



NATION and NARRATION

by **Mladen Dolar**

abstract

Nationalism always relies on certain ways of historical narration. The history of a nation is made in narration, and narratives retroactively create a homogeneous mythical history that is used for the present political purposes. The article considers the emergence of nationalisms during the period of the downfall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and concentrates on the formation of Slovene nationalism through the spyglass of historic narration. The Slovene case may provide some general lessons as to how, in national narrations, history is retroactively homogenized: all significant landmarks of Slovene history that now form the core of the narrative presented at the time the major breaks with the then standards of Slovene national identity. Everything that is now considered the epitome of "Sloveneness" was at the time seen as an import of a foreign intrusion, changing the very standards by which "Sloveneness" was to be assessed. Thus the fidelity to the Slovene national identity can only be achieved by the courage of putting it into question. The last part of the article addresses the larger question of how the nationalisms of that period have in the course of the last decades evolved into the new populisms which no longer try to present a coherent narrative but functions rather as the managements of rage, based on the fantasy of the theft of enjoyment.

KEYWORDS: Historical narration, nationalism, Slovenia

Nation and narration make a good rhyme, and a semantic connection is at hand. One can easily see that there is no nation without narration, and that narratives, stretching back to some mythical origins and never quite free of the mythical background, form the very substance of nationhood. Imagined communities tend to have far more traction than the supposedly real, historical, empirical ones – provided that one can ever fall back on the real historical empirical objective account that would dissipate the appeal of narrations, fantasies and myths and debunk them as myths. But can one ever disentangle the real communities from the imagined ones? The latter actually enabled the formation of the former, by providing them precisely with a narration: "illusions" have material consequences. I guess that this was the weak point of the sociological-scientific approach to the question of national narrations, namely the illusory idea that illusions are mere illusions, and that they can be dissipated by the insight into true facts, by confronting the narratives of mythical fabrication with historic reality. Why do narratives and fictions tend to win in such a contest? Why does one tend to underestimate and dismiss the sheer force of narration and the enjoyment it can conjure? How is it that the question of the nation can never be reduced to the ascertainable objective parameters of common territory, geography, common language, common history and tradition, common economic interests? This alleged factual background

tends to be superseded by narration, which selectively includes or excludes “facts” and embroiders upon them, gentrifies them, in order to create a totalizing narrative, with all its retroactive fabrication and omissions. No national identity without this narrative surplus, without this gesture of totalization/exclusion, and without the surplus of passion that fuels, and is fueled by, narration. The surplus of narration over a “factual historic account” corresponds to the surplus enjoyment, a “politics of enjoyment”, as it were, that is at the core of all nationalism. If one considers the drastic falling apart of some socialist countries on the basis of ideologies driven by nationalisms and their capacity of narration, one can see that the national question was the blind spot of socialist political thought all along (something that Slavoj Žižek called “enjoyment as a political factor”, in the subtitle of his book *For they don't know what they do*).¹

I THOUGHT I HAD invented a felicitous wording, a well-sounding phrase, with my proposal of nation and narration, but one always disappointingly finds out that there is nothing new under the sun; the phrase has been used before (I guess perhaps quite a few may have had this idea), most notably as the title of a collected volume, *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha.² This is an illuminating collection, with a number of different perspectives on this very tricky topic. As felicitous expressions go, Homi Bhabha proposed another one, “nation and dissemination” (or more briefly, *DissemiNation*),³ to counteract the implicit script implied by “nation and narration” (I guess this is not surprising given Bhabha’s Derridean affiliations, and his well-known general line on hybridization). The volume takes as its point of departure the ambivalence of this syndrome “nation-narration”. Benedict Anderson, the great classic on the question of nation formation and the origins of nationalism, put the paradox this way:

The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. [...] Few things are suited to this end better than the idea of nation. If nation states are widely considered to be ‘new’ and ‘historical’, the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and glide into a limitless future.⁴

Nation would thus be a double creature of enlightened rationalism and its dark flipside, where the dark flipside is born out of the spirit of the Enlightenment. Or as Tom Nairn put it: nation is “the modern Janus” (the Roman double-faced deity), and “the ‘uneven development’ of capitalism inscribes both progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality in the very genetic code of the nation.”⁵ There is an ambivalence, the Janus-

character, that one must keep in mind and pursue, for nation, with its narration, is not simply “bad” and to be condemned and dismissed; it actually points to a real that enlightened rationalism both produced and was not capable of addressing and dealing with.⁶ One cannot simply say: “Let’s keep the good side and be rid of the bad flipside”; they have the nasty tendency to stick together, and one should rather take narration not simply as a confabulation, but as a terrain where the ideological battles have to be fought. – But this is not the place to expound on the general theory of nation and nationalism.

Homi Bhabha’s volume appeared at a particularly significant historic moment, in 1990, and it deals with many aspects of nation-formation and its concomitant narrations in England, France, Latin and northern America, Australia, with the colonial legacy, India, Africa – but there is a part that is conspicuously missing, namely the emergence of nationalisms at the point of the collapse of socialist regimes, the falling apart of the Soviet “empire” and the looming falling apart of Yugoslavia. This was in 1990, exactly at the moment when this process was dramatically taking place, but out of the field of vision of this largely post-colonial take on the question of the nation. Another volume would be needed to deal with this new installment of the ‘Enlightenment and its flipside’ story, now under the guise of “socialism and its flipside” – and socialism was conceived as the continuation of the Enlightenment project, however badly it turned out.

But I don’t want to address these larger perspectives which would demand a lot of additional reflection. I would like to concentrate on the case of my own nation, Slovenia, and its homegrown nationalism which largely accompanied the whole process of Slovene independence in 1991, the establishment of this new rather tiny nation state, the independence hailed and celebrated as a great heroic historic achievement. It was part of the larger process of nationalisms getting the upper hand at the point of the collapse of socialist regimes, all of them proposing narrations, a great part being invented and concocted in this new situation while claiming to have been there since time immemorial. New power structures were significantly based on retroactive histories – but the appeal of their narrations was very hard to undo.

“Balkans” as the Other

The first thing to be considered, but this is more of an aside, is the function of the signifier “Balkans”, with all the imaginary ramifications of this disorderly tribal cut-throat fantasy land, supposedly still stuck in a Hobbesian cut-civilized state. “Balkans” is the Other of “our” national community; it starts on the other side of the border. As the joke goes; on the Austrian side of the border with Slovenia, they will tell you that the Balkans begins over there; on the Slovene-Croatian border the Slovenes

“NATION WOULD THUS BE A DOUBLE CREATURE OF ENLIGHTENED RATIONALISM AND ITS DARK FLIPSIDE, WHERE THE DARK FLIPSIDE IS BORN OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT.”



Roman empire 264 BC.

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Map of the former Yugoslavia, showing national borders as they existed before Serbia and Montenegro separated

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will tell you that the Balkans begins on the other side; on the Croatian-Serbian border they will tell you that the Balkans begins on the other side; on the Serbian border with Kosovo they will tell you that the Balkans begins on the other side ... But if we thus progress eastward we finally get to Greece, the extremity of the Balkans, which happens to be the cradle of “our” European civilization. The joke has its moment of truth: It demonstrates, by somewhat crude means, the mechanism of the expulsion of the Other, its dislocation and relocation, but also keeps the Other as something we badly need in order to be ourselves. This presents a bit of a caricature at the core of Slovene identity: we are not the Balkans, we belong to central Europe, we are the last bastion of European values against the East, epitomized by the Balkans (the proverbial Balkan tribes). Ironically, the geographical dividing line, the somewhat arbitrarily convened border of the geographical Balkans, is the Ljubljanica River which runs through the middle of Ljubljana, so Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, appears as the split city sitting on the borderline, a city separated from itself, just as Ljubljanica runs roughly through the middle of Slovenia (prolonged by the Sava River) and splits the whole country into two. It’s an identity which dwells on both banks of the river, however much one tries to expel the Other.⁷

Historically, Slovene national identity relied largely on culture, Slovenia having never possessed serious economic, military, and independent political power. It was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, always governed by foreign rulers. It was the culture that kept the Slovene language and tradition alive, so culture is at the core of a narration based on the formidable achievements of Slovene cultural figures and movements. This is a retroactive narration construed as a continuous narrative of the development and defense of Slovene national identity, the rampart of Slovene national substance – and curiously the term “national substance” emerged at the time (of independence) and played a major role. The question was how to protect the substance from accidents, to use the Aristotelian parlance.

Slovene history: Course and ruptures

How to counteract this narrative, this retroactive continuity serving to build up the national substance? This is where the Slovene history provides some resources which I hope are not just a Slovene specificity but can perhaps serve as a wider model, a paradigm of an argument that one can propose in many similar cases. As opposed to this narration, my thesis is very simple: *all essential points that form the core of Slovene national identity have been precisely the breaks with what at the time was seen to constitute our “authentic” national identity.* What is retroactively considered as continuity is actually a series of breaks with continuity. – In order to elucidate this a bit, I must give a very short and cursory rerun of Slovene history, a crash course.⁸

TAKE CHRISTIANITY to start with. Christianization of this part of the world brought about the violent annihilation of the pagan tribal unions with their many gods and homegrown Slav myths. It was a bloody affair, an alien external force supported by superior foreign military powers, suppressing the relative freedom of the then Slovene community, and subordinating it to foreign rule. This was a drastic end to the first forms of Slovene communal organization, which is now retrospectively much celebrated by the dubious myth of its incipient democracy, the short-lived country Carantania (precursor of Carinthia). But Christianity at the same time also produced the first written document of Slovene language, the so called *Freising Manuscripts*, dating to approx. 1000 CE, which are actually the oldest preserved Latin-script text in any Slavic language. Christianity presented a violent break with our previous identity and introduced a new kind of social bond. There is already a paradox – are we ordinary pagans or are we Christians at our core, the latter having eradicated the former? So how can we be both? – Take Protestantism five hundred years later. It brought about a break with the community of medieval Christianity, established over centuries



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Anton Tomaž Linhart as depicted on a portrait from the collection of "Image archive of the Austrian National Library" in Vienna.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The first Slovene theatre piece was Linhart's adaptation of Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, [*Matiček se ženi*], 1789.



PHOTO: NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF SLOVENIA

Manuscript of the Opera *Črne maske* [Black masks] from 1928 by Marij Kogoj.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Image of the Slovenian composer Marij Kogoj (1892–1956) taken in the 1920s.

– once again as a foreign ideology imported from the outside, armed this time not with weapons, but with the new resources of the printed word (instead of sword). Inspired by the idea that the holy scriptures should be translated and made available in national languages, the Protestants produced the first Slovene printed books (in 1550, with *Catechism* and *Abecedarium* by Primož Trubar, inaugurating literacy), the Slovene translation of the entire Bible and the first Slovene grammar (in 1584). The Protestant period was short-lived, but in the half century of their concerted and dedicated efforts they flooded the country with a whole library of Slovene books. The Slovene printed word was proving to be fatal for the previous Slovene authenticity, but then the Counter-Reform endeavored very hard – in a further radical cut – to erase all Protestant traces. It amply ensured that all Protestant books were burnt (except for the Bible; only a few specimens survived) and as a consequence almost no Slovene book was published for more than a century and a half (1600-1750, with very few exceptions). This is when and how the country turned adamantly Catholic, which is henceforward supposed to define our national identity. – To pursue the paradox: are we Protestants (epitomized by the establishment of Slovene language, the book culture) or are we Catholic (doing everything to eradicate this)? How can we be both?

TAKE ANTON TOMAŽ LINHART, the first Slovene playwright and the beginning of Slovene theatre,⁹ the key representative of the Slovene Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century. The first Slovene theatre piece was, unbelievably, Linhart's free adaptation of Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, [*Matiček se ženi*], set in the Slovene countryside, written in 1789, the year of the revolution. It's still a cause for celebration whenever it is produced in Slovenia, and it is produced often. But what was Linhart if not an "epigone" that followed – with great courage and

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against all odds – a foreign model, the hottest European play of the time? All this presented a radical break with all previous Slovene identity. Linhart was an importer of foreign ideas and ideals, not a guardian of Slovene substance; he was reputed to be an atheist and a freemason, he was denied a Christian funeral, and was treated as an outcast. – Take France Prešeren, the Slovene national Romantic poet, and his brave rebellious attitude against the conservative nature of the then Slovene identity, the liberty with which he reached for foreign expressive forms and made them his own, enormously widening the limits of the previously possible. He too was treated as a dangerous crank. – Take the

Slovene Modernists, especially Ivan Cankar, the most important Slovene writer, but who was accused of following decadent foreign ideas at the turn of the century, so foreign to the Slovene national substance that he had to be met with fire (in 1899, the Catholic church dignitaries bought the entire print-run of his book of poems *Erotika* and had it burnt).

To make things worse, he was the first promoter of socialist ideas. – Take all in-

novative art movements in the twentieth century: scandals that accompanied the first exhibitions of Slovene Impressionists, or the utmost liberty of Srečko Kosovel's constructivist poetry collection *Integrali* (*Integrals*, which was relegated to a drawer and published only forty years after his death), or Marij Kogoj's opera *Črne Maske* (*Black Masks*, 1929, Kogoj was Schoenberg's pupil), or Anton Podbevšek and Avgust Černigoj in the 1920s – examples are numerous, and always the same story: the intrusion of the foreign, a break with the current standards of Slovene identity. This continued also at the time of socialism, when the avantgarde movements of the sixties (the poet Tomaž Šalamun, the artist group OHO, the journal *Perspektive*, the theatre group *Pupilijska Ferkeverk*, later the group *NSK-Neue Slowenische Kunst*) were all met with the same hostility, chastised as the alien bodies disturbing what was now seen as the socialist identity and its

values – very different from the Catholic ones, but the same logic applied.

If a gallery of great Slovenes is now formed in retrospect, the parade of the brave fighters for the Slovene identity, the icons forming the core of our national substance (Trubar – Linhart – Prešeren – Cankar – Kosovel and so on), then the counter argument is very simple: what they all have in common is only the fact that each of them at his own time presented a radical break with what was considered to be the Slovene identity of the time. The ideological operation is obvious: the retrospective constitution of the Slovene national identity/substance consists almost exclusively of cases that prove the opposite, namely that one can only attain important landmarks of national identity by calling into question the very standards of national identity prevalent at the time. Everything that is now considered truly Slovene was at the time seen as an import of a foreign intrusion, changing the very standards by which “Sloveneness” is to be assessed. Slovene culture, supposed to be the bastion of national identity, was actually its harshest critic. Or to put it more pointedly: one can only be true to the national identity by having the courage to call it into question.

Socialism, the massive break

Take, finally, socialism, the massive break, a cut into the national substance on the political, cultural and economic levels, a radical undoing of all previous substantial ties. In the post-independence national narration this period is heavily vilified and demonized. Of course its legacy is highly mixed, with on the one hand, its universalist ideas of social justice and a community not based on national identities (but this came back with a vengeance in the bloody falling apart of Yugoslavia), and on the other hand, its actual form which fell far short of democracy and human rights. But whatever one may think about its course and results, its cut is irreversible; there is no return to some mythical pre-socialist community that the nationalist stance dreams about. This cut has become a part of the Slovene national identity, one more in the line of cuts and breaks that constitute it. This is where the narration has a big problem: no amount of vilification can obfuscate the fact that the socialist time has utterly transformed the country and established new standards of measurement.

To resume this quick and cursory panorama of Sloveneness in a few simple points, one could say the following: one shouldn't simply dismiss the idea of national identity and its narration, but rather show that its narration is contradictory at the very core. It will never do for national identity to take support in tradition, to celebrate its landmarks, to defend the domestic against the alien. Every identity worthy of its name requires an act – both at the individual and the collective levels – that demands the departure from the hitherto known and accepted, the estrangement of the domestic. In psychoanalytic terms, every identity is identification, that is, a risky and contradictory process with uncertain outcome, and not a state or a possession. The safe shelter of homeliness and tradition is the certain way to betray national identity; it can be kept alive only by the courage to ‘betray’ it.



Primož Trubar (or Primus Truber, 1508–1586) was the founder of the Slovenian literary language, a Protestant priest and a leader of the Protestant Reformation in the Slovenian lands. Trubar was the author of the first printed book in the Slovenian language, a Catechism and Primer (Tübingen, 1550) intended for the education of all Slovenians

Those who do not want to accept this, and point the finger at the presumed traitors, are certain to fail it.

It follows that the talk of national identity should abandon the discourse of a measure for delimiting the domestic and the threatening Other. It can make sense only through acts that subvert the very measure. Nothing threatens the national identity more than talk about the threats to national identity. Rather than abandoning narration, one should rather try to bring it to the point where it starts functioning as its own dissemination (to use Homi Bhabha's parlance). One should work with its contradictions and ambiguities, build on discontinuities, try to provide an alternative narrative, push identity to the point of it undermining itself. This leads to the “million dollar” question: how to provide a counter-narration of emancipation that would be capable of engaging passion and tackling enjoyment? Why is it that nationalist narrations tend to be more successful?

The nationalist moment comes to an end

This narration of Slovene national identity was a hot topic at the time when the downfall of socialism coincided with the surge of nationalisms. It seemed that the universalist idea promoted by socialism had no chance against nationalist agendas – and Yugoslavia was precisely conceived as a nation state beyond nationalities, encompassing different nationalities with radically different traditions, histories, religions, and social structures; it was supposed to be the showcase of transcending nationalisms. Then the nationalisms based on newly construed narrations, retroactively establishing concocted national traditions, eventually got the upper hand, emerging as if from nowhere, and managed to present universalist narratives as a pipedream. – But this historic nationalist moment is over, it pertained to the

post-socialist “transition”. It was bad enough, but it seems that it has now given place to something worse, namely the surge of new populisms, whose trademarks are obscenity and cynicism. One can even in retrospect see in the nationalist moment a degree of pride and devotion, however misguided, but now this rather turned into the question of the management of rage. One can briefly say that depression and rage are the two opposite affects produced by the decades of neoliberalism, two sides of the same coin, where depression functions as rage stuck in the throat. Both are not merely widespread feelings, but necessary structural effects of the last decades, now turning into the major driving force of new populisms which are able to provide an outlet. National narration has become secondary, it has been relegated to a sideshow, yet one can detect a continuity concerning the core element: the persistent core is perhaps most easily designated as the fantasy of *the theft of enjoyment*. The others enjoy at our expense, they prevent us from being ourselves or what we should properly be. At the time of the heyday of the nationalisms of the nineties the privileged others were the neighboring nations (hence the bloody wars). Now the others have become expandable and expanding – most obviously and conspicuously migrants, then cultural Marxism, Islam, LGBTIQ+, climate movements, the deep state, China ... The targets are movable, narration has no need for consistency, while the rage is growing. One can feel – almost – nostalgic for the times when one could argue about the inner contradictions of the nationalist narrative; now contradictions are freely exhibited and enhance the economy of enjoyment and its theft which easily translates into new forms of racism and segregation.

Predictions of the future

Let me finish with Lacan, and with a very general point. Lacan practically never undertook the risky business of predicting the future, except, perhaps astonishingly, with his predictions of the rise of new racisms and the increase in segregation. As early as 1967: “Our future of common markets will be counterbalanced by the increasingly crude expansion of the processes of segregation.” He related this to “the consequences of the way that science rearranges social groupings, and in particular the universalization it introduces.”¹⁰ He would return to this in the famous television interview in 1973¹¹ and several other times. There is the implementation of science, of universalization and at the same time, concomitantly, of common markets and globalization, but the more these processes progress, the more the tension will intensify, the more the problem of surplus enjoyment will increase, the bigger the danger of segregation. The more the problem of the theft of enjoyment and of those others who enjoy at our expense spreads, the more globalization will erect new walls against the segregated. Lacan’s predictions are, of course, very general, but we can see that they have unfortunately come true. How can psychoanalysis still serve as a critical tool to counteract this prospect? ✕

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references

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Don't Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1994).
- 2 Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 3 I guess puns easily proliferate once one starts on that slope: contamination, alie-nation, combi-nation, determi-nation, discrimi-nation, elimination, imagi-nation, imperso-nation, resig-nation, subordi-nation ... So many threads that can illuminate nation formation and the vicissitudes of its narration. One shouldn't dismiss puns too easily, they can serve as a weapon of dispersal of unitary meaning, given that the defense of unitary meaning is one of the core concerns of all nationalisms.
- 4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 19.
- 5 Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: Verso 1983), quoted in Homi Bhabha, “Introduction” in *Nation and Narration*, 2.
- 6 It's illuminating to use the Freudian conceptual pair *heimlich/unheimlich*: “The *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other” (Bhabha, “Introduction”, 2), a good way of formulating the paradox of the nation. With nation, the uncanny structurally appears at the core of the ‘homely’ – maybe all nationalisms can be conceived as ways to tackle this extimate kernel.
- 7 As a denizen of Ljubljana, I now live on the European side, but I grew up on the Balkan side, where my parents lived. My Croatian mother was from the Balkans, but my father stemmed from a place very close to the Austrian border, a vintage central European. I am literally a Lacanian split subject.
- 8 Of course there are innumerable sources for the very brief, selective and simplified account that follows. Perhaps the most comprehensive survey of Slovene history available in English is Peter Štih, Vasko Simoniti & Peter Vodopivec, *A Slovene History. Society – Politics – Culture* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino – Sistory, 2008).
- 9 Technically preceded by the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*, a penitential Passion procession in Slovene first performed in 1721, featuring the world's oldest preserved director's book for the performance.
- 10 Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 257.
- 11 Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 534.

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