Krapfl, James


In *Revolution with a Human Face* James Krapfl places Czechoslovak citizens at the center of the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989. He offers a history neither of capital cities nor of elites in revolt, but of an entire nation refashioning itself as a “sacred community” and producing thereby new loci of political power. Krapfl casts aside debates about whether or not a revolution actually occurred—although he assures us that one did—to focus on what events perceived as a revolution meant to participants and observers. He thus secures masses of non-elite Czechs and Slovaks a place of prominence in their own historiography. Moreover, in contrast to the trend of dealing separately with the Czech lands and Slovakia, Krapfl shows the importance of studying both as a unit before 1992.

Krapfl frames his study by following Lynn Hunt in applying narrative theory to the analysis of revolutions (Hunt 1984). He draws from Hayden White and Northrop Frye to show that Czechs and Slovaks of all stations and geographies advanced competing interpretations of the revolution, as it unfolded, to understand it and to shape the future. Krapfl argues that all parties initially narrated the revolution in “romantic” terms, centered on the power of humanity to transform society. Conflict emerged within the revolutionary community, however, when new elites attempted to institutionalize their gains. According to their reconciliatory “comedic” narratives, the revolution had ended. The tension between these two frameworks empowered radicals to seize control by advancing “tragic” narratives of stolen revolutions. Yet, as Krapfl shows, these new leaders failed to restore the pure democracy of the revolution’s early months. Their devotion to nationalist and neoliberal ideologies proved exclusionary and they divided Czechoslovakia against the will of the majority. This, Krapfl explains, led to the emergence of “satirical” narratives, “to a reaction, as well as to a greater or lesser popular ambivalence about the revolutionary process in general” (220).

In chapter 2, Krapfl addresses the revolution’s origins. On 17 November 1989 police violently suppressed a peaceful, student protest in Prague. In narrating the event, Krapfl argues, survivors, witnesses, and soon others conceived a new “sacred community.” Rather than coming together by expelling a scapegoat, as theory might predict, Krapfl shows that they understood themselves to be a “community of the sacrificed” (49). This imagined community expanded to include (nearly) the entire Czech and Slovak peoples though mimetic
processes, facilitated by activists, spontaneous public events, and publications. Krapfl characterizes late-1989 as a period of “collective effervescence and symbolic differentiation” (53). The community itself emerged as “a first principle” of an unfolding semiotic system, a “revolutionary culture, complete with its own rituals, prohibitions, and myths” (9). Forged in reaction to violence, the new community embraced “nonviolence” as its earliest shared ideal.

Krapfl identifies six “Ideals of November” in chapter 3: nonviolence, self-organization, democracy, fairness, socialism, and “humanness.” Socialism, he notes, was the only ideal not universally embraced and was the site of early cleavages within the revolutionary community. Krapfl defines “humanness” as a loose concept derived from the ideologies of 1968 and also as the ideal “to which all of the others were logically subordinate” (100). Displaying archival skills to match his faculty with theory, Krapfl arrives at these ideals by combing through thousands of bulletins, flyers, reports, and other documents. One may quibble with his categories or with his assumption that those ideals expressed most frequently represent those held most dearly. Krapfl offers, nonetheless, three important lessons. First, the demands expressed were overwhelmingly political, rather than material. Second, some believed that the revolution would save or redeem socialism. Third, the events of 1989 added new elements to Europe’s revolutionary tradition, notably a commitment to nonviolence and “humanness.”

In chapter 4, Krapfl addresses the place of national identities in the sacred community. He argues that the division of the country by elites representing different political organizations in Prague and Bratislava respectively reflected more the urban will for empire than a popular contest between Czech and Slovak nationals. Krapfl shows that among the populace, “terms such as nation and people were used to describe the community without thinking too carefully about their implications” and that citizens thought primarily in civic and Czechoslovak terms (111). He also shows that they held complex geographical allegiances which did not map onto the Czech/Prague–Slovak/Bratislava divide. The revolution began with local imaginations and demands. Citizens only later turned to larger units of organization to implement them.

Krapfl next addresses the emergence of alternative arenas of power, which he identifies as a necessary condition of revolution. In chapter 5, he writes, “Power was in the streets, and the square was the seat of authority” (153). Students, along with 1968ers, took the lead. Committed to nonviolence, revolutionaries sought to replace—though not punish—the communist old guard democratically and legally. Krapfl offers an admittedly too general account of personnel changes in various organizations and locations. He nonetheless demonstrates that anxiety spread through segments of the population in