

The Deconstructed *Informátor* and the Social Construction of the Czech Nation

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Abstract: This study attempts to demonstrate the validity of two theses: (1) Deconstruction is a non-standard analytical procedure, which is closely tied to social constructivism. (2) Social constructivism can be interpreted either as anti-objectivist (and thus also anti-Marxist), or as anti-conservative (that is, anti-traditionalist). Similar kinds of post-modern thought can have either a liberal or a neo-Marxist orientation. Vladimír Macura's novel, *Informátor*, is analysed in this context, and in relation to the historian Dušan Třeštík's claim that the Czech nation was „invented“ in the 19th Century.

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Today we know that deconstruction, that much loved post-modern and post-structuralist method (according to some post-structuralism and post-modernism are one and the same), whose aim and intent is to demystify a text and reveal its inner arbitrary hierarchies and hidden assumptions or hypotheses, latent metaphysical structures, ambivalences, blindness, and logocentricity. At least that's what Pauline Marie Rosenau writes in all good faith. I won't dare quote what Jacques Derrida writes about such things as that is really something for the initiated, and even though I am a teacher by profession, the very idea that I should explain to someone what the difference is between *Destruktion* and *kritischer Abbau* in Heidegger and real deconstruction in Derrida would ruin my normally quiet sleep. That is something that only the good Lord knows, plus perhaps Stanislav Hubík and certainly the Editor of the *Sociological Review*, since he knows everything. For a long time now I have had the suspicion that deconstruction is only for the elect, since it cannot be compared with a standard methodology, it doesn't have any explicit rules, and it does call for some special gifts. In the Czech Lands there are a few literary critics who possess these, Miroslav Petříček junior and Zdeněk Konopásek, who apparently deconstructed Ivo Možný, allegedly to his great satisfaction as the deconstruction took years off him.

I started to have horrible doubts about deconstructing Vladimír Macura's book *Informátor*, which was a candidate for this task, when I read that Christopher Norris, who is an indisputable authority in matters of deconstruction (although what is authority really in our post-modern era?) says that *every understanding is a lack of understanding or a defective understanding. For him every reading can be to some degree both a bad reading and a reading which selects certain details at the expense of others which could be equally justified from a critical point of view.* My doubts were strengthened by J. Hillis Miller (not to be confused with the Czech sociologist Vladimír Müller, who I suspect knows how to deconstruct but is keeping it quiet – his frequent visits to the German cities famous for their deconstructive activities would seem to point to this). Miller wrote

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that *deconstruction deconstructs itself since it creates new and different labyrinthine fictions whose authority is undermined by the very fact of its own creation*. Paul de Mann did undermine my forces somewhat with his thesis that *in the act of deconstruction, nothing must be accepted, but there is also nothing that must be rejected*, but eventually he calmed my methodologically aching spirit when he reassured me that *in the final analysis the text deconstructs itself*.

While I now know what deconstruction is, I still do not know how to do it and it seems to me that I am not alone in this. I originally attributed this to my grey hair, but even the young and undeniably educated Jennifer Lehmann failed when she tried to deconstruct Durkheim. She left the title of her book as it was (*Deconstructing Durkheim*) but in the end she recognised that what she was doing with Durkheim was not deconstruction because deconstruction is a *sceptical, undermining, decentering, antifoundational and processual* critique of absolutely everything including the concept of things. And she couldn't manage that because she, *unlike the deconstructivists, accepts that social structures really do exist and that they determine social behaviour both positively and negatively, that they are ultimately intelligible and recognisable, and that social science is therefore possible*. She voluntarily abandoned the idea of deconstructing Durkheim and proceeded to the premise of a critical structuralism which she founded herself. That can be best termed post-post-structuralism, as in fact it suggests.

I have been toying with the heretical idea of deconstructing *Informátor*, the book by the Czech writer and literary critic Vladimír Macura, since I read with pleasure and without irritation (that's what we deconstructivists are like) some articles by the historian and post-modern writer Dušan Třeštík. He wrote that the Czech nation was *invented* by the Czech revival in the last century and that it is now time to *reinvent* it differently. The panic and consternation of the direct descendants of our great Jans – Jan Hus, Jan Žižka, St. Jan Nepomuk, St. Jan Sarkander and Jan Patočka, our Václavs – the First, Second and Third (I'd rather leave out the Fourth in view of his alcoholic leanings, although he did issue the patriotic Kutná Hora Decree), the founder of Czech journalism Václav Wladíwoj Tomek and of course Václav Havel, as well as our Karels – the Fourth, Karel Hynek Mácha, Karel Havlíček Borovský and the minister of industry Karel Dyba, was entirely predictable. If I hadn't known that for the deconstructivist the aim or intention of the author is not to be considered even in moments of human weakness, I would say that it was undoubtedly a quite intentional calculation on the part of the author. He wanted to provoke the traditionalist and often intellectually limited patriots with the idea that the Czech nation is not something „absolutely natural“ which has come down through the centuries as an unchanged entity which is always deserving of respect. And if it was invented once in the 19th century, why couldn't it be reinvented - and bettered? Třeštík did not of course say anything that we (or at least we late modernist) sociologists had not known for a long time – that all social phenomena are (in one way or another) *social constructions*, and in this sense they are continually being „reinvented“. Social constructions (and thus inventions) are just as much social problems as schizophrenia, gender as homosexuality, crime as genius. That is at least the theory of Theodore R. Sarbin and John I. Kitsuse, who rely not only on the classical social constructivism of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, but also on the classical Chicago school of Alfred Schütz and the classical ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel... Even those readers who are most scientifically in tune must realise that the concept of „classical“ is in fact a social construction par excellence and that in this sense it really is „invented“. So are „classics of

marxism-leninism“ – and what classics they were! We first constructed them (not we of course, only „some of us“) and then we destroyed them and denied them the status of classics – and here of course it was „all of us“. After November 1989 it was no heroic action to cry out that Marx never had been a classic, when even President Havel, in announcing the renaming of the Engels Embankment in Prague, said that Engels was an obscure German philosopher, while Rašín, our own Czech financier, was a really nice chap who the whole world knows and appreciates.

Heavens, I begin to wonder if I am not getting everything mixed up – from deconstruction to construction, from deconstructivism to constructivism – can they really go together? But to be serious, I have always had a suspicion that this whole pleasant post-modern game is just jazzing up Mozart (as Adorno would see it) or a rock or heavy metal version of Verdi (The Grand March from Aida and the song of the Slaves from Nabucco, as I would see it). In other words, in other systems of discourse or speech, it is a case of variations on a well-known theme and of solutions that may be unrevealing but are shocking in their radical shrewdness. It would perhaps be more precise to say that what modern sociologists (perhaps like our Masaryk – and there would be a serious subject for serious deconstruction) see as a *problem*, post-modernists see as *facts* we have to live with. And to live with as happily as possible, just as we must sometimes learn to live with a serious illness. The wicked Miloš Havelka (Editor of this Journal) even pinched the word that I had thought of for this fact: *agreeing* (*cultural criticism has become mere agreeing*). Cornelius Castoriadis even wrote his fearful study *The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalised Conformity*, but then what can you expect from a late neo-marxist? Thus the path from social constructivism to deconstruction is simple, because it is in the logic of the things themselves, since if something exists it has some logic. The authorities Sarbin and Kitsuse cited above say that *the social constructivist trend within sociology has recently been greatly stimulated by an infusion of vigorous post-modern, post- structuralist and deconstructivist debate, which sociology has borrowed from literary criticism*. And there it is! Heaven be praised that the good old constructivism that I know so well is all I need to deconstruct the *Informátor*.

If the readers feel that I still cannot grasp the heart of the matter, that is of the *Informátor*, then they can rest assured that the rule of the discourse will not be disturbed, since *digression* is the sign of the new style, rather than strict, rectilinear (let alone causal) logic. Before starting with the *Informátor* and so with how the Czech nation was invented, I cannot resist one more digression. In the years of the Marxist famine we were philosophically sated (satiation in time of famine is perfectly possible in post-modern terms) with leninist assertions that matter is objective reality which exists independently of our consciousness and is only reflected and copied by it. Similar satiation came from the Marxist thesis that social being is primordial and social consciousness only secondary, inferred, dependent on being and simply not independent. After this satiation in famine the ideas of social constructivism appeared to us in central Europe as a vision. They seemed very anti-marxist since they were anti-objectivist and from a certain (single) angle so they were. In a similar way post-modernism has, from a certain (single) angle, a radically liberal course... in which we in the Czech Lands (thanks to Bělohradský, Třeštík and Steigerwald) are used to seeing as the only possible one. Post-modernism and its constructivist predecessors cannot however be considered as evil spirits and one of their faces cannot be absolutised (and anyway what is absolute in this relativised world?). As early as 1986 in *The Salisbury Review*, two undeniably serious ladies,

Caroline Cox and Rachel Tingle published an indignant article with the symptomatic title of *The New Barbarianism*. In this the classic of social constructivism, *The Social Construction of Reality*, appeared as a seed of the devil which undermined not only the traditional concept of objectivity (tradition is a virtue) and so the traditional concept of objective truth, but also all the institutions for the transmission of knowledge: academic standards of knowledge thus become only bourgeois survivals in *a merely bourgeois conception and a relic of a bygone era*. This however opens up the way for the most frequent alternative to conservative thought – marxism and all the variations of anti-government, anti-American, anti-NATO and anti-western crypto-marxism, to be explicit, anti-racism, anti-heterosexism and Worlds and Peace Studies. All these ideas with their relativism and their constant insistence on the context of every assertion make it possible to never find anything positive to say about the history of the West and its cultural traditions and values.

If anyone thinks that marxism, with its ideological absolutism, can be anything except relativism, they are making a big mistake. Marxism has its classical epistemology constructed on the concept of „concrete historical progress“ and the „concrete historical concept of truth“. These concepts are rather more than relative and more than contextual. The conservative ladies Cox and Tingle were not therefore so far from the truth as it may seem to us here in the „concretely historical“ central Europe. From this point of view, while the radical post-modern discourse would be just as legitimate as any other, it is far from seeming as objectionable as Dzugashvili's famous objectivist definition of the Georgian nation *the nation is a fixed society which emerges in the course of history, of people linked by a common language, land, economic life and psychological disposition, expressing itself in a common culture*. Since there does not seem to be a single possible constructivist conception of the nation, according to which the nation is the result of free choice of free individuals (Renan) or the product of permanent interaction and negotiation of people. The nation can of course be understood as something once effectively invented (*a semantic, interactive and negotiated construction*), which may from time to time be repeated so that the objectively non-existent entity of the nation was in some way redefined. This is the context to which Vladimír Macura's book *Informátor* belongs.

There are various possible readings of this book, which is almost a collector's item, (by Favia International, Praha 1993, 193 pp) and all of them are equally legitimate, since we know something about the „death of the author“ and the author's independence of the Reader has never been cast in doubt. Thus Macura's book can be read as a) the story of Johann Mann's unfulfilled love for Miss Rajscká, thus as a love story; b) as a discussion of power and human frailty and cowardice, thus as political fiction; c) as a more or less realistic picture of life in Czech society in the 19th century; d) as a tale of the birth of the Czech intelligentsia, thus as a historic illustration; and finally e) as a tale about how the Czech nation was invented and of the role of the state police in this, thus as a study in the philosophy of history. To tell the truth, for me as an independent reader, as a love story it is not much, as political fiction it cannot compare with the Forsythes... That leaves only the study in the philosophy of history (the main thing would be to be convinced of this), but we do not know if this is what the author really wanted. Taking Derrida's teaching that *a text does not have anything in common with the author as a real person*, there is no reason to even try to ascertain this intention. There are therefore various possible hypotheses, all of them equally legitimate, but we will stick stubbornly to the supposition that Macura's work is a brilliant lesson about what social constructivism

is. Macura's book can be read as a story about a story, that is as a sort of multiple tale, artificially created but not contrived, so that even the undemanding post-modern reader will in the end be familiar with it. Macura recounted the relatively simple story of a certain Johann Mann, a Czech cursed with a weak national consciousness, who in the 1840s met the attractive Antonie Reissová, who had taken the patriotic name of Bohuslava Rajská and who had patriotic fervour to spare. He falls passionately in love with her, and his blind love leads him into mischief, which in turn leads him into the hands of the Empire's secret police, etc. – it is not done to say how the story in a story ends. Macura's Johann Mann, probably in an attempt to rationalise his base collaboration with the secret police (although this is baseness on the level of the 19th century in the Austrian Empire), writes a *novel* in which he shapes his „real“ story into a likeness in which he himself has a much better and more acceptable guise. In this sense Macura's book is also a story about the appearance of Paretian derivations, Freudian rationalisations and fictionalised ideologies of all types. Mann's novel falls into the hands of the secret police, of a confidential court counsellor, who kindly starts to advise Mann how to write a novel! He is of course pursuing his own egoistical aims since he is hoping the novel will tell him what the police really want to know. Mann is not that far from the idea that *literature and life are bound together by a threat of innumerable connections*. But the counsellor also has his idea of the social function of literature and his is clearer than Mann's, as he knows full well that *literature has a great responsibility since its task is not to arouse emotions but rather to awaken love for the throne and the officers on which the throne depends*. Macura's book can however be read in yet another light, that is as a story about everything that can be constructed in literature and in life, and in life as literature, since Richard Harvey Brown has told us that society is text, nothing more and nothing less. And in Macura's story there is more than enough that is constructed. The novel *Informátor* itself is probably a construction of Macura's, because I do not suppose that he found it lying already complete in the Dvůr Králové or on the Zelená hora, as the famous counterfeit Manuscripts of Václav Hanka (yet another Czech Václav!) were said to have been found. Moreover, the main character constructs the novel *Patriotic Love* (Probably Macura wrote this as well, although the deconstructivist reader has every right to see it in a contextually different light). The very fact that Mann became an informer is re-constructed as follows: the counsellor explains to Mann kindly that he is not a snooper but an informer and that an informer is someone who forms something. This reconstruction was of course possible in a period when confidential court counsellors had received an education in the humanities, something that was not so common in the twentieth century. Although Heydrich did play the violin... So here the Czech nation is being formed. It forms itself, takes shape, creates, constructs, in brief it invents itself. In the following passage from Macura's work, the main character Johann Mann regards this behaviour with the justifiable suspicion of the regular reader of Kučera's *Central Europe*.

What is so wonderful about resuscitating a long defunct language? One which has once sounded so quaint somewhere in the fields and pastures. Enough. What is the sense in bringing even more chaos into this Babylonian world? Isn't the language of Hegel, Kant and Goethe good enough for us to understand each other?

But Mann knew that this already could not speak to skeletons. And Lenny is one of them. Lenny with her spread legs and not worrying about whether you said gib mir or give it to me. As long as you put the money on the edge of the table (p. 125)

We can pass over the erotic which has slipped in there in its post-modern way, but we cannot pass over Lenny: a simple girl of the people (the nation?) who leaves the village where she first gave herself for money to Mann, and goes to Prague to devote herself in a cosmopolitan way to a traditional cosmopolitan craft, with a well-developed sense of market reasoning. She is one of the few sympathetic figures in Macura's tale.

Czech patriots did not of course only revive the language, but they in fact built, they constructed. Almost all the characters of Macura's story have their historical basis: Karel Slavoj Amerling (1807-1884), Antonie Rajská (1817-182), Count Lev Thun of course, but also Cyril Kampelík (18-5-1872) and the Emperor Ferdinand, not to mention František Ladislav Čelakovský (1799-1852), who makes a fleeting appearance in order to lure Rajská from Mann, of course wordlessly. Thus the historically based Amerling claims without historical foundation:

I need people, people with a sense of being Slavs, Founders, builders of the cathedral of the Slav soul. The builders of Budeč. Do you know, my friend, what Budeč is? Budeč mean someone who builds! Someone who does nor perish, but survives. Budeč is the seed of our future. But Budeč is also someone who awakes, arouses from two centuries of sleep! Budeč is a word but it is a word which means the world. (p. 50)

Amerling's words make me think of Czech Heideggerians of the 1980s, but at least we know what Amerling really constructed: He could not quite get to grips with Budeč, but with the language yes. Anyway Macura's book is mainly about language and signs, as it must be when the author, if we accept his existence as an objective reality, as Derrida says we should not, is a linguist, a literary historian and a practising semiotician. The whole construction of the Czech nation is primarily a construction of a language, or more precisely of signs.

There are two processes running through the whole text: the process of attributing signs (and thus meaning) to phenomena which previously lacked them (the homeland being the perfect example); and the process of endowing meaning, of setting signs, thus of the process of semiotics, on phenomena whose original character and foundation were intended for something else. This was for example with the ball, as Mann sees it:

But a ball is a ball. And if a young girl beckons to you, your heart begins to thump, making you unnaturally disturbed. That is why you go to a ball in Prague. You may say, „What is so special about that Prague ball?“ In Vienna as much as in Prague, in Buda as in Solnohrad, a ball is always a ball, sometimes better, sometimes worse, but always a ball. My dear people, I can see that you are not impressed with this fashion for Czech balls. Every German word there will cost you twenty fines. And they dance around Jungmann's dictionary set on a marble plinth surrounded by white lilies and red roses. Do you want to know what this dictionary of Jungmann's is? It is just a collection of worlds which Czechs do not understand and Germans cannot even pronounce. It is the bible of the Czech patriots. (p. 100)

And there we are. A German and Germanness are a necessary opposition. Of course as Miloš Havelka says (plenty of quotes from Havelka provide an easy reason for publication in this journal), *understanding oneself, a certain society, a certain artistic direction, certain scientific forms are created only in the distinction from what is different, and so in comparison and relations. Identity is established only on the basis of relations with the other and with its negation.* Macura's book can therefore be seen as an illustration of Havelka's thesis (and maybe of Levi-Strauss) and Macura (we need not

speak of Johann Mann) far preceded the action of Smířeni (Reconciliation) and the conflict over the Sudeten German question.

The fascination with signs is absolute in the actions of the characters in Macura's book. They take new names and thus create themselves, constructing themselves socially (*she gave me a name as if she was my creator and I accepted that name and thus created her*). For love of Antonie, Johann took the name of Vratislav:

– *You must choose a patriotic name, my friend of the people. You shall be Vratislav! In memory of the fact that you came back to us, from abroad to your homeland. That you turned to Slavonic things!* (p. 58)

We should not forget that Masaryk also created and reformed his identity, and before taking the more cosmopolitan Garrigue, he used the very patriotic Vlastimil („he who loves the home country“ since Tomáš was not enough). Fortunately for us he did not keep that Vlastimil. To get to the end of the story, if we read it as a story of the social construction of the Czech nation, Mann's reflections on the Czech national anthem, whose name is such for Czech patriots that it need not be recalled:

Tomorrow man will understand how strange it is that the patriotic visionaries love this song so much... If they knew that it comes from a comedy! Wie sentimental! das Lied eines Blinden! The skinny lawyer clinked his money in front of the harpist and called for the Song of blind Mars. That's what they call it. And the harpist knew it and its words. And half the people in the tavern, not only the students, sang it together. It is a song of the blind.

And that is why it is so eloquent. Just for that reason. Because the blind, eyeless skeletons love the song of the blind best. It gives them a view of a beautiful land. And they are blind when they do not sense the irony. That the blind man sings about a beautiful land. What a spectacle! And they are even more blind when they do not see that spectacle also means scheinbar. Seemingly beautiful. They should sing – Oh my land among the bones! But they look straight in front of them with their eyeless sockets, anxiously shut off from what is going on around them. (p. 47)

The nation as it is in Macura's tale (and why not believe it) was not constructed either by the forefather of the Czechs on the Říp calling out to *Love and multiply!* or by the analogous appeal of the Czech revivalists. Nor did the nation construct itself socially by the natural process of constructing a certain number of children, who acquire the same language and live in similar surroundings (that is too objectivist a construction and if conscious would be social engineering in the Popperian sense and the Stalinist form), but... that is exactly what Macura's book is about. It can also be seen as an example of sociological narrative, about which Josef Alan writes so well that its aim is *to tell the story of events in their natural contexts*. But how does Macura know those *natural contexts*? Did he not construct them too? And what if everything had been completely different – and not only with Johann Mann and Antonie Rajská? Then it would be necessary to write another story which would of course be just as legitimate as Macura's, alias Mann's, alias the court counsellor's.

A propos of the counsellor – Johann Mann of course knows that the behaviour of the Czech patriots is sheer folly and that these skeletons can never get to the nature of things. The Czech nation is a pure fantasy of visionaries, of madmen. He is a person of refinement whose outlook has nothing in common with them... and the counsellor, like the good policeman he is, knows himself. He knows what the Empire has to fear and that

the real madman is not the one who does mad things but the one who sees them as nothing:

– „*They are all crazy but not dangerous.*“

– „*Ah, so they are all crazy,*“ drawled the counsellor. „*All of them are crazy. And what about you? What about you, Mr Mann? In Vienna you go around with that trouble-maker Kampelik. You are mixed up with that ultra-slavist Reissová. And when Vienna gets too hot for you, you come to your friends in Prague... And all of them are crazy! So are you normal, Mr Mann, you who steal the carriages of knights? You who write those doubtful Slavonic papers for Count Thun, you who help Miss Reissová with her Slavonic encyclopaedia? Have you, Mr Mann, ever seen a civilised country where women write encyclopaedias? Like those misguided French who threw half the world into chaos? You who implore Amerling not to forget to give you work in your crazy Budeč – are you not crazy?*“ (p. 131)

The Counsellor understood and his own actions had their own relevance. So in the end wasn't it von Muth, the Confidential Court Counsellor who constructed the Czech nation? If that was the case then I would ask for the copyright on this fact, which is not entirely in line with Macura's report.

P.S. And where does Macura's book belong from the point of view of post-modern deconstructivist intertextuality? Where else than with Jirásek's novel *F. L. Věk*, with the study by Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu* (The Meaning of Birth) and of course first and foremost with Masaryk's *The Czech Question*. Quod erat demonstrandum.

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