


There are points of possible critique, of course. If Greek myths are true, as Castoriadis argues (p. 157) then what makes them myths? Do hermeneutics really have no place in elaborating the social imaginaries of past societies? Although Castoriadis pays more attention in these seminars to Greek religion as a polis-religion than he does elsewhere, the question of the religio-political nexus remains open. The historical breakthrough to autonomy was arguably less a rupture and more a ‘long revolution’; this does not always sit well within Castoriadis’s framework of analysis. But these criticisms are best thought of as entry points into new pathways in the labyrinth – to question, to reflect, to discuss – rather than shortcomings to overcome.

These seminars showcase Castoriadis as a captivating and extremely learned interlocutor with a distinctive and original interpretation of what makes Greece. Whilst sometimes provocative, his insights into the ancient Greek ‘grasp of the world’ are always erudite, thoughtful, compelling. They are valuable not only for the new perspectives they elaborate or for their relevance for the contemporary world, but also as a practical example of historical analysis that is centred on understanding the social imaginary significations of a particular society. Throughout these seminars, Castoriadis seeks to uncover the social imaginary significations embedded in (instituting) institutions as history-in-the-making.

## Note

1. *On Plato’s Statesman* was the first posthumously published volume drawn from the EHESS seminars on ancient Greece. Castoriadis presented those seminars in 1986. *On Plato’s Statesman* was published in English in 2002 but not under the banner title of *Ce qui fait la Grèce*.

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**Deserved. Economic memories after the fall of the Iron Curtain**, by Till Hilmar, New York, Columbia University Press, 2023, 227 pp., \$35.00 (Paperback), ISBN: 9780231209793

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the 1990s, especially its first half, are sometimes referred to as the ‘time of dimmed lights’ or the ‘wild years.’ This moniker alludes to the fragile normative framework that accompanied the transition from socialism to capitalism. The ultimate objective of the transformation – democracy, the free market and the rule of law – was believed to be of supreme

value, legitimising partly undemocratic, non-market and the law circumventing practices by which it was to be achieved. Likewise, public discourse was activist rather than reflexive because the transition period, in contrast to the bureaucratic socialism that preceded it, was seen as a time of deeds and not of talk. This is why the sociological attention now being paid to this period is so welcome. It is all the more commendable that Till Hilmar's book does not portray the 1990s through a mass of disembodied numbers, but examines how people reconstruct their life experiences at that time and what meanings they retrospectively attribute to what they did and what happened around them.

The book is transdisciplinary in its approach and while the research on which the book is based uses oral history techniques and incorporates elements of historical analysis, its main focus is sociological. The author's aim extends beyond merely presenting a straightforward portrayal of the transition period in CEE based on the testimonies of narrators; he seeks to comprehend how individuals experienced this transformative period from the standpoint of socio-economic justice. This led to the adoption of a comparative design, juxtaposing two countries – the former East Germany and the Czech Republic – and two professions – nurses and engineers – and consequently, also genders, as both groups exhibit gender bias. Narrative biographical interviews were conducted with sixty-seven individuals who, as young adults, had just embarked on their professional journeys in 1989 or shortly before. For them, the building of capitalism represented an overwhelming professional and life challenge, which they addressed in a variety of ways. It is this diversity of responses that provides the author with the raw material to categorise and interpret how their conception of merit has evolved and how their understanding of their own and others' responsibility for failure/success has developed amidst the structural transformation of society.

In the introductory chapter, the author establishes the theoretical framework that underpins his research. He suggests that autobiographical remembering is intrinsically imbued with moral significance, and that the substance of memories of social transformation is inextricably linked to how these changes have impacted the individuals' engagement in society. A stark and widely acknowledged example is the dramatic reversal in which communist functionaries were ostracised and dissidents ascended into the political elite. What is virtually unknown, however, is the change in the context of the professions, which were also affected by the transformation. From the point of view of their representatives, the professional transformation had not only a technical but also a social dimension, which was reflected in a change in their perceived ability to contribute. This contribution and how individuals fulfil it can be conceptualised as deservingness. Hilmar's theorising draws on the Durkheimian structural-relational tradition of social integration analysis and the well-known theories of the formation of capitalist society by E.P. Thompson and Karl Polanyi. He adapts these theories to examine the intersubjective world narratively constructed by his research participants.

The following chapter provides a historical overview of the transformation of the two societies under study. The main argument here is the similarity of

East German and Czech societies under socialism and the difference in socio-economic transformation, caused mainly by the unification of Germany and the economic absorption of East Germany by West Germany. This is followed by a kind of parallel chapter that portrays this period from the viewpoint of health workers and engineers. The analysis of their narratives brought to the surface the key role of skills, which form the technical-moral bridge between the socialist and capitalist periods of the narrators' lives. This is understandable, as the research participants were approached as representatives of specific professions, and skills are at the core of any profession; it was therefore necessary for them to emphasise their skills in order to narratively perform a morally acceptable professional identity. Skills were crucial in the transition period mainly because they were considered apolitical; in contrast to the political organisation of work under socialism, it was possible to construct a politically neutral professionalism that replaced the then politicised contribution as legitimate merit. In addition, genuine skills morally distinguished professionals from 'jacks of all trades' who only skilfully feigned their competence. The presentation of memoirs of professional success and failure is followed by a short chapter, *Deserving and Undeserving Others*, in which the author classifies these stories according to their moral value in the eyes of the narrators. He finds cases of deserved success as a result of hard work, undeserved success at the expense of others, deserved failure, but also undeserved failure caused by unfavourable structural conditions or simply lack of luck. The result is an extraction of lay, biographically anchored theories of deservingness against the backdrop of egalitarian ideology. The author thus points to an interesting phenomenon in which the revolutionary effort to reject state-socialist egalitarianism, although this was in fact massively violated at the political level, gives way to another form of egalitarianism, this time consisting of an equal obligation to take advantage of the economic opportunities that have become available.

The book's strongest analytical chapter, in my view, is the fourth, titled 'The Social Experience of the Transformation Period.' In this chapter, the author explores the impact of economic transformation on friendship relationships. He carefully interprets narratives about the breakdown of close friendships, which vividly reveal how humanly challenging the transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism was. Hilmar suggests that the emergence of social inequalities would not have been felt so strongly had it not led to the severing of intimate and seemingly unbreakable bonds between friends whose status and lifestyles had become too dissimilar or incompatible. Friendship presupposes mutual recognition and thus a certain equality, which, according to the narratives studied, gradually became untenable for some of the narrators; this was true for those who had risen in status as well as for those who had remained in their original position or even declined, for example due to long-term unemployment. Durkheim's concept of anomie could arguably also be applied analytically to this aspect of transformation, as the breakdown of social cohesion occurs both in crisis and in periods of rapid growth.


Complementing the Epilogue, which explores the implications of the findings for comprehending the ascent of right-wing populism in CEE, the book also

features a detailed Methodological Appendix, outlining the data sources and analytical methods employed. The author's problem-oriented approach, tailored to delve into the intricacies of the phenomenon, clearly embraces methodological eclecticism.

The broad disciplinary scope is the book's strength, making it accessible and relevant not only to sociologists but also to other scholars in the social sciences and humanities. It is apparent that the author had the reader in mind when writing, which is reflected in the easy-to-read style, not burdened with disciplinary jargon. The author has also made his arguments understandable to a global readership by thoroughly contextualising the research problem, the locality and the findings. From the point of view of a sociologist of the region, this undoubtedly legitimate aim of maximising readership comes at the expense of a more substantial contribution to sociology. Personally, I would have wished a more thorough critical theoretical and state-of-the-art discussion of the interplay between social memory and historiography, as the author frames both with a suspiciously harmonious positivist distinction between the objective and the subjective. Reading the book, I often wondered whether it was necessary to familiarise readers with the macro-level accounts of what 'objectively' happened in order to interpret subjective experiences of social change and to understand the notions of social justice and merit embedded in participants' narratives. Rather than contextualising them with historiographical descriptions, it might be better to pay more theoretical and analytical attention to the narratives themselves, trusting them as an intersubjective reality that the narrators have created in the interviews as factual and that they guarantee as such. This would perhaps lead to a more focused sociological interpretation of the memory of economic aspects of the post-1989 transition process in Central and Eastern Europe.

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**Anonymous: The performance of hidden identities**, by Thomas DeGloma, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2023, 280 pp., USD \$30 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-226-76513-6; USD \$99 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-226-82879-4.

In the cultural sociological work *Anonymous*, DeGloma (2023) argues that anonymity is a performance 'in which actors obscure personal identities as they make