

This re-edition of *Slovakia and Culture* by Ján Lajčiak was necessary. There continues to be a lot of interest in the book and the first edition has completely sold out. Why is it still so attractive? I think that the way Lajčiak writes about the bitter miseries and harsh drudgery of human life is what makes the book so fascinating. Lajčiak's writing style is free from the ballast that typically encumbers other texts dealing with the same topic. When describing laziness and passivity, he touches on ethical issues and provides a catharsis. The text has many layers and inspiring insights.

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About 100 years ago, after returning to what is nowadays known as Slovakia from his stay in Budapest and his studies in Erlangen, Leipzig and Paris in 1905, Ján Lajčiak started to make notes and outline his reflections and critiques on the situation of life at home. However, it was only after his death (exactly on the day of the declaration of Czechoslovak Republic in October 1918) that S. Š. Osuský began to sort the notes and whole chapters into a unique book about Slovakia. What makes Lajčiak's book *Slovakia and Culture* so special that even today a whole edition is sold out? What makes it so charming – even 100 years after it was written?

The magic of his book is in the ethos, in the ethical attitude expressed in his writing. Lajčiak doesn't avoid talking about people's weaknesses and shortcomings which are as obvious as their consequences. However, instead of simple condemnation, he wants to know and say what has to be done in order to change the situation. Yes, the situation is not good. People live in poverty but since they are lazy, alcoholic and so forth (and therefore not able to change their situation); "it is their fault." This direct attribution of responsibility for this situation on individuals has been the prime reason for disagreement with Lajčiak's opinions. However, it might have been a misunderstanding as well. This seemingly libertarian attitude towards individuals is more likely drawing on a certain form of Christian personalism in which every individual is conceived as responsible not only for their faith, but also for their relationship with other people and toward society. This is Lajčiak's moral appeal to people as Christians.

Lajčiak believed deeply in the importance of individual achievement. He knew that action, efficiency, effort, endurance and will have played a very significant role in his own accomplishments. A. Kvasničková remembers that J. Golán, Lajčiak's schoolmate had noted how Lajčiak had decided to get his PhD in the most difficult subjects, such as oriental languages, Hebrew and Arabic (for which he had to learn French and English first). He had mentioned his asceticism, strictness on himself and self-sacrifice in order to achieve his goals. J. Golán said (in 1920) that J. Lajčiak was the schoolmate that he admired the most.

Lajčiak's enormous effort and enthusiasm as well as outstanding activism reflected both his individual experience with studies abroad and his liberal thinking. This was the conviction which he later emphasised in Slovakia. He believed and demanded that a lot could be changed if only everybody would do what they had to and could do. However, not many people adopted and understood this principle of change. J. I. Hamaliar was one of his "better students" who, ten years after Lajčiak's death, said: "Only people themselves, not destiny or misfortune, are blameworthy for their poverty, backwardness and shortcomings. If we want to improve the situation, we have to be active and efficient so that our own will, diligence and initiative start to

eliminate all that has caused our current situation.” Thus he highlighted Lajčiak’s opinion that “it is all is our own fault.”

Another charming feature of Lajčiak’s text is the open and direct way in which he described human problems. He was able to pinpoint essential aspects of the human condition which remain the same even if circumstances change. Passivity creates apathy, and unwillingness to change things causes backwardness. There are other observations that make Lajčiak’s text relevant even today. The characteristic of being used to doing things the old way and a reluctance to consider anything new were later also discussed in the sociography of Slovakia by Anton Štefánek. In another part of his book Lajčiak also comments on the excessive political and ideological competition which occurred between the conservative and progressive political parties. The fight for positive change had been transformed into animosity and the polemics between the parties were unbelievably “abstract and fired by personal hatred.” Lajčiak’s insights into the processes of political divisions provide an apt description of the political situation both then and now.

The engaging character of the text is also helped by supplementing general and abstract statements with examples of the specific phenomena and relations Lajčiak refers to.

In 1905, when Lajčiak returned to Slovakia, he was an educated man, well-oriented both in contemporary European social and cultural development, as well as its history and sources. An outstanding development of science and scientific knowledge had created the impression of a sharp division between science and other kinds of knowledge. Due to new inventions by Röntgen, Becquerel, Curies, Planck, Rutheford or Einstein (whose theory of special relativity was published at the same time as Koch obtained the Nobel Prize for his discoveries on tuberculosis treatment), science and scientific knowledge became an impressive social phenomenon that received great deal of social respect and consideration.

Emphasizing science and scientific knowledge was one of the characteristic features of the Enlightenment era. Lajčiak and some of his contemporaries (the Hlasists, for example) saw science as the basis of development since it was able to replace old ways of production with new inventions and technologies. Science was also believed to provide the most effective tool for overcoming prejudices and old habits. Enlightenment thinkers accentuated the benefits of science to society and people –its limits and shortcomings would not be discussed yet.

Lajčiak highlights the importance of an individual achievement and individual action and this is also discernible in his understanding of science. He was not a historian of science; therefore he was able to write that “there are always individuals behind scientific thinking.” There is, undoubtedly, some kernel of truth in this observation. A renaissance scholar, for example, can be conceived of as an individual thinker.

H. G. Wells claimed that the founders of modern science often worked individually. Some scholars, like H. Cavendish and G. Mendel, were basically self-made men. They worked literally alone (this is also the reason why their notes were discovered much later) and often in completely different areas than their occupational field (harvesting and weaving machines were invented by priests, the sailing chronometer by a carpenter and so forth). But “individual thinkers were later replaced by collective inventors.”

Lajčiak claims that the importance of F. Bacon lies in his understanding of the need for cooperation in scientific research (New Atlantis). C. C. Furnas makes mention of Bacon’s work (Progress in knowledge??) and highlights Bacon’s thesis that knowledge is the fruit of experience and experiments. Lajčiak applies this idea in his comparison of Wolff’s and Wundt’s psychology. He discusses science not only from the perspective of society but

also from the perspective of the researcher. He noticed that scientific research had become an occupation. It was clear to him that the development of society required an increasing number of people in scientific research. The social origin of scientists and the character of the tasks they were working on was not an issue at that time.

However, science has become more and more specialised in terms of knowledge, methods, procedures and techniques and therefore is more like “a club of the informed.” H. G. Wells compares science to religion, pointing to the way that science is able to provide an object of devotion, a source of inner peace, shelter, and/or refuge for some scholars.

The range of necessary knowledge and required skills create the impression that science is accessible only to talented people and closed in laboratories and other experimental spaces. Science has already gone beyond the stage of accumulating knowledge based on experience. Theory, methods and experiments have created scientific knowledge available only to experimenters and professionals and often applied only in laboratories.

J. Lajčiak also reflected on how careers are advanced and scholars are selected, citing H. Gregorová: “There is no will for small things and no talent for big things.” At the same time he notes, “there are so many educated Slovaks that if every one of them started to work seriously, scientific debate could be much livelier.” “We live in the age of science” and “science represents one of the major aspects of culture.” “No nation can afford to cut itself off [from science], no matter how small the nation is.” In Slovakia, however, science is still treated like “a step-mother’s child” that “is not respected” and “is even disgraced.” However, science itself was not Lajčiak’s prime concern. It was the situation in Slovakia that he cared about the most. He was concerned about its development, and he wanted change to be based not “on fantasies,” but on knowledge of real problems and definite procedures to affect change. As Š. Krčméry said: “Lajčiak cared about science the most.” Lajčiak was truly aware of the gap between the development of science in Slovakia as compared to other countries. For Lajčiak, an appeal to the individuals already involved in science seemed to be the only way to catch up. It was obvious to him that science in Slovak areas (Slovakia) was still very far from being an institutionalised practice. He also pointed to obstacles hindering the application of science in the reflection and development of Slovak society.

J. Lajčiak frequently remarked upon the prevalence of belletrist literature in Slovak writings. He acknowledged its up-to date level, speaking highly not only of the classics, but also of women writers. He was the first one to talk about the feminist movement in other European countries. On the other hand, he claimed that Slovak literature was too “optimistic and idealistic.” It ignored many historic facts, and the descriptions writers used did not include the material and spiritual miseries that affect and constitute people’s everyday lives. In his emphasis on facts and historical events, Lajčiak can be seen as a promoter of realism, which would be helpful in creating conditions for overcoming and eliminating traditional approaches, as well as the “ignorance and obscurantism” that had previously characterised dealings with social phenomena in Slovakia. He was very critical of those approaches, which were not based on contemporary scientific knowledge.

Although not everybody agreed with Lajčiak’s opinions, the ethos, rationality and insightfulness of his arguments attracted followers and disciples. Almost forty years later, the sociologist Alexander Hirner literally repeats his comment upon the excessively belletrist character of Slovak literature. J. Lajčiak was a big supporter of sociology as a new empirical science (see the introduction to the first edition of this book). A. Hirner, as a historian of sociology, knew Lajčiak’s work very well. He elaborated Lajčiak’s ideas about the necessity of

science within his own project on the development of scientific research in 1940s. Hirner points to the fact that the founders of sociology primarily emphasized the need for scientific knowledge. An orientation toward its role in enlightenment and nation-building came only later. Lajčiak had his own experience with the representatives of the nationalistic approach, as he kept postponing the publication of his article *Our Literary Tasks*. Both Lajčiak and Hirner, after their studies abroad, saw clearly that educated intellectuals were missing in social life (see *Sociologists' Diaries*, Alexander Hirner 1953-1955, Bratislava 2004). Hirner noted that the absence of science and scientific research had caused all European centres consider Slovakia to be on the periphery. This critique is relevant today as well. More than fifty years after Hirner, Lajčiak's words are basically repeated by L. Kováč: "Slovak culture is still grounded in folklore and belletrist literature and the only way it can attain the level of other countries is by making science a priority." This shows that Lajčiak was able to observe the most salient and lasting features of the social phenomena he analysed.

J. Lajčiak provided a bright and perceptive interpretation of the situation in Slovakia at the turn of the century from a position of influence. Even though there were other people writing on similar topics, conditions in Slovakia prevented the rise of a real discussion. Lajčiak himself called for a scientific debate about the culture in order to provide serious arguments for the coming changes.

The bitter fate and tragedy of Lajčiak's life (S. Š. Osuský) creates a certain distance from his work even today. Lajčiak was always on the margin and this is where he has remained. He was a principled man, he did not like to make compromises – especially in regard to his way of thinking and approach to life. The obstacles that he had to overcome in order to get a good education, and his skills and abilities to deal with the most difficult tasks had formed his character and his opinions on people as individuals, on life and on society. Destiny sent him to a little village named Vyšná Boca where, as a clergyman, he cared for his flock and at the same time scientifically burnt out and faded away. Life in Slovakia did not provide him the necessary conditions to take advantage of and develop his extraordinary talents. And he alone was not able to create them.

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