# THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL POINT OF VIEW IN DETERMINING THE BOUNDARIES OF ETHNIC UNITS: SLOVENE VILLAGERS IN THE CLEVELAND, OHIO AREA

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This article originally was intended to discuss certain aspects of Slovene ethnicity in the Cleveland area, the core group being those migrants and their descendants who are relatives and friends of the inhabitants of the Slovene village of Žerovnica and neighboring villages. Instead, however, it will focus on how the unit of study has been refocused, expanded, and provisionally delineated in order to draw tentative boundaries encompassing certain social networks and how these networks initially are identified. A basic thesis of this examination holds that the primary criteria for detecting ethnic units involve the dynamics of cultural point of view.

It is necessary first to reconstruct the background of this project. The initial impulse to turn to Cleveland was my work in Žerovnica, a small traditional peasant village of sixty houses in northwestern Slovenia. Field research made it increasingly clear that it was not sufficient for the understanding of the culture of this village simply to set it in the context of historical depth, which reaches back to the Middle Ages, and spatial breadth, which encompasses the local district, the broader valley in which Žerovnica lies, the Republic of Slovenia itself and, indeed, Yugoslavia. It became apparent that remote and traditional as this and neighboring villages might appear to a visiting American, a complete description of its culture would have to involve its relation to—or even participation in —other cultural systems in other parts of the world.

"Do you know Cleveland?" (pronounced /Klevelánt/) every villager asked, and "Do you know my cousin, brother, uncle, etc., who lives there?" In short, Žerovnica is full of signs of this other culture, signs which range from verbal expressions to objects of all kinds, such as mementos, presents, picture postcards, greetings, letters, and photographs. Many of these are on display and thus constitute a manifestation both of a memory of historical contacts and a continuing relationship with

migrants in the New World and most particularly in Cleveland. This unexpected discovery during my research in Žerovnica compelled a growing interest in the question: What did the term "Cleveland" signify to these villagers? Accordingly, in preparation for a second study, I gathered the names of village relatives living in Cleveland as well as in other parts of the world.

There is a variety of reasons to justify a follow-up study centered in Cleveland. For example, one of the keys to the remarkable survival of this village and others like it relatively intact over centuries can, so it appears, be ascribed historically to an asymmetrical economic relationship with the New World. The question that interests me, however, is not simply that of the socioeconomic relations between villages like Žerovnica and the migrants they send abroad, but rather the entire cultural system of a group of New World migrants that is in dynamic relation to the country of origin as well as to the host country. Such a cultural system encompasses, in some new configuration, elements from the culture of the area of origin as well as elements of the new country, thereby creating a new subculture. This subculture, or ethnic unit, generally exhibits some characteristics typical of an economic class or stratum, yet it cannot be limited to such a unit and to do so would be a serious reduction. To investigate this problem I initiated field work in Cleveland.

The first requirement for such a study is a working definition of an ethnic unit as understood from the inner point of view, that is, from the point of view of the members of the group. This is necessary in order to approach the task of drawing boundaries, however permeable and dynamic they might be. To begin with, I suggest that a fundamental characteristic of an ethnic unit is its distinction from the larger society and culture of which it is a part by cultural variations which are significant to the particular culture bearers. Thus an ethnic unit is a particular kind of cultural unit, one which is a structural part of a larger system.

This view leads directly to the question: What are the criteria of a minimal culture unit as understood from an inner point of view? Here the concepts of contemporary Soviet semioticians working in the area of the semiotics of culture appear to be especially pertinent. These

scholars understand culture as "a system which transforms the outer sphere into the inner one, or disorganization into organization, or entropy into information. Since a cultural system is dynamic, it may move from one sphere to another" (Van der Eng and Grygar, eds. 1973: 2). Thus it follows that all cultural units at any level encompass a primary and basic opposition, namely, culture and extra-cultural space (ibid.: 4). An extension of this position holds that the inner point of view of the culture bearers situates them in the center of the culture and allows them to see themselves as a normal "we," while other peoples are regarded as anomalies, or as exotic, as strangers, etc. All these oppositions (extra cultural space/inner space, entropy/information, exotic strangers/ normal "we." etc.) are relative to cultural points of view. Accordingly, what appears as unorganized (or non-culture) from an inner point of view may appear, from a position outside that particular culture, simply as a different form of organization, or a different form of culture (ibid.: 3). By illustration, in a purely hypothetical example, it is possible that from the inner point of view of a Slovene villager from Loška Dolina a Macedonian village may be composed of exotic and strange "others," and may represent disorganization. It is then negatively opposed to the positive organization, or culture, in the Loška Dolina area. But from the point of view of some outsider, residing perhaps in Belgrade, both villages simply may compose differing forms of organization or culture.

It is necessary to turn now to the immediate question of this article, the drawing of provisional boundaries of the ethnic unit of study, boundaries that distinguish between cultural and extra-cultural space and that are based primarily, but not solely, on inner criteria which identify, by particular cultural behavior patterns, a certain normal "we," composed of individuals interrelated and interacting in various ways and communicating their feelings of cultural relatedness to outsiders. It should be noted that the question of boundaries of ethnic units must be clarified before any description and analysis of the many other closely related cultural levels of ethnicity which are also part of this study but which cannot be discussed here. While the drawing of provisional boundaries logically is the prior step, nevertheless, if inner and meaningful criteria are

to be employed, such an endeavor is complex and to some extent requires simultaneous penetration into all cultural levels.

In this article I intend to discuss only two preliminary methodological questions in relation to the problem of boundaries of the particular unit involved in my study, a unit composed of some Slovene migrants and their descendants centered primarily in the Cleveland area. They are:

1. Do criteria relating to perceptions on the part of Slovenes in Cleveland of their particular area of origin in Slovenia help to define a minimal ethnic unit in Cleveland? In other words, would my list of relatives of inhabitants from the area of Žerovnica who reside in Cleveland compose some kind of preliminary core group of individuals who, by virtue of their common region of origin, as well as for other reasons, perceive themselves as some kind of integral ethnic group?
2. Assuming this first question is answered positively, the second methodological problem concerns the isolation of criteria relating to geographical location of the migrants in the New World that are pertinent to a definition of the minimal unit of study. In other words, given that it is possible to define a significant ethnic unit by areas of origin in Slovenia, what kind of criteria are relevant in defining its geographical parameters in Greater Cleveland from an inner point of view?

Turning to the first problem, the preliminary step was to establish how many migrants, beyond those on my original list, came to Cleveland from Žerovnica and neighboring areas, and when did they come? It was necessary to decide how wide an area should be considered. A study of church records of Slovene national parishes in Cleveland has shown that the majority of migrants to Cleveland prior to 1914 came from the Dolenjska region of southeastern Slovenia (Susel, unpublished manuscript, 1975: 2). What of central Slovenia, the area called Notranjska, where Žerovnica is located? A rigorous cataloguing of the various church records in Cleveland showed that, from the earliest to the most recent

period, a significant number of migrants came from an area which we began to outline on a working map as larger than Loška Dolina (the valley of the Cerknica area in which Žerovnica is situated) and approximately contiguous with what is known as Notranjska. The next question was to investigate, in some provisional way, the significances today of such regional areas in the minds of informants. Research carried out in Cleveland did discover strong evidences of regional identification in both oral and written sources. In coversations, distinctions such as Dolenjska (Lower Carniola), Notranjska (Inner Carniola), and Gorenjska (Upper Carniola), frequently were made. But the names of even smaller units often were invoked as, for example, the region of Loška Dolina (where Žerovnica is located), the migrants from which founded and still maintain their own association in Cleveland, the town of Cerknica (the center of the *občina* in which Žerovnica lies), as well as other towns and areas of Dolenjska, such as Ribnica and Žužemberk. Such regionalism is known to have formed the basis of early settlements in Cleveland in the St. Clair area. This phenomenon has been described in various Slovene publications by early Slovene settlers themselves, many of whom became able local historians, journalists and writers, and has also been noted by Susel (ibid.: 4). While regionalism no longer serves the many functions it once did, it apparently has not died out entirely and, indeed, has found a new reinforcement in the form of visits to native villages and areas by surviving migrants and their American-born descendants. The availability of relatively inexpensive charter flights and tours has facilitated this trend greatly.

Therefore, on the basis of varied evidence which cannot be fully documented here, I decided to consider as one criterion defining a significant unit of the population to be studied, the tracing of origin from an area somewhat larger than Loška Dolina and not larger than Notranjska. The area of origin generally was identified by Clevelanders either by village or town names, or by the names of larger areas, such as Loška Dolina or Notranjska. While any such decision always is arbitrary to some extent, it seemed to have validity in the minds of the various informants. So, while I did not limit myself solely to informants from Notranjska, this region became the focus which gave direction to the information gathered.

Turning to the second methodological problem in relation to defining a significant minimal unit in order to determine boundaries from the inner point of view, the question is: Are the migrants who identify themselves with distinct regions in Slovenia also united by identification with distinct regions in the new country and, if so, how are these two perceptions interrelated? It has been noted that there were traditional and regionally organized Slovene areas in Cleveland which were part of the overall St. Clair Avenue district. Moreover, there was a development of other primarily Slovene areas in outlying suburban neighborhoods around Slovene churches in Collinwood, Euclid, and Newburgh (see Bonutti and Prpić, eds. 1974: 132-3). There also are a few primarily Slovene farming districts outside of Cleveland. It appears that in all of these locations, although residence no longer is organized by regions of origin, regional consciousness remains important. Local Slovene National Homes, lodges, newspapers, shops, and numerous other activities, all help to organize Slovene communities and are foci of Slovene cultural life, many aspects of which maintain awareness of nation, locality, village or town of origin. Additional features often present are language, dialects, customs, and historical traditions. The conclusion which followed from all this was that Slovene groups in Greater Cleveland do identify themselves as an ethnic unit not only by virtue of their ties to Slovenia and to local regions of Slovenia but also, to some extent, by virtue of their co-residence in particular Slovene neighborhoods in and near Cleveland, and by their activities in locally based Slovene organizations.

Yet this model, encompassing only the homeland and areas in Greater Cleveland, proved unsatisfactory in defining provisional boundaries. The deficiency lay in its failure to account for certain important and distant regions in the United States—most significantly certain mining areas of western Pennsylvania and northern Minnesota—which also appeared to be linked in various ways to the Slovene Clevelanders involved in my study. It seemed that the structure of the ethnic unit of study could be linked in part to a socioeconomic geographical hierarchy embracing not only areas in Greater Cleveland, from the working-class areas closest to factories to the outlying suburbs and farms, but also to certain far-off

mining settlements which occupy the base of the hierarchy. It was not only that many Slovenes started in these mining villages and then migrated to Cleveland. It was also that from the point of view of the social and psychological perception of these informants the mining settlements were not distant and apart any more than were the villages of origin in Slovenia. Accordingly, to think of the boundaries of social networks that define an integral ethnic unit at the center of which is a certain group who are "we" makes it impossible simply to consign these distant places in the United States to what may be called "extra-cultural space." As the Lotman group has pointed out (Van der Eng and Grygar: 5), there is a tension between culture and its outer sphere at the same time there is an interplay between them. This is so because each culture is constructed both of a hierarchy of semiotic systems and a multi-layered arrangement of the extra-cultural space surrounding it. In these terms, then, the ethnic unit being delineated in Cleveland encompasses to some extent certain outlying or frontier areas in the United States, the properties of which penetrate the inner ethnic unit of Greater Cleveland.

This conclusion is justified because of the significant role of these frontiers (Pennsylvania and Minnesota) in the perceptions of the informants. It was clear that how an informant located himself in historical time and socio-geographical space actively affected feelings of self identity and world view. For example, informants expressed shifting points of view depending partly upon whether or not they were recalling earlier experiences in the outlying frontier areas or later experiences in various parts of the Cleveland area. To illustrate—and with no intention to generalize—Slovene Clevelanders frequently remarked upon the positive reinforcement that Slovenes have given, and continue to give, to each other through self-help associations, cultural activities, etc., and the stimulation and opportunities they have managed to enjoy in America after hard but rewarding struggle. Their various goals could not have been realized, they suggest, without the benefit of village traditions of comradeship expressed in economic cooperation and, just as importantly, in song, dance, drama, celebrations and festivities.

Return visits to Slovenia were described enthusias-

tically as great adventures. Yet frequent reflections on such trips suggested that primary identification now was with the New World. Typical comments were, "I love to visit the old village, but it is not a place for me to live now. Here [in America] I belong. What would I do there?" One woman remarked, "I would be bored because there is little for women to do outside of the farm." However, a more nostalgic and far less confident note is sounded when those individuals who started their lives in the United States in the mines of Pennsylvania or Minnesota describe their early experiences. Here suffering, exploitation, and homesickness were the dominant motifs. For example, the same individual who extols his live in Cleveland also remembers harsher times in Pennsylvania by pointing to a piece of coal, which now occupies the place of an ornament in his home, and recalling that his father had told him: "Don't ever forget that you were a coal miner." Women remember with considerable affect their hard life in mining settlements, where they cooked for groups of men and slaved from daybreak to nightfall.

What about those who did not make it to a center such as Cleveland? Here are a few examples taken from informants in the mining area of northern Minnesota—the so-called Iron Range—where I went after working in Cleveland. A widow in her seventies, born in Žerovnica, who came to the United States as a young woman and only recently returned from her first visit back to her native village, commented: "It's much nicer there; I wish I'd never come." She recalled her first impression of the United States by saying, "When I arrived and saw this, I said 'So this is America?'" And what of her husband, now deceased, a disinherited younger son of one of the richer peasant families in Žerovnica? His children report that he was too bitter ever to return to his village, having never reconciled himself to the fact that he was deprived of the land on which he wished to remain. His comment, still quoted, about life in the mines: "I do not need to go to hell, I am in it now!"

I have suggested, all too briefly, a few problems in conceptualizing a minimal ethnic unit. Are we thinking of a core group of Notranjska migrants and some of their relatives and friends and acquaintances with whom they share a common world outlook and self identity, who reside in certain areas in Greater Cleveland, encompassing working class districts on St. Clair Avenue, some

more affluent suburban areas, such as Euclid, and some outlying farming districts, such as parts of Madison? Do we also include the interpenetration of other systems, such as the region of origin, and some mining settlements as far away as Pennsylvania and Minnesota, all still present in the minds of these people, and where some Clevelanders still have relatives?

My response to these basic questions is that it is useful to think of ethnic cultural units as encompassing frontiers, the limits of areas where inner expansion of the homeland area first pushes its superfluous or adventurous members. Two frontiers may be detected then, both populated because of pressures within the primary Slovene homeland. First is the outermost frontier, the mines and forests where the older generation of pioneers sacrificed itself at hard labor for its American-born successor, and from where many among that younger generation departed for urban centers, notably Cleveland. The second frontier consists of the working class districts of Cleveland, close to factories, where migrants came both from outlying American areas and directly from the villages of the Old World. They were also pioneers, being the forerunners of the shopkeepers, innkeepers, professional and business strata, as well as farmers, roles which many of them and more of their children adopted. For example, we may trace the history of one family, headed by an old patriarch still in close contact with his relatives in Žerovnica. As a young man he left the village and settled first in the Slovene working class district in Cleveland. Later he was able to move to an outlying area and establish a successful farm where he still leads a three-generation family consisting of his sons and daughters and their spouses and children, all farming—at least partially—together. This family may be compared to others which went first to the mines and only some of whom later succeeded in moving to urban centers and farming areas.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that if we assume that cross-cutting interpersonal bonds, wherever they may lead, are causally connected with the action of people and the institutions they construct, and if we assume that peoples' traditional history forms a vital part of their mentality, their behavior and their observable social life, then the various kinds of data I have pointed to, relating to cultural point of view, are

relevant to determining the boundaries of ethnic units. Ethnic units clearly are dynamic. Not only may their personnel change, but also their criteria of self-identification are shifting perpetually, since they are based first and foremost on subjectively perceived differences. These differences, whether the perception is subliminal or conscious, are marked and therefore significant, promoting in some way self-evaluation and self-identification, and communicating this to outsiders. Without denying the importance of objective data in establishing basic information, it is nevertheless to the inner, subjective, view that we must look if we hope to find functional and meaningful criteria on which to establish boundaries that themselves are ever changing. Thus the neat units so clearly defined on maps based on conventional lines established by observers are not in themselves sufficient or necessarily accurate in identifying, in any heuristic way, boundaries of ethnic units.

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