

**COMMENTARY: SLOVENIA IN THE 1990s**

**WRITERS AND POLITICS: A NECESSARY DIVORCE IN THE  
WAKE OF INDEPENDENCE**

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After four years in the United States, I responded to the call of nostalgia and tumultuous historical change that in recent years has swept Central and Eastern Europe. Hence I packed my stuff, boxed up my books, kissed my American friends goodbye and in February 1992 returned to Ljubljana, my home town. God, was I in for a surprise! In this lovely Central European city, the capital of Slovenia, a new pocket-size state that emerged almost without bloodshed out of the ashes of a sadly dismembered Yugoslavia, nothing was as it used to be. If *cultural shock* implies a dramatic encounter with values radically different from the ones with which one has grown up, then this term aptly describes my homecoming after a long absence. Of course, a more lucid mind would have expected this shock in advance. After all, what happened last summer in Slovenia was a unique, crucial, and absolutely historical event: the birth of a nation-state.

In the summer 1991, true enough, I had been at home. Instead of basking in the sun, however, I donned a bullet-proof vest and as an interpreter glued myself to the cameraman of the CNN crew that covered *the first open military conflict on the European soil since World War II*. In the ten-day war that followed the Slovene declaration of independence on June 26, lightly armed Slovene militiamen fought against the Yugoslav federal army, the fourth largest standing army in Europe. These unforgettable moments will stick in my mind forever. I saw burned houses, dead bodies, confused horses, crying children, pillaged stores. I sensed determination in the eyes of young Slovene fighters who came in from behind the ploughs and out of the corporate offices to defend a country under assault, I witnessed short but fierce guerilla shootouts on the city streets, I stood speechless at the sight of the federal army's pullout after its unexpected yet convincing defeat. Soon after the last soldier in an olive-grey Yugoslav uniform left, however, I had to return to New York to resume my academic duties. That is why I did not fully experience the cultural, political, diplomatic and economic blossoming in the wake of war. The breath-taking speed with which the rosebud of Slovene lifestyle propelled itself into a full-blown rose was impossible to monitor from the other side of Atlantic. Television networks are hardly a substitute for non-partisan media, let alone for a first-hand experience.

Small wonder then that upon my return I felt not unlike Adam at the end of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. "Depressed, lost and at home!". It could not have been any other way, though. In the last four years I have made considerable efforts to make myself at home in three different social and

cultural systems: In 1988 I left the *late communism* of Slovenia, the most advanced republic in the Yugoslav federation, for the *advanced capitalism* of America. 1992 saw my return to the *primitive capitalism* of independent Slovenia. If I was somewhat creatively restricted in the first system, and was growing critical of the second one, then I certainly cannot be enthusiastic about the third either.

Alfred Schutz, a noted Austrian-American social thinker, developed in his New York exile a theory of the *homecomer*, a man who returns home only to find that both he and his home have changed during his absence. Schutz's theory is a required reading in the graduate seminars in American social studies. I have done my reading but have never really believed that a theory about the bifurcation of past and present experiences of home, deepened by long periods of living abroad, would transcend the ephemeral status of an academic footnote.

These homecomer's anxieties, however, have since my return slowly worked their way into my heart. I, too, have seen that what characterizes a homecomer is the fact that he views his homeland in the light in which living memories of the past mingle with new experiences gained abroad. These views, however, cannot always be successfully translated into the language spoken at home. My homecomer's anxieties were given distinct shape when I wandered the winding streets of the old city quarter and bumped into a friend from college. He took me to a glitzy cafe that has replaced a state-run dive in one of the back streets below the medieval castle.

Quite a guy, this friend of mine. A graduate in philosophy and comparative literature, he used to be a passionate reader, wrote poems and was a regular at literary readings. He was smart and *engagé*, quick to comment on controversial disputes between dissidents and authorities in which I actively participated as the chief editor of the radical student weekly, *Tribuna*. He was at home in the republic of *res publica*, public issues. But this is all history now. Today, he is a top-notch manager for an advertising agency. He smiled constantly, a proverbial Rolex on his wrist, the way he casually dropped the name of a well-known model he was sleeping with, politicians he was on a first-name basis with, etc. Everything about this young man revealed a self-confident person who knew what he wanted and how to get it. Our talk was truly uncanny. It was as if I stared at a character straight out of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, not yet translated into Slovene yet finding its real-life correspondences all over urban settings in my country.

In discussing our past years over hot cappuccino, my newly minted manager did not pause a bit when I asked him what had led him so far afield from his first love, philosophy. He leaned back in his chair, took a sip and snapped: "I didn't abandon the world of ideas. I need to have original concepts in my office, too. And business is such a virgin field! Anything is possible now. Besides," he winked at me, "that's where the power is!" In response to my naive question whether he had recently read an interesting book he might recommend to me, a perplexed homecomer, he just shook his head. The young man who used to follow contemporary French fiction and

was an avid reader of British book reviews, thought it unnecessary to elaborate the obvious: "Who cares about things that no longer matter!"

His answer and attitude are *not exceptional*. Rather, they are the rule. Needless to say, not all managers have liberal arts degree like my friend. But like all fledgling members of this bizarre class that has grown desperately vacuous if not entirely fatigued in the United States, yuppies in a Central European vein exercise the same gut-felt pleasure in making money and the same relentless drive to climb the corporate ladder. This is only natural. Until the fall of Communist regimes, these pleasures represented a forbidden fruit to those who did not belong to the *nomenklatura*, the top ranking party officers.

However, a demonstrated *indifference toward cultural affairs and literature*, these building blocks of an identity for the Slovene nation that has historically lacked political institutions, reveals much more than just a striving toward a new affluence. This indifference admittedly oils the machinery of Slovene economic growth for it does not distract the focus or divest the public energy. At the same time, however, it points up to the sobering fact that culture is *no longer the privileged forum of truth, justice and beauty* and thus, by extension, of national identity. My older colleagues, traditionally very respected spokesmen of the people and hence long accustomed to public attention, predictably grumble and complain. They feel that *literati* are unjustly marginalized.

As for me, I must admit that I understand their grievances. On the face of it, they are right. Yet, that writers of Slovenia (and, I am sure, of Central Europe at large) have emerged today as a "disinherited party," is paradoxically the result of the writers' own doing: their moral stance, civil disobedience and political dissent. As individuals who struggled for freedom and against totalitarian limits to human spirit, they were defeated by their own success. Freedom of choice also implies a freedom not to choose to listen to the writers' voices any longer. Thus, as much as I empathize with the wounded writers's pride and deep disappointment in credit not being given where credit was due, I did take time to contemplate the new situation and do some soul-searching. It was not easy. One needs to be brutally honest with oneself.

It became evident to me that the larger cultural and social scene is now undergoing a process of forming those *elective affinities* that could not come to pass before Slovene independence. When the armchairs of power were still occupied by card-carrying Communists, the Writers' Union, cultural magazines, and other auxiliary agencies of nascent civil society represented a kind of *umbrella institution* under which different ideological groups, individuals, tendencies, programs, and agendas found refuge. Because of its *licentia poetica*, the cultural sphere, precarious as it always was, more or less successfully bypassed the Communist control. The cultural umbrella thus offered a protection for the best and brightest minds who articulated the people's hopes and national interests in the most appealing way. The magazine *Perspectives* in the sixties and *Nova revija* in the eighties were instrumental in giving public voice to the writers' historical responsibility.

The latter inspired writers even to the point of hammering out a draft of a new constitution by which they masterfully challenged the ruling party's grip on power in the late eighties.

Hence it should come as no surprise that culture served as an outlet for those groups and individuals (dissident politicians, social science experts, etc.) who needed cultural licence only as a kind of smoke screen behind which they semi-legally carried on their specific activities. After the Communists stepped down from the throne, such *social mimicry* was no longer necessary, veiled operations lost their rationale and a cultural cover-up became redundant. Having emerged from the cultural closet, as it were, these individuals in pursuit of their specific ambitions left culture and its institutions behind. The shift of focus from culture to *state politics* and the *business world* that took place after the Communists allowed other parties in 1989, should not be regarded, however, as a "betrayal" or "conformism." It is, instead, a natural and logical process wherein creative potential is arranged along the whole spectrum of human action.

That culture ceased to be a privileged platform from which to bring moral judgments to bear no writer can take lightly, myself included. Life in an ivory tower would not appeal to us, veterans of public debate. Swear as we may that we only want to be writers and nothing else, we all subconsciously indulged in the difficult yet rewarding role history assigned us to play. The role of revered *shaman* and *people's spokesman* who tells the stories about historical taboos, repressed memory, about individual solitude and social resistance, is over. The curtains are being drawn, the performance of writers in the public arena is coming to an end. Imagine: a poem carrying the hidden hope of a people, a novel in which an aesthetic statement is pregnant with ethical claims that are publicly respected as such. . . all this seems to be gone, gone forever with the winds of independence.

The social meaning of the writer's vocation has by all accounts irreversibly *changed*. If the writer no longer runs the risk of going to prison for what he publishes, then his word lacks the moral weight it carried before. As long as the writers' search for an answer to the question about *ex Oriente lux*, "the light from the East," is answered in a reader's happy singing about the craving for *ex Occidente luxus*, "luxurious goods from the West", the writers have only one chance left. Writers need to abandon the endless discussions about socialism with a human face and its radical criticism. Rather, we need to focus on the human face alone. In other words, a political theme no longer provides a desired historical and thus aesthetic alibi. The question about whether freedom will know how to sing the way slaves sang about it, if I may paraphrase the late Serbian poet Branko Miljković, thus remains a rhetorical question.

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