



RE-INTERPRETATION OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE SYMBIOSIS AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BELGRADE

Sanja Iguman*

PhD program on Intercultural Humanistic Studies, Dept. of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Communication Studies,
University of Bergamo, Piazza Rosate 2, 24129 Bergamo, Italy

Abstract:

This paper deals with the burning issue of sustainable tourism development in Belgrade, with an emphasis on re-interpretation and re-narration of local cultural and natural heritage. In order to understand the turbulent past, explain it in the present and preserve it for the future, this work enhances the symbiosis of specific geo-political position and natural preferences of Belgrade, being the starting point for interpretation of its heritage. Referring to studies about the city in a present-day form, the paper will show the crucial function of reading the signs that speak for a space significantly transformed through time. Furthermore, narration as the most important tool for increasing the knowledge and value of a place and its heritage will be underlined. The work refers to the local communities (in sense of understanding their multiple identity and heritage) as well as visitors, within the perspective of the so called "tourist gaze" (John Urry). One of the steps will be an attempt to re-interpret the significance of the Sava and Danube and their confluence in both natural and cultural sense.

Key words:

Belgrade,
cultural and natural heritage symbiosis,
re-interpretation,
narration,
space and time.

1. INTRODUCTION

Belgrade is the capital of Serbia and one of the most important centres in South-East Europe. When describing Belgrade's characteristics, one of the first images that comes to mind is the crossway (historical, geographical, cultural, political, religious, ethnical). However, the fundamental characteristic that makes Belgrade different from other cities with similar traits is the fact that it has lied on political-cultural borders for centuries, which is a very specific and challenging cultural and social experience.

This paper deals with reinterpretation of Serbian heritage, trying to scrutinize it not only from the traditional point of view of the encounter of Western culture and Eastern culture, Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, but from the angle of the compositions of these opposites into a process of mutual interaction- that has been, in my opinion, a crucial feature of Serbia's historical and cultural development over centuries. The attempt will be made by reading the signs that speak of an evolutionary space dramatically transformed through time: that is, reading historical periods and sequences of events within the context of their geographical location. Karl Schlögel's ideas of history "spatialization" and the fact that time shapes space and places are quite relevant to this research (Schlögel, 2003).

Therefore, Belgrade is certainly a specific place in the above -mentioned perspective and needs quite a considerate approach if we consider terms of development or reputation strategies. As explained by the scholars who study the image and reputation of countries, cities and regions:

"Places with a reputation of being poor, uncultured, backward, dangerous or corrupt find that everything they or their citizens try to achieve outside their own neighbourhood is harder, and the burden is always on their side to prove that they don't conform to the national stereotype... For the travel and tourism industry, these questions of national image are fundamentally important... Put simply, a destination with a powerful and positive image needs to do less work and spend less money on promoting itself to the marketplace, because the marketplace already believes what it is telling them. It merely has to help buyers find and purchase the product." (Anholt, 2010, pp. 138-139)

This work shall briefly trace the context of the present discourse with a few hints from my PhD project, which will help to better grasp the large and complex background of academic concepts that sustain it.

1. The research stems from the attempt to face the issues regarding the 'allusive'- or as some scholars would say 'hybrid'- identity of Serbian people (particularly around the territory of Belgrade), due to their turbulent history.
2. Re-interpretation of the mentioned 'stratified' identity and of the 'contested' cultural heritage in Belgrade (both tangible and intangible) clearly confirms the past presence and the remains of the domination of Austrian (as example of Western, Christian) and Ottoman (with its Islam characteristics) Empires on the confluence of Sava and Danube. One of the examples might be found in language. As Trovesi explains in his paper "Per una storia comparata dei turchismi in



bulgaro e bosniaco/bosgnacco”, countless examples of Turkish, on the one hand, and Slavic words on the other, are even today present in the Serbian language (Trovesi, 2012).

3. Defining the heritage and the way of interpreting it- in the light of the most recent academic studies-exposing and narrating it to the public as a way to select, give sense and mould people’s opinions. This especially occurs in the cultures or nations that don’t have clearly defined borders, strong national profiles or resolved matters from the past, in particular people’s rejection to identify themselves with certain religious or political models on complex, multicultural territories (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).
4. A focus on the development of tourism starting from the reinterpretation of Serbian rich and complex heritage, emphasizing specificities not yet fully recognised and valorised within the same Belgrade community, and discussing the ways to promote it.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The “tourist gaze” (John Urry) and the impression that foreigners get after visiting Belgrade is an essential issue in my approach to the question of re-visualization and re-identification of Belgrade’s cultural landscape and its potentials in tourism re-enhancement. What the paper will address here as ‘allusive’ identity of Serbian people (difficult to express or exhaust in few words in its complexity and intertwining), and the way it is transmitted to tourists, is one of the most important segments of my PhD research at the University of Bergamo. As Urry has taught us, the “tourist gaze” is not objective but related to opposites, which influences the way certain heritage will be accepted and understood. We gaze upon different scenes we encounter; we curiously look at the environment when we travel. However, people never see one thing only, but experience the whole context in relation to themselves. The concept of the innocent eye is a myth, because of the existing memories, ideas, skills and expectations everyone already owns. In today’s tourism market, professionals help the local communities to construct and develop one’s gaze as a tourist in order to rethink places as destinations. These concepts confirm the importance of narration for the interpretation and explanation of certain sites (Urry, 1990).

If it is true that tourism initially means “sightseeing” (as Englishmen, the founders of tourism called it), then narration of places, both by locals and visitors, is a crucial tool in the semiotic destiny of a place, including its good or bad reputation for present and future times, and determination of durable stereotypes (Bonadei & Volli, 2003).

As regards the present work, the focus will be on a trait of Belgrade’s heritage that I consider absolutely strategic in terms of re-narration of the city’s complexities: the rivers, namely the confluence of the two international rivers- Sava and Danube. Belgrade is the only European capital situated on the confluence of the two big rivers. Unfortunately, until now it seems that this has been used through Belgrade’s history mostly in a negative sense, *i.e.*, in dividing, imposing borders, tracing deadlines. Actually, the exceptional geographical position on the confluence has always represented the crossroad of trade and commerce not only for the Balkans, but also for the entire South-East Europe. Therefore,

Belgrade and its rivers well represent the multicultural city, with its rich but insufficiently interpreted heritage (disregarded even by locals).

Besides that, the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers represents an extraordinary example of both cultural and natural heritage. The importance of the Sava and Danube as international rivers, the Great War Island located on the confluence itself, and the biodiversity in this area, is enormous. As far as cultural determinations are concerned, the military name of this island comes from the fact that it used to be an important strategic point, for either the conquest or the defence of Belgrade.

On the other hand, Great and Little War Islands are unique geological features, which came about when an underwater sandbank ‘surfaced’ in the 16th century. Due to the vast vegetation and large water surfaces, this area represents a feeding, nesting and mating site for a great number of bird varieties of international importance. In this sense, Great War Island is shown as a natural heritage of Belgrade, but devoid of its cultural importance.

We know people often tend to understand rivers as subjects of physical geography, fluvial geomorphology, hydrology, ecology, an object for natural sciences in general. However, rivers might be studied and researched also in terms of archaeology, heritage and cultural studies. They are in fact subjected to different scientific research forms, which can be applied to landscapes, townscapes and artefacts that usually archaeologists deal with. In other words, rivers represent an important link between different natural, social and cultural forms of life and expression. Matt Edgeworth’s claim that rivers are neither natural nor cultural, but rather entanglements of both, goes much further into the past, contradicting common-sense notion of rivers as something purely natural (Edgeworth, 2011).

“Sources of both abundance and destruction, life and death, rivers have always had a powerful hold over humankind. They run through every human landscape, whether mythical or actual. Over the centuries, rivers have often been identified with the societies they supported. Can one think of China without imaging the Yangzi, of ancient Egypt without recalling the Nile, of Caesar’s Rome or Dante’s Florence without picturing the Tiber or Arno?” (Mauch & Zeller, 2008, p. 1)

Even though Belgrade boasts a great number of heritage sites from Christian and Islamic culture, with high historical, architectural, cultural and artistic values, none of them fulfils the criteria of outstanding universal value as single sample of specific pieces of history. However, their concentration on and around the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers creates an exceptional complex of a certain harmonic integrity, that speaks of commercial and social mediations, and is ‘allusive’ of a quite distinctive cultural flavour, a key feature that makes this place unique and might justify its significance and outstanding national and international value. Even more, the natural connotation of the rivers and their confluence increases its value as a very particular cultural space, located in the centre of urban context, and thus a potential powerful symbol of ‘confluence’ and an attractor for visitors who choose cities for urban cultural experience tourism. Rossana Bonadei in her work regarding city compares it to a script/text and explains it as amalgamation of the natural biomass and human’s constructions.



We might thus say that the city represents an artificial organism within the natural body. Natural spaces have been progressively manipulated by humans (through art, technology, culture, history, *etc.*) and urbanized into the shape of the city (Bonadei, 2006). This idea can be applied to the confluence of Sava and Danube, an interesting geomorphologic example where three different elements (water, wood and stone) have formed specific urban body for centuries, *i.e.*, where humans built the fortress and other urban segments within that natural context. Speaking about natural and cultural elements, it is interesting to mention the famous cultural geographer Carl Sauer and his work on landscapes. He combines human presence in the form of culture together with natural origin to explain landscapes as a living synthesis of people and places, which is crucial for local and national identity. Landscape explains the self-image of people living in a certain place, which differentiates them from others. "Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result" (Denevan & Mathewson, 2009).

When speaking about ways of how to actualize the above-mentioned, it is important to highlight that Serbia has difficulties in joining the European Union. Therefore, numerous obstacles appear on the way of resolving matters regarding policies, regulations and reaching the sphere of sustainable development in many senses invoked by modern communities. The problem emerges at the local level, not even considering tourism but city's development in general. For that reason, it is obvious that the situation regarding sustainable tourism development is even worse. Cooperation concerning tourism and heritage management integrated at a destination level, where both cultural and natural resources are valued and protected, is certainly necessary for accomplishing the target. With joint efforts and resources of European and United Nations' organizations and local population, public authorities and development agencies, this idea of reinterpretation of natural and cultural heritage symbiosis in favour of sustainable tourism development in Belgrade would raise the awareness of multiple cultural, social, economic and environmental values attached to it.

According to recent studies, there are many obstacles in sustainable tourism development: irresponsible business, inadequate media reporting and use of technology, insufficient education, inadequate policies, corruption, unemployment, and consumerism. The purpose is not only to provide the city with physical layout or services and facilities, but by developing cultural and creative concepts and concerns, creating the atmosphere of the place (*genius loci*). This is what makes a destination interesting and unique to contemporary visitors. Destination management organizations (DMO) are becoming increasingly aware of these transformations and initiatives, especially owing to researchers such as Richard Florida, Charles Landry, Greg Richards and others. In particular, the capital city tourism is becoming a very complex and multi-dimensional activity which needs to be managed within a larger policy and planning context. Due to a rapidly growing number of destinations around the world, clear positioning/branding is a must (Richards, 2010).

3. SUMMARY

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned ideas and concepts, several conclusions could be made to summarize this work. Chronologically speaking, first there was nature, and the culture occurred and developed afterwards. Nowadays, it is a symbiosis, a cultural landscape, an urban environment in the middle of the natural context. The 'spatial turn' (Schlogel), as a new approach to places in both natural and urban connotation, and its transformation through time, is crucial for understanding Belgrade and its inhabitants and heritage.

The core of this heritage, the coexistence of religions, cultures, civilizations on the confluence of the two international rivers has always been neglected. The reasons, which might be of course quite complex and profound, are not our present concern. Nevertheless, in the era of rapid changes, it is of vital importance to make radical and innovative moves.

As many recent tourism scholars suggest- and recalling Urry's debate on curiosity and diversity as the engine of mobility- anything is potentially an attraction. It simply awaits one person to take the trouble of pointing it out to another one as something worth seeing (MacCannell, 1976). Or, speaking of 'value' as a result of semiotic dynamics: "One place becomes a target when it gets its value, which means by working on it, to provide attributes necessary for the eyes of the visitors" (Bonadei & Volli, 2003).

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank professors Rossana Bonadei and Andrea Trovesi for their unconditional help and support, not just for writing this paper, but for all they did throughout my studies.

REFERENCES

- Anholt, S. (2010). *Places – Identity, Image and Reputation*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bonadei, R. (2009). *Naturaleartificiale: Il palinsesto urbano*. Bergamo: University of Bergamo.
- Bonadei, R., & Volli, U. (2003). *Lo sguardo del turista e il racconto dei luoghi*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Denevan, W. & Mathewson K. (2009). *Carl Sauer on Culture and Landscape: Readings and Commentaries*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Edgeworth, M. (2011). *Fluid pasts: archaeology of flow, Rivers as entanglements of nature and culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- MacCannell, D. (1976). *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mauch, C., & Zeller, T. (1966). *Rivers in history: perspectives on waterways in Europe and North America Rivers in history and historiography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh.
- Richards, G. (2010). Metropolitan Tourism: Competition, Collaboration and Creativity. *Asia Pacific World*, 1(1), 75-94.
- Schlögel, K. (2003). *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*. München: Carl Hanser.
- Timothy, D.J., & Boyd, S.W. (2003). *Heritage Tourism*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Trovesi, A. (2012). Per una storia comparata dei turchismi in bulgaro e bosniaco/bosgnacco. *Studi Slavistici*, 9, 85-110.
- Urry, J. (1990). *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage Publications.