

Andrej Blatnik

SYMBOLIC CAPITAL OF SLOVENIAN READING

ABSTRACT: Following the idea of various capitals in the publishing field established by John B. Thompson, we can observe the book consumption as a process where an investment of economic capital in a bought book results in the potential growth of intellectual and symbolic capital gained by reading. The article is exploring the approach to these book capitals in Slovenia on the ground of a research carried out in 2010 and 2011, comparing its results with those of previous book researches, especially in connection with some specifics of the Slovenian book field such as strong system of public libraries and accordingly low number of books being sold in the bookstores.

KEY WORDS: reading habits, book market, symbolic capital, culture and class

Simbolni kapital slovenskega branja

IZVLEČEK: Slede ideji o različnih kapitalih v založniškem polju, ki jo je uveljavil John B. Thompson, lahko opazujemo knjižno potrošnjo kot proces, pri kateri naložba ekonomskega kapitala v kupljeno knjigo skozi branje prinese potencialno rast intelektualnega in simbolnega kapitala. Članek raziskuje pristop k tem knjižnim kapitalom v Sloveniji na temelju raziskave iz let 2010 in 2011 ter primerja rezultate s prejšnjimi knjižnimi raziskavami, še posebno v povezavi z nekaterimi specifikami slovenskega knjižnega polja, kakršna je močan sistem splošnih knjižnic in ustrezno nizko število knjig, prodanih v knjigarnah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: bralne navade, knjižni trg, simbolni kapital, kultura in razred

1. Introduction

Slovenes somehow do not question the idea of being inseparately connected with the books and crucially defined by them; this notion might extend even further from the creation of community through the process of reading as presented by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1998). 'Birth of a nation from the spirit of poetry' – as this connection, especially in the context of the second half of the twentieth century, is described by Aleš Debeljak (Debeljak 1995) – extends at least from times

of the first Slovenian 'writer of a kind' Primož Trubar, through the introduction which Josip Stritar wrote in 1866 for the second edition of *Poems* by the greatest Slovenian poet France Prešeren, to the Volume 57 of *Nova revija*, a dissident cultural magazine which published 'contributions for the Slovenian national program' in 1987 and thus made the notion of the independent Slovenian state public. However, it should not be forgotten that books have changed from a medium for the elites into a medium for the masses only after the introduction of appropriate technology (i.e. the invention of rotary printing press) and after the establishment of adequate social conditions, in particular a sufficient level of literacy, which was in the Slovenian environment enhanced by the introduction of compulsory education at the time of Maria Theresa.

Raymond Williams notes that books were not a media for the majority of people until the 20th century (Williams 1983: 70); nevertheless, in the recent years, we can read more and more journalistic debate as well as scientific contributions on the topic of the end of the so-called 'Gutenberg galaxy' crucially marked by the books (Anderson 2006; Darnton 2009; Epstein 2001; Gomez 2008; Schiffrin 2000; Striphas 2009) and on the effect of changes in reading paradigm caused by the transition from paper to digital media (Carr 2010; Jacobs 2011). In this context, it seems worthwhile to compare the results of different researches of Slovenian reading habits and to reconsider whether the books in Slovenia nowadays still have so powerful role as we tend to believe, especially in the context of the three capitals which were (in the framework of research of books and culture) established and analysed by Pierre Bourdieu and, on Bourdieu's track, by John B. Thompson: in the context of *economic*, *intellectual* and *symbolic* capital. The basic assumption is that the role of these capitals in the reading field has shifted, and that the books have lost quite a bit of their symbolic capital.

2. Slovenian Book Research

Particularly helpful in evaluating the change of the symbolic capital of Slovenian reading was the data contributed by the empirical research *Culture and Class* conducted by the Ljubljana Faculty of Social Sciences (the project leader was Dr. Breda Luthar). This research took part between Dec 1, 2010, and February 15, 2011, in the towns of Ljubljana and Maribor, i.e. the two biggest cities in Slovenia. The base for questionnaire was chosen on the ground of SRS sample and the target was 1080 respondents who reached the age of majority and were permanently residing in one of these two cities. The target was at least 400 responses in each of the cities, and the research got 820 successful responses altogether, thus reaching the 45% response after deducting the ineligible. One of the tasks of the research was to analyse how culture reflects the (in the Slovenian case) emerging class society – Slovenia started changing from (theoretically) egalitarian society into a typical class society after gaining independence in 1991. *Culture and Class* research was analysing many aspects of culture in connection with class by addressing the respondents with 129 questions or statements and seven of these were aimed at book consumption – most of them will be represented later on. It needs to be noted that systematic surveys of Slovenian book market and reading

habits have stopped in the last years. In recent decades, however, an ongoing research *Book and Reader* was taking place, started in 1973 by Gregor Kocijan. The first survey interviewed 1.312 subscribers of the national television, in this time called RTV Ljubljana. In the following research in year 1979, Kocijan was joined by Martin Žnideršič, and they were again interviewing broadcasting subscribers, this time on a sample of 1.455 respondents. The third survey in 1984 was included in the *Slovenian Public Opinion* survey and included 2.435 respondents. The last comprehensive survey was *Book and Reader IV*, conducted in 1998 in 1.084 households; in this particular case, multistage sampling ensured representative (if reduced) sample. Results of all the researches have been published. (Kocijan 1974; Kocijan and Žnideršič 1980; Kocijan et al. 1985; Žnideršič et al. 1999)

Hope expressed by the research team in the introduction to the published results of 1998 research »that the *Book and Reader* will become a permanent survey every five years and that it will be possible to illuminate some more specific questions with specified smaller researches in the meantime« (Žnideršič et al. 1999: 9) did not materialize. It seems this is due to the lack of interest of potential fund giving organisations, especially those who have established a partnership between public and private sector in the previous researches. The research has been funded from the beginning by the so-called Cultural Community of Slovenia, the predecessor of the Ministry of Culture, and in the second run, public sector was joined by the beginnings of the private sector: part of the financing came from the publishing part of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia which was (and still is) representing the 'market' part of the book production. Slovenian Book Agency, in operation since January 1, 2009, took over the tasks of caring for the books in public interest from the Ministry of Culture (and the Ministry from the Cultural Community of Slovenia), but the tasks stated on its website (http://www.jakrs.si/o_agenciji/) do not include research and analysis of the Slovenian book market. The Slovenian Book Agency did indeed contract a few 'smaller researches', if we preserve the language of the introduction to *Book and Reader IV*, about the 'detailed and pressing issues' such as the public lending right system, but it seems that the Slovenian cultural policy is currently more worried about the maintenance of the subsidy system in order to support or perhaps even preserve Slovenian quality books than about the analysis of the Slovenian book market. Privatization of the book sector in 1991 caused many structural changes (see Blatnik et al. 2005; Breznik et al. 2003; Kovač 1999; Rugelj 2010) and brought new problems which might be among the reasons that the Slovenian book sector has not yet begun seriously investing in extensive research, ranging above the partial and specific interest.

3. Various Book Capitals

Based on the concept of social fields defined by Pierre Bourdieu, five types of capital engaged in contemporary publishing are explored by one of the world's leading theorists of the publishing field John B. Thompson in his comprehensive books *Books and the Digital Age: The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publi-*

shing in Britain and United States (2005) and *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (2010): economic, human, social, intellectual and symbolic. Economic capital is, of course, consistent of the funds needed by publishers for their work, human is represented by the people working in or for publishing houses and their accumulated knowledge, skills and expertise, social by the networks of contacts that an individual or organization has built over time, intellectual represents the rights that a publishers owns or controls and is able to exploit through publications and selling of subsidiary rights, and symbolic capital consists of accumulated reputation and recognition enjoyed by the publisher. Social capital was added by Thompson in the later book, noting how »it became clear that this form of capital, important in all publishing fields, is particularly important in trade publishing, where networking is vital«. (Thompson 2010: 5)

Thompson says that the first four of capitals are self-explanatory and easy to understand components of the publishing field; however, the inclusion of symbolic capital that creates brands needs more explanation. Publishers are, again following Bourdieu's theory, *cultural intermediaries*, and symbolic capital in the publishing field is not only gained by reputation of publishers but also by reputation of other participants in the publishing field, in particular, of course, authors who themselves are becoming *brand names* with various amounts of symbolic capital accredited to their name. Particularly important for the publishing industry are the economic and the symbolic capitals, and their relationship in the context of individual publishers is not necessarily proportionate: publisher with a lot of reputation can operate with modest financial results and vice versa. Publishers operate in two markets simultaneously, the *content market* and the *buyers market* – they buy content from authors and sell books to customers. The books therefore enable capital flow – we may assume that customers give their own economic capital (i.e. money) to publishers in exchange for a particular book in order to receive reimbursement in the form of the potential intellectual and symbolic capital which is brought to them by the book. They are therefore not buying the form, the *object* of the book – if this was the case, one book could be easily replaced by another, as analysed by the studies of cultural industry by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer – they are buying book for its *content*. The *content* is what allows them to get in touch with the intellectual and symbolic capital of any particular book, and with the intellectual and symbolic capital of the book field in general – but to reach these capitals, they need to (in principle) invest their economic capital into the *object* of the book.

The dual nature of books, represented by their acting as 'standard' market goods, an act personified in their form which is bought and sold, but also as particular 'cultural' goods because of their specific content which is transferring knowledge, culture etc., is built into the base of book culture in all cultures; in smaller cultures, more connected with specific forms of cultural expression (for example the language), even more so (Anderson 1983). Therefore, book studies always need to be interdisciplinary, including methods of studies of literature, economy, sociology and bibliography. In recent years, a number of analysts stress how the importance of the two beforementioned capitals in the modern publishing industry is becoming less and less equal: the economic ca-

pital is increasingly prevailing over the symbolic. Perhaps most notable analysis was given by the longtime director of Pantheon publishing house and later on founder of the nonprofit publishing house The New Press André Schiffrin in his book *The Book Business*. »For much of the twentieth century, trade publishing as a whole was seen as a break-even operation. / ... / Thus, the new approach – deciding only to publish only those books that can be counted on for an immediate profit – automatically eliminates a vast number of important works from catalogs.« (Schiffrin 2000: 104)

This is the ground for some questions posed by the research *Culture and Class*; these were derived from the thesis that the symbolic capital of reading is changing, and we were trying to explore how this change is related to the changes of economic capital, since these two capitals are not completely directly related in Slovenian society. Unlike many commodities which must be paid for to be consumed, the books in Slovenia are in principle accessible to everyone. This is possible thanks to the network of well-stocked and efficient public libraries which offer the vast majority of books that are published in Slovenia immediately after publication, free of charge.

4. Readers and Buyers

The results of the beforementioned *Book and Reader* researches, compared with the *Culture and Class* research, show the popular thesis of 'less and less reading' proven wrong: the non-readers (people who did not read a single book in a year) represented 48% of respondents in 1973, 34% in 1979, again 48% in 1984, and 39% in 1998, but only 14,5% in 2011. Similar increase of the book presence in lives of the respondents was shown by the percentage of the non-buyers (people who did not buy a single book in a year): 50% of respondents in 1973, 39% in 1979, 41% in 1984, and 48% in 1998, but only 21% in 2011. (We can, however, subscribe a part of this increase to the fact that the first four researches were aimed at representatives of Slovenian population in general, while the last one was taking place only in the urban areas of Ljubljana and Maribor, where, we might suspect, there are more readers than the average.)

Book and Reader IV research in 1998 concluded that in comparison of the then available data, the Slovenian buying of the books (note that we are talking about buying or not buying, not about the quantity of purchased books!) varies somewhat comparable to the international level – in the U.S., Germany, Italy, France and Poland, the percentage of buyers is similar, significantly bigger only in Great Britain, where 80% of adults purchased at least one book in a year. At the same time, the researchers interpreted that the reduction in the percentage of buyers by 7% in comparison between 1984 and 1998 was due to the degraded material situation of a large part of the Slovenian population (caused by the shift from one kind of society to another, we might add), and concluded that in the near future, as favorable results as in 1979 (61% of respondents were book buyers) will not be achieved. (Žnideršič et al. 1999: 60-61) Judging by the outcome of the research *Culture and Class*, where the question »Would you buy a book that was recommended by a friend if it costs 20 €?« was answered by 'I do not buy books' by only 20,6% of respondents, such a view might be considered slightly too pessimistic,

though, of course, we need to keep in mind that this was only the expression of *intention* and not of an *actual purchase* of such a book.

Uroš Grilc, while researching the book market in Slovenia, noted a gradual increase in average price of subsidized book (Blatnik et al. 2007: 11-52). In 2003, subsidized books were cheaper than non-subsidized, but in 2004, they became more expensive, which, we may assume, also affected the growth of library acquisitions of non-subsidized books which is a phenomenon of the last few years. In another text, Grilc indicates the average price of books in 2009 was 20.03 € (Blatnik and Kovač, eds. 2011: 23-33), which is the figure taken as a starting point for the survey question in the *Culture and Class* research: »*Would you buy a book that was recommended by a friend if it costs 20 €?*« (Most surveys quote 'personal recommendation' as the key motivation for buying a specific book.)

Before we analyse answers to this question, it seems worth mentioning the previous 'open' question: »*What is in your opinion a reasonable price for a novel?*« (Again starting from the usual answer to the question of what kind of books people are buying for 'their pleasure': namely novels.) Reasonable price for a novel is expectedly increasing in relation to the increasing income and education level and is slightly higher among males who were willing to pay an average of 17.73 € and the females a little less, 17.46 €. The respondents were willing to pay 18.66 € in Ljubljana and 16.55 € in Maribor, which is approximately equally distant from the average and probably witnesses the microeconomic situation in the two cities.

The figure expectantly rises with the position within class. It is interesting, however, that, according to the thesis of book being a constitutive element of the Slovenian nation, the respondents who declared themselves belonging to Slovenian nationality were willing to contribute 17.47 € on average for the novel, whereas those declaring themselves being nationally non-Slovenian were willing to contribute significantly more, 18.61 €, which is also above the amount that the average middle class respondent was willing to contribute. It needs to be noted that the declared non-Slovenians amounted to 112 respondents, i.e. roughly 14% of all respondents, and therefore this answer cannot be considered a random deviation. It appears that the investment in symbolic capital brought by a book is worth more to a respondent of non-Slovenian ethnicity, which is perfectly in line with Benedict Anderson's thesis. Incidentally, this fact helps to explain why the most sold Slovenian fiction book in independent post-1991 Slovenia is the multicultural *bildungsroman* by Goran Vojnović entitled *Čefurji raus!* (*čefurji* being a pejorative name for immigrants from the rest of former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia) – if we can paraphrase Fran Levstik, the author of the first Slovenian literary manifesto, according to which 'Slovenian should see himself in a Slovenian novel as he sees his reflection in the mirror' the new *not-quite-Slovenian* sees himself as a 'reflection in the mirror' in this particular novel.

This information is complementary to the answer to the question »*Would you buy a book that was recommended by a friend if it costs 20 €?*« Here, 32.6% of respondents of non-Slovenian ethnicity, compared with 18.7% of respondents of Slovenian ethnicity, chose the response 'I do not buy books'. Their decision for the higher price of the novel

is thus mainly reflecting their respect and recognition of symbolic capital represented by the book, rather than the decision to really invest their own economic capital. (We have already mentioned that in the whole, this response was chosen by 20.6% of respondents.) The answer 'yes, I'd buy it' was chosen by 27.9% of respondents of Slovenian nationality and 26.4% of respondents of non-Slovenian nationality. Willingness to pay this price increases according to the rise of education and class position and is again (by 3.3 percentage points) higher in Ljubljana than in Maribor. More interesting, however, is the fact that such a price is accepted by 59,9% of respondents with income between 1000 and 1999 € and only by 46% of respondents with income of more than 2000 €. In these groups, the percentage difference between those who identified themselves as 'I do not buy books' is negligible (6.1 and 6.9%), also the difference in relation to answers 'I would have bought if I had the feeling that I desperately need it', but the difference in the answer to 'I'd buy it if I could not get in the library' was significantly bigger: it was chosen by 18.2% of those with income above 2000 €, and by only 4.9% of those with income between 1000 and 1999 €. Ratio in the selection of the response 'no, because it is too expensive' was 4.3% vs. 1.7% – *higher ratio by those with higher income!*

This at first sight very surprising answer requires some extra thought. Zdravko Duša in the text entitled *Three Revolutions of The Book* speaks of the marketing campaign which accompanied the launch of an elite series of translated novels *XX. stoletje (XX. Century)*: »The assumption was: OK, the new emerging class [*nouveau riches*] has no real interest in the book, but it means to them a thing of a certain value and will therefore be bought.« (Blatnik et al. 2005: 37-47) The assumption has proven to be wrong and the series has not sold significantly better as other books of the same type: the members of the emerging new class gained already so much confidence because of their wealth that they did not feel the need for such additional confirmation, for, in Bourdieu's term, the *cultural bluff*.

Answers to the quoted survey question suggest an additional interpretation: the new owners believe that the book is too expensive to buy. Its value is therefore not scored as high as it is by not-so-wealthy classes, which is clearly shown by the answer to the question »*How many books did you read in the last year for your pleasure?*« Those with incomes between 1000 and 1999 € read 13.45 books pro year on average, and those with higher income 6.95, which is the lowest response among all categories! The new rich (it needs to be mentioned that, due to the previous 'egalitarian society', almost everyone rich is 'new rich' in Slovenia) seem to be aware though that admitting the non-reading (inherent in the decision for the answer 'I do not buy books' or, to a lesser extent, 'books are too expensive') is not (yet?) socially acceptable answer, so they are trying to correct their approach into the more socially expected: 'I'd buy it if I could not get in the library'. They are not recognizing the economic or intellectual capital of the books, but are still aware of their symbolic capital, alas on a symbolic level only. Bad news for the Slovenian publishing industry – and probably also for the members of the new rich class and their intellectual growth.

5. Conclusion: Decline of the Symbolic Capital

Reading experience is in common knowledge closely linked to education: level of education is increasing with reading habits and vice versa, and this interconnection is confirmed practically in all serious studies of reading habits. The research *Culture and Class*, however, recorded an instructive response to the statement »*In the past, reading books was more important than it is today*«: in the range from 'strongly disagree' to 'completely agree with it' the share of responses is constantly growing: 'disagree' (3.7%), 'do not agree' (8.7%), 'neither-nor' (12%), 'agree' (35%), 'totally agree' (35.8%). The small difference between the last two figures might also be interpreted as a desire to avoid socially less acceptable answer. More than 70% of respondents are therefore expressing their belief that reading books was in the past more important than it is today, which is certainly an indicator of the present state of the symbolic capital of books.

We could try an optimistic interpretation and risk explanation that the respondents decided to make a judgement on vanishing importance of reading books in conjunction with rising importance of the new literacies such as digital literacy (see Knobel and Lankshear, ed. 2007), even make a more optimistic attempt to see some good prospects for the future in such a judgement, since the new literacies include a 'new ethos', namely the increased importance of readers in the reading process: in new literacies, the reader is more active in the act of reading as in conventional literacy (ibid: 9). However, we can quickly undermine our optimism by taking into account the percentage of responses to the claim »*If you do not read, you can not be successful in the society*«: 'disagree' (14.1%), 'do not agree' (26%), 'neither-nor' (25.7%), 'agree' (24.5%), 'totally agree' (8.4%), which tend to represent rather low presence of belief that reading brings important social, symbolic, intellectual or economic capital. (Younger respondents are more committed to this claim, so we may assume the response is at least partly formed by some kind of personal experience!) We shall also mention the responses to the claim »*Books are a great way of spending free time*«: 'disagree' (1.4%), 'do not agree' (8.5%), 'neither-nor' (15.2%), 'agree' (37.3%), 'totally agree' (37.1%). The book is therefore still an excellent thing in contemporary Slovenian public opinion, but a thing for leisure, and not a means of increasing the social, intellectual and symbolic, let alone economic capital.

Primary source

Summary of the research »Kultura in razred«, FDV-IDV, 2011.

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Author's address:

Associate Professor Andrej Blatnik

Faculty for Arts and Sciences

Department of Library and Information Science and Book Studies

Aškerčeva 2, 1000 Ljubljana

andrej.blatnik2@guest.arnes.si