

Sammelrez: Memory of the Socialist Past: Nostalgia, Retro and Remains of Socialism in Czechia and Hungary

Pehe, Veronika: *Velvet Retro. Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture*. New York: Berghahn Books 2020. ISBN: 978-1-78920-628-9; 177 S.

Nadkarni, Maya: *Remains of Socialism. Memory and the Future of the Past in Postsocialist Hungary*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2020. ISBN: 9781501750175; 252 S.

Rezensiert von: Sandor Horvath, Institute of History, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Budapest

How can we understand the relationship between memory, politics, and socialist retro culture? The two books under review here outline two different types of historical analysis, introducing the concept of „remains of socialism“ (Maya Nadkarni) and a revitalized notion of „retro“ (Veronika Pehe). With their particular concepts, both aim at analyzing meanings and interpretations of media representations, political debates, physical objects, and cultural remnants of the socialist past.

Why do we need a new analytical framework and concept if the term ‘nostalgia’ (or the German pun on the word, ‘Ostalgie’) is familiar and widely used to reflect upon the memory of communism? As Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Mücke have noted, „the term ‘nostalgia’ is used to discredit the ideological and political views of the generations of witnesses.“¹ Thus, if an interpretation of the communist past contains anything other than negative elements, it is often labeled as an expression of nostalgia in public as well as academic discourses. Therefore, the proposal to move away from the normative meanings implicit in the term „nostalgia“ by the notion of „retro“, proposed by Pehe, or „remains of socialism“, introduced by Nadkarni, seems useful. As flexible terms, they promise to arrive at more subtle understandings of the ways in which the socialist era is remembered.

How do these concepts differ from the notion of nostalgia, and how do they differ from each other? Unlike nostalgia, as a normative approach often applied to Eastern Eu-

rope, they are not static. Rather, they seek to capture all kinds of expressions of memory in its dynamics and in different situations, and also to understand why and how attitudes toward the memory of the socialist past have changed over the past three decades. Drawing in part on the ideas of Alexei Yurchak and Mary Douglas², both Nadkarni and Pehe are cautious and use a language that remains flexible. For instance, Nadkarni’s notion of „remains“ also includes discursive battles over what constitutes a remnant of socialism, and she explores the various tensions and contradictions of memory while highlighting key elements of post-socialist political transformations in Hungary. Similarly, Pehe’s concept of „retro“ serves to conceptualize the memory processes by focusing on products of Czech popular culture that were designed with a commercial aim and on the „dynamic of refusing the politics of the past while ironically taking pleasure in its aesthetics“ (p. 9).

Nadkarni’s sources include museums, monuments, public demonstrations, and celebrations, as well as ethnographically derived material about everyday life, including private stories, jokes, and conversations. Pehe draws primarily on media representations of popular culture („media of cultural memory“ or „memory-making media“ – p. 19) that reached a wide audience, considering data such as book sales, box office ratings, and TV ratings. The sources in Pehe’s discussion include popular Czech literature, feature films, television series, and broadcasts offering narratives of the socialist past. While Nadkarni borrows her analytical methods partly from anthropology and memory studies, Pehe works primarily with the methodology of media studies.

According to Nadkarni, the state socialist regime was experienced as „injustice and oppression and a relatively peaceful and materially secure existence“ (p. 9). Neverthe-

¹ Miroslav Vaněk / Pavel Mücke, *Velvet Revolutions. An Oral History of Czech Society*, Oxford 2016, p. 202.

² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 2002; Alexei Yurchak, *The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot*, in: *Public Culture* 9 (1997), 2, pp. 161–188; Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton 2005.

less, twenty years after 1989/1990, the transitional moment was remembered by many as a missed opportunity rather than a new democratic beginning. The process of disappointment was closely linked to debates about the socialist past. Both books follow the chronological process of memory transformation, focusing on different themes but often reaching similar conclusions. The first chapter of Nadkarni's book examines the political debates surrounding the creation of the Statue Park Museum, a „statue ghetto“ far away from the downtown area of Budapest, which came into being with the removal of public monuments symbolizing the socialist era at the beginning of the 1990s. Pehe also devotes the first chapters to the early 1990s, exploring the „black and white“ perception of the socialist past and depictions and narratives of Czech anticommunism, in which the communists and dissidents perform as the main actors of the socialist era and were seen as embodiments of „good or evil.“ Both chapters arrive at roughly the same, ironic conclusion, according to which the first debates concerning the memory of socialism created more problems than they sought to solve.

Although the two books explore different national cases and use different methodologies, they can be read fruitfully as a dialogue. Through analyses of various films and novels, the second chapter of Pehe's book explores how and why cultural representations of socialism began to employ the genre conventions of comedy in the 1990s. An important comparative observation is that this process took place to a lesser extent in Slovakia, where comedy had less of a historical tradition than in the Czech Republic. In parallel, Nadkarni consistently applies István Rév's observation that „the normal public rituals of Hungarian history are [...] not victory parades but funerals and reburials.“³ Accordingly, in her second chapter, Nadkarni examines how competing parties, politicians, and activists turned the memory of 1956 into a political battleground in the 1990s, and how 1956 increasingly became „the province of the right wing,“ representing a nationalist revolution against Russian occupation and its failure thus echoing narratives of Hungarian tragedies (p. 63). Nadkarni then consid-

ers how the Fidesz-led coalition government tried to turn the public commemorations between 1998 and 2002 (when this coalition first had a majority in Hungarian parliament) into opportunities for „nationalist“ pedagogy and thus recruit voters (p. 75). However, all attempts to expropriate the memory of the socialist era failed, and, according to Nadkarni, nothing is more indicative of this than the „surprising turn“ (p. 90) of the late 1990s, when the ideological and political struggle for memory resulted in the emergence of nostalgia in popular culture.

This finding of an „emergence of nostalgia“ (Nadkarni, p. 90) is perhaps where the analyses offered in the two books most overlap. In her third chapter, Nadkarni argues that consumers felt nostalgia for fragments of everyday life that had essentially disappeared. She shows how nostalgia's focus on material culture and mass consumption resulted in apolitical interpretations in the 2000s, using the term „nostalgia“ in a similar way to Pehe's use of the term „retro.“ However, this apolitical notion of nostalgic memory has veiled many contradictions in the memories that emerged in the second half of the 2000s in the form of a highly politicized national crisis. Pehe also focuses on the period following 1999 in her third chapter, analyzing several events that took place that year and exploring how the Czech cultural reflections on socialism showed a dual tendency: Like Nadkarni, she highlights a paradoxical simultaneity between breaking with the socialist past and positioning in the political battles of the present.

In her fourth chapter, Pehe analyzes how the socialist past was portrayed in literature and film in the 2000s. She argues that while the presentation of socialism turned toward the repressive aspects of the system, a new interpretative framework was created through the portrayal of what she calls the „petty heroism“ (p. 85) of ordinary people. Nadkarni puts a slightly different focus in her fourth chapter, analyzing the *House of Terror* founded by the Fidesz government and opened in Budapest in 2002. The museum placed national victimhood at the core of the remembrance of socialism. Like the emphasis

³ István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism*, Stanford 2005, pp. 41–42.

on repressive aspects of the socialist regime in the Czech Republic, the discourse of perpetrators and victims became a key element of narratives regarding the socialist past in Hungary in the 2000s.

At this point, the analyses offered in the two books begin to diverge, only to meet again at the end. While Nadkarni explores the memory aspects of Hungarian political events in the second half of the 2000s in her fifth and sixth chapters, Pehe presents her book's main theoretical contribution to the concept of *retro*: She shows that an aesthetic affinity with state socialism is not incompatible with a rejection of its ideology and its practical implementation. In her sixth chapter, Pehe makes a similar point to Nadkarni: the (re-)emergence of a memory of oppression and heroic resistance in the 2000s (symbolized by the opening of the *Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes* in Prague in 2007) can be interpreted in parallel with the opening of the *House of Terror* in Budapest, if in different political contexts.

One important lesson from the comparison of the two books concerns the patterns of memory. Despite the different political processes in the two countries, they have developed in strikingly similar ways. Pehe clearly outlines the process that led from the genre specificity of retro comedy, through many other genres, to the use of the language of tragedy and trauma—aptly labeled as the 'dramatic turn' (p. 155)—in the 2000s. Meanwhile, Nadkarni focuses particularly on the main features of the politics of memory, both of the 2000s and as used by Fidesz from 2010 onwards. While this understanding of memory politics and Pehe's optimistic pluralist memories foreshadow the coexistence of populist memory politics and their most effective antidotes, one question remains depressingly open: If the mechanisms of memory in the two countries were so similar despite the different political circumstances, what are the possible directions for the future?

And what conclusions can be drawn when looking at the longer history of memory, including the time before 1989? The memory of the socialist era, it is worth noting, did not begin in 1990, but decades earlier; in both countries, it started with the de-Stalinization cam-

paigns, which sought to draw a sharp distinction between the socialism of the early 1950s and the „human face of socialism“ of the 1960s. Examples include the many feature films that reached wide audiences during the socialist era, such as Péter Bacsó's *The Witness* (*A tanú* – 1969, but distributed only after 1977 and mentioned by Nadkarni) or Miklós Jancsó's first color film, *The Confrontation* (*Fényes szelek* – 1969) as well as the novels that dealt with the „excesses“ of 1950s socialism in the 1980s. Several novels can be mentioned that use the genre conventions of comedy to recall the „dark 1950s“ already by the 1970s and 1980s (cf. the novels of Péter Esterházy or Bohumil Hrabal). Nevertheless, both books constitute highly valuable contributions to the literature on the memory of the socialist past and the elements of nostalgia and retro in this memory. They also offer a new, more reflective, analytical reading of nostalgia by introducing an analytical understanding of „retro“ and the „remains of socialism.“

HistLit 2021-4-402 / Sandor Horvath über Pehe, Veronika: *Velvet Retro. Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture*. New York 2020, in: H-Soz-Kult 14.12.2021.

HistLit 2021-4-402 / Sandor Horvath über Nadkarni, Maya: *Remains of Socialism. Memory and the Future of the Past in Postsocialist Hungary*. Ithaca 2020, in: H-Soz-Kult 14.12.2021.