

The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Legacies

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The revolutions of 1989 were, no matter how one judges their nature, a true world-historical event, in the Hegelian sense: they established a historical cleavage (only to some extent conventional) between the world before and after 89. During that year, what appeared to be an immutable, ostensibly indestructible system collapsed with breath-taking alacrity. And this happened not because of external blows (although external pressure did matter), as in the case of Nazi Germany, but as a consequence of the development of insuperable inner tensions. The Leninist systems were terminally sick, and the disease affected first and foremost their capacity for self-regeneration. After decades of toying with the ideas of intrasystemic reforms (“institutional amphibiousness”, as it were, to use X. L. Ding’s concept, as developed by Archie Brown in his writings on Gorbachev and Gorbachevism), it had become clear that communism did not have the resources for readjustment and that the solution lay not within but outside, and even against, the existing order.¹

The importance of these revolutions cannot therefore be overestimated: they represent the triumph of civic dignity and political morality over ideological monism, bureaucratic cynicism and police dictatorship.² Rooted in an individualistic concept of freedom, programmatically skeptical of all ideological blueprints for social engineering, these revolutions were, at least in their first stage, liberal and non-utopian.³ The fact that

¹ See Archie Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 157-189. In this paper I elaborate upon and revisit the main ideas I put them forward in my introduction to Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *The Revolutions of 1989* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) as well as in my book *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: Free Press, 1992; revised and expanded paperback, with new afterword, Free Press, 1993).

² See Václav Havel’s reflections on post-1989 politics in his *Summer Meditations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) and *To the Castle and Back* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

³ For the exhaustion of ideological-style secular religions, see Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1991) and S. N. Eisenstadt, “The Breakdown of Communist Regimes,” in Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Revolutions of 1989*, pp. 89-107

the aftermath of these revolutions has been plagued by ethnic rivalries, unsavory political bickering, rampant political and economic corruption, and the rise of illiberal parties and movements, including strong authoritarian, collectivistic trends, does not diminish their generous message and colossal impact. And, it should be noted, it was precisely in the countries where the revolutions did not occur (Yugoslavia) or were derailed (Romania) that the exit from state socialism was particularly convoluted, tottering and in the long run problematic.

Remembering the real message of these revolutions, revisiting their main interpretations and a number of key pronouncements made by the revolutionaries themselves, is therefore a politically, morally, and intellectually useful exercise.⁴ We should not forget that what is now generally taken for granted, the end of Sovietism, was only a possibility, and not even a very likely one, at the beginning of 1989. True, some dissident thinkers (Andrei Amalrik, Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, János Kis, Václav Havel, Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik, Ivan Svitak) thought that the system was slowly decaying and that it had no future, but even they were not considering the collapse an immediate possibility.⁵ The whole philosophy of dissent—Michnik’s “new evolutionism”—was predicated on the strategy of long “penetration” of the existing system, the gradual recovery and restoration of the public sphere (the independent life of society) as an alternative to the all-embracing presence of the ideological party-state, and the practicing of anti-politics as a non-Machiavellian experience of authenticity, transparency, civility, and good-faith.⁶ Think of the subtitle of the extraordinarily influential collection of samizdat essays edited in the mid-1980s by Václav Havel: “Citizens against the State.”⁷

⁴ See Krishan Kumar, *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁵ See Agnes Heller, “Toward Post-Totalitarianism,” and Ivan Svitak, “A Future Without Communism,” in Vladimir Tismaneanu and Judith Shapiro, eds, *Debates on the Future of Communism* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 50-55 and pp. 70-82.

⁶ See George Konrad, *Antipolitics* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984); Miklos Haraszti, “The Independent Peace Movement and the Danube Movement in Hungary” in Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *In Search of Civil Society: Independent Peace Movements in the Soviet Bloc* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp.71-87.

⁷ See Václav Havel, et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990).

The initial general temptation was to acclaim the role of dissidents in the breakdown of Soviet-style regimes and the rise of civic initiatives from below.⁸ Euphoric accounts of the revolutionary wave, often compared to the 1848 “Spring of Nations”, abounded, and Timothy Garton Ash offered some of the most eloquent articles along this line in his gripping contributions to the *New York Review of Books*, later collected in the volume *The Magic Lantern*.⁹ The dominant trend was to regard these revolutions as part of the universal democratic wave; indeed a confirmation of the ultimate triumph of liberal democratic values over collectivist-Jacobin attempts to control human minds. This vision inspired the reflections on the future of liberal revolution by political philosopher Bruce Ackerman for whom the dramatic changes in East and Central Europe were part of a global revival of liberalism. In other words, their success or failure would condition the future of liberalism in the West as well, because we live in a world of political, economic, and cultural-symbolic interconnectedness and interdependence.¹⁰

Taken away by the exhilarating effects of the revolutionary turmoil, most observers preferred to gloss over the heterogeneous nature of the anticommunist movements: in fact, not all those who rejected Leninism did it because they were dreaming of an open society and liberal values. It was only after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the velvet divorce that led to the breakup of Czechoslovakia into two countries (the Czech Republic and Slovakia) that scholars and policy-makers realized that the liberal promise of these revolutions should not be taken for granted and that the aftermath of communism is not necessarily liberal democracy.

Whether the term “revolutions” is the most appropriate to describe these changes is, of course, an open question. What is beyond dispute is the world-historical impact of the transformations inaugurated by the events of 1989 and the inauguration of a new vision of the political. In the profoundly insightful words of Timothy Garton Ash: “The year 1989 left realities. Yet there was something new; there was a big new idea, and that

⁸ See William Echikson, *Lighting the Night* (New York: William Morrow, 1990); Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: Free Press, 1993), paperback edition with a new afterword; Andrew Nagorski, *The Birth of Freedom: Shaping lives and Societies in the New Eastern Europe* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1993); Ivo Banac, ed. *Eastern Europe in Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁹ See Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolutions of ‘89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

¹⁰ See Bruce Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

was the revolution itself—the idea of the non-revolutionary revolution, the evolutionary revolution. The motto of 1989 could come from Lenin’s great critic Eduard Bernstein: ‘The goal is nothing, the movement is everything’. ... So this was a revolution that was not about the *what* but about the *how*. That particular motto of peaceful, sustained, marvelously inventive, massive civil disobedience channeled into an oppositional elite that was itself prepared to negotiate and to compromise with the existing powers, the powers that were (in short, the roundtable)—that was the historical novelty of 1989. Where the guillotine is a symbol of 1789, the roundtable is a symbol of 1989.”¹¹

Some authors (Tony Judt among them) argue that liberal dissidents never had a strong impact on their societies and that the region’s procommunist illiberal traditions, enhanced by the lingering effects of Leninism are a major obstacle for liberal democracy to thrive in the region. In this perspective, there is little usable past for exponents of pluralism to hearken back to. Instead, there is a strong and unprocessed memory of real or perceived victimization, a lot of self-idealization and very little readiness for empathy and commiseration. At the opposite end of the interpretative spectrum stands Timothy Garton Ash. As one of the main chroniclers of the breakdown of Leninist regimes in Central Europe and of the role of critical intellectuals in the emergence of civil societies, Garton Ash insists on the revolutions of 1989 as “moral resurrections” and highlights the crucial status of public intellectuals like Havel or Michnik as paragons of a new political style.¹²

This approach runs counter to the widespread temptation to discard the significance of dissent and treat former anti-communist dissidents as an extinct political force. The fact that many of the personalities mentioned by Garton Ash have lost their prominent positions in post-communist governments is not necessarily an indication of their defeat. After all, seizing power was not the ultimate dissident dream: the antipolitical activist of the 1970s and 1980s were committed to the restoration of truth and morality in the public sphere, the rehabilitation of civic virtues, and the end of the totalitarian method of control, intimidation, and coercion. In this respect, they succeeded.

¹¹ See Timothy Garton Ash, “Conclusions,” in Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* (New York and Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), p. 398.

¹² T. Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern*, pp. 131-156.

True, the new political order is not exactly a liberal heaven, and all sorts of unsavory phenomena have come to the fore: cynicism, corruption, the economic empowerment of the former nomenklaturas, chauvinist and nationalist outburst of intolerance and hatred, new forms of exclusion and ethnic arrogance. But post-1989 East Central Europe is a political and economic laboratory in which the new institutional arrangements will be strongly influenced by the legacies of forty years of Leninism.

Were the events of 1989 genuine revolutions? If the answer is positive, then how do we assess their novelty in contrast to other similar events (the French Revolution of 1789 or the Hungarian one in 1956)? If the answer is negative (as some today like to argue), then it is legitimate to ask ourselves: What were they? Simply mirages, results of some obscure intrigues of the beleaguered bureaucracies that mesmerized the whole mankind but did not fundamentally change the “rules of the game”? These last words, *the rules of the game*, are crucial for interpreting what happened in 1989 and, focusing on them, we can reach a positive assessment of those revolutions and their heritage.

In my view, the upheaval in the East, and primarily in the Central European core countries, represented a series of political revolutions that led to the decisive and irreversible transformation of the existing order. Instead of autocratic, one-party systems, the revolutions created emerging pluralist polities. They allowed the citizens of the former ideologically driven despotisms (closed societies) to recover their main human and civic rights and to engage in the building of open societies.¹³ Instead of centrally planned command economies, all these societies have embarked on creating market economies. In these efforts to meet the triple challenge (creating political pluralism, market economy, and a public sphere, i.e. a civil society) some succeeded better and faster than others.¹⁴ While it is true that we still do not know whether all these societies have become well-functioning liberal democracies, it is nevertheless important to emphasize that in all of them the Leninist systems based on ideological uniformity,

¹³ See Ivo Banac, ed. *Eastern Europe in Revolution* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1992.)

¹⁴ See Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), especially pp. 29-105.

political coercion, dictatorship over human needs and suppression of civic rights have been dismantled.¹⁵

Another factor that should be taken into account is the impact of NATO enlargement and EU expansion on the pace of democratic transitions. As Václav Havel put it: “I felt that the expansion to the East would guarantee the irreversibility of the new conditions in these countries, and of peace in Europe. I could well imagine crowds of populists, demagogues, nationalists, and post-communists who would exploit every delay to argue, with increasing urgency, that the arrogant, consumerist, and selfish West neither recognized us nor wanted us, and therefore we must go our own way.”¹⁶

The road to 1989-1991 was prepared by the less visible, often marginal, but critically significant in the long run, workings of what we call now civil society (Solidarity in Poland, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, unofficial peace, environmental, and human rights groups in the GDR, Democratic Opposition in Hungary). In examining the wreckage of Leninism we should thus avoid any one-dimensional, monistic, approach; there is no single factor that explains the collapse: economics as much as politics, and culture as much as insoluble social tensions converged in making these regimes irretrievably obsolete.

Yet these were not just any autocracies: they derived their sole claim to legitimacy from the Marxist-Leninist “holy writ,” and once this ideological aura ceased to function, the whole edifice started to falter.¹⁷ They were, to use sociologist Daniel Chirot’s apt term, “tyrannies of certitude” and it was precisely the gradual loss of ideological commitment among the ruling elites, what was once a truly Messianic ardor that accelerated the process of inner disintegration of Leninist regimes.¹⁸ In a way, the revolutions of 1989 were an ironical vindication of Lenin’s famous definition of a revolutionary situation: those at the top cannot rule in old ways, and those at the bottom do not want to accept these ways any more. They were more than simple revolts because

¹⁵ See Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, György Markus, *Dictatorship Over Needs* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

¹⁶ See Václav Havel, *To the Castle and Back*, p. 296.

¹⁷ See Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (New York: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Daniel Chirot, op.cit; see also Raymond Taras, ed., *The Road to Disillusion: From Critical marxism to Postcommunism in Eastern Europe* (Armonk/NY; M. E. Sharpe, 1992).

they attacked the very foundations of the existing systems and proposed a complete reorganization of society.

Once ideology ceased to be an inspiring force and influential members of the ruling parties, the offspring and beneficiaries of the nomenklatura system, lost their emotional commitment to the Marxist radical behest, the Leninist castles were doomed to fall apart. Here we see the role of what has been called the Gorbachev effect.¹⁹ It was indeed the international climate generated by the shockwaves of the policies of glasnost and perestroika initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev after his election as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985 that allowed for an incredible amount of open dissent and political mobilization in East and Central Europe. In the early 1990s, Rita Klimova, a former Charter 77 spokesperson and Czechoslovakia's first ambassador to the US after the demise of communism, confirmed to me, during several conversations, that Gorbachev's new thinking was perceived by the Chartists as a necessary condition (though not sufficient, of course) for major change in East Central Europe. While it is true that for the first two years of his leadership (1985-1987) Gorbachev's strategy toward Eastern Europe was one of encouraging intrasystemic moderate changes, without considering the possibility of communist parties losing their privileged positions, after 1988 things started to change considerably. It was Gorbachev's denunciation of the ideological perspective on international politics (de-ideologization) and the abandoning of the "class struggle" perspective that changed the rules of Soviet-East European relations. The Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty was practically abandoned precisely twenty years after its initial formulation, in August 1968, when it was concocted as a justification for the Warsaw Pact crushing the Prague Spring. Initially Gorbachev used his power to repair rather than ruin the system. Much of what happened as a result of his originally modest reforms was spontaneous and unpredictable, and there was an immense gap between the Soviet leader's neo-Leninist illusions and the practical conditions within these societies. By 1988, Gorbachev acknowledged that lest force be used the Leninist system could not be preserved in the countries of the former Soviet

¹⁹ See Karen Dawisha, *Eastern Europe, Gorbachev, and Reform: The Great Challenge* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Pact: unlike all his predecessors he refused to resort to tanks as the ultimate political argument and rejected the Leninist (or Realpolitik) position that might creates right. In so doing, Gorbachev fundamentally changed the rules of the game. Thanks to the “new foreign policy thinking,” advocated by Gorbachev and his close associates Aleksandr Yakovlev and Eduard Shevardnadze, and resented by Politburo hard-liners, the margin of political experimentation in East Central Europe and in the former USSR expanded dramatically.

Let me say that the controversies regarding the treatment of the former party and secret police activists and collaborators were among the most passionate and potentially disruptive in the new democracies. Some argued, together with the first post-communist and anti-communist Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, that one needed to draw a “thick line” with the past and fully engage in a consensual effort for building an open society. Others, for reasons that went from unconditional anti-communism to cynical manipulation of an explosive issue, argued that without one form or another of “purification” the new democracies would be fundamentally perverted.

The truth, in my view, resides somewhere in between: the past cannot and should not be denied, covered with a blanket of shameful oblivion. Confronting the traumatic past, primarily via remembrance and knowledge, results in achieving moral justice.²⁰ Real crimes did take place in those countries and the culprits should be identified and brought to justice. But legal procedures and any other form of legal retribution for past misdeeds should always take place on an individual base; preserving the presumption of innocence is a fundamental right for any human being, including former communist apparatchiks. In this respect, with all its shortcomings, the lustration law in the Czech Republic offered a legal framework that prevented any form of “mob justice”. In Romania, where no such law was passed and access to personal secret police files was systematically denied to citizens (while these files continued to be used and abused by

²⁰ See A. James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

those in power), the political climate continued to be plagued by suspicion, murky intrigues and dark conspiratorial visions.²¹

It is important to notice that, while the structural causes of communism's collapse were similar, the dynamics, rhythm and orientation of these revolutions depended to a large extent on the local conditions. In this respect, one may argue that it was the strength or the weakness of the pre-1989 intraparty reformist trends as well as oppositional traditions that explain the striking distinctions between these events in different countries. The debate on the consequences of 1989 affects our perspective on the role of ideas and public intellectuals in historical changes, the very possibility of a new politics based on trust and morality, and the overall meaning of the anti-totalitarian struggle of critical intellectuals in the East. In my own writings on those events, I maintained—and I cling to this idea—that one of the most profound and enduring meanings of 1989 was the quest for a reinvention of politics along the lines spelled out by the dissidents. If this project fails and East Central Europe reverts to some version of corporatism or quasi-fascist authoritarianism, the consequences of such developments would affect the West as well.

The revolutions of 1989 have fundamentally changed the political, economic, and cultural map of the world. Resulting from the widespread dissatisfaction with Leninist ideological domination, they allowed for a rediscovery of democratic participation and civic activism. After decades of state aggression against the public sphere, these revolutions reinstated the distinction between what belongs to the government and what is the territory of the individual. Emphasizing the importance of political and civic rights, they created a space for the exercise of liberal democratic values. In some countries these values have become the constitutional foundation on which the institutions of an open society can be safely built. In others, the reference to pluralism remains somewhat perfunctory. But even in the less successful cases of democratic transitions (the Balkans), the old order, based on suspicion, fear, and mass hopelessness, is irrevocably defunct. In other words, while the ultimate result of these transitions is not clear, the revolutions have

²¹ For the turbulent experiences with decommunization, see Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghost After Communism* (New York: Random House, 1995); Noel Calhoun, *Dilemmas of Justice in Eastern Europe's Democratic Transitions* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

succeeded in their most important task: disbanding the Leninist regimes and permitting the citizens of these countries to fully engage in the shaping of their own destinies.

As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 revolutions, we have the possibility of contemplating the first two postcommunist decades' illusions, expectations, and balance sheet and of speculating on the years to come. Even after NATO's eastward enlargement and the European Union accession of most East European countries (with the notable exception of the Western Balkans) there is a striking tension between pluralist –democratic and ethnocentric and/or radical parties and groups in these societies.²² The persistence of this dichotomy two decades after 1989 is a telling proof of the ongoing schizophrenic nature of the democratization process. Jack Snyder's by now classical thesis still holds: the political elites' openness to accountability affects the degree of nationalist mobilization and instrumentalization during the transition to democracy. In an attempt to refuse surrendering their authority, these elites hijack political discourse, while simultaneously hampering and taking advantage of citizens' reduced capacity for political participation.²³

We see a fluidity of political commitments, allegiances, and affiliations - the breakdown of a political culture (one that Leszek Kolakowski and Martin Malia correctly identified as Sovietism) and the painful birth and consolidation of a new one. The moral identity of the individuals has been shattered by the dissolution of all previously cherished - or at least accepted - values and "icons." There are immense problems in the continuity of both social and personal memory. Under circumstances of an incomplete pursuit of legal, political, and historical *Aufarbeitung* ("working through") in relation to the totalitarian communist experience, civic consensus and political trust can hardly mature. Despite the ever-widening rescue operation of and working through fragmented memories (both individual and collective), transparency about a guilty and traumatic past by means of a "politics of knowledge" (Claus Offe) has yet to be achieved.

The difficulty of identifying clear divisions between left and right polarization in postcommunist regimes is linked to the ambiguity and even obsolescence of traditional

²² See Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Ernest Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

²³ Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, (New York: Norton, 2000).

taxonomies. In our post-modern and post-conventional age, with its universal disenchantments and political disillusionments, master-narratives such as Marxism or Leninism ceased to be exhilarating ideological projects. Today references to the “left” (in its radical version, at least) are shallow gestures, more born out of nostalgia or a lust for the limelight than expressions of genuine commitment. As Adam Michnik and other former dissidents have often argued, the issue today is not whether one is left or right of center, but whether one is “West of center”. Leszek Kolakowski pointed to a paradoxical attitude toward prophetic stands in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: the intellectuals’ disillusionment with redemptive-apocalyptic teleologies provoked their retreat from political matters, which generated the counter-phenomenon of an ethical pauperization of politics, as there remain “fewer intellectual teachers”.²⁴ The door to prominence is wide-open for baroque ideological constructs and negative political eclecticism. Following, Martin Krygier, I consider that, twenty years after the demise of communism, we experience in the former Soviet bloc a new ideosphere, which is by definition comprehensive, inclusive, and provisional. Moreover, the post-modern political condition makes even organicist, syncretic, and redemptive radicalisms (such as political movements) transient.²⁵

Critical intellectuals seem to have lost much of their moral aura and are often attacked as champions of futility, architects of disaster, and incorrigible daydreamers. Their status is extremely precarious precisely because they symbolize the principle of difference that neo-authoritarian politics tends to suppress. In the context of a widespread disenchantment with political involvement, their moderation remains a crucial factor for social equilibrium. It is essential to avoid mass hysteria, to recognize the need for constitutional consensus, and to foster a culture of predictable procedures. For if these kinds of attacks gather momentum, they could jeopardize the still-precarious pluralist institutions. Ralf Dahrendorf poignantly expressed this imperative of intellectual responsibility: “where intellectuals are silent, societies have no future.” (Dahrendorf, 1997:149) In a deeply fragmented social and public environment, under the constant pressures of globalization, Dahrendorf believes that, despite its diminished appeal, the

²⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

²⁵ Martin Krygier, “Conservative-Liberal-Socialism Revisited”, *The Good Society*, 11 (1): 6-15, 2002.

nexus of ideas and action has in no way lost its revitalizing potential as a force of freedom.²⁶

The weakness of the region's political parties is primarily determined by the *general crisis of values and authority*. There is an absence of "social glue," and the existing formations have failed to foster the consensus needed in order to generate constitutional patriotism. The still unmastered past of the totalitarian experience of the twentieth century in Central and Eastern Europe prevents these countries from establishing the necessary bond between democracy, memory, and militancy. The harmful effects of long-maintained forms of amnesia cannot be overestimated. The lack of serious public discussions and lucid analyses of the past, including an acknowledgement by the highest state authorities of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the communist dictatorships, is bound to fuel discontent, outrage, and frustration and to encourage the rise of demagogues.

²⁶ For an 'update' of Dahrendorf's predictions and evaluation about Europe after the Revolution see his new introduction and postscript in the 2005 second edition of his *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books.