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POLITICAL ITEMS ON THE GROUND OF THE TRIVIAL
Singing politics of Croatian transition

Abstract: The trivialization of the political discourse makes the contemporary Croatia an awkward sample for revisiting *the state of nationalism and antagonism* as the symptom of its post-Yugoslav condition. In their frozen and perplexed shape, many of the items "formerly known" as crucial for the national-oriented politics, are now nonchalantly left to the pop-cultural elaboration. With the two intriguing examples of Croatian pop-ideology we are showing the paradoxes of the cultural critique coping with the *mimicry* nature of its traditional object. The question of "over" or "under-interpretation" of its quasi-political content, thus spreads into the entirety of social understanding of transitional cultures, which are swapping the ideological for the procedural reason of their *political normality*.

Key words: political discourse, Croatia, trivialization, nationalism, pop-culture

The lighter the contemporary Croatian identity becomes - gradually loosening its historically-rooted affiliations - the harder it gets for the investigation of the ex-Yugoslavia *via* the concept of nationalism(s). Partly, the fading of national-centred discourses from the public scene indicates as if those are simply not required, not to say opportune, any more. The main aims seem to be achieved, and the international processes of political normalization have started, despite all the controversies of the war happenings, as well as the judged "anachronous" claim for the national state. Now we are, gladly or reluctantly, turning to the implementation of democratic procedures and minority-talks, at the "one-and-only path towards the Euro-Atlantic integrations" (as the phrase goes).

Thus, from all the regulative programmes of the sober international politics, for the majority of population the valid conclusion runs that the independence is "earned" exactly on the basis of *the historical continuity of Croatian national identity*, with all the pronounced "irrational"¹ support of the notion. Possibly, such a consensus of the inside and outside partakers, allowed understanding differently the meanings - but recommended to apply similarly the means - of the current process of political justification, is the crucial point of further debating the confined *status of nationalism and antagonism*. The mutual

¹ For the rationality vs irrationality in the case of Yugoslavian disintegration see Bates & De Figueiredo, 1998.

agreement on the basically procedural nature of *the execution of democracy* opened a space of arbitrariness between pragmatic deeds and *ideological minds*. Metaphorically, what was once the national-oriented politics, "with a democracy in one's heart", now is a democracy-oriented politics, "with the nation in one's heart". Thus a possibly superficial move towards *the tolerance of politics* functioned as a sufficient move towards *the politics of tolerance*.

The aim here is to disclose the ambiguous object of the conversion of *national into transitional narration*, the process which makes the core of the identity politics of the post-90's Croatia. It was pushed by the ambition to spectacularly envision the new, capitalist and democratic nature of the state politics, but also to diminish the opaque routes of capital that marked the period of Croatian "first transition"².

For that purpose, the elastic, radiating and frivolous scene of pop-cultural values and representations has functioned as the most appropriate ground, at least the one of the last finding its interest in courting with the scratchy items of national politics. While the mass media arbitration of the Croatian state-building discourse from the beginning of the 90' switched popular culture to the acute political instrumentalization (the *singing patriotism*)³, the victory of oppositional coalition parties in the 2000, and, above all, the public withdrawal of nationalist discourse after the 2003, and the comeback of the thoroughly reformed HDZ⁴, triggered the cocooning of the suppressed political content in the segment. It composed a quasi-political climate where one could more credible "vote" for the "politically conscious" entertainers than for a recognizable party's program. But it also revealed an acute rupture in the legitimate matrix of political diversification. The blurring of the principles "formerly known" as to be representative for the left and right political option, including those related to the issue of national-identity politics, has opened a stretchy space of the hypothetical "liberal esteems"- a flamboyant platform able to provide all the persuasive rationalisations of "whatevers" of the Croatian transition, while dismissing the findings of common reasoning and the "old-fashioned" social critique⁵.

² Srećko Pulig instructively points out that the notion of "second transition" in Croatia is a craftiness liberal invention. As they understand the war only as an obstacle for political transition, they needed the alibi for joining the political life, despite the consequences of the criminal war-transition" (Pulig, 2007: n.p.). About the devastating economic consequences of the "first transition" see Vojnić 1999.

³ See Ramet 2001, but also Crnković, for the "underground Anti-Nationalism in the Nationalist Era" (2001), and Velikonja (2002), Port (1998) and Gordy (1999) for the Balkan pop-culture.

⁴ Croatian Democratic Union, the nationalist party formerly led by president Franjo Tuđman. By the insistence on the reforms and procedures of joining EU after the 2003, they changed painstakingly their political language and attitude, putting its extreme right wing to be their resentful opposition.

⁵ According to Daskalovski: "Intellectuals in the Balkans, an infamous region that has

Beyond the critical pertinence of numerous insights into the mentality of South-East European transition, led by the anticipation of social "normality" to which they need to be striving, the aim here is to show something of the opposite routine. How the anomalous facets of the global, neo-liberal capitalism find their ways to settle down in the "laissez-faire" transitional environments, disclosing the upsetting flaw of common analytical tools and critical practices.

A pair of Croatian "pop-political personas", worldly known for their internet's exhibitions⁶, has made an extreme trouble for their critics, both figures ephemeral in their creative share, but the absolute for their faithful consumers and supporters.

«I just sing»

«Thin red line? No! Long red carpet» (Cvijetić, 2000)⁷.

The transformation of Severina Vučković from the «innocent» and approachable *village girl* (as the title of her popular song suggests) in the end of the 1980s, to today's untouchable icon of the Croatian glamour-culture, represents one of the most highly extolled, but also most strongly disputed example of a non-criminal success story of the Croatian transition.

Through the scenario of her own biography, encapsulated within the words of her famous song "I just sing, and have no reason to get upset", she has achieved the prototypical *transitional dream*. The winning-path has led her from professional incompetence (amateurism) and working-class milieu, with the aid of a strong desire for change and abandonment of old communal values, to a figure of huge public influence and private possessions. However, while the process of legalisation of the "original sins" of Croatian *tycoons* has worked out fine, with the objections too wretched to "get them upset", Severina, as a

produced such great thinkers as Mircea Eliade, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek, have had difficult times coping with the democratization process. Ten years after the changes of the political regime five categories of intellectuals are now discernible in the Balkans: émigrés, businessman, politicians, technocrats, and *influentials*" (Daskalovski, 2000: n.p.). As for Boris Buden's mind, it is "the understanding or misunderstanding of the West still to be a key element of recognition of the 'authenticity' or 'non-authenticity' of things occurring within" (Buden, 1996: n.p.).

⁶ Official pages, for Marko Perković: www.thompson.hr, and for Severina: www.severina.hr.

⁷ "Although nearly four months have passed since their landslide victory in the parliamentary elections, the new Croatian ruling elite (the coalition leading by SDP, a.r.) still seem to be in a state of shock. Accustomed, over the last ten years, to the state of mind in which the execution of power is something that is, to paraphrase Milan Kundera, 'somewhere else', or, in other words, a matter of a nice but distant dream, it had been fairly unprepared for a sudden and harsh awakening. And in this dizzy state, it tends to engage in activities that would make for an excellent fable filled with subtle irony, were they not politically disruptive and potentially very dangerous" (Cvijetić, 2000: n.p.).

metaphoric personage of an inappropriate *female transition*, seems to be obliged constantly to explain her «primary accumulation of capital».

Nevertheless, shortly perplexed with the recent sexual scandal, the world-wide-web broadcasting of her stolen home-video, she was soon back again, with a changed image referring to a "new person" she can always be, in the wholeness of her arbitrary pop-culture personality. The porno-scandal (with the identifiable married man involved) exposed the pop-star to both mocking, due to conservative values she otherwise promotes (holly marriage, Holly Mother and the football team Hajduk from her home-town Split) and pitying her as a victim of privacy abuse, here included the Croatian Helsinki Watch Committee rejoinder. But it was only an unplanned reference to another controversial Severina's emergence.

The wholehearted commitment to the political iconography and participation in the political campaigns of the HDZ (with Franjo Tuđman's name proudly displayed on the protruding parts of her T-shirts), proved the total political indifference by her sudden and scandalous «crossing-over to the Left». The «nationally-aware» pop-figure, to the astonishment of the narrow circle of intellectuals with a tired-out feeling for political engagement, appeared at the dawn of the 2003 election campaign as the trump card of the HDZ's harsh opponent, the Social Democratic Party (led by recently deceased Ivica Račan). The pop-heroine, until then naively linked to the politics of her former employers, was now raising the rating of the new ones, performing a concert on Zagreb's central square (newspaper gossip that was never refuted buzzed about a fee of some Euro 200 000). As is known, SDP, together with the coalition, lost the 2003 elections. Obviously, Severina was «just singing», and the potential voters very well knew it. So, how come the intellectual critics and cultural analysts, writers of enlightened newspaper columns, found the «reasons to get upset», trying to decipher whether Račan has finally announced his pragmatic pandering to the Right, or his incurable inclination for the "communist-luxury", or was he simply the victim of "just-singing" American marketing?

The head of the SDP announced such a possibility long before the campaign began: he explained in an interview that it would be quite convenient if he lost the election. He would rest, catch up on his sleep, and live the comfortable life he had been used to. For some time now, he has been behaving in public like a loser, going around with a sullen look, without a smile, as though he wanted to intimidate and drive away potential supporters. Someone has already observed that his main electoral acquisitions – Cro Cop [Mirko Filipović, a popular figure in the Ultimate Fight sports, a member of parliament during the coalition government, a.c.] and Severina – are an expression of his subconscious desire to lose the elections. This selection is fully in the spirit of his recent behaviour. He has been kow-towing to the Right throughout his mandate, even though this has never produced any benefit, nor attracted anyone from that side –while it has repelled his own people. That's the way it will be this time, too. The American advisers who have proposed such road-show

treatment of the election campaign have made a bad mistake. In that respect, Croatia is not yet America, thanks God, nor is Račan Schwarzenegger (Lovrić 2003: n. p.).

Or is it so that, announcing that he could bring to his political court *the most beautiful belly-dancer*, he only confirmed the social insensitivity of Croatian Social Democracy (!), that draws its historical link from «communist Czarism», as is suggested by a socially dramatically intoned variant of the commentary on the event.

Are the parties facing up to the Croatian reality, since the reality under the elite circumstances of life is so very different, how much do they know about the deprived, the invalids, those who are trying to find their dead, and how much do they respect the fresh graves upon which some of them have built up wealthy empires? For, the unfortunate fate of this country must never again be repeated. As in the wartime, Croatia needs strong people and strong programmes, lots of work and the return of hope, of which Pope John Paul II spoke so eloquently during his visits, and as Cardinal Bozanić repeatedly and reasonably points out. Can Hope include a pre-election entertainment event, which, if the newspapers are to be believed, will cost to the SDP Euro 200 000 (from our budget) for Severina Vučković's pre-election concert? With her status as a free-lance artist, thanks to the Ministry of Culture, she could, "generous" as she is, share the money with all the other free-lance artists, from writers to musicians, who often go hungry. Is Croatia transforming into the worst possible *Cabaret* or into some kind of the ancient Rome that falls under the burden of its own humiliation. Severina is last to blame for that; why shouldn't she take what is so generously given to her? It is money snatched from those without homes, from workers who do not receive their wages, from those missing arms and legs - so that the circus can continue, so that the party can last, even though the lights have been dimmed. Where on Earth are the intellectuals, unless impoverishment has made them humble slaves at some of the ministries; it is as though the intellectuals have ceased to exist. The communist mentality is entrenched at the universities and in schools (apart from some honourable exceptions) and the tentacles of this mentality also encompass the thirst for Severina and Brioni [Tito's Islands, a.c.]. The Dictator loved them and why shouldn't the little dictators enjoy them as much as he did. Their intellectual work includes running the relay-races [for Tito's birthdays, celebrated on the Youth Day, a.c.] and attending the Kumrovec School [the Party's ideological school, a.c.], with the psychological component of brain-formation, with its ideology creating slavish souls (Ivanišević, 2003: n. p.).

Anyhow, the most stinging slap in the face to a serious "over-analysis" of that quasi-political event can be found in the interpretation of Severina in the role of «Cosmo Girl intervention», an appearance still insufficiently understandable within the unadventurous Croatian social scene. From that indifferent and light-hearted premise, we are invited for penetration into "the deeper" layers of affair, and that would be the way she was dressed, her sex

appeal, and the eternal envy which is spun around this successful "manager of her own body", in the atrophied environment of the average Croatian voters - the cursed "who will never have a chance to meet Severina".

«There have always been controversies about her songs, and particularly about her star status. So far, Severina is still on the credit side. A considerable majority continues to have a positive opinion about her, or at least only adds that mythic 'but', which maintains her position at the top of today's show business. Anyone *who has had an opportunity to meet Severina* will agree with Miljenko Jergović's conclusion that she is much cleverer than the songs she sings, while she herself is not inclined to excessive mystification of her own job. Because of all, it will be interesting to see the consequences of Severina's political adventure in which she has placed her star status, her charisma, and – let's be frank – her sex appeal in the service of the SDP's election campaign. It would have been most interesting to compare the reactions if Severina had agreed to perform for some ultra-Right option, and for a symbolical fee. In that case, "the female Thompson" would not appear to be acting so strangely. Severina herself claims that she only agreed to sing for those who offered the best conditions. And while the public is shocked at her hefty fee under the circumstances, politicians too, even those from the party for which she is 'doing battle', are objecting, along with the rockers who carried the entertainment load on their backs in the last SDP election campaign, and for much less money. The cynics could comment that Račan once appeared at the rock stage arm-in-arm with Budiša⁸, but that this time he has chosen a well-thought-out media option for himself and the party that he leads. And if elections were won on the basis of such criteria, there is not a man who would not vote for a comrade who replaced Budiša with Severina. However, *a return to the more serious part of this story* brings us back to Severina who is, once again, doing her job in a professional manner. She doesn't talk about politics, but obviously knows her way around politics. Anyone who doubts should take a look at the clothes she wears at her pre-election concerts. None of the tight bodices and hot pants of the type she usually wore at her concerts, but instead there was a more restrained choice of a woman who knows that any contribution on her part to a possible win of SDP would never be acknowledged, but that she could easily be singled out and blamed for crushing defeat» (Radović, 2003: n. p.).

So, it seems that only intellectually and politically «uptight» commentators are in need of being mistakably focusing on "the Singer and the Politician" as symbolically crucial figures of the political status of culture. Rather than misrepresented actors in a flow of transient transitional incidents. People listened to the free concert by the well-loved singer under the "social democratic organisation» and then went off tranquilly to vote for the opponents. There is nothing scandalous in that. Quite to the contrary, what could better

⁸ The former leader of Croatian liberals which owes his charisma to his leading role in the Croatian national movement from 1971. (Croatian spring).

represent the average voters reasoning than the absurdity of this political event, "irrationality" of which does not lie within the sharp differentiation of trivial and purely political values, but in what that imbroglio has been condensed to: the accumulated experience of political concessions which turns the democratic elections into a farce of *just voting*.

Over-analyse this!

"They proclaim patriotism to be fascism, that's how they shield their communism".

Thompson, *Once upon the time in Croatia*

Does, Marko Perković Thompson, however, "just sing"? The contentious entertainer claims that he indeed does not, when it goes for the clean patriotic and Christian values he promotes in his lyrics. But he obdurately refuses to stay behind the obnoxious connotations he evokes in his concerts and otherwise.

The village boy who has never abandoned his devotion towards the "stone genes" that have made him proud and tough as he is, stepped clumsily into the war popular-culture, with a rural voice hoarsely running from the teeth-less mouth. Nowadays he is an interna(e)tionally renowned, although controversial character⁹, but also a heavily re-fashioned musician, with a huge stage support behind. He owes his publicity, contrary to Severina, to a deadly serious, though charismatic performance, designed around outlandish "gothic" emblems, with a sword as a central character of his "medieval" narration about the lost roots and other dissoluteness of modern civilization. The verses of captivating music of the Croatian shepherd's-rocker has been mostly devoted to the historical lament over the Croatian people and national heroes, being the victims of the previous, but also nowadays "communists". Croatian war for the independence criminalized, its heroes squatting in Haag while the fruits are enjoyed by hypocritical politicians ingratiating themselves to the new world masters— this is, in short, *the manifesto* of Marko Perković, called Thompson in favour of his beloved gun from the days of the defence. The manifest, in some points not very far from the suppressed Euro-sceptical and legitimate anti-globalists' claiming, but far too close to the murky legacy of Croatian historical stigma. The problems for him, but simultaneously also the incredible home and Diaspora's publicity, gained by the thousands of the visits to his concerts and web-sites, started at the moment when the public attention began to turn more to the "ephemeral", contextual signs of his performances.

The place where the phenomenon of Thompson, by then a shabby stumbling-block of various *pro et contra* arguments, almost hit its "limits of interpretations", was quite indicative. The obscure performance of criminalized songs extolling concentration camps of the fascist NDH, has in the end emerged

⁹ About the internet aspect of Thompson's popularity see Senjković & Dukić.

at the exactly same independent site where Severina's joyful video was discovered to the public eyes. Indicative for the *gender essence* that the two most politicised pop-scandals of Croatian transition have being abridged to, it was also a moment for Thompson to face a painful question addressed to his heroic maleness.

"When her porno was released on the Internet, she stayed for it, admitting that 'it was indeed her', and asking them to give her tape back. When the scandal concerning your performing of 'Jasenovac i Gradiška Stara' had burst, why didn't you show up publicly to say what you have to say?" (Vodopivec, 2004: n.p.).

As Thompson kept defending in a *just singing* manner¹⁰, the scandal is pushed to the *cul-de-sac* of its procedural arbitration. In the despaired search for the grain of political credence within the miraculous travesties of Croatian pop-ideology¹¹, it turns to a general question of who, at what point, and with which outcomes, stay for the haphazard consequences of such an "elaboration" of its most painful items.

The singer made it obvious that "it is not him", but the officials not being able, or willing, to react properly. Not only that some of them enjoy Thompson's music, so they are *just listening and having no reason to get upset* with its waste connotations. It is neither only a matter of the blurred constitutional law on national-racial hate speech, formulated primarily in the way to avoid resemblance with the notorious, over-policed and totalitarian one of the previous regime. It is, as well, because the Thompson's music, by means of the harshly achieved un-ideological criteria, ought to be recognized separately, from its evident content and not for its hidden intention. As we have seen in the previous case, everybody can choose from the random marginalia of the context, mix up the fallacy with the substance or vice versa. Aren't many of Thompson's massages only a matter of the carnevalesque epic genre, like a maxim "Lady Mary, could you maybe do that, to take Stipe and get Franjo back"¹²? So, up till where are we, exaggeratedly and dimly in the end, to go with our literally construes of pseudo-historical signs and plots which are actually symptoms of "something else"?

Thanks to such a "hermeneutic" hesitation, Thompson's case is turned into the hard-boiled dispute on national identity with uncertain rationales.

"He has been turned to a kind of Croatian God Ianus? For the admirers he is a symbol of 'the days of proud and glory', and for those that despise him, a

¹⁰ "I do not know who those people with Ustashi signs are. I don't bother with that" (Vodopivec, 2004: n.p.).

¹¹ On misuse of ideology in pop-culture, see Đurković, 2003.

¹² Saying inspired by the results of last Croatian presidential elections, which Thompson also uses in his concerts. It alludes on the contemporary and liberal Stipe Mesić, and the late ex-president of Croatia, desiring to change their places in earth-heaven terms, and by help of Holly Mother.

primitive nationalist, who 'does not sing but bray'. Grown from the traditional patriarchal and epic culture, from the folklore of heroic songs and 'stoned genes', by his songs he obviously woke up long hushed-up and forbidden national ethos. While many, also among his listeners, can not understand and forgive him the scandalous blasphemy known as *Jasenovac i Gradiška Stara*, to his critics it comes as a crucial evidence of his Ustashi-inclination. For the mentioned part of Thompson's public, it is unacceptable that someone who claims to live Christian values can be connected with something so monstrous. But, essentially, Thompson is a singer of a disappointed and frustrated *Croatianship*, those who did not expect that the creation of Croatia could be a bare legislative and political act, but a national revival. Thompson is the singer of their warrior's pride and post-war disappointments" (Jajčinović, 2007: n.p.).

For now, his only prohibited concert was one which should have taken place in Sarajevo in April 2007¹³. More recently, Thompson's concert in Canada has almost been forbidden due to the Simon Wiesenthal Center's veto. Instead, "the Croatian neo-Nazi star on November 2nd 2007, performed in the town of Velvet Underground, Ramones and Patty Smith"¹⁴, thanks to permission of the New York's Archdiocese, and after having presented the English translation of the lyrics. They were clean¹⁵.

"Un-concluding remarks"

The awkward mixture of Croatian pop-ideology has led to the fall of an engaged critical thought, defeated at the same point where anchored. Whereas the disclosure of transitional «monstrosity» undesirably works in favour of launching, the primarily denounced, cultural «authenticity», they are gradually

¹³ Thanks to the joint veto of Jewish and Islamic Community, as well as Union of Anti-fascists BIH.

¹⁴ "Marko Perković Thompson on the world tour". Halter, electronic news letter of Croatian alternative. 25.10.2007. <http://www.h-alter.org/tekst/simon-wiesenthal-centar-protiv-thompsonova-koncerta-u-new-yorku/6945#hot>

¹⁵ "Mr. Weitzman urged Cardinal Edward M. Egan, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, to cancel the concerts at a cultural center operated by the Croatian Church of St. Cyril & Methodius, at the 10th Avenue and 41st Street. Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the archdiocese, said church officials had been investigating but had found nothing to substantiate the accusations. Mr. Perkovic's tour is to take him to Toronto; Cleveland; Chicago; Los Angeles; Vancouver, British Columbia; and San Jose, Calif." *Croatian Rocker Draws Anti-Nazi Protests*, By The New York Times. Published: November 1, 2007.

giving up «the country in which mountain clans collide with global-consumerist hype and the post-modern with feudalism» (Pavičić, 2004:18).

Possibly, the cultural analysis generally misses when it obsessively picks up the political meanings from the pop-cultural phenomena¹⁶. But couldn't it be also the contrary, in the "cunning" circumstances of transitional reason, where the cultural trivialization generally works as mimicry, excluding the suppressed political content both from the reach of social critique and legislative procedures¹⁷.

Transitional cultures seem no longer to be graspable in terms of some credible relation between social knowledge and social phenomena. Copying with signs that *may not mean anything*, but a kind of phenomenological «flirting» constantly seeking for deeper layers of analysis, put the social understanding to the borders of suspicious over-interpretation: an "excess of wonder" which leads to "overestimating the importance of coincidences which are explainable in other ways» (Eco, 1990: 167)¹⁸.

Still, how are we supposed to know what is at work here: professional deformation of inventing subversion within banality, or a bigger cognitive deceit which pushes the "leftist imagination" to be lulled into the curing its analytical paranoia and social decline¹⁹?

Croatia has surely entered its post-political era, as putting the former practices of nation-centred identification aside, and turning to the processes of democratic political "normalization" ahead. In relation to the one from 1993, one may speak about some radical cultural change that has occurred here. But, from too many instances, there are also changes pushing it to the edge of social and cultural normality, or, at least, the common reasoning about it. As Zoran Roško, a Croatian representative of the new, post-theoretical thought would put: «something simultaneously frightening, exciting and boring is happening here. Things are changing so rapidly that they become imperceptible, so that they no longer evoke shock but rather indifference: *horror-porno-ennui*» (2002: 120).

¹⁶ As Meaghan Morris suggests (1990).

¹⁷ "All the classical political ideologies in the era of mass-media and pop-culture get transformed meanings, which can lead their immanent dialectics towards utterly dangerous political consequences" (Đurković, 2003: 1).

¹⁸ Eco's distinction between interpretation and over-interpretation, as a usage of text" entirely for our own purposes. For wider debate see Fetveit, 2001: 180.

¹⁹ According to Serbian Philosopher Mile Savić, in the renovation of the idea of "engaged intellectual", "the paradoxical mixture of political *decisionism* and social escapism" we are witnessing a general nostalgia for "the heroic role of Marxist's intellectual *avant-garde*" (Savić, 2002: 1).

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