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## Introduction

### Mapping the Merry Ghetto: Musical Countercultures in East Central Europe, 1960–1989

Our special issue offers an innovative overview of the developments in musical subcultures in East Central Europe from the 1960s to the postcommunist transition period. It intends to place these movements into their respective sociocultural settings, paying attention to both the local political contexts and artistic traditions, and also the transnational cultural mediation of styles and ideas. It also offers an insight into the modern cultural history of these countries, focusing on the alternative musical scenes in the sense of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, i.e., analyzing their complex linkages to other art branches. It tackles questions like the emergence of generational subcultures, the relationship of Samizdat/opposition groups and the art subcultures, the reconstruction of contemporary debates on counterculture, and the question of national/transnational contexts.

To indicate the notion of counterculture we have been relying upon, a few words of explanation are needed. Let us approach this issue from the angle of two related concepts in vogue in the past decades: “popular culture” and “subculture.” Popular culture is partly inherited from romantic and nationalist nineteenth-century conceptualizations of the “people” (Mishkova 2009), the emerging scholarly disciplines of ethnography, folklore, ethnology, and the utopian-socialist vision of the creative powers of the common people (Bakhtin 1964; Klaniczay 1990). It became an important historical and sociological analytical tool in the 1970s and 1980s, i.e., precisely in the period investigated by our thematic issue (Burke 1978), and refined the sensitivity of the analysts for the oral, corporeal, symbolic, communal, and ritual elements of culture, paving the way for the emergence of historical anthropology (Scribner 1997). Much of what developed in the second half of the twentieth century as an alternative both to modern “high culture” and also to stereotyped and industrialized “mass culture” (Gans 1974), above all the culture of modern youth and ethnic minorities, which centered around popular music (blues, rock and

roll, beat, and reggae), and came to be named “popular culture” as well; this is how the designation “pop music” emerged, and also how university departments, research centers, and academic journals were formed around the study of modern popular culture (Redhead 1997). Nevertheless, scholarly discussions increasingly pointed to the inconsequencies and the problematic nature of the notion of “popular culture” (Ginzburg 1976; Kaplan 1984), therefore it has been more or less abandoned today.

A parallel vogue of “subculture” could also be described. Reaching back to the vision of Robert Park and the “Chicago School” of urban sociology (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925), the Birmingham School of contemporary cultural studies with their new approach to working class culture (Hoggart 1958; Williams 1958), and a cultural sociology examining the specific culture of “deviance” and of the “outsiders” (Becker 1963), paved the way for the analysis of the culture of youth groups; the milieu of rock music as a specific kind of subculture developing a “resistance through rituals” (Hall and Jefferson 1976). These subcultures in the eyes of the mass media became kinds of “folk devils” causing “moral panics,” as Stanley Cohen’s landmark analysis (1973) of the British mods and rockers of the early 1960s showed. According to this approach, elaborated upon by Dick Hebdige (1979), who analyzed the styles and bodily symbols of more recent manifestations of punk, reggae, skinheads, and other subcultural groups, modern youth subcultures built upon the sociological and cultural mechanisms previously developed among “marginal” groups of deviants and oppressed (ethnic or sexual) minorities. Their symbols were shaped in the climate of a conscious challenge to the established set of moral and social values and a specific group hierarchy maintaining their cohesion in the circumstances of their life on the margins, in the “underground”—hence the designation subculture. More recently an impressive array of studies have accumulated on the modern versions of subculture in Western societies (Wojcik 1995; Gelder and Thornton 1997; Muggleton 2000), and the study of subcultures extended to the historically interlinked phenomena of late twentieth-century avant-garde art, theater, and the underground scene related to it (Warhol and Hackett 1980; Berghaus 1993).

When we chose “counterculture” as the label of our collective inquiries of the 1970s and ‘80s, we opted for a concept created as a self-designation by the cultural-political agents of this field. The notion itself was first made popular by the American journalist Theodore Roszak (1970), who presented the culture of the youth rebellion of the sixties as more than a mere new popular culture or subculture. In his eyes they presented a true alternative to modern industrial civilization and its high culture: an alternative based upon

a centuries-old critical tradition reaching back to the Cynics of antiquity, the basic values of Christianity, charismatic figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi, romantic poets such as Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Whitman, anarchist or utopian thinkers such as Bakunin, Tolstoy, and Kropotkin, avant-garde artists from Duchamp to Beuys, and more recently to beat poets such as Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac. This notion of counterculture, subsequently becoming very popular in the hippie and yippie movements (Rubin 1970), is clearly not a sociologically refined analytical concept but designates rather a powerful cultural movement of the age, a conceptual tool for the self-assessment and the orientation of an impressive mass of youngsters who were active, among others, in creating this new field which we designated here as “musical countercultures.” Going beyond the US and Western Europe, this phenomenon was becoming increasingly global, and constituted a specific field of cultural creativity and also of resistance and rebellion in the “Eastern Bloc” countries, the field of our investigation.

The general, “global” history of musical countercultures represents now a special large section in bookstores around the world. Besides the torrent of commercial biographies and interview volumes of all the big stars, a cultural journalism of a special kind developed which had been dwelling on the countercultural “aura” of these singers, their texts, their public, and their cultural impact. The ample work of Greil Marcus (1975; 1989; 1991; 1993; 1997; 2005; 2011) is a good example, and provides an imaginative commentary on how musical phenomena and current cultural conflicts intertwine and interact. There were attempts to formulate this kind of overview as a cultural construct or a “sociology of pop” (Cutler 1984; Frith 1988), and also many initiatives to come forward with a revolutionary kind of collage of documents, images, and words (such as McNeil and McCain 1996; and Colgrave and Sullivan 2001). This has been complemented, for quite some time, by a kind of “normal science”; decently documented, precise, and sophisticated studies in the cultural and art history of rock phenomena such as the book by Richard Witts on *The Velvet Underground* (2006).

As for Eastern Europe, due to the specificities of the research environment both within the region and also in the academic circles dealing with these countries in the “West,” there was limited research done on these phenomena up to the mid-1980s. In the local academic contexts musical subcultures were usually treated as part of the problem of social integration of the youth and authors writing from this perspective had a propensity to link them to deviance and the formation of socialist mass society. At the same time, there were some attempts on the part of the oppositional cultural circles to interpret the

rock phenomenon as an alternative ideological space to the official socialist one (e.g. Klaniczay 2003). Similarly, before the mid-1980s there was also limited interest in the cultural and political aspects of popular music in the socialist countries coming from the otherwise perceptive Western historical, sociological, and anthropological researchers dealing with Eastern Europe. Western scholars tended to focus mostly on political developments in these countries and thus they did not pay too much attention to such rather indirectly political phenomena.

The situation started to change with the emergence of a new generation of scholars who had first-hand experience of these subcultures and who sought to link the dissolution of the communist ideological and social framework to the rise of parallel social words for which the official propaganda was increasingly meaningless (e.g. Yoffe 1988). Paradigmatic works, the first general panoramic overviews prepared in this period (such as Ryback 1990 and Ramet 1994), were fascinated by the richness of the musical culture and lifestyle they found behind the Iron Curtain and were also stressing the political implications of rock music in the context of the late socialist and transition years.

It is remarkable that while some of the scholars dealt both with East Central Europe and the (post-)Soviet space, the bulk of the study of these two otherwise interrelated contexts evolved separately, which was both due to the rather separate linguistic and cultural competences of practitioners of Soviet (Russian) studies and those of East Central Europe. It is not by chance then that even today one can find otherwise well-informed case studies where the authors are practically unaware of the fact that the story they are telling had both transnational ramifications and also many parallels in the region.

That said, by now there is a considerable academic literature both in the “local languages” but also in English and German on various aspects of Eastern European popular musical cultures and their complex social, political, and cultural contexts. The most typical genre especially on the local book markets, however, remains the semi-scholarly publication of recollections and interviews (e.g. Kostelnik 2004; Ionescu 2005; Para-Kovács 2006). Along these lines, a number of documentary movies were also made in the last decade seeking to collect contemporary and retrospective materials on various groups and subcultures (e.g. *Happy Child* 2003; *Beats of Freedom* 2010). There are also a number of valuable case studies, edging between scholarly and more personal reconstruction, by former members of these subcultures (see, for instance, Tomc 2003).

All in all, the last decade saw a considerable intensification of research on these topics. This is due to a number of reasons, first and foremost to the

growing “historical distance” that turned these topics into “legitimate” objects of research by a new generation of scholars and the concomitant wave of the opening up of—police and secret service—archives in Eastern Europe, which offered the possibility of involving a new type of source material previously unavailable for researchers. All this helps to refine our image about the ambiguities of resistance and collaboration and gives us an insight into the place of rock culture in the broader cultural-political discussions of the 1960–80s, and the particular interferences of youth culture with such divergent ideological and cultural phenomena as “national communism,” the “ethnic revivals,” human rights movements, reform communism, anticommunist opposition, artistic avant-garde, and religious revivalism (see Gordy 1999; Alan 2001; Havasréti and K. Horváth 2003; Klaniczay 2006; Vaněk 2010).

While Eastern European rock culture has not yet been subject to a systematic comparative venture similar to the project on jazz, entitled *Jazz im “Ostblock” – Widerständigkeit durch Kulturtransfer*, initiated by the Osteuropa-Institut of the Freie Universität Berlin, there is definitely a growing awareness of the possible advantages of a comparative research on this topic. The same is illustrated by recent comparative overviews of East-European avant-garde art (Piotrowski 2009) and of Samizdat culture (Hamersky 2002). Therefore, while we could not aim at a systematic comparison, our intention was to take stock of the research done in the last twenty years in these countries and devise a new and more nuanced picture putting together the description of the musical and the cultural-political sides of the phenomenon. We also encouraged our authors to take into consideration the special methodological difficulties and pitfalls of recent history where most of the actors are still active, i.e., the debates and contests around the present glory of past resistance and the distorting effects of historical memory. We hope that such an overview can stimulate further research, especially on the transnational aspects of musical counterculture during socialism.

The present thematic issue grew out of a guest lecture series, entitled “Approaches to Countercultural Movements in East-Central Europe, 1960–1990,” at the Central European University, supported by Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies and the Center for Arts and Culture of CEU. The lecture series was organized by the editors from 2010 to 2011 in collaboration with the excellent expert on Eastern European avant-garde theater, the late Dragan Klaić (1950–2011), who tragically passed away this summer. Over the course of three years more than twenty lecturers presented case studies and overviews of various Eastern European contexts. The present issue contains some of the most interesting studies presented in Budapest as well as the best

contributions by doctoral students who participated in the lecture series first as the audience and who subsequently developed their research projects that were inspired by the lectures and in dialogue with each other.

The collection starts with Sándor Horváth's text about the sociocultural background of the reception of Western popular culture in the Hungarian context. The author used both the contemporary police reports as well as later recollections of the former members of an "antisocial" youth subcultural group, the so-called Great Tree Gang, who were incarcerated because of a 1969 hippie demonstration in Budapest. His most important finding, assuming the results of his more detailed book on the subject (Horváth 2009), was that the socialist police and socialist press was as busy in constructing and disseminating negative stereotypes of "deviant" rock and roll youth as the contemporary western press, and their intellectual patterns show much similarity, even interrelationship.

This image is well complemented by the study of Tamás Szőnyei. Developing the ideas of his pioneering book on the topic, the first exhaustive analysis of three decade's worth of secret police files on musical counterculture (Szőnyei 2005), he gives an overview of the complex relationship of the secret service and rock culture, pointing at the many modalities of resistance and collaboration co-existing in the very same cultural sphere. As Szőnyei's archival research shows, the secret service aimed at much more than simply gathering information, among others tasks, on the rebellious Hungarian musical counterculture (a scene well described by Szemere [2001]). The secret service was actually actively interfering, that is, by blackmailing some prominent musicians to become their agents, they attempted to "infiltrate" and undermine from within the most critically-minded bands, successfully working for their quick dissolution. They intended to control even the politically, or "counterculturally," most innocent spaces, such as the discos—famous DJs were also among their recruited agents.

The links of rock counterculture with political oppositional movements were the strongest in Czechoslovakia, where the famous case of the persecution and jailing of some members of the legendary group Plastic People of the Universe led to the unfolding of the Charta 77 movement, where high ranking members of the Czech and Slovak critical intelligentsia, such as Václav Havel, Jan Patočka, Jiří Dienstbier, and others stood up in the defense of the persecuted rockers. The nature of the artistic-political oeuvre of this band, and some related ones, is analyzed by Martin Machovec, who shares with us his precious insider observations.

In the last two decades most of the research focused on the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, leaving the impression that

in Romania and Bulgaria nothing interesting happened. The texts by Caius Dobrescu and Vladimir Trendafilov challenge this and offer a nuanced picture of the evolution of the rock scene in the context of a more limited public sphere and restrained cultural transfer from Western Europe. Reading the two texts together gives an interesting insight into the contextual determination of the various popular cultural scenes facing the ambiguous situation of cooptation and resistance: while in Bulgaria progressive rock reflected the moral uneasiness of musicians paying a high symbolic price for being allowed to perform, in Romania the national communist ideological framework created a rather specific discursive space for musicians to bring together the local ethnic references and the transnational stylistic patterns, oscillating between the role of fellow travelers and ideological contesters of the regime.

The second part of the issue deals with the 1980s dominated by punk and new wave, featuring a very different cultural atmosphere from the beatnik-progressive rock generations of the 1960–70s.

Grzegorz Piotrowski's study describes the specific milieu provided by the biggest Polish rock festival where the most uncompromising punk rock bands started to dominate the scene. The article analyzes the complex motivation of socialist politicians allowing this "safety valve" to unfold within the post-Solidarność-Martial-Law atmosphere, and puts the question whether this goal could have been achieved at all.

Looking at the generation of the eighties following the Plastic People, Trevor Hagen's study is based on oral history research reconstructing the cultural atmosphere of those small circles of freedom in the Czechoslovak context which created alternative cultural and political offers by participating in "musicking."

The last three texts deal with the complex developments of the former Yugoslavia. Arguably, from all the Eastern European cases it was this country, enjoying a considerably larger degree of cultural and political freedom and being more directly exposed to Western cultural influence, that produced the most vivid new wave scene. The studies included offer three radically different faces of this phenomenon, pondering also on the conceptual heuristics of the notions of counterculture and subculture. Gezim Krasniqi reconstructs the previously uncharted territory of Kosovar Albanian rock culture and its political and identitarian implications. Ljubica Spaskovska focuses on the antinationalist resistance potentials of rock subcultures in the context of the collapse of the Yugoslav project. Finally, Oskar Mulej turns to the Slovenian punk scene, which was one of the most intensive and innovative pockets of cultural resistance having a considerable impact on the development of Slovenian civil society contesting the Yugoslav communist framework.

In this collection of studies, for considerations of space and also for the coherence of the thematic range, we decided to stick to a geographic and cultural limitation. We do not address here similar phenomena in the Soviet Union, leaving out not only the lively Russian scene (Cushman 1995; Edmunds 2004) but also the many “national” variants in the Baltic region (Yoffe 1988), in Ukraine (Risch 2005), and in the Caucasus and elsewhere. All this has to be addressed with a similar amount of comparative studies and situated in the recently evolving new and more detailed historiography of dissident cultures in the Soviet Union—a task which remains to be accomplished. The second limitation was our decision to leave out the lively musical counterculture in East Germany, much studied recently (Poiger 2000; Schildt and Siegfried 2006), because the specific relationship with the musical and subcultural scenes of West Germany would have required, again, a very detailed consideration, and created here a considerably different situation from that of the “core” of socialist Central and South-Eastern Europe treated in our selection. We hope that our thematic issue will give further incentives to continue the comparative study integrating also these two further domains. Though we are far from a real synthesis or overarching conclusions, it is still the time for taking stock and discovering hitherto hidden treasures in the documentation and in the collective memory of the still active participants.

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