



CARTHAGE THAT COULD NOT BE »PLOUGHED IN«

Thoughts about oppressed multiculturalism in Vojvodina

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1 Ramet, Sabrina: *Balkan Babel*. Colorado: Westview Press 1996, p. 263.

2 Banac, Ivo: Foreword xi.

3 Jankov, Dragomir Vojvodina: Propadanje jednog regiona (Vojvodina-downfall of one region). Novi Sad/Petrovaradin: Graphica Academica 2004, p. 15ff; Djordjević, Dimitrije: *Die Serben. Die Habsburger Monarchie 1848-1918*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1980, pp. 734-744.

4 Cf. Ingraio, Charles: *The Historic Preconditions of Regionalization. Vojvodina and the Legacy of Austria's »Southern Strategy«*. In: *Journal of the Institute for Spatial Planning* 3 (2005).

»To conquer the territory in the fullest sense entails also the conquest of its history, an ›annexation‹ of the history of the region to one's own national history. This is also why the victors in wars for territorial gain typically rewrite the history books upon the conclusion of their wars, in order to justify their conquests.«¹ This general assumption of Sabrina Ramet should be verified in its fullest if applied to the »case study« of Vojvodina during the period of »South Slav state experiment« (1918-1991) and the subsequent »Wars for Yugoslav Succession« (1991-1999). Even after the fall of Slobodan Milošević, there were desperate attempts made to invigorate and to continue the same nationalistic agenda, contrary to the best interests of the ordinary citizens of Vojvodina and Serbia. This paradoxical »full-speed-driving-in-reverse-gear« became particularly obvious after the fall of the Berlin Wall, being in striking discordance with the transitions of most Central and East European states towards trans-border cooperation and integrations. Why is this so? The nationalistic pseudo-elite in Serbia is still obsessed with the political formula Monarchy (Karageorgevich) – Clergy (the Serbian Orthodox Church) – Army (the Serbian Army and *Black Hand*), trying to postpone the articulate response to the crying needs to modernize Serbia in order to strengthen those »Imaginary Pillars of Nationhood«. Having acquired such an unattainable task, they could indulge themselves on conflicts, seizing the power and maintaining it by using all conceivable means, coupled with degradation and downplaying of societal importance of knowledge and academic competence. Above all, there is the omnipresent corruption, with its almost endemic character. It is obvious that a state with such negative capacities has a chronic deficiency of legitimacy; instead of this, there is a constant outcry for unconditional unity of all Serbs against the »perpetual anti-Serb conspiracy«. Such irrational argumentation, repeated so frequently, generates waves of suspicion and xenophobia in the widest public.

The cultural diversity among the nationalities of Yugoslavia has frequently been so acute that there is a tendency to underestimate the elements of diversity within each single nationality... And, indeed, there are vast differences between the disciplined ›imperial sons‹ from the former Habsburg Military Frontier, the exponents of urban Byzantine Orthodoxy from southern Serbia, the patriarchal and natural Orthodox highlanders of Herzegovina and Montenegro, the latitudinarian clergy and burghers from the Vojvodina, and their no less latitudinarian kinsmen from harbours of the Montenegro littoral, not to forget the Serbs who live in areas of predominantly Muslim influence. One could go on like this and demonstrate to what extent the perennial calls for Serb unity address the real fears of cultural fragmentation in reputedly one of the most homogenous of South Slavic nationalities.²

Seen from a historical perspective, the Vojvodina is an example of successful grand-scale planning (area: 20.000 km²), situated more than 600 km from the headquarters in Vienna, almost three centuries ago (first decades of 18th century), further complicated by ethnolinguistic (Serbs, Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenes, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Roma), confessional (Catholics, Orthodox, Calvinist) and geographical (rivers, marshes, wetlands, deserts) complexities.³

This Habsburg southern strategy went beyond administrative atomization to include a policy for resettling the newly acquired, but depopulated expanses of Hungarian plain. Although the Habsburg regime permitted many Magyars to return to the south, a specially appointed Commission Neo Acquistica effectively excluded most Magyar nobles from the Military Border, Banat and Bačka. Indeed, the Commission's Austrian, Bohemian and Croatian officials purposely overwhelmed the number of Magyar settlers with wave after wave of immigrants from all over the monarchy and the Holy Roman Empire... Indeed, there were virtually no linguistic majorities in the newly acquired areas of Slavonia, Srem, Baranya, Bačka and Banat, only a richly multiethnic society in which no one group dominated the political or cultural landscape. The combination of regional autonomy and multiethnic diversity was instrumental in insuring that the southern Hungarian plain became a model for peaceful coexistence for all but a few years of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴

5 Cf. Hrabak, Bogumil: *Autonomizam u Vojvodini 1919-1928*, (Autonomism in Vojvodina 1919-1928). Novi Sad: Godišnjak Društva istoričara Vojvodine 1984, pp. 75-79; Lazar, Vrkatić/Ingao, Charles: *The Unlearned Lesson*. Central European Idea and Serb National Program. Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2001, p. 13f, 136ff.

6 Cf. Ilić, Vladimir/Cvejić, Slobodan: *Nacionalizam u Vojvodini* (Nationalism in Vojvodina). Zrenjanin: Gradska biblioteka »Žarko Zrenjanin« 1997; Ilić, Vladimir: *Prevladavanje prošlosti u Vojvodini* (Coming to Terms with the Past in Vojvodina). Zrenjanin: Gradska biblioteka »Žarko Zrenjanin« 2002, pp. 183-184; Ilić, Vladimir: *Ethnic incidents in Vojvodina*, <http://www.cdcs.org.yu/docs>

7 Vojnić, Tomislav: *Subotnja ptica* (Bird of Saturday). Zvonko Bogdan na severu Bačke. Subotica: Ex libris Boško Krstić 2000, pp. 145-162.

8 <http://www.vojvodinamusic.com>

The abovementioned facts gave us the evidence to see the Vojvodina as a successful, albeit not fully developed protoeuropean region and ethnoanthropological retort being overshadowed by exclusive ideological madness of, according to E. Hobsbawm, the »short twentieth century«. The two-decade short life of the first South Slav State (1919-1941) demonstrated that ignoring a diversity and multiplicity of cultures does not lead to unity through assimilation. On the contrary, there is only little research on the chaotic and, in a certain sense, almost »colonial attitude« towards non-Serbian regions.⁵ We know even less about the tragedy of numerous families of state officials and civil servants of Magyar ethnic origin, who became superfluous and *personae non gratae* in the successor states of former Austria-Hungary, and were eventually forced to emigrate. Using a more colourful language, the degradation of social and interethnic relations in the Vojvodina in interwar period (1919-1941) and in the last fifteen years (since 1988), reminds the author of this text of the fate of the Vojvodina as a prisoner of war and the last hostage of the nationalistic project of Greater Serbia. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take into account the laborious field research in the Vojvodina by Vladimir Ilić and others,⁶ concluding that ethnic homogenization was strongest among Serbs; this group was followed by Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians (in order of citation). Ethnic homogenization was present more in ethnically homogenous settlements than in heterogeneous ones; more in urban settings than in villages. Concerning the socio-educational criteria, lower strata were more ethnically homogenous than middle and higher positioned citizens. A survey done on interethnic relations presented the Serbs as intolerant towards other ethnic groups, far more so in comparison to Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians. Moreover, Serbs were very unidirectionally oriented and politically mobilized around ethnic criteria.

One should ask, after having all this grim facts about near past and present situation, is there a single field of human activity that emanates a clearly positive multicultural influence in the Vojvodina nowadays? Notwithstanding the network of perceptive and proactive non-governmental organizations, the most influential ones are, in the opinion of the author, three personalities coming from musical ranks.

Zvonko Bogdan made enormous efforts to enrich a musical repertoire of South Slavs (mostly Serbs and Croats) in the Vojvodina and the whole Pannonian basin with dozens of Hungarian and Romanian folk-songs and ballads, thus giving them peculiar multiple musical lives.⁷ What makes all this even more interesting is the fact that a lot of these songs were translated from Hungarian almost a hundred years ago by most prominent Serb and Croat intellectuals (J. J. Zmaj, B. Radičević, P. Preradović, A. Šenoa). An equally important achievement of Mr. Bogdan is his long-standing and sophisticated promotion of the musical and folkloric heritage of his kinsmen Bunjevci, a small ethnic group of south Slavs of catholic denomination, living in Bacska/Bačka (on both sides of the Hungarian/Serbian border). Last year, being a guest at a more than four hour long live solo concert at the Youth Festival »EXIT« in Novi Sad, he triumphed before a 20.000 strong audience, performing traditional music of the people of Pannonia and the Balkans. It is a telling example of the great but neglected opportunities of interculturalism and common sense that needs to be prioritized by political elites.

Djordje Balašević (nicknamed Djole) has almost a thirty-year-long career as a music performer, composer, textwriter and novelist, to whom even the Yugoslav fratricidal wars were not the obstacle of being revered and accepted in all successor states of SFR Yugoslavia. During the most tragic years of state dissolution, Balašević engaged himself in the public on an antinationalist, antiwar and anti-Milošević platform; it was a rather courageous lifestyle in those days. Not only because of that are his artistic capacities are far from being exhausted; moreover, he is presently touring the Vojvodina in order to enhance interethnic understanding, using his music as a messenger. One thing is already certain: Balašević has had and still has an influence by creating a modern, supranational identity of the youngest generations that counterbalances the otherwise deleterious effects of wars, poverty and isolation. It was not a real surprise to anybody that Djole deserved the prestigious title of Ambassador of Good Will to UNESCO seven years ago.

Branislav Krstić (nicknamed Bane), the youngest among the three: a poet, textwriter and composer, frontman of the musical group *Garavi sokak*, researcher and custodian of the musical heritage of the Vojvodina.⁸ The type of music he currently performs is situated in

between Bogdan and Balašević), the two renowned performers. Knowing his erudition and passion for music and intellectual endeavours, the very best of his oeuvre has yet to come.

What should be said about the future of multicultural settings in the Vojvodina? Despite of heavy challenges (war, violent changes in ethnic composition, comprising the massive influx of refugees, isolation and downfall of economy), a constitutionally safeguarded autonomy of the Vojvodina under supervision of the international community and the European Union remains the best and the only legitimate modernization paradigm for Serbia. Such a message could be a strong and unambiguous tool for reconciliation, both within Serbia itself and the neighbouring countries. Still, there are some attempts to condition the status of Vojvodina with ongoing and future solutions for Kosovo and Republika Srpska, although the ethnic minorities in Vojvodina are unburdened with war crimes; moreover, they display *en permanence* the full measure of constitutional patriotism (presidential elections 2000 and 2004, Assembly of Vojvodina elections 2000 and 2004). Indeed, the ethnic minorities should act the role of self-sustained »profit centers« in the precious »economy of differences«, that very recently made the admission to the EU possible for the countries of »new Europe«.

