Book Reviews

The Troubled Pasts of Postcommunism:
Shore, Marci


Stan, Lavinia


In Eastern Europe, the communist past has often been approached in public debates and political programs by way of policies such as lustration or providing access to the files of the former regime's secret police. The post-1989 period is rife with vicious polemics on whom, how, and why to purge based on involvement with the powerstructures of the now defunct state socialist regime. Many times, however, the actors of these public skirmishes or scholars forget that participation in the communist modernization project was pervasive. It went much deeper than the majority of these debates were and are prepared to accept. Commenting on the uproar caused in Poland by the 2007 lustration law, historian Marci Shore rightly remarks that, taking into account the specific clauses and formulations of the legislation, one could very well conclude that “it was safer now – as it had been then [before 1989] – to have been one of Havel's greengrocers” (320). In similar fashion, political scientist Lavinia Stan emphasizes that compromise was the defining feature of life during communism. People turned “a blind eye to injustice on relatives, neighbors, and friends, downgrading their life expectations, living parallel solitudes that often drew little support from within and outside immediate family, and even silently rejoicing when their enemies and rivals got in trouble with authorities” (7–8). An additional factor makes things ever more complicated: belief. Maybe such an ingredient was less relevant from the seventies onwards, but it truly was a legitimizing motif from the 1930s well into the 1960s. Or, as one person in Marci Shore’s book candidly admits, during those times “communism was sexy” (203). With all this in mind, one should not be surprised that straightforward policy recommendations or simple invocations
of righteousness cannot solve the riddle of the past. The twentieth century continues to trouble individuals and collectivities torn in a torturous realm between innocence and guilt.

Marci Shore's *The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe* and Lavinia Stan's *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* are two different but highly complementary books. Stan’s volume is a detailed analysis of the interactions between civil society, state institutions, and political actors in the process of formulating policies to address the communist past. Though a case study, Stan engages a wide range of literature dealing with repression, post-1989 transitional politics, truth commissions, retributive and restorative justice, as well as social trust and civic consolidation. On her part, Shore offers a highly personal account of the tribulations of post-communist societies and individuals in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and especially Poland. I would contend that Shore’s stories, interviews, and insights counterbalance and temper Stan’s bird’s eye view of the dynamics of redressing the past.

There are nevertheless important thematic differences. Shore commits a significant amount of pages to the excruciating dilemmas faced by Polish Jews in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and of communism. Maybe because of her narratological approach (Jarausch and Geyer 2003), Shore embraces a continuous understanding of the twentieth century. Stan too stresses that the process of coming to terms with the past in Romania (or for that matter across the region) is complicated by a continuum of traumatic historical periods. She however does not factor in the impact of such sequencing of troubled times into her analysis of the politics of transitional justice. Many of the stories of the post-1989 years were determined by the communist experience. But a significant amount of the post-1945 interpersonal entanglements began long before the war, as Shore rightly notices. Stan, for example, starts with 1940, as the threshold year for when one has to make things right again. It is surprising that the 1930s do not factor in the story. After all, the first dictatorship, the anti-Semitic laws in interwar Romania, or expropriations of Jewish property began in 1938.

1 Though Shore does not offer a methodological justification of her approach, I believe that she would endorse Konrad Jarasch’s remark that “The social constitution of memory suggests a narratological approach that would treat individual tales as stories, asking about their emplotment to unlock their meaning” (319). *The Taste of Ashes* is dominated by the voice of its characters, as the voice of the scholar/author often fades into the background.