

21A.506 Reading Response

American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West

During the world war, socialism and liberalism were described as complete ideological opposites. In 1989-1991, socialism crumbled, and liberalism was deemed victorious, demonstrating that liberalism is more realistic and the socialist experiment failed. However, socialism and liberalism developed in parallel, and their philosophies are posited as an opposition to the other view point. Therefore, it is possible that late-socialism may mirror late-liberalism. This paper examines how political parody operates in Soviet socialist public culture in the form of stiob, and how we can see similar developments in political culture in today's late liberalism. Boyer and Yurchak argue that comparing late liberalism and late socialism from an ethnographic perspective is conceptually helpful in understanding tensions within the West.

Stiob requires overidentification with the object, person, or idea that it mimics. It is so "straight" that it can be difficult to tell if it is derision or sincere support. Stiob emerged in an age of "hypernormalisation" in late-socialist discourse, where the statements from the press and government about the authoritative regime were all tightly controlled and redundant. Overidentification with this discourse via stiob allowed individuals in the regime to make social commentary without explicitly arguing for the opposition. In the U.S., we see a similar pattern emerge that is similar to late-socialist hypernormalisation. A high degree of consolidation among news media sources has caused news sources to become more redundant, and the increasingly coordinated political messaging tactics have caused politicians to turn to a familiar, repetitive rhetoric. Boyer and Yurchak argue that American political performance currently looks quite like the formal political performance of late-socialism.

During perestroika, the stiob began to capitalize on the mass media and propaganda to proliferate its message. One such example, is an article that appeared in Leningrad's main newspaper which attacked rock musicians claiming that they are untalented and lead to cultural and moral corruption. However, it was later discovered that the author of the article was himself active in rock music, and had criticized bands that he himself had played with. Party officials were unsure how to proceed, and members of the music scene worried that readers would take the article at face value. However, the article led readers to understand that rhetoric from a central party newspaper can be both perfect flattery in the form of mimicry, or complete ridicule in the form of mimicry, without having to construct an argument. Another example of stiob emerged in a poster board, where a Nazi propaganda poster was used to as a template for a socialist poster which only changed a few symbols from the original poster. The poster won a national poster competition before anyone realized that the poster propagated a message that was anti-socialism. Sergei Kuryokhin, the same writer of the article mocking rock music, spoke seriously on a popular TV program about how an outrageous origin story of Lenin, claiming that he was a mushroom. This went over the heads of many viewers who did not understand it was parody. Kuryokhin demonstrated how political rhetoric can be nonsense and still sound like it is legitimate, state-controlled statements.

In late liberalism, we see similar examples of Stiob. Jon Stewart, host of the popular political satire television show, *The Daily Show*, uses satire to comment on how mainstream news media is no longer informative content for mass audiences, but scripted "political theater". In one instance, he mocked news media sources for focusing obsessively on statistics and demographics instead of important socio-cultural ideas and the meaning of political events. Similarly in *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert parodies Bill O'Reilly, overidentifying with populist news commentary. In an interview with Colbert and O'Reilly, O'Reilly flails as Colbert successfully derides through pure overidentification and mimicry. O'Reilly is unable to argue with Colbert about any ideological position but instead is exposed as strikingly similar to Colbert, identifying O'Reilly's discourse as hypernormalisation. Like Colbert, Tina Fey's impressive mimicry of Sarah Palin exposed Palin's overformalized hypernormalisation through overidentification. Political activists, such as *The Yes Men*, have utilized similar overidentification tactics. They appeared on the BBC claiming that Dow Chemicals, on the 20th anniversary of the explosion of Union Carbide chemical plant in central India, would dissolve its Union Carbide subsidiary and use the

money to pay victims of the explosion. After the television appearance, Dow chemicals was forced to state that its main responsibility was to its shareholders. *The Yes Men*, through successful mimicry that veered into the realm of caricature, forced Dow to explicitly state that they cared more about its shareholders than the victims of the chemical disaster. There are internal and external conditions that have led to the development of hypernormalisation in the western liberal world which is strikingly similar to developments in late socialism.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

21A.506 The Anthropology of Politics: Persuasion and Power
Spring 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.