

Olivia Angé – David Berliner
(eds.). *Anthropology and Nostalgia*

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Recently, one might feel rather overwhelmed by the more or less hysteric claims about a ‘loss of culture’. Verbal threats of ‘losing’ or ‘diluting culture’, traditions, and roots appear in social media, as well as in everyday conversations, or, for example, music performances. For anthropologists, there is nothing new in this pre-apocalyptic rhetoric (as they have themselves used it and spread it in the past), although many have become increasingly uncomfortable with it, says David Berliner (p. 19), who has published, together with Olivia Angé, an edited volume called *Anthropology and Nostalgia*.

Berliner, Professor of Anthropology at Université Libre de Bruxelles, whose main research interests include social memory (2005), cultural transmission, and the politics of heritage (2012), observes that: “losing culture is a nostalgic figure as old as anthropology. As much as continuity is a key idea for social scientists (Berliner 2010, Robbins 2007), our discipline has, from its birth, held on to nostalgia for disappearing worlds, far away or close to home, as in the case of folklorists (Bendix 1997)” (p. 19). In the thought-provoking first chapter called *Are Anthropologists Nostalgist?* (pp. 17–34), Berliner argues that anthropologists hardly escape nostalgic forms of thinking and writing (although many refuse to be associated with the trope of a vanishing culture) because of what he calls *disciplinary exo-nostalgia*. According to him, nostalgia continues to inform major

aspects of the production of anthropological knowledge.

It is exactly this statement in the book which triggered my curiosity the most. Although I find the whole collective monography – which presents various ethnographic case studies exploring how nostalgic discourses and practices work in different social and cultural environments – to be a very interesting and contributive work worth appraisal, I will focus on the Berliner’s chapter, as surely, it is valuable for all anthropologists, as well as other social scientists or historians, no matter their research interest. I would even recommend including it on the list of compulsory literature for anthropology students who are deciding to undertake their first field-work.

David Berliner understands nostalgia as “a specific [emotional and cognitive] posture vis-à-vis the past seen as irreversible, a set of publicly displayed discourses, practices and emotions where the ancient is somehow glorified and considered lost forever, without necessarily implying the experience of first-hand memories” (p. 21). Drawing on Herzfeld’s ‘structural nostalgia’ (1997), he first turns our attention to the longing of immense numbers of young patriots from different corners of the world for a country they have usually not known, and that probably never existed. Then, evoking Arjun Appadurai’s term ‘armchair nostalgia’ (1996: 78) for a nostalgia without a lived experience or collective historical memory, Berliner points on examples of lamenting the vanishing of other people’s past and culture during his field research in the Lao PDR (Berliner 2012): from tourists complaining that locals do not even wear their traditional

clothes anymore up to UNESCO experts, whose policies significantly contribute to the dissemination of the trope of a vanishing heritage around the world (p. 19). Therefore, Berliner suggests distinguishing between two basic nostalgic postures: between 'endo-nostalgia' for the past one has lived personally and the vicarious 'exo-nostalgia' for a past not experienced personally, nonetheless triggering affects such as indignation, anger, or pain (p. 21).

Berliner shows how the primitivist exo-nostalgic discourse of 'being late', 'witnessing the disappearing native', or 'they must be studied now or never' and 'documented for posterity', has played a dominant role in the history of anthropology, being found in the ethnographies by Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Evans Pritchard, Marcel Griaule or Claude Lévi-Strauss, among many others. Without minimizing the historical facts of brutal colonization and ethnocides, he points to the fact that the so-called traditional societies were *a priori* thought of as unable to resist changes. Anthropologists mostly portrayed themselves as observers and as the prophetic announcers of a cultural disaster soon to happen. Nevertheless, many diagnoses of cultural loss proved later to be wrong. One example is Berliner's own field research among the Baga fifty years after French anthropologist Denise Paulme's claim of 'being too late' in the 1950s. Berliner interprets this theoretical perspective, which soon became a practice institutionalized in university departments and materialized in museum object collections as a form of critique of the present, as a quality often recognized in nostalgia, be it 'imperialist nostalgia' (Rosaldo 1989) or not.

Anthropologists from the major traditions slowly abandoned this exo-nostalgic posture based on the belief in pristine cultural essences seen as disappearing, and substituted it with a discourse on the 'ability of societies to resist erosion' (p. 25), which manifests itself through a copious use of notions such as memory (Berliner 2005), revival, invented traditions, etc. However, their discourses are, according to Berliner, "still crafted within nostalgic narratives" (p. 27), even if transformed. First, he finds the newer expressions of exo-nostalgia in longing for the 'local'. He sees the notion of 'local' as emotionally loaded, replacing the no-longer-politically correct 'indigenous', and believes that many anthropologists, including himself, have "nowadays nostalgized the particular and heterogeneous" (p. 28). Reflecting on his own field research in Luang Prabang, he claims that "anthropologists still need their 'savages', their particular and heterogeneous locals against the idea of undifferentiated modernity" (p. 29). This theoretical stance reflects itself in the choice of the research subjects and in the insistence on the key method of participant observation. According to Berliner, "participant observation functions precisely as a nostalgic quest for intimacy and sincerity with locals (although actual fieldwork can be riddled with conflicts and lies)." (p. 29). Therefore, he provocatively asks: "Have we not nostalgized our methodology itself?" (ibid.).

Moreover, Berliner sees the disciplinary exo-nostalgia – "an indignation and a theoretical stance in front of irreversible loss" (p. 30) – to be deep-rooted in the anthropologists' long-term attachment to the poor, weak and powerless, facing social

instability, urban poverty, migration, war, and political disempowerment. As some of the examples he mentions, he evokes the supposedly pre-apocalyptic tone in the ethnography of crack dealers by Bourgois (2003) or the call to militant anthropology by Sheper-Hughes (1995) based on the idea that anthropology must be a discipline useful to its powerless subjects of research. For him, it interestingly reveals how nostalgia is a specific form of engagement with the future, crafted within horizons of expectations in the present, intertwined with the hope and desire to imagine another, better world.

Surely, Berliner's well-written text might give rise to some questions: e.g., if his understanding of nostalgia is still not too broad, although the chapter and the book seem to aim for the opposite. However, I find it thought-stimulating, provoking self-reflection (I, indeed, must admit that according to Berliner's chapter, I have been quite exo-nostalgic myself). I do believe that nostalgia in our discipline must be reflected upon, not only because it can reveal a lot about our present theoretical and methodological choices, but also because only then can we try to understand and to interpret the nostalgia of others, which is the aim of the subsequent chapters of the book.

In the introductory chapter called *Anthropology of Nostalgia – Anthropology as Nostalgia* (pp. 1–16), David Berliner and Olivia Angé (who is an Associate Researcher at the Sociology of Development and Change Group, Wageningen University) mention the Czech hero of Milan Kundera's novel *L'ignorance*. Josef is suffering from a 'lack of nostalgia' (Kundera 2005: 87), but Angé and Berliner

observe the exact contrary in many parts of the world: "there seems to be a current overdose of nostalgia, a reaction to the modern 'accelerism' [...]" (p. 2). Proving the editors' statement, the following eight chapters take the reader on a fascinating ethnographic ride to Argentina, Cyprus, Spain, Germany, Lithuania, Russia, and Hungary. Overdosed with so many diverse forms and contexts of nostalgia, one actually might find it a "central characteristic of our age", as one of the reviewers on the back of the book suggests (or at least an "undeniable part of modern experience", as suggested by another).

As much as the Holocaust has become a paradigm for research in memory studies, previous works on nostalgia have been "paradigmatically 'Eastern European'" (p. 1). Therefore, it is not a coincidence that five of the eight chapters deal with Central and Eastern European post-socialist contexts:

Gediminas Lankauskas (who is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Regina, Canada) describes and interprets an almost surreal 'commemorative performance' of '1984: The Survival Drama' in the Bunker, an experiential-immersive theme park located underground near Vilnius in the fascinating chapter *Missing Socialism Again? The Malaise of Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Lithuania* (pp. 35–60).

Maya Nadkarni (Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Swarthmore College) and Olga Shevchenko (Associate Professor of Sociology at Williams College) provide an excellent comparative analysis of *The Politics of Nostalgia in the Aftermath of Socialism's Collapse*, drawing examples from Russia and Hungary, locating the

power of nostalgia within the ability of politicians to accumulate political capital out of nostalgic content (pp. 61–95). A different approach to the field of Hungarian nostalgia is undertaken by Chris Hann (Director of the Department of Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle) who revealingly describes the cultural practice of *Crying Back the National Past in Hungary*, and explains why in the case of this country, *Post-imperial Trumps Post-socialist* nostalgia (pp. 96–122), causing an Aha! moment in the Czech reader's mind, puzzled by the seemingly incomprehensible current events taking place not so far away from her.

Interpreting the local boom of private museums of everyday life objects from GDR and the steady reappearance of GDR-era brands, Jonathan Bach (Chair of the Global Studies Program at The New School in New York City) discusses the famous ambivalent phenomenon of *Ostalgie* – the cultural practice of *Consuming Communism: Material Cultures of Nostalgia in Former East Germany* (pp. 123–138). I find his insightful interpretation using e.g. Michael Herzfeld's (1997) concept of cultural intimacy to be very useful. Another example of nostalgia from Germany is presented by Petra Rethmann (Professor of Anthropology at McMaster University, Canada) in her chapter *The Withering of Left-Wing Nostalgia?* (pp. 198–212). Interestingly locating her ethnographic field in the auditorium of a conference entitled *Kommunismus*, organized in Berlin in 2010 with keynote speakers such as Antonio Negri, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou. On this example, Rethmann explores two manifestations of

'left-wing nostalgia' and their attempt to re-imagine a fair future.

Hunted by a different spectre than communism, Turkish and Greek Cypriots engage in remembering their island's partition. Although we usually associate nostalgia with memory, the important chapter *Nostalgia and the Discovery of Loss: Essentializing the Turkish Cypriot Past* (pp. 155–177) by Rebecca Bryant (A. N. Hadjiyannis Senior Research Fellow in the European Institute at the London School of Economics) studies the relationship between nostalgia and forgetting. According to Bryant, "the object of nostalgia has the status of the forgotten – the lost, the irretrievable, the impossible object of memory" (p. 155). She claims that nostalgia emerges most at times of rapid social change, liminality, and confusion because its basic function is to essentialize – to portray ourselves to ourselves in ways we would like to see ourselves, to portray to us some (imagined) essence that has been irretrievably lost. Therefore, nostalgia represents not a longing for a forgotten past, but rather a *longing for essentialism*, a longing for a simplified, clear, and secure representation of ourselves that appears to have been lost in the reconstitution of the community (p. 156 and 172). It may also be "strategically deployed to define thresholds, boundaries and hence orientation towards the future" (p. 172).

Validating Bryant's statement, the chapter *Social and Economic Performativity of Nostalgic Narratives in Andean Barter Fairs* (pp. 178–197) by Olivia Angé shows how – during economic exchanges between Highland and Lowland peasants in Argentina – the repeated allusions to the ancestors' code of exchange and the

vanishing balanced reciprocity contribute to essentializing ethnic identities in a context of social liminality. Moreover, Angé interestingly reveals how peasants mobilize these strategic utterances (as ‘nostalgic discursive devices’) during barter haggling to increase their rewards.

Joseph Josy Lévy and Inaki Olazabal (both anthropologists teaching at Université du Québec à Montréal) evoke the very first meaning of nostalgia as a longing for a lost geographical home. In their chapter *The Key from (to) Sefarad: Nostalgia for a Lost Country* (pp. 139–154), they explore the persistent presence of narratives and images of the powerful symbolic object of La llave, the key to the lost ancestral house which Sephardic Jews are said to have carried throughout their exile following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. The story of the key continues to thrive, as it is mobilized by Spanish politicians to restore relationships with Jewish communities around the world, as well as by travel agencies to develop tourism.

The book surely fulfills the aims of its authors to push the discussion around nostalgia in four directions: First, “to clarify the notional fog surrounding the label” (p. 5). Second, to describe “the concrete fabric of nostalgia in interactions, facts of communication, places and times, and through texts, objects and technologies” (p. 7). Third, to capture the transformative aspect of nostalgia as “a force that does something” (p. 9). And fourth, to capture how “nostalgia always carries with it a politics of the future” (p. 11).

Nostalgia has been an ethnographic puzzle for anthropologists, sometimes rather an unwelcome guest. In his prophetic Afterword *On Anthropology’s*

Nostalgia – Looking Back/Seeing Ahead (pp. 213–224), William Cunningham Bissell (Associate Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Lafayette College) recalls his surprise when his local interlocutors in Zanzibar at the turn of the millennium spoke of the colonial urban past in explicitly nostalgic terms. As a US-trained African studies and anthropology scholar immersed in post-colonial critiques, these were not exactly the sort of sentiments he expected to hear – indeed, quite the opposite. Nor, at the time, did he know quite what to do with these discourses, as he confesses: “Should I dismiss these claims? Simply ignore them?” (p. 213). Although at that time, studies of remembrance were undergoing a renaissance across the humanities and social sciences, one would find only scattered references to nostalgia. Thankfully, he turned this puzzle into a research subject (Bissell 2005), and some others did too. I certainly agree with Bissell’s (p. 222) view that nostalgia represents much more than just an academic fashion. Its prominence as a topic has a great deal to do with its salience in providing a critical take on the unfolding and uneven dynamics of modernity. And, so long as intimations of crises and change continue to be uttered, anthropologists will still have much to say about diverse ethnographic deployments and dimensions of nostalgia. Obviously, the reviewed book greatly pushed advancements in this field, providing inspiration for future research.

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