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1989

The year 1989 is associated with the end of the Cold War and a succession of regime changes leading to the democratization of Central and Eastern Europe, which entailed the end of Communist domination in the region and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Because of the scale and impact of these political changes, 1989 is used as a metaphor designating the triumph of liberal democratic ideology in Europe or referring to spectacular events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, more than a single event or series of events, 1989 encompasses a number of socially meaningful evolutions with a broader context and significance.

Most publications tend to present the collapse of Communism in national perspective, country by country, each with their detailed chronology. However, in several respects, post-Communist democratisation is a transnational phenomenon *par excellence*. First, the events of 1989 represent the convergence of specific political opportunities and social mobilizations already under way: regimes' contestation from the inside, their progressive liberalization and the East–West *détente* facilitated by the Helsinki agreement, German *Ostpolitik* and Gorbachev's *perestroika* policy in the USSR. The fall of Communism sealed the victory of dissident movements (such as *Solidarność* in Poland and *Charta 77* in Czechoslovakia) and their leaders (such as Andrei Sakharov, Václav Havel and Adam Michnik), supported by Western networks comprising intellectuals, radio broadcasting, trade unions, and governmental agencies.

Second, the democratic breakthroughs were characterized by a kind of domino effect: the Round Table between moderate Communist and opposition leaders in Poland from February

to April 1989 was followed by semi-democratic elections on 4th June (the day of the Tiananmen Square protest in China), by mass demonstrations during the symbolic funeral of 1956 heroes in Budapest on 16 June, and by the ‘velvet revolution’ in Czechoslovakia in late autumn. The first visit of Chancellor Helmut Kohl to democratic Poland, celebrating the Polish–German reconciliation, was interrupted by the opening of the intra-German border in Berlin on 9 November, which paved the way for the German unification process. Although the metaphor of ‘contagion’ appears simplistic, the dynamics of this democratic ‘third wave’ have puzzled many authors. These events can be understood better when one keeps in mind the connections that existed between these different opposition movements previous to 1989 and, more generally, the emulation and circulation of information during the regime change, that was impossible to prevent in the context of liberalization.

Third, 1989 was a crack in the national map of post-1945 Europe. It was a direct challenge to existing states and their territorial dimension, and led to a redefinition of national polities. Far from signalling ‘the end of history’ and the definitive victory of liberal-democratic values in Europe, 1989 and its aftermath also reopened the Pandora’s Box of nationalist tensions and territorial conflicts, leading, in a few cases, to war.

Finally, 1989 was the starting point for a broad flow of foreign assistance to democratization. This effort was encouraged by international forums (G7, G24) and coordinated by the European Community which launched its PHARE assistance programme (*Pologne-Hongrie assistance à la restructuration des économies*). Various governmental and non-governmental organisations, such as the US National Endowment for Democracy and private foundations such as Soros, Ford, and the German political *Stiftungen*, joined the movement. Transnational party organisations such as the Socialist or Christian-Democratic International sent their representatives to the region to promote their programmes and search for new partners in the fluid party landscape. These and other ‘democracy makers’

contributed to the diffusion of institutional and constitutional schemes, as well as principles of pluralism, the rule of law, a market economy, and human rights. However, it became apparent that the visions these foreign organizations were promoting concerning civil society, the nature of regimes or the required speed of privatization could diverge.

Notwithstanding the scale of the breakdown, 1989 was neither a *Stunde Null* nor a *tabula rasa* for transnational cooperation. Ideas not only about human rights, ecology and feminism, but also about monetarism, neoliberalism and the new conservatism, had already penetrated Central and Eastern Europe, owing to intellectual exchanges, scholarships and exile networks. But in 1989 public debates about these ideas became possible.

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Related essays

Communism; democracy; Ford Foundation; fellowships and grants; neoliberalism; philanthropic foundations; radio