

Classics and Class – Ljubljana 2013



On 5th March 1946 in Westminster College, Missouri, Winston Churchill said a lot (4,820 words to be precise). Not long after praising the brave Russian people and his ‘wartime comrade, Marshal Stalin’, whose power combined brought a decisive (and brutal) end to WWII and Nazi occupation of much of Europe, he spoke in his potent drawl:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.

On 26th October 2013 in Ljubljana University, Slovenia, I did not say a lot. It was a day for listening. I had travelled that morning to the former Yugoslavian city to participate in an international symposium called ‘Classics and Class: Teaching Greek and Latin behind the Iron Curtain’. On arrival I was presented with pin badges, a tote bag, fridge magnets and a beautifully printed and bound book entitled *Classics and Communism*, written in English. I immediately knew I was in a place where things were going on. Good things.

This book's availability is exciting because it begins to flesh out our skeletal understanding of



what the effect of Marxist-Leninist ideology had *in practise* on classical studies and attitudes towards classical culture in Europe. The volume is the result of an international research project that began in 2009 to investigate the activity of classicists behind the Iron Curtain. Until the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 classicists in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Bloc continued to promulgate what was perceived by the Communist establishment to be their dangerously “bourgeois” subject under the very real threat of imprisonment, exile and even death. I put the term bourgeois (meaning here basically what the Left-wing, Bolshevik

revolutionaries deemed as bad, often because it was associated with the ruling class during the Tsarist era) in scare-quotes because there is to my mind no immanent political colour to the cultural objects of the classical world if viewed as a category. Individually they have the potential to be interpreted in various ways. But it is true that when we zoom out and regard classical culture from a distance it seems mysteriously to acquire traditionalist, right-wing political associations, due largely to its abuse by the ruling classes in educational systems to help maintain an unequal status quo.

A great deal of modern literary and historical scholarship (not to mention economics and sociology) owes no small debt to Marxist social and economic theory. When it is most overtly drawn upon in Classical Reception Studies today it is usually employed as part of an attempt to redress an ideological balance within the discipline. Classics is, and has long been perceived as, an elitist field of study, and the cultural products that draw upon classical culture have often accrued this same elitist and exclusive association. This is not only because of its historic alignment with empire building, elite education and dogmatic religion, but also because of the way that it (including the educational methods it requires and the kinds of thought and art it promotes) has over the millennia built up a politicised (essentially conservative) crust that distances (even before contact) most people who are even casually inclined to the Left. Such political polarisations, however simplistic and unrepresentative of the cultural objects that become ‘charged’ in this way, have and continue to be institutionalised and thus incredibly hard to ‘decharge’.

Our C&C project attempts to do just this, to present the evidence showing that underneath the (to some repellent, to others alluring) elitist crust lies a cultural core representing a wide political spectrum, including works of art and writing that reflect the contested nature of the unequal societies that gave them birth. It is important for us to continue chipping away at this politicized crust and to not make the mistake (if I may mix my metaphors) of throwing the

baby out with the bath water. We also want to show that the reception of classical culture has not only been the domain of the rich and powerful, by presenting working and middle-class engagements with it. While modern “Marxist” scholars are passionate to open up access to an elite culture that has previously been used to ossify the barriers enforcing social inequality by excluding the lower classes, paradoxically the actual practical adoption of Marxist-Leninism (in the Stalinist Eastern Bloc) had, broadly speaking, the opposite effect. It denied a classical education to all classes of society, at least by the conventional routes of schooling.

The deep-set bias of our subject results from the enduring legacy of its survival vehicles: religion, empire, high art and formal education. This bias, which weights our focus towards literary texts used to shore up a backward-looking status quo, has been persistently challenged in recent decades, perhaps most dramatically by a number of Classical Reception Studies, which have explored alternative repurposings of classical culture (e.g. post-colonial receptions) but also by earlier shifts that both encouraged the classical community to look at different classical cultural objects, and also employed different ways of looking at them (e.g. literary theory, historicism).

The fate of Classics in all the countries behind the Iron Curtain followed broadly similar lines, but at the same time it was quite different in each country, and indeed each city. The scope of time too is large, covering 5 decades (1946-1989), to give an adequate summary here. I can only recommend you seek out *Classics and Communism* (2013), now on [Amazon](#), and perhaps also John Connelly’s *Captive University* (2000). For the remainder of this extended C&C blogpost I’m going to tell you what I learned about the state of Classics in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia from the end of the Second World War up to the fall of the Berlin wall. I hope that in sketching out the pictures of these two communist states, I’ll be able to channel (without too much distortion) some of the discussion from the conference and the fantastic book *Classics and Communism* (2013).

Soviet Union



Things started early in Russia. While the 1920s is by some seen as the zenith of classical studies in Russia, Professor Nina Braginskaya (left) explained in her paper how the study of Classics was already in a state of decline in the late 19th century. The first decisive blow to classical teaching, however, did not come until 1917 when, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, classical studies were abolished at secondary school level. By 1921 admission to university classical departments was also terminated. The limitations put on classical education by these measures brought about a degree of stagnation of classical scholarship in the Soviet Union, but it also heralded the transition of some innovative classical scholars, for a time at least, to other creative and professional fields, as well as to a subterranean classical education, which survived in departments of classics that no longer officially existed.

Why was Classics officially abolished? For members and enforcers of the new Soviet regime there were (as there are and were in Britain) deep-set ideological problems associated with the study of ancient Greek and Roman culture. It may be broadly summarised by saying that the study of classics was associated with 1. former Tsarist autocracy, 2. the Catholic church, and 3. the decaying culture of the Western *ancien regime*. [Aside] It's interesting that on both sides of the Iron Curtain rulers referred to the other side as "ancient" in a negative sense.

As was acutely the case in German-speaking countries and 19th-century Britain, the classical education received by the Russian elite who attended classical gymnasiums (secondary schools that taught Greek and Latin) formed an integral part of the social and cultural make-up that helped to distinguish and define them as members of the ruling classes. The negative associations of Classics when playing this socially divisive role meant that the traditional methodological characteristics of classical scholarship, including conservatism and positivism, themselves became dangerously politicized. What use was Latin to socialism?

So, Classics at school was essentially stamped out after the 1917 Revolution; Classics at university was officially phased out four years later (although there were pockets of resistance). The lack of classical training at secondary level meant that when the Classics were welcomed back into university lecture halls (in the 30s and 40s, essentially on the whim of party leaders) a generation of underprepared students were instructed by classical professors. Despite their own high levels of scholarship they could do little more with their students, due to time and ideological restrictions, than to train them to the educational level reached by the former classical gymnasiums.

At the same time the university scholars could not easily, or without fear, publish the kinds of scholarship they were accustomed to produce, partly because of the discipline's bourgeois associations, and also because (after the Iron Curtain fell) they were largely unable to engage with scholarship being produced in the West. As a result the few classical scholars that remained contented themselves in this scholarly isolation with producing translations of certain ideologically "appropriate" classical authors, and some with writing new Marxist theoretical approaches to classical authors. The majority, however, according to Prof. Braginskaya, when the ideological pressure built up on classical scholarship, especially since it did not take much deviation from the Party line for a scholar to lose his or her job, freedom or even life, settled (at least in public) into the relatively safe occupation of what she calls "fact worship", which was little more than pedantry. Sometimes this was employed as a smokescreen to fool the censors, but it was also a survival technique. It was a way in which to continue working without suffering a similar fate, for example, to the classicist Aristid Dovatur (1897-1982), who served 10 years in a labour camp as a political prisoner before being exiled from the 8 major cities of Russia, in a punishment called 'Minus Eight'. All this because he allegedly circulated "counter-revolutionary propaganda". Others were still less fortunate.

Around 1933 it appears that Latin did have a use in socialism after all, and it again became possible to enter university to be taught Classics by 'pedagogical workers' in Soviet Russia. By the late 40s and early 50s Latin (but not Greek) was once more introduced to secondary schools and numbers in university departments gradually increased. The dramatic U-turn of reintroducing classics was made as part of what has been well named as the period of "Stalinist De-Stalinization." It was thought, it seems, that without Latin and some knowledge of the Ancient World it would be difficult for people to engage with much of their history and cultural heritage. Perhaps as large a factor, if not larger, was the fact that the education system, which replaced the pre-Soviet classical education, was not effective in producing what the new systems required. From the moment I learned that Classics was reinstated in Russia in the early 30s I have been asking myself why. What is it specifically about Classics that they wanted? Although the use of classical antiquity as a means to foster national identity is an important factor, the turn back to a classical education may well in practice have been a simple reversion to a relatively safe, tried and tested model of education, which could quite easily be supplemented with a thorough infusion of communist ideology. If it ain't broke... This seems also to have been the case (some years later) in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia

On the Sunday, the day after the conference, I walked around the city of Ljubljana. It was raining hard. From underneath my umbrella I took photos of the wet statues all around town and the wet houses overlooking the wetter river. Just in front of the University Building, in the centre of a small courtyard, stands a sculpture of Europa and the bull.



The sculpture was made by France Kralj and erected in 1955. All over Ljubljana are statues of (mainly male) heroes connected to the city, including Gustav Mahler, who got his first conducting post there at the age of 21. But this statue of Europa stood out. It was a reminder for me of the resilience of classical culture—its allure to artists and tyrants alike—but most importantly of its monumental indifference towards contemporary ideological purposes. While looking at it I imagined the catalogue of Communist dignitaries who would have made their public appearances up on the balcony of the University Building above. How funny to think of their eyes at some point falling on the brazen symbol of Europe being ravaged by the tyrant king of the gods in disguise. I later learned from David Movrin that the statue, although it was made in 1955, was only installed in that spot after 1992 “to celebrate the state's recognition by the EU. Before that, its position was occupied by a rather banal statue of Edvard Kardelj, a source of all wisdom as well as a Party functionary whose name was given to the university to celebrate his polymath career after he died in 1979... Before 1979, the square was empty; Kralj was not exactly ostracised at that time, but he was certainly a persona non grata after 1945.”

David Movrin begins his second chapter (§15) in *Classics and Communism* (2013) by quoting Miško Kranjec: “What good is Latin to Socialism, I ask you? (*Sparrows in the Yard*) The very same question I’d been chewing over all weekend. He explains that, although it is possible to tell the stories of a handful of inspirational classicists, who managed to continue their work under Communism, their achievement can only really be understood in relation to the deeply antipathetic Communist Party policy, according to which Classics was ‘a remnant of the *ancien regime* to be done away with as soon as possible’. It is of course extremely valuable to tell such stories about these brave reactionaries and to document the discipline’s struggle against terrifying oppression. It also strikes me, though, that the effect of the Communist decimation of classical education essentially made classics even more elitist than it was before. That is if we are only looking at education. The same story told through a focus on visual and performance culture, or that of vernacular translation may be entirely different.

The history in Yugoslavia of Classics’ immediate abolition under Communist control (1945), and then its later reinstitution, is the same as it was earlier in Russia. The dates and conditions of course are different, but the pattern still holds. The lengths to which educationalists went in attempts to save Classics from complete abolition were remarkable. Movrin presents a fascinating memo (written in October 1949) arguing that Marxist-Leninist ideology could be delivered during the teaching of grammar, for example, by using “sentences... from contemporary reality, as far as the vocabulary allowed it... Next to the texts, there will be comments... based on dialectical materialism.” Other suggestions follow: Sallust can be used to teach social condition, absolutism and empire; Pliny can deliver lessons on social welfare; Horace on morality and patriotism; Ovid, using mythology, on doubting the national religion and resistance to tradition.

Around the same time, when things were looking so bleak for Latin and the Classics in general, Milovan Djilas (1911-1995) and other Politburo members, set about reforming the new education system – to all extents and purposes reverting to the system he worked so hard to wipe out. After initially being crucially responsible, side by side with his wife Mitra Mitrović (1912-2001), for the brutal purges in early Communist Yugoslavia, Djilas later achieved world-wide recognition as a dissident by publishing in America the book *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (1957), which told of the arrival of the emergence of a new class of Party bureaucrats, and for which he was duly imprisoned. His educational reforms, supported and strengthened by Boris Kidrič, basically followed Stalin’s lead by bringing Latin back into secondary school education. When Kidrič was dead and Djilas in prison Classics had lost its champions on the inside of the Party, and classical gymnasia were abolished in 1958. According to Movrin “a series of reforms followed, with each one making Classics slightly more marginal and ideologically suspect.” Classics

languished in this marginal state until in 1982 only 45 students in the entire country studied Latin in secondary education, which number, Movrin reminds us, was “smaller than the number of Latin *teachers* employed in secondary schools in the 1930s before the Soviet take-over.

The End

Although Classics was initially and immediately anathema to the Communist states, since—in its institutionalised dress—it appeared to stand in direct opposition to the dominant ideology, it managed to bounce back into secondary and higher education. This was not because Classics in the period or afterwards lost its elitist, bourgeois veneer, but possibly for a combination of two important factors: The first being that the classical education proved too useful a social tool to abandon completely; and the second (which I suggest tentatively) that, as the former class-system appeared to be replaced by a newly unequal system, some Communist policy-makers and Party members were in practise unwilling to give up the socially divisive side effects of the classical education, from which a number had themselves benefitted. In some countries, as we have seen in the example of Soviet Russia, there were beneficial by-products that arose from the increased pressure put on the subject and its teachers. The fate of classical culture in performance, material and visual culture is still largely unexplored in these regions. But already there are signs that it was—especially among the work of reactionaries and émigrés—if not in rude health, then at least relatively well nourished. On the side of the revolutionaries too there are examples of where Classics was used to supplement the formal education of the Communist youth, e.g, in Communist Hungary a number of classical plays were staged by youth theatre companies (as Prof. György Karsai demonstrated in his paper), and one only need walk around Ljubljana to witness the enduringly ubiquitous presence of classicism in Yugoslavian monumental art and architecture, when other ideologically unsuitable buildings, such as cathedrals and castles, did not fare so well. The story is a complex one and I look forward to watching the field of Soviet-era Classical Reception continue to flourish. It is both in itself fascinating, but also incredibly instructive to our understanding of our more deeply set and gradualised rejection and reshaping (democratisation?) of classical culture in Western Europe and North America.