

## **Popular Culture and Post-Socialist Societies in East-Central and South Eastern Europe\***

**Ondřej Daniel**

*Charles University in Prague*

**Tomáš Kavka**

*Charles University in Prague*

**Jakub Machek**

*Charles University in Prague, Metropolitan University Prague*

There is little doubt how much expectation has been generated by the end of the Cold War, expectations that were followed by academic reflections worldwide in all areas of social sciences and humanities. The area of cultural production and reception and their scholarly analyses was certainly no exception to this general trend. There is now a voluminous literature about the collapse of the bipolarity in 1989 and the following 'transformation' of the state socialism and more is to anticipate in the future. Nonetheless, the twenty fifth anniversary of the lifting of the Iron Curtain, offered an unique opportunity to look back and ask questions about the impact and reverberations of the socio-political changes in the cultural dynamics of the everyday life of people across generations in various East-Central European countries. It is also a chance to give voice to the youngest generation of scholars who grew up intellectually within the academic context of the social and cultural theories traveling across the ruins of the Berlin wall while combining their unique experience of the 'transitional' cultures with new opportunities to absorb and perhaps rewrite methodologies and conceptual frameworks established in the mainstream fields of cultural and media studies.

Despite important particularities amongst different countries of the region, what they shared was an effort of the communist governments to eliminate some expressions of popular culture (i.e. pulp fiction) while promoting others (i.e. TV series), as well as the new conditions for ways of production and distribution of popular culture generated by the fall of state socialism. At the same time, the "longue durée" nature of popular culture meant that some of its forms and genres persisted beyond the late state socialist period of the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, while some of the patterns of local popular culture remained almost unchanged, the shifts which marked the economic and political metamorphosis influenced the dynamics of other elements and brought around new phenomena that were either suppressed or completely absent during the 'old regime'. We stress the fact that popular culture of the previous so-

---

\* „This special issue is published as part of the Charles University Research Development Programme No. 09 Literature and Arts in Intercultural Contexts, Sub-programme Formula Fiction: 'Trivial' and 'Pulp' Genres in the Context of Historical Development and Concepts of Popular Culture.“

called socialist period still has a substantial impact on the present state of societies in the East-Central and South Eastern Europe region. But did the dynamics of popular culture follow any of the shifts that marked the economic and political spheres? Which patterns of cultural production and reception were mobilized to influence popular culture and how important remained local contexts in this mobilisation? How can these changes be interpreted to reflect present-day societal problems? The economic crisis after 2008, accompanied by the recently growing Central and East European nationalisms, seemed to have put a definite end at the post-Cold War 'transformation'. At this point, we see a chance to address these questions from a somewhat distanced perspective of contemporary cultural history and yet, with an inevitable engagement and responsibility as inspired by the ethos and tradition of cultural studies. Research presented in this special issue thus intends to illuminate new aspects of the post-Cold-War cultural currents as well as their historical ruptures and continuities.

During the break up of multinational federal states such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia new elites utilized popular culture for nationalist mobilization (Holy 1996; Barker 1999; Gordy 1999; Baker 2010). Meanwhile their opponents struggled against the new cultural hegemony and revolted against the "nationalist barbarization of culture". (Jansen 2005). Across East-Central Europe discourses of exclusion based on economic, professional, social, educational, age, gender, ethnic and racial characteristics were spreading and they found their expression in mass media and in popular culture in general (Hann 2002; Kuljić 2010; Verdery 1996). Broadly accepted products of Western popular culture were shortly adapted to the local contexts as well as mixed up with enrooted meanings and values.

Furthermore, the economic crisis deepened in many cases disillusionment with the often largely idealised and in many cases misconceived notion of the 'West'. This disillusionment included also the 'Western' liberal/conservative ideology and its cultural practices and products which, during the rapturous events of 1989/1990, were seen as symbols of the need for change as well as supposed tools of 'westernizing' post-socialist societies. Research in the transitional period can help to better understand the role of popular culture in different political regimes and societies as well as its role in establishing of new models of societal and economic organisation. We are approaching critically the concept of "post-socialist transition" mainly from a post-colonial perspective. Following the debates in social theory of last two decades we acknowledge a certain degree of autonomy and persistence of specific "Eastern" cultural practices (Baladrán – Havránek 2009; Buden 2009; Todorova – Gille 2010; Verdery 1991). We understand popular culture as everyday culture of general public encompassing mainstream culture as well as its subcultural counter-narratives. On the one side, such popular culture in given times and spaces referred to the traditional patterns of culture (preserving folk besides the new developed national and socialist mediatized cultural production). But on the other side, it simultaneously became to be consciously fashionable and globalised. During the transition era, it served the general public as a tool of grafting the new political and societal conditions onto the enduring meanings and values.

Selected articles encompass main regions of East-Central and South Eastern Europe and represent some of the key themes of the transition development such as

the growth of new forms of nationalism; the significance of rural and 'folk' cultures in these new nationalist discourses; the ways in which local is meeting the global, either in terms of Western imports (e.g. various adaptation of TV genres such as soap operas and telenovelas) or in terms of hybridity of cultural forms (particularly some genres of popular music as national rock or turbofolk), and the significance of gender and new forms of feminism. The regional and thematic scope of the Special Issue is meant to promote the specific focus on far largely underexplored areas of cultural studies research that still lacks international visibility.

There is still a limited number of monographs, edited collections and special issues of academic journals addressing the phenomena related to popular culture of East-Central and South Eastern European societies from a comparative perspective (Kolanović 2013; Starck 2009). Those studies that appeared during last decade focused largely on data generated through locally based research in particular countries (ex. Baker 2010; Barker 1999; Berdahl 2009; Borenstein 2008, Tötösy – Vasvári 2011). One of the few special issues of an academic journal is for example the recently published issue of the journal *Mediální studia* (2013/2) on Post-Socialist Media Audiences, which however is mainly concerned with the current state of cultural affairs while lacking larger historical perspective. Another noteworthy study *National Mythologies in Central European TV Series* (Čulík 2013) also addressed the issues of transition from the state socialist to post-socialist conditions but the research is mainly restricted to TV shows. The volume *Gendering Post-Socialist Transition. Studies of changing gender perspectives* edited by Krassimira Daskalova et al. (2012), provides a valuable comparative analyses but still focuses on one particular perspective. Since the late 1990s, we have seen a growing number of comparative works in various areas of social sciences and humanities that address the context of post-socialist Europe (Bridger – Pine 1998; Burawoy – Verdery 1999; Gross – Steinherr 1995; Mandel – Humphrey 2002; Ribić 2007; Silova 2010; Svašek 2006).

The special issue should provide a space for examining experiences of people of the region in different settings and situations of everyday life and leisure time (related to different types of popular culture). The sudden (as in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and GDR), gradual (i.e. Hungary) or continuous (i.e. Yugoslavia) open encounter with the Western counterpart influenced such phenomena as (1) creation of a new national traditions in culinary movement, (2) breakthrough of Western gender patterns or (3) formation of new blended genres through their glocalization as in the case of popular music.

Gábor Egry and Ágnes Kata Miklós address in their article entitled *An Anti-Communist Revolution of Gastronomy. The Gastronomy Renewal Movement and Hungarian History* the way, how parts of the gastronomy renewal movement in Hungary are associated with nationalist politics of identity in Hungary. Authors show how the nationalist anti-communist concept of history is inherent in the gastronomy movement.

The following article, *The Changes of (not merely) Practical Woman and Emancipation of a Hobby Magazine* written by Lucie Kořínková is based on analysing *Praktická žena*, a popular women's magazine that continued from late socialist times through transitional period. The analysis is focused on the relationship between the content of the magazine and the offered ideology from the 1980s till the 1990s, when the

transformation from controlled “life style” magazine of the socialist era to the successful hobby magazine of the present took place.

Eva Schäffler deals with the discourse on eastern German gender and sexuality in the 1990s in her article *Reflections of gender and sexuality in the eastern German magazine Superillu*. The Superillu Magazine explicitly targets an eastern German audience from 1990 until today and its reflections of gender and sexuality can be described as an example of how certain attitudes in this field have continued to exist beyond socialism.

Irena Šentevska offers in her article “*Turbo folk rules!*”: *Turbo-Folk, Chalga and the new elites of the post-socialist Balkans* an analysis of the role of (neo) folk music industry in the symbolic divisions and identity ‘reshaping’ of the post-socialist Serbia and Bulgaria. She argues that (neo) folk music is subject to exceptionally intense processes of manipulation, according to the ideological, cultural and economic interests of the current elites and became a powerful and malignant vehicle of symbolic divisions on both national and international scales.

**Ondřej Daniel**, researcher at Charles University in Prague and co-founder of Centre for the Study of Popular Culture. His research focuses on subcultures, ethnicity and urbanity in post-socialist Europe during the contemporary period.  
ondrej.daniel@gmail.com

**Tomáš Kavka**, researcher at Charles University in Prague and chairman of Centre for the Study of Popular Culture. He is interested in Czech popular culture and history of everyday life in 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.  
tomas.kavka@email.cz

**Jakub Machek**, researcher and lecturer at Charles University in Prague and Metropolitan University Prague. He is interested in Czech popular culture from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through socialism era till nowadays.  
jakub.m@post.cz

## References

- Baker, C. (2010) *Sounds of the Borderland*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Baladrán, Z., Havránek, V. and Krejčová, V. (eds.) (2009) *Atlas of Transformation*. Prague: transit.cz.
- Barker, A.M. (1999) *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society Since Gorbachev*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berdahl, D. (2009) *On the Social Life in Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Borenstein, E. (2008) *Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press.
- Bridger, S. and Pine, F. (eds.) (1998) *Surviving Post-Socialism. Local Strategies and regional re-*

- sponses in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Buden, B. (2009) *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*. Frankfurt/ Main: Suhrkamp, 2009.
- Burawoy, M. and Verdery, K. (eds.) (1999) *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham – Boulder – New York – Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Čulík, J. (2013) *A society in distress: the image of the Czech Republic in contemporary Czech feature film*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Daskalova, K., Tomic, C.H., Kaser, K. and Radunovic, F. (eds.) (2012) *Gendering Post-Socialist Transition. Studies of Changing Gender Perspectives*. Vienna: Lit Verlag.
- Gordy, E. D. (1999) *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. The Pennsylvania state University Press.
- Gros, D. and Steinherr, A. (1995) *Winds of Change*. London: Longman.
- Hahn, C. M. (ed.) (2002) *Postsocialism: Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Holy, L. (1996) *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation*. Cambridge – England – New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jansen, S. (2005) “Who’s afraid of white socks? Towards a critical understanding of post-Yugoslav urban self-perceptions.” Pp. 151–167 in *Ethnologia Balkanica* 9.
- Kolanović, M. (ed.) (2013) *Komparativni postsocializam – Slavenska iskustva*. Zagreb: FF Press.
- Kuljić, T. (2010) *Umkämpfte Vergangenheiten. Die Kultur der Erinnerung im postjugoslawischen Raum*. Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag.
- Mandel, R. and Humprey, C. (2002) *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*. Oxford: Berg.
- Ribić, V. (ed.) (2007) *Antropologija postsocijalizma, Zbornik radova*. Beograd: Etnološka biblioteka, knj. 34.
- Silova, I. (ed.) (2010) *Post-socialism is Not Dead: (Re)Reading the Global in Comparative Education (International Perspectives on Education and Society)*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Starck, K. (ed.) (2009) *When the World Turned Upside-Down: Cultural Representations of Post-1989 Eastern Europe*. Cambridge. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Svašek, M. (2006) *Postsocialism. Politics and Emotions in Central and Eastern Europe*. New York – Oxford: Bergman Books.
- Todorova, M. and Gille, Z. (eds.) (2010) *Post-Communist Nostalgia*. Berghahn Books.
- Tötösy, S. and Vasvári, L. O. (eds.) (2011) *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
- Verdery, K. (1991) *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu’s Romania*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press.
- Verdery, K. (1996) *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.