

Book Reviews

Ivana PERICA, *Politics, Literature and Tertium Datur: Socialist Central Europe, 1928–1968*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024

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Ivana Perica's *Politics, Literature and Tertium Datur* is a bold intervention in the historiography of twentieth-century European literary politics. Its central achievement is to dismantle the entrenched binary frameworks that have long governed scholarship on left-wing cultural production: East vs. West, autonomy vs. commitment, evolution vs. revolution, and, most decisively, “true literature” vs. propaganda. Through a careful reassessment of interwar and post-war Central European cultural trajectories, Perica proposes a more complex model of socialist political-literary engagement: one that refuses to reduce writers to either naïve dogmatists or pure dissidents. Her book is therefore not simply a historical monograph but a conceptual critique of how we have been permitted to think about politics and art.

Perica begins her argument by challenging the received wisdom about “orthodox Marxism.” She observes that contemporary Marxist and post-Marxist theorists frequently dismiss orthodox Marxism as a monolithic, authoritarian doctrine. Yet Perica insists that the term has been used as a cipher, an easy label that masks the historical complexity of socialist intellectual practice. Rather than a uniform dogma, “orthodox” Marxism emerges in her account as a contested field of aesthetic and political negotiation. She adopts Georg Lukács's understanding of

“orthodoxy” not as uncritical acceptance but as a disciplined use of method. This reframing is a crucial corrective to the prevailing tendency to treat socialist literature as inherently anti-aesthetic and politically coercive.

The book’s core thesis revolves around the dialectic of revolution and evolution, and the search for a third way, a *tertium datur*, between them. Perica convincingly argues that the decisive ideological conflict of 1928 and 1968 was not the simplistic choice between freedom and coercion but a far more nuanced dilemma: whether socialist transformation should be pursued through gradual cultural emancipation (evolution) or abrupt institutional rupture (revolution). This problem, she shows, is not merely political but fundamentally literary. The interwar period, often represented as a time of dogmatic, party-led writing, is reimagined as a space of complex negotiation between political commitment and artistic autonomy. Her insistence that the interwar left-wing cultural scene was not devoid of aesthetic ambition is particularly important. Perica thus reframes the historical narrative: rather than seeing the interwar years as a precursor to later authoritarianism, she treats them as a fertile period of debate about the conditions for socialist cultural practice.

Perica’s most compelling contribution is her systematic undermining of binary divisions. The Introduction explicitly rejects the notion that literature can be neatly separated into “autonomous” and “committed” categories. She argues that this dichotomy “virtually decouples literature from action” and is easily instrumentalized to serve a conservative aestheticism. In her view, the conventional distinction between political content and aesthetic value is itself a political act, designed to delegitimize politically engaged writing. This is especially evident in her critique of the lingering idea that only “non-politically engaged” literature is authentic. Perica insists that revolutionary realism can coexist with humanism, and that communist literature is not automatically anti-humanist. In this sense, the book is an argument for a dialectical unity of form and content, not a simplistic moral or ideological alignment.

A further strength of Perica's book is its insistence on the Mitteleuropean space as both analytical category and historical reality. The book rejects the East/West binary that has dominated Cold War scholarship, arguing instead that Central Europe represents a transnational cultural field shaped by shared experiences of revolution, war, and socialist experimentation. The Introduction emphasizes the "transnationality" of these debates and the way interwar ideas travelled across borders and were later revived in 1968. This methodological choice is not merely descriptive: it is an argument that the East/ West framework obscures more than it clarifies. Perica's focus on Prague, Zagreb, Belgrade, and other cultural centres illustrates how socialist literary modernism was not a peripheral phenomenon but a central site of intellectual innovation.

Perica's historical periodization is both innovative and persuasive. She treats 1928 and 1968 as "nodal points" in a longer continuum of socialist cultural politics, rather than as isolated events. She argues that both years were subject to "oblivion" through suppression and later obsession: 1928 through Cold War discrediting and 1968 through Western theoretic appropriation. The book thus undertakes a kind of historical archaeology, excavating debates that were erased or distorted by later ideological struggles. In doing so, Perica not only reconstructs a more accurate history but also shows how the present remains haunted by these unresolved dilemmas.


Perica's book is strongest in its conceptual clarity and its commitment to nuance. Its most valuable intervention is its rejection of binary thinking, which has distorted the study of socialist literature for decades. The Introduction's argument that "orthodox Marxism" has been misrepresented as an ideological monolith is both timely and necessary. The book's transnational, Mitteleuropean approach is also a welcome corrective to the West-centric framing of both 1968 and socialist modernism.

However, one could also suggest potential limitations of the book. Perica's prose is often conceptually dense, which may limit accessibility for non-specialist readers. At times, the work also lacks broader political contextualization beyond the literary field.

Additionally, the book's strong corrective impulse may sometimes underplay the very real authoritarian dimensions of socialist regimes. Yet this is also precisely the point of Perica's work: to resist the easy moralization of historical actors and to understand their contradictions as historically situated, not reducible to caricature.

Politics, Literature and Tertium Datur is a major contribution to the study of socialist literature and cultural politics. Its insistence on nuance, its rejection of reductive binaries, and its transnational, Mitteleuropean perspective make it a necessary corrective to both Cold War and post-Cold War scholarship. Perica demonstrates that socialist writers were not simply dogmatists or dissidents but intellectuals navigating the complex demands of political commitment and artistic autonomy. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the politics of literature, the history of socialism, and the intellectual history of Central Europe.

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