

ZORAN MILUTINOVIĆ

“YES, BUT...”: INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND
DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION
OF SOCIALIST REALISM IN SERBIA

When in 1946 the First Congress of Yugoslav Writers was held in Belgrade, some of the participants had the honour of being received by Josip Broz Tito, Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Marshal of the Yugoslav Army and Prime Minister. The press covered the event extensively, and reported on Tito's address to the select group of the Congress participants. Tito was never a great public speaker: his vocabulary was limited, his accent strange, and his syntax unusual and opaque, yet he sometimes managed to cut to the core of the matter and – albeit unintentionally – to offer the clearest possible perspective. On this occasion he was reported to have said: “Previously, many people disagreed with influencing the direction of literary production. I am also against forcing everything into the same mould, against uniform literature. But – and I am sure you will agree with me – I am also against writing damaging things with the excuse of freedom of literary production”.¹ This sentence encapsulates not only the attitude of the Yugoslav authorities to art and culture in the first post-Second World War decade, but also defines what would become the cornerstone of Yugoslav cultural policy until the disintegration of communist rule, which almost coincided with the disintegration of the country.

The many people who previously “disagreed with influencing the direction of literary production” was a reference to the “conflict on the literary left”, as it is referred to in Yugoslav cultural history, the long quarrel between two groups of leftist writers and Party func-

⁽¹⁾ Ratko Peković, *Ni rat ni mir. Panorama književnih polemika 1945-1965*. Filip Višnjić, Belgrade 1986, p. 31.

tionaries in the 1930s. One group, the “social literature” writers, promoted the “Kharkov line” and declared Socialist Realism the basis of the Party’s cultural policy, while the other, to which Miroslav Krleža and the circle of Belgrade Surrealists belonged, advocated a type of literature which, although serving revolutionary aims, would not be totally submissive to any crude and simplified prescriptions.² At the very end of the 1930s, when the Party abolished internal factions and transformed itself into a proper Stalinist organization, the “social literature” group was victorious, and Krleža, the Belgrade Surrealists, and many others were isolated by the wall of familiar labels – traitors, revisionists, Trotskyists, etc. – which the communist movement was in the habit of using in its endless rounds of purification and internal differentiation. In the Soviet Union this kind of rhetoric would lead one to the Gulag or worse; in pre-revolutionary Yugoslavia, in which the Party was still an underground movement, an almost invisible force, it simply meant being abandoned by one’s comrades.

What Tito’s exact position on the matter was cannot be confirmed with any certainty: in 1939 the Comintern appointed him as Secretary-General of the Party with the task of strengthening and unifying its ranks; the “conflict on the literary left” was only one, and probably not the most significant rift in the Party.³ Krleža’s biographer Stanko Lasić maintains that in 1939 Tito came to Zagreb to convince Krleža, the most influential intellectual among the “traitors”, to end the quarrel and accept the Party line, and puts forward an assumption that Tito had sympathies for, or at least some understanding of Krleža’s and Ristić’s arguments, but that he pragmatically granted his support to their opponents, as his more important aim at the time was the transformation of the Party into a monolithic revo-

⁽²⁾ The classical overview of the “conflict on the literary left” is Stanko Lasić, *Sukob na književnoj ljevici 1928-1952*. Liber, Zagreb 1970. Vasilije Kalezić, *Sukobi socijalne literature i nadrealizma*. V. Kalezić, Novi Sad 1975, and Vasilije Kalezić, *Ljevica u sukobu sa Krležom*. Trag, Belgrade 1990, are also interesting.

⁽³⁾ Tito’s takeover was a long process, which began in 1937 and ended only in late 1940. In January 1939 he was formally entrusted with temporary leadership for three months, which was subsequently extended. See Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Tito. Yugoslavia’s Great Dictator*. Hurst, London 1992, pp. 23-30.

lutionary force.⁴ In view of Tito's later similarly pragmatic moves and the fact that all "traitors" and "Trotskyists" were welcomed back to the Party in 1944, this sounds plausible enough, and gives credence to his 1946 claim – made *before* he himself was branded a traitor and revisionist by Moscow – that he had always been opposed to "influencing the direction of literary production". So his reply to the question of cultural freedom, it seems safe to assume, would have been a "yes", consistent with the second quoted sentence. The following sentence, however, transforms this reply into a structure typical of Yugoslav cultural policy after the Second World War: it begins with a "but" and limits the freedom of cultural production to writing only what cannot be classified as "damaging things". Some liberties are granted only under the condition that they never be used: "I am sure you will agree with me" the writers were told – and who would dare disagree with Tito in 1946? – that writing "things" which contravene the country's interests, as defined by the Party, cannot be excused by freedom of literary production.⁵ Freedom – *yes, but...*

(⁴) Stanko Lasić, *Krleža. Kronologija života i rada*. Grafički zavod Hrvatske, Zagreb 1982, pp. 277-280. Tito effectively put an end to the debate in his article *Trockizam i njegovi pomagači* (Trotskyism and its aides) published in "Proleter" (1, 1939). "Using the brutal rhetoric of Stalinists", writes Velimir Visković, he branded all intellectuals around Krleža's journal "Pečat" as "Trotskyists", and repeated the accusation in his report to the Comintern in September 1939. In the following year Tito restated his accusation in the article *Za čistoću i boljševizaciju partije* (For the purity and bolshevization of the party) in "Proleter", 3-4 (1940), this time branding Krleža and his supporters "anti-Marxists and anti-Leninists". *Književne sveske* (Literary notebooks), a collection of articles which summed up the Party's position in the debate, was published in the summer of 1940. Milovan Djilas and Edvard Kardelj, Tito's closest associates, were heavily involved in writing and editing it. See Velimir Visković, <http://newpolis.org/files/sukob_na_ljevici_v._viskovic.pdf> (accessed on 16th October 2013).

(⁵) The number of extra-judicial executions carried out by the Communist-led Yugoslav Army in 1944 and 1945 is still disputed. Some participants in the events claim that in Belgrade alone the number reached 10,000 within several days of the liberation, and 30,000 in the whole of Serbia (see Nataša Miličević, *Jugoslovenska vlast i srpsko građanstvo 1944-1950*). The Institute for Recent History of Serbia, Belgrade 2009, p. 285. Cvetković maintains that the latter figure is more likely to be 60,000, with 150,000 in the whole of Yugoslavia (see Srdjan Cvetković, *Između srpa i čekića. Represija u Srbiji 1944-1953*. Institut za savremenu istoriju, Belgrade 2006, p. 239).

These two sentences explain why Socialist Realism was so halfheartedly introduced in Yugoslavia in 1945, and why it was so readily abandoned eight years later. In this process of introduction and dismantling one year stands out clearly: in 1948 the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was excluded from Cominform and surrounded by the familiar wall of labels – revisionists, Trotskyists, traitors, etc. While the accusation of revisionism was certainly unfounded – before 1948 Yugoslav communists were as Stalinist as they come – it functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy and prompted a revision of many policies, including the cultural. Hence the division of the immediate post-war period in Yugoslav cultural historiography into two phases: the first between 1945 and 1948, during which the Party attempted to impose the standards of Socialist Realism, and the second between 1949 and 1952, in which this attempt was gradually abandoned. At the end of the second period, marked by the closing of the Party's Bureau for Agitation and Propaganda in 1952, Yugoslav communists had already defined the main contours of their own cultural policy, which would remain more or less unchanged until the mid-1980s, when the whole ideological, economic and political system began to collapse. This article will attempt to give an account of both phases, and to indicate how the unstable balance of power between the Party and artists was maintained after 1952.

The introduction of Socialist Realism: 1945-1948

Socialist Realism was introduced via the state ideological apparatus, and its material, institutional aspect came first: in addition to the many resolutions and proclamations made in the Party's forums, the Bureau for Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop), headed by Milovan Djilas, created a number of institutions which served as the main vehicles of cultural life. Of these, the artists' societies – of writers, painters, musicians, etc. – were the most important. Membership was voluntary, but also required if one wanted to publish, perform or exhibit; it also brought some benefits, not insignificant in a country impoverished by war and destruction, such as artistic material, accommodation, and ration coupons. Heads of publishing houses, galleries, theatres, concert halls and editors of literary journals, etc. were the Party's appointees who were required to submit their publishing or

performing plans to Agitprop for approval. These posts were mostly filled by surviving members of the pre-war “social literature” movement, the leftist or communist intellectuals and writers who in the 1930s followed the Party line; however, those who did not, such as the Belgrade Surrealists, who sided with Krleža in opposing it, were also welcomed back and entrusted with responsibilities provided that they repented. And repent they did, the task made easier by the Party’s pragmatic decision not to revisit old quarrels, but to draw a line and measure their loyalty by their post-war actions.⁶

Yugoslavia was flooded with translated Soviet books and films, especially those which could have been offered as models of Socialist Realism. Out of between seven and nine hundred books published every year in the period from 1945 to 1949 in Serbia, more than half were translations from Russian: for example, only slightly over a third of all books published in the first five months of 1948 were originally written in Serbo-Croat, and more than half were translations from Russian.⁷ Although translations from other languages were still

⁽⁶⁾ Koča Popović, one of the pre-war Belgrade Surrealists, joined the partisan ranks in 1941 and returned to Belgrade in 1944 as the Commander of the First Proletarian Division; eight days after the Partisans took Belgrade, he, along with one other division commander wrote for “Politika”, Serbia’s leading broadsheet newspaper, that justice includes revenge, thus justifying extra-judicial executions (see Nataša Milićević, *Jugoslovenska vlast...*, cit., p. 277.) Marko Ristić, another Belgrade Surrealist, did not take part in the war, preferring to spend it in Belgrade and at his family’s villa in a spa town, but hurried to second this in “Politika” five days later, claiming that those who had not fought would deserve liberty only by contributing names of traitors to the list of those to be executed (see Marko Ristić, *Politička književnost*. Naprijed, Zagreb 1958, p. 15); recent research presented evidence that he also supplied lists of people to be arrested to the police (see Kosta Nikolić, *Funkcija književnosti u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji*, “Serbian Studies Research”, 3, 2012, 1, pp. 95, 97). Two weeks later, once again on “Politika”’s pages, he cheered at the news of the execution of more than a hundred people, some of whom, in addition to being well-known anti-communists, had as their only sin the fact that they had been teaching at the University of Belgrade during the war (see Nataša Milićević, *Jugoslovenska vlast...*, cit., pp. 21-25). He was soon appointed editor-in-chief of the State Publishing Company, and in 1945 he became Yugoslavia’s ambassador to France. Milovan Djilas later wrote that at the end of the war Belgrade Surrealists had outperformed other communists in following Party discipline, and were rewarded appropriately (*ivi*, p. 477).

⁽⁷⁾ Ljubodrag Dimić, *Agitprop kultura. Agitpropovska faza kulturne politike u Sr-*

published, eighty-five per cent of all translated books in the period between 1945 and 1949 came from the Soviet Union. Books in Russian were also readily available: seventy percent of all imported books came from the Soviet Union. Serbian cinemas were dominated by Soviet film, and almost a third of all theatre performances were in one way or another Soviet-related. Twenty-five per cent of school textbooks were translations from Russian – often hasty translations, in which Serbian students learned about Soviet patriotism, Stalin as their leader, and the USSR as their homeland. Newspapers and journals regularly published articles by Soviet authors; Soviet academics and artists frequently came to give lectures and performances. Most of these activities were coordinated by the Society for Yugoslav-Soviet Cultural Cooperation, which had 15,500 members and published a journal, “Yugoslavia-USSR”.

Frenetic translating activity filled the gap left by the lack of domestic production. Many Serbian authors lost their lives in the war, some emigrated at the end of it, and those who remained in the country were mostly uneasy about the new authorities, and refrained from publishing. It is striking how few exhibitions took place during this period: over a five-year period the Society of Painters organized only 11 collective exhibitions in Belgrade.⁸ It seems that there was not much to publish or exhibit: artists and writers who would have felt at ease in the climate of Socialist Realism either perished in the war, or were too busy attending meetings, working in government offices, visiting building sites, and writing newspaper articles and speeches. Hence the impression that Socialist Realism in Serbia for the most part took the form of programmatic speeches, Party resolutions, and literary and art criticism.

This period would have been a wasteland were it not for some writers and painters who had made their names before the war, and despite the unfavourable circumstances, continued to publish and exhibit after 1945. For example, Ivo Andrić published three novels in 1945 (*The Bridge on the Drina*, *Bosnian Chronicle* and *The Woman from Sarajevo*); in 1948 Isidora Sekulić published a collection of es-

biji 1945-1952. Rad, Belgrade 1988, p. 160.

⁽⁸⁾ Miodrag B. Protić, *Srpsko slikarstvo XX veka*. Nolit, Belgrade 1970, p. 366.

says, *Zapisi o mome narodu* (Notes about my People), and Veljko Petrović a story collection, *Prepelica u ruci* (A Quail in the Hand).⁹ They were not leftist writers by any description; however, they could have been classified as sympathisers, or “patriots”, or at least as authors not overtly hostile to the new order. Some made an effort to placate the Party, but without much enthusiasm. Thus Paja Jovanović (1859-1957), the most significant representative of Serbian nineteenth-century academic realism, painted in 1947 – when already eighty-eight years old – Tito’s life-sized oil portrait. Throughout his long life Jovanović lived under Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and post-war communist Yugoslavia, and painted similar life-sized portraits of the heads of the two former states in which he had lived; however, while he represented Franz Josef I of Austria and Aleksandar I Karadjordjević of Yugoslavia as royally dignified, yet relaxed figures, Tito is represented with his clenched fist pressing down on his desk. Jovanović must have read or heard Party officials’ tirades about contemporary painting not presenting well the values of the new society – for example, Jovan Popović reproached the Expressionist painter Milan Konjović, who had tried to meet the demands of Socialist Realism thematically by painting *The Building Site of the Bridge in Bogojevo*, for leaving the impression that work weighed heavily on workers’ shoulders, while “in the new homeland” they should be represented as working cheerfully and enthusiastically¹⁰ – and realized that the Party wanted not only realism, which Jovanović could do just fine, but also values, such as “resolve”. This clenched fist was a nod which academic realism gave to Socialist Realism. To their credit, it must be noted that the Party officials did not insist on the conversion to Socialist Realism of those who had already established themselves, and tried not to alienate them

⁹) Ivo Andrić was quickly incorporated into the new political order by becoming the first president of the Yugoslav Society of Writers. This former royal ambassador also joined the Party in 1954. Andrić mentioned Socialist Realism only once, when he stated that it is a logical continuation of the tradition of Russian nineteenth-century realism, discretely indicating that the model of Socialist Realism should be limited to literature written in Russian. See Ratko Peković and Slobodan Kljakić, *Angažovani Andrić 1944-1954*. Službeni glasnik, Belgrade 2012, p. 64.

¹⁰) Miodrag B. Protić, *Srpsko slikarstvo XX veka*, cit., p. 357.

if their behaviour during the war was deemed patriotic: Milo Milunović, although an uncompromising “formalist” in their view, was granted the title of master-painter within the new, Soviet-inspired categorization of artists, alongside trusted comrades such as Djordje Andrejević Kun, the Party’s favoured painter in Serbia¹¹ and the “patriarch of Socialist Realism”.¹² Those who, like Milunović, ignored the new poetics trumpeted from all sides and quietly continued to follow their own path, may have fared better than those who, like Konjović, tried to please the Party critics thematically, while remaining faithful to their own style: while the former were ignored and left in peace, the latter were harshly criticized for what was considered either attempts to smuggle “formalism” and “subjectivism” into the new progressive art, or were taken to task for not measuring up to Socialist Realist criteria.¹³

No one, in fact, seems to have been good enough for the Party critics. As Stanko Lasić noted, during this period criticism abounded, but there were very few models to look up to and follow.¹⁴ Painters seem to have done better: exhibited at the First Federal Exhibition, Boža Ilić’s painting *Sondiranje terena na Novom Beogradu* (Probing the Terrain in New Belgrade), the “icon of Socialist Realism” in Serbian painting,¹⁵ and Djordje Andrejević Kun’s *Svedoci užasa* (The Witnesses to Horror) were considered a success. However, even these paintings received criticism: Radovan Zogović praised Kun for the parting of the hair of a woman in the crowd, but reproached him for not presenting the people more closely together, which would have stressed their group solidarity, and for presenting children, women and the elderly in the foreground, while the young were in the back-

⁽¹¹⁾ *Ivi*, p. 361.

⁽¹²⁾ Lidija Merenik, *Ideološki modeli: srpsko slikarstvo 1945-1968*. Beopolis-Remont, Belgrade 2001, p. 34.

⁽¹³⁾ The Party’s appointees could not be easily cheated and refused to accept half-hearted attempts: “An artist cannot create genuine works of art”, wrote Jovan Popović, one of the most prolific promoters of Socialist Realism, “if deep down, in hidden corners of his individuality, he still jealously nourishes some intimate thoughts incompatible with the meaning and perspectives of our time”, Miodrag B. Protić, *Srpsko slikarstvo XX veka*, cit., p. 360.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Stanko Lasić, *Sukob na književnoj ljevici 1928-1952*, cit., p. 252.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Lidija Merenik, *Ideološki modeli: srpsko slikarstvo 1945-1968*, cit., p. 31.

ground.¹⁶ Jovan Popović, another writer-cum-universal critic, noted that just painting a factory would not suffice, as indeed there were factories in capitalist states as well; what had to be represented was the attitude of workers to the process of production, and painters often failed to do this by presenting workers' backs, not their enthusiastic faces.¹⁷ Art historian Miodrag B. Protić concludes that Socialist Realist art criticism never managed to address anything that would have even remotely been of some proper artistic interest; it mistook objects for contents, and contents for propagandistic ideas, caring more for the integrity of objects represented than for art as such.¹⁸ What is more, the Party did not have a single art historian in its ranks, and with the cohort of Socialist Realist critics being a very small group, one would find the same few people everywhere: for example, Radovan Zogović was a poet with very limited knowledge of the arts, yet he pontificated on everything, from ballet to painting, and from theatre to literature.¹⁹ He was not, however, oblivious of the problem. Writing about a ballet premiere in Belgrade's National Theatre, he began by admitting his incompetence, but continued by challenging the value of professional competence as compared with the political one: fighting the war and taking part in post-war reconstruction helped one acquire an artistic taste, he maintained, and comrades without specialist knowledge could easily tell "healthy" from "harmful" art. Zogović claimed that progressive, combative and creative criticism was needed, and the lack of professional competence should not have deterred anyone from noticing that the Belgrade ballet continued with "empty, idealess, absurd, aimless dance", which was merely a continuation of the pre-war "classicist formalism"; instead, the Belgrade ballet had to catch up with the times, and start to "edu-

¹⁶) Miodrag B. Protić, *Srpsko slikarstvo XX veka*, cit., p. 361.

¹⁷) *Ibid.*

¹⁸) *Ivi*, pp. 363-364.

¹⁹) The educational structure of the Party cadre explains why the same few names appear everywhere: in 1946 only 1,9 percent of Serbia's communists had university degrees, while two thirds had only completed four years of primary school. Immediately after the war the Party was an organization of farmers and workers, and had yet to recruit better educated members. See Nataša Miličević, *Jugoslovenska vlast...*, cit., p. 512.

cate the people in the spirit of new relationships, of working and patriotic heroism, genuine humanism and love of freedom, beauty, homeland and life”.²⁰ What this would look like exactly, he did not clarify; it may be assumed, however, that empty and aimless dance, or “classicist formalism”, simply meant dance without any propaganda value. If this is so, one must agree with him: he readily admitted that his criticism was directed only at the political and propaganda aspects of the ballet, or lack thereof, and in this respect he was certainly competent enough.

Radovan Zogović was not only the most prominent and influential voice of criticism in this period, but, as Lasić noted, “the purest and most complete” embodiment of Socialist Realism,²¹ whose pronouncements were the equivalent of “court judgements”,²² all the more absurd given the seriousness with which he took himself, while forgetting that he was no more than the most banal dilettante.²³ Up until 1948, Zogović was the Party’s man in literature, and the main interpreter of the Party’s expectations of writers. At the First Congress of Yugoslav Writers, held in December 1946, it was Zogović who gave the keynote speech, entitled *On the Position and Tasks of Our Literature Today*. In this programmatic speech, the most important document of the Socialist Realist period in Serbian culture, Zogović repeated the Party’s interpretation of the war and revolution, enumerated the titles of poems, stories and memoirs written by Partisans during the war – not forgetting to mention his own *Poem About Comrade Tito’s Biography* – and proceeded to explain the tasks of literature: the people had accomplished many heroic deeds in the war, but was not yet aware of it. It was literature’s task, its content, its aim and its meaning to tell the people what it did, to paint its recent history – the war, the revolution and industrialization – in a clear and simple manner, based on the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, and by so doing, to educate it; literature must tell the people what they should and should not be. During this speech, Zhdanov’s shadow

⁽²⁰⁾ Radovan Zogović, *Na poprištu*. Kultura, Belgrade 1947, pp. 171-172.

⁽²¹⁾ Stanko Lasić, *Sukob na književnoj ljevici 1928-1952*, cit., p. 263.

⁽²²⁾ Predrag Palavestra, *Istorija srpske književne kritike 1768-2007*, vol. 2. Matice srpska, Novi Sad 2008, p. 478.

⁽²³⁾ Stanko Lasić, *Sukob na književnoj ljevici 1928-1952*, cit., p. 270.

fell on the Congress. In line with other congresses, where Party officials boasted of great results achieved under their rule compared with the results of the pre-war bourgeois Yugoslavia, Zogović claimed that the print-runs of classical literature had increased four or five-fold, of contemporary literature tenfold, and of poetry collections – twentyfold; he, however, warned that although satisfactory, these results could have been even better, and that “productivity” had to be further increased. Zogović’s speech contained a sentence which would be repeated by many other critics in the years to come: “Our literature lags behind our contemporary reality”.²⁴ In reality, the Party is building a socialist, worker’s society; literature still lives in the pre-revolutionary times. If one were to choose a leitmotif of Socialist Realism in Serbia, this sentence would be the best contender: literature did lag behind the political reality, the Party’s expectations and the critics’ demands.

In 1948 the Society of Writers in Serbia began publishing “Književne novine” (“Literary Journal”), as the main platform for “progressive” literary criticism. Within it no one got off lightly: “Književne novine” published an endless litany of adjectives, of which “decadent” and “formalist” were the most frequent, closely followed by “subjective”, “irrationalist”, and “idealist”. There were also “anti-humanist”, “backward”, “dark”, and “reactionary”, as less prominent – and all these were applied to books which somehow managed to pass strict Party censorship in state-owned publishing houses, as there were no others. Trying to develop a coherent theoretical system which animates this palette of adjectives is hardly possible: for example, the accusation of “formalism”, which made sense in the Soviet Union, as it referred to avant-garde “fellow-travellers”, did not mean much in the Serbian context, as the Serbian avant-garde between the world wars was never as radical as the Soviet one, and “formalism” probably meant any, even minimal attention to form. “Subjectivism” and “irrationalism” perhaps stood for any kind of individual, as opposed to collective (class, nation) focus, “idealism” for everything deemed not quite in line with dialectic materialism, while the rest of adjectives, from “decadent” to “reactionary”, were re-

⁽²⁴⁾ Radovan Zogović, *Na poprištu*, cit., p. 197.

served for politically suspicious writers who could not be trusted to be fully “ours”. Those who tried to learn what the critics wanted, and somehow managed not to attract any of the adjectives listed above, were eventually reproached for writing “schematic” and “colourless” works, and for resorting to unconvincing characters in typical situations.²⁵

Artistic and literary tradition was subjected to a similar set of criteria. The sharpest criticism was reserved for the generation of modernist and Expressionist writers who began publishing after the First World War: they were not only “formalists” by definition, but also “decadents” and “reactionaries”, as they tended to be either politically indifferent or anti-communists, in addition to being social literature’s – whose representatives now came to power – direct competitors for prestige and influence, which was neither forgotten nor forgiven. Their work was dismissed out of hand, and criticism focused on their political profiles rather than on their achievements. Similarly, Socialist Realist painting was “built on the destruction of symbols of the bourgeois tradition and on the negation of Yugoslav art between the world wars”.²⁶ In the nineteenth-century tradition, a selection was made according to two criteria: realism and social engagement. Everything that could, by any stretch of imagination, be deemed realist and socially critical, had very good chances of being presented as a precursor to Socialist Realism, and thus recommended for preservation and study, or used in school textbooks. Most of the Romantic tradition was saved thanks to the specificity of Serbian and South Slav Romanticism. Yugoslavia being a country composed of former imperial peripheries – Habsburg, Ottoman and Venetian – had a very rich inheritance of anti-imperialist Romantic literature, which easily lent itself to reinterpretation and fitting into the “our peoples’ struggle for liberation” category, which was at the same time the main legitimization of the Party’s rule: the Party had, after all, led the liberation movement in an anti-imperialist war which had just ended, come out of it victorious, and was happy to mobilize the Romantic movement’s anti-imperialist and nationalistic sentiments – the latter,

⁽²⁵⁾ Ratko Peković, *Ni rat ni mir...*, cit., p. 41.

⁽²⁶⁾ Lidija Merenik, *Ideološki modeli: srpsko slikarstvo 1945-1968*, cit., p. 29.

of course, only in moderation and with special caveats, as the balance of particular nationalisms was a *sine qua non* of the country's existence – in constructing a historical narrative in which the Party's takeover in 1944 came as the fulfilment of the final aim of an unbroken, long and continuous process of liberation. A special place in the canon was reserved for oral literature: it was, as its nineteenth-century collector Vuk Stefanović Karadžić claimed, “by the people and for the people”, created in pre-bourgeois times and for the most part permeated with the same pathos of heroism and national liberation which the Party supported in all spheres of public life, and thus deserved to be the centre of the canon. The Serbian medieval inheritance, its architecture, painting, poetry and biographies of medieval rulers, for the most part the result of the two centuries of the Nemanjić's dynasty rule, was close to every Romantic's heart, but despised by Serbian socialists, and the Party continued the tradition of its predecessors: it was dangerously close to religion, royalist ideas and conservatism, impossible to reinterpret along the lines of realism, social progressiveness, and anti-imperialism, and as such better left out altogether.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Stalin decided that he had had enough of the Yugoslavs and moved to expel them from the Cominform, the successor to the by then defunct Comintern. His motives have been sufficiently explained: Tito and his closest associates, as leaders of a large movement which achieved liberation and revolution without any significant Soviet assistance, believed that they deserved a special place in the family of communist parties, and behaved accordingly. Eager to share their experience, they lectured everyone about everything; it is small wonder that other east Europeans found them quite overbearing. Tito's ambition was not satisfied with ruling Yugoslavia, his plan extended to forming a Balkan federation, which would include not only Bulgaria and Albania, but Greece as well. To this end, and contrary to Stalin's instructions, he supported the Greek partisans, happy to demonstrate his own independence and influence. Stalin had probably expected that the circle of faithful Politburo members would respond by removing Tito from power and putting forward a leader more responsive to Moscow's instructions, but they did not. Following the initial period of surprise, during which

Yugoslavs tried to offer evidence that they were not revisionists but proper Stalinists, and that it all must have been a gross misunderstanding, they closed their ranks and resolved to fight back. A very small number of prominent communists backed Stalin's accusations; most of them sided with Tito. Though expected and feared, Soviet intervention did not materialize, and Yugoslavia entered a brief period of total international isolation, now having ideological enemies both in the East and in the West. Without abandoning its ideological platform, the Party began a tentative rapprochement with the West in 1950, first economic, receiving financial aid from the US, and then political as well. This entailed a revision of policies, and ushered in a process of liberalization in the 1950s. In 1948 Tito and his associates had been accused of revisionism, which was unfair; as of 1950 they did become revisionists, which was – as far as most of Yugoslav citizens were concerned – just as well.

The de-institutionalizing of Socialist Realism: 1949-1952

The revision of the Party's cultural policy was not a necessary result of the Stalin-Tito split. The Party could have easily remained on the Stalinist course after 1948, or even after the process of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, as the example of Albania testifies. The assumption that Tito and his closest associates – Djilas, Kardelj and Ranković – were covert liberals and anti-Stalinists, who could hardly wait to break with Stalin in order to liberalize their policies, cannot withstand historical evidence. It is much more plausible to assume that their revisionism – or, as seen from a different point of view, the liberalization of the economy and culture, followed by a less pronounced liberalization of the political sphere – was a consequence of the general paradigm the split with the Soviet Union made them forge: they remained communists, and began advocating the idea of different paths to communism. No longer bothered by Soviet advisers, and not having to justify their policies to the centre of world revolution at every single step of the way, they tried what worked best for them, first in the collectivisation of agriculture, and then slowly and apprehensively in other spheres of social and political life. If they demanded for themselves the right to differ, but without abandoning the proclaimed aim, it was only consequent that they copied

the same structure in the cultural sphere as well: if they were confident that communism could be built without collectivising all arable land, as farmers' unrests clearly showed that they did not think much of such communism, perhaps art could still contribute to building communism even if it was somewhat "formalist"? In this second period, art was still expected to serve the same ideological cause, but it was allowed to do so in more than one way, as if it had received the right to its own and different path.

The change was immediately noticeable in schools, bookshops, cinemas and theatres. In 1947 more than thirteen million viewers in Serbia had watched a Soviet film, and less than five million had watched a Western one. In 1950, however, the proportion was exactly the opposite.²⁷ The Society for Yugoslav-Soviet Cultural Cooperation was abolished in 1949, and its journal "Yugoslavia-USSR" did not appear ever again. Russian was still taught at schools, but French and English were much more popular. Soviet textbooks were criticised and quickly disappeared, as well as visiting Soviet academics and artists. The press ceased reporting about Soviet achievements, books in Russian were no longer as readily available in bookshops, and Serbian publishers began translating Western authors: Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, Rilke, Valery, Sartre, Camus, Hemingway and Arthur Miller replaced Sholokhov and Gorky. From the early 1950s, Serbian publishers competed in being up to date with the most recent western production, as did Serbian theatres: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was staged in Belgrade in 1956, three years after its premiere in Paris, and his fiction regularly translated.

This rapid geocultural reorientation may, however, give a wrong impression. De-Stalinization did not progress as rapidly when it came to locally produced art. The de-institutionalization of Socialist Realism was a process as slow as its institutionalization, and took three years to complete. The first sign that the Party was reconsidering its cultural policy was given in the third meeting of the Party's Central Committee in July 1949, when the "administrative and bureaucratic" governance of culture was criticised: the Party now proposed a free "battle of ideas" in which "the revolutionary consciousness and demo-

(²⁷) Ljubodrag Dimić, *Agitprop kultura...*, cit., p. 179.

cratic principles” would be affirmed.²⁸ Liberalization – yes, but within limits: as the general direction of the society was not and could not be questioned, the liberties proposed applied only to different ways of serving the revolutionary aims. In December of the same year, the chief Party ideologist Edvard Kardelj gave a speech in the Slovene Academy of Science and Arts on the occasion of his election to membership. Although he only spoke about science, his criticism of the Soviet cultural model was obvious to all: “we can talk about *partijnost* [adherence to the Party principles] of science only in terms of human knowledge being determined socially or by class”.²⁹ As Lasić noted, in 1937 “tendentious art” was understood as art which transmitted whatever happened to be the Party’s tactics at that moment; in 1949 it was broadened to mean advocating the interests of the working class in general.³⁰ The old terminology, although preserved, received a slightly different interpretation: art was supposed to serve social progress, not a specific Party line or only one approved and certified style. The Party was willing to allow pluralism of artistic styles, and Socialist Realism began to figure less prominently in speeches and criticism, and with it began to disappear Radovan Zogović, its most prominent advocate. From 1949, the palette of adjectives used by literary and art critics acquired new items: “decadent” and “formalist” were still there, but joined by “slavery to dogmatism” and “adherence to the idea of art governed by the state”. The de-institutionalization of Socialist Realism from 1949 to 1952 took the form of a slow re-interpretation of the rhetoric the Party had imposed in the preceding period. Sveta Lukić proposed an apt term for the early 1950s – “socialist aestheticism”: socialist in content, but not realist in style.³¹ The Party fought at two fronts simultaneously: against bourgeois ideology, which, it was claimed, some were trying to smuggle through their art, thus misusing socialist democracy, and against Soviet “dogmatism”, which some were leaving behind only too slowly. As the Party changed its course unexpectedly, it is understandable

⁽²⁸⁾ Ratko Peković, *Ni rat ni mir...*, cit., p. 67.

⁽²⁹⁾ Stanko Lasić, *Sukob na književnoj ljevici 1928-1952*, cit., p. 276.

⁽³⁰⁾ *Ivi*, p. 276.

⁽³¹⁾ See Sveta Lukić, *Savremena jugoslovenska literatura (1945-1965)*. Prosveta, Belgrade 1968.

that writers were slow to adjust: as Zogović previously claimed, literature again lagged behind reality. “Modernist” art and “Western influence”, however, were not as reviled as before 1949,³² and some of the pre-war modernists were given the first small signs of recognition: Sima Pandurović, Milan Kašanin and Ksenija Atanasijević, who were immediately after the war deprived of their citizen’s honour by the court, which involved losing their pensions, as well as the right to work and publish, were admitted to the Society of Writers, and Stanislav Vinaver, after three years of total silence, speaking at the yearly convention of the Society, had a chance to celebrate the work of Miloš Crnjanski, a right-wing modernist who after the war remained in exile in London. The exhibition *Seventy paintings and sculptures 1920-1940* in Belgrade signalled that the rehabilitation of interwar Modernism was under way, although the selection of works to be exhibited carefully avoided anything too radical or avant-garde. The Belgrade Surrealists, already incorporated into the Party and state apparatus, but still regularly reviled as “formalists”, now lived through their finest hour: in the 1930s they were detested for promoting a vision of literature which served the revolution, but without following shallow recipes and tight constraints; in late 1949 this vision was beginning to become the Party line, and they were quick to seize the opportunity. In 1949 Oskar Davičo, the youngest and most talented amongst the Surrealists, and the secretary of the Society of Writers, in his report at the Society’s yearly convention disparaged “the formalism of Western art”, including Surrealism and existentialism, and praised Socialist Realism;³³ in 1951 he published the article *Poezija i otpori* (Poetry and resistances), in which he praised poetry’s capacity to anticipate the future by not imitating, but by creating reality, which may, he admitted, provoke resistance in the reader, but must be supported as a force for progress.³⁴ Dušan Matić, another Surrealist, in 1950 published the essay *Poezija je neprekidna svežina sveta* (Poetry is constant freshness of the world): poetry is either an instrument of freedom, or it is nothing, he claimed; poetry expresses its

⁽³²⁾ Ratko Peković, *Ni rat ni mir...*, cit., p. 67.

⁽³³⁾ *Ivi*, p. 65.

⁽³⁴⁾ *Ivi*, p. 103.

own time better than ideology, beliefs, prejudices and knowledge, and should be listened to, not constrained. Without confronting the Party ideology head on, the poets were raising the claim not only for independence of poetry, but for its equality with ideology. As the Party now claimed that different paths to communism were possible, its poets began to claim that different forms of creativity, poetry being one of them, could work towards the same aim – the revolutionary transformation of society – and that a poet deserved freedom and respect. Two individual exhibitions announced a similar relaxation: Mića Popović's in 1951, with the author's explicit negation of Socialist Realism in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue,³⁵ and Petar Lubarda's in 1951, whose canvases preserved his taste for the monumental and heroic, but presented it with associative, two-dimensional surfaces.

Freedom and respect they did obtain, but within limits. Those who believed that – to resort to Žogović's expression – literature's lagging behind reality could be made up for, were promptly reminded where these limits lay. In 1950 Branko Ćopić, a trusted Party cadre and a popular realist writer, dared to publish a satirical story, *Jeretička priča* (Heretical story), in which he mocked the state functionaries' newly acquired taste for luxury. A salvo of criticism immediately followed, showing where the line lay; even Tito himself, who rarely spoke about particular cases and preferred to leave similar trifles to his adjutants, speaking at the Congress of Anti-Fascist Women briefly mentioned Ćopić's transgression:

He presented the whole of society, from top to bottom, as negative, which means that it should be destroyed. This kind of satire we shall not allow or leave without a response. One does not need to fear that he will be arrested for what he did. No, he deserves a public response, and to be told, once and for all, that hostile satire which aims to break our unity will not be tolerated.³⁶

This reaction set a pattern: writers may not have been requested to express the Party line any longer, but neither were they allowed to at-

⁽³⁵⁾ "I think that grafting an old form on a new set of themes is a business without any chance of success", Lidija Merenik, *Ideološki modeli...*, cit., p. 61.

⁽³⁶⁾ Ratko Peković, *Ni rat ni mir...*, cit., p. 85.

tack Party officials. The most important aspect of Tito's reaction to Ćopić's story, however, was the promise that the author would not be arrested: he would be replied to. In addition to being an assurance of one's life and liberty – no small achievement after tens of thousands of extra-judicial executions only five years previously – the precedent thus set reassured writers, showing them at the same time how far they could go.³⁷ Another famous case followed the publication of Isidora Sekulić's book *Njegošu knjiga duboke odanosti* (For Njegoš, a book of deep devotion) in 1951. Sekulić was a somewhat eclectic thinker with wide-ranging interests, accepted by the Party as a patriotic, though non-communist writer with a great reputation, and as such elected as the first post-war president of the Society of Writers. The first volume of her book on Njegoš was warmly received by critics, which only contributed to Milovan Djilas's anger, and in the same year he produced his counter-book, *Legenda o Njegošu* (The Njegoš legend). Sekulić's understanding of Njegoš was idealistic, mystical, and metaphysical, and played into the hands of bourgeois nationalistic circles, claimed Djilas, and continued by offering an account of this great nineteenth-century poet and playwright based on "dialectical materialism". Although Djilas, at the time still the head of Agitprop and thus officially in charge of all cultural matters, kept emphasising that he was not writing from the position of Agitprop head, and not representing the Party's take on Njegoš, it must have been – in view of those very same recent executions – difficult for Sekulić, already an elderly lady with no one to protect her, to believe that one of the Party's strongest men only wanted to engage with her in a literary debate as her equal, and she burnt the manuscript of the second volume. The Party still needed to convince the

⁽³⁷⁾ This line would, in decades to come, shift frequently: there would still be banned books, films and theatre performances – as late as the mid-1980s – and writers would be exposed to public bashing, unofficial bans on publishing for shorter or longer periods, and occasional court proceedings for "enemy propaganda" or "verbal offences" defined by article 133 of the Penal Code; there were more and less permissive periods, depending on the balance of power in the Party structures. However, the general direction was towards ever greater permissiveness. For example, in 1957 only 50 people were accused of political crimes in the whole of Yugoslavia. (Predrag J. Marković, *Beograd između istoka i zapada 1948-1965*. Službeni list, Belgrade 1996, pp. 176-177)

intellectuals that its invitation to the dialogue of equals was seriously intended.

All these changes did not affect the interpretation of artistic and literary tradition already established in the previous period. Oral literature and nineteenth-century realism, with special emphasis on the social-democratic tradition in Serbia, were still the basis of the canon, and the interpretation of Romanticism was only strengthened by the clash with one more empire – the Soviet Union – which, as many others before it, came to threaten the Yugoslavs. However, the newly acquired taste for independence and self-reliance in the Party's leadership opened the door to re-incorporation of the medieval tradition. As the Party sought rapprochement with the West, there appeared a need to present the Yugoslav culture in Western capitals in the best possible light, on a grand scale, and with the most attractive offer possible. In 1949 Miroslav Krleža was entrusted with organizing an exhibition in Paris, which later toured other European cities as well, and the choice fell on Yugoslav medieval art, mostly art produced under the Nemanjić dynasty. This very choice was already indicative enough: apart from being of great architectonic, artistic and historical value, and thus the best calling card the Yugoslavs could think of, it also served an ideological function. We are a group of old peoples, thus went the intended message, with some glorious moments in our past; for the domestic audience – the exhibition also visited all capitals of the Yugoslav republics – the message was: be confident, trust in yourselves, do not imitate others, create your own values. This message of cultural originality was a constant element in Krleža's thinking and writing for many decades, and he never tired of repeating it. In his essay on Serbian and Macedonian frescoes, written while he was preparing the Parisian exhibition, Krleža claimed that the secret of their beauty, and the particular way in which they announce Renaissance Italian painting lay in their break with the canonical schematism of Byzantine painting, in the freedom with which the painters approached their themes, in their creative independence and originality.³⁸ Thus Krleža used this opportunity to – albeit inexplicitly – once more dismiss the prescriptive, canonical nature of So-

⁽³⁸⁾ Miroslav Krleža, *Eseji, I. Jugoslovenske teme*. Sloboda, Belgrade 1977.

cialist Realism, and at the same time to repeat that only independent spirits can ever achieve originality and produce lasting values. One more, less explicit political message was hidden in the connection between artistic and intellectual creativity on the one hand, and independent statehood and strength, on the other. The eruption of creative energy characteristic of the Nemanjić era, which produced the architecture, painting and writing deemed to be the best the country could assemble to represent itself abroad, occurred in the only extended period of political independence and freedom from foreign domination the country has known.

Soon enough, Krleža had the opportunity to repeat the same message of independence, originality and creativity, in October 1952, when he gave a speech at the Third Congress of the Alliance of Yugoslav Writers in Ljubljana. This speech marked the moment of triumph for those who gathered around Krleža's journal "Pečat" during the conflict on the literary left before the war, and for Krleža personally: what they had advocated in opposing the Party at the time, thus earning the status of revisionists and Trotskyists, the Party asked them to advocate as its own policy at the writers' congress in 1952. Krleža simply repeated what he had been writing and saying all along: truly revolutionary Marxist art can be created only by talented and creative individuals, and not by those who follow Zhdanov's prescriptions. It was in this way that the Party made the break with Socialist Realism official. And as a result of the break, the institution whose task it was to introduce and look after it had to go: Agitprop was abolished in the same year. Art was officially freed from the demand to be "Socialist Realist in form", but it was still expected to be "socialist in content".

After 1952: a precarious balance

Although the Party allowed free competition of artistic styles, it still wanted to control and regulate this "free" competition. In 1952, "Književne novine", the central literary journal in Serbia published by the Society of Writers, encountered a competitor: "Svedočanstva". The erstwhile Surrealists, followed by a group of younger writers, began publishing their works in the latter, which thus became the journal of the "modernists", leaving the former to the "realists". The

conflict between “Književne novine” and “Svedočanstva”, later between “Delo” and “Savremenik”, was the primary cultural conflict in Serbia until about 1955. Sveta Lukić maintained that this was more than a conflict of artistic styles, as art and literature in the early 1950s became the only fields where ideological debates could be conducted, and that the rift between the realists and modernists stood for discussions about cultural freedom, possibilities of public debates and critiques of socialism.³⁹ Other contemporaries disagreed: Predrag Palavestra claimed that although on the surface it resembled the older clash between “realists” and “formalists”, this conflict was actually only about the power of Serbia’s cultural life.⁴⁰ Ratko Peković, who researched the Party’s archive, supplied ample evidence for Palavestra’s claim: both “realists” and “modernists” were members of the same Party cell in the Society of Writers – there has never been any doubt that the Party stood behind both journals – and the minutes of their meetings show that they rarely discussed questions of style, but regularly fought for memberships of advisory boards of cultural institutions, editorial posts in publishing houses and literary awards. At one point, Oskar Davičo, a member of the “modernist” team, complained that the “realists” had beaten the “modernists” by 44:14, which means that there were precisely 58 memberships, posts and awards which they did not know how to divide up equitably.⁴¹ Seen from our times, the dividing line between the two groups seems rather blurred: there were “realists” who produced work more modern than those of the “modernists”, and the other way around. As for the ideological and political debate, the “modernists” were supposed to stand for greater freedom, and the “realists” for authoritarian conservatism; this cannot be corroborated by the evidence, as Marko Ristić and Oskar Davičo, the former Surrealists and now prominent “modernists”, frequently resorted to Zhdanovist political disqualifications of their opponents, which led Palavestra to qualify their position as “anti-dogmatic dogmatism”.⁴²

⁽³⁹⁾ Sveta Lukić, *Savremena jugoslovenska literatura (1945-1965)*, cit., p. 29.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Predrag Palavestra, *Posleratna srpska književnost 1945-1970*. Prosveta, Belgrade 1972, pp. 11, 59.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Ratko Peković, *Paralelna strana istorije. Sporovi o jeziku, naciji, literaturi 1945-1990*. Albatros plus, Belgrade 2009, p. 77.

⁽⁴²⁾ Predrag Palavestra, *Posleratna srpska književnost...*, cit., pp. 56-57, 71-72.

What was needed, however, was a new generation of writers and critics that had neither participated in the conflict on the literary left, nor had had to learn and then unlearn the lesson of Socialist Realism. Such a generation made an entrance onto the literary scene in the early 1950s: Miodrag Pavlović published his collection of poems *87 pesama* (87 poems) in 1952, Vasko Popa his collection *Kora* (Crust) in 1953, and Radomir Konstantinović his novel *Daj nam danas* (Give us today) in 1954. They also had their generational critics, such as Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz. Daring and uninhibited, Mihiz regularly wrote literary criticism for “NIN”, a Belgrade weekly established by the Party’s more liberal wing in 1951, and published his first book of criticism, *Ogledi* (Essays), in the same year. Various Party orthodoxies and their conflicts, whether Krleža’s and Marko Ristić’s “revolutionary content” of literature, or Zogović’s crude version of Socialist Realism, must have appeared pointless to them; from their vantage point, all these must have seemed equally anachronistic. Mihiz wrote to this effect as early as 1953:

there is no, and has never been, and never will be a literary movement which is socialist in itself, and there is no literary-formal method which is anti-socialist a priori. There are only markedly socialist and markedly anti-socialist contents. And there are also contents which are neither socialist nor anti-socialist, but simply human.⁴³

Krleža’s opposition to Socialist Realism with a simultaneous endorsement of creative and original art which would support the Marxist revolutionary transformation of the world may have been a productive position in the 1930s, during his conflict with the simplified and crude position of the “social literature”; in the early 1950s, however, it seemed as politicized, prescriptive and un-literary as the latter. Praising Vasko Popa’s and Miodrag Pavlović’s poetry collections, Mihiz maintained: “they have written a number of poems which are simply, but not simple, moments of thoughts and emotions in human life, imagination and experience, which by this very fact have the right to exist in socialism, although they are strictly speaking not socialist, much less anti-socialist”.⁴⁴ For this new generation, a plural-

⁽⁴³⁾ Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, *Književni razgovori*. Srpska književna zadruga, Belgrade 1971, p. 33.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ *Ibid.*

ism of literary styles, which the Party had offered them in Krleža's speech at the Ljubljana congress, was not enough; only a full autonomy of literature, beyond any considerations of socialism, anti-socialism or politics in general, would be acceptable to them.

Once freed from the demand to learn how to be Socialist Realists, and no longer under the close surveillance of Agitprop, Radovan Zogović and his squad of lesser known, but equally aggressive critics, even the older writers from the Partisan generation changed their poetics. In 1950 Mihajlo Lalić published a realist novel *Svadba* (Wedding); his next book *Zlo proljeće* (Evil Spring) in 1953 was already a modern, psychological novel based on stream of consciousness. Dobrica Ćosić's *Daleko je sunce* (Far Away is the Sun, 1951) was realist, but *Koreni* (Roots, 1954) was already a modern, psychological novel. Čedomir Minderović, who in 1949 in his capacity as secretary-general of the Society of Writers pronounced lists of writers' tasks which they were to carry out in order to support the revolution, several years later "passionately defended the freedom of art from state interference, thus risking the Party's reproach and punishment".⁴⁵ There would be no *Gesamtkunstwerk* Tito.⁴⁶ The Communist Party of Yugoslavia had resolved that it could create socialism without the help of Socialist Realism, and even without the help of literature in general, whether Socialist Realist or "formalist".⁴⁷ As of the early 1950s, it was a resolutely anti-Stalinist party, and had to behave accordingly. Critique of Stalinism was welcome, as it only *ex post facto* strengthened the Yugoslav position in what was now interpreted not as Stalin's split with Tito, but as Tito's split with Stalin. However, it was not always easy to tell where the critique of Stalinism ended and the critique of the Yugoslav, anti-Stalinist version of socialism began. Was Stalinism merely the Gulag and the purges, or was it also the tight control of the press and all forms of public

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Predrag Palavestra, *Posleratna srpska književnost...*, cit., p. 36.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ On Socialist Realism as *Gesamtkunstwerk* see Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*. Hanser, Munich 2008.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Dobrenko defines the basic function of Socialist Realism as the creation of socialism and the production of socialist reality, as opposed to simple political propaganda, Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2007, pp. xii, 4.

speech, the collectivization of private property, and the non-elected government? Where was the line which divided Stalinism from socialism, and how could a socialist system be non-Stalinist? How could socialism be democratic? To learn how to be non-Stalinist, the Party tried to forge intellectual links with Western Marxism, and Gramsci, Sartre, Marcuse, Bloch, Adorno and Habermas, whose books were translated almost immediately after their publication in French, English or German, quickly filled the shelves of libraries and bookshops; a home-grown variant of an experimental, liberal Marxist thought developed by the Praxis group was encouraged to flourish, until it was decided that the explicitness of their philosophical and sociological critique did not quite serve the Party's aims, and the journal "Praxis", with its Korčula Summer School of philosophy, was abolished.⁴⁸ However, this uncertainty about the dividing line between Stalinism and socialism helped create a socialist version of what Habermas called the public sphere, and in it literature had the leading role. Literature did not have to be explicit; it could allude, indicate, point to, it required interpretation, and it could say a lot more than philosophy and sociology, yet protect itself with the claim that literature never imitates, never refers to any – particularly not to Yugoslav – reality. The Party's erratic behaviour, its own uncertainty about how far it should go in controlling this space, its periodic waves of liberalization and tightening control, and the different dynamics of the individual republics' political lives – while room to manoeuvre narrowed in one, it widened in another – all contributed to the relative freedom of Yugoslavia's intellectual and artistic life, provided that certain lines were never crossed: the Party's Stalinist past could not be explored, Tito could not be criticised, not even obliquely, there was only one officially approved history of the Second World War, and the Party's right to rule the country could not be explicitly questioned. Sveta Lukić, ever an astute observer and chronicler of the post-war literary and art scene, noted in 1963: "As opposed to Soviet dogmatism,

⁽⁴⁸⁾ On Praxis philosophy see Mihajlo Marković and Gajo Petrović (eds), *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*. D. Reidel, Dordrecht 1979; Gerson S. Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1977; Slobodan Žunjić, *Istorija srpske filozofije*. Plato, Belgrade 2009.

where the bureaucracy orders artists to do something in a certain way, here, society – through its politicians and ideologues – tries to reach an agreement with artists or recommends that they not do something”.⁴⁹ With the passage of time, the Party discovered that it too could use the space thus created for its own purposes: as Yugoslavia was increasingly de-centralized from the early 1960s on, it started to resemble a country with eight political parties – all of them communist, of course – each based in one of the republics or autonomous provinces, which did not always have the same interests or shared policy; what could not be discussed openly in the Party’s forums could be left to trusted literati, who were willing to raise a question in literary magazines and journals and take the blame if things were to go wrong, while the Party’s functionaries who incited them to go public would wash their hands of them, claiming that they had nothing to do with it, and that in a socialist democracy everyone had the right to speak one’s mind.⁵⁰ This strategy only further eroded control over the public space, as the right to speak one’s mind was eagerly used by those who did not have any Party support.

The history of Socialist Realism in Serbia was brief: the period of its attempted introduction did not last long enough, and did not produce a body of works significant enough to be considered as more than a caesura in art and literary history. The main terrain of Socialist Realism was criticism – including the speeches of the Party ideologues, congress resolutions and proclamations – which did produce some peculiar and occasionally bizarre ideas, fortunately without much influence on artistic production. Hence the main challenge in studying Serbian cultural history of this period is not the poetics of Socialist Realism itself, but the complex dynamics the Party created between art, freedom of speech and the revolutionary transformation of society.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Lidija Merenik, *Ideološki modeli...*, cit., p. 67.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ The commonly cited example is the polemics between Dušan Pirjevec and Dobrica Ćosić in the 1960s; however, the golden period of the Party’s use of literary space as a substitution for the missing public sphere came only after Tito’s death in 1980.