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Editor of series: *Glgorije Zaječaranović*
Address: Univerzitetski trg 2, 18000 Niš, YU,
Tel: (018) 547-095, Fax: (018)-547-950

A SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF THE CONTROVERSY OVER NATIONALISM IN SERBIAN LITERATURE

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Dragan Žunić

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš

Abstract. *The author exposes hypotheses of his research on nationalism in Serbian literature; he also reports on the stock of investigations of this problem, on the position of contemporary Serbian writers and theoreticians in this matter, and displays a typology of critical accusations of nationalism in Serbian literature. Finally, he points out some deficiencies - from the sociological point of view - of this criticism.*

1. The main hypothesis of this research on nationalism in contemporary Serbian literature¹ says that there is a certain relationship between Serbian literature and the awakening of the Serbian national consciousness in the period 1985-1995; writers, their associations and some literary works themselves play an important role in forming the national dimension of the dominant world view. By defining the type of the relationship it would be also possible to investigate the problem of the supposed responsibility of writers and their literature not only for transforming the national idea into the nationalistic ideology, but also for political and war consequences of this transformation.

The main hypothesis is concretized through several supporting hypotheses.

- Traditional mythology, epic tradition and national destiny make the legitimate content of all contemporary modern art (including Serbian literature) and they do not necessarily do a service to nationalism; though both old and new Serbian literature might often be subjugated to nationalistic instrumentalization and political misuse.

- The prevailing national thematic framework and the subsequent national and nationalistic charge are mainly found in artistically unsuccessful works, but it does not mean that the presence of the national is always a sign of aesthetic inferiority. Apart from that, since the aesthetic dimension is not the same as the social function of a work, and the

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communicability of a piece of work is not necessarily a precondition of its artistic value, it is possible that in certain socio-historical and cultural circumstances even great works of literature might exhibit (unintended) nationalistic effects in their reception.

- There is some difference between the public influence of writers and their associations, on the one hand, and the influence of their literary works, on the other. Writers have made the greatest effect on forming the national consciousness rather by their public activity than by their slow and low circulating books. (There are of course exceptions to this rule). The effect of literature seems to be rather indirect, through mass-media promotion and mass media manipulation.

2. First of all, I have tried to examine a stock of research on topic: nationalism and contemporary Serbian literature.

Despite the general tendency of revealing again the tradition and the search for the national identity, which in the Balkans takes the form of dangerous nationalism, it seems that sociologists in Yugoslavia/Serbia did not show an adequate interest in these problems at the very beginning of the decade 1985-1995. Virtually, the initial lack of interest was replaced by some theoretical works about the nation, and then by some works about nationalism and Yugoslavship. Not enough attention was paid to the role of writers and literature in the process of the nationalistic consciousness reviving. What most sociologists missed (with rather rare exceptions) attracted attention of other experts and professionals, though, on the other hand, they did not grasp the portion of the problem which belongs to the realm of sociology. In my opinion, it is a sociological approach to the problem of the relationship between nationalism and literature that is essential, since the problem itself is sociological by its nature, rather than aesthetic or ethic, literary-theoretical or literary-historical, psychological or anthropological. It has turned out that sociologically indicative objections have not been replied in a sociologically relevant manner. In other words, the objections have been mostly rejected, but not essentially refuted. Methodologically, it is very important to delineate the accusations of writers and institutions, on the one hand, and those of literature itself, on the other hand, despite the following important facts: (a) that the literary phenomenon is a unique relationship of "the author-work-audience", and (b) that political attitudes might be in an "organic" way involved in the tissue of a literary work (typical of the world of symbolic forms). It is evident that civic and literary engagements do not overlap. Thus the research is supposed to supply the replies to the following two questions: (1) what of the nationalistic ideology and to what degree is really incorporated in the literary work, and (2) what is that which makes the nationalistic effect in reception.

3. The next problem investigated in my research is the position of contemporary Serbian writers and theoreticians in the public.

3.1. Some most important Serbian writers, both in their works and pronouncements, are in step with the prevailing contemporary current of the humanistic and tolerant European way of thinking about the national/supranational role of writers (as defined in the essays of Czeslaw Milosz and Hans Magnus Enzensberger). In order to prove that, I will mention just a few examples: Aleksandar Tišma considers that many intellectuals - instead of warning of the danger of a nationalistic earthquake to come - have simply yielded themselves to "a tribal way of thinking". (*Naša Borba*, 29-30/05/1993) Moreover,

as Brana Petrović emphasizes many writers are trapped into a conviction that they are the "awakened part of the nation", and thus, playing the role of priests, prophets and bards, they begin to produce literary works of dubious value. (*NIN*, No. 2339, 27/10/1995) Unfortunately, some Serbian writers who do not share Tišma's and Petrović's attitudes are at the head of the nationalistic zeal.

Serbian theoreticians are also divided in their estimation of the historical role of Serbian intellectuals in our contemporary life. While Božidar Jakšić considers that many intellectuals, being under the banner of nationalism and chauvinism, have become "vulgar propagandists of the war aims of national oligarchies" (Jakšić 1995: 103), Nikola Milošević believes that Serbian intellectuals could not make any crucial decisions and thus they could not bear the greatest responsibility for the present state of the nation. Nevertheless, he admits that their support to the politics of Slobodan Milošević has played a significant role in "the political propaganda games". The question is, says N. Milošević, what intellectuals can really do when the media, budget, army and the police are under the absolute control of the regime. (*Nedeljni telegraf*, No. 15, 07/08/1996) In my opinion, even when public people play at least a decorative-ceremonial role in the public promotion of some already made decisions, they still cannot be amnestied for their historical responsibility.

3.2. What is the matter with Serbian writers in these poor and bad times? After the decay of the SFRY some writers - having accused the national policy of their own political leaders - left their places of living (benevolently or under pressure), and became stateless or denounced traitors; the appreciation of famous but deceased writers varies with different ethnic communities, i.e. they have become either desirable or proscribed symbols of a certain national culture, and "the currency" in the nationalistic market economy; besides, the monuments of those writers who have some symbolic meaning in one national culture are being damaged or desecrated by vandals in another.

3.3. It is assumed that the recent type of nationalism has not spared even the institutional forms (organizations) of our literary life. The Serbian Writers' Association is accused of having changed its course from its dissident and democracy-supporting attitude, at the very beginning of the eighties, towards anti-modernism and nationalism, at the end of the eighties, and of missing its opportunity to make a distinction between a legitimate apology of the national cultural heritage and political misuse of its tradition. Moreover, it is also objected that Serbian writers and their associations have become the main "producers of ideology", of course the nationalistic one, and that they have spread the burning issue of the fatalistic conviction that the Serbs are eternal victims.

4. I have tried to make a typology of critical accusations concerning the topic of nationalism in Serbian literature.

4.1. Transmission of the Romantic model of the national role of literature and writers dating from the 19th century into the situation and problems at the end of the 20th century. (Gojković 1996)

4.2. The majority of the contemporary Serbian literary work is mainly founded upon the Serbian epic and mythological tradition; it is obsessed with history, especially with the long slavery under the Turks and with struggles for national liberation. Serbian literature is enslaved by great national myths. (Bremer 1992; Lauer 1993)

4.3. Fatalistic and anachronic literary stylization, mythologization and ideologization

of the irrational motif of the Serbian people as the eternal victim, i.e. of the people doomed to vanish. (Bremer 1992; Lauer 1993; Gojković 1996)

4.4. Dominance of the collective and the ideological over the individual in the majority of the Serbian literary characters; the collective hero is articulated in the manner of the nationalistic ideology (Popov 1989); the main literary hero is not an individuum but the national program. (Đorđević 1996)

4.5. Collective heroes, burdened with their memories of the Serbian people suffering, stimulate hatred and demand revenge; literary works emit a message of the impossibility of any national reconciliation, oblivion and forgiveness. (Popov 1989; Bremer 1992)

4.6. The Serbian literature mentioned above is "the literature of the populist wave", the literature of "the national realism", marked with an open tendentiousness, and it has the main properties of trivial literature (sub-literature). Serving to the dominant pattern of taste, it became very popular, and contributed to the raising of the Serbian populism in the eighties. (Đorđević 1996)

5. This set of accusations seems to be acceptable, but with an important restriction: it is only related to certain literary works, and could not be generalized.

Despite the differences in the sociological theory of nationalism, there are a few common topics. Of all these, I am interested in the one which stresses the priority of cultural nationalism. It seems possible to demonstrate that the Serbian nationalism (perhaps not only Serbian, rather the nationalism of all Balkan peoples) was primarily cultural nationalism (as a kind of the national consciousness articulated in literature), which, after having been transformed into the political one, has finally become the mass ideology and the mass movement.

But, unfortunately, there is no valid sociological data obtained in a standard value-free sociological procedure to support such criticism. In other words, i.e. from the hermeneutic point of view, some of the critics (Lauer, Bremer) have not shown their awareness of the restrictions of their own historical horizon and all the involved prejudices - which motivate their questions, theses, answers and interpretations. They have chosen some politically profitable stereotypes of the collective guilt instead, convinced that they have found its deepest basis: the Serbian epic and mythological national consciousness.

In this way, it is the whole nation that is accused of nationalism - instead of its political representatives, and it is the whole national literature (including the literary tradition) that is charged with it - instead of certain tendentious sub-literary works. Besides, the Serbian literature criticism of this type neglects a very significant fact that even the greatest works of a culture might be instrumentalized in the name of some political and nationalistic interests. In addition, the fact which is, probably, the most important from the sociological point of view is that this criticism has not found out, in a reliable way, the real effect in the reception of the traditional epic and, particularly, recent literary works - in the culture of a nation with problematic literacy and "literarity".

In any case, it is very important to thematize and investigate the relationship between nationalism and literature in the last decade, in general as well as in Serbia. Therefore, the criticism of Serbian literature mentioned above seems to be not only instructive, but also indicative in its nature. Thus, just because of its significance and political delicacy this criticism has to be done in a methodologically reliable way.

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SOCIOLOŠKA DIMENZIJA KONTROVERZE O NACIONALIZMU U SRPSKOJ KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Dragan Žunić

Autor prvo izlaže hipoteze svog istraživanja problema nacionalizma u srpskoj književnosti; potom, izveštava o stanju ispitivanja ovoga problema, o poziciji srpskih pisaca i teoretičara, i izlaže tipologiju kritičkih optužbi za nacionalizam u srpskoj književnosti. Na kraju, pokazuje u čemu se, sa sociološke tačke gledišta, sastoje nedostaci ove kritike.