

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Adriatic Space of Identity**

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The Adriatic Sea, as a macro-regional maritime space, has neither been framed as a specific object of social science research nor approached as a field for multi-disciplinary studies. Moreover, the South East European studies have not taken very much into consideration the maritime perspective and they mostly concentrate on the terrestrial dimension. There is a wide literature that still focuses on the considered region pointing at the European dimension and the Balkan one as the only two significant cultural and political poles of attraction. Accordingly, the Adriatic dimension, despite its importance for the economic, cultural and political development of South Eastern Europe has not been extensively investigated as a relevant "space of identity". While the Adriatic basin constitutes an important area of the Mediterranean basin, even Mediterranean studies usually underestimate the maritime dimension of the Western Balkans. The Eastern shores of the Adriatic-Ionian basin, with the exception of Greece and the partial exception of Croatia, have been largely excluded from what one can call the Mediterranean imaginary, both in terms of national identity making and territorial marketing.

There are probably several reasons why any unitary and recognizable representation of the Adriatic is so ephemeral. One is that the Adriatic space maintains an ambivalent combination of unity and diversity both in the ecological sense and in the social-cultural one. As a matter of fact, the contemporary coexistence of a number of similarities and differences in various realms gives to the Adriatic region a specific connotation, even though it is not possible to speak of a unity, a system or an integrated area. However, the physical proximity between the two coasts on one hand, and the linguistic, political and cultural diversity on the other, only partly explain such a pattern. Differently, one may more accurately cast the light on the overlapping physical and imaginary projections of some powerful political and commercial actors that were active in the Adriatic region. In other words, it is mainly because of the overlapping and often antagonistic engagements of those actors (mostly the Republic of Venice and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) that a unique, although not unified, Adriatic seascape emerged in modern times.

Important scholars such as Fernand Braudel suggested that the Adriatic was perhaps the most unified of all the regions of the Mediterranean sea. (Braudel 1972) mostly for geographical reasons, such as the narrowness of the channel (72 km in width) that guards the entrance to the Adriatic basin. In Braudel's words, the narrowing at the southern end is the essential characteristic of the basin for it gives unity to the sea. Controlling that narrow passage meant to control the entire Adriatic basin, which for its small dimension and its many scattered *micro-cosmos* has also been described as a "sea of intimacy" (Matvejević 1987).

However, besides this unity, there is a further feature of the Adriatic space, which emerges from the Ellen Semple's reflections on the Mediterranean world. Thinking of the constant repetition of the same geographical shapes and the same morphology of the territory, the Mediterranean world would represent just the same model in different scales. Therefore, a first larger sea would contain smaller copies of itself and would be at the same time part of a larger structure that maintains the same features (Semple 1931).

Braudel further integrated that image of a constant repetition of the same model speaking of a Mediterranean world of "space-movement": one circulation system made of liquid field communicating through larger or smaller doors/channels. In this regards, it is quite interesting that someone, as the geographer Franco Farinelli, may suggest that Braudel would have shaped his notion of the Mediterranean taking the Adriatic sea as model: a narrow and almost closed sea, with one strict door (Turri 1999).

Nevertheless, if one agrees with the foregone, a Mediterranean sea in itself would not exist as such. In the words of Pierre Deffontaines, one should better speak of a number of basins and semi land-locked seas that live separate lives; moreover, one can also assume that such model might be found even outside the Mediterranean region *sensu strictu*. From this standpoint, the Baltic sea region or the Carribeans can be approached as Mediterranean for they represent watery spaces surrounded by lands – *between the lands*. Consequently, even areas as diverse as the Indian or Pacific archipelagos might be part of the same category of Mediterranean regions because they maintain the pattern of the "sea between the lands".

Therefore, to speak of the Adriatic from a Mediterranean perspective means to discuss the relationships between the land and the sea. The "land/sea" couple thus works as the leading distinction for exploring the meaning of the Adriatic as a space of identity and consequently to discuss the nature of the relation existing between the oppositional metaphors of fluidity-solidity.

If one applies to the Adriatic sea the image of Stefano Boeri, who speaks of "Liquid Europe and Solid Sea", with regards on the Mediterranean

basin (Freanke, Weizman, Segal and Boeri 2003), then it might be clearer why the Adriatic is a quite controversial and weakly framed space of identity. According to Boeri, as opposite to the flowing, "unspecifiable" character of the European continent, the Mediterranean is gradually and hermetically establishing itself as a territory in the modern meaning. In other words, the cradle of Western culture would be likely to become a space for dissociation and exclusion that inhibits cultural exchange.

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Adriatic Sea set the stage for the development of a specific local maritime culture that still connects – at least mentally – most of its cities and islands under the label of a shared local cosmopolitanism (Apollonio 1998; Mucci and Chiarini 1999; Ivetic 1999). By that time, a seducing image emerged and gradually became very popular in the centuries to come: a somewhat romanticized picture of a maritime multi-cultural society where different ethnic groups experienced a common lifestyle based on economic pragmatism and commercial attitudes. At the same time, the homogenizing ethno-national trends of the continent, that took the upper lead in the nation state building processes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have often been connected with a rural-tribal world and its solid ethnic barriers (Wolff 2001).

From this point of view, it is thus understandable that the Adriatic dimension and its cultural and political implications do not represent a completely ephemeral issue on the local and regional levels. Here, the Adriatic Sea provides a rich system of symbolic references that have been largely exploited in many ways for identity making purposes, even in recent times. In all former Yugoslav Adriatic regions, from Istria to Montenegro, the Adriatic Sea has often granted a symbolic support to reframe specific perspectives over national identity issues. A number of social and cultural actors, mostly expressions of the local milieu, have frequently taken a strategic standpoint in their cultural or political struggles by referring to the legacy of the maritime Republic of Venice or the Austro-Hungarian imperial projections of the Mediterranean. This was particularly evident in the nineties, when the post-Yugoslav states had to face their new national geographies and to cope with the symbolic value of their changed territorial assets.

In Slovenia, the rediscovery of a Slovenian Istrian identity has gone together with the renewed importance attributed to the shortened coast and to the contested sovereignty over the waters of the Piran Gulf. In this regard, the article of Pamela Ballinger underlines the importance of the local museums of maritime culture within the contemporary national and political struggles of the Adriatic. Ballinger's analysis takes into consideration the Gulf of Trieste, which includes the Gulf of Piran and it is included in the wider Adriatic frame (once again, the Mediterranean refrain of "inner seas within inner seas"). It shows how the assertion of "belonging" to a maritime culture can work as a geo-symbolic support to modern ethno-national identities through an internal/coastal dividing line that runs all along the Eastern Adriatic.

In Croatia, the emergence of an Istrian regional identity has taken both cultural and political shapes, bringing about harsh disputes over the institutional autonomy of the region. The popular demands of a special administrative status for Istria are based on the shared perception of a "common Istrian identity" (*istrijanstvo* or *istrijanità*) that would stand beyond ethno-national differences. In this perspective, it is interesting to learn from the article of Lidija Nikočević that the typical Istrian coexistence between visible ethnic differences and a common blend of hybridism or cultural mixture was already put forward by Austro-Hungarian ethnology while classifying the cultures of the empire. Moreover, the scientific engagement of Austro-Hungarian ethnology towards the discovery and the exploration of the peripheral lands often ignored the people inhabiting the coasts of Istria and concentrated mostly on the inland. One reason, according to Nikočević, is that the Adriatic world seemed to Austro-Hungarian ethnologists more defined, clear and eventually part of the "globalized" Mediterranean realm. Thus, one can assess the historical relevance of the symbolic divide between a coastal-maritime space and the inland, which still influences the inter-ethnic relations in nowadays Istria (this point is also illustrated in the contribution of Pamela Ballinger).

Throughout the 1990s the political exploitation of discourses on hybridism fueled a prolonged confrontation between Istria and the central government of Zagreb, differentiating the situation in Istria from the one in Dalmatia, where a political regional movement never really flourished. However, even if the electorate of Dalmatia has often shown a strong loyalty to the Croatian national cause, some mutual feelings of mistrust have grown between the Croatian metropolis and its economically neglected periphery. Even in Montenegro, the boundaries of national identity run over a symbolic line that sometimes divides an internal pro-Yugoslav and pro-Serbian area from a coastal region more strongly oriented towards Montenegrin independence.

The case of Montenegro is particularly interesting because the perspective of a political and institutional transformation (i.e. independence) has enhanced the chances of a difficult metamorphosis of the classical patterns of national identity. The article of Cathie Carmichael and Nebojša Čagorović gives a very good and detailed insight of such patterns and of the values, images and stereotypes of Montenegrin people. Interesting enough, the authors underline how the Montenegrin identity is a typical product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century imagination and an ambivalent one. On one hand, the cultural construction of Montenegrin national identity pictures the unique and compact representation of the tribal and isolated mountain communities. On the other, it puts the heroic Montenegrin highlanders within a wider imaginary of the mountain people such as the Scots. Therefore, if the European and Western imaginaries have set Montenegro apart from its

Balkan neighbors, drawing mostly on the specific characteristics of its mountain life, some sectors of contemporary Montenegrin society seem to search for alternative patterns. In this context, the Venetian legacy might work as a way out of the constriction of such orientalizing discourse.

At the end of the day, the still unsolved question of the independence and the future of the Serbian-Montenegrin federation also has a maritime dimension. Firstly, because the coast maintains a strategic importance in terms of tourism, logistics and transportation. Secondly, for the new geo-political dimensions, mostly Western and maritime oriented, which would differentiate the Montenegrin political identity from the one of its bigger continental counterpart.

Regardless of the differences between the cases quoted above, one can notice that the Adriatic Sea is often referred to as a maritime and cultural space, which might bring about a larger regional frame of identification. That frame eventually legitimizes the possibility to hold some deeper and overlapping local affiliations, which are alternative to the national ones. Moreover, the affiliation to a larger Mediterranean world has been somewhat utilized by local social actors, both at political and cultural levels, to draw symbolic boundaries with their continental counterparts. Mostly, those boundaries recall the distinction between the maritime multiculturalism and the tribal nature of the ethnic nationalism of the inland. Those local actors usually perform a common set of images and narrations about the differences between the peaceful, tolerant and cosmopolitan environment of the seaside cities and the belligerent and violent ethnic nationalism of the inland. During the first bombing of the Dalmatian cities in the most recent war, with special regards on the attack to Dubrovnik, also local and international media were extensively referring to such imaginary.

In this perspective, it is quite interesting to notice that the maritime or Adriatic affiliation often supports the local identification processes and provides in some cases the opportunity to distinguish the authentic local identity from the continental influences coming from the newly established metropolitan area. In some cases, the Adriatic also stands as a counterpart for the Balkan turmoil, for it symbolizes a more peaceful, Western and advanced world. However, a more relevant aspect is perhaps that the Adriatic dimension plays a specific role while allowing the performance of local identity patterns without openly denying the national one. Therefore, one cannot easily point out a distinctive and clear Adriatic dimension within the post-communist identity making processes. The Adriatic space has been brought in as an alternative to the Balkan backwardness or against the new continental sites of power (i.e. the capitals of the republics). However, it has also worked as a support for reframing the authenticity of national identities, for celebrating inter-ethnic coexistence or reestablishing symbolically the lost connection between Europe and the Balkans.

In order to have the entire picture, I think that it would have been also good to read some contributions focused on the Western Adriatic coast, namely the Italian one. Although the scope of changes and transformations that took place on the Eastern Adriatic do not correspond to the ones of the Italian Adriatic regions, it is interesting to note how in the last fifteen years the Adriatic dimension acquired a renewed importance in the Italian public sphere. In the post-Second World War period, all references to the Adriatic issues were treated with suspicion by the Italian public opinion for the abuse that Fascism made of the Adriatic imaginary in its politics of territorial expansionism. In the decades of the industrial growth, the Adriatic Sea regions have represented a peripheral site compared to the fordist production systems of the North Western Italian regions (the industrial triangle of Turin-Milan-Genoa). Also, the Adriatic lands did not receive the same amount of attention that the Southern Italian regions, the *meridione*, had. The latter entered into the post-war Italian imaginary as "the" neglected and backward national periphery that could provide nothing but labor force. However, by the end of the 1970s a new concept of the "third Italy" has been pushed forward (Bagnasco 1977), based on the positive economic trends and the new post-fordist sectors that emerged in Central and Eastern Italian regions. The Adriatic regions are almost all part of the "third Italy", at least the central and northern ones; there, the Adriatic dimension has provided a wide set of exploitable symbols, images and narratives for some growing economic sectors such as tourism or services. Moreover, new patterns of post-fordist urban identity have been emerging all along the Adriatic coast and they are progressively framing a similar model of Adriatic cities with a new set of functions in the field of education, ecology and transportation. Cities like Trieste, Venice, Ancona or Pescara are all undergoing this process.

What is somehow striking is that while at local levels the Adriatic Sea represents a space of identity, in spite of its ambiguity, both the nation states and the European Union do not pay much attention to the Adriatic issues. From the states' perspective, the Adriatic has been a space for national conflicts, especially from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when the processes of state building taking place in the area eventually broke that sense of unity which fascinated Braudel. After the Second World War, the Adriatic issues have been at least officially removed from the agenda of the Adriatic states but this did not avoid the persistence of mistrust, diffidence and confrontation between the Adriatic nations. Thus, still today the Adriatic space enters within some framework of cooperation only when included in some other frames (like Alpe-Adria or the Central European Initiatives, which have a pronounced continental dimension) while purely Adriatic trans-national initiatives like the Adriatic-Ionian Initiatives or the Adriatic Euro-Region does not easily take off.

From this standpoint, the article of Daniele Del Bianco suggests that the institutions of the Euro-Region have been successful tools for integrating the continental part of the EU but they could not lead to the same goals in the Adriatic maritime area. The Euro-Regions have been working effectively as a way to tackle economic, political, social and cultural issues concerning the terrestrial border everyday life. In the contexts of regions divided by terrestrial borders, the social and economic trans-border flows can work a factual support to the representation of a regional unified territory. In the case of the Adriatic maritime space the sea is more often a solid background than a space of social connections while the regional representations do not find any everyday life support but only the imaginary one. At the same time, the Adriatic waters are still protagonists of low intensity conflicts like the ones opposing Croatia and Slovenia on the contested sovereignty over the Piran Gulf or Italy, Slovenia and Croatia over the Croatian decision to establish an exclusive maritime area for fisheries and economic exploitation (Quercia and Eichberg 2004; Lopandić and Bučar 2004).

At the European level, an integrated maritime approach to the region is lacking even though the EU keeps on stressing the need of reestablishing some new framework of regional cooperation that would soften the borders between the post-Yugoslav states, eventually dragging the entire region within the European Union. A number of common problems and relevant issues for the Adriatic basin are currently tackled by European institutions, like fishery, ecology, transportation, etc. However, one cannot but notice the weakness of spatial and conceptual projections that would support the EU actions in the Adriatic maritime region. In spite of the many metaphors that picture the Adriatic as a European lake, a sea of peace, a European corridor, a bridge, a gulf or a water highway, it seems that the stress on the natural and cultural unity of the Adriatic basin represents a typical substitution of the means with the goals. Even if the post-communist transition and the European integration process opened up new political scenarios, the symbolization of the space provides only a means for establishing a social unity and shall not be confused with the expression of that unity (Augé 1982).

At the end of the day, the Adriatic cannot be thought so straightforwardly as a space of identity. At macro-regional level, the Adriatic space rests on the legacy of overlapping imperial imaginaries of unity that do not imply synchronized and internationally shared representations of the Adriatic cultural heritage or of its territory.

At the nation state level, the Adriatic sea is nowadays approached mostly in terms of sovereignty and state territoriality, while at local levels the many and ambivalent roles played by the Adriatic sea within the identity making processes eventually reflect the scattered geography of a fragmented cultural space.

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