



Decolonizing Slavic Studies: On Builders, Destroyers, and Covert History of Institutions. Editorial

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Introduction

The year 1822 saw the publication of two works which were fundamental to what later became Slavic studies. The first one was *Institutiones linguae slavice dialecti veteris* by Josef Dobrovský, a Catholic priest and tutor of the noble family of Nostitz. The second was *Poezje* [Poems] by Adam Mickiewicz, a recent graduate in philosophy and a teacher at the gymnasium in Kaunas at the time.

It is not accidental that we invoke these two works and their authors. These figures – usually placed at the opposite poles – are a perfect illustration of the recurring acts of inclusion and exclusion, construction and destruction, which we consider fundamental to thinking about Slavic studies as a scholarly discipline.

The dichotomy that we talk about here extends to issues of various levels of complexity and abstraction. While Dobrovský is most often viewed as an Enlightenment thinker, Mickiewicz is considered the father of Polish Romanticism. In turn, Mickiewicz “listened” to what the “common folk” said, whereas Dobrovský focused on how they spoke; although neither author was probably in extensive direct contact with the people they studied. It seems you cannot get any further apart.

However, both Dobrovský and Mickiewicz are extremely important figures for Slavic studies (Siatkowska, 2021, p. 21). It is not just about their intellectual contribution, which cannot be overestimated. Rather, what we have in mind is the dialectic tension inherent

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in Slavic studies, which has been the feature of this domain practically ever since it was introduced into the realm of scholarship. Indeed, Slavic studies are stretched between Classicism and Romanticism, between the idea of construction and destruction (Golachowska & Pazio-Wlazłowska, 2019; Golachowska & Zielińska, 2011, 2012, 2014), and they are characterized by both unity and multiplicity. Nothing in them is clear-cut, certain, and given once and for all. Slavic studies undermine their own foundations, unseal their borders, and question their previously adopted principles. This does not occur in an ideological vacuum: it is influenced by the regimes of thought, research trends, and the political situation at a given time.

This phenomenon is perfectly illustrated by changes in the perception and evaluation of Dobrovský and Mickiewicz, who are the main thread of this article. On the one hand, Dobrovský's unambiguous status as an Enlightenment figure is questioned today, on the other – Mickiewicz is no longer regarded solely as a Romantic revolutionary. Despite his fundamental role for Slavic studies and his wide recognition as their founding father, Dobrovský did not intend to establish a new discipline. Rather, he simply wanted to investigate issues that were of profound interest to him. Slavic studies, then, were – *nolens volens* – only a fraction of his broader interest in language as such.

Mickiewicz, in turn, who so strongly called on his contemporaries to “rise over the world that's lifeless” (Mickiewicz, 2014, p. 209) – that is, to abandon the existing order and establish a new one – successfully functioned in the institutional framework of the day, including academia, as evidenced by his famous Paris lectures at the Collège de France. Contrary to Dobrovský, Mickiewicz is not usually regarded as the father of Slavic studies, although the style of his reflections – erudite, going beyond the accepted canons, reaching for new inspiration, tackling issues not yet discussed in academia, and searching for new ways of approaching them – highly corresponds to how we understand Slavic studies today: namely, as a discipline that, when reflecting on the Slavic cultures, applies the tools of several disciplines, and uses the “Slavic studies imagination” (cf. Mencwel, 2006) coupled with a thorough knowledge of the local nuances of Slavic communities, freely exploring their various layers and dimensions. Dobrovský, on the other hand, despite his Enlightenment background, shows Romantic inclinations. This is perhaps best seen in his extensive correspondence with other scholars – probably reflecting his changing mental condition – which includes both scientific and metaphysical content. The boundaries of the categories are neither clear nor given once and for all.

If we follow Ewa Siatkowska and assume that both Dobrovský and Mickiewicz were the fathers of Slavic studies (Siatkowska, 2021), these two figures will enable us to trace an intra-disciplinary discourse on exclusion. The trajectory of this discourse is apparent in the gestures of including and excluding the two thinkers from the scholarly pantheon, in their waxing or waning role in the repositories of memory of national cultures, in the changing reception of their works and ideas, and even in temporary silence about them. These shifts mean that Dobrovský and Mickiewicz are sometimes perceived as founders of new paradigms of thought, and sometimes as destroyers of the existing order.

The Pendulum

As we can see, then, binary oppositions are not suitable for describing Slavic studies. Indeed, Slavic studies have always eluded such dichotomies, and there has always been a third option: ambiguity. Besides, what seems to be of uttermost importance is movement and not the poles which the discipline reaches in its investigations. Slavic studies are characterized by shifting rather than simple bipolarizing, the best illustration of which is the famous Foucault pendulum. The device presented in Paris in 1851 by the physicist Jean Bernard Léon Foucault aroused great interest in different parts of the world (Conlin, 1999, p. 184). It is possible that Mickiewicz, who lived in the French capital at the time, also came to the public presentation at the Panthéon. If he was there, he would have seen a huge pendulum which, swinging alternately in all geographical directions and marking what we commonly refer to as the wind rose, demonstrated the Earth's rotation around its axis (Fig. 1). It is precisely such a movement that we would like to propose today as a metaphor for Slavic studies.



Fig. 1. Foulcault pendulum. By DemonDeLuxe (Dominique Toussaint). Source: Wikipedia.pl. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/Foucault_pendulum_animated.gif. Licence: CC-BY-SA 3.0.

From the point of view of a Slavic studies scholar, the subject of research is in the very center of the pendulum's motion: regardless of the direction of the swing, the pendulum always passes through the center. Importantly, in order to mark this center, it must swing back and forth, but it never stops there—unless, of course, the pendulum is artificially stopped, but then it does not indicate any regularity. The sense of the center is established precisely in the movement of the pendulum. The same applies to Slavic studies, which exist in constant motion. However,

just like the pendulum, which is only a tool that illustrates a certain regularity, the Slavic studies pendulum can also stop over the subject of research or not set in motion at all. This leads to the explanation of phenomena through themselves, i.e. without contextual references. In this case, Slavic studies become characterized by introversion and adopt the attitude of isolationism, closing in the circle of a purist understanding of what Slavic culture is. The stopping of the pendulum, then, means the stagnation of the discipline.

Like other disciplines focused on the study of the culture of a given geographical area, Slavic studies were initially primarily a philology, standing on the pillars of linguistics and, later on, literary studies. They have been coupled with cultural studies, thanks to which we can talk about a disciplinary triumvirate (Rapacka, 2005). The tension we point to is also visible in the shifts between these three perspectives.

Firstly, they reflect the path of development of the discipline, which has not always been a smooth one. From their beginning, Slavic studies, as defined by the philological paradigm, focused on the study of Slavic languages. The linguistic interest was followed by a reflection on the literatures created in these languages. The possibility of in-depth understanding of language, its structures and products, allowed researchers to reach even deeper: to extra-linguistic cultural codes.

Secondly, this trajectory of development of Slavic studies paradoxically frames disputes in the discipline to this day. Some Slavic studies scholars argue that linguists are the least likely to question the unity of Slavic culture (Greń & Szwat-Gyłybowa, 2021) due to their interest being focused on the only unifying element of the Slavic region, that is, the origin and development of the Slavic languages. Does it mean that they guard the boundaries of the discipline most firmly? We will be happy to publish opinions on this issue.

But what if we question the status of language as the only determinant of "Slavicness"? This is well illustrated by the discussion on Franz Kafka. Can we count Kafka, who wrote in German, among Czech writers? After all, it was Prague, where he lived almost all his life, that conditioned his work through its non-monolithic and cultural entanglements. This discussion refers to the fundamental dispute between Josef Jungmann (incidentally, a student of Dobrovský's), who claimed that a Czech is someone who speaks the Czech language, and Bernard Bolzano, who believed that a Czech is someone who lives in Bohemia, regardless of the language they use (Demetz, 2001; Hanzal, 1981).

This brings us back to the metaphor of the Foucault pendulum. Slavic studies constantly move between opposite poles: one fostering and the other undermining unity. The past and present of the discipline are the stories of builders and destroyers, who would not have been able to influence it in such an invigorating way without mutual inspiration and cooperation. Maybe, then, the task of the humanities as such is not only to search for new methods, but also to interpret the interpreted (Markowski, 2013, as cited in Szwat-Gyłybowa, 2014, p. 235). The conception of Slavic studies as a pendulum we propose is based on a similar understanding of return to phenomena that have already been studied and interpreted, in order to look at them again in new conditions and in new contexts, including non-Slavic ones.

Institutions

The pendulum-like character of Slavic studies we write about, and which we thus advocate, also concerns institutions devoted to Slavic studies. A brief glance at the development of those institutions throughout their history and the impact of current politics they experienced provides us with food for thought.

As Anna Engelking points out, Slavic studies before the Second World War were characterized not only by a multidisciplinary approach, but also by a loose institutional framework and a diversity of scientific affiliations of researchers following the project of “integrated Slavic studies” (Engelking, 2021, p. 194). After the war this project was hindered and slowed down due to the political situation. The new regime was guided by the idea of Slavic unity under the political and cultural leadership of the Soviet Union, and it reinforced the ideological premises on which nineteenth-century Slavic studies were founded, including the belief in the immanent dispute between the Slavs and the Germans or the cultural distinctiveness of the Slavs.

After 1945, the temporal and spatial boundaries of Slavic studies, previously frowned upon in the Soviet Union as a reactionary relic of the past (Robinson, 2014), were clearly specified. Scientific views inconsistent with the line of interpretation adopted by the authorities, e.g. recognizing the distinctiveness of the Macedonian language or pointing to the religious roots of Russian literature, could even be a reason for scholarly excommunication or repressions. The discussion about the boundaries of Slavic cultures and Slavic studies is therefore also a discussion about actual and potential exclusion: of research topics, but also of scholars pursuing them. Does the imprint left on Slavic studies by that period still affect their internal dynamics? Does it determine how Slavic studies are perceived and how Slavic studies scholars see themselves?

Just as the Slavic studies pendulum changed the trajectory of its movements in 1945 due to the shift of power and change of political borders, similarly today we observe changes in its movement as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We can see how the place of Russian studies within Slavic studies is currently changing. This is the case especially in the West, where there is a painful discussion about the roots of its Slavic studies centers, conducted to the sound of artillery fire (“Discussion: War against Ukraine”, 2022; Smith-Peter, as cited in Drachewych, 2022). Cultivating the founding myth or, conversely, treating one’s roots as irrelevant means that we deal with either the overt or the covert history of institutions devoted to Slavic studies (Drzewiecka & Wróblewska-Trochimiuk, 2021). The choice of one of the options is a tectonic movement, which Slavic studies in Poland have already experienced. For example, the Southern and Western Slavic studies in Warsaw ceased to have the status of “an add-on to Russian studies” (Wrocławski, 2005, p. 111) in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As it is today, voices about the need to decolonize Slavic studies, not only in terms of institutions, but also paradigms and research subjects, can be heard more and more

clearly. In the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine, complicated questions are being asked about the possibility of cooperation with Russian scholars. The question about the role of Russian Slavic studies is much more complex and indicates an additional, internal shift in the Slavic studies rotation around their own axis.

There is a sad regularity according to which dramatic events such as war, natural disasters, or political unrest draw more attention to a given cultural area. It is no different today in the case of Ukraine. We assume that this also affects the research horizons of Slavic studies scholars. To speak in more general terms, does the threat to or dissolution of the state that we deal with affect how we view the boundaries of our research topic? Do revolutions and wars that bring a given legal order to an end, and bury attendant lifestyles and ways of thinking, influence how we define our own research position? How do nation states and the institutions they create, within which we function, e.g. universities, archives, museums, offices, influence us as researchers? And what happens when they also cease to exist or are in danger?

Slavic studies and Slavic studies scholars have already found themselves at such a difficult crossroads several times. Most often, these were moments of destruction in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (e.g. disintegration of a state, revolution, war; cf. Bogusławska, 2021, p. 21; Detrez, 2021), when the "Slavic studies matrix" was exoticized (Szwat-Gytybowa, 2014, p. 231). For Slavic studies scholars, however, they were not only the moments that galvanized an outside interest in things Slavic, but also the moments of an internal breakthrough, "a thorough decomposition of the interpretative system" as a result of which new regional contexts appeared (Bogusławska, 2021, p. 21).

The war in Ukraine has forced Slavic studies scholars to ask themselves some questions anew, or, in the case of the younger generation, for the first time. Of course, certain issues remain indisputable: Russia's invasion of Ukraine cannot be justified by anything, the war crimes committed must be punished, and a complete withdrawal of troops from Ukrainian territories should be demanded. However, the questions that arise about the roots of institutions devoted to Slavic studies, or the primacy of Russian studies in many Slavic studies centers, especially outside the Slavic countries, in which "their own" Slavic studies are primary, have not yet been unequivocally answered. What to do with the knowledge of their overt and covert histories and how to translate this knowledge into practice within the discipline?

The Discipline

The often-raised issue of whether Slavic studies are a separate discipline results from the ambivalence of the term "discipline". One of its meanings leads us to think of discipline as a rigorous set of principles. This has both a bright and a dark side: the same rigor that allows structured, systematic research can be something that limits the horizon. Returning

to the metaphor of the pendulum: an arm that is too short or too long makes its movement difficult, and sometimes even impossible.

With an arm of appropriate length, Slavic studies, understood as a pendulum, are able to move boldly, yet with respect to the center from which they depart. Thus, Slavic studies use not only methods that are familiar and well established in their framework, but also draw on the achievements of other disciplines. The ideal model assumes that the conclusions formulated within the discipline can be generalized. However, it does not mean imposing predefined meanings, which would bear the mistake of colonial bias. Contrarily, an in-depth knowledge of local cultures allows Slavic studies scholars to follow internal contexts, from where they extract meanings. This perception of our discipline allows us to go beyond the usual limitations in thinking about Slavic studies.

What Are Slavic Studies and Who Is a Slavic Studies Scholar?

In this editorial, we have presented some points of a discussion that has been going on virtually since the beginning of academic interest in things Slavic. We have also proposed another way of understanding the complex and intricate domain of Slavic studies. Two recurring questions in this discussion: “What are Slavic studies?” and “Who is a Slavic studies scholar?” prompted many attempts to answer them (Bogusławska, 2021; Kobylińska, 2021, 2022; Leśniewska, 2021; Szwat-Gyłybowa, 2014). In the light of issues we have raised, i.e. the history and development of Slavic studies, their historical and institutional entanglements, and their current turn, which is related to the war in Ukraine, we propose several new paths that can be followed to find answers to these questions. The question “Who is a Slavic studies scholar?” can be answered by pointing to mutual entanglements between the institutions which shaped scholars (Bogusławska, 2021, pp. 17–18), the research profiles of the centers where they work (cf. Koseska-Toszewa, 2021), the political situation, and the understanding of the research tools they use. In other words, being a Slavic studies scholar is largely a matter of self-definition.

Another possible answer is to understand how Slavic studies and Slavic studies scholars are seen by others. In the eyes of scholars dealing with non-Slavic countries, are Slavic studies scholars defined by the goal they pursue? However, how universal is this goal? Perhaps we all have a common scientific aim: to understand the area and topic we study. Being aware of all the limitations and interrelationships of our disciplines and defining ourselves in a certain way, we always make an ideological choice.

It might seem that the number of texts on what Slavic studies are and who is a Slavic studies scholar indicates only the constant need for a definition in the environment of those concerned. However, this may indicate not an autotelic discussion but a broader reflection on “the crisis of thinking styles in the space of institutions” (Szwat-Gyłybowa, 2014, p. 231),

which, due to the complicated history and entanglements of the discipline, constantly provides Slavic studies scholars with ample material to consider.

The various faces of Slavic studies, the scientific temperament of the discipline, and the variety of topics taken up are covered in this issue of *Sprawy Narodowościowe / Nationalities Affairs*.

The topic of exclusions we proposed led us to variously defined borders (territorial and mental), demonstrating vividly that the view from the outskirts is better, clearer, more distanced. A series of three articles devoted to the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border presents various interpretations of what has been happening there recently. In the first one, "Split Personality of the Sovereign: The Interplay of Power within Bordering Practices of Exclusion at the Polish-Belarusian Border", Mateusz Krępa conceptualizes bordering practices in the context of Agambenian theory of "bare life". This results in a fascinating analysis of the dynamics of power relations as well as the mechanisms of resisting exclusion. Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska, the author of "'People From the Forest': Discourse About Migrants in the Narratives of NGO Workers and Activists Involved in the Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border", shows how those involved in the humanitarian crises as activists or NGO workers create a discourse about migrants who they help. In the third article, "The Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border: Sites and Things", Natalia Judzińska and Roma Sendyka propose a typology of sites and objects supporting people on the move, introducing a new analytical category of "objects-allies".

Other exclusions in Central Europe are presented by Magdalena Semczyszyn and Ala Pihalskaya. The former, in her article entitled "Violence as the Cause of Jewish Flight from Poland, 1945–1946", shows how the postwar violence against the Jews affected the emigration of Jewish survivors from Poland. She follows a hypothesis that even before, the Jewish community was excluded from the Polish national community. Then, the article "The Concept of Localness (*Tutëishasts'*) in Visual Communication in Public Space in Belarus as a Source of Exclusion" analyses how various languages function in public space when official support is only provided to one leading language. Pihalskaya shows this phenomenon against the background of contemporary Belarus.

Furthermore, the theme of this issue features in the "Retrospectives" section, which appears in our journal for the first time. Dorota K. Rembiszewska comments on an article published in the classic *Sprawy Narodowościowe* in the interwar period, concerning the so-called Mazurian question and the issue of how the Mazurian community was approached by both Polish and German researchers.

We are happy to present this issue of the journal and we hope you find it offers an inspiring read.

Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska & Ewa Wróblewska-Trochimiuk

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