Civil Society and the Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing in the Southeastern Alps: Some Implications for Conflict Prevention

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The disintegration of what Katherine Verdery (1996) aptly calls "Communist Party states" was preceded in various Central European countries by initiatives to re-introduce the institutions of "civil society." Protagonists of this activity understood their mission as the consolidation of a unified opposition to totalitarian regimes which it was claimed had virtually co-opted the "public sphere" (Habermas 1989) of society. These initiatives gained momentum in the wake of perestroika, accompanied the demise of effective Communist Party control and elicited legitimacy at home and abroad with reference to western models of plural democracy and free-market economy where civil society is perceived as an essential component of "a desirable social order" (Hann 1996).

This normative understanding of the potential role of civil society (Seligman 1992) behind the "iron curtain," conveyed over that barrier primarily by dissident elite spokesmen such as Vaclav Havel (Hann 1996), caught the attention and imagination of western governments and academics. And following the dramatic fall of the Berlin wall significant material and human resources have been dedicated to bolstering the "public sphere" of these societies by establishing grass-roots non-governmental interest organizations_ (Sampson 1996) and promoting market economies based upon free enterprise. It is apparent, however, that western proponents of such programs frequently have assumed that locally implanted NGOs automatically promote civic awareness and thereby somehow seed the ground for pluralist democracy (Wedel 1994). The infrastructural prerequisites for such a development, such as an independent judiciary and a political culture emphasizing voluntary association as an institutional model for articulating and implementing collective interests, have been less in focus.

It appears to me that the instrumentation of conflict prevention envisioned by the organizer of this session is less presumptuous (Marrant 1996a). Here voluntary organizations and freely initiated businesses situated in settings of potential ethnic conflict are perceived as potential vehicles for mobilizing loyalties and commitments which can transcend primordial

collective self-associations in their quest for public support and participation. But in order for locally based voluntary organizations to actively inhibit or mediate parochial conflict, I would assert that they require the presence and participation, if not initiative, of credible and informed impartial interlocutors who in situations of acute conflict are capable of mobilizing sanctions or proposing alternatives which are legitimate in the eyes of the contesting parties. In the classic jargon of political anthropology, effective instruments for the resolution of conflict ultimately rely upon the ability to achieve compromise or enforce settlements on the basis of some kind of mutually acknowledged authority, be it founded upon the threat to use force or the persuasiveness of cogent argumentation. And the timely presence of a well-informed anthropologist willing to commit himself/herself, perhaps at personal risk, to an activist role may be beneficial to such an undertaking.

Allow me to return to the level of involvement which I identify with the intentions of this session (Marrant 1996b). I turn to the ethnically contested borderland of the Southeastern Alps where I have investigated the institutionalization of civil society in terms of the extension of citizenship rights. I allude to what is known today as the Three Country Region (hereafter: TCR) where several valleys converge at the conjunction of the current Austrian, Italian and Slovene state borders. And I begin by describing two coeval historical processes which in the case of Habsburg society gained momentum after the turmoil of 1848. The first is the consolidation of authority and control in this region by institutions of the modern territorial state — a process which political historians identify with Neo-absolutism. And the second is the effective propagation of ethnic nationalism as a secular religion which eventually legitimated and informed the policy of the states which succeeded the Dual Monarchy. In the following section I then outline the manner in which the above processes have influenced the creation and viability of voluntary organizations in a Slovene village before, during and after its encounter with Italian fascism. And finally, in the third section, I discuss the role of voluntary associations for the preservation of political stability in a multi-ethnic setting where the potential for confrontation is a part of the daily agenda in the lives of ethnically self-aware local residents. This comparison between the institutionalization of civil society in Carinthian and Slovene borderlands enables me to critically evaluate the potential of grass-roots voluntary organizations for preventing ethnic confrontation or resolving its locally divisive consequences.

I

For more than a millennium speakers of Germanic, Romance and Slavic dialects have populated the Southeastern Alps in a mosaic of linguistically diverse settlements. Upon the demise of the Dual Monarchy the multi-cultural ambient and social, economic and political integrity of this region were profoundly disrupted by a fundamentally new principle of social order, namely, the territorial jurisdiction of nation-states (Peter Sahlins 1989). Violation of these newly established borders consequently represented a threat to the integrity of the successor states where loyalty was no longer reserved for the reigning monarch but rather solicited by political, cultural and clerical elites on the behalf of the region's popularly acknowledged yet imagined "peoples." The social stratification of the region's population was no longer merely a matter of ranking in terms of one's relatively fixed position in a static agrarian social order; it was supplemented by ranking according to one's mother tongue, that is, ethnic identity. The structural tensions permeating late Habsburgian society which invited confrontation and political mobilization were thus transformed. One's official ascription to the ethnic majority or minorities of a given state, through for example ethnic censuses (Brix 1982, von Czoernig 1857), ultimately had extreme consequences for the terms of citizenship accorded to each individual.

During the final decades of the Dual Monarchy the local communities of this multi-lingual region fell under the effective control of a highly standardized and efficient state administration — the work of an "empire of bureaucrats" (Johnston 1983). The consolidation of state authority was accompanied by the universalization and extension of civic, political and social rights (Walby 1992) — rights which we commonly attribute to citizenship (Marshall 1964)._ Among these, the freedom of association opened for the establishment in rural communities of a myriad of grass-roots organizations. The public secular institutions forming the "public sphere" of enlightened modern society, formerly reserved for the burghers of towns, cities and market centers, were extended to the agrarian countryside.

Following adoption of the December Constitution of 1867, the emerging public arena of political discourse in this nascent borderland was distinguished by an ideological polarization between secular and clerical authority which systematically solicited the support of an increasingly enfranchised local population. Voluntary organizations became the quintessential vehicles for articulating this polarization in local life. A fundamental political cleavage was established within the region which yet today is fundamental to and distinguishes the left and right poles in the political landscape of Carinthia and Slovenia. In the Dual Monarchy's multi-

cultural regions voluntary associations also became essential vehicles for the politicization of ethnic difference and for recruiting support to increasingly influential nationalist factions within the political framework outlined above. Ethnic identity gradually assumed the quality of an imperative status in the everyday lives of the residents of this borderland in-the-making. In sum, the institutionalization of "civil society" in local communities was intimately intertwined with the state's increasing administrative control over everyday life and increasingly standardized and pervasive ideological representations of the Dual Monarchy's constituent peoples. This perspective on the structural transformation of late Habsburg society facilitates, I believe, a more realistic evaluation of the relative role of locally institutionalized civil society as a potential vehicle for inhibiting ethnic confrontation and conflict. It suggests, in fact, that ethnic-nationalism and its implementation is essentially the work of political and dependent cultural elites which more often than not are conveniently located at some distance from the scenes of bloodshed and persecution which this pedigree of "anti-rational" (Stokes 1993: 4ff.) populism inevitably perpetrates. Ethnic-nationalism is by definition one ethnic group's aspiration for political autonomy at the expense of other such groups.

II

In order to set the above processes of state-making and national consolidation in proper perspective I need to specify my understanding of "the legacy of ethnic cleansing" in the TCR. First, I examine this legacy in terms of the biography of a woman who has been subjected to ethnic persecution. I outline her response to these acutely perceived threats to the Slovene people with whom she unquestionably has identified herself throughout her life. And I examine the implications of ethnic persecution as the motor of traumatic experience which generated and institutionalized passive and armed resistance in her native community. In other words, I consider the legacy of ethnic persecution and opposition in terms of collective memory.

In a chapter for a forthcoming book, War in Former Yugoslavia: Culture and Conflict, I discuss the life history shared with me by Mrs. Darinka Kravanja-Pirc (hereafter: gospa Darinka) as the proto-biography of a citizen. Gospa Darinka was born in 1910 into the family of an inn-keeper and baker in the town of Bovec which is located in the Upper Soca Valley which today borders the Friuli-Giulia-Venezia region of Italy. Slovene has consistently represented the

mother tongue of nearly all residents of the Soca Valley since the time of Slavic settlement in the 6th and 7th centuries.

As a resident of one and the same place — Flitch / Plezzo / Bovec — gospa Darinka has been the citizen of five different states: The Dual Monarchy, The Italian Monarchy of Victor Emanuel III succeeded by the Fascist Republic of Italy, The Third Reich, The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and The Republic of Slovenia. Born into the emerging middle class of this essentially agrarian settlement gospa Darinka has been aware of her Slovene heritage since childhood. This self-understanding was conveyed by her parents and grandparents through, among other things, their active support of various voluntary organizations which flowered in her native town around the turn of the century. The local reading circle and library, choral society (all manifestations of secular initiatives) and various associations initiated under the auspices of the local parish church were together vehicles for propagating awareness of an imagined Slovene nation whereby Slovene language was presented as a literary tradition commensurate with the heritage of the German language.

Gospa Darinka's nostalgic and well-informed recollection of late Habsburgian society also dwells upon the creation of civic awareness in her native community. Within the context of her family she experienced a keen sense of obligation to actively support the various secular and clerical voluntary associations which promoted the welfare and "enlightenment" of her fellow Bovec townspeople. She clearly distinguishes between the possibility to exercise local self-determination through these organizations and the often arbitrary exercise of control over her native community by super ordinate authority, whether it be the Kaiser, Il Duce, Tito or the government in Ljubljana. A few years after the incorporation of the Soca Valley within the newly acquired Julian Province of Imperial Italy in 1918, the centrally conceived ethnic-nationalistic policy of the fascist regime pervaded the conduct of all public institutions in Bovec. The local freedom of association, previously extended by the Vienna parliament and guaranteed by the Kaiser, was co-opted by the highly centralized political, cultural and social institutions of the fascist state, institutions that were dedicated to reclaiming the loyalty of what were perceived to be the unenlightened and uncivilized Slavic inhabitants of this ancient Roman province. Bovec entered the epoch of what a local historian, Andreas Moritsch (1994), calls integral Nationalismus.

Except for masses in the local parish church the use of Slovene in public places was banished and all local voluntary associations which had propagated Slovene language were disbanded. Ethnically self-aware Slovene teachers, functionaries and professionals either went into exile or were deported to central Italy. In fact the severe economic depression of the 1920s which fueled populist support for fascism drove a significant portion of the local population into economic emigration to Western Europe and the Americas. The decimation of Slovene institutions and the town's cultural and political elite was tantamount to dissolution of the nascent civil society which had been formed at the turn of the century in this predominantly Slovene speaking community. Ethnic confrontation was imported by immigrant monolingual fascist functionaries, military personnel and officials into this predominantly Slovene speaking region. For the vast majority of residents native to the Julian Province the fascist epoch was a period of occupation and ethnic repression. In response Bovec natives who managed to avoid internment and deportation drew upon their organizational experience with the institutions of civil society in Habsburg society. They created effective illegal organizations dedicated to resistance which culminated in regional paramilitary organizations such as the TIGR movement (cf. Sardo? 1983, Zidar 1987) and the National Liberation Front. Much of gospa Darinka's recollection of this period alluded to both subtle forms of passive resistance and paramilitary campaigns where she and members of her family were involved. When discussing this period she repeatedly referred to the sign which her father was forced to post in their family inn: "only Italian is spoken here." The fascist administration of Bovec was succeeded by Wehrmacht occupation. Recalling this brief interlude between 1943-1945, gospa Darinka noted that the commanding officer in Bovec imposed a much less severe regimen in the community, tolerating, for example, the public use of Slovene. Significantly, he was a native of Maribor in Lower Styria, spoke Slovene and acknowledged that his Mother was a Slovene. In contrast to his monolingual Italian predecessors he exercised his authority strictly with reference to his obligations as a Wehrmacht officer and, according to gospa Darinka, tactfully avoided whenever possible the ethno-nationalistic policy of the Nazi regime. Indeed this case demonstrates how cross-cutting ethnic loyalties integrated in the self-understanding of a critically positioned individual can inhibit the perpetration of ethnic confrontation.

With reference to the arrival in Bovec of the Yugoslav peoples' authority in 1947 Gospa Darinka wryly notes that she had married a member of the proletariat who became the first

mayor of Bovec under the new regime. Thereby she avoided sanctions experienced by her brother and other close acquaintances who were subjected to the nationalization of property and other measures taken to eradicate the influence of the former burgher class in Bovec. The local choral society, library and other town associations were nevertheless revived at this time. The right of voluntary association was conditionally reinstated. And, significantly, the articulation of Slovene self-awareness in non-politicized fora was no longer restricted. The threshold for public expression of Slovene self-identity in Socialist Slovenia was considerably higher than in other Yugoslav republics where the proximity of autochthonous populations of other officially acknowledged ethnic groups and a collective memory of inter-ethnic strife throughout this century presented a much more inflammable setting for ethnic confrontation.

I turn now, briefly, to the context of Slovene national politics — the institutions and discourses enclosing a moral universe which integrates all those who acknowledge a Slovene self-identity.

Part of the territory redeemed from Italy by the partisan army fell under the interim allied military administration (AMG) between 1945-47. The AMG zone became a refuge for the conservative and largely clerical opposition to the new regime. This was a constellation of Slovene political, academic and clerical elite that originated in late Habsburgian national politics described earlier. But once the new Yugoslav-Italian border was finalized the vast majority of this Slovene opposition went into political exile, first in nearby Italy and then on to the Americas and Western Europe. Here these exile communities established political and cultural organizations through which they have maintained to the present a collective memory of their exodus from Communist Yugoslavia. Since the attainment of Slovene state sovereignty in 1991, members and descendants of this emigration have contributed to the revival of the classic opposition in Slovene national politics.

Toward the conclusion of the 1980s voices of opposition toward the existing socialist regime in Yugoslavia were raised by members of Slovenia's resident cultural and academic elite, initially with regard to issues focusing upon emerging ethnic nationalism in Serbia. With the support of a relatively free and critical press this domestic opposition sought legitimacy with reference to the western concept of civil society which it promoted as the right to establish a pluralist democracy. And an increasingly liberal communist party leadership which was still in effective control of state institutions acceded to these demands and subsequently supported

through the revision of the republic's constitution the formation of a multi-party system of government. Thereby self-determination was restored to local communities such as Bovec in the form of the unabridged right to initiate and support political factions in the newly extended "public sphure" of Slovene society. And previous to Slovenia's first multi-party elections in 1990 the country's clerical and communist leadership publicly addressed the collective memory of those who had gone into political exile. A massive public ceremony of reconciliation was staged at ko?evski rog, the site where it is assumed that thousands of Slovenes, who had collaborated with the occupying powers during WW II were massacred by partisan forces upon their deportation to Slovenia by allied military authorities from internment camps in neighboring Carinthia. Symbolically the clerical-conservative opposition anchored in Slovene national discourse was thereby re-instated in the public sphere of the homeland.

This sketch of the changing role of voluntary organizations in Bovec, and in Slovenia at large, illustrates the interdependence of locally institutionalized civil society with the authority of the state and other super ordinate power structures which have the capacity to either guarantee or deny basic civil rights. It also describes how the effective politicization of ethnicity eventually came to generate unquestioned self-understandings of one's collective identity, regardless of one's position in society. The combination of Gospa Darinka's experience as both a self-aware Slovene and citizen with a strong sense of civic obligation emphasizes the changing possibilities for her to participate meaningfully in the "public sphere" of her native community. Furthermore, we have observed that voluntary or forced exile generates resistance whereby collective memories emphasizing deprivation, persecution and homicide persist until they are meaningfully addressed in the public sphere of one's felt associations. And we have seen how the non-ethnic ideological polarization of the Slovene national public sphere, extended across the globe, also produced an articulate opposition movement which has significantly influenced the re-constitution of the public sphere in that state which lays claim to this universe of Slovene national discourse. Reconciliation is a phenomenon enclosed not only by local communities of face-to-face contact, but also by the imagined moral community in which injustice has been perpetrated.

III

      The mediatory role of the local institutions of civil society in the prevention of ethnic conflict is more clearly apparent elsewhere in the TCR, namely, in the bilingual regions of neighboring Carinthia. This region borders with Slovenia and Italy and remains yet today the home of an autochthonous Slovene speaking minority population. While this region underwent the same structural transformation described above, the articulation and politicization of ethnic difference and the classic clerical-socialist opposition in local political culture has played itself out in the context of bilingual villages in a manner quite remote to the historical experience of Bovec townspeople. In southern Carinthia ethnic confrontation has remained focused within local communities.

      During the Anschluß the Slovene population of this region was subjected to much the same sort of state-sponsored ethnic repression and persecution as that conducted in the Julian Province of fascist Italy. Deportation and exile ravaged the community of self-aware Slovenes during this tragic epoch and led to armed resistance. Since ethnic cleansing was not attained ethnic national contention over this territory persists to the present. But today it is delimited largely to the public sphere of Austrian national politics where the discursive theme of minority-majority relations seems to feed upon the underlying tension maintained between opposed elites which to a certain degree attain their livelihood through their position in organizations dedicated the preservation of the ethnic divide.

      Following W.W.II the renewed international recognition of the Austrian Republic was contingent upon guarantees of the rights of its ethnic minorities. The recognition of Slovenes as an ethnic minority and the guarantee of their rights as full and equal citizens of the Austrian Republic became law. Much of the intervening history of relations between Carinthia's Slovenes and the dominant German population can be described as an exercise in containing ethnic confrontation under the auspices of Austria's legal and administrative institutions. In other words, the state's guarantee of basic civil rights has enabled a Slovene elite to form organizations conceived to represent their common interests within the public sphere and political administration of Austrian society. But even Carinthia's Slovene organizations are notably divided between the clerical right and socialist left.

Austria's most vociferous protagonists of German ethnic nationalism reside in the ethnically mixed region of southern Carinthia and consistently utilize the media, public occasions and the political institutions in this Bundesland to articulate their political platforms; the most notable of these ethnic nationalists is Austria's political comet, Georg Haider. Not infrequently Slovene and sympathetic German public figures are subjected to harassment and violence instigated by Austria's German nationalist right-wing fringe which is implicitly encouraged by the rhetoric of ethnic-nationalism maintained in public media.

At the local level ethnic polarization is played out in voluntary organizations and local community councils where issues of language use in administration, primary education and public events inevitably generate confrontation. The possibility to mediate such local level conflict, to generate Slovene-German coalitions around issues of local common interest, is often inhibited by Carinthian media and regional authorities which continue to promote the ideals ethnic nationalism.

In order to counter the preponderance of German nationalism in various Carinthian seats of authority, Slovene organizations have consistently mobilized support and sought legal sanctions in Vienna where this pernicious residue from Austria's Nazi past is less influential. The retention of an ethnically neutral legal system and state administration at the highest levels of the Austrian state authority represents a guarantee for the country's Slovene population to attain fair and equitable treatment as citizens. As long as Austria's German and Slovene nationalists acknowledge their mutual status as citizens of the republic one can anticipate that their participation in the organizations of their own choice and design represents a vehicle for their relatively peaceful coexistence-existence. Such a state of affairs does not, however, say anything about the longevity of a persistent ethnic confrontation. Rather we have to look at processes throughout Europe and across the globe which are eroding the sovereignty of the nation-state. The kinds of support and legal recourse solicited by Slovene minority organizations both in Austria and Italy is not limited to the state in which they are located nor to the motherland, the Republic of Slovenia, which has proven in its "democratic" Gestalt to be less responsive to Slovene minorities' material requirements than its "communist" predecessor. Rather minority leaders have sought alliances across state borders with other ethnic minorities and they have engaged themselves with pan-European themes such as multi-culturalism and the "green" movement. Various committees and programs of the European Parliament and Union have been

most responsive in their support of these initiatives which ultimately represent an erosion of the sovereignty of individual European nation-states in favor of regional political configurations.

Concluding remarks

Through its formal association with the European Union in June 1996, the Republic of Slovenia joined Italy and Austria within what is popularly perceived as some kind of super ordinate social, cultural and political order. While this development should not be understood as a panacea for the resolution of on-going ethnic confrontation within the TCR, it is indicative of changing patterns in the integration of the lives of those who inhabit the region.

The dramatic decimation of the very formidable infra-structure of freight companies, customs officials and border officers formerly required for controlling traffic across the Austro-Italian state border is a vivid reminder to TCR residents. Though negative in its economic impact, the removal of the border is a powerful symbolic statement about the new social and cultural reality in which they mutually reside. The authority of the nation-state to control the daily social and economic intercourse of TCR residents has been irrevocably eroded. Even local monolingual mayors have become inspired to promote the integrity of the TCR as a region with "one culture and many languages"! And they have acted by coordinating marketing campaigns for local tourist boards and initiating a joint application for hosting a future Winter Olympics. The pre-eminence of the nation-state which in this corner of Europe has been popularly perceived as the inevitable form of political consociation for ethnic groups has been placed in question. And therewith the basic right of free-association, generating the civil society of local communities and regions, has found other guarantors, less pre-occupied with the impossible vision of ethnic statehood.

So what is the role of the anthropologist in such a context? My answer is personal and has more to do with shaping opinion than with conflict resolution. I have recently affiliated myself with an international and inter-disciplinary three year research project, financed by the Austrian Ministry of Culture in celebration of that country's millennium. Our research objective is to document and discuss the causes and consequences of the partition of the TCR by territorial states driven into existence by ethnic nationalism. While this academic project does not address parochial conflicts arising from ethnic confrontation, it does contribute to a reformulation of

popularly held images of collective identity and political association which, appropriately, will be reminiscent of multi-cultural society in the Habsburgian past. At the same time it is my hope that my Austrian, Italian and Slovene colleagues will capture in their representations of the region fundamentally new patterns of European integration which reflect both its unity and manifest heterogeneity.

Notes

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2. With the growing preponderance of free-market ideology and liberal individualism among the major economic powers of the world the concept of nongovernmental organization has been readily and easily associated with the classic idea of civil society, thus enabling governments of these powers to relegate the implementation of welfare institutions and the advancement of political plurality to initiatives taken within the public sphere but located outside the framework of formal responsibility maintained by these western regimes (cf Wedel 1994).

3. In this way the relative autonomy of local polities (i.e., vidlage councils, provincial parliaments, etc.) to regulate and control the political process was co-opted by the increasingly pervasive institutions of the centralized state. 'ne initial institutional vestiges of "civil society" generated in the "public sphere" of local communities became standardized according to uniform administrative and legal codes extended throughout the Dual Monarchy.

4. A parallel development among political emigrants from Istria following partisan "redemption" of the region is outlined by Pamela Ballinger (1 996). Her perspective on the narrative constructions of collective identities resulting from personal trauma generated through persecution and armed conflict illustrates the capacity to transfer and maintain the institutions of opposition (whatever their ideological content) to alien environments from which they can effectively exert pressure for either a violent or politically contained resolution of collectively experienced injustice.

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