Andrzej Paweł Śledź

Jagiellonian University (Poland)

Twenty Years After Communism:

The Methodological Review[1]

Review Essay: Michael Bernhard & Jan Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration.* **New York: Oxford University Press 2014 (pp. 384). ISBN 9780199375134. Price: £79.00.**

Abstract: The paper is a methodological review essay of Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik's comparative study of politics of memory and commemoration in seventeen Central and Eastern European states twenty years after the fall of state socialism. The goal of the essay is to critically examine Bernhard and Kubik's volume, with a particular focus on the comparative methods they applied to explain how some political and cultural factors at the time of the collapse of communism affected a memory regime in the post-communist democracies. This analysis critically examines four aspects of the study, being: the central theoretical assumptions and contribution in comparative and memory politics; case selection; methodology and data analysis; main findings. Each part includes a summary of the particular aspect of the book, the main strengths and weaknesses, and possible improvements. The review essay emphasis is particularly novel and innovative comparative methodology in studying politics of memory and its universality, suggesting, however, severe problems with a lack of clear and consistent discourse analysis methodology which could affect the quality of final results.

Keywords: *Michael Bernhard; Jan Kubik; politics of memory; twenty years after; communism*

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of state socialism in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe was an excellent occasion for sociologists and political scholars alike to try and evaluate the current conjuncture of these states and understand how different configurations of input factors could affect them[2]. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, in their magnificent comparative studies "Twenty Years After Communism. The Politics of Memory and Commemoration", by looking at how 1989 or 1991 were commemorated and celebrated by seventeen European post-communist democracies, successfully managed to detect factors which influenced the types of memory regimes which emerged in these states twenty years after the transition. The goal of this essay is to critically review Bernhard and Kubik's book with a particular focus on the comparative methods they used. This analysis will examine four aspects of the study, being: main assumptions and contribution; case selection; methodology and data analysis; main findings. Each part will include a summary of the particular aspect, the main strengths and weaknesses, and finally, possible improvements.

Main Assumptions and Contribution

Bernhard and Kubik wanted to understand how some political and cultural factors at the time of the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, affected collective memory strategies applied by the main political actors and, in consequence, how these strategies shaped memory regimes of post-communist democracies. In order to do this, they first constructed a theoretical frame consisting of two typologies, then asked a group of scholars with a historical background and knowledge of particular languages to conduct case studies using this common theoretical frame and finally, the authors aggregated all the collected data for analysis using the QCA method to test their theoretical model and give answers to the main question.

According to Bernhard and Kubik, people always feel some need to deal with the past which enables them to recreate the sense of their lives, both at an individual and a collective level. After critical political changes such as, in this case, the political transition, leaders of a new order may find it beneficial to dispose of old elites and the way they do this depends on how this new elite perceive the past. Last but not least, a collective process of remembering the past is always highly politicised so, studying

---

politics of memory helps us to understand power relationships and new political orders (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014a). A political actor may choose one of four types of strategy to deal with the past. The first strategy is that of the mnemonic warrior, who believes that there is only one 'right' interpretation of past events and all other perspectives should be actively eradicated. The second strategy is a mnemonic pluralist, who accepts that there might be more interpretations of the past and all of them have their rightful place and should be tolerated. A third strategy is a mnemonic abnegator who, because of many possible reasons, do not try to participate in a 'memory debate'. The last strategy, which was not detected in studies of European countries, is a mnemonic perspective, who are mostly focused on some desired end state vision and believes it will solve all problems with both past and future (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014b). Depending on what type of mnemonic actors emerge in a particular society and in what configuration, there might be three distinct types of memory regimes, which are: fractured, unified or pillarized. The memory regime is fractured when there is at least one warrior actor. If there is no such actor but the pluralist can be identified, then the memory regime can be classified as pillarized and finally, while no warriors or pluralists can be detected, there is a unified memory regime (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014b). The last piece of Bernhard and Kubik's theoretical frame are structural and cultural constraints in which mnemonic actors need to operate and which affect their strategies and the effects thereof. The first two of these are a type of state socialism, and a mode of extraction from an old regime which allow prediction of how strong, effective, and independent the political actors were after the transition, both anti-communist and post-communist. Another structural constraint which was taken into consideration is the presence of ideological cleavage between actors during the times of commemoration in 2009 or 2011 which could have strongly affected a feature of memory regimes. According to Bernhard and Kubik, memory actors' choices of particular strategies also depended on the cultural discourses present and available in each culture, including cultural forms and themes (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014b).

Twenty years after communism may be qualified as an interdisciplinary work situating itself between classic comparative politics, Memory Studies and, to some extent, Transitional Justice studies. On the one hand, Bernhard and Kubik, as do many political scholars, applied the actor-centred approach widely popularised in comparative politics, used by such classics as O'Donnell and Schmitter, Przeworski or Linz and Stepan, to study a process of democratisation (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014b). Although their focus is mostly on politics of memory, which is quite a new approach, they make use of and contribute to the huge heritage of political studies of revolutions and major social and cultural changes. What is more, even if it is not expressed directly, their concept of actors and strategies seems to flow from the rational choice theory which

is also one of the most popular approaches in political studies. On the other hand, Bernhard and Kubik's study fits into Memory studies, which have been rapidly developing since the 80's, including both the main theme of the book (politics of memory), as well as the main theoretical assumptions which have previously been mentioned, especially the idea that collective memory is constructed. The authors refer to such father founders of Memory Studies as Assmann, Halbwachs, Nora or Olick (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014a). Moreover, finally, even if it seems that it was not a goal of the authors of *Twenty years after communism*, they somehow manage to contribute to one of the most important debates in Transitional Justice, concerning what way of dealing with a difficult past is most effective and what are the consequences of particular choices. Thanks to the interdisciplinary character of the study, it is hard not to agree with the authors that their work "provides […] a novel theoretical framework for understanding the importance of memory for politics on a general level, as well as a series of case studies that address the aftermath of one of the most important historical events of the late twentieth century, the end of European communist systems" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014a, p. 4). Their contribution seems to be doubly beneficial in that it shows the significance of studying memory in politics, including comparative politics, as well as providing great methodology taken from political studies and introduced into the still quite new and chaotic field of Memory Studies.

Among the numerous advantages of Bernhard and Kubik's concept, one of the biggest is definitely its universality and applicability, both in time, space, and themes, or in other words, this theory may travel. Although the typology of mnemonic actors and regimes was applied in this case to the anniversary of the end of communism in Europe, there seems to be no reason not to use it in different historical, cultural, and political contexts as well. The fall of communism in so many states at a similar time was a unique and rare event, however, by changing some of the variables (especially structural and cultural constraints), this theory can be used in many other circumstances. Moreover, many Memory Studies scholars use such concepts as memory strategies and memory actors because Bernhard and Kubik's theoretical frame is one of the first truly consistent and clear concepts.

The main assumptions of the study also seem to have two important defects; firstly, there seems to be a problem with the concept of the fracture memory regimes. The assumption was that the emergence of the warrior actor is a definiendum of the fractured memory regime (definiens). According to the authors, this hypothesis would be negated if […] polities where celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism took the form of culture wars but without clearly identifiable mnemonic warriors, this would have undermined our definition of memory regimes based on specific combinations of mnemonic actors (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014c, p.

273). In further comment, they added that they "found the absence of a warrior to be a necessary condition for a unified or a not-fractionalized (unified and pillarized combined) memory regime" (p. 294) and concluded that "the existence of powerful cleavages (ethnic or religious) is important in the fracturing of the memory regimes around the commemoration of the end of communism" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014c, p. 280). The question is whether this concept of fractured memory regime and these findings are not tautological? Can conflict even emerge without identifiable mnemonic warriors and if yes, how would it be possible? Bernhard and Kubik's empirical findings in this matter seem to be ectypal about their theory, and their hypothesis is hardly verifiable. It might be the case that the existence of ideological cleavages and the emergence of warrior actors are interdependent and might be indicators of the same variable. Another disadvantage of the theoretical assumptions in the book concerns the real variables selected by the authors. There are many reasons to think that some politics of transitional justice, like decommunization or lustration, should have a significant impact on memory regimes in 2009 or 2011. For example, the studies by Susanne Y. P. Choi and Roman David (2012), demonstrated that different models of lustration applied in Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary influenced social trust towards politics and politicians. The strictest Czech model of lustration was at the same time the most beneficial (regarding trust) for its society. It seems, therefore, to be reasonable to think that states like the Czech Republic and Germany, which decisively confronted the past, have no fractured regimes and these two variables are correlated. Transitional Justice as a variable could change and deepen the results of Bernhard and Kubik's study.

Case Selection

For their studies, Bernhard and Kubik decided to include seventeen post-communist states, being: Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and the Czech Republic, however, the Baltic states and the former Yugoslavian states were analysed together. Apart from the communist heritage, the decision was made based on the existence of a minimal level of democracy because the authors assumed that the different level of autonomy of actors and freedom of expression in authoritarian regimes would be an important interfering variable (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014a). Thanks to such a wide selection, the authors were able to use a medium N research strategy, apply QCA method mixing quantitative and qualitative analysis and draw quite strong conclusions. Taking into account that Bernhard and Kubik (2014c) were studying quite rare and unique phenomenon; commemorations of the fall of

communism, and one of their goal was to "detect patterns of conditions that drive the choice of strategies by actors in the construction of the historical visions that they employed in their struggles for power", (p. 262) there seems to be no better and wider case selection. The decision to exclude non-democratic states seems pretty reasonable as well; the increasing popularity of memory studies in the 80's is usually connected by scholars with the process of democratisation in Latin America and Europe and there are many reasons to think that democratic societies remember in a quite different way than totalitarian or authoritarian societies (Brendese, 2014). Nevertheless, the authors' decision to analyse all three Baltic states as one leaves some doubts and questions. While in the case of the former Yugoslavian countries, there seems to be a good reason in the form of common statehood and an extremally important interfering variable (the Yugoslav Wars), it is unclear why Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were analysed together. Neither the contesting narrative identified by Daina S. Eglitis and Laura Ardava concerning ethnic cleavage (Russian minority), mostly in Latvia and Estonia, nor the analysis of the commemoration of the barricades (which was not contested) (Eglitis & Ardava, 2014) suggest that Lithuania should be coded in the same way as the rest of Baltic states. It seems to be reasonable to think that if Lithuania had been treated as a separate case, the results might be different. One may also have some doubts about including Ukraine in the studies as a semi-democratic state. The results show that Ukraine "has its unique configuration of conditions which led to the emergence of a fractured memory regime" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014c, p. 277), which suggests that such doubts are reasonable.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The study of Bernhard and Kubik has two empirical parts. The first is a case study of seventeen previously mentioned countries conducted by scholars specialising in the history of particular states and with a knowledge of their languages. All cases are organised in a similar way: there is a description of transition in 1989 or 1991 (including a characterisation of the type of state socialism, mode of extraction, and a history of the communist party after transition), a description of commemorations twenty years after if they occurred (including the existence or not and type of polarizing cleavages, the existence or not and type of memory layering, and the type of mnemonic actors during the time of commemorations) and based on them and an interpretation of events and actors in Bernhard and Kubik's theoretical frame. If present, the authors also try to feature particular narratives which memory actors produced and decide what kind of memory regimes appeared during the commemorations twenty years after. Based on these case studies, Bernhard and Kubik, in the second part, integrated

all data and coded all cases using Boolean algebra and in the last chapter of their book, they present the output of csQCA analysis which allows them to detect some general patterns of conditions which produce particular memory regimes.

Using the same theoretical model, including the same terminology by authors of all case studies, is one of the biggest advantages of this study, making it very consistent and methodologically correct. It also helps to compare all the discussed states and easily see the differences and similarities. Thanks to the qualitative nature of the data, the reader may explore the complexity of each particular case. The quality of the data also benefits from the deeper inside perspective of scholars with their specific background. However, it seems that Bernhard and Kubik, when preparing the methodological frame, forgot about one fundamental issue which significantly decreased the final effect; a clear and consistent methodology of collecting data for their case studies. There is no comment whatsoever anywhere in the book as to how exactly the data for these case studies was collected or how the categorical key worked. The consequences of this might be seen in the referencing by each contributing author; some of them, like Grigore Pop-Eleches (2014) widely used (or at least they communicate to that effect) texts from mass media (he referred to Mediafax.ro, Ziare. com, Revista). Others, like Anna Seleny (2014) mentioned media only once (Magyar Nemzet). Bernhard and Kubik (2014d) included media comments but only focused on the media from one ideological side (mostly Gazeta Wyborcza). There is a similar lack of consistency in analysing different actors and events; some researchers included all potential political memory actors, like Pop-Eleches (2014) (FSN, PNL, PNT, CDR, PNȚCD, PSD, PRM) while others concentrated on only a few of the most important, completely ignoring others. Some were more focused on only political actors, while others included media, whole societies (national surveys), academia, student groups and others. A glaring example of this inconsistency is the focusing by Pop-Eleches (2014) on debates during presidential elections instead of commemorations. It could cause him to analyse an indicator of a different variable and draw the wrong conclusions regarding the fractured memory regime in Romania. Because of this lack of logical discourse, analysis tools or other methods used to study all cases, the quality of the collected data seems not to be as good as it could be.

Main Findings and Conclusions

Based on the QCA analysis, Bernhard and Kubik were able to trace two patterns of factors which caused the emergence of fractured memory regimes in post-communist countries. The first set consists of four elements: reformed state socialism, negotiated mode of extrication, the presence of a strong post-communist party, and the existence

of political cleavage. There were three countries characterised by this model: Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia. The second set consists of three elements: ideological or ethnic polarisation, hard-line state socialism, and regime collapse mode of extraction. There were five such countries: the Baltic states, Romania, and Slovakia. The necessary conditions for all fractured memory regimes were the existence of a memory warrior as well as some polarising cleavage. According to Bernhard and Kubik, a vital role in the first set may be played by the mode of extraction which produced relatively strong ex-communist social democracies and ex-opposition parties which were using "corrupted revolution" narratives to delegitimise ex-communist opponents. Meanwhile, in the case of the second set, the authors emphasised the role of ethnic cleavages in interpreting the past by members of the Baltic states, while in Romania and Slovakia there seems to be no clear-cut and common explanation of ideological polarisation (Bernhard & Kubik 2014c).

To sum up, Bernhard and Kubik's study is a very novel and innovative work with the great comparative methodology. Its most substantial advantages are its advantageous and universal theoretical model which may travel widely, fantastic case selections covering many states, and last but not least, potentially unique methodology mixing both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, there are some problems, mostly with a lack of transparent discourse analysis methodology in case studies which, unfortunately, could affect the quality of collected data and final results.

References:

Ágh, A. (2016). "Cultural War and Reinventing the Past in Poland and Hungary: The Politics of Historical Memory in East–Central Europe". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 45, pp. 32–44. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2016003.

Bernhard, M., & Kubik, J. (2014a). "Introduction". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 1–6). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bernhard, M., & Kubik, J. (2014b). "A Theory of the Politics of Memory". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 7–34). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bernhard, M., & Kubik, J. (2014c). "The Politics and Culture of Memory Regimes". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 261–295). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bernhard, M., & Kubik, J. (2014d). "Roundtable Discord: the Contested Legacy of 1989 in Poland". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 60–84). New York: Oxford University Press.

Brendese, P. J. (2014). *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*. New York: University of Rochester Press.

Choi, S., & David, R. (2012). "Lustration Systems and Trust: Evidence from Survey Experiments

in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland". *The American Journal of Sociology*, 117(4), 1172–1201.

Eglitis, D.S., & Ardava, L. (2014). "Remembering the Revolution: Contested Pasts in the Baltic Countries". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 123–145). New York: Oxford University Press.

Gliszczyńska-Grabias, A., & Baranowska, G. (2016). "The European Court of Human Rights on Nazi and Soviet Past in Central and Eastern Europe". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 45, pp. 117–129. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2016009.

Kozyrska, A. (2016). "Decommunisation of the Public Space in Post–Euromaidan Ukraine". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 45, pp. 130–144. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2016010.

Marszałek-Kawa, J., & Wawrzyński, P. (2016). "Remembrance, Identity Politics and Political Transitions: a Comparative Study". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 4, pp. 11–21. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2016001.

Pop-Eleches, G. (2014). "Romania Twenty Years after 1989: The Bizarre Echoes of a Contested Revolution". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 85–103). New York: Oxford University Press.

Rekść, M. (2016). "Post–Yugoslav Collective Memory: Between National and Transnational Myths". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 45, pp. 73–84. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/10.15804/ppsy2016006.

Sebina, O. (2016). "Securitization of Past: Analysis of the Katyń Issue in the Context of EU Integration". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 45, pp. 45–59. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/10.15804/ppsy2016004.

Seleny, A. (2014). "Revolutionary Road: 1956 and the Fracturing of Hungarian Historical Memory". In M. Bernhard & J. Kubik (Eds.), *Twenty Years After Communism* (pp. 37–58). New York: Oxford University Press.

Wawrzyński, P. (2017). "The Government's Remembrance Policy: Five Theoretical Hypotheses". *Polish Political Science Yearbook, 46*(1), pp. 294–312. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2017119.

Wawrzyński, P., & Stańco-Wawrzyńska, A. (2016). "South African Post–Apartheid Transitional Remembrance Policy (1994–1999)". *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, 45, pp. 145–154. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15804/10.15804/ppsy2016011

Author

Mr Andrzej Paweł Śledź
Jagiellonian University, Institute of Sociology. Contact details: ul. Grodzka 52, 31–044 Kraków, Poland; e-mail: andrzej.sledz.16@ucl.ac.uk.