Ljubljana between Internationalization and Provincialization

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A few years ago I interviewed Rustom Bharucha, an Indian theater director well known for his essays on interculturalism, at the clinic for infectious diseases in Ljubljana's main hospital. He was in Ljubljana lecturing at the first City of Women festival. Soon after arriving, he came down with malaria and C. At that time, Bharucha shared an interesting thought with me regarding the notion of interculturalism, i.e. a kind of internationalization of culture or, in his terminology, "an exchange of cultures across nations." It transpired from our discussion that the infrastructure of interculturalism rests on three key institutions: the airport, the hotel, and the hospital.

Ljubljana airport is small compared to airports in most other European capitals; it takes bus drivers only a minute or two to shuttle passengers from their airplanes to the main terminal, and vice versa. Drivers sometimes seem to choose a longer route just to break the monotony. Even though Ljubljana airport is the main international airport in the country, its appearance and size make it look provincial. Despite its rapid development and upgrades over recent years—mainly due to the advent of low-cost airlines—some key infrastructures still do not meet at least reasonable requirements, especially transportation from the airport to the city. Public bus lines are infrequent and slow; private vans are faster but even rarer. Taking a taxi is the only remaining option, and it can be quite expensive.

When Rustom Bharucha was at the clinic for infectious diseases in Ljubljana, hospital care was still exclusively in the public domain and provided by full-time surgeons and other staff members. The waiting periods for some surgical procedures were (and still are) unacceptably long; however, the underprivileged also had access to operations. The arrival of Prime Minister Janez Janša's administration sparked a new wave of privatization, which also included the public health care system. For example, surgeons from Ljubljana's clinical center can now acquire a license for private surgical practice. This allows them to perform most surgical procedures outside of the main hospital. The minister of health has been promising

shorter waiting periods; yet, some say he forgot to mention that this only applies to the wealthier patients. Rather than becoming like capital cities whose health care systems are better organized and friendlier toward a wider segment of the population, Ljubljana will probably become more like cities where capitalism has not been at least somewhat "socialized."

The hotel is another key institution of intercultural encounter. Ljubljana's hotels are unable to meet the increasing demand, and the services they offer are not on a par with other European capitals. Some 2004 estimates cite an almost 70 percent increase in the number of foreign visitors to Ljubljana in comparison to the year 2003; this figure was expected to decrease slightly in 2005. As a result, some hotels are renovating and upgrading their existing capacities. The demand for low-budget hotels, such as youth hostels, has been on the rise.

Airports and train and bus stations (a radical modernization of both Ljubljana stations is being planned), hotels, hospitals, and other parts of the urban infrastructure tell us a lot about the city's international spirit and its growing international ties. Proof of this is the British carrier easyJet—only a year after introducing low-cost flights to and from London and Berlin, it brought approximately 100,000 passengers to Ljubljana's airport. Adria Airways, Slovenia's domestic airline, has not been adversely affected by this sharp increase; the company claims that the number of its passengers has remained the same or has slightly increased.

However, we have to be very careful when dealing with numbers and statistics, since they hide a lot. Foreign visitors have flocked to Ljubljana as a result of the increase in international transportation and Slovenia's accession to the European Union. This is evident on the streets, in the squares of the city's center, in the restaurants, and around architectural places of interest. However, such changes are only superficial. While the increase in the number of visitors from abroad has certainly contributed to the city's more cosmopolitan image—for example, English, German, Spanish, and other languages are frequently heard and are part of everyday life in Ljubljana—we have to ask ourselves if these changes have critically influenced the "internationalization" of the Slovenian capital.

History shows that Ljubljana has always been a popular destination. The famous Ljubljana Philharmonic, which prides itself on its three-hundred-year tradition, has counted Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms among its honorable members, and Gustav Mahler was one of its conductors. After the devastating earthquake of 1895, Austrian and Czech architects oversaw the city's reconstruction. This resulted in some extremely beautiful Art Nouveau buildings,

which, together with the work of the famous Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik, constitute the architectural décor of Ljubljana. In addition to the numerous international cultural ties cultivated throughout Ljubljana's history, the city has also been a commercial center.

The city suffered the worst attack on its openness during World War Two. In 1942, the occupation forces (the city was first taken by Italian and then by German soldiers) encircled the city with thirty kilometers of barbed wire. After the war, the authorities built a commemorative recreational path along the same route, which is still very popular with walkers, cyclists, and joggers.

Before World War Two, the city only had a population of around sixty thousand. After the war, its population began to boom. In the 1970s, the second largest wave of immigrants came to Ljubljana in search of work. The majority of them were people from other republics of the former Yugoslavia, mainly from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since Slovenia was still part of socialist Yugoslavia at the time, immigration from other republics was classified as internal migration. However, once an independent Slovenian state had been created, citizens from other republics were classified as foreigners. Most recent data indicate that most immigrants living in Ljubljana are from the former Yugoslavia (around 60 percent). There are far fewer citizens from other countries. According to the latest census, there are 266,000 people living in Ljubljana, the majority Slovenes (85 percent).

When we think of Ljubljana's international character, we cannot ignore the fact that immigrants (both former and current) from other Yugoslav republics have made important contributions to the international and cosmopolitan "human capital" of the city. Many of these immigrants hold low-paying jobs because of their educational profile, poor language competency, and, unfortunately, stereotypes. These stereotypes have also been encouraged by the creators of public debate, mainly politicians from the political right, the media, and the culture and entertainment industry. For example, in sitcoms aired on national and commercial television, the roles of janitors, doormen, and the like are reserved for characters whose names are not traditionally Slovenian (Fata, Veso, etc.). These characters also speak broken Slovenian with a strong Bosnian accent. While many immigrants, especially first-generation ones, do hold jobs that are less desirable and less valued among Slovenians (for example, in the construction and waste management sectors, etc.), some of them are top managers, scientists, artists, and the like. Since this side of the story has not been covered by the media, a one-dimensional image of social reality has been created. This, in turn, encourages

prejudgments about the "uneducated" and "incompetent" immigrants from the "southern republics."

Such stereotypes have stigmatized neighborhoods largely populated by people from these nations. Nove Fužine is an example of such a neighborhood. The sociologists Vesna Leskošek and Srečo Dragoš wrote in 2003: "The entire neighborhood of Nove Fužine has been proclaimed a ghetto and associated with poverty and crime simply because the majority of its residents come from ex-Yugoslavia. In fact, statistical data show that the crime rate is lower in this neighborhood than in other urban neighborhoods."[1] This stereotype of violence allegedly committed by immigrants has been supported by the editorial policies of the media, especially those who choose to feature such crime stories on their front pages. Bojan Dekleva, who researches youth violence, explains that violence committed by locals is "mainly structural and social, while violence committed by aliens is more direct and physical. Therefore, we often find newspaper articles about violence perpetrated by aliens and proportionally fewer articles about violence carried out by locals."[2] When we look at the absolute numbers, the number of crimes is certainly higher in urban areas than in rural ones. Ljubljana is no exception; however, we cannot take this to mean that Ljubljana is a dangerous city or any more dangerous than other European cities.

Nor has Slovenia's official policy been inclusive of inhabitants of non-Slovenian origin. The best known case concerns the "izbrisani" ("the erased")—many of whom had been inhabitants of Ljubljana for decades. Izbrisani is a term that applies to some 20,000 people who lost their permanent residence status shortly after Slovenia gained independence, when they were erased from the register of permanent residents. The Slovenian parliament's failure to pass an amendment proposed by a member of parliament from the Liberal Party that would have defined their status in legal terms led to a legal vacuum and arbitrary interpretations of legal provisions. After many years, the Slovenian Constitutional Court ruled the erasure unconstitutional because it had deprived the izbrisani of their material possessions and other rights. The court demanded that the izbrisani be reinstated as permanent residents without exception. Unfortunately, this provision has still not been implemented, as the authorities continue to drag their feet when it comes to resolving this problem. On top of that, they have ignored warnings by many reputable international organizations that decried the erasure as the most striking and massive violation of human rights in the short history of Slovenia as an independent state.

If Ljubljana wishes to be a cosmopolitan city, it has to be sensitive to the religious needs of all of its residents, not only Catholics, who are the numerically dominant religious community in the city. However, the harsh treatment of the Islamic community shows that this is not the case. It is difficult for an ordinary person, let alone a member of the Bosniak community—the second largest ethnic community in the city after Slovenians—to understand why there is still no mosque in Ljubljana even though the first requests for the construction of one were filed with local authorities thirty (!) years ago. Members of the Islamic community are forced to hold their religious ceremonies in sports halls and other makeshift buildings. It was not at all different for the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina who fled to Slovenia. At the beginning they were welcomed with open arms; however, some of them had to wait ten years for their permanent legal status to be defined. During the decade they spent in Slovenia as "temporary protected persons," they were denied rights a democratic country is normally required to provide to refugees, such as the right to work. After ten years, these people were finally granted permanent residence; Slovenian citizenship was granted to those who opted for it. A modern building for asylum seekers has recently been erected at a relatively obscure location on the city's periphery, at the site of a former shantytown inhabited by Bosnian refugees. This was the authorities' way of killing two birds with one stone. They met the European standards of providing aid to refugees while silencing city residents in an area that had previously housed asylum seekers. That building was totally unsuitable and seriously overcrowded, which contributed to the impatient reactions of the local population.

Nearly ten thousands new asylum applications were filed in 2000, and intolerance toward asylum seekers reached its peak in 2001. Slovenia was not prepared for such a huge number of asylum seekers, and the authorities installed stopgap measures and improvised any way they could in trying to house the asylum seekers. As a result, intolerance reared its head not only in Ljubljana, but in other areas where immigrants were being accommodated. The media didn't exactly help defuse the situation. The conservative and right-leaning media stirred up the xenophobic sentiments of the populace. At the same time, the Peace Institute started publishing annual reports on intolerance in the media. These reports remain the only form of systematic and continuous monitoring of the Slovenian media's methods of reporting on minorities and other sensitive issues. They analyzed the traditional mass media and online forums, and found that immigrants provided unlimited fodder for purveyors of xenophobia and hate speech. Nongovernmental organizations did a much better job than the media by

assisting in the provision of care for immigrants and standing up for their human rights. Activist groups took a similar stance and organized protest marches in Ljubljana in support of the refugees.

While local initiatives were being proposed for removing asylum seekers from Šiška (a city quarter where they were stationed), demonstrations in support of refugees (strengthened by the arrival of numerous Italian activists) were taking place in the center of the city. This may be the best representation of the two faces of contemporary Ljubljana: smugly provincial on the one hand, and cosmopolitan on the other. Yet this dichotomy has always existed. At the start of the 1700s, for example, religious conformists forced the Protestants out of the city and publicly burned their books. Yet, by the end of that century, the Slovenian polyhistorian Valvasor calculated that there were twenty-seven different languages in use in Ljubljana, a city with a mere ten thousand residents. Ljubljana's "compartmentalized cosmopolitanism," as Matjaž Kmecl called it,[3] was noticed by foreign visitors, such as the French writer Charles Nodier, who admired the polyglotism of the local population at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Ljubljana's entry into the twentieth century was marked by the great earthquake of 1895 and the modernization of the city under the direction of Mayor Ivan Hribar and architect Maks Fabiani. During Hribar's tenure, the city built and modernized important infrastructural services (the electrical power, streetcar and sewer systems, and some social and educational institutions) and erected some important monuments, including the Prešeren Monument. The monument stands in a popular square—also named for the famous poet—in the very heart of the city. This was a time when prominent Slovenian painters (Ivan Grohar, Rihard Jakopič, etc.), writers (Ivan Cankar, Dragotin Kette, Josip Murn, Oton Zupančič, etc.), and other artists walked the streets of Ljubljana.

Ljubljana's international cultural and artistic spirit particularly gained in strength in the years between the two world wars. The Slovenians and other South Slavic nations became politically unified in a common state known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS) after the First World War and renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. This is when the University of Ljubljana was founded; Radio Ljubljana began its broadcasts, and the first Slovenian movie, *V kraljevstvu Zlatoroga* (In the Realm of Goldenhorn), was shown at Ljubljana's Union Theater. Theater experts referred to this period as the "Europeanization" of the Slovenian theatre. The standards of the Slovenian National Theatre (in terms of repertory,

acting, directing) were becoming comparable to those of theaters abroad. Slovenian constructivists—painter Avgust Černigoj, writer Srečko Kosovel, and theatrical avant-garde figure Ferdo Delak—all played important roles in the future Slovenian cultural and artistic movements. The constructivists' international activities were far-reaching. By taking part in avant-garde movements throughout Europe, they broadened the horizons of those around them. Some important figures in Slovenian culture and art might have thought of the constructivists as peculiar; yet, they could not completely ignore them. Peter Krečič, who researches the Slovenian historical avant-garde, writes that the famous architect Jože Plečnik allegedly visited Černigoj one day and observed his work. After the visit, he supposedly told fellow architects: "A peculiar man lives in Ljubljana, but he can draw wonderfully."[4]

After World War Two, cultural and artistic production in the capital of the socialist republic, and later of the independent state, went through different phases. Some were more liberal and others more oppressive. Culture was a safe haven for those who disagreed with the nondemocratic political system of the time—a system based on the monopoly of the communist party—and for those who criticized the system for not having a feel for the national issue. As in many large European cities, where fundamental reforms were required, the late 1960s saw the birth of a student movement in Ljubljana. After that, the only earth-shattering event took place in the cultural field. The students' political *freigeist* of the 1960s had left its mark on many artistic and cultural initiatives—notably, the conceptualistic group OHO and the experimental theatrical group Pupulija Ferkeverk. Some art historians define this period as "the neo-avant-garde" or the "second" Slovenian avant-garde. At that time Radio Student, one of the oldest and biggest European non-commercial radio stations, began its broadcasts.

The 1980s were an especially interesting era in the contemporary history of the Slovenian capital. Nowadays, people look back on this period nostalgically, which has resulted in some myth-making. This decade saw the emergence of new social, subcultural, and countercultural movements, peace movements, alternative publications, women's groups, gay and lesbian movements, punk rock bands, a progressive sociocritical theory (Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik, Mladen Dolar, among many others), and many alternative artistic and cultural practices. Ljubljana was an extremely dynamic and open city with international appeal. Aleš Erjavec and Marina Gržinič, who back in 1991 published *Ljubljana, Ljubljana,* the first extended "inventory" of culture and art in Ljubljana during the 1980s, explain why they

devoted so much of their book to alternative and subcultural practices: "So much of this book deals with subcultural and alternative topics mainly because they brought something very new to the atmosphere in Slovenia and Ljubljana during that decade, something that had not been seen since the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. The alternative scene obviously flourished most dramatically during the anarchic times of the 1980s, when the old system and government were slowly dying away, while the new ones had not yet been born."[5] Today, the Cankarjev dom congressional and cultural center in Ljubljana (built in 1983) has become an important infrastructural base for more technologically demanding domestic and foreign artistic productions. Around ten thousand different cultural events take place in the city annually, including thirty festivals, half of them international, but there's little remaining of the political and cultural "humus" cocreated by the social movements of the 1980s. Some might disagree and cite Metelkova, an autonomous cultural center operating for the past twelve years in the buildings of a former military barracks, as an example of a haven for the alternative and cosmopolitan cultural scene. One of the authors included in the anthology *Views of Ljubljana*, for example, claims that Metelkova is "the only genuine representative of the cultural cosmopolitanism of the city."[6] This claim is somewhat exaggerated, but, even if one could successfully argue in favor of it, we still have to bear in mind that one swallow does not make a summer.

Notes

1. Srečo Dragoš and Vesna Leskošek, *Družbena neenakost in socialni capital / Social Inequality and Social Capital* (Ljubljana, 2003), 64.
2. Bojan Dekleva and Špela Razpotnik, ed., *Čefurji so bili rojeni tu: življenje mladih priseljencev druge generacije v Ljubljani* (The Chefurs Were Born Here: the Life of Young, Second-Generation Immigrants in Ljubljana) (Ljubljana, 2002), 260.
3. Matjaž Kmecl, "Kozmopolitizem na drobno: ljubljanska literarna scena do začetka 20. stoletja" (Compartmentalized Cosmopolitanism: the Ljubljana Literary Scene before the Turn of the Twentieth Century), in *Ljubljana—mesto kulture / Ljubljana—the City of Culture*, ed. Bojana Leskovar and Nela Malečkar (Ljubljana, 1997), 54–57.

4. Peter Krečič, *Slovenski konstruktivizem in njegovi evropski okvirji* (Slovenian Constructivism and its European Framework) (Maribor, 1989), 53.
5. Aleš Erjavec and Marina Gržinić, *Ljubljana, Ljubljana: osemdeseta leta v umetnosti in kulturi / Ljubljana, Ljubljana: 1980s in Arts and Culture* (Ljubljana, 1991), 12–13.
6. Tomaž Bartol in: Drago Kos et al., *Pogledi na Ljubljano: ideje o razvoju* (Views of Ljubljana: Ideas for its Development) (Ljubljana, 2001), 14.

[*Translated from Slovenian by Bernard Pesjak*]