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INTRODUCTION

Socialist Popular Cultures between Folklore and Nationalism

This thematic block has its origins in a call for papers on popular culture and socialism(s) launched in 2008. The past two decades have seen a proliferation of writing on the cultural aspects of the Cold War, and on the multiple roles played by art exhibitions, film, music, the news media and other cultural forms in reproducing – and sometimes challenging and subverting – the post-1945 division of the world. Popular culture started receiving its share of attention as well, yet the overwhelming majority of work remained focused on the “big players” – the United States and the Soviet Union – and to a somewhat more limited extent on Western Europe. With the exception of the GDR, English-language literature on popular culture in the rest of the socialist Eastern and Central Europe was relatively scarce. Research was often published in local languages only and remained confined within the boundaries of national scholarly networks and debates. What was lacking, we felt, were opportunities for networking and exchanges that would stimulate reflections on similarities and differences within the region as well as across the Cold War divide. These were also among the key issues raised in the call for papers. One of the topics most often taken up in contributions we received was the interweaving of socialist popular culture with folklore and nationalism. Three of these contributions have been selected for inclusion in this thematic block.

To those used to see nationalism as a phenomenon that bedevilled Eastern and Central Europe only after the fall of communism, such a choice of focus may come as a surprise. The post-1989 political and intellectual climate often stimulated a portrayal of communism as an entirely alien system imposed on the helpless nations of Eastern and Central Europe by force. Nationalism, on the other hand, was typically seen either as a liberating force that helped overthrow the old

political system, or as a menace that marginalised genuinely liberal and democratic movements and ended up replacing one ideologically monolithic political system with another. Neither view is conducive to an understanding that is able to capture the full complexity of the relationship between nationalism and communism. While communist theory and political practice indeed often emphasised the incompatibility of communism and nationalism, a closer look at Marxist writings and political strategies reveals a far more complicated relationship between the two.

To start with, the rise of communism itself owes a great deal to the manipulation of nationalist aspirations, condoned by both Marx and Lenin as an acceptable means of furthering the communist cause in pre-revolutionary societies (cf. Connor 1984). Contrary to the expectations of Leninist national policy, communist revolutions proved unable to diffuse national sentiments; rather, these turned out to play a key role in ensuring the survival of the communist system in the long run. The workings of the repressive apparatus and the threat of the Red Army – although doubtlessly essential – were not enough to keep communists in power for over four decades. To shore up popular support for their regimes, communist elites across the region had to resort to other solutions, and nationalist narratives and symbols, along with folkloric or “native” cultural traditions, provided a rich and effective resource (Verdery 1995; Brandenberger 2002; Mevius 2005; Palmowski 2009). Similarly as their predecessors and successors, communist leaders thus sought to capture the legitimating potential of nationalism and manipulate it to their own advantage.

Exploiting national myths and folklore was, of course, a risky endeavour, and one that was neither embraced unambiguously nor pursued lightly. For one, nationalism and in particular folklore were clearly at odds with the modernising thrust of the communist project. The images of industrial landscapes and modern apartment blocks, accompanied by the drive to “modernise” those perceived as lagging behind the march of progress – such as the uneducated workers and peasants – left little room for the cultivation of national traditions and search for historical roots, or for the fascination with nature and bucolic imagery that are so central to folk culture. The strong emphasis on locality and homeland appeared equally out of place, and sat uneasily with proclamations of class allegiance, internationalism and socialist friendship among the peoples. This aspect made the communist appropriation of nationalism particularly hazardous in the context of multinational federations such as Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, where the strengthening of local and regional attachments could challenge allegiances to the wider socialist federation.

Indeed, as Philipp Herzog’s contribution to this thematic issue makes clear, the political appropriation of folk culture was a double-edged sword. While providing an effective tool for buttressing popular support for communism, state-sponsored

folk music, dance and other activities could simultaneously foster a national identity that was at odds with the one promoted by official policies. In 1980s Moldova, folk performances often featured in public meetings aimed at engendering anti-Soviet sentiments, and the “Sovietised” Estonian folklore eventually came to play a key role in the Estonian independence movement. Yet as Herzog points out, it would be misleading to see socialist folklore exclusively in terms of its contribution to the anti-communist nationalist opposition. As his analysis of the evolution of Estonian folk art demonstrates, folkloric activity could assume a variety of social and political roles, making it perfectly possible to be a good communist and an Estonian patriot at the same time. This inherent malleability and ambiguity, argues Herzog, allowed “Sovietised” Estonian folklore to survive almost intact to this day.

Ana Hofman’s article addresses a different aspect of ambiguity inherent in socialist folklore – namely the one associated with gender – and deals more explicitly with the interface between folk and popular culture. Focusing on the position of female performers in the “newly-composed folk music” in socialist Yugoslavia during the late 1950s and the 1960s, Hofman shows how folk culture was involved not only in negotiations over national and socialist identity, but also played a key role in the performance and contestation of gender roles. The hybrid mixture of rural symbolism and Western popular music conventions typical of newly-composed folk music provoked disdain both among the Yugoslav cultural establishment and among the rural communities from which the singers typically originated. Too traditional and folkloristic for the former, too modern and alien for the latter, the newly-composed folk music functioned as a curious object of fascination and condemnation for both. The behaviour and attire of female folk singers were at the centre of these controversies. For instance, when the performers started abandoning traditional folkloric outfits and adopting more “modern” and “urban” clothes favoured by the dominant ideals of socialist womanhood, audiences met this change with disapproval, arguing that these dresses were overly revealing and at odds with women’s peasant origins.

Catherine Baker’s contribution examines the relationship between communism and nationalism from yet another angle, demonstrating how the legacies of socialism continue to inform popular cultural production in Croatia to this day. Although post-1990 Croatian popular culture is suffused with anti-communist discourse, the shape and scope of the post-Yugoslav music market remain dependent on links established during the Yugoslav period. Apart from that, Croatia also witnessed a revival of socialist popular culture, stimulated in part by the commercial exploitation of post-socialist nostalgia, and in part by the dissatisfaction with contemporary socio-political and economic conditions. It is interesting to compare Baker’s conclusions to those of Herzog. Even though they deal with rather different sets of popular cultural practices and different national contexts, both contributions

suggest that socialist legacies continue to be influential in shaping popular cultural practices in the post-socialist settings, and do so even when these practices are framed in explicitly anti-communist terms.

This thematic issue of course provides only a partial insight into the manifold connections between socialist popular culture, folklore and nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe. We hope that issues discussed here will stimulate others working in the field and thus help us achieve a better understanding of cross-regional similarities and differences. To conclude, we would like to thank those who have made this thematic issue, and the larger project it arose from, possible. We were fortunate to find support for our project within the COST A30 network *East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media* (2004–2009), funded by the European Science Foundation. This enabled us to invite some of the authors to take part in a workshop that took place in June 2009 in Budapest. Thanks are also due to the editors of *Narodna umjetnost* who have found the topic sufficiently attractive and worthwhile to warrant a thematic issue. We are particularly grateful to Naila Ceribašić for her support throughout the editorial process.

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