Uncivil Society as a Memory Shaping Work

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In his essay, “The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,” Tony Judt concludes with a warning to East Europeans to resist the temptation of telling the story of 1989 “in a different and more comforting way,” given the extent to which it would be difficult “to claim that any of the liberations of Eastern Europe, even those of Poland or Hungary, would have been possible without at least the benign neglect of the Soviet Union.” “This is,” he goes on to note, “not a very appealing or heroic version of a crucial historical turning point” especially in a region “where the wheel of history has all too often been turned by outsiders”—all too often evoking sentiments of “humiliation” as a consequence (Judt 2000: 312–313). Kotkin’s perspective on the 1989 revolutions is predicated on similar concerns, namely that scholarly analyses of these events focus too extensively on organized opposition to communist rule, on the heroic actors embedded in nascent civil societies orchestrating “a broad freedom drive,” at the expense of the real underlying causes of regime breakdown such as the impact of the global political economy on a “bankrupt political class in a system ... largely bereft of corrective mechanisms” (2009: xvii). While substituting a “depressing tale” for the more heroic civil society narrative may be unsettling, it is necessary nonetheless, from Kotkin’s perspective, if only to prevent a perpetuation of the myths and “preferable pasts” Judt warned against. Both East Europeans and scholars of the region should, therefore, soberly and unflinchingly, look reality in the face and recognize the extent to which regime inactions combined with spontaneous popular reactions in the context of specific structural conditions, as illuminated in Kotkin’s work, provide the definitive causal account of the 1989 revolutions.

Kotkin thereby follows firmly in the footsteps of Theda Skocpol whose structural account of social revolutions “thoroughly deromanticized – and to some degree devillainized—revolutions” by denying the purposive
actions of “willful individuals and acting groups” any causal weight in her analysis (1994: 8–9).\textsuperscript{1} For Skocpol, as for Kotkin, the “center of all attempts to define and explain social revolutions” should be state organizations (1994: 7) or, in Kotkin’s formulation, the “uncivil society” of the communist establishment which controlled not just the administrative and coercive capacities of the state but also all organizations normally associated with civil society. Since revolutionary organization and mobilization normally “emerge only after a crisis in the normal patterns of state, and perhaps also class, domination,” explaining this crisis should be the analyst’s primary concern (111). Popular mobilization on the basis of ever present grievances can, for the most part, be assumed to follow almost inevitably, even spontaneously, once these patterns of domination unravel. Accordingly, the communist establishment takes center stage in Kotkin’s account with popular mobilization, no matter how massive or impressive, playing a decidedly secondary role. Throughout the work, Kotkin debunks the myth that the revolutions of 1989 were somehow “made” by dissidents as their leadership, ideals, or organizational capacities had, in his analysis, negligible impact (with the exception of Poland). Instead, the revolutions simply happened as the region’s uncivil societies imploded under internal and external pressures they could not adequately address.

But Kotkin’s objectives likely go beyond addressing a regionally focused audience to include shaping the way in which students assigned his work will understand this historical turning point. The book emerged out of a seminar for PhD students taught by the authors; it is short, written in a breezy, accessible style and published as a paperback in a prestigious series, Modern Library Chronicles, which produces introductory texts to seminal historical events and epochs by noted scholars. With that in mind, this review will address the implications of this account as a “memory” shaping work in its own right. Authoritative analyses, articulately formulated and assertively presented, at times dismissive of alternative viewpoints, represent both opportunities and dangers in the classroom. The learning opportunity resides in the extent to which the text is questioned, interrogated, and situated within the context of contested “memories” and competing scholarly interpretations. The danger lies in lazy readings that accept the text at its own valuation without first subjecting it to critical scrutiny.

\textsuperscript{1} Skocpol notes in passing that this de-centering of agency might, in part, account for the chorus of criticism her work received from otherwise very divergent scholars. A similar underlying logic may inform the sometimes frosty reception accorded to Kotkin’s work.