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'(What's so funny 'bout) peace, love & understanding': rock culture and the rebuilding of civic identity in the post-conflict Balkans

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The article examines current rock culture in the Balkans as a potential vehicle for rebuilding the broken sociocultural bonds between the different post-Yugoslav societies and for creating a constructive cultural space for articulating new forms of civic and post-nationalist identities. The argument offered is that, after the sociocultural exile during the war years, rock culture in the post-conflict Balkans has considerable potential to establish itself as a popular-cultural force of 'utopian transcendence' of the current ethno-nationalist sociopolitical moment, and as a catalyst of the new post-Yugoslav spirit of openness, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Yugoslavia; the Balkans; rock culture; progressive urban spirit; hip hop; ethno-nationalism; post-conflict identities; moral imagination

Introduction

After the 1990s' sociocultural exile, the rock culture of former Yugoslavia seems to be making new inroads in the post-Yugoslav sociocultural space. In the past decade or so, public visibility of what was once the most important popular-cultural force of the land is figuring more and more prominently, and is becoming ever more visible on the post-Yugoslav sociocultural map. There seems to be a renewed interest in urban popular-cultural expressions, and – once thought as dead, gone and forgotten – rock culture again seems to be considered as something important, valuable and worth resurrecting. The question is: 'so what – (why) does it really matter?'

The article's answer to this question is: 'yes – it does matter a great deal, because the resurrected rock culture quite possibly signals important shifts and turns in the nature of post-Yugoslav sociocultural space(s)'. This answer is grounded in two main arguments: (1) rock culture's return to sociocultural mainstream represents a significant step towards the mending of broken sociocultural bonds and, in a way, towards the transcending of nationalistic forms of sociocultural – and political – consciousness in the Balkans; (2) the ever more public presence of different forms of rock culture can play an important role in the building of (re)new(ed) forms of civic identity, progressively antithetical to the

still firmly entrenched expressions of national(istic) 'collective consciousness' grounded in 'blood, soil and belonging'. In short, the article's key proposition is that, in a sociocultural sense, the new rise of rock culture quite possibly signals – no matter how provisionally – the 'return of the normal'.

I will examine these arguments by looking into three moments of ex-Yugoslav rock culture: (1) its inception, rise and impact in the late 1970s until the beginning of the Balkan conflicts in 1991; (2) its 1990s' sociocultural exile; and (3) its gradual resurfacing since the beginning of the twenty-first century. I will do this by tracing the rise and fall, and eventual new rise, of what I will call the 'progressive urban spirit'[1] as an 'ethereal embodiment' of the important sociocultural (and political) rock culture idea(l)s first inaugurated in the mid- to late 1970s through the 'new wave' of Yugoslav rock music. My inquiry is predicated on the assumption that, once articulated through and by Yugoslav rock music, this progressive urban spirit turned into a reality *sui generis* (to borrow from Emile Durkheim), not attached and/or reducible to any particular popular music form but, in a sense, floating freely from one of its expressions to another. Thus, although the roots of the progressive urban spirit are in the mid- to late 1970s' rock music, the latter is not its only and ultimate embodiment but (if perhaps most significant) one of its possible 'actually existing' incarnations, past and present.

My unit of analysis, therefore, is the progressive urban spirit (i.e. ethos) of Yugoslav rock culture. My hypothesis is that its relatively recent 'resurrection' in the form of hip hop, and its ever-greater public presence today, represent potentially an important step towards transcending the ethno-nationalist consciousness of 'belittling others and aggrandizing one's own' (Kecmanović 2002, p. 5), and towards (re)embracing more open, tolerant and inclusive forms of individual and collective identity indispensable for the post-Yugoslav and post-conflict coexistence in the Balkans.

In exploring the above, my aim is not to offer a theoretical but rather normative argument regarding the matters in question. Thus, the article's objective is not to provide a general theoretical exploration of rock or popular music and its progressive/emancipatory potential (on this, see Wicke 1990, Hamm 1995, Frith 2007). Rather, its goal is to establish specific normative parameters regarding the potentially constructive impact of rock music's progressive urban spirit within the post-Yugoslav sociocultural space (where the progressive nature of rock music has long been taken as 'axiomatic'[2] (see, for example, Perković 2011)). The article also does not aim to provide a comparative treatment of the development of rock music in Yugoslavia and other East European societies during the Communist era (for a history/discussion of rock music in Eastern Europe, see, for example, Ryback 1990, Ramet 1994). This would be well beyond its scope and – given the article's most immediate objectives – beyond what is necessary (for a detailed treatment of rock music in socialist Yugoslavia, see Mišina 2013). Finally, while its propositions and analysis could (and perhaps will) be read politically, the article has no intention of engaging in political arguments and debates – or offering assessments – regarding the Yugoslav sociocultural past or post-Yugoslav political

present. Both would be fairly problematic and, in the end, not all that productive in light of what the article is ultimately after. Given all of these, the concluding remarks offered at the closing of my investigation and analysis cannot but be general, provisional and non-prescriptive.

With this proviso in mind, let me begin by addressing the following questions: 'what is the progressive urban spirit?'; 'where does it come from?'; 'why is it so important?'

The 'substantive turn': the rise of Yugoslav rock culture

As I have argued elsewhere (Mišina 2013), the mid- to late 1970s in Yugoslavia was the time of a popular-cultural revolution. Its essence was the fundamental reshaping of rock music into 'music of commitment' and, in a larger sense, the birth of the first authentically Yugoslav form of urban youth culture (i.e. cultural expressions that addressed the realities and problems of urban youth and its relationship to Yugoslav society). During this period, Yugoslav rock music took the 'substantive turn' and transformed itself from a popular-cultural form that was predominantly about style to a popular-cultural expression that became overwhelmingly about substance. The transformative moment of Yugoslav rock was thus the moment of realisation that, in order to be genuine, authentic and – in the end – real, rock music had to be about something, and about something that matters. Not only that, rock music also had to communicate something meaningful and it had to engage with the world as directly and as unabashedly as possible. The 'new wave' of Yugoslav rock music that emerged out of this substantive turn took these realisations as the beginning and end point of its new cultural praxis and catapulted what were at the time considered revolutionary rock music forms and expressions, all predicated on the notion of music as committed artistic engagement. The end effect of this revolutionary transformation was the creation of the first authentic form of Yugoslav youth culture that, through the music of commitment as its principal outlet and 'communicative arena' (Mattern 2006), actively engaged with the sociocultural and political realities of the Yugoslav society from a uniquely youth-centred point of view.

In a philosophical-cultural sense, rock music's substantive turn was grounded in Yugoslavia's ideological commitment to socialist humanism – a derivative of western Marxism – which not only inspired the country's official cultural platform but also provided a crucial philosophical-cultural grounding for the music of commitment. In a sociocultural sense, the revolutionisation of Yugoslav rock music was very much influenced by local appropriation of the British 'punk ethos' and its belief that rock music ought to be thought of as a form of sociocultural praxis whose primary task was to speak 'truth to power' and provide a popular-cultural outlet for an active transformative engagement with the world. Finally, on a philosophical-social plane, the rise of the music of commitment was inspired by a Sartrean existentialist notion of 'engaged art' and its assumptions of artistic commitment to society and responsibility to audiences. Overall, the substantive

turn of Yugoslav rock music and the resultant rise of the progressive urban spirit were an outcome of the locally appropriated and synthesised confluence of these three sources of impact and influence. Let us examine them in a bit more detail.

From its very inception, the cultural process of Yugoslav society was grounded in a particular form of socialist ideology whose central idea was to build a community 'in the true measure of humanity' – that is, a society of fundamental liberty, equality and fraternity for all of its constitutive nations and nationalities (see Anon 1984, p. 13, Kremer 1985a, p. 17). This ideological vision was predicated on the political leadership's commitment to socialist humanism and one of its foundational assumptions that true society is *human* society, that is, the form of social life and organisation that provides the political, economic and cultural resources conducive to the full realisation of one's freedom and, therefore, humanity (see Fromm 1966). The country's prevailing socialist-humanist ethos had significant impact not only on the working of Yugoslavia's dominant culture but on the cultural forms that emerged as critical reactions to the cultural practices of the national cultural apparatus, and as attempts to provide the necessary cultural correctives to its shortcomings that would aid the realisation of the Yugoslav socialist ideal. Thus both dominant and non-dominant cultural forms were fundamentally animated by the same ideological – or, better yet, utopian – imaginary, with each form working towards the latter's realisation in a manner construed as most appropriate and/or effective.

Within this framework, the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock music and the emergence of the music of commitment can be best understood as the cultural reaction to the imperfections of the country's official cultural platform. The cultural praxis of the three embodiments of music of commitment – the music movements of New Wave, New Primitives and New Partisans – was posited as a social critique of the national cultural apparatus whose strategic purpose was to help eliminate the 'slippage' between what the Yugoslav socialist community ostensibly strived for and how it actually was (for a discussion of New Partisans, see Mišina 2010). The critique of the parameters and practices of the country's official new socialist culture was aimed at revealing this slippage and, implicitly, at illuminating potential ways for overcoming it (Prljavo kazalište's song 'U mojoj općini problema nema' ('There are no problems in my community') or Zabranjeno pušenje's 'Neću da budem Švabo u dotiranom filmu' ('I don't want to be a German in a subsidised film') provide relevant examples here). Thus, although each rock music incarnation of the music of commitment perceived the source of the disconnect in different terms, they all shared the belief that the social critique of these sources of disconnect was the first necessary, if not necessarily sufficient, step for pushing things in the right direction and bringing them closer to the ideal of socialist Yugoslavia as the community 'in the true measure of humanity'. In this sense, the sociocultural praxis of the post-substantive turn Yugoslav rock music was anchored in the commitment to socialist humanism and its vision of (the possibility of) a genuine human society.

In sociocultural terms, the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock music was grounded in sociopolitical interpretations of the British punk phenomenon, and the subsequent transplanting of punk ethos onto a Yugoslav popular-cultural terrain. Sociopolitically, British punk was understood as a popular-cultural revolt by the disenfranchised youth against the growing social polarisation of British society and the condition of 'political and economic non-privilege of an army of unemployed young English proletarians' (Laib 1985, p. 22). Punk music and its 'there's-no-future' attitude were thus taken as a radical response to the pervasive feeling that there were two Englands – one for the rich minority and the other for the poor majority – and that the official England simply did not care about the conditions of life in the lumpenproletariat England or about doing anything to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots. In this context, British punk provided a popular-cultural outlet for marginalised and voiceless youth to express their dissatisfaction with British society and to rebel against the non-responsive British establishment. In a sociopolitical sense, therefore, the importance of British punk in being the 'voice of the invisible' was in offering a means of authenticating a particular form of social experience, reclaiming a specific type of individual and collective identity grounded in a radicalised form of political consciousness, and 'demonstrating and unmasking the cynicism and false sheen of "the state of welfare" while building its own system of values' (Laib 1985, p. 24).

Transplanted onto the Yugoslav sociocultural terrain, the punk ethos of sociopolitical radicalism took the form of 'radically constructive critical engagement' with the cultural and sociopolitical realities of socialist Yugoslavia. Instead of channelling the radical 'there's-no-future' attitude, Yugoslav music of commitment echoed the sentiments of boredom and emptiness caused essentially by the lack of appropriate cultural initiatives to which Yugoslav urban youth could meaningfully relate and respond (not surprisingly, some of the first songs of the 'new wave' of Yugoslav rock music – such as 'Lubljana je bulana' ('Ljubljana is sick'), 'Plastika' ('Plastic') and 'Dokolica' ('Idleness') – reflected this sense of youth's estrangement, or passive emptiness). This culminated in a proactive attitude to 'do something' about one's condition of paralysing estrangement and, consequently, in a critique of Yugoslav society's organisational and institutional frameworks (perceived as) generative of this paralysis (Azra's song 'Uradi nešto' ('Do something') illustrates this most directly and forcefully). Thus, whereas British punk was 'despisingly against', Yugoslav music of commitment was 'qualifyingly for' the official society. Despite this important difference, however, both shared the crucial commonality of understanding and employing rock music as a substantive sociocultural praxis – that is, as a popular-cultural outlet for channelling transformative change grounded in 'critical consciousness'.

Finally, on a philosophical-social plane, the substantive turn of Yugoslav rock music meant embracing a new philosophical attitude about rock music as the music of commitment (or engaged music), and a new type of artistic self-awareness about engaged musician as fundamentally a public intellectual. Both

were – via the new punk ethos – inspired by the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1989) and, specifically, his notion of 'literature of commitment' (*littérature engagée*) and the idea of an artist's serious responsibility to society (see Sartre 2002). In Sartre's view, literature of commitment was predicated on the artist adapting freely made choices to socially useful ends, and defining himself by consciously engaging in willed action. 'Engaged art', thus, was freely chosen artistic endeavour predicated on serious commitment to society and responsibility to audiences, ultimately oriented towards social usefulness rather than 'artistic self-involvement'. As such, it was the polar opposite of the bourgeois 'art for art's sake'.

Appropriated and transplanted as the notions of 'engaged music' and 'engaged musician', Sartre's ideas were transformed into the new philosophical attitude that in order to be 'real' rock music had to communicate something meaningful and be about something that matters, and that it had to engage with the world as directly and as unabashedly as possible. Therefore, to think about rock as engaged music meant embracing an outlook that rock music can and ought to be used as a cultural weapon in the struggle for self-affirmation, articulation of social presence and critical engagement with society's sociocultural, political and economic realities. The 'final frontier' of the music of commitment thus defined and understood was the revolutionisation of oneself, one's surroundings and the structures of one's existence.

Coupled with this was the new self-awareness about engaged musicians as fundamentally public intellectuals who, through their personal attitude and active relationship to their social surroundings, embodied the very same stance projected through their music of commitment. This new artistic-intellectual self-awareness had three aspects to it: (1) the notion that the music of commitment required (to borrow from Paulo Freire (2000)) a *conscientised* individual 'armed' with 'critical conscience' and capable of immersing in the world in an enlightened and intellectually astute manner (see Rundek in Janjatović 1981, p. 19); (2) the belief that active engagement with the world required a non-conformist attitude (i.e. unconventional forms of thought and perception) grounded in individuality unburdened by social conventions and therefore capable of going beyond the given and articulating the notions of the 'world to be' (see Stublić in Vukojević 1981, p. 49); and (3) the commitment to the idea that one's artistic engagement defines who one is and what one is about, and that the nature of one's engaged existence in the world is a matter of freely and consciously made choices, ultimately animated by the sense of social responsibility and usefulness (see Štulić in Nikolić 1983, p. 30). Put together, these three aspects brought to the fore the new type of artist-intellectual who understood the world, was immersed in it, and – armed with the music of commitment as an 'artistic weapon of choice' – acted actively and consciously upon it (on this, see Pajkić and Vukojević 1981, p. 19). For both engaged music and engaged musician, the fire that fuelled their sociocultural praxis was the categorical imperative 'I act, therefore I am'.

The progressive urban spirit

In light of the above, what I call the progressive urban spirit of Yugoslav rock music is best understood as both an outcome and an embodiment of the three strands of the popular-cultural revolution of the mid- to late 1970s, and – more to the point – of the sociocultural 'entrenchment' of their corresponding values, principles and practices. The end result of this revolution was the rise of a new form of sociocultural consciousness that had a profound impact not only on rock music and artists, but also on rock music audiences and – more broadly – youth in general. The symbiotic relationship between the music of commitment and its ever-growing youth following led, in turn, to the rise of rock culture as an incarnation of the new 'post-revolutionary' popular-cultural developments. Ultimately, the ethos of that rock culture – that is, the progressive urban spirit – became a general signifier for a particular kind of sociocultural awareness of, disposition towards, and existence in the 'world out there'.

The progressive urban spirit is, therefore, Yugoslav rock culture distilled to its universalised core values and principles. As a sociocultural awareness, its main properties are an active and engaged mind. As a disposition towards the world, it is permeated by a non-conformist and constructively critical attitude. As an expression of a particular sociocultural existence, it is about open inclusiveness and cosmopolitanism. These make the progressive urban spirit antithetical to mindless conformity, 'medievalist' parochialism and militant exclusivism, and oriented fundamentally towards reflexive heterodoxy, worldly non-provincialism and affable coexistence. To wax poetic (and borrow from Elvis Costello), at its heart are the qualities of 'peace, love and understanding'.

The fall: Yugoslav rock culture and ethno-nationalism

Throughout most of the 1980s, Yugoslav rock culture had a profound social-cultural influence on the consciousness of a generation (or, perhaps more accurately, generations) of Yugoslav youth who grew up with the music of the period (see, for example, Debeljak 1994, pp. 157–161, Volcic 2007a, p. 78). Through its sociocultural praxis, rock culture also had a considerable effect on the parameters and boundaries of Yugoslavia's dominant culture, and on the dynamics of the latter's relationship with the Yugoslav popular culture in general. Another way to put this would be to suggest that things before and after the rise of Yugoslav rock culture were not the same. Its decade-long existence meant the presence of an un-ignorable progressive sociocultural force that not only permanently marked a specific segment of the Yugoslav population but also left a permanent imprint on the national sociocultural map.

In the context of the above, the rise of ethno-nationalism[3] in Yugoslavia in the second half of the 1980s brought about conscious efforts from different sides to actively marginalise and neutralise rock culture and its progressive urban spirit.

In crucial respects, laying ground for a new ethno-nationalist sociocultural and political agenda meant establishing radically different sociocultural parameters and dealing with cultural visions that challenged and put into question the soundness of the rising sociocultural and political purviews (on the late 1980s' and 1990s' ethno-nationalism in the Balkans, see Kecmanović 2002). In simple terms, creation of the new necessitated the destruction of the alternative. Ultimately, this meant not only dismantling the infrastructural framework within which the cultural alternatives existed and operated, but also problematising and then rendering irrelevant their underlying core values and principles – that is to say, killing their ethos, or spirit.

Co-optation, dismantling, dismissal: ethno-nationalism and its discontents

Broadly, ethno-nationalist attempts to destroy the 'inconvenient existence' of Yugoslav rock culture and its progressive urban spirit took three distinct strategies: (1) co-optation, (2) dismantling and (3) dismissal. The first one, co-optation, was about 'rebranding' the rock culture to fit the new ethno-nationalist sociocultural and political agenda, so as to legitimise the latter as the 'new spirit for new times'. The dismantling was about making the rock culture invisible within the context of the new ethno-nationalist framework, so as to make the latter the only viable parameters of the sociocultural and political existence in the newly formed ethno-national(istic) communities. Finally, the dismissal was about discrediting 'visible residues' of rock culture that ethno-nationalism could not co-opt or dismantle, so as to make them 'pejorative relics' of the bygone era. Needless to say, the three strategies worked in concert with one another, but the prominence of the use of each varied from one region of the carved-up Yugoslav space to another and from one time period to the next.

The above raises an important question: 'why did ethno-nationalism have to take on Yugoslav rock culture rather than simply ignore it?' After all, rock culture was the cultural experience and expression of the minority (i.e. overwhelmingly urban youth), and its existence, in the end, could not pose a fatal threat to the dominant ethno-nationalist culture. I believe that there are three primary reasons for this: (1) fundamental incompatibility between rock culture's progressive urban spirit and the spirit of ethno-nationalist culture; (2) rock culture's impulse to diagnose the cultural pathology of ethno-nationalism; and (3) rock culture's tendency to problematise the ethno-nationalist 'new normal'. Regarding the first reason, the rise of ethno-nationalism in the second half of the 1980s meant the creation of new sociocultural values and principles whose fundamentals were diametrically opposed to the progressive urban spirit. As discussed previously, the ethos of Yugoslav rock culture was permeated by a critical non-conformist attitude, open-minded inclusiveness and a cosmopolitan world view. The spirit of ethno-nationalist culture, in contrast, demanded conformity to the new sociocultural and political realities, bolstered by xenophobia and parochialism. The two were therefore mutually exclusive to the point that the viability of the latter was predicated

on the non-viability of the former. To put it differently (and in slightly stronger terms), the establishment of an ethno-nationalist culture meant, in the end, the creation of a new ethno-nationalist sociocultural agency that would embrace without reservation the core values, principles and practices of the new cultural and political paradigm (for a Bosnian case study, see Christie 1993). To ensure that, the new agency-in-the-making needed to be 'purged' of everything that could potentially lead to its (desir)ability to assess its new sociocultural realities against a different set of sociocultural standards and practices. In this context, ethno-nationalism taking on Yugoslav rock culture was part of a broader sociocultural struggle for – as the saying goes – the 'hearts and minds' of the post-Yugoslav ethno-national subjects.

An additional reason for dealing with Yugoslav rock culture was the latter's impulse to diagnose the pathology of the rising ethno-nationalist culture and in so doing point to its profoundly cancerous nature. To be sure, the source of this diagnosis was, strictly speaking, 'pre-ethno-nationalist', going back to rock culture's critical assessment of the crumbling cultural platform of socialist Yugoslavia. However, the fact that ethno-nationalist culture built its foundations on the cultural pathologies that brought down socialist Yugoslavia and turned them into some of its most defining qualities made the initial diagnosis and its subsequent refinements very much applicable to capturing the essence of ethno-nationalist cultural malaise.

From the viewpoint of rock culture, one of the principal problems of Yugoslavia's national culture of the 1980s was its ever-greater 'estradisation',[4] that is, the process of 'catering to mass-audience and mass-media [with] the simultaneous polishing of the form and emptying of the content' (Kremer 1988, p. 35) – in simple terms, the dumbing down of cultural expressions for the purpose of wide commercial appeal. According to the diagnosis, the driving force of estradisation was the increasingly popular 'newly composed folk music' (*novokomponovana narodna muzika*) – a hybrid of pop music and 'deformed' traditional folk music – and its powerful impact on the musical and, more troublingly, general cultural sensibilities of the Yugoslav nation. The ultimate pathological consequence of the whole phenomenon was 'pornography of the soul' (Labudović 1984, p. 32), which valorised provincialism as the highest form of sociocultural existence and celebrated lethargy, passivity, absence of creativity and mental stereotypy as 'gnosticism of the highest order' (Vitošević 1984, p. 23).

As the cultural foundation of the late 1980s' socialist Yugoslavia was giving in under the weight of estradisation, and the rising ethno-nationalist culture was being gradually propped up by the very same phenomenon, rock musician Rambo Amadeus coined the phrase that would label in definitive terms the cultural pathology of the faltering Yugoslav society and, eventually, of the post-Yugoslav ethno-nations: 'turbo folk'. Although initially Rambo Amadeus used the term to describe his unique style of music (a melange of diverse – and seemingly incompatible – music forms and styles), turbo folk eventually became a conceptual shorthand for estradisation raised to the second power and thus for everything

that was, measured by the standards of the progressive urban spirit, socially and culturally troubling, problematic and outright wrong. On his 2005 record *Oprem Dobro*, Rambo Amadeus (2005, track 5) would eventually define turbo folk as follows:

> Folk is people
> turbo is a system of injecting compressed fuel
> into a cylinder of an internal combustion engine
>
> Turbo folk is the combustion of people
> any prodding of that combustion is turbo folk
> the firing up of homo sapiens' lowest passions

The rest of the song details the definition of turbo folk by listing the present-day realities that permeate the post-Yugoslav sociocultural space (alcohol, porn shops, rave, cocaine, McDonald's, political marketing, etc.). The song concludes with the statement 'I have not invented turbo folk; I only gave it a name'.

Ultimately, what rock culture's diagnosis revealed was the turbo-folk ethos of the new forms of ethno-nationalist culture. More importantly, it also laid bare the perversion of fostering cultural pathologies as the new normalcies of the day, promoted consciously by the post-Yugoslav political regimes in order to first normalise their ethno-nationalist agendas and subsequently normalise the socio-cultural, political and economic consequences and outcomes of ethno-nationalist practices. Thus, the diagnosis was also a forceful critique that not only questioned the sound nature of the new cultural spirit but also created a possibility for the new ethno-nationalist subjects to reflect upon their new milieu and conditions of their very own existence. In the context of the late 1980s' and early 1990s' gearing up for the implementation of post-Yugoslav projects (and, especially, in the context of ensuing ethno-nationalist violence), any sociocultural practices that would crack an opening for a potentially critical reflection on the sociocultural and political realities of the day were taken by ethno-nationalism as unwelcome and problematic, and therefore in need of some sort of handling. Co-optation, dismantling and dismissal became the handling strategies of choice.

The final aspect of Yugoslav rock culture found problematic by ethno-nationalism was the refusal to give in to the new turbo-folk cultural ethos and let go of the tendency to persistently question and problematise the 'new normalcies' of ethno-nationalist sociocultural and political discourses. The reason for this, as we have seen, was the fundamental incompatibility between the progressive urban spirit of Yugoslav rock culture and the turbo-folk ethos of ethno-nationalist culture, resulting in the clash of two sociocultural world views and an ongoing struggle by Yugoslav rock culture to – as a popular slogan of the day had it – 'resist the madness' of ethno-nationalist conformity, provincialism and xenophobia (see, for example, a statement by Nele Karajlić, the frontman of Sarajevo's band Zabranjeno pušenje ('No Smoking'), in Popović 1989, p. 6). As the 1980s

were drawing to a close and the threat of violent ethno-nationalist conflict became ever more present, the struggle to 'resist the madness' took a more politicised turn and evolved into a call for Yugoslavism and an appeal to resist the ethno-nationalist firing up of, as Rambo Amadeus put it, 'homo sapiens' lowest passions'. Overall, the anti-ethno-nationalist political engagement of Yugoslav rock culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s was driven by one single objective and one common goal: 'we don't want folk music to win' (as summed up by the line in a song 'Slušaj 'vamo' ('Listen up 'ere') by an ad hoc anti-war band Rimtutituki (1992, track A1)).

The co-optation of rock culture began in the late 1980s as the new ethno-nationalist parties were gearing up for the first multi-party elections. The general idea was to 'nationalise' the big rock names and weave them into the newly emerging ethno-national cultural mythology. The establishment of ethno-nationalist regimes after the first multi-party elections in 1990 and, especially, the outbreak of ethno-nationalist violence in 1991 added a new 'structural' dimension to the co-optation in the form of 'command culture' (i.e. a system of cultural directives which demanded that a national cultural output be in line with the new ethno-nationalist political ideology). Reflecting on the situation in Croatia, Catherine Baker (summing up Hudelist's arguments) thus writes:

> a policy of 'spiritual renewal', based on Tuđman's belief that Serbs and Croats belonged to entirely different historical civilizations, had led to a state-driven popular music policy which promoted particular musical approaches depending on how closely they matched the presidential narrative which rejected Croatia's association with the Balkans and the East (2010, p. 1742).

This, in turn, had an effect on the working of major national cultural institutions (radio and TV stations, record companies, etc.) whose practices and programming policies closely observed the new cultural directives from the top. In relation to Croatian state television,

> HTV's representation of the war harmonized with the dominant narrative of the Croatian side of the war put forward by the president, Franjo Tuđman: Croatia was thus presented as an innocent, non-aggressive party reluctantly but steadfastly defending itself against the Serbian 'aggressor' (a combination of the JNA, Slobodan Milošević and Croatian Serb rebels). The HTV/presidential narrative extended beyond news to music: HTV did not support songs which contravened its wider aims (if for instance they implied that Croatian soldiers were themselves aggressive), could ask for images in lyrics or videos to be changed and on several occasions removed songs from playlists because editors had apparently had second thoughts about their connotations (Baker 2009, p. 35).

Similar kinds of state-directed cultural initiatives were also pursued in other newly formed ethno-nationalist states. Their aim – as in Croatia – was to bring the public face of national culture in line with the new ethno-nationalist narrative. In this context, the co-optation of rock culture worked as a series of pressure strategies of

accepting to toe the official cultural line under the threat of cultural invisibility or outright cultural ostracism.

The dismantling of rock culture was a 'structural extension' of the practices of co-optation, undertaken when the latter did not yield desired outcomes, or when rock culture could not be made to fit the new ethno-nationalist cultural parameters. The objective of dismantling was to make rock culture invisible to the mainstream society by refusing to promote it in major media outlets, by removing it from the state radio and television, or by vaulting its music output in the archives of major record labels. While seemingly rather successful in terms of its overarching intent, the end effect of these strategies was to push rock culture into a cultural underground which operated as a parallel cultural universe hidden from the eyes and ears of the mainstream public (on the Novi Sad rock scene of the first half of 1990s, see Đerić 2006). This exile from the sociocultural mainstream thus resulted in a situation where rock culture and its progressive urban spirit were officially regarded as successfully exorcised while, unofficially, having a vibrant 'secret life' of their own (see, for example, Matičević and Markov 1995).

Finally, the strategy of dismissal was reserved for the expressions and practices of rock culture that could not be co-opted or dismantled, and that refused a permanent exile to cultural underground – that is, for the continuing open proclamations of the progressive urban spirit in the face of the turbo-folk ethos of ethno-nationalism. The primary aim of dismissal was to discredit any attempts to 'resist the madness' (be it as critiques of the new sociocultural and political realities, or as appeals to resist parochialism and xenophobia) by casting them as either irresponsible betrayals of 'national interests' or as anachronistic ways of thinking of the bygone socialist era of 'mono-thought' (*jednoumlje*). The conceptual shorthand invented by the ethno-nationalist cultural discourse and employed as an ultimate tool of dismissal was 'Yugo-nostalgia' (on meaning and evolution of Yugo-nostalgia, see Seroka 2002, Volcic 2007b, Simmons 2009). During the 1991–1995 years of ethno-nationalist conflicts, to be branded Yugo-nostalgic meant not only being relegated to the sphere of sociocultural irrelevance but also being potentially thrown into the ethno-nationalist whirlwind of politicised 'media witch-hunt' (see Simmons 2009, p. 457). Needless to say, the particulars for being labeled Yugo-nostalgic differed from one ethno-nationalist regime to another. What did not differ was a general principle of using the label pejoratively to denote any sociocultural and political aberration from ethno-nationalist orthodoxy. As Seroka (2002, pp. 35–36) writes,

> In every republic, 'Yugo-nostalgia' carried strong negative connotations. From a Croatian perspective, 'Yugo-nostalgists' advocated a return to a system of Serb minority rule, repression of Croatian culture, and economic exploitation by Belgrade banks and economic enterprises. For Slovenians, 'Yugo-nostalgia' was perceived as a barrier to prosperity and inclusion to Europe. For Macedonian leaders, Macedonia's poverty was attributed to the exploitation of their resources by Slovenians, Croats, and Serbs. Among Serbs, 'Yugo-nostalgia' implied the surrender of regional leadership and to the smaller and 'less heroic' nationalities, as well as

the abandonment of 'fellow Serbs' to cultural assimilation by the other republics' nationalities.

Thus, as the strategy of dismissal, 'Yugo-nostalgisation' worked by way of generating and reinforcing a paradox of declaring any form of sociocultural and political heterodoxy as, simultaneously, both irrelevant and relevant – irrelevant *because* of what it said, and relevant because of *what* it said. In this sense, the relevance of Yugo-nostalgic heterodoxy's irrelevance was, ultimately, in being 'lies that told the truth' (to borrow from Rajin 1987).

Rock culture reloaded: towards the rebuilding of civic identity in the post-conflict Balkans

The fall of Yugoslav rock culture in the early 1990s was a confluence of diverse sociocultural and political dynamics, ultimately resulting in the disappearance of the progressive urban spirit from the post-Yugoslav sociocultural map. It is important to keep in mind that Yugoslav rock culture was only one of the victims of broader self-preservation efforts undertaken by the newly established ethno-nationalist regimes, and that the story of its 'death' is, in the end, a window into a larger narrative of the regimes' destruction of progressive intellectual, sociocultural and political alternatives.[5] It is also important to keep in mind that the fall of Yugoslav rock culture – as the death of other progressive alternatives – was a banishment rather than an execution, whose ultimate accomplishment was the containment of the progressive urban spirit rather than its complete exorcism from the mainstream sociocultural realities of the post-Yugoslav ethno-nations.

However, after rock culture's perhaps last open battle against the turbo-folk ethos of ethno-nationalism in 1992 (a blitzkrieg campaign by an ad hoc Belgrade rock band Rimtutituki, whose message, in the face of a steam-rolling ethno-nationalist 'war machine', was 'peace, brother, peace'), it appeared that rock culture and its progressive urban spirit were dead, gone and forgotten. Shortly thereafter, the post-Yugoslav space quickly became taken over by different regional incarnations of, in the end, the same ethno-nationalist 'cyclonic perpetual emotion machine' (to borrow from Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) that swiftly set the tone and scope for what were to be understood as the legitimate and acceptable forms of sociocultural and political thought and expression. In the thus reshaped and redefined landscape, the only visible faces of rock culture were the ones co-opted by ethno-nationalist regimes, whose statements and practices sounded, looked and felt like an abdication of the progressive urban spirit and everything it once stood for. Rock culture and its ethos indeed had appeared to be dead and gone. But were they forgotten?

Far from it. While ethno-nationalism of the early 1990s might have been successful in, at least publicly, putting the final nail in rock culture's coffin, it was not successful in burying its spirit. The ethos of rock culture lived on and found

its new embodiment in the post-Yugoslav hip hop scene. Reflecting on the state of the 1990s' music scene in Croatia, Ante Perković writes the following (in Bosanac 2004):

> By the mid-1990s . . . rock-music lost its credibility. It was very difficult to see in it the clear roots of the real, the traces of what kids lived through on a daily basis in their neighborhoods. Techno and rave offered a quick escape from the problems, but they offered very little to identify with. Something else needed to appear. Quickly . . . . Using the street vocabulary and a refined sense of justice, hip-hop told what's coming to whom directly, openly and without metaphors (114).

Effectively, hip hop was the new music of commitment – the rock 'n' roll of a new era and a new generation, coming to life because of youth's need to have its own means of communication, its own way of telling its own truths and confronting the realities and conditions of its own marginalised existence. Just like the music of commitment of the late 1970s and 1980s, hip hop built its unique expression on the values of non-conformity, open-mindedness and cosmopolitanism, and took critical social engagement as the beginning and end point of its artistic expression. For all practical purposes, hip hop was rock culture reloaded and the progressive urban spirit re-animated through the new popular-cultural form and in the new sociocultural and political context.

Another parallel between the 'new wave' of Yugoslav rock music and the post-Yugoslav hip hop is the belief that 'true' music has to be about something meaningful and that it has to speak about things that matter – that is, it has to reflect on the here and now and it has to do so from the viewpoint of a common person and a sense of social justice. Music, in other words, has to be the voice of ordinary people and it has to 'speak truth to power'. As Marchello, one of Serbia's most prominent hip hop artists puts it:

> I believe I represent the common people, but with an added poetic dimension . . . . What we're offering is an alternative to MTV and to American hip hop. Our fans are not looking for a gold chain and a gold tooth. They already have that in turbo folk, so hip hop is seen as something rebellious outside the slimy mainstream (in Sito-Sucic 2006, n.p.).

The rebelliousness of hip hop comes from the imperative to address the most 'pathological' aspects of today's sociocultural and political realities in the Balkans: injustice, corruption, nationalism and religious influence on politics. These are the dominant themes of some of the most important hip hop output to date and, perhaps more importantly, the themes that not only point to the common problems in the region but also provide the basis for a common popular-cultural discourse across different post-Yugoslav communities. The song 'Vidi, vidi, vidi' ('Look, look, look') by Bosnian band Dubioza kolektiv (2010, track 6) offers an insightful summary-diagnosis of the contemporary Balkans reality:

As if time has stopped, only days are being counted
I cannot believe it's been already two decades
The most important thing here is who is of what name
it's a shame that this is tailored as my child's destiny
[. . .]
All around me the language of hatred, of anger
everyone's after their own – is there no moderation?
Weirdly shaped heads of negative traits
are in the network of corruptions
guarding all the functions

Look, look, look, what cars are being driven
look, look, look, how the budgets are being spent
look, look, look, what creatures are leading us
look who you are electing
what your votes are coming down to

According to Sito-Sucic (2006), '[the hip hop] artists have been eager to erase the emotional borders created by war, rapping in a language intelligible across the 20 million people previously grouped under Yugoslavia'. It should be noted, however, that the latter does not imply that hip hop's common cultural discourse has a political agenda of advocating the reunification of the post-Yugoslav communities into a new Yugoslav state. Its agenda is explicitly social and it has to do with (to borrow from Paulo Freire (2000)) 'conscientising' young people to reject the turbo-folk ethos of the dominant ethno-nationalist culture and embrace more progressive and humane values, principles and practices. As Bini, a rapper from Kosovo, puts it, '[w]e want to change the way people are thinking in Kosovo . . . . We are fighting the enemy inside. People here have no more love, respect and justice for each other' (in Sito-Sucic 2006). In this sense, hip hop sees itself as a popular-cultural 'communicative outlet' that enables its audience to 'move things forward' by breaking away from the ethno-nationalist past, and facilitates envisioning the possibilities for building a new and better future: '[t]he more people listen to this music, the more they think about these problems. The more they talk about them, the more a critical mass grows' (Bosnian rapper Frankie in Sito-Sucic 2006).

Rock culture and the post-ethno-nationalist 'moral imagination'

Now what is the connection between rock culture's progressive urban spirit and the rebuilding of civic identity in the post-conflict Balkans? One of the main insights of the research on the Balkans, ethno-nationalism, and identity is that the process of creating the new ethno-nationalist subject was driven by particular ideological demands and that the strategic use of culture – and popular-cultural forms, in particular – played a crucial part in fostering and reinforcing the new

type of post-Yugoslav ethno-national identity. As Volcic's research on Slovenia demonstrates, 'the machine that produced and reproduced Slovenians as national subjects' was by and large Slovenian state television as 'the consciousness of the nation':

> television representations worked towards the creation of the Slovenian national to become a recognizable identity – for the Slovenians themselves, and for the others outside the designed nation-state. [N]ational public television invited its Slovenian viewers to become part of one national family, while at the same time encouraging them to differentiate and distance themselves from the Balkan Other. Slovenians started to be daily reproduced as nationals, through a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, images, logos, representations and practices . . . . [T]he nation started to be media-represented, and gradually its aspirations were authorized, legitimized and naturalized (Volcic 2005, p. 294).

Similarly, Hudson's analysis of Serbian cultural identity reveals a deep connection between a particular cultural form – *pesma* ('song') – and Serbian nationalism. As he writes:

> the traditional song has long been embedded in Serbian cultural identity, and has been inspiring Serbian nationalism since the nineteenth century. In the 1990s the stimulation of nationalism by popular and traditional Serbian songs involved a process of ethnification – a cult of the folkloric – in which popular music contributed to the estrangement, alienation and distancing of the Other. This was both a process with roots long buried in the past, as well as one that continued to flourish at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Hudson 2001, p. 158).

Sloboda and Bergh's (2010) survey of some of the research on the Balkan conflicts also suggests the deliberate use of music and popular culture in the process of not only creating but also 'militarising' ethno-nationalist identity:

> in Croatia independently produced tapes of ultra-nationalistic Croatian music were produced and sold before the war started in the 1990s, and in Serbia turbo-folk was used by Serbians to bolster the myth of the Serbian uniqueness. Kosovo Albanians actively used music videos to disseminate a message that tried to create a national identity whilst also bolstering preparation for war (p. 4, in-text references omitted).

Cast sociologically, what the above indicates is that the rise of ethno-nationalism as the dominant sociocultural and political discourse and reality in the Balkans necessitated the shaping of a new form of individual and collective identity through conscious mobilisation and use of social and cultural resources. The latter's strategic objective was to create a particular kind of imagination as an anchorage for the new type of self-understanding and a means of connecting meaningfully one's individual and/or collective experience to a larger sociocultural, political and economic universe within which that experience was embedded and continuously (re)imagined. In this context, diverse cultural formations and configurations employed by ethno-nationalism figured as the essential building blocks

for (re)creating the type of imagination necessary for the continuous existence of the new ethno-nationalist identity and for its ongoing (re-)embedding within the new societal reality.

Now one of the persistent narratives regarding the post-conflict Balkans among the locals in the region (and, especially, in Bosnia and Herzegovina) is the one suggesting that, despite the end of fighting, the conflicts – although non-violent – persist. Its essential point (along with oft-expressed concerns that a new wave of violence could erupt at any moment) is that the cessation of violent hostilities was not followed by the process of peace-building, and that the absence of the latter has resulted in the continuous existence of conflict-prone ethno-nationalist identities across the region. In simple terms, people have not embraced new, post-conflict, identities and are still holding on to their 'wartime mentalities'. The implication here is that the fighting will really end and the peace will really come about only when people in the Balkans embrace 'post-conflict' – that is, post-ethno-nationalist – identities grounded in the values of openness, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. But how will this happen? Where will the transformative impulse for reshaping ethno-nationalist identities into some form of progressive civic identity come from?

If the claim that (to put somewhat crudely) identities are made, unmade and remade by culture is correct, then an answer to the above questions is relatively straightforward: the impulse will have to come from culture – that is to say, cultural expressions, practices and experiences that can have a transformative impact on individuals and collectivities in promoting the values foundational to the progressive civic identity. And it is precisely here that rock culture and its progressive urban spirit (as embodied in hip hop or whatever other incarnation) can have a significant contribution. Although the literature on conflict transformation has been long pointing out that the process of peace-building requires the creation of a new shared cultural identity through which a mutual motivation to negotiate a transformation of the conflict could take place, it has been only relatively recently that music was recognised as an effective resource for building shared cultural identities (see, for example, Urbain 2008, Omeje 2009, ch. 7). In part, the latter is reflective of a shift towards an insight that building a post-conflict identity is not strictly rational but 'emotional work' that requires eliciting psychological change, addressing feelings and thoughts, and improving communication (for Bosnia-specific discussion, see Riiser 2010, Robertson 2010). In this context, music – and arts in general – came to be taken as having the power to impact individuals emotionally, psychologically and spiritually via the creative process that can help foster change within individuals and between conflicted groups (for a concise review of conflict transformation literature, see Sloboda and Bergh 2010).

According to Lederach (2005), transcending violence through an 'emotional work' of emotional, psychological and spiritual transformation is rooted in the ability to generate, build and mobilise 'moral imagination', or 'the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist' (ix, emphasis omitted). As he explains,

the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of rela-
tionships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that
embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief
in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping
into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of
violence (Lederach 2005, p. 5).

The moral imagination, in other words, is a value-grounded understanding of
all the complexities and problems of the world which we inhabit, and a cre-
ative process of envisioning the possibilities of its peaceful transcendence towards
the common non-violent future. As the article's discussion demonstrates, rock
culture and its progressive urban spirit – be it in their original or reincarnated
form – are oriented precisely towards the transformative 'emotional work' and
towards an articulation of the moral imagination as a form of critical awareness,
understanding and 'utopian transcendence'. What fuels the fire of hip hop as
the re-embodiment of rock culture's ethos is, as we have seen, a desire to erase
conflict-inflicted emotional borders and to actively engage its audience in envi-
sioning the possibility of creating a different future. This, in turn, is predicated
on having a clear understanding of and a critical attitude towards the realities of
the world in which one exists and which one – because of all of its (real or sym-
bolic) violence – aims to transcend through an act of emotional, psychological and
spiritual transformation, in order to be able to reach for the 'realistic utopia' of
tomorrow. The critical tone of hip hop is thus combative, but not violent. Its aim
is not to entice conflict but to confront head on everything that denies an ordi-
nary individual the possibility of existence without suffering. 'Music', as Brano
Jakubović of Dubioza kolektiv says, 'pushes the stone from the hill, then it rolls
on' (in Sito-Sucic 2006). Finally, the common popular-cultural discourse of Balkan
hip hop is about 'building bridges' in the face of ethno-nationalist parochialism
and xenophobia, and about creating possibilities for a common cultural identity
grounded in the values and principles of openness, tolerance and peaceful coex-
istence. Effectively, this is the work of constructing a new form of 'civility' that
enables non-confrontational interactions and relationships on the basis of recog-
nising the value of differences and valuing the recognition of similarities – in short
(and as the popular saying goes), 'the stuff that dreams are made of'.

Conclusion

Is the above too optimistic? Perhaps. Is it too idealistic? Maybe. But given the state
of the post-conflict Balkans, it is perhaps the most realistic option there is. In a sit-
uation where political and economic leadership across the region has been widely
dismissed by ordinary people as morally bankrupt, and where the mainstream cul-
tural discourse has been running shallow and spiritually empty, the progressive
urban spirit of rock culture (in whatever incarnation) is one of the few things left
that can still engage at least one segment of the Balkan population at the level

that is meaningful and that has a potential for generating lasting transformative impact. No matter how hyperbolic the latter may sound, it is important to keep in mind that rock culture was the first to formally end the Serbo-Croatian conflict by breaking the cultural ice, as it were, in 2000 (long before the official cultural – and perhaps even political – relations had been re-established); that since then, rock culture has been the one steadily mending and re-weaving the broken cultural bonds across the ex-Yugoslav territory (culminating in Bijelo dugme's Sarajevo-Zagreb-Belgrade tour in 2005); and that, most recently, rock culture in the Balkans has been officially recognised by the international community for its positive contribution to bringing closer the cultures of the region (on the latter, see Anon 2010). Does this mean that rock culture can save the Balkans? Hardly. But it does mean that it should be taken seriously as a force that can make real positive contribution towards the building of a post-ethno-nationalist future. Of course, to go at it alone is much harder and much less effective than doing it in concert with others. Thus the most productive way for rock culture to move things forward would be to establish relations with other progressive cultural forces in the region and to (try to) create a 'united cultural front' on the basis of commonly shared values of openness, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In the end, the only thing that can possibly be lost by giving this a go is a chance.

'What's so funny 'bout peace, love & understanding?' All considered, not much at all.

Notes

1. In the context of 'progressive urban spirit', 'urban' is used to denote a particular 'philosophy of living', or *mentalité*, in terms of sociocultural and political-ideological specificities, rather than a particular living locale. The conceptual opposite would thus be 'non-urban' rather than 'rural'. In the context of urban/non-urban dichotomy, therefore, one could be demonstrably non-urban despite living in an urban environment as much as one could be demonstrably urban within a non-urban milieu. To paraphrase the front man of Sarajevo's Zabranjeno pušenje, Nele Karajlić, the distinction here is one 'of philosophy rather than of geography'.

2. As a counterpoint, Dragan Kremer (1985b) offers critical reflections regarding the inherently progressive/emancipatory potential of (Yugoslav) rock music. In his view, the latter is predicated on rock music's ability to exist as an alternative to cultural mainstream and engage in 'sociocultural interventionism' from the margins. The successful mass appeal – often because of the resonance of sociocultural interventionism – generally results in the shift away from the margins and towards the cultural centre. The key question to entertain, in this context, is: 'can rock music, in moving closer to the cultural mainstream, maintain its progressive/emancipatory impulse, or does it become a cultural form in search of sociocultural conformity?'

3. Most broadly, ethno-nationalism can be defined as a desire to transform an ethnic community into a political community via the pursuit of statehood as a means of securing complete control over one's own collective affairs. Ethno-nationalism is rooted in the sentiment by a particular ethnic group that its interests are not being served under the current political arrangement, and that the best course of action to address this circumstance is to create an ethnically based state fully controlled by an ethnic nation. This is coupled with the perception that the hardships of one's

own ethnic community are rooted in advantageous opportunities the current political arrangement provides to other ethnic communities, which leads to the sentiments of distrust towards all those perceived as a threat to one's own ethnic well-being. Hence, the basic claim of all ethno-nationalists is that their own ethnic community would be best off on its own, in full command of its sociocultural, political and economic destiny. At its most extreme, ethno-nationalism engenders a condition of existence where ethnic affiliation becomes a determinant of person's fate (for a detailed discussion of ethno-nationalism, see Connor 1994, Kecmanović 1996).

4. 'Estradisation' is derived from the word 'estrada', which in its original Russian usage refers to 'Soviet popular or light entertainment, known to audiences in Moscow, Leningrad, and beyond as the "small stage" or *éstrada*, a wide-ranging term that includes pop music but also applies to modern dance, comedy, circus arts, and any other performance not on the "big," classical stage' (MacFadyen 2002, p. 3).

5. As Gordy (1999, p. 2) observes in reference to Serbia during Slobodan Milošević's rule:

> the regime's strategies of self-preservation can be found in everyday life – in the destruction of alternatives. Specifically, the regime maintains itself not by mobilizing opinion or feeling in its favour, but by making alternatives to its rule unavailable [i.e. by] attempting to close off avenues of information, expression, and sociability, while many outside the regime endeavour to keep those avenues open.

Thus, it was precisely because rock culture (along with other progressive forms and expressions) was perceived as an avenue 'of information, expression, and sociability' outside the ethno-nationalist parameters, that it needed to be dealt with and neutralised as one of the alternatives to the dominant sociocultural and political order of the day.

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