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IL PONTE EXCLUSIVE

Yuval Noah Harari:

"Democracies need to defend themselves."

Il Ponte, 6th Volume, Printed Issue
Polarization

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Editorial

Dear readers,

it is our pleasure to introduce you to the 6th edition of our student journal. This time we decided to take a closer look at many topics covered under the umbrella of polarization. It seems that our society is deeply polarized around certain sensitive topics, which usually divide people into two strongly opposing camps, not willing to listen to each other. Whether it is a debate about migration, nationalism, or the rights of sexual minorities, it seems that it is increasingly more difficult to find some common grounds, than to alienate each other further.

Perhaps, we only need to learn how to stop thinking in tribal terms of "Us" vs. "Them" and acknowledge some valid concerns of the other side. This is what Prof. Yuval Noah Harari, a historian by profession, and a prominent author of several best-sellers, suggests in his latest book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. We were lucky enough to attend his press conference in Budapest early in May. Although we did not manage to get the full interview with him, due to his tight schedule, we did get the chance to directly ask him about his views on nationalism. Unlike many political analysts today Prof. Harari does acknowledge that nationalism has its bright side too. Is he right? Read our article with his exclusive answer and make up your own mind.

Another polarizing topic in our society today is migration. Here, we are glad to introduce you to our interview with an expert on the subject, Professor Michal Vašečka. He is not only a great researcher and accomplished sociologist, but he also teaches a course on *Migration in Central Europe* at BISLA. In the interview, you will have the chance to see his point of view on migration, offering you a unique perspective that is often ignored in public debates on the topic. However, Prof. Vašečka was not shy to talk about other equally interesting topics such as climate change, polarization in general, social media influence, or the future of mankind. We hope you will get some valuable insights from this interview.

Our own writers, in Il Ponte, also tackle contemporary topics of today's polarizing debates. Jonáš Jánsky in his article *The Myth of Great Moravia,* for example, focuses on how populist leaders today reframe historical events to fit their own narrow perception of reality. Vivien Slíž, in her article about the controversial abortion law in Alabama, asks whose choice it is, after all? We also asked two students outside Slovakia, Cade M. Olmstead from the University of Northern Iowa, and Promise Frank Ejiofor from the Central European University in Budapest, to offer their insights. Cade writes about how social media frames political activism today. Promise explores the connection between food, identity, and polarization. Towards the end of this edition, we offer you views on polarization, from our own faculty members at BISLA. To show you how a month in a school such as ours looks like, we added the content of our colleagues from BISLA Newsletter, to give you an idea about it. Lastly, but not least, we also offer you a very successful section that we started on our Facebook page called *People of Bratislava*. In it, we try to tell the stories of those anonymous people that you may pass on the streets of Bratislava every day.

All in all, we hope you will find some valuable and engaging content to read on the following pages. Perhaps it will enrich you, both intellectually and emotionally, or maybe it will give you a new unique perspective on the ideas that are explored here. So, please accept our invitation, turn the page and see for yourself.

Yuval Noah Harari: "Democracies need to defend themselves. Not everything is permissible in the name of free speech."

Authors: Peter Sterančák, Michal Micovčin
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IL PONTE
EXCLUSIVE

Israeli professor Yuval Noah Harari visited Budapest on 8 May 2019, to give a lecture entitled "The Bright Side of Nationalism" at the Central European University. The day after, we met him at the press conference of his Hungarian publisher at Société Budapest. Along with representatives from Hungarian national media, we were the only Slovak media present at the press conference. Due to Prof. Harari's tight schedule we did not get a full interview, but we did manage to ask him a question about the difference between nationalism and fascism in relation to the current political situation in Slovakia and the world. You can find his answer to this question at the conclusion of this article, and for those readers that are not that familiar with Prof. Harari yet, we also include a short biography as a footnote to this text.

The following quotes from Prof. Harari are taken from his lecture in Budapest. You can watch the full video of the lecture on YouTube (search for 'Yuval Noah Harari – The Bright Side of Nationalism').

There is a growing wave of nationalism sweeping through Europe today. However, while many reject any form of nationalism whatsoever, as a reaction to it, Prof. Harari suggests that there is a positive side to nationalism which we should preserve. During his lecture he mentions that, "*it is a dangerous mistake to imagine that without nationalism we would all be living in some kind of liberal paradise. Much more likely we would be living in tribal chaos in which nobody cares about anyone except his or her immediate friends or family, and in which it is impossible to build large-scale systems of healthcare, education and security.*" This way of thinking about nationalism today is somehow different from what many people on the liberal side of the debate think, who perhaps see nationalism as a pathology we need to get rid of. Harari's position is also very different from the views of many people on the far-right spectrum of the debate, where many people think of nationalism as being exclusively related to

traditional religious values and the promotion of protectionism, reducing national identity to a very narrow definition that fits their own political agenda.

According to Harari, however, even a healthy democracy is unable to function without some level of nationalism. "*Most conflicts [today] are within nations, which indicates that the right kind of nationalism is actually quite weak. There is no lack of xenophobia in the world, hating strangers, hating foreigners, that's for sure. But nationalism is not about hating foreigners. Nationalism is about loving your compatriots. Currently there is a global shortage of such love. There is a shortage of such love also in Europe.*" Harari points to the examples of countries like Iraq, Sudan, Syria, or Yemen, where "*internal hatred and weak national sentiments have led to the complete disintegration of the state and to murderous civil wars. In countries like the United States, weakening national sentiments have led to growing rifts within society and to a winner-takes-all mentality.*" Harari sees the current high levels of polarization in the United States not as a symptom of growing nationalism but that, on the contrary, "Americans hate the fellow citizens far more than they hate or fear the Chinese, Russians, or the Mexicans."

Harari, however, does not shy away from the problems created by the 'wrong' kind of nationalism either. He says that many political leaders today exploit the current climate of polarized societies. Those leaders, according to Harari, do the exact opposite of healthy nationalism. *"Instead of strengthening national unity, they widen the rifts within the society by using inflammatory language and divisive politics. And by depicting anybody who opposes them not as a right rival but rather as a dangerous traitor."* Many people that read Harari's books enjoy his ability to simplify complex academic language for a non-academic audience. This is certainly true of his efforts to illustrate the world's current problems by using simple metaphors that non-academic readers can relate to. Comparing nations to human bodies, Harari says that when populist nationalist leaders *"see a wound in the national body, they don't put a healing medicine on it. Rather they take their finger and start poking inside the wound to try deliberately to enlarge it and reopen it."* Rather than simply rejecting any form of nationalism, Harari instead suggests that we should realize both its importance and its fragility. Both sides of the debate have legitimate views.

The black and white divide in current political debates are perhaps the main problem of why, instead of resolving existential problems that we face as a civilization, we lose ourselves in fighting the other side of the argument without acknowledging their legitimate concerns. Harari offers the example of immigration. *"I think it would be wrong to force mass immigration on an unwilling population. Immigration is a long and difficult process, and to succeed, you need the support of the local population. On the other hand, it would be equally wrong to destroy the democratic system in order to allegedly protect the purity of the country from immigrants."* So, how to resolve the problem of nationalism? Can someone be a good nationalist and globalist, at the same time? Harari suggests that yes, we can be both globalists and nationalists. There are three major existential threats we, as a civilization, face, according to Harari. These are climate change, nuclear war and technological disruption. To tackle these global problems, we cannot allow ourselves to retreat into an unhealthy form of nationalism and seek answers in the past. We need to take a global perspective. According to Harari, we need to facilitate trust between nations, and we need better global cooperation. We can be both nationalists and globalists, because we can allow ourselves to be loyal to our family and friends, or the nation and to the human race as such.

When nationalism is taken to the extreme it often results in fascism. For Harari, the difference between the two is that nationalism only tells us that my nation is unique and that I have special obligations towards it. On the other hand, when nationalism escalates into fascism, it tells me that my nation is supreme and that I have exclusive obligations towards it. It tells me that the only important loyalty is exclusively to my nation. It ignores the need to enlarge my circle of empathy toward people outside of my nation. Harari offers a fitting example of the Football World Cup, where nations compete among each other yet, they all agree on rules on which football, as a game, is based. To conclude, we do not need to choose between nationalism and globalism.

However, when does nationalism escalate into fascism? This was my question to Prof. Harari during his press conference in Budapest. Here is his full response, exclusively for *Il Ponte*:

PETER STERANČÁK: Hello, we are from Il Ponte, the student journal of the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts. In your lecture yesterday you talked about the difference between nationalism and fascism, and about the line between them. You said that we should not fall into binary thinking and call every nationalist automatically a fascist. So, my question is, we have a semi-open fascist party in Slovakia called "People's Party Our Slovakia" (Marián Kotleba – ĽSNS), which is, according to recent polls, the second most popular party and whose popularity is still growing. There was a recent case where the Slovak Supreme Court was about to decide whether to dismantle it or not. In the end, they did not. So, what should democracies do about extreme or even fascist groups and parties?

What should be done? Should we ban those parties? Should we not, in the name of freedom of speech?

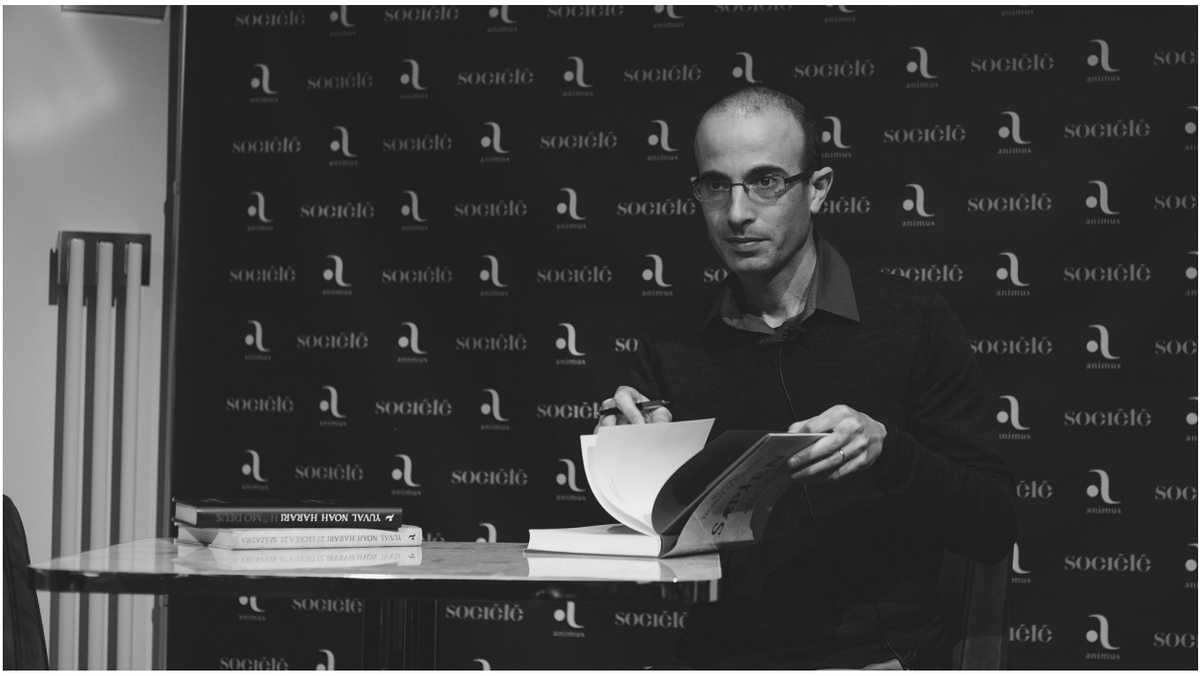
↘

YUVAL NOAH HARARI: Well, if there is a line, which again I am not familiar with this particular example, so I don't know whether it applies to it, but there is certainly a line when democracies need to defend themselves. Not everything is permissible in the name of free speech. And then again, there is a huge debate exactly about where this line should pass, but say a party which openly not only spreads hatred but also openly calls for, let's say, genocide, for the elimination of a particular group. It should not be allowed to run for election even if a lot of people support it. So, this is one side of the equation. There are lines where democracies need to defend themselves. The other side is that you need to deal with the underlying concerns why people are supporting these kinds of parties. Just by banning the party, even if you succeed, it does not resolve the underlying issues. So, it should be kind of a two-pronged treatment, banning the most extreme cases, but being very careful to understand and to find better answers, better solutions to the underlying concerns that drive people in that direction. Humankind normally just doesn't go about murdering entire populations. They have other things to do before they go to murder somebody. But the problem is that they have some concern and it is being hijacked and diverted in that direction; they are led to believe that "You have this trauma, or you are unemployed and it is because of these people. If you kill all these people, you will have a job". So, on the other hand, do not allow such a party to freely act, but deal with the underlying issues of unemployment and make people realize there are easier and better ways to deal with unemployment than genocide.

Professor Yuval Noah Harari

is the bestselling author of Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow; and 21 Lessons for the 21st Century. His first two books have sold more than 15 million copies worldwide, and have been translated to nearly 50 languages. Born in Haifa, Israel, in 1976, Harari received his PhD from the University of Oxford in 2002, and is currently a lecturer at the Department of History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is currently touring the world to promote his latest book, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, giving speeches at some of the most prestigious universities and giving countless interviews to a broad range of global media on topics that are explored in his books. Il Ponte is proud to join the likes of the Guardian, Financial Times, Nature magazine and the Wall Street Journal on this list.

For more information about Prof. Harari, visit his webpage: **www.ynharari.com**

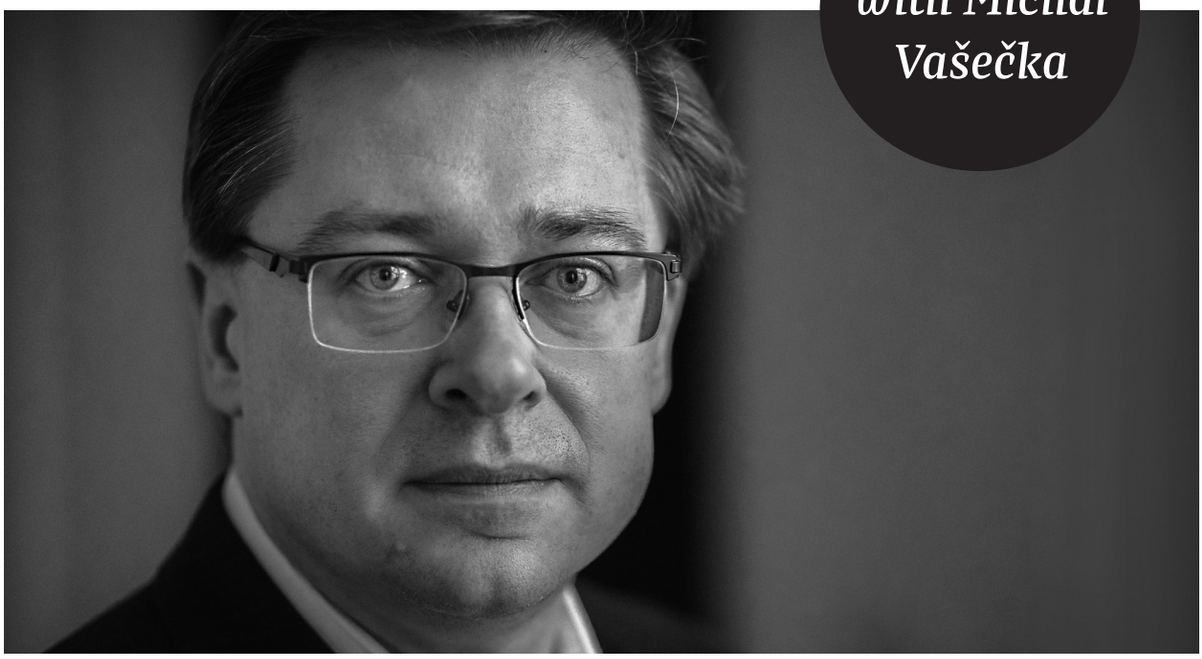


Prof. Harari at the press conference at Société Budapest.

Michal Vašečka: Migration fears, brainwashed teenagers and impending global catastrophe: Another day in the life of a sociologist

Peter Sterančák

INTERVIEW
with Michal Vašečka



The joke goes like this: "Sociologists don't do it. They just observe." Well, Prof. Vašečka is a sociologist and his observations are certainly thought-provoking and valuable, which is why we, in Il Ponte, decided he is a great candidate for a long interview in this edition. However, when it comes to discussing important sociological issues, he can be also witty, proving he does not take himself too seriously. As you can guess from the title, we covered a wide variety of topics: migration, globalization, polarization, communication, education, space exploration, and everything in-between. We met at the Bratislava Policy Institute where he is a director. For those of you who are not familiar with Prof. Vašečka, we included a small biography at the end of this interview; so, feel free to see for yourself whether he "just observes"...

Your main focus of research is on issues of migration, ethnicity, race and minority problems. We've had a lively public debate ever since 2014. What is the main difference between studying migration in the academic context and as a public discourse?

People that are studying migration know very well – from history – that migration is the most natural thing characterizing mankind from the beginning of its history. Public discourse is very concerned by recent migration and it usually perceives it as something unique, that has no precedent in history. It is perceived not as a chance, or challenge but only exclusively as a problem. We see it in most public opinion polls and studies that try to understand people's perception of migration. Practically everywhere in the world we can see various stereotypes towards people coming to some territory, and everywhere we notice general misunderstandings about the reasons for migration. So, I would characterize public discourse as one driven mostly by emotion and which doesn't take into account a broader picture.

This was the story of Slovakia in the past few years. I've been working in the field of migration for at least 15 years and I remember how I was writing my book on migration 10 years ago, trying to explain to both the academic and the general public what are the inevitable problems that will sooner or

later come knocking on our doors. People back then were not listening, and very specifically, many people said that what I describe is far from reality and that they can't even imagine it happening. They perceived Slovakia as a poor country that would not be intriguing for anybody from the outside... I was probably one of the firsts in Slovakia to conduct a complex, both qualitative and quantitative study about migration prepared for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) 10 years ago. Public policymakers did not utilize it, at all. It was practically unnoticed outside the academic field, although practically everything that the study outlined as a prognosis for the future happened later in a very dramatic and extremely emotional form during the so-called migration crisis.

Yes, because nobody is really speaking about benefits of migration in public, right?

No, it's even more complex. Those who are speaking about the benefits of migration are very often stigmatized. They are "migrant-lovers". You know this famous Slovak word, "slniečkári", I don't know how to translate it into English. It is stigmatizing and it does not take into account serious studies analysing – if you want – desirable migration. What we are facing today in Slovakia is bizarre in many ways. Politicians react to the public which doesn't want to even hear the word migration by scaring people about migration; on the other hand the government prepares legal norms and governmental materials that are aimed at increasing the mobility of the foreign workforce, as they call it. Strong pressure from the business sector to open the relatively restrictive measures as far as migration is concerned is more powerful than any arguments based on serious academic work. But government officials speak only about mobility, they expect that "mobile workers" will return home at a certain point. Some will, no doubt, but many others might stay. In other words, we are committing the same mistakes as countries such as Germany, or Austria, committed 50 years ago. We didn't learn the lesson that when people are coming to a country, some of them may stay here.

You also teach Migration in Central Europe, as a course at Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA), and I guess that people who have such a strong attitude against migration and have strong anti-liberal sentiment in them, would assume that it must be in line with the liberal ideology, so to speak. Perhaps they imagine you promote open-borders and "let-everyone-in" type of sentiments. So, how would you characterize teaching the course about migration at BISLA?

Firstly, there's an absolute misunderstanding and misconception of liberal arts outside the Anglo-Saxon world. Liberal arts are not about promoting liberalism, and those who are saying this simply don't get it. To make it even more funny, it sometimes reminds me of the story from the 90s when one MP from Mečiar's HZDS party didn't really get the phrase "non-partisan oriented" in English. He thought that a certain NGO, which was claiming that it's non-partisan does not have partisans on board and he started make a noise why partisans are actually mentioned. (Editor's note: Partisans were guerrilla fighters who fought the Nazis in WW2). It's the same. The phrase 'liberal arts' means something else.

Of course, the other thing is that the atmosphere at BISLA is relatively liberal, progressive and open-minded because of the nature of the teachers and students there. That's another issue. But to connect it with the topic of migration, and migration in Central Europe, is false. We discuss various aspects of migration research, also those that would not be very popular among human rights activists. We discuss – for instance – also the population changes in Africa that will inevitably bring more and more migration into the European Union, and that consequently also Slovakia will have to deal with it. The reaction to it will definitely be some combination of restrictions and some open windows for migrants who will either be refugees, or some of whom will be considered desirable migrants because of the skills they may bring into this country. So, the discussion about migration will be fuelling public discourse for years to come. Very soon it may be the most important topic in the political debate in our country. This already happened in many other countries in the world. For example, when we think about Great Britain and the recent problem of Brexit, it started with the migration of central-eastern Europeans, not so much with those coming to Britain from Jamaica, or Bangladesh. Paradoxically for us in central Europe, people from Bangladesh or Pakistan were very often evaluated by local British people as people who are culturally closer to Brits than, let's say, Polish or Slovak migrants.

Our theme of this printed issue is polarization. Migration is certainly a very polarizing topic today, but who, or what, do you see as main agents of polarization in today's world? Many blame social media, or populist political leaders, for instance. As an academic how do you see the whole problem of polarization?

Firstly, it may seem like a banal fact but I need to stress that every modern society is polarized to certain extent. There is no society that is not polarized. Of course, there are countries that are relatively cohesive. Very good examples are most of the Scandinavian countries that are able to secure

social cohesion on their territory quite successfully. All of the central European countries are, however, deeply polarized and it's the result both of cleavages coming from the pre-communist past, and the transformation of society since 1989. And polarization of these countries has been deepening in the last few years.

As for the reasons, there are many explanations. I believe that, first of all, history is somehow speeding up. People have an increasing problem digesting what is happening around them. They believe that they are losing control of their lives and they search for somebody to blame for it, while not being able to identify that group. Hence people are returning to old-fashioned ways of pointing at certain groups, based on ethnicity, race or ideology. That's why we are divided into conservatives and liberals, good Slovaks and bad Slovaks, for example. And to add also the issue of class here – I believe that behind all this polarization is also a hidden return of class divisions. For instance, six years ago Thomas Piketty wrote a very influential book, *Capital in the 21st Century*, where he basically said that polarization of most post-modern countries in the world is a result of real economic polarization in those societies. He writes that the gap between the rich and the poor has never been so big since the end of the 19th century and that all previous polarizations of this kind ended up in revolutions and wars. So, we are somehow repeating the same old mistakes and we don't understand their potential consequences.

So, would you say that the source of polarization is mostly economic inequality?

Well, not necessarily only economic. It is simply the feeling of many that the equality promised by the Enlightenment during the French Revolution disappeared. Let's remember those three important words of the French Revolution: égalité, fraternité, liberté. Now people have stopped believing that égalité exists any more. They may have a question mark about the other two but they are deeply questioning égalité, and in a way, they are right. Piketty is not saying something that was usual for the old-fashioned types of socialists. He's saying that the problem of modern capitalism is that it's not functioning based on liberal values any more, the way it was projected by Adam Ferguson within the Scottish Enlightenment. Suddenly, all those virtues that defined capitalism are not with us any more. In this sense, I believe that Piketty is right. Class divisions are back, and in an extremely destructive form.

That reminds me that you recently had a debate with the blogger Samo Marec, and the journalist Andrej Bán where you discussed the problem of how to reach people on the other side of the divide. So, how to talk to people in a deeply polarized society?

Well, it's even more complex. The first problem is that to secure social cohesion in a post-modern country is a challenge which is almost breathtaking when you compare it to the past. Speaking about cohesion, we are living in a world that is extremely individualistic. We hear it from every corner: you should focus on yourself; you should be an individual; take care of your family but forget anyone else. At the same time, people are not living in natural communities. In other words, they are not living in *gemeinschaft*, they are living only in *gesellschaft*, which is cold and doesn't have the natural ties it once had. People often don't even know who their neighbours are. In such an individualistic society, however, we hear from advertisements and the media that somebody out there wants your empathy. But people pay taxes and believe that they don't get what they paid for. That is often false, but we know that perception is more important than reality itself. To secure social cohesion in such a situation is a dramatic challenge.

Lastly, society is being polarized politically by the new phenomenon of social media, where we tend to prefer to be in touch with people that have the same opinions as we do. Therefore, if you actually start with the social media at the age of thirty, you're fine. I mean, you still know that there is a world out there which may be different from the virtual one. But kids who start on the internet at the age of ten are systematically seeking only people with the same opinions. And manipulators constantly repeat to them that they shouldn't follow the mainstream media and consequently some of them can be literally brainwashed by the age of sixteen. What we see now is that such people may be convinced that there's just one right answer to all questions, for the rest of your life. This is the responsibility of social media and it's a completely new phenomenon. At the moment we don't know what it will bring in the future, it is very new phenomenon. We know how it is happening, but we don't have satisfactory solutions for it.

Does it mean that face-to-face communication is still the best communication tool available for such polarizing debates?

Well, I believe so. Even when you have a very nasty experience facing somebody who aggressively disagrees with you, face-to-face communication still makes you think about the world differently. Though, I am not suggesting we should all talk to fascists all the time. I am puzzled by their world and I don't understand the way they collect arguments. In the case of Slovak fascists you may get the feeling that they're living in some parallel reality. So far, I've not been able to penetrate into their world and understand

how they collect these so-called causal attributions. And that is a problem, because when you don't even understand the principles on which others function, then you're lost.

Polarizing topics today shape the public discourse everywhere. Whether it's migration, LGBT rights, or religious morality. At the same time, we don't talk enough about real existential problems, like climate change, which is closely connected to migration. Some researchers say that climate change will trigger mass migration that has never been seen before. How big of a problem is that?

Well, I deeply believe it will be a significant problem in the future. I'm not absolutely sure whether we will be able to react to it, though. Honestly speaking, the same situation was in the Roman Empire centuries ago and the Romans dealt with it in a very brutal way. Undesirable migrants were simply killed.

That's the famous dilemma illustrated by the example of people on a lifeboat while another boat is sinking nearby. All of them can't stay onboard, because it's a small lifeboat. So, they're trying to get onboard from the water and suddenly the captain distributes axes and orders to chop off the hands of those who are trying to get onboard. People obey the captain and they save their lives. In a way it's a wise decision because if those others got onboard, the lifeboat would sink and everybody on the boat would die. However, the question is - will those people that saved themselves by chopping off the hands of others be able to live with themselves once they get back on the land? Are they going to live same lives? Well, this is our dilemma today, and I believe this should be a dilemma not of human rights activists, but of all people taking humanism and enlightenment seriously. Mass migration to which we would eventually react violently may change us as Europeans. Europe, in both the Christian and secular tradition after the Enlightenment, is based on humanity. If something is a genuine European tradition it's the tradition of humanity. When we will react to upcoming mass migration violently, we may change ourselves, it will be not us any more; we will not be not Europeans any more.

This is a very real problem, so why we are preoccupied with artificial problems? This is something that worries me a lot. Is the protection of the traditional family really the most important problem, in Slovakia? Well, not really. What actually is a traditional family? Demographic decline is a real issue, climate change is real.

I believe that another such neglected topic that is nonetheless crucial is education. Recent polls documented rising sympathy for parties with extreme ideologies among high school students. It's not just students, though. Just today the Slovak Academy of Science published the outcome of their research on how much Slovaks trust science. I think that a third of respondents expressed the least possible trust toward science. There's also this conspiratorial, anti-experts' attitude that is spreading across societies today.

Well, as a sociologist I have a feeling of satisfaction. Many among us, social scientists, have been warning for years that our country is becoming extremely anomic and nihilistic. We warned that people had lost their compass of what is good and what is bad. People have been losing trust on both the horizontal and vertical level. They've been losing trust between each other, between people, and they're losing trust in institutions. Now we're reaping the fruits of it.

For example, in a few days there will be elections to the European Parliament. Some western Europeans ask me, "how come there's such a low trust in the EU parliament in our countries?" I usually respond with "and why would you expect that there will be higher trust?" Slovaks don't trust any institution. They don't trust the police, their national government, or the parliament. So, why should they trust the EU Parliament? This is the problem. People are full of distrust and anomy. And they don't trust even science and scientists since they don't trust anybody. They don't trust vaccination because they believe somebody is trying to poison them. They believe there's a conspiracy behind almost everything in society, but everything starts with anomy that came in the process of transformation after 1989 that was very fast and dramatic. I often say that the best of the best lost hope, and the worst of the worst lost any inhibition.

Talking about the young generation, you have teenage children yourself. What do you think the world will look like when they will be at your age?

This is a good question (smiles). I think about this a lot. I don't want to be apocalyptic because I dislike it when I am like that. I still believe that mankind will be able to improve with the help of various new technologies that are emerging. I also believe that we will be able to do something with climate change. In this sense I believe in mankind. At the same time, I know that technology on its own will not save us. I am relatively sceptical about the reactions of people who want to live their lives.

Often people that study existential problems of mankind comment and write about it for years. They believe that public policymakers will pick up their thoughts and apply them in reality. We are often quite pushy in our effort to go beyond our standard academic life and influence politicians and

policymakers. Usually the results are very problematic.

I still remember one geologist who was interviewed by CNN, I think. He was standing on a broken dam in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina and the reporter asked him: "So, how do you feel now when you see all this flooding" and he said, "I have a feeling of satisfaction". They asked him, puzzled, "Why?" He replied, "Because for years, I've been trying to warn the city officials that this will happen sooner or later, that the dams will not survive a big hurricane. They were laughing and saying that I'm apocalyptic. Well, now they got it, so I am satisfied."

I don't want to have this type of satisfaction but I believe that mankind will only react to the real dramatic problems when they become impossible to ignore. I'm optimistic about technologies that might help us to deal with many problems but, at the same time, very pessimistic because it might be too late for us to realize those problems. In this respect, I believe that the lives of my children will be tougher in many areas than the life I was used to. Technology will improve many aspects of their lives but simultaneously they will be the generation that will be suffering not only from climate change but also from permanent surveillance on every corner as a result of a polarized world and societies. Their personal freedom will be endangered to such a level that we can compare it only to World War II. I think that what the future will bring for them will be dramatic. This is what I am scared of the most. Dramatic situations, no matter where they will come from, may bring more problems when technology is used to diminish our personal freedom.

Well, to not give you the chance to be apocalyptic and to end on a positive note… What trend, event, issue or political development today gives you hope that we may avoid the worst-case scenario and built a better future?

I will start in a very non-standard way. Before I was born, mankind landed on the Moon. During my lifetime everything was somehow connected to space. It wasn't very visible and I remember some tragedies, such as, when the two US space shuttles, Challenger and Columbia, exploded. Now, however, I am very optimistic that the future of space exploration will continue much quicker. As mankind, we desperately need it. Psychologically, we desperately need the last frontier. To return to migration, in the past mankind was always penetrating new territories and it gave people hope: "There is a world somewhere out there where we can live more freely, more peacefully, or more prosperously…" Now we have lost that option. Psychologically, I feel, that we are completely paralyzed on this planet. We feel suffocated by it. Of course, eventually this planet can become even uninhabitable for us so we need to think about space. That's the first thing – space exploration.

The second positive thing I would mention is connected to climate change and the whole crisis it produces. In spite of the dramatic growth in human population, which is really unprecedented in our human history, issues such as hunger or dramatic genocides are happening less and less. Of course, you can argue that in relatively recent history there was a famine in Ethiopia only 30 years ago. In Rwanda there was a horrific genocide only 20 years ago. But I would argue that in comparison to how we lived in previous centuries, mankind is becoming more and more civilized. I know this might be provocative for some, after the story of the Holocaust, etc… However, we reached the point where there is almost no famine in the world, or diseases that only yesterday were deadly have been eradicated. On the whole, I feel positive about this level we reached globally. I also believe that we have successfully introduced typically liberal virtues like equality to the whole world. At the same time, I see that we have reached a certain zero point now, and all these virtues we gained are once again endangered.

In a way, I believe, that we are living in the best world that we can possibly live in, but that that world is dramatically endangered. Probably even during my lifetime we may witness backsliding to the past.

Well, I tried to end on a positive note…

(laughs)

Doc. PhDr. Michal Vašečka, PhD. *(1972) is a sociologist by background and focuses his interests on issues of ethnicity, race, antisemitism, and migration studies. As an Associate Professor, he has been at Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) since 2015 and he is a director of the Bratislava Policy Institute. He operated at the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno (2002–2017) and at the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences at Comenius University (2006–2009). Michal Vašečka is a founder of the Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture, he served a director of the CVEK (2006–2012), was program director at the Slovak think-tank Institute of Public Affairs (1998–2005), and was a consultant for the World Bank (2000–2008 and 2011–2012). Since 2012, Michal Vašečka has served as a representative of the Slovak Republic in the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). He is a vice-chairman of the governmental committee VRAX tackling extremism and racism in Slovakia and a recipient of the Award for special contribution in the field of human rights by the Slovak Minister of Justice.*

The age of digital identity: the trap for political action

Cade M. Olmstead

CADE M. OLMSTEAD IS A SOCIOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA, WHERE HE IS A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY FOR CRITICAL STUDIES

'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.'

— Guy Debord

When it comes to political expression today, we no longer do things. Instead, we show things. What was once something based in material action, political expression has lifted into the realm of the supra-sensible. Or, as cultural theorist Mark Fisher put it, 'all that was solid has melted into PR'. This process has only been heightened by the advent of social(ized) media. Is it not the case today that each is her own PR agent, selecting and filtering the content to be broadcast and posted? Content which will come to compose her identity or 'public' image. Today's public commons are played out across a range of digital devices, where the totality of political expression finds its articulation in the click of the 'Like' button.

What does the 'Like' button offer as political action? Quick relief? That is, relief from the guilt of not doing one's duty. (Recalling here Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's critique of charity donations being included in the consumption of a Starbucks' coffee). Or maybe it is a different matter. It is instead that the 'Like' button is part of a libidinal apparatus, a structure of repetitive enjoyment. After all, former tech executives themselves have decried the "dopamine-driven feedback loops" that their platforms are built on. But instead of decrying it outright, it is worth exploring the fact that this libidinal structure may be closer to the heart of human subjectivity than an aberration of some primordial harmony. This relief may itself be an incorporative characteristic of the system.

This characterization of the human animal in this way is by no means an original one. It was German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel who characterized the status of self-consciousness as being desire in general, and following him, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who identified the dialectic of desire at work in the construction of one's social reality. We have to wonder how this libidinal drive of today's subject comes to shape politics and how it is intertwined with the digital landscape of our political sphere? And more pressingly, we must identify the limits of political action within the horizon of today's socialized media landscape.

It is on social media where the vast majority of political expression is carried out after all. Is this just because of the technology's widespread popularity or are the digital commons the only place in which one can be public? Is the virtual in our eyes virtually the only option? So much of one's identity is increasingly tied up into these social media platforms. The real concern, though, is the playing out of the public speech within a space of quick-fire ego construction and gratification, or recognition. We quickly leave the realm of principled political action for the realm of the plastic.

This is not to say something new about enjoyment and politics. The discontent of the 1960's has received criticism on similar grounds. The interfacing of social media and politics should instead be viewed as a heightening of this

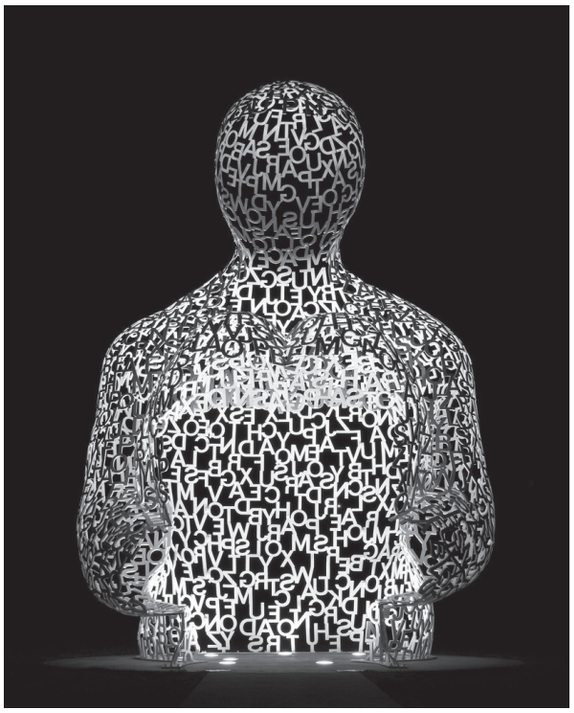


Photo: "Alphabet Man" – Des Moines Pappajohn Sculpture Park. Credit: Jason Mrachina.

problematic situation. Further, I am not claiming that we may totally surpass the libidinal apparatus, which as earlier pointed out may be something more fundamental to human subjectivity. I am instead calling cause for concern over the new attributes of this enjoyment being increasingly faster, more plastic, and dematerialized. For at least in the 1960's, mass numbers of people would still actively demonstrate; that is, their political expression was still done through an act of physical, visible presence. Today's political action is instead nothing more than the circulation of content across media platforms. Sure, social media is able to produce outcomes, but in itself, it does not produce the kind of political action necessary for transforming society.

It is problematic on two accounts. First, in effect, the 'Like' button functions as a mechanism of instant action and reward. One can quickly express their 'voice' on issues through post reactions, whether it be a thumbs up or frowny face. They can feel as if they have spoken on the matter, and it can be done at a rate of rapid fire. This stands in contrast to doing the elongated, meticulous work of political organizing, an activity unlikely to bring a quick payoff. In the current arrangement, we fall victim to the dopamine drive of endless scrolling and double tapping.

Second is the way in which expression is tied into being. What effectively one is is composed of their expressions. The posts, comments, and likes come to be the body, or the avatar, of who we are, and when we become more wrapped up in the realm of the digital, we end up perceiving the world as the total composition of these posts. In this case, the world really is the world wide web. This is problematic because there is in fact a material world apart from the realm of social(ized) media. One where ecological and social catastrophe rest on the future's horizon and people go without basic necessities of life. It is not that we do not know this, but that it does not threaten our digital identity.

Taking these two points in tandem, we come to see the limit of political action in the landscape of social(ized) media. As the public sphere merges with social media, the range of possible political action comes to be constituted in only what is possible on these platforms. For, it is only on these platforms where one's identity really exists and can properly participate. The dominance of social media comes to displace the world of materiality. Further, the action that gets conceived of as possible is nothing more than a libidinal outburst into the void of this landscape. All that reverberates in this void is the tantrum of our alienated souls and heard in the reply of its echo is nothing but the return of the injunction, the drive, to enjoy. In the end, there can be only a call to engage in act of serious political organizing. This is not a call to disclude social(ized) media and return to some historically idealized form of living but to act beyond it, to trespass its limit, and to begin conceiving of ourselves beyond its current arrangement. We must do more than represent a political world; it must be enacted.

The Myth of Great Moravia

Jonáš Jánsky

Photo: The mosaic of Saints, Cyril and Methodius.
Credit: Unknown

We certainly live in polarized times. Maybe because of that there is quite a surge of politicians and political movements who use history and historical imagination as part of their rhetoric. Due to this, historians have started to write articles that aim to argue against the myths that this type of rhetoric inevitably creates. A lot of these articles are written about various alt-right movements as these tend to use medieval symbolism such as the Crusades, but this is not only a problem of nationalist fringe groups. A selective view of history is often employed by mainstream politicians as well as by governments. In this article, I would like to look at one such case, which is quite close to our hearts at Il Ponte: namely, the Slovak treatment of medieval Great Moravia.

At this moment, readers will probably split into two major groups: those who are from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and know what it is; and those who are not from these places, and have no idea. So, to explain, Great Moravia was a political entity, which existed around the second half of the 9th century. Before its expansion under Svätopluk, it was comprised mostly of territory that is today part of Moravia in the Czech Republic and of western Slovakia. It was founded in 833 with the Moravian conquest of the Principality of Nitra and it dissolved sometime at the start of the 10th century due to civil war and the migration of Hungarians into Pannonia.

You might be surprised why I want to speak about something that lasted only a little bit longer than three generations. Well, I want to talk about it mostly because Great Moravia has a huge political importance for Slovakia, as well as, the Czech Republic. This is because both states claim it as their predecessor. Czechs by owning the region called Moravia, and Slovaks through owning the territory of the above-mentioned Principality of Nitra that, after the conquest, became one of the main centres of the empire. Furthermore, its political importance is cemented by the fact that during the existence of Great Moravia, Christianity as well as a written language was introduced in the region.

So Great Moravia is politically very important. Presently it is much more emphasized in Slovakia, as the Czech Republic can also use the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia in its historical narrative. Its existence was one of the premises that were used in an argument made by many members of the Slovak national movement for an independent Slovak state during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Later, after the end of the First World War, it was one of the main arguments for the establishment of Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic we commemorate Saints Cyril and Methodius, who brought writing to Moravia even though Methodius and all his students were later expelled from Moravia by the successor of the prince who initially invited them. It is no surprise then that most old-school nationalists see Moravia as a great Slavic (Slovak) state that bravely fought against the East Frankish (German) yoke and whose destruction is both an important moral lesson, as well as an major tragedy that caused the thousand-year 'enslavement' of Slovaks under the Kingdom of Hungary.

As you can surely imagine, recent historical research often clashes with these nationalist conceptions. First of all, in the current archaeological and historical research there is a debate about whether Great Moravia was actually a state or was a sort of proto-state. This is because, according to Frankish chronicles, power within Great Moravia was not entirely centralized within the hands of a prince. He tended to be referred to as the first among several princes within the empire. Due to this, most Great Moravian territory was in the hands of these subordinate princes and the prince himself controlled only a limited amount of territory around his capital. Another important thing is that, the prince did not rule Moravia as a feudal head of state, as we might imagine it, but 'only' as a prince of the tribe of Moravians. This meant that apart from the above-mentioned subordinate princes, the prince of Great Moravia had to probably consult "veča" , which was an assembly made up of the free male members of the tribe. Because of this, the prince did not really agree to sign what we would now recognize as international treaties, such as payment of tribute, without the agreement of this assembly. All this meant that the prince's powers were severely limited when compared to the power we generally imagine medieval rulers wielded.

There is also a huge stain on the history of Great Moravia that tends to be forgotten in favour of the idealization of Slavs as an inherently pacific people. This stain is slavery. More precisely, Great Moravia, during its peak, was one of the main slave-trading hubs in Europe. It is often assumed that during medieval times slavery disappeared, and reappeared only with colonialism in the 16th and 17th century. But during the early medieval period, slaves were one of the most profitable commodities. Modern historians found out that most of the wealth of the Moravian princes was derived from the slave trade taking place within their empire. These slaves were mostly captives from various military expeditions against non-Christians surrounding Great Moravia. Merchants bought many slaves in Moravia and then travelled south to Venice, where they could sell them at a huge profit in order to buy silks and other luxury resources that they could sell on their way back to Moravia.

Another aspect that clashes with the traditional nationalistic narrative about Great Moravia is the description of its fall as an ethnic conflict between Moravians and the invading Hungarians, after which all the Moravians in what is now Slovak territory were subjugated and oppressed. In truth, after the dissolution of Great Moravia, a lot of local Slavic princes either kept their power and stayed independent for a while, or even joined Hungarians to raid both the East Frankish territories, as well as their own old rulers from Moravia. A lot of these princes then became, together with old Hungarian tribal aristocracy, the core of the medieval Hungarian nobility. One of the best examples of local rulers would be Hunt and Poznan, two princes whose territories are presumed to be in today's Slovakia. These two actually supplied a great number of troops to the Hungarian Prince Stephen, during the rebellions that were led by Stephen's relatives, who resisted his attempts at Christianisation.

In the case of Great Moravia, we can clearly see why it is necessary to be critical of our general perceptions of history. This is because there are various historical narratives that surround us and it is very easy to embrace one narrative that is purposefully crafted in order to achieve some sort of political goal but, at the end of the day, has nothing to do with what exactly happened. As we all know, those who do not know their history are bound to repeat it sooner or later.

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Whose choice is it?

Vivien Slíž

Abortion has always been considered a sensitive topic in society. However, over the past few weeks, it is being discussed more due to the current situation in Alabama, where a new law to ban abortion was recently passed. The law prohibits abortions even in cases of rape and incest. Many women are struggling with people who do not understand the full responsibility of having and raising a child. You can only imagine how frustrating it is for them to hear that now the government or religious lobbyists want to step into this issue and attempt to influence government policies on abortion in line with their ideology. The free choice of women is now considered a crime. The main question is to what extent someone has the right to tell women how to regulate their bodies and to deprive them of the choice to not have a child.

After being sexually assaulted, raped by a stranger or a family member, the victims have to face the suffering of mental anguish. They are unable to cope with their mental distress without the help of professional therapy. Therapy however, cannot help with the unwanted pregnancy itself. Besides, there is also the physical trauma that rape victims go through that is equally, if not more, challenging for these women. Imagine that you are put in a situation where you know what to do and what is right, but the government will not allow it. This may even result in you giving birth to the child of a rapist.

Alabama's new law imposes the most severe restrictions on abortion in the United States. The law was passed by 25 Republicans with the deliberate intention that it ends up before the Supreme Court. These 25 men decided what women should do with their bodies. How absurd. Bear in mind, some Republicans did not read the terminology about what abortion actually is and still voted against it. This law robs women of their basic human rights because the government decided to prioritize the life of the unborn before the lives of women. If this law was truly about protecting life then they would invest money into crucial areas such as maternity leave, parental care and other vital policies that would make it simpler for parents to raise their children.

From a religious perspective, abortion was never the right way. Pope Francis had the audacity to compare abortion "to hiring a hitman to resolve a problem". Later on, he added: "How can an act that suppresses the innocent and helpless life as it blossoms be therapeutic, civil, or simply human?" Will the Pope pay for the expenses that come with the responsibility of having a child? Or will the state provide enough money to do that? In Italy, women's groups are constantly fighting for safe access to abortion, and to demonstrate that nobody has the right to tell you what to do with your own body.

The whole process of creating the idea that abortion is a crime will have a devastating impact on society and healthcare. Some women and families simply cannot afford to have a child. They would do anything to get a doctor who will agree to induce abortion and if they cannot do so they will look for other alternatives. People will still get an abortion one way or the other. The state has the potential to guarantee safe precautions and still tries to make it inaccessible to people who are financially disadvantaged. You cannot prevent abortion in order to promote motherhood if you do not have sufficient arguments and means to assure that these mothers and their futures will be improved.

The government, religious communities or other people do not have the right to control a woman's decision. Especially not a Republican gubernatorial candidate such as Clayton Williams, who likened rape to weather. He claimed that if it is inevitable, women ought to enjoy it and relax while it is happening. The effort of religious lobbyists to campaign against abortion in countries like the US, where states have not interfered with such sensitive issues to such an extent before, is worrying. In matters such as this, it is the women who should primarily have the choice about whether they want an abortion or not. If women do not want to have an abortion they should be able to make up their own minds and have the right to do so.

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Food, identity, and polarization

Promise Frank Ejiofor

When we talk about culture, we tend to overemphasise emblematic features such as language, art, laws, customs, beliefs, knowledge and morals of a particular people and to underemphasise one particular feature: food. But food – like these other features – is a potent force of cultures and identities not only because it is a biological necessity but also because it connects people everywhere. When served sushi in a restaurant in Hungary, we experience Japanese culture even without visiting Japan; when we share bulgogi with a friend in the UK, we are reminded of Korea; and when we enjoy that goulash meal in a Hungarian restaurant in France, we get the feel for something Hungarian – for Hungarian culture – whilst navigating other spaces in France. With globalisation, diverse national cuisines have become domesticated, nay enjoyed, in spaces other than where they had been exclusively enjoyed. It is unsurprising, then, that on my twenty-seventh birthday in Budapest, I shared chicken biryani – a dish with its origins amongst the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent – with friends and colleagues from different parts of the world in an Indian restaurant.

So significant is food for culture and identity that Robin Fox categorically avers that our food choices define us in terms of our religion, social class, ethnicity, nationality, and so on.[1] Exactly because food is always shared with others – it would be so boring, I suppose, to wine and dine alone without company – it always helps to connect people of the same identity. Italians will always be fond of pasta and spaghetti, Mexicans will always be fond of tortillas: whenever the members of these nationalities meet, they could agree not only in terms of their language but also with the national food they consume. Regardless of the differences in worldviews, Italians and Mexicans will always perceive these national dishes as one thing, amongst many others, that makes them who they are, that is, that gives them that sense of belonging to one Italian or Mexican culture.

I have said that food unites people, but there are other times when food polarises. Consider, for example, the case of a Chinese restaurant – Lucky Lee's, by name – run by a Jewish-American couple in New York.[2] Lucky Lee's advertised itself as capable of providing clean and healthy Chinese food that would not make people feel "bloated and icky the next day." And they ended their statement by asserting that "There are very few American-Chinese places as mindful about the quality of ingredients as we are."

Although Lucky Lee's statement sounded somewhat neutral, it stimulated serious backlash from many who considered the statement not only racist and lacking proper comprehension of Chinese culture, but an instance of "cultural appropriation." Amongst those who vehemently condemned the restaurant were a large Chinese following, that is, mostly people of Chinese descent. This episode forced the restaurant to render an official apology to those who were offended by the statements. I am quite sure that Lucky Lee's did not expect that their statement would provoke such a huge backlash: had they known they would certainly not have published it on their website.

Although I do not agree with the charge that Lucky Lee's statement was an instance of cultural appropriation – the concept is too ambiguous and would merit a separate piece to explore – I do think it was a clear demonstration that food can both be personal and political. It shows that one's being Chinese connects to one's having an interest in eating Chinese food but also in that food being respected by others, even when they do enjoy it. So, the issue here is, I think, clearly the sentiment of disrespect rather than appropriation. The backlash happened because some people – mostly Chinese – to whom Chinese food constitutes their identity felt that they were disrespected, that their identity was disrespected.

To respect people is, I think, to respect not only their personhood but whatever constitutes their identities, including their food. Whenever we share those delicious cuisines of German, Italian, Hungarian, French, Chinese or Spanish origin, it is worthwhile to always have in mind that they make up the culture and identity of others. Because our increasingly globalising world can never be at peace devoid of respect, it is morally imperative we accord what others eat respect even when we partake them with our own friends, colleagues and compatriots on our birthdays, vacations, weddings, and so on.

1 Robin Fox (2014), Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective Social Issues Research Centre.

2 Seehttps://www.bbc.com/newsworld-us-canada-47892747 (accessed May 21, 2019)

The Views from BISLA

Laura Palenčíková

To conclude the theme of polarization for this issue we offer you views from our own faculty at BISLA. We asked them whether they think our Slovak society is polarized and if so, what they see as a source of this polarization. In case of our teacher of International Relation and PhD. candidate, Clarissa do Nascimento Tabosa, we asked about polarization in her native country – Brazil.

"Although for now we can have doubts about whether there is a will for dialogue, or if dialogue is even possible, however, one thing is certain: the dialogue will have to begin sooner or later – the circumstances will compel us to do so."

The establishment of an independent Slovakia has brought to the forefront the extent of the division in our society. With the current direction that Slovak society is taking it is imperative to overcome this schism. If during socialism this division has been temporarily numbed by the common need to defend against the communist regime or to coexist with it, after 1989 this divide has resurfaced, once again, in full force. The origins of this schism are already perceivable in the times of Štúr, later it progressed during the conflict between S.H. Vajanský and Masaryk, followed by an escalation between Hlinka and Šrobár during the former ČSR and it eventually culminated during the war between the followers of the Tiso regime and the SNP. There is still a lack of historic studies in these areas, which, gives opportunity for the politicisation and generalisation of these eras. This generalisation and politicisation gives rise to arguments, through which certain parts of society or political parties are trying to build their own legitimacy. Only when we will grasp these historical connections will we be able to get rid of the escalated, yet vague categories such as "loyal Slovak" and "enemy of Slovakia", "democrats" and "nationalists", "standard" and "non-standard" political parties. Categories are on one hand arbitrary for the receiver, yet they give a false sense of superiority to the ones who utter these labels.

If we want to finally begin a dialogue, we exactly need to understand the causes why Slovakia is divided into two camps. But right here is not the place to seek out these causes or to even describe the current schism in Slovak society. If the task of researchers from various social science disciplines is to describe this phenomenon, then it is the task of both divided camps to *find* the causes of their schism. To search for the answers through dialogue and not through shouting through impassable barricades, which internally gradually paralyse and externally isolate Slovak society. Although for now we can have doubts about whether there is a will for dialogue, or if dialogue is even possible, however, one thing is certain: the dialogue will have to begin sooner or later – the circumstances will compel us to do so.

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Doc. Samuel Abrahám, PhD.

"In Slovakia all political conflicts, it means conflicts of publicly justifiable interests, are presented as conflicts between individual persons."

To use the term "polarization" in description of Slovak political scene is rather ingenuous simplification. Of course, Slovak political society is split in different groupings, roughly in the same way as all European societies. These divisions and cleavages as such are no problem. The problem is how the differences, cleavages, are presented and how politicians and political public deals with them. In Slovakia all political conflicts, it means conflicts of publicly justifiable interests, are presented as conflicts between individual persons. And all conflicts between persons in political realm are presented in moral terms. The result is the general moralization of all political problems. The consequence is lessening of political sensibility to the real moral problems. I have to admit, that some political groupings still benefit from this indiscriminate moralization of political problem. I am very doubtful, if this strategy is acceptable in the long run as it seriously destroys the sense of reality.

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Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc.

"If you identify with the political left, you are complacent with the Worker's Party: polarization is framed in such a way that you are either "da direita" (rightist), or you are complacent with corruption and political misconducts."

The current political polarization in Brazil stems from the far-right

reaction to the leftwing government of the former President Lula Workers' Party. The party was involved in a series of corruption scandals when in power for 14 years, and it served as the trigger for polarization between left and right in the political spectrum. In the mainstream discourse advocated by the right, the left in Brazil is epitomized by the Workers' Party. Jair Bolsonaro represents the biggest contrast to the policies and values of "the left". Following the worldwide trend, the internet has been serving as the main arena in which polarization is promoted and articulated, and where Bolsonaro is framed as the only force capable of containing the left. On the internet or in public spaces, being critical of the Worker's Party is not enough. If you identify with the political left, you are complacent with the Worker's Party: polarization is framed in such a way that you are either "da direita" (rightist), or you are complacent with corruption and political misconducts. Polarization stems from the far-right reaction to the failures of the Workers' Party, it is articulated through the internet, and it affects the most the genuine left that is critical of corruption, and that advocate for fundamental rights that tend to be ignored by the government of Bolsonaro.

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Clarissa do Nascimento Tabosa, PhD candidate

"We are also on the geographical divide between the West and the East, which reinforces the value gap between the usually pro-Western progressivists and the Eastern-oriented traditionalists."

Slovak society has been polarized ever since the inception of the first Czechoslovak Republic (at the time, it was the autonomists vs. Czechoslovakists) and this divide has been inherited and incorporated into the post-1989 political life. We are also on the geographical divide between the West and the East, which reinforces the value gap between the usually pro-Western progressivists and the Eastern-oriented traditionalists. These divisions reinforce each other. However, we are also witnessing a more recent polarization, which is worrisome for its increasing trend. The young generation especially (under the age of 24) is reflecting the impact of the globalization crisis, dividing those who perceive themselves as the winners or as the losers of this process. While segments of our youth and young adults are more mobilized and more likely to participate in political life than the generation of their parents, it has a few catches – they participate in more unconventional ways (thus it does not necessarily translate into voting) and they are in fact more polarized – there is a significant group of "assertive citizens" – young people with strong social feelings, highly critical of institutions and political leaders, but deep believers in democracy. President Čaputová and Progressive Slovakia are the ideological home of that cohort. On the other side, there is another significant group of the "apocalyptic populists" who resonate with the politics of fear and extreme right ideology (which we see in the mock elections into the EU parliament in high schools as well as in 2016 election results-where nearly two thirds of Kotleba's voters were from this generation). The trenches are being dug, losing the ability to talk to each other and feel at least remotely connected by some bond into one political nation. Reasons are several and would require a larger space – some are global, some stem out of socio-economic conditions. Most importantly, it is the outcome of an unadressed past, exclusivist concept of citizenship (the idea of "who belongs" with us and who not), lacking responsible reflection, and failing education – which are closely related causes. Answer lies partially in taking this responsibility seriously, in history curricula, as well as in public discussions about our past and its meaning for our present and future.

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Dagmar Kusá, PhD

People of Bratislava

Laura Palenčíková, Peter Sterančák, Georgios Merkouris

It is often said that every person is an open book. We elaborated on that idea in our new Facebook column called People of Bratislava. We were inspired by the famous Facebook page of Humans of New York, where they randomly interview regular people on the streets of New York and then publish it in the form of a short story accompanied by a picture of the person whom they talked to. So, here are some stories of People of Bratislava. For more stories like these, follow us on Facebook at "Il Ponte – BISLA Student Journal", or on Instagram at "ilpontemagazine".

Heinrich

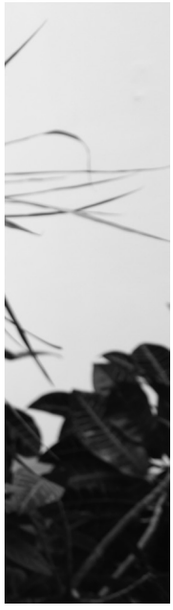
↘

"I'm 86 now but when I was a schoolboy, I was a little bit lazy. My father was a teacher in an elementary school and he wanted me to work harder and become a teacher like him. Later, when I was 18 – 20 years old and started attending university, I worked very hard and climbed up the ladder to become a professor of medicine. It was very hard but I had a group of 7 to 10 young doctors that worked together with me in the research of carcinogenesis. Specifically, carcinogenesis in the gastrointestinal tract. As you know, many people have problems with this today in Western countries. My big hobby is botany and I am looking for botanical gardens all over. I think there's one botanical garden here in Bratislava, near some university but our ship back to Passau is leaving in one hour, so I have no time to go there now."

Natalia

↘

"If someone in the past would have asked me what makes me happy, I would have certainly replied that doing something that is essentially materialistic is the source of my joy. What I mean, is that I used to be the type of person who would have been happy when engaging in simple activities such as shopping. Once you have such an impulse in you that buying new things can give you happiness, you start searching for that feeling over and over again. You do more and more shopping; seeking more happiness, almost to the point of greediness, just to experience that feeling once again. Only after a time, will you realize that this cycle creates more sadness than joy. Today, the source of my happiness is something different, to the point of being the complete opposite. At a certain point, I became determined to say "no" to a consumer lifestyle. At the beginning of this change, I had the impression that no one cared about the impact that our senseless purchases have on the environment or on the lives of the people who produce them. But what makes me happy today, you might ask? The thought that I am not alone in this struggle. I am beginning to understand that there are many more of us; young people who see their future differently from tragic scenarios caused by not intervening in natural environmental developments that lead to disaster. It makes me happy when I see how many people take the initiative into their own hands and start change with themselves. It makes me happy that we have hope. It makes me happy that we believe and are convinced that we can change the world for the better, by small changes everyday. Because the truth is, we can."



Antoine

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"I'm 25 and I'm currently hitchhiking across Europe. I'm on the big trip right now. I started 19 months ago, my last plane took me to Georgia and I hitchhiked across Georgia, Turkey, and then Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and now Slovakia. So, I'm on my way back home after a long time on the road and just enjoying my time in Europe. When I finished my studies, I felt like I wanted to do something big. I didn't want to just travel or have a two weeks' vacation somewhere, so I took the little money I had and I decided to leave without really having a plan. I didn't know whether I would be traveling for one, two, or six months, and look at me, I'm still on the road. So far, so good. So many extraordinary things have happened to me during this trip. I crossed the Atlantic on a sailing boat, at the beginning of the trip which was rather unique. I know, I'm definitely not the only one who has done it. There are hundreds of people doing it right now but still, it was quite an experience for me. It was my first time on a sailing boat too, so it was cool. However, what surprised me the most about my trip were the people. The people are definitely amazing.

I mean, I've been through so many different cultures, like in Asia and Muslim countries, and it's just fascinating to see how human beings can be good and kind. I think we are somehow missing it a little bit, if not in Europe, then in France right now, where I am from. But there's kindness in this world and it's just amazing to surrender to it. I'd say when you expect the best from people, you will eventually find it."

Simona

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"I've been working in this coffee shop for a month, but I had worked in the hospitality business for about 4 years. My biggest dream is to have my own café one day and manage it according to what I like about other places, adding my own ideas, making it the top café around. A lot of the time, it's the attitude business owners have towards their customers and their own staff that repels me about other gastronomy places here in Slovakia. In my ideal café, there would be no single shots, only double shots. Maybe I would also try to find the right profile of coffees and rotate different ones regularly, to avoid stereotypes and offer some more alternatives, too. I've been living in Bratislava for a year now. I came here from Trnava because I need a big city and places to go to, not only during the weekend. I also need more opportunities around me and maybe fewer people who know me. I've always been more of a pessimist but since I came to Bratislava, I try to live my life as I want it to be, because I can and am slowly changing from this dark drama queen, who always saw evil and negativity everywhere around her, to this sunshine I am now who focuses more on positive things. My life philosophy is that we don't only live once; every day is a new beginning. I also believe that we shouldn't be afraid to change and evolve, because if people stay the same throughout their whole life, then they will always miss something. I also try to work on myself, whether on my looks or my behavior – always re-evaluating my priorities because it can change every day, so that's what I mean by saying we don't only live once."

A month in a life of our school, or what happened at BISLA in April 2019

Michal Micovčin, Ivona Mičeková, Matej Bilík

Dear friends, no month is the same at BISLA. Here, we offer you the content of our colleagues from the BISLA newsletter in which they sum up everything important that happens every month in our school. Here is an example of how lively the life at BISLA is from the April edition...

This month, one of BISLA's videos ended up in the headlines of Slovak disinformation sites, comments were filled with hate and unfounded accusations. One easily lets off all of their constraints in virtual spaces, it is like there is no human on the other side. Situations like these invite us to talk more with with one another in a physical space, to see human beings instead of screens.

↘ Brexit and what comes next

The Ambassador of Ireland to the Slovak Republic, H.E. Hilda Ó Riain, visited BISLA. Her Excellency Hilda Ó Riain and professor Radičová were discussing the topic of Brexit with our students.

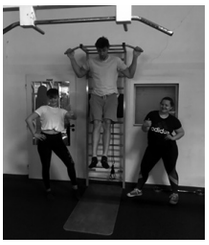
↘ Human Rights Olympics

This year, the 21st edition of Human Right Olympics for high school students took place in Slovakia. BISLA was actively involved, Dr. Dagmar Kusá was a member of a committee in the final round and she moderated the discussion about November 1989.

Our students and Writing Lab tutors, Matej Bílik, Mária Dudžáková and Paula Svatoňová prepared a workshop: How to Write an Essay for participants. They were also evaluating all 64 essays written by high school students.

↘ Plato on education and democracy by Béla Egyed

BIH & BISLA organized a discussion: Plato on Education and Democracy with our visiting professor from Canada, Bela Egyed. Professor Egyed has been reading Plato›s Republic with our students for 10 years. It is a compulsory reading for every student at BISLA.



↘ Workout with Miško

Studying and acquiring new knowledge is important, but so is exercise. Tuesday and Thursday mornings are filled with workouts with our student and trainer Michal Sagula at FanatiX gym.

↘ Open Day at BISLA

BISLA Student Council has already organised two Open Days at BISLA this year. Future students had an opportunity to experience our classes, talk to students and professors, and ask them questions. Great food was also prepared for them.

↘ Dobrý Trh

As during previous years, BISLA once again participated in the Good Market on Jakubák Square. BISLA's garden was open to the public with visitors having an option of partaking in a pleasant program and book bazaar. From Improvisation Theatre to a discussion with famous Slovak writers, there were many things to do.

↘ BISLA Quiz: What do you really know?

Student Council has organised the first BISLA Quiz. 5 teams tested their knowledge and had a nice evening together.

↘ Discussion about Tiso

Kritika & Kontext & BIH organised a discussion about the book: James Mace Warda: Jozef Tiso: kňaz, politik, kolaborant (Slovart, 2018). Moderator Peter Turčík talked with historians – Agáta Šústová Drelová, Ivan Kamenec and Miloslav Szabó.

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