

(Yugo)nostalgia Primož Krašovec

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Nostalgia seems to be the predominant form of popular memory of the socialist past in postsocialist countries. In the countries that emerged out of socialist Yugoslavia it is called “Yugonostalgia” and is a very widespread cultural phenomenon. Practices typical of Yugonostalgics include “Balkan parties” (parties where popular music from the Yugoslav era is played and there is often a dress code requiring participants to dress in a way reminiscent of the socialist past in popular memory) and the collection of different cultural artifacts from socialist Yugoslavia (old records, clothing, foods, old car models, old-fashioned furniture and electrical appliances, posters of Yugoslav pop and sport stars, etc.).

It is not a coincidence that this form of (collective) popular memory is named after a term from the repertoire of individual psychology. The term “(Yugo)nostalgia” is very precise and telling, since (Yugo)nostalgia is a result of a process whereby collective (and thus political) memory becomes reduced to a sum of personal experiences and individual memories. Yugonostalgia is what remains after the process of depoliticization of the collective memory of socialism—it is a form of popular memory that has been washed clean of all traces of political demands for social equality, workers’ participation in the production process, and internationalism as well as for the antifascism, antiimperialism, and antichauvinism that constituted the core of the revolutionary politics of socialism.

This erasure of the memory of socialist politics was conducted by the new, postsocialist ruling classes (either reformed communists themselves, nationalists, or some sort of unholy alliance between them) in collaboration with newly emerging cultural elites, consisting of ex-dissidents, nationalist writers and poets, and revisionist historiographers during the dark age of early 1990s. In that period, the political ideology of realism came to dominate the political field and history was rewritten to reflect the momentous changes taking place in the ways politics was imagined and practiced. Since political realism—with its unprincipled acceptance of violence, exploitation, and oppression and its cynical disdain for any revolutionary, rebellious, or emancipatory form of political thought and action—is not just a form of political practice or an ideology which is different from socialism, but diametrically opposed to it, the victory of political realism could only be achieved by a complete and utter destruction of socialist politics. And not only that—even the memory of socialism had to be destroyed for the victory of realism to be complete. This task was carried out by revanchists in the field of politics and revisionists in the field of historiography.

A new form of official history was written—one of totalitarianism, dictatorships, repressed nationalistic feelings and the heroic suffering of dissidents, etc.—which corresponded to the new dominant political ideology and the needs of the new ruling classes. To be exact, realism is not really a political ideology in the strict sense of the word “political,” since, in contrast with socialist forms of politics, it invents nothing new and does not strive for emancipation. Rather,

realism is a form of antipolitics aimed at the destruction of true politics. Instead of searching for the new, realism adheres to a certain set of dogmatic formulas which it presents as historical constants. These formulas assert that the nation state is the necessary final point in the historical trajectory of a nation, that the nation is the only political agent, that violence and cruelty are an unavoidable part of both politics and economics, and that weaker states must bend their will to that of stronger states. Once this set of dogmatic formulas is successfully established and once the accusation of “unrealism” starts to function as an insult in the political field, socialism can be condemned as the most unrealistic form of politics possible, doomed to fail since it struggled against the politics that the realist set of dogmatic formulas represents.

Since the psychologization of politics is dear to realism (as it is to all reactionary ideologies), socialism is often presented as a kind of adolescence in a nation’s development, an era of hopeless naïveté and idealism which eventually had to be superseded by a mature and down-to-earth political realism. Nostalgia merely displaces this view from the field of politics into the field of culture. Since there is nothing left of the memory of the politics of socialism, the memory of socialism takes on a cultural form as a web of similar, shared experiences from childhood and youth involving rock and roll, fashion, foods, and other such matters. The culture of socialism is looked upon with sympathy; there is a nostalgic yearning for the good old times. Socialist culture is represented, in the cultural imagination of young postsocialist adults, by objects, habits, and forms of sociability harking back to a happy and innocent childhood. In this depoliticized form of popular memory, political history is reduced to personal history, the latter serving as a model for the former—just as all children lose their innocence and eventually enter the real world of adulthood, the socialist dream had to come to an end eventually and make way for political realism. The political and social transformation which marked the end of socialism is thus seen as equivalent to the psychological process of becoming mature. Therefore, nostalgia supplements and reinforces the ideology of realism, although in a more subtle way and in a different field.

Old banknotes, red star pins, posters portraying working-class heroes and other such objects can become valuable as nostalgic collectors’ items precisely when and if they no longer signify anything socialist, when and if they are no longer symbols of socialist political ideas and ideals (in other words, when and if the work of historical revisionism is completed). Certain objects, such as Marxist books or recordings (or written versions) of socialist political speeches, resist total culturization, so the collections of nostalgics do not include old books or newspapers. For example, one prominent Slovenian politician has a statue of Tito in his garden—not because of his politics, but because he was a firm leader and a known seducer, and thus a “real man,” according to the nationalist politician. The process of culturization thus transforms Tito from a political figure to a bizarre, Berlusconi-esque character. Similarly, Yugoslav popular tunes often include bits of speeches by Tito, though they are never political and deal only with youth, sports, and other such subjects. The innocence of youth as portrayed by nostalgia, is actually an absence of politics—the memory of which would corrupt the idyllic image of a joyful and pure adolescence.

This soft, friendly, sentimental nostalgia also has its dark side. It not only reduces history to a set of intimate reminiscences and recollections, it is usually accompanied by a cynical attitude toward socialist politics, which is radically excluded from the happy set of childhood memories. However, this cynicism is of a different kind than that of political realism, for which the alleged naïveté of socialism is a source of contempt. In nostalgia, the naïveté, the innocence and joy of youth (remembered as a set of intimate memories of everyday life under socialism) is starkly contrasted with socialist politics, which, in this context, is opposed to the purity of everyday sociability, popular music, culinary delights, and so on. In nostalgia, hatred for socialist politics takes the form not of realism (although political realism is a condition of its possibility), but of popular resentment toward politics as such, as something which endangers the purity of everyday life and has power over it. In nostalgia, naïveté is not shunned; nostalgia tries to protect it from the threat of politics—and especially of socialist politics, which, unlike the strict liberal distinction between the private and public spheres, demanded the total politicization of all spheres of life.

One nostalgic strategy which avoids remembering the politics of socialism, is the culturization of political events. Attention is focused on the formal properties of such events (dress, speech patterns, decorations, accompanying music) at the expense of their political content. Another strategy involves viewing politics as something ominous which corrupts the purity of everyday life in the memory of socialism. Both strategies, in the end, accomplish the same thing as realism, but in different ways and in different social realms (the former by defending the naïveté of the everyday life of the past from what is perceived as the inherent corruption which is necessarily present in any form of politics; the latter through its cynical disdain of the alleged naïveté of socialist politics): the destruction of the memory of emancipatory promises and socialist politics.

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