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THEORY OF ITALIAN NATURAL BOUNDARY, BETWEEN «MISTAKES»
AND AUGUSTAN ECHOES
AN INTERPRETATIVE PROPOSAL

Natural boundary theory, Irredentism and “mistakes” of Ricchieri. – During the 48 years between Italian conquest of Rome and First World War, a scientific debate started involving Italian geographers about definition of region concept and about alleged existence of an Italian region objectively recognizable.

As well known, the issue arouse interest within Italian academia, specially concurrently with arise of Irredentism movement, whose members tried to find in geographical theories a scientific support to their claims. This situation will bring geography to be charged of enslavement to nationalist instances: merciless indictment, because many geographers tried to face the issue with intellectual honesty and scientific objectivity.

Aim of this article is to read back some steps of the debate, proposing a new interpretation of the relationship amongst geographers and political power.

Marinelli was the first geographer to establish the existence of an Italian region. In order to measure the area, he chose the watershed between Adriatic and Black sea as eastern limit; in this way he tried to find a solution for the “Italy’s door”, namely the problem to find an orographic limit in the Julian Alps region (Marinelli, 1895). However, Marinelli himself underlined that there are not linear boundaries among complex and integral regions: while motivating his choose, he specified that every limit has to be set by using a conventional parameter. The watershed line is for Marinelli the only element able to set a linear boundary where a zonal boundary is needed, that is a territory where the properties selected in the definition of the region shading in favor of the properties of the neighboring region.

In addition, Porena confirmed this idea, underlining that political boundaries are set in treaties and has nothing to do with natural boundaries, identifying a wide area where the proprieties of regions are mixed (Porena, 1910, p. 421).

The concept will be further resumed by Ricchieri, that will use an effective simile: like «just conventionally, in history, are used exact dates in order to mark chronological periods; [such] in geography are used boundaries, **straightforward** but more or less windings, in order to separate regions, as well as in every sciences conventional division are accepted» (Ricchieri, 1920, pp. 8-9).

Put in these items, idea of existence of an integral Italian region with conventional boundaries on the alpine watershed it is not a deterministic view, but it is just a physical reading not necessarily consistent to a

political boundary. For political boundaries, it is preferred to use strategic or linguistic parameters. Nevertheless, as well known, the idea of the Italian right to reach its “natural boundaries” circulated within public opinion and became the main issue of Irredentism movement. Moreover, a lot of geographers joined it.

The seal of this political interpretation was the royal announcement of 24 May 1915, which is said to be wrote from King Vittorio Emanuele III. In this announcement, the King left to the soldiers the glory to «put the Italian flag on the holy boundaries that nature gave to our homeland» (Cuman, Vecchiato, 2002, p. 240). This definition got lucky, and was reported from many sources; Tolomei wrote it within introduction of the *Prontuari dei nomi locali* published by Royal Italian Geographic Society during the war (Tolomei, 1917). Even Wilson, in 1919, established Italian natural boundary, identifying Italian right to touch the «watershed within which Trieste and Pola lie, and all the fair regions whose face nature has turned towards the great peninsula upon which the historic life of the Latin people has been worked out through centuries of famous story ever since Rome was first set upon her seven hills» (Perticone, 1965, p. 528). Vittorio Emanuele Orlando replied to Wilson, guessing how this reading would recognize the need to establish boundary in watershed: «The Presidential Message feel the need to say that, with the concessions, Italy would reach Alpine wall, which is its protection. This is a really important recognition, while this wall has not to be open on the western side and include the line of Nevoso Mountain, that divide water flowing to Black Sea from water flowing to Mediterranean sea. From that mountain, called *limes italicus* from Latin people since the first Italian Nation passed from geography to feelings and conscience of people. Otherwise, within this natural wall should remain a dangerous breach, and should be broken the indisputable political, historical and economical unity of Istrian peninsula» (Adami, 1931, pp. 71/72).

The political debate is based on historical-epic symbolism, often exploiting geographical reasons in support to own thesis. In this respect Ricchieri, **although** irredentist, alerted about linear delimitation of a complex and integral region, mistake of serious consequences where someone want to get whichever political decisions. The geographer talk about two serious mistakes: «It is particularly wrong, and carrier of effects, the delimitation of complex and integral regions with boundaries rigidly settled with criteria valid for simple and elementary regions: for example, when the lawfulness of ethnic or politics boundaries is founded on geological, physical, climatic, biologic elements, of secondary importance compared to the complex of factors characterizing the region. And this wrong criteria originated the wrong interpretation and overestimation of the so-called *natural boundaries*. A first mistake (...) depends on the double meaning of these words: natural can just mean “rational and compliant with the nature of the object”, or it can be synonymous with “physic”. Therefore, natural boundary can be, in the first case, the boundary of elementary region, marked by specific phenomenon, physic or biologic, used to identify region. In the second meaning, natural boundary can be the boundary of a State or a region settled on a mountain chain, or a river, or by the sea, or by any other natural element. From this misunderstanding derive many false frequent assessments about the so-called natural borders of complex regions and of integral regions; but, also interpreted in the second meaning, [natural boundaries] are so far to deserve the consideration, the almost axiomatic respect of many. As it is well proven, the value of natural borders is other than unconditioned. The criteria selected to settle it, may vary according to physical elements of a specific situation (plastic, hydrographic, strategic, economic, etc...), so that we must assume that it is very hard to settle boundaries for geographical regions, and it is opportune to settle them just after studying various aspects and phenomena of every considered region, instead of following the common use to start the description by settling boundaries. Therefore, it will be possible to settle and study them with a geographical mind, that is an objective and morally equanimous mind that comes from the respect not just for a ground patch, tight or wide, beloved by those who consider it a Fatherland; moreover, it comes from the respect for others’ regions and others’ fatherlands, because – always,

and especially in the modern time – every portion of the Hearth is linked with other ones in a permanent way, with material and moral connections that we cannot forget or break, without harming all, and ourselves» (Ricchieri, 1920, pp.10-11).



Picture 1 – Italian western boundary between 1924 and 1941. Source: www.valloalpino.com

After the war, really reached coincidence between political boundary and watershed, the following coming of Fascism will bring to assimilator policy in borderland regions towards minorities, bringing to identification of theory of natural boundaries with imperialism, and hasty condemnation to geography as imperialist tool.

Indeed, by reading with neutral view the texts of main characters of the debate, it is possible to find some elements, often underestimated.

In a pamphlet published in December 1918 – intended for Italian delegation in Paris Conference – anonymous author explain about imperative need for Italy to settle boundary on western Julian Alps. Without political claims, the pamphlet's author use military reasons: for him, the issue is not the alleged Italian right about «holy boundaries» settled by God and nature. The point is strategic: in the beginning of the war, every army need a place where quickly gather troops. This place has to be close to a solid natural border, in order to allow operations in security. Due to particular orographic characteristics of Julian Alps, in case of invasion from East, the only place useful for this gathering is close to Isonzo River. Furthermore, Italy is longer than 1300km, and crossed by Apennines, so this operation need at least 20 days: for this reason, it is necessary that minimum boundary - «militarily essential» - is settled on higher peaks of Julian Alps, so as to prevent enemy troops gathering in Lubijana basin, and arrange army close to Isonzo River, in safety. To avoid any mistakes, the author ends the text specifying that Italy never had ambitions to conquer land beyond Alps, but just defensive needs (*Perché l'Italia deve avere...*, 1918).

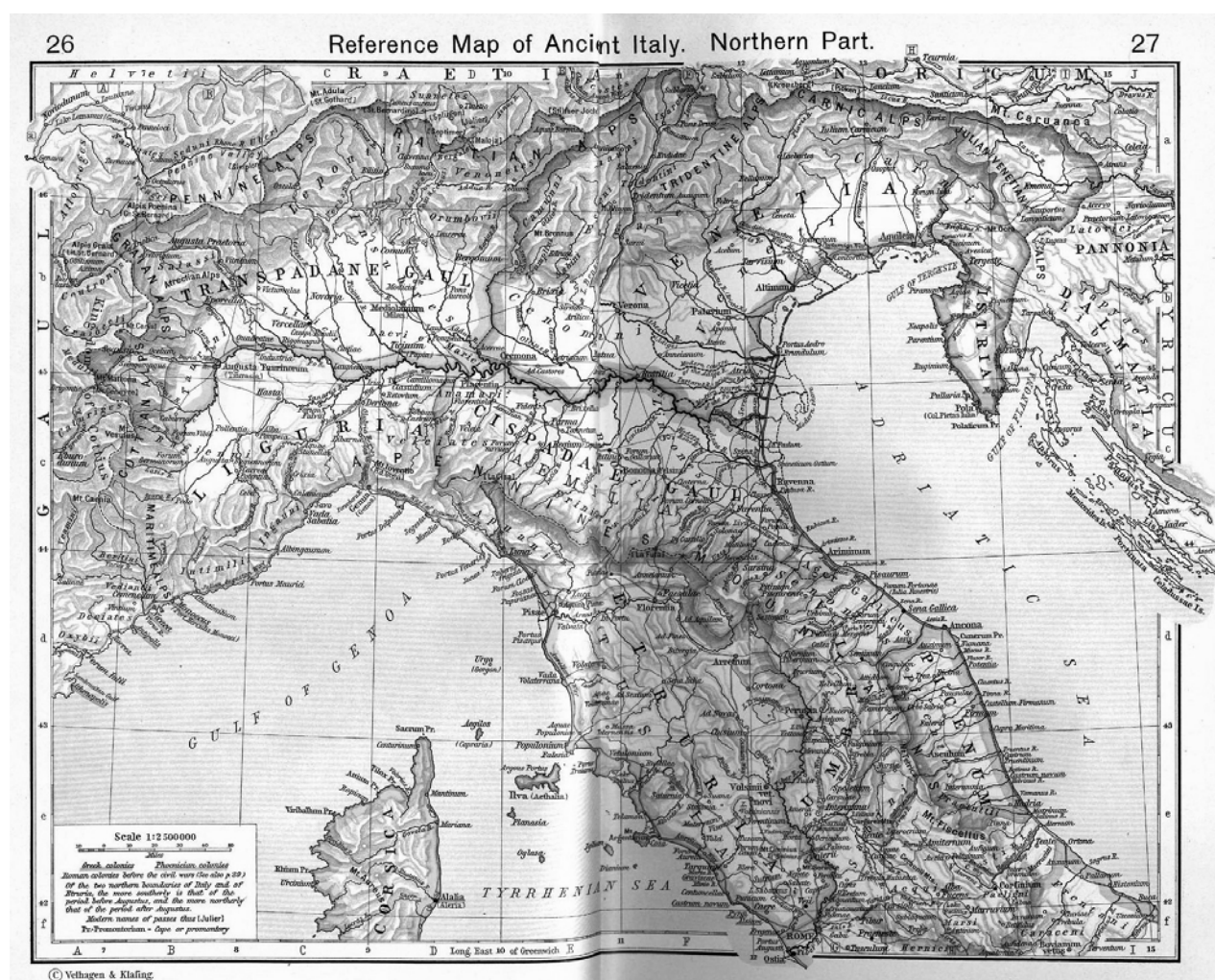
Beyond technical details, the reading of this pamphlet give a different perspective coherent with reasons given from many sources in support of political need of “natural boundary”. Strategic views, aiming to reach defensibility of a territory otherwise easy to disintegrate, more than to obey to an imperialistic plan or a deterministic view.

According to this view, also opinions of main interventionists look different: over all Scipio Slataper, who during 1915 claimed the need to take advantage from the war to settle minimum bases for Italy to develop as nation: «Standing in Brennero and in Longatico we will be treated as equal to the German Empire and Great Croatia (...). We do not have to amend a border but to reach our natural boundaries, because without them we are undefended» (Slataper, 1986, p. VII). Author mentions Prince Eugène Beauharnais, viceroy of Italy, who, during 1810, wrote to Napoleon: «La seule limite militaire à établir entre le possessions de Vôte Majesté vers ce côté et celles de la Bavière est la limite tracée par la nature même sur les sommets des montagnes où se séparent les eaux de la Mer Noire et celles de l'Adriatique» (Slataper, 1986, p.43). According to this interpretation, supporters of natural boundary theory – blamess than following nationalism and imperialism manipulations – would find in the watershed the needful stronghold to ensure achievement and survival of Risorgimental dream. Geographer Arcangelo Ghisleri, liberal Mazzinian far from any charges of nationalism or fascism, claimed without any doubt «the Italian essential need to settle boundary on Alps» in order to prevent enemy to rest «owner of passes and Alpine rampart», and to keep Italy under «nightmare of a perpetual threat» able to undermine serene development (Ghisleri, 1918, p. 13).

The thesis is not new: since during Third Independence War, Bonfiglio wrote: «for every State, the main requirement is to exist, because without this requirement no other ones can be achieved. For this reason, the first need of the Italian Kingdom is to be in the condition to protect the Eastern Alps and the level ground beyond; in fact, this is the easiest passage for Italy» (Bonfiglio, 1866, p.56).

In this sense, the claims of a right to reach natural boundary seems founded on military reasons, explained with need to settle a strategic and defensive boundary, in order to achieve liberal unity process, in the knowledge that every State need stable borders able to ensure survival and serene development during peace time.

Furthermore, the liberals and not only imperialists considered postbellum boundary claims the tool for achieve Risorgimento process, after which Italy would finally «take back its honest sword and converge the efforts of its 40 million clever and hard-working inhabitants in peaceful jobs towards which its thousand-year old civilization and updated vitality push for» (*Perché l'Italia deve avere...*, 1918, p.7).



Picture 2 – The *X Regio* within Augustan territorial organization. Source: Shepherd, 1911.

Echoes of Augustan organization. – The memory of territorial organization determined by Octavian Augustus during I century A.D., comes in support of this reading. The first Roman Emperor organized Italian territory adding the *X Regio Venetia et Histria*. In that occasion, *princeps* settled Western boundary – *il finis Italiae* –

on the *Arsia* River, while until then it was on *Formio* River (nowadays called Risano, near Capodistria-Koper) (Plinius Secundus, 1984, p. 129).

This decision became, in the following history, one of the main reasons of those who supported Italian boundary to watershed: during the century, many authors – from Dante Alighieri to Leandro Alberti – referred to this delimitation, identifying in Monte Maggiore the limit of Italian region (Ghisleri, 1918, p. 22).

In the same way, the memory of Augustan demarcation became, during XX century, one of main reason of supporters of Italian right to reach natural boundaries, established by history as well as nature.

However, it is important to notice that this delimitation leave an important slice of “Irredent” lands out of Italian territory. In particular, Kvarner region, Fiume city and the whole Dalmatia. In facts, reasons of Augustan geographers were mainly military: while Risano is a karstic river with small flow, whose course is partly underground, and it is inappropriate to be a real obstacle, Arsa is a bigger river, linked to Monte Maggiore (from which comes), and represents a natural strong obstacle.

Therefore, geographers claim about need of natural boundary, as established by first Augustus, represents an intrinsic refusal of nationalist and imperialist claims, by keeping out Fiume and Dalmatia. About it, Ghisleri spoke clearly: while supporting the need of natural boundary, Ghisleri had no doubt that border had to be on Arsa river, or at maximum on Fianona peak; for this reason he was criticized by nationalists, because he left out Kvarner and Dalmatia (Ghisleri, 1918, p. 22).

It looks evident how claims related to geographical idea of “natural boundary” was actually a denial of imperialist stance, as excluding lands on the East of Augustan border, although populated by a good percentage of Italians.

Conclusions – The issue of defensibility of territory is closely linked to full realization of unitary process: this element emerges from study of confidential correspondence between colonel Italo Gariboldi – head of Italian Section of International Commission for Italo-Yugoslav boundary – and Chief of Italian Army Staff. In particular, within *Promemoria n. 3* sent in 6 September 1920, we can read that official recommend to Italian Government to insist to reach not ethnic-linguistic line, or the line promised by Treaty of London, but the armistice line. This line reached sea near Castua, West of Fiume, 40 km in the north of Fianona peak, close to “natural boundary” and Augustan line.

In the Colonel words, the point is to find a border able to be a «separating obstacle (...) between two neighbouring populations», in the belief that efficiency of separation should be the principle to settle a line durable, because «the main point is that [borders] must be sure (...). To cede only a small part means to take one part of our essentials and to let the enemy approach his aim, making a war more likely». (Adami, 1931, p. 492)

Gariboldi's reasons are the most rational analysis of natural boundary concept, where adjective characterize noun in the sense that boundary has to be settle on well-defined natural obstacles, and not in the following interpretation about a territory, deterministically given from nature to a nation. Through these reasons, shines the concern about a border definition able to complete unity process, laying the foundations for a durable

peace. «Because [...] we are not imperialist, but Yugoslavs are. They aspire to the sea, and they always will, until it will seem easy to reach, until we will let them close to it (...). Because we are threatened with attack, and we need to keep the enemy *far enough* from the sea, so that the effort of the challenge would weaken his appetite [...]. And this *far enough* means beyond those *Gates*, built by geography and revealed as the best, the most necessary and the safest by history. (...) We have to close those doors where Romans closed it, and stand guard, in order to let populations to mind about industrious development of peace works, for the benefits of the whole country » (Adami, 1931, p. 506). Official words make way for broad assessments, in which is possible to find expectations and hopes of those understood that war was the occasion to complete long unitary process.

So, geographers didn't enslave discipline to growing nationalist propaganda, while nationalism overwhelmed liberal idea of nation (cfr. Proto, 2014a); conversely, they considered "natural boundary" the only tool useful to guarantee peace, prosperity, and a peaceful development of Italian nation, both against external enemy, and against imperialist claims. By doing this, geographers mostly preserved the scientific approach called by Ricchieri the «geographical mind, which is an objective and morally equanimeous mind». (Ricchieri, 1920, pp. 10-11). In this sense, natural boundary theory doesn't represents the funeral march of Risorgimental and Mazzinian idea of nation; on the contrary, it represents the accomplishment, since no nation can live without well-defined boundaries, able to guarantee security.

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