A decade and a half after the unraveling of the Eastern Bloc, the need for evaluating the socialist past had seemed to surface with increasing frequency and urgency. Now that the initial euphoria of 'democratization' and 'market reform' has passed, the ruthless logic of capitalism has consolidated its grip and has become an ambivalent everyday reality for the staunch former builders of communism. Additionally, for many 'survivors' of the post-socialist 'transition,' the political decisions and military operations that ensued after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the U.S. have revealed glimpses of the imperialist face behind the Western thrust for democracy. This particular historical juncture, along with a fifteen-year temporal distance since the socialist period, has provided the stimulus for the evaluation of the past by postsocialist subjects and Western academic scholars alike. This revision of the chronologies and paradigms in thinking about socialism has manifested itself in the recent 2004 SOYUZ (the Post-Communist Cultural Studies Interest Group of the American Anthropological Association) conference titled "Memory and the Present." It has also prompted a roundtable discussion consisting of prominent scholars of postsocialism at the 2004 AAASS meeting addressing the question: "Remembering Communism: How and Why We Should Think About the Recent Past". Following this impetus, my paper will identify the general contours of the literature on the politics of remembering, as well as suggesting areas for further exploration.

The intention here is to view the production of academic knowledge about the socialist past against the background of broader historical and political processes, specifically in the aftermath of the Cold War. With regard to historicity, the anthropological embeddedness of politics of temporality, particularly the denial of co-temporaneity of people studied in the ethnographic present, has been brought to attention by Johannes Fabian (Fabian 1983; Fabian 1991). More generally, the need for awareness of the involvement of anthropological knowledge in the broader politics of representation has been articulated poignantly by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Gupta 1997). In a similar vein, the impact of Cold War politics on the nature of inquiry in American-based scholarship at large has also begun to be discussed (Price 2004; Schrecker 2004). With the same sensibility to the broader historical context and the politics of representation, I explore recent discussions of remembering the socialist past. I use this paper as an occasion for addressing the epistemological and ethical underpinnings of the knowledge produced about the socialist past and about "actually lived" socialism/communism, more generally. What kinds of questions have been used to frame and guide these inquiries into the memories of socialism/post-socialism? What are the possible implications for the societies thus represented?

To situate the discussions about remembering socialism and the implications of these discussions within broader historical and political processes, I adopt, for the purposes of this paper, a distinction between memory as representation and memory as practice (remembering).1 On the one hand, I examine how the texts discuss the practices of memory/remembrance in the socialist and post-socialist contexts. On the other hand, I am interested in memories of socialism as representations of socialism more generally. While for historians it is still too early to regard socialism as one single period, for many people - the differences in generations notwithstanding - the socialist past is left behind and has, therefore, morphed into one temporal whole, especially in contrast to the present conditions of 'wild capitalism'.2,3 In my examination of the memory of socialism as an interested representation, I concentrate on the way socialism becomes discursively produced/represented on a meta-level. My rationale for such a framing is to situate the production of knowledge about "actually lived socialism" within broader historical and political contexts and practices. Specifically, I investigate how these discussions of memories of socialism figure into the politics of representation of socialism more generally, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War.

The texts I explore involve a diverse range of themes and regions but are all broadly related to memories of the socialist past.4 First, the geographical scope spans countries as different as Mongolia, Russia, and the former GDR. Of course, such an expansive range could appear problematic in light of continuing discussions regarding the analytic rigor of the category of post-socialism.
Humphrey 2002a; Kandiyoti 2002; Litzinger 2002; Verder 1991). Can memories of socialism in Cuba be analyzed along those in China or Tajikistan? While the conceptual value of such a category could be certainly debated at length, I approach ‘post-socialism’ as used popularly, as a collective term of reference that has arisen in scholarship to indicate the countries that were previously of a socialist order, the opposite of capitalism. In other words, all the above-mentioned different regions coalesce under the category of socialism/post-socialism from the perspective of the Western liberal democratic “eye”.

Second, the material to be examined encompasses a range of theoretical frameworks, which I group under three rubrics: counter-memory, forgetting (negative remembering) and nostalgia. My starting point consists of the discussions of how memory functioned during the socialist period. These are concerned predominantly with how opposition to the totalitarian socialist state was lodged in various unofficial memories. In other words, it appears that resistance took the form of memories. From these discussions of counter-memory (Foucault 1977) - remembering as a practice of opposition to hegemonic discourses - I move to the accounts that provide commentary on the political and legislative measures taken in response to “dealing” with the socialist past in a number of post-socialist societies. The socialist past emerges here as a collective burden or problem that has to be “worked through”. An alternative focus is on how the socialist past is forgotten or trivialized in post-socialist times. Subsequently, new national histories - mostly based on previously “hidden” memories - are being forged.

The socialist legacies remain either unacknowledged or quietly effaced. Finally, I consider a burgeoning category of socialism/post-socialism that the analytical discussion of memory and remembering situate themselves in relation to and draw from the theoretical framework of opposition/resistance (Arendt 1951; Conquest 1968; Kornhauser 1959; Wittfogel 1957) and, therefore, prohibiting change from below (Breslauer 1978; Burton 1984; Hill 1985; Kornhauser 1959; Medding 1981). Watson and other scholars seek to complicate and modify this view by demonstrating the spaces of resistance as embedded in various memories or hidden histories. Overall, these discussions of memory and remembering situate themselves in relation to and draw from the theoretical framework of opposition/resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990; Comaroff 1991; Mbembe 1992; Scott 1985; Scott 1990).

Counter-memory

One discernible constellation among the discussions about memory within the larger scholarship on socialist and post-socialist societies has emerged in relation to the theoretical discussions of power embodied in the totalitarian state and resistances to it. In this section, I first situate this cluster of texts in relation to the broader field of sovietology, examine its basic premises, and identify the shifts. I draw my examples from the surveyed texts then discuss the implications of these shifts for the discussion of memory as a conceptual tool.


The main premise of these discussions is the overwhelming existence of a totalitarian state. As Rubie Watson explicitly states in the opening sentence of her introduction for an edited volume dedicated to the history of “social remembering” in socialist societies: “This book is about representing the past in societies where history writing has been the prerogative of a single-party state and its agents” (Watson 1994b). The inquiry is thus set up in a way that the analytical discussion of memory and remembering is in direct relationship to the politics of the party-state.

In response to earlier characterizations of totalitarian systems as immutable and all-encompassing (Arendt 1951; Conquest 1968; Kornhauser 1959; Wittfogel 1957) and, therefore, prohibiting change from below (Breslauer 1978; Burton 1984; Hill 1985; Kornhauser 1959; Medding 1981), Watson and other scholars seek to complicate and modify this view by demonstrating the spaces of resistance as embedded in various memories or hidden histories. Overall, these discussions of memory and remembering situate themselves in relation to and draw from the theoretical framework of opposition/resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990; Comaroff 1991; Mbembe 1992; Scott 1985; Scott 1990).

Following this theoretical framework, authors describe the elaborate processes through which alternative memories are created in opposition to hegemonic discourses. The emphasis is placed on the various forms and the means through which
oppositional memories can emerge and proliferate (Jing 1996; Watson 1994a). For example, in writing about the newly independent Georgia, Stephen Jones argues that during the Soviet period the unofficial national history of Georgians was preserved through oral communication (Jones 1994). However, "the [Soviet] state's use of national songs, its patronage of a folklore 'industry' in the institutes of higher education, and its stress on family tradition and respect for elders helped create a strong resonance for orally transmitted national history." (Jones 1994: 157). In other words, oppositional memories were enabled by the very products of the Soviet nationalities policies. This "orally transmitted national history" appears as the site through which collective memory not only survives in spite of the brute force of the official history-making machine, but also becomes the source of tacit challenge to the pervasive reach of the state's control.

Another means through which memories resisted the subsumption by the official history-making apparatus is by 'personalization'. As Vera Schwarz's essay, "Strangers No More: Personal Memory in the Interstices of Public Commemoration", shows, memories privately sustained by intellectuals quietly defied the visions of the "monumental past" put forward by the Communist Party in Maoist China (Schwarz 1994). Not necessarily openly dissident, these intellectuals participated in the crafting of "evocative transcripts", statements of ambiguous nature that "seem to comply with official dogma while challenging it at the same time" (Schwarz 1994:47).

Similarly, Irina Paperno analyzes the importance of the personal memoirs of Soviet intellectuals that served as testimonials to the atrocities of the Soviet totalitarianism (Paperno 2002). Treating these diverse texts as one corpus with common patterns, Paperno illustrates that what comes through is a sense of self derived from the experience of fear, repression, and deprivation imposed by the state; a self worthy to be submitted as historical material, presented, depending on temperament and literal skill, as a literal monument or a document for the archive (609-610).

She sees the intimate personal experiences being written about in anticipation of the trial of history - a tribunal - and this record is addressed to future generations.

A number of texts evaluate the significance of intellectuals in this project of creating resistance to the totalitarian state (Esbenshade 1995; Paperno 2002; Schwarz 1994; Watson 1994a). For instance, Richard Esbenshade underlines the critical role of intellectuals in the articulation of oppositional memories. In light of the manipulation of official history by the party-state, intellectuals like the Czech dissident writer Milan Kundera - through articulating personal experiences in writing - became enunciators and keepers of oppositional memories. Within what Esbenshade refers to as "the Kundera paradigm", memory becomes a site of resistance in opposition to the official party version of history (75).

Within this cluster of texts, memories during socialism appear as practices of resistance to hegemonic discourses of the socialist state. It might appear that the only kind of memory that existed in socialism was secret, hidden, and oppositional. While the state was indeed often repressive and totalitarian, it would be more appropriate to discuss the opposition to hegemonic discourses residing in memories rather than to imply that all memories were always already oppositional in themselves. Such a framing would enable the avoidance of binaries (as criticized by scholars described in the next section). Otherwise, these discussions could easily be viewed as the flip-side of Soviet cultural production whereby only positive memories in relation to the Soviet state were allowed.

This conceptualization of memories of socialism as oppositional has been interrogated and contested by other scholars (Esbenshade 1995; Ten Dyke 2000). The oppositional memories so privileged by the above-discussed authors are shown to be, in fact, just as complicit in the production and manipulation of history as the state (Esbenshade 1995). Furthermore, the entire way of sorting and categorizing memories into 'dominant' and 'oppositional' is criticized as masking "the ambiguity and fluidity of memory or of the ways memory and history can be powerful resources for individuals and groups who must continuously revise their identities as well as their social, political, and moral stances in changing and sometimes volatile circumstances" (Ten Dyke 2000).

These texts thus argue against the binary opposition between "oppositional" memories and "official" histories, and instead pave the way for the possibility of multiple - and perhaps ambivalently connected - memories and histories.

More broadly, the limitations of the interpretative framework of 'resistance' in the Soviet context has been discussed by Alexei Yurchak (Yurchak 1997). His contention is that within this scheme, it is difficult to explain adequately the surprise and disbelief that many people in the Soviet Union experienced when it suddenly collapsed. It is indeed the case that many power structures clout...
themselves with the air of immutability and permanence, and hence shock when these disintegrate like a house of cards. Yet, this alone cannot explain the disbelief (and perhaps even the sense of loss) that people felt when the Soviet Union became dismantled into fifteen countries. How to fit this belief in immutability of a seemingly eternal regime into the conceptualization of daily lives and subjectivities of post-socialist subjects as ‘resistance’ is a theoretical conundrum, to which Yurchak provides an answer to in the article.

These scholarly discussions of memory during the socialist period approach it primarily as practice rather than as representation. The content of the memory is only significant insofar as it explains the positionality of this particular memory in relation to the totalitarian state. Memory appears as some kind of an essence - an embodied resistance - a form of opposition to the state or other hegemonic discourses. These analyses present memory as a form of resistance and, perhaps, as an expression of deep “humanity” and morality against a disembodied totalitarian state.

Forgetting

In contrast to conceptualization of memories as moral and political practices of remembering and, therefore, resistance as described above, scholars of post-socialism now observe “a trend away from the heroization of the memory of socialist wrongs (memory as resistance) toward forgetting and denial of the recent past” (Esbenshade 1995; Jones 1994). This is somewhat ironic because it had been precisely such erasure and manipulation of memories that drew heavy criticism against the socialist state too. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Milan Kundera narrates how the unfortunate official Vladimir Clementis is obliterated not only physically but also from a photograph that had captured him earlier with Klement Gottwald, the leader of Czech Communist Party (Kundera 1999). Indeed, as David King’s project suggests, such airbrushing of people by official history makers was a regular practice in the Soviet Union (King 1997). Vera Schwarz refers to these as the technologies of amnesia that the state used in China to manipulate memory to suit its agenda (Schwarz 1994).

The concept of amnesia had also been used in reference to the enforced forgetting of national culture and language among various non-Russian minorities induced by the Soviet policy of russification - a powerful critique of totalitarianism. One of the most prominent evocations of such amnesia belongs to the pen of Chingiz Aitmatov, a Kyrgyz Soviet writer, who poignantly describes in his novel, The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years, the utter loss of the sense of belonging and roots (Clark 1984). Aitmatov coins the term mankurt to describe people whose memory, and, therefore, sense of self, become erased as they undergo torture.

While such evocations of amnesia present the erasure of memory as something enforced, induced, or violent, post-socialist discussions of memory-politics register forgetting as a voluntary and, furthermore, therapeutic, necessary, instrumental process. In most cases, such forgetting is linked with the nationalist agendas that have overtaken the political landscape in several post-socialist societies. For instance, Esbenshade describes the situation in Hungary as follows:

Post-1989 nationalist leaders needed most of all to offer the nation a direct route out of the swamp of the past forty years. In Hungary, this was attempted by harking back to national history before 19 March 1944 (when German forces invaded Hungary). The intervening years became the possibility of German and then Soviet occupiers and hence not part of the national story (78-79).

Similarly, in relation to the nationalist project of the revision of history with the end of the Soviet Union, Jones notes that the socialist past has been reduced and downplayed in Georgia (Jones 1994). In his words, “one can already detect a creeping amnesia about the Soviet period as people attempt to create a more national, rather than Soviet, identity for themselves” (Jones 1994:161). Overall, such strategic use of forgetting has been indicated by various scholars to be an intrinsic element of any nation-building process (Anderson 1983; Cohen 1994; Hobsbawm 1972; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Renan 1996). As the memories of the old regime fade into oblivion, new shiny histories are forged that fit the current political configurations. Forgetting here appears as an integral and instrumental, and even therapeutic accompaniment of any historical progress towards “freedom”. Esbenshade, following Nietzsche, views such a case of social amnesia as a productive possibility, and forgetting as not “something necessarily false and deceptive”, but “remembering otherwise” (87).

Discussions of memory as forgetting, while offering very incisive insights into the multiple ways in which remembering the socialist past occurs, nevertheless, avoid any engagement with the politics of the representation of socialism. Memory here is again predominantly viewed as a practice, a practice of forgetting, omitting, denying, or transcending the past. The memory of socialism becomes embroiled in
the politics of the present (Koselleck 1985). The essence, if such a thing ever existed, of the socialist past once again escapes and elides our understanding.

Yet, despite the careful and systematic elimination and purging of the socialist past from the new and grand national narratives, the material reality of state socialism perseveres and persists as part of everyday lives in many “post-socialist” societies (Collier 2001; Yurchak 2003; Yurchak 2005). As discussed in the next section, a number of scholars have approached this persistence through the framework of nostalgia. 

Nostalgia

Another dominant analytical framework in which remembering socialism becomes discussed is increasingly often nostalgia. In fact, Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko (2004:2) suggest that nostalgia seems to have become “a central theme for analyzing how post-socialist societies relate to the recent past.” It is indeed difficult not to notice the proliferation of writing – journalistic and academic - on the “paradoxical” rise of nostalgia for the “good old socialist times” in the former Eastern bloc countries (Bach 2002; Barmé 1999; Berdahl 1999a; Berdahl 1999b; Boym 2001; Esbenshade 1995; Fritzsche 2002; Ivy 1995; Lee 2000; Nadkarni 2004; Rofel 1999). While much of the journalistic coverage paints nostalgics as “deluded pathetic subjects,” the anthropological accounts seek to counter these popular perceptions and to explain the underlying power dynamics and conditions that lead to the emergence of such sentiments.

Overall, the discussions of nostalgia for socialism provide a detailed and rich understanding of the ways in which post-socialist subjects remember and relate to the past. For the purpose of this paper, I distinguish three themes characteristic of the surveyed accounts of nostalgia through which I then summarize what these analyses reflect about the memories of socialism. First, consumption is identified as one of the primary sites in which nostalgia for socialism manifests itself. Second, nostalgic practices are discussed in direct relation to present conditions, be it the alienating realities of capitalism or the hegemonic narratives of Germanness by Western Germans. Third, these discussions of nostalgia project the past - the object of sentimental longing - as “imaginary,” and therefore less substantial.

A number of discussions of nostalgia locate it within the practices and objects of consumption (Bach 2002; Berdahl 1999a; Nadkarni 2004; Veenis 1999). In fact, it seems that it is the emergence of a “nostalgia industry” (Berdahl 1999a) that seems to have prompted these analyses. For instance, Bach’s (2002) account of Ostalgie applies the lens of nostalgia to explain the recent explosion of interest in GDR products. Berdahl (1999a) also draws her evidence of nostalgia for the GDR from the increasingly “routinized cultural practices throughout eastern Germany” that circulate around the production and consumption of Ostprodukte.

Drawing on Marilyn Ivy’s (1995) text, Bach differentiates between modernist nostalgia and the nostalgia of style. He understands modernist nostalgia as “a longing for the fantasies and desires that were once possible in the past” and the nostalgia of style as a desire for objects that are valued “precisely for [their] lack of emotional attachment to a specific past” (547). These types of nostalgic consumption practices are discussed and analyzed in greater depth by Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004). In reference to modernist nostalgia, they distinguish between the longing for material culture and the habitus of socialism, which are nonetheless united by their expression of cultural belonging (2004:10). In contrast, the nostalgia of style appears to speak “the international language of political kitsch” (2004:10).

Ironically enough, nostalgia for socialism thus becomes framed through quintessentially capitalist terms of a consumer society. As several authors themselves point out, it is ironic that many of the GDR products are produced and marketed as such by West German companies (Bach 2002; Berdahl 1999a). What does such commodification of the socialist past, of the socialist ideals, entail for post-socialist subjects? What does it do to the representation of socialism by these texts? What happens when nostalgia for socialism is seen through the lens of consumption? That socialism is long and irreversibly gone while the traces remain corrupted by the capitalist logic? By focusing on objects of consumption, what kinds of displacements take place?

In their discussions, scholars of post-socialism employ the characterizations of nostalgia as tightly embroiled in the politics of the present (Bach 2002; Barmé 1999; Berdahl 1999a; Berdahl 1999b; Boym 2001; Esbenshade 1995; Fritzsche 2002; Ivy 1995; Lee 2000; Nadkarni 2004; Rofel 1999). Daphne Berdahl approaches Ostalgie (nostalgia for the East) as the site of a power struggle between hegemonic and oppositional memories whereby Easterners assert (produce) their identification as Ossis through the consumption of Ostprodukte. Their resistance appears to be in specific to “official master narratives of a united Germany” that privilege
the Western view of Germanness (Berdahl 1999:205). Overall, Berdahl seeks to reverse the general mode of embarrassment regarding the stubborn East Germans who continue to long for the GDR.

Bach, too, argues that through the nostalgic consumption of Ostprodukte, East Germans participate in the politics of identity by producing their distinct identities vis-à-vis West Germans. In his words, “consumption as production represents a strategy for easterners to not be speechless in a discursive field of cultural production that is dominated by the West” (554).

Lisa Rofel aptly describes how nostalgia arises in the interstices of the rapidly marketizing China. She also notes the existence of different power-positions in relation to socialist nostalgia (Rofel 1999). On the one hand, there is hegemonic nostalgia, which Rofel approaches as a way of legitimizing and cementing the contemporary dynamics of domination. Renato Rosaldo (1989) has described this as “imperialist nostalgia”. On the other hand, Rofel points towards the dissenting nostalgias of the generations of women workers marginalized by the rapidly capitalizing state which disrupt and undermine the hegemonic discourse. In Rofel’s words, “their nostalgia moves like a sword that cuts more than one way. It serves as a stroke of counter-memory to the post-Mao transformations of categories of gender and class” (148). Thus, the nostalgic remembering of the socialist past emerges as a practice of resistance amidst the politics of the present.

While these discussions provide very perceptive interpretations of nostalgic practices, they also regard the emergence and explosion of nostalgic practices in post-socialist societies as a self-evident and natural development. They take it as an already present phenomenon and provide various explanations and interpretations of it. Bach (2002) examines forms of nostalgic practices as already existing without further probing into the principal causes of the longing for the GDR past. Berdahl explains the explosion of Ostalgie as “symbolic resistance” to the hegemony of the new order. In other words, she connects nostalgia for the East with the practices of recuperation and recovery (201). According to Berdahl, East Germans began to revive some of their ‘socialist’ ways of living in order to assert their own identities against West Germans. And yet, like Bach (2002), Berdahl fails to question the use of nostalgia as a framework for remembering the socialist past. Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004), in their cross-cultural comparison of nostalgic practices, do the same. Per Natalia Roudakova’s suggestion, it is perhaps the nostalgia of anthropologists for the ideals embodied in the socialist order of things that becomes the lens for analyzing these processes (personal communication).

Thus, these accounts approach nostalgia as a self-evident, already present phenomenon without any reflection upon the mechanics of the production of such representation. There is little consideration and acknowledgement of nostalgia as a discursive strategy that represents memories of the socialist past in a particular – depoliticized - way. Within such framing, the actual experiences of the socialist past become irrelevant except as filler for the nostalgic sentiment. Such a representation of the socialist period trivializes the past and consequently turns the emotions and reactions of people to lived socio-political realities into silly inadequacies and paradoxes. Therefore, there should be some deliberation upon the fact that nostalgia is not only a practice of memory that functions on its own, but also a representational strategy through which academics and others frame discussions about the memories of socialism (Rofel 1999).

Altogether, the theoretical lens of nostalgia, through which the memories of socialism become viewed and analyzed, considers the recent rise of remembering the socialist past as a practice, perhaps as a manifestation of identity politics in the present. What socialism was about is less relevant and overall inconsequential. For instance, both Bach (2002) and Nadkarni & Shevchenko (2004) frame the nostalgia for socialism less as the longing for the GDR past and more as the longing for that unfulfilled yearning for Western goods that East Germans entertained two decades earlier (Fehérváry 2002; Veenis 1999). In Bach’s phrasing, “GDR longing was premised on an unattainable object of desire, the ‘fully developed Self’ promised by both socialism and western materialism” (2002:547). The object of nostalgic remembering in post-socialist societies is less the experience of the socialist everyday life, but, rather, the past longing for the unattainable fulfillment indexed by Western consumer culture. Similarly, Nadkarni and Shevchenko state that “What is at stake in each case [of nostalgia] is not the film or pastrý, nor even the historical period they signify, but rather the individual’s memory of past desire, and the awareness of the impossibility of reliving this desire again” (2004:3-4). Thus, the experience of the socialist past that this nostalgia is based upon becomes removed several-fold through the representation of these theorists. In fact, such mythologization of the past as intrinsic to the structure of nostalgia is pointed out by a number of
scholars (Ivy 1995; Lowenthal 1989; Stewart 1988; Stewart 1993). Thus, the way that the framework of nostalgia relates to the socialist past is that it privileges the nature of the sentiment itself, while the actual object of this remembering – socialism – becomes less relevant and trivialized.

Conclusion

To summarize, this paper overviewed the discussions of memory-work during the socialist period, as well as the increasing instances of remembering socialism since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The accounts that engage with memory as sites of opposition to the totalitarian regimes contribute to the meta-representation of “actually-lived socialism” as a “cold dark” homogenous space in which only covert and limited resistance to the repressive socialist state was possible. Moreover, this view fosters a top-down view of socialist societies that privileges the repressive state and its elites. The heterogeneity of the lived experiences of socialism becomes elided.

The discussions of forgetting - at times paradoxical and ironic - that have taken place in the last decade since the dismantling of the Eastern bloc point towards yet another representative strategy of dealing with the memories of “actually lived socialism.” While these accounts register a productive mode of engagement with the past, that of negative remembering, their contribution to the meta-representation of socialism is ambiguous. The socialist period looms here as something traumatic that needs to be forgotten, therapeutically, for the sake of the sanity of a new nation. Moreover, the context of capitalism becomes less visible than it should be.

Accounts of nostalgia, on the other hand, reflect the positive mode of remembering whereby “actually lived socialism” becomes the object of longing and referencing among post-socialist subjects. Yet, a closer look at the interpretive framework of nostalgia makes it clear that the “living experiences of socialism” are rendered inconsequential, insubstantial and even irrecoverable, and are instead displaced with imaginary past that never existed. Thus, within the conceptual apparatus of nostalgia, the positive sentiments towards “actually lived socialism” come to be explained in the same way as one’s view of a mirage or utopia.

Overall, the extent to which all these discussions incorporate glimpses of how actual people themselves perceived and inhabited socialism goes only so far in demonstrating how they are/were engaged in opposition, denial, nostalgia or something else. Altogether, it seems that most accounts portray socialism as something that was unnatural, inauthentic, imposed. Few discussions seek to address it as a lived experience or as a matter of the political ideals of that time. What did socialism feel like, taste like, smell like (Seremetakis 1994)? What was the sociality of socialism? What was the everyday and the mundane like? How did it feel not worrying about losing your job, not spending twelve hours a day in a cubicle office in front of a computer screen, not being assaulted with choosing from twenty brands of shampoo in a supermarket? How did it feel to have assurance and predictability of a guaranteed job placement after college or free medical care? Such explorations may provide an alternative and effectual way of confronting and de-naturalizing the all-overriding hegemonic discourses of encroaching consumer capitalism.

The prevalence of such an emphasis on remembering socialism as practice might reflect the traditional attention of anthropology toward practices. However, we should not neglect the content of these memories of socialism, given the politics of representation involved. There is a certain degree of epistemological violence that takes place with the lack of attention to memories as representations of socialism because that muts the validity of people’s own versions of “what socialism was about” and instead privileges the institutional or “official” view. Lack of attention to unruly memories of socialism as representations often leads to such effects as the erasure, suppression, and depoliticization of memories of people who have experienced socialism otherwise –experiences which might not necessarily fit into the narratives of Western triumphalism in respect to the Cold War (Buck-Morss 2000).

Note

1 I do not follow through the distinction between individual and collective memory as it is irrelevant for my analytical purpose here. However, there is a large number of discussions on this subject. See, Connerton (1989); Halbwachs 1980, Hosking 1989, Le Goff 1992, Rappaport 1990. Furthermore, Berdahl and Ten Dyke question the binary between individual and collective memories altogether (Berdahl 1999; Ten Dyke 2000)

2 Serguei Oushakine writes about the distinctiveness and solidity of the discursive category of “Soviet person” in contemporary Russia.
The following questions are suggestions for potential ethnographic research: What are the contexts in which the socialist past becomes invoked as such? What kind of reactions do references to the socialist past elicit? Overall, how the socialist past becomes discursively constructed amidst the multiple and volatile realities of market economy?

Regarding the use of “communist” vs. “socialist” in relation to the past, I use both interchangeably.

Natalia Roudakova brought my attention to this observation and the volume. Thank you!


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