CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

The Spatiality of Politics: Cesare Battisti's Regional and International Thought, 1900–1916

Or Rosenboim* (iD)

Department of International Politics, City, University of London
*Corresponding author. E-mail: Or.Rosenboim@city.ac.uk

Abstract
This article concerns the conceptualization of political spaces in early twentieth-century European political thought. The main figure is the Italian geographer and political thinker Cesare Battisti (1875–1916). Drawing on his geographical knowledge of his native region of Trentino, then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Battisti envisioned an alternative political order in Central Europe. In a series of geographical surveys and political essays, he described his idea of the region as a meaningful political space, that could become an alternative to both empire and nation-state as part of a continental democratic federation. The article argues that through this new spatial conceptualization of region and federation, Battisti sought to reinterpret the political categories of authority and community. The article examines Battisti's ideas in their historical and intellectual context, arguing that he offers original insights on the evolution of European international and regional thought in the twentieth century.

In recent years, historians of political thought have turned their attention to the notions of "space" and "spatiality."[1] There is a growing attention to the spatial configurations in which political units and organizations emerge and evolve. The so-called imperial, global and international turns have dislodged the state from its central position in the history of political thought and invited scholars to explore alternative spatial imaginaries of political order, such as empires, continents and the whole globe.[2] Ideas about power, sovereignty and representation—key themes

---

[1]See, for example, Barney Warf and Santa Arias, eds., *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London, 2008); Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London, 2011); Harvey Starr, "On Geopolitics: Spaces and Places," *International Studies Quarterly* 57 (2013), 433–9; Charles W. J. Withers, "Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and in History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70/4 (2009), 637–58; Leif Jerram, "Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?", *History and Theory* 52/3 (2013), 400–19; Courtney J. Campbell, "Space, Place and Scale: Human Geography and Spatial History in Past and Present," *Past and Present* 239/1 (2018), 23–45; J. Auyero, "Spaces and Places as Sites and Objects of Politics," in Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Oxford, 2006), 564–78.

[2]On the international turn in intellectual history see, for example, Duncan Bell, "Writing the World: Disciplinary History and Beyond," *International Affairs* 85 (2009), 3–22; David Armitage, "The Fifty

in historical investigations of political thought—are nowadays analyzed in a spatial context, with special attention to a wide range of possible spatial formations in which such concepts are developed and expressed.

Contemporary political issues no doubt play a role in shifting historiographic and methodological perspectives. The rise of globalization as a key phenomenon in political and social life since the late 1990s has contributed to the conceptual erosion of the borders of the state and to novel de-territorialized conceptions of political power, community and authority.[3] Yet today, political leaders, the press and the wider population respond ambiguously to globalization, often embracing a nationalist rhetoric that highlights the disadvantages of global political and economic interconnections for local communities. There is widespread populist revolt against what populist leaders and supporters identify as "the global order," which supposedly enhances the detachment between political authority and territorial states.[4]

As much as the tension between statehood and globality seems novel, historians have long been concerned with the spatial interplay of political community and power. As Lauren Benton argues, "the slippage between political community and spatial arrays of power is a puzzle that absorbs us as historians and that also attracted sustained historical commentary." Benton invites historians to focus on the "uneasy fit between political–spatial formations and the spatial distribution of authority" and to discuss "the tension between spatial representations of political community and ideas about the spatial distribution of authority." Instead of accepting statehood as the inevitable foundational unit of politics, she suggests that "we should regard concepts of the state against the background of a wider range of political possibilities."[5]

Taking space seriously in the history of political thought means examining how past thinkers imagined and conceptualized spatial categories of politics in historical context. The aim of this exercise is, to my mind, dual: first, historians of political thought would benefit from a better understanding of how space and spatial imaginations shape ideas about politics. Second, the greater attention to spatial conceptions invites historians to engage with other disciplines, such as geography, international law, imperial administration and international relations. This interdisciplinary dialogue can prove fruitful for generating new insights on the development and transformation of political thought in a diverse range of disciplinary loci.

The history of political spaces reveals the hybridity and fluidity of spatial political categories, such as the state, the region, the empire or the international.[6] Some

---

Years' Rift: Intellectual History and International Relations," *Modern Intellectual History* 1/1 (2004), 97–109. On the global and globalism in political thought see for example Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013); Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, 2017); on empire and the history of political thought see, for example, the recent special issue of *Modern Intellectual History, Law, Empire, and Global Intellectual History*, 17/2 (2020), ed. Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen.

[3] See Manfred Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009); Sebastian Conard, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, 2017).

[4] See, for example, Jan-Werner Mueller, *What Is Populism* (Philadelphia, 2016).

[5] Lauren Benton, "Afterword: The Space of Political Community and the Space of Authority," *Global Intellectual History* 3 (2018), 254–65, at 255–6.

[6] Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War* (Minneapolis, 2010).

historians, like David Armitage, have identified a transitional moment from the age of empire to the age of nationalism that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while others contest these claims and point to a range of spatio-political alternative orders.[7] Often different categories of political order have coexisted in a complex, multilayered political system that included states and empires, but also federations as meaningful regional and global orders.[8] In particular, as Benton suggests, it is worth delineating historical narratives in which nations and empires coexist, "both categories unmoored in historical thinking from narrow evolutionary narratives."[9] Understanding the spatial categories that defined and directed political thought in the twentieth century means taking stock of the complexity, coexistence and multiplicity of political spaces.[10] Often, as we shall see in this article, the interplay of such spaces as empire and nation-state could be better understood through the examination of additional spatial categories such as region and federation. By overcoming the reductive binary of nation and empire, historians may be able to better grasp the complex spatial configurations imagined by past thinkers and their implications for thinking about political community and authority.

This article seeks to engage with the notion of "slippage," or the tension between the spatial configurations of the political community and political authority, through the writings of an Italian political and geographical thinker, Cesare Battisti (1875–1916).[11] While Battisti's fame as a scholar and political thinker has long dimmed, he is still remembered in Italy as a martyr for the cause of irredentism, the nationalistic and militant political movement calling for the Italian annexation of Trento and Trieste. When his ideas were examined in more detail, the emphasis has often been on the two poles of nationalism and socialism.[12] While this framework is doubtlessly pertinent, it does not exhaust the range of Battisti's ideas about the interplay of geography and politics.

The centenary of Battisti's death in 2016 saw a surge in dedicated conferences and publications. A collection of essays, edited by Elena Dai Prà, explores his geographical scholarship, situates it in its political and intellectual context and analyses its scientific merits with the aim of uncovering Battisti's influence on the development of the Italian discipline of geography.[13] Italian geographers, such as Matteo

---

[7]Armitage, "The Fifty Years' Rift"; Michael Goebel, "After Empire Must Come Nation?", *Afro-Asian Visions*, 8 Sept. 2016, at https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/after-empire-must-come-nation-cd220f1977c.

[8]For an overview of some recent literature on the historiography of federalism, see Merve Fejzula, "The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth Century Federalism," *Historical Journal* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X20000254.

[9]Benton, "Afterword," 257.

[10]See, for example, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010); Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2009); Lauren Benton and Richard J. Ross, *Legal Pluralism and Empires, 1500–1850* (Oxford, 2013); Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International* (Princeton, 2018).

[11]For Battisti's biography see Stefano Biguzzi, *Cesare Battisti* (Turin, 2008).

[12]According to Matteo Marconi, "patria and socialism are the two fundamental terms to understand Battisti's trajectory." See Matteo Marconi, "La redenzione della nazione nella produzione geografica di Cesare Battisti," *Studi e ricerche socio-territoriali* 1 (2011), 29–54, at 36. The main studies on Battisti's socialism and nationalism are Vincenzo Calì, *Patrioti senza patria: I democratici Trentini fra otto e novecento* (Trento, 2003); Renato Monteleone, *Il movimento socialista nel Trentino, 1894–1914* (Rome, 1971).

[13]Elena Dai Prà (ed.), *Cesare Battisti geografo e cartografo di frontiera* (Trento, 2018).

Proto, have rediscovered Battisti's theoretical and cartographic contributions to the spatio-temporal concept of the frontier.[14] A new biography of Battisti by Leonardo Rombai also focuses on his scientific production as an "innovative geographer," highlighting the role of his cartographic representations in political debates about Italy's northeastern frontier.[15] Geographers have mapped the intellectual networks that influenced Battisti's geographical thought. Federico Ferretti highlighted Battisti's important exchanges with the Italian radical geographer Archangelo Ghisleri.[16] Yet in this wealth of new studies, Battisti is primarily interpreted as a geographical thinker. He is rarely examined as a distinctly *regional* or *international* political thinker, interested in redefining the spatio-conceptual foundation of political community in Trentino. I suggest that his figure and his writings are of particular interest to historians of spatial and political thought, because of his attempt to envisage the region as a meaningful political space in Europe, thus widening our understanding of spatiality in twentieth-century European political thought.

Battisti studied the particular elements that defined Trentino as a region to reflect on the fate of small-scale political communities in Europe, between empire and nation-state. Scientific analysis of local geographic and human conditions in Trentino led him to the conclusion that only a strong opposition to imperialism and domination could legitimately generate a regional political community. Yet which polity should have the authority to rule over Trentino—the new Kingdom of Italy, in the name of linguistic nationalism, or the multinational Austro-Hungarian federation, in the name of progress? Battisti used his liminal geopolitical position to reflect critically on both political spaces while seeking to carve a space of liberty and democracy for the region of Trentino.[17]

Intellectual historians have noted the importance of geographers such as Halford Mackinder, Isaiah Bowman, Friedrich Ratzel and Alfred T. Mahan to the

---

[14]Matteo Proto, "Irredenta on the Map: Cesare Battisti and Trentino-Alto Adige Cartographies," *J-Reading*, 2017, 85–94.

[15]Leonardo Rombai, *Cesare Battisti (1875–1916): Geografo innovatore* (Florence, 2016).

[16]Federico Ferretti, "Arcangelo Ghisleri and the 'Right to Barbarity': Geography and Anti-colonialism in Italy in the Age of Empire (1875–1914)," *Antipode* 48 (2016), 563–83.

[17]The region of Trentino in Battisti's times was a geopolitical "island," a frontier zone between the Kingdom of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its Italian-speaking population was divided between a few middle-class urban centers and the poor mountainous countryside. After the Napoleonic invasion (1796) it was secularized and incorporated into the Austrian Crown land of Tyrol as part of the German Confederation, and its Italian population became an ethnic minority. In 1848, nationalistic surges in Europe led to popular insurgency in Trento, to which Austria responded with repressive measures, but also with the foundation of the Diet of Innsbruck, where Trentino was represented. The Italian Risorgimento movement of 1860–61 gave new impetus to Italian nationalism in Trentino, but the movement's leader Giuseppe Garibaldi stopped short of annexing Trentino to Italy. The formation of the Triple Alliance excluded any changes to the geopolitical status quo. By the turn of the century, those disappointed that Trentino was not "liberated" from Austria founded the "irredentism" movement aimed at "redeeming" Trento and Trieste by incorporation into Italy. Nevertheless, the irredentists failed to persuade the conservative Catholic rural masses and the bourgeois liberals to turn away from Austria. Today, Trentino is an autonomous region in Italy, guided by a social-democratic leadership. On Trentino see Michele Lanzinger, *Storia del Trentino* (Bologna, 2001); Umberto Corsini, *Il Trentino nel secolo decimonono* (Rovereto, 1963); Maria Garbari, *Il circolo trentino di Milano: L'irredentismo trentino nel Regno* (Trento, 1979); Marco Albertazzi, "La geografia sensibile di Cesare Battisti," in Cesare Battisti, *Opere geopolitiche: Guide civili e militari*, ed. Marco Albertazzi (Trento, 2011), i–xxiii.

formulation of ideas about political spaces in the early twentieth century.[18] Yet few have paid attention to the development of spatial ideas in the Italian-speaking area of Central Europe, where ideologies and practices of imperialism and nationalism have left an indelible mark on political and spatial thinking. In this sense, Battisti's engagement with geographical and proto-geopolitical interpretations of community and authority provides valuable insights into the ways in which spatial categories shape political thinking. At the same time, this article does not seek to depict Battisti's writings as a consistent or coherent political theory; rather, by spelling out the inconsistencies and tensions in the writings of this "minor thinker," I hope to widen our understanding about the production, development and limitations of spatial ideas in twentieth-century political thought.

My investigation of Battisti's political thought revolves around the question of the relationship between political community and authority in Europe on the eve of the First World War. By analyzing Battisti's geographical and political writings —which form, to my mind, a proto-geopolitical investigation—I seek to reflect on the ideal and possible location of the polity, between the age of empire and the rise of the nation-state. Weaving together geographical knowledge, social-democratic ideas, the geopolitics of Friedrich Ratzel, and his own experience as member of the imperial parliament in Vienna, Battisti advanced a vision of Trentino as an autonomous regional political community based on democracy, socioeconomic justice and political liberty. The regional community, constructed by a sense of belonging based on direct knowledge of local geographical and social particularities, offers an alternative to both empire and nation-state. Yet importantly, the region can become an emancipatory political space—in which community and authority overlap—only by embracing a social-democratic ethos of participation and equality.

By reconstructing the spatial imaginaries that guided the transformation of political order for Battisti, I will reflect on his interpretation of the ideal relations between community and authority centred on the region as an imagined spatio-political hub of freedom, social welfare and democracy. While marginally acknowledged in recent scholarship on Battisti, the idea of democracy, as an emancipatory and welfare-oriented political regime, was central to his political imagination and dictated the spatial solutions that he proposed for the future of Trentino. When he renounced the importance of democracy, at the outbreak of the First World War, his regional vision fell apart. The conflict led him to envision Trentino as a strategic part of Italy rather than an autonomous region. Having abandoned his initial pacifism, his attempt to promote geopolitical change by military means eventually claimed his life.[19]

---

[18]On geopolitical thinkers see, for example, Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2007); Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (Oxford, 2009); Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, 2003); Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, 1994).

[19]After Italy joined the war in 1915, Battisti crossed the border and enrolled in the Italian Army. In 1916, he fought on the Austrian front until he was captured by the Austrians and executed as a traitor. In Italy, he is celebrated as a national hero and martyr, an idea promoted and manipulated by the Fascist regime.

Battisti's geographical and political thought

Battisti was formed in one of the important centres of geographical studies in Italy before the First World War, the Istituto di studi superiori in Florence. Giovanni Marinelli (1846–1900), the "father of Italian geography," became Battisti's mentor and friend. Marinelli and his son Olinto argued that geography should be based on a detailed scientific study of the territory, its characteristics and resources, and their implications for human activities.[20] Following the comparative methods of the German geographer Oscar Peschel, they reframed the study of geography in Italy as an alternative to the German historical geography of Karl Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt, in an approach that combined cartography, statistics and a historicist explanatory framework.[21]

German geography provided a continuing source of inspiration for Marinelli father and son. They were interested in Friedrich Ratzel's notion of *antropogeografia*—human geography—as a method for the study of the relations between physical geographic conditions and the political, economic and cultural aspects of human life.[22] Giovanni Marinelli applied Ratzel's human geography to the study of the region as an "integral" space with well-defined and overlapping natural and human phenomena, influencing Battisti's approach to the geopolitical study of Trentino.[23]

Studying the particular conditions of natural and social life encouraged Battisti to consider the relations between different spatial scales of political community: region, state, nation, empire. These relations not only defined individual and communal political identities but also served as the foundation for the political renovation of the region of Trentino, and of Europe generally. The idea that political identity and natural environment were linked reached Battisti through Ratzel's geography.[24] In 1899, as Battisti started reading and translating into Italian—for the first and only time—Ratzel's *Politische Geographie* (Political Geography), he wrote that the German text made him realize his own "ignorance, little precision of thought and superficiality."[25] In his first book *Il Trentino*, he declared that to avoid political bias he decided to trust only "numbers, documents and facts," without offering "eloquent" analysis, but Ratzel's theoretical apparatus seemed to reveal to him the limits of this approach.[26] He borrowed from Ratzel the idea that nature

---

[20]Ilaria Luzzana Caraci, "Modern Geography in Italy: From the Archives to Environmental Management," in Gary S. Dunbar, ed., *Geography: Discipline, Profession and Subject since 1870. An International Survey* (Dordrecht, 2001), 121–51.

[21]Giuseppe Dalla Vedova, *Scritti geografici (1863–1913)* (Novara-Rome, 1914); Giovanni Marinelli, *Scritti minori I: Metodo e storia della geografia* (Florence, 1908); Matteo Proto, "Giovanni Marinelli and Olinto Marinelli 1846–1900 and 1874–1926," in Hayden Lorimer and Charles W. J. Withers, eds., *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies* (London, 2014), 69–106.

[22]Friedrich Ratzel, *Anthropogeographie* (Stuttgart, 1882).

[23]Matteo Proto, "Geografie e cartografie di guerra: 'Il Trentino. Cenni geografici, storici, economici. Con un'appendice sull'Alto Adige' di Cesare Battisti (1915)," *Storicamente*, 2015, 6–7; Proto, "Irredenta on the Map."

[24]Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich, 1897); Ian Klinke, "Friedrich Ratzel, Lebensraum and the Death Motif," *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018), 97–101.

[25]Cesare Battisti to Ernesta Bittanti, 27 April 1899, in Cesare Battisti, *Epistolario*, ed. Renato Monteleone and Paolo Alatri, vol. 1 (Florence, 1966), 169. All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise noted.

[26]Cesare Battisti, *Il Trentino: Saggio di geografia fisica ed antropogeografia* (Trento, 1898), 3–4.

and humanity interact in a two-way relationship, conditioning and shaping each other.[27] The political order emerges, therefore, from the interplay of physical geography, commercial and military powers, human morality and spirituality.

Battisti disagreed with Ratzel on two issues: the primacy of the nation-state and its inevitable aspiration to greatness through territorial expansion. While Olinto Marinelli accepted these premises as integral—yet marginal—aspects of Ratzel's theory, Battisti rejected both in favour of a vision of democratic and autonomous regional community contained within fixed boundaries.[28] This divergence of opinions can be explained by the different geopolitical viewpoints of the thinkers— from Italy or from Trentino—and by their different political goals. While Marinelli was concerned with enhancing Italy's sense of national unity and pride, Battisti aimed at establishing in Trentino a regional community to foster democracy, progress and social welfare.[29]

The idea that the region was a key political space was shared by other geopolitical thinkers at the time, who were closely interested in the physical and conceptual factors that define a "region."[30] Halford Mackinder's study of the Rhine region is less famous today, but was considered a major contribution to geopolitical studies at the time of publication.[31] Karl Haushofer, another follower of Ratzel who later founded the German school of *Geopolitik*, was also persuaded that regions were the foundation of world order, and advanced this idea in his interwar writings.[32] Yet there is a clear distinction between Battisti and Haushofer's interpretations of Ratzel: Battisti's geopolitical thought was not framed in terms of expansion and hierarchy. He pushed further the interpretation of the region as a distinctly political space by linking it with a bottom-up conception of democracy. Against imperial domination, he thought that geographical knowledge could help fashion a new democratic regional political order in Trentino.[33] The scientific geographical studies of a region served

[27]David Atkinson briefly refers to Olinto Marinelli's essay on Ratzel in his analysis of Italian geopolitics, but does not mention Cesare Battisti's translation of Ratzel or his geopolitical writings. See Atkinson, "Geopolitical Imagination." Battisti sent a copy of his study of Trentino to the German geographer, who read and praised it enthusiastically; see Cesare Battisti to Ernesta Bittanti, 11 Nov. 1898; Cesare Battisti to Ernesta Bittanti, 18 July 1899, in Battisti, *Epistolario*, 129, 188.

[28]"There is too much of novelty, of originality, of geniality in Ratzel's thought" to limit the discussion to "such minutiae." Olinto Marinelli, "La geografia politica di Federico Ratzel," *Rivista geografica italiana*, 1903, 272–7, at 277. For a brief account of Olinto Marinelli's later interpretation of Ratzel that succeeds Cesare Battisti's writings and translation of *Politische Geographie* see Caraci, "Modern Geography," 138–9.

[29]Giovanni Marinelli, *La Terra: Trattato popolare di geografia universale*, 7 vols. (Milan, 1883–1902); Olinto Marinelli, *Atlante scolastico di geografia moderna* (Milan, 1912).

[30]E.g. Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 23/4 (1904), 421–37; Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (New York, 1942).

[31]Halford Mackinder, *The Rhine: Its Valley and History* (New York, 1908).

[32]Karl Haushofer, *Der Kontinentalblock: Mitteleuropa, Eurasien, Japan* (Berlin, 1941).

[33]On Haushofer see Holger H. Herwig, *The Demon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer "Educated" Hitler and Hess* (New York, 2016). On the history of geopolitics see David Atkinson and Klaus Dodds, eds., *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Political Thought* (London, 2000). Italian *geopolitica* (geopolitics) thrived under Fascism. The limited English scholarship dedicated to Italian geopolitics includes, for example, Marco Antonisch, "Geopolitica: The 'Geographical and Imperial Consciousness' of Fascist Italy," *Geopolitics* 14 (2009), 256–77; David Atkinson, "Geopolitical Imagination in Modern Italy," in Atkinson and Dodds, *Geopolitical Traditions*, 93–117. On the history of geography in Italy see Carlo Alberto Gemignani, ed., *Per una nuova storia della geografia italiana* (Genoa, 2012).

to provide its inhabitants with knowledge about their physical and human environment. This knowledge would reinforce their sense of belonging to the territory and improve their ability to govern. Geographical knowledge was therefore instrumental for a participatory and free democratic system.

Battisti's ideas were exceptional in the context of geopolitical thought. Critical geopolitics scholars have shown the important role of ideology in shaping perceptions of the relations between spatiality and international politics.[34] For Battisti, geopolitics could be a strategic tool for military ends, but also—and more importantly—a body of knowledge in the service of social, economic and political progress. By documenting and representing the space of Trentino in cartographic and statistical studies, Battisti gave equal weight to matters of ecological and geographical interest as to issues of economic development and social justice.

If every geopolitical vision is imbued with ideological assumptions, in Battisti's case these were the social-democratic ideas evolved through his friendship with Italian socialists including Gaetano Salvemini, Ugo Guido, Rodolfo Mondolfo and Assunto Mori, who became important protagonists of Italian intellectual and political life. In this circle, Battisti met the feminist Ernesta Bittanti, who became his wife and intellectual partner.[35] Inspired by their socialist vision, in 1899 he returned from Florence to Trento to launch a political career and promote local democracy, while still undertaking innovative geographical studies of his native region.

Battisti's university dissertation and first book, *Contributo alla geografia fisica e all'antropogeografia del Trentino* (A Contribution to the Physical Geography and Human Geography of Trentino), was a seminal scientific study of Trentino's geography that sought to define and defend the region's claim to a particular political identity.[36] The book offers an exhaustive and first-of-its-kind study of the region's geography and history. Only a third of the book is dedicated to physical geography; the bulk of the study explores the nationality, dialects, administration, politics, demography, culture, education, criminality, economics, agriculture, industry, roads, cities, villages and architecture of the region, as well as an innovative demographic study of the population by altitude. It seems, therefore, that the detailed study of nature—including, for example, a survey of the water temperature in the regional lakes and the water-flow velocity of the local rivers—was meaningless for Battisti without the context of human activity. He maintained a similar approach in later studies that explored the local dialects according to geographical areas alongside microstudies of local lakes or rivers.

Natural barriers could condition human culture, but did not determine it: the alpine chain surrounding Trentino created a natural frontier and the Italian language spoken by its people created a cultural frontier. For Battisti, both nature and culture distinguished Trentino as a region, and grounded the political claims of its community. Yet what might these claims be, and how are they linked to

---

[34] Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London, 1996); John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics* (London, 2003); Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge, eds., *The Geopolitics Reader* (London, 2006).

[35] Calì, *Cesare Battisti*, vii–xx.

[36] Battisti, *Il Trentino*.

geography? Battisti's interpretation of the interplay of physical and human geography changed over time. From the conceptualization of regional autonomy on a democratic and federal basis, he transitioned towards an innovative—yet not wholly truthful—cartography of italophone Trentino as the foundation of his wartime political claims for its annexation to Italy.[37]

The popular press and the rise of academic disciplines were instrumental in the formation of the national spatial imaginaries, according to Manu Goswami's study of Indian national imaginary.[38] Similarly, the formalization of the discipline of geography, in both Italy and the German-speaking world, reflected the idea that knowledge about the natural environment was essential for creating the national polity. Comparable processes of imagination and proliferation took place in Trentino, on a smaller scale, in the context of the region's complex relations with its culturally affine neighbors, Italy and Austria. Gathering knowledge about the natural environment of the national polity was an important aspect of the creation of an active political community and a political identity on a regional scale. This was the aim of Battisti's geographical regional studies.

Geographical knowledge was instrumental in the quest for a national space. This idea appealed to Battisti, who, in 1899, published a geopolitical manifesto titled "For the Study of Our Home."[39] Here, he followed Marinelli's vision of regional geographies, emphasized the intersection of nature and culture, and highlighted the importance of documenting the dialect names of local geographical phenomena. His main argument was that geographical knowledge required linguistic mediation to attain political power, and therefore geographers played a political role by documenting, preserving and thus legitimizing specific cultural expressions, in this case vernacular name-giving practices, which fostered regional identity. Italian cartographies of Trentino had hitherto given little attention to local names and their histories. Geographical studies using "scientific"—or at times invented—names in Latin or German for mountains, lakes, rivers and valleys in Trentino were aimed at a Germanic scholarly audience and remained incomprehensible to the local population. By contrast, Battisti's work was intended for a local readership and used local terminology to enhance the identity bonds that connected the inhabitants to their region.

Knowledge had a key political function for Battisti. He reflected on practices of domination expressed through renaming geographic phenomena in the language of the political rulers. In Trentino, German names were used by the administration, while Italian and dialect names were used by the population. This linguistic barrier generated ignorance, confusion and miscommunication between the government and the governed that hindered the social and economic development of the region. Additionally, Proto argues that the semantic study of toponyms aimed at establishing the historical claims of the Italian populations over these territories by representing the "Germanization" of names as a recent imperial phenomenon.[40]

---

[37]Proto, "Irredenta on the Map."

[38]Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago, 2004), Ch. 4.

[39]Cesare Battisti, "Per lo studio di casa nostra: Appello dalla 'Tridentum' agli studiosi trentini," *Tridentum* 2 (1899), iv–v, republished in Battisti, *Opere geografiche*, vol. 1, ed. Vincenzo Calì (Trento, 2005), 507–15.

[40]Proto, "Irredenta on the Map."

To counter the "foreign" influence, Battisti proposed a collaborative project inviting the readers of his periodical, *Tridentum*, to send local names of places and phenomena, which he would compile into a new vocabulary of regional knowledge based on vernacular culture.[41]

Geography brought Battisti closer to the local population—both physically and mentally. His cartographic surveys required visiting every corner of Trentino, including the most remote villages, encountering every aspect of local natural and human life. This experience led him to believe that the local community required political and administrative autonomy to generate social and economic reform. If only the people of Trentino could use their knowledge of the land and its qualities to advance their economy and improve the education system, local living standards would rise significantly. Such a prospect was far from impossible: "to obtain the cooperation of all Trento's forces for the conquest of our economic independence should not be, nor should have been in the past, difficult."[42]

Geography became a political project, aimed at shifting political authority from the imperial metropole to the local community. Battisti's studies were not an academic abstraction or a mere collection of facts about the environment, but a system of knowledge serving a political cause. If the people of Trentino were to take up the fight for democratic and social change, they had to know the land they were fighting for. Battisti grounded the identity of the Italian cultural minority of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a concrete notion of territoriality.

One of the most fundamental things to know about one's political space is where it starts and ends. Yet regional frontiers may be a contested issue. In rejecting Ratzel's emphasis on the state's insatiable urge of expansion, Battisti refuted the idea that frontiers were fluid and movable. He argued that Trentino had clear-cut historical, cultural and geographical frontiers, which he outlined in his maps and surveys as a justification for the region's claims of political and administrative autonomy: "Trentino has always been, since Roman times until 1814, a state of its own, independent from Tyrol."[43] Battisti's anti-imperial stance was motivated by his own political experience in Trentino, a region targeted by Austrian imperial expansion in Central Europe. Adopting the perspective of the exploited popular masses, he argued for an anti-imperial harmonious overlap of community and authority. The organic development of a territory did not depend on its expanding size, but on the application of appropriate social and economic policies in the interests of the local community and in line with concrete geographical and anthropological conditions.

In describing Trentino, Battisti outlined an image of decline, in which natural geography limits political progress: the arboreal mountains that surrounded the region set a barrier on transport and communication and reduced the profitability of agriculture.[44] He highlighted the potential of the nascent paper and wine industries and the new hydroelectric power stations, which would later provide the

---

[41]Battisti, "Per lo studio di casa nostra."

[42]Cesare Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica* (Trento, 1901), republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, ed. Renato Monteleone (Florence, 1966), 106–78, at 166.

[43]Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica*, 169.

[44]Cesare Battisti, "L'autonomia del Trenino e la questione comunale (1)," republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 92–104.

stimulus for Trentino's economic success. Yet these industries were restricted by the fiscal policies of Austro-Hungarian authorities. The reality of domination had cartographic proof: "The map clearly shows that, whereas the roads passing through all villages, alpine passes and forests in Tyrol are suitable for vehicles, here in Trentino the roads of dozens and dozens of municipalities are not even suitable for an ox-cart, let alone vehicles."[45]

The future of Trentino depended on its inhabitants' ability to use the region's geographical conditions to their own economic advantage, rather than for the benefit of the exploitative and conservative imperial government in Vienna. The flourishing of the new popular press, as well as his frequent visits to the Trentino countryside and mountains, served to share geographical knowledge with local populations to generate bottom-up political change. Battisti's guides documented the geopolitical environment with an important political–educational aspiration: "for me it's a thousand times more important that the guide should have a national goal, defend the nation, and embody the national spirit of Trentino. It should be a loyal representation of the thoughts and sentiments of those [in Trentino] who feel Italianly."[46] Thus geographical knowledge could lead, for Battisti, to greater "national" solidarity within the region.

In his earlier writings, Battisti's idea of the "nation" overlaps with the regional community, defined by the material natural conditions and the common characteristics of the people inhabiting the same region. Rather than a mere part of the Italian nation-state, Trentino had its own unique way of "feeling Italianly," which differed from the national feelings of other Italians. Yet the region's identity also differed from the national feelings of the German-speaking majority of the neighbouring province of Tyrol, or from other communities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Geographical elements, therefore, shape a shared national culture. As Judson suggests, in the context of Austro-Hungarian imperial politics, the term "nation" was interchangeable with "ethnicity."[47] But for Battisti "nation" conveyed a sense of territorially bounded community with shared history, language and natural habitat. Nationalism, therefore, carried a significant political meaning, even if it did not imply independent statehood. The quest for national autonomy sought to provide political power to the distinct nation of the region of Trentino, within a framework of a peaceful democratic federation of nationalities. National autonomy was a step towards the progressive association of humanity, a future Mazzinian international brotherhood. Conscious of the rise of nationalist hostilities in Europe, Battisti argued in 1906 that despite "the blind obstinate fanatic patriotism … the nations tend every day to merge together in a harmonious and inevitable internationalism."[48]

---

[45]Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica*, 159.

[46]Cesare Battisti to Guglielmo Ranzi, 29 May 1900, in Battisti, *Epistolario*, 205. Battisti uses the Italian adverb *italianamente*, which I translate as "Italianly" to indicate acting according to Italian traditions, character and spirit.

[47]On this point see Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, 2016), 1–15.

[48]Cesare Battisti, "Fondo," *Il popolo*, 31 March 1906, cited in Livia Battisti, "Contributo alla storia del socialismo trentino," *Studi storici* 11/2 (1970), 347–68, at 364.

After 1914, Battisti advanced a different interpretation of the nation, reflecting his turn to irredentism and his understanding that the nation-state would be the dominant political form after the war. After the outbreak of the war, he prioritized cultural and linguistic affinities as the foundation of nationality, turning away from geographical considerations. Thus the nation is no longer a regional attribute, but could only claim political meaning in the form of the modern sovereign state. With the political ascent of a state-centered form of nationalism, Trentino could no longer hope for regional autonomy in a federal structure. Instead, its best prospect was to become a minority in a (presumably) homogeneous nation-state.

The shift from one interpretation of the nation to another is reflected also in Battisti's pragmatic use of geography. In the third chapter of his 1915 book *Il Trentino: Illustrazione statistico-economica* (Trentino: A Statistical-Economic Illustration) entitled "Italians and Germans in Trentino," he attempted to demonstrate that the Italian-speaking population in Trentino was demographically and culturally more significant than the German population and could be considered a distinct nation.[49] Moreover, if, in his earlier writings, he uses geographical knowledge to cement solidarity among the inhabitants of Trentino, later he authored a series of military guides and maps intended to help the Italian army conquer the region.[50] In this sense, Battisti adapted his use of geographical scholarship to the changing meanings he gave to the concept of the nation.

Battisti's interpretation of the nation reflected his experience of imperial rule. In his earlier writings, the response to empire was a strong emphasis on grassroots democracy and socialism, as the two cornerstones of a future national autonomy in Trentino. In his geographical studies and political thought alike, the people had the power to change the natural—and the political—environment in which they live.[51] The study of geography aimed at providing the general population and intellectual elite alike with facts and data to actualize social-democratic reforms, gear up the economy and establish a representative democratic political system. Yet, after 1914, the instability of the imperial system excluded any prospects of reform, leading Battisti to shift the spatial focus of his interpretation of the nation from the region to the state.

Spaces of community and authority

When spaces of community and authority do not overlap, as was the case in Trentino, structures of representation become particularly meaningful for expressing and acting upon the people's will. This problem preoccupied Battisti, because the will of the people stood at the heart of his socialist ethos. In socialism Battisti found his intellectual and political home. Yet his interpretation of socialism was pragmatic and practical rather than ideological or doctrinaire. Without engaging in abstract ideological and theoretical debates, Battisti drew inspiration from three main socialist approaches: the Italian social democrats Gaetano Salvemini

---

[49]Cesare Battisti, *Il Trentino, illustrazione statistico-economica* (Milan, 1915).

[50]Battisti, *Opere geopolitiche*.

[51]On the capacity of people to generate territorial political change see Cesare Battisti, "Primavera trentina," in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 105–8.

and Leonida Bissolati, the Austro-Marxists Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, and Marxist internationalism.[52] Socialist politics offered him a means to advance democracy and popular political participation, to guarantee the rights of the working classes, and to bring about social and economic justice. The popular masses, moreover, were in his view a force capable of generating a new peaceful international order: "while the governments run to the arms … the people cordially extend their hand and sign pacts of brotherly friendship."[53]

The battles for social change and national autonomy were, for Battisti, linked. In the age of reactionary empires, national autonomy could advance the cause of social justice. Nonetheless, in 1898, Battisti expressed wariness of state-centric nationalism, arguing that irredentism was "the stick in socialism's wheels," and the "most foolish of stupidities."[54] Battisti's bottom-up vision of national autonomy reflected his aversion to the militant nationalism that increasingly manifested in European politics. It also manifested his belief in the corrective power of socialist internationalism. Thus he argued that if governments reflected a negative form of nationalism, "regarding the peoples, it is a different matter: they act to intensify their friendship on the basis of peace against militarism and the international brotherhood of the proletariat."[55] The proletariat should become the motor in the national battle.[56]

If socialism meant, for Battisti, a wide-ranging political democratization based on universal suffrage, economic progress and political and social rights, including freedom of press and expression as well as welfare benefits, it is evident that representation was key for the realization of his socialist aspirations.[57] Yet when local autonomy was lacking, questions arose about the legitimate location of popular representation of the Trentino community: in the Austrian parliament, or in the Italian one? For Battisti, this problem was linked not only to issues of formal sovereignty (which in this case granted authority to Austria–Hungary), but also to communal identity.

The problem of dual allegiance besieged the Italian-speaking Austrian subjects in Trentino. Battisti himself experienced anti-Italian discrimination as a student in Graz and Innsbruck.[58] During his studies at the universities of Florence and Turin, where activists and intellectuals such as Edmondo De Amicis introduced him to the theoretical models of German socialism, he encountered the deep challenges facing socialists in the nationalistic and conservative Italian parliament. Despite the universal aspirations of socialism in Trentino, the particular claims

---

[52]There is vast scholarship on socialism in liberal Italy and in Austria–Hungary. See, for example, Lucio D'Angelo, *Radical-socialismo e radicalismo sociale in Italia (1892–1914)* (Rome, 1984); Leo Valiani, *Storia del socialismo italiano* (Florence, 1951); Leo Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell'Austria-* (Milan, 1966).

[53]Cesare Battisti, "Il movimento pacifista internazionalista," *Il popolo*, 12 Aug. 1911, cited in Livia Battisti, "Contributo alla storia del socialismo trentino," 365.

[54]Cited in Livia Battisti, "Contributo alla storia del socialismo trentino," 366.

[55]Cesare Battisti, "Guglielmone puntella la Triplice," *Il Popolo*, 1 Sept. 1905, cited in Livia Battisti, "Contributo alla storia del socialismo trentino," 363.

[56]Gaetano Arfè, "Battisti, Giuseppe Cesare," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 7 (Rome, 1970), 264–71.

[57]Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica*, 106–108.

[58]Cesare Battisti to Assunto Mori, 18 Dec. 1895, cited in Calì, *Cesare Battisti*, 37–8.

of the region were not represented in the Italian parliament because Italian socialists failed, Battisti argued, to understand or even care for the needs of Trentino, which was still mostly rural and preindustrial.[59]

Modernity in Trentino was hindered by rural poverty. Local political representatives and the urban elites were also to blame for the failure of the local community to attain political autonomy:

> today, due to the apathy of the ruling classes that kept themselves too distant from the working classes in the cities and the countryside, [the battle for autonomy] was limited to the battle of one class only, the class of those privileged by the complex of political laws in Austria, that conserved here in the heart of Europe a living museum of medieval barbarism.[60]

Class struggles undermined the political representation of the rural masses. The root of the problem was that the elite did not see the rural population as part of the political community. The well-educated, wealthy urban conservative Liberals were uninterested in improving the living conditions of the rural poor because they were unfamiliar with their mode of living. From their power hubs in Trento and Riva di Garda, the Liberals advanced the interests of the bourgeoisie and local entrepreneurs, property owners and small industrialists. They would hardly be capable of imagining or understanding the difficulties of a mountain-based farmer who lived in a remote village disconnected from the routes of trade and communication.[61] In addition, voting rights were granted only to a limited faction of the adult propertied urban male population, overwhelmingly excluding the rural and proletarian masses. As the vast majority of the deputies of Trentino in the Landtage parliament in Innsbruck and the imperial one in Vienna were members of the Liberal and the Catholic *popolari* parties, Battisti argued that the rural masses and their interests were, in fact, not represented at all.

The improvement of local standards of living would require wide-ranging reforms in agriculture, trade, communication and industry, with far-reaching social impact on local communities. To this end, Battisti argued, politicians needed direct knowledge of the region's geography, to be able to represent its interests. Geographical education could be based on personal knowledge, but also, importantly, on a local system of higher education, where the geography, culture, language and history of Trentino would be taught in Italian.[62] To prove his point about the importance of geographic knowledge for advancing socially oriented politics, Battisti went on frequent excursions in the remote villages of the mountains. He studied in detail the economic potential of hydroelectric stations, the threat that malnutrition posed to public health and the economic consequences of the small-properties system of terrain distribution. Unlike other contemporaneous thinkers

---

[59]Cesare Battisti, "Gli interessi del proletariato e l'autonomia del Trentino," *Il Popolo*, 22 June 1900, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 86–7.

[60]Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica*, 166.

[61]Cesare Battisti, "Triste contestazione," *Il Popolo*, 6 Feb. 1905, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 238–40.

[62]Battisti led a long-term campaign to establish a university in Trento. See Battisti, "La domanda di una università italiana in Austria," 25 Aug. 1895, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 3–13.

who sought to imagine the postimperial national community as "autarkic" and self-sufficient, Battisti emphasized the role of trade and communications for economic growth.[63] The limited trade relations with the Austrian Empire and Italy, which resulted partially from the repressive Austrian fiscal policy and partially from the geographic isolation of the region, gave little stimulus to local business.

Knowledge should be substantiated by action. Whereas the Liberals were not familiar with rural life, the *popolari*, by contrast, were well informed of the economic and social backwardness in the countryside, but had little incentive to change it. The clerics, who enjoyed great influence in local and imperial politics, feared that democratization could undermine their social and political privileged position in the region. As an atheist progressive socialist, Battisti opposed the Catholics' pretences of representation as a self-interested attempt at reinforcing the imperial status quo, which guaranteed them a powerful position at the expense of the proletarian and agrarian masses.[64] He accused the Catholic *popolari* of disseminating ignorance and prejudice among the poor through their vast educational system.[65] He also attacked the *popolari* long-term strategy of abstention and obstruction in parliament as a betrayal of their duty to represent the voiceless rural poor and actively reverse the Austrian repressive measures in Trentino.[66] The failure of representative politics led, for Battisti, to the widespread phenomenon of emigration, which undermined the social and economic pattern of life in Trentino.[67]

Battisti was concerned with the depopulation of Trentino.[68] In the early twentieth century, a significant part of the local population emigrated to the United States and South America, as well as to Germany and Austria. The agrarian system was undermined by historical feudal relations that left an unwanted legacy in the form of small cultivated plots yielding little profit to the farmers. This situation contributed to many farmers' decision to emigrate.[69] The solution that Battisti advanced was incongruous with both Catholic and Liberal politics: a regional agrarian league that would unify farmers, facilitate commerce and marketing and help represent their interests with local and imperial authorities.[70] Despite his efforts, the local population was slow to accept his ideas. He attributed their reticence to the strong influence of local Catholic priests, who considered socialism a heresy.[71]

[63]Compare with Guswami, *Producing India*, Ch. 6

[64]Cesare Battisti, "La fisionomia dei partiti politici in Trentino" (1900), republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 47–68.

[65]Cesare Battisti, "Intorno all'autonomia ed al Suffragio Universale," *Avvenire del Lavoratore*, 25 March 1898, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 30–33, at 30.

[66]Cesare Battisti, "L'*Alto Adige*' e le nostre idee sull'ostruzionismo ad Innsbruck," *Il Popolo*, 11 Sept. 1903, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 208–9.

[67]Cesare Battisti, "Emigrazione e militarismo: Lo sfratto di Scipio Sighele," 26 June 1912, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 372–81, at 372.

[68]See, for example, Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (London, 2000).

[69]Cesare Battisti, "Piccola Proprietà e Grande Usura," *Il Popolo*, 17 April 1900, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 72–7.

[70]Cesare Battisti, "Per il nostro Trentino," address to the Austrian parliament delivered 12 Dec. 1911, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 354–60.

[71]Calì, *Patrioti senza patria*, 145–62.

Democratic representation—or lack of it—led Battisti to consider the idea of international solidarity and its role in social reform and national autonomy. Socioeconomic well-being depended, for him, on democratic autonomy and freedom from reactionary domination. These goals could be reached through international cooperation: "the Italian proletarians of Austria join hands with the proletarians of all other nationalities to chase away from the bosom of modern Europe the reactionaries, who damage us as well as democracy as a whole, and create an autonomous patria for all nationalities in a confederation of peoples on the basis of brotherhood and not confusion."[72]

Progress translated into political liberty and democracy in Trentino, where Austrian censorship of newspapers and expulsion of citizens on grounds of subversive action were common sights. Battisti, who experienced repression and censorship firsthand, shaped his socialist agenda in defence of freedom from domination; freedom of assembly, speech and organization; and universal suffrage. In 1904, he explicitly stated his internationalist socialist values:

> the conflict between Trentino and Tyrol is incurable. Yet this does not prevent us socialists from Trentino from having solidarity feelings with the German socialists in Austria and Germany fighting against our common and most immediate enemy, nor to feel we are brothers to those socialists in Innsbruck who really are free from barbaric chauvinism that spreads in their country … We are and we want to be brothers to the Russian mujik who are being slaughtered, and to the dispossessed peasants of China, and to the Abyssinians who valorously fought against the Italians in order to defend their native land, but never ever shall we feel brothers to the criminals … to the pan-Germanists who, by beating unarmed youths, show to all the civilized world the extent to which the atavist push to barbarian violence is still present in them.[73]

The cause of international liberty and civil progress, therefore, "becomes one" with the cause of proletarian emancipation from privilege, feudalism, imperialism and exploitation.[74] Yet certain issues such as the absence of industry, education and agrarian development could not be resolved as part of a generic and universal internationalist socialist plan but needed a local—national—solution that would take into account the local geopolitical conditions.[75]

The Italian jurist Piero Calamandrei suggested that Battisti advanced the republican liberty of the Risorgimento to the next phase, where political liberty from domination was reinforced by economic liberty.[76] This is illustrated in Battisti's

---

[72]Cesare Battisti, "Dichiarazioni necessarie," *Il Popolo*, 23 April 1900, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 77–79.

[73]Cesare Battisti, *Il Popolo*, 24 Nov. 1904, cited in Livia Battisti, "Contributo alla storia del socialismo trentino," 365.

[74]Cesare Battisti, "A che tendiamo," *Il Popolo*, 7 April 1900, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 69–71.

[75]Battisti to Bittanti, 25 Feb. 1897, in Battisti, *Epistolario*, 56.

[76]Piero Calamandrei, cited in Alessandro Galante Garrone, "Introduzione," in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, xlvi.

vision, foreseeing that the socialist education of the working masses and the bourgeoisie could lead to "the identification, unification of the cause of socialism with the cause of liberty of thought and civil progress."[77] Individual liberty was not enough if actualized on the political plane alone; individuals should also be free to advance their economic interests through democratic debates and institutions in their community.

As Calamandrei suggested, Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the main political thinkers of the Italian Risorgimento, clearly inspired Battisti's political thought on national autonomy.[78] Battisti embraced Mazzini's idea of the nation, based on the principles of democracy and self-determination. Like Mazzini, he envisaged the nation not as an end in itself, but as an intermediary phase towards the realization of a new political order of humanity, a cosmopolitan peaceful brotherhood of nations. In 1911, Battisti still affirmed that "we hold our concept of nationality very highly because it is incarnate in the concept of humanity. The Italian independence was victorious because it was merged with these more ample concepts of humanity in Mazzini and Garibaldi."[79] The nation was, therefore, part of an internationalist vision imbued with humanist values.[80]

On two important issues Battisti disagreed with Mazzini. First, he replaced Mazzini's liberalism with a socialist creed, which saw national autonomy as a necessary step for the emancipation of the working classes. While he agreed that socialists and liberals could work together to advance the cause of the nation, he considered himself a representative of the proletariat, a notion that Mazzini wanted to overcome by emphasizing inter-classist national unity. In this sense, his ideas were closer to the Italian political current of Mazzinian socialism.[81] Second, the foundation of Mazzini's humanist internationalism was his Christian faith; it was religion that provided the basic values of brotherhood and peace. In contrast, Battisti, a socialist atheist, was highly critical of the social and political influence of religion.

The emphasis on regional idiosyncrasy was not consensual. The idea that the geopolitical reality of the "nation" of Trentino required specific social reforms was seen by some local socialists as a betrayal of the internationalist socialist dogma.[82] They considered the cause of nationalism irredeemably bourgeois: a matter of little consequence for the workers' international class struggle. In response, Battisti temporarily resigned from the Socialist Party. Socialists in Italy, who

---

[77]Battisti, "A che tendiamo," 69–71.

[78]On Battisti and Mazzini see Alessandro Galante Garrone, "Introduzione," in Battisti, *Epistolario*, xi–xlvi.

[79]Cesare Battisti, 2 June 1911, cited in Livia Battisti, "Contributo alla storia del socialismo trentino," 365.

[80]C. A. Bayly and E. F. Biagini, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism, 1830–1920* (Oxford, 2008); Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati, eds., *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini's Writings on Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations* (Princeton, 2009); David Ragazzoni, "Giuseppe Mazzini's Democratic Theory of Nations," in Alessandro Campi, Stefano De Luca and Francesco Tuccari, eds., *Nazione e nazionalismi: Teorie, modelli, sfide attuali* (Rome, 2018), 279–306.

[81]On Mazzinian socialism see Silvio Berardi, *Il Socialismo mazziniano* (Rome, 2016). Berardi, who does not mention Battisti in his study, argues that Mazzinian socialism became a powerful "third-way" current in Italian politics after 1945.

[82]Monteleone, *Il movimento*, 124–7.

embraced internationalism, also opposed the nationalist ethos of Battisti's socialism and his association with the Austro-Marxists who revendicated national autonomy. Battisti's relations with Austro-Marxism were also criticized by Trentino Liberals, who championed national liberation but attacked his social–economic reformism.

How to advance the interests of the local community without losing sight of socialist internationalist aspirations of improving the economic and social conditions of the working classes? Such contradictions, which rendered Battisti vulnerable to criticism from diverse political factions, stood at the heart of his political activism. Battisti was well aware of his opposition: "ever since the first attempts of socialist propaganda in Italian[-speaking] Austrian villages, an insidious and deaf war began against the proponents of the new idea, that tended to denigrate them in front of the public, declaring them enemies of the patria and the nationality."[83] Yet for him the patriotic sentiment of a country is exclusively determined by its economic conditions: national conscience was meaningless for a starved farmer. Socialist patriotism meant "taking the beautiful and the good anywhere they are to be found," regardless of national affiliation, and acting against workers' exploitation everywhere, citing Marx's famous dictum. Battisti and other political activists such as Antonio Piscel and Augusto Avancini tried to overcome—not always successfully or coherently—the tension between nationalism and socialism by proposing federalism.[84]

Battisti's federalist vision was outlined following models drawn by the Austro-Marxists Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, who developed a proposal for national cultural autonomy to resolve ethnic conflicts within Austria–Hungary.[85] Like them, he argued that in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, universal class struggle was secondary to the problem of national autonomy. Similarly, he considered "nations" as ethnic groups that deserved some political expression but not independent statehood. Yet unlike Bauer and Renner, he insisted on the importance of territoriality for the establishment of a social-democratic order.

Bauer sought to address the difficulty of translating the Austro-Hungarian Empire's national groups into self-governing provinces because of lack of territorial continuity through the concept of the "personality principle," which partially detached political sovereignty from territory.[86] His vision, which he outlined in 1899 at the Congress of the Austrian Social Democratic Party in Brno, was a nonterritorial federation, which would give some power to govern—but not self-rule—to the dispersed linguistic and ethnic communities of the empire. The empire's

[83]Cesare Battisti, "Patria e socialismo," *L'Avvenire*, 15 Nov. 1895, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 16–17.

[84]Monteleone, *Il movimento*, 124–7. See Battisti's retrospective note on the federal plan in "Il convegno di Trieste," *Il Popolo*, 13 April 1905, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 240–46, at 245. Battisti's federalism was also inspired by the Italian radical republican geographer Arcangelo Ghisleri, whose positions remained, however, more coherently anti-imperialist and pacifistic than Battisti's. See Ferretti, "Arcangelo Ghisleri and the 'Right to Barbarity'."

[85]On the federal proposals of the Austro-Marxists see Karl Renner, "The Development of the National Idea" (1917), in Tom Bottomore and Patrick Goode, eds., *Austro-Marxism* (Oxford, 1978), 118–25; Ephraim J. Nimni, ed., *National Cultural Autonomy and Its Critics* (London, 2005); Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, 1993).

[86]Rudolf Schlesinger, *Federalism in Central and Eastern Europe* (London, 1945), 210.

various linguistic minorities—of which the Italians of Trentino were one—could attain a degree of political, cultural and economic autonomy within a federation led by Vienna.[87] The Austrian socialists outlined a progressive vision of democratic federation, in which economic prosperity would be accompanied by cultural liberty and political autonomy.

Battisti's views remained geopolitically grounded, formed by the idiosyncratic features of Trentino and its demands for democratic national autonomy. Arguing that such autonomy was viable only in a federation, he seconded the Austro-Marxists' preference for the federal political form as the future reformed structure of the empire, a form that would preserve its advantages—such as multi-culturalism—and dissolve its undesirable hierarchical order. These ideas persuaded Battisti more than the weak proposals of the Italian Socialist Party, which remained effectively impotent against the repressive policies of the Liberal governments of Luigi Pelloux (1899–1900).[88] Indeed, in response to attacks by Italian socialists, Battisti clarified in 1900 that the Trentino socialists he represented aligned with the Brno principles of "non-recognition of any national privilege, rejection of the tendency to introduce a national language, that the rights of elected national minorities should be guaranteed on the basis of universal suffrage equal for all, and that eventually these autonomous groups should form a democratic confederation."[89]

Battisti's federalism permitted him to envision Trentino's future within the sphere of Austria–Hungary. As a frontier region of strategic importance and meagre economic means, Trentino could on no account plan its national autonomy in terms of independent statehood. Rather, the question of its future was bounded by its geopolitical frontier—either as part of the empire, or as part of the Italian monarchic nation-state. As the political situation in Italy was dominated by a conservative Liberal party that, ironically, did not see democratization and liberty as its main political goals, the Austro-Hungarian sphere apparently offered more persuasive prospects of change.[90] For Battisti the federal vision was appealing only in so far as it respected the specificity of territorial location, not merely language and culture. His political community was defined through and conditioned by its relations with the natural environment, which it could not transcend. Imperial policies could improve Trentino's economy, but the region would only thrive if governed by its inhabitants on the basis of concrete knowledge of local needs.

As leader of the Socialist Party, Battisti oscillated between two political goals: autonomy and social-democratic reforms. More concretely, he discussed two

---

[87]Otto Bauer reflected on the Brno Congress in *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (Minneapolis, 2000), Ch. 7.

[88]Battisti was constantly updated on the rise of reactionary militarism in Italy by his friend the Italian socialist Gaetano Salvemini. Their letters were published in Vincenzo Calì, ed., *Salvemini e i Battisti: Carteggio 1894–1957* (Trento, 1987).

[89]Battisti, "Dichiarazioni necessarie," 78.

[90]One of Battisti's goals was to pass the universal suffrage bill in Trentino, including both male and female citizens. Italy provided little inspiration on this front, as a universal male suffrage bill was passed only in 1913. For this reason, Battisti criticized Italy's "reactionary" politics. See Monteleone, *Il movimento*, 119.

options: reforming the empire along the lines of the Austro-Marxists' federal democratizing measures, including universal suffrage and full representation, or breaking away with the empire completely.[91] Battisti's discussion of these alternatives evokes two political issues: authority and representation. From 1903, he started to doubt the efficacy of the official line of the Socialist Party in Trentino that preferred limited social reform within the empire over democratic national autonomy. Universal suffrage remained for Battisti the primary means of democratization in Trentino, but he doubted the effectiveness of representation in the existing political structure of the reactionary, conservative and repressive empire. In centralized Austria–Hungary, any form of democratic representation depended on concessions from the government in Vienna. The meaning of democracy would be reduced to casting a vote. Furthermore, the geopolitical structure of the province subjugated Trentino to the German-dominated Tyrol and enhanced Trentino's marginalization in parliament.[92] The geopolitical and economic isolation of Trentino—the region's main obstacle to prosperity, for him—could not be overcome by expanding the basis of democratic representation within the region, if the representatives would not have any effective power in parliament. Only a radical change—political and administrative national autonomy within a democratic federation—could match the challenges created by Trentino's geographical conditions.[93]

The geopolitical position of Trentino as a frontier region between Italy and Austria provided Battisti with two potential models for political order, but neither seemed adequate. As I highlighted, national autonomy did not mean independent statehood for Battisti, who focused his attention on imagining alternative political spaces in which the local community could thrive. Ideally, this space would be a democratic federation, but on the eve of the First World War Battisti became increasingly wary of democratic reformism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire: "modernity has not arrived at Mitteleuropa: it's a land of reactionaryism [sic] and backwardness."[94] The Austro-Marxists provided inspiring ideas for internationalist political and social revival, but their odds of success within the empire seemed meagre. Italy, by contrast, had a weak socialist party and its social policies were decidedly antiquated in comparison to Austria's.[95] Its Liberal governments tended towards organized repression of the proletariat with no commitment to social and economic reforms. The fourth Giolitti administration of 1911 seemed to undertake democratic and economic reforms, but also inaugurated an expansionist era with the colonization of the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and

---

[91]The problem of universal suffrage was long debated in Austria–Hungary and often served as a deal breaker in other political negotiations, for example on the extension of military service in Hungary. The universal suffrage bill in Austria (1906) did not help, as hoped, to overcome national problems by forging greater unity in social and class matters, and the parliament remained divided on both national and social lines. See Schlesinger, *Federalism*, 208–9.

[92]Kann suggested in 1950 that the Italian minority was relatively well treated by the central Austrian government; any discrimination should be blamed on the local Tyrol population. See Robert A. Kann, *The Multinational Empire: Nationalism and National Reform in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848–1918*, vol. 1 (New York, 1964), 265–7.

[93]Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica*, 106–78.

[94]Cesare Battisti, "Il comizio di protesta pei fatti d'Innsbruck a Trento," *Il Popolo*, 30 Nov. 1903, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 212–16.

[95]Ibid.; Monteleone *Il movimento*, 208.

Cyrenaica. The political space of Trentino between empire and nation-state seemed very narrow indeed.

Up until the outbreak of the First World War, Battisti maintained his support for federalism in Trentino and elsewhere: in 1912 he wrote in favour of the Balkan peoples' national claims against the Turks if they formed "a federation that united their forces against any external intervention."[96] In 1914 he still endorsed the continental federal project, but became increasingly skeptical of Austria's will or ability to realize it. Instead, he saw nation-states, like Italy, as the transformative political power of Europe:

> Once the embers of reaction that lurk at the heart of Europe are extinguished, once pan-Germanism loses its power to suffocate other nations, what once was Mazzini's wish and Marx's program can become a reality: the federation of the States of Europe. For its implementation, there must be states; however, a state is not to be mistaken for a conglomerate like Austria, a chaos within which ten flags, ten languages, ten nations boil, a forced amalgam in which every patriotic or civilized feeling is repressed and replaced by a blind devotion to the most vilified dynasty in the world; a state has to be understood as the union of those who speak the same language, have a common idea of their history and live in a territory demarcated as clearly as possible by natural borders.[97]

By the time Italy joined the war on the side of the Allies, in the summer of 1915, Battisti had become a vociferous supporter of irredentism, the movement calling for the incorporation of Trentino into the Kingdom of Italy. Rejecting his previous geopolitical vision of autonomous democratic regionalism in a federal framework, Battisti embraced cultural nationalism serving the political interests of Italy to expand into strategic northern territories. Before enrolling in the Italian Army, he composed several geopolitical military guides of Trentino to facilitate the Italian invasion, turning his back on his earlier commitments to democratic regional autonomy and peaceful international federalism.[98]

Why did Battisti change his mind? What made him reimagine Trentino as an integrally Italian community and assign its governing authority to the Italian kingdom? There is no historical certainty about the reasons for Battisti's turn to irredentism in 1914. Some of the interpretive difficulties arise from the particular constraints created by Battisti's official roles as member of the Austrian parliament after 1907 and as an Italian soldier in 1916. I would like to suggest five hypotheses for his change of mind, taking into account historical context, pragmatic opportunism and theoretical ideas. First, the rise of state-centric nationalism might have led Battisti to doubt the feasibility of Mazzini's vision of democratic nationalism and peaceful internationalism. Pragmatically, he might have envisaged a better future for Trentino in an Italian nation-state, rather than in an Austrian one. Second,

---

[96]Cesare Battisti, "L'Austria e l'avvenire dei popoli balcanici," *Il Popolo*, 19 Oct. 1912, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 383.

[97]Cesare Battisti, "Trento, Trieste e il dovere d'Italia," speech given at a conference in Bologna, 13 Oct. 1914, republished in Battisti, *Al Parlamento Austriaco e al Popolo Italiano* (Milan, 1915), 106–39, at 136.

[98]Battisti, *Opere geopolitiche*.

Battisti appreciated the strategic value of Trentino for Italy, and perhaps assumed that it would generate an incentive for its development under Italian rule. Third, the decline of Austro-Marxism might have led Battisti to believe that the cause of social and democratic reform in the empire was lost. Fourth, according to Livia Battisti, her father feared that pan-Germanism, which he considered a militant and aggressive national ideology, would become a dominant force in postwar Austria, thus reinforcing discrimination against Trentino. Fifth, in 1914 Battisti outlined a particular philosophy of history according to which national independence was the basis for peaceful internationalism, but such independence was only attainable by war.[99] This position might have led Battisti to abandon his pacifism in favour of a public call for Italian intervention in the war to liberate the nation of Trentino from the imperial yoke.

The embrace of irredentism manifested also in Battisti's cartography of Trentino's frontiers. Influenced by the Italian nationalist geographer Ettore Tolomei, after 1914 Battisti argued that the "natural" frontier of Trentino was the Brenner pass, implying that Italy should occupy not only the Trentino region but also the predominantly germanophone Süd-Tyrol territory.[100] He therefore abandoned his earlier vision of a anthropo-geographical frontier, drawn further south in accordance with alpine geography and the cultural characteristics of the local population. The shifting line on the map reflects Battisti's geographical pragmatism, as well as a change in his vision of the political spaces of Central Europe. The tension between community and authority, which Battisti initially sought to overcome through national–regional democratic representation in a federal order, became a real rupture after the war, when the nation-state emerged as the preferred political form. By prioritizing state-centric national unity—grounded in historical and cultural traits—over democratic representation, social welfare and regional identity, he planted the seeds for the nationalist militaristic interpretation of his ideas which the Fascist regime propagated after his death.[101] Without the democratic ethos, Battisti's regional vision lost its emancipatory capacity.

Conclusion

What political entities were possible—or desirable—in early twentieth-century Central Europe? The creation of a new political order should start, for Battisti, from concrete spaces rather than abstract ideas. The cartographic, scientific and theoretical representation of space led to the configuration of a distinctly political notion of the region, as both a natural and a social entity endowed with a common political project, a bounded territory with particular political identity in which issues are appraised according to their impact on the region.[102] The region was

---

[99]Cesare Battisti, "Lettera aperta al deputato Morgari," 27 Sept. 1914, republished in Battisti, *Scritti politici e sociali*, 470.

[100]Proto, "Irredenta on the Map"; Battisti, *Una campagna autonomistica*, 171.

[101]See, for example, "Fascisti Pay Tribute to Cesare Battisti; Place Wreaths on Monument of Man Hanged as Traitor by the Austrians," *New York Times*, 13 June 1930, 13; Biguzzi, *Cesare Battisti*.

[102]Compare to contemporary definitions of region, for example Michael Keating, *The New Regionalism in Western Europe: Territorial Restructuring and Political Change* (Northampton, 1998).

an alternative space to both empire and nation-state, and a potential solution to the political problems of community and authority.

Spatial thinking, in Battisti's case as well as generally, is not neutral or objective: rather, it is a mode of political theory. The conceptualization of space—through scientific studies, cartography and interpretation—could serve to advance new visions of political order. Stuart Elden argues that regional territory is constructed and contested, not simply dependent on physical boundaries. The region is not a mere container.[103] Battisti helps us understand this by providing the discursive element in constructing an "imagined" region, a symbolic realm of political order grounded in cartographic representations of the natural environment. His geographical scholarship sought to inform the region's inhabitants of their surrounding natural territory; his political writings provided the foundational knowledge for imagining the region as a political community. Yet his turn away from his earlier advocacy for regional autonomy in favour of annexation to Italy shows the malleability of spatial theory, which, rather than relying on the natural environment alone, expresses a political idea.

Central Europe at the turn of the century offered a fertile ground for postimperial political transformation.[104] Battisti's international thought gives a glimpse of a road not taken, a vision of autonomous regions united in a democratic federation, which would foster prosperity, liberty and political participation. The demise of his vision was due not only to his death, but also to the profound rupture in the European political space after the war. The social-democratic visions of international order, which Battisti, as well as the Austro-Marxists, elaborated before the war, crumbled under the pressure of the new ideology of state-centric nationalism.

Battisti's vision was anchored in the claim that regional identity trumped other affiliations and could set a firm base for the construction of a political community. Yet the multiple affiliations of local inhabitants rendered a regional sense of belonging ambiguous, and Battisti's regional project was met with resistance already during his lifetime. The urban middle class engaged in nationalistic movements, while the rural populations often embraced imperial patriotism. Battisti targeted both trends by emphasizing the importance of bottom-up knowledge of the regional territory—held by its rural inhabitants—for shaping the goals and dynamics of local authority. As the First World War manifested the fragility of empires and the rise of nation-states, Battisti acknowledged the failure of his vision and turned to irredentism.

The transition from empire to nation-state did not necessarily signify progress in terms of legal rights, cultural freedom and economic growth: the Austrian Empire offered more legal rights to its minorities than the national states that succeeded it.[105] The imperial sphere embraced diversity, creating mutually reinforcing—rather

---

[103]Stuart Elden, "Territory/Territoriality," in A. M. Orum, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies* (London, 2019), 2167–77.

[104]Natasha Wheatley, "Central Europe as Ground Zero of the New International Order," *Slavic Review* 78/4 (2019), 900–11.

[105]Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*.

than excluding—national and imperial spaces.[106] The Habsburg system provided Battisti with the legal and political grounds to imagine the region as a meaningful space, but he resented its hierarchical traits, which left Trentino inevitably on the political and geographical margins. A federation which would recognize Trentino as an equal member and advance progressive social and economic policies could extract the region from its political and economic marginality. As Battisti himself demonstrated by becoming a militant supporter of Italian nationalism, the regional spatial discourse depended on a conceptual network of internationalist, socialist and democratic ideas that had lost their appeal during the First World War.

The foundation of the European Union gave rise to a new wave of regional thinking in Europe.[107] Under the auspices of the EU, regions have demanded more powers to cope with the demands of European integration.[108] Proponents of regionalism today are unlikely to base their arguments on the same claims as Battisti. But his interpretation of the region as a meaningful political space is a telling example of the advantages and pitfalls of this perspective. As the global order of nation-states enters into an era of crisis and transformation, Battisti's writings on region and federation bring into sharp relief the historical genealogy of alternative spaces of politics.

---

[106]See, for example, Jakub S. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918* (Oxford, 2017).

[107]See, for example, Michael Keating, "Contesting European Regions," *Regional Studies* 51/1 (2017), 9–18.

[108]Carlo Desideri, "Italian Regions in the European Community," in Barry Jones and Michael Keating, eds., *The European Union and the Regions* (Oxford, 1995), 65–88; Lorenzo Piccoli, "Structuring Regional Citizenship: Historical Continuity and Contemporary Salience," in Joseph Marko, ed., *European Yearbook of Minority Issues* (Boston and Leiden, 2016), 130–50.