

## CROATIAN ETHNOLOGY, THE SCIENCE OF PEOPLES OR THE SCIENCE OF CULTURE?

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*The author proposes a hypothesis that older Croatian ethnology has neither been defined nor practiced as the science of peoples but as the science of culture. Croatian ethnologists have shown that the culture of the Croatian people is a mixture of various cultural, ethnic and ecological influences. They practiced ethnology from a specific cultural and historical angle which, from the author's viewpoint, has prevented them to contribute to the knowledge of Croatian culture as distinctive from other ethnic cultures. To be able to contribute to such topics Croatian ethnologists should radically change their approach to culture.*

A recent evaluation of older ethnology in Croatia given by Olga Supek, a Croatian ethnologist of younger generation, will serve as the point of reference for discussions presented in this paper. The author says of Croatian ethnology that: "rather than being defined as 'the science of culture' as in the imperial Great Britain in the age of Tylor and the burgeoning USA in the age of Morgan, <it> was formulated as 'the science of peoples', i.e. *ethno-logy* " (Supek 1988:18). In the science defined in such a way "the folk' or 'the people' was a natural, universal and ahistorical category, a bearer of a genuine culture. The latter may become superficially contaminated by foreign influences, but in the essence it always retains its specific expression. Looking for cultural roots, into healthy and distinct life style of common people in the past, served to confirm the people's right to corporate existence and sovereignty in the present" (ibid., 1988:19).

It seems to me that Croatian ethnology has neither been defined nor practiced as the science of peoples, not even in the works of Antun Radić notwithstanding his explicit statement that ethnology is the science of peoples. That definition is even less accepted by two scientists who have marked a greater part of this century's ethnology in Croatia - Branimir Bratanić and Milovan Gavazzi. Furthermore, it seems to me that the quoted judgement concerning the concept of people (or folk) is not tenable because these two

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1 Since the author's distinction between ethnography and ethnology is irrelevant for our discussion it is not used.

ethnologists have shown that the people (here the Croats) is not a natural, universal and ahistorical category; on the contrary, they have shown that the culture of the Croats is heterogeneous, a mixture of various cultural, ethnic and geographic influences. I argue that Croatian ethnologists have not pleaded either in theory or in practice for ethnology as the science of peoples. I will try to show that they have understood and practiced ethnology as the science of culture to such an extent that today we have difficulties when we need to describe Croatian culture (as distinctive from neighbouring ethnic cultures) and Croatian cultural identity. To pursue research in Croatian culture it will be necessary to revise our definition of culture and methodology of its study.

Let us look first of all at the introduction to *Osnova za sabiranje i proučavanje grade o narodnom životu* written by Antun Radić, founder of Croatian ethnology. Radić says that in ethnology<sup>1</sup> we compare "life, customs and beliefs of all peoples" and that science looks for "general laws according to which peoples live and think. This scientific endeavour was named ethnology, the science of peoples" (Radić 1936 (1897):13, translation J. Č.). The science also looks for causes of those laws, thus creating anthropology (which studies the body of a people) and psychological anthropology (which studies the psyche of a people). Although Radić refers to ethnology as the science of peoples, I think that it is quite clear from his definition that the subject matter of ethnological research is life, customs and beliefs, and that the community or social group within which these are investigated is the people. Therefore, in spite of his definition of ethnology as the science of peoples we cannot claim that culture according to Radić - in the quoted expression "life, customs and beliefs" or elsewhere "life and thinking" (page 17) is not the subject matter of ethnology. The locus of investigation of culture is the people, and ethnology is a comparative science aimed at finding out laws of (folk or peoples') cultures.

A similar view was held by a most prominent theoretician in Croatian ethnology, professor Branimir Bratanić. According to him ethnology is the science of culture and of humans as cultural beings. As culture does not exist outside a group of people, it is always studied within a community or a social group. According to Bratanić, the community "which has an especially great significance for the formation and development of culture" is the people. That fact "etymologically justifies the name 'ethnology'" (Bratanić 1957:12, translation J. Č.). In other texts the same author points to the people as an important bearer of cultural differences: "according to life and customs a village is distinguished from a village, a region from another one, and especially a people from a people or a part of the world from another one" and further: "Between two villages the difference is of course very little, but it is bigger between two peoples, and especially it is big between greater groups of people (for example between all the European peoples on the one hand and African Blacks on the other)" (Bratanić 1941:28, translated and underlined by J. Č.). In the same text the author says the following: "Everything that has been created by a people, and the manner in which a people facilitates, improves and embellishes human life - all of that makes the culture of that people, by which it is distinguished from other peoples" (ibid, page 9, translated and underlined by J. Č.).

What these quotations have in common is that they speak about a people as a group characterized by a distinctive culture, as that community within which cultural specificities arise<sup>2</sup>. Ethnology is then, according to Bratanić, the science of culture; it studies cultures delimited by ethnic borders because it is within ethnic frame that cultural differences are most pronounced<sup>3</sup>. Culture is the subject matter of the science, people is only its frame of reference. The culture of a people is thought to be homogeneous, indigenous, traditional, and oral; it is identified with the folk (peasant) culture (Bratanić 1957:13)<sup>4</sup>. Ethnology thus studies old indigenous cultures, their relations to one another and to the civilization brought in from the outside, with the aim of reconstructing cultural history: "The aim of historical investigation in European ethnology is to reconstruct a good part of European cultural history. More specifically it aims at a) cultural history of particular ethnic groups, b) ethnogenesis of particular peoples (...), c) establishing and studying the history of particular forms and types of culture, d) history of particular cultural phenomena (genesis, evolution) and e) contributing to the general cultural history of the mankind" (Bratanić 1957:14, translation J. Č.). To achieve that end ethnology necessarily goes beyond the borders of only one people and, if necessary, beyond the borders of a continent (*ibid.*, pp. 14-15, translation J. Č.).

Although the author assumes that the peoples are the bearers of distinctive cultures, in practice he does not realize the study of distinctive ethnic cultures due to the postulated aim of ethnology. The aim of the research resulted in studying cultural similarities or parallels in the development of ethnic cultures and not in studying distinctive characteristics of particular ethnic cultures. Examples of such studies are the author's studies published in 1939 and 1951. The same can be said of a most prolific Croatian ethnologist of empirical orientation, professor Milovan Gavazzi. A review of his texts will, I hope, confirm the starting hypothesis that older Croatian ethnology, which has been reproached of being distinctly national, was not **ethno-logy** but **culturo-logy**, and that it did not study the Croatian people in particular but the Southern Slavs in general.

Let us first look at Gavazzi's theoretical writings<sup>5</sup>. In an earlier text Gavazzi (1928) takes an ethnographic item or individual as the subject matter of ethnographic study. He defines it as an individual good or groups of closely connected individual goods of material, social and spiritual culture. An ethnographic item can be determined according

2 A similar opinion is present in the following quotation: "the nation seems to be the locus of the most markedly distinctive cultures" (Bagby 1963:99). Like Bratanić that author envisages different levels of cultural specificity: Bratanić distinguishes these levels: village, region, people, part of the world; Bagby has village, tribe, nation, several societies, but also class, professional, age groups, etc. (Bagby 1963:96-99). Both authors say that the people is the community with marked cultural differences.

3 As we shall see in spite of such a definition of ethnology, the author did not study the specificities of Croatian culture.

4 I will not comment on the concept of people in the sense of folk as understood by Radić, Bratanić and others. See Muraj (1984) concerning this problem. I will not comment on the author's distinction between the notions of ethnic group and people-nation, implicit for example in the 1951 text, but which, to my knowledge, has not been explicated. I will use alternatively the concepts of people and ethnic group as well as their derivatives.

5 Unfortunately, I cannot read German which is the language of publication of many of the author's texts. This limits to a certain extent my study of his work. I will refer only to those texts published in Croatian, particularly those which seem relevant for the theses proposed in this text.

to one or several criteria: geographical, ethnological (cultural)<sup>6</sup>, ethnic, linguistic and racial; it is studied descriptively, comparatively or genetically. The latter study reveals how ethnographic content of such items was created, developed and how it changed in the past. This is what Gavazzi says about the Croats as an ethnographic item, i. e. about an ethnographic subject matter taken from the ethnic point of view: "The main determinant of that item is the ethnic (national) moment: the consciousness of the Croats of belonging to the same individuality of Croatian name. Besides this determinant there are several incidental ones: for the majority of the Croats the religious moment (...), to a certain extent the ethnographico-cultural moment, because some special ethnographic elements link them into a narrower community. Other characteristics, which are common to all the Croats, are even less specifically Croatian (language, ..., alphabet ...) (Gavazzi 1928:115, translated and underlined by J. Č.).

Several conclusions can be drawn from these assertions. First of all, for Gavazzi the subject matter of ethnology is culture, that is its particular or group goods. They can be studied from different aspects. One of them is ethnic, i. e. culture can be studied within borders of an ethnic community. From the quotation we can infer that owing to cultural elements the Croats make up a community only "incidentally" and "to a certain extent". I think that we can say that Gavazzi has proposed a very modern viewpoint present in Barthian and post-Barthian theories on the non-correspondence of ethnos and culture. At the same time that viewpoint is different from that of Bratanić, who on several occasions insists on the distinctiveness of ethnic cultures, i. e. who stresses that the people is a community with marked cultural differences in relation to other such groups.

Gavazzi's analysis of the culture of the Croatian people stems from this theoretical relation between ethnos and culture and from the genetic aim of research (explanation of ethnographic elements according to their formation, origin and antiquity) (Gavazzi 1928 and 1942). More generally, according to Gavazzi cultural analysis is exhausted in the following: "If we wanted to give an entire picture of the contents of a culture and show how that culture was formed and through what phases it went in its development we should actually know or, rather, investigate for each of its cultural goods its antiquity in that culture, whether it was invented in that culture and when, whether it was accepted from outside and when; the destiny of each particular item in that culture through centuries and whether it was developed further; in what relation and connection it was with other elements of the studied culture; until when it was alive, that is whether it disappeared and is forgotten or whether it is still kept, etc." (Gavazzi 1942:639, translation J. Č.). In particular, in the analysis of Croatian culture a special attention is paid to the influence of different cultural spheres, geographical environments and ethnic groups on Croatian culture (Gavazzi 1928:115 and 1940:25-26). That analysis shows that due to various influences Croatian culture is not uniform: it is made up of a series of elements which came from foreign cultural and ethnic spheres and/or were developed

<sup>6</sup> Note that the ethnographic item is at the same time defined and determined as cultural: it is a cultural good and it is determined culturally. Furthermore, it seems that the author does not always leave doubt concerning the relation between different levels of determination of ethnographic items - for example ethnic and cultural, cultural and geographic are sometimes used interchangeably.

under the influence of various geographical factors. Regardless of the indigeneous or foreign origin of some or many of its elements, regardless of the disparity of that culture in different geographical regions, it is implicit in Gavazzi's scheme that all these elements are a part of Croatian culture: the Croatian culture is all elements of which it is made up regardless of their origin and antiquity. Taken into account these observations, can we say that older Croatian ethnology defined the people as a natural, universal and ahistoric category?

Moreover, Gavazzi says that an ethnologist achieves the genetic goal in the analysis of Croatian culture "especially by comparing it with similar phenomena elsewhere, among related and even unrelated peoples". This enables the researcher to "get precious insights into the past of this or that ethnographic element; into changes, or, on the contrary, stability of its form during centuries; into the manner and time of emergence of an element of material culture, a regulation of social life or something else" (Gavazzi 1940:6, translated and underlined by J. Č.). This is how, according to Gavazzi, a double ethnographic goal is fulfilled - reconstruction of the genesis of ethnic cultures and reconstruction of the past (formation, changes, migrations) of particular cultural elements - one goal is achieved with the help of the other. In the above quotation the author explicitly mentions his orientation towards studying cultural similarities, towards studying related cultural phenomena. This statement directly supports the thesis proposed in this paper, namely, that the former ethnological research in Croatia was not aimed at finding out differences between cultures of various ethnic groups, and that such orientation is a reason why today we can say very little or practically nothing about the difference between Croatian and other ethnic cultures.

The study of cultural, especially ethnic cultural differences is not important in Gavazzi's work for two reasons: because culture determines only "to a certain extent" an ethnic ethnographic item and because the goal of research is finding out the history of cultural elements. In his work there is no discrepancy between the subject matter of research (culture in ethnic borders) and the goal of research (history of cultural elements). The subject matter and the aim of science, as well as its results, are in harmony: the results of research (identification of cultural layers based on the comparison of similar elements in several cultures) logically follows from the definition and understanding of the subject matter and the aim of research. In Bratanić's work, on the contrary, the subject matter - **distinctive culture** bounded by ethnic borders and the aim - cultural history, appear contradictory; the results of research do not point to distinctive cultures of ethnic groups as we would expect from the definition of the subject matter, but stem from the aim of research, i. e. are reduced to an analysis of cultural layers contained in Croatian culture.

We can even pose a question whether ethnic culture was at all the subject matter of research of these two ethnologists, or, in what sense ethnic culture was the subject matter of their research. Titles of their papers should not lead astray - "Ploughing implements among the Croats" (Bratanić 1939) or different surveys of "The Ethnography of the Croats" (Gavazzi). Gavazzi's articles which contain in the title the expression "the ethnography of the Croats" are not studies of Croatian culture but as the title says they

are ethnographies, mostly surveys of ethnographic artifacts presented by geographic areas. Ethnological studies by the same author do not carry in their titles the adjectif Croatian but Slavic (e.g. a study in 1959 or studies from the book *Vrela i sudbine narodnih tradicija* published in 1978). The adjectif Slavic is a better choice because in all such studies Proto-Croatian is identified with Proto-Slavic (1928, 1942 and 1988). In these works the Croatian culture is not differentiated from the culture of other Slavic peoples, not even the Southern Slavs (with an exception of a text in 1959 in which the author speaks of a primeval cultural and linguistic differentiation of Slavic groups in the time of their common life in the original homeland). The same can be said about Bratanić's work (1939 and 1951). From the practical research of these two authors it is evident that the locus of research is a supra-national culture, namely (Southern) Slavic culture. On that account we can answer the question whether ethnic culture was the subject matter of Croatian ethnology affirmatively but conditionally: by studying the genesis of Croatian culture their subject matter was Croatian culture, but they denied its specificities identifying its Proto-Croatian elements with Proto-Southern Slavic ones.

Let us look finally at the results of Gavazzi's research in Croatian culture. Gavazzi summed them up in the first and revised edition of the Yugoslav encyclopedia under the title "Ethnic (traditional) culture" (1988: 53-57).

The author divides the traditional culture of the Croats into three ethnographic areas - Pannonian, Adriatic and Dinaric. Their differences stem from specific ecological ("in the nature of these areas") and historico-cultural conditions ("in traditions, old and new"). The description of each is mainly limited to aspects of the so-called material culture<sup>7</sup>, especially those aspects which are directly connected to the soil on which that specific culture was forming (subsistence, village and houses, materials for costume, etc.). The ethnological analysis, in essence culturo-genetic, points to cultural layers common to three ethnographic areas. The author shows from which cultural layers is composed the ethnographic heritage of the Croats: Proto-Balkan, Proto-Mediterranean, Proto-Pannonian, Proto-Slavic or Proto-Croatian, Turkish, Appennine, Alpine, Hungarian and urban<sup>8</sup>.

Let us see what such an analysis can tell us about the culture of the Croatian people: "Besides all the above mentioned differences, those between three ethnographic areas and those caused by a different contribution of particular cultural layers to different parts of the Croatian territory, there are nevertheless many identical cultural elements which connect the Croatian inhabitants on the entire territory. Such are for example traditions of peasant family - *zadruga*, different forms of cooperative practices (*sprega*, *moba* and similar traditions), some customs, e. g. marriage customs (*nakoljenče*, bride passing round the hearth or table, etc.). Among ethnographic characteristics of the entire Croatian area there is also movement to the left (e. g. while dancing *kolo* the rotation is to the left) and especially many aspects of material culture (preparing yarn, spinning and

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7 According to the author material culture is relatively well preserved and is for this reason suitable for research (Gavazzi 1959).

8 It should be noticed how cultural layers carry either ethnic or regional (geographic) names, which is connected to the already mentioned ambiguities concerning the determination of ethnographic phenomena.

weaving, basic tools, subsistence activities, etc.). This ethnographic identity of the entire Croatian territory represents in its basis that **common Proto-Slavic layer**, that is Proto-Croatian cultural heritage which was brought from the north and has been preserved partly up to this day" (Gavazzi 1988:57, translated and underlined by J. Č.).

In this text Gavazzi enumerates those elements which tell us something about Croatian culture. The enumerated elements of Croatian culture are common to all Proto-Slavs, they are the Proto-Croatian cultural heritage brought from the north; they are at the same time the heritage of other Slavic groups. In other words, the author tells us something about the Croats as Slavs and nothing about the Croats as a specific Slavic ethnic group. I dare say that such research, mainly in material culture from geographico-ecological and culturo-genetic aspects, can tell us very little about the characteristics of Croatian culture in general (only about ten elements common to all the Croats are enumerated) and even less about the specificities of Croatian as distinct from other ethnic cultures, namely from cultures of other Slavic but also non-Slavic peoples. From this stems the inability of the Croatian ethnology today to tell us what the Croatian cultural identity is (except for sheer enumeration of elements constituting Croatian culture), or to tell us what in the culture, if anything, characterizes the Croatian ethnos.

After all, maybe nothing that we find in Croatian culture is characteristic of that culture. I think that it is too early to claim that because in the past research we have not even tried to establish its characteristics. Maybe the results of such research will turn out to be negative; maybe we shall confirm Barth's (1969) and implicitly Gavazzi's thesis that culture and ethnos do not correspond, that ethnos is not determined by culture. In such a case we should revise the claim that the people is an especially important locus of formation of culture (cf. Bratanić) and/or we should cautiously state that even if once ethnic cultures could have been distinctive cultures, this characteristic was lost because of diffusion, migration and like events.

If the notion of ethnos is the fundamental term of reference of ethnology and if the science called after this word owes its maintenance or failure to it (Belaj 1989:13), then the perspective of studying **differences** in contradistinction to the former perspective of studying **similarities**<sup>9</sup>, notwithstanding the danger of getting negative results, can contribute to ethnological research, precisely because of the fundamental ethnological term of reference - ethnos. Why would we not start from the hypothesis that Croatian culture has some specificities, why would we not try to find out when, how and with what elements Croatian culture was differentiated from the culture of other Slavic peoples, when and how the Croatian ethnos emerged and whether culture had anything to do with its emergence. After all, why would we not ethnologically study a well-known commonplace that one can recognize at first sight a Croat from a Serb, a Macedonian from an Albanian, not to mention members of more distant peoples (a Croat from an Englishman or a Frenchman and alike); why not investigate cultural symbols of the

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<sup>9</sup> Can we say that the paradigm of difference predominated in the former descriptions of Croatian culture, which resulted in establishing regional Croatian cultures, and that the paradigm of similarities predominated in comparing it with other cultures, which resulted in recognizing cultural layers found in Croatian culture?

Croatian people and their changes through time (cf. Nora on "lieux de mémoire" in 1984 and 1986)?

To pursue such an investigation it will be necessary to abandon the paradigm of similarities, genetic approach and research in the so-called material culture, and direct ourselves towards studying the so-called non-material culture and towards conceiving of culture not as a collection of atomized items but as a system of perceptions, values, beliefs and behaviour; the culture as meanings that people attach to the world and the behaviour of other people (Haviland 1990). This definition of culture is not entirely unknown in Croatian ethnology for Radić has already defined ethnology as the science of how people live and think. Almost a hundred years ago Radić has given a very modern definition of culture<sup>10</sup> as, on the one hand, rules for behaviour (in Radić's words "how peoples think") according to which the members of a society orient their actions and decide on the limits of acceptable and appropriate behaviour (in Radić' words "how peoples live"), and the results of these actions<sup>11</sup>. Radić did not separate those aspects except as a heuristic device (also stressed by Gavazzi 1940:7), although in later research it became the canon to separate out cultural phenomena from the total context.

A change in the conceptualization of culture will permit an analysis of Croatian culture, not in the sense of its genesis and cultural layers, but in the sense of its characteristics with regards to other ethnic cultures, in the sense of investigating cultural categories which have acquired the meaning of ethnic symbols. We should re-orient our research in the following direction:

"If you wished to explain the difference between American and English culture, you would refer to the differences in their attitudes towards authority, towards tradition and class-distinctions, to the emphasis on quantity rather than quality in America, the British love of nature, and so on. And you would illustrate these observations by referring to particular regularities of behaviour, political, social and economic ..." (Bagby 1963:109).

With such research we shall not let down the fundamental term of reference of ethnology - ethnos. On the contrary, I think that we shall contribute to it by adding a very important dimension to its study, and we shall be closer not only to Radić but also to Bratanić who wrote:

"Stating similarities among ethnically related groups, which for almost 1400 years have lived together in contact (not only on their borders but also by the means of internal migration), is nothing unusual and does not give an incentive for further research. On the contrary, the very apparition of differences in the same situation asks for an explanation and is for this reason methodically more valuable for the development of the research" (Bratanić 1951:239, translation J. Č.)<sup>12</sup>.

10 I think that the fact that Radić very early defined culture in the manner in which it is habitually defined today has not yet been adequately evaluated.

11 In one text Bratanić has a similar definition of culture. Cultural goods are "actually the exterior picture of that real culture, that mental capability of men, which created that exterior picture. Cultural thus means two: all that men created for keeping, facilitating and embellishing their life, and besides this, that mental capability with which they created it" (Bratanić 1940:27, translation J. Č.).

12 Finally, it should be mentioned that this paper is not motivated only by the terrible war taking place in Croatia in 1991, but also by a task I took over at the beginning of this year to write about Croatian culture and Croatian cultural identity.



HRVATSKA ETNOLOGIJA,  
ZNANOST O NARODIMA ILI ZNANOST O KULTURI?

*Sažetak*

Autorica preispituje tezu da je starija hrvatska etnologija bila definirana kao znanost o narodu. Nastoji pokazati kako je od početka bila ustanovljena kao znanost o kulturi te da su takvo određenje kao i kulturno-historijski zadatak starije etnologije rezultirali negativnim znanjima o hrvatskome kulturnom identitetu. Za takova istraživanja valjat će revidirati definiciju kulture i cilj istraživanja.