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**This is the published version of the article:**

Škvorc, B. (1997). The question of Yugoslav cultural identity: an artificial problem, *Croatian studies review*, Vol. 1, pp. 59-68.

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# THE QUESTION OF YUGOSLAV CULTURAL IDENTITY: AN ARTIFICIAL PROBLEM

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This article is based on a paper delivered at a conference entitled *The Conflict in Former Yugoslavia - Was it Avoidable?*, and at a lecture organised by the Centre for Croatian Studies, Macquarie University, as part of its University Extension program. The conference was organised during a time when terrible atrocities were being committed in Srebrenica and Žepa (East Bosnia), rendering the conference title itself somewhat absurd.

In order to understand why the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was *not* avoidable, one of the central questions which must be addressed is the phenomenon of 'Yugoslav cultural identity'. References were made during the conference to a 'common cultural identity' which existed during a time when 'these nations lived together in peace'. If I were preparing for this conference today I would include the example of Vuk Drašković, lately renowned for espousing democracy in Serbia and opposing Slobodan Milošević, the man who led the Serbs to war. This is the very same Vuk Drašković who in his book *Koekuda Serbio* (in Relković, 1994) stated: 'Where are, if the partition takes place, the western borders of Serbia( . . . ) They are wherever the Serbian graves are' (p. 111). The fact that the theme of the conference asked about the possible avoidability of the conflict (and not the act of Serbian aggression) speaks for itself. As an analysis of the phenomenon of Yugoslav cultural identity will illustrate, when one army decided to commit an act of aggression, it was impossible for the other side (Bosnians and Croats) to *avoid the conflict*.

My intention here is to use examples which will explain the nature of the phenomenon of Yugoslav cultural identity in a way in which a merely theoretical article could not.

## THREE INTERPRETATIVE SITUATIONS

I would like to start with a presentation, and later an interpretation of three interesting, although at first glance somewhat marginal, situations (sequences) which can perhaps describe and explain some aspects of the problem of cultural unity in the former Yugoslavia. These examples, and also their interpretation can, to a certain degree, tell more about a particular phenomenon than scholarly listed facts. This is especially the case when they are properly interpreted, if there can be such a thing as a 'proper interpretation'. It is interesting to note that the 'best possible' interpretation of complex sign (phenomenon) often depends on the interpretation of sequences which at first glance look marginal. Therefore, I hope that the interpretation of my examples may shed more light on the questionable phenomenon of Yugoslav cultural identity.

The first of our examples, or historical sequences, which are to a certain extent more stories than part of 'official' history, took place in Paris. This is the story told by one of the most prominent

Croatian prose writers, Petar Šegedin. In his book *Svi smo odgovorni? (Are we all responsible?)*, written in 1971, Šegedin wrote about the moral and political situation in what was then Yugoslavia. In the first chapter he wrote about his discussion with an anonymous Yugoslav intellectual and Communist, during their official stay in Paris (1961). Šegedin was, as the story tells, at that time interested in the possibility of establishing a common Yugoslav cultural identity which would include some kind of cultural synthesis where all South Slavonic nations could see themselves as part of a unified cultural project, and where the forcible supremacy of one culture over another would be avoided. That synthesis, according to Šegedin, was the possible means of creating a new cultural identity for the various peoples of Yugoslavia. He said that 'it is difficult to accept that the only coherent factor in the country are the army and police. You Serbs have your own myth which is, unfortunately too nationalistic, and because of this it is unacceptable to Croats, Macedonians, Slovenes and Muslims against whom it is directly pointed with its exclusivity (...). That is why it is supposed to be adjusted, if you really want the establishment of unified identity' (Šegedin, p.29). He expressed these ideas just as he and the Serbian intellectual passed by a street called *Rue Montevideo*. Suddenly, the intellectual, with a play on words, uttered a Serbian phrase 'Bog te video', meaning 'For God's sake', and expressed his view on this issue. 'Why do you need all that?' (...), he said and then added 'As far as myths are concerned, my dear man, the best solution for every nation is to keep their own myths'. 'Then I understood', wrote Šegedin, 'Yugoslavia is not what I thought it was'. (p.30).

Soon after that, Šegedin understood that the 'Yugoslav synthesis,' the Serbian way, meant the expansion of the Serbian national myth to the non-Serbian nations of Yugoslavia. Together with a number of Croatian left wing-intellectuals he opposed this concept and, in the eyes of the Yugoslav authorities, became a dissident. As an author he could neither publish, nor stage his drama *The Caravans* (1971). He could not do the latter because the drama's theme was connected with Croatian political prisoners, (amongst whom were a number of today's Croatian politicians), who shared Šegedin's views and were regarded as 'Croatian nationalists' in a negative sense of the word. Then, in 1961, Šegedin concluded that this example of Serbian cultural expansionism was dangerous, very dangerous, for the future of the country. The Serbian myths were supposed to become dominant for Yugoslavia as a whole (same, p.32). Or, as stated by Hlaviček in the case of Russian/Small Slavic nation relationships (see Kundera 1984), once these myths became 'Yugoslav' and dominant in the entire territory of Yugoslavia, they would be reinstated as Serbian again. Collective remembrance would be transformed and Serbization (same as Russification as described by Kundera) would be achieved.

The second of our three stories (sequences) is composed of two parts and took place in both Vukovar and Paris, one a destroyed Croatian city, ethnically cleansed by the Serbian army, with the fate of more than three thousand of its inhabitants unknown, and the other a very important centre of European culture. Its main character, Milorad Pavić, is one of the most prominent Serbian writers and literary historians. One of his books, in some theoretical and critical circles, has been lauded as a masterpiece of the twentieth century. In an essay written by Christine Brooke Rose, professor of literature at the University of Paris, Pavić's novel, *Dictionary of the Khazars* (Hazardski Rečnik), together with Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and some others, is identified as one of the most interesting palimpsest histories (the novel form which has attained supremacy in the world of narrative

prose). Rose considers Pavić a Yugoslav author with great talent. The question is: Is this Yugoslav attribute in front of Pavić's name what makes Šegedin's synthesis possible, or is it just a screen for what was described in the first sequence? The answer can be found in the second part of this story.

In an essay by French essayist and publicist Annie Le Brun, she writes: 'On the 18th of November 1992 the Serbian army had celebrated its first anniversary of the "liberation of Vukovar"'. On the speaker's platform, a UN representative heard one of the Serbian officers say that Vukovar may be destroyed, but that they will rebuild it. The Serbian officer stated that: 'It is important that the air in the city is clean and that we can breathe freely'. 'After that', wrote Le Brun, '(...) Milorad, whose work *The Dictionary of Khazars* Le Brun characterised as a mixture of kitsch and folklore) proposed rebuilding baroque Vukovar in the Serbian-Byzantine style. In May of the same year, the Belgrade government tried to organise an exhibition entitled *Vukovar 1991 - Genocide on the Cultural Heritage of the Serbian People*. The exhibition was stopped, wrote Le Brun, but a significant fact from our point of view is that it was supposed to take place in the Yugoslav Cultural Centre in Paris, the same place where Šegedin had speculated about the possibility of a unified Yugoslav culture.

Our third sequence is in verse rather than in narrative form. The verses are taken from a book written by Radovan Karadžić, who later became the leader of an army which made his fiction as real as possible. Here is a translation of a few verses from the poem 'Sarajevo', written in 1971 (Pamtivek, 1971):

*'The town burns as a lump of frankincense/In this smoke our consciousness meanders/Empty suits glide through the city/The stones built into the houses are dying. Plague/ (...) Aggressor/is walking through our veins/I know that this is the preparation for the Howl/which will be coursed by black metal from the garage'. (R.55);* and in another piece of poetry from *Crazy Lance* (Ludo Koplje, 1969, he wrote: *'My wish is to reach the core of lily flower/ (...) Sarajevo, the city of horror writes the obituary note for me?'*. These verses show what the prospects for a unified cultural identity looked like in the 1970s, when Croatian writers and politicians were prosecuted because of their 'nationalism'. It is worth remembering that Sarajevo was then regarded as the 'most Yugoslav' centre in the country.

These three sequences are the stories which tell us some facts about what was signified as Yugoslav cultural identity, the one dreamed by Šegedin, the one proposed by Pavić, and the one destroyed by Karadžić. It also tells us something about different points of view on important issues such as the meaning of lexical signifier/liberation/, and also about the extensibility of what can be signified with the signifier/Yugoslav/. However, as history is very often made up of stories, it all depends on the interpretation of the narrative (or verse) which is given up for analysis. It is very difficult, as we have already established, to have an objective point of view, one which will not be influenced by the context, education, or interpretation of other events and historical facts which form the 'frame of the signs'. However, in order to tackle the problem of the existence or non-existence of Yugoslav cultural identity, we have to understand what is minimum of contextual factors which form a specific cultural identity. We can talk about three sets of these factors: The first of them is the existence, or non-existence of a common cultural

centre. The second factor is the consensus of the people who belong to one culture to a minimum set of communicative elements which will constitute their common ground of (or for) dialogue. The third set of contextual factors, which will significantly contribute to the establishment of common cultural identity, are historically conditioned factors such as literature, art, folklore or other experiences, a common tradition, or an interaction between the different cultural elements in a manner which will produce a new cultural identity where, at the same time, original identities will not be lost or pushed aside by force. The central prerequisite for cultural interaction is a need for dialogue, as was noted in 1988 at the Congress of Slavists in Novi Sad by Z. Kramarić. However, when the existence of dialogue is far from the reality, as was the case in Yugoslavia, then the historical situations mentioned at the beginning (we called them stories, for interpretive purposes), could occur in so drastic a form that they sometimes look too cruel to be true.

I shall now discuss all three contextual elements which shaped the cultural identity, in order to ascertain whether the phenomenon of Yugoslav cultural identity ever existed, or whether it was only a political manipulation with a practical purpose, where 'dreamers' were used for the fulfilment of somebody else's dreams.

Even before the discussion we could see both sides of the argument. To support this we may quote, on one side, the Australian Serbian scholar Dr. Kajica Milanov who in 'Serbian Thought', Melbourne, 1969, wrote: *'Vengeance, then, must be the main political aim that takes precedence over all others... Since such vengeance is not feasible at the moment, our political tactics must be so framed that we and the Croats are placed in a situation where revenge will be possible... Those who wish to be revenged on the Croats because of what has happened in the past ought to seek the preservation of Yugoslavia, because it is only within a common political structure that this revenge may be most effectively accomplished... It might easily be staged in the form of major political unrest calling logically for a restoration of public order in such circumstances that the Croats are at disadvantage, let us say without weapons or other technical and organisational means of defence'*.

If we look from Milanov's perspective, it would be logical to conclude that a unified Yugoslav cultural identity did not exist, and yet that it was pursued for 'somebody's pragmatic political aims', and our paper would be finished here. However, on the other side, there were also writers such as Danilo Kiš, a Serbian Jew who tried to be a Yugoslav author, regardless of all regional and nationalistic pressures. In his book *Čas Anatomije* (*A Lesson in Anatomy*, 1981), Kiš tried to defend himself against allegations that his book *The Tomb for Boris Davidović* was a 'betrayal' of the national interests and a 'betrayal of the revolutionary cause'. He tried to challenge what he considered the provincialism of the approach which labelled writers as 'ours' or 'theirs', and satirised the Serbian Association of Writers for being concerned 'because he wrote against one of their Bards', to quote Kiš, 'over there, on the other side', which meant in Croatian newspapers. This example shows that the idea of *Yugoslav identity* similar to Šegedin's was also, in some circles, alive in Serbia. Thus, having established that both sides of the argument existed, we will now discuss the three sets of contextual elements important for the establishment of (an artificial) cultural identity. These contextual elements are: cultural centres, dialogue between various peoples and groups sharing the same cultural concept, which presumes an exchange of spiritual content, and a common historical legacy, or at least the tolerance of the vernacular.

## ABOUT THE NATURE OF YUGOSLAV CULTURAL IDENTITY

### a) Cultural Centre and/or Centres

A number of interesting questions need to be answered by literary historians. For instance, how many times have Ljubljana or Zagreb been described in the works of Serbian or Macedonian authors? Or, how many Croatian writers, who were also ethnic Serbs, such as Vojin Jelić, Vladan Desnica, Milan Mirić, Šimo Mraović or Borivoj Radaković, have situated their novels or stories in Serbia? Were any of Slavko Janevski's characters Croatian? Did Drago Jančar ever write about Bosnia before this war, and express any engagement with its sufferers? The answer must be in the negative. However, the important thing to be noted here is the fact that Yugoslavia was established only in 1918 and that the Croats, for example, at that time already had a literary tradition more than 600 years old. The Slovenian literary tradition also dated from the Reformation, while the Serbian tradition was established in the time of Saint Sava and Stefan Prvovenčani. A similar situation exists with established traditions in other cultural areas. The Croats, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had already established Zagreb as a cultural centre of national importance, and a similar situation has developed with Ljubljana in Slovenia. Belgrade was the centre of Serbian politics and, since liberation from Turkish rule, it had also become the cultural centre. The Croats, like the Slovenes, Bosnians and Macedonians, could not accept Belgrade as their cultural centre. Serbs, on the other hand, could not accept some other centre as their cultural centre. The establishment of another 'federal' cultural centre was unlikely anyway as the political, military and financial power of the country was concentrated in Belgrade, despite the fact that the country was formally a federation with six governments in six republics. On the other hand, a good example of the non-acceptance of cultural diversity was the fact that in the province of Kosovo (Serbia), where 90% of the population speaks Albanian, the official language was Serbian, the language of less than 10% of the population in that region.

### b) Dialogue and tolerance

Our second theme is that of dialogue and the establishment of a joint cultural legacy. As far as a joint cultural legacy is concerned, however, we can note only a few projects, all of them very warmly accepted by the regime. With respect to dialogue on the cultural scene in the former Yugoslavia, it is interesting to quote Z. Kramarić again: He wrote that there wasn't any communication between Yugoslav literary/ cultural centres and that Yugoslavia exhibited the manifestation of a monological type of communication. He used as an example the meeting of Serbian and Albanian writers at the beginning of the conflict which started the Balkan drama, and he also describes the monological logic prevalent in Serbia, where 'Everything that is radically different from my point of view is dangerous, because of this difference, and it represents clear and present danger to my very existence'. Or, as Adorno put it, because of the absence of the practice of dialogue, it is impossible to see others as others, and not as the reflection of our own will. Understanding the problems and traumas of these 'others' was never an issue for discussion. An understanding of the vernacular in art and literature, in film and in painting, was not discussed

at all. As can best be seen in the Danilo Kiš example, a common basis for dialogue and tolerance did not exist and the arguments of logic were not accepted. Because Kiš could not explain his position in a sounding (context) in which people did not want to hear him, he died in voluntary exile in Paris. However, he was posthumously honoured by the Serbian Association of Writers where, as Gauss wrote, he never stood with his feet.

A. Haller thinks, as Kramarić; noted, that it is not only the synchronic situations and sequences which need explanation, but the historical, diachronic organisational principles as well. 'The historical situations are not interesting because they happened', wrote Kramarić, 'but because they still influence the present time'.

### c) Historical Legacy

The countries of which the first and second Yugoslavias consisted came together only in 1918. And, as can be seen in their artistic production the cultural influences on them were very different. Drago Jančar, Slovenian writer and thinker, wrote that Slovenia and Croatia were historically influenced by Central Europe. Croatia was also influenced by Italy, and it is worth mentioning the Hungarian influence on Croatian cultural consciousness. The Serbs and the Macedonians were influenced by both the Orthodox East and the Turkish Empire. Serbs living outside Serbia, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were also influenced in part by Central Europe. Bosnian authors were influenced by Turks and also, to some extent, by Western and Eastern elements. However, the most important difference was in the influence of folk culture. A particularly strong element of mythological consciousness is present in Serbian culture. When, in the nineteenth century, Vuk Karadžić cut all ties with most of the established tradition, and established folklore as the central element of the Serbian cultural vernacular, he influenced the later cultural consciousness of the Serbian nation in a most dramatic way. The martyr's myth, the myth of sufferers, vengeance, or revenge for Kosovo, and other mythological elements of national remembrance, played a dramatic role in Serbian history and presence. With the deformation of remembrance and the 'production of own history' (Đinđić in *Gledišta* 5/8, 1988), Serbian 'national consciousness' produced the concept of 'time which does not exist' and a 'place which does not exist'. At the early nationalistic meetings in the late 1980s, all the participants in the 'democratic changes' (Slobodan Milošević, Vojislav Šešelj and Vuk Drašković) included in their programs 'vengeance for Kosovo' (a battle which took place in the fourteenth century), and Serbian borders drawn by the rule 'wherever Serbian bones are- that is Serbia' (which in their minds included nearly half of Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and parts of Hungary).

After 1918, Vuk Karadžić's (1787-1864) conception of culture was imposed as the official cultural policy of the newly established country. It was, however, a policy that Slovenes and Croats could not accept. This was due to the fact that they had already formed their own literary languages, and they belonged to a different cultural environment with a different background. Or, as was stated by Kramarić: 'Different cultural orientations were too strong to result in a cultural unity'. (p. 17). However, this unity was forced in the school curriculum where the Cyrillic alphabet became 'equal' to the Latin alphabet in Croatia and Slovenia, and by the artificial creation of the Serbo-Croatian language, (in the 1930's, school certificates listed the name of the official language as Serbo-Croato-Slovenian). The examples of the Novi Sad agreement on unified

orthography in 1954, and the Croatian struggle for lingual independence (Declaration on the Name and Position of the Croatian Literary Language) in March 1967, are themes which, in an interpretative process similar to ours, become more than just sociolinguistic themes (see Banac, 1990).

## INTERPRETATION

Now we can come back to the interpretation of our sequences. In an environment without a common cultural centre, without a dialogue between potential partners in the communicative process, and without an appreciation of the cultural vernaculars by the dominant party, it is not possible to talk about one cultural identity.

Today, this is clear to both traditions of 'Yugoslavism'. One, the continuation of Gundulić's and Križanić's pan-Slavic ideas, and the later Illyric movement in Croatia which taught that a solution to Croatia's problems could be found in unity with other South Slavonic countries. The other, Serbian tradition presumed that all *štokavian* dialect speakers were Serbs, as Vuk Karadžić wrote (1850- article *Srbi svi i svuda*) and from which his successors developed the idea of Greater Serbia. From them Kajica Milanov got the inspiration for his 'interesting' program which was tested in practice 25 years later by the campaign organised by Serbian authorities, and is still alive in both the Serbian social establishment and in the circles from which most members of the 'Zajedno' coalition have been drawn.

From a contextually motivated perspective, it is thus possible to see all sides of the argument:

1) Šegedin's Illyric dream of an artificial cultural identity which later became the voice of resistance against a different, which meant Serbian, idea of 'Yugoslav identity' based on army and police control. In this context, his, and other voices of resistance, were considered nationalistic by both the Yugoslav regime and by Western public opinion derived from the Yugoslav regime's propaganda apparatus. From this point of view, one of those former political prisoners, former Communist Franjo Tuđman, is even today considered a 'Nationalist' responsible for the disintegration of a formerly stable country. The only people who remained carriers of the type of Yugoslav synthesis proposed by Šegedin (and Krleža) were people such as Danilo Kiš and Emir Kusturica. Kiš died in exile, Kusturica is seeking French citizenship.

2) The argument given by Pavić, who celebrates the victory of the 'Serbian historical vision' and exists out of space and time, belonging instead to the world of his literature and his mythical Hazars (Serbs?), a people 'better than others', who can destroy and rebuild cities in foreign countries without even being morally condemned. However, at the same time, he doesn't show any interest or sympathy for the suffering of 'others', which, according to Richard Rorty, 'is the main purpose of literature' (Rorty, 1989, p.xvi). Another example is the Paris exhibition, which was held half a year before the celebration and was supposed to prepare the ground for celebration. It was, in fact, a celebration of what was described and proposed in Kajica Milovanov's article, and long before that in the programs of Ilija Garašanin (1844 in *Nachertarie*), N. Stojanović (1904 in 'Until Your or Our Extermination', and Vasa Čubrilović ('Deportation of



Albanians') all in Čović, ed., 1993). This program for a Greater Serbia was later supplemented by the contributions of a number of contemporary Serbian writers, from Dobriša Ćosić, the first president of the rump Yugoslavia, to Vuk Drašković, leader of the new Serbian opposition to Milošević, and Matija Bečković and other authors of the Memorandum of the Serbian Writers Association.

In our third example, it becomes more than just a program - it becomes a Religion. Radovan Karadžić presents himself as a metaphysic entity, as divinity. With the images of darkness, vengeance and the knife (*In my mind I made the knife/longer than a sun ray*), he is trying to build a divine world of *New Religion*. These verses are from 1969, from his book *Ludo Koplje* (Crazy Spear): *'Come on people, become a part of my new religion/I'm offering what nobody ever did/I'm offering unsparing and wine/ (...) On the ones who do not want bread/my sun will shine/(...) because I'm preparing everything for the last moments/when (even) the things will cry for their unknown sense/(...) this God will not cease to exist in a shameful way/because he is real and he can treat us roughly.'* He wrote as a prophet of evil (*'Did you already find out/The hell is on our side/(...) and everything that is waiting for us there/already happened here'*) (Black Tale, 1990)) whose words became reality twenty years later, not only to people in the former Yugoslavia, but to the entire international community. The ideologists of Serbian aggression have supplied Radovan Karadžić and his followers among Bosnian Serbs with arms, so that the dreams he gave voice to in his verses in the same book (1969) could become reality: *'Lets go to the cities/to beat the bastards'* (*Hajdemo u gradove/da bijemo gadove*). Today Karadžić is a war criminal. However, his arms suppliers from Belgrade are considered peace makers.

From the perspective of this semiotic analysis, the content of what was signified as **Yugoslav cultural identity** seems to be very different from what this signifier was supposed to mean when the Yugoslav propaganda machinery presented this syntagm to the West. And it is also different from what was presented to the other nations of Yugoslavia by the nation's officials. This raises a logical question: If cultural identity is what holds peoples together, what factor then held together in one nation those peoples officially called 'Yugoslavs'? Their free will or the supremacy of one group (nation) over the others? And, in effect, when this supremacy was ended by means of the proclamation of independence by Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, was the conflict unavoidable?

Even before the establishment of the first Yugoslavia (1917), Milan Protić, then premier of Serbia, stated:

*'When our army crossess the Drina River we will give the Turks 24 hours, even 48, to convert back to the religion of their gransfathers, and the ones who will not do so will be killed, same as it was done in Serbia before.'* (Meštrović, 1969, Relković, 1994).

By far the most interesting fact in this search for the hidden meaning of the signifier/Yugoslav cultural identity/ and its real creators is the way in which the /signified/ was manipulated. Without an appropriate frame and knowledge about the discourse, it is very difficult to understand what was happening in the former Yugoslavia during the last fifty years. However, through our interpretative sequences, and the chain of contextual references which open with their

interpretation, it is now very obvious that the signifier /Yugoslav/ was the subject of various dispersions of signifying practice (as this term was described by Falck, 1995), which were organised with a specific purpose in mind. The aim was to introduce an artificial entity acceptable to all nations. Over time, the original identity of the individual nations would be lost. Once this happened and the nations were all signified as Yugoslav, then everything would be Serbianized again in a situation very similar to the one described in Kundera's article, where he quotes Hlaviček.

In the meantime, the adjective 'Yugoslav' serves as a very useful tool for propaganda purposes: Those separatist nations trying to preserve their name, territory and very identities were pronounced responsible for the disintegration of Yugoslavia. On the other hand, according to the Serbs, they were only trying to preserve Yugoslavia. Coincidentally, their efforts to preserve Yugoslavia required the destruction of everything that was not Serbian in the process.

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