H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, Stefan Troebst. *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014. 625 S. ISBN 978-963-386-032-8.

Reviewed by Tanja Petrović

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2015)

This voluminous book, an outcome of the long-term research project "Remembering Communism" that has spanned the last decade, is a timely addition to the burgeoning number of publications on memory of socialism Following the logic set by the volume's editors and authors, I use the terms socialism and communism interchangeably and treat them as synonyms. in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. What makes this book a unique and important contribution to the field is its authors' shared interest in concrete subjectivity of those who possess a lived experience of socialism: as stressed by one of the editors, Maria Todorova, they "took seriously the memories of people who experienced communism and showed respect to their claims of having lived a full and dignified life, in contrast to claims that all that is remaining from communism is a collection of exotic memories or that people had at best lived halfway normal lives" (p. 5). Addressing memories related to the most important fields of everyday and public life, and social structures in socialism, such as popular culture, the materiality of the everyday, childhood, schooling, labor, secret police, cultural institutions and production, artistic and academic elites, perceptions of "the system" – the authors of the 29 chapters carefully outline the relationship between individual and public memory and show the complex fabric of the construction of "cultural memory" in post-socialist Europe, particularly in two former communist states: Romania and Bulgaria.

Although the focus on these two countries may seem somewhat limited, there are several reasons that speak in favor to such geographical choice: these are two societies in which the prevalent approach to study of remembering communism is still "institutional, normative, prescriptive, accusatory, and moralizing" (p. 9). It places emphasis on "collecting evidence of abnormalities, disruptions, and, above all, injustice suffered by ordinary individuals" (p. 59); if it focusses at all on "ordinary" memories, these are "privileged" memories of elites and of particular generations, obtained from memoirs, diaries, articles from the press or oral histories (pp. 157, 234).

The comparative approach and analogical readings of discrete memories of several generations in two societies resulted in detailed accounts of a wide spectrum of "social relations and life-worlds" during communism (p. 35), which provide invaluable material for future syntheses and meta-analyses. This is, according to the volume's editors, its main ambition (p. 12). However, the volume transcends this modestly set goal: the studies also reveal the interplay between memory, history and politics of memory and history, clearly showing that experiences and memories of socialism not only shape the present in post-socialist Europe, but are also constitutive of the future; in

that sense, cultural memory of communism is also a political project. This book is a significant contribution to the broader field of memory studies, as it scrutinizes numerous ways memory works and shapes the past, the present and the future, as well as to studying the memories of socialism, in that it highlights ambiguities, paradoxes and complex processes of attachment and distancing rather than picturing the regime as rigid, solid and monolithic; it also reveals "the complexity of the period and messiness of the process of recollection" (p. 22). The complex world of socialism and the impossibility to reduce it to a single moral judgment become particularly evident in the chapters discussing secret police, security services, and surveillance techniques and their post-1989 perceptions in Bulgaria and Romania.

Bringing to the fore the ambiguous moral economies and complex social, economic, cultural and emotional relations that characterized socialism, the volume demonstrates in the best way the unproductivity of the framework in which socialism is interpreted exclusively as a totalitarian system and the failure of such interpretations "to address the sensibilities of those people who saw themselves as not belonging neatly to any category, and who refused to devaluate their life experience under communism in the name of a specific view of history" (p. 35). Being a detailed account of the memories and legacies of communism, particularly in the domains of labor, industrialization, education, culture, welfare, and healthcare, this volume shows connection between socialist Eastern Europe and the broader project of the Western modernity. Thus, it reveals that presumably firm ideological boundaries are in fact quite porous and hardly a productive category for thinking about the cultural history of the 20th century Europe.

The contributing authors are scholars from the region with different generational backgrounds and who had their own subjectivities significantly shaped by the realities, memories, or legacies of socialism. In this sense, the volume is also a self-reflective project: all the chapters are preceded by a personal introduction in which the authors explain their relationship with the studied subject. Paying extensive attention to processual aspects of memory, the volume offers concrete, nuanced, and historically grounded scholarly perspectives on the communist experience and its legacies. These individual accounts are framed by an introductory set of overview articles on the state of the art of remembering communism in Eastern Europe. Case studies on Germany, Romania, and Poland provide a ground for contextualization of the chapters that follow, making it possible for a reader to grasp the dynamics between personal memories, regimes of communication that shape collective memories and their encounters with the politics of memory.

Discussing memories and experiences of communism in Southeastern Europe and outlining their manifold relationships both with the present and the future, this volume offers a complex picture that prevents normative and hegemonic interpretations of socialism. This makes this book important, both academically and politically, for at least two major reasons. First, the volume clearly shows that remembering socialism is a way to construct a publicly legitimate alternative to the present (p. 173). This opens an extremely important horizon of possibilities for the citizens of post-socialist societies of Europe and their political subjectivities. Second, by challenging and dismantling firm dichotomies and one-sided interpretations that became canonical within the totalitarian paradigm this volume speaks against revisionist practices and the rewriting of history of antifascism in this part of Europe.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/

Citation: Tanja Petrović. Review of Todorova, Maria; Dimou, Augusta; Troebst, Stefan. ***Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe.*** H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45164