

Victims and Heroes

Between Ethnic Values and Construction of Identity

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The anthropological concepts mentality and national character are briefly discussed. Research of national character in South Slavic ethnologies is presented along with the contrasting models produced by the Serbian and Croat ethno-anthropologists in the first part of this century. Consequently heroism as the dominant value and its role in contemporary national politics and in the construction of identity has been questioned.

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My aim is to discuss the dominant values and mentality on two levels: with respect to previous studies of those phenomena and regarding their role in everyday life and politics. The location is: contemporary Croatia.

A preliminary remark

I have doubts whether it would be indispensable to start with a polite ‘apology’, in the fashion of postmodern ethnography. I should namely ‘confess’ that I am writing as a native anthropologist, an elderly Croat lady who has had living experiences in two wars (1941–1944 and 1991–1992) and that my information and my views necessarily are biased.

Skepticism is due to my recent reading of texts published in the special issue of *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* (1993) on “War among the Yugoslavs” (as if ever Yugoslavs have been a nation.¹ The papers have been written by non-Yugoslavs, mostly American anthropologists who did considerable research in former Yugoslavia. Some of those writings have been partial (not to say prejudiced). What is common to all of them is the lack of the presumption that their authors, non-native anthropologists, might be biased too. Reading some of those texts the native anthropologist has an impression that the authors

have been confused and shared the same or even greater difficulties as we, the natives have, when discerning between facts and political propaganda of the parts in conflict.

Actual discourse (political, by the media or the academic one) about character and reasons or causes of the war in former Yugoslavia often begins and/or ends with the conclusion that the conflict and the ways it was dealt with should be ascribed to the Balkan mentality. To many European and American politicians, and to some political scientists, philosophers as well as anthropologists, we, the inharmonious nations in this historically notorious turbulent area – are *the others*, ethnicities with: a. an ugly value orientation turning us into warriors, resulting in ethnic cleansing, although; b. we used to have a beautiful folklore from the times of Vuk Karadžić to the folklore ensembles of the former communist state... Unfortunately the two interpretations seldom meet.

What is mentality?

A contemporary definition refers to mentality in this way (Mucchielli 1985:5):

“Une mentalité est le système de référence implicite d’un groupe social, homogène du point de vue de cet état d’esprit commun, ce système

de référence lui permet de voir les choses d'une certaine manière et donc d'avoir des réactions et conduites en accord avec cette perception du monde."

According to the above author mentality is shaped by education and by experiences acquired during the life of individuals in their social environment. In complex societies there may exist various, contradictory and conflicting mentalities.

Anthropological approach to the research of mentality was strongly influenced by the theory of culture and personality. Culture as a complex whole, cultural values and transmission of tradition as well as Gestalt psychology have been milestones in the study of mentality and national character immediately before and during the Second World War. Mentality and national character studies in the 1940s and 50s usually resulted in the construction of more or less ingenious patterns of national character.²

It is significant to have in mind that those studies did appear in specific political circumstances. For example Margaret Mead opens her text on National character in A. Kroeber's *Anthropology Today* (1953) explaining that this kind of study has been an answer to the needs³ of the world political situation after 1939.

Another type of approach to mentality has been developed by French historians.

"C'est un problème qui ne peut se traiter que dans une perspective historique",

writes Michel Vovelle (1982:12). In his words, mentality as a concept combines motivations on the unconscious level: what has not been formulated and what appears as insignificant. In his rethinking of relationship between ideologies and mentalities in a historical perspective Vovelle suggests that mentalities might be treated as former ideologies, dead ideologies of the past which have been remembered due to the powerful inertia of mental structures ("la force d'inertie des structures mentales").

Contrary to previous anthropological construction of national character patterns modern historical study meticulously describes and reconstructs mentality of specific populations

in fixed sections of time. Research is usually founded in historical and archival material, which is ethnographic by its nature: everyday life, family, ritual and customs, festivals, popular piety, death.

In different areas of former Yugoslavia there exist quite a long tradition of mentality studies accompanied by perhaps an even longer tradition of non-academic thinking and writing on this topic. Here a question may be raised. Namely, should para-scientific writing be ignored by the academic discourse or should it be taken into consideration? I will try to answer this later.

The first and for a long time the most influential theory on Balkan mentality was promoted by Jovan Cvijić (1865–1927), anthropogeographer, founder of the Serbian ethnology and sociology and an influential Serbian political personality and statesman before and after the foundation of Yugoslavia in 1918.

Cvijić's argumentation of South-Slav cultural patterns starts with a geographic configuration of the Balkan peninsula, where he distinguishes two dominant cultural areas: a) *a patriarchal regime* from Albania to Braila and the Danube river mouth in the Black Sea in the East and to Istria, Gorizia and Klagenfurt in the West, b) *a modification of Byzantine civilization* spreading in Greece and Bulgaria.

According to Cvijić, from Braila to Gorizia the population belongs to one nation – the Serbian, and they share a dominant patriarchal culture. The most important psychological type by which the Balkan patriarchal culture and mentality are defined is the 'Dinaric' personality.⁴ Cvijić describes 'Dinaric' people as violent and intrepid. Their dominant values are heroism, soldier's morality code (*čojstvo i junaštvo*), national pride, the idea of (Great) Serbian statehood. The above mentioned mentality originates in wars against the Turks. The Serbian people, according to Cvijić, cannot forget the Kosovo battle in 1389, where Serbian military forces had been defeated; they still lament over this downfall, memory of which has been maintained by Serbian folk poetry.

Notwithstanding the population in the Dinaric area was mixed (Serbian-Orthodox, Croat-Catholics, Moslems of Croat and Serbian de-

scent), Cvijić did not distinguish Croats and Serbs neither as two different nations nor as specific cultures or languages. In the best of cases he was addressing Croats as Serbo-Croats. His model of cultural pattern and personality type has been partly modified by the introduction of various 'influences' lacking ethnic character.

I will not discuss his political concepts and aspirations here. I am intrigued by his description of the Dinaric mentality which is *patriarchal, violent but heroic*. His source for the explanation of the heroic cultural pattern and personality type is Serbian heroic oral poetry, collected, edited and sometimes rewritten by Vuk Karadžić.⁵ Heroism as a value and patriarchy have been confirmed by Cvijić's own field research. His undiscussed reputation as field researcher still functions as a definite verification of his accounts, although indubitably they have been created in the frame of his political statements.

A modern anthropological opposition to Cvijić's pattern was expressed by the first Croatian cultural anthropologist, Dinko Tomašić (1902–75). Tomašić was a professor at the Zagreb University. He shared political orientation of the very influential oppositional Croatian Peasant Party between two world wars. Before and after the Second World War he was teaching at various universities in the USA, including Indiana University. In exile after the Second World War he assisted Dr. Vladko Maček, leader of the Croatian Peasant party.

Tomašić was acquainted with culture and personality studies. He also had a good knowledge of Croatian popular culture and Croatian ethnography. Tomašić argued that in Croatia opposite to patriarchal, authoritarian cultural pattern there existed also the democratic 'zadruga' mentality.⁶ His understanding of the patriarchal model offers insight into the hidden side of heroism and soldier's morality, i.e. robbery, violence, getting rich without working, authoritarian personalities and political arrivisme. Cvijić's model is situated in the Dinaric mountains; Tomašić locates his model in north-western Croatia, mainly in the region of Zagorje, in the immediate vicinity of Zagreb. According to Tomašić, contrary to collectivistic

Dinaric cultural pattern, the main values in the Zagorje family organization are individualism and lack of dominant, strong authority.

Tomašić treated both patterns (Cvijić's and his own) as intermingling. He also suggested that continuous wars in the Balkan area were steadily bringing to the fore personalities and groups which share authoritarian (heroic) values, gain economic profit in war and successively political promotion.

In this connection let me report his definition of the Ustaša Croatian state 1941–1945 which is purely anthropological (Tomašić 1942:76):

"The Ustaša state is conceived as an enlarged family of the patriarchal type in which the whole authority is vested in the hand of the patriarch and in which all members are supposed to work under his direction for the benefit of the whole. On the other hand everybody is responsible for the physical and moral well-being of each one of its members. The leaders and the ideologists of the Ustaša state of Croatia themselves come mostly from villages in the Dinaric parts of Croatia, where peasants still live in large families of the old patriarchal type".⁷

Unlike Cvijić Tomašić lacked the charisma of a proven field researcher (although he did some field research). In pre- and postwar political circumstances he acted independently and was attacked by the political left and right. Prominent Croat and American historian Jozo Tomasevich (1955:195–197) criticized Tomašić's model for its political invectives, forgetting at the same time Cvijić's political engagement.

Heroism after the Second World War

Marxist ideology was treating mentality either as evil, belonging to the past, or a blessing, if projects were made for the 'bright' socialist future. Both presumptions inhibited serious studies.

In the mid-60s academic circles a text of Vera St. Ehrlich (1965) was greeted. Her discourse about contact of cultures and dominant values was an innovation in the newborn discipline of sociology and cultural anthropology at the Za-

greb University and a presentation of Kroeber's anthropology. V. Ehrlich also had the charisma of the researcher. She accomplished an inquiry on the transformation of family in various regions of Yugoslavia and offered the anthropological approach to the cultural and social change.

In her study on cultural values she reaffirmed heroism and Dinaric ethos (1965:42):

“In Yugoslavia in the interwar years a dominant value seem to have emerged under the surface of internecine struggles: national independence, or phrased negatively, intolerance of foreign rule and domination. The tribal's, Dinaric, heroic tendencies seem to have gained as an overall trend.”

To the interpretation of 'heroism' and Dinaric values in Cvijić's terms and without Tomašić's criticism the idea was added that Dinaric people during partisan war fought and sacrificed their own lives for national pride and that therefore Yugoslavia had considerably greater losses than other nations in the antifascist war. Nowadays, when on one side we have positive knowledge of atrocities by fascists as well as by antifascists during the Second World War, and on the other there are serious indications about a misconstruction of the total number of the Second World War victims in ex-Yugoslavia, this hypothesis may seem dubious.

Political discourse on mentality and heroism

The writings of Miroslav Krleža, the most influential leftist Croatian writer of this century, could be located somewhere between science, literature and politics. In an interview in 1971, during the so-called Croatian Spring,⁸ he was speaking about mentality in the context of a debate on 'unity of language' promoted by the centralist circles who tended to hamper specific traits of the Croatian language and minimize the historical and literary differences between Serbian and Croatian linguistic expressions and culture (Krleža 1971):

“Mentalities divide people and nations, which

has been demonstrated by so many wars within a common linguistic sphere. It is well-known that mentalities are not idealistic constancies and that they appear as a response to social structures or infrastructures by which they are conditioned. But history has taught us that certain mentalities persist for ages as ancient survivals and follow the laws of spiritual idleness, although the infrastructure on which they repose in many of its elements has been changed for a long time.”

Krleža's thinking sounds as a bridge between hard Marxist ideology and Vovelle's soft Marxist historical approach. His interview appeared in a turbulent political moment when Croatian national movement once again emerged on political scene and was brutally defeated.

It was in the 80s that in former Yugoslavia the rediscovery of Karadžić's and Cvijić's models of Serbian popular culture, mentality and folklore occurred. Strong tendencies to project integralistic cultural and language models of one nation to the whole Yugoslav territory and other nations have been supported by the dominant ideology and politics. The promotion of 'heroic' mentality was functional to the most powerful institution in the country: the Yugoslav Army. Heroism was treated as a primordial value, it was reinforced by integralistic national ideology.

Ethnology/anthropology and paraliterature

During the last fifteen years extensive academic and para-academic literature has been produced rediscovering and reevaluating the work of Vuk Karadžić and Jovan Cvijić, and lately (in 1993) of Dinko Tomašić.

The occasion does not permit to analyze all those writings. I will only remark that along with heroism as national quality the value of 'sacrifice' and 'victim' reappeared. The view was introduced that Serbia was victor in war and looser in peacetime. On the opposite side, the nineteenth century discourse of Croatia as *Antemurale Christianitatis* and as perennial victim has been turning up again. Anthropological or ethnologic and ethnographic 'arguments',

theories such as ethnogenesis⁹ turned up mostly as para-scientific literature in various media, to argue in favour of the actual politics.

Once more mentality was invited to be an argument in the political dispute. As I do dispose only with the knowledge of the Croat situation and media, I may quote one of the newest and quite harmless cases:

The Serbian population in the mountainous region of Gorski Kotar (between Karlovac and Rijeka) avoided conflict with the new government and did not participate in the rebellion against Croatia in 1991/1992. Recently they explained that it was due to, as they said, their 'civilized mentality' (Vičić 1994:6).

Lately the well-known Zagreb sociologist Josip Županov analyzed value orientations of the Croats (Županov 1993). Impressed by the resistance of Croatian population in the war 1991/1992 Županov suggested heroism as the dominant value of the contemporary Croatian society. Contrary to the people of Gorski Kotar who showed reticence apropos nationalistic discourse on heroism and war, and paradoxically enough, the sociological understanding has been supporting Vera Erlich's interpretation of Cvijić's theories once more.

What do we really know about dominant values and mentality?

If we do agree that culture and personality studies as well as national character studies with the construction of ethnic values cannot be satisfactory any more, we have to admit that there is no anthropological or ethnological methodology available for researching mentality. Rethinking national character Alex Inkeles is criticizing "the tendency to sketch national character in unimodal terms" (1988:98). He proposes to use statistical data and comparative method in evaluating e.g. the differences between the national characters of Danes and Dutchmen.

I am prone to turn to historians and adopt Vovelle's suggestion that the study of mentality has to be founded on what 'appears as insignificant' and on 'less noble' sources (1985:13). In

our times one of those less noble sources might be newspaper death notices. Along with some other anthropologists (Ivan Čolović, Enrica Delitala, Klaus Roth) I carried out research projects on newspaper death notices in 1978, 1988, 1992. During the war in Croatia in 1991 and 1992 the newspapers I am reading every day suddenly confronted us with deaths of mostly young people, possibly our neighbours, fallen on the battlefields and with the mourning of their families and friends. Many of those death notices have *not* been just conventional. It seemed that the bereaved needed to express their grief and tended to publish more extensive texts than usual.

My research of obituaries published in Zagreb daily *Večernji list* from summer 1991 to spring 1992 shows the twofold character of the discourse on 'heroic' death. It was possible to follow the line of *cultura egemonica*, in Gramsci's terms: chronicle of eminent war events, the most important, bloody battlefields and fierce battles as well as controversies on the Croatian political scene. On the level of *cultura subalterna* death notices revealed individual and family attitudes towards war, namely how families of Croat soldiers, just ordinary people, did perceive and feel their deaths.

Let us briefly examine the two approaches:

a. There have been families, friends as well as military units (to which the deceased belonged) who have been adopting the pathetic language of politics and national ideology. The sacrifice for an independent, free and sovereign Croatia has been exalted. The victim of a family member has been accepted as heroism.

b. Along with the 'heroic' discourse another type of mourning was constantly present. Many families did not even mention that the deceased was a combatant. They have been just lamenting the immense loss. They described their last meeting with the deceased, his joy of life and how they, usually parents or wives, have been left lonely in this world. Immense grief, tragedy and awareness of being victims (both the deceased heroes and their mourning families and friends) are culminating in those newspaper pages giving evidence of something which firm-

ly exists on the other side of heroism and national rhetoric.

Both discourses sometimes meet in the same obituary; it is therefore that my paper was entitled: "We were proud to live with you, and now immensely sad to have lost you."

What is then heroism and how can we speak of mentality?

A tentative hypothesis may be offered. As is well known the heroism as national value could be attributed to the national epics and folklore which was discovered and partly invented in the nineteenth century. It has been proved that the so-called heroic Kosovo cycle poetry was a construction *ex post* and has not very much to do with the original function of oral poetry. A case well-known elsewhere and treated by the critics of the invention of national epic.

Proclaiming and promoting heroism as national value might be very useful in more or less totalitarian national politics and may frighten (but also provoke aversion in) the international (European) community where this type of rhetoric has been forgotten for at least half a century.

On the other side an actual example may show how politics is paying tribute to the concept of heroism as dominant national value. Croatian Ministry of Health and some other political authorities have been so confident of the strength of this value that they believed there will be no post-traumatic stress disturbances (PTSD or Vietnam syndrome) among participants of the war in Croatia because they have been highly motivated to defend their country. Subsequently health authorities did not provide measures to cope with it.

Although high motivation was present, especially during 1991–1992 this interpretation did not prove true. Only recently a PTSD programme in the Rijeka clinic started to help such patients. The clinic reports heavy cases of war traumas¹⁰ and rebukes members of the Government who still deny the existence of the syndrome. Every day we are reading and listening to the more than tragic stories (suicide, shooting, murder and other accidents) among invaders and other participants of the war.

The ethnology of the everyday life brings to evidence that the attitudes towards death oppose the construction of identity which is leaning on heroism as the dominant value. On the level of *cultura subalterna* as Antonio Gramsci put it, and on the level of 'ordre vecu' suggested by Claude Lévi-Strauss 'mentality' appears as an outlook of victims and defeated. Ordinary people (among them maybe also you and me) feel similarly after any war. Unfortunately this mentality, just because of the strong feelings of loss and defeat, can be manipulated by politics which is promoting heroism and ethnic hostility.

To this an ethnoanthropological judgment or conclusion might be added. The above review of mentality and value-orientation studies has shown how unimodal theories about this topic have been circulating in time and space. It has shown also that mentality requires an accurate study of various sources. Ethnoanthropologists, natives and others, might be victims of theories as well as of political emotions.

Notes

1. Joel Halpern's own inaccurate quotation in a letter published in *Anthropology Newsletter* (1994:6) is also worth noting: "As a long-term researcher in the Balkans and editor of the "Yugoslav Conflict", a special Issue of *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* I would like to respond..." 'Yugoslav Conflict' thus appears instead of the original title 'War among Yugoslavs'. Are there two special issues or does it mean a lapsus, a mistake or a change of the approach of the editor?
2. A recently discovered text by Ruth Benedict about the national character of the Dutch published in this review is a good example of those patterns (van Ginkel 1993, 23:177–184).
3. "National character studies are a recent development in anthropological research on problems of personality and culture. They take both their form and methods from the exigencies of the post-1939 world political situation" (Mead 1953:642).
4. Dinarica is the central mountain range in the southern parts of former Yugoslavia, between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before the modernization the population of the Dinaric region was pastoral and agricultural with extended family organization and clans in Montenegro.
5. In 1987, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Karadžić's birthday I discussed his role in the

construction of patterns of Serbian national mythology and culture (published in 1989). It is well-known that he eagerly attributed many poems or stories collected among Croats or Moslems to Serbian popular culture and oral poetry. Since Karadžić's times the phenomena of popular culture of Croats and all other South Slavic nations were exposed to assimilatory processes tending to label them as belonging to Serbian popular culture. It is important to note that this tendency has been promoted not only by Serbian national ideology but also by the non-Serbian promoters of the idea of the Yugoslav unity.

6. 'Zadruga', South Slavic extended communal family, has been discussed by ethnologists and historians as a specific form of family organization and ethos. Discourse on 'zadruga' during the nineteenth century belonged to the construction of national and social ideologies of Serbs and Croats.
7. Any resemblance to the contemporary state organization in Croatia and Serbia is *not* a pure coincidence. Both leaders of these states act as authoritarian patriarchs. Although the actual Croatian leader stems from Zagorje, the region of the Tomašić's democratic pattern, he is surrounded by strong men from Dinaric regions.
8. 'Croatian Spring', a movement conducted by Croatian communist reformists in 1971 was primarily directed against the centralist economic politics of the Yugoslav government. The movement gained strong support by the Croatian population. In the late autumn the leaders of the 'Croatian Spring' were discharged by Tito as Croatian 'nationalists' and many Croatian intellectuals were up for trial and sentenced to long-term imprisonments.
9. During the period of the so-called second Yugoslavia (1945–1990) the ethnology in Serbia, following Cvijić's premisses perpetuated the research of the origin of the population in the Serbian regions. Additionally books have been published concerning the ethnogenesis of the Montenegrins (whether they were Serbs or an independent nation?), the origin of the population in the Kosovo region as well as the ethnogenesis of the Albanians. Because of various reasons Croatian ethnology showed little interest in the study of ethnicity and ethnogenesis. After the establishment of the independent state the antique theories and myths of alternative Gothic or Iranian descent of the Croats reappeared, trying to replace and diminish the previously dominant theories of the Slavic origin. In contemporary national ideology the theory of the Slavic origin of the Croats functions as a ballast.
10. When arrived here at the psychiatry a doctor asked how did I feel. Just kill four or five people and you will know how do I feel", a former combatant explained to journalists (Bulić-Mrkobrad 1995).

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