

# O Bella Ciao: Nostalgia and Hauntings from the Future

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Research explores the legacy of consumer culture in the context of antifascist heritage sites revival in post-Yugoslavian space. Despite the overarching threat of populism and turbo-capitalism globally, manifested as politics of promoting national hegemony, and social exclusion through adhering to neoliberal norms in post-Yugoslavian space, antifascist heritage sites promote the values of shared humanity and antifascism. Adhering on ethnographic fieldwork, research explores how these antifascist heritage sites reclaimed their position through the return of the values of antifascism and socialism which survived in those spaces. Nostalgia plays an important part in these processes, yet it is a nostalgia for the hope that tomorrow is going to be better than today, positioned as nostalgia for a future that haunts through being unfulfilled due to nationalism and turbo-capitalism. Rediscovery of shared humanity and antifascism through the agency of consumerism, provides solace from social injustices ever present, and empowers the legacy for the hope for social justice.

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To cite: Causevic, S. (2020) O Bella Ciao: Nostalgia and Hauntings from the Future. In G. Patsiaouras, J. Fitchett and A.J. Earley (Eds.), *Consumer Culture Theory Conference 2020: Interrogating Social Imaginaries*. Leicester, United Kingdom

## I. INTRODUCTION

Representation of the past has always been loaded with the contemporary clues, values, and ideologies (Goulding and Domic, 2009; Chronis, 2005). The research presented here is embedded in the social settings which accompany the transformation of the legacy of antifascist heritage sites after the break-up of former Yugoslav Federation. The research focuses on the contemporary period (2015-2020), which is both in the global context and in the context of former Yugoslavia overwhelmed with the climate of historic revisionism, right-wing populism and hate speech (Thorleiffson, 2017). Through the agency of consumer culture, this research explores the meaning of nostalgia in the context of the transformation of the legacy of antifascist heritage sites in former Yugoslavia. It aims to understand the influence that global political context has on the promotion and interpretation of the heritage sites that carry with them the legacy of a Yugoslavian antifascist heritage and celebrate building connections across divides, creating a sense of what Jacques Derrida (2000) refers to as shared humanity.

### Research Approach

This study adopted a retrospective approach that used ethnographic intent, i.e. conformity to ethnographic principles (Wolcott, 1985), and auto-ethnography manifested through introspection upon the interpretation of the fieldwork, enabling unique knowledge production and insights to be reflected upon as an irreplaceable analytical resource (Bourdieu, 2003). The ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in the period 2015-2020, at the commemorative and museum sites located in the former Yugoslav socialist republics, now sovereign states, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Croatia and Serbia. The fieldwork also featured guided tours through Sarajevo (B&H), Belgrade (Serbia), and Rijeka – European Capital of Culture 2020 (Croatia), observing the opening ceremony which featured the city's legacy of working class community, antifascism, social justice and inclusion, accompanied by the lyrics and melody of a famous Italian antifascist song 'Bella Ciao' (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUzWdF7OzU>). The fieldwork included observations of guided tours, specifically focusing on the narrative of the

interpretation of the antifascist legacy of former Yugoslavia and the role which commodification of nostalgic sentiments played within the process. It also included interviews with tour guides, museum directors and custodians.

### Research Findings and Conclusions

During the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s, the heritage sites that celebrated antifascism and shared humanity have essentially been subverted in the official ideological discourse by the dominant political parties in the exercise of building new national identities, namely subverting Yugoslav to Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, etc. identity (Rivera, 2008). Under these circumstances, accompanied by rising populist rhetoric in a global space, visiting antifascist heritage sites works as a protest against populism, cronyism, social injustices, populist rhetoric and historical revisionism. Thus, commodifying and consuming antifascist heritage intersects political activism with consumerism (Chatzidakis, Larsen, & Bishop, 2014), providing temporary solace against contemporary evils such as right-wing populism. The ethnographic part of this research also reveals the importance of understanding the commodification of nostalgic sentiments for the antifascist past, so called Yugo-nostalgia through which antifascist legacy is reclaimed. In social science literature, Yugo-nostalgia is defined as a psychological and cultural phenomenon occurring among citizens from the former Socialist Yugoslavia who still share experiences and memories of their common past (Lindstrom, 2005). Giving the example of the Berlin Wall, Derrida (1994) argued that the idea of communism remains as a spectre, i.e. a visible corporeal spirit which is transcendent and, in its transcendence, it fills the time and space (Causevic, 2019). The fear of its transcendence is haunting

capitalist societies. That fear has manifested itself recently as austerity, social immobility and populist rhetoric which characterise post-2008 neoliberal capitalist societies (Fisher, 2014). Volcic (2017) also reflects on post-2008 capitalist ideology, i.e. neoliberalism, and explains that it is manifested through consumerism which commodifies the welfare state of 1960s and 1970s to be able to sell it as a bitter-sweet nostalgia. Fisher (2014) notes that by locating nostalgia in the past through the simplification of nostalgic sentiments through the act of consumerism, the attention is taken away from the deeper meanings of nostalgia, i.e. nostalgia for the future. Indeed, the hope for a better future was a significant part of popular culture until the 1980s, but that hope has been officially abandoned because of turbo-capitalist relations embodied in contemporary society. Fisher specifically uses Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology to describe a sense in which contemporary culture is preoccupied by the lost hopes of modernity cancelled out by neoliberalism and post-modernity. Popular culture is haunted not by the past, but by a hope for better future which was promised, but never came materialised. It remained as a spectre (Derrida, 1994), visible incorporeal spirit which failed to materialise, but still haunts neoliberal capitalism. Since their independence, the post-Yugoslav countries have borrowed large International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans and encountered economic challenges caused by cronyism, populism, and lack of economic growth. This has resulted in sociocultural, economic and environmental injustices, causing longing for the Yugoslav past, i.e. 'Yugo-nostalgia' (Volcic, 2007). In many western media outlets, Yugo-nostalgia has indeed been a constant source of infantilising. Buchowski (2006) notes different shades of Europeaness understood

in a hierarchical sense, encourages a perception of the 'otherness' of former socialist countries. Yugo-nostalgia, for example, is used to justify the perception of people from former Yugoslavia as infantile due to their supposed longing for the communist past. This 'infantility' places them outside the norms of European modernity, enabling subversion, othering and exotification. Yugo-nostalgia is thus often referred to as longing for the things which have gone by, such as Yugoslav socialism, thus overwhelmingly simplifying the phenomenon to achieve a marketable version of the past (Volcic, 2007). Research presented here, on the contrary, sees Yugo-nostalgia as longing for the future. In contemporary contexts, visitors actively try to find solace from the socioeconomic injustices exacerbated through crony capitalism and populism, by seeking out experiences that induce nostalgia towards the times of the former Yugoslavia. This is not nostalgia for the past or political ideologies such as communism, but rather hauntings from the future which never happened, manifested as nostalgia for the hope that tomorrow will be better than today. Thus, the present moment informs the past, but is also haunted by the future. Further, this is not some kind of specific ex-Yugoslav trend, but these kinds of longings for the 'past' have been present in the global context, for instance, Fisher notes (2014, p. 25), 'What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised.' Thus, being haunted by the futures that failed to take shape is fertile ground for othering, populist rhetoric and historical revisionism to enter the mainstream, both globally and in the post-Yugoslav space. Voicing an antifascist narrative by visiting museum exhibits, events and visiting

antifascist sites, is subversive in the current socio-political and economic settings of social exclusion, othering and crony capitalism, and it is precisely this process of subversion that enables the feeling of empowerment and solace in the visitor experience. Thus, these are not only the actors who co-create and subvert the narrative, but rather the social context that feeds into the subversion. Hence, via the agency of consumer culture, through intersecting political activism with consumerism (Chatzidakis, Larsen, & Bishop, 2014), socialism returns manifested as a nostalgia for the future that still haunts and survives in these spaces.

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