

W(h)ithering Political Phantasms

Abstract Looking at the opposing discursive and political strategies of Serbia in the 1990s, the text examines the nature of wondering about the “path” this community chose. It suggests that there are benefits to rejecting the dramatic fatefulness of this question, and even holds a certain truthfulness in the commonsensical antihistorical conception, *nihil novum*. The conclusion, however, also expresses the limits of the proverb’s validity, that is, the justification of its argumentative function as a corrective, but no as principle.

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A Cry for Orientation

It was the nineties. Grotesque faces ruled public space: ever pouring historical dimensions onto microphone or paper, grandiosly speechifying, they forever presented ultimate solutions and calls to something, some drama, some epic event, some thorn in the paw regarding the status or relation of East and West, of geopolitics, of cosmic justice. It appeared that basic manners demanded that in such an environment one simply declined to be equally pretentious, refused to participate in conversations about ever groundbreaking meetings and decisive battles, in foundation-shaking, all in order to increase one’s own importance. In short, one needed to react to the deafening noise of speakers and guns, in self-defense, in desperation or because lacking any other means, in a more measured tone and more subtle voice.

The delirium of overwhelming engagement could perhaps most conspicuously be read in that not at all innocent question, taken up in innumerable discussions, from barrooms to courtrooms: “Whither Serbia?” I too had to participate in a panel discussing the topic. What else could I do? I resorted to tried and true philosophical contrivances. Since I am disinclined to offer grand historic destinations, and I tend to be suspicious of indicating directions and giving directives, I decided on a strategy of questioning the question itself. A naive, disinterested, responsible and competent observer could thus glean a series of suppositions that lurk behind the question, and are smuggled with its hidden assumptions.

Above all, the question “Whither Serbia?” claims that there is some entity, whether political, cultural, military, bound (up) by blood or interest – we know not. In any case, an entity of considerable level of abstraction, and

hence indetermination, yet to the questioner, and seemingly others, not only recognizable, but obvious, clear and present, unambiguously distinct from others. It further turns out that this entity is going through some sort of episode, it is in motion, headed somewhere. Finally, it seems that we are tacitly saying that it also possesses auto-ambulation, its movement independent from our will, that it is auto-kinetically headed in an unknown direction, and that we are simply wondering about its destination.

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Yet, entirely unexpectedly, it will turn out that the analysis of this intonation would speak less in favor of justification of the question posed thus than would a strict analysis of its text. If, unencumbered, we listen carefully, we will be able to hear a hint of pretension in the question "whither...," as well as an inappropriate ambition, a tasteless theatricality, a solemn tone filled with anticipation. Much as the Russian, "Что делать?" ["What is to be done?"] (cf. Chernyshevsky 1971; Lenin 1943). One could even say that at best, today it sounds somewhat unsophisticated, frivolous, infantile, or else to be harsh, threatening. If we imagine an invitation to a panel or subscription for a brochure themed "Whither...?" or, as it were, "What Is to Be Done?", and if we imagine that it is placed into a stable and well ordered state, such a directly and seditiously formulated question could hardly be seen by an average and reasonably informed citizen as other than a despicable promotion of yet another radical political sect, one in collusion with historical providence, garnering its appropriate conspiratorial audience. In our own community, as in the Russian one, this is not (yet) the case. Our fundamental inquisitiveness regarding "what" and especially "whither" is nearly the traditionalism of thinking politics: it is a timeless question, never to find its answer, less resolving than exhausting itself, upon which we might deal with less global and less crucial problems.

This schizophrenic position, ever-at-the-crossroads, ever-at-the-turning-point, seems not at all comfortable, but could for some, even many, perhaps be so. It only suits the regeneration of neurotic grand-designers and conspiratorial redeemers, although they and their followers are not at all few in number, or not even, at least potentially, in the minority. And that is not only the shameless, but the truly dangerous timbre in the question “Whither Serbia?” It invites what was thought to have been worn out, to have been tragically discredited long ago in some war times or other. Perhaps that is why behind it one hears the mumbling of a desire for prophetic universal insight, one gleans the process of writing out another invitation for the next monster social engineering, one visualizes the scowl of uniformed figures in consternating concern, huddled over maps and the historical being of the people. Such concerns for Serbia, or any entity for that matter, ought to be diverted by direct evidence, if not by other means, such as reading into others’ experience. For it is precisely when such concerns were at their greatest height and scope that the citizens of Serbia ended up doomed – much like other entities (as testified by Robert Musil’s *Man Without Qualities*, about Austria-Hungary prior to entering World War I, as it turns out, its final war (Musil 2006)).

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Does the potential malignancy of the topic, supported by direct personified insight from this region, demand silence? Is it worth declaring it absurd and treating it as a sort of collective clinical chart? Is there a way to form utterances about indubitably important questions beyond messianic pathos and adequate political psycho- and socio-pathology? Can something like the Fate of the Nation or State be spoken or thought of unpretentiously, softly, tenderly? It seem that what decides this questions is measure: measure in understanding the scope of procedure being undergone, measure in its conscious, willful and responsible limitation of validity of any findings, and, in particular, in recognition of the consequence of the findings’ presentation. Yet, is it also possible, as in any theoretical game, that its loyal partner therein, practically disempowered and disinvested inquiry, remain uncompromising in unmasking the object spoken of.

A Yearning for Rest

It is an established fact that being always pensive leads to paralysis. In particular in those not naturally disposed to movement. Those whose character, personal affinity or life choice is, put kindly, immobile. Another murky mega-term, “people,” is such in principle (whatever context great narratives place it in) – now and forever. At least until it is not moved by misfortune. Testimony enough is the resistance encountered to that coded allusion to the slightest movement from a state of rest: “reform.” As far as “people” are concerned, nothing new under the sun and ruling scepter,

certainly nothing that could alter the established order, that is mobilize, no less force, the smallest of changes. Nor was it ever different.

Legend has it that there were attempts in 19th century Serbia to name Austrian-educated men as administrators, to see if they might bring order to documents, cadastres, taxation, the people, to see if they might uproot leisuireliness, irresponsibility, relaxation, in short, custom, thus internally (re)ordering the country, bringing it into the family of bureaucratically organized states. How did it end? Well, finally, the whole set up was abandoned and educated fellows were replaced by “ordinary” people who had more of an “ear” and “feel” for local timeless circumstances and customs. The order of things that acquired sufficient temporal and spacial scope is immutably stable and resistant with regard to any intervention, no less reversal, however such change might be rationally convincing and generally advisable.

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It was actually interesting to further sharpen, i.e. follow to its logical conclusion, and thus test the previously proposed thesis as a provocative response to the suspicious question “Whither Serbia?” by answering – nowhere. Nothing of any importance changes. Nor has it ever. Not through uprisings, coup d’etats, dynastic shifts, putsches, not even through armed or velvet revolutions. Perhaps we are, truth be told, indeed an “unhistorical people,” as we were considered by the classical philosophers of history. Like India. Or China. There is no progress of spirit; the so-called public mind remains the same as ever or exists not at all. Rulers come and go, even parliamentary advantages are put forth, but the rickshaw still is pulled, rice is distributed, potatoes are sold in dirty markets, people are crushed in the streets and find no motive for any sort of historical flights when it comes to reorganization of parts of their own body politic (see, of course, Hegel, 1924). Except that we, as opposed to the Indians and Chinese, are also small, on the periphery, and, despite or precisely because of meaningless vows, self-insufficient – compounding our sense of inferiority.

Yet here as there invincible life wins out. Only survival, continuation and sustainment are victorious. Such obdurate, lumbering, burdened, leery, hesitant, eternalized mentality, grown into national character, suffers all reform. A basic, primitive, brutal conservatism, free of conceptualization, already all too immune to any plan of reshaping, it is entirely impulsively, directly, organically and automatically in antithesis to any difference and change, indeed could experience change as naught else than harassment, attack, catastrophic possibility of the irrevocable infection of the established. As Milan Kangrga used to indefatigably repeat – to the point that it made it into canonical philosophical education – the *The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuha* Krleža masterfully express this vegetative implacability, particularly in

the poem “Khevenhiller” where the horizon of the eternally lasting past becomes explicitly determinative of any potential future dimension.

It has never been so
that it hasn't been somehow,
so neither will it be
that it won't be somehow for us.
(...)¹

Will for Resistance

Although there was a real danger that meddling Krleža, the Croat into “the Serbian question,” that is the “question of Serbia,” would be considered a tasteless and over-the-top provocation, I gambled with another statement attributed to the author, in which, as far as I can remember, he is again dealing with equating “us with them.” Allegedly he said something to the tune of: “All right. You’ve had Svetozar Marković with ‘Serbia in the East’, you’ve had Radomir Konstantinović’s ‘Small Town Philosophy’, and what has changed?” (cf. Marković 1984; Konstantinović 2013; Krleža 2014). We could yet add another few brilliant diagnosticians and their ill-fated attempts and poor outcomes to cure their cantankerous compatriots out of their listlessness. But, truly, except such an immiserated or gasping intellectual environment, where have these findings, declarations, reviews, challenges been taken to heart and by whom? Who has read any of this at all? Who has, for that matter, read Voltaire and Diderot, except the revolutionaries who, convinced of their own enlightened righteousness, falsified them politically? And who among us, reducing such authors to humorless and all to verisimilar pronouncements, did not attempt to alter “the state of things,” changing them in ways different from the authorly intent, all the while garnering illusory hopes of revising an ancient way of life by exposing it?

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Yet it was this very Serbia whose (im)mobility was written about that would not suffer the thundering question “Whither Serbia?” Nor is this the full thesis that ought to be forced through. Its complement, its normative corrective, its sobering and hopeful explanation would like to swing its own punch for the argument. Serbia, namely, is “going” nowhere, much as it never “went” anywhere. And in a sense (perhaps even an important one), this is good, for Serbia as for any community; certainly better than going anywhere. Especially since imagining some movement or suggesting a direction, no less actually heading towards something, has never ended well.

1 The verses, whose alliterations and vernacular rhythm make them untranslatable, go as follows in the original. “Nigdar ni tak bilo / da ni nekak bilo / pak ni vezda nebu / da nam nekak nebu [...] Kak je tak je, tak je navek bilo, / Kak bu tak bu, a bu vre nekak kak bu! [...] Kajgod kakgod bilo opet je tak bilo, / Kak je bilo tak je tak bude bilo” (Krleža 2013: 34; Kangrga 2008: 156).

What was the answer to the question about whither Serbia and whither it ought go, when we posed it in the nineties? Did we move towards compensating historical accounts and finally resolving the question of our own identity? What was the result? The example is tendentious, to be sure, but what better, more complete, more plastic way to picture “going?” Well, if we can at all speak in that ambulatory sense, then Serbia really did go, and it was then that we heard speak of how “Serbia has risen” and “stood up from its knees,” not to mention that it was universally experienced as moving: towards justice and autonomy or doom and war, no matter. It was moving. Just like Germany was moving in 1914 (to leave its subsequent ambulations aside) in the images of streaming volunteers, the hats flung high, frenzied shedding of civil clothes for military garb, that collective illusory fervor, the idolatry of the front (cf, for example, Jünger 1980; Sloterdijk 1983; Jaspers 1987).

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In Germany or in Serbia, or really anywhere, true “going,” the kind that peeks behind the question “Whither...?” takes place, that is, “a people happens,” only as part of so-called foreign policy. Of course, foreign policy by those other, confrontational, means. It is a redundant truism, but a truism that nevertheless still reveals the malevolent dimension of the word, to say that the “going” of a country unfolds only by “mobilizing” its population. It is therefore worthwhile to turn one’s attention to the fact that internal changes do not motivate “going” toward some “where,” certainly never so intensely, nor, I dare say, as extensively, as when, without changing, one must affirm one’s own immobility via others who are differently unchanging. That is where one jumps on one’s horse and flies, once more charges unto the breach.

One ought to keep in mind the dangerous possibility, nay, the certainty, of such collective, that is, collectivistic movement whenever its “whither?” is thematized. This type of caution might be cultivated or simply shared by the very same immobility of stale folksy life. That is its right. Resistance to imprudent designers and planners of historical routes, a guardedness against messianic narrators and eschatological announcers, an indolent dismissive wave of the hand to grand stories and perfectionist plans. Perhaps even such healthy or commonsensical skepticism gives rise to faith in small, immediate moves and changes. But as long as there are foundational questions and global expectations, misgiving is an understandable reaction both to solvable problems and justified hopes.

Therefore, things being what they are, perhaps it is best for Serbia not to go anywhere, and it is perhaps entirely appropriate that it is going nowhere. Such a notion ought to be nurtured. Which was not hard. One would never say of Switzerland that it is budging anywhere, and look how they are doing? Some five hundred years of peace and we too could reasonably

expect to come to terms with “trivial” internal transformations that concern quality of life. At least we will not stand at the ready at every hint of self-reformation. The revealing “truth” reached by countries with less turbulence than has befallen us, the distrust of gradual undermining and the final, if only theoretical, rejection of the emphatic idea of (not only linear, but singular in meaning) progress, and in general, directional historical movement, has by ancient wisdom or cantankerous obtuseness been woven into our character and actually already “inscribed” long ago. Albeit in such a way that it serves as alibi for not-in-the-least movement, for investing only in arguments in favor of negation and minimal possibility of bettering and consequently, reasons for effort in that regard.

Still, one should have and ought to also notice and say the following. Our question, “Whither Serbia?” emerges as a symptom of precisely the very same anti-progressivist and stale unmoving whose antidote is found only in its amputation: removal of fetishization of History and its inexorable flow. Only seemingly paradoxical, and only upon its dethroning might there be a chance to avoid that in which we are mired: an ahistorical mythic curse of the eternal cycle of dissolution and establishment, along with its appropriately ritualistic mourning. Only thus do we not step outside the questioning from the beginning, yet still refuse to program into it – as, by the way, into anything else – the end.

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