

## **American Stiob:**

*Or, what late socialist aesthetics of parody teach us about contemporary political culture in the West*

(co-authored with Dominic Boyer, Rice University)

This paper discusses an uncanny kinship between the modes of parody and political detachment, which flourished at the margins of Soviet and Eastern European public culture in the 1970s-80s and which today become increasingly popular in the United States. The point is to illustrate not a one-to-one correspondence in the institutional and ideological formations of late socialism and contemporary capitalism, but rather that these formations in both systems, however distinct, today seem increasingly subjected to comparable pressures and conditions resulting in some comparable political effects.

The paper argues that the highly monopolized and normalized media conditions that characterized late socialism seem to have anticipated current trends in American media, political discourse and public culture. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that analogues to the ironic modalities normally associated with late socialism have recently become more intuitive and popular in the United States. We call these analogues “American *Stiob*” to accentuate a sense of their family resemblance and common origins. By *Stiob* we mean an ironic aesthetic of a very particular kind that thrived in late Soviet socialism and that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or more familiar genres of irony. Unlike them, it required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which it was directed (often with an ideological statement or symbol) that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two (Yurchak 2005).

Political discourse in contemporary American media exhibits several tendencies that are comparable to late socialist hyper-normalization of discourse: a high degree of monopolization of media production and circulation; the active orchestration of public political discourse by parties and governmental institutions (e.g., Republican party’s “talking points”, video news releases, paid spokespersons imitating objective assessments, “Pentagon information operations” and so on); the cementing of a liberal-entrepreneurial consensus in political news analysis (paralleled by huge growth in business news journalism and the virtual disappearance of investigative reporting); and the thematic and generic normalization of modes of political performance and representation. In this context, a whole new genre of political commentary that employs *stiob* has developed in the past five to ten years in the US. It includes such prominent and extremely popular figures as the comedian and media analyst Jon Stewart, an even more *Stiob*-esque political analyst and comedian Stephen Colbert, political activist group *The Yes Men*, and many others. The paper analyzes examples of this new American genre of political analysis/irony, compares it with the *stiob* genre that developed during late socialism, and describes the reasons for this seemingly parallel development in the two distinct political cultures. Ultimately the paper makes an argument that to understand contemporary political ideology in the West, deeper ethnography of socialist ideology may be a remarkably helpful resource.