

Reality Stranger than Fiction. Living the American Dream in Socialist Yugoslavia

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Abstract:

By looking at the developments in Yugoslav culture during the 1960s through the conceptual lens of 'Americanization', this book shows that, despite its socialist socio-political setup, Yugoslav society underwent a profound transformation that had a distinctly American prefix, eventually producing a decidedly Americanized socialist youth. The relatively unrestrained import of American cultural products to Yugoslavia proved to be a win-win situation for both American and Yugoslav regimes. While Washington kept Tito a safe distance from the USSR, Yugoslav communists fostered their population's sense of freedom and superiority over other socialist societies, as well as the desired external image of 'socialism with human face'. Through its methodological symbiosis of cultural, diplomatic and history of everyday life analysis, the book offers a welcome enrichment for the research on cultural diplomacy and Cold War Studies, further advancing the scholarly 'thirthing' of Cold War dichotomies.

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Vučetić, Radina. *Coca-Cola Socialism. Americanization of Yugoslav Culture in the Sixties*. Budapest/
New York: CEU Press, 2018. 334 pages, 58 EUR. ISBN: 978-963-386-200-1.

Abstract:

By looking at the developments in Yugoslav culture during the 1960s through the conceptual lens of 'Americanization', this book shows that, despite its socialist socio-political setup, Yugoslav society underwent a profound transformation that had a distinctly American prefix, eventually producing a decidedly Americanized socialist youth. The relatively unrestrained import of American cultural products to Yugoslavia proved to be a win-win situation for both American and Yugoslav regimes. While Washington kept Tito a safe distance from the USSR, Yugoslav communists fostered their population's sense of freedom and superiority over other socialist societies, as well as the desired external image of 'socialism with human face'. Through its methodological symbiosis of cultural, diplomatic and history of everyday life analysis, the book offers a welcome enrichment for the research on cultural diplomacy and Cold War Studies, further advancing the scholarly 'thirthing' of Cold War dichotomies.

The scholarly field of Cold War studies has produced significant academic output dealing with the two superpowers' cultural diplomacy and with diverse spheres of life in which this 'war for hearts and minds' of mankind was being fought. Recently, however, the conventional Manichean depiction of the conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact has been enriched by the inclusion of other players, most importantly the countries belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement. In this vein, the story of how the ideological and cultural clash could operate on neutral ground is portrayed through the example of Tito's Yugoslavia in the revised English version (Serbian original published in 2012) of *Coca-Cola Socialism* by Radina Vučetić, renowned cultural historian of Yugoslavia and assistant professor at University of Belgrade. The author chose to view this process through the conceptual lens of 'Americanization' in order to show that, despite its socialist socio-political setup and often close connections with the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslav culture underwent a profound transformation that had

a distinctly American prefix, rather than a more general (and, arguably, nowadays equally contested) stamp of 'Westernization' or 'modernization'. Trying to go beyond the usual focus of related scholarship on political motives of cultural diplomacy, Vučetić specifically focuses on the social dynamics behind ambivalent processes of reception of American influences in different aspects of popular culture and everyday life in Yugoslavia during the turbulent 1960s.

The red thread of Vučetić's argument is the metaphor of the Roman god Janus' double-face which she uses to describe Yugoslav positioning in-between the Blocs – looking at both sides, showing to each a different facet of itself, saying 'no' to both while never uttering an explicit 'yes'. Consequently, the relatively unrestrained import of American cultural products to Yugoslavia proved to be a win-win situation for both regimes. Washington would happily watch the distance between Tito and other socialist leaders steadily increase, whereas Yugoslav communists would foster Yugoslav population's sense of freedom and superiority over other socialist societies, but also strengthen the regime's desired external image of 'socialism with a human face'. This pattern was applied with contextual specificities in such diverse spheres of culture as film production, contemporary art, theatre, the jazz and rock music scenes, television and comics, eventually oxymoronically producing a decidedly Americanized socialist youth. Vučetić is, however, careful not to uncritically perpetuate the already widely accepted myth of 'Yugoslav exceptionalism', duly noting specific cases where other socialist countries pioneered in certain cultural developments long before Yugoslavia. Yet it cannot be denied that, due to its specific diplomatic positioning, Tito's regime could afford to take a surprisingly liberal attitude towards openly capitalist and Americanophile practices that were unthinkable for the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

The book is at its most interesting and controversial when discussing occasional paradoxes of the 'Janus-face' policy, such as in the case of Yugoslav cinematography. While the state (which openly promoted 'Wild-West-like' portrayals of antifascist warfare in blockbuster partisan epics) had a very tenuous tolerance towards the domestic socially critical 'black wave' authors and often implicitly (and sometimes even explicitly) censored their work, it would concurrently send those very same films to international festivals, in order to present itself as a liberal regime before the foreign public. However, this should not be seen as exclusive to socialist one-party systems, since in this same period United States carefully rid the export system of 'inappropriate films' that could potentially tarnish the reputation of America, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *From Here to Eternity*, and *Rebel Without a Cause*. In the sphere of contemporary literature, this paradox is exemplified by the fact that Henry Miller's works were published uncensored in Yugoslavia when that was not possible even in the States. A similar twist occurred with entertainment (i.e. rock music or Disney cartoons). While in the rest of socialist Europe the authorities looked at these products with a high degree of suspicion (which did not

however hinder their popularity all over the Eastern Bloc), the Yugoslav regime openly appropriated these cultural forms by filling them with own ideological contents. Thus, one could totally freely wear jeans or hippie clothes and listen to rock songs praising Tito and revolution, since these symbols of rebellion had been carefully emptied of their dissenting potential. It was only in the later decades that popular culture adopted a more rebellious attitude towards the system, coinciding with the return to hardliner policies by the regime after the political turmoil of the early 1970s.

The author argues that the final aim of American cultural diplomacy with Yugoslavia was not to transform it into a liberal democracy with capitalist economy, but rather to support Tito's regime in keeping sufficient distance from Moscow in order to allow free articulation of Western-induced political and cultural processes in the Balkans. The long-term effects of this Americanizing process are however very difficult to detect, especially since the immediate impact was mostly confined to big metropolitan centers, thus leaving much of the Yugoslav population relatively secluded from many of these influences. In conclusion, Vučetić claims that Yugoslav society never really understood the core of American/Western values, which eventually contributed to the well-known unfortunate fate of the Yugoslav project. And herein lies an aspect of this exciting scholarly analysis that could have undergone a more extensive epistemological treatment. Not only are the adjectives 'Western' and 'American' treated as basically identical (thus constructing a monolithic picture of 'the West'), but these values are often implicitly assessed in uncritically affirmative fashion. Yet, it is the specifically Yugoslav experience of multi-ethnic nation-building, a non-aligned and anti-colonial emancipatory agenda (all deviations in practical application notwithstanding) that could offer a viable platform for more nuanced interpretations of the liberal myth of the 'global West'. It has to be noted though that the author's most recent research on Yugoslav connections with non-aligned countries does point in exactly this direction, promising very interesting results. Nevertheless, through its symbiosis of cultural, diplomatic and history of everyday life, this book provides a very important contribution not just to historiography of socialist Yugoslavia and Yugoslav-American relations, but more generally offers a welcome enrichment for the research on cultural diplomacy and Cold War Studies, further advancing the scholarly 'thirthing' of Cold War dichotomies.

German Abstract:

Die Wirklichkeit seltsamer als die Fiktion. Der amerikanische Traum im sozialistischen Jugoslawien

Durch seine Betrachtung der Entwicklungen innerhalb der jugoslawischen Kultur der 1960er Jahre mithilfe des Konzepts der ‚Amerikanisierung‘ zeigt dieses Buch wie, trotz ihrer sozialistischen Ausrichtung, die damalige jugoslawische Gesellschaft eine dezidiert amerikanisierte sozialistische Jugend erzeugt hat. Relativ uneingeschränkte Einfuhr von amerikanischen Kulturgütern nach Jugoslawien erwies sich als eine Win-Win-Situation für beide Regime. Während Washington Tito in sicherer Entfernung von Moskau hielt, förderten jugoslawische Kommunisten gleichzeitig das Freiheitsgefühl sowie die angebliche Überlegenheit im Vergleich mit anderen sozialistischen Ländern. Dazu konnte die jugoslawische Regierung auch ihr erwünschtes ‚liberales Image‘ vor dem internationalen Publikum weiterpflegen. Die methodologische Symbiose von Kultur- und diplomatischer Geschichte macht diese Monographie zu einem wichtigen Beitrag zur *cultural-diplomacy*-Forschung, sowie eine Weiterführung des immer populärerem Ansatzes des ‚thirding‘ der Dichotomien des kalten Krieges.

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