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# UNDERSTANDING SOCIALIST TELEVISION

## CONCEPTS, OBJECTS, METHODS

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Abstract: This article develops a number of conceptual and methodological proposals aimed at furthering a firmer agenda for the field of socialist television studies. It opens by addressing the issue of relevance of the field, identifying three critical contributions the study of socialist television can make to media, communication and cultural studies. It then puts forward a number of proposals tied to three key issues: strategies of overcoming the Cold War framework that dominates much of existing literature; the importance of a multilayered analysis of socialist television that considers its cultural, political as well as economic aspects; and the ways in which we can challenge the prevalence of methodological nationalism in the field.

Keywords: Television, Socialism, Cold War, Theory, Methodology, Modernity, Nation, Class

The past few years have seen a rapid rise in the volume of original research and scholarly discussion about socialist television, evident in the string of research monographs and edited collections[1] as well as in the proliferation of specialist conferences, international research networks and funded research projects in the field.[2] While these developments are testimony to a notable growth in scholarly interest in socialist television studies, the methodological and theoretical contours of the field remain in flux, and we still have some way to go in persuading colleagues beyond our field that understanding socialist television really matters for them, too.

This article opens by addressing the issue of relevance, identifying three critical contributions the study of socialist television can make to media, communication and cultural studies. It then lays out a number of conceptual and methodological proposals, in the hope of inspiring a more concerted effort at establishing a firmer agenda and rationale for the field. These proposals focus on three key issues: strategies of overcoming Cold War binaries; the importance of a multilayered analysis of socialist television that considers its cultural, political as well as economic aspects; and the ways in which we can challenge the prevalence of methodological nationalism in the field by embedding the story of socialist television in the narrative of multiple modernities and multiple visions of progress.

[1] Paulina Bren, ***The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring***, Cornell University Press, 2010; Kristin Roth-Ey, ***Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War***, Cornell University Press, 2011; Aniko Imre, Timothy Havens and Katalin Lustyk, eds, ***Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism***, Routledge, 2012; Heather Gumbert, ***Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the GDR***, Michigan University Press, 2014.

[2] This includes the recent conferences on *Television Histories in (Post)Socialist Europe* (Stockholm, 2013), *Television in Europe beyond the Iron Curtain – National and Transnational Perspectives since the 1950s* (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 2013) and *Cold War and Entertainment Television* (Paris, 2014), the launching of the ***European (Post)Socialist Television History Network*** in 2013 and the Leverhulme Trust funded comparative project **Screening Socialism** (2013-16) which investigates television, everyday life and memory in five socialist countries.

Throughout the article, I use brief examples from existing research as well as my own on-going work on television in socialist Yugoslavia, to illustrate the arguments.

## 1. Why does Understanding Socialist Television Matter?[3]

There are at least three key contributions that the study of socialist television can bring to media, communication and cultural studies.

First, understanding socialist television is a key prerequisite for developing a truly global television history, and for revisiting some of the key debates about television as a cultural, political and economic formation.

The vast majority of existing work on television has remained limited to liberal democracies of Northern America and North-Western Europe. However valuable and ground-breaking the insights of this research are, they elucidate a rather limited selection of television experiences globally. Until well into the second half of the twentieth century, the vast majority of producers and audiences around the world have experienced the medium of television in the context of non-democratic or, at best, semi-democratic political regimes. Socialist television studies are particularly well equipped to address the specificities of television cultures in non-democratic political contexts. It is also worth noting that television developments in liberal democracies were often either explicitly or implicitly defined in conversation with their counterparts in the socialist east, and vice versa. Debates about public broadcasting, unequal access to information and cultural imperialism, among many others, cannot be comprehended outside of the Cold War context. Understanding socialist television therefore constitutes a prerequisite for developing a truly global understanding of television as a cultural, political and economic formation.

Second, the understanding of the current transformations of television globally cannot advance without a critical understanding of socialist television and its legacies.

In a more narrow sense, this is clearly true for countries that remain wedded to socialist ideals to this day – most notably China, but also Cuba and North Korea. Over the past few decades, Chinese media have of course undergone a series of profound transformations, yet they nonetheless continue to promote a distinctly socialist form of cultural imagination. Given that Chinese television caters for almost a fifth of the world population, it is clear that no genuinely global engagement with television in the 21st century can proceed without a sound understanding of what this specifically socialist televisual imagination involves, and of how it relates to socialism as an economic, political and cultural project. An understanding of socialist television is also a necessary prerequisite for unpacking the nature of television cultures in post-socialist Eastern Europe, which continue to be shaped by professional practices, institutional structures, genre conventions as well as audience sensibilities inherited from the socialist era.

[3] Two notes of clarification are needed before proceeding. First, this article is written from the perspective of a media, communication and cultural studies scholar who – albeit conversant with relevant developments in other disciplinary fields engaged with the phenomenon of socialist television, including history, sociology and area studies – does not want to pretend that the agenda presented here speaks to all the concerns and idiosyncrasies of other scholarly fields. Making a case for the importance of the field will vary depending on the audience we are addressing, and I hope others will join in the endeavour of trying to hammer out why and how socialist television matters not only to media, communication and cultural studies, but also to sociologists, historians, areas studies specialists or anthropologists. Second, the term 'socialist television' as used in this article refers to state socialist television – that is, television as existing in the context of countries under Communist rule. While socialist thought and politics certainly influenced television culture beyond the Communist world, an examination of these influences goes beyond the scope of this article.

Third, a fresh understanding of socialist television can also help us revise the long-standing normative debates about the social functions of television, and inform our thinking about possible television futures.

However misguided the ideological drivers of socialist television may have been, the project of socialist television was, at its core, a project aimed at social mobilization and change, committed to advancing social equality and ensuring a high level of cultural sophistication and literacy across the population. Even though this project was part of a grand experiment that ultimately failed, we should acknowledge that its story is also a story of noble causes and (at least some) notable successes. From the point of view of thinking about the possible futures of television, the failures, successes and aims of socialist television should all serve as a reminder that television can and perhaps ought to be a tool in the service of several different visions of the good life and progress, not only those tied to ideas of never-ending economic growth, capital accumulation and consumer spending.

The challenge, of course, lies in studying socialist television in a manner that will help the field live up to this potential. How do we go about thinking about, researching and analysing socialist television in a way that will enable us to deliver on the promises outlined above?

## 2. Beyond Cold War Dichotomies

The first hurdle encountered by anyone entering the field of socialist television studies is the persistence of Cold War thinking, embodied in deeply ingrained assumptions about socialist television (and socialist media more generally) and their differences vis-à-vis television produced in the liberal democracies of the West. These assumptions are premised on familiar conceptual binaries used in television and media research, such as state versus. market, active versus. passive audiences, information versus propaganda, news versus entertainment, high/elite versus. mass/popular culture, which are neatly mapped onto the east-west divide. Socialist (or eastern) television is thus seen primarily as a tool of state propaganda in the service of ideological goals, as a cultural form subordinated to party politics, devoid of entertainment and immensely dull, yet also somehow hugely powerful and capable of turning audiences into obedient party subjects.[4] If socialist television is recognised as a specifically cultural rather than political form, the culture discussed is typically limited to examples of 'high culture' such as television theatre, drama and literary programmes.

This Manichean framework informed much of the thinking about socialist television and socialist media more generally during the Cold War period itself, and continues to underpin the analysis of post-socialist media landscapes. The problems created by Cold War thinking, are noted by virtually all scholars involved in the recent critical revision of the field. As Dana Mustata argues, available literature on television in socialist Eastern Europe 'has told primarily a political story, looking into the political context of television and reproducing the Cold War history of divisions between the East and the West'.[5] To counter this lopsided vision, Mustata offers a story of Romanian television that attends to its multiple dimensions beyond politics, and highlights similarities with trajectories of television development in the liberal democracies of the West. Likewise, Heather Gumbert's recent study of East German television challenges the idea that East German television can be reduced to a dull weapon of propaganda with no appeal for audiences:

> The assumption that East Germans watched disproportionally more Western television than their own programming is a construct of the Cold War. It fits a narrative that defines – and dismisses – East German television as an institution of political repression: the most significant, yet insignificant, organ of a propaganda machine.[6]

[4] For a classic example of an approach of this kind, see e.g. Fredrick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*, University of Illinois Press, 1956.
[5] Dana Mustata, 'Television in the Age of (Post)Communism: The Case of Romania', in Imre et al., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe*, p. 62.
[6] Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism*, p. 158.

It is worth noting that similar concerns are raised by scholars interested in other aspects of socialist media cultures. Dina Iordanova's diagnosis of East Central European film studies, for instance, could be applied almost directly to East Central European television studies: much of existing research in the field is haunted by Cold War frameworks, which focus on the suppression of creative freedom under state socialism and the functioning of propaganda, miss the importance of popular genres, and fail to offer an insight into the functioning of socialist cultural industries as such.[7] To this we can add the lack of knowledge about the creative practices of socialist screen production, as well as the lack of insight into the day-to-day mechanisms of film distribution and consumption under state socialism.[8]

Yet, where do we go from here? How exactly should we go about making sense of socialist television in ways that truly transcend the Cold War framework? The solution involves two steps, of which the first is more straightforward than the second. The first step involves uncoupling the link between geopolitics and conceptual distinctions. This can be done for instance, by thinking about the role of market forces in the context of a socialist media system, by looking for instances of audience engagement and political participation under socialism, or by paying attention to aspects of television culture not immediately linked to politics, including popular and entertainment aspects.

Many of those working in the field are becoming increasingly adept at making this first step. Two recent collections that in part address socialist television – Aniko Imre, Timothy Havens and Katalin Lustyk's *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism* and Peter Goddard's *Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe* offer good cases in point; they both focus on television genres neglected in existing research – entertainment and popular programmes – and seek to demonstrate that socialist television was in fact able to appeal to large audiences.[9]

Yet, even though this first step undeniably opens up opportunities for new directions into socialist television history, it does not necessarily fully move beyond Cold War frameworks as such. Instead, what we end up with is a view of television landscapes that merely shifts the experiences of socialist television closer to those of television in the liberal democratic West, thereby correcting the Manichean vision outlined earlier yet without overcoming its Westocentrism, and without offering tools that would enable us to rethink existing conceptual frameworks and approach television pasts, presents and futures in new ways. An unfortunate side effect of such approaches to socialist television is a rather comical competition over which socialist television managed to move furthest away from the dreaded east, with Soviet television and Romanian television under Ceausescu typically ending at the bottom of the list. Those familiar with the literature on nesting orientalism and balkanism[10] will recognise a long established pattern haunting intellectual debate in the peripheries of the West, where each country or social group thinks of itself as western, and transfers the stigma of the east to its immediate neighbours. Clearly, this is not an alternative to Cold War thinking, but one of its legacies, rooted in the longer tradition of imagining the world divided into the developed, modern west and the underdeveloped, tradition-bound east.

To move further we therefore need to do more than challenge the black and white mode of thinking underpinned by Cold War binaries, and engage in conceptual innovation and critical dialogue with existing theoretical debates in the broader field of communication, media and cultural studies. For instance, what does the fascination with Western public television among socialist television professionals (noted, among others, by Dana Mustata with regard to Romania[11]) tell us about the nature of socialist television and its relationship with 'the public', and about differences and similarities with the mission of public broadcasting in the West? Did such fascination exist everywhere in the socialist world, and if not, what accounts for internal variations? Yet another route might lead to a rethinking and expansion of the existing typology of television genres and accompanying aesthetic conventions and norms. As Aniko

[7] Dina Iordanova, ***Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film***, Wallflower Press, 2003, pp. 16-20.
[8] Petr Szczepanik, 'The State-socialist Mode of Production and the Political History of Production Culture', in Petr Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau, eds., ***Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures***, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 114.
[9] Imre et al., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe*; Peter Goddard, ed, ***Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe***, Manchester University Press, 2013.
[10] Key references include Larry Wolff, ***Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment***, Stanford University Press, 1994; Maria Todorova, ***Imagining the Balkans***, Oxford University Press, 1997; Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert M. Hayden, '***Orientalist Variations on the Theme "Balkans": Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics***', *Slavic Review*, 51, 1, 1992, pp. 1-15.
[11] Mustata, 'Television in the Age of (Post)Communism'.

Imre notes, socialist television institutions across Eastern Central Europe share a fascination with historical adventure series that is unparalleled in the West.[12] How does this particular type of serial programme relate to the social, political and cultural functions of socialist television, and how does the repertoire of socialist television genres more generally differ from its counterpart in liberal democracies?

Another fruitful area of inquiry involves examining the ideas of audience passivity and activity, and using them to rethink existing debates about audience reception. As shown in my own investigation of the changing discourses about audiences in socialist Yugoslavia,[13] the twentieth century debate about active and passive audiences took on a peculiar turn in the Yugoslav context. Especially in the latter half of the 1960s, Yugoslav audiences were not regarded as helpless victims of media influence, but were rather seen as distinctly active. Driven by the revolutionary trust of the communist ideology, political elites encouraged media professionals to use communication technologies as a tool of social mobilization for the communist cause, using innovative formats premised on audience participation. Similar ideas about politically engaged audiences appeared in a range of other socialist countries, as well as in the liberal democracies of the West, for instance in connection to the introduction of public broadcasting in the US.[14] These similarities cannot be explained within the framework of Cold War thinking, but instead require us to take into account transnational factors such as the cultural exchanges across the Iron Curtain in the 1960s, the shift of political contestation into the realm of the private and the everyday, and the parallel politicisation of cultural practices and forms – including those tied to television.[15]

## 3. Socialist Television as a Cultural, Political and Economic Object

As mentioned earlier, much of the recent research on socialist television challenges the almost exclusive concern with political dimensions of television in existing research, and often seeks to correct this misbalance by paying attention to popular television and entertainment genres and by understanding television as a cultural object.[16] Although it is undoubtedly important to advance research in this area, we should be wary of slipping into an approach that privileges the textual and content dimensions of socialist television at the expense of furthering a more holistic understanding of the ways in which these are shaped by their political and economic underpinnings.[17]

For instance, television entertainment genres may well have been scorned by communist cultural and political elites at the time, yet they nonetheless had profound political implications. As studies of socialist historical adventure series[18] and the 'block of flats' genre[19] suggest, popular television genres acted either as an instrument for shoring up the legitimacy of communist rule, or as a conduit for subtle critique of socialist politics, and often both at the same time. Any consideration of cultural dimensions of socialist television therefore needs to continue to engage with the

[12] Aniko Imre, 'Adventures in Early Socialist Edutainment', in Imre et al., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe*, pp. 30-46.
[13] Sabina Mihelj, 'Audience History as a History of Ideas: The "Active Audience" of the Socialist Sixties', ***European Journal of Communication***, 29, 5, 2014, forthcoming, 2014, forthcoming.
[14] Laurie Ouellette, '**TV Viewing as Good Citizenship? Political Rationality, Enlightened Democracy and PBS**', *Cultural Studies*, 13, 1, 1999, p. 64.
[15] For a fuller argument see
Anonymised, 'The Politics of Privatization: Television Entertainment and the Yugoslav Sixties', in Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, eds, ***The Socialist Sixties: The Global Movement in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Cuba***, Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 251-67.
[16] E.g. Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV*; Imre et al., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe*; Goddard, ed, *Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe*.
[17] For a similar argument, albeit developed in the context of a discussion about potential synergies between postcolonial studies and (post)socialist television studies, see Aniko Imre, '**Postcolonial Media Studies in Postsocialist Europe**', *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, 41, 1, 2014, p. 120
[18] Imre, 'Adventures in Early Socialist Edutainment'.
[19] Dorota Ostrowska, 'The Carnival of the Absurd: Stanislaw Bareja's Alternatywy 4 and Polish Television in the 1980s', in Imre et al., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe*, pp. 65-80.

political dimensions as well, and seek to understand how the production, dissemination and reception of cultural texts interacted with political hierarchies of power.

Another aspect of socialist television worth further consideration is its economic dimension.
We hardly know anything about the particular modes of financing socialist television, and even when this aspect is addressed, the general assumption seems to be that socialist media industries, being controlled by the political elites, were automatically and directly financed by the state, with little if any influence of the market. While the involvement of the state and the party in socialist media economies is undeniable, such an assumption glosses over significant variations within and between different socialist media systems, as well as marked changes over time, including the involvement of non-state actors in influencing the distribution of state funds and the increasing reliance on advertising as a complementary source of revenue in many socialist countries.

Yugoslav television offers a case in point. Spurred by broader changes in Yugoslav politics and economy over the course of the 1960s, Yugoslav media policies became increasingly open to exploring sources of funding beyond those provided by the state or subscription. A widely debated programmatic document that set out the key principles of Yugoslav media policy, adopted in 1965, was adamant about the benefits of financial independence of the media, and suggested that state support of the media should be allowed only where market circumstances do not allow financial independence.[20] Another policy document from the same period, which examined the position of culture in the context of market economy, identified the market as by far the most important instrument for financing culture, and described it as 'a neutral and objectivised mechanism' that is 'most in tune with the self-managing institutional basis of our economy'.[21]

Television professionals in the country were quick at exploiting the opportunities created by these new policies, making their work increasingly reliant on market forces. The latter half of the 1960s saw marked changes in the structure of funding sources for television, with the share of advertising revenue growing from 6.8% in 1966 to 23.1% in 1971. In the same period, the share of revenue generated through subscription dropped from 88.3% to 74.1%.[22] The proportion of broadcast time taken up by adverts also increased, reaching 8.2% of total broadcast time in 1970.[23] In case of some of the imported programming, such as the boxing match between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali in 1971, advertising income constituted the sole source for purchasing broadcasting rights.[24] Typical products advertised included consumer products such as food, chemical products, cosmetics and services and retail,[25] which suggests that advertising was aimed primarily at private consumers in a manner known from commercially funded media in the west.

Another feature familiar from the West was the interweaving of celebrity culture and advertising, exemplified in the frequent appearance of celebrities in television adverts and, conversely, the prominence of television celebrities in print adverts. The two images below offer good examples of these trends; the first involves the appearance of a popular stand-up comedian in a television advert for a cleaning product, while the second advert, published in a TV guide, features a central character from the hugely popular television series produced by TV Zagreb, *Naše malo misto* ('Our Small Town,' 1970-71).

[20] Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, (hereafter AY), f. 142, 207, Jugoslovenski institut za novinarstvo, 'Dokumentacija uz teze o mestu, ulozi i zadacima štampe, radija i televizije o daljem razvoju društveno-ekonomskih odnosa,' 1965, p. 5.
[21] AY, f. 130, 595-987, Ljubomir Madzar and Sofija Popov, Kultura kao delatnost i stvaralastvo u uslovima robne proizvodnje', 1969, p. 1.
[22] Vlado Milosevic, 'Razvoj ekonomske osnove Televizije Beograd', in *Iz istorije Televizije Beograd*, Television Belgrade, 1984, p. 137.
[23] *Godisnjak Jugoslovenske radiotelevizije 1971*, Belgrade: Jugoslovenska radiotelevizije, 1972, p. 327.
[24] Ibid.
[25] *Godisnjak Jugoslovenske radiotelevizije 1968*, Belgrade: Jugoslovenska radiotelevizije, 1969, p. 327., p. 247






On the left-hand side, stand-up comedian Marica Hrdalo appearing in a commercial broadcast on TV Belgrade in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Click **here** to view the full advert.

On the right-hand side, actor Asja Kisić, famous for her impersonation of Bepina in TV Zagreb's *Naše malo misto*, advertises a spice mix on the back page of the TV Studio magazine. Reproduced with permission.

How shall we interpret this increasing reliance on advertising within the framework of a still ostensibly socialist broadcasting system? It may be tempting to suggest that the trends outlined above marked the beginning of the slippery slope that eventually gave way to the full-scale marketization of the media sphere in the post-socialist era. Yet, such a hasty interpretation may well miss the peculiar democratising potential that market incentives had in the context of socialist television.

It is worth noting that the growth of advertising in the Yugoslav 1960s coincided with the expansion of audience research, and that several of the first audience studies focused specifically on advertising. This early audience research was premised on the link between popularity and advertising revenue, and either sought to establish viewing patterns to determine the most effective timing of advertising blocks, or examined audience attitudes to commercials with the aim to inform editorial decisions and improve advertising. Arguably, the growing reliance on advertising revenue therefore contributed to the increased importance of audience preferences, and thereby to the growth of entertainment genres in prime time slots.

While many of the popular programmes that gained prominence in the 1960s may have had little direct political resonance, at least some also featured opened critical reflections on the socialist system, uttered by protagonists of popular television programmes, including, most notably, comic television series. A good example is found in the comic series *Spavajte mirno* ('Sleep Peacefully,' TV Belgrade, 1968), which revolved around a central character with a tellingly oxymoronic name Srečko Napast ('Lucky Menace'), a representative of the Yugoslav 'working people' who lost his job and was caught stealing caviar from a local shop.[26] The series comprised eight episodes, all addressing major 'social problems,' including unemployment, income disparities, social solidarity, and corruption. 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.' The series struck a sensitive chord with audiences, provoking unease among the communist authorities.[27]

In sum, the partial marketization of Yugoslav television in the 1960s did not lead to a narrowing down of the public realm, but instead provided – along with changes in the political realm and other factors – an additional incentive

[26] Radio-Television of Serbia, Center for Public Opinion, Program and Audience Research, Belgrade (hereafter RTS-CPOPAR), Report 354, 'Analiza pisma gledalaca upućenih serijskoj emisiji "Spavaje mirno" + pisma gledalaca upućenih serijskoj emisiji "Spavaje mirno"—izvodi', Part I, 1969, p. 1.

[27] For a fuller analysis of this series and its engagement with contentious issues – including the limits of its critique – see Mihelj, 'The Politics of Privatization'.

for opening up the waves of Yugoslav television to critical public debate. Existing research on socialist advertising suggests that Yugoslavia was perhaps an outlier, but certainly not an exception among socialist countries.[28] It therefore seems appropriate to pay closer attention to the economic underpinnings of socialist television and their implications for television as a political and cultural form.

A comparative investigation of financing models adopted by different socialist television, and their relationships with different types of socialist political systems, may also offer the basis for advancing the project of comparative media systems research in ways that go beyond the existing typologies of Western media systems. What were the distinguishing traits of the socialist media system – including its sub-types – and how do these compare to the distinguishing traits of Western European and North American media systems? Can we describe them within the framework of parameters used to describe Western media systems – the structure of media markets, political parallelism, professionalization, and the role of the state in the media system[29] – or does the description require us to introduce new parameters?

## 4. Overcoming Methodological Nationalism: Socialist Television, Class and Multiple Modernities

There are several methodological aspects of socialist television research that I could discuss here, but I shall focus only on one, namely the problem of methodological nationalism – namely, the tendency to treat the nation-state as a natural unit of analysis. I shall argue that the study of socialist television offers a particularly good basis for developing an original alternative to methodological nationalism. However, to develop that alternative, we need to step a bit further than just examining the transnational aspects of socialist television.

The vast majority of existing research on socialist television is based on national case studies, and although at least some of the studies do acknowledge television's transnational dimensions – for instance by noting foreign programme imports, professional exchanges, cultural influences, or simply similarities with developments elsewhere – the overall narrative is one that focuses on developing a *national* television history. The most immediate corollary of such an approach is that any original insights are presented within the frame of a national history, limiting our ability to distinguish between national specificities, shared features of socialist television, or characteristics of television as a global phenomenon. This, in turn, also limits our ability to develop convincing interpretations for what we are interested in. Working within a national frame, we have a tendency to explain developments found in our particular case studies primarily with reference to national factors – specific national political events, social or economic trends at national level, or national cultural traditions. While we may acknowledge the potential impact of international factors, the national container of our research makes it difficult to gauge the relative importance of these factors vis-à-vis-domestic factors. Ultimately, this also restricts the possibilities for theoretical innovation that will be relevant beyond our little field.

Let me take the example of the prominence of Western imports in Yugoslav television programming.[30] It is very tempting to explain this prominence by reference to Yugoslavia's peculiar geopolitical position, its relative independence from the Soviet bloc, its openness to the West, and the specific political and economic reforms that can be traced back to Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948. However, if we consider existing evidence of reliance on Western television imports in other socialist countries, we quickly realise that these national factors – albeit important – cannot offer a full explanation. Even though the figures vary considerably from country to country,

[28] Philip Hanson, *Advertising and Socialism*, International Arts and Sciences Press, 1974; Patrick Hyder Patterson, ***Bought and Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia***, Cornell University Press, 2011.
[29] A key reference in this field is Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's ***Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of media and Politics***, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
[30] For a fuller discussion of issues outlined here see Mihelj, 'Television Entertainment', pp. 13-20.

it is clear that several other socialist television stations were also rather open to Western programming. For instance, in the early 1970s, a total of 32% of all imported programming on Hungarian television came from the UK, France, and Western Germany.[31] A decade later, an average of 43% of imported television programmes in Eastern Europe originated from Western Europe, and only marginally more – 45% – from other socialist countries in the region.[32]

Evidently, Yugoslav exceptionalism does not provide the full story. To be able to explain the patterns of reliance on Western imports, we may need to consider a combination of other factors, some of them regional, others global. At regional level, the partial opening to the West following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 spurred the growth in East–West trade and cultural exchanges across the Soviet bloc, not just in Yugoslavia. When considering global factors, it is important to note that the reliance on Western imports, and especially imports from the US and the UK, was a feature shared by television cultures globally in the 1950s and the 1960s.[33] As such, it cannot be explained solely by reference to Cold War politics, but should in part be seen as a result of shared, global developments in television industries. These include the fact that the growth of television audiences soon outpaced domestic production capabilities, and started generating considerable demand for imported programs. US producers, in particular, were quick at spotting these opportunities and adapting their distribution policies to the needs of a global market. By 1964, major U.S. commercial broadcasters had an established presence abroad: CBS was operating in 170 countries and NBC in 80.[34]

How can we avoid the pitfalls of methodological nationalism outlined above? The first thing to emphasise is that we do not need to jettison our expertise in national cases altogether, or hurry to build complex transnational projects spanning television cultures across the world – though we should definitely put those on the agenda, too. Rather, overcoming methodological nationalism first requires us to get a better grasp of what it is that we mean by methodological nationalism, and what exactly it is that makes it problematic. The literature on methodological nationalism is far too vast and rich to be surveyed comprehensively here, so I will offer only a couple of pointers.

I shall work with the basic definition, which identifies methodological nationalism with a tendency to treat the nation-state 'as the natural and necessary representation of modern society'.[35] Let us pause to reflect on what this definition actually means. It does *not* mean that the nation-state is not a representation of modern society, or by extension that we should *abandon* studying socialist television through a national lens. Rather, it means that we should acknowledge that *national* television is only one possible form of modern television. It may well appear as the *only* one, or at least *the most important* one, but we must be careful to pay attention also to other, non-national forms of television.

The first non-national form of television to consider is of course transnational television – which can be broken down further into regional and global aspects. This may mean examining cross border television viewing practices, transnational borrowing and adaptations of genres, transnational exchanges and adaptations of television technologies, transnational television institutions, transnational social, economic, cultural and political factors shaping national television cultures, etc. There is some interesting work already being done on these dimensions, and there is surely more to come.[36]

One problem with existing work in this area, however, is that it focuses almost exclusively on exchanges with the West, which has the unfortunate side-effect of reproducing the west-centric bias of existing work on television. To counter this, we need to make sure that we also address other transnational aspects of socialist television, tied to

[31] Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Tapio Varis, *Television Traffic – A One-way Street? A Survey and Analysis of the International Flow of Television Material*, UNESCO, 1974, p. 25.
[32] Tapio Varis, *International Flow of Television Programmes*, UNESCO, 1985, p. 35.
[33] Timothy Havens, Global Television Marketplace, British Film Institute, 206, pp. 16-24.
[34] Burton Paulu, *Radio and Broadcasting on the European Continent*, University of Minnesota Press, 1967, p. 215.
[35] Daniel Chernilo, '**The Critique of Methodological Nationalism: Theory and History**', *Thesis Eleven*, 106, 1, p.99.
[36] Examples include Lars Lundgren, '**Live from Moscow: The celebration of Yuri Gagarin and Transnational Television in Europe**', *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 1, 2, 2012, pp 45-55; Dana Mustata, 'Within Excess Times and a Deficit Spaces. Cross-border Television as a Transnational Phenomenon in 1980s Romania', in Andreas Fickers and Catherine Johnson, eds, ***Transnational Television History: a Comparative Approach***, Routledge, 2012, pp. 89-102; Annemarie Sorescu-Marinkovic, 'The World through the TV Screen: Everyday Life under Communism on the Western Romanian Border', *Martor: The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review*, 17, 2012, pp. 173-188.

international exchanges among socialist countries themselves, but also globally, with former colonies in Africa, the Middle East and South-east Asia. Socialism has a transnational history of its own, and television was a part of it – in ways that are yet to be fully understood and examined.

To fully exploit the opportunities offered by our field, we also need to realise that the transnational is only *one* possible alternative to the national mode of imagining and institutionalising television. As socialist television scholars, we are particularly well positioned to see beyond this obvious alternative to the national, and examine the other central category that served as the basis of representation and organisation of modern societies – including modern media and television – namely, class. It is intriguing to see that this particular aspect of socialist television has not yet received the attention it deserves. If we are serious about bringing our study of socialist television to bear on the understanding of television globally, then we must tackle the ways in which socialist television sought to position its viewers not only as members of nations, but also, and perhaps primarily – at least on paper if not always in practice - as members of particular classes, tied to occupations and positions in social structures that cut across national boundaries.

To put it differently, we need to start thinking of socialist television as a specific subtype of modern television, designed to promote an alternative vision of modernity, modern belonging, politics, economy and culture, structured around the category of class, and aimed at advancing social equality. This alternative vision was premised on an understanding of progress that differed considerably from the one we are accustomed to today, which reduces progress to never-ending economic growth, capital accumulation and consumer spending.[37] As Heather Gumbert argues, building on arguments put forward by Susan Buck-Morss: 'the story of modernity is not just the story of liberal capitalism; it is the story of liberalism and socialism and their relationship to one another'.[38] Our task is to inscribe the story of socialist television into this story of multiple modernities and multiple visions of progress.

We may well wish to argue that socialist television gradually moved away from its original mission to inspire a specifically socialist modernity, and that the initial emphasis on engendering imagined communities of viewers tied by common class interests gradually gave way to fostering imagined communities of ethnic nations and consumers – but we should be careful not to give in to the temptation of retrospectively reading into socialist television the trends that eventually led to the kinds of television we know today. This means remaining attuned to alternative visions and modes of organisation, and paths not taken that may still have the potential to inspire alternative futures of television.

## Biography:

Sabina Mihelj is Reader in Media and Cultural Analysis in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. She is the author of *Media Nations: Communicating Belonging and Exclusion in the Modern World* (Palgrave, 2011) and co-editor of *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective* (Ashgate, 2012, with J. Downey). Her recent research focuses on issues of collective identity, nationalism, mass communication, Cold War culture, and memory, with particular reference to the Eastern and Central Europe after 1945. She is currently leading a major comparative project investigating the relationship between television, everyday life and memory in socialist and post-socialist Eastern Europe (Leverhulme Trust, 2013-16).

[37] For a more extensive discussion of different models of organisation of modern media, including those tied to class and the notion of nations and communities of comrades tied by common class interests, see Sabina Mihelj, ***Media Nations: Communicating Belonging and Exclusion in the Modern World***, Palgrave, 2011, pp. 70-94., 2011, pp. 70-94.

[38] Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism*, p. 4.


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