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Culture and Values*
(a historical approach)

Abstract

It is incontestable that we live in a time of changes so rapid that communities – national, religious and other – are experiencing breakdowns of their cultural identities. This situation can be made resolvable and, hopefully, overcome, only through constant, appropriate action of relevant social factors both within the particular communities and on various international levels. Among them, a significant and active position belongs to the scholars of the humanities, in particular those dealing with historical disciplines.

The culture itself has been mainly created through a certain historical development. But it is too often that we look at life in the past through the eyes of the present. So, all the greater is the historian's responsibility to identify, investigate and present phenomena from the past in a manner which most completely uncloses their essence. This calls for setting the goals of research more at the opposite side of the scale from the usual – the past should not be observed with an aim to explicate but rather with a striving that it should be reconstructed in such a manner which could contribute to a knowing, both of ourselves and the times we live in. This approach would, thus, create an opportunity for us to understand, without stereotypes or mystifications, the diversity of cultures and, at the same time, to discover their common denominators. One probable outcome would be a mutual understanding among social communities and cultural milieus, which should be an important task, especially in the Balkans. Such an outcome could be of a great importance in research of real, common as well as particular, values of the modern cultural environment.

* The paper is printed as submitted.

It is without doubt that we live in times of such rapid changes that human communities – national, religious and others – often meet the collapse of their cultural identities. As each particular culture is the result of a specific historical path, this upheaval is accompanied by fears that are rather based on negative historical experience than on awareness the future could and should bring a rational abatement of this turbulence. The situation is that much more complex because one of the great delusions of our times, on which emphasis is constantly being placed, is the belief that it is enough, in order to ensure the prevalence of mutual understanding, to enable different communities to become better acquainted with each other by living next door to each other or together with each other. It turns out however, that those who have known each other long and well often have little understanding for each other. The South-Eastern Europe is a case in point, regarding this phenomenon, although it is not an isolated example. The phenomenon itself is most certainly the dark side of cultural and historical development.

This phenomenon can be surmounted and, we hope, surpassed only with the constant, appropriate efforts of as many relevant social factors as possible, both within the particular communities and societies and on an international scale, at different levels. Among these factors, scholars in the humanities must have an important and active role, especially those who are engaged in the historical disciplines. I am not sure whether many people nowadays remember the saying that history is *magistra vitae*. But, I am sure that those who do remember it are not all that convinced that this is so. It is said that historians, at least, must uphold that conviction. Yet, it is historians who have from time to time, and all over the world, allowed themselves to be associated repeatedly with the syntagma that history is the servant of politics and that it is the victorious who are the writers of history. In other words, the historical foundation of a cultural identity and cultural values has been often exposed to an approach that should have no place in the profession of the historian itself. We may basically describe that approach as „switching the issue”.

This is just a proof that many people confuse too often writing about life in the past with that life itself. In other words, we do observe too often life in the past through the eyes of today. Understandably, historians cannot entirely avoid doing this in their profession, because the phenomenon is not merely part of the nature of their psychological profile, which could, if needed, presumably be changed for the better. It arises from the simple fact that the historian has no laboratory where he can examine the subject of his research experimen-

tally. The historian's subject of research: life in the past, which shapes the cultural identity, is beyond his influence. Thus, the substitute for the laboratory approach is most often reflected in a return to „old” themes. And, that on its own is an area for new dilemmas and misunderstandings.

It is true that almost every generation, at least once, writes out a history that, in a way, has already been written. But, the objective need for such an approach is obvious: the general sum of knowledge is constantly growing, the methodology of research disciplines is advancing and new sources are being discovered. Based on these assumptions, the knowledge of history is broadening, and such a body of knowledge should not and must not be under the influence of deliberately imported factors from other spheres of human activity, for instance, politics. The historian's responsibility is all the greater in identifying, researching and presenting past phenomena in the manner which best illustrates their nature.

This calls for a goal of research that is rather the reverse of what it usually was – one should not observe the past so much with the aspiration of explaining it as with the aspiration of reconstructing it in such a way that it can contribute to a more accurate knowledge of oneself and one's times, especially having in mind the cultural identity of a society. The usual aim of research was the imperative of an era that is today drawing to a close. Yet, even now and probably for a long time to come, that aim would be legitimate, necessary and often indispensable, but it won't be rather enough. The insistence, however, on the applicability of historical experience would make it possible, in a much greater measure than at present, to understand the diversity of cultures without creating stereotypes and mystifications and, at the same time, to discover the common denominators in that diversity. The probable outcome would be a support for better mutual understanding of social communities and cultural environments. It would be important to achieve this aim, especially in the Balkans. Striving for this could be of great importance in the process of discovering the true values, both common and particular, of a present-day cultural environment.

It is in this understanding that the precondition lies for positive and much needed changes in the attitude towards the natural environment. Because, the attitude towards our environment is a significant element of our cultural identity and our cultural values. In other words, it is the fact, that Man has inflicted more damage on Nature throughout history than he has taken care

of protecting it. The priorities of politics and economics throughout the centuries have been accomplished irrespective of the damage that has been inflicted on Nature. Only in our day has the problem become acute, global and apocalyptic, but that does not mean that there is no connection, a profound connection between our attitude towards history and cultural heritage on the one hand, and our attitude towards natural resources and the preservation of the natural environment, on the other hand. Because, the full cooperation required to preserve the human environment cannot be achieved in its totality without an awareness of the fact that different historical and cultural heritages should not be factors of division, but the basis for knowing that the environment can be preserved and enhanced only through the concerted efforts of those who were born in the frame of that heritage and have been its keepers.

That is why, for instance, one should welcome the principled agreements of the Academies of Sciences in South-eastern Europe to establish joint projects devoted to the preservation and protection of the cultural and historical heritage and the human environment in these regions. I would add only one detail, as an illustration that such a simultaneous approach, based exclusively on scientific foundations can be successful. Many years ago in Serbia, the great and persistent efforts of medieval historians led to preventing the construction of a dam for an electric power plant, otherwise justified from the economic standpoint, because its artificial lake would have changed the micro-climate on an unknown scale in the valley where the famous Studenica monastery has been located. Thus, the threat to its frescoes was averted in a situation where the removal of the monastery church was impossible, and thus the surrounding area of the whole monastery was preserved.