

Juliane Fürst and Josie McLellan, eds., *Dropping Out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 343 p. ISBN 9781498525145

Cold War politics and their present-day afterlife have long defined much of the knowledge produced regarding alternative – non-regime – spheres within the Socialist bloc. As a result, their history, when not ignored entirely, has served as an argument in a teleological narrative about the inevitability of socialism’s demise. Fürst and McLellan’s edited volume, on the other hand, fits into an increasingly popular literature that fosters a re-thinking of the socialist past, the post-socialist present, and the structure of knowledge about the societies that have lived and continue to live this past and present.¹ The book thus not only refocuses the study of alternative spheres away from their usual role as harbingers of transformation, but also provides space for reflection on the nature of social, psychological, and political change *across* the Iron Curtain.

The contributions are connected through the overarching theme of “dropping out,” conceived in broad terms that engage the individual authors in a discussion of its meaning. As such, the collection does not argue either for a specific interpretation of the term, or for a specific instrumental role for dropping out in re-shaping the socialist regimes. Rather, as a “history of emotions” (8) the book provides a glimpse into how individuals (often within a collective) experienced their own activities. The twelve chapters, written predominantly by early career researchers who participated in a British Arts and Humanities Research Council grant, are divided into sections suggesting four categories of dropping out: in spirit, intellectually, in style, and economically. This division is not subjected to a sustained analysis and, while its aim may be more descriptive, its existence prompts the reader to look for connections both within and beyond it, as the presented modes of dropping out often have much in common. The structure de-emphasises chronological and regional variations as to how, why, and with what results people dropped out of socialism, thus drawing attention to the localised individual experiences of the dropouts. These experiences were abundant: there are hippies, yogis, musicians, squatters, hackers, as well as more usual subjects of studies – intellectuals, activists, students, and artists.

¹ See Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Katherine Verdery, “Postsocialism,” in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Robert Scott and Stephen Koslyn (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

The brief contributions raise a multitude of potential analytical issues. Due to the heterodox nature of the contributions, the themes appear as questions, rather than fully formed approaches or interpretations. Not all the authors ask the same questions, but much of what they write is relevant to several prominent themes:

First, the overall framing indicates that the authors, sometimes implicitly, “go West”: placing Eastern European movements within the broader context of pan-European activism during that period.² This framing stresses the universal aspect of alternative movements in the twentieth century. We are invited to consider that the protagonists “dropped out of rational, industrial modernity” (307), and that their activities were connected to those beyond the Iron Curtain because they all resulted from “the shared experience of modernity” across the world (15). Thus the broader question emerges as to what modernity means, to which the volume does not provide an explicit answer, but ample stimulating material that helps us reconsider several existing conceptualisations. Susan Buck-Morss famously analysed the similarities between the Cold War East and West, and encapsulated them in the concept of the “dreamworld of a mass utopia,” in which mass happiness could be achieved through “industrial modernisation.”³ The protagonists of *Dropping Out* often opted for a non-industrial world, trying to build their lives without either a re-ordering of the world through development or through clear categories of belonging and being. Instead, they chose to create individual spaces, their dropping out not always a “permanent or an absolute condition” (87). At points they even developed an alternative “feeling of ‘cosmopolitan responsibility’ for the future of the entire world” (140). Artists in the USSR went as far as to create that alternative space within their own minds, seeking “internal escape routes” (63). Hippies spoke of “knowing themselves” (57) and commune members emphasised “self-knowledge” (185). Even the squatters in the GDR who took over and personally restored older buildings showcased their dedication to modernising activities beyond the state framework, often motivated by a “mundane wish to live an ordinary life” (283). Happiness, therefore, was not to be achieved through a re-modelling of society, but through a kind of work either on themselves, as Häberlen proposes in the conclusion, or on their immediate personal surroundings, or on the global world. Even then, however, the dropouts did not function entirely outside of socialist modernity, some elements of which they embraced, or at least did not reject. Their activities sometimes “helped maintain the integrity” (288) either of an aspect of the system or of the system itself, thus making them participants in the existing socialist modernity. Perhaps, then, their situation might be better characterised as one of striving for a “second modernity,” in which “boundaries and distinctions between categories become blurred” and individualised.⁴

² Tara Zahra, “Going West,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25 (2011), no. 4, pp. 785–91.

³ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (MIT Press, 2002), p. ix.

⁴ Ulrich Beck and Christoph Lau, “Second Modernity as a Research Agenda: Theoretical and

By explicitly raising the issue of dropping out of modernity and presenting people who felt they were “citizens of the world” (141), the volume points to the potential of studies of socialism to question if, when, and how the local and global interacted in gradually bringing about another (second?) type of modernity.

Focusing on the nature of what was embraced by the dropouts points to the second underlying question of the volume: To what extent were there *alternative* spaces? Many contributors recognise that dropping out cannot exist beyond the system, as it is a relational process. However, in the experience of each dropout, the alternative is constituted by their demand to live differently. The individual contributions recognise this as a basic premise, but also reveal that naming and implementing a specific alternative lifestyle is a much more complex process. Is it possible to belong to an alternative movement if its aim is to participate in the mainstream? And must alternative living be more than a personal lifestyle choice, must it promise a future available to anyone else? As the accounts reveal, the protagonists often disagreed on the answers to those questions. Even though their own lived experience was not the same as that of those who belonged to the mainstream, they did not present a comprehensive vision of the future in which the socialist regime did not exist at all. For instance, the inhabitants of the Yellow Submarine commune fought over the extent to which their mode of living should be known, available, or promoted to others, not knowing “what purpose [...] freedom was to have” (197). Others displayed a “lack of awareness of being involved in anti-politics” (79), insisting on the apolitical nature of their lifestyle, which they refused to consider to represent a political alternative to the existing system. Yet others demanded that the state allow them “to participate in socialist society on their own terms” (99), thus carving out their alternative sphere explicitly within the system. Through these examples *Dropping Out* provides ample stimulation for contemplating the nature of the political and the role of alternative futures in its reconstituting. It does so primarily by prompting us to think about how personal ideas about alternative futures relate to the transformation of the broader socio-political context in which they appear.

Looking at the individual experience of forming a dropout culture raises a third important analytical theme, centred on the notion of authenticity. The desire for authenticity is a familiar theme in studies of Western social movements of that period, and one that finally receives due coverage in this volume. For instance, the samizdat writers considered themselves “the *real* heirs to the Russian poetic tradition” (111, emphasis added). In fact, realness of experience was a fundamental aspect of authenticity. Authenticity guaranteed that one’s lifestyle was superior to the mainstream mode of living, through the assertion of difference existing between the dropouts and the mainstream. For the Polish youth computer ownership was a means of “showing off” (170), while a GDR punk stated that regular (as opposed to the punks’) life in their state was “so boring” (210),

Empirical Explorations in the ‘Meta-Change’ of Modern Society,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2005), pp. 525–557, here 527.

and Siberian punks considered themselves “real heroes” because being a punk could entail facing repression (238). In this way, claiming to be authentic was necessarily a political statement, an expression of how to live *better* under socialism, which, as the introduction points out, “demanded to be lived” (13). *Dropping Out* thus helps us in thinking about the actual role of authenticity within social movements. Firstly, if there was a qualitative difference between living in the mainstream and in the alternative, then to brand a fellow dropout as authentic or inauthentic took on greater significance. Different groups had different ideas about how to establish whether someone was a real dropout, but the need to ensure that all members are authentic meant that, as in the case of the GDR punks, even style could become a “means of policing the subculture” (211). Secondly, and even more interestingly, in the case of the Siberian punks, for whom “yesterday’s provoking slogans became today’s [post-transformation] official jargon” (245), this shift in the role of those slogans caused the punks to abandon them. This prompts reflection on whether authenticity only has a political content when in an oppositional relation to the mainstream. Or, perhaps, the desire to be authentic is the actual *content* of dropping out, regardless of its form, because in the long term the form itself does not offer a better alternative. The role of authenticity within movements both before and after they enter the mainstream is a question that has still not been investigated within today’s progressive movements, even though they are perpetually confronted by potential political alliances with forces that are not “authentically” progressive. *Dropping Out* could thus be read by those who seek to understand how social mobilisation works.

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This rich collection is full of “thick” description (181), which offers a variety of readers opportunities to engage with specific contributions beyond the themes outlined above. For instance, the study of Polish *komputerowcy* (“hackers”), who “privatised” (160) computer use, could shed light on the historical trajectory of ownership of new technologies, and even of the digital sphere, a question particularly pertinent in the era of “surveillance capitalism.”⁵ The account relating the political transformation of the Siberian punk underground scene towards nationalism provides a case study in how the participants of protest movements leave spectators “confused” (241) as they behave contrary to the expectations produced by a vision of politics as a space of competing coherent ideologies. The story of Sarajevo’s madrassa students, who discussed pan-Islamic revivalism and felt “embedded in the local-global framework of the 1960s and 1970s” (86), illustrates a need to gain more knowledge of non-Western internationalism and globalisation, an increasingly popular theme in historical writing. Finally, the difficulty that GDR punks experienced in “reconcil[ing] their past identities with their

⁵ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

[post-unification] circumstances” (222) offers an input for universal considerations concerning the difficulty of writing histories after fundamental social transformations have repositioned people into new roles and categories of belonging.

While individual accounts offer these interesting tropes, they are not sufficiently analytically explored, either within the contributions or in the brief introductory and concluding essays. Many fascinating avenues for further debate appear rather as teasers, and readers may easily find themselves desiring more critical reflections on the meaning of dropping out. But placing such diverse contributions in a single volume ultimately draws attention to the multitude of ways that the study of the socialist past can help us reflect on the broader history of the twentieth century, in particular for a scholar interested in understanding how we came to the point we are at right now: politically, economically, psychologically, or emotionally.

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