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Political Aspects of the Drama *Hlapci*

Introduction

The word ‘farmhand’ is a key concept in the Slovenian political vocabulary. Used in this context, it does not refer to material matters nor to stratification of rural society.¹ Instead, it encapsulates various aspects related to the (broadly understood) notions of individual and national freedom, collective identity, and the normative order that Nation and individuals adhere to. To explain the functioning of this pivotal element of Slovenian culture, I will first present the socio-political context at the turn of the 20th century.

¹ This is indicated by the English translation of the title: “Lackeys”. In the article, however, I use the term ‘farmhand’, which contains additional cultural information and is semantically closer to the source word *hlapec*. The translation ‘lackey’ only appears in quotations from the drama.

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Ivan Cankar is a leading representative of Slovenian modernism whose works are characterised by a recognisable and innovative poetics and boldness in addressing weighty issues. The diverse, multi-layered and semantically open metaphorical concepts that literary critics have distilled from his works and essays have become an essential part of Slovenian cultural memory.² An important place among these concepts is occupied by the notion of the farmhand, found in the title of the 1910 drama *Hlapci* [Farmhands], in which the main protagonist, Franc Jerman, utters the words that underlie the most widespread negative autostereotype in Slovenian culture: “Lackeys! Born to lack, raised to lack, made to lack!” (Cankar, 2021, p. 81). Very quickly, the term became detached from this literary text and began to signify an obvious and unjustifiable truth about Slovenian people. In the form of a negative stereotype, it is still present today in sociological and historical-literary discussions, school textbooks and pop culture. Like any stereotype, it contains a strong valuing potential, so it has become an effective tool in cultural struggles, both historical and modern. The power of its influence has not been weakened by the deliberations of literary historians who have shown the metaphorical aspects of the concept in Cankar’s drama, nor by the research of Janek Musek, author of the 1994 monograph *Psihološki portret Slovencev* [Psychological Portrait of the Slovenes], in which this renowned psychologist points out that the myth of being a farmhand (*hlapčevstvo*) was not only destructive to Slovenian culture but also extremely unjust. The research cited by Musek shows that the Slovenian people are characterised by a high degree of aggressiveness, a tendency to dominate, readiness to rebel, brashness, failure to recognise authority, and striving for independence.

In the article, I consider the concept of the farmhand as a uniquely significant nodal point³ for Slovenian national discourse, going far beyond the boundaries of the stereotype. In addition to its basic meaning, i.e., a hired farm worker,⁴ the term ‘farmhand’, along with its derivative words, contains content present in the political vocabulary of many nations: putting one’s own material interests above the good of society, political conformism, submis-

² White chrysanthemum, silk scarf, cup of coffee and more.

³ “Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a center. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation *nodal points*” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 131).

⁴ Related to this meaning, it can also describe a thrifty and industrious man who is ready to fight for his rights and dignity. This is the meaning given to it by Ivan Cankar in his novella *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* [Farmhand Jernej and his justice].

siveness to superiors for fear of sanctions, ideological and political indifference. Thus, in many contexts, it is easily replaced by the closely synonymous terms ‘servant’, ‘butler’, ‘lackey’, even ‘slave’, but then in Slovenian it loses its properties – an essential stabiliser of meaning for national discourse. Modern national discourse since the Romantic turn has benefited from relatively stable narratives that often positively valued rebellion and independence. Exceptional importance was attributed to such historical events as the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, battles waged during Christianisation, peasant revolts, the national liberation struggle, and the establishment of the nation-state. The same values are contained in many of the canonical literary texts that co-shape the national discourse, such as the romantic epic describing the last months of political independence *Krst pri Savici* [Baptism on the Savica River], the unyielding attitude of a man of the people in the short story *Martin Krpan*, and the criticism of submission to authority contained in Cankar’s drama *Hlapci*.

Spiritual division

In order to understand the political connotations contained in the 1910 drama *Hlapci* [Farmhands], it is necessary to at least briefly introduce “the field of praxis” (Ricoeur, 1984) that forms the basis for the configuration of the drama. The socio-political situation at the turn of the 20th century was dominated by a sense of crisis, brought about by the process of modernisation. This conflict has been referred to in the Slovenian tradition as the German pattern of cultural struggle, although at the turn of the century and between the wars the Slovene term for it, ‘spiritual division’ (*ločitev duhov*), was also frequently used. This term, a good representation of public sentiment, was introduced by theologian Alojz M. Levičnik in his article *Kaj nas loči?* [What divides us?] (Levičnik, 1896, p. 235). He answered the question in the title very emphatically:

A deep gulf separates us. It is not due to differences in language, freedom, national borders. This gulf also divides into nations that speak one language, lands that share a common history, countries that share the same borders. The divide encompasses all of humanity. It was present before us and will continue to exist after us. Sometimes more hidden, sometimes more visible, but it always exists. Many people know it, and there are many who would like to hide it. But even if they don’t want to see it, they must submit to it. He is merciless: out – out. (Levičnik, 1896, p. 235)

This and similar social diagnoses present in the journalism of this period ended the era of national consensus (*spravaštvo/slogaštvo*) characteristic of the second half of the 19th century. The term *spravaštvo/slogaštvo*, a derivative of the word *sprava/sloga* (consent), has pejorative overtones in Slovenian and describes a kind of para-ideology, combining liberal demands with the dominant clerical discourse in the name of the nation's welfare, its difficult past and uncertain future. The modernisation process challenged the existence of a collective identity based solely on national premises and forced a confrontation with other political projects. The centre of political life revolved around the political parties that shaped collective identities during this period: the Progressive National Party (founded in Kraina in 1894, Gorizia in 1899, and Styria in 1906) and the Catholic National Party (since 1895). Supporters of the clerical camp fought against "heretic teachings that did not grow out of Catholic soil, teachings that are not only not Christian but also not natural, foreign teachings that are not in harmony with either the character or the history of the Slovenian people" (Mahnič, 1888, p. 3). Mahnič and other theologians working with the journal *Rimski katolik* found theoretical support for their views in theological treatises, especially the encyclicals *Quod apostolici muneris* (1878) and *Rerum novarum* (1891). So they fought against autonomisation, subjectivisation and rationalisation. Autonomisation meant separating faith from reason, theology from philosophy, the state from the Church, the secular intelligentsia from the clergy. Subjectivisation involved placing faith in human reason without relying on "the truth that God has stirred up in reason to guide man as he seeks the Creator in the diversity of things (Mahnič, 1888, p. 23). Also, rationalisation defined thinking that sought the sources of truth in the temporal world, which would lead to the acceptance of the truth of faith and the truth of reason and the replacement of faith in God with faith in liberally understood freedom, familiarity and progress. In proclaiming these views, the Catholic side was also able to rely on the sense of national belonging developed in the second half of the 19th century, based on respect for tradition, language, the rituals of the Catholic Church, attachment to the land, but also respect for political power. The slogan "Everything for Faith, Home, Emperor" combined national and monarchical patriotism. The faction of Christian socialists, moreover, fought with practical action against the destructive effects of emerging capitalism, opposing it with an economic program based on syndicalist models. The battleground on which the battle was fought was,

as in Cankar's drama, the school, as "the dominant ideological apparatus of the state" (Althusser, 2014, p. 142).

The charges of autonomisation, subjectivisation and rationalisation directed at the liberal camp in the cultural struggle did not fully reflect the situation in Slovenia at the turn of the 20th century. As a result of the relatively low level of industrialisation, leading to the fragility of the bourgeois and working class, the ideas embodied in liberal slogans remained largely empty signs. The incompletely formed bourgeoisie was unable to clearly identify its interests. Cankar, in his essay *Slovensko ljudstvo in slovenska kultura* [Slovenian People and Slovenian Culture], puts the words into the mouth of a representative of the Slovenian bourgeoisie, on which the Liberal party was based: "Do you think I should talk about our non-culture? I am a patriot (*narodnjak*)! Learn to separate thought from word, reason from admiration! We don't have culture, that's why we talk about it; if we had it, we wouldn't mention it!" (Cankar, 1921, p. 165).⁵ Cankar calls the creators of the Slovenian national narrative (the so-called *narodnjaki*) a haphazard collection of peddlers and philistines whose patriotism was reduced to the rituals accompanying national holidays and school celebrations. In his view, they could not become recipients of the high culture through which the road to a truly national art was supposed to lead. Even if we bracket some of Cankar's statements because they were made during the election campaign, the essential theses remained valid.

Both sides of the conflict looked to the people for support. The liberals treated the people as the building block from which the edifice of national culture would be constructed in the future, so they placed a premium on education in a positivist spirit and demanded the separation of state and church. Also, the clerical side was concerned about the simple people, seeing in them a solid foundation to support the social pyramid. The people, in whose name these political slogans were created, remained, in the opinion of Cankar, mired in passive subsistence – the result of multi-generational poverty and neglect – therefore they could not actively participate in political life and could not build the edifice of national culture so important to liberals. The program of the sparsely represented Social Democratic party, on whose

⁵ The words come from an election speech delivered by Cankar in 1907 in Trieste. The entire speech was published by the Catholic magazine *Dom in svet*, with an annotation by the editors: "[...] this lecture is a significant document, testifying not only to Cankar at the time, but also to the peculiar 'mentality' of our bourgeois intelligentsia, whose spiritual food was, and still is, unsubstantiated arbitrary constructs taken from the history of our culture" (Cankar, 1921, p. 216).

behalf Iv. Cankar ran for election to the Council of State (*Reichsrat*) in 1907, indeed included a radically anti-capitalist program. In the article *Kako sem postal socialist?* [How did I become a socialist?] from 1918, Cankar describes capitalism as the source of all evil and sharply criticises the Austrian school system, which keeps people ignorant and indifferent to current political and social problems. The aforementioned aspects of Cankar's political program are the starting point for my reading of the drama.

The *Hlapci* drama

The described components of the field of practice were subjected to the rules of the field of fiction in the process of configuration, creating a new grid of meanings. It was only this grid in the process of reception that created the conditions for the term 'farmhand' to function as a nodal point in national discourse. I will direct my attention to the political and ideological context of the word 'farmhand' (*hlapec*), while I will omit important elements of the work that scholars have analysed many times regarding the psychology of the character, the motives of the main character's actions, the interpretive openness of the end of the drama, and other aspects of this text that are crucial to Slovenian culture.

The drama was written two years after the elections to the Council of State and transfers to the fictional plane the disillusionment that the victory of the clerical camp brought to the writer's mind.⁶ In a letter sent from Sarajevo, where *Hlapci* drama originated, Cankar wrote to his Ljubljana-based publisher Schwentner that the drama's publication would cause a great stir as it would provide "a faithful portrait of our current extremely dirty political situation" (Cankar, 1932a, p. 304). At first, the author also considered the titles *New Times* or *New Ways* (Cankar, 1932a, p. 304), which would have accentuated the drama's important theme of social uprising and the related birth of a new man. The change of title probably had an effect on the reception of the work.

⁶ The Catholic camp won 17 seats at the May 14, 1907, election; the Social Democratic won seven, and the Liberal won four (Pančur, 2005, pp. 41–42). Four of the seven seats were won by the Social-Democratic party in Trieste, where public sentiment differed from that in the central areas. It is no coincidence that Cankar's drama was first staged in Trieste.

In the first act, maintained in the tone of political satire, the word ‘farm-hand’ does not appear. In the garden, which acts as a kind of electoral study, the educators who are “designated to spread liberal ideas” have gathered (E., 1907, p. 293). The teachers expect the liberal party to win, eagerly repeating freedom slogans and learning by heart rhymes celebrating freedom. When it turns out that the “blacks” have won, they adopt the language and ritualistic behaviour of the clerical party with blithe indifference. One teacher, following Pascal’s advice, states: “It is imperative that one evolves externally first; the rest will be signalled to us” (Cankar, 2021, p. 33); so, she buys herself a rosary, while her colleagues set about “cleaning” the library, unearthing a crucifix from under a layer of dust and hanging it under the emperor’s effigy. As described by Robert Musil, who had been produced by the emperor-king’s education system, teachers are portrayed as people without qualities.

Satire is a genre with a double structure. It achieves its goal when the viewer is able to confront the world that the satire ridicules with an internally coherent world associated with values that are considered true by the viewer. Only the awareness of the existence of the “true” plane triggers satirical laughter. The opportunism, pragmatism and inability to make independent political decisions that characterise those gathered in the garden direct the reader’s attention to such values as making free moral choices, willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of higher goals, and the will to change.

The priest, who as the new master in the second act accepts bows from the converted sinners and, speaking in an indulgent tone, instructs the “converts” on the duties associated with the teaching profession, is not a man without qualities. It is the master-priest who first uses the word ‘farmhand’, and the context in which it appears is no longer satirical. He conveys his political vision to those gathered in a form reminiscent of a biblical parable, which makes his words ring as an inalienable truth:

If a master asked a servant (*hlapec*) to thresh his wheat, and the lackey (*hlapec*) set it on fire instead of threshing it, would the master not call bailiffs to handcuff the evil servant? Such a servant (*hlapec*) is a teacher who is supposed to guide the youth to faith and God but depraves it instead. (Cankar, 2021, p. 39)

According to the priest, each person has been assigned a special role in the plan of creation, and the individual’s duty is to perform it conscientiously and obey his superiors. He does not demand that obedience to the master encompass a person’s entire life. For the priest, it is enough to rule over the superficial, social

self. He counts on the power of almost unreflectively adopted cultural patterns and behaviours which encompass moments⁷ of dominant discourse. The deep self, which in Bergson's words defines what is in a person "personal, individual, internal, unique and indivisible" (Gadacz, 2009, p. 150), is not addressed.

When you heard the word servant (*hlapec*) from my lips, you saw in your insulted mind a black soutane, a rosary, processions, and fraternities. You heard the order I never gave. Let the parable be elaborated: after the servant (*hlapec*) finishes his work, he may go to the tavern, go wherever the master does not see him. (Cankar, 2021, p. 60)

In contrast, his main adversary, Franc Jerman, draws justification for his actions from a deep self, capable of autonomous and authentic action based on his own moral choices. He adheres to the principle of subjectivisation condemned by Mahnič, recognising that there is no metaphysical instance that can demand of the farmhand acts that are incompatible with the voice of his inner self. The right to oppose the dictates coming from the second plane is the antithesis of Cankar's notion of the farmhand. By inversion (accusing someone of being a farmhand always excludes the accuser from their midst), the word 'farmhand' justifies rebellion as such, gives the right to carry out even violent changes, so the very use of it by the priest, as it were, calls Jerman to action:

I have no joy for martyrdom nor talent for bravery; let come what must come – you can pluck a hawk, but it will never turn into a dove; and may a lark take a pledge nine times, it will never bark. – Honestly, I'm grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. You showed me what my job entails – to make people out of lackeys. (Cankar, 2021, p. 62)

Literary critic Josip Vidmar used the term 'free-thinking' to describe Jerman's attitude, which since the Romantic turn has been a model to follow on both the individual and community levels and is also easily extracted from Cankar's literary works and essays. The only legitimate source of moral and worldview choices is in this rooted-in-romanticism conception, the right and duty of each individual to "build his view of the world and religion in accordance

⁷ "In the context of this discussion, we will call an articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice we will call discourse. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call moments. By contrast, we will call element any difference that is not discursively articulated" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 124).

with his own nature” (Vidmar, 1932, p. 540). In the second act, representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie who do not feel the need to go beyond the framework set by the Austrian educational system and tradition-honoured local social norms are portrayed as farmhands. The historical action was supposed to be carried out by the people, not by intelligentsia. In the third act, Jerman presents the thesis which is rooted in the essay *Slovensko ljudstvo in slovenska kultura*: “Don’t you think this drunkenness is only external, sticking to them on the outside of their overcoats, so to speak, on their tongues perhaps, while underneath they remain human beings, created in God’s image” (Cankar, 2021, p. 51). The pursuit of freedom is ontologically rooted in human nature itself.

For this reason, in the fourth act Jerman decided to convene a meeting of the Education Society, even though he knew that the people were hostile to him and the church authorities intended to exile him to a mountain village for insubordination.

At the meeting, Jerman addressed the hostile people in a spirit of reconciliation, using biblical phrases close to his audience to show that the conflict should not be framed in narrowly political terms. He was concerned with the moral aspects of political choices; he tried to convince his listeners that the path to freedom leads through education and that a man whose actions are in accordance with his “own nature” acts rightly. The listeners, however, failed to grasp his reasoning and interpreted Jerman’s words as an attack on the clerical discourse in which they found safe asylum. So, they began to malign and threaten Jerman, while a woman reminded him of the pain he was inflicting on his ailing mother with his political actions. That’s when Jerman lost control of himself and uttered the words quoted at the beginning of the article: “Lackeys! Born to lack, raised to lack, made to lack!” For Jerman, the people had become an unconstituted, genetically tainted and historically incapable mass that did not need his teachings. Although not stated directly, it is apparent that the listeners understood the severity of the accusation; precisely because of this, and not out of stupidity, they responded to Jerman’s accusations with anger. They effortlessly followed the social rules imposed on them by the priest but did not respond to Jerman’s interpellation, which was addressed to the deep self. From a tragic hero fighting against his surroundings in the name of higher goals, Jerman transforms into a character characterised by modernistic doubt in the possibility of mutual understanding. The physical weakness and small-mindedness that gripped Jerman after the encounter did not (only) stem from the worries of losing his fiancée and his mother’s illness, but from his

inability to affirm his moral code with others. In the fifth act, Jerman, having doubted his mission, accepts the priest's appointed punishment and moves to a remote mountain village, intuiting in a vague – according to Izidor Cankar even mystical – way⁸ that he had chosen the path of love, not reason. He conveyed his political message to Kalander the blacksmith with the words: "This hand will forge the world". The political message of this statement is obvious, but there is no reason to assume that Kalander's message heralds the birth of the free man postulated by Jerman in first act. What Jerman's position is at the end of the drama is one of the most frequently asked questions in Slovenian literary studies, but it already concerns the reception of the work.

A nation of farmhands

The 'farmhand' concept became a nodal point for the Slovenian national discourse only when the text's world intersected with that of the reader. I will point out some literary studies that had a strong impact on the social reception of the work, making Cankar's drama a cultural text behind which "there is a requirement for binding, explicit and eternal truth" (Assmann, 2019, p. 36).⁹

The publication of the drama in January 1910 did indeed cause a great stir; as early as February, a battle broke out between liberal and Catholic magazines, and two months later also between liberal and social democratic journals.¹⁰ Most critics, after a superficial discussion of the formal side of the drama, abandoned the distance that separates the fictional world from the real one and treated the text as a record of the actual situation. Reviewers saw in the drama a sharp criticism of the educational system,¹¹ but above all they saw an open

⁸ "In the conflict-free ending [the drama] passes into an ode, glorifying the omniscient and omnipresent good, mysterious, love-endowed force, miraculously relieving disputes which the mind cannot comprehend, and which, in the poet's intention, is the most important – the most precious among the basic forces of life" (Cankar, 1932b, p. 16).

⁹ On the difference separating literary and cultural texts, see A. Assmann (2019, pp. 23–38).

¹⁰ Hidden under the pseudonym P., the author of an article published in the socialist newspaper *Naši zapiski* blamed the misguided policies of the liberal party for the deplorable moral backbone of the teaching profession "and the character of Slovenes in general" (P., 1910, p. 123).

¹¹ "Farmhands, yes farmhands, are becoming teachers, and we are not surprised because they are becoming farmhands of the struggle for bread. Our times demand that farmhands raise farmhands. Only farmhands can raise farmhands" (Plešič, 1910, p. 1).

(malicious) accusation addressed to the entire nation. This is already indicated by the first review, published in February 1910 in the daily *Slovenski narod*:

Cankar proves in his drama that Slovenes are a nation without character and beliefs, a nation of farmhands that anyone can buy and that allows itself to be enslaved by others, and for this reason he concludes that the entire nationality movement has no prospects, that every fight is doomed to failure and the final defeat is inevitable. (Cankar, 1932a, p. 306)

Liberals treated the drama's message as an appeal to work hard to educate and enlighten society. Phrases such as "not yet", "a lot of work", "a lot of time will pass before" are repeated in many articles published in the liberal magazines *Slovenski narod*, *Ljubljanski zvon* and *Učiteljski tovariš*.

Catholic magazines *Dom in svet*, *Slovenec in Slovenski učitelj* accused the author of dishonesty and falsifying reality. They wrote about "the rape of objective truth that cries to heaven for vengeance" and the "persiflage of the teaching profession" (Lenard, 1910, p. 92). They did not accept the thesis about "the nation of farmhands" and were afraid of the revolutionary potential contained in Jerman's words. The daily *Slovenec* and the bulletin of Christian teachers and educators *Slovenski učitelj* published an open letter in which teachers associated with the organisation *Slomškova zveza* demanded a ban on performing on stage this "extremely offensive and impudent lampoon of the teaching profession" (Moravec, 1969, p. 159). The protests achieved their goal: the drama was banned in Carniola; the premiere took place only in 1919, first in Trieste, and soon also in Ljubljana and Zagreb.

The polemic between Vidmar and the writer's cousin, Izidor Cankar, was significant for the public reception of the work. They both treated Jerman's attitude as the voice of the author himself. Resolving the difficult question about the writer's worldview and moral principles was of great importance for the national discourse because Cankar's art and essays already during his lifetime established a new aesthetic code in intellectual circles and constituted a worldview guide, justified by the unique role that was assigned to art in the period of modernism.¹² Izidor Cankar, author of the introduction and commentary to the collected works of Ivan Cankar, perceived the drama as a dispute between Jerman's individual ethics and what he called the "collective

¹² "[...] everyone understood him; in every comma they discovered Cankar's peculiar beauty, in cafes and inns adepts 'studied' his style, his 'architecture', his 'simbole', etc., in order to copy them properly" (Cankar, 1932a, p. 310).

ethos" (Cankar, 1932b, p. 12) represented by the priest. He accepted the collective ethic, behind which stood the Church's social teaching of the time, reinforced by elaborate philosophical systems and traditions, based on a clearly defined political plan. At the centre of its activities was the fight against the "godless spirit", but it also developed practical tools to combat capitalism and worked for the material and spiritual well-being of the people, on which its power was based.¹³ A society of free people making decisions flowing from the inner self seemed impossible to Izidor Cankar because "the human mass cannot be raised so that each person becomes an ethically complete being" (Cankar, 1932b, p. 11). Izidor Cankar read the ending of the drama as a victory of love, which he in turn linked to a religious experience that took place during the writer's stay in Sarajevo.

His interlocutor, Josip Vidmar, also enjoyed great authority in the inter-war period and exerted a decisive influence on the formation of the literary canon with his critical commentaries and essays. In his 1932 text *Vprašanje Cankarjevega nazora*, he analysed the worldview of Ivan Cankar, distilled from his literary works and essays. He found in them two spheres: political and worldview. He argued that, operating in an adventurous time- and place-dependent political sphere, Cankar was a socialist. He was directed to this path by the writer's characteristic sensitivity to social injustice and the link between difficult material conditions and the spiritual and intellectual stupor that turns people into farmhands. However, the understanding of the drama and Cankar's work in general was, according to Vidmar, decisive for the already mentioned worldview humanism, that is, "the primordial progressiveness that drives the cogs of cultures created by mankind". According to Vidmar, farmhands were people who, by invoking a collective ethos, contributed to maintaining the status quo, failing to recognise the interpellation addressed to them in the name of progressive values. The word 'farmhand' was meant to awaken the people from lethargy and sustain a constant readiness for change. Vidmar's interpretation, expressed in emphatic good Slovenian, had a major impact on the subsequent reception of the work.

¹³ The Christian Socialists' approach, moreover, was quite populist: "We must be cautious and wily. First, we should win support among the people, among the crowds. It should be kept, we should give them advice where it hurts the most: on social issues [...] then we will put the Catholic question before them" (after Pančur, 2005, p. 33).

A nation of heroes

Marxism as a scientific theory, encompassing the entire history of the past and even its future, was the foundation of the official ideology in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Such assumptions as historical necessity and the resulting inevitable collapse of the capitalist system, the possibility of achieving class unity by reducing differences to identities, the identification of goals and the necessary nature of the path that leads to them, alluded to pre-war Marxist and “humanist” discourse. The emphasis was on the necessary and scientific nature of the laws governing social life and even nature.

The coherence of the Marxist narrative facilitated the interpretation of *Hlapci*, as it abolished the division between the “humanist” and “political” spheres and established a clear temporal censorship, separating the pre- and post-war times. Literary interpretations of *Hlapci* – finding confirmation in the text of the drama – comprised a coherent story in which the Slovenes were indeed a nation of farmhands as they lived within the framework of a foreign state under conditions of economic exploitation, convinced that, to paraphrase Cankar, the Catechism is the beginning and end of every science (Cankar, 2021, p. 78). Jerman’s words, “it is time to tear down the fences erected for us by our spiritual and secular guardians”, fell on fertile ground. The social revolution, carried out in parallel with the national liberation struggle, abolished the sources of enslavement so that a new man could be born in the decisive and final struggle. As early as 1944, on the occasion of the third anniversary of the founding of the Liberation Front, a poster entitled “From a nation of farmhands to a nation of heroes” was published. In the picture, painted in a Socialist Realist style, a stout young partisan fights with his bare hands a Nazi armed to the teeth. The broken shackles on the guerrilla’s legs and arms are meant to convey the realisation that the free man whose advent Jerman desired has been born. The bare, muscular torso of the guerrilla on the poster suggests that the process was done in accordance with the laws of nature, which in turn was meant to imply that moral law was on his side. To emphasise the message, the caption in the lower left corner reads: “The Liberation Front transformed the Slovenian people from a nation of farmhands into a nation of heroes”. Jerman, due to his own physical weakness and mental instability, could not continue

the struggle, but the strong Kalander, a representative of the working class to whom the inner dilemmas of the intellectuals were alien, accomplished his work. The priest in *Hlapci* did not ask his subordinates for conviction as long as they completed their legitimate tasks as a part of the eternal order, but new landlords, like Jerman, demanded total commitment. According to Marxist doctrine and the logic of historical necessity, people who are not yet fully free will sooner or later abandon the rituals and behaviours of the farmhands, thus taking the first step on the road to liberation. Those who do not succumb to such a metamorphosis will be relegated to the margins. The poster showed a prominent propaganda character, so its tone is unambiguous and strongly ideologised. Historical and literary analyses from the 1950s and 1960s contained much more subdued and varied messages but were based on similar premises, focusing on those parts of *Hlapci* that found their justification in Cankar's text. The starting point was the belief, often derived from utopian socialism, that in a community of equal and materially satisfied people the nature of man would also change and a free and creative man would be born (Jerman's dream in the second act) – a conscious consumer of high culture.

Individual freedom and the nation

New meaning was assigned to the word 'farmhand' in the 1960s during a brief but intense period of democratisation. The coherence of the Marxist narrative and its claimed cognitive certainty were losing strength in the face of the gap between theory and practice. The younger generation of politicians advocated liberalisation of economic policy, which entailed a softer approach to ideological issues and a nationalism-laced push for greater self-reliance for the republics. During that period, individuals advocating for changes within the party were referred to as liberals. Reformist tendencies also emerged in independent intellectual circles; especially questioned was the assumption of the primacy of communal ethics over the ethics of the individual. Young intellectuals working with cultural magazines sought to expand the field in which the "free subject" advocated by proponents of existentialism and phenomenology could be realised. The Ministry of the Interior, in its 1958 annual report, stressed that the political danger to the regime was no longer posed by the "remnants of the bourgeois parties" but by young intellectuals from the cir-

cle of contributors to these magazines¹⁴ (Gabrič, 2005, p. 1026). The thesis that the goal Jerman had set for the entire nation had already been achieved was one of the first victims of the new ferment.

Literature historian and philosopher Dušan Pirjevec, in his monograph *Hlapci, heroji, ljudje* [Farmhands, Heroes, People] (1968), published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Cankar's death, stated that the drama could only remain relevant if "in one way or another we deny the idea of a historical transformation from a nation of farmhands to a nation of heroes" (Pirjevec, 1968, p. 6). For readers of *Hlapci*, the passages in the drama that muddle the coherence of the narrative, namely Jerman's "ethical twilight" (Pavšič, 1937, p. 373) and the associated openness of the text, became interesting again. When Jerman, in his conversation with the priest, first tried to define his mission, he justified it metaphysically, with a belief in the essential primordial freedom of man, Pirjevec argues.¹⁵ Being a farmhand is a transitional state, bound by a particular balance of power. The Slovenian nation, due to unfavourable historical conditions, has lost the role of historical subject it once had¹⁶ but remained essentially free. Jerman's appeal in Act I, "The verdict will be written by the nation itself, not by a tailcoat nor a monk's robe" (Cankar, 2021, p. 8) has likely been noted in all analyses of the drama. According to Pirjevec, the reference in the drama is to people who can make significant historical actions for the cause of freedom. But the behaviour of the people at the gathering at the end of Act IV made Jerman doubt the validity of his assumptions. He realised that looking for an anchor in a metaphysically grounded being, however precarious, could be illusory.

This means that the subject in its action cannot invoke anything that exists outside of itself that is different or greater than itself. At this point, the second, hitherto hidden dimension of the historical subject is revealed: its unrootedness, meaning that the subject finds no support in any foundation outside itself. The historical subject is fundamentally deprived of foundations; it has no recourse to anything

¹⁴ Especially about the magazines *Beseda* (1951–1957), *Revija 57* (1957–1958), *Perspektive* (1960–1964).

¹⁵ "Man received his essence from god; as a historical subject, man was created by god" (Pirjevec, 1968, p. 41). The noun 'god' is spelled with a lowercase letter because in Pirjevec's case it means any kind of essentialist anchor, not necessarily the Christian God.

¹⁶ The argument refers to a passage in the text in which Jerman states that decent people in the Protestant struggle were exiled or killed and farmhands were left behind, but Pirjevec changes the meaning of Jerman's statement.

greater than itself and is therefore absolutely free and in its freedom also arbitrary.
(Pirjevec, 1968, p. 54)

If one accepts Pirjevec's perspective, the people to whom Jerman spoke at the end of the drama did not need guides. The fact that they reacted violently to the accusation of being farmhands should be understood as a genuine need to protect their own identity.

Revisionism

The possibility of the existence of a national community understood in this way was undermined by post-Marxist theories of discourse, which assume the primary dependence of the subject on social structures. Terms like 'world-view' and Cankar's oft-used 'conviction', which had been a focal point in many literary critics' interpretations of *Hlapci*, were replaced by the word 'ideology', or the representation of the "individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2014, p. 181). As early as 1969, Althusser put forward the thesis that man does not constitute himself as a free individual seeking a way to be but tries to find his place in the existing ideological grid. Transferring the Lacanian theory of the mirror phase to social processes, he states that individuals confirm their identity by looking at themselves in the mirror of the Subject, that is, the One and Absolute Self, in whose name ideology addresses them. An individual who does not respond to the "recruitment" of the Subject cannot be constituted (Althusser, 2014, p. 190). Although a structuralist interpretation, for obvious reasons, cannot incorporate the views of Ivan Cankar, the text of the drama itself allows for such a possibility. From this point of view, the turn of the plot in Act V is the result of the unconstitution not only of the nation but also of the protagonist of the drama himself. There was a lack of mutual recognition between the subjects, and the beliefs or worldview could no longer act as a moral imperative since the justification for them had to be sought not in reality but in ideas about it. Since the only freedom that remained for the subject was to respond freely to the Subject's interpellation, the concept of a farmhand – as defined by Cankar and those who analysed his writing – lost its *raison d'être* but retained its political significance. The struggle that Jerman had started was led further by Kalander the blacksmith.

The political potential embodied in the notion of a farmhand emerged with particular force during and just after the formation of the new Slovenian state, when the dislocation¹⁷ of the national discourse occurred. Proponents of Marxist and post-Marxist theory could not find a common language with fellow citizens who had never accepted classical Marxism and therefore did not participate in the process of post-Marxist deconstruction of its assumptions. The division between proponents of relativism and universalism, a situation seen in many other countries, had additional internal justification in Slovenia. Relativists saw the nation as a historical construct that could be a source of ideological violence. They therefore felt obliged to unveil the ideological mechanisms behind it, with a particular focus on elements in the past that had been overlooked or biasedly interpreted. For the relativists, the stance of the farmhand implies a lack of opposition to narratives they consider hegemonic. In the staging of *Hlapci* by Polish director Maja Kleczewska (Slovensko mladinsko gledališče 2021), a female character hit the ground with a large Slovenian flag, shouting “Here is Slovenia”. The gesture and words constituted a postmodern quote repeating a real event, namely the behaviour of one of the participants of a 2019 anti-refugee protest. The right-wing side of the political scene accused theatre management of spreading ultra-leftist propaganda and of profanation Cankar’s work. Not only the right-wing TV station Nova TV, but also the then-Prime Minister, Janez Janša, and Nova Slovenija party chairman, Matej Tonin, responded in a very emotional way.

Relativists invert the dictionary meaning of the word ‘farmhand’ to use it to express the need to constantly challenge the *status quo*, to call for revolt.¹⁸ We can only attribute such a function to the term ‘farmhand’ if we remember its meaning in Cankar’s work.

However, the process of separation from the Yugoslav federation and the creation of nation- state in 1991 was more conducive to strengthening the so-called geological concept of the nation, according to which a nation is a permanent group of origins that to a large extent “preserves” the experiences of its ancestors and refers to them. Thus, ethnic heritage determines the character of contemporary nationality. For proponents of this option,

¹⁷ Dislocations are collisions that cannot be symbolically represented within the existing discursive order; thus, they lead to its disruption (Howarth, 2008, p. 179).

¹⁸ The students, who in 2012 organized a collective reading aloud of the drama *Hlapci* to protest the passage of the austerity package, described their action as “putting the nation on alert” (M. K., 2012).

the fundamental values in the political sphere include national sovereignty and independence from foreign influence. Supporters of universalism invoke the figure of the farmhand in order to denounce through it any attempt to undercut the essentialist roots on which the national narrative (the lackeys of Vienna, Belgrade, Brussels...) and the worldview (they condemn the adoption of foreign patterns, values, language, ideas) are maintained.¹⁹

The historical cultural struggle centred around political party programs was the final act in shaping modern national identity. In the contemporary cultural struggle, where excess rather than a lack of identity becomes the source of suffering, the national question serves more as a means in ideological warfare than its end.

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¹⁹ Slovenija is not a country of despairing farmhands. It is a country of despairing historians and political stooges. Our history is full of important and great events (Mamić, 2019).

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Polityczne aspekty dramatu *Hlapci*

Współczesne dyskusje dotyczące głębokiego podziału ideologicznego społeczeństwa słoweńskiego zawierają wiele argumentów używanych w wojnie kulturowej toczonej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku. Słowo parobek, w znaczeniu metaforycznym po raz pierwszy użyte przez Ivana Cankara w roku 1910 w dramacie *Hlapci* [Parobki], należy w tej dyskusji do najczęściej używanych pojęć. W artykule jest traktowane jako punkt węzłowy słoweńskiego lewicowego dyskursu od początku XX wieku do dziś.

Słowa kluczowe: parobek; narracja narodowa; kultura słoweńska; Ivan Cankar; marksizm; wojna kulturowa

Political aspects of the drama *Hlapci*

Contemporary discussions of the deep ideological divide in Slovenian society encompass many arguments that hark back to the cultural struggle waged at the turn of the 20th century. The word ‘farmhand’ was first used metaphorically by Ivan Cankar in the play “*Hlapci*” [Farmhands] and remains one of the most frequently used concepts in this debate. In the article, it is treated as a nodal point which connects and stabilises elements of the Slovenian leftist discourse from the early 20th century to the present day.

Keywords: farmhand; national narrative; Slovenian culture; Ivan Cankar; Marxism; cultural struggle

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