

Trever Hagen
Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground

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The book *Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground* seems to be the culmination of Hagen's publishing activities related to the Czech "underground" and especially to the music ensemble The Plastic People of the Universe. Prior to this work, the Czech underground and its association with the anti-communist political opposition was already explored by Skilling (1980). Afterwards, several English-language academic popular music studies on rock and underground music during state socialism in the Eastern bloc appeared in the 1990s (Ramet 1990; Ryback 1990; Mitchell 1992). The Czech underground as a style of music and as a socio-cultural phenomenon associated with the anti-communist state opposition has probably become one of the most salient topics of Czech music history and of late socialism in Czechoslovakia, and it has also reached a broader international audience. In light of this, several detailed works by the former underground representatives themselves have been recently published in Czech by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Academia, as well as by a few other publishers in the Czech Republic (Stárek and Kudrna 2017; Kudrna 2018).

In his book, which is very well-structured and reads smoothly, sociologist Trever Hagen successfully follows up on an established body of previous research published in both Czech and in English, as

he enriches it with the perspective of music sociology. His study therefore examines music as a key element "in" and "as" society, as well as treating music as a key component in producing social relations. In this way, Hagen greatly exemplifies Simon Frith's argument that "making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them" (Frith 1996, 111). Drawing from the example of the Czech underground community, the author aims to demonstrate how an intergenerational and socially heterogeneous group of people in the period from the 1950s to 1980s communed together through music, and how, in this regard, their "communing" was aesthetically mediated. To do so, Hagen aptly uses the concept of "cultural ecology" (in chapter one), introduced by the music sociologist Tia DeNora (2000) and the music psychologist Eric F. Clarke (2005), which can be understood as "the various places, venues, props, narratives, people, bodies, and symbols that come to be connected together using music (as bridging material) to create a space from which to understand the world and act upon it" (3). Hagen regards underground musicking in socialist Czechoslovakia as a cultural resource that was appropriated by its practitioners to furnish a particular "cultural ecology" and sustain a particular way of life. At the same time, the underground "cultural ecology" of the "second" (or "non-official") culture allowed for the rejection and substitution of perceived noxious, oppressive, and unwanted practices associated with the "first", or "official", culture. Thus, both the musical and non-musical activities of the representatives of the "second culture" served not as an intentional form of political opposition,

a direct action, or a protest against the communist regime, but rather as a strategy of “resistance-as-immunity”. Referring to works by the musicologist and psychologist Even Ruud (2013), Hagen shows how, in this way, music was used to alleviate and protect against “unhealthy” social environments, as it served as kind of “cultural immunogen” (17–18). Furthermore, Hagen reveals how Czech underground music functioned as an aesthetically mediated community activity and as a learned way of togetherness that helped reject the threatening cultural forces.

Concerning methodology, Hagen’s publication draws on ethnographic research, including participant observation and interviews. In addition, it is also enriched by an analysis of archival data from the Security Services Archive, deposited in Prague’s Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. The author’s ethnographic approach is subsequently also reflected in the book’s writing style: while almost all the chapters deal with past events, they are simultaneously also accompanied with ethnographic glimpses into more or less contemporary musical events in the 1990s and 2000s. In turn, these events directly refer to the pre-1989 Czech underground activities in their programme and audience. Hagen, for example, personally witnessed the festival *U Skaláka – Magorovo Vydří at Meziříčko* (in existence since 1989), as well as several other events. Furthermore, he also conducted interviews with the most salient personalities of the Czech underground scene and with some academics writing about it (e.g. with the editor and translator Martin Machovec). Moreover, the most cited figure in the book is František Stárek (quoted in seven interviews from

2008 to 2011), the former underground musician and editor-in-chief of the 1980s samizdat periodical *Vokno*, and co-author of the recent Czech television documentary, *Fenomén underground*. Stárek, who is also a current employee of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, seems to be one of the author’s main gatekeepers to the underground community.

However, it is a pity that the story lacks the perspective of the female underground community members, as well as some viewpoints from non-musicians and “ordinary” underground sympathisers who were “mere participants”, not chief performers and intellectual leaders. Instead, the latter are of the most interest to Hagen. Although the underground formed a community with a strong internal solidarity and achieved recognition within the anti-regime political opposition, it did not, however, as Hagen argues, receive wider public support in the 1980s. One may therefore ask what kind of issues could be possibly revealed by incorporating some more extensive biographical narratives with the “key”, as well as the more “ordinary”, underground sympathisers? It is necessary to mention here that the underground movement in Czechoslovakia attracted people of various family, social, class, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Therefore, it would be important to learn who were in fact the underground sympathisers? What were the differences, as well as commonalities, within the scene?

In the remaining part of this review, I highlight the author’s main points that are developed in particular chapters. From the perspective of the Czech reader, who might already be familiar with the locally published “underground” scholarship, Hagen tends to summarise and refashion

some known data. Nevertheless, his contribution is a new interpretation of these known facts, including the presentation and analysis of interviews with some important witnesses, contributing the micro-historical perspective of directly involved actors to the work. Additionally, the interviewees evidently are also aware of the fact that they are telling their stories to a foreign scholar.

Chapter Two provides an introduction to the historical background of the Czech underground and its precursors, which can be traced back to the works of the Group 42 artists, the poetry of Egon Bondy, and the concepts of “total” realism and “non-artistry” (*neuměleckost*) (25–30). Since the 1960s, Czechoslovakia experienced the spread of rock ‘n’ roll music, the establishment of the local *bigbít* scene, and the successive development of an alternative cultural infrastructure based on the non-official self-distribution of texts (*samizdat*) or audio recordings (*magnitizdat*). Foreign radio broadcasts also played an especially important role in terms of distribution, providing the main opportunity for the informal musical learning of the new sounds coming from the West. In this way, music and other locally unavailable Western products were adopted through their imitation, as well as through the transformation and adjustment of local commodities and cultural artefacts to this Western influence (e.g. the local drink Kofola as an imitation of Coca-Cola; 31–36). In this way, Hagen argues, both the sound of The Velvet Underground, as well as the creativity of the Czech group Aktuál (established by artist and performer Milan Knížák), became the musical reference for The Plastic People of the Universe (aka The

Plastics). This reference includes Aktuál’s concept of anti-musicality and “destroyed sounds”, and Czech lyrics, together with the performance of the absurd. Moreover, the Plastics began their musical journey by also incorporating more Western influences: a psychedelic rock ‘n’ roll sound, elaborate stage performances featuring pyrotechnic props, English lyrics, and costumes. However, Hagen claims that other local bands, such as The Primitives Group, were engaged in more than the musical imitation of Western sounds and ideas because their performances created an atmosphere of freedom that was otherwise unavailable in Czechoslovakia. These proto-underground bands represented the first model of a “cultural ecology” – a community which consisted of something more than a mere encounter between musicians and their audience. They represented a network of mutually cooperating people with a unique aesthetic approach and a particular way of life.

In chapters three and four, Hagen’s book then examines how the Czech underground community was assembled within the conditions of the 1970s domestic cultural policy of so-called “normalisation”. This included state censorship and the strategy of excluding those musicians whose lyrics and musical style were regarded by the Czechoslovak state establishment as non-conformist and suspect. In this regard, all musicians who intended to perform legally had to pass obligatory requalification exams, including a test of musical theoretical and practical skills, as well as demonstrating a knowledge of basic Marxism-Leninism principles. So, it was the governmental strategic obstacles which pushed the 1970s non-conformist

musicians into the underground. Moreover, these restrictions also affected their aesthetic, moving it towards a clearer expression of a raw and dark sound, created in opposition to the nice and optimistic ethos of the state's cultural preferences: in this way, musicians intended to produce music that intentionally challenged the official aesthetics. This was also the case with The Plastic People of the Universe, who refused to accept the state's requirements, and so they lost their "official" status of musicians. The band then started playing a distinctively different music repertoire than in the 1960s. For instance, they performed with long messy hair, and without make-up, costumes, or fire stage effects.

Furthermore, organisational approaches, including settings, also changed due to the different socio-political climate of the 1970s. In this time, organisers started organising musical events increasingly outside of Prague in the villages and towns of Czechoslovakia, developing the strategy of organising non-official and illegal performances distanced from the centres of Czechoslovakian public life. These concerts – particularly the three "Festivals of Second Culture" – were arranged by Ivan Martin Jirous as part of wedding celebrations, as they could otherwise not gain the status of legal concerts. The need for self-protection and togetherness became more apparent when the State Security authorities (STB) started to haunt underground community sympathisers, who in turn travelled far to organise and hear the music. In this context, Hagen shows how the Czech underground "cultural ecology" concentrated on the area of the ethnically cleansed and thus depopulated region of northwest Bohemia, what was formerly Sudetenland. This region,

strongly marginalised from the 1950s, experienced a genocide during WWII and the subsequent post-war deportation of the German population by the Czechoslovak state. Especially because of the persecution of the underground community by the STB in the mid-1970s, the community decisively closed and developed a strategy of "cocooning". Thus, underground sympathisers established their own secluded "cultural ecology", which they referred to as the "Merry Ghetto" (76). They regarded it as their own secure space for self-realisation, a "parallel place where one could be a different self than was available in the official culture" (75). They thus produced "a form of social and cultural immunity to unwanted pollutants" (151). Contrary to some other countercultures, they emphasised distinct emotional and cognitive skills such as joy, merriness, collective spontaneity, creativity, trust, solidarity, and fellowship, rather than the "no future" dispositions of the punk culture which was emerging at that time in the West.

Drawing from Czechoslovak non-official culture and musicking in the 1970s and 1980s, the author then presents the development of a form of "aesthetic resistance" to "the sea of mental poverty" (92) and to the production of the late socialist state's official culture in chapters five and six. To demonstrate the concrete features of this "aesthetic resistance", Hagen presents further characteristics of local underground musical practices, and their aesthetic and cultural conceptualisations based on antithetic notions to the official aesthetic commitments of the communist regime. For underground sympathisers, this "stubbornness" became a fundamental moral expression, featuring the rejection

of values and objects identified with the official state establishment. This approach encompassed various strategies of rejecting the norms: the concept of “truth to self”, primitive “non-musicality” (such as the performances by the bands Hever a Vaselina, Umělá hmota, or Aktuál), and playing “with spirit” (79–89). Besides the isolated and now consciously politicised underground community (in the sense of its direct identification with the Czech dissident movement), Hagen also presents a broader non-official culture and musicking in socialist Czechoslovakia, which encompassed various “alternative” musicians, musicians living in the so called “grey-zone” (among them, also “folk” musicians), the activities of the Jazz Section and the festival Prague Jazz Days, and the Brno Scene in the years 1982–84. Special clusters, such as Radotín High School nearby Prague, attended by the children of dissidents, also emerged in the 1980s. In addition, a more punk-oriented “second generation” of the undergrounders was born in the 1980s (e.g. the band *Psí vojáci*), and the Merry Ghetto provided them with an “agency sustaining habitat” (127).

As Hagen argues, the concept of “truth to self” also resonated with regional dissident movements in the wider region of East Central Europe and with their “anti-politics” or “non-political politics” principles. In this way, Czech underground music therefore also became associated with the Czechoslovak dissident movement. This also increased the *cause célèbre* position of the Plastics, offering them new distribution opportunities and further recognition abroad. While live performances were nearly impossible for the Plastics in the 1980s, their legend continued on in

the recordings, through which they were described as the “truth-bearers” and exemplars of all independent activity to new generations. Here, Hagen mentions an important fact: those recordings that were smuggled from Czechoslovakia and produced in the West became recontextualised musical works, delivered to consumer groups that their authors were not originally intending to reach.

As music sociologist Anna Szemere shows with Hungarian examples, many underground cultures and countercultures from the ex-socialist states experienced an identity crisis after the fall of communism. Hagen argues that this is not the case with the Czech underground scene. As the title and contents of Hagen’s penultimate chapter, “Underground Is Life”, indicate, the Czech underground is still uniquely present. The book’s conclusions therefore outline a brief analysis of the underground “renaissance” or “afterlife” after 1989 and up to the present. In chapters seven and eight, Hagen aims to show how the “afterlife” of the underground practices from the past “bear their weight in the present”. Former dissidents and musicians who started to perform illegally in the 1970s now play at festivals such as *Magorovo Vydří* or *U Skaláka* – events intending to enact an underground ethos that continues to this day. As the author points out, the Plastics’ performances have, for instance, also appeared at commemorative ceremonies dedicated to the persecution of the underground movement during the communist era. Quoting Václav Havel, Hagen refers to the current recognition of the 1970s underground members’ activities as those of former “invisible workers of the opposition”, who – among others – shaped the

process of building democratic conditions in the 1990s. Very important facts regarding the processes of cultural memory, nostalgia, and remembering are then just briefly mentioned: first, the Plastics appear at various events as a “memory-object” (148), as an instrument of collective remembering. Second, key “undergrounders” of the 1970s are present as “witnesses” of the communist era and act as mediators, helping to construct knowledge about past realities. Because of the book’s wider historical scope, the author does not make an in-depth analysis of the different modes of contemporary perceptions and remembrances of the Czech underground and its current recognition as an important topic of Czech history in the second half of the 20th century.

In sum, Hagen’s book on the one hand presents a basic and brief outline of the Czech underground for international readers who do not know much about Czechoslovakia and its cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, his work is not intended as a mere contribution to the historical study of music and resistance within the former Eastern bloc, nor does it only tell the story of the most famous underground band, The Plastic People of the Universe. Hagen’s publication instead provides a relevant musical sociology perspective to the phenomena. With this approach, Hagen manages to demonstrate the broader significance of the Czech underground phenomenon, representing it not only from the perspective of the concept of “resistance”. By describing the uses of music primarily as a social force, Hagen’s book challenges the usual notion of the Czech underground as an explicit representative of the opposition to the Czech anti-communist state. Moreover, the

usage and development of some of the main concepts in this book (e.g. cultural ecology, cultural immunogen) is Hagen’s key contribution to the scholarship of music, making the book a very worthy read.

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