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The Politics of Privatization

Television Entertainment and the Yugoslav Sixties

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One of the key dilemmas in scholarly debates about the sixties concerns the relationship between political contestation and culture. Were the struggles of the sixties primarily political, or should we rather see them, as Arthur Marwick suggests, as part and parcel of a “cultural revolution” whose impact went well beyond the realm of politics?¹ Or, as the editors of a recent themed issue dedicated to the international 1968 put it: Did cultural change “merely [provide] the background for the political upheavals of the Sixties,” or did it define “the very essence of this contentious period”?² Rather than opt for an account that gives greater prominence to either one or the other, this chapter approaches the sixties as a period during which the nature of politics itself, along with its link to culture, underwent a profound transformation. Both east and west of the Iron Curtain, long-established fault lines of political struggle, tied to the alternative visions of modernity espoused by communism, liberalism, and fascism, gave way to issues of living standards and social welfare, as well as to dilemmas of family relations, racial segregation, and youth culture—all issues traditionally on the margins of political debate, or considered parts of the private sphere and culture rather than politics proper. The venues and forms of

political communication changed as well. As political contestation shifted to the realm of the private and the everyday, political struggle was increasingly waged through objects, symbols, and genres of popular culture and everyday life.

Nothing perhaps illustrates this shift better than the iconic “kitchen debate” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. During a series of impromptu exchanges that took place at various locations at the exhibition, the topic of conversation moved from the space and arms race to the question of which country was better equipped to provide its citizens with a high standard of living, thereby symbolically marking the shift in political priorities from the public to the private domain. “Would it not be better,” asked Nixon, “to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?”³ Khrushchev took up the challenge. The seven-year economic plan adopted in 1959 promised to improve the provision of consumer goods and raise the living standards of Soviet citizens, and thanks to the mass housing campaign launched a few years earlier, thirty-eight million Soviet families moved into new apartments between 1953 and 1970.⁴ Similar developments were under way elsewhere in the region: from Moscow and Warsaw to East Berlin and Budapest, growing numbers of socialist families experienced the sixties through the acquisition of their own private apartment, or even a family house.⁵ The supply of consumer goods and private services improved as well—most obviously in Yugoslavia, but also in East Germany, Poland, and Hungary.⁶ Across the socialist East, Stalin’s death also opened doors for more conciliatory economic policies and informal workplace bargaining that contributed to improved working conditions as well as higher wages.⁷ Slowly but surely, average livelihoods were getting better, and it was becoming abundantly clear that both the domestic legitimacy and the international prestige of the socialist project, just like those of its capitalist rival, hinged increasingly on the quality of everyday life.

Both east and west of the Iron Curtain, this expansion of politically relevant issues went hand in hand with the broadening of political participation. By challenging established political priorities and becoming more closely linked to the personal and the everyday, politics became attractive to a number

of constituencies that would otherwise shun public debate: women, ethnic and racial minorities, youth, and the working classes. These constituencies, in turn, helped diversify the languages and arenas of public contestation and invested political meaning in forms of expression ranging from music tastes and sexual preferences to fashion choices and television entertainment. To be sure, the forms and extent of political contestation in the socialist East were significantly more subdued and circumscribed than those in the capitalist West and had to reckon with a state apparatus that was far more willing to resort to censorship and brute force. Nonetheless, the new possibilities spurred by post-Stalinist reforms did give rise to a considerably more relaxed political environment and thereby enabled the socialist East to join in the transnational upheavals of the sixties.

As this chapter seeks to demonstrate, television came to play a central role in these developments, acting as an important conduit of the privatization of politics and of the parallel growth of political participation. Both in the socialist East and in liberal democracies of the West, the 1960s were a decade of rapid expansion of television infrastructure and spectacular growth in the number of television receivers. At the start of the decade the United States and Britain were well ahead of any competition, but over the coming years countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain saw their television audiences increase at remarkable rates (table 10.1).

< TABLE 10.1 NEAR HERE >

The mere expansion of broadcasting technology was of course not the only factor that made television so central to the privatization of politics and the expansion of political participation in the sixties. More decisive were its audiovisual character and the social uses of television that became prevalent in this period, above all the institutionalization of television viewing as a private and mass activity. Unlike radio, television had the ability to incorporate a much wider range of cultural forms and genres, including visual ones, and therefore had the means to make public affairs appealing to a considerably wider range of audiences. At the same time, the growth of private television ownership meant that experiences previously available only to the few were now accessible in the privacy of one's

home—a fact that made the consumption and interpretation of political, cultural, and moral messages far less predictable and transparent, and considerably more open to individual whims.

The precise cultural and political implications of these changes are not easy to pin down. It is tempting to suggest—as many contemporary commentators in the West did—that the arrival of television actually prompted a decline, rather than growth, of public engagement. Already in the early postwar years, American sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton suggested that the mass media instigated a passive, purely cognitive relationship to political reality and led citizens to mistake “knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them.”⁸ A few decades later, Michael Robertson likewise suggested a link between television and the weakening of public engagement but provided a different explanation: in his view, the negative coverage of the political process prompted cynical attitudes, and it was those that ultimately led to an estrangement from politics.⁹ Even in recent years, the decline in civic engagement is often blamed on television, its privatizing effect on leisure time, its infatuation with apolitical entertainment, and its tendency to instigate pessimism and low levels of civic trust.¹⁰

Recent research on socialist television adopts a similar line of argument. In Kristin Roth-Ey’s view, the adoption of domestic rather than collective television viewing gave rise to a cultural experience that was fundamentally different from the one envisaged by Soviet cultural ideals and dealt a deadly blow to the capacity of Soviet culture to act as a mobilizational tool. By the time the Soviet Union started falling apart in the late 1980s, its mass culture, with television at its core, had lost its ability to inspire and mobilize and had instead turned into a conduit of “experiences and ways of being in the world unconnected to broader political projects of any kind.”¹¹ Paulina Bren’s analysis of communist culture in post-1968 Czechoslovakia offers a broadly similar conclusion, though the focus here is not on the privatized nature of television viewing as such but on the specific cultural narratives spun by the little screen, particularly those embedded in the most popular television serials. These serials, argues Bren, acted as key vehicles of officially endorsed privatized citizenship and its preferred

forms of family and work life, leisure practices, and intimate relationships, and they had a profoundly depoliticizing effect on Czechoslovak society after 1968.¹²

While such interpretations certainly elucidate important aspects of the privatization of politics in the socialist East and its links with television, the insight they offer is only partial. There are two main reasons for this. First, for all the similarities with the West, we should keep in mind that the scope, practices, and meanings of private life in the East were significantly different. The myriad forms of surveillance and the intricate networks of unofficial informants, though not without their own limits, clearly made socialist privacy far more circumspect and open to state control.¹³ In purely material terms, socialist family dwellings were generally smaller than Western homes and, thanks to the preference for multistory apartment blocks, more standardized and more exposed to the prying gaze of neighbors and authorities.¹⁴ Also, at the level of official attitudes and policies, support for privatization did not entail a retreat of the state from private affairs. In the Soviet Union, for instance, the provision of single-family apartments may have turned the need for privacy into a legitimate element of socialist life, but it also stirred up concerns over the decline of public life and was paralleled by state-led efforts to incite greater political participation.¹⁵ In short, in the socialist context, privacy was and remained a profoundly public matter. It is feasible to expect that socialist television policies followed a similar logic—accepting the legitimacy of private television viewing but at the same time envisaging television as a mobilizer that would bind the private spaces of family homes to the common, public realm.

Second, the nature and consequences of socialist privatization and television culture were changing with time and context. By the 1970s, television was a well-established, nearly ubiquitous element of everyday life in the socialist East. Broadcasters had become accustomed to a diversity of tastes, stratified by age, gender, ethnicity, and class, and had developed program and genre solutions to respond to them—either by accepting the rifts between different publics as insurmountable or by bridging them using polysemic programs such as *Semnadtsat' mgnovenyi vesny* (Seventeen Moments of Spring, 1973), discussed by Stephen Lovell in his chapter. This was also a time when communist

authorities started taking television seriously not only as a technological challenge but as a communicative device with wide-ranging political and cultural repercussions. Political control over television increased, and communist elites became much more involved in decisions over content. In this context, television was far more likely to encourage depoliticization and a retreat into privacy. In the 1960s, by contrast, the challenge of mass, private television viewing was a new thing, one that neither broadcasters nor politicians had yet learned to master. Aided by the relaxed political climate following the Thaw and the popular fascination with the new medium, private television viewing had the potential to turn into a profoundly political experience.

To demonstrate these points, the remainder of this chapter examines the rise of television and the transformation of politics in socialist Yugoslavia. As shown through the investigation of archival documents and popular television serials, the privatization of politics and the proliferation of television sets in Yugoslav homes did not automatically go hand in hand with depoliticization. Rather than prompting a retreat into privacy, these changes initially encouraged greater popular participation in public affairs.

Yugoslav Television between Entertainment and Political Mobilization

News of television's imminent arrival to Yugoslav homes in the latter half of the 1950s was greeted with a familiar mixture of apprehension and enthusiasm. On the one hand, the prospect of mass television viewing inspired utopian projections of a better, more educated, refined, and politically engaged society. On the other, it provoked fears of social isolation, physical and mental passivity, and cultural mediocrity.¹⁶ According to a literary scholar, for instance, television simply did not deserve to be considered as part of culture.¹⁷ By the mid-1960s, those concerned about the corrupting effects of television on Yugoslav society could find much to worry about. Already the earliest audience studies

confirmed that viewers were treating television as a source of entertainment rather than education or political engagement. According to a survey conducted in 1963 in the Yugoslav republic of Serbia, programs combining music, humor, and other forms of entertainment were achieving the highest viewing figures and together with transmissions of football matches regularly rivaled the popularity of prime-time news programs.¹⁸ A study conducted among Croatian viewers in 1965 reached a compatible conclusion: 51.3 percent of those included in the survey described television as a means of relaxation and entertainment, and only 20.3 percent said they used it primarily as a means of information gathering.¹⁹

While members of the political and intellectual elites often reacted to this situation with disdain and fear, television professionals and the technical intelligentsia, eager to promote the development of the medium, were quick to suggest that the problem perhaps lay not so much in popular preferences for entertainment as such but rather in the quality of entertainment on offer. A report prepared in 1964 by the Yugoslav Radio-Television, discussed by the highest political bodies at the federal level, made it clear that entertainment was an integral segment of television programming. In the sphere of culture and art, stated the report, television had the task of “providing cultural relaxation and entertainment to the greatest possible number of viewers, without at the same time neglecting the works of special artistic value.”²⁰ The yearbook of Yugoslav Radio-Television defined the aims of Yugoslav broadcasting in a similar way. Yugoslav television was expected to provide programs that were attractive to “all social strata” and “offered entertainment and relaxation” but also contained “an educational or moral message.”²¹ The solution was thus to be sought, not in treating entertainment as a necessary evil, but in finding ways to accommodate both the popular and the refined and in seeking to ensure a high level of political enlightenment, moral education, and entertainment among the population as a whole.

Another factor that encouraged such attempts to embrace entertainment and use it as a conduit of educational and moral messages was the official endorsement of popular participation in political affairs. As policy documents from the 1960s made clear, Yugoslav media were expected to function not only as

means of top-down transmission of information but as a “political forum” designed to give voice to public opinion and help solve the pressing tasks of Yugoslav society. The “current stage of development,” argued a programmatic document adopted in 1965, required the working people of Yugoslavia “to use the mass media to express their views regarding their own social life and further development,” as well as to engage in the “struggle of opinions” and constructive criticism aimed at improving current conditions.²² General cultural policies followed a similar tune. A document setting out the principles of cultural development, issued by the Association of Cultural Organizations in the Republic of Slovenia, could not be clearer: “The further development of culture is increasingly dependent on the mobilization of a wide number of citizens. Only mass cultural activity and large-scale cultural education of the working people [can provide] the basis of cultural development, new relationships, and a socialist ethics.”²³

Yugoslav television professionals were quick to exploit the opportunities opened by new political principles and emphasized the immense powers of television and their beneficial impact on Yugoslav society. In a lecture delivered in 1964 to the Educational-Cultural Council of the Croatian Assembly, the director of Radio-Television Zagreb argued that recent political reforms enabled radio and television to “fully realize their potential” and “allow the society to even more directly influence the work of self-managing organs.”²⁴ The already mentioned report prepared by the Yugoslav Radio-Television in 1964 provides another case in point. Here Yugoslav television is praised for contributing to the “modernization of political work,” for bringing the work of political bodies closer to millions of people, and for turning into a true “political forum.”²⁵

During the 1960s, humor was often at the center of efforts to bring television to bear on the political development of the country. There are several reasons for this. First, humor was perceived as a cultural form that had the potential to address contemporary realities in a critical as well as an entertaining manner. A number of studies conducted in the 1960s by the research unit of Television Belgrade—one of the main venues for radio and television research in Yugoslavia at the time—focused

on “engaged humor” and on the ability of humorous programs to unmask the mechanisms of contemporary social problems.²⁶ Second, programs containing humor were immensely popular with audiences. According to a representative poll conducted in Serbia in May 1967, as many as 68.2 percent of viewers wanted television programs to contain more “humorous-satirical programs”—by far the most sought-after genre—while only 6.3 percent opted for more information and 10.8 for more educational programs.²⁷ Third, humorous programs were a well-established ingredient of Yugoslav radio production at the time, and television could draw on a pool of existing creative expertise—not a minor factor in times when both funding and experience were in short supply.

The remainder of the chapter examines two humorous TV series and uses them as a starting point to investigate the link between television, the privatization of politics, and popular participation in socialist Yugoslavia: *Spavajte mirno* (Sleep Peacefully), produced by TV Belgrade in Serbia in 1968, and *Naše malo misto* (Our Small Town), produced by TV Zagreb in Croatia in 1970 and 1971.

Self-Management and the Contradictions of the Yugoslav Sixties: *Sleep Peacefully*, Protest, and Containment

The airing of *Sleep Peacefully* in the spring of 1968 came after a prolonged period of unusually frank and vibrant public debate and wide-ranging reforms. The economic roots of these upheavals are well known. The early 1960s brought a decline in labor productivity and per capita real wages as well as a slowdown of economic growth. The ensuing reassessment of existing economic models gave rise to economic reforms that reduced administrative control over several areas of economic life, including the banking system, prices, and foreign trade, and fostered a shift from investment to consumption.²⁸ Despite much hyperbole surrounding the reforms, however, implementation was sluggish and benefits were slow to materialize. Rates of economic growth continued to decline, real wages were at best

stagnant, and unemployment remained high²⁹—a problem compounded by the coming of age of the postwar baby boom generations, which significantly increased the pressure on the labor market. To make things worse, income disparities were increasing as well,³⁰ and so was the frequency of workers' strikes; by 1969, the number of registered strikes, most common among industrial workers and miners, grew to two thousand.³¹

In and of themselves, not all of these problems were new—unemployment, for instance, had been rising throughout the 1950s, despite high rates of economic growth.³² Yet in contrast to the 1950s, the underlying weaknesses of the Yugoslav economic system now grew in magnitude and were more openly discussed in public. While the initial stirrings of discontent, such as the early strikes among miners in Slovenia in the late 1950s, received little media coverage, the situation in the 1960s was different.³³ Public discussion of economic reform, living standards, unemployment, and social inequalities became more frequent and open.³⁴ The brewing dissatisfaction was not only surfacing in obscure intellectual and professional magazines; it was palpably present also in the mainstream press and on television screens. In 1965, TV Belgrade launched a series of talk shows entitled *Aktuelni razgovori* (Current Debates), aimed at addressing the most pressing social problems and involving contributors ranging from factory workers to some of the highest representatives in the Yugoslav economy and politics.³⁵ Television entertainment—including comic TV series such as *Sleep Peacefully*—turned political as well and helped translate the rather abstract terms of public debate into a language that was appealing to the wider population.

This explosion of public engagement cannot be reduced to economic reasons alone; it was also actively encouraged by the communist authorities themselves and was aided by political reforms that sought to reduce the role of the party and the state and to encourage popular participation in political affairs.³⁶ Central to these reforms was the notion of “direct self-management”—an idealistic vision of a society in which all public affairs are run directly by workers rather than by the party or by the state, and in which all property, including factories, is “socially owned.” Originally devised in the aftermath of

Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948, the ideal of self-management provided a key pillar of Yugoslav political identity and served as a marker of Yugoslav specificity and superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union as well as vis-à-vis the capitalist West. By means of self-management, went the argument, Yugoslav society would steer away from the dangers of excessive bureaucratization that allegedly plagued the Soviet Union, as well as from the corrupting effects of unbridled economic liberalism supposedly rife in the West, and would thereby move toward a more advanced stage of socialism.³⁷ The political and economic reforms of the 1960s were presented as groundbreaking changes devised to make way for such developments.

With hindsight, such promises sound misleading; despite the reforms, Yugoslav politics and economy remained far from the self-management ideal. Yet as the debates sparked by *Sleep Peacefully* suggest, the discourse of self-management nevertheless commanded considerable influence over Yugoslav citizens and played an important role in the changing topography of sixties politics. On the one hand, the ideal of self-management suggested that the good life was now truly within reach and in fact dependent on one's own involvement in the managing of Yugoslav society. This not only encouraged the airing of critical opinions and popular dissatisfaction but also instigated the broadening of political participation. But the ideal of a self-managing society also served to obscure the real mechanisms of power. If the true road to socialism lay in avoiding the extremes of excessive bureaucratization and wild market liberalization, and in transferring power from the state and the party to the self-managing workers, then the ones to blame for any setbacks were neither the members of the League of Communists nor the state officials, but the self-managers themselves—or, indeed, the society as a whole, which was not yet mature enough to sustain a full-fledged system of self-management. This logic locked the dynamics of reforms into a frustrating circle, simultaneously encouraging popular dissent while also deflecting attention from the real causes of Yugoslav problems and thereby preventing the articulation of true alternatives and solutions.

The debates surrounding *Sleep Peacefully* demonstrate how this logic worked in practice. In line

with the notion of self-management and the requirement to bridge the chasm between the mass and the elite, producers of television entertainment were encouraged to engage with the pressing issues of the day and find ways to use popular formats to raise critical awareness. *Sleep Peacefully* represented one of the most acclaimed—as well as most controversial—attempts to use humor as a means of critical consciousness-raising. The series comprised eight episodes, all addressing major “social problems,” including unemployment, income disparities, social solidarity, and corruption. Each of these issues was introduced through the personal experiences of a fictional character with a tellingly oxymoronic name Srećko Napast—“Lucky Menace.”³⁸

In the opening episode the jobless and penniless Lucky is caught stealing caviar from a local self-service market and ends up facing a trial at the “court of self-managers.” The plot of the series is organized around the trial, which probes the rights and wrongs of Lucky’s individual deeds and raises questions about the collective responsibility of the society as a whole. The central character is unmistakably critical of the current state of socialism and openly states that being jobless and hungry in socialism “is a disgrace.” He also suggests that his theft was effectively a rebellious act prompted by social inequalities—caviar, he argues, is regularly eaten by those at the top of the socialist hierarchy, yet he has never been invited to take his share. After the last episode, viewers themselves were asked to vote for who was to blame for Lucky’s misery and were offered two possible culprits: the main character himself and “the self-managers.”

The series struck a sensitive chord with the audiences. Television Belgrade was inundated by thousands of letters and phone calls, the overwhelming majority of which congratulated the authors for articulating what everyone felt yet nobody allegedly dared to speak about. As one of the many letters stated, “This program is our reality—although bitter and coarse, it represents our reality.”³⁹ Quite unsurprisingly, the series prompted unease among communist authorities, and the various pressures that ensued eventually pushed the writer-director of the series Radivoje-Lola Đukić to accept premature retirement in 1970.⁴⁰

However, a closer analysis of viewers' letters received by TV Belgrade suggests that popular discontent rarely amounted to a rejection of the ideal of self-management as such. To be sure, part of the reason lies in the nature of the question posed, which offered only two possible culprits for Lucky's misfortunes: the main character himself and "the self-managers." Nonetheless, the results are strikingly consistent and cannot stem from the manipulative question alone. Out of the 954 viewers' letters analyzed by TV Belgrade's researchers, the vast majority (92.8 percent) refused to lay the blame on the central character.⁴¹ Instead, the viewers most often accused "the self-managers" (35.6 percent) and "company managers" (24.6 percent) and occasionally "the society" (6.2 percent) and "the collective" (6.2 percent), while only a minority believed that the system of self-management as a whole (3.8 percent) or the highest state and party representatives (1.5 percent) were to blame.⁴² Judging from these responses, the viewers saw the problem not so much in the system of self-management itself as in its incomplete implementation and various "deformations," including bad legislation, lack of education, acts of unscrupulous individuals who were taking advantage of the system, and so on.⁴³ Rather than providing an insurmountable challenge to established ideals of socialist Yugoslavism, such answers remained firmly within the frame of dominant political discourse.

The tendency to ascribe blame to the "deformations" of the existing system, rather than to the system itself, was also the approach adopted by Yugoslav authorities when facing student protests in the summer of 1968. In his televised appeal, Tito sided with the protesters, expressed agreement with their criticisms of Yugoslav reality, and asked them for help with making Yugoslav society better.⁴⁴ The majority of students embraced the offer; in 1968 alone, the proportion of League of Communists members below twenty-five years of age almost doubled.⁴⁵ According to John Lampe, Tito decided to co-opt the students to prevent them from joining forces with disgruntled workers, but "overall, the experience helped convince Tito, Kardelj, and many of the communist leaders that enlightened public opinion would support putting socialism, however ill-defined, ahead of the market mechanism in Yugoslav self-management."⁴⁶ It is feasible to suggest that the *Sleep Peacefully* series, despite

encouraging popular dissatisfaction and provoking disquiet among the authorities, helped prepare the grounds for these developments. In sum, the combined effects of political reforms and the ability of sixties television to translate abstract public debates into entertaining personal stories did encourage greater popular involvement with public affairs, yet also contained the seeds of its containment.

Enter the Yugoslav Seventies: *Our Small Town* and the Comforts of Late Socialism

Like the airing of *Sleep Peacefully* in 1968, the broadcasting of *Our Small Town* in 1970–71 came at a time when public debate and popular discontent were reaching a boiling point. In the years that separated the two series, however, the realm of political contestation grew even wider, this time to make room for the rise of constituent Yugoslav nations—Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Bosnians—as increasingly decisive players in the political life of the country. Over the course of the sixties, the combination of political and economic reforms and a more open climate facilitated the consolidation of key nation-building institutions below the federal level. In the realm of culture, policies aimed at creating an integrated Yugoslav culture were abandoned in favor of divergent history and literary teaching in each of the republics.⁴⁷ The Yugoslav media system was undergoing similar changes: republican media, including television broadcasters such as TV Zagreb and TV Belgrade, turned into protonational outlets, targeted first at local national audiences and only then at the wider Yugoslav imagined community.⁴⁸ Just like the participants of the World Youth Festival in Nick Rutter’s contribution to this volume, and the Soviet tourists and their Czechoslovak hosts in Rachel Applebaum’s chapter, the key actors of the Yugoslav sixties were using a common vocabulary but increasingly speaking in different tongues. Before long these developments prompted a revival of nationalist antagonisms and regional economic rivalries.⁴⁹

These changes coincided with a mounting sense of insecurity and frustration. Successive reforms

appeared to have little immediate effect on the standard of living. Unemployment and living costs continued to rise, and growing numbers of Yugoslavs were leaving the country in search of employment in the West. By 1971, an estimated 860,000 Yugoslavs—the vast majority, 38.4 percent, from Croatia—worked abroad.⁵⁰ In the increasingly messy struggle for power, nationalism provided a convenient shorthand for explaining the roots of Yugoslavia's problems, as well as for envisioning possible solutions to the crisis.⁵¹ As a result, tensions between the proponents and opponents of economic and political liberalization became intertwined with national antagonisms. Economic liberalization and political decentralization were associated with the aspirations of Slovenians and Croats, while central economic planning and decision making was seen as the option preferred by Serbs. Outbursts of nationalist fervor became particularly acute in Croatia, where they ultimately precipitated a wave of mass protests that erupted across the republic in autumn 1971, with students again as a key constituency.⁵² This escalation sounded a death knell for proponents of the nationalist cause and supporters of economic liberalization alike, first in Croatia and then elsewhere in the federation. The threat posed by nationalist tensions prompted the aging Yugoslav president Tito to intervene and turn the course of Yugoslavia's development back toward the core principles of Marxism-Leninism. By the end of 1972, many of the leaders of political and economic reforms that had marked the 1960s had disappeared from the public stage. The Yugoslav sixties had ended.

The TV series *Our Small Town* offers a perfect vantage point for a discussion of the role of television in these changes and the continuities and discontinuities between the Yugoslav sixties and seventies. The series is set in a picturesque small town on the Adriatic coast, in the Croatian region of Dalmatia, and follows the life of local inhabitants from 1936 to 1970. Every episode is introduced by a narrator—the town postman—who usually provides the moral of the story, followed by the episode itself. The two central characters are the town's doctor, Luigi, who studied medicine in Padua and is an avid reader of Dante but also has a weak spot for younger, sexually attractive women, and his middle-aged, utterly patient and forgiving sweetheart Bepina, whose only goal in life seems to be to please her

partner and eventually marry him. Other prominent characters include their friends and acquaintances, in particular the owner of the local hotel and his wife, members of the local Communist League branch, the local barber and priest, and others. The episodes are tied together primarily by the ups and downs of Luigi and Bepina's relationship and the everyday worries and humorous incidents involving their friends and acquaintances. Broader social issues are not entirely absent but mostly function as an inconsequential backdrop for central developments to do with personal relationships, leisure activities, and shopping trips to Trieste.

The series is rather remarkable for the marginal role of blue-collar workers and peasants, who otherwise played a central role in Yugoslav television entertainment at the time. The key characters of *Our Small Town* are employed in the service industry and hold rather independent or even managing positions. Although they are regularly depicted in work-related situations, work does not really seem to feature prominently in their lives—at least not as something they are particularly invested in or worried about. These are evidently not characters akin to the unfortunate Lucky Menace from *Sleep Peacefully*; their jobs are secure and their lives are comfortable and slow-paced. This slow-paced life is, in fact, one of the overriding motifs of the series and is often explicitly defended as the best possible way of life. The following excerpts, taken from the postman's introduction to the eighth episode of the series, provide a case in point:

My gosh! What else will they come up with?! Look at what petty complaints they have about my story—that it is developing too slowly, that it has a weak plot. . . . Go to hell! When was it ever the case that things were happening quickly around here, in our small town?! Whoever wanted a quick life went to America, or today, to Germany! . . .

You see, we were never particularly fond of fast life and efficient work in our small town. To hell with work! What benefit does one have from work? Our motto is: The less we work, the better we live! And if we do work, then we work slowly, and we live slowly.

The way of life described by the postman is obviously miles away from the mass civic engagement envisaged by the ideal of self-management. Yet at the same time it is also neither explicitly anti-Yugoslav nor unambiguously pro-Western. Quite to the contrary; the slow-paced life of “our small town” is set against what is presented as the Western way of life, characterized by speed and efficiency,

as well as a lack of pleasure and joy. Neither could it be said that *Our Small Town* posed an insurmountable challenge to existing political and economic arrangements, or to the legitimacy of communist rule. Despite its mildly mocking portrayals of communist officials, and regardless of its insistence on ideals of life that were somewhat at odds with official values, *Our Small Town* could easily be read as a defense and even celebration of the socialist Yugoslav way of life, with all its deficiencies.

The arrival of World War II during the fourth episode, for instance, sees all the central characters joining the struggle on the side of communist partisans, with Doctor Luigi taking care of wounded partisans. Above all, the insistence on “our” way of life and its superiority vis-à-vis the life in the West was sending a clear message that the way out of the quagmire of reform did not lie in embracing Western models: insofar as Yugoslav socialism was capable of tolerating the idiosyncrasies of Yugoslav regions and nations, and insofar as it was able to offer the comfort of a leisurely life, complete with a measure of consumer goods, travel abroad, and a summer holiday on the Adriatic coast, it seemed preferable to the drudgery of long working hours and hectic life in the capitalist West. The fact that the cozy socialist paradise could not be available to all did not seem to matter. As the town’s postman suggested, labor migration to the West could be written off as a matter of choice rather than necessity, an opportunity open to those who might be bored with the slow pace of Yugoslav life.

For some segments of the communist elites in 1971, the glorification of consumerism and leisure and the lack of respect for communist authorities may have been too much to stomach, but the developments in the following years attest that it did not fall on deaf ears. Notwithstanding all the purges that swept through the federation in 1972, many of the changes brought by the sixties were there to stay. The new constitution, enacted in 1974, inaugurated a further decentralization of the country and an additional strengthening of republics-cum-nation-states. As far as the economy is concerned, the emphasis on heavy industry was abandoned in favor of a more consumer-friendly regime. While the underlying economic weaknesses remained unchanged, Western loans and remittances sent by Yugoslav citizens working abroad helped keep the country afloat throughout the decade.

In the realm of television culture, the production of entertainment continued to flourish but was far more closely supervised by the authorities. Radio-television centers were requested to prepare their yearly work plans well in advance and to submit them to the scrutiny of a wide range of political committees that assessed their compatibility with official policy goals. Humor abandoned the public domain and retreated into the privacy of socialist homes—a tendency already visible in *Our Small Town* and most clearly exemplified in TV Belgrade's blockbuster *Pozorište u kući* (Theater in the House, 1973–84). The other trajectory of retreat was tied to the revival of Yugoslav myths, above all the myth of the common struggle against fascism during World War II. Many of the most popular series broadcast in the 1970s, including TV Belgrade's *Otpisani* (The Outcasts, 1974) and TV Zagreb's *Kapelski kresovi* (The Bonfires of Kapela, 1975), center on the heroic actions of Yugoslav civilians engaged in fighting the fascist enemy. In sum, the expansion of politics had run its course—after a decade of growing political engagement, the private and the public started parting ways. The seventies had begun.

One may be tempted to suggest that the particular patterns of socialist privatization and television culture traced in this chapter are unique to Yugoslavia. There is certainly much that sets the Yugoslav version of socialism apart from its siblings elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and it is feasible to argue that the Yugoslav media and political reformers enjoyed a greater level of freedom than their counterparts in the Soviet bloc. Nonetheless, there is enough evidence to suggest that these were differences in degree rather than in kind and that similar patterns of growing public participation in the sixties, followed by increased political control and retreat into privacy in the seventies, appeared elsewhere in the socialist East. During the 1960s, encouraged by the new possibilities spurred by post-Stalinist reform, socialist television across the region became considerably more open to critical debate. Newly introduced television programs tackled explosive issues such as unemployment, corruption, social inequalities, and

freedom of speech. Czechoslovak television offered its viewers televised confrontations between political prisoners of the Stalinist era and their prosecutors and scenes of Soviet troops descending on Prague in August 1968,⁵³ while the Hungarian current affairs program *Forum* featured party leaders and representatives of various ministries answering questions posed live over telephone.⁵⁴ In the Soviet Union, a local station in Kuibyshev produced a program in which the journalist confronted the members of the City Executive Committee with probing questions from the public, while a similar program broadcast in Soviet Estonia featured government ministers answering questions from viewers.⁵⁵

In contrast, the 1970s were marked by a tightening of political control over television, as well as by a more explicit, top-down appropriation of popular entertainment as a tool of political communication. At the Socialist Unity Party (SED) conference in 1971, a figure no less prominent than Erich Honecker described East German television as boring and called on broadcasters to provide their audiences with more entertainment.⁵⁶ In postinvasion Czechoslovakia, television professionals were urged to invest more heavily in light entertainment in an effort to win the hearts and minds of the masses and prevent them from turning their antennas to television signals from Austria and West Germany.⁵⁷ In the Soviet Union, the ability to spend a relaxing evening in front of the TV set came to be viewed as a right—as reflected in the statement, “The Soviet person has the right to relax in front of the television after a day’s work,” attributed to none other than Leonid Brezhnev.⁵⁸ As a result, television professionals across the socialist East were becoming increasingly adept at entertaining their viewers, but they did so in ways that steered clear of controversial public issues. Much like the most widely watched TV serials of the Yugoslav seventies, the most popular Czechoslovak serials of the decade frequently depicted the dramas of private, everyday life in the socialist present.⁵⁹ The Yugoslav serials depicting the common struggle against fascism during World War II also had their counterparts elsewhere in the socialist East, such as the already mentioned Soviet spy thriller *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973).

We should of course be wary of exaggerating the contrast between the socialist sixties and the

socialist seventies. As the Yugoslav case suggests, the official endorsement of popular participation that marked the sixties had its clear limits and effectively ended up containing and pacifying popular dissatisfaction. Likewise, it would be misleading to see the seventies as an unambiguously stagnant or conservative decade. At least some of the political constituencies that came to the fore in the sixties—the constituent nations of socialist federations, youth, and to a lesser extent ethnic minorities and women—continued to gain visibility, if not formal recognition.⁶⁰ In the Soviet Union, the seventies may have been a time of political stagnation and of a retreat from the public sector, but they were also a time of consumer revolution,⁶¹ and thus a period when the fantasy of a modern Soviet consumer, embedded in the domestic appliances of the sixties discussed by Susan Reid in her chapter, turned into a lived reality for growing numbers of Soviet citizens.

On the little screen, even the otherwise apolitical forms of entertainment, centered on depictions of private life and mythologized recollections of World War II, sometimes left room for subtle criticism and irony, or at the very least allowed for a range of individual interpretations. In Yugoslavia, the comic twists and turns of everyday life depicted in *Theater in the House* (1973–84) and *Vruć vetar* (Hot Wind, 1980) occasionally poked fun at the seamy underbelly of Yugoslav affluence, including unemployment and reliance on mass labor migration to the West. Likewise, the Soviet variety show *The Pub of 13 Chairs* regularly included stand-up comedy stints parodying the shortcomings of Soviet society, such as the scarcity of consumer goods and the mismatch between political visions and everyday life.⁶² Such forms of ridicule were a far cry from the more openly politicized forms of humor in the sixties. Nonetheless, they serve as a reminder that even during the 1970s socialist popular culture was not ideologically uniform and that self-congratulatory, mythologized portrayals of socialist reality could coexist with more ambiguous messages. Only by attending to such contradictory tendencies, discontinuities as well as continuities, can we fully appreciate the nature and consequences of sixties politics and culture for the socialist East.

Chapter 10

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