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SEARCHING FOR 'YESTERDAY'S MAN' - CONNECTING HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND PROVERBIAL WISDOM*

B. J. Whiting's statement: "Happily no definition (of the proverb) is necessary since we all know what a proverb is" may sound like an anecdote, but it is so often quoted in texts that deal with paremiological problems (paremiology - scientific discipline whose main interest are the proverbs) that it may soon become a proverb in itself. Generally speaking, what is mutually accepted as well known and thus never defined, can either be extremely simple, or so complicated that it can not even be verbalized.

In the case of the proverb, a phrase that is often heard is that as a genre it is characterized by 'relative simplicity'. However, as one goes through the actual paremiological material and research, it is exactly its relative simplicity that one becomes aware of. Linguists, folklorists, psychologists, sociologists, they all seem to deal more with 'operational' definitions that serve the purposes of their own research in the frames of their disciplines, while there is a minority of the ones who dare to go into combat with the ghost of the proverb's 'incommunicable quality', of the ones trying to rationalize and articulate the supposedly common knowledge of what a proverb is. Thus, a proverb is sometimes defined as 'a moral advice based on experience...a practical as well as moral wisdom', it is a 'form of informal teaching' which draws strategies for behavior based on normative standards set by the 'group consensus' - it is a rhetorical tool used for shaping actions, social control and conflict resolution. Sometimes it is a linguistic entity with its own structure, a particular text which is a subject of certain language rules in general, but at the same time it is a folklorist item, a part of the tradition. The most accurate definition seems to be the one which combines it all. Proverb's apparent polyfunctionality, heterosituativity and polysemanticity is a real challenge for the scientific 'treasure hunters', and although some of it has been dug out of the depths, there is still a lot of it lying under our feet.

What was the past and what is the present situation of the possible connection between historical research and proverbs? As one of the rare texts dealing with this issue notes - "proverbs did not receive much attention from historians by now, especially compared to the number of references of proverb research done by folklorists, literary scholars and psychologists" (Obelkevich 1994). According to the author, one of the reasons for this situation is the general anti-proverb prejudice that has haunted the educated classes (among which are historians as educated people) for quite some time. Since the proverb is a folkloristic item after all, its popularity among historians may have shifted as these two disciplines (history and folklore) experienced their development: "Even those historians who are interested in popular culture and peasant customs have long neglected the data provided by folklore, perhaps because they felt incapable of judging its value by means of 'historical criticism'. Despite their interest in the past, folklorists, for their part, have frequently considered folklore to lie outside the study of history. Though historians and European ethnologists have been conversing and working together for several years now, the problem of the relationship between folklore and the prevailing culture remains difficult to resolve and is rarely studied", wrote Jean-Louise Flandrin in 1981.

The more recent investigations make it clear though that this kind of interdisciplinary approach is not only valuable but is a must: "Folklorists need history to help them understand the process of change in folk culture; social historians need folklore to help them understand the role of the folk in history" (Joyner 1989). What is meant is that, among other things, social history, i.e. historical anthropology as a type and/or approach of social history, which is considered to be a 'new historical paradigm', needs and can use folklore material as a source, as one of the 'new' sources for a 'new' history, besides employing images, statistics, reading of the official records in new ways, as well as paying more attention to physical objects belonging to material culture. However, from the traditional point of view, these new sources, for example the ones which belong to oral tradition and these include the folk proverbs, have been for a long time considered as 'the understudy of the

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written documents *diva* in the historic opera'. Official sources were preferred and the oral data presented an alternative, second best or worse kind of source, and they were tolerated in cases where there is no writing. But as Jan Vansina and other rhetoricians of oral sources have showed, the oral data (Vansina was interested primarily in oral narratives but this can be applied to all 'new' data used for historical research) "serve to check other sources as they serve to check it...they also can give minute detail which is otherwise inaccessible and may thus stimulate the historian to reanalyze other data in fresh ways"(Vansina 1985).

This seems an exact description of how proverbs are, although not in such amounts as they could be, productively used by historians. Still, things are not so simple as they may appear to be at first glance. "Proverbs and other adages have rarely attracted the interest of historians, being often ambiguous, sometimes contradictory and always difficult to date" (Flandrin 1981), and it is true - proverb collections which are the only source of proverbs from past times, often do not contain crucial information for the historian - time and place, when and where the proverbs were collected, not to mention the context or intended meaning in addition to the explicit one. Proverbs translated from foreign languages are often included without the original version and without being noted as foreign, many proverbs are not included because they do not fit into the collector's didactic or whatever other purpose. One is never sure of how complete and/or authentic the collection is, especially when one is dealing with cultures with a recent tradition of proverb collecting - then the tracing of the continuity or changing fortunes of a particular proverb is almost impossible. However, it seems that in spite of all these difficulties, and to answer Taylor's rhetorical (?) question, it pays to try.

A few fine examples of historical researchers who use proverbs as an additional source seem to prove this statement. Jean-Louis Flandrin is one of them. His book "Families in former times"(Flandrin 1976), which focuses upon the concept of the family, kinship and household, as well as domestic morality and sexual life in past times, especially in France during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, often uses proverbs which are connected with his subject of research - as a picturesque illustration, as an additional source, even as a main source combined with prescriptions of the customary law and ecclesiastic manuals. In the chapter titled "Kinship and neighbourhood among the peasantry", which is based upon the idea that the customs which regulated peasant life in France favored the membership of the village and the neighborhood instead of favoring kinship ties, when speaking of the neighborhood solidarities which were, according to him, particularly strong in the case of women, he uses the following proverb as an illustration: "Two women make a dispute, three make a great chatter, four make a complete market", thus trying to describe the way women communicated: gossiping on the doorsteps of their houses and meeting in the traditional meeting-places of the womenfolk - the well and the washing place. Here a proverb is used more as an illustration, but further in the book proverbs are also used as a source and a strong methodological device. Speaking of the authority of the father of a family over his wife, children and servants and his duties of love and correction with regard to them, Flandrin on one hand quotes the two fundamental texts of Christian doctrine in this sphere stressing upon the essential importance of Christianity regarding the authority of the father or lord - the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue ("Honour thy father and mother, that thy days may be long") and St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (5.22 to 6.9), but on the other hand gives the secular perspective on this matter which starts as similar to the Christian one but then, starting from the eighteenth century onwards, experiences an interesting shift (Kussi 1998). Something that started as "A woman who talks like a man and a hen that crows like a cock are not worth keeping" in the fifteenth and " A good horse and a bad horse need the spur, a good woman and a bad woman need the stick" in the sixteenth, turned into "One must be a companion and not a master of one's wife" in the nineteenth century. Flandrin's explanation of this evolution of the precepts of popular wisdom is that it is a result of a transformation of behavior, especially among the elite of society. Traditional society not only gave man, through the stipulations of customary laws, the means to impose his will, but also demanded that he did impose it, if he fails in accomplishing the task it is HE who gets punished. The husband is also responsible for the morals of his wife and thus he is permitted "to beat her until he drew blood, as long as it is done with good intent - 'bono zelo', in order to reform her", says an ancient compilation of customary laws dated thirteenth century. However, a wife's subordination to her husband, which was most explicitly emphasized in the manuals of moral theologians at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries is no longer stressed in these manuals at the beginning of the eighteenth century. "The authority of the father of the family and the authority of God not only legitimized one another, they served to legitimize all other authorities - kings, lords, patrons and ecclesiastics have all represented themselves as fathers and as the representatives of God", writes Flandrin, and Church has really showed a great interest in domestic life starting from the fifteenth century, but the bourgeois mentality of

the nineteenth century which considered the attitude of men towards women as one of the principal criteria of civilization seems to prevail and even influence the mandates derived from ecclesiastical morality. "...They appear to confirm that , in the daily life of the household, the wife became gradually and partially emancipated from the tutelage of her husband", writes Flandrin.

Flandrin's "Sex in the Western World - The Development of Attitudes and Behavior" (Flandrin 1981), a collection of previously published and a few unpublished articles and lectures, is an inquiry of the elements, above all the conventions, that have shaped psychological reality (especially sexual life as a very important part of that reality) through centuries. It is exactly through these conventions that a historical explanation of the psychological reality can be derived: "The outward manifestations of our drives can only be shaped by the conventions of a specific culture; our feelings only become apparent to us when expressed in the words and images which the culture offers us", writes Flandrin at the very beginning of the book. Even if he does not make a reference to the above mentioned definition which stated that the proverb is based upon normative standards set by the 'group consensus', Flandrin feels that it is the case, that the proverb could be a mirror of those conventions which are so important in explaining feelings and behavior patterns: "Despite all drawbacks, they (the proverbs) do however represent an invaluable source for studying the history of human attitudes, since they provide almost our only evidence of the oral traditions of the vast majority of people in the past." It would be logical but not always veritable, says Flandrin, to think that in a Christian society, such as that of the medieval or modern West, the prescriptions (conventions) of the religious law were decisive. "Church doctrine has never been passively accepted by an entire population...each social milieu adapts doctrine to its own needs, its customs, its traditional beliefs", but the relation goes also the other way round - in order to get closer to the people, theologians quote folk (not only Biblical) proverbs in the manuals for moral behavior. Attempting to warn couples against committing a sin while making love in their marriage bed, theologian Benedicti in his statement dated 1584 uses the proverb "One can get drunk on one's own wine" which according to him refers to the fact that a man must not use his wife as a whore, that although he has his wife's body at his bidding he should not take advantage of her as he pleases. "As a whore" would mean "as a woman who sought carnal relations out of passion or for pleasure" which contrasted with the nature of the honest woman who was supposed to seek those only for the good of marriage - for procreation. Speaking of children, the attitudes towards them and the upbringing which families did their best to give them, Chapter 11 titled "Ancient and Modern Adages Concerning the Child Within the Family" is the one which uses proverbs at most and at its best. Contrasting French proverbs which stress upon the worries and bad sides of having offspring, especially for the mother, at the same time subtly propagating against reproducing ("The less money and fewer children there are, the fewer worries there are"- Catalonia, 1969) to the ones more comforting which encourage forming large families ("The more the merrier" - Gascony, 1916) and speak against abortion ("The mothers of aborted babies condemn themselves to the tumbrel" - Catalonia, 1969) he succeeds in presenting a rich palette of feelings, doubts and dilemmas that are connected with the miracle of bringing a child into the world and the efforts of raising it. As paradoxes and contradictions were and are present in this world of ours, and since (in the words of Herder) a cultural whole is not necessarily a way of referring to a state of blissful harmony, but it may just as conceivably refer to a field of tension, it is not surprising to find those contradictions and that 'tension' reflected in proverbs. Two proverbs from the same period and region could contain very different, even opposing statements when referring to the same thing. Besides, it is people who invent and transmit proverbs, and people are different in the way they think and act even if they belong to the same culture - sometimes they accept and spread forward the common shared values, sometimes they try to contradict them. However, through examining corpuses of proverbs from different periods, some prevailing attitudes can be extrapolated. For example, through centuries children were considered as dirty, they were 'reputed to dirty the house and their parents' bed' as it is reflected in "She who sleeps with children does not always have a clean night-dress when she arises" (Basque country, 17 century) which persisted in different versions until the 19th century. However, this theme seems to have disappeared after the 1880s, as it is absent from the subsequent collections. Why would this be so? "The explanation is rather to be found in the way in which children were toilet-trained after the beginning of the nineteenth century" - writes Flandrin. "Before that time, as we know, children ran around without underpants...and relieved themselves freely in the house or outside...Until the nineteenth century and before the West became obsessed with cleanliness, children's dirtiness was considered an inevitable annoyance." It is interesting though that hygiene in a positive sense was treated as a theme in older proverbs, probably derived from Latin ("Being clean is half of being healthy", Bearn, 1892) but only speaking of hygiene in general, while

the ones that refer to children plus hygiene dated before the end of the 19th century speak only of children's dirtiness. A child was not only considered dirty, but its whole humanity was sometimes questioned. Although proverbs such as "For a little child, little mourning" (Cotgrave, 1673) or "If one dies, there is more bread for another" (Gascony) may sound cruel, they reflect the efforts of enduring the infant mortality rates without putting too much emotion into such events, and effort of accepting common infants' deaths in a way that would result in maintaining ones' 'mental balance'. Parents, maybe because of the same reason, did not consider themselves responsible either for the conception nor for the death of the child - it was God who decided on both matters. However, this attitude has also experienced changes starting from the 19th century as reflected by the proverbs - "Let those who conceive children in the hay carry the consequences" (Aube, 1904) and "Those who produce the child must feed it" (Aube, 1932) which are a sign of the growing awareness and modern understanding of parental responsibilities at a time when "birth control was already being used all over France, and Church and State were just beginning to get worried about it", a sign of Malthusian debate appearing in proverbs. However the attitude towards children has changed during the course of time, some old proverbs expressing a feeling of inferiority and disgrace for being a child, the pejorative connotation when an adult is called a child, i.e. is accused of childishness and infantile behavior are still very "in". Phrases like "I am no longer a child" from the fifteenth century and "Don't act like a child" (undated) can still be heard in different languages, as well as "Go tell your mother to blow your nose". Although being called a 'child' may on one hand imply a lack of reason ("When you are young, you just don't know"), on the other hand it may imply innocence. "Innocent as a new-born baby" (Aube, 1912) was mentioned even in the seventeenth century, but this purity of the heart in the context of the traditional expression, according to Flandrin, means something else than we today understand it, that it is physically impossible for new-borns to have sinned, but that they, like adults and perhaps even more so, tend towards evil because of the existence of original sin. A very important barrier towards malice was a proper upbringing, to chastise which meant instructing and not punishing but still showed some correspondence between those terms since the upbringing was all about strict training. Fathers were considered most capable of introducing one, but mothers were the ones who had to be strict when daughters were in question, to teach them modesty and hard work. It would be however a mistake to prescribe this "enlightened" pedagogy solely to the norms of Christianity on one hand and to the efforts of making children's presence in the house profitable on the other, writes Flandrin, since it may easily be just an 'excuse' of parents' will of submitting their children. "A tree must be bent while it is young" dated 20th century, "springs out of a traditionalism which expresses (maybe the same way as it always expressed - author's note) parents' will for power as their authority is disintegrating".

Our second, and more recent example of a historian using proverbs in his/her research is again a French one - Jacques Gelis and his book "History of Childbirth - Fertility, Pregnancy and Birth in Early Modern Europe" (Felis 1991). The book is a result of research done into the anthropology of childbirth, based upon a plethora of different sources - medical, religious, legal, ecclesiastic, ethnographic. They all serve to trace the development and change of 'the way in which a society receives a newborn child into its bosom', an essential element for understanding the society's attitude towards life in general. An Alsatian proverb that is quoted as a motto and covers with meaning the whole second chapter: "He who has no children knows no reason for living" serves almost as a resume of what the author would like to point out - that in the frames of the investigated culture(s) perpetuation of life was considered as an essential biological demand on each living creature and that the unfulfilment of that demand was considered not only as a biological, but also as a mental and cultural failure. A biological reason for such a "failure" or "succes" were, among other things, the 'monthly red flowers', i.e. women's periods. The presence of these flowers were considered the principal sign of her capacity to procreate, they were evidence of an intense inner life. This is again illustrated by a quoted proverb - "No seed without flower", no procreation without a menstruating female body, a body which should be fertile as a tree, active as all nature's active forces which are almost always female in their gender in Latin, but also in German. This body experiences huge and obvious transformations during the course of pregnancy, but at the very beginning those signs are somehow blurred and never too safe to establish whether a women is pregnant or not. Country women had their own 'tests' and beliefs on this matter and the proverb that is quoted in Chapter 5: "Flat stomach, child inside" points out one of these, that the first weeks of pregnancy the organs (especially the womb) experienced a shrinkage, that "the womb hugs the seed, which it does not want to escape, so tightly that the stomach decreases in volume". A few other proverbs are used to describe the further situation regarding attitudes and beliefs once a child is conceived. "The first morsel goes to the child", for example, is used by Gelis

in a context of the common belief that a pregnant woman shares her meals with the child she is carrying and the priority the child has regarding food distribution, the sharing of those insufficient and monotonous day-to-day meals that the majority of people got in the past.

Being born on certain hour, day or month was also significant and presented a good or a bad omen. In that sense the Alsatian proverb "Sunday's child is a lucky child" is used to illustrate the belief that Sunday was a lucky day to be born, it is the day of the sun and of the Resurrection as opposed to the bad fortune of being born on Friday, the day of Christ's death. Some months also brought bad luck to a newborn child - "Month of August, desired by none" and "Nothing born in May is worth a thing", it was said, thus reflecting the common belief that fortune never smiled on children born in August, while May children were even supposed to be idiots. Unfortunately, the author does not give us the origins of those beliefs. The belief in good/bad fortune is reflected also in another proverbial phrase - "To be born with a caul" is a proverbial description for someone who is born lucky, like "born under a lucky star". The caul is in fact a part of the amniotic membrane which covers the head of some newborn babies and which was believed to have supernatural beneficent powers. Gelis this time gives us a wider social and ethnographic explanation of the origin of this belief and consequently the origin of the proverb, starting with the Roman midwives who stole the precious caul and sold it to lawyers to help them in court, to the myth of the Benandanti, a sort of brotherhood whose members were distinguished by having been born with a caul and thus able to communicate between the world of the ones 'dead before their time' and the living, and that were at the same time considered as protectors of the harvest. Finally, the proverbs from Alsace "Wie der Acker, so dir Reuwe" ('As the field, so the turnips') or the popular in many languages "De Apfel fällt nit wid vom Baum" ('The apple doesn't fall very far from the tree') (Mieder 1995) which has its version in "Like father like son", are quoted to stress upon the recognized (genetic) fact of heredity from parents to children (when positive, but also when negative characteristics are in question), and maybe by recognizing this similarity reassure the father that he is really the 'creator' of the child.

David Warren Sabeau is another example of a historian using proverbs in his research. He uses "Don't put young bees into a full hive" as an illustration, while at the same time the proverb acts as a rhetorical device for carrying his narrative. He tries to contextualise it in two of his works - "Property, production and family in Neckarhausen, 1700-1870" (Sabeau 1990) and in a paraphrased version in "Young Bees in an Empty Hive: Relations between Brothers-in-law in a South German Village around 1800" (Sabeau 1990). Although from different angles and covering different periods of time, both works stress upon the issues of property and inheritance, and this particular proverb serves as a starting point in explaining the strategies undertaken regarding the relatively complicated process of land devolution in Germany, strategies that were nevertheless embedded in a certain set of rules. The proverb is used however as a reflection of the common wisdom of practice since, as Sabeau notes, "generally speaking, the younger generation was provided with just enough land to keep them anchored in the village and tied to the interests of their parents and to the needs of their property-owning elders". Between the marriage of the young couple and the retirement or the decease of the older ones all kinds of arrangements were made to provide the children with property (through gifts, sale, devolution in return for an annual rent etc.) but only after the death of the parents did they eventually get a portion of the final inheritance which was assigned to them by the intestate law. This is, according to Sabeau, a strategy of parents retaining a good deal of power over their children during the course of their whole life, a way in which "the springs of power were hidden in the ideology of practice".

Up till now we went through few examples of how are proverbs used in the frames of wider anthropological investigations: as descriptions and/or illustrations, as a support to a certain thesis, as an additional or main source upon which the thesis is built and more or less successfully proved. They all speak of issues that were considered as important - family, children, gender roles, sex - in a manner that is sometimes universally understood (those proverbs seem the easiest to be contextualized and thus used more often in such investigations), but sometimes referring to situations, places and persons that could be understood solely by a particular culture or by a person who is well acquainted with that culture. It could be that these ones are the most useful for a historical and a comparative anthropological study. One's experience (and this implies both to an individual and to a whole culture) is what makes the whole difference. "This information forms a vast pool, one that encompasses the whole of inherited culture - for culture is what is in the mind. It is a pool that is essential to the continuity of culture and the reproduction of society from generation to generation" (Vansina 1985). Proverbs are a specific sublimation of that experience, reflecting, but at the same time taking active part in the processes of the cultural 'dialectic continuum', the processes of Tradition and Building. Since their role is often

to serve as a source of integration of a particular culture, they help in producing and maintaining a sense of 'collective identity'. Although this 'purpose' could be performed by proverbs which refer to any aspect of human life, the proverbs referring to certain events or experiences from political history seem to be the ones which are the most explicit when creating and passing on the distinction between 'we' and 'the others' (Kerewsky-Halpern 1979). This is especially transparent when Balkan (especially South Slav) proverbs are being examined. South Slav proverb heritage (as well as their oral tradition in general) is extremely rich and vital - there are proverbs referring to almost every aspect of life and they are still used in every day speech, even by the younger generation. Among those proverbs there are many with allusions to distant historical events - for example Serbian, Macedonian and Bulgarian proverbs very often contain allusions to a particular (foreign) culture and/or nation with whom they were in touch with over the course of history, they stress the feeling of jeopardization, fear and distrust (mostly regarding the Turks), or point out a specific historical episode that was of particular importance for the future flow of events. In this case I will stress upon two Serbian proverbs because they offer the richest background for this article's purpose: it seems that remembering those events and the consequences they produced, as well as passing on the established images of 'the others' is something vitally important, maybe exactly because of the reating and maintaining of the abovementioned 'collective identity' (Halpern and Kerewsky - Halpern 1972). Both proverbs are found in the famous collection of Serbian proverbs of Vuk Karadzic. Taking a proverb for examination from the pages of a collection is quite tricky, especially when the relative novelty of South Slav tradition of collecting proverbs is bared in mind. One is never sure if a certain proverb is really a part of the oral tradition, or only a part of the collectors intention, fantasy, creativity - the absence of the possibility to track the changing fortunes of a proverb during more than one century (which is possible when, for example, German speaking nations, with a longer written tradition and proverb collecting tradition, are concerned) and relying on what has been written down by the collectors, is a great problem in establishing the categories 'real' and 'invented'. It is worth taking into account the reputation of Karadzic who had an approach of an ethnologist, who often noted when and where a certain proverb was collected, as well as its context. However, the most 'secure' way, no matter if we trust the collector or not, is to combine/compare the proverbs with other sources, maybe then they can tell us something, at least something we already know.

The first proverb examined is "Jao je meni otkako je Lazo na Kosovo poginuo" ("Weeping is since Lazo was killed at Kosovo"). For the historian, especially for the one who specializes in Balkan or Serbian history, the story behind it is more or less clear and the mentioned names familiar, for others a short explanation would be needed. The twelfth and thirteen centuries, according to some authors, represent 'the golden era' of the Serbian national state, which reached its zenith in the twenty years' reign of Stephen Dusan (1331-55), best known by the famous "Dusan's code", a ruler with a great governing capacity whose court became a center of art and literature. Unhappily, Dusan's greatness died with him, while his dominions became the prey of warring feudal lords. After the battle of Marica, Prince Lazarus and his brother-in-law Vuk Brankovich found themselves masters of the most important fragment of what had been the empire of Dushan. Some of the feudal lords recognized the authority of Lazarus, and northern Serbia was nearly reconstituted under a firm central power. It is precisely at this moment that the Turkish sultan Murad decided to finish the conquest of the Balkan peninsula. Lazarus together with the Bosnians and the Albanians stood united against the Ottomans, but at the Battle of Kosovo the Turks were stronger than all these nations combined. Murad, as well as Lazar, were both killed in the battle, but their successors, Bayazid (Murad's son, proclaimed as sultan in the course of the battle immediately after his father's death) and Stephen Lazarevich entered into an agreement which formally established the inferior position of the Serbs. The event presented thus Serbia's defeat which was followed by long centuries under Ottoman rule, but although it may seem as a paradox, out of the defeat emerged a rich oral literature, which was instrumental in preserving collective identity. Proverbs were part of it, too. In that sense Taylor's remark that "Proverbs which turn on historical allusions are necessarily rare and short lived...the allusion must be rendered so general that it no longer has an identifiable connection with the historical fact" (Taylor 1995) is not accurate in this particular case - the proverb refers in a very emotional manner to an historical event (even more - a defeat) even five centuries after its occurrence (the battle is dated 14 century while Karadzic's collection was completed by the end of 19th)!

Such results can be obtained by examining other proverbs that refer to political history as well. In the Serbian case, such a proverb would also be the following: Srbin kosi, Svaba nosi, Srbin bere, Svaba zdere ('The Serb scythes, the Shvab takes, the Serb picks up, the Shvab eats'). Although its background may not be so obvious as the first one's, it most probably refers to the Austro-Hungarian rule of Serbian lands, even more

precisely the rule over what is now the north border land with Hungaria - Vojvodina. The history of the Austro-Hungarian presence on this part of the Balkan is overflowing with events, but for the purpose of explaining the proverb I will note just some moments which, I think, are crucial in explaining its origin.

Since it was liberated from the Turks, to the First World War, Vojvodina was constantly under Austro-Hungarian rule. Although the revolution from 1848/49 discarded feudal economic relations on the whole territory of the Habsburg monarchy, Vojvodina still had extensive land estates that were of feudal origin. According to the expectations of the peasantry, abandoning the feudal relations meant returning of the land portions which were taken from them earlier. This was to be done through court processes between the rich owners and the peasants, but the court decisions were deliberately prolonged for years, even decades.

The capitalization of the economy had a great influence on the property issue too, but that was also the case with some other processes which had started before that time. The segregation of land combined with different malversations on one hand and the possibility to buy land portions led to a situation where Serb peasantry was subordinated primarily to the rich land owners and capitalists from the rows of the ruling nations. Statistical records referring to the property relations in different parts of Vojvodina collected by the Administrative Agency of Agriculture of Novi Sad in 1919 (Gadzesa) show that Hungarians and Germans (in the proverb pejoratively named as "Shvabs") had very strong positions regarding land property, they owned the biggest estates, while the Serbs owned the medium, small and extra small ones or did not own anything. An interesting situation appears in Bachka (part of Vojvodina) where the statistics show that in fact the Hungarians constitute the majority of the ones who do not own anything, but the reason was that the colonization of Bachka was at the time when data were collected still relatively new compared to other portions of Vojvodina. Another reason was that the Hungarian state authorities tried by all means to raise the number of Hungarians to a majority level without taking care of whether those colonized people received or did not receive land. However those property issues developed through time, it is a fact that the formal liberation of the previously feudal depended peasants, kmets with no land who in the circumstances of a slow capitalization of production could not switch professions, and who could not afford to immigrate, did not leave many choices for them. One of the 'choices' was to work for the 'Shvabs', but the anger derived from it, which is expressed in the above mentioned proverb, lead to the development of a socialistic movement, a movement for radical changes of the property rights which were finally established in 1919.

Proverbs are not radical historical instruments, nor are they factually oriented. They do not provide us with traditional historical data - but we are overloaded with them anyway. Combined with other sources, they could show us another side of the 'story', how different aspects of life were and are reflected in people's mind, what is considered important in a culture's perception of its micro world and thus remembered and transmitted, how are the 'others' perceived, how is the 'anger' and fear of the difficult times articulated and, as psychologists would say, compensated through that articulation. Proverbs, as this article has hopefully showed, can help the historian who searches for a 'total' image to get at least a glance in that world from the past, to get to understand the yesterday's man who, in the words of E. Durkheim, is a part of each of us.

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