

How to Think Critically about the Common Past? On the Feeling of Communism Nostalgia in Post-Revolutionary Romania

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HOW TO THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT THE COMMON PAST? ON THE FEELING OF COMMUNISM NOSTALGIA IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY ROMANIA

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Abstract

This article proposes a phenomenological interpretation of nostalgia for communism, a collective feeling expressed typically in most Eastern European countries after the official fall of the communist regimes. While nostalgia for communism may seem like a paradoxical feeling, a sort of Stockholm syndrome at a collective level, this article proposes a different angle of interpretation: nostalgia for communism has nothing to do with communism as such, it is not essentially a political statement, nor the signal of a deep value tension between governance and the people. Rather, I propose to understand this collective feeling as the symptom of a deeper need at a national level for solidarity and ultimately about recapturing a common feeling of identity in solidarity. This hypothesis would be in line with a phenomenological approach to memory as a process of establishing shared codes by rewriting the past in such a way as to strengthen social bonds and make possible a re-imagining of a common future. Nostalgia for communism does not need to be ultimately an uncritical stance as it has been depicted, instead one could interpret it as a form of critical reflexion about our current forms of life. Instead of seeing communism nostalgia as a specific form of being stuck in the past, one could explore its potential for pointing at the things that are still not working in the current neo-liberal regime.

Keywords: nostalgia, emotions, feelings, communism, ideology, collective feelings, critical thinking, critical reflection, memory.

Introduction

While taking a stroll through Romanian marketplaces, streets, parks, or when taking the public transportation, the attentive ear will probably

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hear a certain phrase uttered mostly by older people: 'Life was better during Ceaușescu's time' or simply 'Life was better in communism'. These phrases express a certain nostalgia for the past lived during communist times which is a common phenomenon in former communist countries from Eastern Europe such as Russia, former Eastern Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, as documented by sociological surveys (White 2007, 36; Beta 2013; Biray 2015; Esche *et al.* 2010). Romania makes no exception from this East European phenomenon, displaying nostalgia for communism openly (Inscop 2013; IRES 2010). Communism nostalgia is not the majority feeling in Romania. A study from 2013 had located it at about 40% of those polled (INSCOP 2013) and more recent studies are needed to document the full extent of it. More empirical research is needed into this matter in order to discern what exactly are people nostalgic about when they hear the word 'communism'. But it is a curious phenomenon in need of an explanation.

But what is the function of this nostalgia for communism? Could it be just another form of nostalgia for the past, yet another expression of regret for the times when the speakers were young? Is there anything interesting philosophically about the communism nostalgia?

Nostalgia for life in communism has been studied by sociologists and political scientists, philosophers have neglected thus far this phenomenon. However the question of communism nostalgia rises epistemic issues concerning collective memory and its uses, hence it is particularly interesting from a phenomenological angle. Why would one remember a traumatic past with fondness and regret? What does communism nostalgia signify about the past? What can it show about the collective values of a nation? While communism nostalgia has been researched to some extent in Germany (under the name of *Ostalgia*), its specific features need yet to be untangled locally because the nostalgia does not signify exactly the same thing in every country it appears, as it will be shown in the next section. The main hypothesis of this article is that communism nostalgia is a form of a collective feeling which could be used to discern certain problems currently undiscussed in the public realm in Romania.

Nostalgia scholars – mostly from literary and cultural studies, but also historians – usually point out its negative connotations in the

political realm, by linking it to conservative ideologies and to populist discourse. It has been shown that nostalgic voters who are stuck in a vision of past tend to vote ideologies which promise them a return to that idealised past. However, nostalgia does not come only in one flavour, rather there are multiple types of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia, thus:

(t)wo kinds of nostalgia are distinguished: the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming-wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym 2008, xviii)

If we use the theoretical framework of Boym, it is worth asking whether communism nostalgia in post-revolutionary Romania is a form of restorative nostalgia or whether we are dealing with a reflective form. And, if the case were to be the latter, what does communism nostalgia show us about the collective feelings of Romanians? In other words, are there any epistemic functions that communism nostalgia could fulfil, and what are those? The purpose of this article is to analyse the epistemic functions of communism nostalgia and to use it as an illuminating concept, going beyond the common understandings of nostalgia as being just stuck in a fantasy past.

Nostalgia for communism as a value tension

In German context, there is a term dedicated to the specific phenomenon discussed here: *Ostalgia*² or nostalgia for the East. *Ostalgia* manifests itself via collector's items and knowledge about the past. In other former Socialist Bloc countries, nostalgia for communism appears less through artefacts, but through statements uttered in the public

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostalgie>

discourse and in private conversations that 'Life was much better before [the revolution]'. Because of the ways in which this nostalgia appears in the public scene, many would be tempted to interpret it as a straightforward endorsement for the communist values and political principles. In a rough translation, the phrase 'life was better before, during communism' could be interpreted as 'communism is better than capitalism'. This is the preferred interpretation of mass-media opinion pieces who discuss the phenomenon. But is it correct to interpret it as a longing for the communist regime itself, hence an endorsement of communist values? And assuming that nostalgia for communism would signify a genuine desire to return to the past, should this be a problem?

Nostalgia for communism would be primarily a feeling of nostalgia about a past spent during a dictatorship. Just like any other feeling, nostalgia is not by itself irrational but rather points out certain values and their underlying tensions. By interpreting these value tensions emerging in the nostalgia for communism, one can paint a richer picture of the present and of the values which surface in the public discourse about the past. The history of Eastern Bloc during the Cold war was littered with daily infringements of human rights, such as censorship of free speech, the limited freedom of movement, political trials and imprisonments, also the forced labour. Confronted with the daily violations of human rights, the prevailing interpretation would be that present-day citizens should have no reason to desire a return to the past, since the communist past was objectively speaking horrible. From a certain point of view, nostalgia for communism seems irrational. For example, in Romania, it is possible that the same people who currently benefit from the freedom of travelling abroad and who subscribe to the consumerist ethos will also utter typical nostalgic statements that life was better before. *Prima facie*, then, it seems that nostalgia for communism is pointing to a contradictory value hierarchy, hence that the subjects who utter these phrases are self-contradicting themselves at some level.

Another interpretation of communism nostalgia would be to say that there are no value tensions in it, but rather a value hierarchy skewed towards the past. Thus, communism nostalgia would point to some values which were fulfilled in the past and that no longer are

upheld. Such values would be the economic stability, public safety and the general feeling of equality:

The social and economic downturns following the transformation have produced major public disapproval – these surveys indicate that substantial segments of the populations in Eastern Europe find life worse under post-Soviet conditions. Most people in these countries have gained an appreciation for the many positive features of the Soviet system: the role of the state over employment, the provision of social welfare, equality and public order. According to the same surveys, post-communist rule is considered to be remote, parasitic and incompetent and is also associated with crime and corruption. (Biray, November 10, 2015)

Like the Norther Star, communism nostalgia would point to the underlying values of a nation and its lack of fulfilment in the present day. Hence, there can be no discussion of value tensions in the present, rather the emerging discussion should be about the inability of current political regimes to fulfil the functions of the past, especially those related to welfare and the social state. However, under this interpretation, it would follow that, for some citizens, the daily infringements of the human rights were not as important as the stability of the welfare state. Under this interpretation of communism nostalgia, it would follow that (at least some) citizens are endorsing a different value hierarchy than that of their elected government. Since most former Soviet Bloc countries are endorsing democracy and basic human rights, it follows that this priority in values skewed towards freedom instead of financial safety is not well-received by some of their citizens. Depending of the number of citizens manifesting a communism nostalgia, it could turn out that the values of the government do not represent the values of the citizenry, and hence we would be confronted with a crisis of representation.

Nostalgia as a collective feeling

Another interpretation of communism nostalgia would be less about the past and more about the future. Boyer has already proposed that, in the German context, nostalgia about the communist past is not an actual desire to return to it, but rather a symptom of the impossibility of a

common future, what he calls a 'past-fixation' when confronted with an uncertain future:

Ostalgie is a symptom, but in my opinion it is not – as it is most often interpreted to be – the symptom of an eastern longing for a return to the GDR or for the *jouissance* of authoritarian rule (...) In a word, my strategy is to use *Ostalgie* as a lens through which to examine the problem of the future in eastern Germany, a future that has by no means been dampened beyond recognition. (Boyer 2006, 362)

This interpretation is inspired by and in line with psychological interpretations of nostalgia as a feeling of 'a heightened mental state, an enhancing, uplifting mood related to particular memories of the past' which also 'entails the recognition and acceptance that this past can never return' (Kaplan 1987). Hence communism nostalgia should not be regarded as giving any indications about how the past was experienced, but rather as a symptom of shock in front of a future which cannot be foreseen, and thus eliciting compensatory memories about the past. In this interpretation, the past is seen in rosier colours than it should be, but this is all part of a defence mechanism of dealing with the present. It is worth dwelling deeper into the collective functions of communism nostalgia and its possible functions as a signifier of collective unconscious. Communism nostalgia is a collective feeling. By contrast, the individual nostalgia as experienced by exiled refugees is also a feeling about something which does not exist in actuality – see for example the poetic nostalgia of Iosif Brodsky (Ilie 2014, Ilie 2018, Boym 2018) for a non-existent Russia, whereas communism nostalgia affects large groups of population, even entire nations.

Collective emotional states have been researched in the recent years, especially under the terms of "emotional atmospheres" or "climates" (Krueger and Szanto 2016, 870) but these researchers have stopped at the group level, hence a relatively manageable size of subjects. These emotional atmospheres were researched in a small time-frame and assuming that all subjects are in the same space: a stadium where fans sing hymns for their favourite team, a concert hall where people experience electrically the mood of the music, etc. However, what makes communism nostalgia phenomenologically different from emotional climates is that it is experienced by scattered individuals at

different points in time and space, without being confined to a particular gathering. Thus, communism nostalgia is a collective feeling asynchronous and a-spatial. Hence the feeling has common causes, but these are not experienced at the same time and there is no emotional contagion possible.

From an emotions theory perspective, communism nostalgia becomes interesting for its epistemic function: it gives insight into what citizens think and feel, beyond the hurdles of political representation. Political representation is 'one of the key concepts of modern political theory' (Dumouchel 1996, 68) which ensures a democratic legitimacy of a government. Through representation, it is assumed that the people's will is emergent in the government's actions, via delegation. The most common mechanism of delegation is through votes: either voting on elected delegates, or on specific laws (as is the case with direct democracy). However, political representation works from a heavily rationalistic bias: it assumes that what people want can be discerned via simple questions about matters of fact. Even when electing candidates, it is assumed that the people choose those candidates with whom their values align best. However, the representation mechanisms via voting do not give insight into how people feel and what their value hierarchies are, especially in times of changing values. Representation mechanisms via elected officials only delegate the most obvious decisions to the candidates with the clearest values. However, there is an entire continent of hidden values, changing values, shifting hierarchies which remains undiscovered via traditional representation mechanisms. It is possible that the citizens feel completely disconnected from their elected officials without showing any outward sign such as riots or public manifestations. Communism nostalgia gives a glimpse into this complex value landscape and it is a useful instrument in discerning what people value beyond the political facts precisely because it is a collective feeling.

The epistemic functions of communism nostalgia

The epistemic potential of communism nostalgia draws its strengths from two features: that it is a feeling and that it is about collective memory. The feeling attribute has been discussed previously as having

the advantage of offering insight into people's values and desires at a more direct level than their statements or voting choices. The epistemic functions of collective memory deserve to be briefly elaborated here. Research into the phenomenology of memory has shown that the human memory works primarily as a social mechanism. According to Alessandra Tanesini, a social and

(p)rimarily purpose of memory is to create and strengthen social bonds. If individuals come to agree about the past, their shared recollections bring intimate couples closer together and increase the feeling of belonging in individual members of social groups. The accuracy, faithfulness, or completeness of memories do not directly contribute to its ability to fulfil this function since its goal is convergence onto a shared version of the past (which may or may not be truthful). (Tanesini 2018, 198)

We usually tend to think of memory as a 'storage place' where we keep records of past events and feelings. However, it has been shown that "human biological memories are condensed, selective, and malleable; they trade precision for accuracy but can also be inaccurate" (Tanesini 2018, 197). Following Tanesini and the psychological research she summarised, human memories are not about factual accuracy nor about the storage of facts. A notebook is better than any memory. However, human memory does have two distinct functions which are related to its individual and social purposes. Individually, human memory is about 'planning future activities (Schacter 2012). We encode representations in the brain (memory traces or engrams) in a way that makes them suitable for use when imagining possible future events (Tanesini 2018, 198). Collectively, an important function of human memory is to create social bonds and to strengthen groups.

While Tanesini distinguishes between future making and social bonding as two separate functions, it is plausible to see communism nostalgia as fulfilling both functions at the same time. However, communism nostalgia can be read in this line as a malady of memory: not because the memory would be inaccurate, but because it cannot fulfil its function of social bonding. Communism nostalgia appears as a specific phenomenon arising collectively when people are incapable of imagining a collective future together because their current lives are

scattered and dispersed. To illustrate this point, it is useful to compare the communism nostalgia in Romania with *Ostalgie* in the German context.

In Germany, the specific occurrence of *Ostalgie* materialises itself through a material pop culture displayed proudly:

New York Times journalist Richard Bernstein described the “strange mood of nostalgia” in eastern Germany: “People wear ‘born-in-the G.D.R.’ T-shirts, or they collect Trabants, the rattling two-cylinder cars that East Germans waited years to buy, or they go online to be contestants on the ‘Ossi-Quiz,’ all questions relating to East German pop culture (2004).” (Boyer 2006, 361)

However, underlying this display of clothes and collectibles from the past, Boyer interpreted the signs of a repressed memory of the German past which must not be remembered. *Ostalgie* would be then a rosy memory hiding an even farther past which should not be remembered. In Boyer’s analysis, *Ostalgie* is not “the symptom of an eastern longing for a return to the GDR or for the *jouissance* of authoritarian rule” (Boyer 2006, 362). Instead, *Ostalgie* hides “the grief and pain of the memory of the Third Reich, a grief that has codified history – and pastness more generally – in post-war Germany as burden (*Belastung*), fabricating it as a powerful ethnological inheritance and presence that calls into question any German future” (Boyer 2006, 362). By trying to not remember the Nazi past – which has not yet been processed at a collective level – Germans prefer to focus on what happened after the Second World War, when the country was divided by a wall, yet united by a common struggle – to reunite. *Ostalgie* would then not be about the communist regime as such, but about remembering a time when it was acceptable to be proud of being a German. The Cold war acted as a distraction from revisiting the Nazi past, claims Boyer, and thus postponed dealing with the guilt feelings following the Second World War. However, the delayed memory exploded after the reunification of Germany, and thus created a contrast between the present – when Germans had to deal with feelings of shame and guilt about the pre-1945 past – and the recent past when no such feelings were demanded. *Ostalgie* would thus be a memory blocking the other memories which are unbearable at a collective level. By contrast to Germany, Romanians are not using communism nostalgia to hide from

any repressed memories. Romanians actually enjoy remembering the time between the two world wars as the most glorious time of the nation as Romania had acquired then its largest territory historically. Romanians remember so fondly the inter-war period, and since their historical depictions of the Second World War are less riddled with guilt and shame than their former German allies in the same war.² On the contrary, one would expect that Romanians remember more fondly the inter-war time when Romania as a monarchy rather than the communist age (1948-1989). One could find practical reasons for this selective choice of memory, namely that the people who lived during the two wars are very few nowadays – whereas communist regime had at least three generations of survivors. However, the reason why the communist regime is fondly remembered has more to do with the feeling of collective solidarity it gave rise to, a feeling hard to encounter in previous ages – with the exception of the Unification moment in 1918.

The solidarity experienced during communist regime was not a feature of the communist ideology as such. Scholars have already pointed out that the communist regime in Romania had some strikingly non-egalitarian features, such as the existence of the *Nomenclature*, a privileged caste of Party members who had most of the deciding power. Hence the feeling of collective solidarity experienced by Romanians during the communist regime was not generated by the egalitarian features of the political regime itself. Rather, there were two main factors contributing to this feeling of collective solidarity. First, the public discourse, bordering on ideology, in which Romanians were depicted as one nation with one language and one identity. History was heavily mythologised in the public discourse, creating the semblance of a united nation against the external enemies, which is also one of the oldest tricks for creating a political solidarity among a non-cohesive group (Schmitt 2007; for a recent discussion of this see Marin 2016). The second reason is more subtle and it concerns the resistance displayed by many

² The existence of pogroms and forced deportations during the Second World War has been documented extensively in the Romanian context, but Romanians still reject the feeling of collective guilt, as illustrated by Radu Jude's movie *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018).

Romanians in their day to day lives during the communist regime, namely that Romanians were united by a shared feeling of being prisoners in their own country. This feeling was tacitly acknowledged through many actions such as telling subversive jokes about Ceaușescu, by listening to forbidden radio stations such as Free Europe, or by illegally smuggling merchandise from the Western Bloc. That which could not be publicly said constituted a form of common knowledge which gave rise to a form of solidarity common among inmates. It is this solidarity which is evoked nostalgically when remembering the pre-1989 years: the time when Romanians were one people, united in their suffering and struggle.

Present day Romania displays a remarkable lack of solidarity, visible in how little collective action takes place. Public scandals have brought to the surface internal processes of endemic corruption in which the deforestation of the landscape or the fracking projects are just a few examples of how a country is left defenceless to corporate interests as just one symptom of atomisation and what sociologists call *anomie* (Durkheim 1893). Public collective action in Romania has been scarce, with most mobilisation taking place through public protests in cases such as Roșia Montană or anti-fracking protests (Vesalon and Crețan 2015). However, when these protests are described in mass-media, the narrative is that of a generation of ecologically-minded youngsters fighting the corrupt politicians. The story of collective action in present day Romania is not the story of a nation, rather it is fragmented into generational and political factions, depicted as being hostile to each other. It is common, during elections times, for mass media to depict the old generation as the conservatives subverting the future of the youngsters. In this climate of atomised factions, individuals tend to feel disconnected from the others. It makes sense then to see the nostalgia for the communist regime as a nostalgia for a feeling of shared solidarity which also made possible a common future. As it stands now, Romania seems to have no common project for the future other than immediate survival.

The politics of memory (Enns 2007) are revealing of how a nation sees its past in the light of a common future. Following Alessandra Tanesini's research, the two major functions of memory are primarily to establish solidarity among the members of a group and to make possible

future actions via a planning informed by the past mistakes. However, in the Romanian case, the politics of nostalgia for communism show a conflation of the two functions of memory: it is both about the (im)possibility of a common future because no social bonds are created anymore. The communism nostalgia is a reaction to the perceived atomisation of the social body in Romania, of the individualised and isolated feeling experienced by many Romanians, be they young or old (Gavreliuc 2012). If we follow this common feeling of nostalgia as it is expressed publicly, we might arrive at the conclusion that nostalgia is not about communism as such, nor about a hierarchy of values, but rather a sign that the memory cannot fulfil anymore its social bonding function since there is no collective agreement on how one should remember the past.

Reflective nostalgia and collective critical thinking about the past

Up to this point, this article has enumerated several plausible interpretations of communism nostalgia in the Romanian context. From the simplistic interpretation as a value contradiction, to a more complex underlying tension among social and individual values, and finally to a crisis of representation, communism nostalgia is a rich feeling in need of exploration as it can lead to insight into what people want but cannot articulate through the existing instruments of democratic representation. By using the framework of Tanesini, it has been argued that communism nostalgia fulfils both functions of individual human memory but at a collective level: it is used to build social bonds in view of a common future, however, it is also a symptom of the lack of a common vision of the future and of the fragmentation of the Romanian society. Building on these interpretations, could there be also critical uses of communism nostalgia?

The critical function of nostalgia been explored mostly in cultural and literary studies. Scholars dealing with nostalgia usually oppose it to critical thinking, as it seems intuitive to do so. This tendency pointed out by Svetlana Boym, who shows how a certain inclination of nostalgia can be used for ideology endorsing, hence stifling critical thinking:

Nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding. *Algia* – longing – is what we share, yet *nostos* – the return home – is what divides us. It is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters. Yet the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition. (Boym 2008, xvi)

However, Boym proposed to distinguish between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia, two concepts coined by Boym herself. The difference between the two would be whether one seriously wants the past to return or whether one can approach it ironically yet affectively: “Reflective nostalgia ... reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection” (Boym 2008, 49).

It is worth then asking whether communism nostalgia also has a critical potential for the Romanians, in line with a Nietzschean model of the critical method of approaching history, namely “in the service of living” (Nietzsche 1874). Some of the interpretations sketched here which go against the common idea of the communism nostalgia as a restorative practice (hence antiquarian or monumental in the Nietzschean sense) do point to the creative and critical potential of communism nostalgia. As communism nostalgia reveals the collective feeling of longing for solidarity and a common project, it also gives indications on how the future could be changed. By fostering more occasions for solidarity and collective projects, the impetus behind the communism nostalgia could be captured and used to make possible again a common future. Communism nostalgia is the symptom of a collective malaise, but it also gives indications on how it could be fixed.

Conclusions

The feeling of communism nostalgia shows something beyond its mere informational content. The hypothesis of this article was that the

nostalgia for communism was not at all about communism as an ideology, nor about a hierarchy of values favouring the welfare state, but rather about a deeper need at a national level for solidarity and ultimately about recapturing a common feeling of identity in solidarity. This hypothesis would be in line with a phenomenological approach to memory as a process of establishing shared codes by rewriting the past in such a way as to strengthen social bonds and make possible imagining a common future. While more empirical research is needed from the sociological, anthropological and psychological disciplines, the phenomenological basis of memory offers a rich venue of interpretation for what nostalgia is aiming at. Informed by this phenomenological approach, a public policy based on the analysis of collective feelings concerning collective memories could have a significant potential to uncover public desires and feelings. Thus, a public policy informed by collective feelings could ultimately lead to a new form of critical reflection about the past, what Svetlana Boym has termed a 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym, 2008). Instead of seeing communism nostalgia as a specific form of being stuck in the past, one could see its potential for pointing at the things that are still not working in the current neo-liberal regime. The inheritance of communist past needs not be an eternal burden for Romania, but rather an opportunity to re-evaluate the past through the feelings it elicits, and to possibly find new ways of building a common future.

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