



## FREE BY LEA YPI SLOBODNÍ PODĽA LEY YPI

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**FREE. COMING OF AGE  
AT THE END OF HISTORY, 2021**

LEA YPI

London: Penguin

ISBN 978-0-24 1-48185-1

*Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* is a memoir by the Albanian political theorist Lea Ypi, which navigates the turbulent landscape of Albanian transition from socialism to capitalism in the late 1980s through the early 1990s. The memoir provides a complex portrayal of the historical junction by overlapping her formative years from childhood until the end of adolescence with the trajectory of the socio-political shift of the country.

Ypi, an academic focused on the work of Kant and Marx, carefully chooses a more simplistic method of storytelling, narrating her story from the perspective of a child, evolving and building depth slowly, in chronological parallel with the political developments in the country. This method allows the author to cover with grace, ease, and a certain degree of sensitivity one of the most painful, divisive, and taboo topics in the contemporary

discourse of the history of the country, while concurrently going through one of the most difficult psychological processes of losing one's innocence, gaining understanding, and developing a sense of self in between worlds. This combination generates the unique value of the story, highly specific to time place, or generation, yet also universal in its message.

Critically acclaimed internationally and one of the most widely read works by an Albanian author, the book nonetheless met with mixed or contradictory reviews at home. Worldwide, the book is applauded for its personalized detailed storytelling, sometimes at the cost of its core value by excessive anecdotes. Meanwhile, in Albania the memoir was praised by Ypi's own generation and younger elite, yet heavily criticized by the older generation which framed the story in a binary

system of socialism-capitalism – even though this opposition is not significantly present in the actual memoir.

### The Socialist Era

The story takes place in the late 1980s in Durrës, the second-largest city in Albania and the country's main port on the Adriatic Sea. During the first half of the 20th century, the city faced numerous transitions, acting as the Albanian capital for a short period of time, falling under occupation of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Italy and Nazi Germany, and serving as a naval battleground during WWI and WWII. These historical events shaped the city with a new architectural layer of royal and institutional buildings, added to the architectural heritage of Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire already present in its urban fabric. With the establishment of the socialist state, the city entered a process of reconstruction after WWII, mostly focused on heavy industrialization, expansion of the port, construction of the railway to Tirana, and above all on social/public infrastructure.

In the memoir, the perception of the city is used as another layer interconnected to the perception of the overall socio-political landscape. The childhood of the author is presented as an idyllic, static image painted by the state, filled with narratives of heroism, communal life and pure dedication to the Communist Party. Ypi takes the reader on a journey set in the socialist era, navigating the physical landscape of the city through a child-scale world on her daily routine: from school to her house, under the constant presence of the party-state: in school in the form of teachings on Marxism and Stalinism, at home in the form of the photograph of head of the state hanging (or not) on the wall in the living room. Between these ends, the memoir introduces certain elements that form the child's routine: the House of Culture and its statue of Stalin located in the city center, the House of Pioneers, the Party Headquarters, and her neighborhood, which function as an extension to the understanding of the family.

The sense of community and belonging within her neighborhood and the city, characterized by shared labor and collective endeavors, contrasts starkly with the fleeting cracks in the ideological facade, occasionally revealed through whispered adult conversations and fleeting desires for foreign novelties. Nonetheless, the oversimplified worldview

of a child, shaped by the indoctrination of the state, presents a stationary reality devoid of critical questioning or alternative perspectives.

Navigating the drawn map of a safe and predictable environment, the author questions the meaning of exercising *freedom* as a matter of choice between predisposed options with predicted outcomes. In this blank, almost comic interpretation of the concept of *freedom* – as a matter of choice of path, the author is shocked when introduced to an unexpected outcome: protests against the regime.

### A Revolution against Concepts

A wave of protests, started by students in Tirana, spreads across the country and forces the government to legalize pluralism. The collapse of socialism, bringing the author out of her Plato's cave and shredding her childish innocence, transpires in parallel with the dismantlement of the concept of the family core, social fabric, social hierarchy, economy, and state itself. The author is faced with a more complex reality behind the idyllic image of the first chapter when concepts such as class struggle, internment or (later) property restitution are introduced inside her family.

This fragment of the book, mostly underrated or ignored by non-Albanian reviews, portrays a very different zeitgeist from any other moment of the story. Despite the shock, the non-violent nature of the velvet revolution, or as the author calls it the *revolution against concepts*, creates a wave of hope combined with grave social uncertainty. The temporary power vacuum shreds every drawn map of navigation: citizens feel *free* to move up the social hierarchy, move physically inside the country, or even leave the country. During the early 1990s, thousands of Albanians hijacked ships in Durrës port to emigrate to Italy. The city became the center of internal and external mass migration and foreign programs to keep it under control. Painful or anarchic, this historical contrast embodies simultaneously the essence the previous system, but also the capitalist system newly becoming installed.

### A Dark Tunnel without a Torch

As the country embarks on a trajectory toward liberal democracy, external entities intervene to shape Albania's future. Foreign assistance floods various spheres of society, restructuring the government and economy, influencing school curricula, and redefining familial and

societal dynamics. Ypi examines the multifaceted impacts of this *shock therapy* of capitalism, explaining the disorienting effects on familial power dynamics, communal structures, and the broader socio-economic landscape. As the country is introduced to *free* market capitalism and goes through a severe process of privatization, as *possible choices are channeled and restricted* by the new system, the author portrays the erosion that fractures the relations inside her own family structure, later to be manifested on a societal level.

During the late 1990s, Durrës and Tirana became a symbol of chaotic internal mass migration, informal settlements, land occupation, unemployment, and illegal activities, the direct result of job cuts, privatization of public entities and contradictory newly passed laws on agricultural land distribution and restitution of properties. Ypi portrays this process through the lens of a teenager, who experiences the fading role of her previous landmarks of her daily routine and their replacement: the House of Culture gets replaced by nightclubs run by gangsters, the House of Pioneers by NGOs and voluntary work in overcrowded orphanages, the neighborhood grows unsafe as the neighbors turn strangers to each other.

The culmination of the societal decay erupts into civil war in 1997, right after two-thirds of the country lost their savings in pyramid schemes. Here, the war is covered by unedited fragments of the author's diary during her total isolation, where she shares her own traumatic reaction that leaves her incapable of speech. Against the anarchic state of the 90s, the civil war does not aspire, but instead paralyzes the country. Streets, business, government buildings are looted, which causes another wave of asylum seekers towards Italy, including Ypi's family members.

As a war without a clear target, Albanian public discourse even now finds it hard to explain the process leading to the following events. While most scholars or journalists with a dissident background from the socialist era try to explain the civil war as a delayed historical event that had to occur in the early 1990s with the collapse of socialism, the author builds a more complex narrative that sees the failure of two ideological systems overlapping and eventually collapsing due to the unquestionable nature of their implementation. In the book, the accidental suicide of her neighbor symbolizes the tragic and naive nature of 1997,

while her visit to the ruins of the Royal Villa above Durrës symbolizes the total suicidal collapse of societal agency.

## The People's History and the Struggle for Dignity

While leading the reader on a simplified and personally subjective journey through the temporary destruction of two ideologies, this memoir avoids academic narration, moralizing, or literal comparative analysis. As such, it sets itself apart from the traditional narrative that presents the historical events passively occurring without clear cause-effect and detached from the people. If the orthodox take on history creates gaps in its continuity, the personalized narration fills them.

At the same time, to understand the harsh criticism the book often received in Albania, it is crucial to question the existing contextualized discourse present there, which tends to moralize and sensationalize history while distancing it from the people and from its implication in the current state of the transition process in the country. Ypi sidesteps this discourse with finesse, by simplifying the language of storytelling. This maneuver allows the author to shine light for a younger or foreign audience on her story.

The book's promotion in Albania in 2021 was organized in the abandoned residence of communist dictator Enver Hoxha. Despite its location in the most crowded area of Tirana's center, the house has been until recently left untouched. While all other heritage of socialist architecture already passed through a chaotic selection process of decay, demolition, or revitalization over 30 years of transition, the villa was kept hidden behind railings as a physical-architectural taboo that mirrors the country's unresolved issues with the past.

This choice on Ypi's part provoked much negative attention in the public eye, reinforcing the existing stigma attached to that period of history. Yet it equally invokes the importance of truthfully discussing and shifting the manner of addressing the issue: ironically, exactly the aim of the memoir itself. The location of the book promotion serves as an addition to the broader message of the book, similarly as Slavoj Žižek's remark that questions the concept of *freedom* in any given status quo and ideology, emphasizing instead the necessity of pursuing resilience and personal agency, human dignity beyond any ideological system.