

History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s

Review Number:

84

Publish date:

Monday, 1 November, 1999

Author:

Timothy Garton Ash

ISBN:

9780713993233

Date of Publication:

1999

Price:

£20.00

Pages:

462pp.

Publisher:

Allen Lane, Penguin Press

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

George Schöpflin

There are various ways of reading Timothy Garton Ash's *History of the Present* and I shall try to look at it through four different sets of criteria. These are iconographical, historical-historiographical, political and sociological, and, finally, literary. This last criterion produces the best evaluation, so if anyone wishes to skip the critical bits, they can go directly to the end of this review.

Iconographical.

The aesthetic criteria are only about the appearance of the book. On the front cover is a photo of a street in Vukovar after the siege of 1991 and on the back, one of the author. Both of these are revealing, not necessarily intentionally so. Why Vukovar, why the destroyed street? It is built in what is a recognisably Baroque style, with soldiers or paramilitaries (or perhaps just firemen) walking away from the camera. There are destroyed cars on either side of the street - symbolic of the destroyed modernity that characterised the war of Yugoslav succession? Possibly these ruins and shards of broken glass symbolise not just the shattered state of former Yugoslavia, but post-communism itself, at least in the author's (and picture researcher's) mind. The old order has been shelled to smithereens and the reader or casual customer in a bookshop can expect insights into the destructive elements that post-communism has released.

The author's likeness is more mysterious. He is pictured standing against a wall, the plaster is cracked, with light and shade moving from the author's to right to left; the bottom quarter of the photo is overprinted in red. This, we might think, reflects the element of communism that still survives in Central and South-Eastern Europe. The author himself is almost wholly dark, a darkness from which only the upper part of his face appears, his forehead high and dominating the entire ensemble, intrepid and determined. His eyes are shaded and all but squinting, screwed up against the light maybe. In any case, a viable reading is that the author's intellect is the dominant quality that he brings to the book.

Historical-historiographical.

Broadly, there are two kinds of history writing fighting it out in Britain today - the professional and the non-professional. I will not call the latter "amateur", because that word carries a certain amount of dismissive baggage. TGA, as I shall refer to him in this review, is firmly in the latter camp. That might settle it. This book should be read as non-professional history, as an engaging but not particularly well ordered set of reflections on the post-communist world. It would, were it not for TGA's introduction, in which he seeks to place himself firmly among the historians.

He sets out his criteria, his credo, in this introduction and it is by these that his enterprise must be assessed. First, he argues in favour of history as being "what it was really like at the time. How places looked and smelled, how people felt, what they didn't know" (p.xv). This kind of history can only be written by those who go there, to the field, who undergo the experience of being in touch with what they write about. Academic history, written from archives, cannot attain this goal. There is accuracy in this, but it is very far from being the whole story. Crucially, there is such a phenomenon - not referred to by TGA - as being too close to events, as being overwhelmed by the emotions that they generate, the crowds, the awesome human presence, the pheromones, and never thereafter being able to see the wood for the trees. Going there, produces "feel", but feel can distort as much as it can illuminate.

TGA quotes George Kennan as follows: the "history of the present lies 'in that small and rarely visited field of literary effort where journalism, history and literature ... come together'(pp.xiii-xiv)." Maybe. But this omits a rather vital aspect of the story, namely the mental equipment of the one who goes there. TGA tacitly assumes that all observers are the same, come with much the same set of experiences, rational ideas and moral norms. This is very Anglo-Saxon and very universalistic. It takes no account of diversity at the cognitive level, of radically different ways of understanding the world. And it overlooks the proposition that a historian who is trained in the disciplines of history - or, in my case, of political science - brings a different and equally valid set of intuitions and insights to his/h field of study from that of the journalist or novelist. So maybe the history of the present does not lie exclusively in that triangle, but parts of it are to be found elsewhere in the forest, parts that TGA does not think worth visiting.

Then, TGA discusses the problem of sources through the prism of language, the languages of Central and South-Eastern Europe, and the relative inaccessibility of these places to anyone who has no knowledge of any of the languages. Agreed: if you don't know the language, you will be lost for various reasons. One of these is that you will not have access to at least three-quarters of the sources. Second, you will never pick up the very informal communications by which TGA sets such store. Third, the locals tell different stories in different languages. Here the spread of English as second language gets in the way.

English is an excellent second language precisely because for non-native speakers, it carries very few emotional overtones. Native speakers of English are at a disadvantage here, by the way, because they decode what they hear in International English by their own linguistic codes and, therefore, misunderstand them. Then, the degree of intimacy in the mother tongue is necessarily higher than in a second language and "history as feel", TGA's chosen method, must depend heavily on this intimacy, on this ability to pick up the allusion that is second nature to native speakers. This clearly places him at a severe disadvantage in the many countries where he does not know the language. Hence the importance of methods other than feel, the cognitive categories of discipline, of comparison, of seeking a pattern and looking for divergences from that pattern.

Further, every language has its own capacities, its unique expression. Sometimes these cannot be translated. An example (not from this book, but it illustrates what I mean). Anyone who can compare the excellent English translation of Péter Nádas's *Book of Memories* with the Hungarian original will soon recognise that English cannot do it justice, because English is too concrete, too concise to render the vague, allusive, almost oneiric quality of Nádas's Hungarian.

There is another revealing aside on language, on p. xvii. TGA refers to "the South Slav languages now bewilderingly called Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Macedonian". Now this "bewilderingly" is an odd adverb to use. It carries a number of implications. One refers to a core value of the Anglo-Saxon mindset, that foreigners make life difficult by speaking their own languages and that there are too many of these languages. Otherwise, we shall be bewildered. Or is this reading too fanciful? Not really; the English and Americans deeply dislike the diversity of languages and TGA, with his knowledge of some of the languages of Central and South-Eastern Europe, reflects this inadvertently. Or is it that TGA is himself bewildered? In that case, should he be offering us this history of the present in South-Eastern Europe?

There is a further point. The list of bewildering South Slav languages omits Slovene and Bulgarian. Why? Possibility (1) is that TGA does not know that they belong to the South Slav language group; unlikely. Possibility (2): Slovene and Bulgarian are somehow more respectable because they are spoken by language communities that have gained international respectability. Possibility (3): including them would confuse the picture of there being too many "bewildering" languages because their presence would suggest that it is quite feasible for some language groups to gain acceptability and then become role models for the rest.

Then, TGA does not recognise that language exists in at least three dimensions - the philological, the cultural and the political. Philologically the South Slav language area is one, in that one can move from Slovene to Bulgarian and encounter no discontinuity; the dialects shade into one another, whereas there is discontinuity the moment one moves outside the area (ie Italian, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Albanian, Greek). But all this says nothing about the cultural values, norms, expectations, habits of mind that every language encodes, transmits and even less about how and why such diversity can become the target of political aspirations.

This brings us to a major point, the role of the historian as interpreter and translator. TGA is aware of this problem, but I'm not persuaded that he has explored his own perfectly proper Anglo-Saxon prejudgements here. He does not seem to me to recognise the pitfalls that beset him, with the consequence that at times he is in the same bear-trap that he suggests academic historians tend to inhabit: "Academics, by contrast [to journalists], can take years to finish a single article. ... Witnessing real life is not what they are supposed - or funded - to do. ... Participants in the worlds they describe sometimes throw up their hands in laughter and despair at the unreality of what comes out" (p.xix).

This is a very revealing passage. It says clearly that for TGA there is only one "reality" and only one way of understanding and interpreting that reality. Farewell diversity, good-bye otherness, adieu reflection. Reality is what we experience directly and anything else seems to be a misreading of that. Participants have the monopoly of real life. All this is very empirical and positivistic. It is also very open to question. It is open to question above all because it assumes that participants see everything around them (through feel?), that they see both text and context and that they have total perception. We know that this is nonsense, of course, and that participants have an extremely partial view of what they see. A brief glance at the literature on eyewitness testimony will confirm the accuracy of this argument. Besides, as TGA knows well, memory distorts.

To all of which may be added the central methodological difficulty, that of the problem of occlusion. Contrary to many people's tacit assumptions, at all times certain ideas, certain forms of knowledge, certain assumptions are screened out, they cannot be heard or seen. Hence our assessments of the world will always be partial. The hidden assumptions, the implicit norms that we carry with us as a part of our cognitive baggage, do, however, affect our judgement and it would enhance TGA's approach to recognise this, because then he could place participants' "laughter and despair" into their appropriate context. They do not know everything, but think they do. How often have we heard a particularly outrageous proposition legitimated by "I was there, I know"?

There is more to be said on TGA's historiographical method. The current British scholarly and intellectual style, unlike the French, requires the fullest possible citation of sources and acknowledgements, as if to say "mine is a collective work, really", though customarily adding, "I take the blame for any flaws in it." TGA's work is at the lone author end of the spectrum. There are, indeed, sources, but we have no picture of what works make up TGA's intellectual assumptions, his parentage as historian. This applies to the deep background. Has he read Hayden White? We do not know. There are references to Weber but I could not find one to Durkheim. Yet it would be helpful to know in connection with his perception of his role as historian. He seems to be operating within the paradigm that history is like the natural sciences - positivistic, empirical, moving from one proposition to another, with the occasional intuitive leap possibly. But strictly nothing post-modern, nothing at all.

Nor does there appear to be much attention devoted to the secondary literature on the topics under discussion. Then, it is generally a courtesy to attribute ideas to those who first published them. One of the phrases used by TGA to capture the collapse of communism is "negotiated revolution". It is strange that he nowhere notes that it was first used by Rudolf Tokes, whose book on the transfer of power in Hungary is actually called "Hungary's Negotiated Revolution".

In the 1990s, TGA decided to concern himself seriously with South-Eastern Europe, but it is very unclear what he has read. Stavrianos, Tomasevich, Erlich, Bicanic, Jovan Cvijic might have been useful, but there is no mention of them. If one is to understand some of the collective motivations of the Serbs, should one not have glanced at the Kosovo cycle of ballads? Does all this matter? Yes, because knowing allows us to assess what TGA, a relative newcomer, though distinguished, should and should not recognise in what people say to him in the area. It is a part of being straightforward with the reader about one's sources. His interlocutors come from very different thought-worlds, believe that their thought-worlds are the only way of understanding their aspirations, and what they say can never be fully understood; but it can be better understood if one has a rough and ready model of that thought-world, the one that TGA - or any other author - is attempting to interpret for us.

This is particularly the case when one is dealing with Central and South-Eastern Europe which has thought-worlds that are seriously at variance with those of the Anglo-Saxons. TGA does not have too much time for this. He refers to Bronislaw Geremek, historian first and politician second, as someone who has "always been fascinated by structure and process, which alone gives sense to events and anecdotes. ... [O]ne sometimes wishes that the relentless analysis of structure and process might now and then give way to description or evocation of the scenes and emotions with which this year [1991] was, after all, packed full" (p.79). TGA's concept of the writing of history may fairly be defined as the reverse of Geremek's. This encounter encapsulates the difference between the English and the Polish thought-worlds.

Political and sociological

When it comes to applying the criteria of political and sociological analysis, matters become more difficult. The Anglo-Saxon historical tradition seldom troubles itself with questions of political theory. It tends to see such questions either as "common sense" or as something that will take care of itself (which is not quite the same thing). In so far as one can deduce a theory of power from such an approach, it runs the risk of becoming a residual category - when everything has been tried, call it power. Yet the notion of power - why people command and obey, what they see as an authoritative command, how power is used, why some forms of power are legitimate (or seen as legitimate) while others are not, what is the relationship between coercion and consent - is vital. Without a theory of power one runs the danger of ending up with a "coercion and fear" model, tacitly anyway. Furthermore, are models of power in Central and South-Eastern Europe different from those in the West; if yes, why, in what way and why do they persist?

If this dimension of one's analysis is neglected, one can offer no persuasive answer, say, to the paradox of Milosevic, a ruler who lost every major ethno-nationalist objective yet still commands a degree of consent that goes beyond coercion. People do not obey merely because they are afraid of being beaten up (not that TGA says this, but then he says very little on this problem). He is certainly not a Maoist, a devotee of Mao's beguilingly reductionist theory of power, that it grows out of the barrel of a gun - this might also be called the Al Capone theory - but TGA leaves us without any account of how sees these issues.

There are other uses for a political science reading of what is going on in Central and South-Eastern Europe. TGA's own evidence is quite clear that there is fluidity, uncertainty, insecurity in the region, but it is less clear why this should be the case, why it is that the introduction (importation?) of democratic institutions like elections and parliaments, should have failed to produce democratic stability. The answer lies in the nature of the move from communism to whatever post-communism is - a sui generis system with features that are democratic and some that are not by the accepted criteria of Western practice.

The communist system established a political and economic monopoly and post-communism has been engaged in diluting this. This has necessarily meant a very large number of new political and economic actors, people with power, but without their having accepted the democratic values (moderation, responsibility, self-limitation, compromise etc) that make democratically elected institutions operate democratically. This state of affairs is hardly a surprise, as communism did everything to destroy democratic values. It eliminated civic institutions, and thus the practice that goes with them, and vested as much power as possible in the state. Hence the end of communism left post-communist societies without either the institutions or the values to cope with diversity - a diversity that had existed under the ever more threadbare veil of communism, but which communism did nothing to integrate into itself. In this sense, communist societies emerged into post-communism all but naked.

Every society, if it is to be called that, needs a set of shared, agreed values. Some of these are established and maintained by the state, some by citizenship and civil society and some by ethnicity. In the absence of the first two, ethnicity acquired a disproportionate role in the politics of post-communism and one that it cannot discharge, as ethnicity has nothing meaningful to say about the equitable exercise of power, about the mutuality of obligations in the political sphere, about popular sovereignty and popular control of coercion and taxation. The inevitable outcome of this disproportionate role has been the fluidity and insecurity that TGA registers.

The new political and economic actors simply lack the democratic cultural capital that would make democratic institutions work by Copenhagen criteria. What? Oh yes. TGA strongly supports the eastward enlargement of the European Union, but says little about the nuts and bolts of enlargement. The Copenhagen criteria lay down minimum conditions for membership. This is of central significance in the history of the present of Central and South-Eastern Europe. Eastward enlargement really is of pivotal importance in the contemporary history of the region and would, I should have thought, deserved extended treatment. TGA does not seem to agree, to judge from this book.

The point is that we are 10 years after. Post-communism has itself acquired a momentum, had its own consequences, shaped its own responses and values. No longer can everything be blamed on the communists. Indeed, some of the actors have begun to generate attitudes and values that are new and more compatible with Copenhagen criteria than not. But they are still few and there are very serious cleavages between those who do and those who do not accept democratic values.

Broadly speaking, about one-third of the populations of the early accession states (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia) have undergone a new socialisation and are ready to face the challenge of enlargement, though even here there is a question mark over the Czech Republic, which has an elite (led by TGA's sparring partner Vaclav Klaus) that is clearly opposed to the EU and has considerable public backing.

This is a very serious difficulty. Elsewhere, sizeable swathes of the population are sceptical of membership, but do not have a high prestige political elite to articulate this. Does this imply that accession is undemocratic? Possibly so, but then every radical shift is opposed by significant sections of public opinion and is driven by elite will. The question in Central Europe is whether the elites can build consent that will be sanctioned by referenda.

That brings me to the last point about politics, one where a theoretical distinction is genuinely helpful in understanding what is going on. In sum, these systems are consensual but not democratic. They are consensual in that parliaments are elected and express the will of the people - something that communism disdained because it had an ideology that assumed consent - but consensus does not, as I have argued, amount to democracy without the values that underpin the democratic working of institutions. Paradoxically, this means that what post-communist elites do is more difficult to contest, because they have a claim to consensual power. Neither elites nor populations are ready to recognise this vital distinction, vital because it explains why post-communist systems can behave in the way that they do. The fluidity and insecurity, the diversity and conflict feed on themselves because of the lack of trust in one's political opponents. This distrust then becomes perfectly rational, as political actors come to expect the worst of one another and enter into a self-fulfilling prophecy. And yet it is based on consent.

Does TGA have a theory of collective action? Why do people, the people on whom he reflects, identify with others and accept a degree of solidarity with them, their political opponents with whom they disagree included? Why do people do things as members of a collectivity that they would never do as individuals and what consequences does this phenomenon have? Should the historian, particularly the contemporary historian, seek intellectual self-empowerment by means of a theory of collective action? Yes, otherwise h/s will not understand what h/s is seeing, or only very partially. Above all why is collective action rational in its own terms and why collectivities, with their differences, particularisms, differentiated forms of knowledge, will not be absorbed into a kind of universal harmony (heaven forbid, say I), one that might suspiciously resemble one's own prior assumptions?

TGA has little time for such theories. He notes, of course, that there are collective identities, collective action and, though he would not use the term, collective representations. But he leaves it at that. The reason why people come together in collectivities and what effect this has do not really interest him. This is a perfectly legitimate approach, in my view, but it does leave a fair number of issues unexplored.

Literary

It seems to me that it is by literary criteria that this book scores best. It is very elegantly written. TGA has great skill in finding the right phrase, the vivid description (that he self-professedly relies on for creating a powerful impression), the thumb-nail sketches of places and people. Indeed, the book is a pleasure to read. It has great charm and some passages, like his reflection on Britain and Germany, are very moving. It is only when he ventures into theoretical analysis, like his paper on Britain and Europe ("Catching the Wrong Bus"), that his prose limps somewhat. That leaves only one question. Is it history? Well, as TGA himself has argued, it is his kind of history. Read it as that, as a first person narrative of distinction, as a very English reading of Central and South-Eastern Europe, as TGA's ongoing encounter with the region. By this yardstick, he is even entitled to be bewildered.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/84#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1008>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>