

Tomislav Oroz. *Where were you in 1573? Diverse faces of Matija Gubec in practices of remembering*. Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2018, p. 305

Book Review

The book, whose part of the title, as I had found out only later, refers to an inscription on a T-shirt that the author received as a gift, is certainly bound to attract your attention. The title in itself would certainly not be so intriguing, were it not paraphrasing a loaded question from recent Croatian history - "Where were you in 1991?", which has become synonymous for enquiring about someone's participation in the Croatian War of Independence. It is a question that reveals "an obsession with historical topics that fills the Croatian media space" (p. 10) and it has also been parodied through an Internet meme about time loop from which Croatia will not disentangle for a while more (the Internet meme about the eternal Croatian circle 1945 – 1971 – 1991). I liked the book with a provocation in its title even before I started reading it. Nevertheless, I liked it even more after I had read it. The author was successful in his intention to show that it is possible: "to start solving serious problems (...) through frivolous questions" (p. 17). Like most author's interlocutors in research who only at the end of the research conversation shyly venture to express their own view of the Peasant Revolt and the character of Matija Gubec or some curiosity from personal life linked with him, as a marginal piece of information that "could be of interest (to the author)" (p. 271), I also carry the memory of Matija Gubec literally "inscribed" or even better "embodied" in myself. I am referring to 5 or 6 stitches on my left leg that I got during a school excursion in the second grade of elementary school during a visit (and some accompanying mischiefs) to Gubec Linden Tree.

It is perhaps clearer now why I was so interested in what was behind the excellent title and Milovan Gavazzi annual award granted by the Croatian Ethnological Society to the book in question (for 2018).

Nevertheless, what truly delighted me was its content, of course. The author Tomislav Oroz skilfully takes the readers, especially those uninformed ones, with his pen through all the curves of insights necessary for mastering the knowledge required for understanding of the complex and always actual issues of social memory and different practices of remembering, analysed through the phenomenon of Matija Gubec. Social memory is one of many research topics that intersect areas of interest of different scientific disciplines and Tomislav Oroz broached the subject through his doctoral thesis entitled "Cultural Anthropological Approach to the Character of Matija Gubec in Political Discourse and Popular Culture". Historians have significantly contributed to theories of social memory, while the most important aspect was emphasised by the author himself who holds a MA degree in History: "Historical legends evoking the specific historical

content and hence those inspired by the character and the biography of Matija Gubec should definitely not be judged from the stance of their historical, chronological or factual accuracy.” (p. 64).

Hence truthfulness or untruthfulness, authenticity or inauthenticity for the phenomenon of social memory (as a matter of fact, as well as for many other phenomena such as, for example, inventing tradition) are almost not relevant at all and historians are (have become) well aware of that. Social memory is a phenomenon, like many others (e.g. Williams’s structure of feeling or like heritage), in which each generation (and frequently also a group) expresses and interprets individual elements of the past, irrespective of their authenticity, again and again and in a different way, yet each time in accordance with their own actual needs.

Consequently, the author does not address the issue of authenticity of historical information about the Peasant Revolt and Matija Gubec, but he provides an abundance of information about how, in what period and in what culture segment the memory of Gubec and the Peasant Revolt developed and/or was adapted. In that sense, the book is a true gold mine.

The book is divided into 8 chapters. After a specific introduction entitled “Matija Gubec Reinterpreted” in which we become acquainted with the author’s motivation, the second chapter “Interdisciplinary Fraternity and / or Disciplinary Arguments” questions the differences/ similarities of the approach of different disciplines in relation to memory (primarily of history and anthropology, as well as, for example, art – through an example which is not acceptable to everyone of “avoidance of perpetuating victimisation patterns of memory” of the project *Dancing Auschwitz* (p. 49). The author provides an overview of relevant theories and approaches to social memory and hence also terminological explanations of the notion and its kindred notions (such as, for example, *memorial site*, *collective memory*, *counter-memory*, *figures of memory*, *memory practices*). The relevant research conducted in Croatia on this topic has not been left out, which rooted the paper in the corpus of the existing analyses performed from the stance of social memory on domestic ground.

A true mine of meticulously collected information about where, when, how and why there are different interpretations of Matija Gubec throughout the 19th century ensues from the third chapter entitled “New Peasant Revolts, New Faces of Matija Gubec – a Historical Imaginarium of the Long 19th Century”. The author here provides a cultural anthropological analysis not only of popular views and artistic value in connection with Gubec, but also an analysis of politically relevant factors that interpret the context in which each individual author created a piece of work inspired by Gubec. (p. 59)

Considering the huge potential of revolutionary capacity of the idea of the Peasant Revolt and Matija Gubec, it is not surprising that the fourth chapter entitled “The Myth of the Peasant Revolt and Matija Gubec During the Interwar Period” is dedicated to the memory of the Revolt in the political discourse at the turn of the century. The author analyses the portrayal of Matija Gubec and the Peasant Revolt from magazines to postage stamps, yet, of course, also in popular literary and theatre pieces. It is important

to highlight the theatre play entitled “Evica Gubčeva” by Marija Jurić Zagorka, which, as was the case with many other texts by the same author, was perceived as a theatre piece of not very high quality, which was compensated by the obvious patriotic fervour. Nevertheless, as with any deviation from the norm, it is important to point out the importance of this piece in terms of women’s emancipation, as through “fictionalisation of historical narrative in which there is a female figure as an equal bearer of social change, as a counterpart to male leadership that dominates in historiographic representations of the Revolt.” (p. 94)

Through an analysis of this inception, the author takes us to modern popular notions that fully came to life in the second half of the 20th century (p. 102). That part was addressed in the fourth chapter entitled “The Myth about the Peasant Revolt and Matija Gubec During the Interwar Period”. This chapter is dedicated to an analysis of character appropriation and of the work of Matija Gubec by different, frequently opposing protagonists manning the political stage. The author analyses the efforts of the Croatian People’s Peasant Party and the Radić brothers who started evoking the symbolism of the Peasant Revolt and Matija Gubec fairly early in their political activity and they strived to emphasise the organic bond of the peasant leadership from the 16th century with those from the first half of the 20th century (p. 122). A similar thing was attempted also by other rivals on the political stage. The Ustasha rhetoric invoked the fight for justice in the context of “a return of the directives from the times of our national rulers” (Račan 1944: 2 according to Oroz), while the social component of the Revolt led by Gubec was used by the Communist Party for the same purpose (shrouding the political agenda with incontrovertible historical facts). The strength of the revolutionary charge can be identified through the fact that also a terrorist organisation of illegal pre-war Ustasha Movement bore the name of Matija Gubec, as well as the partisan brigade and a volunteer brigade in the Spanish Civil War.

The use of the name and the character of Matija Gubec on promotional materials of the partisan movement and in the media (p. 139) in the newly established state was striving to reflect the ideological positions of the new authorities that, through inclusion of Matija Gubec in their symbolic repository, on the one hand, had to overcome the constraints of regional legend, as well as the pre-existing interpretations in other interpretive matrices (p. 142). A curiosity in relation to the character and work of Matija Gubec in the newly established state at the beginning is the description of the Ambassador to the Czech Republic in Belgrade, upon the marking of victory at the National Theatre, where the play “Matija Gubec” was staged, in which he stated that people fanatically (and let us be realistic, totally akin to the modern not at all less fanatical (and funny) applauding to different leaders of party movements in the occasion of, for example, the elections) applauded “Gubec in the grand tier” i.e. Tito (p. 147). Tito and Matija Gubec were equated and so were Peasant Revolt and revolutionary rebellions, which continued even after the Second World War, when Gubec, as well as other characters from the Peasant Revolt started appearing in popular culture – comic books, films (animated, documentaries), as well as in rock operas.

A more impressive and it appears an unknown episode thus far is one concerning the search of the film director Vatroslav Mimica for the actor who would embody Matija Gubec in his film entitled “Anno Domini 1573”. In fact, he attempted to find the solution to this issue in co-operation with the magazine Studio, which invited the readers to send their suggestions and descriptions of what Gubec is supposed to look like. This resulted in an impressive collection of ethnographic records about the collective need to imagine Matija Gubec 400 years later, reflections about him, as well as a true repository for analysis and requirements in terms of cultural anthropology. A large number of individuals, from pupils to old age pensioners sent not only their descriptions, but also drawings, sculptures, photographs with accompanying anecdotes, among others and hence this quest for Matija Gubec represents a real ethnographic treasure that shows the reach of social memory.

The analysis of staging “Gubec-Beg” rock opera is especially interesting because of the controversies that at the time accompanied the distrust in rock, which was then perceived as an undesirable genre. Nevertheless, the authors of the rock-opera showed that even at the time there was room for negotiation and they managed to use it by justifying it through so frequently used arguments about presenting specific (educational) content to the youth in a manner that they would find adequate (p. 218)

The author addressed the memory of Gubec in post-socialist period through character appropriation of Gubec by several types of actors. The first ones were the members of the band Legen who, through the metaphor of the Peasant Revolt criticised tycoonisation (illegal privatisation) of Croatia (e.g. a tycoon like Franjo Tahi portrayed by Dubravko Mataković on the “Peasant Revolt” album cover). Different activist movements have also used the inexhaustible potential of Matija Gubec. These include Anonymous Croatia, as well as, for example, Matija Gubec Civic Initiative – Resistance to the Space for Political Discretion, which was against the ban of public gatherings / public protests in St. Mark’s Square since 2005 (lifted seven years later). In the context of the latter activist group, the explanation of the choice of the name for the initiative given by one of the actors is indicative “as young people in their twenties if they were to launch such an initiative, they would not choose Matija Gubec as a relevant factor” (p. 245). This quote shows the existence of specific intergenerational differences in the perception of Matija Gubec and it provides an opportunity for further analysis of effectiveness of modern protests in general or an analysis of involvement in them in terms of age.

Finally, an analysis ensues of perhaps the firmest modern consumerist aspect of character appropriation of Matija Gubec that saw “ceding the active role to the visitors” (p. 267), which certainly “does not contribute to the transfer of the interpretative matrix of rebellion”. The latter refers to the festival aspect of Peasant Revolt in Donja Stubica that needs to be analysed as “a cultural phenomenon that could not be ignored in the context of understanding a broader post-socialist attitude to historical heritage.” (p. 256)

In the final chapter the author revealed even more, as well as about the course of research conversations with the interlocutors, which further faithfully shows the attitude towards memories of individuals as less valuable compared with the official

one. The previously mentioned assumption that the researcher “could be interested” in information perceived as marginal, such as, for example, a personal experience or a curiosity from one’s own life shows not only the attitude of individuals to social memory, but also to their attitude towards themselves as a protagonists of historical events, as well as about the current status of perception of our profession by the main protagonists of our research.

It is a book that will not only cheer you up and enrich you with abundance of interesting information, but it will also encourage you to question your own role in the context of large-scale social events.

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