

Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Before we know it, the tenth anniversary of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe will be upon us. Because scholars and their publishers love such milestones, one can certainly anticipate a flood of new works devoted to assessments of the so-called "transition." Vladimir Tismaneanu's book must be read as an opening salvo in this impending debate even though the author weighs in on more current controversies. As befits such a work of comparative analysis, Tismaneanu tackles the big questions: why the transition has been so disappointingly slow and uneven; what the role of intellectuals can or should be in a post-Communist civil society; and why so much that is distasteful – especially anti-Semitism – has reappeared in the region. Comparative analysis on such a large scale is always fraught with risk, perhaps never more than when dealing with such a complex and contradictory region as Eastern Europe, and so the author is to be commended not only for his breadth of vision, but also his bravery.

Although this is a work ostensibly about politics, Tismaneanu is not particularly interested in the rough and tumble of political life, preferring instead the more rarefied realm of ideas, or as he puts it, the "mentalités and behavioral patterns that explain many of the current evolutions or devolutions in the post-Communist world." (8-9) His main hypothesis is that post-Communist societies "are still in search of a new axis mundi, because traditional identities have fallen apart, and new mythologies have emerged to inspire unity in a despairingly fragmented body politic." (14) While the notion of an identity-vacuum in post-1989 Eastern Europe is certainly not original to the author, his use of myth as the prism through which he views the problems resulting from this vacuum is refreshing and stimulating. Tismaneanu argues that during periods of intellectual dislocation, such as has been the case in Eastern Europe for the past decade, myths become "ideological surrogates, competing with other intellectual and political trends. Their principal function is to unify public discourse and provide the citizen with an easily recognizable source of identity as part of a vaguely defined ethnic (or political) community." (7) The more discord a society experiences and the weaker its democratic traditions, the more various myths have the "power to mobilize, energize, and even instigate large groups into action." (9) Kosovo's importance to Serbian national self-understanding and the ready willingness of so many Serbs to fight for a piece of territory that is important only as a symbol of something long-vanished is only the most obvious example of this phenomenon. From Skopje to Gdansk one need look neither very hard nor very far to find case after case to support the author's thesis. As a result, Tismaneanu offers up a lucid and convincing argument for the importance to the present of various myths so

creatively and problematically rooted in the past.

Most satisfying in this work is the author's analysis of these many myths. Some are "salvationist," others are "Vindictive and messianic," some are myths of "vengeance," and others are "redemptive, reactionary, or restorative." Where many before Tismaneanu have remarked upon the power of myth to motivate action in Eastern Europe, none have so carefully analyzed the content, style, and impact of various mythologies. Because he places problems such as resurgent anti-Semitism within this larger interpretive framework, rather than considering it as a separate or exceptional phenomenon, the author offers one of the strongest discussions available of the recent treatment of Jews in Eastern Europe. Tismaneanu argues that anti-Semitism in the present is not only a continuation of earlier forms of ethnocentrism, but rather is a reflection of the region's larger "unresolved adjustment to modernity." (108) As evidence of the power of new myths to affect discourse on such important issues, the author offers the example of what he calls "competitive victimization." (106) In response to any mention of Jewish treatment during the Holocaust, the most common response one hears in Eastern Europe is that "we suffered too" under both the fascists and then under the Stalinist regimes, and so why should Jewish grievances have precedence over ours? Once the myth of competitive victimization is accepted, then the Holocaust can be marginalized without much difficulty.

As long as he sticks to his original intention of analyzing the power of these various myths to influence thought and behaviour in post-Communist Eastern Europe, the author is on very strong ground. It is when, in the final third of the work, he shifts away from this framework to an extended polemic on decommunization and the need for a continuing role for the former dissidents, that the weaknesses of this otherwise excellent work appear. Tismaneanu is obviously quite distressed by the return to power of former members of Communist parties and what he sees as the companion phenomenon of the decline in the authority of the dissidents. For the author, these two matters are part of a larger struggle between and among members of a political and intellectual elite. As a result, he leaves little or no room for the possibility that, once freed from the repressive regimes and able to make informed choices, the average Pole, Romanian, Hungarian or whomever, might be able to make well thought out decisions. Instead, it seems that the average voter is so easily duped by cynical former Communists that the actual choices of voters in what mostly have been free and fair elections across the region since 1990 are of no particular importance. In fact, the reader will look in vain in this work for reference to anything but the competition between members of the elite. Not surprisingly, Tismaneanu is such a strong believer in the power of ideas to shape reality, and the iron grip of intellectuals on those ideas in Eastern Europe, that he comes down hard on the side of the revolutions of 1989 being the result of the dissidents' exposure of the bankruptcy of the regimes.

“The revolutions did not take place only because of economic deprivation (which was and is real), but primarily because people were tired of mendacity and fear.” (148) As compelling and attractive as this interpretation is, Tismaneanu offers no evidence to support it. Without evidence of a direct link between the ideas of the intellectuals and the actions of the masses, the reader is left to take the author’s word for such a connection, and unfortunately that is insufficient.

The final chapter of this work is little more than an extended plea for a continued role for the former dissidents in the political life of Eastern Europe. With a few notable exceptions, few of these dissidents have successfully transformed themselves into politicians in the new regimes and many have retired from political life in disgust. Tismaneanu is especially distressed by attacks on the dissidents that have recently appeared in the *New York Review of Books* by Tony Judt and Theodore Draper, among others, and this sixth chapter is his response to those attacks. While he presents a strong case for the importance of the intellectual to East European society, it is never clear to the reader exactly how the author’s polemic contributes to his otherwise strong analysis of political myth. Further, this portion of the work is so one-sided in its presentation that it raises caution flags for the reader. Because the author himself has long been active in the struggle to inaugurate a true civil society in Eastern Europe, he can perhaps be forgiven his favouritism toward those who have been his allies in this campaign. For example, Adam Michnik appears 88 separate times in this work (not counting his laudatory quotation on the back jacket), while Václav Klaus, arguably a much more influential figure in post-Communist Eastern Europe, appears only twelve times. In the end, the author would have been better off leaving this last chapter out and sending it to the *New York Review*.

Like all transition studies, portions of this one are already being overrun by the pace of change in Eastern Europe. However, the theoretical structure that Tismaneanu has erected will stand for many years and should become one of the standard methods for investigating the tumultuous events of the past decade in this troubled region. Because his analysis is often very original and is never half-hearted, those who plan to contribute to the up-coming flood of tenth anniversary transition literature will do well to read this work first.

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