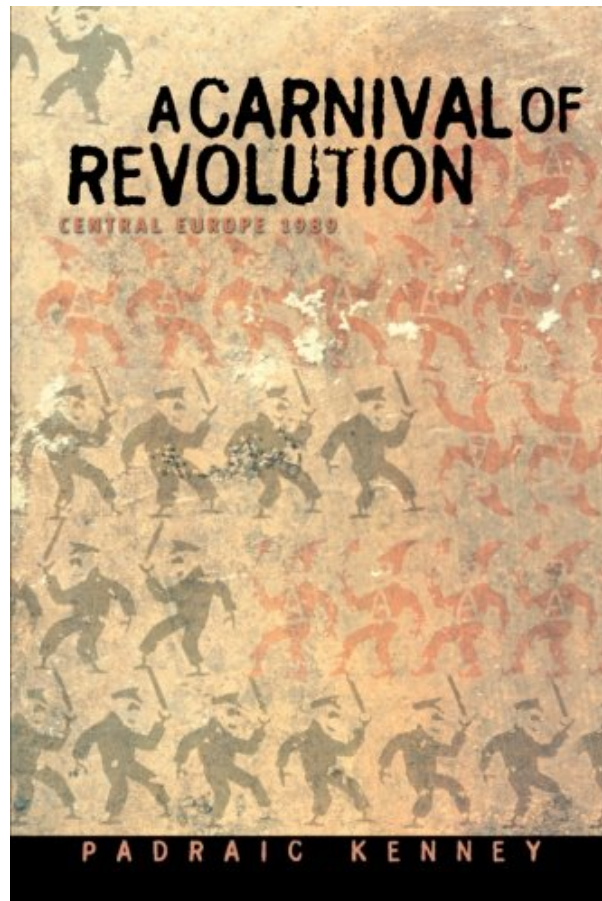
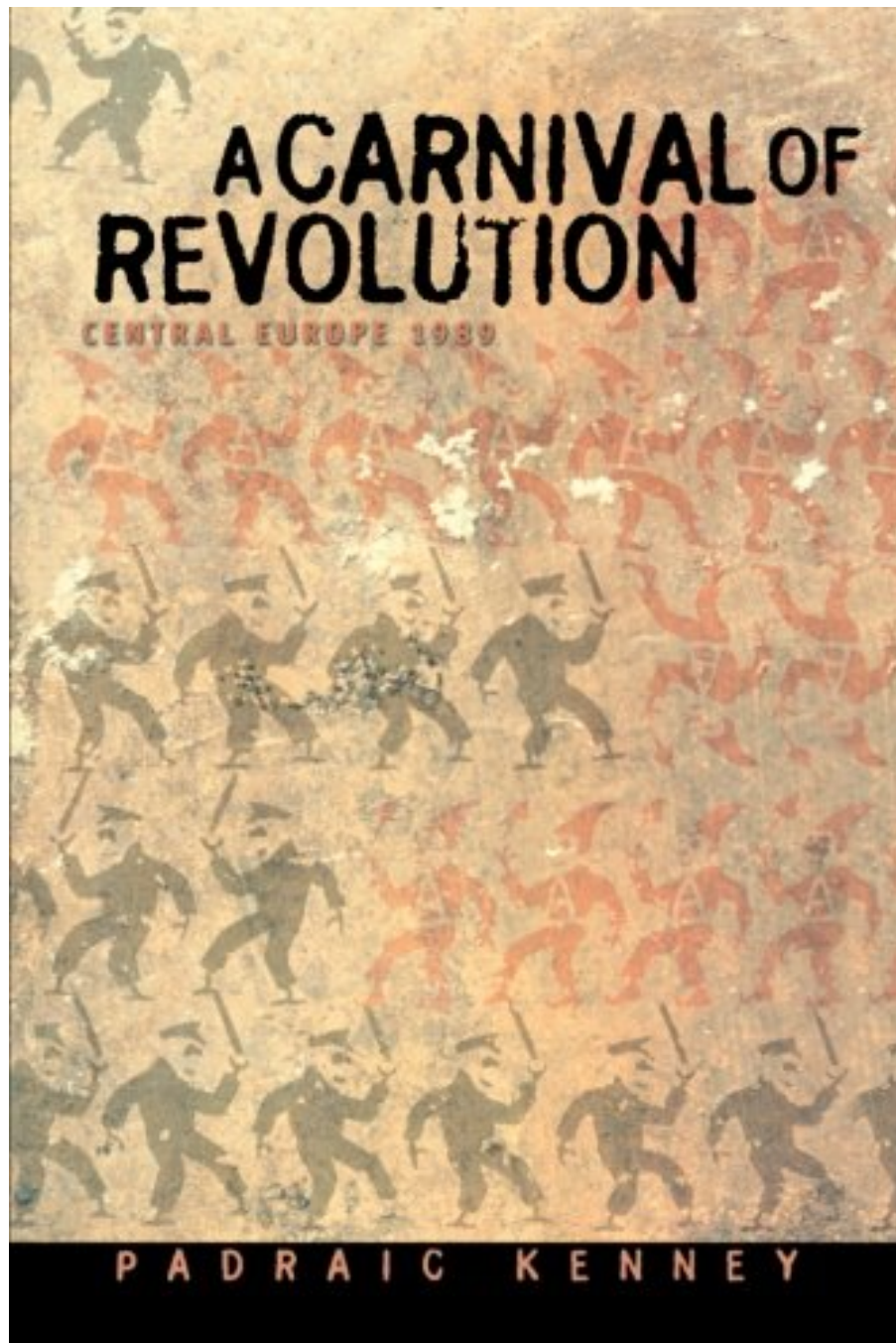


# A CARNIVAL OF REVOLUTION: CENTRAL EUROPE 1989 BY PADRAIC KENNEY



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This is the first history of the revolutions that toppled communism in Europe to look behind the scenes at the grassroots movements that made those revolutions happen. It looks for answers not in the salons of power brokers and famed intellectuals, not in decrepit economies--but in the whirlwind of activity that stirred so crucially, unstoppably, on the street. Melding his experience in Solidarity-era Poland with the sensibility of a historian, Padraic Kenney takes us into the hearts and minds of those revolutionaries across much of Central Europe who have since faded namelessly back into everyday life. This is a riveting story of musicians, artists, and guerrilla theater collectives subverting traditions and state power; a story of youthful social movements emerging in the 1980s in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and parts of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

Kenney argues that these movements were active well before glasnost. Some protested military or environmental policy. Others sought to revive national traditions or to help those at the margins of society. Many crossed forbidden borders to meet their counterparts in neighboring countries. They all conquered fear and apathy to bring people out into the streets. The result was a revolution unlike any other before: nonviolent, exuberant, even light-hearted, but also with a relentless political focus--a revolution that leapt from country to country in the exciting events of 1988 and 1989.

A Carnival of Revolution resounds with the atmosphere of those turbulent years: the daring of new movements, the unpredictability of street demonstrations, and the hopes and regrets of the young participants. A vivid photo-essay complements engaging prose to fully capture the drama. Based on over two hundred interviews in twelve countries, and drawing on samizdat and other writings in six languages, this is among the most insightful and compelling accounts ever published of the historical milestone that ushered in our age.

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Very Disappointing

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A few years ago Padraic Kenney wrote an important monograph on the contrasting experience of workers in two very different cities in early Stalinist Poland. Kenney's work was important because it brought questions from the field of labor history and larger trends in Anglo-American historiography into an area where they had previously been ignored. This book appeared very promising since it would appear to offer a similar historical depth to the journalistic accounts of the revolutions of 1989.

Unfortunately, that has not occurred. Kenney's book deals with the carnivalesque, anti-authoritarian elements of the opposition to the Communists. The focus is Central Europe, with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, Ukraine and Slovenia. One should point out the disingenuousness of the term "Central Europe," which the Czechoslovak dissident Milan Simecka pointed out at the time and Perry Anderson has also recently criticized. With its emphasis on Central Europe's links to the West, it could imply that "Eastern Europe" were lesser breeds unworthy of the law. Certainly the absence of Serbia, Croatia and the rest of



Yugoslavia is rather striking. During the eighties most people would have thought Yugoslavia was the most liberal of the communist states. But during the bloody attacks of Bosnia, it was very convenient for those who didn't want to help that "civil strife" was the inevitable result of Yugoslavia's atavistic Balkanness. By leaving out Serbian and Croatian politics before 1990 Kenney appears to imply that they too were foredoomed to failure, in part because they were not as hip and stylish as Slovenia's activists.

For although Kenney constantly praises the Central Europeans for their "internal pluralism," his book concentrates on the "carnival," those activists who engaged in ingenious forms of confrontational street politics. These people were often young and indeed made a politics of their youth, such as the Hungarian Association of Young Democrats who banned anyone over 35 from joining their party. They found new ways of raising issues embarrassing to the authorities, like the environment, worker's pensions, homelessness. They (and they were mostly Polish) found new ways of contacting with other countries in both the West and the East. In groups like the Orange Alternative, they engaged in ingenious forms of peaceful mass protest as they worked with hippies, punks, greens, admirers of John Lennon, while engaging in surrealist antics or dressing up like elves or the smurfs. It was this ingenious, carnivalesque politics, Kenney argues, which played a key role in the fall of Communism.

While there is certainly a lot of information about some of these groups, there are some major weaknesses in this account. Who belongs to these groups? Aside from the young and the fact that they are concentrated in Wroclaw, there's not much systematic detail about them. What did the larger public think about them? Possibly everybody, since Kenney does not grant the regimes any base of support, possibly less, since the fuddie-duddies of Solidarity appear to show a disconcerting lack of faith, and there references to apathy in the larger population. The portrait of politics is one of minorities, groups of benign bohemian leninist vanguards against communism. It is important to note what is left out. In discussing Hungary Kenney concentrates on the hip young Association of Free Democrats, and it is only at the end that we find that the conservative, somewhat chauvinist Democratic Forum won the first free elections in 1990. But then they're not as cool. Almost all questions arising after 1989 are downplayed or ignored. The transformation of Slovak and Ukrainian nationalism into a demagogic sinister authoritarianism only gets a couple of sentences. There is certainly no discussion of whether Slovaks, Ukrainians or Slovenes actually wanted to be in a new separate country before Vaclav Kraus, Boris Yeltsin and Slobodan Milosevic make the decisions before them. And there is certainly no discussion of why one of Jaruzelski's cabinet ministers has been twice freely elected president of Poland, or the return to popularity of the ex-Communists in East Germany or Hungary. Kenney notes how the carnival used the problems of homelessness, alcoholism and workers' pensions as sticks to beat the Communists. It is rather disconcerting that there is no discussion of these issues after 1989 to see whether they did any better at solving these problems.

Kenney wishes to give these radicals credit for overthrowing Communism and take much of it away from Gorbachev. This certainly accepts the mindset of the Polish radicals, but is it accurate? After all in East Germany many of the dissidents were sympathetic to socialism until almost the very end, the Slovenian opposition grew out of the local Communist party and the Hungarian government had agreed to multicandidate elections in 1985 and multiparty ones in 1988. And one cannot weigh the influence of the carnival without paying more attention to the weight of the Church, Solidarity, the Party, the Soviets and the continuing economic crisis in a more systematic matter than Kenney has done. The consequence is a book in which the carnival's worldview is taken on its own terms and all the complexities and messiness of politics are either ignored or happily viewed as inevitable. This book does not so much analyze their enthusiasm, as indulge it.

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