

COMMENT ON ANDRE SIMIÆ REVIEW OF GORDY FROM ROBERT M. HAYDEN AND ERIC D. GORDY

To the Editor:

It is unusual to complain about a review of somebody else's book; but when the review in question is by a senior scholar of known reputation and the book by a very junior one not likely to be known to many readers of the journal, gross unfairness in the review should be corrected by other senior scholars.

Andrei Simiæ's review of Eric Gordy's *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (18#1: 87-95 [2000]) is, to me, a grossly unfair representation of one of the best books in English on Serbia since the demise of the former Yugoslavia.

Let me be clear about my position as an evaluator. I have done research in and on Yugoslavia for almost twenty years, most of the time in Belgrade. I know Simiæ only by reputation and from meeting in passing once or twice; I met Gordy for the first time in June 2000, at a conference to which I had invited him on the strength of *The Culture of Power in Serbia*. Thus I have no ax to grind here other than a concern for the scholarly enterprise.

Gordy's book is a strikingly original contribution to the literatures on the former Yugoslavia, on post-socialist Europe and on the political use of popular music. Gordy attempts to answer the really interesting puzzle about Serbia since 1990, which is how a regime that has destroyed the country, impoverished the people, and lost wars that it said Serbia wasn't even involved in when everybody knew differently, has managed to stay in power without (until 2000, at least) utilizing much of the kinds of obvious thuggery that had kept the regimes of formerly existing socialism in power. The idea that Serbs were somehow uniquely nationalistic (as per James Gow's depiction of the "hissing snakes" of the Serbian symbol of four S's, or the Goldhagen-style "Milosevic's willing executioners" genre of nonsense) was belied, as Gordy shows, by measures of social distance perceptions of Serbs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which showed that levels of rejection of other Yugoslav peoples were very low.

Gordy's approach to this problem is informed by his analysis of that uniquely Serbia musical

genre of *turbofolk*, a populist form of music not really comparable to anything in the U.S. While most analyses of popular music under state socialism saw it as a subversive force, Gordy saw that the Milošević regime harnessed a populist version of popular music forms to create a mechanism for cultural control. By using the resources of the state (which controls all major mass media) to support *turbofolk* to the exclusion of others musical forms, the regime was able not only to control musical culture but even to manipulate it. Gordy then takes this insight and applies it to the regime's creation and promotion of certain mass media and of political parties, manipulating themes that had some slight resonance in popular culture to create state-supported mass phenomena that simply crowded out genuine (i.e. non-state) alternatives. I am not embarrassed to say that even after close observation of Serbian politics since 1989, I learned a lot from Gordy's book, although he first got there in 1994.

Gordy supports his case through really close analysis of original materials. His references include all of the primary sources that I would want to see in such a study; his analysis of the music itself is grounded on very close familiarity with it and with the language in which it is performed. I stress this point because Simiæ insinuates that Gordy may not be proficient in Serbo-Croatian. To the contrary: his Serbo-Croatian is excellent: fluent, colloquial, and according to native speakers with whom we have both conversed, virtually unaccented.

In short, this is one of the very, very few good books on Serbia to appear in English since 1991. I recommend it as an analysis of Serbian politics and society, as an innovative approach to the cultural construction of political populism, and as a fascinating close analysis of a politicized form of popular music.

Robert M. Hayden
University of Pittsburgh

To the Editor:

Andrei Simiæ's "Conventional Wisdom and Milošević's Serbia" in the Spring issue of AEER offers observations on the manufacture of the wars of Yugoslav succession by Western governments and advertising agencies, something he calls "the Serbian world view," the American and German conspiracy to destabilize Communist economies, and the question of whether Professor Simiæ's ethnic origin prepares him for hospitality more than, say, me. Strangely, it is presented by the editors of AEER as a review of my book, though most of it is an elaboration of Professor Simiæ's political opinions rather than a response to *The Culture of Power in Serbia*.

Professor Simiæ criticizes my work for its "implicit distaste and unqualified disdain for traditional Serbian rural culture and values" (87), a category which I did not discuss, nor would there have been space to discuss it in a study about cultural conflicts in the urban setting of Belgrade. Surprisingly, Simiæ systematically confuses rural culture with the mixed and transitional culture of Belgrade's "urban peasants," a distinct cultural formation which is neither rural nor urban. One would expect Professor Simiæ to be well aware of the distinction, since it was his 1973 study, *The Peasant Urbanites*, which introduced and elaborated the category. Professor Simiæ also systematically confuses authoritarians with "traditionalists" (his term, not mine), perhaps indicating more about his orientation than about anything to do with my research. One has to ask what sort of "traditions" Professor Simiæ has in mind: are there specific "traditions" which he believes are preserved by supporting the present regime in Serbia, or is it his argument that the regime constitutes a kind of "tradition" in and of itself?

Professor Simiæ's systematic confusion is most apparent in his discussion of the portion of my research which deals with cultural conflicts around popular music. Not only does he demonstrate ignorance of the rich vein of Yugoslav and Serbian rock and roll, identifying this as "Western musical forms imitative or derivative of rock" (90), but he also appears to be unaware of the distinctions between traditional folk music, the *novokomponovana narodna muzika* from the period when Professor Simiæ was an active researcher, and the regime-produced "turbo-folk" of the nineties. His suggestion that Orthodox ritual

and cameral music has a place in the competition of commercial cultural forms is simply bizarre.

Professor Simiæ accuses me of "idolizing" (91) one of the currents in the conflict which I describe, and demonstrates this by presenting quotations from my respondents as if they represented my views. One can assume that Professor Simiæ is capable of distinguishing evidence from conclusions, and therefore has to ask why he has refused to do so.

Professor Simiæ raises the "methodological" point of questioning my proficiency in Serbo-Croatian. It is apparent from the citations and quotations in my study, which are based on my own ethnographic observation as well as on an exhaustive review of local media and of the major research in English and Serbo-Croatian on the region, that I know the language. In any event, I will gladly put my bibliography and original sources up against Simiæ's, which include personal letters from researchers working in other places, political-advocacy articles from *Covert Action Quarterly*, passing references to taxi drivers, publications of the Serbian Ministry of Information ("no publisher indicated," Professor Simiæ?), and a polemical collection edited by that noted Balkans specialist, Mr. Ramsey Clark.

It would not be appropriate to respond to Professor Simiæ's political opinions here. It is his choice to hold them, and the choice of any editor to publish them. However, it is dismaying to see them take the place of a serious and substantive critique of my research.

Sincerely,

Eric D. Gordy