

## **FREE: COMING OF AGE AT THE END OF HISTORY INSIGHTFUL REVIEW OF “FREE” BY LEA YPI**

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### **Abstract**

The book “Free: Coming of Age at the End of History” is a captivating piece of Lea Ypi’s philosophical memoir. The abstract offers a glimpse into Ypi’s thought-provoking ideas on justice, communism, and dynamics of power. “Free” engages deeply with the philosophical concept of freedom, unraveling its intricacies and shedding light on its multifaceted dimensions, to this regard through a systematic review of the book the aim is to invite readers to critically reflect on the complexities inherent in the concept of freedom, forging a path for a deeper understanding of its profound implications in both theory and practice. As “Free” is based on a true story it is so vividly explains the historical timeline of the events in a way that the author (narrator) gives to the readers the *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age). The paper aims to enrich the academic dialogue surrounding political philosophy, providing a comprehensive evaluation of Ypi’s work and its implications for the evolving landscape of social and political thought. In the book review we found out that yes, the book is written about the end of the history but about the end of history that did not happen and through Nini’s life (Ypi’s grandmother) which is a central figure in her memoir we can understand that even though Nini’s life was full of struggles and transitions she never lost her inner freedom.

*Keywords:* free, philosophical concept, history, Freedom,

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### **I. Introduction**

Even before one opens the book one cannot help be struck by its characteristic cover, purposely chosen because of its association with the idea of the ‘end of history’ and that is where an international relations scholar and a philosopher met at Lea Ypi’s book “*Free: Coming of Age at the End of History*”

The first one believed that the book was related with Francis Fukuyama’s book “*The End of History and the Last Man*” while for the philosopher the first thing that came to his mind was the connection of the book with the philosophy of Hegel, who said that: “*history is the fulfillment of an idea through time*” in fact both of them dare to judge the book by its cover.

As a matter of fact they both met in the judgment of the cover and little did they know that they will have to deal with the idea of freedom under the communism and not about the very notion of the ‘end of history’.

The philosophical memoir, as Lea calls it, agrees somehow that there is no end of history but there is end to an ideology and both socialism and capitalism equally failed in transmitting the freedom that Karl Marx believed in.

In the century after Marx's death in 1883 a wave of communist regimes began to rise first in Russia, then in Eastern Europe, China, and elsewhere. Bringing in life "his ideas" these regimes left a track of human suffering that stained his name what will later will happen in communist Albania and when this '*sad, bizarre chapter in human history*' (as Ronald Reagan called it) drew to close in the years after the 1989 Marx's vision seemed as bankrupt as the broken-down states that had usurped in the name of communism. (Dupre, 2010, p.72).

While for capitalism Lea in discouraging tones wrote that "*we were free to leave the country, but not free to arrive somewhere else*" as Lea, provides a very declarative close: "*When you see a system change once, you start believing that it can change again.*"

Somehow this passage reminds me of Isaiah Berlin concept of *negative freedom*, which let me conclude that you can have liberty but if you lack wealth, education and other resources you cannot act upon it.

The book "Free: Coming of Age at the End of History" shocks the reader with the first sentence when she says: "*I never asked myself about the meaning of freedom until the day I hugged Stalin,*" the book then successfully interweaves the biography of the author and freedom as a philosophical concept, the memoir besides the informative and entertaining role also plays an educational role as well.

The book is addressed to all the readers without exception but in the center is an entire generation represented by the author Lea herself who spent her childhood years in Communist Albania. In the first part, the author skillfully brings us through her experiences a broad picture of Albania during the years that preceded the fall of communism until the beginning of the 90s. An isolated Albania, which had severed ties even with other communist states, "showing its back to Yugoslavia at the end of the 40s when it broke away from Stalin, cutting diplomatic relations with Russia when Khrushchev betrayed the ideals of communism in the 60s, and in the late 70s abandoning the alliance with China because it forgot the lessons of proletarian internationalism and the cultural revolution," but continued to exert even greater authoritarian control over its citizens. This was explained as a necessity of the time, as "whenever our friends threatened us, the unyielding unity of the party with the people was strengthened even more" (Ypi, 2021, p. 22) In contrast to the first part, the second part describes the transitional Albania, where the author presents it in a slightly more unrestrained form, highlighting a parallel between the main character's transition from childhood to adolescence and the transformation of a country in its transition "from socialism to liberalism, from monism to pluralism, from one state to another, from one life to another" (Ypi, 2021, p. 188). A country that at a fast pace shifted to liberalism, not allowing people time to digest the newly revealed truths about a new reality they were seeing without the filters and colors imposed by the system.

“When freedom finally came, it served as a plate full of frozen foods. We tasted a bit, swallowed quickly, digested poorly, and remained hungry” (Ypi, 2021, p. 141). The book is divided into chapters where important social issues such as emigration, gender inequality, social inequality, the breakdown of social norms, human trafficking, etc., are explained through the simple language of a child. Lea brings a collective psychology of transition and stays within the nuclear family’s focus in this regard emotions, thoughts, and memories are shared with the reader in an extremely intimate form, unprocessed and untouched by stylistics and aesthetics, presenting it in a vulnerable state, bringing it closer to the reader.

The artistic choice of narrating the entire story from the perspective of a child is brilliant because only through the eyes of an innocent and honest child a peaceful narrative can be presented, devoid of resentment for a suppressive system.

By using irony and sarcasm, the author portrays life in socialist Albania and the concept of freedom in a very unique way, describing it as “the only place in the world that had managed to build a fundamental socialist society.” People, even though lacking everything, still “...had something extraordinary: true freedom.

## **II. Free**

The book begins with the observation that “the understanding of freedom had never been in my thoughts until the day I embraced Stalin” (Ypi, 2021, p. 11), while crowds were heard cheering for the onset of Freedom and democracy. “I had never thought about freedom. It was unnecessary. We had as much freedom as we wanted. Personally, I felt free, although this freedom often turned into a heavy burden. In certain cases, the burden became oppressive, threatening” (Ypi, 2021, p. 14). For a young girl who grew up with the ideals of the party, it was incomprehensible to seek freedom outside socialism, which, even so, provided a lot of freedom. The only thing left was to learn to use and defend it by making decisions for which they would be responsible.

Indoctrination with the party’s ideals began in childhood through the education system, mainly through moral educators, portrayed in the book by the character of Teacher Nora. She had the fortune of shaking hands with Uncle Enver, and her hand, even though she had washed it after a few days, remained paralyzed. The force lingered there, and until death, it would stay with her, and her spirit would be the Party’s spirit until her last breath. “I recalled Teacher Nora’s hand as I sat on the ground, facing Stalin’s weathered statue, shrunken in fear, with thoughts scattered like mud stains on my mind. Her commands from a few months ago came to my mind. I tried to revive with the power of imagination the courage she conveyed after shaking Uncle Enver’s hand when she told us she would defend freedom with her life. I tried to be like her” (Ypi, 2021, p. 23).

The moral teacher was the only one who spoke openly before them, eliminating all possible doubts and had the courage to interpret political issues that typically did not receive the proper answers within families. Therefore, it was natural for young Lea, with the surname of the collaborator, the other Ypi, weighing on her shoulders, every time they had to learn about him in

school, to refuse to go, avoiding facing the curiosity of her classmates, who each year were not satisfied with her explanations about why her father was named Xhafer and they had his last name. “If we had some hero of the people or some former partisan, well, even still alive, not necessarily dead, just to mention once in class. Then, no one would bother with that other Ypi.” (Ypi, 2021, p. 34).

This thing had also been suffered by her family, even though her parents were “intellectuals,” none of them had pursued the desired branch of study, and precisely their family background had hindered them in this matter. Specifically, their family origin was the reason because her father was Xhaferr Asllan Ypi, the son of Asllan Xhaferr Ypi, which strangely coincided with the name of that other Ypi, Xhafer, the deputy prime minister who handed over Albania to the Italian fascists after the departure from the monarchy of King Zog.

“He did nothing wrong. Was he a fascist? I don’t know. It’s possible. Did he not defend freedom? It depends. To be free, you have to be alive once.... Before coming with weapons, the Italians came with food and goods. Even the roads, the fascists built for us. The architects of Mussolini himself had designed the government buildings that they later seized. What they called a fascist occupation.” (Ypi, 2021, p. 35).

These words of her mother, which shook her for the first time with the ideological ambiguity, were a prologue to what would follow when she realized that they did not love her as much as she loved “uncle Enver,” maybe they did not love him at all.

The display of innocent love for the identifying figure of the Party, its founder, culminated in the insistence of her parents to place his photograph in a frame. The great sorrow she felt when “Uncle Enver” passed away was justifiable, to the extent that her insistence to accompany her father to pay homage, which met with an unstoppable resistance from her parents, was also justifiable. Top of Form

“The truth was that no one cared; no one had any desire to pay homage at Uncle Enver's grave or to display his photograph in the waiting room. I had asked them countless times to put up a portrait and they always forgot” (Ypi, 2021, p. 59).

The indoctrination manifested itself in another dimension as well, that of expressing disbelief in religion, even when it came to the death of Uncle Enver. To find comfort, it was rationalized with interpretations that even after death, the body traveled to another world, and depending on one’s deeds, it could be either dreadful or marvelous.

“Another world? How can a person travel after death to another world? When someone dies, they cannot move anywhere. They put them straight into the archive” (Ypi, 2021, p. 50).

One of the significant benefits of communism was the “abandonment of God,” which took place in the lives of capitalists. They found it easier to exploit workers by blaming this inhuman being to free themselves from responsibilities.

“Now we had the Party. It made us understand that God was just an invention, an invention of those who posed as his interpreters and enforcers of the rules he set, using his power to rule and subjugate others” (Ypi, 2021, p. 53).

A noteworthy event was the arrival of the empty pleasure of Coca-Cola at Koka's home, bought by her mother at the price of a Skanderbeg painting. To avoid diminishing her "aesthetic authority," they decided to place it without a coaster on top of the television. This was a new moment in their lives because, besides the symbol of capitalism triumphantly entering their homes, it also depicted the misery into which post-communist Albania had fallen. This was further confirmed by the description of the long lines in front of stores to secure the basic necessities for existence.

"Hundreds of limbs in motion, heads stretching beyond the human barricade to see what supplies were still available beyond the counter, shoulders colliding with each other, hands grabbing and letting go in their calculations, murmurs of anxiety and whispers of anger, saleswomen with eyes mobilized, four in search of friends in line to give them priority" (Ypi, 2021, p. 62).

Children had the luxury of enjoying only the papers that wrapped the gum, which were thrown away by foreign tourists who were also rare in the country isolated from everyone and where ideals were lived as if they were immune to any influence.

"I can give you Huba Buba... It's still fresh in my mind... not more than three months or maybe four. Depends on how early they smelled it..." (Ypi, 2021, p. 74), were the words with which the little girl defied the threats from the neighborhood bullies who were searching for the remains of the scent of gum wrappers.

The pleasure, which was rare at that time and was usually, displayed next to the picture of Uncle Enver as a status symbol, also led to a dispute with their first neighbors, the Papa family. They were the only ones with whom they shared secrets and the keys to their home. Fortunately, the conflict ended after an intervention to encourage reconciliation.

However, Lea concluded the matter by stating, "Koka Kola's pleasures are produced in imperialist countries, and perhaps the saboteurs brought them secretly to corrupt us, to break our unity and solidarity" (Ypi, 2021, p. 72).

### **III. The end of history**

With the innocent language that characterizes a child of her age, Lea said: "I believed blindly that communism was marvelous. Every morning, I woke up with the desire to do something to accelerate progress towards it" (Ypi, 2021, p. 132), reinforcing the concepts learned from her moral education teacher that when people grow up in a just system, and children are educated with the right ideas, they fully internalize them. "Marx believed that in capitalism, people are not free, as workers are not allowed to do what is allowed for capitalists" (Ypi, 2021, p. 108).

She tried to decode the codes of the language spoken by adults without having a code to help her. Often, she found herself in a dilemma between fantasy and logic, where, from her perspective, the logic under the cloak of doctrine led her to the conclusion that there should be no doubt about the state, the party, and the system.

"I often asked myself why the hell my grandmother repeated this story every time someone came to visit and remembered the time at the B. University where Haki had also been an educator. I

couldn't understand this detailed analysis of the fact that my grandfather had given him cigarettes when they met years later" (Ypi, 2021, p. 125).

There was a parallelism between the isolation of the country and the isolation in which Lea had grown up. Her family had carefully raised Lea without involving her in family secrets. With her highly intuitive nature, she often asked questions, some of which were initially originated in her mind, while others were directed to the adults. Many times, the answers she received from family members left her unhappy with her curiosity.

And one day, in December 1990, the end of history came, but not with the end of classless society as communism taught, but with the fall of the iron curtain. Lea faced the reality that the only truth they had known in socialism was slavery and censorship, not freedom and democracy. All the secrets were revealed at once.

Even in her epilogue she stated that: "When you see a system change once it's not that difficult to believe that it can change again." This is the kind of intellectual clarity that comes from living through a genuine rupture in history, a moment when, in reality, everything changes and there is a quantum jump.

"I learned shocked, that our former prime minister, the one I had despised throughout my childhood because he shared the same name and surname as my father, was not the shadow of a regrettable misunderstanding. He was my great-grandfather himself" (Ypi, 2021, p. 134).

She also understood that even though she was a pioneer, chosen prematurely, she would follow the same fate as the biography dictated, precisely because she was the descendant of the one who had sold the country to the fascists.

"I learned the truth when the truth was no longer dangerous. I learned it at a time when I had grown enough to ask myself why my family had kept me in lies for so long" (Ypi, 2021, p. 138).

What followed in the following days was even more shocking. Although they had been prepared for attacks from outside, for which they had built bunkers everywhere, the enemy emerged from within. It had the same features as us, had lived among us, within us; that enemy was us" (Ypi, 2021, pp. 140-141).

"We had been warned that the dictatorship of the proletariat is always threatened by the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. What we had not predicted was that the first victim of that dualism, the clearest sign of victory, was the obliteration of key words: dictatorship, proletariat, and bourgeoisie" (Ypi, 2021, p. 141).

The sense of disorientation experienced by Lea was not hers alone but that of an entire generation. It was a collective disorientation for all those who were not accustomed to living differently and knew nothing else because they were the product of the family as much as they were the product of the state.

"In a society where politics and education permeated all spheres of life, I was a fruit of both the family and the state. When the conflict between them openly unfolded, I felt blind, betrayed, abandoned" (Ypi, 2021, p. 138).

Suddenly, overnight, the curtain of the living theater scene fell, so the characters were no longer required to play their assigned roles. Finally, they could be themselves, articulate their thoughts freely, stripped of fear, that overpowering force that dictated everyone's lives.

“The universities my family had attended were indeed educational institutions, but of a special kind. They told me that when relatives were mentioned, this implied their release from prison; that the end of school implied the end of years of punishment; that the initials of university cities in the diploma indicated places and prisons of internment, that various study subjects corresponded to various accusations” (Ypi, 2021, p. 133).

The strong light of the projectors in this theatrical scene clearly revealed the dark prison in which the country had been for more than half a century. Now people were free, no longer like those puppets tied with strings, limited in their movements.

“Socialism, the society we lived in, had been lost. Communism was the society we sought to create, where the class conflict would be extinguished, and everyone’s free abilities would develop fully, had also been lost” (Ypi, 2021, p. 141).

The created euphoria blurred the view of reality on the ground, turning into a kind of mist fed by ignorance, a general lack of information, uncontrolled thirst for being in control of their actions, but also the ambition to win quickly, influenced by the fear and uncertainty that the future presented. All of these together created a chaotic turmoil as the country moved towards civil war. “I will never know if the working classes that paraded on 1st of May were the same crowds protesting in early December. I will never know what I would have done if I had asked different questions, if my questions had found different answers or collided with a stubborn resistance” (Ypi, 2021, p. 142).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The book which is dedicated by the author to her grandmother (Nini) who, alongside her, stands as a committed and emblematic figure can rightfully be considered the symbol of the historical phases that the Albanian state has gone through. Serving as the moral backbone of the book and being the moral pillar of the family, regardless of the challenges in her life, Grandma Nini radiated nobility in every action she took. In the book, she appears with an unparalleled dignity, reminiscent of a granddaughter of a pasha, blessed by fate and life in her youth but tried and interned precisely because of the privileges brought by that very biography and the fortune of her youth.

Despite all she had experienced, significant losses in her life, and her fate, Grandma Nini had self-control, giving meaning to freedom as a conscious necessity. Freedom, she believed, is universal and all-encompassing, it is everywhere around us, intimately connected to the understanding that each of us gives to respecting one’s autonomy. “*We lost everything, but we did not lose ourselves. We did not lose dignity because dignity has nothing to do with money, glory, or titles. I am the same person I have always been.*” (Ypi, 2021, p. 137)

In the first part of “Free” Lea with her innocent voice believed what the teacher portrayed as “the revisionist East” and “the imperialist West” but by the end of the book, the promises and

disappointing reality of both socialism and liberalism were unmasked, but as she tries to answer the profound question “What is freedom?” she often finds herself returned to her grandmother’s concept of freedom. *“It’s something that reveals itself when you act responsibly”*.

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