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SLOVENIA: HISTORY BETWEEN MYTHS AND REALITY

Oto Luthar

This article highlights those chapters of Slovene history which to a certain point have taken on mythic proportion and because of that become part of an ongoing political-ideological struggle over the definition of community for the past fifty years. Even more so, the chapters I am going to address have recently divided Slovenians into two different worlds with two different understandings about the national past, and with two perceptions of the national interests and the correct course of future development.

I will begin with the myth that Slovenians are autochthonous residents of the eastern Alpine region and finish with the myth that speaks of a functional collaboration between Slovenian Home Guard units and German and Italian occupying forces during the Second World War. Along the way I will include a myth pertaining to the history of the United States. It is an episode that centers on Thomas Jefferson and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence.

Let me first briefly present and discuss my view of the relationship between myth and history. In this particular case I understand myth as a chain of concepts that are widely accepted within a culture, through which a particular topic is understood and conceptualized. I see it as the manifestation of ideology and (or) as a form of utterance. Like Roland Barthes, I believe that it is not the subject of a message, but the way the message is uttered that defines it as mythical. The meaning of the myth and its political significance differ depending on the context, and invariably belong to history. There are no eternal myths (although there are weak myths whose political quality has faded).[1] In order to understand the politics of a particular myth, it has to be placed in time and space. To understand means to take into consideration different local ideologies. The chosen myth should be

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[1] In his *Mythologies* (trans. Annette Lavers [London: Vintage, 1993]) Barthes distinguishes between strong myths (the political quality of myths is immediate, the depoliticization is abrupt) and weak myths (the political quality has faded).

understood within concrete historical situation. Myth is never arbitrary; rather it is defined by its intention, motivation, and its values. This means that the motivation (be it nationalism, colonialism, authority, power, "true" history, or the like) causes the myth to be uttered.[2]

The essential function of myth, therefore, is to naturalize a concept, to remove it from the historical condition (context) of its emergence. Mythical speech becomes frozen into something natural—as if the form (e.g., the sign of the cross on a Catholic church) naturally relates to the concept (e.g., a particular national identity). Myth does not hide or suppress nationalism or chauvinism—it turns them into a natural order of things. The product of history is taken as a logical outcome of the nature of things as if cultural traits were genetically transmitted. The form (a landscape) is robbed of its history in order to naturalize the concept (e.g., nationalism). Something that is contingent appears as natural—that is, eternal, fixed, and unchanging. Its intention is eternalized and de-historicized, containing some natural analogy between form (a picture of a beautiful Alpine landscape with church on the top of the hill) and meaning (being Slovenian). My conclusion, therefore, is that every myth resides in a specific social environment with its own micro-climate, where it was born as a politically and ideologically motivated interpretation, which eventually turned into mythology. In order to understand the politics of a particular myth, the latter must be placed in time (i.e., history) and space (i.e., culture) within its concrete historical situation.

Let us now turn to the first myth, which states that Slovenians are autochthonous residents of the eastern Alpine region. It is based on the so-called Venetic theory, invented by amateur historians who use naïve linguistic derivations for constructing the difference between Slovenians and other South Slavs. Following the archaic division into Western Slavs (Veneti) and Slavs—first mentioned by the Roman historians Pliny and Tacitus—the proponents of the Venetic theory are eager to prove that Slovenians are actually descendants of the Veneti. The Veneti are supposed to have settled across Europe no later than 1,000 B.C. and controlled more than two-thirds of the Central European

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2 Joseph Mali, *Mythistory. The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003).

region.[3] A significant side effect of this theory during the last two decades of the twentieth century is the symbolic alienation from the tumultuous Balkans, which, in the 1990s, took on the additional attributes of chaos and barbarism.

According to the three best-known Venetologists (Matej Bor, Ivan Tomažič, and Joško Šavli),[4] Slovenians are, in fact, the descendants of those Western Slavs, who, as mountain peasantry, persevered through Celtic and Roman occupations. According to these Venetologists, the Veneti later successfully rebelled against the Romans, burnt the majority of Northern Roman cities, broke free from Roman supremacy, culture, and the Christian faith, and founded their own state in the eastern Alps, which supposedly remained independent until the arrival of the Franks. Matej Bor, the most enthusiastic advocate of this theory, even claims that the prehistoric Venetic inscriptions in Italy may be read and understood properly only with knowledge of the Slovenian language. Accordingly, it was precisely the Veneti who were the bearers of one of the most important Central European, pre-Christinan (Lusatian) cultures, whose origins reach into the middle of the second millennium B.C.

The academic community never accepted Venetic theory.[5] On the contrary, the vast majority of Slovenian archaeologists and medievalists agree that the Western Slavs, who populated the region

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3 See also Angelos Baš et al, *Leksikon etnologije Slovencev* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2004) 667.

4 Matej Bor, Jožef Šavli, and Ivan Tomažič, *Veneti naši davni predniki*, (Ljubljana 1989); Ivan Tomažič, *Etruščani in Veneti* (Dunaj-Ljubljana: Editiones Veneti, 1995); Ivan Tomažič, *Novo sporočilo knjige Veneti naši davni predniki* (Dunaj-Ljubljana 1990).

5 Beside the leading Slovenian medievalist who strongly disagree with the authors of the Venetic theory (see, for example, Bogo Grafenauer, "Ob tisočtristoletnici slovanske naselitve na današnje slovensko narodnostno ozemlje," ed. Pavel Diakon, *Zgodovina Langobardov* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1988) 321–422; Štih, Peter, "'Ej ko goltneš do tu-le udari po konjih'. O avtohotonističnih in podobnih teorijah pri Slovencih in na slovenskem," *Zgodovina za vse. Vse za zgodovino* 8. 2 (1996): 66–80. I would like to mention Tom Priestly's comments on the onomastic components of the Venetic theory. Priestly's very thorough article ("Vandals, Veneti, Windischer: The Pitfalls of Amateur Historical Linguistics," *Slovene Studies* 19.1-2 [1997]: 3–41) on this topic analyzes the diachronic linguistic portions of the writings of Šavli, Tomažič, and Bor.

between the Baltic Sea and the Carpathian Mountains, started to influence the life of their neighbors in the Alpine region in the second century, A.D., but did not really migrate before the fourth century, A.D. Scarce sources indicate that in about the third century this relatively homogeneous group started to divide into several tribes. Judging from one of the rare maps from this period,[6] the peoples of Venadi Sarmatae and Lupiones Sarmatae populated the region north of the Roman province of Dacia, and the Veneti settled north of the mouth of the Danube River. The oldest source calling the Slavs by their present name—*Sklabenoi* in Greek—was found only at the beginning of the sixth century A.D. Its author reports that a people bearing this name lived relatively close to the left bank of the Danube River. It took them half a century to reach the eastern Alpine region and another fifty years or so (between 605 and 615 A.D.) to settle the major part of the Balkan Peninsula.

In the beginning of the seventh century Western Slavs (together with the Avars) poured into northeastern Italy and plundered the entire Istrian peninsula. More than one century later, the Slovenian ancestors (now we can start to use this term) lived in a region three times the size of the present-day, Slovenian ethnic territory.

According to archeological findings, this settlement followed a rather irregular pattern and had its center in the region of present-day central Slovenia and Austrian Carinthia. Evidence for that may be found in the word "Kärnten," the current name of the Austrian province (derived from the Slavic or Slovenian for "Carinthia"). The naming of inhabitants of this area at that time demands particular attention, since the first modern record of the tribal people, called the Carinthians (Carantani), refers to the beginning of the eighth century.

As in many other instances, the formation of the first Alpine-Slavic state was the result of external pressures: the collapse of the Slavic-Avar-Persian alliance against Constantinople in the south and Lombardic and Bavarian incursions from the north and west. In any case, the first significant and somewhat better organized community in this region was most likely led by Prince Valuk. But far more important is the fact that his state was independent and militarily sound. It

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6 The map is mentioned by Grafenauer in his part of *Zgodovina Slovencev* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1979) 95. Grafeanauer believes the map, whose author remains unknown, was created at the end of third century.

successfully repelled the first Frankish expansion towards the east and defended itself against Lombardic and Bavarian pressures from the north and west.

Subsequently, in the mid-eighth century, the Franks defeated the joint Slavic-Bavarian army and transformed Carinthia into a semi-vassal principality. Under an administrative reform adopted between 820 and 828 A.D. (and following the division of the Frankish state between the two sons of Louis the Pious), Carinthia was reorganized into a county and militarily incorporated into the so-called Eastern Region (*Ostmark* in German).

Nevertheless, only half a century later, the central administration of this region was re-established in central Carinthia, while the subsequent intrusion by the Hungarians contributed to the state's newly gained independence. In fact, once German supremacy had been renewed in this part of present-day Central Europe, Carinthia underwent a period of its greatest expansion and development. In the mid-tenth century the name Carinthia first started to serve as the name for all Alpine Slavs, but after a while it began to appear also as a "first specific ethnic name referring to the Slovenian people as a specific group of the Slavs." In light of this—as Bogo Grafenauer, a leading twentieth-century Slovenian historian would put it—the development of Carinthia represents the "central axis of the Slovenian history in the Middle Ages."[7]

What is of particular importance for our narrative, however, is the fact that even though the use of provincial names had prevailed also among Carinthian feudal lords ever since the thirteenth century, the awareness of the Slovenian origin of this wider historical unit was kept intact throughout the whole Middle Ages. According to the authors of a reference book of Slovenian history from the late 1970s, this is primarily the consequence of an ancient ritual of installing the dukes of Carinthia. As a typical Slavic ritual, it involved the election of chiefs and mayors. Starting as an affair of all free male members of the community, through the centuries it turned into the exclusive right of the members of a special electoral body. Following Carinthia's transformation from a semi-vassal principality into a Frankish province, it only confirmed or rejected pre-elected Frankish counts and later land dukes.

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7 Bogo Grafenauer et al., *Zgodovina Slovencev* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1979) 146–55.

This rather unique protocol of the European feudal system, practiced until the beginning of the sixteenth century, in its somewhat romanticized version was turned into living proof of an existing social contract which supposedly affected the history of the United States.

Nevertheless, we also find this statement in Senator Frank Lausche's 1967 Senate speech, published in the November issue of the *Congressional Record*.[8] Similar to Joseph Felicijan, the Slovenian émigré and lecturer at St. John's College in Cleveland, who in 1967 published a book on this topic (*The Genesis of the Contractual Theory and the Installation of the Dukes of Carinthia*),[9] the senator from Ohio believed that the medieval ceremony of installing the dukes of Carinthia inspired Thomas Jefferson in his drafting of the Declaration of Independence. He believed that the ritual he found in Felicijan's book was "the contractual theory stated in its basic terms." It seems he was very much impressed by the "custom" in which "the duke-to-be did not wear fancy clothes; he was dressed as a man of the people." It is clear that he liked the scenario in which "The peasant on the stone assumed an indifferent attitude toward his future leader until the agreement between the parties had been reached." As an American (although of Slovenian descent), the senator fancied the ritual that ignored whether the future duke was a nobleman, "whether he was wealthy or famous, nor was he asked whether any interest group would receive special consideration." Lausche was impressed by the fact that the duke "had to promise to be a righted judge" and that he had "to swear it before the people." And finally, he was willing to accept the interpretation that

> the Slovenians believed that the power to govern rested with the people who were to be governed, not those who were governing. (That) they believed that their rulers should be men of the people, (...) that the true qualities of those in government should be competency and concern, (and) that their leaders had a solemn duty to the people to be righteous. (...)

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8 *Congressional Record*, Proceedings and debates of the 90th Congress, first session, 28 November, 113, pt. 193.

9 (Celovec: Mohorjeva družba). Translated as *Slovenstvo in prva ustava ZDA*, ed. Miran I. Knez (Ljubljana: Knjižnica Slovenskega bibliofilskega društva, 1995).

Therefore he was eager to believe that "Jefferson's convictions were confirmed when he read (about) this beautiful Slovenian custom, a custom which lasted for over 1000 years," and "maybe the American form of government was reaffirmed because of Jefferson's reading about the installation of the Dukes of Carinthia."[10]

Felicijan and Lausche claim that Jefferson took the idea about this "most democratic transfer of the nation's sovereignty on the ruler" (Felicijan 1995, 5) from Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later to become Pope Pius II, who, at the beginning of sixteenth century, described this particular ritual in his *Asiae Europeaeque elegantissima descriptio* (*The Accurate Description of Asian Europe*).

According to Felicijan, Jefferson discovered the idea while studying Jean Bodin's works, in particular his *Six livres de la republique.* Felicijan argues that a segment of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence draws on Bodin's and Piccolomini's reports, respectively, concerning the installation of the dukes of Carinthia. "If Jefferson had not learnt through Bodin of the zenith in the then European democracy; of the principles, contents and ritual of the Slovenian plebiscitary enthronement ... Jefferson's Constitution ... (as) an example of the highest level of democracy ... would not have been so democratic (at all)" (Felicijan 1995, 5).

Even though serious historians never confirmed an interpretation even close to that, we heard a similar statement from former President Bill Clinton during his visit to Slovenia. Anxious to stress commonalities and aspects of a common history, Slovenia's highest state representatives eagerly joined the president in following Felicijan's and Lausche's conclusions from late 1960s.

The entire story is an exaggeration of mythic proportions. The same could be said about an interpretation, which maintains that the same practice was still being pursued during the time of the American Revolution. Likewise, it is an exaggeration to argue that this is living proof of the existence of a social contract among Slovenians.

These romanticized interpretations are problematic in at least two respects. First, the act described by Piccolomini and Bodin can by no means be equated with the existence of a social contract, since by the

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10 *Congressional Record* 113, pt. 193.

time these authors learned about it, people gathering on this particular occasion for about 500 years served merely as audiences. And second, since the ninth century the dukes of Carinthia had been descendants of either Frankish or German nobility. The Slovenian gentry, called Kosezi (or "Edlinge," in German documents), could only confirm what already had been decided by Frankish or Bavarian courts. Accordingly, the interpretation that the election of the duke of Carinthia proves the existence of the social contract among Slovenians is dangerously close to resembling the difference between the way in which the British king appointed the governors of the American colonies and the election of the American president.

Finally, let us consider the myth of the so-called functional collaboration of Slovenian Home Guard units with the Nazis and Fascists during the Second World War. This recently elaborated myth is a consequence of a radical reinterpretation of the most traumatic part of national history leaving out some of the crucial facts connected to that period. The creators of this myth simply overlooked the fact that after the occupation of Slovenia in April 1941 and after the creation of Slovenian liberation front at the end of the same month, right-wing political parties, together with the Italian occupying authorities, started recruiting men into the special militia (Milizia Volontaria Anticommunista). After Italy's capitulation in 1943, the latter was reorganized into an anti-resistance (and anti-Semitic) group called the "Home Guard" (Domobranci). The same authors[11] have also overlooked the fact that in 1944 members of the Home Guard publicly swore to fight side by side with the Germans against partisans and any other common enemy, such as the Allied forces. With the intention of restraining and historically "reorganizing" the facts, they started to present collaboration as a clash over moral values between "godless communism" and Catholicism. They began extensively to use the expression, "civil war" instead of "occupation," and equated the European resistance movement with communism. In doing so, the term "resistance" is constantly avoided and replaced with "revolutionary terror," which, in this representation, forced the Home Guard to collaborate with occupying forces.

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[11] Boris Mlakar, *Slovensko domobranstvo: 1943-1995: ustanovitev, organizacija, idejno ozadje* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2003); Jože Dežman, *Moč preživetja* (Celovec-Ljubljana-Dunaj: Mohorjeva, 2004); Tamara Griesser-Pečar, *Razdvojeni narod. Slovenija 1941-1945. Okupacija, Kolaboracija, državljanska vojna, revolucija* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2004).

By claiming a difference between "functional" and "real" collaboration, revisionists started to argue that collaboration with the occupier should be understood as functional opposition to the revolution and hence as morally and politically justified. In their view, collaborators recognized the danger of communism and were forced into collaboration in the name of patriotism. Their activities are, therefore, sometimes interpreted as having been "liberating and heroic." Although this is not an accepted argument over all of recent Slovenian historiography, some historians in Slovenia are, nevertheless, responsible for helping produce this and similar myths.

In their interpretation, for instance, it was the risky and provocative actions of the resistance movement that drove the occupying forces to repression and that were responsible for the onset of collaboration. Advocates of this viewpoint even go so far as to systematically translate collaboration into the anti-partisan movement or maintain that the behavior and deeds of individual collaborators must be evaluated according to their actual effect and that people who were perhaps sincerely convinced that their actions were for the good of their people should not be treated as traitors. A special example of this is the academic discourse surrounding recent textbooks[12] on history, which have arisen as the result of ongoing "cultural wars." The source of collaboration (and with it the blame for it) is not the political, moral, or ideological project of the collaborators, but communism, revolution, and the resistance movement, which prompt the "counter" movement of the collaborators.

In addressing this issue, Slovenians stand more divided than ever. One side still condemns the collaboration, while the other side refuses to believe that Home Guard activities constituted genuine collaboration and tries to re-present it as a struggle against communism. In the second interpretation the collaborating Home Guard units are presented as victims of their noble intentions with no responsibility for the moral consequences of their actions. Thereby they are given the legitimacy and moral authority they had been deprived of during the historical narrative of socialism. Revisionists would like to convince us that we ought to understand functional collaboration also as a warning

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[12] Ervin Dolenc and Aleš Gabrič, *Zgodovna 4. Učbenik za 4 letnik gimnazije* (Ljubljana: DZS, 2003); Aba Kern Nuša, Dušan Nečak, Božo Repe, *Naše stoletje: zgodovina za 8. razred osnovne šole* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2000).

against the deep rupture within the national (and) united "we." In their notion of identity, the difference is a threat that has corrupted and compromised national identity. Like the naïve reinvention of Slovenians as autochthonous inhabitants of the region and claims of an ancient democratic civil society the myth of functional collaboration therefore also presupposes a uniform national interest, where the very core of the nation is to be explored in search for common beliefs.

This kind of rethinking history is (at least in my opinion) part of so-called present- and future-oriented history, where the past is used to reconstruct "the right future" in order to gain more respectable position within society. This kind of discussion of the past and the reconstruction of historical truth actually reveal more about "cultural wars," the fragility and plurality of identities in the present, and politics aimed at fixing the definition of national identity. And finally, this kind of historical representation has not only become the site of struggles over meanings of past events and structures, but also part of the new quest for the ideal "we" of the present.

Scientific Research Center of the
Slovene Academy of Sciences

POVZETEK

SLOVENSKA ZGODOVINA: MED MITI IN DEJAVNOSTJO

Spodbujen z živahno razpravo o slovenskem izvoru ter vlogi Slovencev v določenih prelomnih obdobjih, se je avtor lotil komentarja treh osrednjih mitov slovenske zgodovine.

Kritičen do tako imenovane Venetske teorije, ki za več stoletij prehiteva s prihodom južnih Slovanov oz. jim pripisuje pretirano razširjenost in vpliv, zagovarja klasično interpretacijo po kateri so predniki Slovencev prostor med Alpami, panonsko nižino in Istro dokončno naselili šele v 7. stoletju.

Na podoben način je zadržan do domnevno odločilnega vpliva, ki naj bi ga imelo ustoličevanja koroških vojvod na avtorja ameriške ustave, Thomsa Jeffersona. Glede na to je zadržan tudi do trditve, da predstavlja ta praksa enega vrhuncev evropske demokracije na začetku 16. stoletja.

Z istimi zadržki se v sklepnem delu ogradi tudi do vse vplivnejšega mita o funkcionalni kolaboraciji slovenskih domobrancev z italijanskimi in nemškimi okupatorji. Gre za mit, ki je v zadnjem desetletju razdvojil slovensko strokovno in politično javnost. Avtor je kritičen do tistega dela sodobne revizije obdobja 1941-1946, ki se namesto dopolnjevanja predstavitve najbolj travmatičnega obdobja slovenske preteklosti, loteva sistematičnega prevajanja odporniškega gibanja v revolucijo oz., ki sodelovanje z okupatorji razlaga kot proti-partizanski oz. proti-revolucionarni odpor.

Pri svoji analizi opisanih mitov avtor opozarja na razliko med govorico strokovnih razprav in mrežo različnih para-zgodovinskih interpretacij, ki v zadnjem desetletju močno pridobivajo na veljavi.