

IMRE, Anikó – *TV Socialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. 315.

Timely and innovative, this comparative history of television across the Eastern Bloc in the socialist and post-socialist periods uses television as a lens to destabilize post-Cold War narratives of socialism and its demise, while also using the socialist example to revise the way we think about television. Imre has succeeded on both counts, offering some surprising and fruitful conclusions that will revise the way we think about socialism and its relationship to the emergence of nationalism and post-feminism in post-socialist societies. At the same time, it challenges contemporary television studies to look toward the past and farther afield than America and the United Kingdom.

The book is a synthetic work that also offers original research and provocative insights. Imre builds on important recent national studies on the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and East Germany, as well as critical studies of genre, cultural theory, and European media cultures to trace regional trends and demonstrate remarkable continuities within and beyond the Soviet sphere. Its scope also includes original archival research and interviews with television professionals from Hungarian State TV. It also breaks down the conventional boundaries of media research—exploring television as a transnational medium; genre as a “transcultural form of expression;” and the onset and end of the Cold War as mere moments in a larger history of media cultures. Imre gives us a fresh and invigorating interpretation of industrial, political, and cultural practices that transcend the boundaries of (Cold War) East and West, and the Cold War itself.

The book is organized in four parts defined by the discussion of particular television genres: reality and realism; “History” and the historical adventure drama; “Fiction,” especially soap operas; and Humor, especially socialist and post-socialist political satire. In each of the four sections, Imre traces the broad strokes of the history and operation of genre in particular national contexts, provides case studies of specific programs, and demonstrates the significant—and often unexpected—continuities between socialist and post-socialist television cultures and practices. The narrative and affective patterns developed over decades under socialism and evolved during the “thaw” of late socialism smoothed the way for neoliberal TV practices and even the rise of the radical right in places like Hungary.

In the first part of the book, Imre explores socialist “reality television,” arguing that its history is not a “narrative of failure,” but instead offers us “an alternative pre-history of reality-based programs” that can also revise our understanding of the entire bipolar Cold War order (pp. 39, 84). Such programming was designed as an instrument of social transformation, a “grand equalizer,” exposing rural and undereducated populations to greater edification and European high culture (p. 46). Case studies of “School TV,” crime, and game shows illustrated how socialist reality television engaged in “taste education,” encouraged learning through participation, and “mobilized affective engagement without yielding to voyeurism or self-serving emotional display” (p. 65). Such programming revealed how fundamental notions of gender roles, success (meaning talent and hard work), competition, and national community were for socialist societies.

Popular television nurtured Eastern European cultural nationalisms, which Imre describes as “anticolonial” and directed primarily against the (imperialist) Soviet Union (p. 87). Post-socialist states have relied on and intensified these cultural nationalisms to provide legitimacy to new governments, leading to the paradoxical mobilization of socialist-era programs and formats to shore up conservative values. The emergence of cheaper, Western formats has challenged these nationalisms and, in particular, their claims to cultural and ethnic homogeneity.

The second section delves into “Genres of History,” including the historical adventure drama, the problem of nostalgia, and how commercials became repositories of socialist memory. This is a complicated story of the emergence of a regional television culture that reinvented the nationalist project of Eastern European literary cultures. These tendencies generated a “blatantly inauthentic” set of national myths with narrative elements that were interchangeable throughout the region (p. 154). Commercials on television similarly offered audiences opportunities to identify with Western-style consumer identities, creating expectations that socialism could not fulfill.

The commercial culture of socialist television was of each regime’s own making; most were actively involved in marketing to their citizens, their neighbors, and the West. For Imre, the gap between expectations and reality became constitutive of socialist television’s mode of address for Eastern Europeans: “late socialist culture . . . lived in a nostalgic mode, at a certain ironic, knowing distance from what it was supposed to be” (p. 182). In the post-socialist period, commercials have become the lightning rods for “nostalgia” for late socialism. Imre argues that this nostalgia is a “mode of continuity” between late socialism and the post-socialist period (p. 182). The continued fascination with the television culture of late socialism is an expression of how contemporary Europeans—and not just those who actually experienced socialism—are coming to terms with Europe’s socialist pasts.

Part of that European past is an imperial framework within which Eastern Europeans have occupied the role of the colonized. Socialist programming in many national contexts challenged the imperialist Soviet Union. In the post-socialist period, the political economy of television has revised the contours of the imperial relationship, replacing the Soviet Union with the richer countries of the European Union and the overwhelming economic weight of the United States. The European Union’s “Television without Frontiers” content law—a cultural nationalist project aimed at protecting domestic industries against Americanization—has paradoxically inundated Eastern European broadcasting with Western European products. At the same time, competition with commercial broadcasting has reduced domestic television industries to providing “below the line” labor to international prestige productions, such as Showtime’s *The Borgias*.

In the final two sections of the book, Imre delves further into how socialist television prepared the ground for post-socialist television cultures. The serials of the 1980s, she argues, mirror a gradual transition into capitalism, not a sudden collapse of socialism as many Cold War narratives assume. Fictional television made a cultural compromise between the aesthetic culture of early socialism and

late capitalist commercial entertainment both of which relied on pre-socialist gender boundaries and rejection of feminism.

Television humour drew on pre-socialist tastes, values, and even formats, evolving forms of European cabaret for television. Satire was central to socialist television, especially the tradition of “Stiob” or “overidentification” with official positions (p. 247). In 1980s Hungary, Imre argues, satire was the “default mode with which to reference the socialist system in public discourse” (p. 249). The satirical mode of late socialist programming prefigures the popularity of political satire in late capitalist television. The incredible concentration of media ownership and power, the declining integrity of government and belief in a commonweal, and disappearance of a credible geopolitical antagonist, the role previously filled by the socialist world and the Soviet Union in particular, has made the late capitalist television audience deeply suspicious of authority. In particular, contemporary news “produces a highly reiterative, performative rhetoric,” determined to naturalize the principles of neoliberalism, that echoes the official speak of former socialist regimes (p. 246).

TV Socialism is a lively, provocative, and important work that suggests how different our understanding of television history and culture, not to mention the history of post-socialist societies and the Cold War, might be if more scholarship took the socialist part of the project of modernity seriously. It deserves a wide readership among scholars and students of television, socialism, post-socialist societies, political culture, and Cold War history.

Heather L. Gumbert
Virginia Tech

JAFFARY, Nora E. – *Reproduction and Its Discontents in Mexico: Childbirth and Contraception from 1750 to 1905*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. 302.

In *Reproduction and Its Discontents in Mexico*, Nora E. Jaffary tackles the topic of reproduction and its regulation in Mexico City and the southern state of Oaxaca, from the mid-eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. One of the primary arguments of the book is that between 1750 and 1905 the sexual and reproductive practices of a wide sector of Mexico’s female population were increasingly scrutinized by society, as sexual honour and public virtue were associated with the independent nation.

The book is divided into six chapters: virginity, pregnancy and contraception, abortion, infanticide, monstrous births, and obstetrics. Its subtitle emphasizes the concepts of childbirth and contraception because they were central to the project of nation building in Mexico and elsewhere. In all cases, Jaffary addresses the legal, medical, and cultural aspects that are the reason behind continuity and change.