

BOOK REVIEW

THE RED RIVIERA

Kristen Ghodsee (2005)

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While reviewing *The Red Riviera* I learned that Bulgaria was slated to join the EU in about a year and this made me wonder what repercussions might be in store for Ghodsee's Black Sea resorts. What will happen as money and tourists flow eastward? Tropes of ageless tranquility to the contrary, change has always formed part of the tourism picture, and it is hard to imagine a global business with comparable sensitivity to upheavals, natural or man-made. What is unusual is to find a full-length tourism monograph devoted to change and to the social price this has exacted.

Kristen Ghodsee's study is many things, but above all it is a detailed account of the Bulgarian tourist sector during the era of state socialism and the country's far-from-painless insertion into global capitalism. What gives the book ethnographic depth is the way that the social and personal costs of this shift are explained through the voices and stories of Ghodsee's informants. In the same manner, we come to understand how those at the receiving end of these tectonic changes learned to modulate their behavior and, in some cases, their attitude. As she writes in a first chapter aptly titled "Shattered Windows, Broken Lives," no one predicted the events of 1989. "After almost half a century of Cold War that had brought the world to the brink of total nuclear annihilation, the enemy just disappeared." But, of course, the people remained, and this is part of their story. We learn a great deal about mechanisms of survival, particularly about the mobilization of networks and the deployment of cultural capital. The closer Ghodsee comes to her informants, the clearer it becomes that this journey also chronicles the ethnographer's effort to comprehend, cerebrally and psychologically, the impact of a massive collapse.

The book consists of an Introduction and five chapters. In Chapters 1 and 2 the author discusses the specific historical circumstances surrounding the development of tourism, and how this permitted some women to acquire very

considerable cultural capital. Acquisition took a variety of forms, but the most valuable elements proved to be work experience, control of foreign languages, and degrees from prestigious universities. Many of Ghodsee's informants accumulated these non-material assets under socialism and later managed to use them to their advantage when tourism emerged as one of the country's most dynamic economic sectors. Chapter 3 examines tourism policy under socialism and links it to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, particularly the definition of leisure as part of the productive process. A concrete result was general and substantial experience with vacations: before 1989, about half of Bulgaria's hotel capacity was reserved for domestic tourists. In Chapter 4, ominously titled "To the Wolves: Tourism and Economic Transformation," the focus shifts to a consideration of the price and pain of postsocialist restructuring and privatization, a process that lent itself to the emergence of Mafias and shady "domestic investors." Chapter 5, "Feminism-by-Design" is less about tourism than about the role and place of feminism and foreign NGOs in present-day Bulgaria. These latter could be likened to colonial outposts, "distributorships for Western ideas about gender." The argument goes much deeper, an appeal to allow Bulgarian women to define their own priorities, and chart their own ways.

In brief, this is the composition of the book. Two master themes articulate it: the changes in Bulgarian society following the dismantling of socialism, and the role of women in the managerial and service structures of tourism before and after this change. By the measures in use at the time, the tourist industry worked quite well under socialism. It generated significant amounts of hard currency from Westerners during the peak season, and at other times met the vacation needs of Bulgarians and "fraternal visitors" from other socialist societies. The whole system, political and economic, of

which the tourism sector formed a part, was predicated on a straightforward formula:

The communist state owned everything and no one had access to private economic capital. The opposite was true of cultural capital. The communist state had, as one of its core ideological goals the “uplifting” of the workers and peasants, and the imparting of cultural capital evenly among the population. (p. 104)

As part of its conceptual bargain the state provided access to education, credentials, and other skills. As Ghodsee notes, as early as 1977, 22 percent of those between the ages of twenty and twenty-four were enrolled in institutions of higher learning—a percentage greater than that found in the UK, Switzerland, or Austria.

These figures are relevant for understanding future developments. It has been argued that state socialism inevitably led to the infantilization of both men and women, but skills, education, and even substantial exposure to “bourgeois” or “high” culture, would seem to argue that this was not the whole story. It is certainly correct that the state was “paternalistic,” and no less true that many of the prestige jobs in socialist Bulgaria went to men. Tourism, however, was both a prestigious profession and one staffed virtually top to bottom by women. Only as a result of such educational opportunities would the author have encountered a “remarkably qualified... waitress” with “the equivalent of a master’s degree in English philology” and knowledge of four languages besides her own. Ghodsee very rightly insists that one should not globalize experience, male or female, but that gender certainly matters. While the vast majority of the population, male and female, was initially negatively impacted by privatization, some suffered more than others. In Ghodsee’s words,

Here is where gender enters the argument in fascinating ways. Cultural capital was allocated to socialist subjects along specific gendered lines. Women like Desi the waitress were concentrated in the universities, where they got a more general education, whereas men like Desi’s husband were concentrated in the more technical colleges, where they learned skills specific to the communist command economy. (p. 107).

The husband in question is now out of work because there is no demand for his engineering skills. Unemployment is not the only problem: the whole moral order has changed drastically:

Every speeding ticket or other traffic violation can be avoided with a ‘special fee’ paid in cash directly to the officer. An envelope of banknotes will guarantee every application for a government license or permit. (p. 125).

Tourism is a relatively bright spot because the Black Sea beaches continue to attract visitors; it was also one of the first sectors to experience privatization, with mixed results.

The Red Riviera is not a depressing book, even if it has been necessary to count the costs of a transition that many observers now believe was inevitable. It is basically an ethnography for our times, times when systems are put to the test and many people live in the midst of uncertainty. This does not only happen in former socialist states.

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