“Uncivil Society?” Where Is the Sociology?

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Stephen Kotkin and Jan T. Gross are names that do not require any introduction. Foremost historians of the Soviet Union and Poland, respectively, their knowledge of the region is immense and command of historical sources extraordinary. Moreover, both authors are well versed in the social sciences, and have demonstrated their ability to combine theory and history in creative and sometimes counterintuitive ways. Attempting to write a critical review of their work, therefore, is a tall order not just for a historian but for a social scientist, as well. Yet, this is precisely the task that lies ahead.

Uncivil Society originated in a graduate seminar that the two authors co-taught at Princeton University in 2007. Discussing the implosion of communist regimes with top graduate students and with Adam Michnik must have been an extraordinary occasion by any standard. The book seems to have been written mainly by Kotkin, with Gross possibly contributing the chapter on Poland, though this is left unspecified. The use of the pronoun “we” throughout (as in “our term ‘uncivil society’” [2009: 12]), however, suggests that the two authors share the book’s main assumptions and conclusions. Accordingly, I will treat the book as a joint enterprise while recognizing that Kotkin is the main author.

The main thesis of Uncivil Society is simple and plausible enough. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe were not brought down by “civil society” (with the partial and significant exception of Poland). Rather, they imploded from within on account of the internal contradictions of “uncivil society.” This term signifies the communist establishment, i.e., the “formidable bonds and forms of social organization” that united its members at the helm of “an illiberal state without private property” (12). How encompassing was this “uncivil society” cum establishment? Even if the families of the party-state apparat are included, not more than 5–7 percent of the
population belonged to this category. Though the authors carefully note that their analysis of communism’s downfall will make room for some elements of “the second society” (the term was coined by the Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss [1988] by analogy with the notion of the “second” or unofficial economy), they are deliberately dismissive of the notion of “civil society.” Kotkin and Gross argue that calling a few dozen (or, at best, a few hundred) members of the opposition a civil society while implying that hundreds of thousands of communist officials somehow did not constitute “a society” is not only descriptively inaccurate but also causally inadequate. Just like the proverbial bourgeoisie which allegedly brought about the French revolution but whose consolidation was, in fact, its long-term outcome, so civil society in Eastern Europe was the product rather than the cause of system implosion (7 passim).

The proof lies in the pudding: the mass demonstrations in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the bloody confrontation between enraged citizens and the state security apparatus in Romania were largely spontaneous affairs in which “unorganized crowds” confronted regimes that had lost both their legitimacy and coercive backing from Moscow. In the only case in which mass demonstrations did not occur (Poland), an actual (not just “imagined”) civil society existed that could reasonably negotiate with a weakened communist elite (in Hungary, the communist authorities had to prop up the small opposition in order to have an actual roundtable). If communist regimes imploded so rapidly, therefore, this was because they were vulnerable from the very outset.

What were the sources of this vulnerability? The first one was the “structural incompetence” of the regimes themselves (13–16). The absence of information gathering and conflict resolution mechanisms in a regime that proclaimed “class harmony” by ideological fiat meant that any spontaneously expressed grievance would be treated as a potentially mortal threat to the regime itself. As a result, officials had a built-in incentive to falsify information and promote subordinates who would convey only the “good news,” while social conflict was routinely suppressed by repressive means. Secondly, by comparing themselves with Western capitalist countries in developmental terms, communist regimes could not hide from their populations (not in the long term, in any case) the inferiority of their social systems. Thirdly, once the combination of structural incompetence and political-economic competition resulted in a foreign debt crisis, communist regimes lacked the capacity to renew themselves. When Gorbachev tried to do so, seeking reformist political partners in the East European