What the Field Needs:
On Arrested Epistemologies and the Ethics
of Engagement

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This essay engages with the concept of *epistemic arrest* as introduced by Nikola Balaš in his monograph *Ethnographic Chiefdom: Epistemic Arrest and Knowledge Production in Czechoslovak Ethnography (1969–1989)* (2025), using it as a point of departure for a broader critique of anthropology as an epistemic field in Slovakia. While Balaš focuses primarily on Czech ethnography during late socialism and its aftermath, this essay examines how analogous patterns of intellectual stagnation and selective appropriation have manifested within the Slovak context. It argues that epistemic arrest is not merely an outcome of ideological constraints, but also of disciplinary mimicry, structural dependencies, and unexamined theoretical genealogies. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (1986, 1987, 1990), Soviet ethnographic thought, and the often-overlooked legacy of figures like Yulian Bromley and Vladimir Bogoraz, the essay proposes that the Slovak field's relative autonomy paradoxically enabled theoretical insularity. Rather than a conventional disciplinary history, this text adopts a reflexive and generative stance, advancing a methodological argument for lateral engagements across traditions and for the ethical responsibility of anthropologists to create epistemically open spaces. Writing from a position of critical distance, the essay treats disciplinary narratives not as archives to be preserved, but as prompts for reconfiguration. It calls for a reimagining of the field beyond inherited limitations, toward more plural and accountable futures.

Keywords: "epistemic arrest", disciplinary autonomy, anthropology and ethnology in Slovakia, Soviet/Russian ethnology

The Field in Arrest

This essay takes as its point of departure several conceptual and historiographic provocations introduced by Nikola Balaš in his recent monograph, *Ethnographic Chiefdom: Epistemic Arrest and Knowledge Production in Czechoslovak Ethnography (1969–1989)* (2025), a long-awaited study that offers both a social history and, in part, an anthropology of "our" domestic ethnological and folkloristic tradition. Instead of providing a conventional review, however, I aim to engage selectively with a few concepts that Balaš, often alongside Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1987, 1990), proposes, particularly the notion of "epistemic arrest", and to further develop its analytical potential from the vantage point of Slovak ethnology, its silences, and its latent inheritances.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CHIEFDOM

Epistemic Arrest and Knowledge Production in Czechoslovak Ethnography (1969–1989)

Nikola Balaš

Balaš's book offers a nuanced analysis of disciplinary stagnation within Czech ethnography during the late socialist era and the early post-socialist period. For me, however, its most generative contribution lies in its invitation to rethink what constitutes theoretical innovation, critical engagement, and intellectual responsibility in small scholarly fields. While Balaš's focus is primarily Czech, the structural dynamics he traces resonate deeply with Slovak contexts, albeit in ways that demand separate elaboration. It is precisely in this space of resonance and divergence that I locate my intervention.

As someone who entered the Slovak academic space after 2012 and belongs to what is now referred to as the "middle generation",[1] I have found myself more attuned to the themes and processes associated with knowledge production than to interpersonal dynamics within the field. I approach this inquiry not as a historian of ideas, or as a disciplinary insider bound to defend a legacy, but as an anthropologist attuned to the conditions under which knowledge is cultivated, foreclosed, or rendered epistemically illegible. Balaš's book serves as a conceptual catalyst: its themes do not delimit this essay, but rather activate a broader meditation on what the field needs, analytically, ethically, and institutionally, if it is to confront its past without remaining arrested by it.

It is from this vantage point that I wish to pause over one particular theme in Balaš's book, one I found especially compelling and which, I believe, may offer

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1   I defended my PhD in 2010 and I do not know the author of the reviewed monograph in person.

valuable insights for the kind of intellectual dynamism I am currently striving to cultivate in research culture in home anthropology. I want to draw attention to one of his key conceptual contributions, *epistemic arrest* (Balaš, 2025: 1), and with the author's indulgence, venture to develop it further in an alternative direction. Balaš's deployment of the notion of *epistemic arrest* offers a compelling critique of knowledge production in the context of late socialist Czechoslovakia. My reflections stem primarily from the Slovak context, which may in turn complement Balaš's analysis that is more firmly situated within the Czech environment.

Balaš describes *epistemic arrest* as a condition in which a field of inquiry, such as ethnography, becomes constrained in its capacity for theoretical innovation. While practitioners engage with established frameworks, they lack the structural and institutional conditions to develop or extend them critically. Rooted in both historical legacies and internal dependencies, this arrest manifests as a marginalisation of critique and an inhibition of transformative thought. The author endeavours to uncover the concrete mechanisms that simultaneously enacted and mitigated the impact of state power, while paradoxically undermining ethnography's epistemic aspirations toward scientific truth. This ambivalent condition gave rise to what he terms *epistemic arrest*, a stasis in knowledge production shaped by the institutional and ideological constraints of the period.

Balaš's rationale for the concept of *epistemic arrest*, as articulated in the second chapter of his monograph, draws explicitly on Bourdieu's field theory (1986, 1987, 1990). Bourdieu's distinction between the *champ des positions* and the *champ des prises de position* is central here. While the *field of positions* refers to the objective distribution of agents within a social and institutional space, defined by the institutional hierarchies and forms of capital, the *field of stances* captures the performative, discursive, and fluctuating ways in which these agents articulate their views and claim legitimacy.

Balaš's critique operates within the domain of scholarly discourse, seeking to expose and reconfigure previously dominant stances rather than to conduct a structural mapping of positional distributions. This focus is most evident in his self-reflexive declaration that his book is "a part of the struggles over legitimacy," aimed at reshaping "the universe of legitimate discourse" through a critique of earlier stances and their advocates (Balaš, 2025: 35). In this respect, Balaš situates himself squarely within the *field of stances*, actively intervening in it rather than claiming the analytical detachment of a field-theoretician diagnosing objective structures. He demonstrates that *epistemic arrest* did not necessarily result in total institutional stasis, but instead took the form of contested discursive configurations in which scholarly stances were continuously negotiated, even if within narrowly prescribed ideological boundaries. In this sense, *epistemic arrest* designates not the cessation of thought, but its enclosure: a redirection into acceptable forms, vocabularies, and topics sanctioned by the regime.

Double Arrest

Balaš rightly challenges simplistic binaries such as Hannah Arendt's ([1951] 2017) "totalitarianism" thesis and Miroslav Vaněk et al.'s (2018) "islands of freedom" model (Balaš, 2025: 1), seeking instead to theorise the disciplinary field through a Bourdieusian lens. The fact facilitates analysis of ethnography in Czechoslovakia through Bourdieu's dual-field model, as Balaš convincingly demonstrates, that the discipline maintained a certain degree of autonomy. It constituted a field in Bourdieu's sense (*champ*), a structured social space characterized by internal struggles over authority, recognition, legitimacy, expertise, and the rules of scholarly engagement. Crucially, it possessed its form of what Balaš terms "ethnographic capital", both symbolic and epistemic, which, as he notes, "had currency even outside the field of ethnography in the broader realm of sciences and humanities" (Balaš, 2025: 159).

While criticism was not absent within the discipline, it assumed a specific and often constrained position in the broader economy of knowledge. This peculiar status of critique stemmed from a complex interplay of internal dependencies and institutional configurations that shaped the field. Reflecting on this situation allows for a critical engagement with Bourdieu's notion of autonomy: greater autonomy does not necessarily entail epistemic vitality. On the contrary, as this case illustrates, autonomy may coexist with intellectual closure and theoretical stagnation.

One of the most incisive formulations in the book appears on page 267: "The most significant consequence of this [epistemic] arrest is the fact that Czechoslovak ethnographers worked with theories but were incapable of developing them. In other words, Bourdieu could come to visit Czechoslovakia, but no Bourdieus could have easily emerged there." This statement well encapsulates the asymmetrical flows of theoretical influence. And yet, it also gestures to the deeper structural and institutional constraints that inhibited the production of original theory within the Czechoslovak ethnographic tradition.

Yet this asymmetry is not merely structural; it is also a matter of selective engagement, both by scholars working under late socialism and by those of us who now look back at this past. From the perspective of a scholar attuned to the marginalization and frequent misreading of Soviet ethnographic theory, it is striking that the Soviet legacy remains under-examined as a potential conceptual resource, despite the controversy surrounding some of its theoretical models. Why does the analysis bypass a more sustained engagement with Soviet theoretical production, particularly given its likely formative influence on the Czechoslovak disciplinary landscape? Was the relationship to Marxist thought – and specifically to its Soviet interpretation – not marked by complexity and internal tensions? Can we truly speak of an objective absence of Soviet and Russian ethnological and anthropological ideas within Czechoslovak ethnography, or is their marginality itself in need of critical explanation?

To paraphrase Balaš, it appears that even Yulian V. Bromley, arguably the most *politically* prominent Soviet ethnologist of the second half of the twentieth century,

never truly "arrived" in Czechoslovakia. Nor did other influential figures such as Kirill V. Chistov, Sergei A. Arutyunov, Sergei P. Tolstov, or the linguist-folklorist Nikolai I. Tolstoy (some of whom they could even meet in person). Even Siberian specialists such as Galina N. Gracheva, respected at home for her invaluable contributions to the study of Indigenous cosmologies and religious beliefs, and Igor Krupnik, renowned for his innovative approach to the anthropology of environment and ecology, have not received sustained critical engagement within Slovak anthropological discourse.

Balaš's argument regarding *epistemic arrest* might have been even more compelling had it addressed the absence of Soviet thinkers within the discursive field of Czechoslovak ethnology. The disciplinary milieu exhibited a selective and internally curated orientation, both during the period of (albeit coerced) political proximity and later, within the ostensibly more permissive conditions after 1989.

My argument in no way seeks to sideline or devalue the contribution of Pyotr G. Bogatyrev (1893–1971), the Russian and Soviet scholar who played a pivotal role in the establishment of ethnology and folklore studies in our region. His name is well known among Slovak ethnologists and remains a staple of disciplinary histories, often serving as a canonical reference for those studying the development of Slovak ethnology. Yet it is precisely this singular focus that calls for critical reflection. When certain generations within the Slovak scholarly community elevate Bogatyrev while remaining less familiar with other Soviet or Russian ethnologists, this selective recognition may reflect the dynamics of epistemic arrest itself. Indeed, the fact that some scholars revere Bogatyrev while remaining largely unaware of his contemporaries is symptomatic of a broader epistemic narrowing.

This narrowing appears to have functioned reciprocally. The limited reception of Soviet ethnological theory in Slovakia mirrors, in reverse, Bogatyrev's own experience upon his return to the USSR. In 1941, he defended his dissertation based on material collected in Czechoslovakia. However, he was subsequently unable to translate his expertise on Slovak folklore into symbolic capital within the Soviet intellectual field. His outstanding students likewise did not pursue engagement with Slovakia in their work: Sergei V. Nikolsky focused on Bohemistics, Erna V. Pomerantseva specialised in the Russian fairy tale, and Viktor Y. Gusev on Russian folk theatre.

Now I briefly turn only to two scholars as case studies. They represent totally different scholarly backgrounds and also era of Russian/Soviet academia. My goal is not to give a chronological and historical overview of the Russian/Soviet scholarship but to pinpoint a few phenomena worth reflecting on, in connection to my central argument on epistemic arrest.

Vladimir Bogoraz

Vladimir G. Bogoraz (Tan) (1865–1936) (for an overview of his life's work, see Krupnik, 2008) developed his ethnographic practice not through formal university training, but during political exile in Srednekolymsk under Tsarism. There, he became a self-taught ethnographer, learned local languages, and conducted in situ research with Indigenous communities (mostly Chukchi). His later work was supported by the Imperial Academy of Sciences and, together with Vladimir Jochelson and Lev Shternberg (the latter eventually emigrating to the United States after 1917), in the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, coordinated by Franz Boas. He ultimately returned to Petrograd (renamed Leningrad in 1924), where he established and sustained an academic career throughout the early Soviet period, even enduring the precarious conditions of the late 1920s, when the very existence of the discipline was at stake and, most likely, escaping the repressions of the 1930s only by his death. His work marks a paradigmatic shift in Russian and later Soviet ethnography through the integration of long-term, linguistically informed fieldwork, the uneasy tension between colonial and decolonial scientific paradigms, and a commitment to applied research.

Of particular relevance to the latter is what Elena Liarskaia (2016) reconstructs as the "Bogoraz project". Contrary to prevailing narratives of stagnation following the 1929 "Marxification" of the discipline, the institutions established under Bogoraz, such as the Institute of the Peoples of the North, its research division, and the northern section of the Herzen Pedagogical Institute, formulated a practical and *interventionist ethnography* grounded in principles reminiscent of those of Bronisław Malinowski. Central to this model was the insistence on stationary, longitudinal fieldwork and the elimination of linguistic intermediaries, privileging direct engagement through native language competence. This approach enabled a more relativistic, *emic* understanding of northern Indigenous cosmologies, challenging both earlier racial anthropology and later bureaucratic typologies of *etnos*.

The northern studies framework developed by the Leningrad school departed markedly from rigid disciplinary boundaries. Institutions operated as interlocking systems where ethnographers, educators, linguists, and Indigenous students of the North collaborated across teaching and research. Ethnographers co-authored grammars with future teachers, while students contributed to documentation and curriculum design. This inter-disciplinarity reflected a deeper epistemological commitment to plural knowledge systems, recognising Indigenous interlocutors as co-producers of scientific knowledge. Moreover, the system embedded an applied dimension: ethnography was tasked with informing economic development, social policy, and educational reform in the North, rather than remaining a detached academic pursuit. Beyond relativism, field immersion, and practical utility, Liarskaia (2016) identifies other key contributions of northern studies: the integration of Indigenous agency into research design, an early model of participatory pedagogy,

the creation of hybrid scholarly-public platforms such as the journal *Taiga i tundra*, and the development of material infrastructures to support Indigenous-led knowledge production. The Bogoraz project, in this light, constitutes a rare but generative moment of structural experimentation and ethical imagination within Soviet science – an alternative genealogy of ethnography rooted in critical humanism, epistemic collaboration, and grounded empirical engagement.

The legacy of the "Bogoraz project", though marginalised by Stalinist centralisation and institutional purges, offers a necessary corrective to the canonical history of Soviet ethnography and invites further dialogue across disciplinary and geopolitical divides.

Yulian Bromley

Yulian V. Bromley (1921–1990) serves here as an example of a prominent political career within Soviet academism, whose enduring influence is evident in the continued resonance of his theoretical framework in post-Soviet policy discourses. European audiences were first introduced to Bromley's theory of *etnos*[2] in 1964 during the VII International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) held in Moscow (Gonionskiy, 1963).[3] The theory was subsequently (re)interpreted to English-reading audiences by the anthropologists such as Ernest Gellner (1975), Teodor Shanin (1986), Marcus Banks (1996), and Petr Skalník (2007) as a "non-relativistic" and "non-relational" theory of identity (Anderson, Alymov, Arzyutov, 2019: 2). Bromley's theory of *etnos* in Slovak academic context has never received proper critique although, and here I agree with David G. Anderson, Sergei S. Alymov, and Dmitry V. Arzyutov (2019: 1–2), it is a framework that continues to offer interpretive value, shedding light on the cultural dynamics of post-Soviet (and post-communist) contexts.

Even today, Balaš's reading of Bromley's theory of *etnos* (Balaš, 2025: 85–91) remains somewhat reductive. To fully grasp the contributions of Soviet thinkers such as Bromley, one must consider how they mobilised categories like *etnos* not only as

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2   The theory of *etnos* was further developed in a series of journal articles published in both Russian and English, before being consolidated in the monographs *Etnos i etnografiia* (1973) and *Ocherki teorii etnosa* (1983).

3   Of particular interest from the perspective of international cooperation is the fact that this Congress was preceded by a session of the Permanent Committee of the International Congresses of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held in Prague in 1962 and dedicated to the preparation of the VII Congress (Grigulevich, Olderogge, Trofimova, 1963). The Soviet delegation was led by Sergei P. Tolstov. The international committee was hosted by the Slavist and folklorist Jiří Eduard Horák (Institute of Ethnography and Folkloristics, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences). In Slovakia, the delegates visited the Institute of Ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, the Department of Anthropology and Genetics at Comenius University, the Ethnographic Museum in Martin, the Archaeological Institute in Nitra, and an archaeological site near Poprad.

ideological instruments, but also as conceptual attempts to mediate between Marxist dialectics and empirical ethnographic practice. If, as Balaš suggests, Bromley's work is responsible for introducing an ethnonational ontology into Czech ethnography (Balaš, 2025: 87), then this may reflect less Bromley's original theoretical intent than its subsequent misinterpretation or selective appropriation. In fact, Bromley's conceptualisation of *etnos* thinking, rooted in the earlier works of Nikolai M. Mogilianski (1916) and Sergei M. Shirokogoroff (1923), emerged in dialogue with broader Soviet debates, both scholarly and ideological. On the scholarly side, it was influenced by Nikolai Marr's attempt to apply Marxist theory to language change (1934); on the ideological side, it was shaped by Joseph Stalin's corrective article *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics* (1950),[4] which asserted that language evolves according to its own internal laws, independent of class struggle or dialectical processes. This intervention marked a decisive break with the theory of the class character of language and contributed to the depoliticisation and institutional autonomy of Soviet linguistics, a concession that paradoxically paved the way from semantics to idealism.

Bromley adopted a similar strategy in arguing for the autonomy of ethnography. Seeking to establish it as a legitimate science within Marxism, he proposed that *etnos*, like language, is a social phenomenon governed by its laws of development, distinct from the dialectical mechanisms that structure class society. In doing so, Bromley elevated ethnography from a descriptive historical subfield to a discipline capable of generating its own theoretical models and analytical principles. However, this positioning came with significant epistemological costs. In Marxist theory, development is inherently dialectical; phenomena that evolve outside of this dialectical framework cannot truly be said to "develop" in the Marxist sense. Bromley thus concluded that ethnic groups, like languages, do not develop hierarchically but merely undergo change. This led to the foundational principle that all *ethnos* are equal as ethnic formations, regardless of the social formations in which their members participate. In my understanding, Bromley's anti-hierarchical stance implicitly rejects discrimination based on civilizational superiority.

Despite its theoretical ambitions, Soviet ethnography often struggled with conceptual clarity. The category of the *ethnic group*, though central, remained ambiguously defined, rendering analyses of processes such as assimilation, identity reproduction, or transformation analytically diffuse (Skalník, 1990: 187–189). Similarly, research on ethnogenesis was frequently under-theorised, resulting in a voluminous yet fragmented body of descriptive material that resisted synthesis into a coherent conceptual framework. While these theories were certainly flawed and shaped by bureaucratic constraints, they were not intellectually vacuous. On the

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4   At the time, all academic research was required to reference Stalin's works – linguistics scholars cited his writings on language, while ethnographers referred to his definition of the nation (see Skalník, 1990: 183). This relates to Alexei Yurchak's term *authoritative discourse* (see Balaš: 2025: 263).

contrary, they articulated models of socio-cultural continuity, territoriality, and historical depth that were analytically distinct from both Anglo-Saxon anthropology and nationalist romanticism. Balaš's limited engagement with this issue allows the post-1989 dismissal of Soviet and Russian ethnography to remain unchallenged, treating it as too epistemologically compromised to merit serious critique, even as the book aims to provincialize such traditions.

The limitations of the theories, perhaps exacerbated by the very autonomy Bromley sought for the discipline, left Soviet ethnography vulnerable to both internal ambiguity and external critique, particularly in post-Soviet and post-socialist reinterpretations. Contemporary anthropologists, including Liarskaia (2016), Anderson, Arzyutov, and Alymov (*Eds.*, 2019), have argued for a necessary decentring of the historiographic narrative concerning the development of Soviet ethnographic knowledge. From this perspective, two key tendencies can be discerned: one revisits *etnos* thinking to understand how technocratic Eurasian states continue to engage with national identities today; the other challenges the canonical, centralised accounts of Soviet ethnography by foregrounding its diverse, regionally embedded, and often contradictory trajectories.

As Alymov, Anderson and Arzyutov write, "*etnos* thinking is not only present when the term is used overtly. It is also recognisable when more familiar terms such as 'tribe', 'nationality', or 'nation' are applied by experts" (Alymov, Anderson, Arzyutov, 2019: 22). This perspective challenges narrow interpretations of *etnos* as a fixed or uniquely Soviet construct, instead highlighting its broader discursive life in biosocial and ethno-political contexts. Contrary to expectations that *etnos* theory would fade into obscurity after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has continued to exert significant influence and remains deeply embedded in the anthropological landscapes of Russia, Central Asia, and China. Rather than being a discarded remnant of a bygone ideological project, *etnos* has demonstrated a surprising capacity for adaptation and persistence.

Alymov, Anderson, and Arzyutov (2019, Chapter 2) further contend that the development of *etnos* thinking cannot be understood as a coherent or centralised process but rather as a set of overlapping, regionally embedded, and sometimes contradictory trajectories. Acknowledging this dispersed and contested genealogy is crucial for many reasons: rethinking the intellectual history of Soviet ethnography, understanding historical entanglements of ethnography with nation-building and identity politics across Euroasia, reassessing its epistemic afterlives in the post-Soviet space and beyond, and, certainly, interrogating the ways in which non-Western genealogies of anthropological thought continue to shape knowledge production in the present.

It is therefore far from certain that Bromley's theory of *etnos* holds the paradigmatic centrality so often attributed to it in both Western and post-socialist critiques. Bromley's prominence in disciplinary histories owes much to an institutional narrative shaped by Moscow-based scholars, who have traditionally framed the field

in terms of leadership succession at the Institute of Ethnography. This "reign-based" periodisation privileges figures like Bromley while side lining alternative intellectual formations – such as the Bogoraz project in Leningrad, the Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics, or regionally grounded and interdisciplinary practices. The result is a flattened, overly centralised historiography that obscures the multiplicity and conceptual richness of Soviet ethnographic thought as it evolved across various institutional, geographic, and political contexts.

Sensitivity of the Field

Let us return to the question: Why was the more intellectually stimulating body of work of Soviet provenance not sufficiently compelling for Slovak ethnologists? And why wasn't even the "ideologically correct" content of the Soviet works properly analyzed? A pertinent version of this question was posed by Juraj Podoba already in 2006: "To what extent did Soviet ethnography influence Slovak ethnography, to what extent did the ideology of Marxism-Leninism influence the development of ethnographic research? In other words, was it an ideology, or was the Slovak Marxist ethnographic school formed under conditions of ideological pressure, for which Marxism was not an ideological cloak or career tool, but a true scientific method?" (Podoba, 2006: 271). Despite detailed overviews of the institutional landscape of Slovak ethnology (see Kiliánová, 2017; Kiliánová, Popelková, 2010; Podoba, 2013; Hlôšková, 2021; Zachar Podolinská, Popelková, 2023; Balaš, 2025), Podoba's question has yet to be adequately answered.

This remains a compelling and underexplored area that merits a dedicated investigation. Here, inspired by Balaš's institutional reading and informed by Bourdieu's field theory, I wish to suggest that the relative autonomy of the ethnographic field in Slovakia may have paradoxically hindered epistemic receptivity to Soviet theoretical production. That is, the field's semi-insulated position may have allowed its agents to maintain methodological continuity without engaging seriously with Soviet scholarship, even when formal ideological alignment might have implied such engagement.

It is therefore necessary to ask: to what extent did Slovak scholars engage with Soviet ethnography, whether through direct access to original texts or via translations? How prevalent were informal, in-person exchanges in which ideological prescriptions may have been temporarily suspended in favour of shared empirical or field-based concerns? And how were key Soviet ethnographers interpreted, appropriated, or disregarded within the Slovak context? While one might assume that alignment with Soviet institutional models would have incentivised engagement with Soviet theorists, particularly insofar as such recognition could confer symbolic capital within the domestic academic field, the historical record suggests a more ambivalent, even dismissive, relationship. For instance, this is exemplified by the

2nd World Congress of SIEF held in Suzdal (Bromley, Kuzmina, 1983), which saw the participation of Czech ethnologists A. Robek and V. Frolec. Their colleagues at home might have perceived their presence as both a moment of theoretical exchange and a manifestation of alignment and institutional prestige. This ambivalence, I propose, reveals not only ideological (in the broad sense) discomfort but also an epistemic boundary that remains insufficiently interrogated. For Slovak ethnology, for instance, participation in events such as the 25th anniversary conference of the International Commission for the Study of Folk Culture in the Carpathians and the Balkans, held in Lviv in 1984, was of greater scientific value; reports from this event were later published in *Slovenský národopis/ Slovak Ethnology* (Bromlej, 1985; Botík, 1985).

Balaš elucidates this apparent contradiction by drawing on Bourdieu's insight that complicity is inscribed in the very dispositions and preferences which render individual agents receptive to the manifestations of power (Balaš, 2025: 33). In the Slovak case, however, the habitus of ethnologists – shaped by internal disciplinary hierarchies, trajectories of professionalisation, and a historically embedded orientation towards nation-building – seems to have rendered them more attuned to institutional survival and symbolic performance than to substantive intellectual engagement with Soviet (or any other) theoretical paradigms.[5] Rather than fostering epistemic alignment, the prevailing strategies of valorisation privileged ritualised displays of loyalty over theoretical appropriation, resulting in a situation where a substantial body of ethnographic knowledge and high-quality data – as well as imaginative and inspiring analytical work by certain individuals – was persistently ignored, marginalized, or even ostracized by the ethnographic mainstream (Podoba 2007:177; see also Podoba 2005, 2006 on this issue).

This lack of sensitivity to Soviet intellectual authority is all the more paradoxical given the field's genealogical ties to Russian and Soviet traditions. The early institutionalisation of Slovak ethnology was significantly influenced by figures such as Pjotr G. Bogatyrev, mentioned above, a product of the Russian intellectual milieu and collaborator of Roman Jakobson (see Lur'e, 2024) as well as Andrej Melicherčík, who openly defended Soviet etnography in 1950's, albeit more in rhetorical than analytical terms (Melicherčík, 1951). Despite such historical linkages, Slovak ethnology remained remarkably insulated from Soviet theoretical developments. This epistemic detachment suggests that Soviet scholarship failed to function as a meaningful source of symbolic capital within the Slovak academic field.

While Soviet ethnography was preoccupied with typologies and historical trajectories of diverse ethnic groups within a Marxist teleology of socio-economic

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5   A similar approach among local scholars is noted by Podoba also in the 2000s, highlighting the continued mimetic tendencies in theory and qualitative social research even after the political transformations (Podoba, 2012: 44–45).

formations, Slovak ethnology remained embedded in a paradigm of describing national culture, or "folkness" (Melicherčík, 1945: 133, a collectivity that would later be remembered in Valery A. Tishkov's ethnicity, 2001).

Marxism, ostensibly the dominant ideological framework, often served more as a facade than as a genuine analytical commitment. The case of the Slovak historian Ľubomír Lipták – whose sincere engagement with Marxist theory arguably harmed his career – underscores the risks associated with taking ideology too seriously. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union itself, the canon had already begun to shift. Claude Lévi-Strauss' work was translated in 1985 and circulated, while thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu or Marvin Harris remained largely unknown. Ironically, it was precisely Lévi-Strauss's semiotic analyses – subsequently repackaged through Lotmanian frameworks – that would become something of a scholarly *Grail* in the 1990s.

At the same time, specific Soviet analytical models did find their way into the Slovak context, albeit selectively. For instance, Ján Botík drew on Chistov's ethno-genetic frameworks to explore the ethnogenesis of Rusyns in Slovakia (2007, later in 2021 translated into English) and on S. A. Tokarev in the semantic analysis of material culture (e.g., in the Encyclopaedia project, vol. I & II – Botík, Slavkovský, *Eds.*, 1995).[6] In the Russian context, this an objectifying interpretative framework at times took on a markedly contrived character; for instance, in analyses of domestic space such as those applied to Komi peasant households, where the spatial arrangement between the icon and the stove was read as a symbolic axis corresponding to upper and lower worlds and to masculine and feminine principles. Such readings were subsequently employed to interpret, repurpose, and even reconstruct life-cycle rituals, revealing the extent to which symbolic analysis could be extended beyond empirical plausibility. Even such applications, however contrived or reductive, remained marginal. Slovak ethnology remained anchored in a paradigm of meticulous cultural description, shaped by regionalism, historicism, and a persistent folklorist ethos.

Inertia. FutureS

Balaš convincingly demonstrates that *epistemic arrest* continued to structure Czech ethnology beyond 1989, revealing the persistence of disciplinary closure even amid political rupture. He shows that academic practices were not simply interrupted by the collapse of state socialism, but instead reproduced in its aftermath, reconfigured

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6   Together with the *Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia*, published in 1990, which aligns with the German tradition of folkloristic and ethnographic mapping from the 19th century and with the *theory of pure types* also used in USSR and other socialist countries to push the ideal of a culture area *ad absurdum*, this contributed to the crystallization of terminology in the discipline in Slovakia (*Etnografický atlas Slovenska*, 1990).

yet undergirded by prior institutional and epistemic logics (Balaš, 2025: 37). As Martin (2021: 3) reminds us, although socialism as a dominant political order may have dissolved, the socialist project endures. It persists not as a static remnant but as a *palimpsest* (Martin, 2008), a residual imprint within the architecture of the academic field. In this sense, the disciplinary landscape of anthropology remains shadowed by the socialist project, its traces sedimented in methodologies, institutional arrangements, and scholarly subjectivities. What appears as evolution is less a rupture than a layered landscape, in which the residues of past formations persist, resurface, and entangle with emergent modes of thought.

This is particularly evident in the post-socialist debates of the 1990s concerning the conceptual and institutional distinction between "anthropology" and "ethnology" (see Baiburin, Kelly, Vakhtin, *Eds.*, 2012; Skalník, 2020; Kürti, 2020). Rather than yielding a radical epistemological break, these debates often resulted in terminological revisions without substantive theoretical transformation, leading to the renaming of disciplines that did not entail a deeper engagement with contemporary social theory. Nationalist idealism, essentialist conceptions of ethnic and national groups, and a focus on material culture framed in historical narratives remained dominant.

Balaš identifies a key feature of this inertia through Bourdieu's term *hysteresis effect* (Balaš, 2025: 36), whereby the habitus continues to operate despite changing external conditions. In this regard, the post-socialist transformation did not automatically dismantle inherited academic dispositions; instead, it revealed the strength of long-standing scholarly routines. As Balaš notes, Czech ethnology in the 1990s and 2000s continued to exhibit familiar characteristics: a reliance on primary empirical analysis that remained disconnected from theoretical abstraction (Ibid.: 275), an absence of critical interrogation of established conceptual frameworks, and an ambiguous conflation between theoretical categories and the empirical subject matter. Even where theoretical pluralisation occurred, particularly in the uptake of Anglo-Saxon anthropological literature, it often remained in an inchoate state (Ibid.: 276), insufficiently elaborated and lacking in critical reflexivity.

Yet one feature weaves persistently through this disciplinary history like a red thread, rarely named and even more seldom confronted: mimicry. This is not mimicry in the sense of strategic cosmopolitanism, but rather a modality of epistemic displacement, an accommodation to dominant paradigms that simultaneously occludes their genealogies and local effects. As László Kürti (2020: 10) argues, the post-socialist scholarly field became entangled in a double blind: the pressure to adopt the language of liberal democracy and multiculturalism without critical reflection on the historical conditions that rendered such paradigms desirable. This produced a form of disciplinary mimicry that approximated Western norms in appearance, yet lacked the institutional infrastructure and critical mass to sustain a genuinely transformative project. "What many call anthropology in Eastern Europe," he writes, "mimics the Western tradition, yet it does so without genuine institutional support or critical mass" (Kürti, 2020: 11). The result is not epistemic stasis in the conventional

sense, but what might be termed *hollow dynamism*: a field marked by gestures of reform that fail to shift underlying conceptual architectures. In this light, epistemic arrest does not always announce itself through visible stagnation; it often hides in movement, in the enactment of futures that remain uninhabited conceptually. This condition, suspended between borrowed legitimacy and inherited paradigms, reveals a field where the appearance of change masks unresolved continuities, and legitimacy rests on selective forgetting rather than critical renewal.

Creativity Against Arrest: On Method and Distance

What does it mean to reflect on a disciplinary history one does not wholly inhabit, either generationally, institutionally, or ideologically, but which nevertheless structures one's intellectual formation? This question is not peripheral to the concerns of this essay; it is, in a sense, its epistemic hinge. I write not from within the disciplinary formation whose arrest Balaš diagnoses, nor wholly from outside it. I write *with* it, at an angle, with distance, but also with a sense of embedded responsibility.

This positional ambiguity is not unique. It resonates with what Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2019) has termed *ethnographic conceptualism*, a mode of scholarship that takes the disciplinary apparatus of anthropology not only as an object of critique but also as a medium of conceptual invention. In this register, to reflect on one's discipline is not simply to describe what was, but to experiment with what could be otherwise. *Ethnographic conceptualism* refuses a merely descriptive or normative science; it inhabits the tension between method and meaning, critique and creativity. Balaš enacts this mode selectively, particularly in its reflexive assertion that the book participates in "struggles over legitimacy" (Balaš, 2025: 35). Still, it stops short of entirely reconfiguring the genre of disciplinary historiography itself.

To write against arrest, therefore, requires more than exposing past limitations. It entails developing a vocabulary for inhabiting disciplinary genealogies without either succumbing to their self-congratulatory mythologies or entirely disavowing them. This is especially difficult in "small fields", where epistemic prestige is often yoked to institutional continuity and where reflexivity risks being read as betrayal. In this context, the stakes of distance are both ethical and methodological.

My strategy, perhaps imperfect, is to foreground methodologically plural forms of anthropological creativities as both critique and contribution. Here, I refrain from using the trendy term "multimodal anthropologies" (Collins, Durington, Gill, 2017), as I wish to focus on the spontaneity of the process, rather than the forms of the practices or outcomes. Rather than tracing a single disciplinary lineage, I choose to engage in lateral conversations across traditions (e.g., the Soviet, the Anglo-Saxon, French, and semi-peripheral), to stage encounters rather than arrive at closure.

My engagement with Balaš's work is less to contest its historical claims and more to activate his writing as a methodological relay, that is, as a point of departure for

reflection, redirection, and reconfiguration. This gesture invites a shift: from treating disciplinary accounts as fixed archives to approaching them as generative prompts. What forms of knowledge become possible when the field is narrated not by custodians of tradition but by interlocutors, those whose commitments are situated, whose inheritances are chosen, and whose critical allegiance lies with what anthropology might yet become? This is not a call to relinquish rigour, but to embed it within an open and imaginative epistemic stance. The methodological task, then, is not only to diagnose arrest, but also to write (film, perform, speak) one's way *out* of it. And this, I propose, is where doing anthropology becomes a mode of epistemic responsibility: not merely to represent what the field *was*, but to intervene in what the field *could still become*.

To me, *An Ethnographic Chiefdom* makes a valuable contribution to the much-needed reassessment of Czechoslovak disciplinary history. At the same time, it bears traces of the enduring epistemic ruptures. A more comprehensive historiography might engage more fully with the ambivalence of this inheritance, recognizing not only how other theoretical frameworks limited certain forms of knowledge production but also how their wholesale dismissal may continue to constrain the discipline's capacity for critical self-reflection.

My reading of Balaš is that he does not so much offer closure as he opens a space for reflection. The post-1989 moment, far from dismantling the inherited epistemic structures, revealed their tenacity. The field of stances has since remained embattled, even as the field of positions has theoretically allowed for new configurations. If contemporary ethnologists and anthropologists in Central Europe wish to escape the "non-contentious straitjacket" imposed by the inherited habitus and the "small epistemic communities they inhabit" (Balaš, 2025: 279), their most viable pathway lies in sustained engagement with innovative theoretical repertoires, regardless of their provenance, and to develop a critical meta-discourse on their disciplinary traditions.

For me, this question is less about the ontology of the discipline and more about shaping its identities – and, crucially, its legitimacy. My response is straightforward: I return to the ethical foundations of anthropology. I strive to co-create spaces of exchange with field partners, to practice reflexivity, to foster open-ended dialogue, from "within" and from the "outside", and to introduce alternative strategies of valorisation, which necessitates multiple rear view mirrors, just as Balaš does.

Epilogue

On 30 April 2025, Anna Netrebko's concert at the Slovak National Theatre was met with a protest organised by the Open Culture platform. The central slogan of the demonstration employed a Slovak paronomasia: *"We do not need [netreba nám] Netrebko!",* signalling civic resistance to cultural figures perceived as complicit in

geopolitical aggression. In the fervent debates over what is or is not 'needed', in the performative field of stances, in which each stance is striving for its legitimacy, I perceive a form of *epistemic arrest* akin to that which characterised socialist-era Czechoslovak scholarship. After all, a genuine gesture of 'open' culture, just as of 'open' science, would entail the ongoing interplay of diverse intellectual perspectives, while remaining cognisant of the distributions of power within the field of positions, which may (still) be genuinely structurally, institutionally o-p-e-n. And if the latter is true, if the field is open, then I imagine a stage where productions by figures such as Russian stage and film director Kirill Serebrennikov, Russian poet, playwright, and theatre director Zhenya Berkovich,[7] and Ukrainian theatre director Andriy Zholdak would be given space to unfold – not because of their national origin, but because of their mastery to resonate with that which transcends mere presence.

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7   In May 2023, she was arrested on charges of "justifying terrorism" under Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code. She remains in pre-trial detention as of mid-2025.

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