

Reviews

Review Essay: An Ethnography of Pastness Identity Playgrounds and Battlefields in Post-Post-Soviet Estonia

Francisco Martínez (2018), *Remains of the Soviet Past in Estonia: An Anthropology of Forgetting, Repair and Urban Traces* (London: UCL Press), 259 pp., Pbk £22.99. ISBN 9781787353541, Hbk £45.00. ISBN 9781787353558.

The last time Francisco passed through Lisbon before this book was out, he brought me from Estonia a marine blue rucksack and a shocking-green pin with the words ‘believe in the periphery’. These two objects came to my mind when I started writing this review, not just because this is a book about material culture being taken out of the waste and repaired by the youth in Estonia, but mostly because I have had the opportunity to discuss with Francisco the dialectics of the ‘post-Soviet’ in various travelling contexts. Travelling as method has taken us through the post-Soviet wastelands and its borders, problematizing anew the ‘post’ and ‘pastness’ while eating *khachapuri* in Tbilisi, staring at the Soviet Armenian industrial complex of Alaverdi, or crossing silently the ghost town of Agdam, in Nagorno-Kharabakh.

On a personal note, then, this is a book about time travelling – into different temporal regimes – where the urban *flâneur* strives to understand the Soviet ‘pastness’ as the subjective quality of something being remembered rather than immediately experienced (according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary). But it is also about shared journeys of knowledge and the critical inquiry into the here and now, about how past legacies get repaired and different temporal-aesthetic regimes are sutured to give rise to a post-post-Soviet condition. On a more academic note, this is a book about materialities – haunted buildings, amalgamated urban centres, objects rescued from oblivion and negligence – and the new meanings the youth ascribe to what had been seen by the Freedom generation as mere waste or rubbish – the leftovers of Sovietism – forgotten, eradicated or just left to rot. Unlike Francisco, I prefer the term ‘Sovietism’ over ‘Socialism’



because it emphasizes what was a specifically modern project. Turning the famous aphorism on its head, Sovietism equalled Socialism plus electrification: meanings and materialities, ideas embodied in concrete structures.

While contesting the relevance of the ‘post-Socialist’ category to understand the current social and cultural moment in Estonia, this book develops strong ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions about how to approach the complexities of change. Drawing on Rancière (2006), and Bolstanski, and Thévenot (2006) among others, and embracing a cross-disciplinary approach, it becomes a most valuable contribution to rethinking the way we understand ‘transitions’ in the post-Soviet world as the contestation among ‘orders of worth’ and ‘forms of visibility’. The book is based on a complex set of ontological tensions: the dialectics of meanings and materialities, articulated with the ‘dialectics of old and new’ whereby reality turns out to be the result of both obdurances and ruptures, producing dyssynchronous temporal-aesthetic regimes that persist side by side. Epistemologically, Francisco problematizes the ‘post’ condition by looking at (and taking part in) the social practices that constitute the idea of ‘pastness’. This way, the kind of multi-sited ethnography practised by the author embodies knowledge and practice as situated phenomena. It is through the engagement of the knower (or observer) that knowledge can manifest itself. By engaging, and not just observing, he deploys the kind of interpretive reflexivity that is critical to understand the research context, in other words, how ideas are appropriated anew, legacies passed on to younger generations, and new meanings ascribed to old materialities that persist in physical and affective landscapes. On an epistemological level, this book engages in the production of situated knowledge in order to identify and understand the micropowers and practices at work in the suturing of dissonant temporal-aesthetic regimes produced in times of transition.

Methodologically, Francisco deploys a thick multi-sited ethnography formed of textured and colourful vignettes that develop his engagement in the everydayness of social relations constituting today’s Estonia – through conversations, artistic performances, interpretive reflections, or mere daily life roles – thereby allowing the reader to go beyond conceptual and structural dichotomies and avoiding simplistic renderings of the ‘post’ condition. On the contrary, and as set up by George A. Marcus (1995), Francisco’s ethnography develops along multiple sites of observation and participation that stress the dialectics of old and new, local and global, material structures and

ideas. Therefore, this is a powerful book about the complex refashioning of identities in today's Estonia escaping simplistic and unilinear renderings of what is, contrariwise, a fleeting process constituted by contingency, negligence, and forgetting. The different ethnographic vignettes that intersect with the more theoretical discussions in the book have the merit to illustrate that identity is the product of a complex dialectics of playfulness, re-appropriation, and confrontation. Throughout the book, the author observes, interprets, and engages with the multiple sites and material structures where old and new ideas and generations are colliding but also being sutured, namely the identity playgrounds and battlefields of post-post-Soviet Estonia.

Francisco and I are now in Yerevan, aboard the night train, all set for the journey back to Tbilisi. The roly-poly woman serving as attendant there takes me back to the USSR. She is grumpy but always about to show her lukewarm humanity vis-à-vis the clients. After a while, she brings the bed linen and Francisco asks her if we have to pay for it. The woman gets heated: 'In what kind of world would that happen?' She spots the bottle of Armenian brandy on the table of our berth and nods acquiescently. In the early morning, I step outside to contemplate the fleeting post-Soviet wasteland and realize the door of her berth is half-open. There she lies helpless in her sleep still, the round body exposed and reclined in the manner of a postmodern Delacroix nude.

Marcos Farias Ferreira
University of Lisbon

References

- Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L. (2006), *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Translated by Catherine Porter. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Marcus, G. E. (1995), 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, no. 1: 95–117.
- Rancière, J. (2006), *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum).

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin (ed.) (2017), *Irish Ethnologies* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 238 pp. 238, \$40.00, ISBN 9780268102371.

Ó Giolláin's edited book offers a broad perspective on the field of Irish ethnology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The essays here were first published in 2011 in French in *Ethnologie française*. The