

Culture



Manoly R. LUPUL (ed.), *Visible Symbols: Cultural Expression Among Canada's Ukrainians*, Edmonton, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1984. 204 pages, illustrations

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unnecessary repetition. The praised sinewy style occasionally leads to punchy but meaningless expressions, e.g., “rampant subimperialist”, “intense struggle of a social formation”, “mock feudal bureaucracy”, and “... Nigeria could no longer afford the colonial state”, “the abolition of the legal right to own property in land... was... in the interests of capital as a whole”.

The collection of papers (some of which were published in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 19 [1985] 1.) in *Mode of Production: the Challenge of Africa* brings together papers by major French contributors to the mode of production debate, Coquery-Vidrovitch, Rey, Dupré, and Terray, and a few other European commentators, and North American Africanist historians. The state of discussion on the meaning and utility of this concept is well represented by the headings under which the papers are grouped: “Reflections and Commentaries on a Worn Out Debate”, “Seizing Reality Using the Concept of Lineage Mode of Production and Articulation”, and “Suggestions for a New Start”. The editors “stress that [their] own texts... are... two very personal readings on certain issues.” From these headings and the indirect disclaimer of the editors there is an indication of the conclusion and disarray in the literature on the concept of “mode of production” as applied to African traditional societies and others. What can “seizing reality” possibly mean? Why mix the concrete and the abstract? Is African history and anthropology long-winded and tendentious poetry?

The papers themselves range widely in intent and subject. They range in length from 2 pages to 11 pages. Some are personal reflections, of which the most interesting as intellectual history must be Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s as she was one of the earliest to discuss an African mode of production in 1969. Some seem too arrogantly personal, as the author who confesses that “had I understood my ‘early Marx’ properly I could have avoided all the problems in which I found myself ensnared.” Others are defenses of the utility of the concept in regard to the author’s own work or the work of a group of historians, e.g., Peter Harries on the historiography of South Africa. A number attempt to place the discussions of the concept in a wider political or scholarly context. Some have taken to using capitals for names and sentences as if language must be given impact by graphics. A few provide independent reviews of the problem and these will be the most useful to the reader interested in the issues of research and theory in the debate. Of value in this respect are the papers by Dupré, MacGaffrey, Jewsiewicki, Amselle, Kitching, and Létourneau. The bibliography of 23 pages is an excellent resource

for the student of these questions; but in regard to the papers themselves one would wish to have citations for place of original publication as many are published elsewhere.

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Based on contributions to the fifth annual conference on Ukrainians in Canada held in 1981, *Visible Symbols* aspires to capture the essence of Ukrainian cultural identity in this country. The result is uneven, which is perhaps due to the varied backgrounds of the authors: twenty-six artists, civil servants, and academics whose contributions range from page-long abstracts to lengthy scholarly articles. The essays are presented in six parts, each devoted to a cultural theme—such as material culture, music, dance, politics—each concluded with a lively discussion.

Which symbols does a Canadian Ukrainian associate with his social background? According to a study conducted by sociologist Wsevolod Isajiw, most Ukrainians perceive their cultural distinctiveness through food, embroidery and the command of a few Ukrainian expressions (in that order). What is intriguing about these dominant symbols is their congruence with the stereotypes held by non-Ukrainian Canadians and the extent to which these symbols are derived from former rather than the present homeland. In Isajiw’s words, “There are practically no Ukrainian Canadian novels, no original classical music and very few painters like William Kurelek who have interpreted the Canadian experience” (p. 127). The lack of Ukrainian *Canadian* symbols seems to be taken very seriously by the majority of the contributors. There is good reason for this concern since the authors are the most visible symbol of the impact of the Canadian experience upon the Ukrainian community. They are members of the rapidly emerging urban intelligentsia whose aspirations and self-image differ from those of their peasant-like parents and grandparents. To the highly educated professionals of today, Ukrainian food, embroidery and spoken (rather than written) ancestral language are folk symbols of a distant past, which fail to express their own complex cultural identity.

The contributors to this volume agree that new symbols are required to accentuate the *Canadian* Ukrainian experience, but they fail to explain the content of the intended 'symbolic reconstruction'. On the one hand, most of the authors seem to bemoan the folksy image of Ukrainian culture and aspire to inject it with cosmopolitan elements. This desire is summed up by the art critic Lydia Palij: "Culture... is something different than peasant life. The Germans would not point to Tyrolean dancing or wiener schnitzel as their culture. When you talk about German culture you talk about Beethoven, you talk about Goethe (Applause)" (p. 169). On the other hand, several contributors dismiss this striving for a 'high' Ukrainian culture as an elitist attempt of urban professionals who, in the words of the literary critic Jars Balan, "want to impress their German and French friends by putting on a record by a Ukrainian Mozart" (p. 176). Instead of imitating the giants of world culture, some of the 'populists' suggest the important potential of the Ukrainian 'low' culture for revitalizing the de-humanized technological society of mainstream North America.

Regardless of whether the rural background of Ukrainian culture is seen as an asset or as a drawback, the need for 'symbolic reconstruction' permeates the pages of *Visible Symbols*. Ranging from dance to *pysanky*, the authors claim that the old symbols have lost meaning for the new Canadian Ukrainians. Ironically, this loss seems to have been accompanied (and perhaps partly caused?) by the acceptance of these cultural expressions by Canadians at large. What is to be done? According to Jars Balan, "it is important to recognize that symbols are both appropriated and consciously created, and that no group is simply a passive inheritor of its vocabulary

of signs. Just as graphic artists can create logos for corporations... so, too, the Ukrainian community can consciously develop a system of identifying and unifying symbols" (p. 166). It must be kept in mind that this is the opinion of a member of the Ukrainian intellectual sub-culture—an opinion which, judging from several contributions, is not shared by the rank and file members of the Ukrainian Canadian community. On the contrary, the picture that emerges from *Visible Symbols* indicates that the Ukrainians outside the professional/intellectual sub-culture continue to cling to the old, pre-Canadian symbols, rejecting any attempt made by the intelligentsia to rejuvenate the ethnic culture. The rampant conservatism of the organized Ukrainian community seems to compel those innovative artists who depart from the old clichés of "facile, mindless landscapes with thatched roofs, heroes of the last century (and) sickly sweet enamel work" (p. 34) to cater to the Canadian rather than the Canadian *Ukrainian* public. One is reminded of the rejection of William Kurelek's art by his fellow Ukrainians, stemming in part from his tendency to portray Ukrainian women as 'ugly' (p. 178).

Visible Symbols does not contribute to the anthropological theory of symbolism by refining the concepts of 'symbol', 'sign', 'icon' or 'index', nor do its authors make a distinction between the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. Instead, they present captivating material which clarifies the role symbols play in the shaping of cultural identity in Canada. The situation created by the emergence of an ethnic intelligentsia who desires to shed an old and construct a new image is not limited to the Ukrainians, and this volume helps to explain the seemingly universal importance of visible ethnic symbols.