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Central European Crossroads, Glagolitic Heritage, and Post-Socialist Epistemology : A Croatian Philosophical Framework for Decolonizing Borderland Humanities

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Abstract

This study investigates the distinct contribution of Croatian intellectual history and Central European borderland philosophy to contemporary humanistic scholarship. By examining the Glagolitic literary heritage, Renaissance humanism along the Adriatic (Dubrovnik and Dalmatia), the praxis philosophy of the mid-twentieth century, and post-socialist cultural transformation, this paper articulates a modern paradigm for epistemic autonomy, liminality, and critical pedagogy in higher education. Furthermore, it evaluates the challenges of digital archival sovereignty and cultural preservation in South-Eastern Europe, demonstrating that Croatian critical traditions provide essential conceptual tools for navigating peripheral identity and democratic resilience in a globalized era.

Keywords: Central European , cultural preservation , democratic resilience

1. Introduction: The Epistemic Landscape of the Adriatic and Central European Crossroads

The intellectual heritage of Croatia occupies a unique position at the intersection of Central Europe, the Mediterranean world, and the Slavic realm. This geographic and historical liminality has shaped a distinct philosophical traditions characterized by intercultural negotiation, linguistic resilience, and a profound engagement with questions of identity, statehood, and cultural sovereignty.

In modern higher education, dominated by Western European and Anglophone paradigms, small nation intellectual lineages are frequently relegated to regional studies or peripheral status. However, Croatian intellectual history offers critical insights into how peripheral and borderland societies maintain epistemic agency, preserve historical memory, and navigate imperial pressures.

This article proposes a systematic re-evaluation of humanistic inquiry through a Croatian conceptual lens. By bringing the Glagolitic tradition, Dalmatian Renaissance humanism, twentieth-century Praxis marxism, and post-socialist transition theory into dialogue with modern digital humanities, this paper charts a path toward an inclusive, peripheral-conscious humanistic curriculum.

2. Glagolitic Literacy, Renaissance Humanism, and Adriatic Enlightenment

A cornerstone of Croatian epistemic identity is the Glagolitic script and lituro-literary tradition, which flourished from the ninth century onward. Unique in Western Christendom, the Croatian Glagolitic tradition allowed the use of the Old Church Slavonic language alongside Latin in official religious and legal domains. Documents such as the Baška Tablet (Bašćanska ploča, c. 1100) established early legal literacy and linguistic autonomy, demonstrating how vernacular culture could coexist with universal European institutions.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Adriatic coast—particularly the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) and Dalmatian city-states—became a vibrant center of Renaissance humanism. Thinkers such as Marko Marulić (often termed the father of Croatian literature and author of 'Psichiologia', one of the earliest recorded uses of the term psychology), the

philosopher Frane Petrić (Franciscus Patricius), and the political theorist Nikola Vitov Gučetić synthesized classical philosophy with maritime civic governance.

Frane Petrić's 'Nova de Universis Philosophia' challenged Aristotelian scholastic orthodoxy with Neoplatonic natural philosophy and cosmic light metaphysics, anticipating early modern scientific thought. Concurrently, Dalmatian humanism cultivated a civic ethos centered on republican liberty, diplomatic realism, and cultural synthesis between Slavic and Italianate traditions.

3. The Praxis School: Humanist Marxism and Alienation in the Twentieth Century

In the mid-twentieth century, Croatian scholars made an internationally recognized contribution to modern philosophy through the Praxis School (Praxis grupa), centered at the University of Zagreb and the Korčula Summer School. Emerging in opposition to dogmatic Soviet dialectical materialism, Praxis philosophers—including Gajo Petrović, Milan Kangrga, and Mihailo Marković—reconstructed humanistic Marxism grounded in Karl Marx's early writings.

The Praxis school placed human creative action (praxis), freedom, and the critique of alienation (otuđenje) at the center of philosophical enquiry. They argued that human beings are not passive products of historical determinism, but self-creating agents capable of transforming their social reality.

Petrović and Kangrga mounted a rigorous critique of bureaucratic statism, consumerism, and dogmatism, asserting that critical thinking must continuously interrogate power structures, regardless of political ideology. The legacy of the Praxis school remains a vital reference point for critical pedagogy, emancipatory theory, and democratic dialogue in contemporary social sciences.

4. Post-Socialist Transition, Peripheral Memory, and European Integration

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and the post-1991 transition to democratic governance and market economy presented profound structural challenges for Croatian academia and cultural institutions. This era required a delicate balancing act: processing historical traumas, re-evaluating twentieth-century national narratives, and integrating into European Union frameworks.

Croatian cultural theorists and historians have contributed significantly to post-socialist memory studies and peripheral theory. Scholars have analyzed how post-communist societies navigate 'double peripheralization'—facing both the economic demands of Western European integration and the internal politics of post-conflict reconstruction.

In humanistic education, this post-socialist perspective provides a crucial critique of unexamined linear narratives of modernization. It demonstrates that democratic consolidation and institutional reform must respect local historical memory, vernacular knowledge, and the specific socio-cultural dynamics of Southeastern Europe.

5. Digital Archival Sovereignty and Heritage Preservation in Southeastern Europe

In the twenty-first century, the digitization of Croatia's rich cultural heritage—ranging from medieval Glagolitic manuscripts to Venetian-era architectural archives and modern socialist art—presents new opportunities and vulnerabilities in the digital humanities.

A key concern for scholars in the region is digital archival sovereignty. While multinational technology platforms provide digitization tools, ensuring that digital corpora, metadata, and linguistic models accurately represent regional Slavic and Mediterranean languages is essential for avoiding digital colonialism.

Croatian academic institutions are leading initiatives to build open-access, multi-lingual digital repositories that preserve rare Glagolitic texts and regional folklore. By combining advanced computational text analysis with philological rigor, Croatian humanists ensure that peripheral cultural legacies remain accessible to global scholarship without losing their contextual integrity.

6. Conclusion: A Borderland Paradigm for Epistemic Pluralism

Reimagining the humanities from a Croatian perspective provides a compelling model for global education in an increasingly multipolar world. The Croatian experience demonstrates that intellectual strength does not depend on imperial power, but on the ability to synthesize diverse cultural influences while preserving epistemic autonomy.

By integrating the Glagolitic tradition of linguistic sovereignty, Renaissance Adriatic civic humanism, the critical spirit of the Praxis school, and contemporary post-socialist memory studies, higher education institutions can foster a nuanced, resilient, and pluralistic humanistic curriculum.

Ultimately, a Croatian-inspired humanism offers a vital lesson for the twenty-first century: that true wisdom thrives at the crossroads, where borders become spaces of dialogue, critical reflection, and shared human dignity.

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