

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

AS-21
Stirrings

Bircaninova 28b
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Before the end of the month, a plenary session of the Communist Central Committee is expected to set the date for the Eighth Party Congress -- the first since 1958, when the Party Program was adopted and promptly attacked by Peking and Moscow. It is generally expected that the Congress will be held in Belgrade, probably in October or November. Perhaps in anticipation of this event, there have been signs of a certain restlessness among the middle ranks of the party and, especially, among its present or former intellectual sympathizers.

To be sure, the party's supreme leaders are mainly occupied with such global matters as the Sino-Soviet conflict, the preparations for a new conference of the "non-aligned and other countries striving for peaceful coexistence," and the principles which are to govern the seven-year economic plan for 1964-70 (a plan whose broad outlines remain to be revealed and which will probably not be launched before the Party Congress). The public at large, on the other hand, has been grumbling about the current power shortage and steadily rising prices, most recently of cigarettes and bus fares. It is on the middle level, between the man in the street and the party Executive Committee, that there have been peculiar stirrings -- stirrings which are easier to recount than to characterize.

One should begin, I suppose, with the movie Grad (The City), which was written and directed by three young men from Belgrade -- Dr. Marko Babac, Živojin Pavlović and Kokan Rakonjac -- who, after making the film as amateurs a year ago, sold it to a Sarajevo company called Sutjeska Film in the hope of gaining general distribution. Suddenly -- as a result of an intervention whose origin has never been made clear -- the company refused to distribute the film. Apparently the three young men had some idea of showing the print in their possession to a select audience in Belgrade, perhaps in the hope of attracting new backing. Whether or not it actually was shown remains in dispute. In any case, the director of Sutjeska Film took the case to the District Public Prosecutor in Sarajevo, who applied in the District Court last July for an injunction to prevent the showing of the film and to destroy all copies. The main thrust of the prosecutor's case was that the film showed the social development of Yugoslavia in a negative light. Representatives of the company and various "social-political and cultural workers" testified at the trial, although the three young men who made the film were not called. On August 13, 1963, the three-man court ruled against the showing of the film, but did not insist on the destruction of the prints; they were to remain in custody of Sutjeska Film. Two of the authors, Pavlović and Babac, thereupon

promptly appealed the case; on the ground that portions of the film had already been shown in Belgrade, they argued that the Sarajevo court was incompetent and that the case should have been tried in Belgrade.

The film itself consists of three stories. The first, "A Year of Love," begins with a dialogue between two young girls (18-20), one of whom is depressed and suicidal; the other tries to fortify her to accept fate, with little success. The second girl then goes to visit her lover, a young man in his early twenties, whom she finds sleeping. She wakes him and tries to make him remember that today is the first anniversary of their meeting, but he has forgotten. There is long love-play between them, which the young man terminates by saying that the girl wears him out. His boredom is clear; she leaves. The second story, "Heart," concerns a young doctor and his various visitors: first a prostitute, then a rather homosexual young imbecile, and finally a middle-aged man with heart trouble who had been an aristocrat but now works for the Communists. In telling this, he has a heart attack; the ambulance that comes for him passes a young man who had been beaten up on Marx-Engels Square in Belgrade and who lies bloody on the pavement. The third story, "The Ring," concerns an armless veteran who, unshaven and dirty, appears in a cafe where he sits under pictures of the war, Ivo-Lola Ribar and Comrade Tito. At a nearby table, some young men are abusing a drunk woman; he defends her, but upon leaving the cafe, the young men beat him up under a railway crossing. He goes to another cafe, where nobody pays any attention to his bloody, dirty, beaten state. At a nearby table two young women are discussing abortions. After a while the invalid leaves and under a streetlight hears some young people criticizing a woman who has left her husband and two children for a truckdriver; it appears that it is his own wife, although he does not react. "Leave him in peace; he's also a person," says one of the young people as he walks past them into the fog.

This is obviously rather strong stuff for a Communist country, although Polish films have gone nearly as far. Yet what is interesting, I think, is not that the film was banned but that, first, it was made, then accepted by the film company, then defended publicly--and not only by its authors. In the December issue of Delo (here, Work or Writings), a Belgrade literary monthly, the banning of the film was openly attacked in a 36-page essay by Dejan Djurković, a young playwright and critic, who quite angrily berated not only the prosecutor and court but the pliability of the film company and all the others who went along with the "witch hunt" (a recent phrase of Tito's which Djurković applied here). So sharp was the attack that the Sarajevo prosecutor asked the Belgrade regional court to institute criminal libel proceedings against Djurković. That was a month ago; yet it now appears that the Belgrade prosecutor has declined to go along, and the Sarajevo man's only recourse is a civil suit in which precedent, by and large, has been against plaintiffs. Furthermore, despite this furor, a new play by Djurković has recently been set for a Belgrade premiere next week.

One of my friends compares this apparently contradictory history to the manner in which Nikola Pašić and the old Radical party used

to govern Serbia and the new Yugoslavia a half-century ago; to all, even those with the most diametrically opposed views, Pašić would say "You're right," and somehow muddle through by private compromise. That foxy tradition is by no means dead in Serbia -- or in other parts of the country. In addition to the fate of Djurković, one should also mention what happened to one of the script-writers of Grad, Živojin Pavlović, the author of the invalid sequence. At the time of the Sarajevo case, he was working on a picture for Avala Films of Belgrade, perhaps the country's most important producers; they quickly dropped him and his picture. Yet, a few months later, he was quietly approached by a studio in Ljubljana, which gave him a substantial advance to do a film for them.

A few months after the Grad case, it was the turn of a novel, Cangi (the hero's name), by a young Zagreb author, Alojz Majetić. Excerpts had previously appeared in Zagreb and Belgrade literary magazines; the novel was published last fall in Novi Sad. Last December 17, the Public Prosecutor there applied for an injunction banning the book because of pornographic scenes and -- probably more important-- "false characterization of youth participating in work actions." The novel depicts the life of youth brigades working on highway construction, and in a manner completely contrary to the happy socialist myth; the youths' lives seem pointless, grubby, nihilistic. The opening scene of the book is a weird, rather comic orgy, but although the novel is not important literature, the intent is serious. I suppose one could best characterize it in American terms by saying that the novel attempts to be a Yugoslav Studs Lonigan, but ends on the level of, say, Irving Shulman's The Amboy Dukes.

The Novi Sad prosecutor succeeded almost immediately in obtaining a temporary injunction against the book, but then the case became stalemated. The publishers, aided by various Croatian and Serbian critics and literary figures, demanded that the court hear expert testimony from a number of prominent writers, educators and ideologists. The court summarily denied this request, but the next morning changed its view and agreed it would hear the experts. The sessions were postponed (that was December 20) and have never been resumed. A court fight has thus been avoided, or at least postponed. Cangi, like Grad, is out of circulation; to release it now, say friendly critics of the regime, would make it a best-seller.

In both cases, one notes three interesting themes. First, the resentment of the film-makers and publishers, as well as critics and editors allied with them, at "administrative" interference in culture. These people, many of them party members, took seriously the Yugoslav system of "self-management," according to which cultural bodies were sovereign in their own domain; they resent interference in their affairs by public prosecutors and the like. Second, there is an evident conflict of generations. Nearly everyone involved in the production of Grad and Cangi is between 25 and 40; this is the postwar generation which is getting tired of the lectures and reminiscences of the old Partisans. The political figures who authorized or sponsored the two prosecutions are doubtless of the older generation, for holders of the 1941 Partisan Medal occupy in this country the same status as members of the Grand Army of the Republic in the United States of 1865-1900. Third, there is also an element, at

least in the Grad case, of nationalities conflict or, rather, conflict between "mountain" and "plains" people. Ernest Halperin in The Triumphant Heretic interprets the triumph of the Partisans as largely a victory of the poor, backward mountaineers of Bosnia and Montenegro over the civilized bourgeoisie of Belgrade and Zagreb. There is a good deal of truth in that interpretation, but one must add that, as Yugoslav society has become more complex, the mountaineers have found it impossible to govern without the cooperation of "plains" elements -- i.e., of the old intelligentsia or its heirs. In Djurković's defense of Grad, one feels an almost compulsive emphasis on the Moslem names of the Sarajevo Public Prosecutor and some of his associates; how dare they do this to us, is the refrain. The demand that the case be re-tried in Belgrade is in the same spirit; and the dropping of the Čangi case in Novi Sad is part of the same pattern, for that city, even more than Belgrade, is the historic seat of Serbian culture. In both cases, the central press, especially the Belgrade Politika, has shown itself quite sympathetic to the defendants, or at the very least objective.

These tensions among the nation's upper strata help explain the indecisive conclusion of both cases, and the attitude taken toward them by the highest figures in the regime. In a speech to a consultative conference of the Communist Central Committee on December 26, the Vice President and heir-apparent, Aleksandar Ranković, felt compelled to defend his prosecutors but in a rather mild manner:

"You have seen from the press that some time ago a law court in Sarajevo banned the showing of the film Grad, and that recently the Public Prosecutor in Novi Sad started action for the banning of the distribution of a novel (Čangi). Undeniably, such measures are not good, even though justified in the long run; but they would never have been applied had the Communists in... these producing and publishing houses discharged their work diligently and on time.

"Certain self-styled 'fighters for the freedom of creativity' (this is young Dejan Djurković) are trying to present these measures in a cheap and sensational way... as being a brutal onslaught by bureaucratism on the freedom of artistic creation. To the authors of those articles and the editorial offices which have given space for such profoundly inhuman attacks on the state organs, it is quite clear that what they (the prosecutors) are asserting does not exist, because the organs which have undertaken these measures do not appraise the artistic value of these works, they do not judge the works from the esthetic point of view, they do not ever examine whether a work is good or bad, but only look at it to see whether certain things, such as sheer pornography, come into conflict with our positive legislation.

"Against gross excesses in that field, which clearly come into conflict with the morals of our society and with the socialist conscience of our workingmen, even such measures as these must be undertaken if all other means have been exhausted, or if the organs of social management, and the Communists in them, have failed....

"As regards the criticisms that creative freedom is being endangered, the League of Communists not only does not endanger that

freedom, but directly aims at the freeing of Man in work and in creativity..."

This is, I think, the old Pašić style, especially since the same consultative conference (December 25-26) and a second one (February 11-12) began bringing forth criticisms of Yugoslav society more direct and political than those made obliquely in the film and novel. At the December conference, for example, the secretary of the Central Committee's Organizational-Political Secretariat, Krsto Bulajic, delivered the main report and noted, inter alia:

"It happens frequently that individual workers and others, who have been maltreated because of criticism, have to fight by themselves for their rights, while the League of Communists and the trade unions remain neutral; and this is one of the reasons why many complaints are addressed to senior officials and forums. Until matters are cleared up, they have to suffer a great deal, both materially and in time, and the worst thing of all is that appropriate material and political sanctions are not taken with sufficient energy against those who have acted incorrectly...."

"There are facts which prove also that some members of the League of Communists were involved in different aspects of crime and in other misuses. Embezzlement and crime are also to be found in socio-political organizations (presumably the Socialist Alliance and trade unions) and sometimes among lower officials in the communes. And what is extremely strange, when proceedings against them are instituted, interventions begin with the alleged purpose of saving the reputation and authority of the organization of which they are members.... Still more strange, toward certain individuals the party punishments were mild, and some of them were not even called to book on Party lines. There are cases of sentenced Communists remaining party members."

"There are frequent cases of bribery, corrupting people by presents, higher rewards, comfortable positions, flats, etc. -- all with the intention of preventing people from criticism, of inducing them to renounce their own ideas and thus clear the way for different, incorrect decisions...."

At the second conference earlier this month, criticisms along the same lines were heard; this was the theme, after all, struck by Marshal Tito in his famous Split speech two years ago. But there were also newer notes. For example, Boro Petkovski cited the protests of miners in Macedonia against a wage scale that had been imposed by the directors and "approved" at a workers' meeting at which less than half the workers had been present. Danilo Fogel raised an even more fundamental and heretical question: "Why is the efficiency of individual directors judged by the profits accumulated in funds, rather than by the workers' wages, earnings and living standards?" And a 42-year-old Slovene named Stane Kavčič made the flat statement that "the influence of members on the policy pursued by the leaders of the League of Communists and on their decisions is very little; it is even less than in other social organizations...."

All of this was, to be sure, within the bosom of the party, but it was reported, if only summarily, in the press -- and one gets the sense from these and similar episodes of a certain restlessness and impatience within the party ranks. The reasons for the restlessness are not difficult to adduce. Quite apart from the problems involved in the change of generations, which is here also in part the pressure of the educated young "plains" people on the semi-literate old "mountaineers," the Yugoslav regime has become involved (or involved itself) in a number of apparently insoluble contradictions. A rapprochement with the Soviet Union is being squared with influence among the "non-aligned" and economic dependence on the West. A tight dictatorship is being rationalized by theories and formal institutions promising "socialist democracy." The centralized party apparatus must exercise its control in a governmental and economic system formally based on federalism and "workers' self-management." High investment rates and low wages contrast with slogans of "freeing the workingman" and stimulating "the material interest of the direct producer." A nation still fundamentally backward in many respects continues its pretensions to world leadership, and attempts to elevate a brilliant nationalistic opportunism into an ideological principle.

There has been much inspired improvisation over the years in getting around these contradictions, yet the strain occasionally begins to tell -- and this seems to be one of those times. The country does not quite know where it is going in foreign policy, and discussion of the pending 1964-70 economic plan has mostly been discussion about the need for discussion. As a result of these contradictions and uncertainties, "disorder" if you will, things get said and done which point to the true -- rather than mythical -- state of affairs in the country. I take it that both Grad and Čangi were in this category, and far more to the point was a remarkable essay which appeared in Politika February 2 and whose salient points were promptly picked up by the writers' weekly Knjizevne Novine. The essay was written by Professor Mihajlo Marković, a semantic philosopher at Belgrade University, and it is largely a plea against the starvation of the social sciences, and of theoretical work generally, in Communist educational policy. The entire essay is interesting, but the peroration is absolutely daring:

"Our society," says Dr. Marković, "pretends that it is developing in accord with scientific principles, on our flag are inscribed the most noble human aspirations of contemporary life, our society is clearing paths which have been till now impassable, it is making experiments with millions of people, an experience unknown to history.

"And yet we do not always have a scientific plan for our experiments -- for which we would not forgive even a laboratory assistant experimenting with mice. We are unable to foresee many of the vital social consequences of individual practical measures.... We do not even possess sufficiently comprehensive and trustworthy knowledge about the following:

"-- How individual classes in our society live, what their political views are, what their moral formations are like;

" -- What the effective role of the working class is in our society;

" -- What changes are taking place in the countryside;

" -- What the present relations are between the various nationalities in our country and what tendencies are being manifested;

" -- What the young generation, which was born under socialism, really looks like;

" -- What are the effects of various great changes taking place in our society -- technical progress, social self-management, decentralization, more intensive money-commodity relationships, etc.

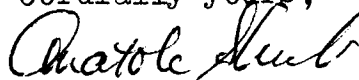
"About all these problems we have, it is true, various partial, hastily prepared and insufficiently reliable reports, papers, analyses, inquiries, statistics and so forth. The great question is: To what extent have all these documents been the product of really scientific methods; to what extent is this documentation satisfactory; how much have we been able to generalize on the basis of information collected one-sidedly; how many facts are to be found in all this and how much idealization, apologetics, the desire to please those who have requested the documents and have preconceived notions on these matters?

"In a nutshell, there is a great question as to how much scientific truth (author's emphasis) is to be found in these texts. Probably, one can squeeze out of them some things which pertain to our reality. But do we know about our reality as objectively, comprehensively and concretely as possible?

"Without such knowledge, rational control of social processes, decisive mastery of the situation in the face of uncontrolled events, real liberation of individuals and society in general, is absolutely out of the question. Without this knowledge, politics are more or less a matter of brilliant and inspired improvisations, more or less a process of painful and expensive learning from mistakes."

Is it necessary to add that criticisms of this kind are not made in a Communist country without powerful support on high?

Cordially yours,



Anatole Shub