

***Lost in Transition. Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism* by Kristen Ghodsee. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011. vi, 206 pp. Preface. Appendix. Further Reading. Paper.**

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“Lost in Transition” is an enchanting, deeply intimate and experimental ethnographic narrative revealing life in postsocialist Bulgaria in which the author Kristen Ghodsee challenges us to question assumptions about the inherent superiority of democracy. What is particularly intriguing about this book is that it is written also as a sort a scholar’s coming-of-age story, lining up in a longer legacy of self-reflective ethnographies, such as Paul Rabinow’s “Reflections on the Fieldwork in Morocco,” or the more recent work of anthropologist John Borneman and João Biehl. This is an ethnographic narrative deeply cognizant of its writing self and one that inspects “research” as inconveniently situated at the juncture of living and knowing. It is this quality that also makes the book attractive to various audiences by offering intimate experiences of socialism and postsocialism, as well as broadened understanding of modern Europe and the world that is complexly entangled with the legacies of the Cold War.

The volume consists of 15 short stories, four of which are marked as ethnographic fiction. A short introduction and an afterword frame the author’s own interpretation of this ethnographic material. It opens with a chapter set in the United States in the mid-1980s, with the author herself shown to inhabit the Cold War on the “other side”. This intertwining of the author’s own personal and intellectual biography with the motivations and goals of the ethnography sets the tone for the entire book. Subsequently the stories follow a 20-year chronology, which offers a nuanced and rich picture of the changing life that marked this turbulent period in the history of Bulgaria. If there is one single overarching theme that nevertheless binds the different parts of the book then this is nostalgia.

We sympathize with the trepidations of young Muslim women living in some of the poorest regions in Bulgaria who travel to the big cities in pursuit of work and more reputable life, only to be disappointed as they are pushed towards the grey zones of the new undocumented sex economy. We also come to empathize with other working people trying their luck in the newly structured private sector, who feel helpless in the new system. Along appear also some more privileged experiences of Western-educated returned emigrants grasping to understand the new realities in their country, for whom it seems life falls in the cracks of the old and the new. These kinds of situations not only draw a sharp contrast in the minds of Bulgarians between the past and the present, enticing strong nostalgia, but also in the minds of the Western readers, for whom the book is typically meant, and who have been inclined to see communism as the ultimate repressive state.

In variety of ways these postsocialist subjects then are sympathetically reminiscent of their near past during socialism, when camaraderie, predictability and security made for an

overall more certain and fulfilling existence. What the stories convey is not a naïve view, however, that things went without discrimination and coercion during communism, but shows instead how the mundane moments of everyday living under socialism, which make the bulk of people's experiences, are remembered favorably by those who lived through those times.

One of the most rewarding goals of the book is revisiting the past from outside of the themes of totalitarianism and repression. On the other hand, one might want to acknowledge the somewhat conspicuous lack of stories that are critical of the past (with the exception of one in Ch 3), as a weak point. This "omission" might warrant questions of method and whether the so-called "representative sample" of the book has not been skewed in a direction that produced stories overall more sympathetic of the past. With an ethnographic experiment such as "Lost in Transition" is there not a danger, for instance, to produce, quite intentionally, yet another homogenous stereotype (this time of postsocialism as a space of communist nostalgia) for a society, otherwise multivariate and dynamic?

In the author's defense, Kristen Ghodsee explores responses from various social actors, whose backgrounds reflect a range of social statuses in the new Bulgaria and who still return similar sentiments. On average, these are the generations that lived through the most brutal first decades of the communist regime in the 50s and 60s. The author is quite explicit in her interpretation that nostalgic longing conveys not necessarily a desire for a return to the past, but rather a grasp for a present that people wish could be different. Nostalgia then is a kind of a coping tool to deal with difficult times. As a fellow scholar of Eastern Europe and Bulgaria, I wonder whether she is not also responding here to the effects of the "anti-communist industry" that had a strong say in the Bulgarian transition as well. The image of communism as a "repressive authoritarianism" has also served a crucial role in the public discourses in Eastern Europe in the last two decades to legitimize political and economic measures that had a painful effect on society, but nevertheless were seen as justifiable in the name of the desired "transition to democracy and capitalism". An entire new industry of media institutions, think-tanks and NGOs were engaged in upholding this image at the top of the political discourse as a way of assuring the success of the capitalist reforms (Dostena Lavergne, 2010. "The Experts of the Transition: the Bulgarian Think-Thanks and the Global Networks of Influence" *Iztok-Zapad [In Bulgarian]*).

I read Ghodsee's book then as a subtle invitation to renegotiate the terms of social life post-1989. In this sense, it even strikes me, as somewhat unfair to absolve nostalgia simply as an emotional coping tool, which seems to be Ghodsee's main rendition of the term (For an intriguing exploration of the various inflections of nostalgia see: Maria Todorova, 2010. "From Utopia to Propaganda and Back". From: *Post-communist Nostalgia*, Todorova, Maria and Gille, Zsuzsa (Eds.) New York: Berghahn). Could it be that nostalgia – as a critical comparison between the past and the present – is in fact a very logical engagement with the realities of postsocialism, one that questions quite directly not only the foundations of capitalism, but also points to the limits of resistance available to us? Ghodsee seems to imply this about her subjects, yet the message comes more from her authoritative voice than the stories she has selected.

Nostalgia, I hope, conveys in itself also the yearning for more genuine political alternatives and indicates the potential for alternative political hopes and subjectivities that run counter to the visions of elites, unable to translate their visions of “democratic transitions” into solidarities that resemble at least the once more secure pasts of socialism (Peter Locke, 2010. “Deleuze and Anthropology of Becoming” with Joao Biehl. In: *Current Anthropology*, Vol 51 No3 pp. 317-351). I read then “Lost in Transition” also as an invitation to revisit that notion of “the 3rd way” between socialism and capitalism, the idea with which Eastern Europeans began their exploration of capitalism in the 1990s to begin with (Don Kalb, 2010. “My multiple, manifold, and endlessly contested 1989s” In: *Focaal, European Journal of Anthropology*, 58. Pp 99-123).