

Original Scientific Paper

**THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE BALKANS  
IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES –  
BETWEEN NATIONAL EMANCIPATION MOVEMENTS AND  
GEOSTRATEGIC GAMES OF THE GREAT POWERS .**

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**Ljubiša R. Mitrović**

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

**Abstract.** *The paper analyses the geopolitical processes in the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries within the theoretical and methodological approach offered by historical sociology and from the perspective of contemporary geopolitics. It first problematizes the question of the production of historical events in the dialectics of history, pointing thereby to Brodel's and Marx's research of history as a complex, structural and contradictory process. Then it presents a sociological analysis of the geopolitical position of the Balkans and its bloody fate – as a cross, a crucifix, a crossroads at which different cultures and civilizations intersect and produce a "surplus of history", which makes the Balkans a "powder keg" and a region of the culture of death and incomplete peace. It especially focuses on the bloody Balkan geopolitics in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, solving the Eastern Question, the national liberation movements, the rise of the old and the new imperialism in the Balkans and the implications of the given processes for peace, stability and development of the Balkans. It also analyses the geopolitical transition of the Balkans at the beginning of the new millennium, as well as the possibility of the renewal of the movement whose guiding idea was "the Balkans to the Balkan nations" in the era of globalization. The paper makes the point that the future of the Balkans does not lie in rewriting the past but in the culture of peace, in democratic integration and cooperation of the Balkan nations.*

**Key words:** *geopolitics, the Balkans, historical sociology, regional conflictology, the culture of peace.*

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**Corresponding author:** Ljubiša R. Mitrović

Faculty of Philosophy, Ćirila i Metodija 2, 18000 Niš, Serbia

Tel: +381 18 514 312, ext. 169 • E-mail: ljubisa@filfak.ni.ac.rs

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Current Relevance of Researching the Questions Related to the History of the New Age  
and the Contemporary Era in the Balkans, and the Challenges Historiographers and  
Analysts Face*

Although most social science researchers write about a radical paradigm change in the 20th century, which is marked by radical changes indeed, and talk about a change from geopolitics (at the beginning of the 20th century) to geoeconomy (the second half of the 20th century) and to geoculture (at the beginning of the 21st century), it should be pointed out that after 1989, i.e. after the Cold War, interest has once again grown for geopolitics? Why?

Primarily because of *a new trend embodied in the global geopolitical transition* from the bipolar to a unipolar world, in the tendency to create a new world order, in the global geopolitical transition and the processes of neoconservative restoration, all of which requires a "revision of the past", i.e. a revision of the official historical truth about what happened in the 20th century.

In the *era of historical neoconservative restoration* (in which we live today), when the new generations are searching for the roots of their identity and for their geocultural code, and when various ghosts of the past come alive, it has virtually become trendy to undertake *a revision of the past* at both the national and the global levels. So what we see today is a revision of the outcomes of the First and the Second World War, with the aim of justifying the new world order and a revision of the regional and national history.

While not accepting a dogmatic absolutization of the historical truth and its getting mythologized, and while remaining open to new re-evaluations, which is the right of the new generations, I must say that historical relativism, too, has its principles and limitations.

As opposed to the current political historiography, which is heavily influenced by ideology and does not see deeper structural contexts and the causes behind social and historical events related to the *longue dourre* history, we hold the opinion that scientific truth must analyse and interpret historical events on the basis of a deepened dialectical, historical, civilizational and sociological analysis. It is only in such a context that the real, and often hidden, essence of social events that both produce and are products of historical change, can be seen.

It is in this context that analysing the geopolitics of the Balkans in the 21st century indeed has its *raison d'etre*. This conclusion does not come out of the current needs of political parties and movements that wish to "redefine the past" because of demagogical electoral advertizing, but out of the crucial needs of the reserach of historical events and achieving rational self-consciousness on the part of both the ordinary people and the agents of social change.

What is needed in this process of objective scientific reserach of the past is a cooperation od reserachers / scientists specializing in various areas, as well as a combination of various paradigmatic and methodological approaches, and their creative synergy. In this context, it is especially important for sociology and history to cooperate, which is something that *K. Marx, E. Durkheim, M. Weber*, but also *F. Brodel, E. Wallerstein* and numerous other representatives of *historical sociology* deals with, as a transborder interdisciplinary science exploring contradictory in-depth currents of history as a multivalent process of selfproduction of history through actions of social agents.

I WHY IS THE BALKANS A REGION OF "THE CULTURE OF DEATH" AND  
"A SURPLUS OF HISTORY" I.E. A GEOSPACE OF IMPERFECT POLITICAL BORDERS AND  
CLASHES OF CIVILIZATIONS?

*The Contemporary Balkans* is an area with politically imperfect borders, a surplus of history and "incomplete peace". The surplus of history in the Balkans and the inability of the Balkan nations / elites to govern their destiny / their region has been cynically addressed by W. Churchill, who thereby forgot that that the production of the surplus of history in the Balkans is the result not only of the actions of the Balkan nations but also of the major colonial powers, which, in this area where various civilizations intersect and where religions and ethnic groups are mixed, have not only "shuffled cards and arbitrated" but also directly provoked conflicts and managed them. That was not only the case in the 19th and the 20th centuries, but is, unfortunately, still so today.

*The contemporary Balkans is today undergoing the process of geopolitical transition*, from the East (away from the Soviet influence up to 1989) towards Euroatlantic organizations. When it comes to economy, their elites / pseudoelites uncritically follow the neoliberal model of dependent modernization, whereas in the political sphere they strive for a liberal democratic multiparty parliamentary representative system. In the sphere of culture, they follow the spirit of Anglo-Saxon modernization and of dependent culture. The Balkans is currently characterized by recolonization and by its effectively becoming a protectorate, by the peripherization of economy, society and culture, with the political sphere being characterized by limenpolitics and lumpendevlopment.

As a cross and a crossroads among civilizations, the Balkans is a *big cemetery of civilizations and forms of rule*. This area has long been traversed not only by merchants, tourists and peace-loving writers, but also by crusaders, conquerors, colonizers and plunderers. It is only in such a context that one can understand the metaphorical thought of *Justin Popović*, an Orthodox theologian, on the Balkans as the cradle of different nations, that is based on the blade of the knife and that is in a permanent state of incomplete peace, giving an impression that the Balkan nations had made their nest on top of a volcano itself.<sup>1</sup>

*The Balkan nations* are no less industrious and skilful than the other European nations, but in the Balkans the *geohistory* has always seemed like a storm, eradicating in all too frequent times of war and blood all that the previous generations had achieved in this geospace.

All too often, Europe, that old hypocritical lady, sent its crusaders to conquer, plunder and convert the Balkan peoples. Then the Balkans became enslaved by the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. And then other empires came. Each of them has taken its toll. Sometimes it was people were taken away by the occupying forces (tax in blood), sometimes it was material resources, while today we can talk about brain drain, i.e. about parts of the young generation getting sucked away into the system of the great powers.

It is known that the south Slavs, when they came to the Balkans, represented an industrious, welcoming and peace loving group of people that loved to sing and dance, and that used both song and dance in welcoming friends and foreigners alike.

*The war culture* of the Balkan nations is a product of geohistory. Having "built their home right on the road" (J. Cvijić), they have had to endure attacks coming not only from

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<sup>1</sup> See Lj. Mitrović, *Savremeni Balkan u ključu geopolitike* [Contemporary Balkans from the Perspective of Geopolitics], Institut za političke studije, Beograd, 2006.

different civilizations, but also from Crusaders from the West and East (the Roman empire, the Ottoman empire...). So as to preserve their homes, they turned from peasants to warriors. In those perilous times they had to leave their fields and take up arms. The result of that existential need to preserve their hearths and identity was the emergence of a specific war culture. In other words, war culture is definitely not any racial trait of the nations from the given region.

Naturally, what the Balkan nations need in the new historical conditions is a Copernican revolution – abandoning war culture for work culture, i.e. a new culture of work and of peace. That is the major prerequisite for the development, modernization and progress of the Balkans. And that requires a thorough change of the system of values, of the world view, of cultural orientations of the Balkan nations, which, of course, has implications for the process of self-identification, and for a radical overhaul of the cultural being of the Balkan nations. That means a change from monolayered closed identities towards an open pluralistic identity, and from the identity of the veils and burquas towards an open, transnational identity, that is able to communicate with the others, and that represents a unity of local, national and universal values.

In keeping with the slogan coined by *Đura Daničić* which says that "one can serve the homeland in every line of work", it is high time a metamorphosis of cultural patterns were undertaken, away from the war culture to the culture of work patriotism.<sup>2</sup>

## II THE BLOODY HISTORY AND GEOPOLITICS OF THE BALKANS IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES – BETWEEN A STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION, AND THE GEOSTRATEGIC INTEREST GAMES OF THE MAJOR POWERS AND COLONIAL CONQUERING AND SUBJUGATION

*The History of the Balkans in the 19th Century* was marked by solving the so-called Eastern Question, i.e. by national liberation from the Turkish Empire. That movement for national liberation matured in different ways in different parts of this geospace. What helped articulate the national liberation (self-)consciousness were the Orthodox church as a keeper of national identity, the emerging intelligence, as well as the social and political movements of the emerging young bourgeoisie and mass impoverishment and dissatisfaction of the lowest social levels.

At the beginning of the 19th c., the Turkish Empire was undergoing a process of implosion. Numerous revolts and uprisings (starting with Karadorde in Serbia) strengthened the national liberation consciousness and the formation of the movements aiming for liberation of the Turks and restoring sovereignty of the peoples of the given region.

The great historic events in the Balkans during the 19th and the 20th c. were characterized by considerable influence of the interests of the great powers – especially Russia, England, Germany and Austria-Hungary. These powers "shuffled cards" and tailored the destiny of the Balkan nations, and did so either openly or in a clandestine way, being governed thereby by their interests and the Machiavelist "divide then rule" slogan.

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<sup>2</sup> Mitrović, Lj., *Čari nepoznatih obala [Charms of Unknown Coasts]*, Književna zajednica Veljko Vidaković, Niš, 2007. 76-78.

The 19th and the 20th c. in the Balkans are full of conflicts of different kinds - national and liberational, ethnopolitical, local and religious, and global ones. It is in such a context of the clashes of interests and the redivision of political power in Europe and in the world, as well as in the context of structural, developmental and civilizational changes in production, that we should understand the dialectics of social change. *The First and the Second World War, the so-called Balkan Wars (at the beginning of the 20th c.) and the so-called Yugoslav Wars at the end of the 20th c. merely reflect deeper geopolitical and structural changes in the relations of the world powers and not simply mere lunacy of the national elites. Unfortunately, each redrawing political borders in this region always required "tax in blood".*

Along the same lines, the latest *geopolitical transition* of the Balkans from the East to the West and the EU, from Sovietization to Natoization, reflects more the shifts in the global geostrategic power (i.e. a change from bipolar to monopolar power) and the adjustment of the current elites, than deeper changes in national sentiments<sup>3</sup>.

Although the processes of European integration represent a specific type of regional subglobalization, *the expansion of the EU towards the east* is actually dictated by the logic of the megacapital, i.e. by transnational corporations.<sup>4</sup> This process is paralleled by the expansion of the NATO, which should represent a "global policeman" and a night guard of the wealth of the transnational gladiators that are recolonizing the world in the conditions of the emergence of the era of "liberal empires", whose birth is ideologically and theoretically legitimized by an American and a British geostrategists *Robert Kajgan* and *Robert Cooper*.<sup>5</sup>

*The contemporary geopolitical transition of the Balkans* is dominantly governed by the great powers, above all the USA as well as Germany, as the leading country of the EU. In connection with that, *Z. Brzezinski* openly writes (in "The Great Chessboard", 1997) that the latest transition of the Balkans should contribute the geopolitical and economic welfare of Germany, and that the USA in the 21st century will fight a decisive battle precisely in the Greater Balkans for global leadership in the world.<sup>6</sup>

### III HISTORY OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND THE DESTINY OF SMALL NATIONS IN THE ERA OF THE RISE AND FALL OF COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM

*History of the 20th century* is marked by two imperialist wars, October and other socialist and anticolonialist revolutions, the Cold War aimed at redividing and preservation the spheres of interest, and eventually, by implosion of socialism and by geopolitical transition, as restauration processes marking a change in the balance of power at global and regional levels.

<sup>3</sup> For details on the geopolitics of the Balkans see: „Savremeni Balkan u ključu geopolitike“ [*Contemporary Balkans from the Perspective of Geopolitics*], Institut za političke studije, Beograd, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Hofbauer, *Proširenje Evropske unije na Istok* [*Expanding the EU towards the East*], Filip Višnjić, Beograd, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See R. Kuper „*Raspad nacija*“ [*The Breaking of Nations*] Filip Višnjić, Beograd, 2007; kao i studiji R. Kajgana „*O ratu i moći – Amerika i Evropa u novom svetskom poretku*“ [*On War and Power – America and Europe in the New World Order*], Čarobna knjiga, Beograd, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Z. Bžezinski, *Velika šahovska tabla* [*The Great Chessboard*], CID, Podgorica, 1999.

*The geopolitical transition of the Balkans* serves the purpose not only of freeing this region from Russian influence and domination, but also benefits the transnational geostrategic interests of the forces of globalism, as a new form of imperialism or the "new world order". *The dissolution of Yugoslavia* and the wars in this region, including the NATO intervention in 1999 and the declaration of independence of Kosovo, are a part of the same script – expansion of the NATO to the east and paving the way for further geopolitical expansion of the West, and expansion of the influence of the USA towards Russia.

Despite all the *changes in Russia*, the USA has not lost its geopolitical interests in conquering the central Eurasian area in the 21st century. As the "soft" Orange Revolutions / antirevolutions and other political events have shown, the USA and the NATO strive to strategically surround and disintegrate Russia and take hold of its geopolitical and natural resources (gas, oil, water...).

*At the global level, the 21st century will be marked not only by the struggle for the sources of energy but also for water and other ecological resources*, that are abundant in Russia (especially in Siberia and Caspian Lake). Therefore, the geostrategy of the powers of monocentric globalism is characterized by a combination of geopolitical and geoeconomic struggle for neoimperial expansion. It is to be expected that, after conquering the Balkans, the USA and the NATO will in the 21st century continue conquering the ex-Soviet area (all the way to China), and they will do so through both peaceful means and weapons. It is also to be expected that these new "crusaders" will not be able to do so and will "break their teeth".

*The current economic crisis* is a long-term one. It is a product of the American neoliberal global development strategy and the dominance of the interests of greedy bankocracy and corporatocracy, of financial bourgeoisie and unbridled megacapital. It has spread from America to Europe like a tsunami and continues to spread on. Its consequences will cause implosion of numerous national and regional economies, as well as new social contradictions and conflicts, including *regional wars and even a global conflict*. Under the slogan that the "era of liberal empires" has come, ideologists / geostrategists of the USA and Great Britain are trying to legitimize the need for the rehabilitation of the colonial role of the West in the 19th and 20th centuries, and to recolonize the world once again. Under the guise of protecting human rights, we see 'humanitarian' wars being waged, not only for the purpose of changing the ruling regimes (as was the case in Serbia in 1999, and is currently the case in the north of Africa), but also of acquiring new markets (oil and other resources).

The beginning of the 21st century is characterized not only by Huntington's thesis about the clash of civilizations (the West civilization and Islam) under the guise of the struggle against international terrorism, but also by the struggle of the forces of monocentric globalism, i.e. of the "new world order", for a redivision of economic interests and political influence.

Today's *unipolarity* has already brought the world to new forms of instability and shown its neoimperial face – a bloody face of crusaders / barbarians and occupiers that is concealed behind the the guise of exporting the "cruising democracy" and protection of human rights. This new *postmodern neoliberal totalitarianism* has to be not only exposed but also stopped, if we do not want to see the revival of facism, a new cold war and even a nuclear clash in the world.

*Today the USA* spends more money on weapons than any other country, develops war industry, prints "fake" money for the money-loving internationale of the megacapital and for subjugating the world either in peaceful ways or by force. The NATO has changed form a defence alliance to a world policeman aiming at achieving the geopolitical goals of the USA.

The new progressive movements in the world will either stop the current forces of monocentric globalism in their neoimperial odyssey and undertake a revival of multipolar development, or the USA and the NATO will produce a global clash. In such a context, it is important to reconsider the position of the Balkans, which is currently under western domination (above all the USA and Germany) but also to explore *new ways of the struggle for a new alternative* that is summed up in the slogan "the Balkans to the Balkan nations", for the ways that would reaffirm the role of the new anticolonial and anti-imperial forces in the Balkan countries, which would pave the way for peace, stability, democratic development and regional integrations.

Unfortunately, *the small nations in the Balkans* seem to once again be becoming prey of neocolonialism. Their puppet *pseudoelites*, together with comprador bourgeoisie, seem to accept their puppet status and a satellite role in the "new world order". Today we are confronted with neoconservative restoration of what used to be the official historical view of the world. The history of the Second World War is getting falsified and the importance of the antifacist movement in Europe is negated. That can potentially bring about the revival of evil and the "eclipse of the mind", with tragic consequences for mankind.

#### IV A PLEA FOR THE CULTURE OF PEACE AND GLOBALIZATION OF UNDERSTANDING AND SOLIDARITY AMONG BALKAN NATIONS

Instead of "redrawing the past" and the "divide then rule" policy, the Balkan nations need to look to the future and development. It is in development, cooperation and democracy, and not in serving the interests of the others, that the new generations in the Balkans should serach for the new modes of development.

It is the task of *science and of the university* to reaffirm the universal humanist and emancipatory values of the culture of peace in the Balkans, so as for the new generations not to become prey of the revival of the rightist neofacist ideologies, so as for them to build their future on democracy and freedom, and so as for that future of theirs to be based on a unity of tradition and modernization, on national and general human emancipation. It is only in that spirit of sustainable and humane development that the true progress of society and of man is possible.

*The culture of peace*, coupled with the social democratic strategy of sustainable and humane development, can contribute to the globalization of understanding and solidarity among nations. It would restore the faith of the Balkan nations in themselves, in their neighbours and in the democratic future of the Balkans. It would reaffirm the principles of equality of all citizens and nations, a respect for the dialogue of different cultures and the partnership of civilizations, all of which is a strategic common interest of all the Balkan nations if this region is to become a geospace of peace, development and stability, rather than a "powder keg" in the geostrategic games of the major powers.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Lj. Mitrović, *Ka kulturi mira na Balkanu [Towards the Culture of Peace in the Balkans]*, Centar za

The realization of the aims of the culture of peace in the Balkans is not possible without abandoning the neoliberal strategy of dependent modernization, that has introduced lumpendevlopment in this region (A.G. Frank) and has turned it into an area of peripheral capitalism. It is to be expected that the new generations will adopt a *social democratic development model*, without which there can be no global justice and global peace in the world and in the Balkans. The essence of that model has been best formulated by *Frederick Mayor*, a former director of UNESCO, who in his book "Tomorrow is always Late" wrote: "*The humanist development concept implies a strict application of the principles of social justice for all the citizens in the world ... The basic questions with regard to development are quite simple: what development and for whom? The answer cannot be shorter and more all-encompassing – for each person and for all people (Popularum Progressio). A true development always strives for the freedom of man... Each person, each nation, has the right to govern their / its own future, to set the path of its development and enrich its culture and values*".<sup>8</sup>

The point I have been trying to make here is: the Balkans cannot possibly restore its dignity and get out of its peripheral status until its position and role in the European division of power gets improved. Such a *radical change* is not possible without the adoption of the *social democratic development model* and without the consciousness of social agents about the course of this "transitional boat", i.e. without the consciousness about *what kind of development we are struggling for and for whom*. It is time the Balkan elites sobered up, that they dropped the neoliberal ideology and submissive lumpenpolitics and started searching for an authentic alternative in their development and national policies.

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balkanske studije, Niš, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See F. Major, *Sutra je uvek kasno* [*Tomorrow is always Late*], Jugoslovenska revija, Beograd, 1991., p. 64.



## **GEOPOLITIKA BALKANA U 19. I 20. VEKU – IZMEĐU POKRETA NACIONALNE EMANCIPACIJE I GEOSTRATEŠKIH IGRI VELIKIH SILA**

**Ljubiša R. Mitrović**

*U radu autor razmatra geopolitičke procese na Balkanu u 19. i 20. veku u okviru teorijsko-metodološkog pristupa istorijske sociologije i u ključu savremene geopolitike. Najpre, problematizuje pitanje proizvodnje istorijskih događaja u dijalektici istorije, ukazujući na značaj Brodelovih i Marksovih istraživanja istorije kao kompleksnog, strukturalnog i protivrečnog procesa. Potom, daje sociološku analizu geopolitičkog položaja Balkana i njegove krvave sudbine – kao krsta, raspeća, raskršća, na kome se seku lukovi različitih civilizacija i kultura i proizvodi "višak istorije", koji od Balkana čini "bure baruta" i region kulture smrti i nedovršenog mira.*

*U fokusu autorovih razmatranja nalazi se okrvavljenja geopolitika Balkana u 19. i 20. veku, rešavanje istočnog pitanja, pokreti za nacionalno oslobođenje, uspon starog i novog imperijalizma na Balkanu kao i implikaciju ovih procesa na mir, stabilnost i razvoj Balkana. Autor posebno razmatra geopolitičku tranziciju Balkana na početku novog milenijuma, kao i mogućnost obnove pokreta pod lozinkom "Balkan Balkanskim narodima", danas u eri globalizacije. On svoj rad poentira predojeom – da budućnost Balkana ne treba da leži u "prekrajanju" prošlosti već, u kulturi mira, demokratskoj integraciji i saradnji balkanskih naroda.*

Ključne reči: *geopolitika, Balkan, istorijska sociologija, regionalna konfliktologija, kultura mira.*