

DOI: 10.38173/RST.2022.24.2.19:277-282

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Section: Social Sciences

Issue: 2(24)/2022

Received: 14 September 2022	Revised: 14 October 2022
Accepted: 2 November 2022	Available Online: 15 November 2022

Paper available online [HERE](#)

NOSTALGIA OF SOCIALIST ERA INTEGRATED STEEL PLANT OF GALAȚI. REFLECTIONS IN THE POST- COMMUNIST AGE

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ABSTRACT:

THIS PAPER IS A REFLECTION ON THE NOSTALGIA CONCEPT THAT APPEARED UNEXPECTEDLY WITHIN A BIGGER QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ACHIEVED BY INTERVIEW METHODS. WE FOUND OUT THAT NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST TIMES IN THE COMMUNIST REGIME HAD BECOME A COMMON PLACE DURING THE INTERVIEWS FOCUSED MAINLY ON THE LABOR IN THE INTEGRATED STEEL PLANT OF GALAȚI. THIS SITUATION MADE US STUDY MORE CAREFULLY THE NOSTALGIA CONCEPT, ASK QUESTIONS AND SEEK FOR POSSIBLE ANSWERS.

KEY WORDS: NOSTALGIA, THE INTEGRATED STEEL PLANT OF GALAȚI, COMMUNISM, POST-COMMUNISM.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges were not just few in approaching a topic concerning the post-communist transformations of a big size production organization built in the past centralized economy period through the eyes of written media, and also of employees or former employees of the respective organization. The topic is rarely approached by sociological researches in Romania and only tangentially, in historical specific papers. For research purposes, we resorted to an exploration of the communist regime by significant historical data and also by recourse to the memory of the interviewed subjects. The recourse to memory lead to an unexpected identification (*serendipity*²) of a “nostalgia” featured by all interviewed subjects. For them, the integrated steel plant of Galati represented a peak of economic and

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² *Serendipity* concept was firstly developed in *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*, a paper written in the 50s by two reputed sociologists, Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber. Curiously, the paper was not published at the moment of writing, but it was mentioned in the scientific environment of the time. In Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, (New York: The Free Press, 1968), the author explains, in the the introduction, that *serendipity* represents “unexpected discovery of new things by a trained mind, things that were not purposely looked after from the beginning”. In the same paper, at page 158, Merton specifically says that “serendipity pattern refers to the fairly common experience of observing an unanticipated, anomalous and strategic datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory”.

intense industrial and urban development lived before 1989 compared to the situation nowadays. “Nostalgia” occurrence during interviews has been noticed only after recording the same. Therefore, we started to seek answers for many questions arisen in connection with same: “*what is the reason for people’s nostalgia for the past communist time period of work in the steel plant?*”, “*what was that good to deserve such a regretful recalling of those times?*”, “*how was the communism working within the company and what were the stimuli that left such a strong positive memory?*”, “*how is the present of the organization interpreted by comparison to past work experiences?*”. Thus, the course of the research led us to a better understanding of such people who are nostalgic for what was in the past. We found out that nostalgia for the communist past of the plant has become a social phenomenon among the generations at work during that period. We also tried to examine the way younger generations, who had nothing to do with the work in the communist era, have the representation of the same organization. We have expected from younger subjects to disagree with the nostalgic people from older generations, bringing into discussion the technological progress, technological updating of the steel plant, efficiency of the new management etc. But younger subjects depicted a less expected reality of the company, pointing out low wages, burdening with job tasks, multiple subordination, dangerous equipment because of improper maintenance made with precarious funds approved for the same, stress at work, professional advantages granted to those in “good terms” with the upper management, work performed to exhaustion, fear of losing jobs, disappointment and lack of perspective.

Surprisingly, interviewed subjects’ nostalgia for the steel plant in the past appears to the youngest subjects too. They appreciatively recognise the professionalism of previous generations who built the integrated steel plant. The above aspects made us to evaluate more closely the defining the nostalgia concept.

MAIN CONTENT

“Nostalgia” word etymologically consists of two other Greek words: νόστος, which means the return home, in the metaphorical sense of Homer's *Odyssey*, and άλγος, synonymous with pain. We can speculate that nostalgia meaning is equivalent to the Romanian *dor* (meaning *longing*), a motivating psychic stimulus for crossing obstacles on the way home. Or, it could be as well about the heartache at seeing again the origin places which do not look as they were knew by the returning individual. It may also be a kind of disappointment about the present seen in the light of a better, more favourable past.

The definition of nostalgia had many transformations in time. All started in the 17th century when nostalgia has been mentioned by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer de Mulhouse in his thesis entitled *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia* (Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia)³, dissertation given in Basel in 1688⁴. In the paper, nostalgia was considered a “cerebral disease” with a specific symptomatology, related to the longing for the native places experienced by young Swiss people. Hofer seems to be exactly the person who invented the name of nostalgia by dressing up the so-called disease in the linguistic elegant costume borrowed from Greek. The medical meaning of nostalgia as pathology surprisingly persisted up to the middle of 20th century when a more cultural significance was drawn up.

³ Jean Starobinski, *Melancholy, Nostalgia, Irony*, (Meridiane Publishing House: Bucharest, 1993), 135.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents.” In *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 9, no 2, (2007): 7, www.iasa-culture.org/eNews/2007_10/9.2CBoym.pdf.

In sociology, the concept of nostalgia has been analysed for the first time by Fred Davis in *Yearning for Yesterday. A Sociology of Nostalgia*⁵, paper published in 1979. Davis aimed to understand the general conditions and circumstances that lead to the feeling of nostalgia by eliminating random associations. To accomplish the same, he used several sociological methods, interviewing 12 people at first, based on an interview guide, on a topic related to their nostalgic experiences and the significance they gave to nostalgia. He then applied a questionnaire to his university students on the same subject. Among the questions in the questionnaire, there was one consisting of a task for respondents. They were asked to choose whether they would associate nostalgia with expressions such as “homesickness”, as a painful experience, or rather with the positive emotional meaning of a “desire for something” (yearning). The result was that students associated nostalgia with emotionally positive expressions rather than a negative emotional meaning.

Fred Davis concluded that nostalgia, in the everyday language, is considered more a tonic evocation of a past time lived with satisfaction, joy, happiness, pleasure and less an experience of negative emotions like desperation, shame, hate or unhappiness. In what concerns the endeavours for analysing the past, the American sociologist considers that the past “is never something just simply waiting to be discovered, but rather is something that must always be filtered, selected, arranged, built and rebuilt from collective experience, like other products of human consciousness. The foothold for such an immense work can be only the present time, with its anxieties, aspirations, hopes and fantasies”⁶. Another interesting aspect in the Davis’ paper is that of author’s high criticism on the contemporary nostalgia. Nostalgia has become, in his view, a great business, specifically indicating cinematography and media. Both often appeal to the past in order to induce to people feelings of nostalgia in order to promote their products. This is, for Davis, nothing but a mercantile speculation of nostalgic feelings about the past and also a way of controlling situations that can generate nostalgia among the audience.

A paper published in 2001, also marking the history of nostalgia concept, is Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia*⁷. According to Boym, nostalgia is the longing for a house that no longer exists or has never existed, is a feeling of loss and distance, and also a kind of romanticism related to one's own fantasy. We encounter here two different series of images: home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. When trying to put them in a single image, the frame breaks. Feelings of nostalgia would not exist without the boundaries of time and space, and that is why the past paradoxically becomes more unpredictable than the future, through the very permanent recreation of a vision of the past. Moreover, according to Boym, quite the present globalization itself exacerbates the feeling of nostalgia through a stronger reaction of attachment to the local area in contrast with the *cyberspace* and the *virtual global village*⁸. In fact, Boym says that nostalgia occurs especially after revolutions. As it was, for example, in the case of France after 1789.

Upon political changes on the map of Europe after 1990, Charity Scribner⁹ points out that earlier in this century, after the unification of the two German territories, West Germans noticed that some East Germans were missing the period before the reunification and called the phenomenon Ostalgie (German) or “nostalgia for the East” (Ostalgie, anglicised). By the other hand, even West Germans did not remain immune to the phenomenon. Among those

⁵ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday. A Sociology of Nostalgia*, (The Free Press: New York, 1979).

⁶ *Ibidem.*, 115-116.

⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (Basic Books: New York, 2001).

⁸ *Ibidem.*, *passim.*, 13-14.

⁹ Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*, (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003), 63.

“infected”, there were film producers¹⁰, artists or writers, all of them fascinated by *Ostalgia*. According to Scribner, the same was displayed by a regret to loss of material culture from the communist period or social guarantees granted in the era.

We consider that nostalgia¹¹ is, first of all, a *transdisciplinary* concept, as per the meaning outlined by the physicist Basarab Nicolescu, a concept that “[...] exists in the same time *in between* disciplines, *inside* various disciplines, and *beyond* any discipline”¹². Firstly claimed, at its beginning, by medicine in its psychiatric branch, often mentioned by literature, analysed by sociology and psychology, nostalgia is hard to understand as it is situated on the border between an individual biography and that of a social group or entire nation, between an individual memory and that of a community.

Secondly, nostalgia refers to a deep human and perennial feeling, which shows that there have been and will always be people with nostalgia for something or someone. Although the trigger for nostalgia is basically the same, i.e. the significant emotions from the past, what differentiates among nostalgic persons are the specific events or situations in that past generate nostalgia for each individual. But what if the same situations are triggering nostalgia for a large number of people? Can we consider, in such a case, that a social nostalgia phenomenon exists for those specific events and/or situations?

Unlike nostalgia for the old integrated steel plant in Galați, appearing like a red thread through the interviews of our research, the paper of researcher Mara Mărginean¹³ about the development of the urban area around Hunedoara steel plant and “Victoria” works in Călan, during 1945-1968, focuses only on a study of archive documents, a study meant to be as objective as possible. The study shows aspects of the everyday life of the city in full emergent process, approaching subjects related to the social mobility of the inhabitants, demographic aspects as natality, marriage rates, mortality, natural growth, life standard, food consumption, steel workers’ identity shaping, labour productivity, labour force fluctuation, Romanian state policies for urban development, influences of Moscow and local realities and so on. With arguments, the author criticizes aspects of the urban development communist project around the two integrated steel plants, considering the same in the present rather a failure of industrialisation than an “expression of post-socialism”. To sustain the asserted, the author indicates the present ruins of the two Transylvanian¹⁴ old steel production complexes, incapable to deal with the competition on the free market. Besides, Mara Mărginean claims¹⁵ that the said steel plants were under a cloud even before 1989 because of the huge iron and steel integrated plant built in Galați¹⁶ and providing much bigger quantities of finite products.

¹⁰ Scribner mentions here many directors and their movies: Tony Harrison with *Prometheus* (1998), John Berger with *Art and Revolutions* (1969), *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and the trilogy *Into Their Labors* (1979-1990), Mark Herman with *Brassed Off* (1996) and Leslie Kaplan with *Factory Excess* (1982).

¹¹ For more details on the *nostalgia* concept, see the *Social Psychology*, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași, no. 40 (II) (Polirom: Iași, 2017), that deals with this concept in its entire mentioned issue.

¹² Basarab Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinarity*, (Polirom Publishing House: Iași, 1999), 53.

¹³ Mara Mărginean, *Windows to the Red Blast Furnace. City Planning and Everyday Life in Hunedoara and Călan (1945-1968)*, (Polirom Publishing House: Iași, 2015).

¹⁴ Upon various planning, reorganization and privatisation actions, what remained out of the former “Victoria” works in Călan - with approximately 600 employees in 2004, still manufacturing ductile iron tubes and being the sole manufacturer of such products in entire Romania – enters the bankruptcy procedure in 2005. The metallurgical plant in Hunedoara (or, in fact, the remainings of the same) has been taken over by Arcelor Mittal group (Mittal Steel at that time) in 2004. Nowadays, employees at Arcelor Mittal Hunedoara cannot be counted for more than 700.

¹⁵ *Idem.*, 316.

¹⁶ In Mara Mărginean’s mentioned book, at page 316, some information that we consider inaccurate appear. According to the author, building of Galați steel integrated plant had been started in 1958, an assertion for which

We consider that the author's conclusion on Călan works closure and drastic reduction of steel production at Hunedoara is a hasty one that the two steel plants would not have faced a free market. The story of the two integrated steel plants deserves a more profound analysis, with objective data, not just an opinion. Besides the above, a remarkable aspect that Mara Mărginean succeeds to point out is that of the *game* of power and negotiations carried out between the authorities and inhabitants of Hunedoara in order to implement urban and social plans of the communist regime, with results that were not always the expected ones because of the real social context. Such plans, not a local pattern at all, were part of a general social engineering project ideologically directed from the USSR, which addressed the former communist bloc countries in order to create the new individual, essential core for transformations in the communist societies. Romania was not an exception in the communist geopolitical blender.

CONCLUSION

In what concerns Galați steel plant, most of the people interviewed displayed nostalgic feelings for the communist past, at times during the interviews. Analysed in general, the interviews show that people's regret was not for the ideological regime itself, but for the society developed by the hands of professionally active in the 60s, 70s and 80s. They compare their era when, in a relatively short time, many dwellings were built and an entire industry was developed, with the present time when they see that everything built in their times is destroyed and nothing substantial is built in place. For this reason, we consider that such people are unjustly labelled as nostalgic for the communism in a pejorative sense. The old "steel planters", as they were called, do not have nostalgia for a political communist regime, but for what was achieved and what they felt that Romania and themselves meant during that period. Most of the subjects we discussed with appeared enthusiastic in remembering those times when they lived intensely, with important satisfactions in their professional lives. This finding makes us consider nostalgia, in the sense identified by Fred Davis, as a positive feeling, as a sweet and pleasant memory of a past, a reconstruction from memory of what happened. Out of the interviews taken, we understood by the other hand that such a reconstruction of the past has a comparison term too – the present time, seen as a problematic, uncertain period, full of unknowns. These people's appeal to memory is one profoundly reflexive to the present, sourced by the experience of their past times in life, a *lifeworld* in the Husserlian acceptance. Nostalgia is transformed this way into a *resourceful emotion*, a way of resisting the present situation, a disappointing one compared to what those people meant for themselves and lived in their glory times.

no documented indication has been provided. Historical documents we have identified, corroborated with references in the written press of the era and presented within our research mention the start of the building works in Galați as happened in 1961. Another inaccuracy is represented by the figure of 30.000 people who were at work on the metallurgical industrial site at Hunedoara in 1990, although Hunedoara complex has never gathered more than 20.000 workers at any moment in its entire history. To highlight the proportions, Galați metallurgical site is quoted, for the same year of 1990, with approximately 72.000 workers.

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