

first publication

I

1 Dekleva, Milan/Kranjc, Mojca/Predan, Aljan: 1821: historično-ljubávní igrokaz. Ljubljana: MGL 2000. – Although written already in 1985, the play did not premiere before January 13, 2000 at the Municipal Theatre of Ljubljana (MGL). (MGL Press simultaneously published the text.

2 All the appearing translations are mine. I owe my profound gratitude for very kind and helpful assistance in my translation efforts from Slovenian into English to Tom Priestly, Professor Emeritus at the Univ. of Alberta in Edmonton.

»How long are we going to stay in this uncouth corner?« (p. 15),¹ Count Gleb Vasil'evich Volkonski, Russian Cultural Attaché, otherwise adventurer and poet, rhetorically asks in the play entitled 1821 of his Austrian counterpart, baron Friedrich von Gentz, the assistant and adviser to the Secretary General of the Congress, Chancellor Metternich, who, in fact, cannot even recall the name of that forsaken place. One thing is obvious to both of them: »Here, we will be bored to death« (p. 18).²

It is January 1821. Imagine Ljubljana, at that time still called Laibach, »this Carniolan city with a crazy name« (Baron Gentz, p. 10), where an important event is about to take place: the Congress of the Holy Alliance. The play 1821 spans the entire duration of the Congress, from 26 January to 12 May.

By way of a brief elucidation, this was one of the conferences of the so-called »Congress System« (1815-1856). Its main task, after the fall of Napoleon, was to maintain the (restored) peace in Europe established through the Vienna Settlement of 1814/15. Hence, after having divided their areas of influence, Austria, Britain, Prussia, and Russia created the Quadruple, also called the Holy Alliance. Yet even though their goal had been the same, the differences in their visions soon became apparent: while Austria and Russia were in favour of interfering in the internal affairs of other countries in order to suppress (possible) revolutions, Britain was less in favour of such action.

Thus, the Congress in Ljubljana was convened by Austria and Russia (it is believed today that the driving force behind it was Chancellor Metternich) in order to lure the consent from Britain and Prussia to quell the Carbonari revolt led by General Guglielmo Pepe in the Kingdom of Naples where King Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies was forced to subscribe to a constitution modelled after the Spanish one from 1812. At the Congress, Metternich managed to persuade the other sovereigns to let the Austrian army enter Naples which, in turn, successfully quelled the uprising.

The quotes about Ljubljana taken from the play 1821 may be, I believe, easily metonymically understood as standing for the entire region where, at the time, Slovenians lived in the Habsburg Monarchy: the province of Carniola together with southern parts of Carinthia and Styria, and the littoral. It may be therefore understood as standing for the entire Slovenia. The play 1821 was written, which is quite significant, in 1985 that is six years before Slovenia reached its actual independence, and provides, in addition to portraying the grand scheme of politicking, intrigue, ruthless conservatism and successful restauration of the *Ancien Régime* in Europe, also the picture of the local populace as purportedly seen by the noble guests on the one hand and their own view of themselves on the other. Everything would be wonderful – tourists come and go, some with positive, others with less encouraging impressions – unless the picture of Slovenians, as given by the authors Milan Dekleva, Mojca Kranjc, and Alja Predan were so decidedly negative and outright sweepingly damaging.

In addition to the comments provided as an introduction, here are some more examples of their negative observation. Truly striking and vicious are the views uttered by the locals that is, in most cases, the Slovenians themselves. A protagonist, poet Miha Kastelic, warmly avers that »the Carniolans are nothing but hirelings, maids, priests and curates« (37). For France Prešeren, the romantic poet, nowadays hailed as the greatest Slovenian bard of all times, while calling Ljubljana, in a quite belittling way, a »tribal capital« (65), the entire congress is »One big theatre. For this entire horde. For all these glassworkers, cleaners of intestines, hunters, and cart drivers« (22). Finally, Josipina Češko, a wealthy daughter of a Slovenian early-capitalist entrepreneur, confesses to Volkonski that »in this town nothing flares up. There is one big dampness, Sir. Here everything smoulders and flickers and sizzles« (69).

II

In fact, the play 1821 is a keyhole through which to enter the space of the contemporary Slovenian national identity. Even though one play may not be representative enough, it is true that

3 One should make no mistake: The play was written not by some mischievous enemies of the nation but, rather, by the representatives of its intellectual elite.

4 Vodopivec, Peter: *Temno in svetlo ogledalo zgodovine*. In: *Sampodoba Slovencev*. Ljubljana: PEN 2001, pp. 58-63, here p. 59, similarly Bučar, France. *Slovenci v politiki*. In: *Sampodoba Slovencev*. Ljubljana: PEN 2001, pp. 15-22, here p. 15.

5 This topic has become a major national concern after Slovenia gained its independence (for the first time ever!) in 1991, and again just recently, after the accession to the EU. It is in this vein that the Slovenian branch of the *P.E.N. International* organized a symposium in November 2001 entitled *Self-image of the Slovenians*.

6 Bučar 2001, p. 20; Kreft, Lev: *Odrpto in razsrediščeno slovenstvo*. In: *Sampodoba Slovencev*. Ljubljana: PEN 2001, pp. 36-41, here p. 37; Peršak, Tone: *Samopodoba Slovencev* (in slovenstva) – ponižnost po eni in komplekse večvrednosti po drugi plati. In: *Sampodoba Slovencev*. Ljubljana: PEN 2001, pp. 51-57, here p. 52.

7 Nečak, Dušan: *Avstrija. Jugoslavija. Slovenija. Slovenska narodna identiteta skozi čas*. In: *Avstrija. Jugoslavija. Slovenija. Slovenska narodna identiteta skozi čas*. Ur. Dušan Nečak. Ljubljana: Oddelek za zgodovino Filozofske fakultete 1997, pp. 19-24, here p. 21: »Fran Zwitter comments that the crucial terminological clarification took place between 1806 and 1812, when our national community for the first time receives a name – it is difficult to say whether it had been aware of itself because, most probably, the general Slovenian self-notion from a minoritarian views to majoritarian self-image was not transformed until the rallies at the end of the 19th century in their role of the first national movement that captured almost all ›Slovenian‹ lands.« Cf. Kreft 2001, p. 37.

8 Bučar 2001, p. 15.

9 Nečak 1997, p. 19.

10 Mikeln, Miloš: *Slovenska samopodoba 2001*. In: *Sampodoba Slovencev*. Ljubljana: PEN 2001, pp. 42-50, here p. 44.

11 Nečak 1997, p. 19.

12 Kozak, Primož: *Slovenia*. *Belgrade: Yugoslav Review* 1974, p. 11.

13 *Novice* [News] started as *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* [Agricultural and Handicraft News] and were being published between 1843 and 1902. For some time this was the only

for Slovenians the connection between culture and identity is of seminal, existential importance. The question that arises is, how is it possible that the only emerging picture about the local population, that is Slovenians, from the mouths of foreigners, despite their temporary acquaintance with the country and its people, is so degrading? Furthermore, why is it so much more expressed through the opinion of the local populace than in the judgments of foreigners? Since *1821* can be, as any other literary work, read in at least a twofold manner – first, as fiction with factual historical ground and second as pure product of imagination – logical questions ensue: is, what is expressed the historical condition of Slovenian self-understanding or, rather, a contemporary ironic self-portrait that the authors want to present with no factual bearing on reality?³ If it is so what reality does the play reveal? Is the paradigm of Slovenian self-understanding the more contemporary self-image of the Slovenian nation? In other words, what does this negative attitude tell us about the Slovenian national identity?

At this point, it appears reasonable to place a caveat: even though I am aware that »collective self-images are [...] an abstraction«⁴ and that, while talking about it, we are chasing the illusory essence of a nation or, what Dolar calls »the phantasm of national identity« (2), it is exactly this notion of identity that follows us as a spectre, a completely immaterial, yet ubiquitous shadow, invented and imagined but no less real and, therefore, influential. Even though we, according to Eric Hobsbawm, invent the tradition, it is still this »fiction« that is stronger than many (presumed) facts.⁵

Since the realization of, within the larger group of Southern or Western Slavs, their distinct nationality (which must have, according to many scholars, such as Bučar, Kreft, Peršak,⁶ occurred in the early 19th century),⁷ Slovenians have examined their roots, taking an almost masochistic pleasure in discovering and wallowing in their insignificance and general weakness.

The most widely spread myth about the historical condition of the Slovenian nation, which is also supported by quite contemporary Slovenian writers, is that the nation has been exposed »to the above-average pressure of all kinds of invaders«⁸, which resulted in the fact that »time and again [...] we had to fight at least for national autonomy if not for survival«⁹, turning us into a »small and humble nation«¹⁰ that has never become a real subject of history but has remained merely its insignificant object. Among other literary works, in *1821* this confirmation comes again from Count Volkonski, who, in what are effectively the last words of the play, inquires: »About Slovenians? Slovenian language? You will not believe this... This is the first time since my arrival that I have heard these two words« (84). Thus, the everlasting image that Slovenians have had about themselves, the one that »traumatically accompanies contemporary history of a Slovenian«¹¹, is one of historic subservience, political dependence, and national insignificance since »the Slovenes were for centuries the lower, working and subjugated class in society«¹².

In and of itself, this fact alone would not have been problematic since Slovenians are not the only nation to have experienced a similar fate. The difficulty lies in the fact, as Peršak maintains, that the image of »Slovenianness«, which certain journals such as *Novice* systematically cultivated, and for decades educated the population in accordance with it, in the end suffused the notion that Slovenians had about themselves and thus grew into a self-image« (52).¹³ This historical verity has become so ubiquitous and so etched into the Slovenian national psyche that it has started shaping the national character. Slovenians have always been threatened by diverse enemies. As a result, they have had to keep their heads low, which in turn has found its reflection in their character, which purportedly is humble and submissive. Suffice here to quote only one example from Anton Trstenjak, a philosopher, theologian, and psychologist, a priest and professor. In his opinion, the Slovenian character is »scrupulous«, that is conscientious and strenuous.¹⁴

Interestingly enough, precisely this stance finds its reverberation in the play. Austrian Emperor Franz I (who, at the same time, was Francis II, Holy Roman Emperor), at the festive banquet that the citizens of Ljubljana have arranged for the magnates, expresses his gratitude to his subjects: »I am moved when I see in front of me the subjects who have for centuries faithfully served the Homeland, loved your Emperor, glorified the Holy Church and rejected those ideas that could jeopardize the Austrian Crown. You, Carniolans, have always passed for honest, stout, hardworking and obedient people. I thus lay this to your heart: keep this good reputation!« (57). This portrait ties in very well with the ancient (in)famous catchphrase of the Habsburg Monarchy, repeated in *1821*, namely »All for Creed, Homeland, and the Emperor!« (ibid.).

Slovenian newspaper. Till 1867 *Novice* were edited by Janez Bleiweis, a journalist, veterinarian, and conservative politician absolutely loyal to the Habsburg Monarchy. Bleiweis, for example, opposed the 1848 program *Unified Slovenia*. Regardless, he was later given the honorary nickname »the father of Slovenian homeland«.

14 Trstenjak, Anton: Misli o slovenskem človeku. Ljubljana: Založništvo slovenske knjige 1991 illustrates this with an example from the times of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Namely, if the Slovenian was the train conductor, Austrians could be absolutely clear in their mind that nobody would ride without a ticket. Thus, scrupulous means here dutiful, dedicated, loyal, dependable, obedient, and devoted.

15 Peršak 2001, p. 52.

16 Whether the Catholic religion in fact sustained Slovenian culture or, as Dolar, Mladen: Slovenska nacionalna identiteta in kultura: navodila za uporabo. In: Pagon, Neda/Čepič, Mitja (Eds.): Nacionalna identiteta in kultura. Ljubljana: Inštitut za civilizacijo in kulturo 2003, pp. 21-35 shows, did its best to squander it shall here, because of the magnitude of the topic, remain unanswered.

In the first half of the 19th century, the time during which Slovenian identity was supposedly formed, the paradigm of Slovenians spread as »diligent, devout and thrifty, loyal to the Catholic church and the Austrian crown, and a predominantly conservative people who regard any ideas about far-reaching changes of their own condition and subversiveness as foreign to them«¹⁵. At that time, Slovenians were chiefly rural folks without a desire to change the century-long foundations of their national identity, that is their »roots« and »tradition« since these two were psychologically as well as politically the most secure to cling to.

This claim, for example, was confirmed in 1918 by Aleš Ušeničnik in his apology *Um die Jugoslavija* [About Yugoslavia] in which he sides with the South-Slavic case, while elucidating the above point, the »Slovenian nation was always loyal to the emperor. Even in the turbulent year 1848 Slovenians behaved so »bravely« that the [imperial] government called the Slovenian nation the »jewel« among the nations of Austria. It would be unusual if this nation would in the meantime become unfaithful to such holy traditions« (6).

All of this was captured by Josip Vidmar, a key public figure between the two world wars and later, who in his *Kulturni problem slovenstva* [Cultural problem of Slovenianness] (1932) described the

[t]wo most dismal phenomena of our Slovenian people. The first is the inclination towards alcoholic unruliness that in the enslaved and oppressed people replaced a proud, natural and unenslaved pugnacity. The second is merely spiritual. Cankar called it the spirit of hirelings. The shameful submission of our general state really does not deserve a better name. The worst is this characteristic among the intelligentsia where it surfaces as grovelling, denunciation, lack of self-confidence or any pride at all, a permanent notion about our own inferiority with respect to members of other nations, yet at the same time an hysterically high-placed contempt for near surroundings, of course against the one that in any way depends on us. However, as much as all these characteristics are worthy of contempt and hatred, they are understandable if we consider that we have been for thousands of years German thralls and serfs. These thousand years have distorted our nature and some time will have to pass before the notion about our own dignity cures again our spirit and character. (43f.)

Needless to say, if we consider all these fragments, under the weight of such a legacy Slovenians seem all but doomed.¹⁶ It is obvious that the Slovenian national identity has been caught in a self-degrading loop that does not lead into development but, rather, into devolution and the disintegration of self-esteem.

III

To counter this self-destructive myth and to justify our contemporary existence, the flipside to the entire national jeremiad has to be taken into account. A different perspective has been nagging all along, that of the people's survival as a nation. Since »national ›self-images« are the product of national ideologies, together with which they are shaped and changed«¹⁷, I have to tackle the (other) essential legend of the Slovenian nation: the myth of its survival by virtue of culture. This myth emphasizes the importance of the spoken and written word, and not, as in the case of almost every other larger nation, its military, political, and economic pressures. This stance, too, is documented in the play *1821* when France Prešeren describes himself as an »adventurer who will found this nation on a romantic folly« (83).

In contemporary Slovenia, there would be a very few who would oppose the thesis that the Slovenian nation was formed by virtue of language and survived centuries of foreign hegemony on the basis of its culture stemming from its language. Nečak, who maintains that »the main cohesive powers at the inception of the Slovenian nation and consolidation of Slovenian national identity [...] were language and culture, and not the state, dynasty, or religion as was the case of many an other nation« (20), joined thus Josip Vidmar and his true definition of a nation precisely as a group of people with a unified language (cf. 10-11). For another Slovenian historian, Vasilij Melik, the beginning of the Slovenian national movement embodies *Kraynska Grammatika das ist: Die crainerische Grammatik, oder Kunst die crainerische Sprach regelrichtig zu redder und zu sprechen* from 1768 (41), that is the work that laid the theoretical foundations for the modern Slovenian literary language.

Ivan Cankar's comparison of Slovenians with other south Slavs is also well-known. He maintains that:

28 Hegel, G.W.F.: *Science of Logic*.
London: George Allen & Unwin
1969, p. 412.

29 Žižek, Slavoj: *Jezik, ideologija, Slovenci*. Ljubljana: Delavska enotnost 1987.

30 Dolar 2003, p. 2.

31 Debeljak, Aleš: *Evropa brez Evropejcev*. Ljubljana: Sophia 2004, p. 37.

32 Letter from 19.08.1900 in: Cankar, Ivan: *Zbrano delo Vol. 28*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije 1972, p. 66.

33 Vidmar 1932, p. 5.

tity (self-identity, which is personal or even national) is in fact »self-contradictory«, »self-different«, and »self identical in its variety of contradiction«.28 Hence, the philosopher suggests using the identity that has a difference built within itself. In other words, there may be no identity (I am not speaking only about psychological but also about philosophical and mathematical concepts without difference and even opposition).

Already in 1987, Slavoj Žižek in his book *Jezik, Ideologija, Slovenci* [*Language, Ideology, Slovenians*] made the claim that the designation »Slovenian« itself does not mean anything and that the »national identity« cannot be subsumed under a »series of positive, usual terms«.29 Žižek, too, advocates a break from tautological identity.

Now, in terms of culture, there are, according to Dolar, two ways to approach it. The first is exclusive, with predominantly rural characteristics, utterly traditionalist, therefore self-absorbed, and, in the end, nationalist, while the other approach appears to be the opposite, that is inclusive, forward-looking, rather urban and liberatingly cosmopolitan. While the first looks for a national essence, an immobile national substance, the other compares itself against different other entities, oversteps the border and engages in comparison, if not even in constructive conflict. In Dolar's words, »dissonance, discrepancy, split, contradiction and battle [represent] the generators of culture, nationality, Slovenianness and identity«.30 Thus, we have two versions of identification juxtaposed: both equally applicable, both equally real.

Both identities can be applied in a similar way yet they differ in their consequences. Namely, the first attitude that is directed inwardly, is the one seeking the »essence of the nation«, its absolute ideals. It is, alas, the one that focuses on identity in an exclusive way. This, of course, would have not been negative in itself, unless the consequences were not the splitting, and the introducing of the differences between »Greeks and Barbarians«, people from »within« and from »without«, the »good« and the »bad«, »us« and »them«, hence giving the basis for all kinds of xenophobic, intolerant, prejudiced and narrow-minded reactions. There are always enemies to »our« way of life to be looked for or to be afraid of. Thus, this first attitude, according to Dolar, ends up producing more enemies than friends, more animosities than friendships.

Why is this important? What goes along with this negative attitude is, logically, the appearance of a »frightened« outlook at the world, the appearance of all-against-all or, at least, everybody-against-us mentality, and, as a final consequence, a self-deprecating and self-belittling self-image. With our own isolation, we feel even more threatened. Where there is no single enemy, everybody becomes one and that is too much to exercise any control over.

This is a real problem, dealt with also by Aleš Debeljak in his recent book *Europe without Europeans* in which he maintains that »at the crossroads, which, historically speaking, never managed to be a fortress, even though the radical Slovenian nationalism would prefer to present us as an outwardly bridled, self-sufficient and self-satisfied community«.31

This problem was known already to Cankar, who, in his letter to Alojz Kraigher, describes his comedy *Za narodov blagor* [*For the Prosperity of the Nation*] published in 1901:

The matter aims at those Slovenian magnates who hold the »nation's« well-being in their hands, who dictate to this imaginary »nation« different ideals and sacred things that are untouchable, yet not a single soul pays attention to them – namely, against those people who think they are a nation yet are nothing else but pigs.32

Hence, if we accept the thesis that the identity of the nation relies on its culture and if we trust Vidmar, who maintains that culture has a centripetal tendency,33 then it becomes obvious that the Slovenian national identity has been caught up in a self-aggrandizing, yet, as a result, self-defeating, downward spiral. The above mentioned loop keeps bringing up the naked truth: regardless of all the culture, Slovenians have no history to corroborate its meaning. The outcome of all this is, logically, the lack of self-confidence, together with intolerance, feelings of being threatened etc.

Contrary to the above perspective, culture – in order to be open, grow, and develop – has to involve, contain, and praise the difference, cherish the liminality. It has to be transgressive; it has to test its own limits. Its role is exactly to put aside this artificially idyllic state of national affairs by breaking away from the yoke of tradition, by not feeling bound to observe it but, rather, to cross the borders and take a fresh look at itself. Therefore, I can only echo Aleš Debeljak's opinion that »cultural tradition cannot be mechanically inherited from generation to generation« and that it is this crossroad space in whose »framework individuals form their

34 Debeljak 2004, p. 37.

temporary identities³⁴ are differentiated. The difference is also the one that decides about identity. After all, as it became obvious, culture and identity cannot be viewed separately. The difference, liminality decide about – because they are, in turn, defined by them – factual autonomy and, thus, identity.

Slovenia's contemporary formal conditions have, after gaining independence in 1991, significantly improved. The circumstances are right for history to start. It would only make sense to turn the spiral of self-esteem upward.

IV

35 Nećak 1997, p. 20.

36 Kreft 2001, p. 41.

37 Vidmar 1932, p. 92.

Interestingly, this approach adds even more weight to the statement that Benedict Anderson used for the title of his ground-breaking book: the »imagined communities«. Imagination is what it is precisely by virtue of its transgressive nature. It works only when there is enough fodder for its defying expansion, which precisely turns out to be a constructive and community- or even nation-building element.

It is no wonder then, that, given the self-defeating state of affairs, Slovenian identity went through a period of stagnation, if not outright regression, and that it has not pulled itself out of it completely. The self-image has been negative because Slovenians survived by virtue of culture which they have, in a self-defeating move, closed in, sanctified and excluded any and all dialogue with others. In an unhealthy spasm of self-protection they overlooked the need for »difference and opposition« and, hence, started being afraid of their own shadow.

This type of existence forced them into a tautological identity (Vidmar) and enabled self-effigy, which, because of the harsh historical conditions, isolated itself and started referring solely to itself. We could also call it the »crisis« identity. It has been in force for almost the entirety of their existence as a people and a nation, since Slovenians have always been limited, hindered, kept in check: during the centuries of Habsburg rule, in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia or after the World War II.

What are the chances for the future of the Slovenian self-image to improve? Since it is precisely this kind of identity that is supported by the play *1821*, it is possible to maintain the conclusion that the approach to identity from 1821 to 1985 has not changed much. However all this altered in 1991. Since then, Slovenians have constructed their nationhood and established all the necessary conditions for a history to start developing. Thus, the conditions are ripe for a full-fledged historical Hegelian »contradictory« identity, a satisfied self-image with its opposite built in.

With the national-political program *Unified Slovenia* (1848) Slovenians have become a »modern political people«. ³⁵ With their own state, they have grown into a modern political nation. It is time to leave behind the past paradigms. If in 1911 Cankar claimed that they would have no history for the longest time, now they have at least its beginning and future developments look promising.

It is my conviction that the seminality of the implication of difference and liminality in the notion of culture and identity proper has become obvious. With it, even Slovenians should be well equipped to transcend their anxious self-enclosure and step across the red line between self-constraint and openness to the world, to face brighter times ahead. The time for changing the paradigm of their identity has come: only »open and decentered Slovenianness« ³⁶ will help them in creating a »new Athens or new Florence on [their] own soil« ³⁷.

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