Book Review: *TV Socialism*

Imre, Anikó
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Studies of media industries in the former Warsaw Pact during the communist era and following the collapse of the Eastern bloc are relatively rare and rather limited in scope when they do exist. Often, accounts are narrowly national, treating developments as though they occurred in only one country. It is against this tendency of creating discrete national narratives that Anikó Imre's book *TV Socialism* is aimed. Imre's approach to TV in the socialist world is extremely unique. Rather than looking at a single national context, she focuses on a number of different genres and traces their origins and spread through the socialist states of the Cold War era. Imre's book is at its best when she tracks the lineage of genres in a number of socialist countries, tying developments across these geographic boundaries together. Her work often reflects the fact that audiences in one communist country are watching programs from neighboring states and emulating innovations. She also shows that the communist states often engage in limited ways with programs from the West.

According to Imre, East Germany was particularly important in East-West cultural transfers since it was impossible to keep signals from the West isolated, thus the East was never completely culturally isolated by the Iron Curtain. Imre convincingly shows that East and West interacted culturally even during the height of the Communist period. These interactions strongly prefigured the pattern of program transfer in the post-socialist period. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is her examination of communist-era advertising, where she demonstrates that, in the waning days of communist rule, television helped set the stage for neo-liberal capitalism that would take its place after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. By Imre's account, television advertisers of the communist period were aware of ads in the West, since to some degree signals spilled across national borders. They imitated, sometimes clumsily, the conventions of Western advertising by promoting a product that was either not available due to widespread shortages or available in very limited quantities. These ads, however, started to inculcate Eastern viewers into the consumerist mindset that would be at the very core of the post-socialist, neo-liberal project to transform Central and Eastern Europe into markets for Western goods.

The scope of Imre's work is also worth noting. Her project attempts to bring in as much of socialist Europe as possible, with especially close attention to Imre's native Hungary, also including programs from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, and East Germany. The breadth of the programs she surveys is impressive, although at times the number of programs overwhelms the reader. Some of the chapters have a tendency to devolve into litanies of programs, which can be hard to follow since many of the programs are from similar genres, but different countries. For example, in her chapter on melodrama, she examines a number of programs from different socialist states that all feature Janosek as the central character. While this is quite interesting in some ways, the rapid manner in which she shifts from one series and national context to another is occasionally disorienting and suggests that Imre's scope may be a bit too ambitious to be achievable without leaving the reader feeling as though they are on a whirlwind cultural tour of half a continent.

The scope of the project, in fact, leads to perhaps the biggest complaint with the book, which is its treatment of the Soviet Union and of post-Soviet Russia. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its successor state receive scant attention in Imre's account. One is left with the sense that the sections on Russia may have been added at a later stage of the project to appease an editor who felt, understandably, that a book on television in socialist countries needed to include the largest and most powerful socialist state. So little attention is given to the USSR, however, that it might have been preferable had Imre simply decided to exclude the country from her analysis altogether with the understanding that discussing it would be a project of its own.

In her examination of Soviet television, Imre is overly dependent on the works of Kristin Roth-Ey and Christine Evans. Both scholars have produced excellent work and Roth-Ey's book *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* is particularly good, though it deals with television in a limited way. The works of these two scholars are not sufficient to create an adequate portrait of television in the Soviet Union; therefore, Imre's over-reliance on these two sources means that she scarcely mentions the importance of Brezhnev era television serials, with the exception of the best-known exemplar *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. This historical moment in Soviet television has been written about extensively by Russian media scholar Elena Prokhorova, and its near exclusion

is a lacuna in Imre's otherwise interesting work. Given that the series of that era are often regarded by Russians with extraordinary fondness and nostalgia, their omission is quite problematic. The book also makes no mention of the Soviet animation industry even though there are several excellent and recent books on the topic. Other comprehensive sources of information about Soviet television such as Adele Marie Barker's edited collection of Soviet and post-Soviet culture are not present, giving the impression that the portions of *TV Socialism* dealing with the USSR were not fully developed.

Unfortunately, Imre's treatment of post-Soviet Russian television is even more problematic than her sparse treatment of the Soviet media. In one of the few places where Imre discusses Russian television she asserts that "in Russia, state sponsored nostalgia has become the dominant mode of television, the result of the Putin government's attempts at recentralization," adding that "This situation has favored programming that selectively reinvents Soviet television tradition in the shape of programs of high cultural quality saturated by a Russian post-imperial discourse of cultural superiority."² This is a bold assertion, for which Imre provides no evidence. Additionally, she makes no mention of the transition that Russian television went through in the 1990s under Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin. Admittedly, the literature on television in the Yeltsin era is somewhat sparse, in large part because the Russian television industry struggled mightily during this period, but it is not non-existent, and the Putin era cannot be understood fully without a sense of how television was shaped in the Yeltsin years. Imre's account of Russian television would be enriched by consulting the growing body of scholarship on the medium, such as David MacFadyen's *Russian Television Today*, Stephen Hutching and Natalya Rulyova's *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia*, and Birget Beumer's *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*.

A particularly troubling example of Imre's incomplete analysis of Russian television is evident in her treatment of Philip Rosenthal's 2010 documentary *Exporting Raymond*. This film relates Rosenthal's experiences in making a Russian-language version of the popular US sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, which Rosenthal executive produced for CBS from 1996 to 2005. Imre's criticism of the film contains a number of factual errors. For example, she asserts that "[*Everybody Loves Raymond*] was only one of a handful of American sitcom adaptations in Russia in the late first decade of the new millennium."³ In fact, attempted adaptations of American sitcoms were so plentiful from 2006 when *The Nanny* was adapted, that by 2012 (only six years later) Russian companies had exhausted the supply of available formats.⁴ Imre expresses indignation at Rosenthal for his lack of sophistication and American cultural chauvinism toward Russians. She complains that "the 'Russians' do not get to explain 'the history of Russian humor' in Rosenthal's documentary because they are viewed through his condescending Cold War lens from the beginning." Imre speculates that "they would say their resistance to *Raymond* is not because the show's humor is too sophisticated and absurd, but because it's too mundane and shallow."⁵

This complaint might be valid, were it not for the fact that the program's history in Russia speaks against the assertion that Rosenthal is a cultural imperialist. As noted at the end of the documentary, Rosenthal's comedic instincts were broadly correct. For example, his objections to the actor chosen to play Raymond/Kostya were spot-on: The first actor chosen for the role was badly received in focus groups and was eventually replaced with Georgii Dronov. This change seems to support the notion that perhaps, at least in terms of making modern television comedies, the Russian producers were not terribly sophisticated and

needed American support. It is also notable that under Sony's careful and continual guidance, the series has been phenomenally successful and is one of the longest running sitcoms in Russia. In fact, the series has been so successful that at present it has aired 447 episodes fully, 237 episodes more than the American original. This fact suggests that perhaps Rosenthal was correct in much of what he said, which undermines Imre's reading of the situation.

Unfortunately, the omissions and errors with regard to Soviet and Russian television lead one to wonder whether similar problems might be found in Imre's discussion of other national industries that are not as well-documented by scholars. This doubt is regrettable since accounts of television in Eastern Europe in the communist period are so rare; it is disappointing to find one that is incomplete. Imre's work is still quite valuable to scholars interested in this area, and its ambitious scope is both its greatest asset and the element that leaves it most susceptible to criticism from those deeply versed in particular national contexts.

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² Anikó Imre, *TV Socialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 167.

³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴ Vladimir Nesterov, "Russia Is Running Out of TV Shows," *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, December 24, 2012, http://rbth.ru/articles/2012/12/24/russia_is_running_out_of_tv_shows_21403.html.

⁵ Imre, 229.

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