INTERLOCKING OF URBANITY AND RURALITY IN THE POPULAR CULTURE OF EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

Editorial Note

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The historical narrative of nation building in East Central Europe has highlighted how national movements have linked the city and the village (see e.g. Hroch 2000: 156–161). The linear process of urbanization as a part of modernization has relied on a logic that interlocks rural and urban spaces in this region (Jemelka 2014, Brzostek 2014). Whilst on the one hand, both capitalist and state socialist modernization have brought an influx of rural migrants from the countryside to urban centers, this has, on the other hand, given rise to numerous artistic and social activities that have fostered an interest in rural space and culture (e.g. folklorism, (agro-)tourism, rural sentimentalism). It is only from this perspective that we see the emergence of tensions between popular culture rooted in traditional folk culture, cultural activities stimulated by new technologies, and the everyday life strategies of urban communities and subcultures. During the 20th century, different political regimes brought to the fore either rural or urban segments of the population, which in turn had a significant impact on popular culture. Taking this as a starting point, this thematic issue is focused on the question of an in-betweenness that could be dubbed "rurbanity", comprising such phenomena that challenge the simple urban/rural split (Todorova 2009: 47–48, cf. Halstead 2008: 2–4).

Thus, in-betweenness is here understood in both static terms – that is, rurbanity as intersection of urban and rural areas, including experiences of withdrawal, uprooting, and dislocation – and dynamic terms, as a process of breaking mental boundaries, of dis-identifying with one's state of mind and as the beginning of the transformation to another state (Haney 2002: 96–97). As an analytical category, in-betweenness focuses our attention on transitional phenomena and periods between urban and rural space (such as the Gründerzeit of industrial capitalism in 1860s, Stalinist modernization in the 1950s, or post-communist transformation in the 1990s), when rurban migrants played an exceptional role in the liminal moments of social and economic processes

(Berend 2002: 49ff., Cotkin 1997, Horváth 2017, Lebow 2013, Thomassen 2009: 17–19, Horvath – Thomassen – Wydra 2009). Because of their ambiguous background, migrants lose their binary orientation and move into the middle stage between the city and the countryside. Many of them might no longer mentally hold on to their past world, but have not yet begun the physical transition to their future one, which they will possess when they settle into the new environment. On the contrary, some of them might hold on to their physical settlement, while their mental transition to the new stage has already finished.

In any case, during a liminal stage, most stand at the "threshold" between their previous way of structuring space, time, imagination, and a new way, brought on by the transition.

Such an approach re-interprets the past, the present, (and perhaps) the future of East Central Europe in important ways, reflecting that East Central Europeans were always part of the very processes of urbanization, migration, and globalization they hoped to stabilize. On the one hand, it highlights the seminal role of emancipated subjects like migrants ("backward peasants") from the countryside to the city in generating early and influential – albeit highly contested – coexistence models, suggesting that national narratives may be best understood from these contexts. On the other hand, however, it shows how East Central Europeans dealt with "urban" and "rural", "modern" and "traditional", and "progressive" and "anachronistic" to negotiate their uncertain identity.

The present issue aims to consider new approaches to the study of the urban/rural divide from the perspective of popular culture. Besides decentering the classic narratives of urbanization, migration, and globalization, which focus on the dichotomy of "base and superstructure", it seeks to operationalize concepts that rearrange our understanding of the urban/rural split – approaches that took shape during long periods, yet remained unstable throughout.

While East Central European urbanization, migration, and globalization have been widely studied by the social sciences, popular culture has rarely been considered as a peculiar topic that serious scholars should deal with. When popular culture was eventually explored, it was framed in the simplified binary contexts of the Eastern and Western models of modernity. We would rather see the East as "a convex mirror" of the West, mirroring the West in a much wider horizon that it can see itself. Articles in this issue do not understand (popular) culture as the proverbial "cherry on top", but as an imaginary point where the asymmetries of power crystallize. To the extent that popular culture arose in response to such asymmetries (high/low, colorful/uniform, rich/poor,

complex/rudimentary, agriculture/industrial, state socialism/capitalism, free market/state control, civilization/alienation etc.), we are interested in how popular culture could be problematized vis-à-vis its normative status in modern East Central Europe. We are interested, too, in how East Central European popular culture was confronted with the collapse of communist dictatorships, post-socialist transformation, the crisis of the global economic system, and the rise of nationalism (Sakwa 2009). Did popular culture serve to naturalize and legitimize existing authorities (of state, church, business, etc.), or was its purpose to subvert and to liberate? Was or is popular culture the motor of hybridizing between the urban and the rural space, between the café and the pub?

In her article, Michaela Rudyjová explores the mobility of artists between city and countryside in present-day Slovakia. She asks what is the impact of this shift on artistic expression, process, and sociability? She investigates three cases of mixing urban and rural artistic endeavors that played a significant role on the contemporary Slovak art scene. She analyses the case of young artist Andrej Dúbravský, who relocated his artistic activities to a Slovak village, Fero Guldán, who moved from the seat of Director of Slovak National Gallery to a small town near Bratislava, and the very phenomenon of Zaježová community, an almost hippies-like community in central Slovakia. Rudyjová shows how relocation in these spaces of in-betweenness affects the whole process of artistic creation, presentation, and reception.

In her thought-provoking article, Irena Šentevska analyses the phenomenon of the "peasant ghetto" (*seljački geto*) in Serbian hip hop. Here, the contrasting characteristics of this urban subculture, with roots in New York's Bronx, and of a strong rural identification with marginality within the Balkan unstable context are amalgamated. Šentevska approaches this hybrid musical field in two steps. She asks what are the emic conceptualizations of "ghetto", and then she tries to identify different levels of the urban/rural divide in Serbian hip hop. According to her, this musical genre could be seen as a critical commentary of today´s Serbian society, with its legacy of post-Yugoslav isolation and inwardness. The in-betweenness of "peasant" hip hop is further stressed by the regular contact of these performers with the turbo folk music scene, juxtaposing the originally urban subcultural milieu with the music popular in the Serbian countryside, linked to various folk traditions.

In his article, Jiří Fialka sheds new light on the "Slušovice miracle", an extraordinarily successful village in Czechoslovakia during the late state socialism. The rapid and exceptional growth of this village located in a peripheral

region of East Moravia was fueled by the synergic efforts of the local authorities and the local collective farm that fully utilized the slowly opening conditions of socialist economy in the 1980s during the perestroika period. The entrepreneurship of the originally agricultural enterprise was expressed not only by widening the production commodities (including computers), but also by developing a specific hybrid type of popular culture. Fialka chooses three examples of public events that reshaped the originally rural public festive culture into a mixture of national pop star and TV glamor and of traditional folk public festive elements: horse races, TV contests, and and "discos", or nightclubs. He argues that in this case, popular culture was used by the main actors to legitimize their shift from a village to a town, and to build a new urban cultural imaginary. After the fall of the socialist regime, the whole system of economic and social growth largely based on nepotism and corruption broke down, but paradoxically, it was not until this new era that Slušovice gained the official status of municipality.

In the last article, Hedvika Novotná, Dana Bittnerová, and Martin Heřmanský bring into the fore the case of the competition of the best Czech village ("The Village of the Year"), which has been taking place in the Czech Republic since 1995. They argue that this kind of "virtual rurality" brings together global and local politics, expert discourses and global morality, practices and representations, etc. They conclude that the present rurality is constructed around the discursive frameworks as a territorially- and socially-bounded space, as roots and continuity, as a rural idyll, and first and foremost, as the image of social cohesion that covers all other frameworks. They point out the mutual relatedness of these discourses, and show how they enable each other.

In his discussion paper, Michal Lehečka asks several questions about hybridity in the rurban space on basis of his experience from a local Czech village. He proposes to conceptualize the social problem he observed there as "social and geographical solitude", which is fueled by the global interconnectedness of late capitalism. In his opinion, this solitude has three dimensions: micro-social within the local community, national infrastructural disparities, and local impacts of global capital mobility that creates feelings of exploitation, solitude, and invisibility.

Following this short summary, we can conclude that in this volume, the topic of rurbanity is addressed from different angles, and that various disciplinary perspectives on different levels succeed in widening our over-simplistic binary view of the phenomenon. The split between rural and urban should not be seen as fixed or stable, but rather as a process that is negotiated again and

again in different situations. In some cases, we observe very subtle nuances that require careful analysis and critical reflection of political and social contexts.

The attempts to "re-villagize" villages are often driven by strong nationalist sentiments: villages, as seen from within this discourse, bring people closer to their national origins and legitimize the role of rural space in postmodern society. Perhaps this element distinguishes the post-socialist concept of "the best" or "the proper" village from the highly modernist view of state socialism that tried to "modernize" the socialist village. Through this imaginary, postsocialism seems to return to the way national movements of the 19th century constructed national communities in East Central Europe. While these historical constructions of the nation through the prism of rural traditions are well-researched, particularly for the 19th century, and have thus become a matter of common knowledge, in the postsocialist context, we can only offer the first insights into their meaning and role. Nevertheless, following the contribution of Michal Lehečka, contemporary countryside in East Central Europe can easily fall into the trap of a negative in-betweenness – a solitude caused by not taking part in postsocialist urban growth while simultaneously having lost the traditional bonds of community life.

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