

# A PROBLEM WITH YUGONOSTALGIA: YUGOSLAV SOCIALIST EXPERIENCE AND POST-YUGOSLAV LEFT

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**Abstract:** *This article deals with debates on Yugonostalgia among leftist scholars and activists in the post-Yugoslav societies and their diasporas. The majority of them insist on the political and intellectual futility and theoretical incapacity of Yugonostalgia. Taking the persistent capacity of Yugonostalgia to generate social, political and intellectual debates as a symptom of our own political present, I argue for the epistemological relevance of discourses on Yugonostalgia for (self-)reflection in the production of intellectual knowledge in a post-socialist society. Two related issues emerge from these debates as central to the post-Yugoslav left's "problem with Yugonostalgia" – the first is the epistemic status of the experience of (state) socialism, and the second is the political potentiality of emotions in the specific post-socialist context. These questions are not only crucial for our understanding of Yugoslav socialism as a political project and the lived experience of 'really existing socialism' as inseparable from that project, but also for the ways in which the social theories that shaped that project live their post-socialist (after)lives.*

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Relatively soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the political projects of state socialism in Eastern and Southeastern European societies, the term 'nostalgia' emerged in the everyday, journalistic and academic discourses.<sup>1</sup> Not sensitive to the diversity of actors, historical legacies and experiences of state socialism, this term has come to designate an array of very diverse emotional engagements with the socialist past, encompassing products of popular culture (music, films), everyday objects, food, drinks, visual symbols, recognisable figures, but also personal memories and references to social and political aspects of life "lost in transition"<sup>2</sup>, and political claims based on the past experiences. During the last three post-socialist decades, nostalgia for socialism, labelled Yugonostalgia in post-Yugoslav societies and its diasporas, has not lost much of its currency. Although outside observers still

1 This article is a result of the research program *Historical interpretations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century* (P6-0347) financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

2 Kristen Ghodsee: *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

connect it to the well-known liberal tropes of cherishing dictatorship and recognise it in kitschy paraphernalia,<sup>3</sup> regional public, activist and scholarly debates are, rather, concerned with its political meanings and its conceptual and political potential. Popular culture and particularly music have attracted significant attention within these debates due to their affect-generating capacity. Numerous media articles and scholarly works point to music's capacity to affectively unite audiences across national borders and to the fact that "the Yugoslav popular music outlived the country in which it emerged"<sup>4</sup>, and often ask about any political implications of the persistent musical unity of former Yugoslavs,<sup>5</sup> while others concern themselves with the ways Yugoslav popular music has been pointing to a utopia – and heterotopias – of Yugoslav socialism.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after the demise of state socialism in Europe, the understanding of nostalgia for socialism exceeded sociocultural meanings: it was recognised as a political problem, and such perception persists to these days. In earlier decades of post-socialism, Eastern Europe, preoccupied with "the European future" and neoliberal

- 3 In one of recent takes on Yugostalgia, Jessica Bateman writes: "Many of the visitors had grown up under the old system and had come to mark the dictator's birthday, which was a major public holiday before Yugoslavia's disintegration. Some belonged to far-left political parties, and sported kitsch-looking T-shirts and banners" (Jessica Bateman: "Everyone Loved Each Other: The Rise of Yugostalgia", in: *The Guardian*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/25/everyone-loved-each-other-rise-yugostalgia-tito> [accessed on August 1, 2024]).
- 4 Ana Petrov: "I posle Jugoslavije – jugo-muzika", in: *Politika*, 30 December 2016, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/371131/I-posle-Jugoslavije-jugo-muzika> (accessed on August 1, 2024). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author of the article.
- 5 See for example Nemanja Marinović: "Za ona dobra i stara vremena: Fenomen jugonostalgije u pop-kulturi", in: *Centar za marginu*, 18 September 2020, <https://czm.org.rs/za-ona-dobra-i-stara-vremena-fenomen-jugonostalgije-u-pop-kulturi/>; Ilija Đurović: "Fantom Jugonostalgije", in: *Normalizuj*, 8 February 2024, <https://normalizuj.me/kultivator/fantom-jugonostalgije/>; I. D.: "Aleksandra Denda: U Njujorku vlada Jugonostalgija", in: *Direktno*, 26 January 2021, [https://direktno.rs/magazin/zabava/muzika/330092/aleksandra-denda-gremi-njujork-jugonostalgija.html#google\\_vignette](https://direktno.rs/magazin/zabava/muzika/330092/aleksandra-denda-gremi-njujork-jugonostalgija.html#google_vignette); Milica Trklja: "Jugonostalgija ili 'neka tajna veza': Propali pokušaji da se muzika deli na 'našu' i 'njihovu'", in: *Sputnik*, 13 January 2014, <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20240113/jugonostalgija-ili-neka-tajna-veza-propali-pokusaji-da-se-muzika-deli-na-nasu-i-njihovu-1166328422.html> (all accessed on August 1, 2024). Several academic monographs have been dedicated to these capacities of popular music, among others Ana Petrov: *Jugoslovenska muzika bez Jugoslavije: Koncerti kao mesto sećanja*. Belgrade: Delfi, 2016; Danijela Š. Beard and Ljerka V. Rasmussen (eds.): *Made in Yugoslavia: Studies in Popular Music*. New York: Routledge, 2020; Anita Buhin: *Yugoslav Socialism: "Flavoured with Sea, Flavoured with Salt"*. Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2022.
- 6 See for example Marko Zubak: "Yugoslav Disco: The Forgotten Sound of Late Socialism", in: *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s: Disco Heterotopias*, ed. Flora Pitrolo and Marko Zubak. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 195–221; Tamlin Magee: "'It was Ridiculous. It was Amazing': The Lost Pop of 1980s Yugoslavia", in: *The Guardian*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/oct/12/it-was-ridiculous-it-was-amazing-the-lost-pop-of-80s-yugoslavia> (accessed on August 1, 2024).

modernity,<sup>7</sup> became intolerant of any kind of nostalgia, and particularly of nostalgia for socialism. In triumphalist discourses of Europeanness, nostalgia was seen as a sign of moral weakness, irrationality and inability to find one's way around in the ongoing social and economic transformations. It was regarded as a "result of a feeling of having lost out in the transition from communism to democracy", a threat to "still fragile democracies" and a symptom of "an emergent retrospective positive evaluation of the old regime among the citizens in Central and Eastern Europe", where "growing numbers of respondents feel that 'a return to communist rule' would in fact be a desirable option"<sup>8</sup>.

More than three decades since the demise of the socialist projects in Europe, no one fears anymore a possibility of reinstating socialism and returning to 'communist rule'. In the lands that used to comprise Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the space which concerns me in this article, this fear haunts no one, too, and Yugonostalgia seems to be of no concern or interest for the ruling political elites. There seems to be, on the other hand, a growing concern with Yugonostalgia among the post-Yugoslav left: from young activists to established leftist intellectuals and scholars, many recognise Yugonostalgia as a problem, point to its political futility, and describe it as trivial, superficial, non-reflexive and damaging for political action. Yugonostalgia is seen not only politically, but also epistemologically unproductive: according to Maja Breznik and Rastko Močnik, the heterogeneity of phenomena subsumed under the label of nostalgia "makes it impossible to fix nostalgia as a scientific concept"<sup>9</sup>. Reana Senjković is critical of labelling memories of life and work in socialism as nostalgic for quite a different reason: because it diminishes the legitimacy of these memories.<sup>10</sup> Senjković's argument points not only to the widespread negative societal but also to scholarly assessments of nostalgia as an unproductive, passive, and paralyzing feeling, a "pining for social safety that never really existed"<sup>11</sup>, as the banal commodification of socialist

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7 Gediminas Lankauskas: "Missing Socialism Again? The Malaise of Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Lithuania", in: *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, ed. Olivia Ang and David Berliner. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014, pp. 35–60, here p. 54.

8 Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde: "Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe", in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21/3 (2005), pp. 354–374, here p. 357.

9 Maja Breznik and Rastko Močnik: "Organized Memory and Popular Remembering: The Encounter of Yugonostalgia Theories with Socialism", in: *Memory Studies* 15/5 (2022), pp. 1055–1069, here p. 1061.

10 Reana Senjković: "Konfiscirana sjećanja (na rad i zaposlenost)", in: *Transformacija rada: narativi, prakse, režimi*, ed. Ozren Biti and Reana Senjković. Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2021, pp. 111–138.

11 Charity Scribner: *Requiem for Communism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p. 11.

objects and symbols (and, as Maya Nadkarny and Olga Shevchenko lucidly note, as the triumph of capitalism),<sup>12</sup> or proof of dangerous, atavistic cultural attachments, false consciousness,<sup>13</sup> and malady.<sup>14</sup> Studying recollections of socialism, Andrew Gilbert points to the disproportionate focus on nostalgia and argues for “a need to go beyond nostalgia in order to identify and analyse a broader range of meaning and action in the creation and deployment of representations of the past”<sup>15</sup>.

In this article, I look closely at the discourses on political and intellectual futility and theoretical incapacity of Yugonostalgia articulated by leftist scholars and activists in the post-Yugoslav space. Taking the persistent capacity of Yugonostalgia to generate social, political and intellectual debates as a symptom of our own political present,<sup>16</sup> this article argues for the epistemological relevance of discourses on Yugonostalgia for (self-)reflection in the production of intellectual knowledge in post-socialism. It aims to show that two related issues, emerging from these debates as central in the post-Yugoslav left’s “problem with Yugonostalgia” – the first being the epistemic status of experience of (state) socialism, and the second the political potentiality of emotions in the specific post-socialist context –, are critical not only for understanding Yugoslav socialism as a political project and lived experience of “really existing socialism”, but also for understanding “the everyday (after)life of our social theories”<sup>17</sup>.

12 Maya Nadkarny and Olga Shevchenko: “The Politics of Nostalgia in the Aftermath of Socialism’s Collapse: A Case of Comparative Analysis”, in: *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, ed. Olivia Ang. and David Berliner. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014, pp. 61–95, here p. 63.

13 Zsuzsa Gille: “Postscript”, in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, ed. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York: Berghahn Books 2010, pp. 278–289, here p. 283.

14 Maria Todorova: “Introduction: From Utopia to Propaganda and Back”, in: *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, ed. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York: Berghahn Books 2010, pp. 1–13, here p. 2; for an overview, see also Ana Hofman and Tanja Petrović: “Introduction”, in: *Affect’s Social Lives: Post-Yugoslav Reflections*, ed. Ana Hofman and Tanja Petrović. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2023, pp. 7–42.

15 Andrew Gilbert: “Beyond Nostalgia: Other Historical Emotions”, in: *History and Anthropology* 30/3 (2019), pp. 293–312, here p. 295.

16 Although Yugonostalgia may be compared to collective feelings towards imperial and supranational legacies such as Habsburg/Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman in different parts of Yugoslavia, it is this capacity to generate public and intellectual debates, as well as its particular relation to the lived experience discussed later in this article, that legitimizes treating it as a phenomenon of its own right. For imperial nostalgias in the post-Yugoslav space, see Bojan Baskar: “Austronostalgia, Yugonostalgia and Memories of Empires”, in: *Balkanica* 5/12–16 (2004), pp. 48–52, as well as the ERC project REVENANT – Revivals of Empire: Nostalgia, Amnesia, Tribulation, <https://reventant.uniri.hr> (accessed on July 31, 2024).

17 Anna Kruglova: “Social Theory and Everyday Marxists: Russian Perspectives on Epistemology and Ethics”, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59/4 (2017), pp. 759–785, here p. 760.

AMBIGUITY OF EXPERIENCE  
AND (IN)EFFICIENCY OF POLITICAL ACTION

The issues of collective mobilization, organization, and political change have become central leftist concerns of our political time, which is characterized by neo-liberal exhaustion and fragmentation, as well as by “diminution in the production of new utopias”<sup>18</sup>. As a consequence, the past increasingly becomes both a place where the imaginations of the future are sought and “a densely animated object of enchantment”<sup>19</sup>. While this is also true for the post-Yugoslav socio-political space,<sup>20</sup> there are also noticeable efforts by those who turn to Yugoslavia for inspiration for the politics of resistance to detach the Yugoslav past from the inevitably messy and contested experience of actual Yugoslavs. One way to do that is by reducing that past to the pure essence of the revolutionary moment and its values, and purifying it of all ideological layers that might compromise it.<sup>21</sup> For example, the all-female choir *Kombinat* from Ljubljana performs exclusively partisan, anti-fascist songs that were written during the Second World War by members of the partisan movement. In their opinion, only these songs, untainted by the subsequent state ideology of socialist Yugoslavia, are capable of reflecting the ‘pure’ revolutionary values of resistance and solidarity. Those written during Yugoslav socialism cannot be the holders of revolutionary potential as they have been corrupted by the ideological use of the socialist regime.<sup>22</sup> Many leftist activists similarly see Yugoslav socialist experience as useless and unproductive for today’s struggles and resistance.

Another way to detach socialism from the experience of former citizens of socialist Yugoslavia is to question the very socialist nature of that experience: scholars point to the early onsets of the capitalist aspects of Yugoslav socialism, locate the early processes of post-socialist transition in the early 1950s or early 1960s,<sup>23</sup> and

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18 Frederic Jameson: “An American Utopia”, in: *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2016, pp. 1–96, here p. 1.

19 David Scott: *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 13.

20 See Larisa Kurtović: “An Archive to Build a Future: The Recovery and Rediscovery of the History of Socialist Associations in Contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina”, in: *History and Anthropology* 30/1 (2019), pp. 20–46.

21 See Tanja Petrović: “Towards an Affective History of Yugoslavia”, in: *Filozofija i društvo* 27/3 (2016), pp. 504–520.

22 Ana Hofman: *Glasba, politika, afekt: Novo življenje partizanskih pesmi*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015.

23 Branislav Dimitrijević: “In-Between Utopia and Nostalgia, or How the Worker Became Invisible on the Path from Shock-Worker to Consumer”, in: *Nostalgia on the Move*, ed. Mirjana Slavković and Marija Đorgović. Belgrade: The Museum of Yugoslavia, 2017, pp. 30–41.

observe Yugoslav society as post-capitalist rather than socialist.<sup>24</sup> Many of them recognise the ‘really socialist’, emancipatory and Yugofuturistic nature of Yugoslav socialism only in its earliest phase: for Asja Bakić, “Yugofuturism is a concrete moment in the past (for some it is the period before 1962, and in my view it is the period before 1953), when the future seemed much different from the one we live today”<sup>25</sup>. As a consequence, Bakić writes, “what we consider the dissolution of Yugoslavia is a period of time that actually lasts for more than two decades (part of the 1960s, whole 1970s and the 1980s)” during which “Yugoslavia became a bureaucratic nightmare”<sup>26</sup>.

As these views suggest, only post-WWII events, organizations and practices, directly stemming from the People Liberation Struggle, such as early period voluntary labour actions or activities of the Antifascist Women’s Front (AFŽ) could be revolutionary and authentic, while labour actions from the later period, or efforts by female political workers who importantly contributed to Yugoslav women emancipation are considered inauthentic, useless, even harmful for the future politics of emancipation.<sup>27</sup> Such views, moreover, marginalize or entirely ignore the impact of the modernizing achievements of the Yugoslav socialist project (reflected in the improvement of living conditions, the increase of literacy rates, accessible employment, education and healthcare, and vertical mobility) on the lives of generations of Yugoslavs.

Apart from being ideologically ‘tainted’ and ambiguously socialist, the experience of life in Yugoslav socialism and its affective recollections usually labelled Yugonostalgia are perceived as superficial, banal, commodified, and thus inefficient and unproductive for any political action, mobilization and change. Svetlana Slapšak, for example, writes that she thinks nostalgia is negative

because it reinvents, from depression and despair and a melancholic philosophical thought, what was most visible, simplest and most kitschy in the then-culture. Restoration of the partisan spirit on the level of admiring comic book heroes or wearing uniforms and singing partisan songs with grandmothers and grandfa-

24 Srećko Pulig: “Rade Pantić: Za socijalističku umetnost treba naporan kolektivni rad” [interview with Rade Pantić], in: *Novosti*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/rade-pantic-za-socijalistic-ku-umetnost-treba-naporan-kolektivni-rad> (accessed on August 19, 2024).

25 Asja Bakić: “Jugofuturizam kao zamka”, 6 June 2023, <https://asjaba.com/2023/06/06/jugofuturizam-ka0-zamka/> (accessed on August 19, 2024).

26 Ibidem.

27 Lilijana Burcar: *Restavracija kapitalizma: Repatriarhalizacija druŹb*. Ljubljana: ZaloŹba Sophia, 2015; see also Tanja Petrović: “O herojima, od ranog do poznog socijalizma, i dalje: Izgradnja prvog i drugog koloseka pruge Źamac–Sarajevo dobrovoljnim akcijaškim radom”, in: *Duh pruge*, ed. Andrea Matošević and Tanja Petrović. Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2020, pp. 147–165.

thers – all of this is of course emotionally satisfying, but cognitively damaging. I am deeply persuaded that a new conceptualization of Yugoslavia has to reject this. We need to stop longing for the “Buco” cheese and “Gavrilović” pate.<sup>28</sup>

Many other leftist intellectuals and activists similarly point to political inefficiency of everyday, activist and artistic references to socialism. In the view of the art historian Rade Pantić, “it is not enough to paint a mural depicting workers or to establish a choir which will perform songs from the People’s Liberation Struggle and say ‘we are making a socialist art’.” Such an art, he argues, “requires hard collective work in all fields”<sup>29</sup>. Of all fields of cultural production, the popular culture is seen as the most powerful generator of nostalgic and unproductive feelings. As the writer Ilija Đurović wrote for the Montenegrin portal *Normalizuj*:

Around ten years ago I first noticed something which I explained to myself with the notion of “phantom Yugonostalgia.” Listening to music on YouTube, I was led by an algorithm to a seemingly non-subversive channel, labelled “Peđa Radović”, with an avatar of Podgorica’s coat of arms. It did not look promising, but behind the link there was something that will reach all corners of former SFRY, as well as beyond its borders during the next decade [...]. Then unknown Peđa Radović digitalised from LPs and other sound carriers the whole treasure of the Yugoslav music production, dutifully equipped it with names of performers, publishers and other information, in an archivally literate and serious manner. He performed this job so seriously that the YouTube audience imagined him as a dusty old man who lives among piles of vinyl plates [...]. Only later we learned that behind this channel was a man born on the eve of Yugoslavia’s disintegration, with no experience of life in the country whose music he guards from forgetting. The whole music past has emerged, and a specific social group (of young, ‘left’ people born immediately before, during or after the breakup of the country whose music Peđa Radović has offered on YouTube) found a new quality, and even identity, in this sound. It was a sound from the past, telling them “This is how the music of the country where you did not live, but you would want to live, sounds.”<sup>30</sup>

28 Svetlana Slapšak: “Jugonostalgija i smeh”, in: *Peščanik*, 13 December 2008, <http://pescanik.net/jugonostalgija-i-smeh/> (accessed on August 19, 2024).

29 Pulig: “Rade Pantić”. See also Rade Pantić: *Umetnost skozi teorijo: Historičnomaterialistične analize*. Ljubljana: cf\*, 2020.

30 Ilija Đurović: “Revolucija malog Perice na Instagramu”, in: *Normalizuj*, 2 October 2023, <https://normalizuj.me/praxis/revolucija-malog-perice-na-instagramu> (accessed on August 19, 2024). The mentioned YouTube channel is accessible under: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCESY-bEs7998WRpINv192zQ> (accessed on September 2, 2024).

Many leftist scholars and activists seek to expose nostalgia as being the opposite of what it seems to symbolize and recall, claiming its capitalist/consumerist nature, its opportunistic, antisocialist/pro-Western or liberal character, and pointing to its workings towards forgetting, obliteration and revisionism. According to Đurović, “nostalgia is essentially counterrevolutionary, while socialist memorabilia reflect the capitalist logic of the world.”<sup>31</sup> While acknowledging a great diversity of phenomena subsumed under the label of Yugonostalgia (which is for some even a reason to deny its viability as an object of scholarly exploration), many researchers of (post) socialism, intellectuals and activists recognise it primarily in commodified objects, and “as ignited by the market economy, and the productions and demands of the restored capitalism.”<sup>32</sup> Tropes such as the “mythological offer of commodities”<sup>33</sup>, the “emerging commercial culture in the postsocialist era”<sup>34</sup>, the “industry of nostalgia”<sup>35</sup>, the “commodified set of practices”<sup>36</sup> are found in many scholarly assessments of nostalgia for socialism. Commodification of the past, intrinsically connected to the spheres of popular culture and popular memory, is seen as hindering political mobilization, eliminating possibilities for emancipation, subversion and change, and maintaining the status quo: “the past is sold as a consolation for the present, it not only brings profit to those who sell it, but also guarantees that that past will never become a future of those who buy it, because all its potentials will

31 Đurović: “Revolucija malog Perice na Instagramu”.

32 Ana Hofman: “Jugonostalgie gegen Konfiszierung der Erinnerung”, in: *Volksstimme* 11 (November 2022), pp. 25–27, here p. 26.

33 Dean Duda: “U raljama nostalgije”, in: *Feral Tribune*, 28 September 2004. Duda criticizes for “their entrapment in Yugonostalgia” the authors of *The Lexicon of Yu Mythology (Leksikon YU mitologije)* which was initiated in 1989 by Dubravka Ugrešić as a project dedicated to Yugoslav popular culture and designed to involve a wide number of Yugoslav citizens. But it is its “second life” in the mid 1990s, in the aftermath of Yugoslavia’s breakdown and with its disastrous consequences still ongoing that made this project an embodiment of Yugonostalgia. Then, “many ex-Yugoslavs, mostly those in the diaspora, answered the call of the Lexicon editors and started to contribute entries on the Web site, lamenting the loss of multicultural diversity [...]. The material from the Web site was selected, edited, and published in 2004 by the publishing houses Rende in Belgrade (Serbia) and Postscriptum in Zagreb (Croatia), as a book entitled *The Lexicon of Yu Mythology*, which has since gone through several editions.” (Aleksandar Bošković: “Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: Lexicon of YU Mythology”, in: *Slavic Review* 72/1 [2013], pp. 54–78, here p. 57–58).

34 Zala Volčič: “Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia”, in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24/1 (2007), pp. 21–38, here p. 25.

35 Daphne Berdahl: “‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things”, in: *Ethnos* 64/2 (1999), pp. 192–211, here p. 192.

36 Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley: “The Modalities of Nostalgia”, in: *Current Sociology* 54/6 (2006), pp. 919–941, here p. 932.



be exhausted in the process of demand, selling and use.”<sup>37</sup> What is more, commodified nostalgic recollections of the socialist past are seen as revisionist, distorting the gaze on that past and erasing what is really important to remember and revive: Milorad Gačević sees “the key problem of nostalgic memories of socialist good life and consumerist experiences” in

forgetting the struggle that made possible that good life and consumerism. It did not fall from the sky, but came as a result of decades of struggle for socialism followed by suffering and repression, illegal work, agitation, incessant work on education and emancipation of people, heroic resistance to occupiers during people-liberation struggle, voluntary labour actions organized to construct the country, attempts to build self-management, with all victories, defeats, good and bad sides.<sup>38</sup>

The accusation of forgetting, distorting the past and even revisionism is extended to the works by scholars who analyse manifestations of Yugonostalgia in discrete sociopolitical contexts and everyday practices and memories. Breznik and Močnik label them “nostalgia scholars” and criticize them because, with their focus on experience, they call

for “softer” approaches, for the use of research tools employed by oral history, the history of everyday life, anthropology and cultural studies where the concept of nostalgia was initially formed. [...] For this reason, the study of post-socialist nostalgia appears as an “up-to-date” project. It seems to be catching up with the latest historiographic approaches, which during the socialist era were allegedly suppressed by dominant Marxist understanding of historical processes (in which class struggle is the driving historical force and the material production determines all other relatively autonomous spheres of social life).<sup>39</sup>

Such an assessment comes as a surprise for several reasons: it establishes a temporal scheme in which oral history and the history of everyday life, anthropology and cultural studies are “the latest historiographic approaches”, as if they have entered the Yugoslav intellectual space only after socialism ended. With such an understanding of the novelty of “softer” approaches and an understanding of class struggle as isolated from everyday conditions and independent from cultural practices and representations, Breznik and Močnik not only ignore the decades long genealo-

37 Đurović: “Revolucija malog Perice na Instagramu”.

38 Milorad Gačević: “Levica i jugonostalgija”, in: *Novi plamen*, 16 January 2019, <https://www.novi-plamen.net/glavna/levica-i-jugonostalgija/> (accessed on August 19, 2024).

39 Breznik and Močnik: “Organized Memory and Popular Remembering”, pp. 1061–1062.

gies of ‘history from below’, the Marxist foundations of the cultural studies, their essential connection with the New Left in Britain, and the importance of their understanding of culture as a battlefield and sight of class struggle,<sup>40</sup> but also overlook and dismiss the resonances works by thinkers such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, and Edward P. Thompson struck with Yugoslav thinkers. They also dismiss the large body of research in socialist Yugoslavia focused on the everyday, real conditions of life and work for the workers, and on culture understood as a field of the class struggle – which was essential not only theoretically, but also practically, for Yugoslav self-managing cultural politics in which amateurism had a central place.

What is at stake here is not only denying any Marxist character of oral history, the history of everyday life, anthropology and cultural studies. The critical question to be asked here is who ‘owns’ Marxist epistemologies and social theory – both within intellectual community and across social spaces, and by extension, who is ‘allowed’ to speak of socialism and whose voice matters. Anna Kruglova points to the relevance of this question when she argues that “ideas and ideals about what constitutes a just, well working society [...] are not confined, either in practice or concern, to the ivory towers or more elegant classes”<sup>41</sup>. She further argues that Marxism needs to be studied by anthropologists, and we need “to stop looking at Marxism as ‘just’ an ideology or even a philosophy, and rediscover Marxism as it has evolved, and continues to evolve, as a form of Gramscian hegemony.”<sup>42</sup> Such an understanding both opens a place for ‘ordinary’ people as ‘everyday Marxists’, their everyday negotiations, ‘popular’ memories and cultural patterns to be seen, heard, and taken seriously as political actors, and prompts intellectual self-reflection about one’s own, class-defined position from which one makes a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate voices, memories, experiences and feelings.

### POLITICS OF EMOTIONS AFTER YUGOSLAVIA

While discrete experience of socialism in all its everydayness, messiness and ambiguity is generally seen as an unproductive way to look for the politics for the future by leftist thinkers and activists in the post-Yugoslav space, the inseparability of that experience from emotions and affects (which also leads the way towards the commodification of the Yugoslav past) seems to be an even greater reason for its dismissal. Unlike the right-wing politics, which “continuously capitalizes on the

40 Dean Duda: “Hrvanje s anđelima”, in: *Reč* 66/12 (2002), pp. 79–107, here p. 92–93.

41 Kruglova: “Social Theory and Everyday Marxists”, p. 759.

42 *Ibidem*, p. 760.

feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and exhaustion that dominate the contemporary political arena and uses them to mobilize people for the national(istic) politics of belonging and community building, the left-oriented forces too easily dismiss the emotional investment with the historical project of socialism<sup>43</sup>, although they simultaneously express frustration by the success with which the right mobilizes emotions among the citizens.<sup>44</sup>

An easy rejection of emotions by leftist intellectuals and activists in the post-Yugoslav space, who mostly consider them “entertaining, banal, or quotidian, and, therefore, ‘apolitical’”<sup>45</sup>, comes as a surprise if we have in mind the amount of attention given to the political relevance and potential of emotions in the recent, and not so recent, scholarly debates:<sup>46</sup> the history of thought that recognises the political character of affect is a long lasting one, and the claims that “our ethical and political projects must be formulated and conducted as the terrain of the affects”<sup>47</sup> span the centuries, from Baruch Spinoza to Lauren Berlant. At the heart of these projects, as Michael Hardt argues, is the necessity to understand our power to be affected “not as a weakness, but a strength.”<sup>48</sup>

The leftist rejection of emotions is surprising also because the current political, economic and ideological conjuncture overtly denies the post-socialist subjects the power to be affected and empowered by their own socialist past and its symbols, and more specifically by the most politically relevant aspects of that past, such as modernization, vertical mobility, the available education, healthcare, and social security. The consequence of this denial, as Boris Buden pointed out, is that the “social contradictions of post-communism, such as the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the dismantling of all forms of social solidarity, enormous social injustices and widespread suffering—they all remain affectively unoccupied [...] This social anaesthesia is one of the most salient symptoms of post-communist transformation.”<sup>49</sup>

43 Hofman: “Jugonostalgie gegen Konfiszierung der Erinnerung”, p. 27.

44 See for example Đurović: “Revolucija malog Perice na Instagramu”.

45 Hofman and Petrović: “Introduction”, p. 14.

46 For an overview, see Hofman and Petrović: “Introduction”; see also Tanja Petrović: “Nostalgia for Industrial Labor in Socialist Yugoslavia, or Why Post-Socialist Affect Matters”, in: *Nostalgia on the Move*, ed. Mirjana Slavković and Marija Đorgović. Belgrade: Museum of Yugoslavia, 2017, pp. 14–29.

47 Michael Hardt: “The Power to Be Affected”, in: *Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant* (= International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 28/3 [2015]), pp. 215–222, here p. 215.

48 Ibidem.

49 Boris Buden: *Zona prelaska: O kraju postkomunizma*. Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2012, p. 78.

Reducing affective engagements with the socialist past to entertainment, banality, commodification, to “a feeling like longing and daydreaming, close to escapism from the present challenges”<sup>50</sup>, and seeing them as a mechanism to avoid the responsibility for disastrous wars in the 1990s, not only denies that the emotional and the affective can be and often are a basis for reflection,<sup>51</sup> but also obscures their clearly political aspects: what is derogatively dismissed as Yugonostalgia is often an expression of resistance to historical revisionism,<sup>52</sup> to confiscation of memory,<sup>53</sup> a response to the ethnicization of cultural landscapes, a “contra-discursive moment” to hegemonic discourses of “nationalistic amnesia”<sup>54</sup> and an effort to re-establish and maintain cooperation across the new political borders of the nation-states,<sup>55</sup> but these aspects remain neglected and overlooked.

The neglect of emotions and the dismissal of affective engagements with the Yugoslav past are not universal, though: a closer look to the ways in which the post-Yugoslav intellectual and activist left treats this past reveals a class-based affective economy that has to do with the essential question of who can have the “power to be affected” by the Yugoslav past.<sup>56</sup> It shows how Gramscian hegemony governs the field of remembering as much as it governs the field of Marxist theory production. The curators of the Museum of Yugoslavia’s exhibitions seem to be aware of this hegemony and of the fact that dismissal of nostalgia results in exclusion of “ordinary people” and their emotions, visions, desires and voices from narratives of the past and imagination of the future: for a long time, they have been making efforts “to detach from the nostalgic connotation, which, it was believed, conceals objectivity and distances the Museum content from critical thinking, which is an imperative of

50 Sara Sopić and Mirjana Slavković: “Hedgehog’s Home – Inventing a Better World”, in: *Hedgehog’s Home – Inventing a Better World*, ed. Mirjana Slavković and Sara Sopić. Belgrade, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2023, pp. 12–54, here p. 14.

51 Ibidem, p. 12.

52 Maruša Pušnik, Breda Luthar and Dejan Jontes: “Spominski narativi in bitke za opredelitev socializma: Jugoslovska osemdeseta”, in: *Teorija in praksa* 61/2 (2024), pp. 407–427.

53 Dubravka Ugrešić: “The Confiscation of Memory”, in: *New Left Review* 218 (1996), pp. 26–39.

54 Stef Jansen: *Antinacionalizam: Etnografija otpora u Beogradu i Zagrebu*. Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2005, p. 256.

55 Mitja Velikonja: “The Past with a Future: The Emancipatory Potential of Yugonostalgia”, in: *Transcending Fratricide, Political Mythologies, Reconciliations, and the Uncertain Future in the Former Yugoslavia*, ed. Srđa Pavlović and Marko Živković. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013, pp. 109–128, here p. 115.

56 Hardt: “The Power to Be Affected”; Petrović: “O herojima, od ranog do poznog socijalizma, i dalje”; Tanja Petrović: “Alternative Cinematic and Literary Histories of Yugoslavia and ‘The Power to Be Affected’”, in: *Affect’s Social Lives: Post-Yugoslav Reflections*, ed. Ana Hofman and Tanja Petrović. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2023, pp. 165–191.

contemporary theory and practice of museology”<sup>57</sup>. However, they have recently embarked in a „series of attempts to tackle these claims and institutional anxiety in a different way”<sup>58</sup> – by curating exhibitions that represent “an important step in institutional history in terms of welcoming *ordinary peoples’ voices*, which were ignored in official histories.”<sup>59</sup>

Dismissing Yugo-nostalgia as a negative phenomenon that revitalizes most accessible, visible, banal, and kitschy aspects of the Yugoslav culture, Slapšak opts for another kind of nostalgia, based above all on “the legitimization of longing for Yugoslavia in intellectual circles.”<sup>60</sup> She thus gives intellectuals “permission” to long for Yugoslavia and “its real, productive, and still important achievements, some of which are directly inscribed in the present day world crisis: equality, the right to work, health insurance, gender equality, etc.”<sup>61</sup>, while simultaneously rejecting any possibility that other affectively engaged recollections of socialism may also articulate legitimate, reflective, and politically relevant claims.<sup>62</sup> Đurović similarly points to a useful and productive reading of the Yugoslav past:

Such readings luckily exist. ‘Left’ theoreticians, philosophers and artists are ever more numerous in every corner of the former SFRY, there are many wise heads at departments of important western European universities, they are writing books in which they point to sentimentalism and nostalgia as a problem that needs to be eliminated without forgetting all important aspects that can still unite the space that used to share Yugoslav experience. This space can be united not in some new territorial Yugoslavia, but in a new leftist politics, in a Yugofuturism that would expel Yugonostalgia forever.<sup>63</sup>

Gačević makes a similar juxtaposition, contrasting maintaining the memory of “banal, everyday objects bought in the time of socialism, summer holidays on the Adriatic Sea and shopping travels to Trieste” with “the memory of true heroes of socialism.”<sup>64</sup> He praises “all those who work as theoreticians and curators and organize conferences and exhibitions nurturing the memory culture about national

57 Neda Knežević: “Foreword”, in: *Hedgehog’s Home – Inventing a Better World*, ed. Mirjana Slavković and Sara Sopić. Belgrade, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2023, pp. 6–10, here p. 7.

58 Ibidem.

59 Ibidem. The emphasis is mine.

60 Slapšak: “Jugonostalgija i smeh”.

61 Ibidem.

62 See also Svetlana Slapšak: “Twin Cultures and Rubik’s Cube Politics: The Dynamics of Cultural Production in Pro-YU, Post-YU, and other YU Inventions”, in: *Südosteuropa* 59/3 (2011), pp. 301–314, here p. 312.

63 Đurović: “Revolucija malog Perice na Instagramu”.

64 Gačević: “Levica i jugonostalgija”.

heroes, men and women, who have worked on liberation of the country from the occupiers, on reconstruction of the country, on raising literacy rates and education of the people, on improving position of women, and many other things.”<sup>65</sup>

There is an obvious tension between this call to deal with “real heroes of socialism” and the gaze to which these heroes, together with other former Yugoslav citizens, are subjected when they claim the legitimacy of past socialist experience, the political importance of that socialist heroism, but also when they recall that past experience with emotional engagement – for example on commemorations or protests, when they carry symbols of socialist Yugoslavia. They are seen through the prism of irony and cynicism, while their claims are met with suspicion and a lack of belief in their sincerity. This is particularly true for the “heroes of late socialism” of the 1970s and the 1980s. Despite their sincere investment in the values Gačević lists in the above quote, they are usually seen as ‘nostalgics’, anachronistic, grotesque and stuck in the past.<sup>66</sup>

The fact that a majority of activists and left intellectuals denies Yugonostalgia any political potential does not speak much about the people who emotionally engage with the past, but rather points to a hegemonic gaze which doubts their authenticity and the sincerity of their belief in socialist ideals. This doubt and this disbelief are by no means specific to the post-Yugoslav space: William Mazzarella describes them as “an itch in the liberal imagination”, quoting the example of reactions to North Koreans’ tears for Kim Jong-Il, when Western media kept asking “Do they really mean it?”<sup>67</sup> The answer to this question was always negative – the North Koreans were either pretending because they were forced to express their emotions publicly, or they were being manipulated. While reason and affect are definite elements of sincerity,<sup>68</sup> they are denied to those who emotionally engage with the Yugoslav past and used as tools for delegitimization. A similar, class-based gaze is applied to the popular culture which has long been understood as the most propulsive generator of nostalgic sentiments among former Yugoslavs.<sup>69</sup>

65 Ibidem.

66 Vesna Adić: “Nevidljivi poklonici: Dan mladosti u Muzeju istorije Jugoslavije”, in *Muzeologija, nova muzeologija, nauka o baštini*. Belgrade – Kruševac: Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu – Muzej u Kruševcu, 2013, pp. 339–344.

67 William Mazzarella: “Totalitarian Tears: Does the Crowd Really Mean It?”, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 30/1 (2015), pp. 91–112, here p. 92.

68 Ibidem.

69 For a discussion about the potential of music to shed a new light on memory politics and practices in the post-Yugoslav context, see Ana Hofman: “Introduction to the Co-Edited Issue ‘Music, Affect and Memory Politics in the Post-Yugoslav Space’”, in: *Southeastern Europe* 39/2 (2015), pp. 145–164, and the articles in said Special Issue.

## CONCLUSION: REDIRECTING THE GAZE

Firmly associated not only with popular culture and commodified objects such as “fashion, food and other such things”<sup>70</sup>, but also with the notions of the past, remembering, and memory culture, Yugonostalgia as a generalized designation for a wide range of affective engagements with the past socialist experience is seen by the post-Yugoslav left as politically unproductive, anti-revolutionary and damaging for the future-oriented left politics.<sup>71</sup> For Bakić, “Yugonostalgia symbolises generalized, almost apolitical longing for the past and is a petit-bourgeois sentiment”, but she also considers Yugofuturism a trap for the left, because “it does not allow present-day leftists to step into the future with optimism. Obsessive dealing with Yugoslavia, with what it used to be and could be, blocks communist fantasy which (finally!) would not be connected to Yugoslavia.”<sup>72</sup>

There is, in contrast, an increasing number of researchers insisting on the importance of the possibility of imagining a future from the problem-space of Yugoslav socialism and its immediate experience,<sup>73</sup> as well as of those who, while acknowledging the epistemic strength of global and universalizing narratives such as those of post- and decoloniality, insist on “the concrete historical and material contexts in their dynamic and lived manifestations”<sup>74</sup> and on keeping the perspective that is historically specific and informed, that is, “in which time-bound and place-bound specificity counts.”<sup>75</sup> Xine Yao argues that emotional expression is not simply the signifier of a “universal human” but is deeply conditioned by the very operation of “humanity”, as it is itself based on an exclusion of the Other, to whom the very possibility of being included into this category is denied and whose feelings are

70 Primož Krašovec: “(Yugo)nostalgia”, in: *Atlas of Transformation*, 2011, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/yugonostalgia-primož-krasovec.html> (accessed on August 19, 2024).

71 See Todor Kuljić: *Manifest sećanja levice*. Belgrade: Clio, 2021, pp. 153–154.

72 Bakić: “Jugofuturizam kao zamka”.

73 See Tanja Petrović: *Yuropa: Jugoslovensko nasleđe i politike budućnosti u post-jugoslovenskim društvima*. Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2012; Kurtović: “An Archive to Build a Future”; Larisa Kurtović and Azra Hromadžić: “Cannibal States, Empty Bellies: Protest, History and Political Imagination in Post-Dayton Bosnia”, in: *Critique of Anthropology* 37/3 (2017), pp. 262–296; Hofman: *Glasba, politika, afekt*; Nadia El-Shaarawi and Maple Razsa: “Movements Upon Movements: Refugee and Activist Struggles to Open the Balkan Route to Europe”, in: *History and Anthropology* 30/1 (2019), pp. 91–112; for a broader post-socialist context, see: Dace Dzenovska and Nicholas De Genova: “Desire for the Political in the Aftermath of the Cold War”, in: *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 80/1 (2018), pp. 1–15; Scott: *Omens of Adversity*.

74 Hofman and Petrović: “Introduction”.

75 Maria Todorova: “On Public Intellectuals and Their Conceptual Frameworks”, in: *Slavic Review* 74/4 (2015), pp. 708–714, here p. 711.

not recognised as such.<sup>76</sup> In the post-Yugoslav context, debates over Yugonostalgia reveal class-based hierarchies and legitimization struggles, but this class dynamics remains unaddressed, silenced and ignored, even by those leftist intellectuals who insist on a historical materialism that understands class relations and inequalities as crucially defining for social life.

Can we think of an epistemologically and politically productive, but also more just and mutually supportive understanding of the affective engagements with the Yugoslav past, one that does not dismiss the experiences, desires and claims of those who engage, either because that past is part of their own biographical experience, or because they act as its archivists and see it as an inspiration? Can we think productively about the temporality of past–present–future<sup>77</sup> and go beyond the trope of ‘being stuck in the past’ which usually accompanies critical discourses of Yugonostalgia? For this, we first need an approach which does not treat as mutually exclusive epistemic positions an insistence on material production and class relations, and taking seriously into account lived experience in its complexity and ambiguity. That approach should also acknowledge not only the agency of those who emotionally engage with Yugoslav past, but also the capacity of that past to affect, and destabilize the fixed relationship between the temporal frames of past, present and future and teleological ideas of time passing. The recognition of this agency of things, feelings, and ideas from the past and its political potential has a long-lasting genealogy: it is central to Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of ‘futures past’, referring to the “onetime future of past generations or, more pithily, [...] a former future.”<sup>78</sup> Koselleck insists on the connection, as stated by Tribe, “between a chronological past, a lived present that was once an anticipated future, and expectations of the future.”<sup>79</sup> A related concept is ‘afterlife’, which became prevalent with its usage moving “away from longstanding meanings in religious, archaeological, and art studies”<sup>80</sup>, building instead upon Walter Benjamin’s reflection on ‘Nachleben’ connected to the idea that “works, lives, languages, and media possess a historicity that cannot be reduced to the continuum of temporal unfolding preferred by the nineteenth-century German historicism associated with such proper names

76 Xine Yao: *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Durham: Duke University Press 2021, p. 5.

77 Scott: *Omens of Adversity*.

78 Reinhart Koselleck: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 11.

79 Keith Tribe: “Translator’s Introduction”, in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, by Reinhart Koselleck. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. vii–xx, here p. x.

80 Nancy Rose Hunt: “Afterlives: A Trajectory and the Curatorial Turn”, in: *Allegra Lab*, May 2020, <https://allegralaboratory.net/afterlives-a-trajectory-and-the-curatorial-turn/> (accessed on August 19, 2024).



as Leopold von Ranke.”<sup>81</sup> This renewed academic interest in afterlives remains engaged with the affective and embodied workings of unresolved traces of the past, but has become increasingly linked to political affects. An important body of this research has been dedicated to the afterlives of socialist projects across the globe and the ability of their material, cultural, and political remains to transmit collective affects across time and space.<sup>82</sup> While ruins, residues, remains, relics, or memories occupy an important space in the imagination of socialism from its aftermath, inseparable from the notions of the end and failure, emotions which the socialist past still generates point to the “endings that are not over”<sup>83</sup>, and an agency that unfolds not as being caught or stuck in the past, but as “living on and after that both remains attached to what came before and [...] departs from it in ever-new directions.”<sup>84</sup> It is these future oriented, ever-new directions inseparable from the socialist past that deserve our attention.

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81 Gerhard Richter: *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 2–3.

82 Christina Schwenkel: *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, p. 8.

83 Avery Gordon: *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 139.

84 Richter: *Afterness*, p. 4.

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