

Making History and Silencing Memory

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Little did we imagine, when we first started planning a conference to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Polish Round Table, that we would receive more than five hundred letters of protest, that we would find ourselves vilified in several Polish and Polish-American publications, or that some of our invited guests might fear the political consequences of participating in the event. We historians frequently complain that our work receives little attention from the general public, and we agonize over the balance between scholarly sophistication on the one hand and accessibility (or even relevance) on the other. I assumed that any gathering including the likes of Adam Michnik and President Aleksander Kwaśniewski would break through to a non-academic audience, but I never anticipated the sort of recognition I and my fellow organizers would receive. Indeed, I never imagined that anything I would ever do in my professional career would provoke enough emotion to generate hate-mail. The conference on “Communism’s Negotiated Collapse,” however, did just this.

The Polish Round Table of 1989 is a fascinating topic, with important lessons about the processes of political transformation, the dynamics of negotiation, and the relationship between causation and contingency. But the University of Michigan’s Round Table Commemoration of 1999 is equally fascinating, because it casts light on the very nature of history – its personal and public remembrance, its professional (usually professorial) representation, and its political significance. In his introductory remarks on the first day of the conference, Michael Kennedy said, “Academics are not the only interpreters of history, and most especially they’re not the ones that make history. The people we have invited to this conference have made history.”¹ But upon further

¹ *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse: The Polish Round Table, Ten Years Later. A Conference at the University of Michigan. April 7-10, 1999. English Transcript of the Conference Proceedings*, trans. by Kasia Kietlinska, ed. by Donna Parmelee (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Russian and East European Studies, 1999), 2. My citations are all from the full printed version of the English translation of the conference transcript. Not all the passages referred to here have been included in the excerpts reprinted above. For the full text, see <www.umich.edu/~iinet/PolishRoundTable/frame.html>.

consideration, this distinction between the conference organizers and the guests breaks down, because we scholars are in fact the ones who *make history*, in the sense that we legitimate a specific story about the late 1980's in Poland, and silence any memories that might challenge our interpretations. We literally set the stage for debate over 1989, and in doing so we forced some voices to speak from offstage and others to be silenced altogether. This may not have been a bad thing – maybe the excluded ones deserved their fate – but we cannot deny that our organizational and commemorative efforts played an important role in shaping the discussion of 1989 in 1999. From our authoritative position as international “experts” on Poland, and as the organizers of the largest and most visible public reconsideration of the Round Table (in Poland or abroad), we helped establish the issues to be debated, the questions to be posed, the time-frame for telling stories, and (perhaps most important) the people who would be allowed to speak. At the time, we diligently and sincerely strove for objectivity and distance: we were the impartial outsiders, the disengaged (though obviously not disinterested) scholars. But precisely *because* we were acting as historians, we were necessarily constructing boundary posts around the past, drawing lines between the visible and the invisible, the vocal and the silent.

One vital lesson of the Round Table Conference of 1999 (independent, in this sense, of the Round Table Negotiations of 1989) is that history is *always* political, whether we like it or not. This is the same lesson learned by the American historians who tried to collaborate with the Smithsonian Museum to create an exhibit on the Enola Gay; it is the lesson learned by those who tried (and failed) to formulate a set of historical standards for American high school students. At the time of both controversies, many complained that historical truth and objectivity had to be sacrificed when scholars enter the public arena, but this reaction was inappropriate. Instead, we should interpret our effort to commemorate 1989, along with these earlier disputes, as unusually dramatic examples of how history is *always* made, challenged, and remade. This experience should help teach us – and help us teach our students – that history itself is not an object to be discovered and learned, but a fluid discursive space in which we all argue about the past, present, and future.

The story of our conference began in late 1997, in the hallway of Michigan's Center for Russian and East European Studies (CREES). I was chatting casually with Marysia Ostafin, the chief administrator for our Polish studies program, about what to do for the 1998/99 Copernicus Lecture, an event we hold each year to promote Polish studies. One of us mentioned that 1999 would be the tenth anniversary of the fall of communism, so it made sense to do something to commemorate this moment. “But who should we invite?” Marysia asked. Which single individual could possibly capture all the complexity and magnitude of that event? Without really thinking, I responded, “Let's invite them all!” Marysia groaned as she considered the amount of work that

would be involved in such a project, but the idea to re-create the Round Table of 1989 had been born.

Our first organizational dilemma came when we realized that the Round Table talks included too many people. Not only did the actual table have 56 chairs – far more than we could hope to invite to Ann Arbor – but many additional people participated in the various sub-tables, and more still influenced the process from outside the negotiating halls (some by protesting their exclusion from those halls, others by denying the legitimacy of the talks themselves). During the very first meeting of our organizational committee, we decided to limit our invitations to those who actually took part in the talks. Our goal would be to pose questions about the *process* of negotiation, without directly addressing the value or wisdom of the talks themselves. We would organize sessions around questions like “what were the conditions that made it possible to enter into dialogue,” “what was the relationship between the participants and their constituencies,” and “what specific lessons from the Polish Round Table can be applied to conflicts elsewhere”? As it turned out, in our futile attempt to avoid the most contentious issues, we began the process of setting boundaries around our topic – a process that would become extraordinarily contentious.

Another issue arose at that first meeting: should we invite General Wojciech Jaruzelski? In 1970, as Minister for Defense, he had been responsible (directly or indirectly) for the massacre of protesting workers in Gdańsk, and as head of state in 1981 he had attempted to crush the Solidarity movement by declaring martial law. Because of this background, some on our committee were uncomfortable inviting him to speak, but most of us felt that his role in the negotiations of 1989 was too important to overlook. Since we also intended to invite a strong contingent from the Solidarity side – including Lech Wałęsa himself – it seemed clear (to me, at least) that we were offering no endorsement of General Jaruzelski. We would soon learn that such an endorsement would be assumed, regardless of our intentions.

From the start we received criticism from many different directions. One of my colleagues told me that such a conference would be of no interest to students or faculty outside the Polish studies program, because our guests were limited to “a bunch of obscure male politicians.” Another dismissed it as a publicity event with little intellectual content. Although we were able to obtain enthusiastic support – and money – from the university administration, I would continue to perceive the apathy of my fellow faculty members. Evidently we were striding dangerously close to the line between the scholarly and the popular. Of much greater concern was the aggressive opposition that arose outside the university. In October 1998, Michael Kennedy (then Director of CREES) visited Poland to extend personal invitations to those we hoped to bring to Ann Arbor. Apparently this visit brought our plans to the attention of those who had long opposed the Round Table and the compromises it had entailed. The right-wing newspaper *Głos* ran an article urging readers to protest our plans to provide a

forum for communist “criminals.”² This appeal, and others like it in Polish-American publications and on Polish e-mail lists, provoked an avalanche of letters to CREES and to the University of Michigan’s president, Lee Bollinger. As one of our opponents put it, “what is the POINT of the conference? Why is it not being held in POLAND? Are these scholarly bleeding hearts unaware that some of the invitees have blood on their hands?...Is history being whitewashed again for the sake of some scholarly papers?”³ One bitter Polish-American, Mirosław M. Krupiński, even sent us a poem, in which he complained about the “traitors” who “ten years later, fat and arrogant / well fed from profits, and victorious / without any disputes, any disagreements / once again raise a toast – in Michigan.”⁴

Another critic, Tadeusz Witkowski, composed an article for a Polish-American journal called *Periphery*, in which he complained because we had limited our invitations to “individuals representing the left, the center, and the very moderate right.” By focusing on those who actually played a role in the negotiations of 1989, we had overlooked the many Poles who had opposed the talks. What most disturbed Witkowski, though, were “the political ideas behind the conference” – that is, our own alleged agenda. “Some American academics,” he wrote, “apparently try to measure the welfare of Polish society only in terms of what benefits today’s political establishment and the new Polish business class.” Here Witkowski was plugging into a common (albeit minority) conviction that the Round Table did not mark the end of communism, but was instead a negotiated settlement allowing the communists to retain their wealth and influence under new circumstances. As Witkowski put it,

for Americans who do not understand the Polish political scene, the Round Table might be something that “opened a new era for Eastern Europe and the entire world” [this is a quotation from our own pre-conference literature]. For many Poles it is only one more fraud and act of power division. Many would prefer to leave the “opening of a new era” to others and in Poland settle accounts with those responsible for the crimes of the communist era....At the Round Table, new elites emerged that absorbed the old ones.

For Witkowski, the Round Table is responsible for “a nihilism affecting young Poles as a result of their sense of the impunity of evil committed by the communists and a devaluation of the patriotic slogans used by some representatives of the opposition who

² News of this article came to us thanks to David Ost, in an e-mail message from November 3, 1998. Unfortunately, I have not been able to track down the original article.

³ E-mail from Maryann Poniacka to Don Benkowski, March 2, 1999. My thanks to Mr. Benkowski for forwarding this to me.

⁴ Mr. Krupiński sent us an e-mail expressing his concerns on April 5. His poem can be found at <worf.albanyis.com.au/~matuzal/PG29.htm>.

subsequently exchanged them for money.”⁵ Such opinions are by no means limited to émigrés like Witkowski. On the occasion of the Round Table’s anniversary in 1998, a right-wing political party issued a statement declaring that “nine years ago the communists came to an agreement with the pink leadership of Solidarity, dividing Poland like a cake....All of them thought only about themselves, leaving only meager remains for society.”⁶

It was easy to dismiss the conspiracy theories regarding the Round Table, particularly when they accused us of involvement in a mysterious plot to retain the “pinks and the reds” in power, and simultaneously to buttress the interests of the American business elite. In the heat of the moment, I reacted with anger to the charge that I was pursuing a political agenda. Writing in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* in February 1999, I attempted to respond to these critics.

We were well aware that the memory of 1989 remains controversial, and we realized that it would be inappropriate for an American institution to put its stamp of approval on any particular interpretation of Poland’s past. But whether one considers of the details of the April accords good or bad, it cannot be denied that the *process* of negotiation merits further study. We wanted to learn something about the Round Table, not just glorify it. Above all, we wanted to understand how Poles came to the realization that they could change the course of history. Even those who opposed the talks believed that they were making decisions that mattered, so we wanted to hear from them, too.⁷

Michael Kennedy was similarly insistent about our distance and objectivity. In his opening remarks at the conference he said, “I want to emphasize that our ambition here is not to celebrate or heap blame on those who made the Round Table; our ambition rather is to understand better the conditions, contingencies, and consequences of the political choices that led to the Round Table and negotiated collapse of communism.”⁸ Both of us were sincere—but we both missed the point. Because the charges leveled against us seemed so spurious and inflammatory, and because the authors of these complaints discredited themselves with their own conspiracy theories, I failed to consider more seriously the way we were, in fact, reinforcing a specific reading of the history of the 1980’s. Our values and our understanding of communism’s collapse were reflected in each aspect of the conference, from its planning to the way we staged the

⁵ Tadeusz Witkowski, “A Legitimate Concern,” *Periphery* 4-5 (February 1999). Text available online at <www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~zbigniew/Periphery/No4-5/editorial01.html>.

⁶ This text, from Federacja Młodych ROP, was originally posted at <friko5.onet.pl/wa/fmrop>, although it was subsequently removed from the party’s site.

⁷ Brian Porter, “Ucieczka z więzienia historii,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* 29 (4 February 1999): 19.

⁸ *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 7.

sessions themselves. Ironically, our critics were right; their only mistake was to imagine that things could have been otherwise.

If there was a single theme that united all the presentations at our conference, it was the desire for “truth,” and the conviction that we had provided an opportunity to present this truth. Adam Michnik opened the conference with an accusation that “for short-term gains, there is some tendency to falsify contemporary Polish history. Such insinuations make dialogue impossible. They help to create an image of a traitor and enemy, rather than of a polemicist and critic....I claim that this kind of false historiography engenders false policies.”⁹ To remedy this, Michnik cited documents and evoked his own memories in search of a “true” picture of the events of 1989. Mieczysław Rakowski later responded to some of his critics with the cry, “This is a historical lie!” He, too, insisted that the truth should be allowed to prevail (although his truth was not the same as Michnik’s truth).¹⁰ Stanisław Ciosek tackled this issue directly, when he cautioned us against the tendency to rely on written documents from the 1980’s. “The documents that remained from those years,” he said, “...were not written for history, but only to present some order, but in reality, decisions were made in circles which would leave no trace. Minor notes here and there have perhaps survived, but I think that the best proof is the testimony of witnesses....So I would like to caution you not to take papers as the only evidence, because they won’t always tell the truth.”¹¹ Here, as elsewhere, the “truth” resided in the oral testimony of those who experienced the fall of communism, it resided in memory, not in the documentary foundations of historical writing.

But at our conference, memory was hemmed in on many sides by history. History is usually – and the exceptions are rare indeed – a narrative genre.¹² Its telling is

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² It has been almost thirty years since Hayden White first made this observation, and explored its implications, in his seminal book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Today nearly every history graduate student reads this classic text, which is widely seen as the spark that ignited a thorough reconsideration of the theoretical foundations of history. A sampling of some of the best work that arose subsequently would include: Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994); Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke, 1995); Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art*

rooted in two points: the past before our story, and the present. Virtually every history text begins with some discussion of the “background” or “context” of the material to follow. The historian must set the stage, and in doing so he or she delineates what will be deemed “relevant” and what will be dismissed as “trivial.” Such choices, as we will see in the case of the Round Table Conference, can never be entirely innocent. It is somewhat less compulsory, though still nearly universal, for historical writing to point towards some concern of the present day. This may come as an explicit assertion of relevance, as in the classic *magistra vitae* formula, or as an evocation of some current historiographical debate. When the present is ignored altogether, when the controversies of the discipline today are avoided in favor of a detailed reconstruction of some past moment, with no nods whatsoever towards the present, we criticize such works as “antiquarian,” and denigrate their authors as mere “history buffs” (rather than “true scholars”). Thus straddling the past and the present – and striving to connect them – historical prose is drawn almost invariably towards a narrative form, in which the irreducible confusion of the past is placed within the confines of a story with a beginning and end, with a plot, with featured characters, and with a wide variety of rhetorical conventions particular to storytelling.

An example of this can be seen in a few paragraphs of publicity material I composed for the Round Table conference in early 1998.

On April 5, 1989, the world as we then knew it began to unravel. On that momentous day, the “Round Table Talks,” a two-month-long process of negotiations between the Polish communist party and the opposition, came to a stunning conclusion. The “Solidarity” movement, outlawed for almost a decade, was re-legalized, and the first multi-party elections in post-war Poland were scheduled. When that vote was held two months later, the communists lost virtually every contested parliamentary seat. In the coming months, communist regimes would fall in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and finally in the Soviet Union itself. Although the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November, 1989, provided the world with a visual metaphor for the political transformations of that momentous year, the peaceful, negotiated transfer of power in Poland seven months earlier opened a new era for Eastern Europe and the entire world....From April 7-10, 1999, the Center for Russian and

of Memory (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993); Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); David D. Roberts, *Nothing but History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

East European Studies will gather in Ann Arbor the leading actors – politicians, Church leaders, and prominent intellectuals – from all the groups which participated in the unprecedented events of 1989. Our goals will be to recreate the atmosphere of the Round Table and to put this era of “negotiated revolutions” into historical and global perspective.

The thrust of this paragraph positions the Round Table within a specific story about the fall of communism. Even if we set aside the explicitly evaluative terms like “momentous” (twice!) and “stunning,” we are still left with that most powerful of persuasive tools, the narrative. We start with act one, where we find Solidarity “outlawed for almost a decade” by an implicitly undesirable communist regime. Then comes act two, the “negotiated revolution” that began the process of “unraveling the world as we then knew it.” For the final act we get a happy ending, in which the example of Poland “opens a new era for Eastern Europe and the entire world.” At the conference we intended to focus on the process of negotiated change, to narrow our lens to an almost technical question: how does one move from conflict to dialogue in situations of political and social polarization. But from the start we positioned this scholarly inquiry within a grand narrative that valorized the Round Table Talks, accepted the alleged virtues of the post-communist socio-economic order, and closed off alternative readings of 1989. This is not because we were dupes in the hands of Poland’s current elite, nor is it a result of any deliberate effort to “spin” the story of 1989 in any particular direction. It is, instead, an example of how history – *all* history – is made.

Michael Kennedy, a sociologist by training, was perhaps less drawn to the narrative form, but his focus on the sociological present drew him to the genre in spite of himself. The tension in his commentary during the conference is eloquent: “NATO’s expansion on the one hand, and Southeastern Europe’s disintegration on the other, might properly be seen as the contemporary background for some of the questions we discuss in this conference. Certainly, our conference is premised on the idea that radical transformations can be accomplished not only through violence, but also peacefully. But I must emphasize that this is not a conference about contemporary politics in Poland or Yugoslavia. It is about the contingencies of 1989.”¹³ All of us would repeat this line throughout the conference: this was not to be a discussion of today’s political squabbles; it was not to be cast against the backdrop of Yugoslavia (not excessively, at least); it was not to be “presentist” (to use the most beloved historian’s invective). The historian is perpetually torn between the desire to be relevant, and the fear of being anachronistic. This is not a resolvable tension: it is the fundamental contradiction at the heart of our discipline, and the impetus behind the narrative form itself.

But memory does not share this contradiction, and memory need not be cast as a narrative (although it sometimes is). Stanisław Ciosek made this point effectively when

¹³ *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 4.

he protested the straightjacket placed upon him by the theme of his panel ("The Political Contest, 1986-1988"). "History cannot be divided into pieces," he argued. "That is against the natural tendencies of historians who would like everything in order, would like the maximum number of facts gathered. The situation in Poland, on the other hand, and this topic that we are discussing, cannot be put into the brackets of the period of the two or three years we're focusing on here." If Ciosek explicitly challenged the narrative discipline we had imposed upon him, Bishop Alojzy Orszulik implicitly rejected it. His talk offered snippets of insight and recollection stripped of both chronological progression and logical structure.¹⁴ His was, so to speak, memory in the raw, unmediated by the desire to make history, with its necessary narrative form. To a greater or lesser degree, many of the conference presentations shared this characteristic. Several of our participants spoke without notes, as they allowed their memories (and sometimes their passions, as with the dramatic tears brought forth by Bishop Dembowski's recollections¹⁵) to flow over and through them. If we attempted to publish the conference transcript without extensive editing and annotation, most readers would reject them as confusing, randomly organized claims about the past. Few would accept this as a contribution to any sort of historical literature, because it seems to lack the narrative form we expect from such writing.

Indeed, this is *not* yet history. Whether used as a classroom assignment or a piece of data in a scholarly project, this is "primary material," a "source" from which the historian applies his or her craft. We are called upon to make sense of the obscure references and allusions, to provide the necessary background to place these comments into some context, and above all to configure the whole thing as a narrative. History must be a story. We might strive to suppress our own biases, to be as objective as possible, to describe things as they really were, but we cannot escape the fact that we ask questions of the events, we draw the background scenery, we populate that scenery with the characters we select (leaving others aside, for reasons both good and bad), and we decide what those characters will say and do. On the most basic level of all, we decide when the story will begin and when it will end. We might do all this with a specific agenda in mind, tactically selecting the best elements to support our particular point of view. Or, as in the case of our Round Table conference, we might try to draw our boundaries so as to avoid areas of troublesome dispute, so as to make the conference as scholarly as possible (as if scholarship could ever *not* be political and contested). But in either case, the result is the same: a historical (re)construction that says nearly as much about our desires, goals, and ideas as it does about that amorphous thing called "the past."

In our specific case, we made a number of decisions that angered our opponents and gave the conference its spin. First, the topic itself was problematic, more so than we

¹⁴ Ibid., 52-59.

¹⁵ Ibid., 74.

initially realized. Wiesław Chrzanowski first pointed this out when he opened his presentation by declaring, “I am totally opposed...to any attempts to build up a legend of the Round Table, in connection with its tenth anniversary.”¹⁶ Chrzanowski argued that the Round Table merely “accelerated by a few months the changing of the guard of power in Poland,” and in doing so “provided measurable, although at the time not fully predictable, advantages to the participating partners.” These advantages came from the fact that the communists selected their negotiating partners from those who themselves had once been party members, even if they had later become dissidents. “For the leftist opposition,” said Chrzanowski, “[the Round Table] was an opportunity to eliminate or limit the influence of the right wing of the opposition.” If the Round Table itself was a mere political maneuver, much more significant were the elections held on June 4. At that time, argued Chrzanowski, the public repudiated the Round Table Accords by voting overwhelmingly for Solidarity, thus rendering pointless earlier agreements about the party’s preservation of power.¹⁷ The basic flaw in our conference, then, was its focus on the negotiations of February to April, 1989: by establishing these chronological boundaries we were sure to misrepresent the real dynamics of communism’s collapse.

Similarly, our temporal barriers determined the sorts of issues we could raise, closing off alternative ways of viewing Poland’s past and present. Chrzanowski wanted to push our boundaries far to the past: “Ten years ago, the communist camp was closer...to the position of the occupiers of Poland during the [nineteenth century] than to the government side in the democratic country, even though this camp was composed of Poles....The actions of many members of the government camp were driven by ideological causes, but they were international rather than Polish causes.”¹⁸ Only by using a wide-angle lens could Chrzanowski attack the communists with such harsh moral condemnation. The historical story told by the right is one in which Poland must always fight against domination by Germany and Russia, and the events of the past 200 years make sense to them within this framework. The struggle is constant; only the players change. Within this historical vision, the communists – with their undeniable ties to Moscow – can only be perceived as agents. This story can’t be told if one limits oneself to the period between 1986-1989, as we mandated for our conference. In those years the ties between Warsaw and Moscow were particularly (Chrzanowski would say unusually and temporarily) weak, and it may well have been the case that Jaruzelski was more influential on Gorbachev than the other way around. But if we start our story in 1795 (the third partition of Poland) or even in 1945, the anti-national villainy of communism can be more easily described. From an entirely different perspective, both Stanisław Ciosek and Mieczysław Rakowski complained that our chosen dates made it impossible to appreciate the magnitude of the change within the communist party, or

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

the fact that the leadership had actually been pursuing reform for many years, if not decades. Rakowski pointed to the rise of “national communism” in the 1960’s as the first step in moving Poland away from the Soviet model, and then argued that those who traveled to the West in the 1970’s “were not prisoners of one ideology any more, because they had an opportunity to confront the ideology that was being fed to them with the reality in the West.”¹⁹ Ciosek was even more insistent, claiming that “after the Stalinist period, the Polish party tried many times to better the system, to loosen up its doctrine and to reach economic growth. And we got some results, against the backdrop of more dogmatic surroundings....”²⁰

So whether one was coming from a nationalist or a communist perspective, the time-frame of 1986-1989 made it impossible to tell the story. As I’ve argued at length elsewhere, the way one casts historical time is one of the most important elements of any world-view.²¹ Whether time is configured as progressive, uniform, decadent, or circular strongly determines how one is going to approach the central questions of political philosophy or social theory. Similarly, whether one expands or contracts the chronological field will fundamentally alter one’s perception of any issue. Consider the difference between telling the story of Polish Stalinism within a history of twentieth-century political violence, or (alternatively) within a post-WWII history of Poland. In the former case, the relatively short period from the communist take-over to the death of Stalin will appear as an incident of little importance, when set alongside the monstrous horrors of the Holocaust and Soviet Stalinism. In the latter case, however, the violence with which communism came to power in Poland will stand out in stark relief. In planning our conference we quite sincerely told ourselves that we had to draw *some* boundaries in order to keep the discussion focused, and the dates 1986-1989 seemed reasonable. But like it or not, such a decision was loaded with substantive implications.

Our guests could challenge our time-frame, but some of the other constraints we imposed were so powerful that they silenced all dispute. Rakowski exemplified how narrow the field of possible disagreement was when he said, “Yes, [communism] would undoubtedly have gone to its grave, but nobody knows when. It was not carved in stone that that had to happen in the late 1980’s.”²² Zbigniew Bujak only appeared to be arguing for indeterminacy when he said, “I claim that perhaps, if we had been somewhat incautious at that time and lost control, a completely different situation would have emerged in our country.”²³ In fact, the position articulated (perhaps ruefully) by Rakowski was universally shared by every speaker at our conference: communism was doomed, and the only question was how it would exit the stage of

¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²² *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 19.

²³ Ibid., 39.

history. Embedded in this consensus is a liberal world-view that has penetrated to the very core of public discourse in Poland and in the US. Communism was referred to during the conference as an “experiment” and a “dream,” but it was always contrasted (as Rakowski, of all people, suggested) with the “reality” of life in the West.²⁴ Capitalism has clearly become naturalized, to the degree that even the leaders of the alternative system that existed for four decades in Eastern Europe can only speak of their earlier lives as ephemeral, transient, and (it literally goes without saying) flawed. My point here is not to argue that they are wrong, but to point out the impossibility of even suggesting that they might be. The historians’ boundary posts are firmly in place in this instance: we have defined the years between World War II and 1989 as an error, a foolish experiment, or perhaps even an extended reign of terror. This makes it difficult to think seriously about the decline of living standards in Poland during the 1990’s, or to understand the waves of social protest that have been plaguing the country in recent years. The questions posed at our conference reinforced this hegemony. The most common query was some variation on the theme, “when did you realize that you had to negotiate a surrender of power?” All our guests had some sort of answer, even as they disagreed about a wide variety of interpretations and memories within the bounds of this question. But missing at the table (because of the way we initially defined the conference’s topic) were any of former members of the communist party who believed that socialism was still worth a try. In today’s environment, anyone who would even articulate such a position would be seen as quaint, if not mad.

As it was, madness was in abundant supply at our conference, and among those who protested but stayed away. We had to contend with a great number of psychologically troubled individuals, from the conspiracy theorists cited above to the obviously disturbed gentleman who came bedecked with military regalia to push his claim (loudly) that the Germans were secretly conquering Poland. When a group of protestors issued a poster calling for a counter-demonstration against the “Solidarity Commemoration” at “Michigan State University,” and subsequently showed up in East Lansing on the day of the conference, we all got a good laugh (although those of us with Polish ancestry asked why our opponents had to generate these real-life Polish jokes). It was easy for us to take comfort in the fact that most criticism was limited to marginalized émigré intellectuals or small-circulation right-wing papers in Poland. We received words of praise from *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the two largest newspapers in the country); we had representatives from all the major political parties and the Church among our guests; we had financial support from major corporations and from our own university administration. So we could say that anyone who wanted to offer a different story about 1989 was isolated (if not crazy), and thus unimportant. One might also argue, however, that the narrative of conflict resolution and peaceful

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

revolution so succinctly summarized in our promotional literature has become so hegemonic that one would *have* to be crazy to challenge it. Indeed, as Foucault has suggested, this might be the lesson that madness has to teach us.²⁵ Anyone with any sense would work within the framework of the dominant discourse—just as we did in organizing our conference.

The lesson to be learned from the Round Table Conference of 1999 is that history is always political, whether we like it or not. Choosing a chronological framework, determining which voices will be heard and which will be silenced, identifying what is important and what is trivial: all these decisions can be cast as necessary, for every historical story has to have some limits lest it degenerate into a chaotic account of indiscriminately selected events. But the way we draw these limits is important—indeed, it might be far more important than our explicit arguments. One can disagree with an argument, but it is extraordinarily difficult to challenge the accepted boundaries of a topic, once these have been widely accepted. By identifying the Round Table as the key point to remember from 1989, we helped construct the debate about that anniversary in both the US and Poland. Those who would have highlighted alternative moments, and those who would have marked the anniversary as tragedy rather than triumph, had difficulty making themselves heard. But that is what history *always* does: it not only gives narrative form to memory, but silences those who might remember different.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).