
Book Review

Sik, Domonkos (2016) *Radicalism and Indifference: Memory Transmission, Political Formation and Modernization in Hungary and Europe*. Peter Lang Academic Research. 283 pages.

How does historical entanglement with modernity shape cultural memory? How does memory influence the landscape of national political culture? And how do anti-democratic sentiments emerge in formally democratic institutional settings in the very center of Europe? These questions form the structure of Domonkos Sik's comprehensive monograph on memory discourses and contemporary political-cultural formations in Hungary and beyond. The evidential basis of the book is a combination of focus group and in-depth interview data, discourse and ethnographic analysis of museum displays, and qualitative data from a survey panel of 14 European countries.

In the 'history—memory—political culture' construction, the book treats all three elements of the triangle with equal attention, examining their interrelationships. History—political culture tension is examined in the first chapter of the book, setting the frame for the discussion to follow. The key argument of this opening section is that the distinctive experience of modernity characteristic of Central Europe formed a particular type of political culture which, in turn, created impediments to the development of the communicative rationality necessary for a thriving democratic polity. The peculiar, 'semi-peripheral' character of the Central European experience of encounter with modernity meant that the project of modernity itself could be externalized as both optional and foreign, triggering fears of cultural colonization, worries of falling behind, and fantasies of opting out which prevented both serious engagement with and embrace of modernity's emancipatory promises, and ownership and an honest reckoning of its drawbacks. In addition, Sik points out that the ascendance of a 'dogmatic, authoritarian nationalism' in the interwar period was characterized by 'the emotionally overburdened, anti-democratic, intolerant deformation of political culture' (19 p.) which precluded criticism and debate as signs of potential disloyalty to the nation. The dogmatism marking the 'ontological nationalism' of the interwar period was followed, in Sik's analysis, by the alienations and privatizations of the socialist era, and the disillusionments of the post-socialist transition. Each in its own way, these 'local primordial impressions of modernity' provided the context for the 'long-drawn out identity crisis' of Central European countries in which the pathologies of modernity were either naturalized or blamed on others, while its universalist promises were misrecognized (49 p.).

The book's introductory discussion about the Central European entanglement with modernity defines the important conceptual context for the empirical chapters on memory and political culture. It makes it possible to frame the current constellations of political sentiments as necessarily situated in the fabric of historical and

sociopolitical experience of Hungary's national development and informed by its trajectory and positionality through the 20th century. At the same time, it raises the danger of not only oversimplification, but also implicit determinism, in that the multiple pathologies and distortions listed by the author (without paying equal attention to pockets of alternative developments) could be taken as decisively preempting the possibility of a genuinely inclusive and rational political debate either in the past or in the future.

But if the reader is tempted to make such an assumption, it is squarely countered in the rest of the monograph, starting from the subsequent two chapters which take on the third vertex of the book's conceptual triangle—cultural memory, insofar as its landscape is shaped by the historical processes of Central European modernization. As the author suggests, the historically rooted identity crisis resulted, in the case of Hungary, in a memory vacuum that, in turn, produced a bimodal, politicized culture of collective memory. Taking Hungary as its empirical case, the book examines two memorial institutions in Budapest, the House of Terror and the Holocaust Memorial Center, and concludes that in dramaturgy, intended effects and overall narrative these two sites serve as 'idealtypical expressions of the right wing and the liberal-left interpretations of the 20th century' (106 p.). The author is attentive not only to the logics of the exhibitions themselves, but to the way in which Hungarian students perceive and respond to these spaces, finding that the lack of a minimal consensus about the past in the public sphere turns some students towards family memories, but results for others either in a dogmatic embrace of the tendentious narratives that are available, or a withdrawal from past traumas altogether. This analysis is followed with in-depth case studies of three families that illustrate that, despite the largely overdetermined landscape of public memory, students find rather different pathways through the stories that are passed to them through public and private channels, resulting in distinct configurations of memorial and political culture, ranging from indifference to engaged commitment to either populist or emancipatory activist causes.

The fourth chapter momentarily takes a turn away from questions of historical memory to tackle the social and economic underpinnings of political culture. It undertakes a systematic comparison of two Hungarian cities, Ózd and Sopron, in which economic and social issues (rather than those of memory) come to the forefront as key drivers of young peoples' political outlooks. The comparison is rooted in the analysis of the two cities' different positions and historical experiences, which enables the author to take them as quintessential examples of two 'divergent constellations of Hungarian modernity' (167 p.); namely, one marked by 'the distorted perception of modernity and the consequent identity crisis' (212 p.) associated with socialist-era industrialization in the case of Ózd, and one marked by proximity to Austria and legacies of its bourgeois past in the case of Sopron. These divergent constellations are what gave rise to the divergent patterns of political attitudes revealed in the author's interviews with local youth, who possess what Sik describes as 'a basically "hopeless"' and 'a basically "indifferent"' political culture, respectively. Importantly, the difference in political culture is paralleled by a difference in the outlook on the past, in the sense that the young people in the two locations emphasize different historical turning points (injustices of the Treaty of Trianon and nostalgic memories of socialism in Ózd

versus the trauma of the Holocaust and the difficulties of state socialism in Sopron), suggesting an abundance, rather than a vacuum, of memory discourses available to them.

Persistent through the book is the author's interest in the transformations of political attitudes, particularly as it pertains to the tensions between activism and indifference, and between radicalism and democracy. These sets of oppositions provide the coordinates to the last, and most ambitious chapter, which undertakes the project of developing an analytical typology of European political cultures that integrates the books' earlier observations concerning the formation of political attitudes among youth. The chapter draws on comparisons within as well as between 14 European countries (or 15 locations, as East and West Germany are treated separately) to map out a range of idealtypical political formations derived through cluster analysis, ranging along the axes of radicalism and indifference. The six patterns (which the author labels 'anxious anomic', 'satisfied bystander', 'politically alienated', 'traditional antidemocratic', 'populist antidemocratic', and 'emancipatory activist') vary according to their makeup and causal origins in discernible ways, which allows the author to propose specific recommendations regarding their likely trajectories and further transformations. While I will leave it to my quantitatively inclined colleagues to comment on the statistical soundness of the cluster analysis, indexes and linear regression models used in the chapter, the discussion of the typology itself is crisp and detailed, successfully placing the Hungarian case in the context of political trends of its European peers, and offering a sophisticated, theoretically grounded set of categories with which to approach transformations in political cultures elsewhere. At the same time, the chapter implicitly throws into doubt the language of 'distortions' to modernity by showing that the same pathologies of political culture that plague Hungary occur in countries that are typically considered the cradle of modernity (such as the United Kingdom).

Perhaps inevitably for a book of such ambition, the monograph contains some themes that could be fruitfully developed more thoroughly. Given the analytical centrality of radicalism as a topic of exploration, a working definition of radicalism would significantly enhance the subsequent discussion, as would a more theoretically grounded development of radicalism's relationship to populism and democracy (as in 'radical democracy'), which currently seems antithetical to the author's working model. The role and significance of memory in political socialization, too, invites some further discussion. How necessary (or for that matter, democratic) is memory consensus for a healthy society? Or does the surest engagement with memory indeed, as James Young (1992) proposed, 'lie [...] in its perpetual irresolution'? Could such an engagement be a possible consequence, as opposed to a necessary cause, of civic activism? Despite (or perhaps, as evidenced by) these questions, *Radicalism and Indifference* is a rich, insightful and deeply committed work that will inspire and resonate with any readers interested in modernity, memory, and political and critical theory.

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References

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