



PART I

**RUPTURE AND THE ECONOMIES  
OF NOSTALGIA**



 1

## FROM ALGOS TO AUTONOMOS

Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania

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### Grief or Obsession?

What distinguishes nostalgia in Eastern Europe today? For one thing, that so many people agree that it exists, not only in individuals, in individual countries, but rather also as a regional phenomenon. One finds a curious agreement between external observers and the internal afflicted. Eastern Europe is nostalgic; it yearns.

But, why and for what is Eastern Europe yearning? Popular and scholarly representations may diverge in their particulars but they usually sketch what amounts to a standard history of the cultural effects of post-Socialist transformation. Here is how the narrative unfolds: Eastern Europe suffered a mighty cultural displacement in the aftermath of the events of 1989–1990. On the one hand, its borders and horizons opened. Yet, its internal lifeworlds were shaken and in some cases shattered, its populations unsettled in all senses of the term. Then, in the ensuing fifteen years, forces of change stormed across the region, moving, as weather mostly does, from West to East. Although it is difficult to plot the vectors of a tempest, the dominant historical forces at play in post-Socialist Eastern Europe have nevertheless been assembled under rubrics like: (neo)liberalism, late capitalism, globalization, marketization, Europeanization, technocratic governmentality, even, in my colleague Jakob Rigi's arresting phrase, a "chaotic mode of domination" (Nazpary 2001). A certain market-centered modernity, a modernity that state socialism had been straining to resist for decades, hit Eastern Europe fast and hard in the 1990s. And this was only the half of it. The other, not unrelated blow was the precipitous expansion of Western European sociopolitical imaginations and institutions into Eastern Europe, largely for economic and security reasons, although proceeding always under the banner of civilizational union and redemption.

Staggered, reeling under this double confrontation, observers found Eastern Europeans reaching backward, seeking to balance themselves. In the words of West German media entrepreneur Hubert Burda, “Looking for some support and stability in politically, culturally, and economically new worlds, these people [East Germans] demand emotional bridges to their own past.” Only in memory, then, could Eastern Europeans retrieve the senses of security and autonomy otherwise denied them as new market and governmental forms of sociality innocently filled the social and historical “vacuum” created by the collapse of totalitarian states. Thus, Eastern Europeans naturally tethered themselves to recalled, also always fantasied aspects of life before 1989 that seemed better—warmer, more human, safer, more moral—than the chaos and devolution of life today.

Enter the epidemiology of nostalgia. In his remarkable 1688 medical dissertation for the University of Basel, Johannes Hofer coined the term *nostalgia* by combining two Greek terms—*nostos* (the return home) and *algos* (grief)—to identify a pathological variant of the common condition known to his contemporaries simply as *Heimweh* (homesickness). To validate his neologism, Hofer explained that *Heimweh* itself was not lexically adequate to the task of medical diagnosis. But then, almost apologetically, Hofer offered the less-celebrated terms, *nostomania* and *philopatridomania*, obsession with the return home or with love of the fatherland, as equivalents for those dissatisfied with his first choice (1934: 380–81). Hofer’s diagnosis, gathered under the term *nostalgia*, thus signals both grief and obsession with a return to the place of origin. Nostalgia concerns the autophagous desire to deny the truth of the present by returning to a source. For Hofer, this source was explicitly *Heimat* (home) and nation—his medical analysis of nostalgia was humoral and climatological and centered on the aggravation of mental spirits and fibers acclimated to a certain territory when the afflicted undertook extended travel (note that “extended” travel in Hofer’s life-world could mean 50 km or even less). The afflicted, meanwhile, could only be cured by returning to their native climate.

In the postmedical era of nostalgia, however, we confront a less corporeal notion of grief and obsession. Also, a less territorialized one—today, nostalgia most often appears discursively not as a search for a place, a home or nation, but as a sociotemporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life (as Kant put it, for our youth). In this respect, post-Socialist nostalgia is most often interpreted not literally as a desire to return to state socialism per se. Instead, it is understood as a desire to recapture what life was at that time, whether innocent, euphoric, secure, intelligible. In other words, such nostalgia is understood as a psycho-

logical or emotional prop, a “coping behavior,” what sympathetic West Germans in my experience described to me as a “completely understandable” defense mechanism for people who lived half their lives in a state-imposed stasis only to have all those certainties, true and false, swept away in the second half of their lives by the uncomfortable forces and, of course, “realities,” of life in a market-centered society.

The standard history closes with the prosthesis of memory stabilizing the shaken Eastern European, a figure whose past trauma casts into doubt his/her capacity to function effectively as a historical actor in the future. The narrative has a decidedly liberalist tinge to it, but one must admit that it is not a bad description of the facts in some respects. Perhaps its chief virtue beyond descriptive accuracy is that it is so intuitively familiar, both because it has been well publicized as a mode of legitimating projects of external intervention into Eastern Europe and because it taps into long-standing narratives of Eastern European past-orientation and backwardness that have exercised powerful historical influence over social identities in Eastern Europe, particularly regarding their relationship to the West (Boyer 2006; Glaeser 2000). Let me offer a few necessary corrections to this story that could help us to sharpen our attention to the phenomenon in sentiment and discourse we have come to know as Eastern European nostalgia, or better yet, “nostomania,” which, I think, better captures the obsessional essence of Hofer’s initial diagnosis.

### **Five Theses on Eastern European Nostalgia (*Nostomania*)**

#### *Nostalgia Is Heteroglossic*

To borrow Bakhtin’s terms, upon close analysis it becomes clear that nostalgia is by no means the kind of “unitary language” or stable and internally consistent discourse that is often described, for example, in international news journalism (1981: 270–71). All of us who have lived or worked in post-Socialist Eastern Europe are familiar with talk of “how life once was” uttered in distinction to some judgment on the present. Here are just three brief examples selected from among countless similar dialogues during my research in the former GDR between 1996 and 2002. My friend Albert tells me, speaking of journalism, “You know, although there was enormous surveillance of our work back then, at least it had a purpose. In this system you have a formal freedom but nothing ever goes anywhere.” On another occasion, a former GDR satirist tells me that you can judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable members: “The strong will find their way in any so-

ciety, but socialism did a much better job of caring for the weak than this *Leistungsgesellschaft* (performance-based society) does. One should judge a society by how it cares for its weakest members." Finally, my friend Karl, ruminating glumly upon the successes and failures of his professional life, says, "You know, some day, as this society gets harder and harder, the West Germans are going to realize that the values, the *Menschlichkeit* (humanity), we had the in the GDR was good."

So, no one can dispute that the discourse phenomenon exists. But I think it is mistaken to assume that such talk transparently signals a grief for, or obsession with, the past, even when speakers themselves gloss their talk as "nostalgic" in character. Beneath the surface of speech, we should work to recognize and represent the dialogical gossamer of idiosyncratic references, interests, and affects that are channeled through nostalgic discourse. There are speech situations, of course, when such talk may represent precisely a grief for a faded past. But there are other times when it is deployed, for example in political rhetoric, to mobilize a present- or future-oriented project of identification and belonging. And, still other cases when such talk is less about transacting meaning and more about coordinating or cultivating intimacy through shared expression, a part of speech used to signal and bind "us-ness," as in the case of two friends commiserating over the trials of life over coffee or beer. At the level of sign and discourse alone, one should be suspicious at talk of the ubiquity and uniformity of nostalgic expression in Eastern Europe without even raising the more vexing issue as to whether the "sentiments" of nostalgia such discourse is assumed to represent are uniform as well. Finally, we must understand the gesture to define nostalgia as a unitary language as an interested and therefore political speech act in its own right that seeks to dampen down nostalgia's actual heteroglossic character and to give it the appearance of a shared discourse and consciousness that typifies Eastern Europe as a cultural unity.

### *Nostalgia Is Indexical*

It is common enough to consider nostalgia as a descriptive, evaluative or, even analytical practice; in other words, as a way of grappling with the presence of the (external) world through a past-oriented medium of expression. But nostalgia is also an indexical practice, a mode of inhabiting the lived world through defining oneself situationally and positionally in it. And, therefore, as a kind of discourse that is evoked to create and maintain social distinctions between groups and between persons, it can never be entirely separated from ongoing politics of

identification and belonging both inside and outside Eastern Europe. In these politics, accusations and embraces of nostalgia are never value neutral. Consider, for example, the small castes of social elites across Eastern Europe who quite willingly identified themselves with the external business, professional, and political interests that moved into the region in the 1990s. These are also the eastern citizens—owing to their acceptance of a particular future orientation desired by the arriving powers—who are normally exempted from association with nostalgia. If anything, they are the ones who claim legitimacy as social elites based precisely on their ability and desire to extricate their fellow citizens from their endemic past-orientation and backwardness. In a place like Eastern Germany, many of the most vociferous publicists and critics of so-called East German nostalgia (*Ostalgie*) are not West Germans, but rather the liberal wing of the former GDR civil rights movement, who count among their membership the current Chancellor Angela Merkel. Parenthetically, I participated recently in a podium discussion for Berlin public radio on East German nostalgia where another speaker was Marianne Birthler, the current special representative of the German government charged with managing the enormous archive of Stasi files. Herself born and raised in the GDR, Birthler drew a sharp distinction between the East German citizen of the future and the nostalgic *Ossi*. She said that she had “no sympathy” for people who clung to the past so desperately that they were willing to glorify a “perverse” and “oppressive” regime. She offered instead a number of exemplary tales of East Germans who had rightly chosen to put that past behind them and to embrace the “new possibilities” of a democratic state. Such discourse on East German nostalgia from GDR-born elites, heavily seasoned as it is with the public Western liberalism of individual choice, rights, and accountabilities, both legitimates their position as spokespersons of a “more healthy” East German identity and performs work on behalf of the dominant interests in West German political culture to delegitimize as “nostalgic” those East German voices that seek greater discussion of inequalities and legacies of the unification process or that, once upon a time, even sought alternatives to the West German colonial status quo.

#### *Nostalgia Is Allochronic*

Anyone who has read Larry Wolff’s (1994) wonderful history of the constitution of “Eastern Europe” as an object within the social imagination of the Enlightenment should realize that contemporary nostalgia talk participates in a civilizational discourse of the *longue durée* that

offers the solid lump of Eastern European pastness as the base point from which Western Europe charts its lightness, its futurity, indeed its very "Europeanness." We should thus recognize that the facticity of Eastern European nostalgia is every bit as vital for Western European sociopolitical imagination as it might be for local or individual senses of belonging in Russia, Poland, or Romania. The idea that nostalgia "belongs" somehow exclusively or even especially to Eastern Europe is pernicious, an aspect of the persistent allochronization (that is, temporal displacement) of Eastern Europe into the imagined margins of the urban, industrial, and scientific centers of Western European modernity. According to these centers, how could Eastern Europe be anything else other than past-fixated? For one thing, its pastness is genetically constitutive of Western futures. For another, if the polities of Eastern Europe were capable of generating and governing their own futurity, what would that say about the legitimacy of the long historical project of Western Europe to colonize and civilize the territories and polities lying between it and its perpetual civilizational nemesis, China? Paraphrasing the anxiety at slavery and social domination simmering within the kettle of European Enlightenment, Montesquieu once mused, "It is impossible for us to assume that these people [Negroes] are men, because if we assumed they were men, one would begin to believe that we ourselves were not Christians" (1989[1748]: 250). Eastern Europe's humanity poses a similar problem for Western Europe's humanism. We must therefore recognize that a Western desire to identify nostalgia and kindred modes of past-fixation in the East as part of the conditions of possibility of, and motivation for, our analysis.

### *Nostalgia Is Symptomal*

This point, in essence, encapsulates the three previous corrections. But what kind of symptom is it? Critics as diverse as Arjun Appadurai (1996), Svetlana Boym (2002), and Frederic Jameson (1989) have characterized nostalgia as a modern symptom. They helpfully diagnose the temporal and spatial displacements of modern social relations domesticated at the level of social consciousness in the subject yearning for past or future utopia. They thus reference the subject of modern *Entfremdung* (estrangement) that Hegel and Marx articulated with such dialectical vigor. Recall that Marx's estranged subject displaced his failed knowledge of present social relatedness into the institutional fantasies of transcendental salvation (religion), autonomous humans (liberalism), and socialized objects (fetishism). Yet, even historical materialism revealed a symptomal communitarian fantasy in its futurist imagination of "com-



munism” as world-historical transcendence of alienation. Nostalgia is surely a symptom in these terms, but the limitation of the *Entfremdung* argument is that it lacks historical specificity. It can explain a basic epistemic disposition toward nostalgia, but not necessarily why nostalgia seems so pervasive in Eastern Europe today. I would argue, following upon the discussion of allochrony above, that we should regard Eastern European nostalgia always also as a *postimperial symptom*, a symptom of the increasingly manic need in Western Europe to fix Eastern Europe in the past. The key point here is that Western Europe has been aware since its phase of imperial dissolution and retraction in the 1950s and 1960s that it no longer governs its own futurity either. What is the post-1960s European fascination with “postmodernity” if not a recognized and repressed sign that modernity has become significantly plurinodal—that the remains of European empire, notably places like the United States, Japan, China, and India have pushed Europe significantly into their own margins of intellectual and material productivity? Personally, I am fond of the Deleuzian rhizome and the Foucauldian network of enablement (*pouvoir*), but they efface, as it is the enterprise of philosophy to do, their social conditions of origin, here in a destabilized Western European intellectual culture. These are cybernetic-semiological theories of power that sought (and continue to seek) to suppress the growing global dispersement and marginalization of Western European authority around them. In fact, Western Europe is not just becoming one node in a distributed network of power, but also a *significantly lesser* node—no longer the indisputable “surplus power” of Foucault’s sovereign, but rather an evaporating center whose own futurity can now be questioned. In this postimperial environment, the need for Eastern Europe as a *still lesser* node, a space that Western Europe can still suppose itself to dominate, has been vital. Indeed, the post-1989 Western European obsession with Eastern Europe’s obsession with the past must be understood as an anxious lateral signal that the pastness of Eastern Europe can no longer be taken for granted. It is routinely observed these days that politically, economically, and technologically, Eastern Europe (or at least parts thereof) are poised to leapfrog the West into the liberal global future. Such a fear of Eastern civilizational advancement has harried Western Europe at least since the Enlightenment. And, what could have been more unsettling for Western European states than when the proverbial village idiot of the West (Bush-era US diplomacy) looked to Europe and pronounced that it saw “newness” in the East?

If you are looking for a familiar example of what these anxious signals look like, think of the rather desperate embrace throughout the West of the film, *The Lives of Others*. On filmic grounds, personally I

find it a rather mediocre effort, unlike, say, *Goodbye, Lenin!*, another West German film about the GDR, which offers a very well-crafted and -executed farce. When I interview friends and colleagues about what precisely they like about *The Lives of Others*, the answer is usually something concerning its “universal human message” (of the struggle between creativity and power, faith and disillusionment, trial and redemption, between spirit and system). I’m not disputing a universalist thematics in the film’s narrative, of course. But I would suggest that the political fantasy of the film tells a rather more specific story. From the first moments of the film (black screen, the sound of boots marching with military precision down a hall) the East German party-state is depicted as rife with the despotism, corruption, and moral degeneracy that has been the semiopolitical burden of the East since the Enlightenment. True, signs of humanity and decency stir here and there in the East, even, as it turns out, within the state security apparatus itself. But the seedlings are stunted in the socialist gloom and only truly flourish after 1989. In this respect the last scenes in the film are particularly telling. Justice and the rule of law only appear to emerge in the context of the absorption of the former GDR into the Federal Republic. Even the good Stasi-man finally receives his due with the help of the investigative apparatus of the West German state. Please note that the West German presence in these West German films about the GDR is always minimized as a technical, enabling presence, a prosthesis for East Germans to do what they supposedly would have wanted to do anyway—that is, to release their long repressed yet “natural” liberal ambitions. This suppression of the mediating governmental agenda and interests of Western market liberalism is precisely what gifts the political fantasy of the film its symptomatic universalism. But, to be clear, the fantasy falls short of a “universal human message” in that it does not communicate effectively outside Western liberalism, and, more to point, to many former GDR citizens, the very subjects of this history. My friend, Albert, who both was the target of a Stasi OPK proceeding and also a successful professional ravaged by doubt and despair about the GDR—in other words, more or less the protagonist position of the film—wrote to me that he watched the film as though he were watching a movie about a foreign country (later he said he identified with the film *The Queen* as much as with *The Lives of Others*). He summed up his review pithily: “Was da gezeigt wird hat es alles gegeben. Aber eben SO WAR ES NICHT. Es stimmen 1000 Details nicht.” (Everything that was portrayed in the film happened. But it didn’t happen LIKE THAT. 1000 details were off.)

*Nostalgia Always Carries with It a Politics of the Future*

The crucial problem with ceasing our analysis of the sentimental cultures of post-Socialist Eastern Europe at terms like *nostalgia* and *nostomania* is their analytic closure around a sign of pastness. To put it bluntly, these sentiments and discourses have, in the final analysis, no more to do with the past than with the future, no more to do with the desire to return to a remembered or idealized past than with the project of defining and claiming autonomy in the present.

**Politics of the Future**

Returning to the end of the seventeenth century, Johannes Hofer completed his dissertation on nostalgia with the following story: “Thus not long since it was told me by a Parisian that he himself had an Helvetian bound servant who was sad and melancholy at all times so that he began to work with lessened desire; finally, he came to him and sought dismissal with insistent entreaties, of which he could have no hope beyond him. When the merchant granted this immediately, the servant changed from sudden joy, excused from his mind these phantasma for several days, and after a while remained in Paris, broken up no longer by this disease” (1934: 390).

What Hofer located as a sort of anecdotal remainder to his thesis contains, as is often the case, the key to reimagining the entire diagnosis. The freed Helvetian longed not for a return to his place of origin—even though this is what both he and his master were convinced afflicted him—he longed instead for the right of future-determination. Having won this right, he surprised all parties, including doubtless the admirable Dr. Hofer, by remaining precisely where he was.

In my opinion, Eastern European nostalgia contains a similar secret. Perhaps it ultimately has less to do with the recovery of a past or past-phantom than, as in the case of the Helvetian servant, with the politics of the future. The moral here is not to doubt either *algos* or mania in post-Socialist Eastern Europe. Both, I think it is safe to say, abound. What we should doubt is that the primary object of reference for either of them is *nostos*, the return home (Berdahl 1999: 201–2). What I think we are witnessing instead in Eastern European nostalgia are tropes of idealized pastness that set out to accomplish two very contemporary projects in communication and knowledge: (1) to signal and voice estrangement from the fact that post-Socialist transformation in Eastern Europe has been a process steered by social and political interests

largely lying outside Eastern Europe, and, (2) to make a claim upon a right of future self-determination. Given the social reality of contemporary Eastern Europe, it should be clear to us why both these projects are vitally important and so contingent as to give rise to a repetitive practice of signaling that is easily interpreted as either full of grief or obsessive. So, *algos* and mania, yes, but with the core referent of *autonomos* (self-rule) rather than *nostos*.

Am I not quibbling over semiotics? I don't think so. Circling back to points made above, the very real propensity of Eastern Europe to govern and to direct its own future is powerfully suppressed within a discourse environment where Eastern European citizens' estrangement from the external steering of their social transformation is labeled (also autolabeled) nostalgic, where "modernizing" Eastern European elites persistently apologize for the nostalgia of their fellow Eastern European citizens, where Western European elites accept such apologies as tokens of reassurance that Eastern Europe is still the way it always has been—that is, full of productive promise, slow to develop, prone to anticivilizational tendencies, and, always in need of developmental attention from the West. This discourse environment extends beyond Western Europe, of course. The funniest, also saddest, thing to me about the recent global Borat craze is not its exposition of the anticivilizational underbelly of the United States, but with the way that underbelly—and by extension many others who laughed in recognition—found it rather unexceptional that Eastern Europe would represent itself as a space of degenerated modern humanity rife with rape, incest, filth, murder, Jew-hunting, Gypsy-baiting, and so on and on. US theaters were filled with people who didn't entirely get the joke of what Yurchak (2006) might call the "overidentifying parody" of Borat, perhaps precisely because the caricature was already so thoroughly banal. Irony only works, after all, at a distance, when a gap between sign and subject can be recognized.

A good direction for our analytical work on Eastern European nostalgia is toward an impact with such caricatures. Like any schema in knowledge, it cannot be shattered through force of argument alone, since through institutions and the "spontaneous consent" of its targets it generates a sufficient evidentiary and interpretive basis to sustain its reasonableness. After all, can we not find many Eastern Europeans seemingly eager to announce their nostalgia? So why am I creating so much trouble over what seems like a nakedly empirical problem? Because it is also an *ideological* problem. What Žižek, for example, terms "everyday spontaneous ideology" is the repression of the historical contingencies of knowing in order to produce the sense of epistemic

universality requisite for action (1994). The nostalgic Eastern European (as unitary subject of unitary language) is, in a very important way, an ideological necessity of postimperial Western Europe, a suppressed recognition of a constitutive practice of domination upon which the imagination of Western European (and also more generally Western) freedom, autonomy, and futurity is contingent.

So, chronicling the self-knowledge, even the critical knowledge, of Eastern Europe as channeled through nostalgic estrangement seems not quite the right scale of response. Put another way, it is a necessary but not a sufficient response. The ethnography of nostalgia is an important project, but it should also be a symmetrical ethnography that takes seriously the *Mania* of past-fixation issuing from Western metropolitan centers of intellectual production and circulation. It also needs to be a critical ethnography that disengages this mania from *nostos* and grasps instead the hovering desire for *autonomos* both historical and contemporary, both in Eastern and Western Europe.

Let me emphasize this point. I am not arguing that Western Europe is solely responsible for generating the figure of the nostalgic Eastern European. I am suggesting instead that we view this figure as the fault-line between two politics of the future, two projects of *autonomos*. As things stand, these projects are at cross-purposes and their conflict is epistemically generative in ways we do not yet fully grasp.

In the end, all I am really arguing is that we should listen to nostalgia discourse more carefully. That is, we should take seriously the fact that nostalgia talk in many contexts means something more or other than resignation to “westernization” and melancholy for how much better or easier or younger life once was. I interpret much nostalgia talk in Eastern Europe as precisely the opposite of this—nostalgia’s obsessional method of past insistence can also serve as a way of drawing attention to an emergent politics of the future that is by no means settled.

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