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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Thinking Against the Blackmail of Democracy

Review by Sinan Dogan.

Red Hangover. Legacies of Twentieth-Century Communism. Ghodsee Kristen. 2017.

Duke University Press.

Barely two years into being a student/scholar of “post-socialism,” and an immigrant in the USA, two sources of human histories have grown intertwined within me. Narratives of post-socialism reveal conflicts between the idea of collectivized justice and human dignity, and that of state as an institution whose irreducible goal is to control and govern. Whereas the experience of immigration, in relation to “Americanness,” has helped me to ask the question “for whom?” concerning liberty, representative democracy, and entrepreneurial values. Seemingly paradoxical yet curiously, echoing impacts of narratives of post-socialist transitions, as well as constantly curated histories of socialist pasts can be deciphered from the current predicament of capitalism and authoritarianism. Is it possible to historicize the times that are after the end of this history? *Red Hangover* offers insights concerning these intellectual and ideological sensibilities by using a variety of writing, in both fiction and non-fiction genres.

The book starts with an incisive point: the ideological war that marked the Cold War has not ended. Crises of the recent years, such as the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the Syrian Civil War, the rise and fall of the DAESH, and authoritarian leaders’ global rise to power, can be traced back to legacies of “really existing socialism” and the triumph of liberal democracies over socialism. Having spent several years in Bulgaria and Germany, alongside visits to other parts of the Eastern Bloc, Ghodsee presents the reader with ethnographic insights and historically engaged commentaries on the daily lives of

socialisms and post-socialisms. The centrality of one argument is clear: democracy and capitalism should not be thought of as inseparable, as the inequalities and disenfranchisement created and exacerbated by neoliberal capitalism have done more harm than good to democracy.

The first chapter tells the story of the utterly disappointing socioeconomic desperation in Bulgaria through acts of self-immolation. Resonating with Bargu's (2014) "necroresistance," these acts are far from being divergent from social reality due to their extreme nature, but indeed define the reality through premediated political acts. In Dimitar Dimitrov's words, the man who set himself on fire in front of the president's office and survived: "Under Communism, we had money, but there was nothing to buy. Now, there is everything to buy but no money. [...] One can't live in a constant recession" (8-10). "Cucumbers" follows the autobiography and carefully archived dossiers of an ordinary man, Mr. Andreev, an agricultural planner whose major success was to plan the growing of imported cucumbers. Through his dossier, the reader gets the chance to peek into Bulgaria's deteriorating waste management system, collectivized agriculture, and alternative futures where the ethnographer becomes a spy in coordination with the Agent Andreev who poses as a cucumber expert. "Pieces" is a fictional story that strongly demonstrates a variety of freedoms from "post-socialist democracies": thriving Bulgarian entrepreneurs who sold arms illegally to war criminals during the Bosnian War, prevalent structural and explicit racism against the Roma, and orphans whose organs are harvested and sold through multinational organizations. "Belgrade, 2015" recites a fictionalized dialogue between the wife and the son of a recently deceased Serbian man, discussing whether a star or a cross would be on his tombstone.

In "#Mauerfall25," Ghodsee discusses her observations on the event that commemorates the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Western triumphalism after the fall has led to aggressive expansion of the neoliberal dominance over former Eastern Bloc countries, through policies that stripped social rights and securities away from citizens, as well as political and military maneuvers that left most of the nations in the midst of social and political crises. Using the discourse during the commemoration event as a vantage

point, Ghodsee argues that today's "refugee crises" and ongoing wars in the Middle East can be attributed to the interventionist politics by "liberal democracies." In "The Enemy of My Enemy" and "Venerating Nazis to Vilify Commies," we read a bold critique of anticommunist politics, which find a platform through the rise of far-right conservatism whose attempts to legitimize xenophobia and authoritarianism find expression in the rewriting of socialist history. In "A Tale of Two Typewriters," we read a social history of typewriters made in Germany over the course of the twentieth century, while "Gross Domestic Orgasms," which was advanced in Ghodsee's (2018) later book *Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism*, provides an engaging analysis of "how the two contrasting political and economic systems of the twentieth century manifested themselves in the realm of intimacy" (101). "My Mother and a Clock" postulates the part of the Cold War in which socialist realism and abstract art have been pitted against one another. The author unsettles the paradigm of "freedom vs. authoritarianism" by pointing to the commercialization of modern art and limitations imposed on the artists who produce within the dominance of free markets. "Post-Zvyarism" is a playful yet sobering sequel to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which includes the post-socialist transition of Zvyaria Farm. Citizens of the farm who first toppled their exploitative human owner, and then the oppressive pigs' government, face the harsh realities of liberal democracy and go on to elect a social democrat-turned-crony capitalist ex-intelligence officer dog Muttro. First delighted by the private ownership of the farm's facilities, animals are quite rapidly dispossessed and ultimately eliminated by humans whose capital flow impeded any possible economic development from which animals could benefit. The story can be read as an essential guide to post-socialism as it brilliantly combines widely varying histories of post-socialisms in a coherent narrative.

The thirteenth chapter presents a near-future scenario where Dr. Ghodsee seeks refuge in Germany due to political suppression in the USA and is interviewed by an immigration officer. In this transcript of the fictional interview, Dr. Ghodsee's Democratic Party membership is the main concern of the interviewer who eventually provides a positive recommendation for political refugee status. But the officer advises against the professor's employment in German universities due to the hesitant support for

warmongering democrat politicians. This does not fit the ideal of employing “educators [who] must be men and women willing to question authority and resist tyranny in all its forms” (178).

Finally, “Democracy for the Penguins” elaborates on and questions the liberal idea of democracy as a market endeavor. Ghodsee starts by presenting the anthropologist David Scott’s argument that “former colonial powers now deployed the idea of democracy, in much the same way as they had once mobilized the concept of civilization, to justify violations of the sovereignty of developing countries” (180). After reviewing the critical literature on the growing incompatibilities between capitalism and democracy, the author argues that political theories and ideas can be separated from their failed implementations. This applies to both communism and democracy. “[T]he triumphalism of the West [which] legitimated the military, political, and economic violence” has employed liberal democracy to suppress radical alternatives in the name of freedom (192-3). Ultimately, the author urges that “those who still believe that people should be treated with equal respect and accorded the same opportunities to live and thrive in a peaceful, diverse, and sustainable world” (197) to come together, despite the internal differences, and strive to “make democracy great again” (198).

Overall, *Red Hangover* provides an immensely valuable contribution to the literature on post-socialist futures and critiques of liberal democracies. Dr. Ghodsee’s unapologetic approach concerning atrocities committed in the name of socialism as well as freedom and democracy is certainly inspiring. With its creative and engaging writing style, *Red Hangover* is an empowering book for those of us who feel estranged and cast aside by the looming darkness.

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Works cited:

Bargu, Banu. *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

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