

An excerpt from

# The Politics of Small Things

The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times

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## 1989: New Definitions of the Situation

The theoretical implications of the collapse of socialism, the socialism of the Soviet bloc, have yet to be fully assimilated by social, cultural, and political theorists. Usually when we think about the meanings of 1989, we think about big geopolitical issues: the fall of an empire, the victory of capitalism, the end of an ideology, if not ideology in general, the end of history, an international effervescence of democracy, the victory of civil society. These are important matters, properly at the center of our attention, as are the issues of the consequences of the momentous breakthroughs of '89. We consider how the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the Soviet Union after it, have changed just about everything in our geopolitical landscape. We wonder whether it is fruitful any longer to think about a systematic alternative to capitalism, even when we realize the need for alternative ways of doing things. We consider the changing relationship between force and reason and sensation, and have a sense that a magical type of political thought (ideology) is, or at least ought to be, a thing of the past. We study the various transitions to democracy and consider appropriate models of democratic constitution, institutional design, and market consolidation. We appreciate how voluntary associations, social movements, and a free public life opened up the possibilities for these transitions and how they continue to support them.

Yet the theoretical implications of the global changes in our recent past go beyond these large-scale transformations and geopolitical challenges. It is in the microstructures of social interaction that the innovations of political culture become apparent, as these innovations, in their interactive contexts, constitute public space. These microstructures, I suggest, form the foundation of democratic culture. This foundation was, as we have seen, initiated in 1968. It began supporting new democratic structures in 1989. In this chapter, we examine how that support worked.

## The Definition of the Situation

There was a dramatic moment in 1989 when the dynamic of a new definition of the situation became strikingly apparent. On December 17 of that year, the security forces of Romania's Ceausescu regime attacked protestors in the city of Timisoara. There, the parishioners of a Hungarian pastor, Laszlo Tokes, were attempting to prevent his arrest, and their Romanian neighbors, including many students, were demonstrating in their defense. In the manner typical of the repressive regime, the police fired on the crowd, resulting in a massacre. Despite these events, Nicolae Ceausescu left the country on a state visit to Iran, apparently confident that the radical changes occurring throughout the Soviet bloc would not effect his hold on power. At that time neither the circle immediately surrounding the communist dictator nor the general populace imagined that the old order was threatened by these events. In previous years, social protests, particularly strikes, had occurred in Romania, and repression had been effective. After the fact, it is easy to see that the geopolitical situation had changed and that the old way of doing things

in Romania, as in Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and elsewhere, was over. But it was not so clear at the time.

Our problem is to understand how it became clear, and this is where the definition of the situation comes in. When Ceausescu returned from Iran, he called for a state-managed mass demonstration in support of the prevailing order. But something strange happened. It became apparent during the televised rally that the definition of the situation had changed. When the dictator began speaking to the vast assembled gathering, people booed, first in the back of the crowd and then more generally. Progovernment chants were slightly modified to become chants of derision. Totalitarian unity was disrupted. Ceausescu had to retreat rapidly from the disordered scene. There was an open revolt and the means of repression were no longer up to the task. In the crowd, as people interacted with one another, a demonstration that was meant to bestow legitimacy on the regime very rapidly withdrew it. The authority of the dictator could visibly be observed to be melting away.

In the days that followed, a war between repressive forces ensued. Apparently the Securitate, fighting for the old order, battled against the army, which aligned itself with an emerging authority made up of former communist leaders, onetime associates of Ceausescu who were then out of favor. After the fact, there has been much suspicion about the actual identity of the new authorities and the meaning of the transformation they ushered in. For our purposes, what is crucial is that the changes were supported by mass mobilizations. These constituted and were fortified by a new, shared definition of the situation: the old regime came to be seen as mortal, and radical political change now seemed possible. People who would not have dared talk to each other openly before now did, and they acted in concert in entirely new ways. Although what was then perceived as revolutionary change may now appear to have been an attempt to preserve much of the old communist order, it is significant that for this to have occurred change had to be defined as revolutionary by the people on the streets. Ultimately, this definition had its own momentum.

I want to be clear. I am not suggesting that it was always possible to "just say no" to the regime. I am not arguing that there were no extrasituational factors that made it possible to turn an exercise in legitimizing a totalitarian dictator into a mass revolt. What I am arguing is that in order for the structural conditions to lead to change, a shared change in the definition of the situation had to become public and had to be acted upon. Large groups of people, acting and interacting in concert and contrary to the restrictions of the regime, constituted a transforming political power.

The fact that this was happening became clear thanks to the fact that the actions and interactions were broadcast on television. The central place of television in the Romanian revolt was noted immediately. The most heated battles between the new powers and the defenders of the old order occurred around the television station. The end of the old order was defined in the interactions on the streets, but the interactions were extended throughout the nation through televised broadcasts, which rendered the changes real in their consequences.

There were, however, important limits to the changes, which were most apparent in their infamous climax: the trial and execution of Ceausescu and his wife, Elena. First, on December 26, 1989, there was a brief announcement: an "extraordinary military court" had tried Ceausescu

and his wife. A few hours later (at 1:30 a.m.), the television showed its first footage of the trial and announced the verdict: "The sentence was death and the sentence was executed." The verdict was proclaimed in the name of the "Council of National Salvation," a then faceless executive body. Throughout that day, the videotape of the trial and the executed leader's body were repeatedly shown on television. A new political situation was being defined in this broadcast, but what form that situation would take was quite unclear.

In comparison with the momentous changes in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia earlier in 1989, the way the changes unfolded in Romania is disturbing. Interactions contributing to the definition to the situation there were marked by authoritarian negation instead of democratic affirmation. The booing at the mass rally expressed a simple negation. The "no" was directed to the dictator, although the grounds for the political judgment remained unarticulated, hence unclear. Without an articulated judgment, there could be no living in truth in the sense of Havel. The opposite of a lie is not necessarily the truth. The opposition to dictatorship does not necessarily lead to democracy. A Foucaultian detachment from a truth regime need not imply an Arendtian distancing of truth from politics. These simple propositions were dramatically revealed by the later course of events in Romania.

We can point to all sorts of structural explanations why things worked out so roughly in Romania. The dictatorship was particularly repressive, the economy particularly devastated, the opposition particularly full of shady characters. In the interactions of the popular demonstrators, these structural factors found their expression as limitations on their definitions of the situation. They could only articulate and show among themselves an opposition to a brutal form of modern tyranny, totalitarianism. They were not able to marshal the power of politics in the service of democratic purposes in a sustained and differentiated fashion.

This is not to belittle the importance of the Romanian events of December 1989. I am here pointing to something that is both obvious and overlooked. Theoretically, I am underscoring the need to synthesize the insights of the interactive sociology of Erving Goffman with the political theory of Hannah Arendt. The synthesis illuminates some of the special legacies of 1989, particularly as they are revealed in different sets of circumstances, in the political experiences of Czechoslovakia and Poland and that of Romania.

### **The Social Definition of Power and Freedom: Czechoslovakia and Poland**

It may be obvious that the transformation in Romania was not likely to follow the same path as those in Czechoslovakia or Poland, but why was this so situationally? What occurred in the moment of transformation that led to such different outcomes? Answering these questions requires a close consideration of the way the definition of the new situation is formed. In Czechoslovakia and Poland, the new definition went beyond the act of simple negation of totalitarianism. There were a number of distinctly different definers with distinctly different voices, and these voices and their power of definition had histories. In these countries there were interactively constituted alternative publics, something strikingly absent in Romania. The definitions of the situations there were built upon shared and sustained cultural, political, and social experiences.

Although the events leading to the changes of '89 in Czechoslovakia were fast and dramatic, they had a social background. The Charter 77 movement and VONS, the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted had sustained an alternative at the margins of political life for over a decade, coordinating oppositionist seminars, vibrant political debate, and theoretical discussions. There had also been significant Catholic Church–based social mobilizations developing apart from the officially sanctioned political order starting in 1985, when 150,000 Czechs and Slovaks marked the eleven hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Methodius. In the oppositional activities of Charter 77 and VONS, sophisticated alternatives to the regime's imposed order were discussed; in the Catholic activity, a fairly broad segment of the population had experienced a public life set apart from the regime. Yet the oppositional world of such figures as Vaclav Havel, Rita Klimova, Jan Carnogursky, Petr Pithart, and Pavel Bratina was cut off from the general population, and the Catholic movement, ultimately, was focused on the concerns of only a small segment of believers, a group that cannot be identified with the whole nation (as at least some maintain is the case in Poland).

But in 1989 this isolation and segmentation of public participation came to an end. Students organized themselves. Discussion groups worked on the border between the official and the oppositional, and the spread of samizdat readership prepared the ground for a direct challenge to the previously existing order. A demonstration called by the officially supported youth organization for November 17, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the martyrdom of Jan Opletal, a Czech student murdered by the Nazis, took an antiregime turn. After meeting at a cemetery, a larger than officially anticipated group turned the commemoration of past sufferings into a demonstration against the present communist order. The assembly left the cemetery and marched to Wenceslas Square, the setting of great moments in twentieth-century Czechoslovak politics, in 1918, 1948, and 1968. They called for freedom and change and were met by brutal repression from riot police. Soon after, a strike was called, which spread quickly from the students of Charles University to students around the country, then to actors and other people in theater, to oppositional circles, and eventually to industrial workers. Three days after the initial demonstration, diverse elements of Czech society came together to form the Civic Forum—the students and actors who were engaged in the initial protests, members of Charter 77, VONS, the Movement for Civic Freedoms, and Rebirth (the club of excommunicated communists), as well as individuals from puppet parties of the regime. The way they defined the situation with each other, through heated discussions and agreements on common action, and the way they interacted with the regime, shaped the course of transformational events in Czechoslovakia.

Beyond an analysis of the formation of Civic Forum and the twists and turns of its negotiations with the party state, we should pay special attention to what went into the definition of the situation, how the definition of the transformational situation in Czechoslovakia differed from that in Romania. Although for a long time, both the Czechoslovak and the Romanian regimes had been extremely repressive, in striking contrast to the Polish and Hungarian regimes, the events of 1989 were very different. Some of the difference has to do with how the regimes themselves acted, no doubt, but even more important is how the oppositional definition of the situation differed in the two cases. In Romania, the first mass mobilization was capable of saying no, but the agency of the address was secret and unclear and ultimately the language of

address was violence. In Czechoslovakia, the "no" was articulated by the Civic Forum, a differentiated body made up of different actors, former communists and anticommunists, those who still had dreams about socialism with a human face as well as those who opposed all isms, veterans of the opposition alongside young students. All these groups were held together through the leadership of Vaclav Havel, a remarkable political figure clearly identified as a democratic hero. Under his leadership, a free interactive public was formed.

There was humor and romance in the Magic Lantern, the Prague theater where the opposition debated and formulated its politics. The key oppositional actors had conducted themselves in widely varied ways during communist rule and continued to differ among themselves after. But they were able to act in concert in their negotiations with the authorities, without losing their distinct identities. They were able to sustain a democratic definition of the situation. They defined their situation as one of democratic transformation, and as their interactions were repeated in the streets of Prague and throughout the country, the transformation remained democratic in its consequences.

Havel provided the classic text that can serve as a guide to understanding the dramatic events he also led. In "The Power of the Powerless," as we observed in chapter 2, he tells the tale of a greengrocer who does not put a Workers of the World Unite sign in his shop window. Havel reviews with the reader the meaningless of the sign, but also the immense implications should the grocer take down the sign. Not only would he lose his job. His family would suffer. He would lose friends. His life would be fundamentally overturned. But Havel also considered what would happen if the grocer, in concert with those around him, came to "live in truth." He speculated that their world then would be transformed. Totalitarianism would come to an end. In 1989, life imitated theoretical speculation. Networks of people living in truth, or in Goffman's terms, networks of people constituting transformed social definitions of the situation, politically created a democratic alternative to totalitarianism. Please note that these webs of new definitions of the situation, established by people who had some experience living in truth and by those who were significantly more cautious, meant that there was a capacity to openly contest alternative means of transformation. This capacity developed only later in Romania.

On the other hand, experience in sustaining a free politics had also been rather limited in Czechoslovakia. After 1968 and the repression of the Prague Spring, not only oppositionists, such as Havel, but even liberal communists were subjected to systematic repression. The party state had successfully atomized the society. The world of historic dissent was not visible for average Czech and Slovak citizens. This was in striking contrast to the situation in Poland. There an additional element of the interactive creation of the political can be examined.

The changes in Poland were developed over a long period of time and had become institutionalized. Opposition intellectuals had developed a highly elaborated alternative cultural system, and the vast majority of the population had links to Solidarity. The sort of "no" articulated in the face of Soviet totalitarianism was a matter of long experience; it had been expressed in 1956, '68, '70, '76, and throughout the 1980s. But much more than negation was involved in those expressions. As in Czechoslovakia alternative positions were represented, but in Poland these alternatives had a history and were systematically and intentionally developed. In Romania, the definition of the situation was unitary. In Czechoslovakia, it was diversified but

very much an immediate improvisation. In Poland, a temporal dimension further enriched the democratic quality of the definition. The interactive public did not exist situationally only in space but also through time.

Adam Michnik famously formulated the opposition's central organizing imperative in the late 1970s: to act as if one lived in a free society. Michnik realized that if people acted as if they lived in a free society, they would, in the process, constitute free public space. He drew out the theoretical implications of what was developing in the private spaces of family and friends.... This strategy spread from a relatively small circle of opposition intellectuals to the broad societal movement of Solidarity....

That this simple opposition strategy had immense potential, beyond negation, was revealed during the societal mobilization for the first visit to Poland of Pope John Paul II. In communion with their faith and their compatriot, the Polish pope, the population saw themselves set apart from the communist authorities. They conducted themselves with dignity, and the authorities could do nothing but accept their powerlessness. Some saw in this a true, Catholic Poland. For others the lesson was less specific, but still they saw a self-organized society, independent of the party state. Definitions of the situation varied, but they had in common the characteristic of freedom.

The struggle against officialdom was a long and hard one in Poland. There was a long history of opposition to the Soviet-imposed order, and this history shaped the political landscape. From the immediate postwar period, through the consolidation of Polish Stalinism, the Polish October of 1956, the events of March 1968 and the strikes of December 1970, 1976, and 1980, and on to the struggles of Solidarity above and below ground, a full spectrum of political orientations and groupings developed in Poland. It was the great accomplishment of Solidarity to incorporate just about all opposition forces in the battle against the party state, and it is no surprise that they quickly separated once the common foe disappeared. Acting as if one lived in a free society created freedom dramatically and symbolically in key public events. The highlights included the papal visits, the nationwide strikes, the signing of accords between the communists and the union, the open actions of an independent workers' movement, and the first relatively free elections to put an end to a totalitarian regime. The self-constituted freedom also involved less visible actions: publishing clandestine newspapers, journals, and books, conducting illegal seminars, unionizing, and—the climax—working out the project of democratic transition through roundtable negotiations. The roundtable was a political form that repeated itself throughout the old bloc and was a key to the new definitions of the situation that emerged, a new political form. But note the special place it played in the Polish transition. It established the conditions for an election, which allowed the general public, as a free public, to democratically choose fundamental political transformation. Acting as if one lived in a free society did in fact bring such a society into being, and not only at the margins.

This points to an additional constitutive element of free politics. The Romanian case reveals the power and limitations of negation. The Czech case shows how linked acts of living in truth can come together to form a self-reflective and strategically capable form of power, up to the task of confronting and prevailing over a totalitarian opponent. In Poland, we observe how coordinated actions based upon the principle of freedom constituted a free public, which was capable of

rapid institutionalization.

## **Relations in Public**

My task in this chapter is to highlight how the interactively constituted politics of small things affected the course of postcommunism in three settings, not to make invidious comparisons between transitions to democracy. That the groundwork for free political action was better prepared in 1989 in Poland than in Romania, Czechoslovakia, or for that matter anywhere else in the former Soviet bloc, is obvious, as is the fact that the special advantage this preparation provided has been relatively short lived. There are also benefits that accrue to late developers. Thus, the first free elections in the rest of Eastern and Central Europe were not, for the most part, as limited as the first elections in Poland had been. And the advantages of sustained relatively free public activity in a totalitarian context are easily gained in more liberal circumstances.

Compare, for example, the development of the oppositional free press in Poland with the press in present-day Russia. Despite the fact that the press in Russia today is under very significant pressure, it is still freer than the press ever was in communist Eastern Europe. Poland did have a fairly well developed civil society in the communist period, and this was an advantage in the early postcommunist years, probably key to the success of the radical economic program. The new authorities had legitimacy with the public and utilized this successfully. But such is a story already well told, and it leads to false controversies, in my opinion, having to do with a strategy of transition and the relative importance of economy, state, and civil society.

Rather, what I am trying to accomplish in these overviews of the struggles to constitute a democratic alternative to totalitarianism is a glimpse at the interactive dimensions of the politics of small things: the networked political definition of the situation as an active project of politics. In Romania, we saw the dynamics of the definition of the situation. In Czechoslovakia, we saw how a differentiation by those doing the defining facilitated a democratic antitotalitarian definition. I have turned to the overview of the Polish experience to underscore the importance of the temporal dimension in sustaining a democratic transformation. Experience of political action over time solidifies free democratic action, gives depth, breadth, and diversity to the definitions of the situation. Even more than solidifying definitions it actively creates them. The definitions of the situation add up over time to create a fully constituted free public domain.

## **Small Things in a Great Transformation**

On the streets of Bucharest, Prague, and Warsaw, people constituted space for themselves to act freely. Crucial to their actions is what I am calling here the politics of small things. But their capacity to act freely was differently constrained, and the outcomes of their free action were quite different. The differences illuminate the theoretical advantage of Arendt's position, versus Foucault's, on political culture. On the streets of the three cities, action was detached from the truth regime of previously existing socialism—in this regard participants in the opposition did not differ. They did differ, however, in how they related truth with politics. In Romania, the relationship was still very intimate, as was manifested in the trial of the dictator and his wife. In Czechoslovakia, an improvised plurality separated the new political force from interpretation and grounded it in the factual. In Poland, the interactive public was already institutionalized,

with an ongoing history of searches for factual truth and competition over interpretations of the events at hand. Political pluralism was the new challenge.

Does this prove that in the final analysis civil society and not the power of the state or the economy has been the key to axial change in our recent past? I want to be clear. This is not my argument. I just want to state that the politics of small things, often summarized in the notion of the importance of civil society, provided an important, if somewhat elusive, base of power, not that it is the ultimate source of power. This more minimal argument should be kept in mind as we try to understand our contemporary difficulties. The politics of small things is not as apparent a source of power as the power of the economy and of the state, but it is there. The events it comprises are not as televisual as suicide bombings and military actions. Yet the presence and the elusiveness of the politics of small things help clarify some of the major problems we confront in the war on terrorism in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The politics of small things broadens the political landscape in a way that is not often recognized. Its importance in the transformations of 1989 gives the lie to the notion that terrorism is the only tactic available to the powerless, and stands as a cautionary lesson for those who imagine that the war on terrorism must necessarily or primarily involve military hardware.

In the next chapters, I will try to substantiate these assertions. But before I do, we need to appreciate what happened in the great transformation of Eastern and Central Europe from the point of view of our theoretically informed understanding of the politics of small things. I have been suggesting that a great transformation occurred between 1968 and 1989, and I have highlighted what might be termed the micro-origins of post-totalitarianism. We have observed three key elements: "living in truth," the extension of the kitchen table, and the formation of publics.

*"Living in truth."* The most radical break in the formation of the political culture of previously existing socialism occurred in 1968, not in the land where "Marxist humanism" and "socialism with a human face" were tried and defeated by Soviet tanks, i.e., Czechoslovakia, but in Poland. There the liberalization was short-circuited, but, in the terms of Havel's essay, a politics built upon the notion of living in truth was initiated. Key was the fact that those who were concerned with issues of freedom and justice stopped using the official language to pursue their goals. They took down the Workers of the World Unite sign from their interactive windows and pursued humanism and politics with a human face without justifying their claims using the regime's newspeak. They pursued their political principles not by attacking one ideology, communism, with another, anticommunism, but by withdrawing from ideological discourses, that is, discourses that presented interpretations as truths and which were so committed to their interpretations as to substitute opinion for fact.

*The extension of the kitchen table.* Such distancing from the demands of the previously existing socialist regimes was, as we have seen, built into normal, everyday life around kitchen tables. People began there to work not only at presenting themselves in everyday life truthfully, but also at constituting an interactive space that opened up this activity in different and broader contexts. In Poland and Czechoslovakia, but not in Romania, there were networks of people issuing alternative publications, meeting in small seminars, discussing forbidden facts and interpretations. I have emphasized here not the substance of this work but the significance of the



performances that helped establish the places.

*Formation of publics.* Alternative publics were formed in these performances, as we observed in considering the snapshots in chapter 1, and these publics had great political significance. Even where these spaces were restricted to small circles, as in Czechoslovakia, they played, at the moment of systemic transformation, a key role in yielding peaceful and unambiguous change. The absence of such public space contributed, as we have also seen, to the violence and uncertainty of change in Romania. But where the alternatives were more extensive and had developed over a longer period of time, they played a major role in the transformation and became a resource for democratic consolidation. This was the case in Poland.

In fact, there was a sense in which the institutionalized network of public life in Poland and the more improvised network in Czechoslovakia were not alternative publics but the *only* publics in those societies during the socialist period and its immediate aftermath. Arendt tells the story of totalitarianism as one in which public life is destroyed. A definitive characteristic of a totalitarian order is the absence of a public realm. There was no place in totalitarian imagination and practice for people to speak and act in the presence of others as equal and free agents, to establish a place in which to act independently and in concert, to create political power in Arendtian sense. That people did still have this capacity and could create what Goffman calls the underlife of a total institution became manifest around the kitchen table. The great transformation was very much shaped by the extension of such public capacity.

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