Youth cultures of socialism and post-socialism

Lifestyles, conformism and rebellion

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Since the end of World War II, a wide variety of youth cultures have emerged and disappeared. These youth cultures were characterized by the fact that their youthful adherents attributed to themselves specific lifestyles that in the first place differentiated them from their elder contemporaries, but also served to distinguish them among their age peers. More so, these lifestyles often articulated values that encompassed a zone of tension between conformism and rebellion vis-à-vis society at large. This volume starts by placing the spotlight on the grey zone between the political and apolitical where the boundaries between the aspiration for lifestyle-based distinction and the engagement with a political cause are blurred, and to elucidate the ensuing dynamics in political concrete situations. In two distinct sections, the volume bundles together contributions from both a Bulgarian and international group of authors that deal with various aspects of youth cultures. The first section in this volume deals with countercultures under state socialism and focuses mainly upon the aspect of youth rebellion, while the second section treats the post-socialist period and touches on youth culture in a broader sense underpinning the lifestyle element as a prism to gauge conformism or resistance to the social and political structures.

The first section of the volume, Counterculture under Socialism: Styles, Music and Poetics as Outlets of Youth Rebellion, traverses the socialist landscape of youth cultures from the Soviet core of the communist camp to the satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe and further to the resonance of the Cold War in the decolonizing world.

In the first article of this section, Gleb Tsipursky explores the first post-war youth counterculture in the Soviet Union discussing the appearance, practices and evolution of the so-called Stiliagi as well as the Soviet regime’s response to the "youth problem" from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Tsipursky places the phenomenon within the broader spectrum of the rise of post-war youth counterculture in both East and West while underlining the specifics of the Stiliagi as “westernized” youth inspired by American popular culture and thus the Party-state’s response – as a part of the “cultural Cold War”. While he acknowledges the phenomenon as an attempt of Soviet youths to distinguish themselves from the “heroization of the war veteran” and to find a way to side-step the control of the Party-state and its youth policy, Tsipursky shows that initially many Stiliagi
came from elite milieux with access to western commodities and that in fact the
countercultural trend had a class-based aspect to it. Indeed, Stiliagi sought to construct a
“taste-based hierarchy” to increase their status among the Soviet youth while the
subculture also became more internally differentiated as its numbers grew over the
years. The article in addition demonstrates an evolution in the Soviet regime’s policies
towards this phenomenon: while initially the regime paid relatively little attention to the
Stiliagi beyond moral condemnation, after the death of Stalin Stiliagi became subjected
to more targeted repressive measures. Simultaneously though, the regime came to
accept and co-opt certain elements of western popular and consumer culture. Tsipursky
also draws parallels to the appearance of youth countercultures on the other side of the
Iron Curtain in the post-war years showing commonalities in the way members of the
post-war generation of youth sought an alternative identity for themselves. Yet, he points
to a differentiated approach by the authorities on both sides of the Cold War divide
emanating from the different role played by the state and the absence of market
mechanisms in the Soviet case. Ultimately, the article describes this complex
phenomenon as a defeat for the Soviet Union in the ideological and cultural rivalry over
youth and a retreat from constructing a socialist modernity.

Extending the discussion into the Bulgarian context and shifting the chronological lens to
the last two decades of state socialism, Mihail Gruev traces the emergence of distinctive
subcultures gravitating around musical genres, style attributes and social outlooks. He
analyzes the phenomenon of a socialist youth subculture through the lens of its double
marginality vis-à-vis both the Western culture that it mimetically reproduced on the other
side of the Iron Curtain and the local “high culture” that was officially promoted by the
regime as integral to the “socialist way of life”. Therefore, the author contextualizes the
groups of hippies, bikers, heavy metal fans, punks and new wave fans with regard to the
youth policies of the Bulgarian regime that vacillated between outright condemnation of
their presumed “ideological diversion” to relative tolerance in recognition of their
usefulness as social safety valves. The development of a youth underground is also
juxtaposed to the waning relevance of the official youth movement (komsomol) that was
increasingly sliding into bureaucratization but also into consumerism. In the vacated
ideological space, some grassroots youth groups consolidated around authentic socialist
ideas raising suspicion from the regime for their self-initiative despite their politically
correct stance. The Bulgarian story of socialist countercultures is presented against the
canvas of broader changes in the political climate within the Soviet bloc from the Prague
Spring to perestroika. A pivotal moment within this timeline is represented by the world
youth festival hosted in Sofia in 1968 which offered Bulgarian youth a unique encounter
with international leftist youth movements and at the same time made them aware of the
rift within the European left. Parallel to the evolution on both sides – the regime and the
countercultural scene – Bulgarian youth gradually grew into an autonomous social actor.

Picking up in the aftermath of the 1968 student protest movement in socialist Yugoslavia,
Marko Zubak treats the rise of punk rock in Slovenia in relation to the activity of the
local student radio. Zubak ascribes a mediating role in youth culture to the radio by
analyzing its role in promoting and bestowing political content upon this new genre of
rock music and the subculture linked to it which came over from the West in the late
1970s. Radio Student was set up as a particular branch of the youth press around the
time that the authorities clamped down on the latter for its role in fueling student
resentment against the disruptions of the specific Yugoslav socialist system of self-
management. Nevertheless, the radio managed to avoid being curbed in its activity as the regime stopped short of interfering in the autonomous sphere of student and youth culture. This cultural arena soon became a retreat for former student activists to continue their exploits. Zubak focuses on the role of Igor Vidmar, an exemplary case of an activist who retreated from direct political action into the sphere of popular culture while continuing his political mission with other means. After discovering punk rock, he immediately saw the genre’s subcultural potential against the hitherto mainstream and unproblematic Yugoslav rock scene. Vidmar engaged in promoting and managing the activity of the first Slovenian punk bands while simultaneously acting as the political guru of the movement and elevating it from the recreational level of its grassroots fan base. By the early 1980s, the Party moved to crack down on the punk movement, but this maneuver was countered by Vidmar and Radio Student leading in the end to a situation where the official youth union embraced punk rock. Finally, as Zubak underlines, the role played by the radio in promoting punk and subsequently defending it vis-à-vis the authorities would result in the punk movement acting as a constituent of the Slovenian civil society that was pivotal at the end of the 1980s in challenging the regime.

The theme of youth counterculture as a challenge to a communist regime is elaborated by Tom Junes in his article on Poland which presents an overview of the main countercultural trends that appeared from the early 1950s to the late 1980s. The article discusses the so-called Bikiniarze and Chuligani during Stalinism, the hippie movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, and the punks, rastafarians, heavy metal fans, Poppersi and skinheads of the 1980s. These countercultural trends had blown over from the West though they manifested themselves as specific Polish variations. Junes argues that it was the regime that projected a political meaning on these trends though the subcultures were the product of genuine rebellious feelings among Poland’s youth. Depending on the era and the overall political conditions and needs, the regime reacted differently vis-à-vis the subcultures moving either to counter, neutralize or contain them. However, as Junes demonstrates, there were certain aspects of youth culture that the regime was willing to adopt such as rock music and fashion in a bid to win the hearts and minds of the younger generation. Nevertheless, this made that western influence spread among the latter and in fact led to the reverse effect. By the 1980s, the situation had evolved to such an extent that the regime even preferred to tolerate the various countercultural movements as a lesser evil in light of the increasing political contestation emanating from Poland’s youth. While the discussed subcultures were apolitical in essence, the phenomenon of youth counter-culture was ultimately, as Junes underlines, a manifestation and catalyst of apathy towards and discontent with the youth policies of the communist regime.

The final article of this section ventures into the sphere of youth subculture in the context of a non-European socialist regime. In it, Ana Sobral explores meanings of poetry and rap music in Angola from a generational perspective linking the themes of socialism and decolonization with the narratives that expressed the views and experiences of Angolan youth from the 1950s until the present. She highlights the importance of poetry and its continuation in present-day rap lyrics as not only representative of the national pantheon of heroes who often were poets but also for its critical portrayal and engagement with the surrounding realities. She compares the poetry of the anti-colonial struggle to the rap music of today’s young generations and examines the commonalities as well as the intergenerational tensions that flow from this dialogue. Herein, Sobral focuses on the symbolism of the sea – as having served to bolster the imagined national identity from the
slave trade to colonialism – during three distinct periods: the anti-colonial struggle, the civil war and the 21st century. During the liberation struggle, the sea, i.e. the Atlantic Ocean, was used as a trope to symbolize the alliance and common fate of oppressed people in Angola, Brazil, Cuba, and the USA, while in the ensuing period of civil war the sea came to encapsulate violence, isolation and death. Following the end of the civil war at the beginning of the 21st century, the sea once again changed its significance, this time referring to the offshore oil wealth upon which the country’s rulers aim to build the future. However, in the poetry and the emerging hip hop music, it came to serve as a metaphorical critique of the rampant social inequalities and corruption that plague the Angolan regime today. In doing so, present-day Angolan rap artists return to the theme of the suffering of the people, this time not because of the colonial oppressors or the horrors of the civil war, but because of the activity of the country’s post-colonial elite.

The shift from subcultures based on a lifestyle differentiation to subcultures consolidated around intellectual ideas constituted by Ana Sobral’s text is further elaborated in the discussion on Bulgaria’s “academic underground” in the 1980s represented by various informal seminars. Avoiding the cliché figure of dissidence and briefly bracketing the issue of security surveillance and inside informers, the participants in this discussion reflect on the institutional conditions that opened room for free thinking and allowed such intellectual niches to sprout. Miglena Nikolchina opens the discussion with a somewhat utopian assertion of the seminar form modeled on Plato’s prototype of the symposium as a counterpoint to the official ideologized and monotonous speech of the regime back then but also as a potential rectifying response to the contemporary situation where new technologies and media erode the dialogical search for truth. Against this idealistic background, the founding members of two such seminar formats, Deyan Deyanov (the Marxian Seminar) and Alexander Kiossev (Synthesis group), recollect their own seminar experiences not as a straightforward and neat ex post facto history but as ambiguous and evolving set of stories reviving some old points of dispute as well as acknowledging the other side of intellectual pursuits manifest in inter-group conflicts and intellectual vanity. Juxtaposing the two seminar groups, their recollections outline a variety of intellectual paths within the repressive political context of late-socialist Bulgaria: from “theoretical hooliganism” to “scholarly sectarianism”; from a disciplined pursuit of knowledge to a parody-shaped critique; from an intelligentsia attempt at political reformism to anarchist rebellion; from a deliberate disregard for the ideological conjecture to a purposeful political provocation. Summarizing the differences between the two seminar approaches, the discussants pointed to the poles of power and freedom (as key values and pragmatic stakes) and ultimately the ongoing conversation as an end in itself.

The thematic section dedicated to Post-socialist Subcultural Groups: Lifestyles or Alternative Styles of Life, Conformism or Resistance discusses collective youth behavior after 1989 in the former Soviet bloc and especially in Bulgaria – from street violence to civic protests – tracing how it relates to the dominant political culture, public discourse and societal norms.

Moving beyond the socialist era, Svetlana Stephenson elucidates the inner world of Russia’s street youth gangs challenging the generally accepted notions of violent youth gangs as mere hooligans and delinquents. She points to long-standing historical traditions of violence in Russian society that were in fact part of the social fabric.
Subsequently, she shows how these practices evolved during the Soviet era and then underwent a transformation during the transition to a free market society by focusing on the cases of Kazan street gangs and the so-called liubery in a suburb of Moscow. Stephenson argues that around the 1970s the structures of youth violence changed when some territorial youth networks started to engage in illegal entrepreneurship. Though these subcultures had started to alter their practices, their members nevertheless saw themselves as still constituting an incorporated part of Soviet society often stressing their patriotism and depicting their violent behavior as enhancing social justice. Stephenson underlines that, while their exploits were at odds with the mainstream society, the young members of these gangs still shared the dominant perception of what it was to be a Soviet citizen. During the 1990s, the gangs and their members became violent entrepreneurs in effect using organized violence for economic profit, yet still adhering to the dominant value system which conversely had changed to that of capitalist entrepreneurialism. They now saw themselves as hardworking businessmen and their violent behavior and criminal activity only as a means to an end. More so, Stephenson argues that they shared most of the prejudices against outsiders as the majority of Russian society. Ultimately, she points out that while violent youth street gangs are often seen as representing a subculture that resists the dominant social norms in society, in fact they are just as much part of the social structure of the normative majority.

In tune with the youth theme of the volume and in line with the policy of the journal to promote young scholars, this section includes two debut publications. Kristina Dimitrova analyzes how the youth appropriates the space of the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia through creative uses sidelining its charged significance as a lieu de mémoire – a battlefield of conflicting interpretations of Bulgaria’s socialist past and a symbolic site of legitimation of clashing political ideas. After sketching the dominant debate pro and contra the preservation of the monument, Dimitrova pinpoints the emergence of alternative, even if less visible discursively, visions of this public site focused on active use. She identifies three trends of uses – civic appropriations, street art actions and appropriation through everyday inhabiting. Within the first type, Dimitrova subsumes both human rights initiatives such as Sofia Pride and entertainment events such as rave parties aligning them by their nature of subversive popular movements raising civic claims that are not bound to political identities. Further on, in the street art interventions on the monument, Dimitrova sees an attempt to reclaim public space from its commercialization through for-profit uses and visual hegemony of advertisement, and to simultaneously relegate public debates to the street level of everyday experiencing of the city and thus encourage residents to take civic responsibility. Finally, her study of the everyday uses of the monument’s area by various youth subcultures concludes the prevalence of a distinction on generational grounds rather than on lifestyle differentiation. Despite differences in music tastes and preferences of recreation, youths gathering around the monument are united in their anti-consumerism and search for alternative pastime to mainstream individualism and marketization. Linking her analysis of their attitudes towards the monument to the publicly dominant debates, Dimitrova underscores their ambiguous stance within this polemics: on the one hand, surprisingly resisting destructive proposals per se and in theory supporting the respect for national traditions as embodied in monuments; on the other hand, lacking knowledge on the concrete historical meaning of the monument.

Keeping with the theme of streets and monuments, the debut article of Nikolay Nikolov...
analyzes how public space in Sofia became the setting in what he coins a “battle for access to truth” during the #Dance with me protest movement in 2013. He discusses the discursive critique that emerged from within the protest movement vis-à-vis the power structures in post-socialist Bulgaria, and the counter narrative and measures. In this, he underscores how the use of public space became the framework through which especially members of the post-socialist generation who took part in the protests and were forged into a community came to think about the present, past and future. Nikolov considers the main setting for the protest marches and how it contributed to the formation of a renewed lived urban environment which was then curbed by the increasing police presence and cordonning off of crucial parts of the city center. This restriction of the protest movement was broken when students representing a core constituent group of the post-socialist generation occupied the Sofia University. The occupation not only allowed to change the dynamic of the protest and its discursive role, but also helped to shape the students as a distinct group within it. Moreover, during the occupation, the latter would create opportunities to rethink the present as well the past and the future which were, as Nikolov points out, ultimately unknown to them. The relationship to the past becomes even more problematic when another constituent of the public space is brought into the focus of the protest movement – the Soviet Army monument. Nikolov underlines the low level of resonance the actions involving the monument had on the younger generation and ascribes it to a historiographical vacuum about the socialist past. Ultimately, Nikolov posits the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to describe the public space dimension of the protest where the meaning and conception of post-socialism were contested.

The 2013 university occupation in Bulgaria is analyzed also by Ruzha Smilova who deconstructs various interpretations of the protest events that either generalize them as an integral part of a “global wave of protest” or posit them as unique events decontextualized from the broader protest movement in the country. Tackling the first paradigm of political commentators, Smilova questions its fundamental premises and implicit judgments concerning the protests’ anti-systemic character, lack of positive demands and overwhelming distrust towards governance and elites in general. Furthermore, she refutes the very dilemma of exit versus voice whereby protests are seen as a form of anti-politics short of genuine reformist energies. Addressing the second paradigm of the autonomist treatment of the university occupation, Smilova shows how the demand for decision-making freed from any external intervention indeed precludes the possibility for collective action and social solidarity, and only deepens stultifying public distrust. Unraveling the mechanics of maintaining the university occupation, she pinpoints the structural deficiencies of its supposedly autonomous institutions: on the one hand, the lack of representational legitimacy within the so-called “headquarters” and, on the other hand, the lack of collective responsibility among the broader student body due to their anonymity of participation. This double predicament undermines the efficiency of decision-making procedures and coordination mechanisms and prevents the possibility for a unitary vision or ideology. Despite highlighting organizational shortcomings of the university occupation, Smilova concludes its success in giving a public voice and agency to the post-socialist generation that thus far had been perceived as lacking in civic engagement.

In KX Presents, we gave the floor to Banitza – an online platform run by students that provides young people with the opportunity to share their thoughts. In response to our
invitation to present Banitza, its editors Nikolay Nikolov and Raya Raeva reflect on the possibilities for a genuine comprehension across generations; the right to talk about a past that is not your own; the chance to break through an intergenerational rift where “history becomes a barrier sustained by permanent silence”; the war of memories of people whose experiences are caught in such a deep social upheaval as the establishment of a communist state or its later dismantling. Trying to understand the time-place of youth subcultures in the postwar era, they traverse the “different Americas” from the beat generation to the hippie era to land back in socialist Bulgaria of their parents. Underlining the need for hearing new voices, the Banitza editors extend an essayistic invitation for their readers to join them as writers.

Venturing beyond the topic of youth cultures, the last section of the volume builds upon a years-long thematic interest of the journal (elaborated into the Human and Social Studies Foundation’s research project “Challenges to Representative Democracy Today,” 2008-2012). The section on Contemporary Critiques of Capitalism offers insights not only into the mutating logic of the capitalist economy but also into what constitutes conditions for crisis within it today and opportunities for mobilizing productive strands of protest and resistance towards it.

An entry into the topic, Nancy Fraser’s text complements Marx’s theory of capitalism reduced to a mere economic system by venturing into the non-economic (or background) conditions for its functioning that, in their interaction with capitalism’s economic logic, indeed transform it into a “capitalist society” – that is, an “institutionalized social order.” She identifies those conditions in three “hidden abodes” of capitalism: social reproduction (including housework, child-raising, schooling and welfare arrangements); nature (particularly, its annexation by capital); polity (namely, the legal frameworks and public powers that safeguard economic activity both within the territorial state and on the global scene). The dynamic between these elements of capitalism’s backstory and its frontal features constitute historically particular institutional separations – reproduction / production; natural / human; political / economic – within “capitalism’s distinctive normative topography”. Subject to historical change, the established boundaries of these essential separations might be challenged both by capitalism’s expansionist hunger and by social struggles defending or resisting existing arrangements. In particular, neoliberalism upsets their balance inaugurating further encroachment onto the background conditions, simultaneously making them a “site and flashpoint of capitalist crisis”. While in Fordism, they remain “non-commodified zones”, under neoliberalism the three realms conditioning capitalism become targets of commodification. The possibility for a viable critical theory as well as protest action vis-à-vis contemporary injustice therefore needs to internalize these non-economic conditions and the perspectives that tackle them (feminist, ecological, political-theoretical, the latter including state-theoretical, (post)colonial, transnational).

The topic of appropriate political critique is further extended in the interview with Nancy Fraser conducted by Dimitar Vatsov. Elaborating on many of the core themes of Fraser’s work throughout the years – e.g., hegemony, right to justification, parity of participation (and the implicit idea of equal moral worth), the triplet of redistribution, recognition and representation (the latter involving the struggle for just framing) – this conversation highlights crucial challenges to governance and civic protest today in an attempt to integrate their interpretation into existing critical paradigms, thereby
enriching and extending the latter. With the shared emphasis on the ongoing and open-ended essence of endeavors of enhancing social justice, Fraser and Vatsov approach issues related to the struggle over interpretation of needs, interests and rights, the legitimate power asymmetries and emancipatory movements in their ambivalence and implicit potential for creating new forms of domination. Thus, reflecting on her evolving notion of emancipation, Fraser warns against its “dangerous liaison” with neoliberalism – or the “historical affinity between struggles for emancipation and economizing forces” in promoting individualization and breaking down traditional communities, both processes weakening social ties and solidarity. Further on, Fraser and Vatsov discuss up-to-date developments – from the Arab Spring to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – unraveling the rootedness of their own perspectives in historically defined traditions of intellectual critique and social engagement. Finally, they deliberate on the viability of a Marxist language of contestation in the contemporary Bulgarian context in light of the civic struggle against the oligarchy.

Another interview of Dimitar Vatsov inquires Amy Allen’s take on the key issues of critical theory and social critique today. As a preview to Allen’s forthcoming book The End of Progress: De-colonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory, the discussion opens by revisiting the notion of historical progress and the embedded claim of universal validity of normative principles. To this understanding legitimizing the European essence of normativity and progress as such, Allen counterpoises her emphasis on contextualism pointing to the importance of localized claims on progress that are self-conscious of their own historically specific frameworks and thus reassert the contingency of values through their de-ideologizing. Another key notion that enters the conversation is intersubjectivity defined as avoiding any attempt to “subsume the other’s difference under the totalizing logic of identity thinking”. Revisiting paradigms of critical theory from the Frankfurt School to postcolonial studies, Allen underscores the viability of critiques when positioned at the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality, yet widening the critical horizon further by combining them with an approach recognizing transnationality and the need for de-hegemonization, therefore tackling issues of global justice. Finally, hitting the ground of current protest movements from Occupy Wall Street to Maidan, Vatsov and Allen unravel the strengths of such forms of collective critique in providing good diagnostics from below, yet leave the question open as to the anticipatory potential of these movements, which stay aloof of any representational power and insist on horizontal self-organization, to produce a positive project of social change.

The final section of KX Comment gives the floor to Boyan Znepolski for a critical deconstruction of what he diagnozes as apocalyptic narratives on the Bulgarian present that impregnate the media environment with prophetic gestures of resignation in the face of a presumably inevitable and imminent national collapse. According to the author, in their concentrated appearance, these narratives start to form a holistic worldview based on the fictitious social reality they reify and thus function as “discursive viruses” which erode not only our cognitive abilities but also our practical capacities and motivation for civic action. Znepolski distinguishes three types of apocalyptic narratives brought together by their deterministic projection and emphasizes that in their peculiar reflection on an existing crisis they themselves become a dimension of that crisis. The first group of narratives provides explanations of a presupposed national misfortune on the basis of conspiracy theories combined with a certain ideological framework that invests meaning into historical processes. Common threads here are the notions of Western colonization
as well as internal assimilation by criminogenic local minorities (a role reserved most often for the Roma community). The second type finds reasons for the imminent national tragedy in an insurmountable cultural or mentality deficiency of the Bulgarian nation which such narrative unravels from the vanguard position of an external authority and through a charismatic rhetoric of phenomenological insightfulness. The third trend is summarized as a notion of “two Bulgarias” – that is, a divide of the people vs. the elite that advances certain class aesthetics and naturalizes individual characteristics into community-forming specifics. Pointing to a number of intellectual op-ed-styled publications in Bulgarian media, Znepolski warns against the incapacitating effect of such depictions in light of the need for political change and citizen engagement.

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