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ĎURICA, POSTMODERNISM AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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When I first thought of writing an article to introduce the brouhaha surrounding the recent publication of the second edition of Milan Ďurica's book, A History of Slovakia and the Slovaks, I thought I might start with the following sentence:

*Neither a historian nor any critically-thinking individual can take Ďurica's book seriously. It lacks any analysis, is often self-contradictory, and deals very carelessly with historical facts. But Ďurica's apparent purpose is not to search for historical truth. Rather, his purpose is a) to prove that Slovaks have constituted a nation for a thousand years – if not longer – and b) to rehabilitate the war-time Slovak fascist regime and, especially, to exonerate its leader Jozef Tiso.*

My intention was then to present the evidence in support of my claims, in the hope that, after reading my article and the other views presented in this issue of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT**, any who had admired Ďurica's book might change his or her mind. But it seemed to me that there are several problems with this type of approach. First, I doubt it is possible to persuade those who admire Ďurica's book with arguments that I consider to be rational. Simply, it is not enough to show that Ďurica has gotten many of his historical facts wrong. Second and more important, we have no reason to think these errors are deliberate distortions. We must grant that Ďurica is both serious and sincere and truly believes in what he writes. We cannot just dismiss him as a charlatan. To do so would be neither ethical nor respectful to all those who, perhaps just as sincerely, believe that Ďurica has all the facts right - give or take some minutiae (see Letz's review) - and that he has the patent on historical *Truth*. It also would not be fair to Ďurica himself, a man whose sole academic aim and apparent purpose in life has been to make Slovakia an ancient and proud nation and Jozef Tiso its brightest son.

Thirdly, we are all well-aware that in our age of relativism, "objective facts," and especially "the objective facts of history," are susceptible to the most contradictory interpretations and by the most serious of academic specialists. This is the case even where one invokes the "irrefutable standard" of logic, reason, and common sense - as the very unassailability of this standard is now in doubt.

Finally, there is still not enough historical literature available, in Slovakia or elsewhere, that would provide a solid, scientific alternative to Ďurica's book. This means that an educated Slovak reader cannot reach for a reliable, unbiased history text by which he or she might adjudicate competing historical claims. Given this lacuna, readers may respond to Ďurica's book with praise or with derision - as, indeed, many have already. But only very few are equipped to make judgements that are well-informed.

How then are we to proceed? For the time being, it seems to me that we might approach the Ďurica controversy as an opportunity to reflect on the problem of just how best to deal not only with a set of contestable arguments, but with arguments derived from a different world view and from incommensurable standards of just what it is that makes an argument convincing, if not "right" or "true."

In this respect, I found inspiration in an article from *The Times Literary Supplement* (December 13, 1996), written by an American professor of philosophy, Paul Boghossian. In it, he tries to comprehend the implications of the so-called Sokal Hoax, which provoked a most heated debate on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> His central concern is how to preserve scientific standards in the face of the challenges of post-

1) Boghossian writes: "In the autumn of 1994, a New York University theoretical physicist, Alan Sokal, submitted an essay to *Social Text*, the leading journal in the field of cultural studies. Entitled: "Transgressing the Boundaries:

modern relativism, an intellectual current which slowly has crept from the humanities to the social sciences and, finally, to the natural sciences – in the latter case, a most daring attempt, given the achievements of the natural sciences over the last two centuries, and the seemingly unshakeable authority of the scientific method.

One aspect of the post-modernist challenge is that it is impossible to achieve absolute, objective truth by the means that are available to humans – a view that is accepted by many realist thinkers as well.<sup>2</sup> But the post-modernist challenge goes further, insofar as post-modernists claim that any criteria distinguishing truth from falsehood, or science from myth, are – and can only be – internal to a given philosophical perspective. Just as radically, they assert that scientific realism and the authority of “objective truth” are merely the tools of political and social domination, whereby Western science imposes its standards over non-Western means of interpreting the world and reality.

Boghossian gives an example of a dispute between archaeologists and Native Americans about the historical origins of some Native Americans tribes. Archaeologists claim that these tribes arrived around 10,000 years ago, coming across the Bering Strait from Asia. However, according to the creation myth of the Zunis, they have lived in the Americas ever since their ancestors first emerged onto the surface of the earth from the subterranean world of spirits. In an effort to show respect for the Zunis’ account of their history, and to reconcile the two incompatible views, one archaeologist remarked: “Science is just one of many ways of knowing the world...[The Zunis’ world-view is] just as valid as the archaeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about.” This relativist interpretation is typical of post-modernism: truth is relative to the perspective in which a certain claim is made. Thus, for the relativist, both the archaeologist’s and the Zunis’ claims are each right on their own terms. This is evident nonsense. But the question remains, does there exist any way to reconcile both claims?

Indeed, how are we to make sense of two incompatible interpretations of the same event? Surely, it would make no sense to dismiss the Zunis’ interpretation of the world, the same as it would accomplish little (beyond insult) to mock the Biblical claim that Eve was created from Adam’s rib. That this version of human creation does not satisfy the standards of modern biological science is clear. But why invoke the standards of biology in the first place? It is beyond the capacities of biology or of any other science to account for the origins of life; for believers, the Bible explains what science will never be able to explain. Without air-tight scientific proof, the non-believer has no right to dismiss the believer’s assertion of divine creation. The non-believer can only claim the right not to believe in divine creation, whether in its Christian or Native American variant.

Can a rational individual accept such incompatible truth-claims as equally valid? And how may this be done without undermining the perspective in which one happens to believe, and without dismissing the per-

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towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity”, it purported to be a scholarly article about the “post-modern” philosophical and political implications of twentieth-century physical theories. However, as the author himself later revealed in the journal *Lingua Franca*, his essay was merely a farrago of deliberate solecisms, howlers and *non-sequiturs*, stitched together so as to look good and to flatter the ideological preconceptions of the editors. After review by five members of *Social Text*’s editorial board, Sokal’s parody was accepted for publication as a serious piece of scholarship. It appeared in April 1996, in a special double issue of the journal devoted to rebutting the charge that cultural-studies critiques of science tend to be riddled with incompetence.“

2) The sentence by Joseph Schumpeter that is the motto of this journal deals exactly with this issue: “To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.” We know that absolute truths exist, but as it is beyond human capacity to discover them, we can only hope to approach such truths by exposing nonsense and rot for what it is. That is the basic premise left to us by Plato and Kant. Beyond that, we stand on shaky ground, and ultimately remain unable to foreclose the space available to sophists and mystics.

spective one does not happen to share? Boghossian argues that the claim that the Zuni myth is “just as valid” as the archaeological theory can be read in three different ways: as a *claim about truth*, as a *claim about justification (evidence)* or as a *claim about purpose*. He cautions that it is important to keep in mind which of these sorts of comparisons is being made. I will not detail the very interesting arguments that Boghossian has developed to confront the postmodernists.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I wish to elaborate upon his distinction of different sorts of “claims”, as I believe they offer a very constructive way to confront a book like Ďurica’s. By separating Ďurica’s claims about truth and evidence from what Boghossian might call his “claims about purpose”, then it becomes possible to judge the book with respect for its author, and to judge it on its own merits and not only on the standards of historical science – which I believe are external to it.

A claim about truth signifies that there cannot be two contradictory interpretations of Slovak history – that of Ďurica and that of the historians of the Slovak Academy of Science (SAV) – which are equally true. If Ďurica was a relativist, he would claim that he has his truth and the SAV historians have theirs. However, Ďurica is decidedly not a relativist; he claims that his truth is based on scientific evidence. As logic tells us that two mutually exclusive histories of Slovakia cannot both be true, are the historians from SAV simply wrong? This leads us to the second type of claim, that of justification (evidence). What historical evidence is there for these two interpretations? Based on the available evidence, it is clear that Ďurica’s account contains a great number of factual mistakes and misleading interpretations. So, if we use the rule of evidence as our measuring stick, we would dismiss Ďurica’s book – as have the SAV historians, Rychlík, Grexa, and Krakovský. Yet, Letz, Szelepcsényi and Vergesová are satisfied with the evidence provided by Ďurica. Evidently, they are using different rules of evidence to support their assessments.

It is the third claim, about purpose, which offers us the potential to reconcile these competing views. To use Boghossian’s terms, the assertion that Ďurica’s book is “just as valid” has nothing to do with *truth* or *evidence* but rather with the different *purposes* he aspires to with his book, in contrast to the scientific purposes of the SAV historians. Whereas historical science seeks to provide a descriptively accurate account of history, Ďurica’s book has a different goal in mind: to create a new historical identity for Slovaks and to encourage active identification with it. Ďurica’s purpose, then, is both emotional and symbolic. In respect to this purpose, Ďurica’s account might serve even better than the strict account of Slovak history provided by the scientific method.

If it is true that the book is designed for these purposes, our response should not be to determine whether it is scientifically true and its arguments backed by historical evidence. Rather, we should determine whether the book *serves its own purposes* well. Although we cannot and should not ignore the fact that the book is not based on historical evidence, we do not have to refute it outright. We may instead ask, does it serve its purpose? In response, I would argue that – besides its other shortcomings – Ďurica’s book fails to fulfil even this legitimate function – its purpose.

It is quite evident that anyone supportive of Ďurica’s book would dismiss this whole exploration of truth, evidence, and purpose as worthless. The Lets and Szelepcsényis would argue not only that Ďurica’s book is a true interpretation of Slovak history, but that the evidence used in it is based on solid historical science. Well, I am not in the capacity to convince them otherwise; it is for the Slovak historians to supply the book market in Slovakia with enough high quality history texts to drive books like Ďurica’s to the margins.

So how does Ďurica’s book fair as a book which heightens the historical, national consciousness of Slovaks? How does it present Slovakia to the rest of the civilized world? Will Slovaks who read it become more proud of being Slovaks? Certainly for those for whom this book embodies the only interpretation of Slovak history, it might become a source of pride. Instead of two hundred years of Slovak national consciousness, they will read that we have been a nation for more than a thousand years and, moreover, that we

3) In fact, he finds postmodernism wanting on all three counts.

long ago had our own state: the Slovak Empire. We also had a brilliant leader, Tiso, who was sentenced to death by the Czechs – a martyr to be proud of and who must be rehabilitated. If only the world knew how wise, decent, and magnanimous he was. Yet, reading the book one realizes that accepting its arguments must be an act of faith. How does it present Slovakia to the outside world?

Ďurica's is not a politician but a historian. Thus, his agenda is not a political one. I assume that a major part of Mr. Ďurica's purpose is for Slovakia to be respected and recognized on equal terms by other nations. For this, independent statehood was a prerequisite. Surely too, he wants to have Slovakia join other nations in the European Union, as a sign of Slovakia's equal standing and dignity as well as to secure the possibility of a prosperous and peaceful future. (He has lived in Italy, after all, and so he knows first-hand the benefits that member-nations have derived from European integration).

To secure for Slovakia a place of dignity, prosperity, and security in the world is a noble goal – and one that I think Ďurica's detractors share with him. But even if we do respect his aim to promote Slovakia in the world, we must still ask whether, and to what extent, the book he has written contributes to this goal. Given the content of the book, I very much doubt it.

First of all, any attempt to connect the present independent state of Slovakia with the war-time regime created under the duress of Germany, and beholden to its fascist leaders, can only be counter-productive to the goal of promoting Slovakia. While Ďurica's uncritical praise for the wartime state might win the favour of some Slovaks, it is certain to trouble - if not alarm - the international community. Rather than enhance the prestige of the Slovak nation, Ďurica's linkage of present-day Slovakia with the war-time Slovak regime and thus with Nazi Germany – a regime responsible for the Holocaust and a World War – is likely to tarnish Slovakia's image abroad.

Secondly, does an acceptance of Ďurica's views bring us closer to the European Union or does it push us further away? As a community of nations trading freely with each other, the European Union offers Slovakia a level of prosperity it could not achieve on its own. But the European Union is more than a common market. Its members also share democratic values and certain standards for the interpretation of history. The strong impetus of its inception was to make and keep Germany a democratic state. Through a shared prosperity, the countries of the EU hope to prevent populists and nationalists from seizing power at the price of human misery and economic destruction as they did once – and tragically – in the Weimar Republic. Thus, any attempt to praise a regime or movement sympathetic to the ideology and practices of Nazism can only destroy the possibility of gaining the respect and the acceptance of the West Europeans. It is not that they do not recognize views other than their own, but that they have learned from the bitter experiences of World War Two.

I believe that Slovakia and the Slovaks have learned the same lessons from the same time. The relative prosperity and pride that some Slovaks enjoyed under the war-time state was only a temporary affair, above all a prosperity bought with the blood of innocent people. That state could not outlast the Nazi regime. To try to rehabilitate this state, whatever the rationale, will alarm Western Europe, whether Mr. Ďurica and his admirers like or not. Western Europe recognizes and respects difference but will not share a political realm with those who do not clearly disassociate themselves from the undemocratic forces of the past. If not ethics, then pragmatism and common sense should assist us in promoting Slovakia's place in the world.