"INTELLECTUAL CONCERNS AND SCHOLARLY PRIORITIES": A VOICE OF AN ETHNOGRAPHER

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The author deals with the issue of intellectual and scientific engagement in the actual situation in her country, having in mind the methodological currents presently characterizing Croatian ethnology/anthropology. It is her opinion that the interdiciplinary approach cultivated among Croatian ethnographers offers some comparative advantages in dealing with the war.

In January 1995 I was invited to participate with a ten-minute presentation at the conference entitled "Intellectual Concerns and Scholarly Priorities in South Eastern Europe", in front of a body of intellectuals representing the *American Council for Learned Societies*. The Croatian organizer of this conference was *Erasmus Gilda*, a highly esteemed intellectual initiative for the promotion of values and institutions of modern civil democracy, which, unfortunately, also suffers a media-generated stigma of being hostile not only to the present Croatian political power structure, but also to the entire idea of the contested and hardly won Croatian statehood, a stigma that once again seems to label some intellectuals as not belonging to the group of "honest intelligentsia" unreservedly dedicated to the reconstruction of their homeland.

The invitation, which did me honour and which I didn't even dream of declining, still put me in an awkward position. Namely, the syntagm "intellectual concerns" is traditionally perceived in Croatia as defining public, political *engagement* in the Sartreian sense of the word, an obligation of intellectuals (especially those working in the humanities and, more so, those working in the social sciences) to denounce abuses and repressive behavior of power structures, to stand up against all régimes and the ideologies that feed them, openly to confront indigenous mentality when it starts inventing reasons for prejudices, provincialism, self--complacent political illiteracy and cultural mediocrity.¹

As they told us later, our American colleagues were surprised that we all felt somehow obliged either to excuse ourselves for our lack of engagement in political critique or complain about the impossibility of it. For them, scholars are primarily people engaged in scientific work, not necessarily involved in public debates about current policies, and they

But at the time I was invited to this conference Croatia was (and still is) in a disastrous war which, I deeply felt, it neither provoked nor deserved. For the first time since it started I had to decide publicly about my position and my attitudes as a zoon politikon: was I to practice my criticism, complain about the growing unimportance of scientific work, low salaries, a repressive system of career promotion, nonexistent forms of moral and other stimulation, lack of information, etc., etc., or was I to "admit" (it is a crime to blame the Other, isn't it) I was sick of foreign misinterpretations, subtle ways of patronizing, imposing feelings of guilt and brain-washing of Croatian intellectuals, who had, as many foreign observers promptly denounced, so disgustingly turned into patriots incapable of rational thinking.² How was I, in aany case, to explain the unexplicable endeavor to float beyond established discourses, just to remain human and sensitive to explicative aberrations which so easily switched concepts to their own purpose of defining and thus controlling, including here eventual preconceptions and rigid frameworks of my audience? My personal situation was not much of a help: professionally, I also stood in-between, not quite sure whether I was really representative of the science I was there to represent, for I was invited as an anthropologist, and my Ph. D. thesis was not in social sciences, but in theatre studies.

On the other hand, and that is how I started my report, I was representative of the recent processes happening within the frame of ethnological/anthropological studies in Croatia:³ as a theatre expert working among literary scholars, linguists, historians, musicologists and sociologists in an ethnological institute, I embodied the willingness of an academic institution to promote the interdisciplinary approach that is usually vigorously praised but, in fact, rarely institutionally practised in social sciences.

There were two reasons for me to insist on that point. First, because I believe that only an open, pluralistic atmosphere in academic circles can legitimate all our claims for a truly democratic society, for freedom of public speech as well as for moral and financial support of the arts and humanities from ministeries and other, Croatian or foreign, organisations, which dictate

were more interested in eventual limits set by the government to the free expansion of scientific thought.

² Finkielkraut's work testifies to the contempt of French intellectuals towards the national loyalty of Croatian ones, a contempt which I myself experienced when participating in a broadcast on a highly reputed radio station *France Culture*, during which I was accused of promoting government policies, although I was there simply to talk about the Croatian war ethnography. The same prejudices were expressed by numerous well-known scholars and writers such as, just to name some of them, Edgar Morin, Gjörgy Konrád and Peter Handke.

³ These processes probably do not include the *larger* part of ethnological work done in Croatia, but, in my opinion, *the most interesting* part of it.

directly the amount of impact our thinking and/or criticism will have.⁴ The second reason to emphasise this relatively peaceful coexistence of different scientific traditions is of a substantial nature: it changed the face of Croatian ethnographic writing, by enabling all concerned to become conscious of its limits and scope, methodological choices and pitfalls, of the historical determination of its shape and function, researchers and objects, as well as of the textual character of its production, which, like all texts, creates narrative illusions, the major of them being the speaking of *the* "truth" about past or present realities.⁵

Thus, ethnology and folkloristics needed to be redefined as sciences which had lost their firm ground of scientific enthusiasm that characterized their origins in the 19th century and has, as it seemed, lasted ever since, despite several different ideological and theoretical costumes they had changed on their journey to the actually reigning epistemological insecurity. For this past five years, one could say, metacriticism has been winning the battle: the status of the profession has been questioned (Sklevicky 1991),⁶

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⁴ In this respect the conference I was invited to offered a unique occasion to meet colleagues from other professions, an occasion never experienced before. This, however, did not automatically imply interest and tolerance, which are always left for better times. Unknown to each other, gathered for the first time around a bizarre motif of exposing to Others our collective, national and scientific, *examen personnel*, we were in ourselves proof of institutional inertia and professional prejudices.

⁵ One of the first Croatian studies dealing with the textuality of ethnographic accounts and interpretations, Traces of the Story, was written by a linguist Mirna Velčić (1991), a former member of the Institute. Her essay on "the relationship towards the Other and the contemporary ethnographic practice" (162-197), inspired by pragmatic analysis, focused on the fictionality of any verbal production and discussed various ways of legitimating ethnographic writing among other social sciences, through the use of discursive conventions in order to "present the actuality of one's own (textual, note LČF) production as the reality produced out of its space" (168-169). It is her opinion that only the accounts radically conscious of their illusionary quality, and their immersion into other texts, myths and (scientific) ideologies, as well as already written narrative scenarios, can pretend to overcome limits characteristic of monologue discourses and eventually come closer to the unattainable dialogue quality. Despite its problematic points, already denounced by some critics (Jambrešić 1993; Čale Knežević 1995), this book testified, for the first time, to the possible insertion of Croatian ethnographies into the postmodern epistemological paradigm and implicitly influenced concrete narrative procedures which characterized war ethnographies and which I will discuss later on. (The issue of the "textual constructions of reality" in social sciences was systematically treated in Paul Atkinson's study The Ethnographic Imagination, 1990).

⁶ An originally strictly sociologically inspired contribution of enormous importance, for a double reason. The results of the survey concerning the sentiment of adherence to the professional ethic and the perception of the social status of ethnologists were disastrous in that they were obtained by a distinct minority of interested professionals willing to answer (one third) and in that they gave a picture of their sadly low self- -esteem. Reversing the focus to the producers (and, in some cases, preservers) of knowledge about culture, this

together with the epistemological place and the very name of these knowledges (Prica 1992; Čapo Žmegač 1993).⁷ Croatian ethnologists and folklorists have started to ask themselves whether they should catch up with the missed chances of the socialist period (Rihtman--Auguštin 1992; Čapo Žmegač 1991; 1994).⁸ They have engaged in criticizing previous definitions of their respective fields or in discussing their growth under various theoretical influences and institutional roofs (Jambrešić 1993; Lozica 1993; Čiča 1993).⁹ Even some of the basic terms (as, for instance, the terms

study provided some scandalous raw facts on which to base further introspection of the multiply conditioned authorial voices in Croatian ethnographies.

- Prica named the disciplinary framework within which she is trying to maneuver "little European ethnology" situated in a postcritical period, a period of loss of faith in huge all-covering stories/theories. She confronts its position with the anthropologies of the exotic Other, and finds some valuable "comparative advantages" for it in the postmodern "reduction of hope", and in its scientific generic liberalism favoring a decentralized and metacritical perspective. Čapo Žmegač commented the ongoing debate about whether Croatian ethnology should change its name into social anthropology and was more concerned with delineating different traditions connected with different names attributed in different countries to the same body of knowledge. She sees it as a science concerned both with historical layers of an ethnic culture and with its role in contemporary social processes, focused on its differential aspects (as opposed to the similarity imperative which has reigned so far) and to the people and their way of living rather than on objects left to be deciphered.
- Both authors stressed, for instance, the avoidance of the national dimension in reflecting about cultural processes. Rihtman-Auguštin put this perspective, censored so far, into the category of the "neglected *themes*"; for Čapo Žmegač it was also an *empty notion* in the tradition of a nominally national ethnology, a conceptual *space* to be filled explored, studied, discussed and finally, if possible, defined. Although aware of the deficiencies of an objective, *etic* approach to emotionally colored entities she would like to see foregrounded, investigated and described, she is still, as Rihtman-Auguštin, concentrated mostly to the widening of the ethnological eyeshot and not yet willing to question the ethnological writing in itself, its place in the global production of knowledge, which made it blind to these suddenly discovered areas of interest in the first place (cf. Prica 1995). Despite the risk of just substituting the old topics by the new ones, favored by the current course of political events, these claims were enlightening in their critique both of our research tradition and of its contemporary reception, a reception which tends to universalize and essentialise the historical positioning of romantic grounds of modernist ethnology and labels the search for its unsolved questions as scientific anachronism.
- ⁹ Čiča transformed and downgraded the issue of the methodological discordances appearing within the profession into a mere ("nonproductive", as he states) *querelle des institutions* (IEF and the department at the Faculty of Philosophy), in an understandable, though naïve attempt to find a common denominator and prompt the reconciliation between conceptions of research that are perceived as being antagonistic and that are, according to him, supposed to collaborate in a unifying project of describing what he, rather simplifying, sees as *their common culture*. Jambrešić explores the traces of the influential teaching of the Prague school in Croatian folkloristics, but in fact ends up in a far-reaching analysis of the position of the Croatian folkloristics within the discourse of humanities and social sciences. She understands the original romantic project of exploring popular oral literary (and verbal in

"cultural identity", "custom" and "folklore") have been examined in a deconstructive perspective, as self-closing terms, tautologically defined, and yet uncritically used as "handy" and "operative" terminological tools (Lozica 1991; Prica 1991a; 1991b).¹⁰

The outburst of the war coincided with these developments, and the war is the first thing I can think of when asked about the actual political circumstances affecting the status of my science.

For let me remind you of how delicate the traditional major issues of ethnology and folklore research became at that moment, how suitable to all kinds of ideological and political manipulations, to begin with the notion of

general) genres as an ideologically generated one, and therefore emphasizes the methodological and theoretical turning points in the last thirty years of contemporary Croatian folkloristics as proof of its continuous fight for scientific autonomy beyond utilitarian claims, for multiperspectivity and theoretical relevance. Lozica's study is an excellent example of the aforementioned qualities of Croatian folkloristics: permeated with doubts, questions and metacritical self-awareness; his text, while trying to inaugurate a new subdiscipline of ethnotheatrology in the context of a growing fragmentation of knowledge, is also an implicit endorsement of how the discipline, through inventing its own object of research in order to legitimize itself, still manages to provide fruitful insights into phenomena considered to be already exhaustively "covered" by ethnology and theatrology.

¹⁰ The uncertainties around the definition of *folklore* have been criticized since the term first appeared. Lozica not only explains the need to stretch the notion to the cultural facets that entered the sphere of interest of folkloristics during past few decades, but goes further in trying to describe the historically ever-shifting qualities of aesthetic and nonaesthetic functions (in Mukarovskii's terms) within what is primarily defined as folk art (1991:18— 30). Exposing the blurring "borders of custom" comprehended as a notion and as a supposed delineated empirical entity, Prica touched the most sensitive point of the Croatian ethnographic discourse, "its logo, its link with its starts, part of its identity and its authenticity" (Prica 1991a:253). Built out of binary oppositions which made it neighbor to notions such as everyday life, context, cultural behavior, praxis, habit, ritual, ceremony, feast, holiday, determined by the chosen etic or emic approach, as well as by form and substance dichotomy, reduced once to the traditional and extended another time to the contemporary culture, the term and its definition (or rather, its desired operative uniqueness!) seem to slip out of the fingers of its users and point to the concurrent analytical traditions. Prica attributes the resistance the term has shown so far towards attempts to dismiss it as inefficient in the present methodological situation, to its generally perceived firm link with the referent it is supposed to designate. Thus, the discussion about the term leads to the discussion about this "general perception", namely, about the state and the goals of such a cultural analysis, relying on the so-called ethnographic material and objective accounts obtained by fieldwork, unwilling to reconstruct the conditions of its own scientific production and unaware of its terminological tools as analytical constructs, results of different intersecting languages, cultural and scientific. The same inevitability of turning to the "shaky grounds of interpretation" (Prica 1991b:77) is met by the author while debating about the doubly (as a scientific term and as an idealized, harmonious cultural projection) decomposed "cultural identity", to a position which necessitates selfconscious selection of symbolic traits and burdens the ethnographer with the long refused authorship of cultural texts established by his personal vision.

ethnos and ethnic identity, so readily designed as conceptual shelters for the definition of this war, and to continue with the notions of people and culture, so often used and abused in political discourses to legitimate actions of various kinds. Even the seemingly benign, and relatively recently discovered object of contemporary ethnological research, i. e. everyday life in urban surroundings, suffered the intrusion of the contagiously spreading "vivacity" brought by the breakdown of communism, by the arrival of political pluralism and, finally, by the war - events for some processed by the media, for others unbelievably real.

This confusion of events, policies, concepts, discourses and moral choices, this mixture of public messages and private feelings waited for this new, redesigned, interpretative ethnology (or should I say cultural anthropology? ethnography?) which was to profit from the postmodern blurring of disciplinary and generic boundaries in order to keep up to the chaos. Its inherited marginality, its independence from large meta--narratives and the general ideological elusiveness it has acquired through the adoption of strategies of textual self-awareness, its faculty to collect, absorb and creatively rearrange all kinds of lost bits and pieces from other knowledges, and, above all, its ear for the so-called little, personal narratives, usually quickly forgotten, disregarded and suppressed, all that now proved to be an advantage for creating at least somewhat trustworthy documents of war, that could neither be easily dismissed as political propaganda nor be interpreted as hypocritical intellectualism unwelcomed in difficult times.

In fact, being an intellectual once again became almost an ethically questionable quality. How can one think and feel at the same time? Surrounded by sharp, uncomfortable and semantically shaken, nearly reversible oppositions of past and future, east and west, individual conscience and collective cause, patriotism and nationalism, etc., the authors who decided to react by writing reached for autocathartic devices, treating their own lives as texts that ought to be written against mainstream interpretations, whether they were coming from outside or from inside the jeopardized country.¹¹ This, naturally, raised the problem of the receptional inertia of the

Although almost all the Croatian war ethnographies were, because they were written by the insiders, to some extent autobiographical (as Brian Bennet put it, they were "a subjective interjection of themselves into the text" (1995), Maja Povrzanović was one of the rare authors who explicitly included parts of her personal life into her ethnographic accounts, in which members of her family and herself suddenly became characters in a breath-taking war story, discursively coexisting not only with anthropological analysis (and doubts), but also with fragments of reality transmitted by the media, with newspaper titles or emotionally overloaded sentences taken out from personal letters (see especially Povrzanović 1993b). It seems that presently more space for theorizing emotions involved in the "participatory experience" has been opened in the view of abolishing the "brahmanical division" which assumes "that the field experience is separable from theory" (Okeley 1992:3).

virtual readers - the World with a capital W they appealed to for help on one hand and the understandably "jumpy" indigenous audience on the other. To avoid that overwhelming mistrust on all sides, Croatian ethnographers tried to find their courage in playing the postmodern game. They took advantage of the postmodern rhetoric of textual deconstruction, self-consciously revealing their authorial voices in their texts, exposing their personal moral dilemmas, 12 presenting themselves as bearers of conscious and unconscious prejudices, whether ideologically, nationally or emotionally generated, in that way gladly abstaining from fulfilling the previous claim for absolute objectivity (Pettan 1993), 13 sometimes openly displaying the experimental nature of their texts 14 which strove for the tridimensionality unknown and previously even unwanted in scientific discourse, producing stylistic effects that were reserved earlier for literature, 15 in short, making, so to speak, ideal commodities for the

Writing in war as acting and therefore necessarily taking moral responsibilities towards human beings as objects of description and analysis was explicitly treated as an issue mostly by Povrzanović (1993a) and Prica (1993), who both saw it as an imperative and a challenge, despite its seemingly comfortable position of consuming and also in a way processing already mediated war events instead of bearing all its painful consequences. It is especially Prica who emphasizes the indispensable humility of such an enterprise and sees the devotion to writing and using an apparently "totally useless and senseless" language in a war situation as an "unambitious and relatively clean" one, because it is "restricted to the places of cultural remodeling" and disburdened of pretenses to "write history".

Pettan is, first, overtly writing about himself as an ethnomusicologist, a "researcher and an object of research as a subject of the experiment, both concentrated in the same person", claiming that he will consciously adopt a "personal approach" and "renounce the pretense to represent attitudes of ethnomusicologists in Croatia at the general level", wishing to "incite new and different reflecting of the science about music" in general (1993:153—154). Second, in his analysis of (Croatian and Serbian) popular music production in the context of war in Croatia, he does not disguise the fact that the choice of the representative material could be different, leading to almost contrary conclusions. While trying to present persuasive arguments for the chosen and compared songs, he was demonstrating that subjectivity in writing does not mean arbitrariness, but doubled responsibility and prudence towards the contextual shaping of oneís discourse. However, Pettan also implicitly argues that constant self--questioning could stay just a rhetorical device and that, although aware of a risk of slipping into the overarching *episteme* which is also always some kind of ideology, one must still avoid ambiguity as much as one can in "taking sides".

Perhaps the most radical one was Ines Prica's attack on interiorated norms of a "well written ethnological study". Having modestly named "notes" (in Croatian the word was the notorious "material") something that was to be classified as an "original scientific paper", she developed it around ostentatiously subjectively and arbitrarily chosen motifs that she herself found as striking in the media experience of this war, and reverted on purpose the usual proportions of information and interpretation in the main and the footnote text (see Prica 1993).

¹⁵ Reana Senjković used the verses of a popular song written and sung during the war by a rock star as mottoes for the chapters of her study on war iconography. The structure of the song seemed thus to dictate the structure of the article, and pointed to the interpenetrating

discursive economy of postmodern thought.¹⁶ The profit they made out of this was both meager and considerable: being far away from the realm of their possible material or professional "success", they "acted out", as psychoanalysts would say, in an impossible situation, and saved their intellectual consciences.

Therefore, and here I will probably disappoint my readers, the scientific efforts I was there representing tend to be neither ideologically approved of nor politically provocative or "dangerous": too conscious of their own textuality, of the amorphous and multiple realities they are trying to grasp, these new ethnographic texts, even when they talk about the atrocities of the war, are now only eager to *please*¹⁷ - in the sense Roland Barthes used the terms of "plaisir" and "jouissance" in connection with literary texts. Their subversiveness, if there is any, lies both in the refusal to rationalize old myths with worn-out preconceptions and in the denial of any absolute scientific criteria for selection of the so-called pertinent traits¹⁸ that could support a

of diverse forms of popular cultural expression that characterized the symbolic resistance to the aggression (see Senjković 1993).

Yes, they took the postmodern liberties proclaimed by Clifford, Marcus, Fischer and others seriously, in a conviction and hope that it will enable them not only to express their doubts in their own authority, but also to find a common language with the contemporary anthropological thought, and still stay true to themselves and their right to be different (about the relevance of the new ethnography for the ethnologist in the war situation see Povrzanović 1993a and Prica 1992; 1995). Povrzanović is willfully using quotes from these authors in a double (and conditioned by a double context of reception) urge to legitimize her writing within the critical "open ended postmodern discourse" and to excuse herself in advance for the eventual dis- and con--cordances of parts of her interpretation with the "official version", which could, as Brian Bennet warned Croatian ethnographers, "appropriate their texts for their own purposes" (1995).

¹⁷ The risk of writing mere literature instead of reflecting the cultural processes, which has already been "discovered" as a serious threat for the authority of anthropology, is in my opinion only proof of the generic superiority and magical powers beyond the text that anthropology tends to attribute to its writings, which cannot escape laws of verbal representation, for instance uses of tenses and pronouns in an endeavor to "preserve the reality of the ethnographic encounter" (Hastrup 1992:117). The irony of such a claim is the emergence of "literary anthropology", a search for anthropological data in literary texts, an acknowledgment of "the fact that not only have narratives preceded the development of anthropological research methods and equipment..., but that they continue to document their cultures today" (Poyatos 1988:xiii).

In fact, once again ethnographers pointedly reached out for non-pertinent ones, rumors, oral accounts, private rituals, to derive from them their insights in the inextricable complexity of the popular perceptions of the meaning, causes and effects of this war: for instance, Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin continued her former work on death notices which in war appeared as rich documents revealing the mythical, ideological and emotional filling of the notion of a heroic death, as valuable proof of the moral, cultural and educational standards of patriotism, generally unstable and struggling for supremacy in the context of war (see Rihtman-Auguštin 1993).

presumptuous political and cultural critique - a barely visible graffiti message or a chance statement of a child are as important an argument in the development of a thesis as are official announcements of presidential policy professed on the main square of our capital. The responsibility is all on the interpretative perspicacity and reflective depth of researchers themselves, on whose sole persuasiveness depends the "effet du réel" their stories will engender.

Croatian ethnographers do not feel their job is to offer smart recipes for the "bad guys" in power: their last choice was to (re)turn stubbornly to refugees, 19 the exemplary reminders of the contradictions underlying clear-cut solutions, these points of dangerous intersection of foreign and domestic guilt everybody would like to disappear somehow after having served statistic purposes. As people who are condemned to keep repeating to themselves who they really are, they seem to be the sadly perfect object of the new ethnographic inquiry, strangely fitting the painful re-building of the collapsed scientific self-confidence. Let us hope that their voices, which are now suffocating in collective oblivion, will resurrect through ours, thus saving us both from the horrible, yet growing political and intellectual indifference towards the only apparently unreachable reality of moral issues.

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¹⁹ The project of collecting and analyzing personal narratives of refugees and displaced persons started in 1992 under the guidance of Ines Prica, and had one of its most fruitful outcomes in Renata Jambrešić's studies in oral history as issued from the laws of narratively presenting it in life histories, more concretely war testimonies and trauma narratives, which are, as she claims, polyphonic (as opposed to the unison discourse of the official national narrative), imbued by official rhetoric, personal sufferings, striving for (at least narrative) order, sense and hope, and are in their elaboration distinctly determined by the gender of their tellers (see Jambrešić 1995a and b). The most recent result of the interest in the perspective refugees and displaced persons could offer to ethnographic understanding was the conference *War*, *Exile*, *Everyday life*, organized by the Institute in March 1995.

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