

The Past in the Future – The Tourism of the Balkans through the Eyes of Anthropology

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Abstract “Space has a formula, a place has a genius: they are not only nature and environment, ground, soil, climate, flora, waters, mountains or these together. A place is not only where these things are located. A place is friendly or repugnant, frightening or gentle, tranquil or majestic, and language has hardly any adjective which could not be used to describe a place. There are no two identical places, just like there are no two identical moments. The richness of human life is in never recurring moments and in places that compare to nothing. ... A place has not only physics but also metaphysics and is not only a sight but also a genius. This is why it cannot be defined, only described: because a place is not predictable, because a place is a face.” [13] Due to its extremely eventful history, the stereotypical associations about the Balkans do not paint an uneventful, tranquil or, not to mention, boring environment but much more a place full of surprises, the co-existence of power and passion, together with some sort of naturalness, respect for tradition and a romantically intact natural environment. In the trans-avant-garde dimension of the new type of – mainly elite – culture, intimacy and the embracement of tradition can be interpreted as a touristic potential of space, as opposed to the more general postmodern trend, which tries to focus the passing of time into the continuous present [2]. This study takes as its starting point the opportunity of using space for touristic functions; looking at the colourful traditions, or cultural diversity, as real reserves of the Balkans, it examines the Balkans as a region that preserves and develops its traditions. Partly as an ethno-scape (a region’s identity determined by ethnic features) and partly as the subject of political tourism, along the meanings and contents it has created itself.

Keywords Heritage, Value, Tourism, Space, Time, Balkan, Anthropology

1. The Balkans as a Touristic Meta-Space

When thinking about tourism, emphasising the role of space is extremely important as the experiences provided by touristic products are tied to place (attractiveness), even though “the touristic space rarely becomes an independent entity – in most cases, it can be identified among basic social functions, along the space-in-space principle.” [20] ¹ At the same time, the touristic space is defined not only by the movements themselves that draw its boundaries but also by their time and intensity [1].

Although, agreeing with Georg Simmel, we can say that it

is not space itself that has social importance but the spiritual activity which divides space into parts and reviews it [7], we ought not to overlook the fact that each space carries its own, inseparable content, each social group perfects and preserves itself in a time-space form, producing the appearance that group-identity stabilises its own unity as a form and content space [15], [26].

An ethnic unit is able to express itself in a spatial-regional framework and an ethnic feature that carries space-related features may become a cultural feature of the local native population, sometimes independently of the identity undertaken also “to the outside world” that is based on its own space-identity, the language spoken and religious practices. “The place taken in space, therefore, somehow gets represented in the dimensions of culture. ... Hence, as time goes by, each space carries its own content, every social group preserves itself in a space-and-time based form and protects the pretence / reality of group identity, i.e. its unity as a form and its practice of social space use as the content of this form is capable of displaying the special features of a complex culture, of interiorising this culture and making it implicit, the contents of “speaking the same language” – and gets manifested not only in an administrative way.” [8]

The segment of reality in whose superficial relations the surplus carried by the immateriality of the area it designates is described and interpreted by related literature as

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1 Michalkó [20] points out that tourism is interwoven with the basic social functions even in regions where it plays a dominant role. In a given settlement, inhabitants’ homes, work, welfare and social provisions, education and the world of free-time activities are all involved in tourism in some way as and while demand is satisfied [3].

“meta-space”². This surplus gets embodied in space-related myths, institutionalised ideas, beliefs or very realistic phenomena that are invisible only to the outsider. “Myths often express and explain society’s image of itself and of the world with and through religious beliefs, feast rites and customs practiced every day.” [20] These, just like the scenes of city legends, are spatial constructs, which can be experienced only if we unleash the rational shackles of our consciousness [12], as “particular spaces are created not only by the quality differences between elements of space or methods of mathematics but also by how spaces are sensed, i.e. the perceiving person himself/herself.” [21]

We can thus say that when we perceive space, the perceiver’s subjective, “reflected” spaces appear,³ while, at the same time, to the “perceiving” individual, “these do not appear as figures placed in clearly defined areas but as nomadic arrangements rushing in the space of flows” [16]. Post-modern life strategy succeeded in making time unrecognisable and once time is no longer a vector, no longer an arrow with a head or a river that has a direction of flow, it no longer structures space; it becomes useless forward and backwards and the only thing that matters is that we are and remain able to move and never stop. Fitness – that we can quickly get ourselves in the centre of events and be ready to receive experiences, as they come, [2] without content.

It is thus clear that if history, time and change did not intervene, “the strip of Moebius would become a closed an infinite ring. Though it is true that the fundamental reason for the existence of the *lieu de mémoire* is the stopping of time, the prevention of the work of forgetting, the fixing of the status quo, making death immortal and materialising the spiritual, with an eye to getting the maximum of meaning from the minimum of signs, it is equally clear – and this is what makes the whole story exciting – that the *lieux de mémoire* survive through their ability to transform, the constant reviving of their scope of meaning and the unforeseen branches of their change.” [22]

Piotr Uspenski [25] defines time as space imperfectly perceived. In other words, if and when we sense something in time, we are actually sensing a space that is superior to us – because it is incomprehensible to us – and it is our

2 In the definition offered by Michalkó [20], the essence of meta-space is that behind the mostly audio-visually perceived space there is another space, which can be recognised only by the initiates and which is actually created by society, the result of development and transformation processes taking place in history, culture, the economy and technology. The two scenes are tightly interrelated even if and even though this symbiosis has restricted tangibility. Since the meta-space carries several enigmatic elements, one can expect, as a natural consequence of human nature, that its existence will arouse the interest of society, which, at the end of the day, will get manifested in touristic mobility. At this point, meta-geography, the new trend in social geography, deserves to be mentioned, which is focused on the meeting points of research in historical and political geography and cultural anthropology. For more details, see: [17], and we also ought to make mention of meta-cartography, which is associated with meta-geography. [4]

3 The theoretical foundations of the mental space are among the cornerstones of the settlement arrangement policy, i.e. settlement marketing: one of its central elements is the space image that can be created on the basis of the preferences of the targeted social group.

imperfection that forces us to perceive and understand it in time, as a process. [19]⁴

“The *lieux de mémoire* are our moments. ... Differently from all other historical subjects, *lieux de mémoire* do not have references in reality. Or, rather, they are their own references, clear signs which denote only themselves. Not that they do not have contents, a physical appearance or a history – on the contrary. ... *Templum*: this is, in its profane undefined nature, dividing a circle – space or time, space and time – into pieces, in which everything matters, symbolises something and carries some meaning. In this sense, the *lieu de mémoire* has a twofold nature: it is a place that is too much closed, tied to itself and attached to its own place but, at the same time, is also continuously open to the interpretation of its meanings.” [22]

The sale potential of the authentic milieu and atmosphere and originality is a threat and an opportunity at the same time for the Balkans. The need for a sensitive balance between preserving authenticity and becoming “globally” successful gives tourism an anthropologic function. What is “traditionally” incomprehensible may become exciting and on-the-surface transparent through a regional identity built on national region awareness.

2. Heritage Industry in the Balkans?

The ‘cultural industry’ and the ‘heritage industry’⁵ consider culture and cultural heritage as economic products.⁶ In this respect, perhaps the most important element is *tradition*⁷, i.e. the passing down and continuous changing of long-lasting customs, knowledge and social practices. [24] The key functions of tradition are to ensure a balance between elements old and new; continuity (organic nature); the safe transfer of the features characteristic of a community; creating social cohesion, identity; capital of trust and knowledge and to support the seizing of the opportunities of the individual and the community. Hoppál [14] emphasises the importance of three elements of tradition: that as a real reserve of humankind, it offers possible answers to the challenges of a community; that, if preserved, traditional values can serve as the foundation on which mutually receptive, tolerant cultural communities can be built and that

4 “A contact with some space that we are unaware of arouses in us the feeling of moving in this space and all this, i.e. the imperfect awareness of some space and the feeling of moving in this space is what we call time. The latter strengthens the assumption that the idea of time is rooted not in observing movement in nature but the other way round: it is the perception and idea of moving that is rooted in the “sense of time” existing in us, which, in essence, in nothing else than imperfect sensing of space: the limit or boundary of our perception of space.” [25]

5 The heritage industry approach is represented by, for example, [11]

6 Our memories surviving from other eras are important not only as cultural values: they often preserve the knowledge of people of old times.

7 Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash speak about the disappearance of traditions. According to their view, „radical departure from traditions playing a significant role in the reflexivity of modernity completely cuts our connections [...] with former eras” [10]. “Research carried out in different parts of the world, however, do not confirm this statement.” [23]

a community that possesses strong traditions and, hence, is open is able to adapt to and utilise the advantages of globalisation and reorganise and rebuild itself.⁸

“In this interpretation, culture and the cultural heritage are one of the key factors of economic and regional competitiveness – resources, in other words – and, as a result, economics and economy-related fields of science show an increasing interest in them. Their economic importance is rooted primarily in the special value added by them, which has cultural contents. The cultural heritage, however, is far more than that: not all elements of this heritage can be attached the label of “value” in an economic sense, especially not “profit” that gets manifested in money – and these cannot be the aims of using this heritage. Through the complexity carried by it, heritage sheds light on the fact that the sector-based separation of nature, society, culture and the economy does not support either understanding or the identification of an actual solution. A new approach is needed, which thinks not along discrete sectors but in unity, as a whole.” [6]

Hopp *á* [14], connecting tradition with cultural processes, establishes that in this connection two mechanisms can be identified at the same time: the innovative effect, which serves the integration of new elements and the renewal of the system, and another mechanism, which ensures the continuity of the system and, thus, the transferring, the carrying forward of traditions. The key features of traditions that work are a balance between the two mechanisms and maintaining their dynamism, which changes from era to era. If one becomes predominant over the other, this balance will collapse, which may result in this culture’s becoming rigid or, if tradition falls apart into its individual elements, even the loss of the continuity of tradition.

The economic importance of heritage is also rooted primarily in the special value added by it, which has cultural contents. The “sustainable heritage development” defined by Graham-Ashworth-Turnbridge [11] may play a highly important role in this respect: the economic potential of heritage ought to be exploited so that the cultural value content of this heritage does not get damaged during the process.

Traditions are worth preserving also because they are the sources of renewal and, at the same time, through the diversity of patterns of thinking, lay a good foundation for flexibility and adaptation to change. The role of tradition in the world is the same as its role for the individual: tradition helps us create a balance between old and new qualities,

⁸These together gave birth to the „*tradition-based society*” or „*tradition-based knowledge society*” concept, which, on the one hand, considers tradition as a set of pieces of knowledge and experience that organize society and, on the other, as the model for equality-based community building. The starting point of this approach is that traditions can be equally shared, can only be lived together and the more the individual acquires of it the stronger his/her community building power will be. Thus tradition is a local community’s capital of trust and power for survival, with a significant community-creating force, which offers a system of values and life quality principle that give priority to intellectual and spiritual assets and, at the same time, a moral order.

preserve durable values, i.e. things that have proven to work, and transfer the knowledge assembled of our comprehensions to others, even to new generations. [6]

If that is achieved, tourism may be an ideal means in the Balkans for a region peacefully standing up for cultural diversity to not only be the devisee but also the deviser of values accumulated over time: values which have so far much shown a disintegrating nature. Tourism is an excellent opportunity for the Balkans to issue the best possible certificate of itself.

3. Revitalizing (Experience) Tourism

In certain cases, the restructuring brought about by globalisation does not ruin but on the contrary: it keeps the old scenes and customs of life alive. Sometimes, the identity awareness born and/or strengthening in the interrelations between globalisation and localisation, in the glob-local world, is what stops cultural or even economic decline. Using the words of Wallerstein [27], we could also say “universalism through particularism and particularism through universalism”.

For this very reason, it has increasingly been getting recognised what a huge role tradition preserving and development programs play in preserving the local identity, in strengthening or creating a community’s belonging together, i.e. to help a region develop into a “tradition-based region” (the expression invented by Csörgő [5], i.e. a cultural complex that will healthily survive historic eras and will preserve the continuity of tradition.

Though ‘tradition’ has mainly been interpreted along humanistic coordinates, an economics-based approach to it is becoming ever more widespread. Already in the 19th century, Scotland already had what is today referred to as the “tradition industry”: conscious tradition development and, moreover, the invention of traditions.⁹ Communities which have strong traditions and are, therefore, open, are able not only to adapt or to utilise the advantages of globalisation but also to reorganise and rebuild themselves. As was already mentioned, this is how tradition acquires an ever more powerful function in the global economy.

„In most cases, tradition tourism is built upon typically local traditions, national or ethnic features, local values: traditional feasts, still living (or revivable, re-creatable) and, in most cases, truly spectacular local folk customs, the spreading of handicraft traditions or, in some cases, the natural environment. By today, certain villages have created

⁹ It is little known that the kilt is also a product of the industrial revolution: its original purpose was not the preservation of some glorious tradition but to bring the people living in the Scottish Highlands from the moors and take them to the factories. Though tradition usually brings economic benefits in a very indirect way, we can still say that tradition can be a very important foundation for the economic development of a region as it increases human and knowledge capital. It carries a far more direct economic value – as “added tradition value” – in, for example, handicraft products, in which knowledge passed down generations becomes visible. (For more details, see: [5])

– either in the framework of traditional “village days”, gatherings, customs or on the foundation of traditions of the past or production related ones recently started as part of specialisation (from potato growing to cart making) – the special image of the settlement, which has not only a touristic but also an economic appeal. These programs do not only improve the image of the village and boost its economy – through, among others, tourism – but also contribute to community development and help strengthen the local identity.” [5]

Csörgő [5] also points out that these programs make local people realise how valuable their own culture is and, as part of that, how important their traditions are and this, if the path of tradition-based economy is walked, works as positive feedback: looking back into the past and forward into the future, local people start to “re-learn” their traditions. A tradition-conscious way of living is established, in which tradition is consciously attached importance and is given a role in the preservation and renewal of identity and in the process of community reorganisation.¹⁰ In this regard, it would be extremely exciting to compare the concept of tradition-based tourism with the principles of responsible tourism. The intensity of the effect is frenetic and dispersive.

We must also call the attention of the reader that deciding what is really important about traditions is difficult. The difficulty is rooted in the fact that it is not easy to find the tools and methods with which the real content of tradition can be preserved among the ever changing circumstances of life, the disintegrating external supports. It is, therefore, an important question how the community’s memory structure can be maintained if it, owing to its nature, used to be tied to a way of life and now, among the rapid changes of our age, it often seems that the community, which continuously loses its cohesion, has no time to find and develop new forms through organic restructuring. We would like to find an adequate answer to this question in tradition-based economy and, within that, tradition-centred tourism.

Consequently, the Balkans is now facing the challenge of becoming receptive and showing its authentic nature in the global space with this receptiveness.

4. Instead of an Epilogue: Political Tourism?¹¹

¹⁰ Today, there are several settlements where the lives of our ancestors are put on display in “live”, experimental archaeological and ethnographical “museum villages”, created at permanent sites and operated on a continuous basis. There is an increasing number of complex development projects which invite visitors to a time travel, who can not only take a look at the life of a small settlement of craftsmen in the early middle ages but can also become familiar with the typical lifestyle of an era through typical buildings of different centuries and/or even take part in the revival of traditional rites.

¹¹ “With tourism and tourists, we also face an institution in the sense that, when necessary, the often remembered moments of national history are translated into the language of politics and, on other occasions, this institution as a shaper of the places and times of memory, radically separates us from everything that is customary and, yet on other occasions, it is nothing else than touristic locality that becomes the preferred domain of collective memory.” [9]

“Regions are created not by space but by time and history”. (Paul Bois)

One of the most appreciated tourism theories (Dieter Kramer or Gerhard Schulze) also builds upon the intention to colonise forms of experience – which makes the interpretation of tourism as a political phenomenon nearly natural. „It is beyond doubt that in this context, the „field” we are talking about is often not a real city or social space which someone tries to remember, evoke, conquer or pay tribute to but merely a perception, idea, a virtual appearance which, both in its moral-memorial constructs and in the majority of the external impacts on the individual “some people” refer to as „the space of politics”. [9]¹²

Gergely emphasises the importance of the *quality* of the region resulting from the region’s role played in history: according to him, this quality is usually created by the political power and economic environment and movements in space show to what extent and how a given space is attached a uniform, possible-to-experience and loveable meaning and content. Naturally, this meaning and content can be furthered by functional features and the quality of a region primarily depends on *community contents*, the levels of the quality of life, the depths and solidity of identities, ethnic and cultural specifics and the names carried by spaces.

In the mental unity, the “meaningful” space and the face of culture that can be researched (from the point of view of complexity), Gergely [9] highlights the joint experiencing of *social space-time*, the importance of its jointly created norms, the level of publicity and the desirable *value* of political-cultural or ethnic tolerance, as well as the way these get represented, “manifested” as a joint experience and their influence on laying the foundation of identity.

With all the above taken into account, “*The big question still remains: can apollonic shaping finally put an end to the Dionysian chaos coming from the Balkans, the wildly devastating drunkenness? Chaos and order... when the pathos of death is defeated by the ethos of life.*” [18]¹³

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¹² Constructs, memorial places, sites of actual events, neighbouring territories which the collective or individual memory records in contemporary travel catalogues as holy places of politics.

¹³ “Here everything is abnormal, cursed and is perhaps a vicious chaos” – we can say with Ivan Karamazov, „but even if all the horror of human disappointments falls upon me, I still want to live.”

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