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## **Crossing Boundaries: From Syria to Slovakia Introduction**

Slavica Jakelic and J. Varsoke

The array of themes and disciplines displayed in this volume mirrors two fundamental features of intellectual life at the Institute für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna – its multidisciplinary orientation and its international makeup. The contributions of Paulo Pinto, Bogdan Barbu, Natascha Vittorelli, Adam Lipszyc, Katharina Pewny and Slavomir Krekovic, fellows of the IWM and nearly all participants of the Junior Fellows' Conference held at the IWM in June of 2002, involve history, anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, and gender studies, to name a few. They cover regions that extend from Syria to Slovakia, and include a variety of subject matters – from the symbolic cultural presence of the West in Romania during the Cold War to the quest for tranquility in the contemporary age of disquietude.

The volume opens with Paulo Pinto's text that calls our attention to the political role of Sufi communities – the mystical communities of Islam. Briefly reviewing the history of the Sufi orders, Pinto suggests that, while profoundly religious in character, these orders have a long history of both revolts against and collaboration with different governments. Focusing on the case of Syria, Pinto describes the historical

reasons that allowed Syrian Sufi communities to preserve a significant level of autonomy with regard to the state, and explains why Sufi communities in Syria serve as an important factor in balancing the relation between different groups in contemporary Syrian society, and state.

As Pinto argues, the appeal of Sufism in Syria does not have only historical but religious foundation as well. After bloody conflicts between the Syrian state and different Islamic groups, the Sunni population in Syria accepted the emphasis that Sufism puts on religious experience as the primary source of an individual's moral transformation. The ultimate source for the authority of the leaders of a Sufi community, *shaykhs*, rests in their spiritual capacities and knowledge of the mystical path, rather than in influence they might have in society. Such a view in turn demands that *shaykhs* must not become subservient to the apparatus of the Syrian state if they are to keep their status of leadership. With examples of Sufi communities opposing (rather than only supporting) the Syrian state, Pinto highlights the complexities of religious and political maps in contemporary Middle Eastern societies, maintaining that the scholarship on the Muslim communities and identities, as they shape the political life in that region, must take into consideration those Islamic groups with no explicit political agenda.

Bogdan Barbu looks at the American cultural presence in Romania between 1945 and 1971, and the cultural policies of the Romanian communist government that affected modes in which the US was presented and perceived. Concerned with the neglect of the American cultural impact on Eastern European societies during the Cold War, Barbu traces official and unofficial channels through which the US cultural products (specifically music and movies) were transmitted to Romania. He demonstrates that cultural contacts between the West, particularly the US, and Eastern Europe did not cease to exist but decelerated and hence only changed their character. Offering a wide range of examples that describe the rich images of, what he terms, the US "symbolic presence" in Romania, and discussing the events that as landmarks shaped the history of the communist Romania, Barbu unpacks the meaning of that "symbolic presence." He demonstrates that, despite the political blockade and condemnation of American movies and music as capitalist propaganda, these items found their way onto the Romanian black market, via cultural exchanges, among the political protégée. The American cultural presence was particularly felt with the opening of the Romanian society to the US during the "national communist-phase" of the Romanian communism.

Barbu remarks that instead of a simplified “cultural Sovietization-cultural Americanization” model, the presence of the West in the communist East must be viewed in a more nuanced manner and through more comparative lenses. Such an approach to the perceptions of “the West” and “America” as they have been produced in Eastern Europe, Barbu declares, may contribute to an improved sense of the relations between East and West today, relations particularly important at “the intersection between Cold War mythologies and post-communist realities.”

Natascha Vittorelli discusses the work and historical context of Zofka Kveder (1878-1926), one of the leading figures in the history of the Slovenian and South Slav women’s movement. Specifically, Vittorelli reflects on Kveder’s first work *Misterij Zene* (*The Mystery of Woman*), and its reception in the context of the women’s movement in the South Slavic region at the turn of the last century. Kveder’s *Misterij zene*, Vittorelli explains, stirred the public simply by the virtue of one woman daring to write about the “fate of the contemporary women,” ultimately opening the space for negotiating a “woman’s mystery” as well as female authorship.

Adam Lipszyc drafts a map of “political and intellectual” paths of German-Jewish intellectuals born at the end of the nineteenth century, who rejected the assimilatory lives of their parents as “a spiritual wasteland” and self-deception. Lipszyc centers his examination on three German-Jewish thinkers – Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem, Franz Rosenzweig, and Walter Benjamin. Historian Scholem is viewed through his break with the assimilatory practices of his family, adoption and adaptation of Zionism, and through his study of *kabbalah*. Scholem’s Zionism, as Lipszyc cautions us, was not a vision of a political but rather a cultural “renewal” that would include both the secular and religious versions of Judaism. On the other hand, the subject of Scholem’s historical study, *kabbalah*, became his resource of the living Judaism.

Contrary to Scholem, Rosenzweig’s idea of a renewed Judaism was anti-Zionistic. Rosenzweig argued that the Jewish nation was not bound by some secular laws, geographic destination or living language, but by ritual law, land as “an eternal promise” and “sacred language.” Thus, as Lipszyc succinctly puts it, while theologian and philosopher Rosenzweig escaped from history, Scholem jumped out from the German into Jewish history. At the same time, Benjamin’s philosophical and literary work demonstrates that he was “interested neither in Rosenzweig’s ahistorical ritual community nor in Scholem’s Zionist return to Jewish history.” Ben-

jamin acknowledged his Jewishness as an element in the understanding of European culture in general.

Juxtaposing the life trajectories of these three men of genius, Lipszyc illustrates how their ideas, spiritual paths and political projects can serve as a general landmark for studying the post-assimilatory generation of German Jews. Lipszyc also concludes that some aspects of the work of the three examined thinkers – Gershom’s study of *kabbalah*, Rosezweig’s approach to Judaism as a religious ritual community, Benjamin’s general sense of Jewish identity in a larger picture – may find their followers even today.

At the center of Katharina Pewny’s analysis is the im/possibility for human beings to find *Ruhe* (calmness, stillness, peace, tranquility). Pewny examines the relation between *Ruhel Unruhe* (restlessness), theater and politics, by tracing the notion of *Ruhe* in several discourses: the philosophical discussions of the notion itself, sociological approaches to the question of leisure, self-time, and work, psychological and psychoanalytical discourses that bring bodies at the center of the question of *Ruhel Unruhe*, and different theories of theater. The latter highlight theater as the place of disturbances (*‘Belun/ruhigungen’*) but also of the place of ‘dynamic stillness.’ Pewny furthermore examines four theater events that address different aspects of *Ruhe* – the production and representation of *Ruhe*, gender identity, colonial studies, general sociological concerns, and psychological/psychoanalytical discourses.

While theater has not been the dominant subject of the discussions in the cultural studies, gender studies and deconstructive thought within which Pewny works, it presents the locus of her quest for *Ruhe*. As Pewny argues, theater, which Plato, Aristotle, Schiller, and Brecht describe as a place of political turbulence, could become a refuge from the contemporary world into a world of tranquility by introducing the viewers’ production of *Ruhe*.

Slavomir Krekovic’s paper is geographically located in several post-communities societies, and analytically focused on the use of the Internet and new technologies in connection to art. He refers to this problem as ‘new media culture,’ and is interested not only in detecting the manner in which the Internet and new media are used in art, but also who employs them. Most importantly, Krekovic attempts to

find out how this new segment of cultural production and methodology shapes the cultural policies in the former communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe.

Krekovic investigates the phenomena associated with the 'new media culture' as they create the new forms and new modes of expression, as well as new and different social discourses. He asserts that the Internet has brought a greater freedom and more communication possibilities for the artists across the borders, but also notes the lack of, and the need for, an appropriate cultural policy that would make 'new media culture' projects sustainable in the long term while leaving freedom of expression unharmed.

What connects all these essays? The volume begins with two texts whose authors argue that an essential step in evaluating the present of some phenomenon is the knowledge of its idiosyncratic history. Pinto thus accounts for the significance of religious Islamic groups for the past and the present of political life in Middle Eastern societies, while Bogdan remarks that a better understanding of contemporary relations between the US and Europe may have one of its starting points in the debates about the nature of the US presence in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Vitorelli and Lipszyc demonstrate that for the comprehensive appreciation of ideas that shaped the history of philosophy, theology, politics and social movements, we must grasp the individuals and individualities that stood behind them. Vitorelli, on the one hand, addresses Kveder's vital importance for the development of women's movement in South Slavic regions. Lipszyc, on the other hand, comments on three intellectual, spiritual and political projects of post-assimilatory generation of the Jewish German intellectuals, which marked the history of ideas and the history of Jewish cultural and political modernity. Finally, Pewny's interdisciplinary project searches for philosophical sociological, psychological and theatrical notions *and* possibilities of *Ruhe*; Krekovic's examination combines sociological and cultural questions with those related to policy-making, in order to grasp the cultural propensities of the Internet as they are and as they could be in the post-communist societies. With the disciplinary and thematic overlapping that exists among the texts, one component binds them all into a whole: they all stand as yet another statement about the IWM's dedication to cross academic and geographic boundaries in order to enrich our world of ideas and further our understanding of the world in which we live.

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