

## AN INTRODUCTION TO PAPERS ON “NEW RESEARCH ON SLOVENES OF CARINTHIA”<sup>1</sup>

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Scholarly interest in the Slovenes of Carinthia arose at the time language differences came to distinguish the many “peoples” of the Dual Monarchy as political subjects. The papers presented here fall within a research tradition dedicated to understanding Carinthia’s Slovene speakers as a *Volksgruppe* (ethnic group) and as a minority. Coming from different disciplines, the authors convey contrasting understandings of the contemporary situation of the Slovene minority in Carinthia. Each acknowledges in one way or another how recently dismantled state borders (through common membership in the European Union) are transforming the life situation of Carinthian Slovene speakers. The papers thus question, at least implicitly, the validity of earlier research about the people in focus here.

Matjaž Klemenčič begins by presenting minority-majority relations in Carinthia in light of the 1955 Austrian State Treaty. Since language has been the essential marker of ethnic identity in Carinthia, he usefully chronicles the failed adoption of bi-lingual signage as a central political issue in Carinthian Slovenes’ quest as an organized minority for equity in a multi-ethnic state. In his account of this campaign over many decades he argues that “territorial implementation of article 7 of the (1955) Austrian State Treaty” (guaranteeing minority rights) has been consistently inhibited by the German majority’s ability to shape provincial and national minority policy, and in particular to thwart implementation of bilingual signage, ordered by Austria’s Constitutional Court, in Carinthia. He shows, for example, that census manipulation and alliance building within majority institutions has facilitated German national hegemony.

By associating territory with identity and by raising the problem of equitable political representation for Austria’s autochthonous ethnic groups, Klemenčič sets the stage for the other panel contributions. He concludes by noting that policed state borders are no longer present in the everyday lives of borderland Slovenes or the politicians representing them. With this he implies that new possibilities (other than legally sanctioned political actions of the Austrian government discussed in his paper) may be found to implement bilingual signage. Indeed, I would suggest that the transformed

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<sup>1</sup> On 18 November 2007, Metod Milač chaired the panel, *Newest Research on Slovenes of Carinthia*, at the Thirty-Ninth National Convention of the AAASS in New Orleans. Abbreviated versions of papers and comments presented during the panel are presented here.

“borderless” society where Carinthia’s Slovene speakers now live represents a fundamentally new set of contingencies for participating in the politics shaping their daily lives. We arrive thus at the theme of the second panel paper, political participation.

Boris Jesih outlines how Carinthian Slovenes have participated in and organized themselves as subjects of local, provincial, and national politics. He draws attention to an ideological division among them, between a church-oriented right and socialist-oriented left, and how this resulted in two contesting Slovene organizations, *The National Council of Carinthian Slovenes* [NCCS], and, *The Association of Slovene Organizations* [ASO]). This dual institutionalization of Slovene interests has impeded effective representation and consolidation of power vis-à-vis the political order kept in place by the German majority.

According to Jesih, political engagement of members of the Slovene minority following World War II has been bedeviled by a fundamental contradiction. Should those who identify themselves as Slovenes pursue their “minority” interests through the auspices of one of the above Slovene organizations, neither of which has a precisely defined legal status within the governmental institutions of Austria, or should members of the minority choose to participate in one of the major political parties, all of which have been notorious for their failure to insist upon implementation of basic minority rights guaranteed in the 1955 Austrian State Treaty? This choice is of course not absolute. The ASO has long supported both forms of political participation and the NCCS has more recently opened for this. Jesih notes that in recent years Slovenes have obtained a voice as a minority within Austria’s Social Democratic Party. Yet he laments the failure of this party to completely disassociate itself from the German nationalist stances of the other major parties. On the other hand, the lesser Green Party has become an effective vehicle for representing minority interests at various levels of government. And this is not surprising because the green movement adheres to a global idea of environmentalism rather than to the divisive ideological schism between right and left that propels the politics of Europe’s classic nation-states.

Jesih suggests, nevertheless, that members of the Slovene minority are confronted ultimately with the quandary of having to choose between “minority, state, and ideology” when adopting a path for political participation. And he envisions resolution of this dilemma through creation of elected bodies at all levels of government in Austria where ethnic identity is a precondition for membership. But are the paths to political participation as constrained as Jesih suggests? Today’s Slovene-speaking Carinthians daily encounter institutions of the European Union and a global economy, not to mention transnational movements such as “ecological farming,” which is strongly promoted in Carinthia. The nation-state and the

classic ideological polarization between Christian conservative and socialist liberal, at the center of Jesih’s account, no longer command the central importance they once did. In fact I would ask if members of younger generations of Carinthia’s Slovene speakers experience collective self-identification primarily in terms of belonging to “the Slovene minority.” Does this collective identification mediate for them the primordial confirmation of one’s self that it did in the days of extreme collectivist ideology—namely, ethnic nationalism? Has not collective self-identification among this group nowadays become much more individualized?

In their contributions to this panel Matrjaž Klemenčič and Boris Jesih assume that ethnic confrontation is inevitable and minority-majority relations are prerequisite for political participation and for forming collective identity among Carinthia’s Slovene speakers. Jernej Zupančič adopts a more open analytical stance that allows us to question these assumptions and to answer issues I raise above. He questions the primacy of ethnic self-identification in contemporary identity constructions among Carinthia’s Slovene speakers, and he draws our attention to wide-ranging processes of social transformation that indicate a more complex framework within which people manage their identity and categorize others.

As a social geographer, Zupančič broadly sketches the social and spatial transformation of the Slovene-speaking population in Carinthia following World War II. He thereby avoids the narrower focus of the two foregoing papers, where the actions and understandings of the Slovene ethno-political elite are the focus of attention. Rather than emphasize ethnically driven political confrontation or bemoan assimilation, Zupančič chooses to account positively for that growing segment of the Slovene speaking population that has attained a high level of education and experienced significant upward social mobility. He attributes this development to effective institutionalization of bilingual education in Carinthia that in turn has provided a basis for successful professional and academic training within a modernizing economy. Even though, according to badly flawed official statistics, Carinthia’s Slovene speaking population has decreased greatly in absolute numbers it has increased its influence in Carinthian society by assuming increasingly important roles in the professions, education, government, and commerce. According to Zupančič, a social elite has been created among Slovene speakers that has “attained a higher level of education and qualification than the majority population.”

Zupančič emphasizes economic opportunities, rather than political structures, encountered by Carinthia’s Slovene speakers. He is concerned with the broader regional economy and economic flows across state borders, both before and following Slovenia’s independence and adoption of the Euro. For him these flows represent numerous opportunities for bilinguals to take advantage of commercial, professional and consultancy

tasks across the border. He views members of an emerging Slovene speaking elite as entrepreneurial bridge builders across a border that formerly impeded, through the machination of nation-states, economic growth and cooperation in the greater region. He notes that more than 700 Austrian companies have located in Slovenia since the 1990s, all of them employing the services of bilingual Carinthians.

The upward socio-economic mobility of Carinthia's Slovene speakers has transpired alongside the evolving aspirations of the ethno-political elite representing them. In his commentary on Zupančič, Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik observes that persistent ethno-political confrontation is essential for the legitimacy of this political elite. But ethnic confrontation is not requisite to the social recognition of those members of the Slovene-speaking elite positioned outside this political domain. By drawing attention to this broader-ranging social elite, Zupančič opens new perspectives for understanding the dynamics of identity construction and the relative role of ethnic self-identification among the current bilingual population. I would assert that today's Slovene-speaking Carinthians participate in political fora and experience self-understandings that do not inevitably include an ethnic dimension. And if this is the case, we should ask if Boris Jesih's prescription for attaining political equality (i.e., achieving minority rights) in Carinthia through the extension of ethnically based collective rights is not retrograde in the increasingly open and global social environment that is home to the province's Slovene speakers.

The social integration of today's Slovene-speaking elite is fundamentally different from the small-scale, face-to-face communities of the past—the agrarian communities from which many of them originate and some still reside. Today, new core groups of Slovene speakers are developing in urban centers (both within Carinthia and beyond) close to the institutions that afford them employment in the post-modern economy. Social relations are no longer restricted to the daily round of direct encounters but build increasingly upon individualized social networks and indirect communication. It is easy to imagine that professional, academic, commercial, and other associations compete as bases for one's self-identification. And as state borders have been dismantled within the European Union, one detects a reorientation of individuals' territorial association away from the nation-state toward what we might call "*heimat*." Hence the social and territorial construction of collective self-identities is undergoing a transformation. As Zupančič suggests, what it means to be "a member of the minority" is changing. And I would go even further and suggest that belonging to "a minority" is losing its political significance in the everyday concerns of many Slovene speakers.

Finally, the question arises as to what extent the Slovene language still is the quintessential marker of Slovene identity. It seems the utility of

bilingualism is currently a driving force behind the Slovene language's promotion and social recognition; bilingualism is both social and economic capital within the borderland society of which Carinthia is part. Ethno-political campaigns for language rights fall into the background as bilingualism gains pragmatic support. And, as Zupančič observes, when Slovene is learned primarily in schools, rather than homes, its potential as an ethnic marker is reduced. Speaking Slovene is no longer exclusively an ethnic marker. Increasingly learning Slovene is understood as a pragmatic decision facilitating social mobility in a borderland, regardless of one's mother tongue.

In sum, the classic role of state territory (and the idea of the nation) and mother tongue as the essential criteria defining one's ethnic identity are challenged. The transformed social universe where Carinthia's Slovene speakers now live and the ways they understand themselves as members of collectives that count in their personal lives represent a new social order. As Zupančič suggests, ethnic self-understanding nowadays involves individually unique associations with diverse social groups and networks and with the territory in which one lives and moves. I would assert that the collectivist perspective on ethnicity is losing ground in favor of a more individualized understanding. The papers presented in this panel open the way for thinking such thoughts and revising perspectives on the study of Slovene speakers in Carinthia.

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