

Book Review

Dejan Jovanović, PhD*

Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade

**DRAGAN SIMEUNOVIĆ, “POLITICAL THOUGHT OF SERBIAN
ENLIGHTENMENT”,
“DOSITEJ OBRADOVIĆ” FOUNDATION, BELGRADE 2022.**

Before us is another work by Dragan Simeunović with an extraordinary contribution to science and society. The book “Political Thought of Serbian Enlightenment” primarily provides the reader with a scientific explanation of whether the Serbian Age of Enlightenment is late and how long it lasts in relation to the same process that took place in Europe in this sense. What sets this book apart from similar ones is that, as a product of the author’s long and studious work, we have before us the largest political analysis of the political ideas of the famous members of the Age of Enlightenment in our history. The summarization and production of the political tincture of the Serbian Enlightenment is something that is not found in other books by philologists, art historians, historiographers, cultural scientists, and philosophers. Dragan Simeunović reintroduces the readership to the previously unknown side of the famous greats of Serbian history. This unknown does not necessarily

*dejan.jovanovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

have to be previously unpublished, but previously unexplained in this way. We believe that the main scientific contribution of this book is in terms of scientific explanation and scientific classification, in addition to certain novelties on this topic that have been published for the first time in this book.

Secondly, this book is a contribution to the long-standing work of the author Dragan Simeunović on finding a political coupling between the statehood of Serbia in the Middle Ages and the statehood of Serbia in the modern age. These scholars are invaluable in the fight against the unscientific narrative of 500 years of Serbian slavery, darkness and intellectual silence into which the Ottoman occupation threw us.

Dragan Simeunović gives us the boundaries within the framework of political science that determined Serbian Enlightenment thought. The ideas of national identity, rationalism, education and social progress developed among the Serbs at the same time as among other much larger peoples of Europe. Despite the fact that the Serbs did not have their own independent state in the 18th century, they had their own national intelligence that carried the torch of magnificent events that would follow in the 19th century of freedom and struggle in the plane of nationbuilding. The extended 19th century is connected with the historical memory of medieval statehood and greatness, precisely through the idea of the Serbian Enlightenment. The foundation of Serbian liberation and man's progress to humanity and freedom was laid by Serbian greats who were the subject of scientific research by the author of this important book. These greats were revealed by the scientific argumentation of Dragan Simeunović as the cornerstones of Serbian statehood. They are: Gavril Stefanović Venclović, Zaharija Orfelin, Jovan Rajić, Dositej Obradović, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and Vasa Pelagić.

After a very inspiring preface by the author, the book opens with the first portrait, certainly one of the most significant Serbs from the late 17th and

first half of the 18th century - Gavriilo Stefanović Venclović. After his father Stefan Stefanović, crowned Venclović, was born in Srem in 1680, and from 1690 in Szentendre as a boy in a family that found itself in that city, the future epicenter of Serbian culture, on the wave of the Great Migration of Serbs. This Serbian writer wrote tens of thousands of pages of manuscripts, of which 9,000 pages were written in the Serbian vernacular. Gavriilo was also an exceptional illustrator, as can be seen from his numerous miniatures with which he decorated his books. He was also a priest who advocated the education of female children. Thus, Venclović published his first book written in the Serbian vernacular in 1732. How famous the preacher was as a priest is also indicated by a recorded sermon with elements of a dramatic text from 1740. Simeunović emphasizes the importance of sermons with elements of a drama theatre performed in the church, as the clearest indicator of Venclović's belonging to the era of enlightenment. These kind of dramatic sermons were intended to draw ordinary Serbs away from banal street theater and bring them to the divine liturgy in church. In addition, he advocated that this service be in the Serbian vernacular to such an extent that he saw the need to improve the church alphabet by filling it with missing characters. Simeunović emphasizes that it was Venclović who introduced the characters for the sounds Ć, Đ and DŽ into Serbian. Almost a whole century before Vuk Karadžić would do it again. As Simeunović emphasizes Milorad Pavić's assessment – Venclović is the most prominent writer of the Serbian Baroque.

Zaharija Orfelin is the second in a series of Serbian enlighteners that Simeunović included in his research. Citing the assessment of the Czech Slavist from the early 19th century, Josef Dobrovský, that Zaharija Orfelin is the founder of new Serbian literature, the author of this book immediately at the beginning of this review lets the reader know how highly he himself assesses the life and work of Orfelin. According to the sources presented, Orfelin was born in Vukovar in 1726. The same year as the famous Jovan Rajić. The first significant work that he wrote, but also illustrated and decorated with song notes, is "Greetings to Moses the Traveler". A politically significant work, as

Simeunović emphasizes, because of the explicitly expressed national and political ideas of the Serbian nation. Orfelin and Dositej met in 1757 in Hopovo, while Dositej was still a monk. He published the poem "Gorestni plač slavnija inogda Srbiji" in 1761, the lyrics of which are permeated with the ideas of Serbian national freedom, as Skrelić assessed. As Simeunović points out, Orfelin realistically assesses the poor prospects of the Serbian nation without a leader and without a state, surrounded by hostile nations, and without the help of sister Russia. Instead of fighting for others, Simeunović interprets Orfelin, the Serbian people should fight for their freedom and the restoration of a free state. In Venice, Orfelin also achieved success in 1764 and later as the publisher of Krinkovski's Sermons, which had previously been translated by none other than Jovan Rajić. Zaharija Orfelin and Jovan Rajić collaborated occasionally. The reissued poem "Gorestni plač slavnija inogda Srbiji" under the new title "Plač Srbiji" in 1765 is characterized by the use of language that is significantly more folk-like. The last precious copy of the poem burned down in the German bombing of Belgrade on April 6, 1941. The newer version of the poem from 1765 introduces an important addition to Orfelin's position in terms of the future of the Serbian nation, namely, he believes that there may be salvation for the Serbs, but only if God helps them to free themselves from the yoke. After that, Orfelin published the first Serbian magazine, "Slavonic-Serbian Magazine," in Venice in 1768. Through Simeunović's analysis of the preface to Orfelin's magazine, political science as a science joined the assessment of the extraordinarily high importance of that text for philology, history, and literary theory. According to Simeunović, that text is undoubtedly an educational program that highlights the connection between the vernacular language and national consciousness. Orfelin published his most famous work, "The Life of Peter the Great," in 1772, and the quality and scope of that book are evidenced by the fact that it received its second edition in Petersburg in 1774, and that Pushkin himself used that book as a template for his work. Since he artistically perfected all his works by adding copper engraving decorations to them, his contribution to the art of copper engraving was crowned in 1767 by his membership in the academy of the Viennese

master Jakob Matthias Schmutzer. Known for his "Representation to Maria Theresa", Orfelin also wrote the extensive manuscript "Book against the Roman papacy". In addition to Orfelin's significant book "Eternal Calendar" published in Vienna, Simeunović also highlights the book "Experienced Cellarer" as a surprisingly comprehensive and, for that time, substantiated lesson on viticulture and winemaking – completely in the spirit of the Enlightenment with bilingual instructions for the Serbian elite and ordinary Serbian people.

An indispensable enlightener who competes with and makes up the Enlightenment trinity of the second half of the 18th century, along with Orfelin and Dositej, is Jovan Rajić. Born in the same year as Zaharija Orfelin, 1726, Rajić is remembered not only as a cleric and historian, but also as an enlightener with a significant contribution to political science. Although part of the same Enlightenment movement among Serbs, Simeunović identifies Rajić as an ideological counterpoint to Dositej, who, unlike Rajić, was critical of religion. As a cleric and historian of Enlightenment orientation, Rajić is credited with the significant resistance that the Serbs in Austria, led by their Serbian Orthodox Church, offered in 1774. Namely, the church catechism created according to the Roman Catholic and Jesuit program was to be imposed on the Serbs and their church by Vienna. Jovan Rajić not only prevented the Synod from accepting the text, but also created a new one in a record time of 17 days, in order to avoid printing the Jesuit text in as many as 10,000 copies. Jovan Rajić is also known for one of the first histories of the Serbian people. He wrote his book "History of Various Slavic Nations, Especially Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs" in 1768 in three volumes. This work was so potent in terms of national educational significance for the Serbian nation that it was not printed until 1795. The political definition of Jovan Rajić given by Simeunović defines him as an Eastern enlightener but also a Western rationalist.

In the part of the book that deals with the political thought and work of Dositej Obradović, the author, relying on previous research by historians,

carries out his political analysis of this primarily national revolutionary in his political theory and practice. His, certainly emancipatory, role was primarily expressed through his participation in the Serbian Revolution and the First Serbian Uprising. Simeunović accordingly divides his political activity into two phases, where this role is placed in the second phase, which is designated as the period of Dositej's political practice. While in the first phase of the development of his political thought, it was reduced to a passing thought written primarily in the context of the role of an enlightened ruler and the way of governing. The first phase is marked by the idea of emancipation in the sense of modernization, while in the second phase it is about emancipation in the form of political liberation of the nation. It could be said that the second phase begins in 1788 with the beginning of the last war that Austria will wage against Turkey, which will be the beginning of great hopes for the Serbian nation in terms of liberation and unification, which will not cease throughout the entire 19th century. During this period, Dositej's "Fables" are also created as a completely political work. Here, a scientific judgment can already be rightly made about the creation of political doctrinal writings by Dositej, with the aim of teaching the ruler. For Dositej, without a doubt, only an enlightened modernizing ruler is suitable. At that time, the French Revolution breaks out, about which Dositej does not write, bearing in mind the position of Austria in which he lives and works. That is why Dositej does not write much about the revolutionary nature of the Serbian question, but rather about the liberation of the Serbs through the Austrian war against Turkey, with an emphasis on battles such as the one in which the Austrians drove the Turks out of Belgrade. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising, concludes Simeunović, that Dositej's positive attitude towards Emperor Joseph II does not make Dositej a "Josephineist", as some would assess him. Especially if we learn the fact that Dositej was also enthusiastic about the Russian Emperor Peter the Great for the same enlightened reasons. Although the mix of political ideas according to the criterion of priority changed over the years on the hierarchy of Dositej's political scale, it is quite certain that Serbian patriotism never left the first place.

The book would be incomplete if the most famous enlightener among the Serbs, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787 – 1864), would be omitted. According to Simeunović, Vuk Karadžić made a rich contribution to Serbian political thought both through theory and practice. He was a participant in the First Serbian Uprising, a secret diplomat, judge, legislator, agitator and propagandist. His definition of the Serbian Revolution as a process is still scientifically relevant today. Namely, he understands the Serbian Revolution as a process that began in 1791 without a clear assessment of when it was completed. The author of this book excellently notes and highlights Vuk's political prudence, which enabled him to have such an advanced understanding of revolutionary processes that many authors can still envy him today. Therefore, Simeunović, we believe, rightly gives him the status of a political theorist in the rank of the ancient meaning of the word theory. Vuk was the one who, by preparing the material for Leopold Ranke's famous book, had a decisive influence on the popularization of the Serbian Revolution within European circles. In this part of the book, Simeunović devotes a significant part of the pages to a letter that Vuk Karadžić sent in 1832 as a reasoned criticism of the rule of Miloš Obrenović, to him – Miloš Obrenović. In Simeunović's opinion, this letter is an extraordinary political analysis of the state of political life in Serbia at that time, which shows the level of knowledge of politics that Vuk Karadžić had. Vuk advocated the creation of a modern public administration, the introduction of democratic institutions, but also for the overall stabilization of the situation in the political system of the Principality of Serbia because, as he noticed even then, the disorder of the system causes young Serbs to go abroad. What is interesting, as Simeunović points out, is that Vuk advocates for the existence of heroic political ethics in modernity. The statehood of a nation depends on its commitment to the ideal of freedom, and the best example of a ruthless fight for freedom is provided by the heroes of freedom. As an example, Vuk offers Hajduk Veljko, whom he compares to Achilles and Obilić.

The choice of the last portrait of this book will certainly surprise the reader. The controversial Vasa Pelagić (1838 – 1899) was a nationalist, socialist, and

educator. In fact, all political phases changed, but Vasa's spirit of enlightenment and attitude towards the people did not change. A teacher who was sentenced to 101 years in prison for defending his students in Bosnia from the Turkish authorities, only to be saved from the Asia Minor dungeon thanks to the joint efforts of Serbian and Russian diplomacy. Pelagić was also a writer with a total circulation of his works of an incredible 250,000 copies. Simeunović argues that "the development of his thought, which went through several phases, from clerical-theistic, through populist-rebellious to socialist, in which he gradually approached the positions of Marxism from an utopian, influenced the maturation and more complete theoretical formation..."¹ Vasa Pelagić, as a Serbian nationalist at the time, was a participant in the Serbian uprising in Bosnia in 1875. What's more, he even saved the life of Petar Karađorđević, who was fighting there as a volunteer. He considered the personal example of a patriot indispensable for maintaining patriotic consciousness. A patriot must not only be self-sacrificing but also be ready to step out of his comfort zone by taking extreme action as an act of propaganda in action. Pelagić's social ideal is a society of social justice.

In our opinion, this book represents another jewel in the crown of Dragan Simeunović's political science career, for the benefit of current and future generations.

¹ Simeunović, 2022.