

### Review: Kristen Ghodsee: Red hangover: legacies of twentieth-century communism

O'Neill, Bruce

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Book Review:

## Red Hangover: Legacies of Twentieth-Century Communism

Bruce O'Neill\*

***Red Hangover: Legacies of Twentieth-Century Communism* by Kristen Ghodsee, 2017, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

*Red Hangover* is a book as much about the Western world's socially and politically fraught present as it is about central and Eastern Europe's recent past. At its most basic, the book explores how the legacies of the Cold War impact a present marked by the ravages of neoliberalism, an immigration crisis that threatens to break apart the EU, and a far-right turn in politics that have enflamed nationalist and xenophobic sentiments in Europe as well as in the United States. Surveying the present friction, the gripping essays and captivating short-fiction that comprise this infinitely accessible volume, *Red Hangover* opens up an important space for considering how the history, ideals, and experiences of twentieth century socialism can (and should) inform mainstream efforts at retooling the present and reimagining potential futures.

An important and timely argument about the relationship between political ideals and the historical pathologies associated with them underlies *Red Hangover*. Significant scholarship, the author notes from the outset, has been dedicated to documenting the abuses of state socialism, particularly the atrocities associated with Stalinism. Yet a thick literature has also been written detailing the dramatic human toll of neoliberal markets that now operate virtually unchecked by democratic oversight. While mainstream discussions about social and political reform readily disentangle democratic ideals from their historically specific link with the abuses of neoliberal capitalism, the same intellectual work of disentanglement has not been carried out with twentieth-century European state socialism. One practical consequence of this omission is an unnecessarily limited political imagination, one that fails to draw upon the values and experiences of socialism to put in check gut wrenching levels of global inequality.

*Red Hangover* is organized into four parts. The first, 'Postsocialist Freedoms,' explores neoliberalism's disorganization of everyday life in the Balkans. The opening chapter catalogues a spiking number of Bulgarians who turned towards self-immolation to protest political corruption and the unaffordability of everyday life. The next chapter considers Bulgaria's changing economy by way of a recovered, communist-era personnel file from the Ministry of Agriculture. The file enables Ghodsee to trace the shift in cucumber production from, during socialism, a domestic product grown within a planned economy to an imported good within a globally free market. The third chapter is a piece of fiction, based upon news coverage, about the illicit trafficking of organs from Bulgarian orphans to international buyers. This piece of fiction intimately mines the continuum of violence and vulnerabilities that animates post-socialist involution. The final chapter, also fiction, explores the generational tensions of children who came of age after the fall of socialism and who struggle to make sense of their parents' enduring attachment to the symbols of a bygone era.

The book's second section, 'Reuniting the Divided,' examines the politics of German reunification in the 1990s and the broader impacts of Western triumphalism on both Eastern Europe and the broader global economy. The section's opening chapter takes the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall as an opportunity to complicate predominant sentiments that democracy solves problems while state socialism created them. The chapter meditates upon the internal conflicts, violence, and oppression brought about by the sudden imposition of democracy and free markets upon a unified Germany but also across Europe and the Middle East. In an effort to push beyond the specter of Stalinism in leftist thought and action, the next chapter focuses on the inspired writings of Rosa Luxemburg and the protests of German

\* E-mail: [boneill1@slu.edu](mailto:boneill1@slu.edu)

communists against the rise of fascism. Chapter 7 traces the parallel histories of a West and East German typewriter company to bring into view the political and organizational pressures that disadvantaged East German industry from enduring through the period of privatization.

The book's third section, 'Blackwashing History,' explores the politics of history and the abuses of public memory in regards to twentieth-century communism. The section's opening essay delves into the sexual lives of East and West German woman to explore the intimate effects of capitalism as compared to state socialism. The essay considers how state-socialism's support of work-family balance fostered women's economic independence as well as improved their intimate relationships. Chapter 9 moves from the bedroom to the art gallery to consider the aesthetic merits and historical context of socialist realist art and sculpture. Chapter 10 examines ongoing efforts among conservative intellectuals and politicians to equate state socialism with Nazism. One consequence of these efforts to cast fascism and communism as moral equivalents, Ghodsee notes, is to place acts that challenge the economic interests of super elites on the same moral plane as genocide, a particularly troubling position in a moment of unchecked global inequality.

Part IV, 'Democracy Is the Worst Form of Government, Except All Those Other Forms That Have Been Tried from Time to Time,' examines the unhappy marriage of democracy and capitalism and raises the possibility that the lived experience of socialism may provide insight into improving present circumstances. The section opens with a series of fiction writings. Written in the style of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1993), chapter 12 is a moral fable that provides insight into how the process of democratization lent itself so seamlessly to corruption and embezzlement. The following piece of fiction takes the form of a government dossier, set in the near future, documenting the author's request for political asylum to Germany from an authoritarian United States. The fiction-essay evocatively explores how abhorrent government abuses upon individual liberties can appear banal at the level of the everyday. The final chapter, 'Democracy for the Penguins,' considers how Western powers have, since the end of the Cold War, mobilized the language of democracy to benefit economic elites the world over. While democracy and capitalism are often thought to be complementary, two decades of neoliberal politics have generated growing inequality while simultaneously eroding the capacity of democratic institutions to regulate the excesses of global markets. The essay calls, ultimately, for a decoupling of the abuses of neoliberalism from the promises of democracy, and to seek inspiration for a better tomorrow by taking seriously the positive ideals and practices that can be gleaned from the experience of twentieth-century state socialism.

Read together, *Red Hangover* provides a clear, creative and gripping window onto the key processes and debates shaping everyday life in the post-Cold War era. The book makes for essential reading for undergraduates in anthropology, history, and European studies as well as readers beyond the classroom setting who are interested in cultivating a more critical understanding of a tumultuous present.

**Bruce O'Neill** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Saint Louis University, USA.