

A National Ethnology, its Concepts and its Ethnologists

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Ethnological concepts and research traditions in Croatia are viewed from the experience of the ethnologists, testimonies to the war and transition. Postmodern approach and rhetorics in describing/writing about the war is analyzed along with the recent use of the traditional ethnographic and folklore archive material. The political bias in ethnology is questioned and the necessity of a critical dialogue with the bearers of power is emphasized.

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The criticism of *the main concepts and research traditions* in ethnology launched by German Volkskunde in the late sixties reached the underdeveloped, folkloristically colorful, multi-ethnic and therefore still exotic (as it seemed) lands such as the former Yugoslavia with the usual lag of about ten years. The evaluation of the concept *narod/Volk* that in the contemporary jargon of our science could be called *deconstruction* gained considerable reception among Croatian and Slovenian ethnographers.¹

The critique of the romantic concept was met with some mistrust in Croatia, not only because it advocated a radical change of the research paradigm but because it somehow implied the critique of the syntagma *Croatian nation*. By some ethnologists it was misunderstood as a variation of the official rhetorics and the communist critique of the *Croatian nationalism*.

One could dwell upon the fate of the crucial concept and of its critique. In both Croatian language and ethnology it was conceived as the *Volk/folk/narod*, and not the *people/puk*. I do agree with Tamás Hofer (1995) that “the two concepts are connected to separate differentiations between ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ levels of culture, both imply different relations between culture and society and produce different narratives in cultural-historical research”. I could add that the two *translations* or *interpretations* of the main concept in a certain degree denote

the political dimension of the research as well. It cannot be forgotten that to the concept of *Volk*, all of us in Centraleurope and in the Slavic countries owe the starting incentive to the development of our science. That development did not happen in a historical vacuum but in the course of a well-known political process...

How to reformulate the concepts

In a newspaper article published in July 1993 Ernest Gellner pleaded: “The concepts we use to describe the world now urgently need to be reformulated”. The actual political situation in my country, the war combined with transition (or viceversa), confronted individual native researchers with a series of questions. It was not only about what kind of concepts we did adopt in the past but primarily about what we did *not* research during socialism.

After the breakdown of socialism and its ideology ethnologists have been met with an ethical challenge. It was necessary to recognize what we avoided or feared to deal with, what kind of censorship and autocensorship was at stake, and which kind of phenomena we simply did not perceive under less totalitarian – than in other Eastern states – but still single party communist rule? Was it chiefly a problem of ideological, and power pressures and their reflection in ethnology? Or the theoretical defi-

ciencies of the ethnology itself should have been examined?

In 1990–92 I thought that our experience with the political pressure² might help the auto-reflection, a mental activity so highly valued and diligently exercised in contemporary ethnology. (Now, when I am living again in a system called by Predrag Matvejević “demokrat-ura” (*demokracija/diktatura*) I have some doubts regarding the power of the pedagogy, but that is another story).

Reflecting on what we as ethnologists did not research in Croatia during socialism³, I came to the conclusion that, as surprising as it might be, the crucial concepts *ethnicity*, *ethnic relations* and *ethnic identity* have been omitted.

The concepts and the power

As to the lack of the modern ethnicity studies in Croatian ethnology once again the political context has to be considered. The official state ideology argued that communism has solved the national question by itself. In fact the ruling elites fostered their particular interests and force was used to control ethnic and/or oppositional national movements. On the other hand the most outspoken left wing critique of the official ideology (e.g. philosophers and sociologists around the *Praxis* review) still believed in the doom of the nations. *Volens nolens* their radical and one-sided discourse against the evils of nationalism was helping the regime to repress every national opposition.

The polemics about the ethnic traits and symbols current in the older South Slavic literature, and functional in the national awakening movement during the 19th century, concerning the national (Serbian or Croatian) origin of some heroes, motifs, poems, customs... have been *successfully* avoided by the ethnologists and folklorists in the socialist Croatia. The field research in the Croatian areas with mixed catholic and orthodox population has been accomplished without references to the ethnic identification of the people. In the better of cases in the archives of our institutes and museums only minor hints to ethnicity or religious membership of the population have been recorded.

It is not that I am pleading the case for a revival of the methods adopted by the more or less amateur folklorists and ethnographers of the 19th century who have been in search of the origins of the nations and their folklore marks. I just wish to state that in a country with disparate cultural regions where, due to the historical process populations belonging to different nations and religions were mixed, the *native* ethnology up to the 1990s was not interested in the research of the ethnic boundaries (if they existed at all) or in topics such as ethnic identity and how it was constructed. It has to be stated that adequate research in the field was hardly possible, because any direct question about religious or national membership would have been treated by local authorities (and central as well) as subversive political activity.

Therefore the policy of the ethnology could not be anything but to avoid the delicate concepts. It is no wonder that the establishment somehow favoured the traditional cultural-historical paradigm and its interminable concern of finding more and more material, proof of the *still alive* traditions as Andrew Lass put it, of the glorious popular culture. The search of the origins – Protobalkan, Oriental, Slavic... avoided and/or concealed the actual ethnic differences.⁴ Far less value has been attributed to the contemporary European influences because those meant the impact of the western civilization, feared and condemned by both the early national and the communist ideology.

The reconsideration of the ethnologic paradigm might show that by researching and finding Slavic roots of a phenomenon, we still do not know whether it belonged to the Serbian, Croatian or other traditions. Now when everybody argues that Croatia has to be a part of Europe, and wishes to prove that the nation belonged to Europe for time immemorial – what should be done with the European traits of the popular culture, dating from more recent pre-industrial and industrial ages and so nicely hidden by the old paradigm?

Political bias in ethnology

Again I wish to clarify that I am not pleading for the resurrection of the romantic paradigm⁵,

thus conforming to the national and nationalistic political conjectures. My aim is to raise the following question: How to approach the political bias which for about fifty years Croatian ethnology pretended to ignore?

The problem does not concern ethnology or/and anthropology merely in my country. Discussing moral models in anthropology Roy D'Andrade explains the attitudes of two scientists who have been very influential in the development of the anthropological thought: "The ascetic imperative of Boas and Weber who sought to separate truth and politics, still entailed an active vigilance lest these two realms fuse. It never occurred to these European intellectuals that political concerns were not central to the life of an intellectual – they saw them as so central they have to be kept in check. The sacrifice demanded of the scientist was not the loss of political passions but only that they be kept clearly distinct from scientific activities qua science. Over the time of two generations the tensions between these two callings, and hence the potential threat they posed for each other's autonomy, was gradually dissipated. In its place an ethics of scientific comportment became a code of civility. As this code took center stage, the more directly political concerns were weakened" (D'Andrade 1995:402).

During the Second World War, when in Croatia a Quisling state has been constituted, as well as in the postwar, communist period the leading teachers of the ethnology in Croatia (M. Gavazzi, B. Bratanić) have been promoting the above mentioned code of civility. Consequently, by avoiding political pressures in times of socialism the Croatian ethnology succeeded to have *mani pulite*. It was not obliged to deliberately conceal the data. It abstained from taking part in the construction of the socialist ritual. But since Boas and Weber the times have changed and the noble civil code approach without "telling the truth to power" during the last decades of the century turned into "false neutrality" as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) affirms. The communist regime and the more conjectural sciences, such as sociology, considered Croatian ethnology as irrelevant and innocuous. And it was true.

The price of the non-involvement included

the absence of the concept of power, namely of "power relations in the cultural ordering", as E. Wolf stressed it lately (1994). Following the above mentioned noble *code of civility*, and ignoring politics, ethnology persisted with a rosy, optimistic prospective. It was the collapse of socialism and the war which made us look at the reverse of the coin.

A look at the reverse of the coin

An excellent study of the dwelling culture in a village about 40 km from Zagreb was conducted in the 1980s by my colleague Aleksandra Muraj (1989), an esteemed Croatian ethnologist. The *dwelling culture* (a concept which renounced and substituted the traditional *material culture*) was studied in the context of the social life and the historical cultural change. During many years of her intensive study of the village, which was considered a good ethnological terrain, and in the conversations with the inhabitants the researcher never noticed the slightest whisper that in the same village there existed a cave where victims of partisan retaliations have been secretly buried in 1945 shortly after the Second World War. It was after the breakdown of communism that the author discovered it as a first grade newspaper sensation. In the village, of course, everybody knew it and nobody gave a sign.

There are plenty of such caves in a country situated at the crossroads of the history, the meeting place of the international conflicting interests, religions, nations and cultures, where almost every 50 years a new war happens. In the caves different layers of the victims of various regimes/armies can be found. We are just used to every new victorious regime discovering a new layer condemning the former rulers and hiding the actual violations of the human rights.

Just not to blame the native ethnologic approach I will quote a foreign anthropologist. For several years Mart Bax accomplished an excellent research in Medjugorje (Bax 1995). Only during his last visit in the 1990s, when the war in Bosnia started, his informants and friends spoke. After a considerable hesitation they showed him the location of a former partisan monument, now demolished. The story emerged

similar to the one mentioned above. The actually destroyed monument has been dedicated to the Serbian people, killed by Croats during the Second World War. Bax, an anthropologist by education, could not avoid a historical research of the political relations and conflicts between Serbian and Croatian population in the region of Brotnjo in Herzegovina where Medjugorje is situated. The chronicle started with the Ottoman empire. Turks made political use of the Serbian population to oppress other ethnic groups in the region. The dominance of the Serbs continued during the first Yugoslavia (1918–1941). The position of the ethnic groups did change with the 1941–1945 episode of the Croatian Independent (but Quisling) State and their retaliations against Serbs. The partisan victory in 1945 brought the Serbs to the fore again. In the region almost all Croats were considered and treated as Ustasha butchers. They were persecuted, arrested. Many of them fled the country. They, or their descendants now have destructed the partisan/Serbian monument...

Confronted with similar (hi)stories and bored to death with the TV reports of disaster and killing, western public opinion as well as the cynical politicians conclude: Let them kill each other.

At home, confused between former rosy views of the *people* and its culture (*tanzende Bauer* as Hermann Bausinger ironically used to describe the canon) and the newly discovered gloomy face of the same culture, what can the native ethnologist do? Maybe he could also react cynically and ignore the actual relations? There are plenty of traditional and postmodern concepts to explore or deconstruct which could provide for a calm and prosperous life in the Academia!

Traditional concepts and the 'new ethnological awareness'

I am asking myself: Is ethnology the science of the people, and is anthropology the science of man if they both do not possess the concepts, the ability to perceive the crucial forces which control the people's lives, their individual identities and destinies?

Croatia is a small country, our ethnology is even smaller. The postmodern ethnographical critique, at least the one in Croatia, has a very simple answer to that. It denies any value to the old ethnographic material because it was deliberately chosen by the researchers and it reflected their (romantic or else) approaches, concepts and views; because it lacked the essential information about time and social context, about conflict and pathology of the social life; finally because there were serious doubts about the relevance of the recorded material (customs, folklore) in the life of more or less complex rural communities.

Another look at the reverse of the coin might reveal the actual relevance of the traditional material. Namely, the approach to the *traditional* ethnographic or folklore material is going to be the great divide in the studies interpreting (deconstructing) the war and its consequences in Croatia. A group of the ethnologists who definitely rejected the historical and more or less traditional concepts and material (Prica, Čale-Feldman, Senjković, Jambrešić; Povržanović) published their papers about the war in Croatia in a book translated into English, which reached the international audience and interest.

It is far less known that many other Croatian ethnologists reacted to the war adopting the traditional material and the historical approach. The above mentioned author Aleksandra Muraj published a paper based on the archive materials collected in the fifties describing the traditional folk culture in the region of Banija (Muraj 1992). Mixed Serbian and Croatian population lived in that region for centuries. There have been intervals of peace and war, periods of hatred and others when people used to meet, celebrate together their catholic or orthodox festivals. Occasionally conflicting, sometimes working together in the neighbouring towns they often intermarried. Popular culture provided some rituals of coexistence. *Čarojice*, groups of masked orthodox young persons at Christmas time visited catholic families, and in return two weeks later, when orthodox Christmas was celebrated, catholics used to visit the orthodox families. Although in certain periods those encounters have been quite formal they

symbolized some kind of the popular ideology of coexistence in the community life.

In 1991 the Croat inhabitants of the region have been expelled by Yugoslav Army and Serbian troops. Since then they lived as refugees. Now, after the Croatian offensive in August 1995 all the Serbs left.⁶

A similar paper by Jadranka Grbić (1992) was documenting the folk culture of Ilok. The town near the Serbian border belonged to the Croatian republic in the former Yugoslavia. Since 1992 Ilok was occupied by Serbian forces, and the Croats have been expelled.

Some Croatian ethnologists and folklorists published and commented material on oral literature of the Dubrovnik area, so heavily damaged by the war in 1991 and again in 1995 (Polonijo, Dukat, Čale-Feldman). Another group published ethnographic material about the Croatian population and culture in Baranja, a part of Croatia which is still under occupation at the moment (February 1996) I am preparing this paper.

The life in all those regions will never be as it was. The identity of the population which will return or settle in these regions will undergo a long process of readaptation. New identities will be constructed.

I am asking myself: should the material on folk life produced by previous (nationalist, romantic) folklorists and ethnologists be entirely discarded because of the *faulty* concepts of our forerunners? We, now so very clever ethnologists, criticize with good reasons but also with a great amount of our newly invented *ethnological awareness*. At the same time an ethno/anthropologist in Croatia sometimes feels as Nancy Scheper-Hughes' native students in South Africa, torn between the theories constructed somewhere else, in a postmodern "borderless world", and their own social reality here and now.⁷ Deconstruction is a fine intellectual activity, but what about the identities of the people displaced, emigrated, or just shocked by war events and misery. What about their/our Croatian identity? Should it be constructed using the proposals of the official nationalist propaganda or an ethnological, critical (not annihilating) evaluation of the national popular culture, its symbols and myths are required?

Moreover, it is obvious that historical or microhistorical ethnology cannot abandon the *old* material, although never forgetting the concepts behind it. Maybe now, when hatred, mistrust, and vengeance are so current in public life and politics, we, the *native* ethnologists, could help by opposing the promotion of the mutually contesting and purified national identities and in presenting testimonies from the traditional folklore and folk life collections offering hope for the possibility of the coexistence.

Considering the hatred and the lack of an ideology of coexistence in politics I sometimes feel prone to reconsider, even to somehow evoke the romantic concepts I used to criticize so often...

A final remark

Vesna Pusić, a well-known Zagreb sociologist suggests that the gap produced by the downfall of the ideology in my country has been occupied by nationalism (Pusić 1995a). She considers that nationalism has two substantially different faces. "The first is cultural nationalism, which is xenophobic, authoritarian, demands uniformity in the state and religion, and advocates a closed society... The other face of nationalism is liberal nationalism. The main distinctive feature in comparison with cultural nationalism is the fact that it is based on the category of free human will and rational choice, i.e. on ethical individualism. This type of nationalism values every nation, and the national identity of every other nation is as important to it as its own" (Pusić 1995b:45,46). The actual political struggle in Croatia, according to this author, is culminating in the conflict between the liberal nationalism and the radical, fascist one.

The ethnoanthropologist, who is not a political scientist, is confronted with a quasi insurmountable problem: how to get through the immense flow of information attacking our knowledge and our emotions. How to discern various forms of political pressure hidden behind the discourse on patriotism and nationalism? How to get different information, the information about the Others which at the moment are not only Serbs in Croatia, but all the

people who do not think the same as the ruling elite does?

Destroyed towns, villages and houses, refugees and displaced persons, families torn apart, faces of the young people who look at me from the newspapers obituaries after the victory are Others among Us. A painstaking, time-consuming endeavour is needed to understand, to accept some facts and to be critical. Because the ethnologist (myself) cannot be a passionless observer. *Willy-nilly* he/she is a testimony.⁸

Ethnologists in the former socialist countries educated in cultural history now are turning to anthropology in search of new concepts and new fields of research. In Croatia the shift has been partly accomplished before; now the postmodern critique is at stake. I am not sure if the new concepts and orientations perceive the inadequate treatment of power in the *cultural ordering*.

In fact pure "autoreflexion and constant skepticism without a critical dialogue with the bearers of power" will not make ethnology recognized as a socially relevant science, just to quote my friend, the late Croatian ethnologist Lydia Sklevicky (1991:58).

Notes

1. However, at that time the critique of *Volk / narod* as the main concept of cultural-historical ethnology was not accepted and applied in the eastern ethnological traditions of the former Yugoslavia. In Serbia as well as in Bosnia and Macedonia the bulk of the ethnologists was coming from the Belgrade University. The criticism of the main concepts was not promoted by the senior generation of the Serbian ethnologists teaching at that university. Modern methodology and the discourse such as Turner's theories on ritual, introduced in the seventies by a new generation of Belgrade ethnologists and anthropologists did not deal with the concept *folk*.
2. Of course, political pressure in ethnology as it was practised in the former Soviet Union has been more drastic, including the persecution of ethnologists, their emigration (e.g. Shirokogoroff) and ideological limitations to the theoretical development. I will quote only one example. As contemporary soviet ethnologists do report, in 1951 in the "Atlas narodov myra" (Atlas of the peoples of the world) they have not been allowed to mention the

repressed populations, such as the Chechens or the German ethnic group in Russia. Additionally, in 1961 they have been requested to justify the map presenting the Crimean Tatars (which have been deported from Crimea) in front of the president of the Praesidium of the Supreme Soviet Anastas Mikojan (V.A.Tishkov 1995:94,95).

3. I expressed these ideas in a paper read at the annual meeting of the Croatian Ethnological Society in 1990 and published in 1992.
4. Ethnologists and linguists often avoided to mention the name of the Croatian nation. They used to speak about *our* language and *our* customs and rituals.
5. Nowadays when promoting national values, culture or language the native Croatian ethnologist is often met with disagreement by some of his foreign (American, European) colleagues and labeled as nationalist.
6. They have not been directly expelled, but the actual Croat authorities did hardly hide their satisfaction with this result of the offensive. In fact Croat government inhibited their return. The outcome was a kind of *soft ethnic* cleansing.
7. "The anthropology that most Cape Town Xhosa, Venda, Zulu, Afrikaner and Moslem students want is not the anthropology of deconstruction and the social imaginary but the anthropology of the *really real*, in which the stakes are high, values are certain, and ethnicity (if not essentialized) is certainly essential" (Scheper-Hughes 1995:417).
8. Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues: "If it is to be in the nature of an ethical project, the work of anthropology requires a different set of relationships. In minimalist terms this might be described as the difference between the anthropologist as "spectator" and the anthropologist as "witness" (Scheper-Hughes 1995:419).

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