

Annemarie Sorescu Marinković¹
Institute for Balkan Studies,
Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade

TELEVISION OF THE EAST WEST DIVIDE

(Sabina Mihelj, Simon Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Although the majority of audiences around the globe experienced television in the context of non-democratic political regimes until the second half of the twentieth century, a decade ago it seemed probable that liberal television was there to stay, and that its historical forerunners were consigned to the history's dustbin. A decade ago, when research on state socialist television was in full swing, the existence of socialist television as such seemed connected only to a past historical period and was mostly perceived as a reminder that the liberal media world was not the only one possible. Today, when the "illiberal turn" is sweeping democracies all over the world, studying the bygone era of state socialist television in Eastern Europe has gained more than merely historical relevance. It has become a highly topical subject, one that could help media researchers better understand differences and similarities between democratic and non-democratic media systems and cultures, old and new, and anticipate where current developments are heading.

What Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable manage to do in *From Media Systems to Media Cultures. Understanding Socialist Television* is, above all, enhance our understanding of mediated communication in non-democratic settings, based on the analysis of television cultures of Eastern Europe during the Cold War. However, the relevance of the comparative framework developed in the book goes beyond its application to the historical experiences of state socialism and its legacies in post-socialist Eastern Europe, providing important lessons for understanding the nature of mediated communication in surviving communist-led countries, and in non-democratic contexts in general.

1 annelia22@yahoo.com

In addition, this book of almost 400 pages offers more than a template for global comparisons of television in non-democratic contexts. First, it reorients the focus of comparative media research from media systems to media cultures. Starting from the premise that a systemic approach offers only partial insight into the social implications of mediated communication, the authors develop an analytical framework of media cultures as patterns of ideas and practices with distinct spatial and temporal characteristics, which can be applied in various political and cultural contexts. Second, the authors use the experience of socialist television to question several key concepts in contemporary media research and their global relevance, thus suggesting a number of revisions and proposing a new theoretical agenda for comparative media research, anchored in the notion of entangled modernities.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, “Concepts and Contexts”, develops a definition of media culture, with a focus on television, and introduces its key dimensions: publicness, privacy, gendering, transnationalism, temporal orientation, extraordinary temporality, and secularization. To help explain how and why television cultures in socialist Eastern Europe differed along these seven dimensions, it offers a broad overview of the historical conditions in which they arose. Particular attention is paid to four features of their broadcasting systems: their transnational orientation, the timing of infrastructural developments, their relative core-periphery position, and the television’s relationship to party and state. Drawing on Hallin and Mancini’s typology of media systems in Western Europe and Northern America,² the authors identify three major types of state socialist television systems: market state socialist, reformist state socialist, and hard-line state socialist TV systems, and discuss further relevant contextual factors.

The second part, “The Spaces of State Socialist Television”, turns to the empirical investigation of socialist television cultures, applying the analytical and theoretical framework to five East-European countries – the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, East Germany, Poland, and Romania. It explores television’s involvement with public and private spheres, focusing on the *domestication* (how the television set came to be integrated into family and domestic life, thus becoming an essential part of the modern home) and on *privatization* of television (as visible in television programming) – processes which resembled the Western ones at the time. The last chapter of this part looks at another key

2 Daniel C. Hallin, Paolo Mancini 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

dimension of variation between television cultures: their involvement with transnational exchange and ties.

The third part, “The Times of State Socialist Television”, focuses on the temporal aspect of television cultures, and examines scheduling techniques which shaped viewers’ everyday practices, but also the way in which television was used as a means of raising historical awareness. The last chapters compare two major types of media holidays across countries: those linked to a distinctly communist vision of progress, and those without a marked communist identity, and tackle selected dramatic and disruptive events of the television era, both of which projected the audiences into an extra-ordinary time.

Socialist media research, despite being a rather new field of study, has been developing amazingly fast. In the very short time elapsed from its establishment as a separate discipline, it managed to overcome the bipolar model commercial (Western) television / public service (Eastern, socialist) television, which dominated the field in the beginning and was deeply entrenched in the persistent East/West divide, characteristic to the Cold War way of thinking. Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable go a step further. By summing up the knowledge in this field, they offer a convincing answer to one of the burning questions related to socialist television: Did communist authorities during the Cold War manage to harness the potential of television to advance their revolutionary ideas, or did television set in motion a revolution of its own, contributing to developments that in the long run proved detrimental to the communist project? Even if socialist television was mainly a means of diffusing communist propaganda, the authors convincingly show that the answer lies somewhere in the middle: “Television was immensely successful at weaving communist ideals into the very texture of everyday life, providing a basis of shared rituals and other forms of sociality, but did so without necessarily inspiring a commitment to the communist agenda. As such, television had an ambiguous relationship with the communist project: it served as an anchor of normality and thereby contributed to the stability and longevity of communist rule, while at the same time allowing the ideological message to become ever more blurred”.

Initially intended as a history of Yugoslav television, later as a study which would set the Yugoslav experience in a comparative context,³ this cross-co-unity comparison and longitudinal analysis of television cultures in five East-

3 Александра Миловановић 2018. “Рефлексије социјалистичке телевизије: Студија од медијских система до медијских култура” in Александар Раковић и Татомир Тороман

European countries during the socialist and partly post-socialist regime is an impressive interdisciplinary study. The authors draw on a multitude of sources and, apart from developing a synthesis of existing literature, also engage in empirical research to generate a substantial amount of new data. The result is a hybrid study, which aims at attracting different kinds of readers: from those interested in the history of television, socialism and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century, up to specialists in the comparative analysis of media cultures in general.⁴

Ambitious, though disconcerting at points by its ample scope, the book is one of the most important contributions to the field so far. Still, it has several minor drawbacks. First, it fails to explain why the base for the comparative analysis consists of the five countries chosen by the authors, and why Albania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, for example, were left out. One can only guess that the main reason was the scarcity of sources in English. However, given that the authors advocate for avoiding the trap of methodological nationalism, they would at least need to detail on their reason, and on the implications of their choice on the proposed comparative model. Thus, Albania and Bulgaria remain an enigma as far as social television is concerned, and unfortunately are not even mentioned in the chapter dedicated to experiencing transnational television, despite the fact that large parts of audiences in both countries were heavily exposed to the Yugoslav and other more liberal television systems in the second half of the 20th century. Second, the expertise of the authors in Yugoslav and Russian cultures transpires throughout the book, so that not all five countries are equally represented. For example, the history of Romanian socialist television,⁵ though mentioned as a secondary source, is hardly ever used. As well, when juxtaposing conclusions about historical state socialist television with observations on the television in communist-led countries that still survive (China, Cuba and Vietnam), the authors find striking similarities with Yugoslav television only, which might be slightly biased.

This notwithstanding, the book is a most valuable read, which goes beyond the comparative frame and daringly questions the role of television today. The authors argue it is too early to abandon the analysis of television cultures, as new opportunities for consuming television content in a variety of public

(ур.) Југославија и култура: културна политика, промене, феномени, „Култура“ 161, 273–288, page 281.

4 *Ibid*, page 278.

5 Alexandru Matei 2013. *O tribună captivantă. Televiziune, ideologie, societate în România socialistă (1965–1983)*. București: Curtea Veche.

and private contexts are opening up despite the dislodging of traditional television viewing models brought on by the Internet era. They conclude that what we are witnessing is not a wholesale transition from television cultures to digital cultures, but rather the rise of a hybrid media culture, which combines elements of both traditional, analogue broadcasting, and the newer digital and mobile technologies.

