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Missing It: Nostalgia for the Factory in the No-Work Era

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Historical Background

When East Germany joined the West in the early 1990s, the era of the “end of the individual”¹ was already apparent in the social and industrial fabric. The crisis in socialism involved the breakdown of the trade unions, the corporate dispersal of manufacture to the economies of the South, the replacement of factories by service industries, and the disappearance of the middle class. In worldwide economic terms, workers were now measured as standardized units since they no longer “lead an

independent economic existence.”² Technology steadily transferred the laborer’s tasks to machines. Once the physical movements of a human laborer became appendages of electronically controlled installations, the most mundane tasks disappeared without a trace. As a result, dire consequences for the social fabric arose, which had been centered primarily since Marx on concepts such as human praxis and labor.

To address society’s diminishment, Jürgen Habermas proposed communicative action (open-ended inquiry) to evaluate technologic imperatives, pointing to how individuals have evolved into commodities. Realizing that the end of the work-based society creates a “split” society, leaving a productive core of the employed and an ever-expanding margin of the jobless that are forced into subcultures, Habermas asks: does the new ‘non-class’ of non-workers “feel at ease in their alienation”?³ Just as factories and the traditional labor force became obsolete, the ‘individual’ likewise has disappeared.

Habermas addresses what he calls the “extinction of remembrance,” noting that there is “a lack of images of happiness” in the industrial world. “Industrial labor is haunted by the telos of its own abolition.”⁴ But there is more at stake than pining for a social safety net that never really existed. Taking the German word for east, *Ost*, and nostalgia, the term *Ostalgie* refers to the sense of promise and possibility contained in the GDR hope for the socialist project. *Ostalgie’s* sentiments of loss and longing in the context of broken promises and disillusionments does not reflect a longing to return to the GDR, but rather expresses a sense of lost possibilities.⁵

In 1984 Habermas suggested publically in “The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies” that a misguided memory of a past golden age extolled the liberating potential of labor and production. This utopian vision shifted in the 90s from its emphasis on the future to an emphasis on the past. When the two Germanys united, the East got lost in the desire for an imagined other world.⁶ The term “unification” suggests a return to a prior, more natural state. It is also symptomatic of the lack of reflection of what separated the two parts of the country after more than forty years of separate development.⁷

Seeing the past as a golden era exemplifies Maurice Halbwachs’ observation that a society’s current perceived needs impel it to refashion the past, and that successive epochs are kept alive through a common symbolic canon even amidst contemporary revisions.⁸ After many disappointments, the East felt devalued, and as a result, related to the present in terms of the past. Feelings of guilt and anxiety about the nature of capitalism, human rights, and accountability surfaced. *Ostalgie* aims to salvage the idea of a collective fraternity in the factory, i.e., when workers shared exchanges during downtime while waiting for a machine to be repaired, or when mothers dropped off their children at the communal day-care center or kindergarten and entered the factory gates as a unit. *Ostalgie* takes people back to the moments of solidarity and intra-factory arbitration rather than to the drudgery of rote assembly on the factory floor.⁹

Illusory Memory

There is a grudging need to refashion the past. Daily life in the GDR had an austere rhythm. People pressed their own juices, tolerated substandard laundry detergent, and wore unfashionable and inferior denim, among other examples. An enforced economy of scarcity placed a premium on thrift. However, a stultifying lack of product innovation in industry flowed from a fear of diversity. The motto “There is no obsolescence in our culture”¹⁰ blocked risk-taking and creative incentives from the private sector. The tiny, 2-cylinder Trabant auto cost East Germans a year’s salary and yet was constantly in need of repair. Since social life in the East revolved around labor, a loss of identity ensued with unemployment. The feeling was not so much love of a repressive regime, but anger toward a government that failed to deliver. Access to Western consumer goods and choice was never seen as a right, yet when consumer choice became available, people felt disloyal if they chose labels other than their own.

The socialist project had an enduring impact on social attitudes. It boasted a shared knowledge that created solidarity by excluding others. East Germans felt they had ‘better’ products – lenses, machine parts, fountain pens, and educational methods. The slogan, “My hand for my product,”¹¹ stood for workers’ pride in their labor. People prized the social cohesiveness of the factory brigades, the factory sponsored trips, subsidized housing, on-site day-care, and women’s reproductive services. “Germany for Germans” was another slogan that encouraged German superiority and exceptionalism. When Stasi revelations revealed how deeply the East was kept as “Other,” East Germans still insisted on their GDR “identity.” The clash of utopian socialist work values with those of

capitalist technology became evident in the reduced labor involved in making a product today—labor consisting of just a few people to activate the robotic assemblies.

The late 70s saw automated machining methods move into factories at a fraction of the labor costs in the West. As a result, long-term unemployment led to the current development of an underclass of part-time employed workers, with severe consequences for productivity, public finances, pensions, education, and social stability. A premium on productivity pushed companies to invest in technology to boost production with fewer workers – a trend that spread from manufacturing into the service sector.

Habermas cautioned that Germany must not forget what ‘progress’ truly meant, nor allow it to melt away into oblivion. One of the paradoxes of institutionalized nostalgia is that the stronger the loss, the more it over-compensates with commemoration.¹² Nostalgia obstinately refuses to accept change and history; it is an exercise in invented memory, an attempt to preserve a world before it disappears, but also to reinvent it. The inhabitants of the GDR were deeply marked by the experience of exile and loss. They wanted to return to a time when all was well, when everyone got along. *Ostalgie* is notable for the way it links place and time together, reminding us that the feeling is not just homesickness, but the need to travel back through time, to shape it to fit our yearnings. After unification, people created museums of practically everything – old photos and films of past events were glorified, as were documentary films.

Traumatic Space

The fall of the Wall provoked an artistic examination of the “traumatic space” of the home, school, and factory. Some recalled the “semantic occupation” of language in the Propaganda-speak and the creeping in of the “silence of the Orwellian citizen.”¹³ On the cusp of unification, Habermas warned of an ominous political shift as people regressed socially to restore so-called “traditional values.” Subgroups hostile to gays, religious minorities, and immigrants emerged. Many progressive ideals were rejected in a fetishization of “security” and the urge to clamp down on terrorists.¹⁴

Facing traumatic memory is difficult psychologically when the ‘stories’ it tells of the past are too difficult to verify, either because the historical sources have been wiped away or because in telling a truthful story, one would have to acknowledge one’s involvement in a process that proved to be damaging to one’s value system. For example, people argue on both sides whether or not the East German novelist, Christa Wolf, had collaborated with the authorities. Her novella, “What Remains,” published in 1990, describes in interior monologue her life under surveillance by the Stasi and how memory affects reality. The 2006 German film, “The Lives of Others,” recounts a similar story.

Most importantly, finding true sources of memory requires that we be wary about the principal of consensus. While it points to an agreement that is arrived at through dialogue, consensus is also a component of one-dimensional thought. Bureaucratic systems naturally want to maintain the performance of the status quo.¹⁵ True discovery in inquiry involves allowing dissent, or dialectical thinking. Ideas that “disturb the order of

reason” open “new norms for understanding”¹⁶ and lead to transparency. Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that systems theory has “no scientific basis” for use in industry because it reduces complexity and diverse views. It maintains the status quo and “induce[s] the adoption of individual aspirations to [match] its own ends.”¹⁷ A one-dimensional view will lead a group to collectively remember the same version of events (“our products were superior;” “we knew how to follow orders; “factory life was cohesive”).

Blind Spots in Memory

One-dimensional consensus leads to “blind spots.” How do they work? For example, a blind spot is formed when administrative procedures encourage individuals to “want” what the narratives encoded in the system needs in order to perform. In an Orwellian world, the bureaucratic system suggests that people not be content with mere negative obedience, nor with abject submission. It implies, “You must act of your own free will, you must want what you want.”¹⁸ When people adhere without question to orders in a factory or a school, their needs and feelings are transformed into internalized commands, and the prevailing norms win out without an exchange of views. Consensus assures everyone that they agree on the same reply and that they all feel the same way about an issue. Not only did Germans feel compelled to adopt a story line (‘we were all victims’) after the war, but those who gave the socialist experiment a try also felt inferior when it failed. The phrase, “there is no obsolescence in our culture,” proved to be a blind spot that duped many.

Vaclav Havel wrote in 1989 that “the line of conflict did not run between people and the state, but rather through the middle of each individual, for everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.”¹⁹ When people emerged from the initial shock of unification and saw that freedom of opinion would not get them into trouble, a rash of documentaries proliferated jammed with confessions, personal stories, and narratives that traced portraits of individuals finding a place for themselves. The emotional fragility of such reports exposed a kind of “borderline syndrome.” Found items, such as women’s factory smocks, children’s school things, and objects from daily life took on enormous importance. Simple objects bespoke a social ecology of the vanished world of the factory where time was measured in the rumble of machinery.

Socialism attempted to reduce injustice by resolving problems through collective efforts. Eventually, technological development overtook this utopian effort and Herbert Marcuse has pointed to the ‘end of utopia’ in this context.²⁰ Historically, the 19th century witnessed an excess of available labor; many new technologies were developed; factories were set up for the first time; and the mechanization of the labor was first broken into divisions. Workers were uprooted from their daily lives and impoverished. Exploitation, the brutality of factory and machine, the increase of labour time without even the guarantee of basic necessities of life, together with the extremely low life expectancy and injuries caused by negligence—all revealed the dark side of misery in the industrial world. But by the middle of the 20th century many violent conflicts were held in check, and class struggles eased. Today, another menace strikes at the opportunity that socialism offered: Work is increasingly scarce. Work itself is becoming redundant, and with this,

the oppressed worker reappears as the un- or under-employed worker. This forces a reconsideration of what a modern standard of living means. Indignation is no longer aroused by material need, yet the threat of a total division of society, centered on the competitive sharing out of a limited supply of work with privileges for the few (generated by a new scarcity) looms ever larger on the horizon.

Why is it important to preserve memory? Just because we have eliminated the most brutal processes of modernization, we should not forget what we have gained in social participation and free dialogue. We are more acutely aware of these freedoms now that they are threatened. The problem now is the tracelessness of human progress, in that progress has stagnated. Wages and home ownership have fallen and education is slipping. Fewer people die on the job and life expectancy extends, yet one can be severely “impoverished” and (ironically) possess the latest in technology: a smart phone.

Shared Work: the New Collectivism

In no other period since the Cold War ended have companies been simultaneously faster to increase spending on machines and software, while slower to add people to run them. Instead of hiring or investing in new factories, companies are rehabilitating the old ones and investing in technologies to boost production. Robotic forklift cars now replace forklift drivers. In some instances, only one or two people are needed to supervise an entirely automated factory floor. Software has created jobs as a result of businesses using computers in the place of people in the service sectors. For example, waiters are being replaced by electronic ordering systems. A Presto console is “cheaper than even the very

cheapest waiter.”²¹ Automation and productivity at the Stihl tool factory increased by 6%, as noted by Peter Mueller, its owner, who remarks that 120 robots operate around the clock on each shift in one of his plants.

Material improvements for the generations who lived through the economic upswing of the post-war period bear the loss of historical memory. Having a car or a washing machine once meant unheard upward mobility. But emancipation from the constraints of nature must not slip into the amorphousness of an endless pressing forward. Although people have the right to vote, entire groups are excluded from advancement because they lack technical skills. We need a symbolic form of representation for those things for which we have fought, for which a new collective effort is required. Habermas worries, “What is terrifying about material progress . . . is this traceless disappearance of the historical path. It is terrifying both for past suffering and past sacrifice, which, without the possibility of a reconciling remembrance, is as good as lost, and for the identity of those who come later, who, without an awareness of the heritage which they have entered into, can have no idea of who they are.”²²

Remembering Truthfully

History written without imagination risks a failure of basic human empathy. We often think that the historical imagination is seeing PAST—seeing past the squalors of an earlier era to the larger truths that it encompassed. Actually, history is about seeing IN, capitalism: the worker now sees himself made redundant. For a time in the late 1990s Germany was proud to guide workers off the factory floors and into part-time jobs in the

digital economy. Consequently, workers no longer share shift hours but work in isolation; nor do they assemble as a group each day at central worksites. Fewer working hours, fewer benefits and outright joblessness define the newest social crisis. Technology replaces a worker with its own 'brain' and its own dialectical forces. Today's era of the end of the individual now sees the machine as the new Subject.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 117.

² Habermas, *Legitimation*, 127.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews*, ed. Peter Daws (London: Verso, 1986), 142.

⁴ Habermas, *Legitimation*, 140.

⁵ Daphne Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Post-Socialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 127.

⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 91.

⁷ Huyssen, 75.

⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Cosen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 26-7.

⁹ Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 6.

¹⁰ *Ostalgie*: Catalog of the Exhibit at the New Museum (Brooklyn, New York): May 2011.

¹¹ Berdahl, 53.

¹² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 17.

¹³ David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 242.

¹⁴ Habermas 1986, 40.

¹⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. George Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 60.

¹⁶ Lyotard, 61.

¹⁷ Lyotard, 61.

¹⁸ Lyotard, 101-102.

¹⁹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 138.

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 72.

²¹ Thomas Friedman, "Average is Over," *The New York Times*. (January 25, 2012): A25.

²² Habermas, 1986, 139-140.

²³ Remnick, 85.
