



2005

'Oh, You Use 098, You Must Be From Hercegovina?' Communicating Identity in Everyday Consumer Rituals in Croatia

Katherine Sredl

Loyola University Chicago, ksredl@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/business_facpubs



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sredl, Katherine. 'Oh, You Use 098, You Must Be From Hercegovina?' Communicating Identity in Everyday Consumer Rituals in Croatia. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 23, 2: 90-93, 2005. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, School of Business: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Business: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© Indiana University's IUScholarworks, 2005.

“OH, YOU USE 098, YOU MUST BE FROM HERCEGOVINA?”
COMMUNICATING IDENTITY IN EVERYDAY CONSUMER RITUALS IN CROATIA

Katherine Sredl, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

During my preliminary dissertation fieldwork in Zagreb and Split, Croatia, in 2002-2003, I found the debate over Croatian identity played out in symbolic consumption very interesting. I chose consumption because it is an everyday act in which people actively create and communicate identity to themselves and to others (Douglas and Isherwood 1973). Often, they communicate membership to social groups as well as status (Solomon 1999). I thought that these would be important issues since the post-Yugoslav identity, as it was explained to me, is about negotiating new identities in a changing political climate. I noticed differences in style between Hercegovci and other people from Zagreb, and I sought understanding, from a local point of view, of what this might mean. Informants from Zagreb generally organized legitimate Croatians as culturally European, and non-Croatians as culturally “Balkan.”

Post-socialism offers an opportunity to study the social process in which national identity is negotiated. The Yugoslav state attempted to create a homogenous Yugoslav national identity, for example, by glorifying Yugoslav shared peasant heritage (Banac 1999). Political and cultural history of the Republics, and even within the Republics, trumped efforts to present a common peasant heritage at the Yugoslav level. Critical discussion of the state did not create, across the Republics, a sense of unity through protest as might be expected in other movements: rock musicians and their audiences understood the music as expressing protest from the views of Bosnia (New Primitivism), or Slovenia (Laibach) but rarely a unified, Yugoslav protest identity (Ramet 1999: 126-150).

Yugoslav project, nevertheless, did create a common “other” within Croatia. The question of why Croatia had a right to statehood and what the borders would be, and who would be excluded, remained rather unsatisfactorily answered for many Croatians at the start of the first Yugoslavia (Banac 1983). After 1945, Tito favored a new narrative of unity in which all ethnicities contributed to the anti-fascist to suggest ethnic assimilation. There was also no formal national reconciliation in Croatia after World War II (Ramet 1999). Many Croatians, however, experienced Yugoslavia as a politically and

culturally foreign occupying force, which created a sense of Croatian unity, or at least distanced it from many internal divisions. After Yugoslavia, the transformation of political structures redirects the construction of Croatian identity and its “other.” This research asks how these questions of identity are addressed in everyday life.

For many Croatians from Hercegovina, secession from SFRY was a chance to reinstate the historical, “thousand year old dream of the Croatian state,” as well as an ethnically homogenous Croatian state. For people in Zagreb, it was a chance to leave the balkanization that came with the influx of peasants into Zagreb, their rise in political power, and their “backwards” culture and political processes of Yugoslavia. They could return to their European cultural and political identity. With the victory of Franjo Tudjman, who aligned himself with the Hercegovina Croats at home and abroad, the historic view of Croatian rights prevailed. Many people from Hercegovina migrated to Zagreb; their village networks took control of political and cultural life, displacing Zagreb natives and diminishing their hopes that postsocialism would legitimate their political and cultural views. For example, Tudjman’s argument for annexing Hercegovina was that this was not annexation of the territory of a neighboring state, but re-establishment of Croatia’s historic borders (Hockenos 2003: 17-80; Tanner 1997: 275-289). Tudjman censored media criticism of his strategy (Udovicki and Ridgeway 1997: 267-280). This discourse directed identity into the historical and ethnic argument for Croatian statehood and created the “other” as those internal groups who opposed it. Zagreb natives became the political and cultural “other” in their city, just as migration and political transformation were bringing in migrants from Hercegovina. How was this tension negotiated in daily life?

Once, at the beginning of the research project, as I was searching for a hook to hang these observations of contested cultural “Croatianess” in the symbolic consumption realm, I happened to tell a friend that my phone number was 098462843. He responded by saying, oh, you are for the HDZ, which I took also to mean that I am a *Hercegovci* (I’m not; my family is from Zagreb and Slavonia). I decided to research why 098

could be a symbol of cultural and inside/outside Croatian identity.

Croatia Telecom (HT), which had been a state-held company, completed the privatization process in 1999. Under the guidance of *Hercegovci* émigrés in Germany, who were tied to President Tudjman's government, Deutsche Telecom (DT) purchased a controlling share in HT. Moreover, the state included a moratorium on accepting bids from other fixed-line providers in the privatization terms. For most informants, the privatization of HT represented the pillaging of the Croatian state's rich resources. They saw the HT infrastructure as theirs; during SFRY they paid to build state telecom. They anticipated privatization would bring them a return on their investment. They also anticipated that it would end the state-socialist monopoly style of services. Instead, they understood that *Hercegovci* émigrés close to the Tudjman's party, the Croatian Democratic Community, (HDZ) and foreign interests (DT) profited at their expense. A small group of elites controlled the telecom, creating a situation that did not seem too different from state socialism. An informant commented, "The war and that period when the, uh, HDZ was in the government and all of privatization, and all that happened with it was horrible" (Silva Zagreb 32). As a consequence, HT was unpopular with most Croats. I recall a friend from Dalmatia commenting, "I don't care if Slobodan Milosevic owns the next service fixed line company in Croatia, I hate HT and I am switching when the moratorium is over" (Marie Sinj 30).

At the end of 1999, HT introduced the first mobile phone subscription service in Croatia under the brand Cronet. Cronet was expensive, and most subscribers were *Hercegovci*. Mobile phone service was a way to communicate membership in Croatia's new political and economic elite. In the eyes of other Croats, it also communicated "balkaness" because of the way many people used their phones. In Zagreb, fixed line prefixes are related to neighborhoods, so telling an acquaintance that your phone number is 4826 032 is a way to communicate your status of having an apartment in the center, meaning you have deep local connections and/or money. The Cronet phone number prefix, 098, however, communicated financial status. It also circumvented and added uncertainty to the previously mentioned status networks of place and connections. "You would tell someone where you lived, and you would lie about it and say you lived somewhere better... Also you would not give your home phone number

but your mobile number so they would not know" (Vera Zagreb advertiser 30). The newcomers used their mobile number from Cronet which came to be known as a "balkan" brand because of its connection to HT and the privatization deal, who was using it, and how they were using it. "HDZ was ruled by *Hercegovci* and they were unliked but they were really rich and they were on [HT mobile]" (Vera).

In 2000, the symbolic field changed. The Croatian government accepted the bid of Austria's Vodafone to enter the Croatian market. VIPme and its 091 prefix offered consumers an alternative to the symbolic associations of Cronet and 098. "VIPme [Vodafone] came on market and the people didn't like HT so they went to VIP" (Vera). With the introduction of 091, *purgers* (Zagreb natives) were able to communicate their identity. Just as the 48 prefix on Zagreb land lines stood in for connections and/or money, 098 and 091 were understood as signifying cultural identity: 098 stood in for "Balkan" and 091 for European. With the changes in technology, consumers had applied old meanings to new symbols. They were organizing post-socialist changes to national identity – the end of the Yugoslav cultural identity project and the start of the Croatian project – along historic lines of creating a national cohesion, and who has the right to belong.

Hercegovci, ethnic Croats from Hercegovina, were powerful in Tudjman's administration (1990-1999), and in Croatian economics, and many migrated to Zagreb from Hercegovina or émigré communities abroad after 1991. Many informants from Zagreb questioned the legitimacy *Hercegovci* power with the argument that they were not culturally Croatia. In general, this meant they did not speak Croatian and their culture was foreign - they spoke a dialect different from Zagreb and they were not civilized and not European as *purgers* see themselves, i.e. *Hercegovci* culture was "Balkan". *Hercegovci*, who came from a mountainous borderland with Bosnia, viewed themselves as "true Croats" by their historical resistance to the Ottomans and Eastern Orthodox political, cultural, and economic influence. This looked like historical fanaticism to *purgers*, and as other scholars (Ramet 1999: 166) have noted, like Croats in Istria, who wanted nothing to do with this type of "Croatianess". The in and out groups were all united on one thing, defining Croatian culture and history against the East.

It seemed to me that people in Croatia, especially Zagreb, understood *Hercegovci* as consuming more conspicuously than other groups. Women and men *Hercegovci* are associated with BMW cars and the mafia. An informant commented, "Young girls driving BMW at the university, things like that, that's usually the mafia" (Jagoda, 35 Zagreb). While the BMW is usually a sign of status and stability in the US, in Croatia, it is a sign of power related to corruption. My friends pointed to *Hercegovci* cafes and commented on them as places that the mafia frequents. One friend from Zagreb calls them *kotsku glavi*, square heads, because, she says, that is how they look. Respondents describe *Hercegovci* as lacking taste, extremely patriotic, and behaving as a mafia - a closed society, helping only its own, with ethically questionable business and political behavior. This tension between *Hercegovci* and *purgers* in a post-Yugoslav climate of negotiating identity was the theme of a play I saw, "*sta je smijesno, bando lopovska*" "what's so funny, you band of thieves".

An important aspect of the stories of informants from Zagreb is that they react to the changing social structure by re-defining their status position on cultural grounds of westernness. One respondent from Zagreb, who's parents are from Zagreb and Ljubljana (Slovenia), described the newcomers' pursuit of status goods, "how do they earn their money as they think only about how much money they have ... it's totally a cultural shock for let's say us [people from Zagreb] who were not taught that way ... people who come now from that part of Croatia [Hercegovina]... the values are totally, I mean, wrong and they did not stand on healthy feet so you can feel it on the street" (Marija 29 Zagreb).

Creating a homogenous Croatian ethnicity in Croatia is a difficult project, since most informants refer to Italian, Hungarian, or Montenegrin grandparents. The literature tends to center on the question of the civil and cultural rights that the Croatian state ensures for ethnic minorities (i.e. Serbs living in Croatia). Certainly, minority rights are an important issue for European states with particular political challenges for post-socialist states emerging from authoritarian national ideology. In my research, however, I felt that for most informants, the first national project was a cohesive Croatian ethnic, historic, political, and cultural identity. One reason, I believe, is that the Yugoslav political climate did not allow for a negotiation of this question. I also believe that another issue is that

ethnic identity is a complex process everywhere, especially in Croatia, a borderland, where most informants are ethnically mixed. Focusing on ethnic identity makes very few people a legitimate Croatian. For people from Zagreb, focusing on cultural identity ensures their power. For *Hercegovci*, historical identity makes sense because it points to a distinct period in which they were part of a Croatian nation.

I believe my findings support scholarly notions of Orientalisms and nestling Orientalisms (Bakic-Hayden and Hayden, Todorova 1997). Taking the question out of Serb/Croat context pointed to me the importance of defining "Croatian-ness" and how these are related to ideas of the state's legitimacy. Moreover, most informants disclosed that one parent or grandparent was from another former Yugoslav Republic, but they identified themselves as Croatian. I felt that this informed an open discussion of the problems of definitions of ethnicity, because most people cannot claim to be ethnically "pure" Croatians. Also, the country's regions share different cultural and historical influences. It felt as if the country was in a period of negotiating who, if anyone was a Croatian. I recall an advertiser commenting, "We can't use comedy in our ads, making fun of ourselves, because it is too sensitive still. We don't know who we are to make fun of ourselves" (Luka, Zagreb 30). I think the question of national identity is first to be dealt with between Croatians. Once that is handled, dealing with ethnic minorities can be perceived as non-threatening to Croatian identity.

References Cited

- Banac, Ivo, 1984, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Banac, Ivo, 1999, "Foreward", in Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed. *Balkan Babel, Balkan Babel: The disintegration of Yugoslavia from the death of Tito to the war for Kosovo*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, xv-xix.
- Bakic-Hayden, Milica and Robert M. Hayden, 1992, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme "Balkans": Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics", *Slavic Review*, 51 (1), 1-15.

-
- Burn This House: The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia. Jasminka Udovicki and James Ridgeway, eds., 1997, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Douglas, Mary and Baron Isherwood, 1979, *The World of Goods: Towards and Anthropology of Consumption*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gross, Mirjana, 1981, "On the Integration of the Croatian Nation: a case study in nation building", *East European Quarterly*, XV, 2 (June), 209-225.
- Hockenos, Paul, 2003, *Homeland Calling: Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ramet, Sabrina Petra, 1999, *Balkan Babel: The disintegration of Yugoslavia from the death of Tito to the war for Kosovo*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Solomon, Michael R., 1999, "The Value of Status and the Status of Value," 63-82. in Morris B. Hollbrook, (ed.) *Consumer Value: a framework for analysis and research*,. London: Routledge.
- Tanner, Marcus, 1997, *Croatia: a Nation Forged in War*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Todorova, Maria, 1997, *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.