

Remembering Communism, Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe. Ed. Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, and Stefan Troebst. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014. xii, 640 pp. Appendix. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. \$80.00, hard bound.

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Two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of socialism in Europe, Jacques Rancière published *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*.¹ The book reaffirmed the early 19th century professor and philosopher Joseph Jacotot's concept of "intellectual emancipation" and "self-instruction," which opposed official educational methods—that of the master's "explication" and "guidelines." His conclusion, that equality "is neither given nor claimed" and consequently not the goal but the precondition and origin of emancipation, have become highly provocative once the transition process of post-socialist societies came into focus for humanistic analyses. As the victorious tide that sank socialism in Europe slowly receded, the more nuanced and complex analyses of both communist theory and socialist practice offered by Rancière in his "Ignorant Schoolmaster" established the work as one of the most intellectually provocative reads. Hegemonic simplifications such as the monolithic image of east European societies as historically and economically backward and rooted in the traditions of oriental political despotism lost their dominant position. Concurrently, the "totalitarian paradigm" that pictured communism as the ideological twin of fascism or Nazism, although (still) highly influential in the political sphere, was seriously shaken in academic circles as nothing more than an ideological construction.

Rancière's approach negates the premise of the lagging and, consequently, inevitably subordinate post-socialist societies and thus serves as a productive framework for analyzing the collective volume *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe*, edited by Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, and Stefan Troebst.² From the Ignorant Schoolmaster's perspective, it becomes interesting to ponder the editors' intention to create a specific forum for all who are concerned with and determined to understand the consequences and causes of the European socialist regimes' collapse and their transformation into cultural heritage. The editors' aim to provide a space for discussion for various researchers, predominantly those with the experience of living in socialism, and to combine their different analytical insights and perspectives, could be considered as a specific "emancipatory politics" in a field of memory studies.

The book represents the result of more than a decade-long project. Twenty-eight contributors (fourteen from Bulgaria, nine from Romania, three from Germany, one from Poland, and one American), have dealt with specific thematic

1. Jacques Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation) (Stanford, 1991).

2. Together with the two previous volumes edited by Maria Todorova, this one creates a compliant opus. See: Maria Todorova (ed.), *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York, 2010), and Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, eds., *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York, 2012).

circles (clusters), covering some of the most important realms of memory studies focusing on the socialist period. Part 2 of the book (Chapters 7–10), “Thinking Through Things: Popular Culture and the Everyday,” examines the dynamic changes in everyday practices during the socialist period and the variety of practices of remembering. Part 3 (Chapters 11–13), “Memories of Socialist Childhood,” focuses on the most important formative period in the life of the individuals, which combines private and public recollections and mixes individual and collective images of the past. Part 4 (Chapters 14–17), “What was Socialist Labor?,” mainly outlines the field of working-class consciousness and the creation of social empathy. Part 5 (Chapters 18–20), “The Unfading Problem of the Secret Police,” deals with the delicate topic of the functioning of the secret services. Part 5 (Chapters 21–24), “The ‘Cultural Front’ Then and Now,” questions the memories of intellectuals and their (op)position toward the socialist regimes, while Part 7 (Chapters 26–29), “Remembering Extraordinary Events and the ‘System,’” represents some of the main socialist events and their position in the post-socialist calendar. The excellent opening part of the book (Chapters 2–5), “The State of the Art of Eastern European Remembrance,” focuses on the contemporary, and along with Todorova’s “Introduction,” (Chapter 1), creates a methodological and theoretical framework in which all the individual contributions together form a coherent structure. As stated in the “Introduction” (11), the goal was “to hear the preoccupations, interests, and voices of East European academics on their own turf,” and to question the reasons for suspicion, shared by many, that the practice of certain projects turned “East European academics into data collectors and Western ones into analysts” (12). The initial intention was to create a network of researchers who would analyze from their position as participant observers both the socialist experience and the complex process of the creation of memories about that same experience.

The two main premises of the volume, generally shared by almost all of the authors, are that there was “no single idea of socialism” and “that there is no single practice of communism” (5). This is exactly the point in which lies one of the main intellectual provocations of the book. Its most vivid example is the unanimous decision to use the terms *communism* and *socialism* as synonyms, sharply distancing this historical sequence eastern Europe from the idea of a socialism that is functional in liberal democracies. During the Cold War, everyday practice merged the two terms, so that the memories of individuals and groups were produced on the consensually-adopted assurance that east European socialist societies were waiting at the entrance hall of communism. Many authors hitherto shared this approach.³ The equalization of the two terms, however, raises an important question: is the decision to analyze the process of “remembering communism” the (un)wanted and final detachment from the communist idea and ideology? In line with this, even the colloquial perception of contemporary east European societies as “post-communist” further blurs the differences between the societies of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the communist ideal of a classless society. Nevertheless, after reading this book one could argue in a completely different

3. See for example: Peter Apor and Oxana Sarkisova, *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989* (Budapest, 2008).

manner and claim that the authors' introduction of the phrase "remembering communism" and their methodological approaches has strong potential to formulate an alternative ideological concept to currently hegemonic neoliberal reality. It refers to communism as a mental category constructed through the remembering process.

The second provocation of the editors and authors comes from their interest in the relationship between individual and public memory, which is realized in a methodologically-peculiar intellectual experiment. The contributors used the prologues to their texts to present their personal memories on life in socialist societies. Being different by gender, profession, nationality, and generation, the authors included their private perspectives and in so doing problematized the unquestionable historiographical premises of objectivity and distance. They became "an embodiment of memory." Thus, the authors simultaneously, and curiously, perform the role of analysts and witnesses. This approach is widely shared by anthropologists, but is highly problematic for historians, remaining a vivid notion throughout the whole volume. As Todorova implies, this was the way "to rescue from oblivion" all those numerous positive aspects of socialism which are fading away before the revisionist images that focus only on the "oppressive side of the system" (7). This approach is not the product of the commodification of memories, or of the growing nostalgia. Rather, it could be understood as the imprint of time, of our "Era of the Witness" in which the objectivity of the document and of the historian is highly problematized.⁴

One can only regret that the project and the consequent volume did not include the experience of other southeast European socialist societies—the complex experience of multinational Yugoslavia, for example, both in the spheres of socialist self-management and non-alignment policy, and of Albania as the most isolated and self-sufficient entity. However, as Todorova points out, there is the possibility for further developments for the entire enterprise. One could be the analysis of the ways in which socialist regimes are remembered in a wider European framework. This could deconstruct a dominant but highly problematic approach that overexposes the transformation of post-socialist societies while completely neglecting the influence that the collapse of socialism had on what is traditionally called the west. Another important point is that this new methodology can recognize and emancipate the communist idea and socialist practice—including seemingly minor but in fact crucial differences between the two—as an important part of the universal history of mankind. Whether it can reestablish the Left alternative remains a daunting question related to possible new insights into the regional and global history of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, the preconditions in which this volume was created and the goals it established gave this book a special place in the rich corpus of works written on the topic of remembering the socialist experience in the eastern Europe.

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4. Anette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, 2006).