

Book Review: Post-Communist Nostalgia

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*Although the end of the Cold War was greeted with great enthusiasm by people in the East and the West, the ensuing social and especially economic changes did not always result in the hoped-for improvements in people's lives. This led to widespread disillusionment that can be observed today all across Eastern Europe. This volume is successful in investigating the diverse meanings and expressions of nostalgia in former Communist countries, finds **Lorenzo Ferrari**.*



Post-Communist Nostalgia. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.) Berghahn Books. April 2012.

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Why do some in Central-Eastern Europe miss the Communist times? Where do such nostalgic feelings come from, and what exactly is missed? The existence of a phenomenon that can be called post-Communist nostalgia is generally accepted in [the literature](#). What is more problematic though, is the elusive character of the concept, and the normative ways in which it is sometimes employed. This volume aims at applying some precision to the concept of post-Communist nostalgia, and at discussing the peculiarity of this type of nostalgia while refraining from moralizing judgements. The essays composing the volume contribute to shed light on what is expressed through post-Communist nostalgia, and on the different means and ways through which it is expressed.



The volume is edited by [Maria Todorova](#) and [Zsuzsa Gille](#). Like both editors, almost all contributors to the volume are based in the US (mostly at the University of Illinois), with only one actually based in a former Communist country. All the essays focus on single country cases, looking at how nostalgia is expressed in different social milieus and through different means. Despite some disciplinary variety, a large portion of the essays belong to the fields of anthropology and of the cultural studies.

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Art is a powerful means through which to express nostalgic feelings, and a number of essays deal with cinema, music or literature indeed. For instance, Donna A. Buchanan shows how the evolution of musical trends in Bulgaria over the 1990s and 2000s mirrored the evolution of people's attitudes towards the Socialist and pre-Socialist past. After 1989 Socialist-time professional ensembles and musical practices had to undergo a complex reinvention, and attempted to forge "a timeless sonic history dominated by Bulgarian Slavs". However, it was more cosmopolitan music that encountered an increasing popularity. On one hand, great success was enjoyed by the so-called "Pirin songs", which recalled the pre-Socialist experience of the entire region. On the other hand, great success was enjoyed by popfolk mixing different regional traditions. As Buchanan argues, popfolk songs and videos were directly linked with debates on nostalgia and with the larger ongoing social and political processes affecting Bulgaria.

People's nostalgic feelings in post-Communist settings sometimes have a complex relationship with the official memory discourses and practices. Diana Georgescu shows this well by analysing the use and role of irony in post-Communist Romania. In particular, she traces the spreading of ironic stories, advertisements and songs concerning the former Communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu. While the remembrance of Ceausescu is seen by some observers as a worrying signal of restoration of his figure, the author argues that irony about Ceausescu concerns the present more than the past. Ceausescu's figure has gone through a process of defamiliarization and resignification, and his remembrance is quite irreverent. Irony concerning Ceausescu is used to challenge the rigidity of the official Rumanian memory discourse, and most of all to signal people's unease with the present-day political and social situation.

In her essay about Hungary, Maya Nadkarni carefully investigates other processes of resignification. She focuses in particular on the nostalgia for everyday objects of the Communist times, ranging from the soft drink *Bambi* to *alföldi papucs* (closed-toe sandals). After 1989, a number of objects started to attract significant attention and to be commodified, being seen as signs of an "elsewhere" that could not be reached. Nostalgia did not concern the past in itself, but rather people's memories of their past fantasies and of their imagined futures. Thanks to its focus on domestic, everyday objects and to its apparent refusal of politics, nostalgia "offered one of the few safe discourses available for talking about the previous era". It helped to structure challenged individual identities, but also the Hungarian collective identity, offering a tool to create distance from the Communist past and from the current experience of the West at the same time.

Despite its title, it is difficult to claim that *Post-Communist Nostalgia* investigates post-Communist nostalgia in general. The former USSR is almost completely neglected, and major countries such as Poland and the former Czechoslovakia are not covered at all. What the book does in fact is to investigate post-Communist nostalgia in the Balkans – despite the odd inclusion of East Germany in the country set considered. The Balkan focus of the book is particularly strengthened by the analyses concerning former Yugoslavia, whose peculiar experiences both before and after 1989 set it apart from the Communist satellite countries. The volume is divided in two parts, the first one focused on rupture and the second one focused on continuity. The distinction is not very clear however: as Todorova herself admits, practically all essays deal with both concepts.

Despite these outline weaknesses, overall the volume is successful in investigating the diverse meanings and expressions of nostalgia in former Communist countries. Todorova's introduction and Gille's postscript provide a very valuable framework to readers, together with Dominic Boyer's theoretical chapter. The editors wisely chose to give a forefront role to the empirical analyses based on the case studies, letting theoretical or ideological discussions in the background. Despite the prevalent use of academic anthropological and cultural studies language and concepts, the volume is accessible and will appeal to a large and diverse audience. Those interested in transitions, collective memory, cultural history, and South-Eastern Europe can find inspirational elements in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*.

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