Academy of Fine Arts Trebinje, University of East Sarajevo

Key words: Milan Selaković, Jovan Kršić, Bosnia, Marxism, Croatia, Pregled

https://www.doi.org/10.17234/9789533792170.16

ART AS AN ANTI-SYSTEMIC ATTITUDE: MILAN SELAKOVIĆ IN PREGLED

Abstract

After the Munich Agreement, Jovan Kršić, the editor-in-chief of the magazine Pregled, exerted all of his capacity to find adequate support for his anti-fascist stance. Above all, he was involved in the case of Milan Selaković. From 1938 to 1941, Selaković's texts charted a path of potential transformation for Croatian society. Seen as a democratic and anti-clerical republic, the state that Selaković envisioned became the South Slavic axis for proposed changes. Selaković, who was highly esteemed by the editorial board, dialectically analysed artistic examples ranging from Krsto Hegedušić and Vilim Svečnjak to Franjo Mraz. By refusing a static cultural model, Selaković maintained a critical distance from academism and any kind of stylistic pretension. Instead, he consciously developed a specific attitude against intellectuals and dogmatic narratives, and found in the peasant painter Franjo Mraz the necessary substance for a new state option in depictions of the close contact between a worker and his native land. This conclusion did not rely on stereotypes or the ideological colonization of peasant life and its class contradictions. For Kršić it was an optimal solution and an adequate replacement for his old and now ineffective commitment to Masaryk's understanding of the state and its ideological premises.

A BOSNIAN MAN AND HIS LANGUAGE

The horrible provisions of the Munich Agreement - signed in September 1938 – directly impacted the everyday routine of Bosnian political magazines.¹ Pregled was particularly affected due to its leftist ideological commitment and editorial worldview.2 In October 1938, Jovan Kršić - the editor-in-chief at the time - published a critical survey of the inevitable consequences of the Agreement.³ In his view, the politics of appearement represented a catastrophic choice by the Western states but – and this was the crux of Kršić's opinion – its grave repercussions would primarily affect eastern European states created after 1918.4 The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was not an exception. Why was this of utmost importance for Kršić and the critics close to him?

¹ For more on the political consequences of the Munich Agreement, see: Zara Steiner, The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 610-668.

² As a magazine devoted to cultural questions by virtue of its editorial politics and policies - published in Sarajevo from January 1927 to March 1941 - Pregled aspired to rise to the rank of journals such as Nova Evropa, and to offer a solid platform for a different image of South Slavic unity.

³ Jovan Kršić, "Posle Minhena" [After Munich], Pregled, no. 178 (1938): 617-620.

⁴ Jovan Kršić (1898-1941) was a Bosnian writer, critic and avid defender of South Slavic unity and its anticlerical, antifascist and republican substance. He graduated in philosophy from Charles University in Prague in 1923, and remained devoted to Tomaš Masaryk's worldview until the end of his life. He was murdered in early days of the fascist occupation of Bosnia by members of Ustaša movement.

With a presentiment of desperation, Kršić predicted the fall of France as an independent state based on the model of Versaille, and foresaw the destruction of Czechoslovakian democracy. In effect, for him the Munich Agreement signified the complete collapse of the European bourgeoisie and its ideological capacities. For Bosnian intellectuals, this was not an accident. As strong supporters of the main principles of Tomaš Masaryk's presidency, Kršić and his followers encouraged Yugoslavia in the late 1920s to mirror Czechoslovakia.⁵ From its very first issue, the *Pregled* editorial board advocated Czechoslovakian republicanism as an adequate model to follow in the reconstruction of South Slavic unity, with a procedure based on a common and historically-verified aim: freedom. Kršić's platform insisted on Bosnian experience and Bosnian ethical substance as evidence of its ability to become a decisive, integrative element within a new, radically improved state – a republican and democratic one. Moved by nationalist enthusiasm, Kršić and his colleagues were not able to recognize the authoritarian features of Masaryk's policy and his subtle ambition to embed the Czechoslovakian state within the cultural experience of Western Europe. Understandably, the main conception of Masaryk's policy, forced Westernization, was totally unacceptable for the *Pregled* contributors as a new motif for the predominantly passive masses of the Balkans.

In Kršić's programmatic text, *Pripovedačka Bosna* (Narrative Bosnia) – published in 1928 – freedom was described as an act of linguistic liberation. ⁷ To be a Bosnian implied having sound knowledge of the words that local people know, rather than those of foreigners or invaders of various origins. Situated in the middle of a mountainous region, Bosnia existed as an example of historical strength and the will to persist despite plans and actions launched by Vienna, Rome or Istanbul. With its conservatism, exclusivity and series of xenophobic evocations, this carefully prepared paradigm conveniently followed the main expectations of the dominant cultural view at the time. Known as a return to order, this position insisted on citations and repetitive cultural forms as the criteria for the aestheticized predispositions of contemporary cultural language. ⁸ Native language connected everything. As such, the morally as well as aesthetically perfect language of South Slavs needed a high profile representative. In Walter Benjamin's words, it required a translator or a figure with the ability to understand and implement the basic procedures of mimetic

⁵ Jovan Kršić, "Masarik – vođ" [Masaryk – the Leader], Pregled, no. 75 (1930): 131–135.

⁶ In effect, after the changes of the Constitution in 1921, Masaryk sheltered his presidency within a group of carefully selected intellectuals and journalists, governing the Republic despite the will of the parliamentary majority. The main concept was based on the idea of Czechoslovakia as a typical Western state. Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe 1914–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57–94.

⁷ Jovan Kršić, "Pripovedačka Bosna" [Narrative Bosnia], in *Sa strana zamagljenih*, ed. Kovan Kršić (Sarajevo: Grupa sarajevskih književnika, 1928), 7–12.

⁸ On stylistic regression in the 1920s, see: Kenneth Silver, "A More Durable Self," in *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany 1918–1936*, ed. Kenneth Silver (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2010), 14–23.

praxis, as described in Erich Auerbach's famous interpretation of the Old Testament. Therefore, Kršić's platform engaged nationally-competent writers – Petar Kočić, Svetozar Ćorović, and Ivo Andrić – as representatives of the widespread need for freedom and its metagrammatical rules.

The fatal consequences of the Munich Agreement became explicit within a couple of months. In December 1938, Emmanuel Mouniere - editor-in-chief of the French magazine Esprit - witnessed the elements of political as well as intellectual paralysis as a result of the new, essentially extremist movements of the ideologically energized masses. 10 Mouniere adduced many reasons for an intellectual to be an escapist, captured by grave melancholy. But not Kršić and Pregled. Refusing the Western compromise, he accepted writers from the radical Marxist left. In fact, he opted for introducing dialectics into the magazine, but at the same time he accommodated a dangerous Stalinist worldview.¹¹ Paradoxically, Kršić changed his static and anti-bourgeois stance by opting for the key economic quality of the bourgeois system, utilitarianism. Usefulness represented the highest priority in a time of total ideological deconstruction.¹² Nor was Stalinism the only ideology that *Pregled* entertained. To survive and to be politically effective, Kršić decided to reconstruct the editorial profile of Pregled to accommodate a mosaic of useful interpretations. The new editorial logic was exclusively dedicated to producing a radically different state organization - predominantly a dialectical one - so it was no surprise when Kršić chose Milan Selaković as a new, politically-engaged contributor.¹³

SELAKOVIĆ'S ENGAGEMENT IN PREGLED

The young and agile Selaković, with his Marxist views and closeness to Krleža's nonconformist dialectic, brought a necessary ideological equilibrium to the magazine. His position offered an opportunity for constructing a differently coded social episteme. In contrast to the ideological force of Ždanov's theses, Selaković put the accent on the personal side of main historical movements.

⁹ On Benjamin's analysis of translation as a key cultural mechanism, see: Wolfram Eilenberger, *Time of the Magicians: The Invention of Modern Thought 1919–1929* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 96–102. Erich Auerbach at the end of 1930s was deeply concerned about humankind's autonomy and their obligations before the gods and existing ideological structures of the Ancient and Old Testament worlds. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3–23.

¹⁰ Michael Foessel, *Recidive 1938* [The Recidivism of 1938] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2019), 140–141.

¹¹ Dušan Nedeljković, "Stvaralački stav novog realizma" [The Creative Capacity of New Realism], *Pregled*, no. 177 (1938): 572–583; Đorđe Jovanović, "Realizam kao umetnička istina" [Realism as Artistic Truth], *Pregled*, no. 179–180 (1938): 689–701.

¹² Examining the very beginnings of the capitalist episteme, Franco Moretti, in reference to the example of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, recognizes usefulness as a basic structural word. Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2014), 35–39.

¹³ Milan Selaković (1914–1995), the Croatian writer and critic, was in the 1930s characterized as a man close to Krleža's ideological view and a representative of the nonconformist left-wing Marxist worldview. He was active in *Pregled* from 1937 to 1941. Stanko Lasić, *Krležologija: Kritička literatura o Miroslavu Krleži od 1914. do 1941.* [Krležology: Critical Literature about Miroslav Krleža from 1914 to 1941] (Zagreb: Globus, 1989), 274.

However, Selaković's notion of produced individuality was not necessarily compatible with the type required by bourgeois society.

Relentlessly searching for a synthesis between the locally existing human communities and indisputable belonging to Marxist consciousness, in June 1938 Selaković became preoccupied by the biography of the 16th century Franciscan monk Baldo Lupetina.¹⁴ For Selaković, he was an emblematic example of the Croatian past repressed by the selfish and repressive interests of powerful foreigners. Lupetina, as a convert to Lutheranism and a nonconformist believer, was, in Selaković's imagination, a morally incorruptible person ready to suffer for the highest possible ideals without any hesitation. In those circumstances, everything was summed up by Lupetina's dominant virtues which, in Selaković's opinion, were anti-clericalism and a dialectic view of decisive moments of life and ideology. These characteristic inevitably encapsulated Lupetina's experience, making his life a model for the desired new type of local biography. It is important to notice that Selaković's apology for Lupetina, despite his strong and immoderate words, wasn't just a reflection on the polished doctrinal surface of the Stalinist praxis of the sublime (as was the case, for instance, with Soviet propaganda about Papanin's expedition into the North Pole Basin, completed in February 1938).¹⁵ It was obvious that the time was ripe to devote oneself to heroic, sacrificial figures. In Selaković's opinion, Lupetina's example was fit to be a countermodel for the pervasively dominant petit bourgeoisie standard in Croatia.

In September 1938, Selaković published a review of Krleža's novel *Na rubu pameti* (On the Edge of Reason), insisting that the focal point of the whole narrative had been caused by the fall of the stereotypical figure of the Doctor. ¹⁶ Constructed as a paradoxical engine of Krleža's novel, the Doctor was an inauthentic instigator of social rebellion. In his grotesque fate, Selaković recognized a decisive moment of local historical circumstances, rife with frustrations and improbable ambitions. By carefully choosing his words, he created a dramatic metaphor of mechanically-produced inevitability: "As a steam engine set on the fixed rails, man doesn't turn on his own will, but gets moved only by the messages coming from the timetable which represents all of his dynamism and which exactly and determinedly notes his every breath and every step, every move and the final aim." ¹⁷ Uprooted and deprived of class consciousness, the Doctor, in Selaković's view, represented a clumsy puppet who originated from the pages of Benjamin's critical writing. And just

¹⁴ Baldo Lupetina (1502–1556) was a defiant Lutheran and social reformer who persisted in his ideological stances during and despite Venetian incarceration from 1542 to 1566. Milan Selaković, "Zla kob hrvatskih reformatora" [The Bad Fate of the Croatian Reformers], *Pregled*, no. 174 (1938): 339–346.

¹⁵ Katerina Clark, Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture 1931–1941 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 276–306.

¹⁶ Milan Selaković, "Uz najnoviju Krležinu knjigu Na rubu pameti" [On Krleža's Latest Book, On the Edge of Reason], Pregled, no. 177 (1938): 589–595.

¹⁷ Ibid., 591. If it is not stated otherwise, all translations are by the author.

like Erich Kästner's figures were merely jovial puppets for the German *petit* bourgeoisie at the beginning of the 1930s, the main character of Krleža's novel was an unconscious mannequin of the morally disturbed Croatian pseudoelite. Selaković made a clear statement: A revolutionary act is both a part and a vital consequence of the wider social background, defined by its ideology, class tensions and strict procedures for organizing repressed masses. Authenticity, courage and seriously-matured consciousness represented the key facts of possible social change, characterizing Selaković's ideological contribution to *Pregled* in 1938.

Concerned and fearful of particularistic tendencies, Kršić recognized in Selaković a chance to foster serious critique of ongoing political practice. This was especially so after the endorsement of Cvetković-Maček Agreement, which, in August 1939, led to the creation of the Banovina of Croatia. From the *Pregled* perspective, this act represented the first step in the ongoing process of reformulating the conservative and ideologically-sclerotic Yugoslav state. For Kršić, a strong supporter of South Slavic unity, the Croatian question indisputably unveiled itself as the most dangerous problem. Selaković's participation was of immense value because of his Marxist background, which brought by itself efficient tools for decomposing the pervasive system of official culture (whether produced by the Kingdom or the Banovina) and its falsely proposed imperative of ideologically induced aestheticization.

The unrelenting tide of ethnically-coded nationalism reflected the common sentiment in Europe under fascist pressure. This led Selaković to criticize the fact that the most important figures of the Banovina of Croatia didn't recognize the distinction between reasonable ethnic desires and right-wing extremism. In April 1940, he reviewed the exhibition, One Hundred Years of German Painting, in an article for Pregled.20 As an ambitious representation of German culture in Zagreb, a carefully prepared selection of artists and their works embodied the main principles of the contemporary state aesthetic. As an immediate response to the Nazi social stereotype, the exhibition was marked by thematic and stylistic right-wing escapism. Therefore, the exhibition embodied a reason of higher importance and was not subject to a simple rebuttal by any kind of modernism. Everything had been carefully prepared, put under the sign of the German peasantry and encapsulated inside the firm strictures of sclerotic style – in this case, Biedermeier. Accordingly, the peasantry that inhabited the exposition halls represented the ultimate phantasm and ideological ballast, and expressed the fascist will in its most dangerous aspect. At that moment, it was

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 423–427.

¹⁹ For more on the Agreement, see: Dejan Đokić, *Nedostižni kompromis. Srpsko-hrvatsko pitanje u međuratnoj Jugoslaviji* [The Unattainable Compromise: The Serbo-Croatian Question in Interwar Yugoslavia] (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2010), 243–264.

²⁰ Milan Selaković, "Jedno stoljeće njemačkog slikarstva" [One Hundred Years of German Painting], *Pregled*, no. 195 (1940): 175–180.

not only a question of aesthetics or an anomaly of taste. On the contrary, it was an epitome of state politics, a pure dogma.²¹

At the same time, Selaković opened the way for a thoroughly different kind of aesthetic. In its logical continuation, the exhibition represented state reason constructed from the bottom of the class hierarchy, in immediate contact with the native land and its working conditions. In February 1940, Selaković surveyed the 16th Exhibition of Croatian Artists, with a focus on two key figures. In his view, Ljubo Babić represented all of the conservative aberrations of Banovina politics. Babić's conception was absolutely dependent on ideologically selected types, creating a pseudo-Biedermeier image of peasants and their lives in a series of sterile placards. "(His) peasant studies stand in an obvious contrast to the deep social, psychological and figurative understanding of Krsto Hegedušić and look like the placard which repeats itself stereotypically on the basis of the same blandly-conceptualized scheme, without a concrete affirmation of Babić's theory of colour and harmony."²³

Instead of promoting Babic's paintings of Croatian land and peasants, Selaković promoted Krsto Hegedušić as an exemplar. As a former member of the group Zemlja, Hegedušić generated a new anthropological profile for an artist, based on his readiness to be involved in political and ethical battles fought inside the local, almost exclusively peasant society. Seen as an ideological translation of Lupetina's paradigm, Hegedušić was tortured by systematicallyapplied state injustice, and became in his own right a paradigm of the process of class and national emancipation. Selaković was careful as a critic to highlight the substantial difference between right-wing and organically-conceived nationalism, so common in the late 1930s and especially in the policy of the Popular Front. Croatian people represented the main subject of Hegedušić's huge historical canvases, but always in strict accordance with their class origin. Situated at the very bottom of the social structure, the people depicted in Hegedušić's scenes moved dialectically from the first signs of consciousness to become ideologically mature peasants ready to rebel against social injustice for the sake of the end goal of national freedom. Hegedušić's huge compositional drawing Stubica 1573 (The Battle of Stubica 1573) epitomized his previous intentions, and its monumentality was key to its success: "The Exhibition in its entirety is dominated by the powerfully constructed individuality of Krsto Hegedušić as a competent painter, whose huge canvases, grandiloquent compositions and impeccably and solidly made drawings put the ambition of his own colleagues completely in the shade."24

²¹ Berthold Hinz, "'Degenerate' and 'Authentic': Aspects of Art and Power in the Third Reich," in *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930–1945*, eds. Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott and Ian Boyd Whyte (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995), 330–333.

²² Milan Selaković, "16. Izložba hrvatskih umjetnika" [The 16th Exhibition of Croatian Artists], *Pregled*, no. 193 (1940): 59–61.

²³ Ibid., 61.

²⁴ Ibid., 60.

For Selaković, Hegedušić's vehemence stood as proof of the Marxist potential that was embedded in the very core of the Croatian people. Thus, Stubica, as an historical example, was just one of the selected moments in a series of historical, ideologically-representative events. All of this was governed by the idea that class oppression and ethnic injustice have the future potential to transform the Croatian people into the ideal subject of a new political perception. Confronted by fervent nationalism, Kršić, with his Bosnian optics, had to be desperate to save his political ideal – South Slavic state unity. After the catastrophe of the Munich Agreement, the ideal of a gifted cadre of selected intellectuals was completely ruined, and Kršić was deeply suspicious of any intentions to evoke or renovate it. Selaković's nonconformism and his seriousness convinced the editor-in-chief of *Pregled* that the new state conception had to evolve from objectively perceived conditions of the land and its forms of labour.

In February 1940, Selaković published a long, meticulously-written text about Vilim Svečnjak's exhibition of graphic works.²⁵ Selaković held Svečnjak's expressive drawings in high esteem, especially his ability to depict class subjects. It was obvious that the main figures of Svečnjak's graphics had their social origins in Croatian land, set between brutal occupants and the fatal consequences of prolonged economic disasters. Hence, in the cycle of Balade Petrice Kerempuha (The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh), Selaković recognized an existential synthesis of an entire world akin to Don Quixote's ascetism. Svečnjak was frustrated and moved by the injustice and horrific circumstances of peasant lives. Expressive lines and summarily placed fields of intensive colours were the characteristic motifs of Svečnjak's style: "In effect, Svečnjak is nervous and ready, in every moment, to concentrate over his own canvas, repeating the thousands of lines in just one of his drawings right up until he makes the acceptable one; and that is the reason why we can see such an intensive search for a specific answer, and almost experimentation in style, but, in general, the entire thing exactly attained."26 However, despite the expressiveness of Svečnjak's images, they were just an intellectual imagination. He was not a real witness but someone who was capable of an effective, but merely aesthetic, translation. Svečnjak flourished according to Krleža's ideological paradigm without a predisposition for proximity like that of deeply existential personalities such as Lupetina or Hegedušić.

At the beginning of 1940, Selaković knew that the lack of original impulses in art inevitably led to parasitic consequences. He was afraid that an expansive ideology, in this case Stalinist, could replace authentic meaning with dogma. Fear of Stalinism dominated, and there was real evidence of confusion on the left over the last months of 1940. For example, Selaković negatively reviewed

²⁵ Milan Selaković, "Slikarstvo Vilima Svečnjaka" [The Painting of Vilim Svečnjak], *Pregled*, no. 193 (1940): 45–51.

²⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

August Cesarec's drama about the 19th century Croatian revolutionary Eugen Kvaternik.²⁷ Cesarec's thematic selection was completely wrong on ideological grounds. Cesarec was too close to the contemporary, nationalistic understanding of Kvaternik when he insisted on the power of documents and pure facts. Selaković had a different opinion: "Art is not in a conflict with science or reality, but it doesn't interpret the same reality just by real, factual, concrete arguments; instead, its interpretation is constructed of psychic, social and political elements and uses the whole complex of related time (...) which leads us towards the conclusion that will be in agreement with scientific examinations and real facts."²⁸

NATURALISM INSTEAD OF REALISM

Krleža was silent and in evident confusion, and this convinced Selaković that the problem of freedom had to be resolved within, and despite, the context of diminished political tools. His refusal was similar in terms of consequences to Kršić's refusal in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement, but this time it had the imprint of ideological distance from Stalinist pseudo-documentarist pretensions. ²⁹ The right-wing critics were delighted by its narrative implications, which alarmed Selaković. Any potential convergence between the Stalinist option and everyday nationalist inclinations represented an abhorrent side effect that was absolutely unacceptable. Selaković was determined to envision an optimal condition for the projected Croatian republic, and this field had to be cleared and inhabited by the real productive class alone. This class's ability to develop an adequate aesthetic response and to become culturally mature would constitute an indispensable basis for the future republic.

Selaković was deeply aware of the unfavourable situation. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – signed in August 1939 – and the overtly evident right-wing tendencies in the local culture bore witness to the fact that the process of constructing a genuine leftist state had to be postponed. The right time for action to take place would not be like it was in the case of Kvaternik's choleric impulses, nor even as it was in the case of Lupetina's persecution. In his text, Selaković carefully distilled Ante Starčević's political example as a key point for the end of 1940. He profiled Starčević as a politician devoted to the Croatian people and to the empirical standards of contemporaneity. In a desired parallel with Starčević, Selaković himself refused the immediacy of revolutionary practice and the pressure applied by ideologically-oriented intellectuals. This important dilemma also suggested the ultimate reason for Krleža's silence at the time.

²⁷ Milan Selaković, "Cesarčeva drama o Kvaterniku" [Cesarec's Drama about Kvaternik], *Pregled*, no. 200-201 (1940): 452–457.

²⁸ Ibid., 456.

In stylistic terms, the situation required a new type of aesthetic response. Instead of realism, aesthetics had been transformed into a procedure for the meticulous examination of everyday experience. In January 1941, Selaković published an essay about the peasant painter Franjo Mraz.³⁰ His connection with the land and hard labour made him an ideal channel for the naturalistic expression that Selaković advocated. As a student of Hegedušić's school, Mraz was vital enough to save his work from any kind of academicism, and continued to paint as a worker and peasant without any intellectual pretensions. For Selaković, this kind of freshness (and freedom) represented the first necessary step in the formation of the new republic.

In this delicate political atmosphere, Mraz's example represented an optimal path for an effective reappraisal and reinterpretation of the Yugoslav state idea for both *Pregled* in general and especially for Kršić. Abandoned to its own ethnically-instigated conflicts, Bosnia lost its priority in the moral-political defence of South Slavic identity. Kršić was deeply aware of the decisive change in the state paradigm at the beginning of 1941, and found in Selaković – and in his closeness to Croatian land – a connective figure. Selaković was someone capable of establishing a new position for naturalism as a necessary replacement for the iconoclastic, conservative and xenophobic domination of the intellectuals and the native language of the Bosnian and Yugoslav 1920s.