

Opponent review

Author: Jovana Vukčević
Master thesis: Commodification of the Collective Memory: Yugonostalgia as a Marketing Strategy

The presented thesis deals with a phenomenon which nowadays concerns wide popular interest as well as social scientific research. Yugonostalgia, the “longing for the country that no longer exists”, is evidently present in almost all countries (except of Albanian population in Kosovo perhaps) that once were parts of federal Yugoslavia. Apparently, this nostalgia does not correspond with the national ideologies of most of successor states whose integral parts are the stories about suffering of their nations under the oppressive communist and anti-national regime. Nevertheless, the positive memory on Yugoslav past is wide reaching; moreover, it became a significant element of mass popular culture and – as author of this thesis highlights – a successful commercial article. Of course, such revival of Yugoslavia in public sphere raises many questions. Where are the sources of this sentiment? What nature is the content of it? Is it political or apolitical? Is it whole-hearted or rather superficial as the pop-culture phenomena used to be? Are there any consequences which should be expected?

First of all, it is necessary to highlight the outstanding quality of the submitted thesis. The author proved profound erudition, interpretation skills and ability to deliver convincing argumentation. This Master thesis exceeds undoubtedly above standard.

Jovana Vukčević deals her topic in four chapters. In chapters one and two she displays and sums up a theoretical debate on nostalgia and Yugonostalgia. The chapter three treats a theoretical framework of using the nostalgic branding in the advertising strategy. Finally, the chapter four presents author’s own research into the use of Yugonostalgic sentiments in the marketing policy, its impact on the consumer’s behaviour, and how Yugonostalgia is manifested in sport or through the places of memory.

In three “methodological” chapters, the author demonstrates most profound theoretical background and extensive knowledge and orientation in the respective secondary literature. Her commentaries and explanations are clear, intelligible and written with highly sophisticated style. I would only object to one aspect which is rather typical for the scholar beginners. The student put forward a large display of authors and their theories, and this way convinces reader about her erudition. But the long row of quotations and paraphrases are not always commented. So the author’s standpoint on the quoted debates is not clear on several issues. One could also ask if so detailed survey of the secondary literature is not disproportional with regard to the thesis extent. The three “introductory” chapters take up more the a half of the thesis.

Based on the above mentioned debate Jovana Vukčević constructs her approach. She characterized Yugonostalgia as a phenomenon common to all post-Yugoslav societies (Yugosphere), as a reflective nostalgia, this is the remembrance of the past that cannot return. The author holds that in Yugonostalgia the former common country plays a role of depoliticized idea. It is not reminisced as a state or ideology, but as a life story. This approach fits very well with the aim to analyse Yugonostalgia as a pop culture or consumption phenomenon what is the content of this thesis. With respect to this interpretation I would like to raise several objections and counter-opinions:

There is not only one Yugonostalgia, but rather we can trace different Yugonostalgias. Perhaps, Yugonostalgia as marketing strategy and consumer behaviour is the phenomenon common roughly to all post-Yugoslav societies. This Yugonostalgia is apolitical, symbolized with the brands, pop stars, sport icons etc. shared by the people in the all “Yugosphere”. Its continuity or just revival and popularity among the post-Yugoslav young generation is facilitated by the common language or language proximity and persistent cultural codes. Nevertheless, there are also other forms of Yugonostalgia, and these are highly political!

I do not agree with the author that the remembrance of consumerism under socialism could not compete with the today’s degree of the consumption which is evidently much higher. The collapse of common state brought to the large groups of population across the whole former Yugoslavia a rapid decrease in life standard, a deep fall of social security and cutting of life opportunities. This bad economic and social situation was, and still is, for huge part of society much worse in contrast even to the conditions under the economic crisis of the 1980s. Yugoslavia is compared to the actual situation characterized by the evils of the so called transition – the enormous social contrasts, the rise of the new plutocratic class on one hand and the huge groups of impoverished citizens – pensioners, peasants and inhabitants of the peripheral areas, unemployed etc. on the other. The memory on Yugoslavia is in this case the remembrance of life in socialism which guaranteed a social welfare essentially better than today’s governments do. We can observe this type of Yugonostalgia, more or less, in all former Yugoslav republics. It is symbolized with praising of the Tito’s personality. The object of this nostalgia is not Yugoslavia itself, but her socialist character is positively valued. It is peculiar that the interwar Yugoslavia, for example, is not commemorated at all. Within this nostalgic framework Tito’s Yugoslavia is also remembered for its inter-ethnic peace and tolerance, especially in those post-Yugoslav republics and among those groups which were severely affected in the wars of 1990’s.

I am not sure if we could speak about Yugonostalgia generally without respect to the different situation in individual former Yugoslav republics, as author suggests. I suppose that remembering Yugoslavia in Slovenia is, for example, quite different than in Serbia. In Croatia, in Muslim society of Bosnia and Hercegovina, or in Macedonia the social and economic aspects are emphasized rather than commemorating Yugoslavia as once mighty and world-wide respected country as in Serbian and Montenegrin case.

The appreciation of socialist Yugoslavia in any form is politically very controversial. On the basis of Jovana Vukčević’s thesis one could suggest that Yugonostalgia is commonly well received and that it does not cause any negative reactions. Just on the contrary, some influential political circles and their adherents see in any positive sentiment toward Yugoslavia both assault on the state ideology, act against the national interest, and attempt to rehabilitate communism. Especially, the right wing nationalist politicians in almost all post-Yugoslav countries criticize Yugonostalgic manifestations very fiercely. The anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist sentiments are as well as strong, and still maybe stronger, than the nostalgic are.

In chapter four the author analyses so called nostalgic brands and growing of their popularity. I think that the results of her research are very interesting and inspiring. However, I am not sure if we can consider all “nostalgic brands” as really nostalgic. There is no doubt about Cocta lemonade for example. It was re-introduced on the markets of all former Yugoslav republics with the advertisement clearly referred to “the old times” in Yugoslavia. Also some other brands intentionally use this advertising strategy. Nevertheless, some of products under

scrutiny never disappear from the market (or only for several years, under sanctions inflicted upon FRY in 1990s). Then there is a question whether the consumer's preference of these products are influenced by the Yugonostalgic sentiments at all. I would also doubt in nostalgic character of some advertising campaign used by the Slovene companies in Serbia. For example, the slogans of Merkator supermarkets seem to me very inexplicit.

Finally, I suppose that Yugonostalgia is rather more complicated and more variable phenomenon than the author presents. On the other hand, some phenomena are too automatically assigned to Yugonostalgia and perhaps their sources are diverse. The remaining streets and squares named after partisan and communist heroes, for example, could not be attributed to Yugonostalgia. The reasons depend on the local conditions, whereas inertia plays its role often.

Nonetheless, with all these objections I do not diminish my high evaluation of the thesis. I would like rather to bring in questions into discussion.

Therefore, I can fully recommend the thesis of Jovana Vukčević for defence and I propose to classify it with the mark „excellent“.

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