

Berdahl, Daphne (edited by Matti Bunzl, foreword by Michael Herzfeld). 2010. *On the Social Life of Postsocialism. Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 192 pp. Pb.: \$24.95. ISBN: 9780253221704.

This compendium of articles are a tribute to the thinking of Daphne Berdahl, a consummate ethnographer of post-socialism and East Germany. The articles, almost all published elsewhere between 1994 and 2009, show this scholar's evolving thinking on post-socialist and capitalist conditions, consumption and memory through the struggles of her East German interlocutors. Arranged chronologically, the collection demonstrates Berdahl's increasingly assured hand, from the discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a site of healing and cross-over between personal and collective commemoration, to her analysis of the hit film *Goodbye Lenin* as a recognition and farewell to lives spent in the GDR. Berdahl worked with great skill to evoke the life-worlds, contexts and the often poignant quotes and subtle observations that make her argument come alive.

Her discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington chronicles the belated creation of a site that publicly recognises and heals the experiences of soldiers and their relatives. As in her later chapters on 'ostalgia' (nostalgia for the East), she argues that personal and public memory pursue a power-inflected dialogue with each other. She notes a shift in memory practices, a routinisation accompanied by 'museumifying': certain kinds of commemoration become the 'done thing', while remaining heart-felt. Berdahl indicates that the reception of the Gulf War was shaped by these forms of commemorating Vietnam, a hint I would have liked to hear more about.

In several chapters, Berdahl uses a fantastic range of ethnography to describe a new form of citizenship and stratification through politicised and 'competent' consumption in East Germany – the cosmetics seminars promising to equip East German women with the 'image' claimed necessary to find scarce work, a trickster tycoon who becomes a folk hero in Leipzig. In her later chapters, she draws on Jean and John Comaroff's notion of 'millennial capitalism': East Germans find that full membership of the prosperous Germany requires a certain cultural competence in consumption. Inspired by Appadurai, Berdahl treats us to the social life of the Trabi car, from a much loved and much hated scarcity in the GDR to its de-valuing in the immediate aftermath of re-unification and its later rediscovery as a (more less tongue-in-cheek) symbol of defiance and East German identity. She shows us that while in the GDR, resistance might be expressed by harboring Western goods, now the opposite may be the case, for example by re-donning GDR house-smocks. Here are citizens remembering themselves as proud producers and workers, rather than consumers. Berdahl is careful to show that such 'commodified resistance' both contests and affirms the new Germany. Indeed, at several points she is close to asserting that it was consumer choices, rather than political freedoms which people most missed in the GDR and which caused its downfall. Returning to her interest in memorials, she discusses two GDR museums, one a state-sponsored portrait of a repressive regime, the other a collection recovering discarded GDR products from the 'dustbin of history', in which many East Germans more easily recognise their own life-experience. As elsewhere, Berdahl is attentive to the multiplicity of experiences and mixed feelings – of dispossession, promise, betrayal – that these sites of

commemoration evoke. She argues that expressions of ‘ostalgia’ do not have one political cause or feeling at root, and firmly critiques triumphalist narratives which dismiss positive associations with life in the GDR as a dangerous belittlement of an oppressive regime. She claims that labelling a fondness for Trabis as a ‘cult’ phenomenon is an attempt to devalue eastern German critiques of re-unification. It is at such moments that I wished for a more comparative perspective to draw out the specificity of the German case, and feed her argument on a general sea-change in citizenship practices.

A highlight of the collection is *Mixed Emotions*, an essay in which Berdahl shares a deeply affecting moment of fieldwork. Witnessing her very ill friend Johanna’s profound devotion during a church service, Berdahl is jolted out of her frustration with her friend’s trust in religious rather than medical authorities, and entertains the possibility that it is faith itself that is keeping her friend alive. Berdahl courageously allows us an intimate view of her frustrations with the village priest and Johanna, to good effect. It offers us the chance to recognise ourselves in the power relations and personal circumstances we move within, especially when they tempt us to act as ‘Besserwessis’ – Western know-it-alls. The author points to the deceptive familiarity of her European fieldwork site, which in fact masked profound differences, and predicated her demand that others behave as she would. Though highly effective, this chapter also provoked some unease: did her intimate description of Johanna and the village priest not make them all-too recognisable?

The case of a fraudulent real-estate mogul who developed much of inner city Leipzig and became a local hero shows how much the contemporary financial markets rely on appearance rather than fact, and how the citizens of Leipzig celebrated tricking the big bosses of capitalism. Berdahl’s suggestion that the experience of post-socialist citizens de-naturalises capitalism and affords us a valuable standpoint of critique is well worth pursuing.

The book also offers an interpretation of the massively successful film *Goodbye Lenin*, which accomplished many things at once: it captured the roller-coaster of euphoria, insecurity and disappointment of the early 1990s, gave ‘Ossis’ the opportunity to acknowledge and value memories, acted as a rite of farewell and united ‘Ossis’ and ‘Wessis’ in laughter – though perhaps at different things.

Overall, while hugely admiring her ethnography, I was often left wanting a more explicit discussion of her broader claims, such as how exactly she saw personal and public commemorations relate to each other, the question of ‘resistance’ through consumption or the relationship between the production of locality, individuals, the nation and global capital. Though her emphasis on multiple meanings of phenomena such as ‘ostalgia’ rings true, such an emphasis is also somewhat inconclusive. As a posthumous publication and deserved labour of love, this compilation understandably has some repetitions and loose ends, but also highly suggestive arguments that remain ours to pursue. It is a pleasure to follow Berdahl’s lines of thought and growth as a scholar, her consummate fieldwork and writing.

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