

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Miroslav Krleža

Flags

Zastave

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Miroslav Krleža's last novel, *Flags*, narrated from the perspective of Kamil Emerički Jr., depicts political and social events from 1903 to 1922, through the First World War, the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the founding of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The significant historical context, the themes of the conversations and events in the novel and also Krleža's announcement of the novel (Forum, 1962, 2 and 3), accentuated political themes and references.

"The political theme of the novel," says Krleža, "opens up a broad historical perspective on the lives of the Croatian, Serbian and Hungarian generations born between the 1860s and 1890s. In the period between the death of Obrenović, the banning of Khuen and the Balkan wars, the main characters of the work, in addition to their individual fates, were whirled around by a dramatic political whirlwind, like birds lost in a storm. On the eve of the collapse of Austria-Hungary, amidst numerous and varied illusions, deceptions and hopes, in the opaque fog of the fires and dynamite of the First World War, in this novel two generations make their way through the fog and the uncertain reality to continue the pre-war political struggle under new circumstances, on the terrain of the newly created Kingdom of SHS, in an increasingly fatal contrast of national and social differentiation. In the post-war circumstances of political and moral confusion, the novel becomes a stage for dramatic clashes between long-lived social prejudices, mythomania and socialist views on the question of South Slavic national and state unification."

"The gallery of the Hungarian, Croatian and Serbian intelligentsia is at the centre of this chronicle, in the period 1919-22, between Kumanovo and Bregalnica, the assassinations in Zagreb and Bosnia, up to the emergence of Leninism, which appears in the minds and consciousness of the romanticised characters as an ideological and moral counterpoint to everything that, according to the law of historical inertia, has a negative and destructive effect on the development of national and social relations in our country.

Flags, then, are symbolic banners that the characters in this gallery of novels, led by Kamil Emerički, apostrophise as signs of their own ideas, aspirations and projections. Krleža carefully presents this theme at the motif level of the novel, whereby the flags (banners) also take on other, not only narrowly political connotations. The flags are the names of progressive publications (*Crveni barjak*, *Zastave*), the most important of which for the novel is the Hungarian magazine *Barjaci XX stoljeća*, in which Kamil publishes his subversive texts under the pseudonym Zeno. They problematise social and political issues, the colonial position of the small nations in the Monarchy as well as socialist thinking and the prospects of resistance brought about by the post-revolutionary era. Flags are of course also part of the national symbols and thus a symbol of political agreements

and colonial relations, in which generations of the Croatian people died tragically as *antemurale christianitatis*, which Kamilo's grandfather comments on by saying that "our old families" received a "fresh fig" from the Monarchy for this loyalty until death (II: 170-171). In this context, the banners, together with the drums, are part of the circus of the imperial armada, as Kamilo sees it (II: 173), but also the banners of freedom, of Nietzschean rebellion, from which new perspectives open up. As a counterweight to such parades and performances, Kamilo will rephrase it with the following words: "Let us develop new banners and not fake ones, we have opted for new, socialist banners, and our youth should go to the left, all the way to the left, to the negation of all lies, in Svetozar Marković's International "Serbia in the East", that and Franjo Supil's last letters in "Riječki novi list", those are our banners, and they are enough for us to change the mentality of one and another province of the mind..." (II: 132)

Although flags are the banners of Kamil's beliefs, under which he will walk until the end of the novel, they are not exclusively ones with political colours. They are also "flags of the heart", even when it comes to politics: in the encounter with Joja, Ana and the fallen comrades who share a Nietzschean cry against the senselessness of crime and war (III: 179). In the poignant explanation of the death of the sick Ana Borongay, the human heart is much more than an organ of materialistic medical hydraulics, it is a "silken banner" that "feels every innocent breath of the zephyr", it is an "orchestra of harps and cymbals, of violins and trumpets", a "roaring sea", a "mad storm of thousands and thousands of instruments" (V: 111). For Kamilo himself, she is "a veil fluttering over the procession like a banner waving towards bright joy." (V: 64)

Between the one and the other, the bloodthirsty arena of the contemporary political circus and the subtle tones, the gentleness and strength of the "flag of the heart", the conflicts and longings, Krleža develop the narrative and the dynamics of his novel. They are carried and guided in a dialogue between Kamil Emerički and his father, Joja, Ana Borongay, Amadeo Trupac and then Guido Glanz and Genja. These relationships are often strained, inevitably dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. As a main character, Kamilo is developed as a speaking subject, Bakhtinian, as a fundamental element of ethical and legal thought.

The novel develops in a dialogue that often grows into a polemic, which Krleža sometimes skilfully elaborates on two levels: on the one hand, by following the actual spoken conversation, and on the other, by expressing equally (or even more clearly) polemical thoughts that the character does not express loudly. In that way, the novel pulsates, developing the tension between the spoken and the unspoken, thoughts and words, writing and speaking different political options that enter into a dialogue. Those are Kamilo's Croatian, South Slavic and Communist ideas, his father's Hungarian and then Yugoslavian monarchist career, Kamilo's political engagement and Ana's and even Genja's apoliticality, etc. Dialogical opposition brings together different languages and dialects: Croatian, Hungarian and German, Serbian and Kajkavian, Italian, French and Latin. They intertwine mutually, complementing each other, creating barbaric and expressive elements of the novel's narrative. The dialogue, as the basic expressive strategy of this novel, sometimes does not even use its other counterpart. Often, the main character's own consciousness is structured in dialogue, so that his thoughts and attitudes that we follow change diametrically in just one episode.

Processuality and dialogue form the main character's maturation through the temporality specific to the *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, they express the main political thesis of the novel: one's truth (the banners of the heart, the flags of ideals) is necessarily expressed in dialogue, polemics and mutability, without which there is no politics.

Therefore, the role of the ideas and ideals that motivate the progress and changes of the main

character is equally important as his ability to express himself through dialogue. Although his political development ends with the perspective of social justice and the optimal projection of communism, the dialogue of the novel and the construction of the main character show that the political does not lie in fixed, outlined ideas, but in the possibility of dialogue. By making dialogue the matrix of his own narrative, Krleža's novel polemically refers to the time he describes, the time from which he writes, and the time from which we read and understand it today. Exposing the political as inherently human in these intersections, he also honours it in encounters and solitude, in dialogue and belonging, in warmth, art, food, the reality of breathing and existence, bare life.

Note on editions

The novel was first published in instalments in the literary journal *Forum* in 1962. The first book version, modified from the magazine, was published by Zora (1967) in four books. After that, the last changes were made in the joint edition of Oslobođenje Sarajevo and Mladost Zagreb. (1976). It grew into a five-book novel, with the fifth one (the last one written by the author) being inserted between the second and third books of the Zora edition, where it chronologically belongs from the perspective of the story.

Translations

Zástavy. Transl. to Slovak by Andrej Vrbacký, Slovenské pohľady, 79, 1963. (some parts translated?)

"Joja to Glina and Kamilo to the Hungaricum: from the novel 'The banners'". Transl. to English by Celia Williams, *The Bridge* 1970 23/24, Contemporary Croatian prose. (small fragment)

Znamena. Transl. to Russian by T. Popovoj, I. Dobry, A. Lazutkina, T. Virty, A. Danilovoj. Raduga, Moskva, 1984.

A fekete sas arnyekaban. Transl. to Ungarn by Csuka Zoltan, Europa Konyvkiado, Budapest, 1985.

Sztandary. Transl. to Polish by Maria Krukowska, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, 1990.

Die Fahnen. Transl. to German by Silvija Hinzmann and Gero Fischer, Klagenfurt/Celovec: Wieser, 2016.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

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