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THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS IN THE TEACHING OF HISTORY:

**Some Observations from
Slovenian Textbooks**

INTRODUCTION

This discussion will focus on the idea of progress as a driving force of history in the Slovenian history textbooks from the 20th century. More precisely, we wish to present the long-term approaches and changes in the interpretations of historical processes and phenomena in various social and political contexts during the 20th century. To this end we will analyze history textbooks printed in various periods of the 20th century and used in secondary school education or at the so-called gymnasiums. The first textbook was printed in 1909 and was in use before World War I, in the time of the Habsburg Monarchy.¹ The second textbook was used in

¹ Josip Brinar, *Zgodovina za meščanske šole [History for Bourgeois Schools]*. Ljubljana: Katoliška bukvarna, 1909.

the interwar period and the version we analyzed dates back to 1939.² The third textbook originates in the 1980s³, while the last two are from the transitional period of the 1990s.⁴ The discussion will be divided into four chapters, presenting the interpretations of progress in the following fields: economic development, Slovenian national emancipation, perceptions and constructs of the “other” and “others”, and treatment of the communist social and economic system.

All of these content groups have the idea of progress in common. The authors of the textbooks use progress as a key concept in the interpretation of historical dynamics. This is not surprising, because the foundations that the analyzed history textbooks were based on, especially those after 1945, are clearly identifiable. We are referring to the modernization theory, which essentially presupposes that social progress is a constant process. In the interest of consistency we should first define the forms of modernity itself, and only then proceed with the interpretation of the textbooks’ standpoints and the messages communicated to the students or pupils. The traditional pre-modern society constitutes itself in the economic sense as an agrarian economy with emphasized self-sufficiency (autarky), confinement within narrow local contexts, and lack of interaction or integration into the broader flows. In the social sense, pre-modernity is defined as an aristocratic-monarchic regulation of society where the differentiation takes place on the basis of origin, dividing the society on the basis of family relations in an environment of ideology and the practice of religious culture. The forms of modernity of a society and economy, however, are defined with opposing attributes. Thus, a modern society is based on the following principles: the principles of market or capitalist economy (in Marxist terminology: all-encompassing commercialization or commodification), the principles of democratic political organization of the society, the principle of the division of the society into strata (classes), and the principle of secular culture. Modern societies are complex and more fragmented in terms of lifestyles, education, property, and so on. The complexity of modern societies expresses itself in the formation of various social institutions where private and public life take place. Social fragmentation is the result of the division of labor. In modern societies the increasing number and significance of social (professional) groups based on education is obvious. At the same time, the regulation of the work carried out by these groups is also

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- 2 Bogdan Binter – Vojteh Štrukelj, *Zgodovina Jugoslovanov za četrti razred srednjih šol [History of Yugoslavia for the Fourth Grade of Secondary Schools]*. Ljubljana: Jugoslovansko profesorsko društvo, 1939.
 - 3 Branko Božič - Tomaž Weber - Janko Prunk, *Zgodovina 2 [History 2]*. Ljubljana: DZS, 1978.
 - 4 Ervin Dolenc – Aleš Gabrič, *Zgodovina 4. Učbenik za četrti letnik gimnazije [History 4. Textbook for the 4th Year of Gymnasiums]*. Ljubljana: DZS, 2002; Božo Repe, *Sodobna zgodovina. Zgodovina za 4. letnik gimnazij [Contemporary History. History for the 4th Year of Gymnasiums]*. Ljubljana: Modrijan, 1998.

increased, especially from the viewpoint of educational qualifications, that is, the criteria for entering the labor market. One of the characteristics of modernity is also individualization as the autonomy of individuals in personal and social relations within the complexity of social norms and standards defining behavior in concrete social situations. Secularization as a process of raising the scientific and technological awareness of a society in which religious thinking, practices and institutions are losing their social significance and withdrawing to the private realm, is also important. Clear distinctions between the public and the private take place. Secularization leads to a further and very important integral part of modernity: rationalism, involving decision-making at the level of individuals or the society as a whole on the basis of efficiency, predictability and usefulness. Since modern societies involve a large number of actors (individuals or institutions) and interferences between their actions and interests, they are also societies of conflict and risk.⁵

To begin with, we should underline an important turning point in the teaching of history in Slovenia in the 20th century: the establishment of Yugoslavia. This development is related to the establishment of Yugoslavia as a state in 1918 as well as to its transformation into a communist state after 1945. Thus, 1918 marks the implementation of an ethnocentric model of interpreting and teaching history, while in 1945 the class-oriented approach was introduced. However, the class-oriented approach did not imply that ethnocentrism would be abandoned. Quite the opposite: both approaches merged into an inseparable whole.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Comparative reading attests to an interesting fact; namely, that economy or economic development were not subjects of considerable attention in the textbooks prior to World War II. On the other hand, such contents represent one of the central issues in the textbooks from the second half of the 20th century. The industrial revolution was especially important. The communist period textbooks introduced the concept of economic and social modernization into the classroom. The textbook used in the pre-transitional period presents industrialization as a path towards modernization, both associated with undisputable progress. In accordance with the established scheme from social sciences, less industrialized or unindustrialized countries are defined as un-modern, and economically and socially backward. The evaluation is clear and unambiguous. The logic of

5 Haferkamp, Hans- Smelser, Niel (eds.), *Social Change and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; Peter Braham, John Allen, Paul Lewis, Stuart Hall (eds.), *Political and Economic Forms of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity press, 1992.

historical development in the economic or social sense may only pursue the swiftest industrialization possible in the economic sense and the social structures adapted to it. Science is a key activity on the path towards modernization. With its achievements and industrial application it allows for progress in the economic field. Thus, science and its derived technologies become an exceedingly important ingredient of economic modernity, defining – in the context of historical dynamics – the quality of economic development, the growth of the economy, social well-being, the living standard, as well as the lifestyle. In the pre-transitional textbooks, these contents are related to the concept of the Marxist interpretational pattern of social and economic analysis. Economic contents are most prominent in the textbooks from the transitional period, attesting to the onset of a vital turning point. After 1991, with the transformation into a different political and economic system, changes in historical identity also took place. In the substantive and interpretative sense, the communist ideological reductionism vanished from the textbooks. The class-oriented analysis of society gave way to more complex overviews of social relations. The interpretations are mostly balanced, the discourse calm. The scope of economic and social contents became more extensive, and the role of the economic and social sphere gained importance. Nevertheless, we can state that the economic and social contents within the whole curriculum, and consequently also the textbooks, serve primarily as an illustration of general circumstances, not as one of the important foundations for understanding the relations of the social power and status of individuals, population groups, or, at the international level, states or regions. However, in this case also we are dealing with the continued interpretation of economic history within the concepts of economic modernity and industrialization as a key criterion of modernity or un-modernity/pre-modernity.

Such a conceptualization of economic and social progress contributes to a second, clearly identifiable category. If industrialization is the foundation for economic and social progress, then the environments where these processes are most evident in the historical context are in the center of interpretative attention. This is where geographic reductionism takes place. In order to substantiate the prevailing thesis about modernization, the authors limit the presentations of economic contents to those regions of the world where these processes are most evident. Therefore it is not surprising that in the context of the economic-social processes, textbooks are exceedingly Eurocentric or, more precisely, Western Europe-centric. Here the textbooks convey a clear message about values to the students. Modernization, that is, industrialization as a mechanism of modernizing the economy and society, becomes a synonym for the “Westernization” of other societies. Western society is the modern economy or modern society, that is, the

society of progress. Such an approach to interpreting economic and social change has been a constant of the textbooks from the period after World War II onwards.

SLOVENIAN NATIONAL EMANCIPATION

As we have already stated, 1918 was an important turning point in the concept of teaching history. Namely, from the viewpoint of the historical perspective it signifies the introduction of the ethnocentric concept as the basic value in the teaching of history. A more detailed insight into the structure of the 1909 textbook brings the attention to the differences in the concept of national spaces. The analyzed textbook was not written from the viewpoint of Slovenians as an independent entity. Quite the opposite, it was written from the viewpoint of the Habsburg Monarchy as a whole. It is written from the standpoint of social power, meaning that the central role, the main driving force of history and state, is reserved for the emperor. The emperor was cast in the role of protector of every citizen, of a caretaker in charge of the well-being of the citizens, regardless of their ethnic origins. Thus, he was seen as a supranational institution which should ensure unity within the heterogeneous realm of the Habsburg Monarchy.

In such an idealistic and idolized concept there was no room for the reality of the Monarchy. Permanent political conflicts along the lines of national and ethnic divisions were ignored. The author of the textbook, a teacher himself, presents the Habsburg Monarchy as an orderly, stable and harmonic community of various nations. As a reflection of state ideology he clearly emphasizes the standpoint that loyalty to the emperor is at the same time also loyalty to the state and even to God. Significant political differences and gaps between the levels of economic and social development are not mentioned, the author simply overlooks them. He makes the only exception in the case of the year 1848, when the existence of the Monarchy was threatened because of armed uprisings in Italy and Hungary.

The insistence on the concept of harmony prevented the author from presenting society as a complex mechanism of interfering interests of individuals and social groups. His interpretations are deficient, biased, overly simplified and thus also quite reductionist. Yet, having on the one hand overlooked the complex and conflicting ethnic structure of the Habsburg Monarchy, the author was able to introduce other moments in his presentation, not noticeable to this degree in the subsequent textbooks. Within the strictly delimited concept of social harmony he focused on the status of the individual citizen, his political, social, and economic rights. And this is the basic starting point for interpreting the historical progress made.

In the interwar period, the establishment of the Yugoslav state had important consequences, also for the teaching of history. In the Slovenian political rhetoric, Yugoslavia was a Slovenian national state. The evaluation of the past was adapted accordingly, since the interwar period had brought changes to the conceptualization of the state, monarchy, and nation. In accordance with the concept of the tripartite Yugoslav political nation, consisting of Slovenians, Croats and Serbs, the basic emphasis had changed. The emphasis no longer lay on the citizen. The discourse of the community and nation as a whole was at the forefront. The driving force of history was now the nation, in our case the Slovenian nation with its political ambitions, economic and social interests. Thus the long-term historical situations of primarily Slovenians and then also Croats as well as the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro became the greatest concern of the textbooks. Awareness of the Yugoslav diversity in the ethnic and religious sense is reflected in the abandonment of the unitarian narrative. No single narration exists, unlike in the case of the Habsburg Monarchy. Instead, several stories unravel at the same time. Besides the primarily Slovenian historical experience, the author of the 1939 textbook simultaneously recounts an interpretation of the history of Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. As the recounting of various histories is involved, the story also contains a common element: the political efforts of the South Slavic nations to establish the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia, which function as a common denominator of various histories.

After 1945, in the communist regime, the ethnocentric and Yugoslav concept still prevails. As an interpretative basis, ethnocentrism remains the dominant model of interpreting historical progress in the context of Slovenian national emancipation. However, an additional substantive emphasis appears at this time. The concept of the “unsolved Slovenian national question” asserts itself in the historical discourse and becomes the key point of the Slovenian national ideology. It stems from the political concept of “United Slovenia”, shaped by the Slovenian political elites in the middle of the 19th century, more precisely in 1848, in the year of the European “Spring of Nations”. The concept was based on the never realized unification of all Slovenians in a single administrative unit within the Habsburg Monarchy. The concept of United Slovenia became an issue again in the time between both world wars, when the Slovenian ethnic space was divided into four states – the major part in Yugoslavia, as well as territories in Italy, Austria and Hungary. The expression “undelivered Slovenia” was introduced to refer to the parts of the Slovenian ethnic space in the neighboring countries. During World War II the resistance movement (under the leadership of the Communist Party) revived the concept of a United Slovenia as a motivational impetus of the resistance

against the Italian and German occupation forces, and the liberation struggle was an act of emancipation for the entire Slovenian ethnic community. World War II was supposedly an opportunity for the realization of this concept. After World War II, only the border with Italy was changed, resulting in an annexation of a considerable part of the Slovenian ethnic territory of the Slovenian republic in the context of the Yugoslav state. The borders with Austria and Hungary remained unchanged, and large Slovenian ethnic minorities remained in Italy as well as in Austria and Hungary.⁶ It was this division of the Slovenian nation into four states that defined the concept of the “unsolved Slovenian national question” in the political discourse. The introduction of the new interpretative concept also meant that school history would be presented differently. The new approach also involved a strengthening of the ethnocentric imagery of school history. As an additional criterion of evaluating history, the concept of the Slovenian state was introduced, because the Slovenian state stood in the background of the “unsolved Slovenian national question” concept. At that time this was still within the context of the Yugoslav community. In this concept of evaluating the past, the Slovenian state represents the final emancipation and final solution of the Slovenian national question.

In accordance with the concept of the “unsolved Slovenian national question”, the perception of the Habsburg Monarchy changed radically. This was a time and a state which had prevented the historical progress of Slovenians. Thus Yugoslavia became the only realistic solution to political subordination, economic and social disregard. The establishment of Yugoslavia in the textbook interpretations from the communist and transitional period remains a positive action, a path of progress in the process of Slovenian national emancipation, regardless of the fact that the evaluation of the existence of the Yugoslav state is twofold. On the one hand, the processes of economic and social modernization during its existence are underlined. On the other hand, the emphasis lies on the restrictions of the political sovereignty of Slovenians within the Yugoslav state and the profound Yugoslav crisis in the 1980s, contributing to the formation of the independent Slovenian state. It is this fact which is presented as progress on the path towards Slovenian national emancipation.

6 For detailed information see *Slovenska novejša zgodovina [Slovenian Contemporary History]*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2005, pp. 24-25, 510-565, 758-761, 908-926, 1226-1255.

ON OTHERS

In our case the concept of “the other” is narrow. It is limited and does not relate to the social implications of the concept of the other and otherness. It has to do with other nations with which Slovenians cohabitated or shared borders in the past: the Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Croats and Serbs. Already at this point, attention should be paid to the basic component of Slovenian national ideology apparent in the 20th century textbooks. Slovenians are presented as a passive subject of history, as a small nation, deprived in the political, cultural, economic and social sense. In this context, Slovenian history is imagined as a variety of external and internal conflicts and threats. The implementation of the ethnocentric model after 1918, the outlines of the “unsolved Slovenian national question”, and class-oriented logic after 1945 in the school history repertoire represented an integral part of strengthening this sort of an outlook on the world and history.

After 1918 an additional element was introduced. The textbook published before World War I was based on the idea of internal harmony, and the concept of conflicts was used to interpret international relations. Thus the Habsburg Monarchy and hence also Slovenians were threatened by Germany and Italy due to their unification aspirations, which was in conflict with the Austrian interests. Another threat was represented by the Turkish state due to the slow disintegration of its central authorities, its underdevelopment and lack of culture.

Nor does the narration change with the establishment of Yugoslavia. The list of threats and conflicts is only extended. Primarily this is due to the changed interpretative context. The legitimacy of the Yugoslav state is sought in the past, and the discourse of “Yugoslavism” is established. The interpretation of modern regional history involves a conflicting interaction between the “righteous” efforts for Yugoslavia and the protagonists of preserving the Habsburg Monarchy. Another novelty, contributing to the broadening list of threats, is the inclusion of Serbian and Croatian historical imagery into the Slovenian school history. The principle is identical, only that new names are added to the list of threats. Besides the Slovenian traditional “opponents”, that is the Germans, Italians and Austrians, the list is now also populated by Hungarians, Bulgarians and Albanians in accordance with Croatian and Serbian interpretations. Turkey as the eternal opponent of Christianity and the personification of backwardness in the cultural and economic sense is a special case. However, the textbooks from the period of the communist regime extended the list of conflicting relationships even further. In addition to all the neighboring nations, the list of threats now included – in accordance with the class-oriented logic – the bourgeoisie, the liberal type of

democracy, and the capitalist economic system and its propagators. The circle was thus complete and the model of conflicting relations was filled without and within.

Even though the textbooks from the transitional period did not stray far from the dominant pattern of teaching school history as a series of conflicts and threats between neighbors, certain changes are nevertheless evident. Here we have to do with a phenomenon relativizing the still dominant ethnocentric model of conflicts and threats. For example, the Western countries (the United States, Great Britain, Italy, Austria and Germany) gradually gained a positive reputation after the dispute between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. With the strengthening of the political and economic cooperation between Yugoslavia and the Western countries, the character of certain "others" changes slightly. The idea of cooperation gradually comes to the forefront instead of fear or danger. The aforementioned Western countries became the most important economic partners. Finally the emphasis is placed on partnership. Thus a long-term overview shows that in the end of the 20th century the authors included the model of cooperation and international partnership instead of confrontation into history textbooks for the first time. This new emphasis is most noticeable in the chapters about the establishment of the Slovenian state, where Germany and Austria are presented as countries firmly supporting the Slovenian efforts for their independent state at the turn of the 1980s. Furthermore, for the most recent period the authors introduced the concept of the "common Slovenian cultural space". This term found its way into the textbooks from the political discourse as a concept of acknowledging the unchangeable European borders, declaratively defined by the Conference on European Security and Cooperation in the second half of the 1970s⁷. This new concept of openness and cooperation replaced the preceding concept of United Slovenia from the 19th century, which had been based on a clear ethnic and territorial distinction from others.

7 The Conference on European Security and Cooperation was organized in an effort to overcome the Cold War ideological polarization in Europe and as a result of the ongoing processes of decreasing tensions. In 1975 the highest representatives of the European countries, the United States of America and Canada met in Helsinki. In the final declaration, they undertook to encourage cooperation and the peaceful resolution of disputes instead of polarization and confrontation. The provision on the inviolability of the territorial integrity of the European countries was exceedingly important. It implied that the borders between European countries were acknowledged as unchangeable, regardless of their historical creation. Human rights were the second important point. The signatory states also undertook to respect human rights and freedoms (freedom of conscience, ideas, thought and religion). For detailed information see Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005, pp. 500-503.

COMMUNISM

The idea of communism is very interesting if we want to illustrate the relativity involved in the definition of progress. In this case we are dealing with two approaches. In the pre-transition textbooks, communism is defined as a very successful way of significantly improving the social and economic situation of the population. By abolishing social injustice the population would supposedly, besides gaining an improved living standard, also gain dignity. The transitional period, constituted as a negation of the communist regime, brought new and different emphases. In the transitional period textbooks, we witness interpretations about communism as an unsuccessful social and economic model, which, in the long run and historically, has not justified its existence neither at the national nor international level. Such evaluations certainly attest to the altered value bases of the authors as well as the society as a whole. The new estimates are based on the standpoint that the liberal type of democracy and market (capitalist!) economy are a state of "historical normalcy".

In the pre-transitional textbooks the definition of communism is clear. It is a process, supposedly representing a natural historical course of human development and progress. Communism is defined as a progressive phenomenon in itself. The school version of history spreads the message that communism as a political movement, and its practice allows small, deprived nations or social classes to emancipate themselves historically. It enables them to correct social injustices within their state borders or at the international level. Communism is presented as the most important phenomenon of the 20th century, changing the world at its roots with its existence. In the case of Yugoslavia/Slovenia (or other Eastern European communist countries) the authors stated that the goals of the communist movement had already been achieved by seizing power after 1945. By strengthening itself in the Eastern European countries its goals had also been reached at the international level. With regard to the character of the communist regime, the authors offer a characteristic duality. On one hand, they emphasize the processes of the political, social and economic emancipation of the lower social strata, that is, the working class (!), while on the other hand they underline the Slovenian national emancipation with their own republic in the context of the Yugoslav state. The definitions carefully follow the political rhetoric of the communist era and interpretation of the past as shaped by the official doctrine of the Communist Party.

In the textbooks printed during the transition, the issue of communism is dealt with in a more balanced and complex manner. Communism is defined as a movement for the reparation of social injustice. However, as the authors

move away from the level of principles, their wording becomes more critical. They distinguish between two periods, two practices of the communist regime in Slovenia (Yugoslavia). The time since the end of World War II until the mid-1960s is defined as a period of a centralized Stalinist Party state, where the dynamics of decision-making were dictated by a few members of the innermost leadership of the Communist Party. In the political sense, the Slovenian (Yugoslav) communism in the first two decades after World War II is defined as an open political and economic dictatorship. However, for the more recent decades the term “ideologically liberalized model of communism” is used due to the completed reforms in this time. When the moment of economic development is introduced into our deliberation, the characteristic dual presentation of communism is obvious again. We notice two types of argumentation. The students should realize that the period of the centrally-planned economy was a time of shortage. Everything was in short supply: democracy, freedom, consumer goods, well-being. The 1960s, famous for being the most liberal time in the period of communism when economic reforms were emphasized, are presented with approval. The reforms are defined as an attempt to introduce certain principles of market (capitalist) economy into the communist economic system. The reforms are also defined as an effort to strengthen the living standard of the population through manifestations of consumerism according to the Western models. This argumentation served the authors as an illustration of the basic dividing line between Slovenia (Yugoslavia) and other Eastern European communist countries. As the main shortcoming of the communist regime in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, the authors underlined the inability to ensure long-term political stability (also due to the “unsolved national question”!) and to create and pursue a suitable economic policy which would ensure a sustainable level of economic growth in the long run.

CONCLUSION

As we argued in the beginning, the Slovenian textbooks are based on the concept of history as a constant progression on the path towards the ultimate goal, the latter of which, naturally, depended on the social context. The analyzed textbooks attest to the practice of reoccurring reinterpretations of school history and the concept of progress within a wider social and economic context. As the social and economic context changed, the interpretations of the past changed as well. The legitimization of the present by reinterpreting the past is indisputable in the analyzed textbooks from the various periods of the 20th century. In this

process we can underline four aspects as important points from the viewpoint of the 20th century as a whole:

The first important point in the concept of teaching history in the 20th century is the establishment of Yugoslavia, since the year 1918 symbolizes the adoption of the ethnocentric model as an interpretative context for the teaching of history. This model was complemented and strengthened by the concept of the “unsolved Slovenian national question” in 1945. The second point determining the contents of the teaching of history after 1945, also important in the long run, is the introduction of a class-oriented approach to interpreting the past. During the transition, the class-oriented approach was abandoned. However, the ethnocentric approach became a constant, since it persisted already in the third social context of the 20th century.

The introduction of conceptual and interpretative foundations, made possible by the ethnocentric approach and the model of the “unsolved Slovenian national question”, also influenced the way history was taught. This is most obvious in the presentation of history as a constant series of opposing interests and conflicts with the neighboring nations. The “others” are regularly presented in the textbooks as a threat to the Slovenian national existence, culture, and future. In time, the circle of those threatening the Slovenian interests became increasingly wider. A gradual revision of this approach can be noted towards the end of the 20th century. The textbooks from that period already emphasize the model of cooperation noticeably, which is a departure from the dominant ethnocentric model of confrontation.

In the communist period, the concept of modernity was widely introduced into the contents of school history. This concept presupposes that history has an ultimate goal. Unindustrialized or poorly industrialized countries were seen as pre-modern or even un-modern, and they also had a status of socially and economically undeveloped and developmentally backward countries. The message and the value system were more than clear. In order to avoid being branded as un-modern and undeveloped in the field of economics and as a society, countries had to become industrialized or at least strive towards urgent industrialization. At the same time, modernity or industrialization is associated with “Westernization”. The Western society is modern society. This becomes a norm for judging the social and economic development of all societies.

In the presentations of communism we witness an interesting twist in the relative concept of progress. There is no doubt in the pre-transitional textbooks. Communism is a successful way of overcoming social and economic differences at the national and international level. According to this interpretation, commu-

nism contributed significantly to the improvement of the living standard and the inclusion of the population into the social and economic processes. Therefore its contribution to overcoming the boundaries of social "injustice" was supposedly of key importance. The transitional period, however, brought a completely opposite emphasis. Due to the denial of political rights and other freedoms of the people as well as because of its economic failure, communism becomes an unsuccessful historical process at the level of individual states as well as at the international level. Such evaluations in the textbooks attest to the altered value bases of the society, where the liberal democratic political model and market (capitalist) economy constitute themselves at the level of permanent historical "normalcy".

