

REFLECTING ON *THE CULTURE OF POWER*, TEN YEARS ON

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Eric D. Gordy

Clark University, Massachusetts, USA
egordy@clarku.edu

Abstract. *Ten years after the fieldwork that led to *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, the author reflects on the book's reception, and considers some questions that were not taken up in the original research. Intervening events are taken into account as they relate to issues of the autonomy of culture, to theories of nationalist mobilisation, and to the question of characterising social divisions in contemporary Serbia. The author clarifies his position on conflicts between popular musical cultures, and considers how the cultural meanings of musical forms may be changing. Finally, the author considers the question of how much has changed over the ten years since the original research, and ways in which the construction of "transition" impacts on political culture and legitimacy.*

Key words: *political sociology, cultural sociology, nationalism, popular music, transition.*

My book *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, filed as a doctoral dissertation in 1997 and first published in English in 1999 (with a Serbo-Croatian translation of a portion of the book by Karel Turza and Adrijana Zaharijević appearing in 2000, and of the entire text by Biljana Lukić appearing in 2001) was the result of fieldwork conducted in Belgrade during 1994 and 1995. Most of its value comes from using a "thick description" of the social and cultural environment of that time and place as a basis for some broader suggestions about how the politics and culture of Serbia and Southeastern Europe might be understood. However much I tried to satisfy the desire of the ordinary urban citizens, who were isolated and ignored at the time and whose conversations with me form the foundation of the material presented in the work, for somebody to "*tell our story!*," the work does not amount to more than what is described above. If, in the meantime it has taken on some importance beyond that of a medium-term ethnographic study, that is because other researchers, with access to greater resources and broader insight, were not doing the same thing at the same time.

At the time of its initial release, *The Culture of Power* received several reviews. Most of these were welcoming toward the research, particularly its effort to produce an account of political dynamics which were not confined to an analysis of rhetorics and conflicts at

the top level. The concentration of attention on the top levels of the political structure is a tradition of American analysis of the region which dates back several decades. It has its roots in the necessity of following events from afar, in the Cold War context of the development of "area studies," in the application of the principle of "Kremlinology" to the discussion of other environments, and in the domination of the field by political scientists of a particular generation and orientation. While Yugoslavia had been an attractive site of research for many American specialists in Eastern Europe because of the ways in which it had partly succeeded in escaping and transcending the division of the continent into mutually hostile blocs, there can be little question that the perception of the world as divided into blocs continued to exercise a meaningful influence on the thinking of American Balkanology's "old guard." The violent dissolution of the country, and its descent into the sort of authoritarian monadicity which Yugoslavia had mostly avoided since 1965, shocked and surprised most of the members of this academic generation. As longstanding intellectual friendships collapsed under the pressure to assign blame and choose sides, serious analysis suffered, and a vacuum was created. This is where *The Culture of Power* made its entry: it was not a rhetorical effort to take sides, it took a sociological perspective which had been mostly unavailable to English-language readers up to that time, and it applied a mixture of methodologies which generally do not find a place in conventional political analysis.

As a result, the publication took on a prominence which can only be described as unusual for the first major work by a young scholar. An early review (Kerenji, 2001) noted that most of the predictions in the book turned out to be true. Most university programs which offer a specialty in the region have it somewhere on their syllabus. It may have contributed to a growing perception that cultural factors need to be taken into account in understanding the politics of the region (especially when a powerful force in politics continues to be exercised by nationalism, an effort to harness culture to politics which traditional political science finds itself singularly incapable of explaining). It probably encouraged outside observers to think, in 1999 when it appeared deeply entrenched, that the Milošević regime could be compelled from power. When one critical review (Seroka, 2000) said that the book was "not the authoritative source" on Serbia in the 1990s, my impulse was to take the comment not as a critique, but as an amazing incident of somebody raising the possibility that it might be thought of as an authoritative source. Only in retrospect does it occur to me that given the deep crisis of the field at the time and the paucity of new works engaging the region at the ground level, my work could be accorded that sort of importance.

That is not to say that *The Culture of Power* is or was "the authoritative source." There are shortcomings which were noted at the time, as well as many that have become apparent to me since. In this essay I would like to take the opportunity to raise and address some of those, and also to reflect a bit on how the environment has changed in the ten years since the original fieldwork was conducted. It may also be the case that the book presented some insights which continue to be valuable, and I would like to take the opportunity to offer some suggestions as to what those might be.

ASSESSMENTS AND CRITIQUES

As might be expected, many of the initial critiques were political in nature. Although the book did not receive a lot of negative critical attention, those negative reviews which it did receive (Simic, 2000; Seroka, 2000; Djurkovic, 2002) were of mostly polemical value and had little to do with the work itself or its methodological or theoretical framework. Their principal goal was to identify the author of the book as either more "pro-Serbian" or "anti-Serbian" than the ways in which the reviewers perceived themselves. Other than noting that these responses exist, the less said about them the better. Few of the questions they raised have any importance now.

More serious critiques have to do with questions of the relative autonomy of culture (Kligman, 2002) and with the issue of whether "national" mobilization is derived from something existing in fact or produced out of whole cloth (Bieber, 2005). Another line of critique calls for additional historical context, in particular on the issue of whether the framework for dissolution and criminalization of the society had already been laid by a generation of Communist practice in the preceding decades (Bougarel, 2002).

The autonomy of culture is of course a perennial theoretical question, which is not likely to be resolved by a single study and certainly not in this brief essay. The variety of possible approaches ranges, in principle, from the early approaches of thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Matthew Arnold who saw culture as providing a framework for the improvement and remaking of society (an approach later rejected by Pierre Bourdieu as "the ideology of charisma") to the dogmatic applications of Marxist theory which considers culture as possibly a reflection of "material" relations, but in no case as their creator or as an influence on them. As is usually the case, doctrinaire positions contribute little to the production of new knowledge. A usable sociology of culture adopts a middle-range position: autonomous or not, culture is always embedded in a system of social relationships, influenced by them and seeking to intervene into them. It may be less important to ask to what degree culture is autonomous from politics, as each field seeks to assert control over the other. This relationship takes place in ways that are culturally structured differently in different environments (the various *Dallas* studies [Ang, 1989; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Silj, 1988] demonstrate the point eloquently) – a point which will be important as the present discussion moves to the question of globalisation of culture.

On the question of nationalist mobilisation, this issue remains controversial among observers of the region. The perception that the elections of 1990 and 1991, which brought parties organised around maximal demands to power in every republic of the former Yugoslavia except Macedonia, represented an authentic mobilisation of popular sentiment remains a popular one in political discourse and is also advocated by some researchers (Hayden, 1999; Malešević, 2001). At the opposite end of the spectrum is a constructivist perspective, according to which manipulation and political propaganda are regarded as having created interethnic conflicts where none existed (Thompson, 1995; Kurspahić, 2003). I think that both perspectives are incomplete: the first treats an artifact of a political moment as though it were a fixed quantity, and the second treats real phenomena as though they were epiphenomena. The "destruction of alternatives" hypothesis attempts to take into account both the political inheritance of an earlier authoritarianism and the efforts of the subsequent regime to find a basis of legitimacy, and so it avoids both of the above extremes. It has been elaborated in several directions by subsequent research, par-

ticularly by Ana Dević (2002) who connects the appeal of authoritarian movements to feelings of powerlessness in the period of Communist decline, and by Chip Gagnon (2004), who details the extent to which the encouragement of national conflict was a shared strategy of authoritarian regimes in Serbia and Croatia. My approach to the question nationalism remains grounded in a firm rejection of the primordialist arguments advanced by theorists like Anthony Smith (1993) and popularised by any number of political writers, and an insistence on the value of the perspective offered by John Breuilly (1993), who characterizes nationalism as one of several strategies by which political actors seek to intervene in and establish influence over a political community. While there is no point in dismissing the genuine appeal of invitations to national sentiment to many people, there are probably few assumptions more culturally limited or potentially dangerous than the proposition that nationalism represents a sort of biologically determined consensus from which all other approaches are simply deviance.

In addition to the critiques of the work that have been raised by various readers since it was released, I have some issues with it myself. Probably the major one of these has to do with a schema of categorisation which was imposed by the conditions under which the work was done, but in retrospect could benefit from far more intensive elaboration: this is the presentation of social conflict in 1990s Serbia as dichotomous. The dichotomy involved on the one side a pro-regime bloc constituted by residual powerholders from the preceding period, a new "criminal elite" emerging from the conditions of lawlessness and disorder created by the regime, and bases of support drawn from those conservative elements of the rural, less educated and displaced "urban peasant" portions of the population. On the other side was a more diffuse collection of young urbanites, intellectuals, cosmopolitans, and people who had been involved with or had benefit from the liberal currents of Yugoslavian communism.

In retrospect it is not entirely clear that these two groups constituted blocs rather than temporary and opportunistic coalitions. The emergent "criminal elite" appears to have since divided: one group which relied solely on its sponsorship by the old regime has generally moved underground and declined, at least after its unsuccessful attempt to take power by force in 2003 (Vasic, 2004), while another group which constructed its capital principally around the opportunities afforded by lawlessness appears to have little difficulty accommodating itself to changed political conditions. The divide between the urban and rural publics would appear, especially given changes since 1997, to have more to do with the distribution of independent media outlets than with the nature of urban or rural life – the expansion of ANEM in 1997, especially, changed the information landscape of small to medium-sized population centers around Serbia, with major consequences for the opinion landscape. Similarly with regard to age, recent research by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (Jarić in Politika, 2005) suggests that much of what *The Culture of Power* interpreted as generational differences may be differences deriving from the diffusion of hopelessness.

One dichotomy, however, stands behind the social divisions portrayed in research ten years ago and would appear to function still. That is the division between general overarching worldviews which are *generally open* and ones which are *generally closed*. Even with different political actors these general orientations continue to explain most of the political conflicts having to do with the identity and direction of the country. What would seem to call for further explanation (not only in Serbian society, but as a goal of political

sociology in general) are the factors contributing to the development of these two general outlooks.

A further corollary to the question of dichotomous presentation has to do with the ascription of political positions. Maybe inevitably as a consequence of the time in which it was written, there is a tendency to treat *opposition* as if it were a unit of analysis rather than a relative position which can be occupied in different ways. This may be a strong temptation in the description of the political systems of Eastern Europe – no less an historian than Joseph Rothschild (1974) often made reference to "a governing party" which remained essentially the same although it went under different names at different times. However, it is increasingly clear with greater distance from October 2000 that if a sizable social and political bloc was unified by opposition to the Milošević regime, there was little else to unify many portions of this bloc. Similarly, to regard the groups organised around the Serbian Radical Party and, to a lesser degree, what remains of the Socialist Party of Serbia and its clients as an *opposition* is to treat the category as entirely political and empty of cultural meaning. It may be more useful to speak of political parties in terms of more globally conceived political orientations, as first attempted by Mikloš Biro (1994).

One of the conclusions often drawn from the book which I would like to address is the way in which the study has been understood by many of its readers as an exercise in confirming the snobbish idolisation of *rokenrol* and dismissal of *turbofolk*. This was neither the intention of the research nor is it a perspective which the author shares. My own tastes and fascinations with music for its own sake aside, what made the two forms fascinating in the 1990s were not their musical characteristics but the fact that they were widely used as a way for ordinary people to understand the divisions in the society in which they lived. This popular shorthand had little to do with music, and a lot to do with ways in which members of one audience perceived members of another audience. Absent this web of association, *rokenrol* and *turbofolk* would represent nothing more than two items on the menu of choices of popular entertainment. The web of association was created by political engagement – on the part of the state in facilitating the rapid and massive expansion of one form of entertainment, and on the part of the *rokenrol* public in investing another form of entertainment with meaning. The cognitive associations which once caused these two musical forms to stand for something are far weaker now. To the degree that aesthetic questions are at stake, there is just as little reason to underestimate the capacity of *rokenrol* to produce deadening and formulaic works as there is to underestimate the capacity of *turbofolk* to produce genuine and exciting innovations. To the degree that popular art is a relatively autonomous activity, this depends more on the artists involved and on the development of commercial markets than on the political context in which they operate. The analysis of the retreat of the Hungarian rock music culture by Anna Szemere (2001) would appear to apply increasingly well to Serbia.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are some elements of *The Culture of Power* which I would argue continue to be of some possible value to researchers, and which I would hope would make up a part of the long-term legacy of the work, if it has any. First, it should have established the necessity of ethnographic engagement with questions of politics and culture as an indispensable

part of the understanding of any social environment. In that regard, the approach taken in the work can be applied to other research environments and times. Second, the work's emphasis on general social orientations as units of analysis offers a useful model for approaching social dimensions of political conflict, which might be applied well beyond the environment of the original research (perhaps even to the contemporary United States, as a deeply divided society in which an unpopular governing coalition frequently calls forth arguments for its legitimacy based on a strictly conceived cultural essentialism). Third, some light has been shed on relations between states and societies by the introduction of a way of examining the processes and consequences of what has been called, variously, the *destruction of alternatives* (Gordy, 1999), *the destruction of society* (Lazić *et.al.*, 1994), *sociocide* (Turza, 2003) or *decivilisation* (Bolčić, 1994).

A minimal program for further research which might complete the tasks begun in *The Culture of Power* would probably include an expansion of the analysis of music to other sectors of cultural life, as a way of further elaborating the instrumentalisation of diverging audiences and the politicisation of the differences between them. In particular, a productive area of analysis which continues to be important was suggested by Ivan Čolović (1995) in his early foray into the political and cultural analysis of sports fans. There is also good reason for further research to try to address the question of exoticism by exploring whether or not Serbian society is unique in terms of the dimensions of analysis in the book. I expect that similar phenomena can be observed in other social environments, especially in the region. At the very least, it would probably be of general interest to see similar analyses of the political and social environments of Croatia and of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

CHANGES SINCE THE PERIOD OF INITIAL RESEARCH

In some respects *The Culture of Power* could be thought of as a period piece, appropriate to understanding a particular formation at a particular time. It is marked by the time of its production in too many ways to detail, a condition which becomes easier to recognise as time goes on. Some of the conditions which have changed in the meantime are obvious, but it may be that those elements which tend to date the work are more subtle and less obvious. Let me point to what I think may have been the most meaningful changes in Serbian society and culture since the publication of the book.

First, culture has seen the defanging of turbo-folk, although its remnants continue to be dominant. For the first time since its initial appearance, turbo-folk is nothing more than a form of popular music. If it ever was the case that it did, too, turbo-folk no longer stands as a synecdoche for folk music (in fact, the resemblance between turbo-folk and folk is less than it ever has been). In the meantime, a number of artists and producers have been working intensively on the recuperation of folk culture, shifting its orientation from the commercial to the aesthetic realms. The result has been the domestic and international promotion of a number of artists both traditional and innovative, in which projects such as the Mostar Sevdah Reunion and B92's *"Serbia: Sounds Global"* initiative have played a considerable role. On the one hand, this effort to recuperate the aesthetic and representational value of folk might be said to emulate the reification of folk by Communist regimes in an earlier period, but the lack of official sanction (and support) means that there are differences both in audience and orientation.

Second, the *rokenrol* culture remains a minority urban culture. This is probably not surprising given the fact the culture initially developed during a period of rapid urbanisation and general openness, conditions which are not reproduced in the contemporary environment. Contemporary surveys also continue to suggest that young people are more inclined to find places for themselves in another country than contribute to the development of a congenial atmosphere at home. These are of course not ideal conditions for the development of domestic cultural forms of any type. At the same time, the reestablishment of exchange and communication across the borders of what was once Yugoslavia will be meaningful in terms of the development of musical, visual and literary arts. This is an inevitable development, even if it has not developed at the pace which some cultural actors might hope for. There are certainly cultural (and especially political!) actors to whom isolation is preferable, whether for ideological reasons or as a way of achieving a protected market for mediocrity. The success of strategies of isolation will depend on the degree to which the country remains marginal.

Third, it is surprising that even absent the regime which was described in the initial research, many elements of the description of the political environment, especially its stagnation and exclusivity, would appear to still apply. The same weakness infects the political atmosphere, with the crucial difference that it now lacks a center. This means that the positive consequences of the disappearance of an overwhelming authoritarian structure are somewhat compensated by the negative consequences of nothing new having been built in its place, and the recurring fear of the *return of the never-repressed*. Over time, this is likely to mean that the failure of a new regime to systematically confront the legacy of its predecessor, itself a product of political weakness and uncertain legitimacy, will probably continue to further weaken the emergent order as time goes on.

Probably most importantly, relations with the global cultural and political system have changed. The world which was at one point a source of hope may in some respects begin to present itself as a threat. In the Serbia of the 1990s, many if not most people experienced isolation from global institutions and global currents as a shock, compared the demolished international reputation of the country to the welcome it had experienced under Tito, and anticipated that the opportunity to rejoin the world could only bring relief. Five years after the departure of the regime that brought on the isolation, it is not necessarily clear that all of the expectations that were attached to reapproachment have been met.

One reason for this has to do with the manner in which powerful international states have structured their approach to the successor states of the former Yugoslavia: not as subjects of cooperation but as objects of attention. Whether the current conditions in Serbia are described as "incomplete transition," "blocked transition," "delayed transition," or something else, the effects are similar. One of the consequences is that the state is approached as something less than a full participant in bilateral relations, either as a potential recipient of conditioned assistance or as a testing ground on which various abstract ideas about "building democracy" in different environments can be played out (Gordy, 2002). The long-term result of this is that the state is compelled to occupy a junior position in global political and economic relations for an extended time.

The first consequence depends on powerful international actors maintaining an interest in "building democracy" in that particular place. More likely is a second consequence, which we are probably already witnessing. That is a scenario in which the dramatic events which first sparked the interest of outside actors recede in time, and the testing ground

begins to lose out to other testing grounds with more recent conflicts or "transitions." In this case it means that the actors who were once interested in environments like the states of the former Yugoslavia take a greater interest in environments like Afghanistan and Iraq, where the same sorts of projects are carried out with the same lack of resolution. In all cases, the result is not the establishment of some type of model democracy, but the achievement of a point of stagnation which is sustained after the outside actors lose interest. This is why terms like "transition" are misleading: they imply that states are moving into an eschatological dynamic at the end of which some ideal state will be attained (in this regard the rhetoric of liberal democracy *parallels* the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism), while what is actually attained is an uneasy equilibrium in which the strongest argument in favor of a weak new order is the threat that an old and dangerous one might return.

In another context I have described the kind of transition processes experienced in the region as "democracy from above," and observed that "the currency of democracy was precipitously devalued as soon as it came into everyday circulation" (Gordy, 2004). Among the consequences of this are institutions which retain the weaknesses and legitimacy problems of their authoritarian predecessors, along with increased hopelessness and abstention from participation in democratic procedures, as evidenced by such indicators as abstention from voting (Mihailović, *et. al.*, 2003). Democracy quickly shows itself to be no less capable of producing frustration and disappointment than other political arrangements, with the crucial difference that it does not offer the hope that problems could be solved by replacing an undemocratic order.

It would be easy to minimise or dismiss the weaknesses encountered by democracy as it emerges in Serbia as the result of purely local factors or a political culture which is not receptive. I am inclined to think that a more global phenomenon is at stake. Many of the difficulties that Serbia faces with regard to trust in institutions are also faced in longer-established democratic states, such as the United States and the member states of the European Union (Gordy, 2004). This is a weakness observable at other political moments as well, as in post-World War I Europe (Mazower, 2000), when liberal democratic states offering legality, free trade and protection of civil liberties, but very little in the way of social welfare or care for human needs, found themselves in a weak position to challenge the age's then-emergent authoritarian movements. There are lessons from that period to be taken now, in Serbia and elsewhere.

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OSVRT NA KULTURU VLASTI, DESET GODINA KASNIJE

Eric D. Gordy

Deset godina nakon istraživanja, autor knjige Kultura vlasti u Srbiji razmatra recepciju te knjige, i uzima u obzir neka pitanja koja nisu bila uključena u originalnom istraživanju. Događaji za vreme i nakon istraživanja uzeti su u obzir u odnosu na pitanja autonomije kulture, nacionalističke mobilizacije, kao i na pitanja karaktera društvenih podela u savremenoj Srbiji. Autor pojašnjava svoj stav o sukobima u popularnoj muzičkoj kulturi, i navodi mogućnost da se kulturni značaj muzičke forme menja. Na kraju, autor postavlja pitanje koliko je situacija u Srbiji drugačija u odnosu na period od pre deset godina, i kako se konstrukcija "tranzicije" odražava na svakodnevni život i legitimitet.

Ključne reči: politička sociologija, sociologija kulture, nacionalizam, popularna muzika, tranzicija