

Nadkarni, M.: Remains of Socialism: Memory and the Futures of the Past in Postsocialist Hungary. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2020. 234 p.

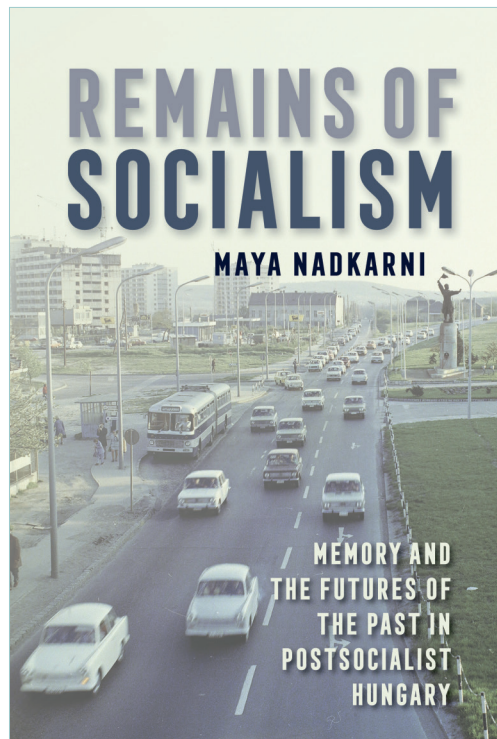
More than three decades have passed since 1989, yet there seems to be no consensus about how Hungarians should collectively remember the socialist era. From the optimistic initial phase of transition throughout the pompous representative ceremonies for the anniversaries of state foundation and 1956, to the recent illiberal turn, *Remains of Socialism* takes us for quite a ride mapping out the many changes in narratives about the past.

Pierre NORA (1989) suggests considering sites of memories (*lieux de memoire*), which are constantly present in personal and collective memory, enhancing identities and therefore forming an integral part of the development of nationalism. The work of NORA (and also his critics) spawned a surge of interest in researching the politics of memory and memory studies in general, but also intrigued historical and cultural geographers. Unlike many other trends which local science only adopts with a considerable lag, this approach was quickly followed by Hungarian researchers too. For a long time, the field was dominated by researching Holocaust trauma, but recently there

seems to be a turn from loss, dysphoria and mourning towards more positive experiences. This allows for a more nuanced study of the postsocialist context since it is crucial to understand “the creative and positive meanings with which [citizens] endowed their socialist lives—sometimes in line with the announced goals of the state, sometimes in spite of them, and sometimes relating to them in ways that did not fit either-or dichotomies” (YURCHAK, A. 2005, 9).

One takeaway from this book is that remembrance of socialism was always relative and ambiguous – that also means that, by extension, our own memories of the socialist past are under constant transformation. We can also conclude that the former influences the latter. Adopting the language usually deployed in the postsocialist setting (ruins, ghosts, etc.) would risk “limiting our attention to only the negative experiences of the past’s remainders” (p. 6). To avoid this, the author conceptualises *remains* as „matter out of time,” referencing Mary DOUGLAS’s presentation of dirt as “matter out of place” (DOUGLAS, M. 2002, 36), stressing this malleable and shifting nature of memories. Remains of socialism were not only kept from being buried, but rather kept alive to scrutinise, hold as ‘the’ problem that previous administrations neglected to solve, while “the conditions for “entering Europe” and becoming fully “modern” included the demand that Eastern Europe sacrifice previous historical narratives (whether communist or nationalist) and disavow the meaningfulness of earlier lifeways” (p. 12). Although the presented case studies are exclusively Hungarian, the analysis can be interpreted more universally, essentially as “a study of modern historical subjectivity and the overlapping, incommensurable, and conflicting narrative horizons that compose it” (p. 13).

NADKARNI spent years in the country teaching English in rural villages—this explains how she could handle ethnographic research dealing with controversial topics like politics and remembrance of socialism (which often leads to heated debates even among family members and friends in Hungary). The end result is a testimony of extensive fieldwork culminating in countless interviews with voters of different age from Hungary (recruited during random meetings during everyday life), and also with those from the political and cultural elite. She also consulted the relevant archives and contemporary publications, analysed events, especially scandals in detail, essentially performing a very detailed Foucauldian discourse analysis. The stories presented are often familiar – I have either heard some of them before, since my own family shared similar memories with me, or for most of them I have been alive to experience it growing up in post-socialist Hungary.



For geographers, the volume should be considered as a companion piece to CZĘPCZYŃSKI'S *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities* (2008), which contributes to similar topics, albeit about post-socialist countries in general from a decidedly more geographical perspective. Each chapter revolves around a particular form of remains (be it a material object, or cultural remainders). The first three chapters share a pattern of optimism for a successful present by mastering the past, while the remains described in the latter three chapters warn us about the looming danger of communism creeping back.

The political regime change in 1989 brought a physical change towards a new, democratic and capitalist landscape. But while the replacement of iconic socialist buildings, infrastructure and vehicles were costly, impractical and slow, one of the early performative acts of transformation was the removal of socialist symbolism from the country. Discarding them simultaneously labeled these kinds of remains as unsatisfactory or even unpleasant to the eyes of the new ideology. Chapter 1 (*Banishing Remains: The Statue Park Museum*) shows how political groups rallied to 'spring clean' by renaming streets and removing statues associated with the toppled ideology.

NADKARNI argues that by moving these statues from important sites to the outskirts of the city into a small theme park of socialist history was not a response to public demand, but rather reaction to the lack of such demand by trying to maintain control over it. Perhaps the most iconic (and geographically interesting) case was the removal of the statue of Ostapenko—but dealing with an important landmark with heavily shifted cultural connotations was „a more ambivalent task than disposing of countless Lenins” (p. 36). The statue, erected near the city limits at the end of the highway leading to Lake Balaton, quickly lost its original meaning and entered urban culture as a positional marker, a meeting point and a symbol of travel. Therefore, even the physical relocation could not remove the remains of the statue of Ostapenko: the local McDonald's inherited the name (and closed the circle of Disneyfication).

In Chapter 2 (*A Hole in the Flag*), NADKARNI highlights the incoherent outcome of constant political battles among the new democratic forces for the legacy of 1956 that reduced its memory to a “stockpile of decontextualized events and symbols” (p. 168). After the regime change, both the nation and its history had to be reinvented by those in power (ANDERSON, B. 1983; HOBBSBAWM, E.J. and RANGER, T.O. 1983), and these modernist concepts about nationality are inherent in approaches to reconstruct the narrative of the failed 1956 rebellion against the Soviets, and Fidesz (Young Democrats) party's commemorative efforts culminating in the Millennium celebrations. The goal of these political battles with strong representative roles was to invert the national narrative of Hungary as a perpetual

victim, with “a continuous history of executions, exiles, and political suicides. The normal public rituals of Hungarian history are, accordingly, not victory parades but funerals and reburials” (RÉV, I. 2013, 41–42).

After attempts to distance the past by removal of the old and silence the past by more suitable cultural alternatives, a third way of remastering is presented in Chapter 3 (*Nostalgia and the Remains of Everyday Life*). *Eastalgy* (*Ostalgie*) towards the former GDR in Germany became a strong cultural trend from the late 1990s, and other postsocialist countries followed suit. This longing for the simpler and safer good old times is not a postsocialist specialty of course, but it adds to the complexity of how these remains could be handled. By reintroducing products from their childhood, the objects of nostalgia could not only be juxtaposed to the new ways of living but could also define the consumer in a capitalist society for the first time.

Following the 1990s, the period of change seemed to be taking too long, so people began to become disillusioned with the experience of transition. Sensing the downturn in support Fidesz started to return to the narrative of victimisation by repositioning themselves as those, who can overcome the burdens of the socialist past, rather than merely overwriting it. By the end of its first cycle from 1998 to 2002, Fidesz experimented with a new approach to tackle the past. In Chapter 4 (*Recovering National Victimhood at the House of Terror*), NADKARNI explores how the governing coalition revived remains to warn about the looming threat of communism. In a building where first the extreme right Arrow-Cross Party, then the ÁVO, the State Defense Department of the Sovietised Hungarian State Police, held and tortured political prisoners, the museum opened just in time before the finish of the 2002 election campaign—with previously unexperienced emphasis on immersion. Viktor ORBÁN, the prime minister hoping for a reelection, described the events as „locking the past behind bars.” With the main political opponents being the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Fidesz presented the elections as a moral battle between those who looked into the future and those who resembled the oppressive past.

The motif of unaddressed problems of the past never going away can be found in the case of former informers of the socialist regime, sparking heated debates about accountability throughout the 2000s. Chapter 5 (*Secrets, Inheritance, and a Generation's Remains*) charts how the conflict in families and between generations led to the reconceptualisation of socialist remains to avoid reproducing them.

At the end of the second postsocialist decade, many events called attention to the failure to fully transition. The fiftieth anniversary of 1956 saw mass demonstrations against the socialist government after prime minister Ferenc GYURCSÁNY'S confession to lie in order to win the election was leaked to the media. Less than two years later, the severe effects of the

global financial crisis led to the bailout of the country by the IMF. These traumas led to the landslide victory of Fidesz in the 2010 elections, but also fuelled the view that the remains of socialism are still present as an obstacle that prevented Hungarians to live a fully normal life. Chapter 6 (*A Past Returned, A Future Deferred*) concludes that the history of communism might still have not completely finished.

After a period of disenchantment with the transition, which should not have led to such political and economic turmoil, Hungary had to find new ways to overcome old problems in the wake of joining the European Union, and once again, victimisation during the socialist past proved to be an obvious choice to highlight the dangers of the present. The success of Fidesz during the 2010 elections provided legitimacy to their efforts to close the chapter of Hungarian socialism once and for all. Now a populist party leaning towards the right wing, their strongly anticommunist rhetoric seemed contradictory to many of their actions, which according to the opposition brought back many authoritarian elements to the detriment of the 'failed' democratic transition. This provides a comfortable analogy in the former Soviet aggression in multiple—either by comparing it to the European Union, like the ruling party often mentions, or to Fidesz, like the opposition does. This illiberal way therefore also keeps the remains of socialism alive after more than three decades of transition.

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