

Geography and Nationalist Visions of Interwar Yugoslavia. By Vedran Duančić. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 286 pp. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-50259-1

The recent book by Vedran Duančić is a work which will be of interest to any reader, whether historian or geographer, who is eager to learn more about the relationship between nationalism, nation states, and politics, and not only for scholars on the Balkans. Duančić's approach, which straddles the border between the two disciplines, was something of a revelation to me, and the theme itself is of unquestionable relevance. His style is also fresh, engaging, and simple, yet also precise, and his insights are emphatic. The text is logical and coherent, and his approach is centered around problems. He takes the challenges faced at the time and the responses given by the discipline of geography to these challenges as his point of departure. The book is much more than a history of the geography of interwar Yugoslavia, and indeed it is much more than an analysis of the intertwining of science and politics. It is a substantially new contribution because its innovative approach is not Serb-centric. Duančić stresses that, although one could hardly afford to ignore the role of geographer Jovan Cvijić and his wide network of contacts, the book is not intended as another analysis of Cvijić, but rather seeks to reveal to the reader his impact on the domestic scientific and political milieu, his organizational work, and the consequences of his contacts abroad. Cvijić's contemporaries, including his disciples, his followers, and his ideological opponents (indeed, there is a common intersection of the three categories), are all brought into the discussion and subjected to analysis (Erdeljanović, Filip Lukas, Artur Gavazzi).

The book also excellently situates Balkan geography in a European context, with a look at Central European "state-building" geographers such as the Polish Romer, the Czech Dvorsky, and the Ukrainian Rudnyits'kyi. It offers a clear overview of their connections to Friedrich Ratzel's anthropogeography and the initiatives which went beyond it: the local confluence of the determinist-possibilist debate and its consequences and implications for the organization of the political state. We are given a picture of the scientific milieu from which the first generation of geographers of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes came. Not surprisingly, Vienna and Berlin were the centers where they were trained, so of course their initial acceptance of Ratzel's position concerning the development of nations and the superiority of the nation state framework over the supranational empire is understandable, even if they were politically

opposed to the states which were home to their alma maters. We learn of the influence of Penck on Cvijić, who moved from Vienna to Berlin after 1906 (they continued to correspond vigorously after World War I, when they were on opposite sides) and of Cvijić on Penck in the latter's geographic turn, in the course of the elaboration of the "Blood and Soil" ideology after 1920. We also learn of the time Cvijić spent in "exile" in Paris during the war years, which led to the birth of his book *La Péninsule Balkanique* and also gave him the chance to win the friendship and sympathy of Isaiah Bowman and de Martonne, who played a major role in policymaking in 1920. Duančić also offers an analysis of the contents and conceptual frameworks of the main geographic works. He notes that Cvijić's arguments were contradictory, and although his voluminous work exerted a considerable impact on readers and politicians, Romer achieved the same thing in Poland in far fewer pages. Thus, in the end, it was not the coherence of the work or the extent to which it testified to its author's expertise that was decisive, but the simple fact that the Yugoslav (Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, etc.) arguments (regardless of their accuracy or relevance) were precisely what politicians needed in 1918. Thus, a work that numbered only some 50 pages could serve as scholarly background material just as effectively as a work that was 500 pages long.

Thirdly, the political and ethnic character of the nascent Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes itself was riddled with contradictions, which meant that the rival ideologies of Paul Vidal de la Blache's possibilism and Ratzel's determinism appeared in the argumentation of both opposing national and etatist (including Greater Serbia versus Yugoslav) and centralist and federalist geographers, with strong political overtones. Sometimes, even the same geographer would change his opinion over time. At the time of the birth of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, there were several possible alternatives: it could have been created as a strongly centralized supra/transnational (Yugoslav) political entity or a decentralized federal-national entity. What in reality emerged was really more a state that rested on a centralist foundation with Greater Serbia leanings (at least according to the Croats in the opposition).

It is worth taking a moment to consider how the political-constitutional problem was grappled with in geography. In 1909, after the annexation, in his first explicitly political (and more ambitious) work, Cvijić rejects the Austrian imperial contention that Austro-Hungary needed Bosnia to ensure the security and economic development of Dalmatia. After 1920, however, he himself argues against Italian claims that Dalmatia was necessary to promote

the economic development of isolated Bosnia. In other words, he uses the (imperial) argumentation he had earlier rejected in support of his own political claims. The notion that access to the Adriatic was necessary for the viability of the state (once Thessaloniki had been lost) was again a geopolitical argument and more imperialist in nature. It could even be called a paraphrase of the “*Drang nach Salonika*” accusation levelled against the Monarchy. (Similarly, the Serbian geopolitical argument for the unification of Serbia and Montenegro as a means of cutting off the Monarchy from the Turkish Empire and putting an end to the former’s constant meddling in the Balkans is also merely a rephrasing of an imperialist idea.) Moreover, this argument led to another geographical—and politicized—problem. The Greater Serbia ideology saw Austro-Hungary’s endeavors in Bosnia as a form of colonization, and it dismissed developments such as the construction of the railways with the contention that Serbia could have done this on its own. However, after 1920, as the new masters of the territory, the politicians who had promulgated this ideology were unable to connect the cities of the Adriatic with the interior. The lack of political and economic unity led to another geographical debate: did it make more sense to unite economically and socially similar territories into a single state or, on the contrary, would it be more practical to unite territories which, precisely because of their differences, complemented one another? This question, obviously, cannot be answered unequivocally from a purely academic point of view (both arguments were made in the peace negotiations), but it was raised in practice in connection with the political structure and territorial extent of the nascent Yugoslav state. Economically and ethnically, Dalmatia was not similar to Bosnia, so the latter argument (which put emphasis on the importance of uniting complementary territories) had to be used, and this in turn raised the question of local self-government and decentralization, which the Serbs rejected. However, the notion that the Serb-Croat-Slovenian nation was a closely linked tribe (a notion that also served as an explanation for the rejection of national-subnational levels of self-government) served to buttress the visions of those who espoused the idea of similarity. Thus, depending on the nature of the state that the emerging Yugoslavia would be, a different system of geographical argument would have to be used. In other words, it is very clear that the structure of the state was not determined by scientific, geographical considerations. Rather, geography merely offered a system of argument as a basis for claims to legitimacy on which the political will behind the structure of the state could build.

The Ratzelian and national Darwinist notion of nation state supremacy was just as problematic. Before 1920, this notion provided a logical ideological background for Serbia's territorial growth. The young nation state was trying to achieve its ethnically ideal borders against two non-national empires that were seen as evolutionarily obsolete. Yugoslavia could only be understood as a "nation state," however, if the idea of Serb-Croat-Slovenian unity could gain at least theoretical acceptance. This notion, however, was thrown into question, primarily by the Croatian side, and the new political entity was seen as a Greater Serbian empire. Supranational Yugoslavism, as a possible alternative, could not be coupled with the nation state logic either. In other words, both the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and Yugoslavia embodied a type of state criticized as obsolete by Serbian geographers (and Ratzel). It is thus not surprising that Yugoslav geographers, whether they identified themselves as Serb, Croat, or Yugoslav geographers (which they did), alternately drew on Ratzel's nation state determinism and Vidal de la Blache's possibilism. These two theories offered divergent explanations of (if indeed they could explain) the trajectories of Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian national development (the debate between Lukas and Cvijić's successors). If one accepts as a point of departure the existence of the "three-one nation" in the historical past, the question is: when did they begin to develop in different directions? Some Croats and some Serbs lived in a geographically similar environment (far from the Dinaric Alps), yet their development took different paths. In contrast, the Croats of Dalmatia and the Croats of Pannonia, though they lived in strikingly different regions, formed one nation, while the Serbs, Muslims, and Croats living in the Bosnian mountains did not. This would suggest that it is not the geography of the land that is the determining factor but rather culture, and this meant that Ratzel and people belonging to his school of thought were wrong. When did the nation's path of development split? With Byzantium? With the Turks? Or did the natural geography-based dilemma suggest a similar political-ideological background: the Dinaric Alps morphologically tie the country together? Or the Vardar-Morava axis? According to the geography on which visions of Greater Serbia were based, it is the latter, since the two sides of the Dinaric Alps have different climates, lifestyles, etc. But according to those who espoused the notion of a Yugoslav state and also proponents of the race theory (there were also those who believed in a "Dinaric" type of man as the prototypical Yugoslav), the Dinaric mountains and the importance of uniting people of complementary (not identical) cultures and lifestyles

were the essential factors. It is clear that the relationships among geography, ethnography, linguistics, and cultural anthropology on these issues needed to be clarified, as did the stances in these various branches of the sciences, and there were serious debates and differences among members of the first generation of geographers (inherited from the empires), who were transforming either to proponents of the national ideal or to supporters of the Yugoslav vision. Some of the new university centers, such as Skopje, were merely part of the long arm of Belgrade. In Ljubljana, first Croatian and then local influence became dominant. Zagreb was seen by Belgrade as a reactionary hotbed, not only politically but also academically. Social geography, especially its Yugoslav dimension, was, on the basis of the curricula analyzed, relegated to the background under the Croatian-Italian Artur Gavazzi, who was educated in the Austrian school and, moreover, published little and traveled little, in contrast with the traditions of the “autochthonous” school. Cvijić himself traveled a great deal, and before 1914, he was engaged primarily in geomorphology (thus, it was not credible to blame Gavazzi for a lack of interest in social geography; rather, he could have been faulted for a lack of “field studies in local history”). At the same time, geomorphology was considered a much more serious science than anthropogeography, and it is hardly surprising that the latter was chosen by many people and was also in demand by the state.

The book sheds light on such problems, while examining one by one the struggles of the leaders of the Yugoslav/Grand Serbia center and the national university centers, as well as their attitudes to the changes which came in the wake of Cvijić’s death and the introduction of the royal dictatorship (which were a caesura from the perspective of the history of science). The book will also be of interest to readers who are not geographers, because it provides an impressive array of information on the history of ideas and mentality, the history of relations, and the interweaving of politics and science in the period, and it also discusses and interprets the main events and the roles of academic work in the process of state and nation building in Yugoslavia (a process rich with contradictions), not in a descriptive manner but rather by placing this all in context (with aptly chosen quotations). The fact that the author is a representative of a new generation who was not raised in the Belgrade geographic tradition and thus dares to be critical of the dominant narratives, bringing into focus and putting in a favorable light peripheral (or rather damned to the periphery) local-national narratives (while presenting not only the Croatian trend, but also others through their relation to it), obviously

plays a major role in this assessment. Thus, the Croat-Serb opposition, all too familiar among historians, manifested itself not only among contemporary historians, but also in the natural sciences.

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