

REPRESENTING PLACE AND TERRITORIAL IDENTITIES IN EUROPE. A REVIEW

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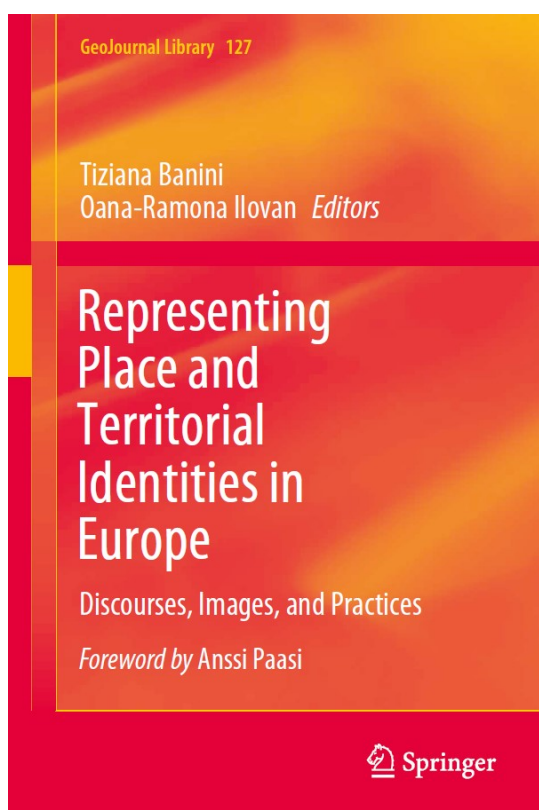
INTRODUCTION

Both the notions of place and territory have undergone a shift in perspective the last three decades, from a strictly geographical, topological, understanding to a more cultural, humanistic, meaning, a perspective that emphasizes the nature of human connections and place attachment which now outweighs the importance of the geographical location *per se*.

These tendencies have been gradually adopted in all connected research fields, from cultural and political geography to social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political economy), landscaping, territorial and urban planning, and others. In a globalized world of rapidly shifting influences and cultural areas, places and territories are far less delineated than before and are understood in a dynamic, fluid interaction with each other.

The current book edited by Tiziana Banini and Oana-Ramona Ilovan follows the same pattern of thought, presenting itself as a rich tapestry of chapters and methods that underline the connection between human activity and the anthropic environment. As stated by Paasi in the Foreword, there is a shift from a rigid space of places to a more flexible space of flows where everything is in constant change and evolution (Banini & Ilovan, 2021, p. vi).

The preference for either “place” (in Anglo-Saxon literature) or “territory” (in Continental Europe research) alludes to a possibly different understanding of this dynamic with emphasis on



either an important centre – well determined spatially, or a wider area of manifestation and far less strictly bordered both in terms of space and time.

Furthermore, the editors make in the introductory chapter a distinction between the notion of “territory” as understood by English speaking scholars, who emphasize a top down, political determination of territory as opposed to the French-Italian authors who perceive territory as a bottom-up emergent entity, based on the relations and interactions of the groups of people inhabiting it. In other words, they stress out the negative and passive understanding of the former as opposed to the positive and active image of the latter (Banini & Ilovan, 2021, p. 3).

Finally, the “identity of place” that is one of the terms that has been used extensively in the last decades to denote a certain specificity, starting from Norberg-Schulz’s reconceptualization of *Genius Loci* (Norberg-Schulz, 1980) as a part of personal identity derived from dwelling in a place is differentiated from the “identity of the place” which is defined on the basis of shared representations at group or community level (Banini & Ilovan, 2021, p. 5).

All these distinctions and definitions that are provided in the introduction of the book offer a key to understanding the various positions and perspectives of the authors that further present their research in the following chapters, making for a well needed overview of what is actually a combination between an interesting read and a thought-provoking opus.

PERSPECTIVES

The volume is structured into four sections, each with a different topic and set of research questions. The first part deals with rebuilding place-based relations at urban level and focuses on five urban contexts, four in Italy and one in Romania. Apart from the obvious similitudes in the abovementioned topic, the five chapters included exhibit different methods of collecting data and analysis, from the classical approach of interviews to a more innovative one comprising of analysing social media excerpts for underlying sentiments and attitudes and to further mixed methods. The focus of the research also oscillates between the feelings of marginality in a globalized capital, gentrification in a rich historical city centre, music geography in a medium-sized town or e-participation and landscape education at a more regional level in Italy. What they all have in common is discussing various material and immaterial assets that fall under the umbrella term of heritage and its representations, withal emphasizing place attachment through empowering the citizens. From the Esquiline in Rome and the Inner City of Palermo to the smaller town of Lugoj or to the regions of Salento or Friuli Venezia Giulia, identities are analysed both at individual and community level for a broader perspective on the phenomenon.

The second part has four chapters and is concerned with the topic of representation at national or urban level both from above and below. Qualitative and mixed methods are used to depict representation both at the mental and material level. An innovative method of in-depth graphic analysis of pictures and postcards sheds new light on the topic, sometimes conflicting with the intended rhetoric (as in Socialist Romania, for example). The chapters study an unprivileged neighbourhood in Dublin, a contemporary view of national identity in Romania in general and Cluj in particular and a retrospective overview of Socialist Romania either again at national or urban level (the last chapter dealing with Anina as a case study).

The third part consists of only three chapters that focus on the issue of negotiating identities and belonging. The first two are interested in revealing whether the top-down national

(Romania and the Republic of Moldova borderline) or regional (Rupea in Braşov County) delineated territories coincide with the bottom-up or historic understanding of communities and identity of the place. It is no surprise that sometimes artificial borders or administrative limits do not take into consideration older established entities, sometimes being specifically enforced in order to dislodge the stronger feeling of belonging to a certain group or minority and thus facilitate a quicker integration and absorption into a new political frame (as was the intention by the USSR annexation of Bessarabia, for example). The third chapter in this section deals with an even more controversial issue, namely the drama of women forced to migrate in order to escape domestic violence. Following the victims, the author considers their experience of space and place as they are forced to reassign home into a very different environment and start over their lives from scratch.

The final part is entitled *Challenges and stereotypes: representing rural areas*. As the name suggests, it treats three case studies from villages in France, Poland and Ireland respectively, by deconstructing some myths in confronting the attractiveness of the rural landscape, sometimes marketed for touristic reasons, with the emerging poverty and depopulation that is specific to so many secluded rural areas across Europe. The authors deal with the policies and future plans for revival of these areas from several points of view. In order to do so, they employ a variety of methods, ranging from in-depth interviews, photo mapping of the territory and even free hand sketches in order to give an accurate overview of the described rural landscape (the second chapter). The first chapter depicts the natural beauty of Ariège region in Southern France but warns against common misconceptions regarding the idyllic atmosphere that is counterbalanced by seclusion and poverty. The second chapter deconstructs the general accepted idea of village life in rural Poland, by analysing 21 villages through interviews of the locals and freehand sketch maps and reveals the post socialist dynamic of country life. Finally, the third chapter opposes the resilience of local fishermen communities in coastal Donegal (Ireland) who still live in harmony with the nature and the sea to disruptive regional policies enforced from above.

CONCLUSIONS

As stated by the editors of the book in the conclusions, the main aim of the collective volume is to encourage further theoretical debates on the notions of territorial identity, place identity as well as representation through empirical data collected in various formats and through multiple methods and, as far as the reader is concerned, it manages to live up to its goals, providing an immersive compendium of practices and stories on local, regional and national identities and belonging, spanning 15 chapters each dealing with a different case study.

Identity emerges in individuals that share the same narratives and similar conditions of life, sometimes incentivizing them to become part of a community, a term that unfortunately is thoroughly abused lately. Adversity or common goals and interests foster resilience and resilience in turn consolidates the feeling of belonging that comes to life within a certain group of people. And it is the various ways of life that these groups of people exhibit and their stories that make for the richness of human experience across national borders and artificial barriers. It is in this context that this volume emerged and should be perceived as an overview into the multitude of representations that certain places and territories receive from above or below.

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