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## Metropolitan Belgrade: Culture and Class in Interwar Yugoslavia.

By Jovana Babović. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2018.

ix + 259 pp.

Jovana Babović's *Metropolitan Belgrade* is an attempt to wrest a significant part of the cultural history of interwar Yugoslavia out of the shadow of dominant political narratives. Babović instead wants to tell another story, one that took place simultaneously but separately from the better-known histories of authoritarianism, ethnic conflict, and national tension. The subject of the book is Belgrade's cosmopolitan cultural life between the two world wars, as well as the story of the people who produced and consumed this culture. Babović's key argument is that Belgrade's emerging middle class (the author uses the term "self-actualizing middle class") largely shunned domestic culture in favor of foreign and/or European culture. In this way, Belgrade's middle-classes distanced themselves from the cultural and political projects of Yugoslav state-forming (a distancing that became more pronounced in the period of King Aleksandar's "Yugoslavizing" dictatorship, from 1929 to 1934) and identified instead with perceived symbols of metropolitan Europe. This was also a means of creating a space between an emerging middle-class identity in Belgrade and working class or lower-class social strata.

The book is divided into six chapters which offer amusing but also telling examples of this process of cultural identification and separation. The first chapter, "Entertainment and the Politics of Culture," establishes the allure of foreign entertainment, presented to and by Belgrade's middle classes as a "benchmark of European taste" (p.37). Chapter two examines the heady early days of Radio Belgrade, including its programming and likely listenership, and the manner in which the station addressed itself ostensibly to all of Yugoslavia, but practically to Belgrade alone (in its content and through its signal strength). There are further chapters on the professional associations of Yugoslav performers and working-class entertainers (a counter-example to the foreign cultural consumption preferred by most of Belgrade's middle class) and on the development of Belgrade's leisure district in the 1920s and the 1930s, with a particular focus on cinemas and theatres as perceived sites of moral transgression (it seems the feuilleton writers of Belgrade's newspapers and magazines were particularly interested in the potential of these darkened rooms for extramarital affairs). Babović's final two chapters highlight two important figures in the cultural life of interwar Belgrade: the

visit of American-born French performer Josephine Baker, the “Black Venus” who performed in Belgrade and elsewhere during a tour at the end of the 1920s to much outrage but also fascination in Yugoslavia; and a chapter on Serbian strongman Dragoljub Aleksić, an entertainer who became popular in the dictatorship period by duplicating and, Babović argues, subverting the regime’s emphasis on physical discipline and culture, especially as embodied by the official “Sokol” gymnastic associations.

Babović’s succeeds in telling a complementary history of the interwar period, one that differs from the better-known political narrative of the period and one in which class affiliations take precedence over those of nationality and in which the authoritarianism of the dictatorship years does not seem to be all-encompassing. On the former, it could perhaps be argued that Belgrade as the state capital and Serbs as the “hegemonic” nation might simply not be cognizant of their position as *primus inter pares* in the interwar kingdom (an idea hinted at in the chapter on Radio Belgrade, in which the producers of radio programming are not always clear about the difference between an urban Belgrade listenership and a broader Yugoslav one). In her chapter on Josephine Baker, Babović shows the contrasting ways in which this entertainer’s performances were received in Zagreb (far less kindly, it turns out), and there is surely scope to draw out comparative or transcultural analysis of different urban centers in interwar Yugoslavia. This even offers a chance for further ethnic and national differentiation: how did Novi Sad, with its Habsburg history and its intercommunal traditions, differ from Belgrade? Here is a tale of two cities, two ostensibly Serbian metropolises that are on closer inspection quite different from each other. Babović’s book is a piquant and persuasive study which asks and answers many important questions.

There is a rich historiography on urban culture in Belgrade, one which covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to deepen our understanding of the time and the place in a turbulent political environment. But it is to date available largely only in Serbian, as Babović’s citations attest (for example, the work of Dubravka Stojanović, or Radina Vučetić-Mladenović). This book is a rare example of an English-language treatment of certain themes and discussions which have already been the subject of nuanced discussion in the Serbian-language secondary literature, but it also advances these discussions with its innovative ideas about class and metropolitanism in interwar Belgrade. Perhaps the closest field in English-language is the fascinating literature on socialist consumption after 1945, pioneered by scholars such as Paulina Bren

and Mary Neuberger, and it can only be hoped that authors will be inspired by Babović's work to look more closely at the way culture was produced, exchanged, and consumed in interwar East Central and Southeastern Europe.

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