

Comments on “Encounters with Post-Communist Sites”

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A couple of years ago my teenage son excoriated me, “Gee, Dad, you act like this is the twentieth century!” Well, I suppose I do. But nothing will move me more quickly and surely into the twenty-first century than the writings of these young American studies scholars. Andaluna Borcila’s “Encounters with Post-Communist Sites” is a breathtaking, articulate, and passionate excursion into a new world of, as she says, “history happening.”

These encounters reveal only apparently a world of returns. History is not actually being visited. It is being created—as history always is—glaringly within the context of current political and economic realities. “And you see,” I might tell my son, “these realities are anchored in the past, so you must know the *ancient* past century to make sense of their manifestations today.” A truism barely worth acknowledging, but nonetheless my starting point in commenting on Borcila’s sweeping tale of the West’s construction of the new Eastern Europe.

Each of the image items examined in Borcila’s analysis is a commercial item, a commodity or, I should say, an item in which a story is engaged that has the purpose of being sold. But like many, if not most, commodities produced and marketed in the past hundred years, what is being sold is not only the item for sale but a message that includes two promises: a promise of the satisfaction of personal wants and a promise of security, fulfillment, discovery, or accomplishment.

The narratives explicated by Borcila predate the specific items encountered, reaching back to the U.S. anti-communism of the twentieth century that began well before the Second World War which was solidified both militarily and in terms of the global political economy in the second half of the last century. The Cold War was far more than a complex of adversarial foreign policies and belligerent spheres of influence. It was more than the several trillions of dollars spent to arm the United States and the Soviet Union with thousands of nuclear weapons and an assemblage of more than two thousand military bases worldwide. For the United States, it provided a secular morality and legal foundation for society-wide mobilization, including the mobilization of the manufacture of culture and the “soft power” recently discovered by American political scientists. And it remains so in 2003.

The Cold War was and is about economic reach, bolstered by a munitions economy that invests in and feeds on insecurity, facilitated by growing state power extending from individual consciousness to a militarized planet. NATO expansion, balance of trade equations pivoted on arms sales, a muscular exertion of global U.S. power, and the sanctioning of state violence against any restive—to say nothing of revolutionary or independence minded—political group or stateless ethnicity is testament to the resilience of what the Cold War (never mind the collapse of the Soviet Union) incubated, hatched, and has become in the twenty-first century.

Borcila locates or situates Eastern Europe in this process in many creative and insightful ways, offering both a methodology and an overarching thesis rich in theoretical power by virtue of her compelling conceptualization. In quilting television portrayals, manufactured events, travel guides, and stories of similar “resident alien’s” encounters, and linking these to encounters with the body—albeit diseased and battered—she is excavating new ground with great promise of things to come. I would like to offer some suggestions for furthering the discussion of her analysis, primarily by considering the political geography of this mysterious locale and the political economy of the manufactured consent regarding it. First a few comments about this, then some connections to Borcila’s analysis.

Far from being a victory of good over evil, the collapse of the Soviet Union was an outcome of the crisis in global capitalism precipitated by the innovations that required a loosening of state power (primarily exercised by the United States) over currency values, trade, manufacturing processes, and the control of resources. Increasingly, the crisis of capitalism wrenched these spheres of economic control from the hands of the state and into the clutches of increasingly powerful international corporations and quasi-governmental banks. These innovations, along with the OPEC oil boycott and subsequent accumulation of capital that stemmed directly from the 1967 (Six Day) War in Palestine, precipitated massive international speculation and over-investment, bringing on the debt crisis of the 1980s. The failure of Third World Development (“the lost decade of development”) corseted capital and finally forced the United States and Western Europe to accede to demands (*a rapprochement* with the Evil Empire) that opened the gates for capital to flow into previously forbidden zones, expanding its sphere of investment and finding desperately needed new markets. Africa’s weakness as a site of investment—despite the fact that it became a net exporter of capital in 1983—made Eastern Europe a new, more promising Africa for global capitalism.

In this context of political economy, Eastern Europe by any name is ripe for commodification and incorporation into the matrix of global capitalism. Working out the contours of the process—initiated or even preceded through imaging for commercial purposes—is what I see as the fundamental contribution of Borcila’s paper. So let me offer just a few and very inadequate observations that may be worth exploring in greater depth by others better able to continue this dialogue.

Stories of Return: These are always problematic. There is a mixed sense of self-discovery, betrayal, disappointment, and ungrounded speculation in most such tracts. They often assume a tone of peachiness that betrays the superiority of the emigrant-now-cosmopolitan coming back to check on the locals. I am thinking of similar accounts being produced by Chinese writers who have left the People's Republic of China, especially since Tiennaman Square, and the way these have played to the prejudices (not dissimilar prejudices toward a "failed communist system") in the West that makes their work saleable commodities. It might be interesting to explore in comparative terms these and other narratives of return.

Borcila focuses especially on *The Return*, chronicling Petru Popescu's inner turmoil and interpersonal dilemmas upon visiting his native Romania. Flying first-class, having garnered a "Hollywood contract for a book," it is not difficult to imagine the author's hope that this adventure could become a six-figure screenplay. Unlike Jim Jarmusch's comically insightful *Stranger Than Paradise*,¹ Popescu would have us participate in his personal angst. Not only should we admire his strength to leave the tyranny of a communist state and become a successful writer, but we are invited to grieve his loss and the loss of everyone who lived under Ceausescu. Only the more naïve and self-righteous among those who have embraced the ideology of the Cold War could find Popescu's narrative compelling, but that is the paying audience for this genre of writing.

Getting There: Explicating the messages of travel guides is really a marvelous "site of history happening" in Borcila's analysis. Unlike expatriate stories of return, these are openly aimed at consumers and are written to market an expectant adventure. Thus, the imaging of Eastern Europe must simultaneously maintain the exotic (even the dangerous) while insisting on the approachability of a locale. In *Fodor's* accounts of Romania there is a sense of rescue and voyeurism of the victim that would not appeal to everyone, but resonates with those having more kinky tastes—the self-styled political sophisticate and would-be secular missionary, perhaps. But the patronizing tone of the guides cannot be mistaken. Traveling back in time to this long-suppressed region is less a learning experience than a teaching one. Didacticism reigns, though the authors are careful to cast the lesson in terms familiar and generous to the self-congratulatory Free World.

The irony, not surprising but articulately expressed by Borcila, lies in the promise of the traveler experiencing a pristine (or at least quaint) environment, unspoiled by capitalism and its garish culture. This message is, of course, designed with the most sincere intentions available to a marketing department staff. Again, playing to the readers' prejudices and naïveté, the product is manufactured for sale.

Play Me, Again and Again: The most interesting material, for this reader, is the Olympic coverage, introduced through and juxtaposed to the television movie, *Nobody's Children*. Borcila's interest in and understanding of media studies, and her insights into the importance of the body as a site of political imagery,

takes us both back into the sordid past of Ceausescu's reign and to the contemporary need to feel the pain of these barely salvageable Eastern Europeans.

The Olympics have been, for decades, a ham-handed exercise in jingoism and a legitimized opportunity to bellow about national triumph. Expressions of racial superiority are barely suppressed. Sitting at the confluence of politics and economy, the Olympics has had a difficult time for many decades with the countries Behind the Iron Curtain. Explaining the amazing accomplishments of athletes of the Soviet Union was less problematic (because of its size and state reach) than the much smaller countries: e.g. East Germany, Cuba, and Romania. Quite simply, an answer had to be provided for the American consumer of Cold War ideology for the incredible ability, motivation, and dedication, to say nothing of the patriotism of athletes from these countries, ruled by totalitarian regimes and assorted evildoers.

One answer voiced in living rooms across the United States involved the capacity of the communist state to build a tool of propaganda. Their drive to tell the Big Lie extended to the confiscation of children from their loving families, their exile to secret training facilities, the unsportsmanlike (certainly nothing amateur about this) fabrication of super-athletes. This was both inhumane and a foolish and wasteful diversion of scarce resources typical of the totalitarianism. The incubation of super-athletes from the crib to the winners' podium could only be done at the expense of the exploited masses, a betrayal even leftists would condemn.

When the response of the American public was less moral outrage than a desire to emulate, the storyline unraveled. The Colorado Springs Olympic training facility, the abandonment of "amateur status" as a criterion for participation, and the making of celebrities of promising children who would soon bring honor on the USA were all popular with the American public. At worst, an ethic of if-you-can't-beat 'em, join-them prevailed from sea to shining sea.

This was followed by the drug scandals among super-athletes, readymade for Cold War propaganda. The Nixon/Reagan Doctrine that communists are congenital liars fit nicely into the assumption of pharmaceutically-enhanced performances as a sign of reprobate politics. Unfortunately, on the heels of every scandal implicating a Bulgarian weight lifter was a revelation of Canadian steroid use, Italian blood-doping, and U.S. female track and field medication with a banned substance.

More powerful and popular with the sociological sophisticates has been the notion that, in such a repressive regime, personal ambition and greatness can only be channeled through sport accomplishment. Would-be Cuban CEOs become great high jumpers or heavyweight boxers, if only they would be allowed to put this drive and talent to good use, rather than posing for pictures with Fidel.

Another narrative lies in the hidden desire of these automatons, these state-crafted replicants, to escape. Through international travel they are given the

opportunity to flee their captors and breathe the air of freedom, not for a weekend or a week, but forever. And then, as President Ronald Reagan and Senator Alan Simpson said when they left public office, they can start making some real money.

This need to find a new set of friends and family converges with Borcila's image of the Romanian female gymnasts, girl-children all. Nadia Comaneci (like the Russian gymnast, Olga Korbet, before her) had been figuratively orphaned by her exile to life-long training camps where her surrogate father, Bela Karoli, gave her the love and support to become a great gymnast. These children were winning for Bela, not Romania, and certainly not for Ceausescu. If subsequently Bela Karoli hadn't left Romania, he would have to have been kidnapped by the State Department.

In the 1990s such orphans re-emerge, this time linked to the orphanages of the HIV/AIDS-riddled Ceausescu's regime. Hollow-eyed, wounded, in need of love and protection, these competitors were truly victims of communism. They needed—now more than ever—our rescue, our way of life, and our presence. Who could impart this message better than Ann-Margret. Bring them back, these televised orphans. We need to help them become, as they so much want to be, like us. This is the message of empire. It is nothing new, but ever so timely in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. *Stranger than Paradise*, directed by Jim Jarmusch (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1983).