

BOOK REVIEWS

Childhood and Schooling in (Post)Socialist Societies: Memories of Everyday Life.

Iveta Silova, Nelli Piattoeva, Zsuzsa Millei (eds.)

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Review by Robert Hamm, Maynooth University

The annoying thing first. For a book that is supposed to be read, the price is exorbitant. This obviously is not a problem of this book alone, neither is it something that would be in the hands of the authors. Nevertheless it is a matter to consider.

The book itself is highly readable. Framed by an introductory and a summarising chapter authored by the editors, it comprises ten essays by authors who all present personal memories from their period of growing up in societies deemed socialist or post-socialist. These memories are put into historical contexts and interpreted by the authors.

Memories in the book span a period in time from the 1960s to the 2000s. They represent experiences in Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, China, USSR (Latvia, Russia, Ukraine) and post-soviet Russia, plus a Polish exile community in Canada. Of the ten memory chapters nine are written by female authors (H. Lenart-Cheng, I. Luca, L. Oates-Indruchová, I. Kašparová, V. Hoang-Phuong Ho, A. Bogic, Z. Millei, N. Piattoeva, I. Silova, E. Aydarova, A. Battalova, E. Przybylo, P. Ivleva, J. Wu), with one authored by two men (O. Kaščák, B. Pupala). The gender imbalance is notable. It raises a curiosity to read further material also, from a more gender diverse perspective.

The memory stories are highly personal accounts of encounters: with teachers, peers, in families, in communities, pioneer camps. They comprise a bandwidth of experiences, ritualised and formula bound performances, status negotiations, daily drudgery and high points of social life. I refrain from singling out any of those in this review because what makes the book worthy reading is exactly the multiplicity of experiences recounted and commented on by the authors of the different chapters.

As with most auto-ethnographic material, there is an immediate effect on the reader. The memory stories are highly contagious. This is impressively demonstrated in five afterwords

written by scholars from different disciplines (M. Tesar, R. Imre, M. Tlostanova, S. Gannon, J. Rappleye) who were invited by the editors to share their opinions about the material assembled in the book. Each of the five authors of those afterwords reverts back to memories of their own growing-up. Everyone was a child at some stage, everyone has something to tell. We automatically compare. When we read about the summer camp of the young pioneers we remember our own experiences, in the scouts camps and with sports clubs, when we read about the break time regime in school we remember our own school days, when we read about dress codes we remember our own school uniforms and fashion fancies. It seems there is no escaping of the domino effect of memory stories. We hear one, we tell one.

This is the strongest point in the book. It sweeps away the “stereotyped images of the child as an icon of socialist utopia, or the child as a traumatized victim of a repressive regime” to “give way to more ambivalent depictions, layered forms of knowledge and deeper understanding of institutional settings and their effects on the former young subjects” (Lenart-Cheng & Luca, 2018, p. 21) in what is deemed to be past socialist and post-socialist societies. The children come to life as active agents in negotiations of issues of importance on their everyday level.

For anyone with the picture of the former so-called socialist bloc as a unified experiential world the collection of essays furthermore reveals that, from the local perspective of everyday life, there were as many “socialisms” as there were national societies. The relationships between the State and the People are in any case a field of tension. What is possible and what is not differs according to national, regional and local histories. This is the case for adults (who obviously also feature as key figures in the memory stories in the book) and for children alike.

As a contribution in an academic sphere, the editors explain the context of the book as an “intellectual project of decolonizing knowledge production in and about socialist and post-socialist societies in Eastern and Central Europe” (Silova, Millei & Piattoeva, 2018, p. 231). Put with slightly different wording, this can also be read as a claim to gain their own respected space within international academic discourse. As such the book is certainly an important and commendable step in this direction and would deserve distribution not hampered by a forbidding price tag (see above).

A level of analysis that is missing in the book is where the memory stories are seen as today’s representations of a gone-by event always coloured from today’s perspective. As such the memory is always more informative about the respective author’s contemporary construction of the event in question. This in mind the analysis could move on to the author’s (today’s) negotiation of, and engagement with, the categories in question (in this case: socialism, childhood). This would open an extended view on the ambiguities in which the authors themselves are entangled, in their narration and interpretation of their memories possibly reaffirming the very status of childhood as a category that depicts a social form of individuality (Sève, 1974). In this sense using childhood in research as a concept that is not of itself in question (for its effects as a matrix against which a concrete person has to develop in their becoming social actors, irrespective of the political system under which they live) is a

missed opportunity. Taking such an extended view into account could provide a more solid grounding for today's positioning in concrete negotiations, social, political, economic (if the separation is wished for) than the airy liminality of "open-endedness, uncertainty, and unpredictability" (Silova et al., 2018, p. 251) that seems so attractive in post-structural circles. It would provide a route into engaging with today's struggles over the status of children in society, their contemporary institutionalisation, and their subsuming as beings to fit the category childhood, precisely via the route of working with the richness of auto-ethnographic material as presented in the book.

But that is something that, in line with the afterwords that are included in the book, "could follow afterwards" (Silova et al., 2018, p. 259).

There is an abundance of material in the book that offers itself for such further engagement, material that is evocative and inspiring, with the potential to incite similar (and follow-on) projects. If not for this reason alone, the sheer pleasure of indulging in personal accounts that are at the same time analytically reflected allow for the hope that this book might be widely read.

References

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Reviewer Details

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