the building of modern infrastructure aimed at facilitating the further exploration of the northernmost regions, the Arctic became a military and geostrategic site [48].

The 20th century clearly put the Arctic region on the map. Like VS suggested, science and technology contributed to a better knowledge and, eventually, increased cooperation in the region, making the PMI a more viable option [49]. A new paradigm of the Arctic was clearly brewing. Finally, among the outputs of scientific knowledge and strategic concerns stood out the Arctic States’ investments into infrastructures (e.g., airports, roads, buildings, harbors) that became valid promoters of regional development [50].

Despite not being characterized by VS’ friendly approach, these wars and confrontations also highlighted how the Arctic had passed from a mere transition point to a geostrategic center [51].

The end of the Cold War era brought increased peace and stability to the Arctic region, and helped to develop a new cooperative and diplomatic reality [52]. The world changed, and social imaginaries were once again reshaped – the North became closer to be seen as the proposed PMI. In other words, more globalized, connected, and accessible in terms of information/knowledge, goods and (inter)national cooperation.

Since then, initiatives focusing on Polar matters and respective strategies of cooperation have taken different shapes, but are nevertheless legion.

For example, we can list: the foundation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in

1991 (Rovaniemi Declaration) and the Arctic Council in 1996 (Ottawa Declaration), involving simple intergovernmental agreements; the Northern Forum of 1991, giving voice to subnational subjects and their respective interests, usually different from their national governments; the Inuit Circumpolar Conference of 1977 and the International Arctic Science Committee of 1990; and even the launching of the University of the Arctic (2001), which did not have a governmental root but has constituted an important platform for the research, discussion, and promotion of Arctic-related matters, ranging from social work to natural science [53].

The Arctic region was a very active place of these shifts, in fact, still is. The scientific advancements also unveiled the existence of climate change and its dire consequences for the planet, especially the Polar regions [54]. Warmer temperatures have a direct impact on the biodiversity and geographic composition of the Arctic, which can be seen, simultaneously, as a menace and/or an opportunity. This trend raised considerable awareness during 20th century and, since then, it has caught much attention from governments, international organizations, and national as well as local communities [55].

How Does the Mediterranean Basin Mirror the Arctic?

Unlike the Arctic, the Mediterranean region has been an epicenter of Western socio-cultural and economic interactions for many centuries. Its history is well-documented, and a varied number of civilizations have thrived along its shores. A multicultural environment has always been surrounding the basin. The unique geography and climate have also played a big role in the development of the region.

In spite of being diametrically opposite in many respects, both the Mediterranean and the Arctic regions have similarities and nuances that allow them to be compared, as done creatively and insightfully by VS. This comparison is the core element of his PMI, because it aims to find those significant parallelisms that can help us to comprehend what could possibly happen in the future of the Arctic.

The Mediterranean basin is characterized by an agglomeration of fragmented landscapes

that are densely interconnected [56]. Indeed, the variety of local communities and the possibility for mutual communication led also to the promotion of three major religions within a relatively small area, underlining the richness of the social imaginaries in the region. These paths proved essential for the regional and global development of numerous societies and their imaginaries. Hence, the Mediterranean Sea and the adjacent rivers had the role of uniting, instead of disjoining [57].

Historically, despite its conflicts and contradictions, the Mediterranean basin provided an ideal environment promoting trade and socio-cultural interactions through the establishment of routes over millennia. Mediterranean civilizations had a great influence on world development at large, and could be seen as pivotal merchant and cultural highways that stimulated prosperity and growth [58]. Well-established economic and cultural routes throughout the Mediterranean Sea could then play a function as mediators between the central territory and other regions or continents, i.e., a hub or transition point where other cultures could trade different goods and ideas.

As the historian Fernand Braudel underlines: “The rule has been that Mediterranean civilization spreads far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continual returns (...) The circulation of man and goods, both material and intangible, formed concentric rings around the Mediterranean. We should imagine hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, and some cultural.” [59].

Future Transpolar Routes?

The Arctic's future is definitely connected with the necessity of being more accessible and open to the southern regions. As mentioned above, the idea of Transpolar Routes dates back to the 16th and 17th century, when there was considered the existence of a path capable to link the Atlantic Ocean to China. It was VS, however, who insisted and envisioned a future for the Arctic region based on (Transpolar) Sea Routes. In VS' own writings, hints abound at ways in which the Arctic peoples have been capable to accept and adjust to the presence of strangers, who are bound to become more and more numerous in the future, given also how “[t]he transpolar route will become more important decade by decade” [60].

Sea routes constitute an important economic value, but they can also have a tremendous social-cultural impact on the development of the regions, in many negative senses too. Nevertheless, the cementation of transpolar pathways takes time, but by being aware of such possibilities the local Arctic communities can develop strategies to generate income, infrastructure, and services, whilst preparing for any negative impact as well. Finally, it is important not to forget that an accessible and connected Arctic can excel in the assimilation of a Polar identity, especially in a globalized world.

As Fernand Braudel wrote: “The different regions of Mediterranean are connected not by the water but by the peoples of the sea” [61]. This statement can be linked with the contemporary Arctic Imaginaries aiming to establish a new North, which is connected, i.e., not isolated and apart. To a relevant extent, the Arctic has the background and the potential to pursue such a path, i.e., the transpolar routes [62], which would then be capable of offering reliable solutions to the modern and future global community. All of this, of course, as long as we are willing and able to pursue the socio-economic development of the region in an adaptative and sustainable way, i.e., such that it does not threaten international peace, local stability, and human survival.

Parallely, geography and climate also play a crucial role in the PMI and its future. As mentioned above, both the Arctic and Mediterranean regions have unique characteristics. The geographical boundaries of the Mediterranean Sea are set by a long and jagged coastline. However, this region is more than its sea, or even its coastline, insofar as the radius of influence embraces the adjacent territories from its edges for millions of square kilometers in the hinterlands [63]. Simultaneously, the Arctic is a peripheral region, with less population when compared with the south, but with an extended and also jagged coastline that, allied with the climate and septentrional location, offers a pristine diversity of natural resources (i.e., terrestrial and oceanic). As a result, the Arctic Ocean is a place where peripheries connect.

The predictions regarding the rising of the modern transpolar routes started with VS and are part of the remarkable importance of his legacy. Even though his expectations are not an exact mirror of what happens nowadays, they nonetheless cleared the horizon, so to speak. The new PMI intended to substituted old socio-cultural and political imaginaries into a renewed portrait of the Far North, i.e., a region with a huge diversity of possibilities and

far more accessible than it had been thought for centuries: “Accordingly, most of us will get a wider view of the commercial, political, and military future of the world when we realize that the airplane, the dirigible, and the submarine are about to turn the polar ocean into a Mediterranean and about to make England and Japan, Norway and Alaska, neighbors across the northern sea.” [64].

Concluding Reflections

The PMI is a set of ideas originated in order to provide a dynamic and informed conception of the Arctic, promoting an interactive and constructive relation among all the involved players, immersed in their unique geo-cultural surroundings. VS was, to a certain extent, the decisive bridge between the past and the present beliefs about the Arctic. The originality of his ideas earned him the title as the so-called “Prophet of the North” [lxv]. He helped to enlarge the factual comprehension of the local human component, the international divulgation of the region’s potentialities, and the creation of a new way of looking at all things Arctic, i.e., his PMI.

The Arctic region was deemed to be an inaccessible and inhospitable zone, and yet started to be seen as a hub connecting different cultures, States, and socio-economic realities. The frozen and seemingly impassable Arctic Ocean turned into a region “conceived as a land to promote peripheries and not a center” [65]. VS openly pointed out to a conception of the North as a middle point that unites geographically opposite regions, instead of an inaccessible barrier or wasteland.

From the first reference of PM (during the inter-war period) until the first decade of the 21st century, the North slowly became a zone of dialogue and cooperation, promoting all kinds of environmental protections and cooperative projects for sustainable development in the Arctic. The Arctic reality has truly shifted exponentially in the last century. These shifts bringing not only more opportunities but also a plausible threat to what the Arctic is. It is not possible to dissociate the climate, the geography and, of course, its peoples. VS drew the attention for northernmost region in a very positive and friendly way, where everyone could benefit from a more developed and accessible Arctic. However, trends like

environmental changes and globalization can also be menaces to the identity of the Polar regions.

PMI is, nevertheless, an interesting approach and worth to be put into table as paradigm to approach the future. A viable balance and a sensible strategy must be obviously thought of in order to not destroy the Arctic's individuality, its own unique heritage, and constructively capitalize on its potential benefits.

From the early stage of Humanity, the Mediterranean Region has been occupied by many different cultures, traditions and customs, some of them having still a very big presence and impact in modern societies (e.g., the Latin alphabet, Roman law, classical canons of beauty). The dynamic history of this region can serve as a potential source of information for the Arctic. Mark Twain said: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Parallely, by understanding the importance of the Mediterranean and how it developed, and using it as a reference point, the PMI can provide the Arctic at least some of the required knowledge to be prepared for the future. With that information, Arctic players can have more tools to negotiate their interests and preserve their cultural identity.

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Endnotes

[1] This sentence was surgically taken from the editorial policy section of the *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* (<https://nome.unak.is/wordpress/editorial-policy/>), and perfectly suits the aim of both Vilhjalmur Stefansson and this journal.

[2] The concepts of 'idea' and 'imaginary' are quite complex and relate to different fields, ranging from history, philosophy, as well as psychology, to anthropology and much else. Hence, for this research, I have only emphasized some crucial and brief points in order to help the reader to grasp the notions of 'imagination' and 'imaginary'.

[3] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (MIT Press 1987) 117.

[4] This article is based on Cornelius Castoriadis' (CC) legacy. The Greek French philosopher provides a solid philosophical background that helps to understand how social imaginaries work. He put "imagination" at the very center of his understanding of reality. In particular, he suggested that there are important connections between the individual faculty of "imagination" (i.e., a person's ability to produce new images, hence ideas or concepts) and the social "imaginaries" (i.e., the complex symbolic networks that we also call "cultures"), without which no society and no individual could ever survive. As a matter of fact, for CC, the human faculty of imagination is the basis of social organization and the possibility of autonomy, i.e., self-rule, both individually and socially

[5] Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou and Marianna Fotaki, 'A Theory of Imagination for Organization Studies Using the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis' (2015) 36 Organization Studies 321, 325.

[6] Castoriadis (n 3) 124.

- [7] Richard Vaughan, *The Arctic: A History* (A Sutton 1994) 35–39.
- [8] Yuval N Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Vintage 2015) 26–42.
- [9] Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (The Macmillan Company 1921) 10–13
<<http://archive.org/details/friendlyarctic017086mbp>> accessed 1 March 2021.
- [10] “West” and “Western” identify cultures originating from Western Europe in a geographic sense, but there exist also many “Westernized” cultures across the globe, given the West’s pervasive influence over the past four centuries, e.g., the US and Australia.
- [11] Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire (1922)* (The Macmillan Company 1924) 42–50.
- [12] Lassi Heininen and Chris Southcott, *Globalization and the Circumpolar North* (University of Alaska Press 2010) 1.
- [13] ‘Boundaries of the Arctic Council Working Groups | GRID-Arendal’
<<https://www.grida.no/resources/8387>> accessed 8 September 2023.
- [14] Mary Durfee and Rachael Lorna Johnstone, *Arctic Governance in a Changing World* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group 2019) 9–11
<<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442235649/Arctic-Governance-in-a-Changing-World>> accessed 1 March 2021.
- [15] Joan Nymand Larsen and Nordic Council of Ministers (eds), *Arctic Social Indicators: ASI II; Impletation* (Nordic Council of Ministers 2014) 23.
- [16] The “Far North” started to become populated after the migration routes of “Super Eurasian Family” reached the Northern Circle. In fact, between 40,000 and 15,000 BC, various populations started to occupy the northern parts of Eurasia and, gradually, reached the Northern Circle territories either by boat or on foot. Based on these migratory patterns, different groups took different paths, in what was a mixture between the shared instinct of survival, flexible adaptations to the features of the surrounding environments, and the

creative development of unique techniques.

[17] Níels Einarsson (ed), *Arctic Human Development Report* (Stefansson Arctic Institute 2004) 22-26.

[18] Louis Rey, 'The Arctic Ocean: A "Polar Mediterranean"' in Louis Rey (ed), *The Arctic Ocean: The Hydrographic Environment and the Fate of Pollutants* (Palgrave Macmillan UK 1982) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-05919-5_1> accessed 26 March 2022.

[19] *ibid* 5.

[20] Federico Actite, 'Ancient Rome and Icelandic Culture - A Brief Overview' (2009) 4 *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* 1-2.

[21] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II: Volume I*, vol I (Fontana Press 1990) 226-230.

[22] Earl Parker Hanson, *Stefansson, Prophet of the North* (Harper & bros 1941) 182.

[23] Philip E Steinberg and others, *Contesting the Arctic: Politics and Imaginaries in the Circumpolar North* (IBTauris 2015) 6
<<http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/contesting-the-arctic-politics-and-imaginaries-in-the-circumpolar-north>> accessed 9 February 2021.

[24] Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (n 9) 29.

[25] Gísli Pálsson, *Travelling Passions: The Hidden Life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (UPNE 2005) 25.

[26] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire (1922)* (n 11) 128.

[27] *ibid* 20.

[28] *ibid* 20-22.

[29] Hanson (n 22) 178.

[30] Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (n 9) 354-358.

[31] *ibid* 162.

[32] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 11) 20.

[33] *ibid* 22-41.

[34] Klaus Dodds, 'A Polar Mediterranean? Accessibility, Resources and Sovereignty in the Arctic Ocean' (2010) 1 *Global Policy* 303, 308-310.

[35] Hanson (n 22) 182.

[36] Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (n 9) 6.

[37] In Vilhjalmur Stefansson book *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 8), he devotes the entire chapter VII to those matters.

[38] Kimberley Peters, *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean* (Routledge 2016) ch 2.

[39] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 11) 172.

[40] *ibid* 120.

[41] *ibid* 168.

[42] *ibid* 202.

[43] Joan Nymand Larsen (ed), *Arctic Human Development Report: Regional Processes and Global Linkages* (Nordic Council of Ministers 2014) 154-155.

- [44] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 11) 130.
- [45] Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 'The Arctic as an Air Route to the Future' (1922) 205-18 *National Geographic Magazine* 205-18.
- [46] Scott R Stephenson, 'Confronting Borders in the Arctic' (2018) 33 *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 183, 187-188.
- [47] Ronald E Doel and others, 'Strategic Arctic Science: National Interests in Building Natural Knowledge - Interwar Era through the Cold War' (2014) 44 *Journal of Historical Geography* 60, 77-79.
- [48] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 11) 199.
- [49] Durfee and Johnstone (n 14) 49.
- [50] Doel and others (n 47) 63-66.
- [51] Durfee and Johnstone (n 14) 107-108.
- [52] Tim Marshall, *Divided: Why We're Living in an Age of Walls* (Elliott and Thompson Limited 2018) 177-183.
- [53] Oran Young, 'Governing the Arctic: From Cold War Theater to Mosaic of Cooperation' (2005) 11 *Global Governance* 9, 9.
- [54] Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA). Slide 8
- [55] Nymand Larsen (n 43) 142-145.
- [56] Eivind Heldaas Seland, 'Writ in Water, Lines in Sand: Ancient Trade Routes, Models and Comparative Evidence' (2015) 2 *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 1110272, 5.
- [57] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel: Lectures on Philosophy: The Philosophy of*

History, The History of Philosophy, The Proofs of the Existence of God (e-artnow 2019).

[58] GH Blake, 'Settlement and Conflict in the Mediterranean World' (1978) 3 Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 255, 255-256.

[59] Braudel (n 21) 170.

[60] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 11) 178.

[61] Braudel (n 21) 276.

[62] The Arctic has been experiencing the changes brought about by climate change about twice as fast as any other part of the globe. Specifically, Arctic average temperature has risen almost twice the rate as the rest of the world in the past few decades. As a direct result of this phenomenon, there has ensued a growing number of months that are considered "ice-free", which is a viable economic justification for conceiving of the Far North as allowing the settlement of new transpolar routes, using the Arctic Ocean as a means for traveling and connecting different polar regions and the surrounding continents. The Northern Sea Route, Northwest Passage and Transpolar Sea Route are three of the main corridors mentioned and studied in contemporary academia.

[63] David Abulafia, *The Mediterranean in History* (Getty Publications 2011) 11.

[64] Stefansson, *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) (n 11) 199.

[65] Hanson (n 22) 233-234.

[66] Steinberg and others (n 23) 8.