

AMBIENTE FISICO E TERRITORIO

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La Geografia è la disciplina che studia le relazioni fra uomo e ambiente; essa si propone quindi di osservare e classificare i molteplici fatti e fenomeni — fisici e antropici — che si sviluppano sulla superficie terrestre, per arrivare a un'interpretazione relativa all'organizzazione che le società umane hanno dato, o progettano di dare, al territorio. Questa collana vuole pertanto accogliere testi con contenuti di geografia umana e di geografia fisica, in quanto entrambi indispensabili per realizzare tale analisi interpretativa e poter così spiegare i processi sociali, economici e culturali che caratterizzano il territorio stesso.



Vai al contenuto multimediale

Emilia Sarno

Identity Issues in the Western Balkans

The cases of Albania and Montenegro

Linguistic revision by
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Contents

9 *Introduction*

Part I A Complex Identity

17 Chapter I
From the Historical Tyranny to Pluralism: Anthropological and Environmental Factors of the Balkans

1.1. Introduction, 17 – 1.2. The Balkan Toponym and the Weight of History on Geography, 18 – 1.3. A Mosaic to East of the West, 21 – 1.4. Geographical Factors and Anthropological–Territorial Models, 23 – 1.5. The Planned Construction of Pluralism with a View to the EU, 27.

31 Chapter II
The Ottoman Empire. The Antithesis Which Has Forged Place Identity

2.1. Introduction, 31 – 2.2. The *Sublime Porte* Conquering Europe, 32 – 2.3. The Territorial Fluidity of the Ottoman Empire, 34 – 2.4. The Eastern Question in the Eighteenth Century, 36 – 2.5. The Territorial Composition of Modern Turkey, 38 – 2.6. Conclusions, 40.

43 Chapter III
How to Establish the Borders of a State. The Case of Albania

3.1. A Complex Theoretical Issue, 43 – 3.2. The Historical Region of Albania, 44 – 3.3. The Turkish Dominion, 48 – 3.4. The Establishment of the Borders, 49 – 3.5. Unresolved Issues, 51 – 3.6. The *Platform* for Albania, 52.

Part II The Establishment of a State

57 Chapter I
Geographical and Sociodemographic Features of Montenegro

1.1. Geographical Characteristics, 57 – 1.2. The Ongoing Demographic Changes, 59 – 1.3. The Agricultural Sector, 61 – 1.4. Tourism: an Emerging Phenomenon, 64.

67	Chapter II <i>The Creation of a Capital: Podgorica</i>
75	Chapter III <i>Wine Tradition as an Identity Trait</i>
79	Chapter IV <i>The Montenegrin Identity Between Myths, Refusals and Future Orientations</i> 4.1. Introduction, 79 – 4.2. The Strength of the Myth, 79 – 4.3. The Double Identity, 81 – 4.4. Today's Path, 84.
89	<i>Conclusions</i>
93	<i>References</i>
105	<i>Acknowledgements</i>

Introduction

This book is the result of two scientific impulses: the problem of territorial identity and the complexity of the Balkans as a geographical area. In the last years, I explored these two different issues, the former methodological, the latter thematic, through parallel as well as different research experiences. Territorial identity has been the paradigm of the research group AGEI, coordinated by Tiziana Banini, professor at the University La Sapienza of Rome (Banini, 2009b; 2011a; 2013). Hence, I took part in a debate which allowed me to reflect upon the constitutive elements of territorial identity: a constant interaction between a community and a territory, an interaction full of motivations and values (Sarno, 2013). Indeed, I happened to discover that the relationship between a community and its territory is to be considered an experiential path which organizes and transforms over time, as repeatedly outlined by Paasi (1995; 2001; 2016; Paasi, Häkli, 2003). He emphasized the empirical dimension of identity promoting a dynamic vision. Indeed, this view entails a precise and stratified analysis of a territory, without overlooking the actors and relationships established in it¹.

Furthermore, the relationship actors–territory must be examined from a socio–economic as well as motivational and moral point of view; indeed, actions and beliefs contribute to the recognition of a community and its sense of belonging. Hence, that long–lasting patrimony of a community is established, a patrimony which can experience continuity but also changes and discontinuity. It is fundamental to identify the structural features of a collectivity by analyzing the relationships; furthermore, tracing the evolution entails giving the right importance to the temporal dimension.

Space is significant as well. «The spatial coordinate is a privileged perspective by which the concept of identity can be reformulated so as to keep on promoting the importance of some dimensions of the existence fundamental for every person such as the social and territorial belonging but to also set some current key issues in concrete» (Banini, 2011b, p. 12). The territory is thus regarded as the cultural space which belongs to a community (Bonnemaison, Cambrézy, Quinty–Bourgeois, 1999; Agnew, 2011).

Such a study requires the abandonment of some abstract positions, such as the pursuit of a unique essence which could represent the identity features

1. See too Pollice, 2004; Guarrasi, 2006; Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2009.

of a population or the abstract correspondence between the cultural view of a social group and the structure of a territory. The correspondence does not become significant from a retrospective but from a prospective point of view (Turco, 2010). Territorial identity should not be considered a fixed set of values which do not modify over time, but it should be a project which leads the community to build up its history and shape its own territoriality. And the most complex variable comes into play in this context, the variable of history which can influence or, even upset the existence of a community. The variable of history refers to all those political, economic and social processes which determine and sometimes affect the relationship actors–territory. The identity itself is thus undermined or upset until actors become aware of it.

Each element leads to establish or change the identity of a territory, hence the reconstruction of the map of a place and its population is a tricky and ambiguous operation, although it is scientifically stimulating especially when identity has been subject to changes or it is an ongoing process. All things considered, I started to reflect upon the territorial identity of the Balkans.

My attention to the Balkans has been fostered, as I mentioned at the outset, by some experiences of research; the first was the coordination of a research group for the Regional Agency of Agricultural Research of Italian Region Molise (former ARSIAM Molise, today ARSARP Molise) with the aim of establishing some forms of cooperation with Montenegro between 2011 and 2013. Since then, a scientific and cultural project has started so as to discover such a young country as well as the Western Balkans.

Moreover, the Online University Pegaso commissioned me another study entitled *The consequences of the 2008 crisis for the geography of the European commercial relations. A research hypothesis so as to geopolitically remap the European Union in 2016*. Although the aim of this research was to address other issues, it was a further stimulus to deepen my knowledge of the complex theatre of the European Union and the peculiarities of its areas.

If field studies, necessary for the project supported by ARSARP Molise, allowed me to become acquainted with a particular historical moment to the Montenegrins, that is the establishment of their autonomy, the study on the ongoing changes in the European Union gave me the opportunity to expand the range of my analysis.

What is more, although projected on the future, the Montenegrins, as other Balkan communities, cannot be considered disconnected from the spatial relationships they shared and still share with the neighboring countries; relationships that, for some aspects, must be shared. All in all, they cannot build their future forgetting the past. This would be a mistake for such populations, and it would even be more erroneous from a scientific point of view.

Instead, it is necessary to start from history or, in actual fact, from the tyranny of history and geography which marked this peninsula. As clarified in several works (Todorova, 1994 and 1997; Squarcina, Dell’Agnese, 2002; Roudometof, 2003; Checkel, Katzenstein, 2009), in order to start to understand the Balkans, it is necessary to decode the stereotypes, the negative connotations and the mistaken representations. Those last have been influenced by the geographical position of the Balkans, halfway between Europe and Asia, a position which has unfortunately acquired several values.

The East and West have been considered geographical places with a political and social value since the ancient age (Strath, 2002; Bucci, 2005; Delanty, 2012). This has occurred due to the role Europe had performed as the observation point of Asia. For this reason, there was the necessity to establish the borders between Europe and the others, that is between the geography of the West and the East (Stacul, Moutsou, Kopnina, 2006). This issue is old and linked to the conflicts between the *poleis* and the Persians, the Romans and Barbarians, the Christians and Muslims. Hence, Europe and Asia, the West and the East, acquired a geo-political significance, imposing the borders and emphasizing the differences (Applebaum, 2015). That is the reason why the necessity to identify a Near, Middle and Far East arose. In such a complex geopolitical division, the Balkans marked the boundary, and, at the same time, they represented the nearest danger. The geographical position made the Balkans the crossroad of populations and cultures as well as a place of political and religious conflicts. They represented a Near East with which it was possible to cautiously negotiate as well as a fearsome opponent represented by the Ottomans (Bozeman, 2017).

Once again, history seems to repeat itself due to the regime of Tito and his choice of not aligning as regards the two fronts, that of the Soviet Union established by the Warsaw Pact and that of NATO. In this way, a dialogue could have been possible. However, the disembodiment of Yugoslavia caused conflicts and gave rise to stereotypes and past representations again (Gallagher, 2013). After all, as regards the Albanian crisis in 1997, two opposite tendencies occurred: negative stigmatization of the Albanian identity and, at the same time, although partially, proofs to make the international political relationships effective (Antonisich, 2002).

In actual fact, the conflicts arose over time due to the fact that this region had been contested by several empires and because it is characterized by an extraordinary mosaic of settlements which follows the space-network logic rather than that of the coherence of places (Squarcina, Dell’Agnese, 2002, p. 28).

The Balkans represent a territory crossed by several divisions, established by populations who crossed and dominated it: the Romans, Slavs and Turks. In the nineteenth century, they are considered a complicated and

dangerous melting pot of populations, religions and languages: Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Albanians, Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians and Turks. It is not a case that terms such as Balkan and Balkanization acquired a political and even a negative connotation. The Balkan mosaic was regarded as the power keg of Europe and it was one of the causes of the First World War (Massoulié, Gantelet, Genton, 1997).

In the nineties of the last century, the Balkan populations had to face divisions and conflicts so as to reach, only in the new millennium, a configuration which mirrors their will of self-determination. However, there are still some ongoing issues: Kosovo has not unanimously been recognized yet or the ethnic minorities, present in every newly born state, do not have the adequate and legal protection².

Furthermore, another ongoing issue is the recognition and the establishment of territorial identities. For this reason, I thought it would be appropriate to conduct a study in this sense, adopting a geo-historical method of investigation useful both for identifying the landscape peculiarities of a specific community and for recognizing the relationship between the spatial and temporal phenomena, between the geographical and historical dimension (Quaini, 1992; Rombai, 2002). The latter is a key to interpretation which allows the understanding of territorial processes from a diachronic point of view.

That being said, the starting point was the analysis of the stereotypes, or at least the most significant ones, with the aim of identifying, apart from the already defined representations, the geographical features and the fundamental anthropological-territorial models of this composite region (Sarno, 2014b). Hence, the Balkan region is here re-interpreted looking at the major environmental factors and anthropological-territorial models developed in it, inasmuch as the region identity can be in the most authentic way understood through these factors. This approach can be considered as the starting point for a responsible pluralism in Balkans, whilst this new vision is needed to the UE which has to see this region in a different way (Hammond, 2017).

Indeed, the discussion in the first chapter aims at discovering the constitutive elements of the Balkan territory and of its actors, in order to make assumptions from which the different communities can develop their present and future plans and can deal with an organization as the European Union which is attempting to put a stop to the dualism between the East and West by opening up to the countries of Eastern Europe (Kuus, 2004).

Due to the above-mentioned importance of a diachronic vision, the second chapter focuses on the Ottoman Empire as a long-lasting histor-

2. See too Zarrilli, 1999.

ical–political experience which influenced the Balkans from XIV to XX. The aim is to show how political macrostructures such as empires are the emblem of the negation of the establishment of identity. Furthermore, the role of history is clarified. It can exert a negative influence on the existence of populations. Indeed, even the main actors of the Ottoman Empire, that is the Turks, when they had to face defeat after the First World War, only defended their original territoriality, the Anatolic Peninsula (Ahmed, 2005; Deringil, 2007).

However, the identification and circumscription of one's territoriality, hence the identification of the cultural and political space of a community is not a simple operation especially in the Balkan mosaic. For these reasons and due to the complexities of the geographical area, I believed it was necessary to carefully analyze the Western Balkans and, in particular, two specific problems: the issue of the Albanian borders and the establishment of the Montenegrin state.

For these reasons, the first part of this volumes ends with the analysis of how the Albanian borders were established. The case is interesting due to the chosen path, the decisions made and the unresolved issues. The main problem is not the establishment of the borders but the recognition of the existence of a community and its need for independence. Despite being limited, the path allows us to think about the criteria chosen to establish which places have a relationship with a community or belong to it. Moreover, the case was closely linked to the disembodiment of the Ottoman Empire and it offered an opportunity to discover the correlation between the identity processes and the recognition of the borders of a state.

Moreover, the Montenegrin issue has the merit of being ongoing and I managed to collect useful information by establishing a direct contact with cultural and political representatives.

For a little more than 10 years Montenegro has finally been dealing with the establishment of an autonomous state and, thus, of a political project coherent with its history as well as with the image the population wants to convey of themselves (Malešević, Uzelac, 2007). The identified problems concern the reorganization of the economy and of the urban settlements. Hence, the second part of the volumes starts with an examination of the main geographical and socio–demographical features so as to show the principal aspects from which Montenegro is characterizing itself.

The following chapters focus on a complex analysis of this state so as to clarify how it is succeeding in rising from the ashes of its history and forging its identity (Subotic, 2011). The case allows us to trace the path of a community which must deal with socio–economic backwardness but also with an identity which has often been negated or considered non–existing (Bieber, 2003; Darmanovic, 2007).

Hence, the experience of Montenegro encourages a reflection on the ongoing identity, on how to make Podgorica the symbolic center of this territory and on how to perform an active role in the Balkans and the Mediterranean.

To a greater extent, if we reflect upon the above methodological indications regarding territorial identity as a process to be built in perspective on different facets rather than in retrospective, it should be clear that the different countries of the Balkans can join the European project only if they focus on the historical–geographical complexities of their territory, on the occurred political processes and on the divisions they underwent (Todorova, 2010; Džankić, 2015). In this way, the reflection on the identity consciously allows them to take part in wider scenarios.

PART I

A COMPLEX IDENTITY

From the Historical Tyranny to Pluralism

Anthropological and Environmental Factors of the Balkans

1.1. Introduction

The contemporary redefinition of the states of the Balkan area requires a new reflection on the historical–political process which has conditioned this change and on the image of the area which has been continually labelled as the “powder keg” of Europe and has led to the development of expressions such as “Balkanized” or “Balkanization”. According to Todorova (1997, p. 303), «the recurrent image of the Balkans, which first developed in its general sense around the period of the First World War, has been constant through time and has assumed the function of a dissertation»¹.

History is not the only factor involved, in fact the “tyranny of geography” has made the Balkans a particular region in which the many different ethnic groups and their identity have been a constant source of conflict (Fumagalli, 2002). An understanding of the complex “tyranny” of geography and history is fundamental to the knowledge of this large area in order both to reconstruct its social–geographical characteristics and to be able to correctly elaborate the terms of the present–day dialogue with the European Union (EU).

Such a study necessarily requires an investigation into identity in an attempt to show how some “fixed characteristics” have been imposed on the area, whereas what is necessary is that any reading of the Balkans must start from the territory itself. Territorial identity is a complex issue owing to that abstract correspondence between the cultural vision of a social group and the structure of a territory. The correspondence does not become significant from a retrospective but from a prospective point of view given that it cannot be considered a state but a process (Raffestin, 2003). Even Häkli e Paasi, giving emphasis to the empirical dimension, promote a dynamic vision «The present, the past, and personal and social identities are bound up together in a complex manner, in which identity is rather

1. Todorova (1997) traces the history of the term Balkans and gives interesting information and documents.

a dynamic, continually changing process, than a static condition» (Häkli, Paasi, 2003, p. 143). The above dynamic vision entails a precise and stratified analysis of a territory, analyzing the actors and relationships developed in it. Hence, it is fundamental to distinguish the structural characteristics of a local community (Sarno, 2013).

Therefore, it is only by examining the anthropological models and the territorial organization of the Balkans that such a complex mosaic can achieve the awareness of pluralism.

1.2. The Balkan Toponym and the Weight of History on Geography

The geographic determinism of the 18th and 19th centuries reasoned by means of paradigms and wanted to classify, as they did with the Italian and Spanish peninsulas, the Balkan peninsula, which politically did not coincide with a single nation and whose borders were not easily identifiable (Bracewell, Drace–Francis, 1999).

The Balkans were defined as «a peninsula of the Mediterranean, extending south from Cyprus to the Danube and the Sava in the north» (Castellan, 1999, p. 11), this definition however, was far from unanimous. Similarly, various definitions of the northern frontier were given; according to Vialli (1969) it should have coincided with the Trieste–Odessa geographical line, but, according to others, it coincided with the Kupa–Sava–Danube river borders, starting from the city of Fiume and reaching the mouth of the Danube. As Prévélakis (1997) has stated, there is no clear line of demarcation in the north, as in the case of the Alps or the Pyrenees in Italy and Spain, which would indicate where the peninsula ends. Even should we consider the Balkan mountains as some kind of natural frontier, but the exclusion of Romania and Bulgaria due to various factors, would not take into account their historical–political role in the area. The rivers of the Balkans, such as the Danube, make communication easier rather than an obstacle. Franzinetti (2001) states that the idea of the Balkan mountains as inaccessible is contradicted by the presence of the wide Danube plain: there are here no insurmountable natural obstacles.

If the southern border is apparently defined by the Mediterranean, the typically Mediterranean characteristics of Greece have little in common with the north. The Balkans is therefore a composite geographic macro–region, which extends from the jagged Greek peninsula to the Danube and Central–Europe. If this is the case, how did such an evidently inappropriate name ever come to be applied? The term Balkans is based on a mistaken idea, that is to say the Balkan mountain chain was believed to cross all the northern part of the peninsula ranging from east to west.

It is a rather modest chain of mountains and so the choice made in the seventeenth and eighteenth century to choose it as an identifying element was purely nominal (Fig. 1.1).



Figure 1.1. The Balkan mountains and their actual physical position (source: <https://bulguides.com/mountain-ranges/>).

It is the name, rather than the geographical reality, which has acquired a political meaning: it indicated a vast area which, due to the Turkish influence, had to be distinguished from Western European culture. The West had for a long time never even posed the question of the existence of the Balkans as a geographical reality (Wolff, 1994). The Balkan mountain chain had always existed, as Mazower (2000; 2007) highlights, but it was only the crisis of the Turkish Empire which led the Europeans to try to name and define the area.

The Western perception of the Balkans developed in relation to political factors such as the dissolution of the Turkish Empire (Duroselle, 1965; Jelavich, 1983). The term “Balkanization” was used to indicate the existence of numerous fragmented states. They were an example of a political instability which was not considered as something positive according to the German politics, as at the time German politicians exalted nationalism. Todorova (1997) has noted that the expression “Balkanization” appeared soon after the First World War and the first use of the term in the New York Times was on December 20th, 1918. The journalist Rathenau used the word to indicate the apocalyptic

devastation which might have struck Europe if strong nation states were not created. From that moment, the Balkan peninsula became the powder keg of Europe in the *weltanschauung* of that time. The term Balkanisation, even though it has been used in other contexts, seems to have become linked in particular to the Balkan area itself as if it were its specific characteristic accentuated by the wars in the final decades of the last century.

The political crisis of the 19th century brought the area under the scrutiny of the West while geographers were trying to define its name and the term Balkan came to the fore at the expense of other names such as South–Eastern Europe. According to Drace–Francis (1999), «South–Eastern Europe is first used in German in 1861, it was theorized and popularized by the geographer Theobald Fischer in an article of 1893 and another one of 1909 and it was subsequently promoted, notably by the Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga, as a neutral term in the wake of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913».

The name found favor among the geographers of that time who tended to use neutral terms, but it was not easy to agree on what was meant by, and the extent of the Eastern area, given that the heart of Eastern Europe was the Russian Empire. The problem was to define which was the southern limit of Eastern Europe. For this reason, the Italian geographer Balbi (1840) used the term Eastern Peninsula, indicating the territorial extension of the East. Balbi applied the most neutral available term, which however made a precise identification of the area.

Laurie James (1842) chose to use the term Slavo–Grecian Peninsula with reference to the most present ethnic groups in the area. Drace–Francis (1999) relies on widespread school text–books and diplomatic documents and shows how the use of different terms was current up until the 1912–1913 wars, after which the term Balkans prevails to indicate the dissolution of the Turkish Empire and the unstable situation of the new states.

The denomination, formalized on the basis of a geopolitics vision and on the history of the area, seems to have roots in the far past based on the creation of the Ottoman Empire and the Eastern question until the Balkan wars (Vezenkov, 2006). The negative connotations of the word have developed through a long period of time in the general perception of Europeans (Russo, 1998). The area had for long been the domain of Turks and Moslems, and so represented a “Near East” which was seen in opposition to Western European culture.

We agree with Duhamel (1941) that the term Balkan is the product of the tyranny of both the physical and historical environment².

2. In a latent way, the Balkan issues were also related to the ideas of Diaspora and conflict between minorities. The process is well–known, as Slavs and Albanians emigrated to the Italian side of the Adriatic throughout the modern age. See Lizza (2002).