

ARTICLE

On the natural border: A bio-geo-political reading

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Abstract

This article engages in a critical analysis of the concept of the natural border. It highlights its inherently biopolitical nature by exploring how it intersects with biology, history and geography. In the last decades, critical border studies have deeply questioned the naturalness of borders. As a consequence, the concept could sound today as nothing more than the relict of late nineteenth-century positivist and descriptive physical geography. However, discourses on natural borders are not as dusty as one may think: the idea of the natural border has been consistently exploited as part of new right-wing populist narratives, all the more so in a political scenario in which the reclaiming of territorial sovereignty has become a main pillar of populist discourse. While critical approaches have developed a biopolitical perspective on bordering processes, we argue that the ontology of the natural border needs to be further investigated. By tuning into the debate on Friedrich Ratzel and the biopolitical nature of his work, we investigate early twentieth-century border theories developed by Italian geographers. Ultimately, through the under-researched case of Italian geographical thought, the paper demonstrates how natural borders are conceived, and how they work, as a biopolitical dispositif.

KEYWORDS

Balkans, biopolitics, Friedrich Ratzel, Italy, natural borders

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE ENDURING FASCINATION OF NATURAL BORDERS

In fall 2022, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban appeared at a football match of the Hungarian national team wearing a red, white and green football scarf that showed a map of pre-First World War Hungary—also known as Great Hungary. The map drawn on the scarf referred to a time when Hungary ruled over several, different lands in Middle Europe, including portions of territories that are now part of Ukraine and Romania, among others. Ukrainian and Romanian politicians and members of the government bitterly protested and demanded formal apologies (The Guardian, 2022).

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As discussed in recent years by historical geographers, the political idea of Great Hungary was based on a fundamental physical-geographical discourse. Hungarian academic geographers and geographical institutions have developed this discourse since the second half of the nineteenth century. They aimed at identifying a physical-natural region—namely the Danube basin surrounded by the Carpathian—as the proper and vital space of existence for a Hungarian, unified, nation-state, protected by its geographical-natural border (Gyori & Withers, 2019).

Just a few years before Orban's cringe-making show, in 2017 the then newly nominated Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz had launched a proposal to extend Austrian citizenship to the German-speaking population living in the nowadays Italian, autonomous province of South Tyrol (until 1918 part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Here, the issue was at the same time similar and opposite to the Hungarian one: after the First World War, and following the Paris peace conference, this predominantly German-speaking region was annexed to Italy, since it was considered part of the physical Italian region, bordered as it is by the geographical-natural border of the Alpine watershed to the north (Proto, 2023; Shelef, 2020). While Kurz's proposal never materialised, as it would have weakened decades of bilateral Austrian-Italian agreement on South Tyrol autonomy, in 2011, Orban had succeeded in modifying citizenship laws, thus granting Hungarian passport to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hungarians, mostly inhabiting the now Romanian—formerly Hungarian—historical region of Transylvania. With this initiative, the Hungarian prime minister not only broadened his electoral basis, but also fostered a sense of national belonging that implied the rise of new borders and conflicts between different ethnic groups in their home-states (Pogonyi, 2018). More than a century after the end of the war and the peace treaties that redrew Europe's map according to a questionable idea of self-determination, natural borders still play a central role in politics.

These examples emphasise the current geopolitical relevance of the so-called natural borders, as they were theorised in the second half of the nineteenth century by academic geographers. Our article aims to critically analyse these conceptualisations, highlighting the biopolitical character of natural borders and their positioning at the intersection of biology, history and geography. In the following sections, in order to situate the scientific definition of natural borders, we firstly articulate an analysis that engages border studies with the literature on biopolitical governmentality (Esposito, 2008; Lemke, 2010), as well as with recent debates on Friedrich Ratzel's reception (Chiantera Stutte, 2018; Jureit, 2018; Klinke, 2023; Klinke & Bassin, 2018). Following this, we exploit two apparently conflicting theorisations developed by early twentieth-century Italian geographers in relation to the Eastern Alpine and Balkan border to empirically demonstrate how natural borders are conceived and work as a biopolitical dispositif. The paper formulates two main contributions. On the one hand, it provides novel insights on an under-researched case—that of Italian geography—relevant to the broader field of border studies. Through such a case, the article interprets and deconstructs the fragmented and stratified nature of borders and explains how natural borders still perform political narratives and the construction of political space. On the other hand, it contributes to wider reflections in the history of geography by investigating new understandings of scientific paradigms that are often simplistically interpreted through the dichotomic of geo-determinism and possibilism. Our analysis suggests that by developing a biopolitical understanding of natural borders, we can gain a better understanding of how the 'natural' sphere—encompassing geo-physical and biological dimensions—and the 'social' sphere—pertaining the historical narratives—are significantly interconnected and juxtaposed, thus calling for new multifaceted and interconnected paradigms.

2 | BETWEEN *BIO* AND *POLITICS*: THE BIOPOLITICAL CHARACTER OF NATURAL BORDERS

In the past two decades, critical border studies have deeply questioned the naturality and linearity of borders as well as the territorial understanding that imagines borders as fixed and given entities at the very margin of the state itself (Green, 2009; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009). From this perspective, today the issue of natural borders could sound nothing more than the relict of late nineteenth-century positivist and descriptive physical geography, or a modernist and obsolete understanding of state power. However, as the examples above show, the issue of natural borders has been exploited as part of new right-wing populist narratives that aim at challenging the overcoming of national borders as well as the consolidation of the European Union political space, also because, as stressed by several scholars, the reclaim of territorial sovereignty has become a main pillar of populist discourse (Casaglia et al., 2020; see also Paasi et al., 2022). Moreover, as analysed in recent years by several scholars, although since the end of the Cold War globalisation has fostered the mobility of people, goods and money, on the other hand, barriers and borders have continued to proliferate, within the EU too (Stoffelen, 2022). This occurs not only through militarisation and the development of security infrastructures mainly aimed at controlling migration flows (Glouftsiou, 2021; Jones & Johnson, 2016), but also—since borders are no longer understood as fixed entities—through multiscale social and cultural practices of bordering that affect every-day

life (Brambilla, 2015; Cassidy et al., 2018). As shown above, the political initiatives promoted by the Hungarian, populist government in terms of citizenship have pushed for new bordering processes (Pogonyi, 2018). Therefore, borders and bordering practices cannot be understood as something that produces a cross-cut separation between two entities. Rather, they are a dispositif that incessantly implies new negotiations, the rise of a different awareness of identity and belonging, not to mention the intensification of tensions and conflicts, as recent debates on the so-called 'hyper-border' exemplify (Richardson, 2016). In any case, bordering does not prevent the emergence of new forms of contestation, also within the body of the state (Reid et al., 2013).

While borders and bordering practices are commonly unquestioned as one of the main pillars of the modern, territorial state (Elden, 2013), it is no longer a matter of debate that all boundaries are a historical-social construction (Agnew, 1994; Penrose, 2002). Of course, this is also undisputable for the so-called natural borders. In fact, although commonly recognised as barriers identified simply by following morphological, physical-natural features of the earth, natural borders have also been socially constructed as barriers with significant impacts on the spread and the functioning of life. Their determination as 'borders' is similarly worked out through 'scientific' discussions about how a natural border shapes the biological sphere and humans. Juliet Fall (2010) summarised the history and the genealogy of the scientific debate that since the late seventeenth century discussed the nature, the feasibility and the political opportunity to establish naturally based borders in an effort 'to construct regional divisions grounded in a particular conception of natural discontinuities, reflecting specific scientific determination' (p. 144). This led to borders' 'reification, naturalisation, and fetishization' (p. 146), a depoliticised progression founded on the rigid separation between nature and culture that characterised geographical sciences and Western thought more broadly (Descola, 2013). Fall's analysis also made reference to research that explored the social and political construction of nature, proposing for a hybrid conception of it, beyond the dualistic understanding of human/non-human worlds and thus rejecting any geo-determinist view of life and social relations (e.g., Castree & Braun, 2001).

However, as mentioned above, the definition of natural borders entails a complex relation between the inorganic elements of earth surface morphology and the organicity of life forms. In turn, we argue that the intimate essence of the politics of natural borders resides in the relation between the inorganic and the organic, thus in the politics of the theorisation of life sciences more broadly rather than in a simple geo-determinist understanding. Of course, beyond plants and animals, life also concerns human life and the sphere of the social. Friedrich Ratzel himself—often regarded as one of the main advocates of geo-deterministic natural borders (Fall, 2010)—in the second edition of his *Anthropogeographie* affirmed that: 'The border is simply a manifestation of the outward movement or growth of a group of people' (Ratzel, 1899, p. 263, translated by the authors; see also Farinelli, 2000). For Ratzel too, the understanding of the state and the establishment of its space was determined by the tension and the mutual interaction between the relative stability of earth's morphology and the very unstable, constantly transforming, spread and evolution of organic life (Klinke, 2019). This understanding did not exclude the relevance of history and the sphere of the social in the process of identifying natural borders. Rather, Ratzel's biogeography metabolised human action in a naturally and biologically informed philosophy of history, opening up—as we will see—towards a new biopolitical horizon.

Here we employ the term biopolitics as elaborated by Michel Foucault, referring to a new form of power, alternative to modern state sovereignty, that 'beginning in the eighteenth century, took charge of men's existence, men as living bodies' (Foucault, 1979, p. 89). The rise of biopower was inseparable from the advancement of modern sciences, particularly the life sciences. This application to politics fostered an organicist understanding of the state, supported by various scholars, including the Swedish geographer and political scientist Rudolf Kjellen, a student of Ratzel, who first introduced the term biopolitics (Lemke, 2010).

A biopolitical perspective on state borders and bordering processes that moves away from a geopolitical understanding was extensively investigated by Vaughan-Williams (2009) in an effort to recognise what borders produce in terms of geopolitical imaginary and 'to consider the relationship between the concept of the border of the state and our understanding of practices of sovereignty, violence and (bio)power in contemporary political life' (p. 9). Engaging with the work of theorists such as Schmitt, Derrida and Agamben, Vaughan-Williams advanced a conceptualisation of biopolitical borders to understand how borders are produced and reproduced, in particular in terms of global politics and their effect on life government. In this sense, the biopolitical reading of borders points out how borders operate in terms of performance related to bodies and subjectivities, that is, in terms of a governmentality of life and beyond the traditional geopolitical dichotomy of inside/outside. Yet, such an approach does not discuss the ontology of the border itself and of natural borders in particular. In short, here borders are taken (not for given but still) as an element of the governmental apparatuses deployed by biopolitical forms of power while the biopolitics of the natural border is not discussed.

Natural borders, we argue, can be interpreted as a biopolitical dispositif in and of themselves. While being framed in the traditional modern geopolitical imaginary founded on the opposition between an inside and its outside, the establishment of natural borders entails a further insight to be fully grasped. They are not only a dispositif aimed at controlling life, but also one in which, and already conceived at the point where, the bio and politics intersect and mutually define one another.

As stressed by Giorgio Agamben (2009), while Foucault never provided a definition of ‘dispositif’ (often translated as ‘apparatus’ in English, see below), the exploitation of this term in his work is linked to his increasing interest in biopolitical governmentality. In fact, a dispositif emerges as something that transcends traditional forms of modern sovereignty and can be understood as:

a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non linguistic, under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements ... The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation ... As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge.

(p. 2)

Therefore, a first conceptualisation of the dispositif involves, on the one hand, its relationship with power and, on the other hand, its essence as a strategic technology that facilitates the actualisation of power. Furthermore, Agamben emphasises the significance of the dispositif as something that separates and produces subjectivity:

Foucault has demonstrated how, in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create—through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge—docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their “freedom” as subjects

(p. 19)

Not by chance, political geographers have often examined bordering processes and practices through the theoretical lens of Foucault’s dispositif, interpreting the border as a force that both shapes identities and establishes order (Johnson et al., 2011; Rumford, 2008; Sheller, 2016; Tazzioli, 2023; Tekin, 2022). Additionally, borders are seen as a central tool in biopolitical governmentality, aimed at defending life through death (Glouftsiou & Casaglia, 2023; Mbembe, 2019; Rouland, 2017).

Italian political philosophy has particularly focused on this later aspect in reclaiming and implementing Foucault’s theorisation on biopolitics. Particularly, Roberto Esposito has emphasised that the core issue of biopolitical governmentality could be recognised:

in the liminal space where death is not solely the archaic figure against which life defines itself, nor the tragic price that life must pay in order to expand, but rather one of its inner folds, a mode or tonality of its own preservation.

(Esposito, 2011, p. 152)

Moreover, Esposito reflected on the relationship between politics and life, through which the biopolitical horizon intersects with the classical power of modern sovereignty: ‘What does biopolitics mean, what outcomes does it produce, and how is a world continually more governed by biopolitics configured?’ (Esposito, 2008, p. 31). According to Esposito, the main issue that Foucault leaves somewhat unresolved is whether biopolitics constitutes a politics *over* life, making life its object of domain, or whether it is a politics *of* life, a politics that subjectifies the biological datum. Further to this point, Esposito highlights a dual process that already lies at the heart of Foucault’s interpretation of biopower. Indeed, what differentiates Foucault’s reflection on biopolitics from the previous ones is that Foucault does not view the biological dimension as an objective entity rooted in a natural-scientific approach. Instead, he argues that there is not such a thing as a natural life ‘independent from the meanings that culture and therefore history have, over the course of time, imprinted on it’ (Esposito, 2008, p. 29). From this perspective, the concept of *bio* is not an unalterable fact, as history and nature are constantly intertwined and each one influences and shapes the other. So, life is not solely measurable through the natural dimension, but it always requires a historical determination—which Foucault refers to as biohistory. Therefore, as Esposito highlights, biopolitics ‘doesn’t refer only or most prevalently to the way in which politics is captured—limited, compressed, and determined—by life, but also and above all by the way in which politics grasps, challenges, and penetrates life’ (p. 30).

As we will demonstrate through empirical examples from the history of geographical thought, a biopolitical reading of the epistemology of natural borders reveals their dual nature, where history and the human experience are intertwined with biology and the natural world. This approach can transcend a purely geo-determinist understanding by demonstrating that the naturalisation of the border is not solely based on physical-geographical and bio-geographical features, along with the related methodologies for their scientific investigation. Rather, it is also the result of how a specific idea of nature is historically determined.

3 | IN THE BEGINNING WAS FRIEDRICH RATZEL: A BIOPOLITICAL READING OF NATURAL BORDERS

As mentioned before, Friedrich Ratzel is commonly regarded as the advocate of geo-determinism, as he is believed to have prioritised natural forms and laws over human agency (Fall, 2010; see also Capel, 1981). However, in the last few decades, numerous authors have attempted to move beyond this perspective in various ways. Efforts have been made to rediscover the connection between Ratzel and the earlier tradition of Humboldtian geography (Farinelli, 2000). Additionally, scholars have emphasised certain quasi-humanistic dimensions of Ratzel's work. For instance, his claim about the impossibility of establishing Newtonian laws for geography, and his conviction that 'geography must be guided by science and art' (Klinke, 2023, p. 102).

Importantly, Ratzel's engagement with physical-natural sciences has also been reconsidered by highlighting his connection with nineteenth-century life science theories and how they were applied to political geographical theorisation (Jureit, 2018). This connection started to underscore the predominant biopolitical nature of his work (Chiantera Stutte, 2018; Klinke, 2019). Along and beyond this line, Klinke (2023) has shown that the environmental agency places less emphasis on the Ratzelian conceptualisation of *Lebensraum* (e.g., the soil or the climate), as life's creative energy has a greater influence than the physical environment in shaping the living space. In fact, even considering the reflections outlined in his essay on *Lebensraum* (Ratzel, 1901), Ratzel's theorisation generated two fundamental considerations. Firstly, it addressed the close relationship between people and soil, and secondly, it delved into the idea of a vitalist movement as a natural force that propels life on Earth. This last consideration specifically relates to Ratzel's reception and adaptation of Moritz Wagner's theory on migration, which had interpreted movement and conflicts for resources and nourishment as a general condition of organic life, characterised by an irresistible pressure to grow, expand and colonise (Jureit, 2018). This idea, as further noted by Jureit and Klinke, establishes a link between Ratzelian geographical theories and the political age of European imperialism. Ratzel's connection between the bio-scientific concept of *Lebensraum* and the political imperatives of expansionism and (racial) extermination serves as the foundation for this connection.

This final aspect fully situates Ratzel's work within the new horizon of power that emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century and that is linked to biopolitical governmentality (see also Lemke, 2010). However, in our opinion, Ratzel's view reveals a dual process that is inherent in the emergence of the new biopolitical horizon and that has not been explicitly formulated so far in the literature. On one hand, as demonstrated by many authors, in Ratzel's political geography there exists a phenomenon referred to as the 'biologization of politics and culture' (Chiantera Stutte, 2018, p. 92), in which the evolution of political phenomena is interpreted through the principles of life sciences. Yet, on the other hand, it is also life itself, in its biological sense, that is historicised and politicised. Such dual process can be discerned by following Esposito's theorisation (Esposito, 2008, 2011)—which, as earlier recalled, emphasises that understanding bio-power at the intersection and juxtaposition of politics and life is crucial for comprehending the new biopolitical horizon central to Foucault's interpretation.

How can we identify this double passage in Ratzel's geography? It is essential to analyse the concepts of culture and cultural development advanced by Ratzel in his *Lebensraum* essay. Upon Ratzel, modern societies possess cultural superiority, which gives them an advantage both in the competition for living space—*Kampf um Raum*, and the struggle for survival—*Kampf um Dasein*. As already stressed by Chiantera-Stutte (2018), shortly before publishing the *Lebensraum*, Ratzel had elaborated a crucial distinction between the categories of *Naturvolk* (natural people) and *Kulturvolk* (cultural/cultivated people), which are distinguished by their rootedness in the soil. While a *Naturvolk* is static and at the same time culturally and environmentally less rooted in its soil, and therefore weaker, modern societies, thanks to their geographical knowledge and resulting spatial consciousness, are more dynamic and able to colonise their respective environments. What is then the essence of culture according to Ratzel? Culture is manifested in the cultural landscape, which is created through human labour and through the conquest and colonisation of space. As a result, culture represents the historical and natural complex associated with a particular population and situated in a determined space.

Therefore, the cultural landscape is a complex that has historical roots, as it is shaped by historical events. However, it is also influenced by nature and has become naturalised. This is because the cultural landscape is not only found within a specific part of the natural environment, but also follows natural laws such as growth, the need for nourishment, expansion, decline and extinction. This theoretical framework also explains the dynamics of clash, submission and substitution between different species and human beings discussed in the *Lebensraum* essay. In other words, the point is that a political phenomenon, like culture/cultural development, is understood through the politicisation of biological categories: life—not just natural versus cultural but also cultural versus cultural—is racialised, understood through the categories of biology. To provide an example, for Ratzel, this point shed light on the events that had taken place since the beginning of European colonisation in the American continent:

Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, America has experienced a Europeanisation of its peoples, fauna and flora, which in some places has led to a complete reversal of relationships. As for the distribution of peoples, we need not waste words, given that eighty million Europeans and Africans live in North America, compared to a few hundred thousand destitute Indians, driven back to the least favourable regions. We know that in the last century, the pampas, llanos and prairies were already aswarm with horses and cattle of European ancestry [...] Even in the southwestern Andes the European apple tree has become so familiar [*heimisch*] that it is now part of what makes the landscape distinctive. And just as Negroes have become native [*einheimisch*] to Jamaica, where Carib tribes had lived before, so the Indian grey mongoose (*Herpestes griseus*), introduced to exterminate Jamaican snakes, has taken the upper hand in a detrimental manner.

(Ratzel, 1901, 2018, p. 73)

In these cases, the outcome of the struggle, which can be interpreted based on natural laws, was also determined by the evolutionary level and rootedness in the soil of the various populations involved, and therefore it was bound to their historical genesis. But more broadly, as Ratzel himself stated, the same term of struggle juxtaposes the biological feature with the political-historical one:

In the struggle for life space has a similar significance as those decisive climaxes in the struggle of nations [*Völkerringkampf*] that we call battles. In both cases what is at stake is the acquisition of space in movements of advance and retreat.

(Ratzel, 1901, 2018, p. 72)

To sum up, the main point here is to emphasise how, from Ratzel's perspective, this double step occurs along the lines of the previously highlighted Foucaultian theorisation of the new biopolitical horizon related to power and the relationship between politics and (natural) life. On the one hand, nature and natural laws—particularly in the field of life sciences—illuminate the functioning of society and politics. On the other hand, inherently political and historical concepts like dominion, supremacy and conflict have been deployed to depict the way nature functions and subject life to political imperatives.

Going back to the issue of natural borders, while Ratzel, in his *Politische Geographie*, avoided the idea of determining a linear border through a scientific process,¹ his reflection on the essence of natural borders aligns with the above discussion on his theories concerning the struggle for life and space. Firstly, he defined natural borders as a manifestation of movement that is associate to terrestrial forces, including physical-natural but above all biological aspects:

While it may appear extremely fixed, the border is actually an expression of movement ... There are borders that change so rapidly, for example, in the case of a growing population, that it is also possible to refer to them as shifting borders ... The boundary belt is a phenomenon of movement that we can find most highly developed in the terrestrial biosphere, which is inherently highly mobile.

(Ratzel, 1897, pp. 450-451, translated by the authors)

Again, as Moritz Wagner had taught, the natural laws that elucidate the vitalist movements of expansion and growth—which are essential for nourishment and survival of life—also hold scientific significance when it comes to understanding borders. Therefore, borders, in their naturalised acceptation, can be utilised to define the political boundaries of a population or a state. Secondly, a few lines later, Ratzel continued his discourse on the origin of borders, shifting his analysis towards another form

of impetuous movement, which, though distinct in essence, he considered equally fundamental to the struggle for space and survival: war. This long excerpt must be quoted:

War erases linear borders, which represent elements and symbols of peace. Once linear borders are redrawn after the conflict is resolved, their rigidity completely contradicts the war as an energetically dynamic movement. War itself cannot erase the condition of trade, settlements, cultural, and ethnic borders, even if it can give rise to their displacement. It could be argued that even war must respect real borders, while obliterating abstract ones. From the moment war is declared, international law considers border violations to be permissible ... War, with the force of storms, creates new spaces of power, the boundaries of which are typically fleeting and safeguarded by subsequent warfare. But the border that war draws in its periods of calm, in moments of ceasefire, is something completely distinct from the abstract borders of peace. This is a wide area, that acts as a neutral strip between the two positions, several marches in width. And as such, this serves as additional evidence supporting the notion that spatial extension is a crucial characteristic of a border when it becomes a part of reality. No general would consider placing an ideal border line in the center of this area, but rather, at the end of the armistice or shortly before, he would quickly try to conquer it in its entirety, like [Gebhard Leberecht von] Blücher did in August 1813 in Silesia.

(Ratzel, 1897, pp. 451–452, translated by the authors)

Here, once again, arises the aforementioned tension between artificial, linear borders established through diplomacy and what Ratzel conceived as the only scientifically acceptable definition of border from a geographical standpoint, which sees the border as a frontier area of varying width, where geographical elements gradually disperse. For instance, it could be likened to the strip of land where the sea crashes onto the shore, or a forest with increasingly sparse trees, gradually giving way to a meadow. War contributes to shaping the terrestrial surface by also influencing the formation of these boundary belts. However, as mentioned above, war cannot be divorced from its historical context and the agency of individuals and therefore it is also interconnected with a particular level of culture and technological advancement, as Ratzel himself acknowledged at the end of the extract when he referenced General Blücher and his involvement in the Battle of the Katzbach in the Napoleonic Wars. So, the historical element, through war, intervenes in the transformative forces that shape life. This occurs because, as Ratzel stated, war is fundamental in reshaping phenomena that determine the spatial extension of borders. Therefore, historical-political dynamics play a crucial role in shaping and defining the field of biogeography, which actually means to categorise life in its biological sense.

Due to Ratzel's significant influence on European, and specifically Italian geography, we now delve into two distinct discourses formulated by Italian geographers during and after the First World War. These discourses revolve around the establishment of linear natural/geographical borders, with a specific emphasis on the political and cultural boundaries of Italy as a nation.

4 | MOUNTAINS, RIVER BASINS AND PEOPLE: THE ITALIAN (BIO) GEOGRAPHICAL BORDER

The issue of Italian natural/geographical border dates back to the long nineteenth century and was connected to debates and struggles during the so-called *Risorgimento*, the historical period that led to the political unification of Italy in 1861 (Cattaruzza, 2016). Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, academic geographers began to formulate a sophisticated theory regarding physical geography and anthropogeography, which was closely linked to the rise of regional studies and to the adoption of German geographical theories, particularly Ratzel's ideas. This theory effectively demarcated the geographical boundary of Italy along the Alpine watershed. While Italian geographers claimed to provide a scientific and depoliticised perspective on border demarcation, their stance soon revealed a strong connection with the rising issue of the *irredenta*. This concept referred to the political question of the supposed Italian populations and lands that had not been included within the Italian political space following the unification of 1861. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these territories still belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Proto, 2014, 2023; see also Rosenboim, 2015; Dai Pra & Gabellieri, 2021).

The main issue regarding the so-called *terre irredente* (unredeemed lands) pertained to the sovereignty on Trento, Trieste and Istrian peninsula regions. But the Italian state's territorial claims went beyond these regions to include the eastern Adriatic coast, specifically the historical region of Dalmatia. From the *Risorgimento* onwards, the people

of Dalmatia were often compared with Italians: the two coastal communities had numerous cultural connections and shared a common past in various historical periods (Ivetic, 2022). These nationalist narratives prompted debates around the so-called Adriatic question: the political issue of extending Italian rule over the whole Adriatic region. Although this topic emerged as a dominant political issue in the post-war period, following the rise of the fascist regime, it was already being raised and argued at the beginning of the First World War (Cattaruzza, 2016). As with the Alpine border question, scientific geography became involved in the political debate. Italian geographers began to investigate Dalmatia with an eye to incorporating this region into the national territory. Giotto Dainelli (1878–1968) and Carlo Maranelli (1876–1939) developed two distinct and apparently opposite theorisations regarding the eastern Italian boundary and the consequent Italian sovereignty over the Adriatic and the Balkan peninsula. These scholars were quite different in terms of their intellectual perspectives and political positions.

4.1 | Giotto Dainelli: A positivist-physical and biogeographic paradigm

Professor of Geology at the University of Florence, Dainelli had developed a strong interest in human geography with a marked physical-natural approach in relation to socio-historical aspects. He was an ardent nationalist and enthusiastic supporter of Italian colonialism and the ‘civilising mission’ of Italian culture in general, which he advocated for also through alpinism and explorations (Dainelli, 1906).

Dainelli was the first geographer to extend the concept of a geographical border along the Alpine watershed, to include Dalmatia in the Italian physical-geographical space. In Dainelli’s view, Dalmatia was a homogeneous region, with distinct natural features and cultural identity, closely linked to the broader Italian natural and historical region, and one geographically separated from the Slavic/Balkan world. This theorisation was based on considerations regarding the morphological, biological and socio-historical spheres. Dainelli employed a physical-geographical perspective to suggest that the Alpine watershed—Italy’s geographical border—could be seen as running from the Eastern Alps along the mountain chains of the Velebit Mountains and the Dinaric Alps, thus including the entire region in the Adriatic basin and separating it from Balkan Croatia. This area’s flora and fauna, typical of a Mediterranean environment, could likewise be compared and associated with the milieu of the Italian coast facing Dalmatia across the sea. Human geography also provided evidence to support this view: the remnants of Roman and Venetian civilisations; traces of this shared cultural heritage in the habits of the local population; and the economic and commercial connections between the people of the two coasts. Even if Dainelli criticised existing census data as being anti-Italian, he could not deny that the majority belonged to the Slavic ethnic and linguistic group. Despite this contrary evidence, his work showed that there was a very significant Italian presence in the big cities and in the Adriatic’s large islands. Dainelli therefore concluded that here, as in the Alps, the non-Italian population was the consequence of centuries of invasions that had destroyed the cultural homogeneity of the region and resulted in an unnatural distribution of the population, so undermining the area’s regional geographical unity. In his view, the dynamism and the rootedness of the civilised and urbanised Italian minority determined their primacy in the cultural and economic sphere of the region; he framed the Slavic population instead as static and primitive, with a merely marginal role in the economic system (Dainelli, 1918). In so doing, Dainelli (who would soon be joined by a number of geographers and other scholars in this view) began to formulate a deeply racist discourse well before the Fascist regime’s coercive and chauvinist politics of the 1920s and 1930s. This formulation provides a clear comparison to Ratzel’s theorisation about nature and cultural people discussed above. The Slavs, despite being majority, are portrayed as static and weaker, lacking the capacity for colonisation and thus playing a marginal role in economic and social development. In contrast, the cultured Italians, with their millennial-long civilisation, exhibit a dynamism that enables them to control trade and commerce and to dominate cultural and urban life.

Dainelli’s view clearly exemplifies the prevalent physical-natural positivist geography, which held significant influence in Italy and elsewhere during that historical period. Recalling Ratzel’s theorisation discussed above, his perspective prioritises environmental aspects and the connection between people and soil. In a broader sense, it applied the principles of natural and life sciences to the investigation of social and cultural phenomena. As evidenced by Dainelli’s discourse on Dalmatia, on the one hand, morphological and biogeographical characteristics determine the geographical structure of different regions and, consequently, their political division. On the other hand, vitalist and evolutionary theorisations were employed to analyse the socio-cultural dimension of different racialised populations, thus contributing to the development of a racist perspective. Therefore, Dainelli can be seen as having developed a biopolitical discourse that emphasises the process of biologising the political. As for Ratzel, the main question at hand was the struggle for survival in defence of an ethno-cultural principle, specifically that of the Italian people, which he viewed from a biological perspective.

As had occurred with the Alpine border, Dainelli's theorisation found substantial support inside and outside of the academy and was brought into the public realm through popular works, and in newspapers and magazines. Tourist organisations such as the Italian Touring Club (TCI) played a key role in this dissemination. Since the early 1930s, the TCI had published a guidebook on Dalmatia in Italian that emphasised Italy's cultural ties with this land (Bertarelli, 1934; see also Bosworth, 1996). The Adriatic question also had significant reverberations in the international geographical journals, where (perhaps unsurprisingly) the positions of Italian geographers clashed with those of Slavic-language geographers (Cvijić, 1919), and some Anglo-American scholars also interjected their views, including British geographers like Marion Newbiggin who supported the Italian perspective (Newbiggin, 1916).

While Dainelli refrained from providing a comprehensive theoretical framework to support his work—which was often quite descriptive—he also did not explicitly reference any specific scholars from whom he drew his theorisation. However, some of his general ideas can further highlight the connection between his thinking and that of Ratzel. Firstly, Dainelli owed his education to the German geographer Albrecht Penck, with whom he spent a year of post-graduate specialisation at the University of Vienna (Dainelli, 1905). Although Penck is primarily renowned as a geologist and physical geographer, he also contributed to forging a generation of geographers deeply immersed in the theories and methodologies of natural sciences, but strongly focused on geographical political issues and specifically involved in shaping the new political geographies of Europe after the First World War (Gorny, 2022; see also Seegel, 2018). As Schultz (2018) highlighted, Penck significantly embraced and expanded on Ratzel's theories, particularly with regard to the concept of natural border presented in the *Politische Geographie*. Moreover, exploiting a framework that was well established in early twentieth-century Italian geography, and which borrowed from Ratzel (see above), Dainelli understood the basis of regional geography as a comparative research encompassing both geographical and geological aspects: 'Geographical situation and geological structure and composition: these are the fundamental notions from which you must start' (Dainelli, 1915, p. 175, translated by the authors). According to Dainelli, as with other Italian geographers (Proto, 2023), the concept of geographical situation corresponded to Ratzel's conceptualisation of *Lage* (location/situation), which was used by the German geographer to illustrate the relationship between physical-natural and biological phenomena, and therefore to connect the soil with the sphere of life (Ratzel, 1899, see also Klinke, 2023). Again, in relation to Ratzel, Dainelli positioned human geography as the ultimate stage of biogeographical research. Once the relationship between soil and life, as well as the distribution of plant and animal life forms, has been analysed, 'the descriptive framework should conclude with an analysis of various human activities, which can also be attributed to the physical environment and its associated biological characteristics' (Dainelli, 1915, p. 175, translated by the authors).

4.2 | Carlo Maranelli's counter-narrative: Biopolitical regionalism

Concerning the debate on the Italian eastern boundary, Carlo Maranelli seems to have opposed both Dainelli's political stances of the claim and its underlying scientific justification. A professor of economic geography in Bari and later in Naples, Maranelli was one of the few critical figures to appear in Italian geography at this time, as well as the first geographer to become interested in the issues of Italy's South. Guided by his friendship and professional relationship with Gaetano Salvemini, Maranelli joined the Socialist party with a reformist and democratic stance, far removed from revolutionary socialism and Leninism. In terms of his political thinking and engagement, his research into the social problems of the South should be seen as an effort to understand the issues of underdevelopment in order to improve the conditions of the lowest social classes (Maranelli, 1908; Cerreti & Galluccio, 2012).

Given his political motivations, Maranelli charted a critical, alternative research path, firmly rejecting environmental determinism and eschewing theories and methodologies borrowed from the natural and life sciences. In relation to the Alpine border, from 1915 onwards he contested the mainstream framing of the unredeemed lands. He asserted that non-Italian people deserved a right to self-determination since they were historically rooted and represented a significant presence in those territories. He criticised the historical-geographical reconstructions proposed by various scholars, such as Dainelli, to demonstrate the presumed Italian characteristics of the disputed regions and prove this point. For instance, he questioned the philological surveys conducted to prove that German and Slavic place names in South Tyrol, Istria and Dalmatia had Latin/Italian origins and, therefore, the claim that these regions possessed an Italian character (Maranelli, 1915; Società Geografica Italiana, 1918).

His main contribution to the border issue was a volume he edited together with Salvemini, written during the First World War (Maranelli & Salvemini, 1918). In the book, Maranelli and Salvemini argued that Italy should give up any

aspirations to take over Dalmatia and, on the contrary, should support the establishment of a south Slavic state to safeguard against Russian or German imperial ambitions targeting the Balkan and Adriatic regions. Their proposal was a negotiated solution that would have given Trieste/Trst and Istria/Istra to Italy, but also would have ensured Slovenian people free access to Trieste/Trst harbour. They argued that the Italian government should renounce any claim on the city of Fiume/Rijeka and the whole Dalmatian coast, as these represented essential grounds for the establishment of a powerful and unified Slavic state, the future Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

From a political standpoint, Maranelli and Salvemini's book appeared to be in opposition to the imperialist politics championed by Italian nationalists. Their critique stressed the antidemocratic and imperialist character of the nationalist political ambitions of the period. They compared the Italian claim over Dalmatia with Prussia's oppressive politics towards Poland, the Austrian-Empire's stance towards the Balkans or even the broader colonial politics of Western nations in outer European lands. In so doing, the two authors formulated an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist position in which they stated that what Italy sought to do in Dalmatia was the same as European colonialism had enacted in an anti-democratic and despotic way towards overseas countries or even in the imperialist oppression of various nationalities inside Europe. Quite surprisingly, while supporting an anti-imperialist position, they somehow accepted the idea of Italian hegemony over the Adriatic and partially over the Balkans. This was due to the idea that Italy could expand its domain over Albania, to maintain control of the Strait of Otranto, which connects the Adriatic Sea with the rest of the Mediterranean:

... Italy would not oppose the dissolution of Albania, with the northern Albanian region being given to Serbia, the southern part to Greece, and the remaining part of Albania under Italian protection.

(Maranelli & Salvemini, 1918, p. 279, translated by the authors)

How can we make sense of this contradiction in holding an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stance, while also advocating for the scramble of Albania between bordering countries? This denied the right to self-determination for a population that was culturally and linguistically quite distinct from the neighbouring countries, which were deemed worthy of self-determination. We argue that this position was connected to their geographical understanding and its biopolitical nuances, which, while being antithetical to the natural positivist perspective taken up by Dainelli, still led to a regionalisation that influenced the bio(political) partition:

National unity is distinct from *geographical* unity. It does not depend on mountains, rivers, or seas, but rather on the people themselves, because they share the awareness of a common historical heritage, a lasting sense of solidarity, and a free will to shape a common future. And empowered by this consciousness and will, the people can go beyond mountains, seas, and rivers. They can even transcend seemingly indivisible geographical regions by splitting them with political borders. They give a soul to lifeless lands and waters, imbuing them with a distinct historical tradition. In doing so, they create a fatherland.

(Maranelli & Salvemini, 1918, p. 45, italics in the original, translated by the authors)

This passage exemplifies the biopolitical nuances of Maranelli and Salvemini's position while spotlighting their distance from that of Dainelli too. They stressed the inadequacy of natural laws and causal mechanisms as lenses to understand processes of nation-building. Yet, rather than foregrounding a constructivist understanding of social and historical processes, the authors tend towards a politicisation of biological/natural elements. Not only concerning 'lifeless lands and waters' that may assume a 'soul' thanks to a somehow linear trajectory of 'historical tradition'. But also through a 'volkish' stance that results in a geography of vital needs and collective agency. This viewpoint ends up equally aligning them with Ratzel's biopolitical lenses, although through a different view than that proposed by Dainelli. For the latter, the natural border results from the biologisation of the sphere of life and the naturalisation of human social conditions as aspects that shape places and thus can ultimately draw borders. Maranelli and Salvemini instead tended towards a politicisation of natural-geographical dimensions, something that nonetheless is achieved through an objectified understanding of a spirit of history that eventually determines on the one hand the cultural features and development of political communities and their 'culture' and, on the other, borders.

As mentioned earlier, Maranelli's approach, even in relation to research on southern Italy, primarily focused on economic and social research, and it appeared far removed from geo-determinism and biologism. However, since the research of Barnes (2001), the connection between Ratzel's thinking and the rise of economic geography has been emphasised. Along these lines, Barnes and Minca (2012) further investigated the relationship between Ratzel's geography and

quantitative spatial theory, specifically focusing on Walter Christaller, whose theories proved fundamental in the development of post-war economic geography (see also Gyuris et al., 2022). In this context, a significant figure is the Estonian geographer Edgar Kant, almost a forgotten pioneer of quantitative revolution, that from a fundamental Ratzelian anthropogeography (Kant, 1935), moved to quantitative theories and methodology (Tammiksaar et al., 2018). This digression helped further emphasise the connection between physical-natural and biological-based geographical research and inquiries in the social sphere, with their focus on socio-economic and historical processes.

In the case of Maranelli, it is important to note that his geographical education was supervised by Giuseppe della Vedova, an influential figure in Italian nineteenth-century geography, who played a significant role in introducing German geographical theories, with particular reference to Oskar Peschel's comparative methodology (Luzzana Caraci, 2004). Moreover, in an essay commenting on Jean Brunhes' *Geographie Humaine*, Maranelli not only demonstrated a deep understanding of and appreciation for Ratzel's anthropogeography, but also stated that the fundamental facts that form the basis of human geography are connected to the 'geography of the first vital needs (physiological needs for eating, sleeping, and dressing)' (Maranelli, 1912, p. 403). These are the fundamental facts, continued Maranelli, to which the economic, political and historical facts are subordinated. The aspect of the vital needs brings to mind Ratzel's theorisation of the battle for life, the struggle for survival, which Maranelli, in contrast to Dainelli, viewed through a historical and socio-economically influenced perspective.

5 | CONCLUSION

Through the empirical examples of how Italian scholars theorised the delineation of the Eastern-Italian and Balkan regions in the first quarter of the twentieth century, this article has provided a critical reflection on the origin of the scientific concept of natural borders. In the context of the consolidation of biopolitical governmentality, we situated our reflections within the coeval European geographical debate, particularly focusing on German language geography and Ratzel's anthropogeography. Not only did Ratzel influence many scholars in Western geography for an extended period (Jureit & Chiantera-Stutte, 2023), but he can also be considered one of the first theorists to reveal a biopolitical horizon that evolved into necropolitics (Klinke, 2023).

While Ratzel was quite sceptical about the political significance of natural borders, his ideas profoundly influenced politics beyond their original conceptualisation, by exploring factual solutions for political resolution. Notably, when discussing the delineation of the new Italian-Austrian border after the First World War, Ratzel's student Ellen Churchil Semple proposed aligning the border with the natural division of the Alpine chain, despite the discrepancies in the anthropogeographical conditions that this border would reveal in terms of ethnicity and history (Adams, 2011). This reveals a shift from the bio-geographical dimension to the bio-geopolitical, where borders can be seen not only as a product of a politics on/over life, but also as the product of a politics of life. This duality is illustrated by the two examples presented in Italian geography.

The theory, exemplified by Dainelli's mainstream physical-natural and biologist perspective, was an attempt to objectify the relationship between society and nature. While science still claimed the role of a neutral and depoliticised form of knowledge, this theoretical address produced a wholesale politicisation of scientific discourse. Dainelli naturalised society by viewing nature not as a fixed and unchanging entity, nor as a force that deterministically shapes human life. He regarded nature as the only perspective through which historical and social processes can be understood. As for Ratzel, this conception was not disconnected from the practice of war and racial supremacy—a reactionary thinking also embodied by the figure of Giotto Dainelli. In contrast to the rationality of causal, natural-scientific explanations, Dainelli evoked irrational mythologies, militarist celebrations, metaphors of ancient society, and individualistic heroism.

From a specular perspective, Maranelli acknowledged that all forms of knowledge are political in nature. Representation is not an independent logical entity divorced from the human world, and therefore can be considered neither impartial nor neutral. On the contrary, he recognised that all representations are always historically, culturally and socially situated, an insight that did not re-emerge in geographical thinking until the second half of the twentieth century. Critiquing geographical regionalisations based on physical and biological traits, he asserted the existence of plural communities detached from a biological understanding of human-nature relations and the related normative and naturalising (bio) political project present in Dainelli's view. Notwithstanding, he likewise produced a regionalisation, therefore determining natural borders, through which nature itself was politicised, by applying historical explanation to the very essence of life. To recall Esposito's theorisation, for Maranelli too, 'History and nature, life and politics cross, propel, and violate each other according to a rhythm that makes one simultaneously the matrix and the provisional outcome of the other'

(Esposito, 2008, p. 23). And this inevitably led to the emergence of a biopolitical horizon, characterised by the use of racialised and subjugated categories. We could argue that Maranelli fell prey to a form of Balkanism (see Todorova, 2009), which somehow still echoes in recent scholarship revisiting the work of the French historian Fernand Braudel and his supposed Mediterraneanism (Giaccaria & Minca, 2011). In this sense, although beyond the scope of this paper, a comparative analysis of Maranelli's theorisation in relation to the French school of the *Annales* and French human geography—also considering Maranelli's reception of Jean Brunhes' work—points to a fruitful avenue for further research.

What matters here though is to acknowledge the intersection of Dainelli's and Maranelli's theories on borders with the politics, and histories, of the first post-war period. Starting with the unresolved issue of Fiume/Rijeka, Dalmatia became a primary focus of Italy's foreign policy and the expansionist and imperialist ambitions of the fascist regime. This phase reached its peak with the aggression towards Yugoslavia and the subsequent Italian annexation of Dalmatia in 1941. Secondly, Albania too became a target of Italian colonisation since the end of the First World War. An agreement for the scramble of Albania between Greece, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (future Yugoslavia) and Italy was signed in Paris in 1920, closely aligned with Maranelli & Salvemini's (1918) views. However, it was ultimately blocked by the will of US President Wilson. Following the proclamation of the Italian Empire in 1936, and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, Mussolini resolved to invade Albania in the same year. This invasion was seen as the first step towards establishing a greater Italy in the Balkans (Ivetic, 2022). The short twentieth-century relationship of Albania and Italy eventually came to an end in the 1990s when, due to the increasing migration flows that occurred after the fall of communism and the subsequent collapse of state institution, Italy took the lead in promoting Operation Alba, a UN- and OSCE-approved military intervention to restore order in Albania (see also Debié, 2000). On this occasion, the Italian navy established a still-existing base on Sazan, a small island which had already been occupied by Italy as early as 1914 until the end of the Second World War (see also Ivetic, 2022). The recent agreement, signed in December 2023 between Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, which aims to establish detention centres in Albania for migrants heading to Italy, appears to be ushering in a new era of governmentality of life between the two countries.

The logic and praxis of the natural border—as per the reading we foregrounded—still resonates widely in contemporary politics. Well beyond the political geographical relations between Italy and Albania, or 'its' north-eastern regions, the discursive and techno-scientific production of the natural border contributes to naturalise hierarchies of human life, while turning them into an object of government. Back to the opening empirical anecdotes, for example, Orban's scarf stands for the politicisation of geological and natural elements, like mountain ranges, watersheds, rivers. Yet, when linked up with a simultaneous modification of citizenship laws and granting of passports in Romania's Transylvania, his political manoeuvring highlights another dimension of the natural border that the article historically substantiated: the naturalisation of a political phenomenon in order to manage life. Through a historic-geographical reconstruction of this double dimension of the natural border in the case of Italy, we showed how the natural border not only operates on the horizon of geo-political discourses and conflict, but also stands at the very roots of diffused border regimes as a component of biopolitical apparatuses geared towards the governing of life. By naturalising different forms of human life—it thus comes, in fact, as no surprise that 'naturalisation' refers to the process of awarding citizenship status—the natural border generates hierarchies of life while drawing inside/outside lines.

To conclude, analysing the genealogy of natural border conceptualisation and implementation in the political space as related with the rise of biopolitical governmentality, which represent—as Foucault had it—a new horizon of state power in European modernity, enhances our understanding of how borders serve to naturalise specific political spaces and human hierarchies, beyond viewing borders merely as biopolitical dispositifs within governmental apparatuses. This understanding reveals two distinctive perspectives in research. Regarding the histories and genealogies of geographical thought and their legacy in contemporary geographical narratives, we have supported those reflections that have begun to challenge traditional views—particularly those related to French human geography (Febvre, 1922). Starting with a critique of Ratzel's thinking, these theories have proposed a dichotomous understanding of geographical paradigms that replicates the dualism between the physical-natural and the cultural-social (see also Usher, 2020; Klinke, 2023). On the contrary, the analysis of natural borders conceptualisation reveals that their determination is not only physical but also historically contingent, as a specific understanding of life and nature is rooted in a particular socio-historical context. Secondly, regarding the contemporary geo-biopolitical scenario, natural borders, while often framed as a relict of nineteenth-century positivist geography, continue to function as (bio)political dispositifs. This is evident not only in the securitarian proliferation of barriers and boundaries—particularly concerning migration dynamics—but also in their role in defining the limits of nature and politics, in building lines between the inside and the outside, in short, in building and ordering political communities.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE

¹As a general understanding of borders, Ratzel stated that: ‘The boundary belt represents reality, whereas the liner border is an abstraction of it’ (Ratzel, 1897, p. 385, translated by the authors).

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