

## **New Age, Socialism and Other Millenarianisms: Affirming and Struggling with (Post)socialism**

BARBARA POTRATA

New Age has become an increasingly popular western religious phenomenon (Heelas, 1996; Hamilton, 2000, p. 190; York, 1995, p. 2). Since the late 1980s a growing number of people have been consulting horoscopes and tarot cards, wearing crystals, communicating with fairies and angels, worrying about their chakras and auras, and using various healing modalities, ranging from bodywork to regressing into their previous lives. Several studies indicate that New Age is also the most successful proselytising religious phenomenon in postsocialist countries (Smrke, 1999; Toš, 1999).

On the basis of my extensive fieldwork among New Agers in postsocialist Slovenia,<sup>1</sup> I argue that the interest in New Age in postsocialist countries is not a coincidence. Whereas in many aspects similar to the western New Age, the reasons for the popularity of this phenomenon in postsocialism, I believe, can be better understood only when New Age is seen as a constant dialogue with, and opposition to, socialism and postsocialism.

When one understands New Age as a millenarian religious phenomenon that shared core values with another millenarianist–socialist project, while opposing it in many important aspects; and when one understands how New Age carried over into postsocialism pivotal values of socialism while affirming the new postsocialist social contexts with what used to be opposition to socialism; New Age no longer appears as a postsocialist curiosity.

### **New Age in Slovenia**

My research was conducted in Slovenia, a former socialist country that gained its independence by breaking away from Yugoslavia in 1991. The country managed to avoid the war in its vicinity, and is currently one of the most economically successful and politically stable postsocialist countries. Ethnic Slovenians comprise 89 per cent of the population and they are mostly Catholic (58 per cent of the total population), while the other two biggest religions are Islam (2 per cent) and Protestantism (1 per cent). Even though other religious communities and groups comprise only a fraction of the overall population, Slovenia is nevertheless a religiously heterogeneous country, with 33 registered religious communities.

As to the number of New Agers, estimates are always difficult, not only because they are not institutionalised and are therefore difficult to trace, but also because they might simultaneously belong to several groups, and many of them do not want to be referred to as 'New Agers' (York, 1995, p. 43). My Slovenian informants, for example, do not call themselves 'New Agers', but rather define themselves as 'people who are involved in New Age spirituality'.

Nevertheless, some rough estimates can be made. In the case of Britain, judging from the readership figures of various New Age magazines, Heelas estimates that New Agers

represent around 0.5 per cent of total population (Heelas, 1996, p. 113), and using the same indicator (including the audiences of various New Age television programmes) I estimate that Slovenian New Agers represent between 0.4 and 1 per cent of the total population (Potrata, 1996, p. 28).

Many New Age ideas, however, have gained wide cultural acceptance. For example, Heelas (1996) presents some survey poll data, conducted in Britain by Gallup in March 1993, according to which 72 per cent of the population is aware of a 'sacred presence in nature', 26 per cent believes in reincarnation, 40 per cent believes in 'some sort of spirit or life-force', 45 per cent in telepathy between two people, and 21 per cent in horoscopes; 6 per cent have consulted a homeopath (Heelas, 1996, pp. 108–109).<sup>2</sup> Using the same and similar indicators from various Slovenian and international comparative studies, Smrke (1999) and Toš (1999) conclude that New Age is also the most successful proselytising religious phenomenon in Slovenia and other postsocialist countries.

New Age in Slovenia, as in the West, has direct roots in 1960s counter-culture. Like their western counterparts, the young throughout Yugoslavia at that time read books about different socialist and other political alternatives. Some engaged in the hedonistic life of 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll', and some experimented with life in communes. Since the borders had recently opened for all citizens, some started a quest for the 'authentic self' by taking tours to the East or by reading works of eastern philosophy.

The decade of 1970s continued to witness many social experiments by the young, such as rebelling against the older generation (and political authorities) by following alternative ways of living. Young people who travelled to India brought back knowledge of religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. I was told by informants that during the 1970s these groups started to gather around one of the few religions that had a long and uninterrupted history – the Theosophical Society – which provided New Age with most of the key ideas, as I am going to argue in the following paragraphs. Theosophy was strongly organised and had had a strong hold in Yugoslavia prior to the Second World War.

Another channel for nontraditional religious ideas were the children of respectable and privileged party members, who were able to travel around the world. These were mostly the children of Yugoslav ambassadors, living abroad, who came into contact with youth counter-culture and the emerging New Age ideas. A creative amalgamation started between the Theosophical Society and new ideas coming from abroad. It can be argued, therefore, that interest in Eastern religions, other 'native' traditions, various spiritual practices and so forth was one of the signs of dissatisfaction with official ideology that was expressed by the young in Yugoslavia.

The dissatisfaction became prominent in the 1980s, at a time of crisis in the former Yugoslavia (including Slovenia) – a crisis that further weakened the already questioned legitimacy of the socialist regime. In order to mollify social discontent and contain social fervour within the existing political and social structures, the socialist authorities granted many concessions to dissenting civil society: they reduced ideological pressure and allowed greater freedom to the rapidly emerging social groups and even greater openness to ideas from the West. Along with other dissenting social groups, in this decade New Age, although a relatively small movement, was one of the means of expressing political discontent (Potrata, 2002a).

Instead of opting for radical changes, New Age advocated a gradual change of the social system 'from within'. This was also the strategy of the Slovenian transition into post-socialism, which was characterised by breaking with the socialist socioeconomic order, building on internal resources, continuing to decentralise Yugoslav political and social structures, and promoting market socialism. New Age has remained relatively popular up to the present, yet New Agers are not registered at the Slovenian Office for Religious

Communities (*Urad za verske skupnosti*) because they claim that they do not have a body of binding beliefs, organised institutions or figures of authority.

Despite these claims, my extensive ethnographic research among the Slovenian New Agers demonstrates that they do adhere to several common ideas, not unlike those identified by Hanegraaff (1996), Brown (1997), Heelas (1996), Luhrmann (1988) and McGuire (1988). However, these scholars consider other groups as well as New Age, and usually describe New Age as a collection of certain themes, rather than demonstrating how the ideas, concepts and beliefs are interrelated. With the exception of McGuire (1988),<sup>3</sup> none of them concentrates systematically on the concepts of health, illness and healing, even though they do recognise that healing is a very important feature of New Age.

My findings, on the contrary, show that despite the wide variety of New Age practices, New Age practitioners adhere to several commonly shared ideas about spirituality and operate within one, single system of understanding of health, illness and healing.<sup>4</sup> These core beliefs are in fact a part of theosophy and various post-theosophical movements (Alexander, 1992, pp. 34–35; Brown, 1997; Diem and Lewis, 1992, pp. 48–49; Hanegraaff, 1996; Hammer, 2001; Sutcliffe, 1997, pp. 103–5; York, 1993).<sup>5</sup> Like other perennialists (perennialism is a belief that some notions, values, concepts and practices are found in all religious traditions, even though they might appear to be very different), New Agers in Slovenia believe that these core beliefs are at the heart of all religions, however different and diverse they might seem, so they can look for them in various (religious) traditions. This attitude makes New Age ideas and practices both eclectic and syncretist.<sup>6</sup>

All New Agers share the belief that in the primordial state, human beings are quintessentially divine. They have godlike powers and their words and even thoughts have magical agency. In such a state, people are in constant communication with ultimate reality. An aspect of this communication is 'energy' (*energija*). However, it is society and its institutions and their unhealthy prohibitions and demands (or individuals who act according to internalised social programming), which literally inscribe themselves onto the human body, making individuals ill. In order to regain health, a patient, together with his or her New Age therapist, must 'become aware' (*ozavestiti*), in order to identify (with the help of bodily symptoms) which of these societal 'distorted patterns of thinking' (*izkrivljeni mišljenjski vzorci*) has provoked illness in the first place in order to let go of it, or to 'cleanse' or 'purge' it (*očistiti*) and heal oneself.

The New Age healing process has two stages: 'protective', when a client comes to a practitioner feeling disempowered and therefore looking for a spiritual 'protection'; and 'emancipatory', when a patient takes full responsibility (but not the blame) for the situation and tries actively to change in the future with conscious action. The therapy fails if a client does not recognise the 'pattern of thinking' that created the illness in the first place, or if an illness is 'karmic', that is, brought over from one of the client's previous lives so that he or she can 'learn' from the experience of illness and suffering.

New Agers are constantly required to 'work on themselves' (*delati na sebi*). By this concept they mean being involved in various practices (lectures or workshops, for example), in order to experience 'learning', or moving from the lower levels of personal and spiritual development to higher ones, toward the state of future abundance. 'Working on oneself' is a process of working on one's 'self', that is, a process of individualisation in which an individual recognises increasingly more 'distorted patterns of thinking' that are imposed by society and are making him or her ill. The process draws increasingly refined boundaries between the self and the society in which it lives, by questioning what was previously unquestioned, and by 'cleansing' the 'distorted thinking'.

The concept of 'working on oneself' does not only involve the process of individualisation; it is also a process of building sociality. This is because New Agers, despite the fact

that they have many ideas in common, choose to define themselves only as people who 'help others', out of completely altruistic and disinterested motives. However, they are inevitably involved in the money economy and consequently feel great anxiety about charging money. How can a person be altruistic and disinterested, that is, a New Ager, if one accepts money for products and services? In my doctoral research (Potrata, 2002a) I argued that New Agers, through various strategies, redefine their money economy as an altruistic and disinterested 'gift' economy.<sup>7</sup> Being constantly involved in 'working on themselves', attending and paying for one another's lectures, workshops and events, through what is seen as a practice of gift-giving, prestations and counterprestations, New Agers are involved in building strong ties of friendship amongst themselves. Through exchange and their economic activities, they are building their own community.

### **New Age and Socialism: Areas of Agreement**

The New Age phenomenon is deeply embedded in the socialist social context.<sup>8</sup> This is primarily because in their expectations of a massive social shift to a better future, New Age and socialism are both also social utopias – more precisely, millenarian movements. The very name 'New Age' indicates a millenarian approach towards the understanding of human history.<sup>9</sup>

The social context in which New Age appeared can, to a certain degree, be compared to the conditions in which most millenarian movements appear. Such conditions imply a major reconfiguration of societal power (Burridge, 1971); millenarian movements emerge in circumstances of general social upheaval and appeal to people who can no longer rely on traditional means of support for survival in the new circumstances (Cohn, 1962). Cohn explains that millenarian movements attract people who no longer have recognised social roles, are on the margins of society and have no other institutional means to express their dissent and voice their claims; they therefore seek alternative means of social recognition (Cohn, 1962).

Although Slovenian New Agers rarely experienced a complete uprooting from their everyday world, they, as well as most of other Slovenians, nevertheless felt under constant threat during the general economic, political and moral crisis in Yugoslavia in the 1980s. A category of people who would be especially prone to embrace New Age in the new, post-socialist social context, the middle-aged,<sup>10</sup> were suddenly pushed towards the margins of society. They were considered as relics of the past who could adapt to the new reality only with great difficulty. They were among the first to be fired from their jobs and the last to find new employment. Their social position was vulnerable and their social roles had become ambiguous; at the same time, they had less opportunity to voice their dissent within institutional frameworks.<sup>11</sup>

New Age ideas are in many respects quite similar to the worldviews of many other contemporary (Burridge, 1971; Comaroff, 1985) or historical (Cohn, 1962) millenarian movements. New Agers, like the followers of many other millenarian movements (Burridge, 1971; Cohn, 1962), are dedicated to ultimate divine reality, but stress the importance of being firmly rooted in everyday reality. Like the followers of other millenarian movements, New Agers strive to articulate the 'new man' through a constant process of self-perfection ('working on oneself') to the point of reaching inner divinity. Attaining this state, New Agers acquire healing powers. The world of the 'new man' is one of 'plenty' and 'abundance'. A utopia has been lost in the past, but another one will come in the future.

As a millenarian movement, New Age shares many of these characteristics with the socialist utopia based on Marxist ideas. Nove (1987, p. 42) describes Marxism 'in many respects as fundamentalist–millenarian, in the realm of religious faith' and Cohn clearly

positions communism among millenarian movements. He argues that although the communists always officially adhered to ideas of 'science' and 'progress', they were nevertheless, like the members of any other millenarian movement, convinced that unjust tyranny (exercised in the communist understanding by the 'bourgeoisie') would be destroyed by a 'chosen people' (in this case the 'working class') in a 'final and decisive struggle' (Cohn, 1962, p. 311).

Not only do New Age and communism share a teleological view of history, they also share a similar concept of the 'aftermath': a massive social transformation and a new world of 'plenty' (regarding communism, see Nove, 1987, p. 15). Both New Age and communism envisage the emergence of a 'new man'; as Nove (1987, p. 10) describes the ideal communist man, 'unacquisitive, brilliant, highly rational, socialised, humane'.

According to Slovenian New Agers, a New Age person should be completely dedicated to 'helping others' out of altruistic and disinterested motives alone. Similarly, the communist man was expected to 'serve others'. Both communism and New Age contend that in the future state of abundance, every person will fulfill his or her inner potential and be fully in control of his or her destiny. Moreover, both the communist and the New Age 'new man' is expected to command the natural world completely and in this respect to exercise god-like powers.

In the communist conception, the formation of the new man would be greatly facilitated by the power of words. Marx believed that 'men are supposed to become good through reading books and listening to speeches' (Nove, 1987, p. 17). The socialist regimes put this conviction into practice; a study of the socialist period in Hungary up to the 1980s, for example, shows that the government believed that an appropriate vocabulary would bring about social transformation, and that it was possible to change individual consciousness by means of language, slogans and posters (Lampland, 1995, p. 237; see also Yurchak, 1997). The apparently eccentric New Age idea that it is possible to change the world with positive affirmations (that is, positive syntagms that should be repeated until the individual starts to believe in them, and they become objective reality) is very similar to the socialist belief in the agency of words, which have the power to change individual consciousnesses, and consequently bring about social transformation.

Marx believed that the world of future abundance will not be disfigured by private property, which causes 'false consciousness' (Ritzer, 2000). In New Age language, the equivalent to the latter is 'distorted patterns of thinking'. Contemporary Slovenian New Agers have a similar attitude to private property to that of the communists, frequently producing only for direct consumption and striving to avoid market exchange (Potrata, 2002a, p. 143). With this 'gift fetishism' (where the discourse of gift hides market relations) New Agers, like communists, deny 'commodity fetishism' (where the apparent market relationships hide relationships between people) and try to reconcile 'market' and 'society'. By building relationships of intimacy and friendships in the market, the New Agers reinforce their view that the economy does not have an existence independent of society. While Polanyi (1957) argued that the 'great transformation' from feudalism to capitalism was about separating the economy from society, the New Age 'great transformation' is from the present condition to the ideal 'New Age' future.

In communism, the end of commodity production is also the end of private property. As noted above, communism sees private property as the basis of 'false consciousness', that is, ideology. New Agers similarly make connections between 'false thinking', imposed and enforced by society and its institutions, and ideology.

This kind of thinking, that life is struggle, full of misery and limitations, is referred to by New Agers as a 'distorted pattern of thinking'. It is viewed as a kind of 'false consciousness' because it is not in accordance with what New Agers understand as the 'natural state', that

is that people are 'by nature' happy, creative, joyous and possessed of all other positive cultural concepts, and that they have unlimited divine-like powers.

In the communist and New Age understanding alike, once man is liberated from 'false consciousness' work will no longer be alienated 'labour' but a creative and fulfilling social activity through which people will realise and develop their full potential and attain 'true authenticity' (for socialism, see Ritzer, 2000, pp. 48–54; see also Lampland, 1995, p. 329). For New Agers, the idea of 'working on oneself' entails spiritual development through creative and fulfilling work and (self-) realisation of one's 'full potential'. This involves the individual overcoming alienation and coming into contact with his or her own 'true authenticity'.

### **New Age and Socialism: Areas of Opposition**

During the socialist era, New Age shared many core ideals with the official utopianism. However, New Agers also opposed this socialist utopianism in many respects. Like the millenarian seventeenth-century radicals in England, who emerged after the 'socialist' regime of Cromwell in 1649 as an opposition to his regime (described by Hill, 1980), Slovenian New Agers turned the socialist world they lived in 'upside down'.

New Agers and Marxists have very different ideas about how the massive societal transformation should occur. Whereas Marxism puts emphasis on the collective, and claims that a massive change in society and social institutions and frameworks will cause a transformation of the individual, New Agers are individualists and believe that massive societal change will occur only by patient 'work from within' in each person. New Age thus strongly opposed the official socialist utopianism in this respect. Marxism talks about revolutionary changes, whereas the New Age utopia looks for evolutionary and 'reformist' ones.

While state ideology in the socialist era was controlled and apparently tightly organised and, in the case of former Yugoslavia, claimed to be finding its own way to socialism, the New Age world was organised in the form of loose networks and a loose set of ideas, opposing the dominant utopianism (socialism) with an ideology that incorporated ideas from the West. Above all, New Age opposed the atheism of the official utopianism and, in contrast, emphasised spirituality. Generally the New Age discourse was of 'openness': 'open' 'chakras' (chakras are the apertures in the 'energy body' that surrounds the physical body and they enable the exchange of 'energies' between individuals and their natural and social environment), 'opening' oneself to experience, 'open' bodily postures during meditation. This was a critique not only of the rigidity of socialism but of all ideological rigidity.

New Age further opposed the state ideology of collectivism and the state-organised economy. Instead, New Age adopted the practice of individualist entrepreneurialism that was situated in the informal sphere of people's lives. The informal economy of 'actual existing socialism' (Bahro, 1978) was both a symptom of state inefficiency and a strategy of coping in a dysfunctional formal economy marked by constant systemic shortages. People's pursuit of individual interests depended on social networks, webs of family, friends and acquaintances. Since the informal economy was situated in the private lives of the people, outside the control of the intrusive state, it was often perceived as a site of individuality and morality (Lampland, 1995; Pine, 1994; Pine, 1997; Pine and Bridger, 1998; Wedel, 1986) and, as such, a locus of subversion and resistance against oppressive state constructs. Slovenian New Agers thus fall into the category described by Smith (1992, p. 311) of people who get involved in the informal economy in order symbolically to resist those who control the government or economic sector.

When looking for goods and services that were hard to obtain, people had to use their initiative as entrepreneurial and atomised individuals. This had important consequences for

New Age understandings of gender. Whereas in the West, New Age and the neopaganism that is related to it celebrate values that are culturally identified as 'feminine' (Bednarowski, 1992; Feher, 1992; La Fontaine, 1998, p. 46; Luhrmann, 1989), Slovenian New Agers curiously celebrated (and continue to celebrate) what are culturally defined as 'masculine' values: individualism, power and empowerment, self-confidence and assertiveness, determination and strength, perseverance in the face of adversity and entrepreneurial behaviour.

During my fieldwork, although I did not witness men being encouraged to get in touch with their 'feminine side', I was present on several occasions when women advised men to bring out their 'masculine energies'. The women pejoratively described such men as 'yin men'.<sup>12</sup> By the same token, men admired women for their 'masculine' traits, and both male and female New Age practitioners encouraged women to adopt values that are culturally associated with 'masculinity', such as assertiveness, self-confidence and fearlessness.

I would like to suggest that this phenomenon regarding gender relations is to be analysed and understood in relation to the rival utopianism of socialism. Socialism was perceived by the citizens of socialist states in terms of values that are culturally associated with 'femininity': it was about community, cooperation and social relationships, caring and giving. New Age in socialism emphasised what is culturally defined as 'masculinity': individualism, confidence, personal initiative and entrepreneurialism. This emphasis should also be ascribed to the fact that men, as well as women, acting in the informal and private spheres of their lives, had to be bounded, assertive, entrepreneurial individuals if they wanted to survive in the dysfunctional formal economy.

As I have argued above, both socialism and New Age share the idea of the centrality of production and the fact that 'work' is essentially social – it is work (in socialism, physical work), which makes a person. Yet the New Age concept of work also implies the idea of consumption because the New Agers 'work on themselves' – are constantly involved in lectures, talks and workshops – by consuming New Age services and products. This concept therefore implies both production and consumption. During socialism, consuming foreign goods was strongly disapproved of (Verdery, 1993; Heyat, 2002, p.22; Humphrey, 1995a; Verdery, 1996), but was seen as a means of distinguishing oneself from the uniform masses (Humphrey, 1995a, p. 57). New Age consumption of services was even more subversive, since it was about consuming spirituality as opposed to producing in the context of the dialectical materialism of the official socialist utopia.

### **The Divided Self**

We thus see that the socialist and New Age utopianisms shared certain common ideals,<sup>13</sup> but were nevertheless based on competing notions. New Age emerged in the 1980s when socialism was already on the wane. New Age shared and carried over socialist ideals to the new, postsocialist reality, but these ideals were not situated in the public, political world of those who followed the New Age utopia. The utopias belonged to different spheres of the life of an individual; the socialist utopia in the formal sphere, New Age in the informal.

The two domains, private and public, existing in parallel in the life of an individual, were often opposed to each other (Lampland, 1995; Humphrey, 1995a; Verdery, 1996; Wedel, 1986). This phenomenon is explored by Yurchak (1997) in his discussion of 'pretence' under socialist and communist regimes; as a case study he analyses the situation in the former Soviet Union. He claims that it is generally acknowledged that the socialist systems were based on oppression, control and other totalitarian tactics. However, Yurchak maintains that the fundamental mechanisms of the Soviet system were, in fact,

'pretence'. From the late 1970s, official socialist ideology was no longer capable of representing reality in a convincing way. Many Soviet citizens believed the ideology was unchangeable, but also that it was largely false (see also Humphrey, 1995a, pp. 44–45).

Yurchak goes on to argue that the people of the last Soviet generation regarded socialist ideology cynically. On the one hand, they pretended to conform to it, while on the other, they participated in nonconformist discourses and practices, and derided the official ideology (see also Humphrey, 1995a; Lampland, 1995, p. 246). Hence the 'socialist self' was divided between two cultures: the formal, which was observed and controlled by the state, and the informal, which was outside state control and where state ideology was often subverted (Yurchak, 1997).

Politics intruded into all areas of life. In contrast, the private sphere was perceived as an area of individual autonomy and morality. In the public world, any digression from given rules was likely to have consequences. The official ideology was perceived to be 'immutable'. However, since it was also believed to be 'largely false', people had learnt to 'pretend' to believe it and 'play the game' successfully (Yurchak, 1997).

The same is also true for at least some other socialist states (see Humphrey, 1995a for socialism in general; Lampland, 1995, p. 246 for Hungary; Smrke, 2004 for the former Yugoslavia) I myself remember my classes in 'Self-management and the basics of Marxism' at high school in Slovenia in the mid-1980s. Nobody objected to this subject. Nevertheless, instead of learning about the classics of Marxism, we read the major anti-utopias and critiques of communist totalitarianism (and all other totalitarian regimes) – Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* – and we discussed and analysed the negative aspects of socialism. While we 'pretended' to learn about Marxism, in fact we subverted this school subject.

Most people did not have trouble in moving between these two worlds, the formal world of 'pretence' and the private, informal world of 'true authenticity'. People participated fully in the public sphere, if not through politics, then in the sphere of work. Nevertheless, they tried to overcome the deficiencies of the public sphere in their private lives. The private sphere was the site of resistance against the dominant social(ist) reality and, above all, the space for articulating alternative values. For some people, New Age ideas were the source of active resistance against the dominant reality, as well as the building blocks of an alternative world.

## **Two Utopias and Postsocialism**

The sociopolitical turbulence of the end of state socialism and the transition to postsocialism did not radically alter the coexistence of two worlds, one formal and other informal, public and private. The process of the reevaluation of values continues in the postsocialist era; the old system has gone, the new one has not fully emerged yet, and as Verdery (1996), Pine and Bridger (1998) and Burawoy and Verdery (1999) argue, it is not clear what kind of system the next one is going to be. Hence the postsocialist 'self' is still divided, and New Age continues to thrive in the informal sphere.

The postsocialist public sphere of new entrepreneurialism and work, politics and new rules, and also new fragmentation and divisions continues to be dangerous to the New Age private world with which it exists side by side. In communist times the state aimed to organise labour; and as several scholars have observed, (physical) labour (working hard and efficiently in order to produce physical, tangible results) was seen as a way of making a person, since it was (physical) labour that was of utmost significance for people's identities and a measure of their subjectivity (Lampland, 1995; Holy, 1992; Humphrey, 1995a, p. 46; Verdery, 1996).



The situation has changed radically in postsocialism, as the state no longer attempts to shape all areas of people's lives or to create highly social citizens. In the new social context, the state is supposed to have only a supportive role, to help individuals to help themselves. It is the market and market relations that create and shape individuals rather than the state. The market has assumed a central role.

Those living in the postsocialist era and those in the West involved in helping postsocialist countries expected that the market would quickly cure all the ailments of socialist economies. Perhaps not surprisingly, neoliberalism, emphasising the central role of the market, was seen as the appropriate solution. This was also partly an expression of a certain *Zeitgeist* (Hart, 1992, p. 214), in line with the predominance of neoconservative governments in the West (Thatcher in Britain, Reagan in the USA, Kohl in Germany and Nakasone in Japan).<sup>14</sup>

New Agers support certain aspects of the new reality. These include the ethos of individualism, private entrepreneurship, spiritual values and the celebration of values that are culturally associated with 'masculinity'. However, New Agers continue to believe that personal identities are created through labour by 'working on oneself'. On the one hand, this concept is a continuation of the old socialist understanding of identity formation that people are 'produced' through (physical) work. On the other hand, the idea of 'working on oneself' implies consumption, since it involves consuming various New Age products and services.<sup>15</sup>

This concept therefore introduces a new understanding of identity formation, not unlike that in the West where, it has been argued, consumption has become the main axis for articulating identities and for meaningful social action (Appadurai, 1986; Bourdieu, 1991; Douglas, 1997; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Howes, 1996; Miller, 1995; Miller, 1998). It could be argued that the uneasiness of the transition into a consumer society is mitigated by the 'spiritualisation' of production – which is one of the characteristics of the New Age consumer model.

The transition into a consumer society is not the only problem faced by the postsocialist states. As Sampson (1996, p. 92) points out, the model of 'proper' consumption is not clearly defined, even though one's identity is increasingly based on the polarisation between being, or not being, a consumer of (most importantly) expensive and imported goods and services. Again it can be argued that New Age model solves this problem, since New Age products and services carry some of the characteristics of 'luxuries'. In line with Appadurai's (1986, p. 38) definition of 'luxuries', New Age products and services are limited to the 'elite', and mostly to the 'spiritual' elite. Their acquisition is a complex process of 'working on oneself'. Since not many people are fully involved in it, in this sense products are scarce and a specialised knowledge is required for their proper consumption. Like the consumption of luxuries, moreover, the consumption of New Age products and services is also linked to person, body and personality.

In the new social context, it is the market, market relations and consumption rather than the state that create and shape the self. Market relations have intruded into the New Age economy and now money is exchanged among New Agers for their goods and services. In the new social reality, labour creates individuals through the market (and consumption). Because of this, an important moral problem arises: how to be sociable while pursuing individualistic personal interests. For some people, New Age fills this moral vacuum, by spiritualising consumption and by creating webs of sociability through exchange in the market.

By redefining money relations as altruistic gift giving, New Agers do not only evade the moral unease caused by charging for something that is supposed to be both 'altruism' and 'assistance'. They also create relationships of reciprocity and sociality among people who would otherwise be atomised individualistic actors in the (New Age) market, unrelated by kinship or close friendship ties. New Agers thus bring the core values of socialism to the atomising postsocialist world. In fact, they continue to believe in the socialist ethos of

highly 'altruistic', 'disinterested' individuals who are dedicated to 'helping others'. By attempting to produce only for use value (for a known person and direct consumption), they attempt to end commodity production, and to bring about an egalitarian, classless society – both, again, communist ideals.

When this is not possible, New Agers demonstrate that 'work' has a profound social character by creating the webs of sociality in the market. Despite their view that spiritual consumption 'makes' a person, New Agers continue to believe in the importance of 'work' in identity formation. Like all millenarianist utopians, including the socialist, New Agers believe in the teleological nature of work and history. They believe that at the end of history, the 'New Man', who is profoundly social, brilliant, dedicated to helping others and fulfilling his inner potential, will emerge. In this respect, New Age is at odds with the new social reality.

## Conclusion

In my discussion of New Age in Slovenia in socialist and postsocialist times, I have challenged the assumptions behind negative attitudes towards the New Age phenomenon: according to Burrige, such attitudes often arise out of repugnance towards the anomie, irrationality and disorder from which these movements are perceived to stem. Antipathy for millenarian phenomena is in this perspective seen as a sign of a profound commitment to what is believed to be rationality and order (Burrige, 1985, p. 223). In this light, millenarian movements are frequently regarded as cultural aberrations or some kind of irregularity, a sort of psychosocial illness or disability (see Lemieux *et al.*, 1993).

Instead, I have examined the relations between New Age, socialism and postsocialism, and demonstrated that New Age was deeply embedded in the dominant utopianism, socialism. I observed that while these two millenarian utopianisms shared a number of common ideals they were also opposed to each other in many important respects. New Age continues to be in constant dialogue with postsocialism, but what used to be an opposition to socialism is in the new social context an affirmation of postsocialist ideals and goals. Nevertheless, postsocialism continues to be perceived as dangerous and people living in postsocialist societies generally see themselves as having little influence over those societies, albeit for different reasons from those explaining the same lack of influence in the socialist period. New Age again opposes the mainstream culture by carrying over the core values of socialism into postsocialism.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Because of the lack of relevant studies, in describing New Age in the postsocialist context I rely on my own doctoral research that was conducted between 1998 and 1999 and on observations from several subsequent visits in 2000, 2001 and 2002 to the site of my fieldwork. I accumulated my informants according to the network principle: one informant would tell me about a second, the second about a third and so on. In addition, I was a participant observer in numerous New Age events, and conducted in-depth interviews, formal and informal, with approximately 70 people who were involved in around 50 types of New Age activities.
- <sup>2</sup> These numbers should be taken with caution because, for example, Hindus and Buddhists also believe in reincarnation and this concept is therefore not only (or primarily) New Age.
- <sup>3</sup> McGuire (1988) particularly focuses on healing practices in suburban America, but New Age groups are only part of the subject of her research.
- <sup>4</sup> New Agers practise a wide range of healing techniques. My fieldwork revealed the following. 'Energy' healing includes: healing with one's own energy (bio-energy); *Reiki* healing (in Japanese: *rei* – universal, *ki* – energy: healing with universal, 'channelled' energy); *Shen Qi* (channelling of

*Qi* energy); and healing by communication with entities from other planes of existence. Popular were healing practices like crystal therapy, chromotherapy (healing by employing the energies of colours), radionics (the use of pendula for diagnostic and healing purposes), sound therapy, regression therapy (regression into previous lives) and pyramid healing (pyramids are supposed to have great healing properties as a result of their shape). Many used versions of acupuncture: the Japanese version, using fingers instead of needles to stimulate acupuncture points, is called *Shiatsu*; diagnosing and healing by pressing acupuncture points in the palms of the hand is called *Su Jok*; if the points are on the feet, the technique is called 'reflexology'. Some of my informants did various forms of bodywork, like yoga, *Tai Chi* and various types of massage. My informants healed not only individual bodies, but space as well, with help of geomancy, *Feng Shui* (a Chinese form of geomancy and understanding of the energies of the Earth), identifying lay lines, and various forms of 'healing the Earth'. Some of the people I studied also practiced homeopathy (a system of healing based on the view that substances that are harmful in larger quantities can heal when used in smaller doses), healing with Bach's floral remedies and herbalism. Some informants practised firewalking (on burning coal) and took shamanic saunas. Other practices included 'experience of enlightenment' (practices in which by 'emptying' the mind a person is supposed to achieve a temporary enlightenment), astrology, tarot reading, rune reading, numerology (studying the influence of numbers on human beings), Ayurvedic healing, and numerous techniques that various individuals have made up themselves.

For more detailed descriptions of these and other aspects of New Age belief and practice, see Potrata, 2001, 2002a, 2002b.

- 5 Theosophy dates from 1875 when Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott founded the Theosophical Society. The aim of this organisation was to promote world peace and a comparative study of religions, especially those of India. It also aimed to study the spiritual unity of world religions through the ages (Goring, 1992, p. 70). Goring (1992) defines theosophy as a belief that there is an 'esoteric unity of all religions' and that theosophy is the way to discover this. 'Meditation is important, and the spiritual development of individuals is (or can be) guided by a secret set of Masters living in Tibet. Theosophy states that we all reincarnate many times, according to our deeds, and the aim of life is that we should achieve our real self and our full potential by aligning ourselves to the divine will of the universal Spirit. The universe has seven planes and we have seven bodies. We, and the universe, are revolving towards a spiritual destiny' (Goring, 1992, pp. 526–27). One of the offspring of theosophy is anthroposophy, which is defined by Goring (1992) as a 'spiritual doctrine, influenced by theosophy and its understanding of Hinduism, and Goethe's romanticism'. It was founded in 1912 by Rudolf Steiner.
- 6 Many of the New Age practices are not new, but are part of a wider cultural inheritance. Crystals, numerology, colours that supposedly have magical agency, fairies and angels, the cosmos as an interconnected unity, the unity of matter and spirit – all these ideas were, according to Thomas (1973, p. 271), already present in the revival of Neoplatonism, pagan religion and magic in medieval times.
- 7 The strategies for redefining the money economy as gift giving are various. Sometimes, practitioners are literally repaid in gifts. This can be unsatisfactory, however, as people do not always know what a practitioner needs. Most commonly, New Agers believe that a 'fee' is but a 'token' for something that was done out of 'unconditional' love, and can never be fully repaid. The difference between the payment and the priceless service constitutes a 'gift'. A client is, therefore, eternally indebted to a therapist (see Hsu, 1999, p. 67 for *Qi Gong* healers in China). Monetary recompense may also be seen as a reimbursement for 'expenses', although the sum paid usually far exceeds any expenses actually incurred. Another solution is to redefine fees as a 'charitable donation'. Frequently, it is up to the client to decide how much, if anything, to pay for a particular service; but most people know how much is normally expected. As to the New Age products themselves, they are often believed to have a special, distinctive character and beneficial healing properties. The practitioners usually impregnate them with 'energy', which is equated with 'love'. This practice creates that 'extra' quality, which gives an object or a service the character of a 'gift'. It is this quality that cannot be repaid and that is therefore given free. It resembles the Maori concept of '*hau*' (Mauss, 1954), the 'spirit' or 'soul' – essentially the moral and/or religious quality that compels the recipient

to reciprocate the gift. This strategy again redefines a commodity as a gift; Nonnan (cited in Carrier, 1995, p. 146) argues that a commodity of any size or amount becomes a gift when it conveys love. Furthermore, New Age objects and services are highly customised and personalised (see Kelner and Wellman, 2000, p. 10). Noonan (cited in Carrier, 1995, p.146) says that a 'gift' must be chosen in accordance with the recipient's interests; extreme customisation of New Age products or services can thus be seen as a form of 'masking', giving a commodity a gift-like character. New Age products are sometimes sold in gift shops. In such cases, it is the context of a 'gift' shop, which implies the idea of a 'gift'.

- <sup>8</sup> Whereas in reality all the regimes in Eastern Europe were 'socialist' and 'communism' was regarded as the ideal that was still to be achieved in the future at some unspecified date, I use 'communist' and 'Marxist' when I am discussing such an ideal state and the blueprint for it.
- <sup>9</sup> The term 'New Age' is used because a New Age is believed to start when the Earth leaves the old astrological era, the Age of Pisces, and enters a new era, the Age of Aquarius. The general understanding is that the Age of Pisces (described by the Slovenian New Ager Havliček as a time of religious and ideological fanaticism) was characterised by battle for ideological supremacy in the face of dualistic divisions. The Age of Aquarius, or the New Age, will be marked by attempts to learn to live with differences, to overcome dualistic tensions by balancing the rational and the intuitive, and to live as an authentic person in a diverse world. While the great ideological projects of the past were founded either on ideas of lost primordial bliss (religion) or the assumption of imminent Heaven on Earth (socialism/communism), New Age (so Havliček argues) tries to renounce such perspectives by focusing on the present alone (Havliček, 1992, pp. 50–51). New Age expectations of a major societal shift, preceded by natural cataclysms such as earthquakes and floods (see Brown, 1997, p. 5; Burridge, 1971), are characteristic of other millenarian movements too. While New Agers in general are not unanimous as to when the New Age will begin, Slovenian New Agers believe that the dawn of the Age of Aquarius happened on 11 August 1999, a day before the total solar eclipse. They marked this 'entrance' with a Slovenia-wide meditation.
- <sup>10</sup> As to age, studies of characteristics of western New Agers are more ambiguous. While some studies claim that New Agers are young (Kelner, 2000, p. 84), others point out that they can be young or middle-aged (Rose, 1999).
- <sup>11</sup> Other major categories of New Agers are women, because being involved in New Age activities and practices can be 'empowering' (for western New Age see Hamilton, 2000; Heelas, 1996). Nurses, doctors, psychotherapists, psychologists, as well as teachers and social workers (Heelas, 1996, p. 119; Luhmann, 1989, p. 101; Rose, 1999, p. 11 for Britain; cf. Warburg *et al.* 1999, p. 11 for Denmark) are very often found among New Agers. In the case of medical workers (doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists) and 'caring professionals' (teachers, social workers), there is a congruence between the ethos of 'caring' professions and New Agers, since they are both committed to 'helping others' (cf. Hedges and Beckford, 2000, p. 179). The major difference between New Agers and caring professionals, as New Agers see it, is that caring professionals receive regular salaries for their help, while New Agers are supposed to give purely altruistic 'help', if possible, outside the money economy. Another major category are, perhaps surprisingly, (good) natural scientists, mathematicians, chemists, physicists and above all, computer scientists (see Luhmann, 1989 for Britain) who figure prominently among the professions of Slovenian New Agers. I have argued that this is because through New Age the scientists articulate a knowledge system, alternative to that of socialism and its claims to be scientific (Potrata, 2002a).
- <sup>12</sup> The term refers to the female principle in traditional Chinese philosophy. In this context it refers to men who are seen to exhibit excessively 'female' characteristics.
- <sup>13</sup> In Slovenia, although people resented socialist reality, they largely adhered to socialist ideals. Repe (2000) writes that public opinion polls immediately after the death of Tito in 1980 demonstrated that up to 60 per cent of people still identified with such ideals.
- <sup>14</sup> I agree with those researchers (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Gudeman, 1992; Hart, 1992; Mencinger, 2000; Stiglitz, 1999) who argue that the western neoliberal insistence on a 'radical break' with the socialist past was more ideological in character than economically sound. As postsocialist experience has shown so far, the neoliberal approach unfortunately had disastrous consequences for many postsocialist economies.

- <sup>15</sup> For most of the citizens of postsocialist states, consumption is very hard work. Perhaps the only exception is Slovenia, which is relatively well off. Humphrey writes that in postsoviet Russia, shopping is far from being a leisure activity, because the severe financial hardship suffered by most citizens means that they have to put considerable effort (or 'work') into procuring even the cheaper domestic consumer goods (Humphrey, 1995b). In this case, therefore, the idea of 'consumption' simultaneously conveys the concepts of 'work' and 'consumption'.

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