

POSTSOCIALISM, OR WHAT? DOMESTICATION OF POWER AND IDEOLOGY IN SLOVENIA

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Prologue¹

The entire field of postsocialism studies² is organized, implicitly or explicitly, around the idea that the times of global flourishing of (very diverse) absolutist regimes commonly denominated as socialist, and their rather thespian demise in Europe after 1989, represent social turbulences of such magnitude that they must have had profound, easily discernible, and mutually comparable impact on the societies in question. Political singularities such as the creation of numerous new nation-states, the emergence of thousands of kilometers of new international borders, and radical changes of political systems within the newly created and delineated state formations no doubt held promise of societal situations so exceptional and in so much

¹ I have to thank many colleagues for inspiring exchange and instigations for this article, and a book project on provincialism that is planned within the HESP ReSET project *Postcolony and postsocialism contexts in social scientific writing and teaching*. My thanks goes to all the colleagues in the project, but especially to Martin Berishaj, Michal Buchowski, Duška Knežević Hočevar, Jasmina Husanović, Ivan Panović, Hannah Starman, Sari Wastell, Daniel Wildcat, and Nancy Ries. Special thanks goes to Drago Braco Rotar and Taja Kramberger with whom I spent long hours debating the issues of the very elusive Slovenian *genius loci*. Their erudition, and incisive analytical insights were of great help.

² See footnote #1, Page 3 of this issue.

structural flux as to offer unique and unprecedented insights into human sociality.

The epistemological shortcomings of large portions of this enterprise were detailed at the beginning of our HESP ReSET project³ and need not be rehearsed again; in the final instance, many of them can be attributed simply to the more pragmatic and mundane aspects of the ontology of a very specific global industry that we call social sciences. Instead, I would like in the following to briefly outline a different possible view of life in a postsocialism state such as Slovenia that does not give quite so much credence to the unique, decisive, or even fatal impact of political, formal, and ideological structures of power such as (post)socialist governance, formal democracy, capitalism, international alliances and formations (European Union, NATO) etc. Rather, I would like to test the hypothesis that these structures can be, at least at certain very prominent levels of communal life, totally domesticated and absorbed into the local web of social relations that are much more enduring than political regimes, and are best represented and observable in what I shall tentatively call 'mentality dispositives' (after the examples and usages in Rotar 1998; 2004).

I am well aware that the term could be associated with certain less fortunate episodes in the history of social science in

³ The project's homepage is at <http://www.inv.si/hesp/>; project description and main theses can be found at <http://www.inv.si/hesp/project.htm>.

general, and in (colonial) anthropology in particular, from generalized guesses at 'national character' down to the rather numinously unfathomable notion of 'culture.' I am not saying that all Slovenians possess a special national character, nor that, say, all Slovenians have a Kardinerian basic personality structure. But I would venture to say that a national community like Slovenia is organized along certain very persistent patterns of (self)perceptions, actions, and modes of building of societal networks that are much more enduring than any single model of social organization superimposed by political and ideological power. I would also guess that this type of communality is everything but exclusively Slovenian and not at all confined to postsocialism contexts, but perhaps nowadays especially worthy of social scientific attention as a model enclave of parochialism that demonstrates surprising abilities of resistance to ideological, legal, and economic, commercial and other currents commonly referred to as globalization.

In an interview for the Serbian based *Blic news* (Nikolić 2003), the renown Slovenian sociologist Rastko Močnik commented on the Serbian translation of his book entitled '3 theories' (1999). Among other things, he states:

In the Introduction to the Serbian edition of "3 theories," I have radically changed my theories on ideology, nation and institution. We no longer live in nations, we only think that we do, and we sometimes harbor ill feelings about this type of community. It is my thesis that the dominant discourses introduce a type of community that can be called identity-based. This is why I tend to write about the nation much more favorably than I used to, because a nation is still a form of a pluralist collectivity, whereas identity communities no longer maintain an internal pluralism. Rather, they are folkloristic communities with a strong ideology and marginalization

drive, prone to exclude all that remains outside their ideology.

It is clear from Močnik's further clarifications that he does not confine the emergence of 'identity communities' to post-socialist contexts; on the contrary, he goes on to enumerate, as ideologues or political proponents of such communities whose discourses he subjects to his analysis, people like Dimitrij Rupel (the then, and the actual Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs) and George W. Bush alike. Having all but said that precisely such 'identity community' is an enduring type of social organization among Slovenians, I am almost tempted to say that it must have been a Slovenian invention in the first place; such a conclusion would certainly well represent the specific slant that anything in such an 'identity community' is subjected to once it is filtered through the appropriate mentality dispositives.

The latter have both official and unofficial expressions. The former are manifest in all forms of public discourse, from media to literature, from science to arts, and structured as recounting an elevated, tragic, deep history of the nation: Slovenia is small (but beautiful!); Slovenians are less than two million, and throughout history on the very verge of extinction (not in the least because of genocidal inclinations of their Germanic and Romance neighbors); have always been subjugated by foreign powers (as one of my informants, a middle-rank state official put it, 'Slovenians cannot do without a Vienna or a Belgrade, so now it is Brussels – no big difference here'⁴) and are therefore unduly timid and servile, especially in the international political arena; and above all,

⁴ From interviews conducted with state officials and bureaucrats within the research project entitled Processes of Ethnic Differentiation in Slovenia: Confronting the Perceptions (*Procesi etničnega razlikovanja v Sloveniji: soočenje percepcij*). At: Institute for Ethnic Studies, Ljubljana (financier: Ministry of education, science and sports of Slovenia, 2001 – 2004; project no. J5-3543-0507-01.)

Slovenians had their ‘national substance’ (a thing basically pseudobiological, but mostly discernible through moral degradation) threatened for centuries (depending on the political inclination of the speaker, the recent most perilous influences would be either communists or Catholics; but universally, people from the Balkans and their sloppiness, immigrants, the Roma, etc.).

Let me repeat, these are not marginally held stereotypes, but obstinate leitmotifs in any manner of public speech. On the unofficial level, outside public speech, these same messages are conveyed in a manner of ritual yammering (very reminiscent of ‘litanies and lamentations’ that were described by Ries, 1997: 83-125, in Russia during the 1980s) that serves both as a suitable entrée into any conversation, and as substance of many heated debates on Slovenianess. A most striking feature of these verbalizations is that virtually every person has a set of elaborate diagnoses about life in Slovenia (politics is corrupt, as it always was, before it was the communists, now it is the liberals; yes, it is horrible and oppressive to live here, it is suffocating; yes, Slovenians are petty and mediocre, every accomplishment, talent, idea is suppressed; yes, Slovenians are horrible racists and xenophobes; yes, it is them Gypsies and foreigners and Muslims that are destroying it for us); a palette of romanticist beliefs (but we are so few; many wanted to exterminate us, but we are persistent; Slovenians should be more proud of their nation and country; Slovenian women should give birth to more children), but invariably only one conclusion: nothing can be done.

It is probably surprising for any outside observer just how frequent and verging on obsessive are debates on these themes in any social setting in Slovenia. The discourse is saturated with an air of urgency and tragedy; this is probably why the notion of political correctness is nonexistent and deemed, at best, a hypocritical maneuver to obscure the truth: a right-wing party MP’s statement that Slovenian Romas are ‘a population that has

strayed into a certain bad civilizational form of behavior’⁵ is widely read as both self-evidently true and exemplarily restrained in its formulation. A (female) journalist does not hesitate to accuse one of the ministers of ‘hiding behind a woman’s back’ because he would not see her personally, but directed her to his (female) PR person⁶ - and the readership would sooner think of this turn of phrase as a heart warming allusion to the sacred treasure of folk proverbs than any kind of chauvinism. The debates on the European Union membership rarely if ever address the benefits and costs; the all-pervasive topic about the EU in political speeches, presidential addresses, and TV round tables is invariably the hypothetical danger of imminent ‘loss of Slovenian identity’ in the EU.

This obsession with ‘Slovenianess’ and ‘identity’ is perhaps the key diagnostic element of an ‘identity community’ in Močnik’s sense, and presently the most prominent mentality dispositive through which all other themes are domesticated in Slovenia. But Močnik’s reorganizing thought on contemporary community-forming can also be interpreted as saying that especially in the vast, multidisciplinary field of studies of postsocialism and “transitology,” the prevailing theoretical thinking on nation-building may have been caught in a very misleading conceptual and terminological traditionalism. What was universally seen as a process of ‘retrograde’ falling back to a 19th century type of nationalism in postsocialism Europe may in fact have been a novel process of community forming based on radically homogenizing ideologies. As Močnik suggests in the above statement, ‘nationalism’ as the designation of postsocialism processes is a clear misnomer,

⁵ Janez Drobnič, quoted in Media Watch online by the Peace institute, Ljubljana, at: <http://66.102.9.104/search?q=cache:7aGO8aImf2AJ:mediawatch.mirovni-institut.si/bilten/seznam/19/mjezik/+civilizacijsko&hl=sl>.

⁶ Daily *Delo*, 19 Feb 2004, p. 16.

as both civil and ‘ethnic’ state-building nationalisms of Europe’s past were inclusive, ecumenical (and in some cases, all the way down to imperial) in nature, seeking to translate the impassable, ethnic difference into a soft, transient, cultural difference (cf. Šumi 2003). The ‘old’ nationalisms thus sought to unify local histories, linguistic, and cultural repertoires by interpreting them as signs of essential sameness by means of invention of national histories, languages, and culture, and/or by civil ideologies of egalitarianism. The new, post-1989 ‘nationalisms’ (that Močnik, for one, does not confine to postsocialism), on the other hand, take a reverse course: rather than a process of unification and leveling out of differences, it is one of purging out everything and everyone that is not conforming to what is seen as very stable identities crystallizing from deep histories. A postsocialism state such as Slovenia can therefore be said to base its ideologies of commonality on (a single) ‘folkloristic’ identity that is increasingly impervious to, and openly hostile towards, recruitment or exchange of personnel, to use the classical Barthian term. As I shall try to show below, this easily observable parochialization is in Slovenia widely seen as the goal of ‘national independence’ finally reached, and a natural state of communal existence that both includes and subsumes ‘capitalism’ and ‘democracy’ – and the social memory on the recent past. The latter two are not seen as a novelty, but rather as a return to a sobered-up communal existence after socialism.

Memories of socialist Yugoslavia as fun

To briefly illustrate this point, I should now like to turn to (seemingly) more light-hearted aspects of Slovenian community and state building, as they are reflected in the memories of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945 – 1992). A prominent feature of this public memory is in striking opposition to the events that usually come to mind when Yugoslavia is mentioned: the so-called ‘interethnic’ warring, ‘ethnic cleansing’ and genocide, the despotic regimes of Tujman and Milošević, etc; it is

even in striking opposition to the notions of ‘socialist regime,’ communist dictatorship, and economic backwardness that inform both the official capitalist-liberal ideology and commonsensical public notions on ‘socialism’ worldwide. This feature is, simply put, humor; or rather, the fact that in large portions of public memory in Slovenia nowadays, Yugoslavia seems to have been about a whale of (bitter) fun.

In its 23 December, 2002 issue, the Slovenian weekly *Mladina* published an article entitled ‘Historic tourism: SFRY for repeating students. A tourist guide of a non-existing country.’⁷ The article brought a detailed digest of a book by Dejan Novačević (2002) whose work is reported to be inspired by an internet project dedicated to the compilation of a ‘Lexicon of YU mythology.’⁸ Both the website and the book are written in the sardonic manner of a matter-of-fact sourcebook that organize ludicrously fashioned ‘information.’ Both are attempting to reveal history as personal memory, and are dedicated to ‘the preservation of cultural heritage of SFRY,’ as the *Mladina* article informs the Slovenian audience. Commenting on their work, the authors of the webpage, and the book insist on a make-believe perspective and thus see themselves as ‘writing in Diaspora’ from Yugoslavia – a country that, as Novačević initially advises his readers, ‘is best visited in the time period of the 1970’s.

The *Tourist Guide* is systemized into several headings. In the chapter on Culture, subheading Film, the reader is informed that

⁷ *Zgodovinski turizem. SFRJ za ponavljalce. Turistični vodnik po neobstoječi državi.* – The term *repetent* in Slovenian designates a pupil who flunks school and has to repeat the year; thus the book that the article reports on is meant for those who failed to ‘graduate’ from Yugoslavia ‘in the first term’, that is to say, who have not actually experienced it.

⁸ *Leksion YU mitologije.* This webpage can still be found at http://www.geocities.com/yu_leksikon/svipojmo_vil.htm.

the most characteristic genre of the Yugoslav film production is the so-called 'Partisan movie' which evolved into 'Partisan film school' – the term Partisans being a well-domesticated abbreviation for the WWII Communist resistance movement in Yugoslavia. The film that is most representative of the school is *Battle of the Neretva river (Bitka na Neretvi)* in which the director, Veljko Bulajić, 'transposed the boundaries of film genres as he introduced into the realism of a war epopee narration the elements of thriller and science fiction.' This description seeks to comment on the way the Yugoslav socialist filmography incorporated the perpetuation of WWII trauma that permeated all official discourses in Yugoslavia: the Communist anti-Fascist resistance under Tito was an obsessive, and obsessively compulsory, theme on all levels of public discourse through which the regime sought its legitimation. It was no doubt also an aspect of the Tito cult and an expensive indulgence to the Marshal's own cinematic interests and aspirations, as the aforementioned *Battle of the Neretva* featured top international film stars such as Yul Brynner and Richard Burton, the latter portraying Tito himself. In an illustrative reference to benefit the 'repeaters,' the *Tourist Guide* cites "Saving Private Ryan" as a recent example of Partisan movie genre.

The WWII trauma perpetuation in Yugoslav public discourses is also reflected in the *Guide's* Population and Demography chapter. Aside from peasants (*seljaci*), Yugoslavia is populated by Yugoslavs, a people that became extinct in the last decade of the past century; members of other, smaller nations that 'are very sensitive' and are therefore best referred to as 'nationalities'; but above all, the most numerous population are the Krauts (*Švabe*): 'These are very bad indeed, as they tend to kill off wounded Partisans.' Under no circumstance are they to be confused with Germans, however:

'The people of Yugoslavia have a completely different attitude towards Germans ... as they are highly

respected, especially their monetary unit called "marka". The distinct expression of respect of the local population for Germans is the motto *Zimmer frei* that is, as a welcoming sign, posted on every house from Koper to the Skadrsko lake.' (Hrastar 2002: 57)

This comment on the tourist industry along the Adriatic coast in the socialist times has several specific subheadings in the *Guide*. *Mladina* in its report chose an excerpt that describes a specific aspect of German-loving attitude, and relates to sexual practices in Yugoslavia: "Statistically speaking, love in SFRY is a most prevalent occupation of the so-called *galebi*⁹ (Ger. *Bumsenexperten*), inhabitants of the seaside regions, especially Dalmatia. ..." (cited in Hrastar 2002: 58). The *galebi* are males that seek to upgrade the tourist attractions of the Adriatic coast and are easily spotted as they sport a distinct professional attire: a golden chain with a pendant depicting the wearer's astrological sign; a massive silver bracelet with a plate bearing the wearer's name in italicized inscription; white trousers and a floral-pattern shirt, unbuttoned; a tattoo depicting a stylized anchor, and the acronym 'JLA' or, even better, JVM – the former standing for *Jugoslavenska ljudska armija* (Yugoslav People's Army), and the latter for *Jugoslavenska vojna milicija* (Yugoslav Military Militia). Two additional paraphernalia are required: a very long and carefully manicured fingernail of one of the little fingers; and a gold-plated ring with a large black stone, the meteorite. This ring serves as the principal 'contact facilitator' with the target vacationing German female population, as the luring verbal formula that is used with it goes: '*Schau, schau, mein Schmuck aus Himmel mit ein Meteorit kommen.*'¹⁰

⁹ 'Sea-gulls'.

¹⁰ "Look, look, my jewel coming from heaven with meteorit." Author's note: the grammar errors are translations from the German and intentional.

The *Mladina* article brings several other highly entertaining translated passages from the *Tourist Guide*; on the popularity of yearly Eurovision Song contests where local TV hosts impressed the public with their command of foreign languages ('neezerlans sree pointz', 'be'ibah troa pooan'¹¹); on the chief economic production field of Yugoslavia, the so-called newly composed folk music 'performed on traditional musical instruments (Dallape, Yamaha, Fender-Stratocaster)' that

...concentrate on basic metaphysical questions, especially theodicy (... "Why, o Mother, do I have to suffer so?"), but do not ignore individual scientific disciplines, e.g. comparative sociology ("My village is more beautiful than Paris!") or psychiatry ("I would so like to make out, but my mother wouldn't let me"). (cited in Hraster 2002: 58)

The readers' comment page at *Mladina*'s web page¹² is replete with expressions of a warmest welcome to the article. One of the readers says that 'you have to be just the right age to grasp the point. There is so much truth in all this, my eyes got misty.' Another does not admit to nostalgia, but '...did I have a laugh!' Yet another reader reports having 'nearly died laughing.' Still another reader is more eloquent:

Cool!!!! I did so laugh. The best article in *Mladina* ever. I don't feel nostalgic, but, it is a comedy from start to finish. We were such a crazy country, I couldn't stop laughing.

A less humorously disposed reader kept it short:

Yuga was one sheer stupidity in which for 50 years, 20 million

people stepped out from the world of reason.

The notion that 'Yuga' was a lot of fun essentially says that in socialism, we have all lived in a world that was basically unreal and unrealistic, childish, free of responsibility; an enchanted world, a care-free grace period before the present times of adulthood and seriousness. That the new times did away with laughable recitals of utopian values which are increasingly replaced by solid, material valuables is, on the other hand, widely seen as but a necessary and logical aspect of the event of overarching importance: national independence. The nation has, perforce of circumstances, assumed a somewhat latent existence throughout socialism, but has resumed its natural pre-WWII course in 1992. The new ideologically protected values such as capitalism, democracy and, as of late, membership in the European Union and NATO, are seen as bringing (back) harsh life, threat of poverty and ruthless competition, the same old, unfair, and corrupt power game, albeit with a new name, and a renewed threat to the 'national essence' (EU and NATO) in a historical series of similar such threats. In this vein, *Mladina*'s readers expressed the particular Slovenian variety of 'Yugonostalgia': one of embitterment over five decades lost; Novačević's naïve humor and literary *manière* are seen as a distinctly non-Slovenian, Balkanian, sentimental if also mocking, irrational way of reminiscing – if, of course, also entertaining.

Brief flash: the political arena

Slovenian national exclusivism with respect to other parts of the socialist federation has a particular history of reinvention within post-1990 political discourse. When the united anti-regime coalition (DEMOS) took over the government in 1990, they must have shared this *Mladina*'s last quoted reader's standpoint. In order to communicate the absurdity of the Yugoslav federation, and the imminent Slovenian 'return to Europe,' a specific adverb was invented to describe the

¹¹ 'Netherlands, three points; Pays Bas, trois points.'

¹²

<http://www.mladina.si/tehdnik/2002251/clanek/sfrj/>.

pro-European, pro-western social evolutionary goals of Slovenians that implied a strong contrast to everything ex-Yugoslavian, outdated, backward, and socialist: the word, sounding pretty impossible in Slovenian from every grammatical point of view, was 'civilizational' (*civilizacijski*, -a, -o). 'Civilizational' and its counter-concept, 'non-civilizational,' had an equivalent in the then political planning of secession: the idea of an 'asymmetric' federation played on the notion of things Slovenian, national, progressive, indeed 'civilizational,' which also had a gradation: 'civilizational', and the superlative, 'general(ly) civilizational' (*občecivilizacijski*, -a, -o). This newspeak was used, for instance, by the presidential candidate in 1990, Dr Jože Pučnik, in his TV campaign, who declared that

time in the rest of Yugoslavia [...] is moving at a different pace than in Slovenia. [...] We have to follow our own general civilizational imperatives or face a fate of national extinction.¹³

The adjective 'civilizational' has since become widely used to denote anything perceived non-Slovenian and non-cultured, its explanatory powers all but exhausted. This goes to suggest that an accomplished 'identity community' is one whose 'development' is seen by its members as completed (hence its exclusivist, internally non-pluralist organization), and its space and time of development, as well as inclusion and equalization, saturated and set right – a history set straight and resumed rather than ended, to play on a Fukuyaman note.

The academic arena

Postsocialism is hardly a term used in any manner of public discourse; same goes, not surprisingly, also for social sciences in Slovenia. Among several hundred research projects in social science and the humanities that the national ministry in charge of

financing research has backed in the last odd decade, not a single one has postsocialism in its title.¹⁴ Quite substantial funding, however, goes to projects that, predictably, incorporate 'Slovenian identity' in their titles. This is hardly surprising, as the 'Slovenian national question' - commonly translated into English as 'ethnic studies' - as a problem field in social science boasts a tradition of no less than eight decades. The primary, if not the exclusive objects of study have always been, and still are on one hand, the 'autochthonous' Hungarian and Italian national minorities in Slovenia, and on the other, the Slovenian minority populations in Italy, Austria, and Hungary. More recently, in 1991, the status of the Slovenians in the successor states of former Yugoslavia was also defined as an object of study. Occasionally, the Romany issues, and the recently politically acute question of the 'Old-Austrian minority' are also touched upon. Only very recently did the so-called 'new minorities' enter this repertoire, the syntagm standing for people originating from various republics of former Yugoslavia, members and offspring of a labor immigration that began during the 1960's. These people, while citizens of Slovenia, are now perceived as sufficiently culturally different, numerous, and organized as groups to fit the same constitutional provisions on preservation of cultural diversity. The steadily growing transient and permanent immigration from the Far and Near East, Africa, former socialist countries of Europe etc. is summarily ignored as ephemeral precisely because it is felt that there is no constitutional or legal compartment befitting them. It is clear from this repertoire that in the research on the 'Slovenian national and nationalities' (= national minorities) issues, only those groups that are firmly established, historical, indigenous, not to say

¹³ RTV Slovenia, 5 April 1992, special broadcast Elections 1990.

¹⁴ The lists of financed projects can be found at the ministry's webpage at http://www.mszs.si/slo/znanost/rezultati_javnih_razpisov.asp; there are links to archive pages for several fiscal years back.

primordial, qualify as relevant – following closely those that are at the same time legally recognized by the Slovenian state in its founding legal documents. Both academic and political discourse thus equate the scientific problem field of ethnic studies with that of legally recognized national minorities in Slovenia.

Aside from the name of the field, assimilated were also its outer symptoms: in a manner akin to a caricature, the terminology of the Anglophone analytical thesaurus was made synonymous with the extant Slovenian glossary. Thus for instance, ‘ethnic group’ (or even ‘ethnos/ethnie’); ‘ethnic boundaries,’ and ‘ethnic identity’ got to mean ‘national minority,’ ‘(unjust) state border,’ and ‘national consciousness,’ and are extensively used synonymously. Pointing out these conceptual errors is received, in the true perspective of a provincial mentality dispositive, not as an honest professional intervention, but an immoral imposition, as it is invariably read as an attack on Slovenianess.

To conclude

The above three hasty examples of provincial mentality dispositives in Slovenia are but an excerpt of a possible path of analysis still contemplated. As hinted above, no cause-consequence type of history, and no speculation about the pivotal role of formal structures such as socialism or postsocialism can really explain the persistence, much less the contents, of the provincial habitus: those practical level, seemingly invincible, mentality dispositives that can absorb, domesticate, and transubstantiate with so much vitality. It may indeed be what anthropology in its romanticist golden years of colonial flourish termed, with a characteristically commonsensical and characteristically numinous word, as ‘culture.’ The mystery of culture can of course be unveiled with the aid of many conceptual tools, either as transgenerational mechanisms, as a system of beliefs, as function of complex systems, as discourse, habitus, social memory etc.;

but a possibly worthy exercise would be to initially ask, who are the people – or rather, who do they need to be – who populate this social space, and who interiorize, perpetuate, and communicate its meanings.

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