

***Post-Communist Nostalgia*. Ed. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York: Berghahn, 2010. viii, 299 pp. Notes. References. Index. Figures. \$80.00, hard bound.**

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This volume examines nostalgic remembrance of socialism in the contemporary European East. Comprised of an introduction, fifteen research essays, and a concluding “postscript” contributed by an interdisciplinary team of scholars hailing from the social sciences and humanities, the collection explores different manifestations of nostalgia for the socialist past in popular discourse, visual imagery, and musical performance. In the words of Maria Todorova, one of the editors of the book, the objective is “to deliberate whether we can apply some precision to the concept [of nostalgia]” (p. 1). In an attempt to come to grips with this notoriously elusive concept and to make it more “precise” by grounding it in the minutiae of daily social life, the writers ask who is waxing nostalgic for the era of Communist rule, how nostalgia is externalized and displayed, and why it is so prevalent at the current moment of neoliberal “modernization” in Eastern Europe.

Using rich data that interweave historical and biographical remembrance of socialism, the contributors investigate ways in which nostalgia becomes implicated in articulations of personhood and socio-moral worth, and reflect on how it intersects with gendered, national, and ethnic subjectivities (Burić, Petrović, Pilbrow, Scarboro, among others). They also inquire into how the “free” market commodifies nostalgic recall by packaging it as a desirable product sold for profit (Creed, Berdahl, Nadkarni). Several essays examine how nostalgic and oftentimes ironic yearnings for “good” socialism—whether articulated by Bulgarian villagers, German *Ossis*, or Romanian singers—is channeled into popular discourses that critique unsettling socio-economic and cultural transformations in post- 1989 Eastern Europe (Creed, Berdahl, Georgescu).

The contributors make several important arguments concerning nostalgia and social memory in general. For Dominic Boyer, the pervasiveness of nostalgic recall in postsocialist settings, which he aptly calls “nostomania”, is a decidedly political and postimperial project (neoimperial perhaps would be more accurate): “the increasingly manic need in Western Europe to fix Eastern Europe in the past” (p. 23). He also contends that nostalgic recollection of socialism is not about a desire to bring it back as a Marxist-Leninist political order, but as a yearning to recuperate socialism, usually in an idealized fashion, as a life once lived, or to imagine how that life might have been lived. Other writers push this argument further suggesting, more abstractly, that nostalgia should be conceptualized *à la* Lacan as a longing for longing, or a desire for desire (Nadkarni, p. 197). Still others maintain that nostalgia is possible today because the socialist past it activates and engages is now irretrievable, and as such can never be made part of the present again. Otherwise put, it is now “safe” to remember socialism, because it has become (relatively) distant history. To quote Creed, “now that no one expects or fears a return to socialism nostalgia is apposite” (p. 37; cf. Murav). This, to be sure, is a valuable insight, but what are we to make of phenomena such as so-called Mao nostalgia in contemporary China where socialism is not at all past? Nostalgic reminiscences of the 1950s revolution in today’s socialist Cuba also come to mind here. Might we think of such memories as nostalgia for the present?

In her opening piece, Todorova, paraphrasing Marx, writes: “A specter is haunting the world of academia: the study of post-Communist nostalgia” (p. 1). While reading the volume, I was wondering to what extent we as memory researchers were responsible for invoking and animating this specter. Could it be that we sometimes see it where it does not exist? Are we not over-nostalgifying, so to speak, memories of socialism? No one can dispute that in the present-day European East nostalgia looms large in the memorial consciousness of many. But not all postsocialist memory is nostalgic. Not all events and experiences are remembered because social actors desire to reconnect with them. Undesirable and “unmemorable” pasts are also integral to the commemoration of socialism. Nostalgia does not colour every reminiscence and is not everywhere. Besides, it is not only socialism that East Europeans remember today. Missing for me in this collection is a more focused and rigorous discussion of what can be termed non- and counter-nostalgic recall which is integral to the remarkably heteroglossaic and “busy” mnemoscape of postsocialism.

The potential conceptual trouble with nostalgia is that it can easily gloss over complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of memorial practices in social life. In other words, nostalgia runs the risk of totalizing and simplifying, of essentializing and reifying. It may help us build neat models of “positive” memory—think, for example, of Svetlana Boym’s oft-cited dualism of reflective vs. restorative nostalgia (*The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001)—but it can also leave us with an incomplete and *imprecise* picture of memorial practices that we strive to understand and explain. I note that several contributors to the volume, refreshingly, distance themselves from the dominant nostalgia paradigm, proposing instead to theorize recall of the socialist past outside of the rather cumbersome “nostalgia box” (Nadkarni, Pilbrow, Buchanan; cf. Gille, p. 287).

While the volume is ambitious in its interdisciplinary reach, its geography could be expanded beyond Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, ex-Yugoslavia and the now defunct GDR, or beyond what is sometimes known in the literature as “East Central Europe”. I would like to see a more robust representation of the former Soviet Union, where there is a great deal of socialism to remember, nostalgically and otherwise. Only one contribution (Murav) takes the ex-USSR, notably the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan, as its geographical reference point. I think it is important that our maps of nostalgia include a multiplicity of postsocialist (and still socialist, such as China and Cuba) regions. More inclusive and expansive mapping will allow us not merely to document the diversity of nostalgic reminiscence, but also to undertake a more comparative investigation of it.

Overall, this an impressive set of essays that makes a weighty contribution to the study of nostalgia in the European East after socialism. It adds significantly to the burgeoning literature on the infinitely complex and fascinating subject of social remembrance (see also *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, Sarkisova, O. and Apor, P., eds. Budapest: CEU Press, 2008, 416 p.). Scholars and students interested in how memory works (and fails) will find much to appreciate in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*.