

Andrew Roberts: From Good King Wenceslas to the Good Soldier Svejk. A Dictionary of Czech Popular Culture

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Andrew Roberts: *From Good King Wenceslas to the Good Soldier Švejk. A Dictionary of Czech Popular Culture.*

Budapest, New York 2005: Central European University Press, 300 pp.

In *Reading the Popular* (1989) John Fiske defined culture as a systematic process of the production of meanings on the basis of social experience. Most members of society have first-hand everyday experience with this process of symbolic production in their interaction with popular culture, as popular culture plays a fundamental role in the construction of identities. In this regard, Parsons has correctly noted that there is no way to clearly separate the study of culture and society. From the perspective of cultural studies, popular culture is part of the process of the production and reproduction of social life and is at the same time an instrument of power and a tool of resistance to power (the emphasis on unmasking political and ideological influences and practices within capitalist society means of course that cultural studies are also highly political).

Popular culture is understood to refer to the sum of various activities and products that reflect the lifestyle of society as a whole and that of its various sub-cultures and the individuals within it (the term is sometimes translated into Czech as 'common culture', as it is synonymous with the entire breadth of everyday experience). Examples of what you might find within the realm of (Czech) popular culture are the protagonists in the most popular TV reality show; a kitchen straight out of an Ikea catalogue; a billboard-size photograph of Richard Krajčo – front man in a Czech band called Kryštof – riding the Pendolino express; a Hugo Boss jacket worn by Karel Gott posing on the front cover of the weekly tabloid *Lucky Jim*; a list of the top-ten restaurants in the Czech Republic, along with their master chefs' fool-proof 'secret' recipes; your neighbour's favourite cologne and his wife's preferred brand of automobile; the ad campaign of a company

that makes condoms; the latest film starring Meryl Streep, and so on into an infinity of other cultural references. What is clear in this is that the mass media play a key role in the production and spread of popular culture.

'Popular culture' is not a term that is semantically established and rooted in public awareness or even in its usage within the academic community. One reason for this lies in the fact that the valuation it conveys can be positive or pejorative, but it is also because there are two ways of looking at popular culture: 1) as a culture forced on the public from without, or 2) as a culture that originates among the people, reflecting their traditions and taste.

Cultural studies, a field that began to develop in the late 1960s, takes a primarily positive view of popular culture. In part this is because cultural studies emerged out of the concept of the 'active audience', at the genesis of which was Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding and John Fiske's theory of polysemic texts (people generate their own meanings from a text according to the needs of their own identity). Concisely put, the audience is endowed with semiotic power, and based on its interpretative practices and its cultural background it can encode and decode messages – and thus also every product of popular culture – in various ways. Members of the audience are in this case not viewed as helpless victims oppressed by a dominant (cultural or other) ideology, but are instead seen as free beings that have and exercise the right to decode, 'read', and interpret every message in their own way, or as Stuart Hall puts it: in the (producer's) preferred code or in an oppositional or negotiated code. Popular culture is therefore created by meanings that people construct rather than by meanings that we can identify in a message. The production of popular culture may lie in the hands of (global) organisations and corporations, but it is the audience that has control over, creates, and many a time even changes its meanings.

It is within this paradigm of everyday, 'common', 'experienced' popular culture that the American Andrew Roberts is working with his dictionary of Czech popular culture, aptly titled *From Good King Wenceslas to the Good Soldier Švejk*. This author may be familiar to regular readers of the *Czech Sociological Review*, as an extract from the book was published in Volume 39 (6). As Roberts writes in the Foreword, his aim "is not to provide a complete account of Czech history and culture. I am neither a historian nor cultural critic, merely an observer of everyday life. My aim is simply to introduce the reader to a number of concepts – people, places, songs, games, slogans – common in Czech popular culture". (p. ix in Preface) According to Roberts the book could easily be subtitled: 'Things That Every Czech Knows, But No Foreigner Does'. The author has selected over seven hundred such 'things', presented in the dictionary's entries, which are arranged alphabetically in the book and in the index are grouped under thematic headings: Appearances, Art, Celebrities, Children, Cities and Towns, Communism, Consumer Products, Czech Places, Expressions, Folk Traditions, Food and Drink, Foreigners and Ethnicities, Historical Figures, History, Holidays, Home, Work and Daily Life, Language, Literature, Media, Military and Police, Music, Myths and Legends, National Traits, Religion, School, Social Life, Sport, Symbols, and Theater. Following this list and theoretical overture, it is no surprise then to find on a single page entries like *knedlík* (dumpling), *Komenský, J.A.* and *komunismus* (communism), or *Strč prst skrz krk*, (Stick your finger through your neck), *sudetští Němci* (Sudeten Germans), *svatba* (wedding), and *Svatý Václav* (Saint Wenceslas), or *papaláš* (fat cat), *panelák* (prefabricated apartment building), *pěstítecké práce* (cultivation work), and *pětiletka* (five-year plan).

Roberts' background in political science is reflected in the accuracy of the entries on Czech (and Slovak) history and statehood. Whether writing about well-known historical figures or specific historical periods,

turning points or dates, he presents a clear, concise and impartial idea of something that is – let's hope – part of every Czech's mental cultural map. Perhaps the only debatable entry in the History section is the inclusion of *Sametový rozvod* (the Velvet Divorce – the break-up of the Czech and Slovak republics on 31 December 1992), not because it was not a crucial geo-political event in the region in the 1990s, but because this metaphorical reference belongs more to the vocabulary of Czech intellectuals, while 'separation' is the word more commonly used for the event. Other minor criticisms relating to the choice and usage of some terms in Czech could also certainly be found – for example, Czechs use the word *Houbaření* rather than *Houbařství* for their 'mushrooming' pastime, and *Tlachání* (catching) comes across as a somewhat unusual if not actually archaic phrase in the contemporary Czech language.

Looking again at the dictionary's structure, one has to acknowledge that the author has done truly remarkable research in the other areas of Czech popular culture he defines. The parade of figures from Czech theatre, film, literature, and sports is accompanied by a catalogue of customs, traditions, everyday items, and distinctive attributes of various sub-cultures from different periods, and even things bound to be found in the wardrobe of every 'average' Czech. The reader also learns about Czech gastronomic habits and national mythology, plays on words, fairytales, and various phenomena connected with education, the family, predominant ideologies, and other things that the Czechs 'lived through', particularly during the communist period. On occasion a questionable interpretation appears in some entries. For example, it is not clear what is 'mysterious' (p. 156) about foreigners' reasons for liking the Czech speciality fried cheese, and the author makes the unsubstantiated, and thus highly subjective, claim that in the Czech Republic "wine... is even frequently mixed with soft drinks" (p. 179). In these points the author appears to be speaking from his own

preferences and experience, which are otherwise absent from the majority of the 'objective' interpretations in other areas, but that in no way detracts from the quality of the book overall.

The entries mapping the 'cultural' sphere in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the entries informing readers about which actors, bands, books, writers, singers, songs, and filmmakers rank among those most 'popular' in Czech society, is based primarily on production dating from the First Republic and the normalisation period. All the 'schoolbook' authors can be found (here it should be noted that the English translation of Ladislav Stroupežnický's play *Naši furianti* (p. 111) that the National Theatre in Prague uses is 'Our Uppish and Defiant Fellows' and not 'Our Swaggerers', as Roberts translates it in the book). Regrettably, the cultural scene after 1990 is somewhat neglected and sparsely referred to, as is production in the area of mass forms of entertainment and especially TV, but considering the scope of the book it is hard to hold this against the author.

Notably absent from the book, however, is an entry for TV series, though Roberts does write about Jaroslav Dietl, the most famous writer of normalisation-era TV series, and his *Nemocnice na kraji města* (Hospital on the Edge of Town). However, in the Czech Republic and globally there is no more characteristic element of popular culture than the TV series. It and its audiences occupy a central place in academic literature on popular culture, and in recent years the Czech TV series is a phenomenon that has become the

object of serious academic attention even in the Czech Republic; the sociologist Irena Reifová and the historian Petr Bednařík, for example, have lectured on this topic both at home and abroad.

There are many ways of looking at Andrew Roberts' book. It is an important empirical contribution to Central and East European sociology of culture, which particularly under the previous regime struggled at the margins of academic interest, and which, not unlike the mythical Phoenix, is only gradually arising anew out of the ashes. But it is also bound to appeal to the wider public, given its wealth of content and easy style (at times perhaps too 'light' for academic taste). And that is its equally if not more important asset – it provides foreigners interested in the Czech Republic with a much broader picture of Czech popular culture than they will every find in a tourist guide, either in human or published form. It also presents an outside look at this culture through foreign and detached eyes, which, regardless of whether the view is amiable or ironic, is enriching to both the observer and the observed. For this reason we trust that it will interest some publisher enough for a Czech translation of the book, making it available to as large as possible a number of the 'observed' – Czech readers. A good accompaniment would then be a translation of a work containing insights on the Czech Republic, Czechs and their culture titled *Gottland*, by the Polish journalist Mariusz Szczygieł, which was published in 2006 by Czarne publishers.

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