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## **1989 as a mimetic revolution: Russia and the challenge of post-communism**

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### **Abstract**

Various terms have been used to describe the momentous events of 1989, including Jürgen Habermas's 'rectifying revolution,' and my own notion of 1989 as a type of 'anti-revolution': repudiating not only what had come before, but also denying the political logic of communist power, as well as the emancipatory potential of revolutionary socialism in its entirety. In the event, while the negative agenda of 1989 has been fulfilled, it failed in the end to transcend the political logic of the systems that collapsed at that time. This paper explores the unfulfilled potential of 1989. Finally, 1989 became more of a counter- rather than an anti-revolution, replicating in an inverted form the practices of the mature state socialist regimes. The paucity of institutional and intellectual innovation arising from 1989 is striking. The dominant motif was 'returnism,' the attempt to join an established enterprise rather than transforming it. Thus, 1989 can be seen as mimetic revolution, in the sense that it emulated systems that were not organically developed in the societies in which they were implanted. For Eastern Europe 'returning' to Europe appeared natural, but for Russia the civilizational challenge of post-communism was of an entirely different order. There could be no return, and instead of a linear transition outlined by the classic transitological literature, Russia's post-communism demonstrated that the history of others could not be mechanically transplanted from one society to another.

### **Keywords**

1989 revolutions, anti-revolution, Atlantic power system, counter-revolution, mimesis, returnism, Russia

### **Résumé**

Différents termes ont été utilisés pour décrire les événements fondamentaux qui se sont déroulés en 1989, dont ceux de « révolution réctificatrice » de Jürgen Habermas, et mon propre concept définissant 1989 comme un type « d'anti-révolution » : rejetant non seulement ce qui c'était passé auparavant, 1989 a également constitué une négation de la logique politique du pouvoir communiste et du potentiel émancipateur du socialisme révolutionnaire dans son entièreté. En l'espèce, si l'agenda négatif de 1989 a bien été réalisé, il a échoué, à la fin, à transcender la logique politique des systèmes qui se sont alors effondrés. Cet article explore les potentialités inassouvies de 1989. Finalement, 1989 est devenu plus une contre-révolution qu'une anti-révolution, reproduisant sous une forme inversée les pratiques des régimes ayant mis en place un socialisme d'État parvenu à un certain stade de maturité. Le manque d'innovation institutionnelle et intellectuelle survenue en 1989 est frappant. Le motif dominant était celui du « retournisme », une tentative de se joindre à une entreprise déjà établie plutôt que celle de transformer cette dernière. De cette façon, 1989 peut être vu comme une révolution mimétique, dans le sens où il a imité des systèmes qui ne s'étaient pas développés de façon organique au sein des sociétés dans lesquelles ces derniers s'implantaient. Pour l'Europe de l'Est, « revenir » à l'Europe est apparu comme naturel mais pour la Russie, ce défi civilisationnel que constituait le post-communisme était d'un tout autre ordre. Il n'y avait pas de retour possible, et au lieu d'une transition linéaire mise en évidence par les recherches de la transitologie classique, la Russie post-communiste a

démontré que l'histoire des autres ne pouvait pas être mécaniquement transplantée d'une société à une autre.

### **Mots-clés**

anti-révolution, contre-révolution, mimésis, retournisme, révolutions de 1989, Russie, système de pouvoir atlantique

European history moves in roughly 30-year cycles, and 1989 joins the pantheon as one of those turning points that shape the continent. Like all other great inflexion points, from 1848 to 1968, as well as those marked by wars and peace congresses, the significance of the events is debated long after. The absence of a settled meaning and the capacity for endless reinterpretation may well be the characteristic that makes these events so important. This certainly applies to 1989, the moment when the bipolar security order that took shape in the late 1940s gave way to what was perceived to be a moment of European unification. It was also the moment when the long-term challenge of revolutionary socialism as an alternative modernity gave way to what was perceived at the time to be the victory of capitalist democracy, liberalism and the onset of the 'end of history.' Collectivist models of social emancipation gave way to the precedence of 'negative freedom' and the primacy of individual human rights. Sustained alternatives to capitalist democracy and the international order in which it was embedded were delegitimated. However, the collapse of the Soviet challenge and the victory of the Atlantic power system radicalized what came to be known as the 'liberal international order,' which effectively claimed to be synonymous with order itself. This resulted in a two-fold counter swing of the pendulum: rethinking forms of national and social solidarity, and a shift towards more pluralist (multipolar) forms of international politics.

### **1989 against 1991**

Emphasis on the year 1989 already signals a temporal disjunction. As far as Russia is concerned, 1989 is only part of the story. This is the part in which two major events came together. The first is the renunciation within Russia itself of the Leninist version of the revolutionary socialist challenge. This represented a powerful movement for self-transcendence. The last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power in 1985 and at first led a movement, which he dubbed *perestroika* (restructuring), to reform the Soviet model of socialism. His reform communism drew on the ideas of the Prague Spring of 1968, but soon became a movement for its transformation. By 1989 the instruments of Communist rule had been dismantled, and 'reform communism' gave way to post-communism (Outhwaite & Ray, 2004). The second process was putting an end to the Cold War. Through a long period of gestation in the various institutes of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the New Political Thinking (NPT) rethought the structure of international relations, and came to the conclusion (perhaps prematurely) that the capitalist world is not necessarily militaristic and imperialistic (Gorbachev, 1987). This allowed Moscow to come to the conclusion that the Cold War was no longer worth fighting, and that the Soviet bloc was no longer worth defending. It was this that allowed the Berlin Wall to be dismantled and for '1989' to take place (for an inside view, see Krenz, 2009). The narrative at the time was that this was a common victory of common sense, and only later was a triumphalist discourse of Western victory super-imposed on the earlier version; an imposition, understandably, never accepted by Moscow.

For China, 1989 has a very different meaning. The occupation of Tiananmen Square by students and others demanding the continuation of the perestroika-type reforms pursued by Hu Yaobang (who died on 15 April 1989) was crushed on 4 June. Instead of the reform communism pursued by Gorbachev, China continued on the path of a 'communism of reform,' in which the Communist Party of China (CPC) put itself at the head of the country's transformation while retaining the political superstructure of Party rule and all that this entailed. In an extraordinary repudiation of 1989, the Chinese model of reform revalidated the leading role of a communist party, although in the end the 'communism of reform' generates contradictions of its own and may ultimately go the same way as reform communism (cf. McAdams, 2017). Hence the other part of the story is '1991.' Soviet reform communism followed a very different trajectory, which by 1989 allowed the dissolution of the

communist system and the end of the Cold War, but which also by 1991 precipitated the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

As for Russia, 1991 has a number of overlapping meanings. First, it denotes Russia's emergence as an independent state in borders that roughly correspond to those of European Russia in the sixteenth century, with still unresolved issues of identity and purpose. Second, Russia in 1991 also had its democratic revolution. The popular mobilization against the attempted coup in August brought a precipitous end to the remnants of Communist power and validated the democratic aspirations of the country. In March 1989 the Soviet Union was the first of the Soviet bloc countries to stage a relatively free election (White, 1991). This was intended to achieve an evolutionary transition to a democratic post-communism, unlike the East European elections held soon after which were designed to seal the rupture with the past (Travin, 2019: 7). The democratic aspirations of August 1991 remain one of the foundation stones of post-communist modernity, although they were poorly articulated and ultimately fused into the radical marketizing agenda of the neoliberal reformers (Reddaway & Glinski, 2001). Nevertheless, these aspirations largely shaped the December 1993 constitution, which remains the bedrock of the institutional development of the country. Third, it meant the end of empire for Russia itself. The rise of popular nationalism now took the form of a radical state and nation building exercise, accompanied by withdrawal from the former 'colonies' in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Russia is still marked by a distinctive type of postcolonial syndrome, which feeds alternatives to constitutional democracy as the source of legitimation, notably various forms of 'Russian exceptionalism' (for example, Orthodox nationalism). Fourth, a new way had to be found of interacting with the other 14 newly-independent states. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was established in December 1991, but while for countries such as Ukraine it provided a mechanism for 'civilised divorce,' for many in Russia it was (and remains) the kernel of some sort of post-Soviet international community. Fifth, 1991 entails a fundamental geopolitical shift. The Cold War ended in 1989, but the democratic Russia that emerged in 1991 certainly did not consider itself a defeated power. Although greatly weakened economically and diminished in military power, Russia in status terms believed that it had scored a mighty victory in putting an end to the pointless confrontation with the West and believed that it could now become the co-creator of a transformed post-Cold War security order in Europe and a more cooperative international politics. Instead, narratives of failure and defeat were imposed onto 1991. After a quarter of a century of cold peace, the tensions thereby generated in 2014 provoked the onset of what some call a Second Cold War.

Although 1989 and 1991 represent different appreciations of the meaning of the end of communism, they are closely linked, and the failures of the one provoked the contradictions and resentments of the other. Russia in 1991 sought to transform the historical West through Russia's addition to make it a 'greater West.' The political West as it had taken shape after 1945 in the form of the Atlantic power system saw no reason for transformation, fearing normative dilution, institutional dysfunction and weakened hegemony, and instead advanced an increasingly ambitious program of expansion (Sakwa, 2017). The logic of transformation ran into the logic of expansion. In the end 1989 was not ultimately transformative and only reproduced in new forms the expansive logic of the politics that it sought to overcome. Paradoxically, it was 1991 that provided the real opportunity for transformation, but in the end it was defeated by the agenda of 1989. And the agenda of 1989 was not only expansive in geopolitical terms, ideologically it represented the anti-collectivist and anti-utopian social program that had developed in the West since the 1970s, now radicalized by its perceived victory in 1989. This is not to deny the raised expectations of the participants of the anti-revolutions, who anticipated not only a social transformation but also a personal liberation (Vogt, 2004).

### **The expansive dynamic of 1989**

Jürgen Habermas and others have stressed the imitative character of the 1989 revolutions, lodged in his characterization of modernity (for an assessment, see Arato, 1993). The absence of new ideas and institutions spawned by 1989 is remarkable. This sterility can be explained by the predominance of mimetic processes – the attempt to copy existing forms and to reproduce patterns of life devised elsewhere. That sterility is challenged by those who insist that a grand theory of 1989 can be devised (for an overview, see Mark, 2010). This retheorization focuses on a critique of 1989 as a failed moment of transformation (see Lawson, Armbruster & Cox, 2010; for a contrary view, see

Tismaneanu & Iacob, 2012). Stephen Kotkin famously argued that the communist collapse in East Europe, with the partial exception of Poland, represented little more than the implosion of a moribund and exhausted communist establishment (dubbed by him ‘uncivil society’), rather than the insurgency of a dynamic civil society (Kotkin & Gross, 2009). Kotkin thus deflates the rather grand but ultimately hollow theorizing of the time about civil society as the source of the dynamic renewal of democracy and society (cf. Kumar, 1992a; for a critique, see Killingsworth, 2012).

This is why Ken Jowitt argued that the ‘Leninist extinction’ heralded an age of global turbulence, with unpredictable consequences (Jowitt, 1992). 1989 opened the door to geopolitical changes as profound as 1945, but it operated within the same logic, and thus in perverse ways perpetuated the logic of Yalta and Potsdam, although now without the balancing mechanisms in them that more or less kept the peace in Europe for 30 years. In these terms, 1989 was not such a ‘critical juncture,’ but the continuation of great power ‘overlay’ over Europe, although in new forms. The Atlantic power system and its instruments, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and what became the European Union (EU), expanded into what it perceived to be a vacuum, but failed to take into the power consequences of its actions when it encountered an alternative culture in Eurasia, with its own power complex and manifestations of modernity.

Piotr Sztompka (1996) describes 1989 as ‘a cultural and civilisational break,’ but it is not clear what was broken – was it Russia or the past, or both? He talks in terms of the legacy of ‘civilizational incompetence’ because of the impact of ‘bloc culture,’ but argued that it could be overcome by rejuvenating indigenous cultures but above all by adopting ‘globalised Western culture.’ This is the essence of the ideology of ‘returnism.’ The revisionist critique of 1989 would note the potential paths not taken – the idea of transformative politics mentioned earlier. The revisionist critique of 1989 is close to the classic sense of the word, arguing that 1989 led to de-differentiation and homogenization.

The character and significance of 1989 remains contested. First, 1989 is central to the ideological and geopolitical character of the modern world. It has been called unfinished, unformed, rectifying or plain mistaken, but underlying all these is the sense that this was a revolution. However, its revolutionary character is of a specific sort. Joseph de Maistre (1994) argued that a counter-revolution (‘contrary revolution’) operates within the same logical framework as a revolution, whereas an anti-revolution (‘the contrary of revolution’) in his view represented a repudiation of the earlier logic of power. 1989 had the potential to become an anti-revolution, but this would have entailed embracing a logic in which power relations and geopolitics would have been transformed. An anti-revolution would mean the repudiation not just of revolutionary socialist ideology, but the logic of political action on which it was based. This would entail a view of these revolutions as having a *pouvoir constituant*, a foundational dynamic that could have provided the political basis for a new conception of social order. Instead, these ‘postmodern revolutions’ presented themselves as revolutions ‘against the modern tradition of revolution’ (Arato, 1993: 624), and thereby became imitative rather than foundational.

The dominant paradigm in the end became the expansion of the system against which the communist revolutions had originally been directed. This turned 1989 into a classic counter-revolution. It operated according to the same logic as the thing that it opposed, but only with the opposite sign. This is vividly in evidence in the various museums of Soviet occupation and repression in Vilnius, Prague and elsewhere. These museums are as ideological as their Soviet predecessors, with little attempt to distinguish history from propaganda. The new emphasis on individual freedom and human rights was pursued with the same exclusive passion as earlier collectivist solutions had been imposed. The contradictions inherent in this counter-revolutionary militancy helped transform the regimes in Hungary and Poland into authoritarian simulacra of their socialist predecessors. There was no anti-revolutionary transformation but only counter-revolutionary returnist enlargement. This negative agenda was underpinned by the ideology of the ‘return to normality.’ In the late perestroika period in the Soviet Union even ideologically competing groups, ranging from neo-Marxist proponents of ‘socialism with a human face,’ to liberals and all the way through to Russian nationalists, joined the anti-revolutionary ‘conservative,’ a turn based not on empirical analysis of what was to be conserved and what was to be changed but on a utopian ‘natural-historical’ essentialism. Drawing on Alexandr Solzhenitsyn’s thinking, the various tendencies converged on the

idea that, purged of ideology, violence and political projects, society would bend back into a more 'normal' congruence with human nature (Atnashev, 2017).

Second, the shadow of 1968 hangs over 1989, but in the end 1989 was as much directed against the ideology of 1968 as much as it was against the geopolitical settlement of 1945. For our purposes 1968 is associated with the idea of reform communism – the view that some more humane and dynamic socialism could be retrieved from the repressive Soviet-style state socialism. These ideas had already been advanced and partially implemented in Yugoslavia, but they were formulated most consistently in Czechoslovakia and gave rise to the Prague Spring's attempts to formulate 'socialism with a human face.' This was crushed in the Soviet-led invasion of 21 August 1968. This was the greatest self-invasion in history since it not only crushed the specific experiment in democratic socialism in Czechoslovakia, but also doomed the Soviet Union to twenty years of stagnation. Independent initiatives in the workplace and political sphere were stifled, and sources of innovation suppressed. When 20 years later Gorbachev returned to the reform communism of 1968, it was too late. By the end Gorbachev was talking of a 'humane, democratic socialism,' as the draft Party Program put it in 1990. By then the populations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and indeed in Russia, were no longer interested in democratic socialism; they wanted no socialism at all. The goal by then was not to reform socialism but to put an end to its perceived misery.

This in the end meant dismantling not only Soviet socialism, but also much of social democracy. In a philosophical sense, 1989 emerged out of the failure of 1968 to create a dynamic reformed socialism. This opened the door to the imposition of linear models of transition, the mechanical transposition of socio-economic models to the new territories, largely operating within the framework of classic and largely discredited models of modernization. Transitology implied 'a space-time in which the liberal democratic present of the so-called West was posited as the future for the postsocialist states of the East.' In the end, postsocialism came to mean the end of social democracy but in fact heralded the rise of neoliberal precarity (Graan, 2014). What had been the socialist world was 'desocialised' (Suny, 2017). As a result, the region became 'the world's last underachiever' (Bajrektarevic, 2015).

This brings us to the third and most mimetic aspect: enlargement rather than transformation. Many ideas are associated with 1989 – civil society, the end of history, the return to Europe, even anti-politics – but they all fall within the compass of the enlargement of an already existing enterprise – Western capitalist modernity. 1989 was unable to devise a modernity of its own, or to shape its own history. However, by repudiating the past, East European countries sought to escape the bonds of their own history. In political and economic terms, this took the form of the enlargement of the EU, and in security terms the expansion of NATO. Together, this meant the enlargement of the Atlantic power system, which had been devised in specific historical circumstances of an earlier era, yet gained a new lease of life in very changed conditions. This generated tensions and contradictions that in the end provoked a return to conditions of Cold War, which had given birth to the Atlantic power system in the first place. The circle was complete, with 1989 representing no more than a pivot point as the arc bent back on itself. The logic and purpose of the Atlantic power system was not transformed. Instead it gained an expansive dynamic that transformed anti-revolutions into counter-revolutions, and thus in the end vitiated the logic of emancipation from revolution itself.

The fourth issue builds on the previous points. The dissolution of the socialist alternative followed soon after by the disintegration of the Soviet Union radicalized the historical West. The contradictions of the historical West only intensified (Kimmage, 2014). In the long perspective, we can now see that 1989 represented little more than a milestone in the consolidation of the hegemony of neoliberalism – or put more simply, the onset of a period of militant capitalism. Even the EU talked less of the 'social market model,' one of the major themes of the 1980s, and focused on regulating and stimulating a competitive market economy. Neoliberalism believes that markets are self-regulating and self-correcting, and that markets operate efficiently when the sphere of state activism and provision is reduced to the minimum. The rationale is not only economic but also political – by enlarging the sphere of market choice, personal autonomy and freedom are extended. To use the language of Karl Polanyi, the sphere of market relations is 'disembedded' from the larger socio-economic system (cf Ruggie, 1982). The expansive logic of 1989 weakened embedded liberalism and intensified the neo-liberal reduction of citizens to consumers, while hollowing out the foundations of democratic citizenship.

The rise of the neo-liberal form of capitalism was a long process, from the end of the Bretton Woods fixed exchange rate system in 1971 towards the beginning of financial deregulation later that decade to the election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979 and Ronald Reagan in November 1980. Eric Hobsbawm talked at the time of ‘the forward march of labour halted’ (Hobsbawm, 1978). Long before 1989 the foundations of the post-war social democratic consensus were being eroded. The process is described by Leo Panitch in his co-authored book *The Making of Global Capitalism*. As he notes in an associated article (2014): ‘For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word ‘reform’ was commonly associated with securing state protections against the chaotic effects of capitalist market competition. Today, it is most commonly used to the undoing of these protections.’ This is associated with the triumph of the ideology of globalization. The term was hardly mentioned before 1989, but at this time became the dominant ideology of the era. It is associated with state disempowerment (although ‘third way’ social democracy greatly enhanced the intrusive regulatory state), the homogenization of political space (although sociologists stress the elements of societal variation), the assertion of political conformity and the discrediting of alternatives. The result was open societies but closed political systems in which the range of acceptable alternatives was narrowed.

### **1989 as a mimetic revolution**

This brings us to the fundamentally mimetic character of 1989 and the problem of Russian post-communist modernity. One of the distinctive features of 1989 is the repudiation of the past and the attempt to transcend it by outlining a spatial project of the ‘return to Europe.’ This entails a repudiation of tradition and models of development rooted in the past. For a country such as Russia, this adds another level of disjunction between the programs of 1989 and 1991. There could be no ‘return’ to a Europe which, since 1945, had gained layers of institutionalization from which Russia had been absent. Europe, moreover, had become embedded in an Atlantic power system that Russia, a major continental power with a vast Eurasian presence, by definition could not join as an equal, since that would disrupt the existing power hierarchy; but even less as a subaltern, since that in turn would disrupt Russia’s self-understanding as a great power operating on a global scale, however diminished it may have been in the immediate wake of the Soviet collapse.

At the same time, imitation has always played a large part in the political imaginary of Russian modernization, although typically couched in terms of autochthonous development (Petro, 1995). Since Peter the Great at the beginning of the eighteenth century, it has imitated Western models for technological and economic modernization, usually driven by the imperative of competing on equal terms with the European state system. Imitation is at the heart of any definition of the ‘modern.’ As Habermas (1983: 4) notes, the term ‘appeared and reappeared exactly during those periods in Europe when the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients – whenever, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation.’ Imitation is central to Western modernity, although typically couched in the language of tradition or the classical heritage (Turoma, 2017). Paradoxically, innovation typically comes from imitation, and thus the 1989 ‘revolutions’ restore the original meaning of the concept, denoting the circular momentum of historical time (Koselleck, 1985: 41–42 *and passim*). Russia as the bearer of an alternative tradition is thus perceived as imitating Western modernity, accompanied by notions of falsehood and fakeness.

The shift from the temporal (‘the shining heights of communism’) to spatial models of development (the ‘return to Europe’) means that the political time associated with the 1989 revolutions is no longer rooted in the past and autonomous traditions (whether invented or not) but in a displaced present in which the country itself is on the move. And it is moving towards something already rooted in the lived experience of another world, but which it tries to copy nevertheless. This changes the quality of political relationships. Mimetic politics share an axiological disposition; that is, towards closing down debate and patterns of dialogical interaction (Sakwa, 2018). In political dialogism all the actors change as a result of their interactions, whereas dialectical politics is more linear (giving rise to transitology), historicist (claiming to know the meaning and purpose of history), and axiological. Axiological politics are based on a distinctive hermeneutics in which one interlocutor places themselves in a privileged position *vis-à-vis* the other. The autonomous political subjectivity of the other, in both domestic and international relations, is thereby denigrated. This is why diplomacy has degraded in the

post-communist era. The logic of expansion means that the ‘other’ is designated as little more than an ‘us in waiting’; and if they refuse to fulfill this role, then they become a ‘malign actor’ and are demonized as such. This applies as much to EU–Russia relations (Prozorov, 2016) as to the great power relationship with the US (Cohen, 2018). This is manifested in many different ways, ranging from rhetorical violence and diplomatic exclusion to more subtle attitudes of ‘othering’ and ‘orientalization.’

In the context of 1989, three types of mimetic politics can be identified: the mimetic scapegoat, adaptive mimesis, and mimetic simulacra. The *mimetic scapegoat* is the most basic and truest to the insights offered by René Girard. Scapegoating entails separation and is a way for a society (or an international community) to relieve tensions through the ritualized application of violence. Girard (2005) views the scapegoating principle as a universal phenomenon, although it takes many different forms (see also Girard & Freccero, 1989). The symbolic allocation of responsibility for social ills is ascribed to a particular object, which is then deprived of the most basic of rights, the right to life. In common parlance, a scapegoat is a mechanism to direct violence outwards, to find some external ‘other’ responsible for internal contradictions. In Girard’s conception, the violence has to be ‘forgotten,’ and the sacrificed object becomes sacred. Mimetic violence is cathartic and helps not just to displace anger, but above all reinforces the bonds of community and preserves existing hierarchies. The inherent rivalry and conflict within human society have deep anthropological roots, in which the mimetic nature of human relationships reproduces the values, customs and beliefs of a given order. Politics alone cannot resolve this violence but it is tempered by the sacral elements that sublimate the violence into religious, mythical and ideological forms. In his book of interviews, *Battling to the End*, Girard (2010) applies mimetic theory most fully to international affairs. He was less convinced than ever that politics could confront and resolve violence, and instead argued that even the struggle against violence only begets greater violence. This is a powerful description of how the foundations of the post-Cold War order generated resentment and violence when applied in the form of axiological virtue politics.

Girard (1976: 4 and *passim*) argued that democracy is the most mimetic regime of all, since its essentially egalitarian principle means that every citizen is the model and rival to the others. Forms of mimetic desire are ‘internally mediated,’ where the distance between the subject and model is reduced or entirely removed, as compared to the social and other barriers to ‘undifferentiation’ in more traditional societies (notably, the gulf between the lord and serf, where neither is the model for the other, and therefore mostly not potential rivals) (see also Hodge, 2014: 31–43). In international society the old status hierarchies of the colonial era have been leveled to encompass some 200 states with formally equal status. In the European context, many of the recently ‘liberated’ East European states are the most vigorous in delegitimizing Russia’s security concerns, and in repelling any notion of ‘spheres of interest’ in the region. For them, America is so far above the rest that it cannot function as a mimetic rival, but as the distance with potential rivals closes, then mimetic hostility is generated. The scapegoating mechanism, of course, is unstable and prone to crisis, and thus contingency and elements of decisional leadership can change the dynamics.

The didactic character of much Western policy *vis-à-vis* Russia is couched in terms of *adaptive mimesis*. This is embedded in the revived modernization framework and is also a type of violence in that it presumes a superiority that reinforces hegemonic structures of power. Autonomous political subjectivity is effectively diminished by engagement in ‘reform,’ a code word designating dissatisfaction with one’s own present and the attempt to adapt to some normative standards set outside one’s own historical or developmental experience. For Aristotle, mimesis is the way in which people learn, as a child copies the behavior of adults and thus is educated in the ways of adults. A child until a certain age is deprived of legal autonomy, and so it is by analogy with states, where political subjectivity, if not political sovereignty, is diminished. This, ultimately, is the epistemological foundation of democratization theory on which the post-Cold War literature on transitology is based.

Russia has been locked in a form of catch-up modernization for generations, and the history of Russia’s engagement with Western modernity has been accompanied by traditionalist concerns that adaptive mimesis would lead Russia to lose some of its ‘authentic’ identity as it copied Western models of development and denigrated its own customs. Despite this, Russia for several centuries has been a prickly yet eager student, desperate for a learning that would confirm its place in the community of European civilized states. Since Peter the Great opened his ‘window to Europe’ the tension between Russia as an adept and as a master has never been overcome (Malia, 2000). In the eighteenth century, Russia considered itself a Northern power, and had the self-confidence to



challenge the earlier strategic balance in the region. However, when the axis of influence shifted to the East-West plane, Russia found itself at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the dynamic modernity that was taking shape in Western Europe. Today this takes the form of a struggle between Russia's torn identity as the most Eastern of the Western powers, or as the most Western of the Eastern civilizations. The latter today takes the form of the ambitious but ill-defined Greater Eurasia Partnership (GEP), with Russia and China at its core.

Viatcheslav Morozov calls Russia a 'subaltern empire': it is subaltern because its vision of modernity is ultimately derivative, generated by Europe, with whom it has traditionally had an ambivalent relationship; but its self-image as a great power perpetuates the imperial dimension, with profound consequences for its domestic and international policies. Because Russia has been Europeanized it cannot offer a vision of an alternative modernity; but it claims to be a more authentic version of that modernity to which it aspires (Morozov, 2015). This is the 'true' Europe that was already articulated in the nineteenth century (Neumann, 2016). The subaltern relationship means that the hegemonic social order does not allow Russia's voice to be heard; but the imperial self-identity insists that its voice is heard, hence the endless tensions, crises and contradictions of our time (Morozov, 2015). This is a classic and perhaps quintessential mimetic relationship, where the object of desire is defined by the experience of the other. This helps explain the mimetic crisis in which Russia and Europe now find themselves.

The 'Bolshevik experiment' (De Basily, 1938; Suny, 1998) was an attempt to achieve an emancipated version of Western modernity: seeking to transcend the contradictions while fulfilling the potential that the founding fathers of Soviet-type socialism recognized to lay within that modernity (Anderson, 2015). The Soviet experiment represented an attempt to create an alternative modernity to the degree that it differed from the practices of Western capitalism, but in the end failed to sustain itself as a coherent alternative social order (Arnason, 1993). This is the philosophical basis for Vladimir Putin repudiating the language of 'reform' when he came to power in 2000. He refused to accept that the template for Russia had been forged elsewhere. His repudiation of revolution and other-oriented reform was already outlined in his *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium* in December 1999 (Putin, 2000). This reflected a profound feature of Russia's self-identity: the belief that Russia could not borrow the history of others but had to fulfill its own destiny.

The concept of 'reform' is now seen precisely as an expression of the subaltern relationship. Reform suggests adaptation to norms and practices generated elsewhere. In the Russian context, Putin's strong antipathy to the term is reinforced by the painful experience of Gorbachev's reforms, which in the end provoked the dissolution of the communist system and the disintegration of the country. The stress on 'sovereign democracy,' advanced above all by the Kremlin's chief ideologist up to December 2011, Vladislav Surkov (2010), explicitly rejected adaptive mimesis, which was considered to have a violent element at its core, namely the destruction of Russia's autochthonous traditions and the negation of its historical experience. The West set itself up as mentor, which could not but reduce the subjectivity of the learner (Prozorov, 2016). This helps to explain the uncomfortable connotations associated with the concept of 'democracy' in contemporary Russian political discourse. Like the notion of reform, it is associated with the 'time of troubles' in the 1990s and the loss of political subjectivity. At the same time, Russia can be considered an unruly pupil, lamenting its exclusion because of the EU's hierarchical and administrative practices but at the same time excluding itself from Europe because of its great power identity, hence it oscillated between being 'in and out of Europe' (Prozorov, 2009).

This brings us to the third form, *mimetic simulacra*. In typical circumstances of 'democracy promotion,' adaptive mimesis can be perceived as a form of tutelary violence. For Plato, mimesis is a form of copying, but it lacks the benign pedagogical impulse that is at the heart of the Aristotelian conception. Mimetic politics is what the West does when it says to the rest of the world that they must copy the West in order to move beyond their current state of infantilism (the Aristotelian version). The immanent goal may well be good governance, the rule of law and secure property rights, but these are embedded in an axiological culture of politics. From the Platonic perspective, mimetic politics lacks authenticity since it copies the form but lacks the substance. The revolt against universalizing discourses reflects an innate Platonic conception of mimesis as mere imitation and estrangement from truth and originality, and reinforces the search for a genuinely foundational Russian tradition in art and politics (Greenleaf & Golburt, 2009: 744–745). The mimetic introduction of the form at the

expense of the substance has allegedly produced a particularly lifeless form of politics. Dmitry Furman talked of 'imitative democracy,' in which the social institutions of democracy are imported, but in the absence of the appropriate socio-cultural life world (the appropriate political culture, elite dispositions and social structures), they become mere imitations of the institutions taken from the West (Furman, 2008). Simulacratism can only be challenged by a substantive reinvestment in politics and the political process.

What makes 1989 specifically mimetic? It certainly was a copying event, with almost nothing new devised as part of the process of change. It was copying through the ideology of returnism, although some pre-communist elements were also restored. Once the counter-revolutionary character of the change became clear, it was conducted ultimately within the dynamic of enlargement. Although the societies concerned were transformed, these changes were adaptive rather than innovative. But above all the Girardian mimetic process was at work: the copying of the desires of others provoked resentment and ultimately intense scapegoating. This enduring condition provoked tension with Russia and various 'others,' notably migrants; and this mimetic violence is the root cause of the renewal of a new type of Cold War. This includes mimetic rivalry between the EU and Russia, as twin putative great powers on the same continent, with overlapping and contesting normative ambitions. The process of imitation is not so much learning as a socialization into the norms of a given order. For Girard, violence is a phenomenon of mimetic contagion: in other words, mimesis triggers violence. Mimetic competition turns into mimetic rivalry when the object is not available to both (in our case, the post-Soviet territories and the status denoted to the order-makers). The mimesis of appropriateness and emulation leads to undifferentiation, and the actors – because of, and not despite the undifferentiation – perceive themselves as rivals.

### **Enlargement and returnism**

1989 represented a radicalization of dialectical politics, reproducing linear, historicist and axiological narratives. In other words, 1989 not only tried to copy the model of modernity that appeared to have proven itself so successful in the West. Paradoxically, to achieve the approximation of that modernity by entering into a politics of enlargement, in fact East Europe reproduced precisely that which it had putatively tried to overcome, a dialectical style of politics that assumes a certain singularity of outcomes. This was a new type of the monism that the revolutions had tried to overcome. The ideology of returnism represents a spatialized version of socialism's traditional temporal striving to reach the horizon of human community. The temporal goal of communism can never be achieved (certainly when it is formulated in such linear terms); but what happens when a country reaches the horizon? The future in a temporal utopia can always be reinterpreted, but it is much harder to redefine the physical realities of a spatial utopia. When it is discovered that there is only more of the same 'over there,' disillusionment inevitably sets in. This in turn provoked a return to what were considered native and authentic traditions, notably in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and the Poland shaped by the Kaczyński brothers (Davis & Slobodchikoff, 2018).

Even more deleteriously, by confirming the triumph of the institutions of the historical West, the victory discourse of 1989 helped freeze political development in the West. The Atlantic institutions became 'normalized' as the new 'standard of civilisation,' the re-appropriation of a nineteenth century concept in the very different late twentieth conditions (Gong, 1984). The Central and East European states thereby self-orientalized themselves, and once again rendered themselves peripheral. Krastev notes how 'the politics of 'normalization' replaced deliberation with imitation' (Krastev, 2010: 117). He goes on to argue: 'By declaring democracy the normal state of society and restricting democratization to an imitation of the institutions and practices of developed democracies, Central Europe's ideology of normality failed to give rein to the creative tensions that do so much to supply democracy with its flexibility and endurance' (Krastev, 2010: 118). From this perspective 1989 and other modern revolutions can be seen as 'negative,' in the sense that although they retain a degree of 'revolutionary energy' they failed 'to produce a genuine historical break or a long-term democratic engagement' (Magun, 2013: 1). 1989 represented a 'radical denial of the past' as well as a 'denial of the denial,' because essentially these were 'revolutions against revolutions' (Magun, 2013: 2–3). Otherwise put, these were anti-revolutions, repudiating not only earlier specific revolutions but the logic of revolution more broadly. From this springs also a positivity, which in the case of 1991, is

‘an event to whose democratic desires and victories it is important to keep fidelity’ (Magun, 2013: 13).

Ayşe Zarakol (2011: 54–55) reframes the argument in terms of the way that ‘semi-sovereign’ states in the periphery internalized the standards of civilization and institutions of modernity drawn from the West. The adoption of these institutions purportedly brought them closer to the core. This nineteenth century idea of linear progress was revalidated after 1989, only to be questioned as its deleterious consequences emerged. Russian post-communism operates in a very different civilizational matrix. From the beginning, Russia refused to accept any notion of peripherality and insisted on its sovereignty (Kokoshin, 2006). While there remains a powerful constituency in Russia of the view that modernization entails Westernization, for the ruling elite modernization remains something distinct from the Atlantic power system. Russia, they insist, will modernize, but in its own way. The standard of civilization from this perspective could never be set in the West, and unlike Turkey in the interwar years (Zarakol, 2011) and Germany and Japan after 1945, Russia would not ‘embrace defeat’ (cf. Dower, 2000) but would continue to insist that its path to modernity would be devised in Russia. This does not mean attempts to recreate an alternative modernity let alone to devise a new *Sonderweg*, but it does mean that adaptation to modernity would not take the form of subordination to the post-1945 Atlantic power system. Russia continues to argue in favor of transformation to create a greater West rather than the linear enlargement of the historical West.

There were potential alternatives. Václav Havel, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and many of the best thinkers of the period not only talked of dialogue but understood that the word represented a different style of politics. Havel was one of the generations who defined a new form of ‘anti-politics’ after the crushing of the Prague Spring (Popescu, 2012). Dialogical politics represents an open-ended (pluralistic) style of politics in which all of the subjects involved change through their interactions. Political dialogism represents a substantive repudiation of the monism of dialectical politics, in which the outcome is assumed to be known, and instead outcomes are achieved through mutual transformation. This brings us to a second central characteristic, a different relationship with time and political temporality. There is a dialogue with the past, the present and the future, and thus the character of political temporality is more open-ended. There is less certainty and more experimentation. Instead, of course, the politics of the transition after 1989 was deterministic and rooted in a political temporality based on the enlargement of an existing, and clearly attractive, political enterprise. Its very attractiveness turned into a ‘fatal conceit’ to use Hayek’s term, and for prominent liberals such as John Rawls, Richard Rorty and even Habermas the triumph of late twentieth century liberalism was justified not because it had been theoretically, or even practically, validated, but because it had won the Cold War. Even when not specifically mentioned, the liberal historicism of ‘end of history’ thinking underlays this expansive discourse (Drolet & Williams, 2019: 28). The pretensions of the ‘liberal delusion’ were punctured on the rocks of geopolitical and civilization contestation (Mearsheimer, 2018).

Of all the thinkers of the period, Havel came closest to devising an original theory. He understood that both sides needed to change, but he generated no theory about how this could be achieved. In other words, he failed to move towards a genuinely dialogical position. He understood that democracy means dialogue, and to work it needs active participation of a citizenry. However, when it came to a dialogical transformative process on a continental scale, Havel and his compeers in fact closed things down. He repeated arguments about the ‘end of ideology,’ arguing ‘We are on the threshold of an era of globality, an era of open society, an era in which ideologies will be replaced by ideas’ (Havel, 1993: 128). Fine sentiments, but in this paradigm the West was established as the paradigm and paradise. This is far from dialogism and in fact represented a return to crude dialectical thinking. Worse, the striving of the ‘other Europe’ to return to a mythologized historical Europe only reinforced the predominance of the historical West (Rupnik, 1989), rather than transforming it to become a ‘greater West.’ Liminality became instrumental rather than transformative, and adaptation to an existing model rather than contributing to a common transformative endeavor dominated. Instead of reconciliation, a cult of victimhood was nurtured. Not surprisingly, by 1993 Havel became one of the cheerleaders for the enlargement of NATO, while arguing for the ‘self-transcendence’ of humanity (Havel, 1995). By then, the emancipatory drive of 1989 was reduced to little more than moving as far as possible from Moscow, and embracing the historical West, without in any way changing that West. This suited the neo-nationalist faction in Ukraine just fine, establishing various

institutes and programs to eradicate its communist (and Russian) past to move forward into the bright European future. The removal of Soviet reminders and the promotion of an ethnocentric, nationalistic narrative echoed the East European ideological pattern of the previous three decades (Kasianov, 2019).

The dialectical politics of enlargement represented the homogenization of time and space. This intersection of time and space created a system that was remarkably hermetic – that is, closed to sources of innovation and change. Worse, it appeared that Cold War liberalism became the dominant form, with a certain closure to innovation and ideas coming from outside of its own tradition. This in practice was tempered in most post-communist countries by a continued commitment to social welfarism, accompanied sporadically by various ideologies of conservatism. Above all, if there was a center that was expanding, this means that there was a periphery to which the center expanded. This was not only acceptable to most East European countries, but actually welcomed. The clamor at the doors of the EU and NATO could not be ignored by Western leaders, and although Bill Clinton understood that enlargement entailed alienating Russia, he came to believe that the price was worth paying. Critics who argue that Russia has made too much of NATO enlargement have a point: the alliance is defensive and as currently constituted, represents no threat to Russia; and possibly even enhances Russian security by damping down potential conflicts between bloc members, and guaranteeing strategic coherence across over two dozen members. However, Russia could not accept peripherality, and thus status concerns as much as security issues determined its response to the advance of a formerly hostile alliance system to its borders.

The emphasis on enlargement at the expense of transformation in the end provoked what could be called ‘political involution’: the choking of sources of renewal and innovation (Burawoy, 1996). Involution is when a life form stops evolving, often marked by signs of regression. This was most evident in the crisis of liberalism. For many in the post-communist world, liberalism appeared to reproduce the political practices of the former socialist systems by imposing solutions on to society rather than allowing society to generate solutions from within through a dialogical process. The problem could well be deeper. Before 1989 there may have been dual involution: of the ancient regime of Soviet-style socialism; and of the West which the countries aspired to join. The post-1989 act of enlargement in the end only reinforced the elements of involution in the West, by ostensibly confirming their superiority through victory in the Cold War, but which in fact helped slow processes of adaptation and change. Understandably, at the time there was little impetus for change in the West, since the immediate crisis affected only the Eastern part of the continent, but ultimately ‘post-communism’ is a syndrome and problem that affected not only countries that had formerly been communist (Sakwa, 1999).

This is seen most vividly in the ideology of ‘returnism’; with the ‘return to Europe’ presented as the dialectical unfolding of an ineluctable process that had been artificially impeded for so long by the imposition of Soviet power (Kumar, 1992b). The ideology of returnism is classically monist, presented as a linear and naturalistic process, but which shuts down more open-ended and plural visions of Europe. The return was not to a putatively continental Europe, one which works to achieve the greater European ideal of a common European home, but which takes the institutions of the Atlantic system (the EU and NATO) as the best representations of Europe. The return thereby becomes no more than the enlargement of the Atlantic system to encompass the forcibly separated wanderers, rather than a transformative project that takes advantage of the unique opportunity opened up by the fall of the Wall. This was literally a liminal moment – when the *limes* (the border between the Roman Empire and the Germanic tribes) was eradicated to create a new community which expanded that liminal space to encompass both sides of the former frontier (Thomassen, 2014). In this reading, the old border becomes the new center, and thus the peripheral is transcended. This really would have been the wall to end all walls.

Gorbachev envisaged that the common European home would be a house with many rooms, encouraging a diverse political ecology of different regime types and social forms. By 1991 the disintegration of the Soviet Union put an end to Gorbachev’s dream of a ‘renewed, humane’ socialism, his version of the earlier aspirations of the Prague Spring for ‘socialism with a human face.’ As we have seen, his reform communism reformed the Soviet Union out of existence. There is a deeper paradox at work here. Gorbachev imbibed some of his ideas through meeting Czechoslovak students when he was a student at Moscow State University between 1950 and 1955, and he

clandestinely visited the country in the mid-1960s. It was these ideas that helped precipitate the Soviet collapse in 1991. Stalin had extended the Soviet realm to encompass Eastern Europe after 1945, and it was now Eastern European ideas that destroyed the USSR. The circle was complete.

There were also directly ideological challenges. By 1989 the American administration headed by George H. W. Bush feared that the dynamic Soviet leadership was gaining the intellectual initiative, and sought a way to regain the upper hand. They did this by formulating the concept of 'Europe whole and free' (Engel, 2018). The idea was first presented by Bush in his speech in Mainz as early as 1989, and then repeated in subsequent speeches to Congress. Clearly, this is an attractive notion, but it is vitiated by being part of a rather cynical attempt to reassert geopolitical advantage by displacing the notion a common European home. It reinforced the notion of enlargement rather than transformation. The idea of Europe whole and free was at the center of the Charter of Paris adopted in November 1990, but amid the ringing declarations was a steely intent for the historic West to restore its hegemony over the processes of change unleashed by the 1989 revolutions.

In this context, returnism represents a type of involution. It reinforced a Europe embedded in the Atlantic power system rather than taking advantage of post-Cold War conditions to institutionalize new forms of pan-European continentalism. The failure of the EU to assume deep responsibility in partnership with Russia for European space left the running in security matters to NATO, with all of the subsequent deleterious consequences. The ideology of returnism became a one-way street that once again turned into a dead-end alley. The concept of 'Europeanization' (meaning adaptation to the norms of the EU) thus became a form of self-orientalization (Zarakol, 2011). To return in this context meant giving up the East to become part of the West. In this cosmology, Russia represents the Orient and all that is backward, despotic and regressive. However, embedded in the ideology of returnism is a paradox that would ultimately challenge the developmental premise on which it is based, namely that the return ultimately would become uncontrolled and would smuggle in the grievances and *ressentiment* accumulated over the ages. In the case of Poland, for example, in the guise of the Kaczyńskis' Law and Justice Party (PiS), this meant taking revenge not only on the liberal wing of Solidarity, to whom they had lost out in the 1990s, as well as grievances related to war reparations as well as the social injustices allegedly spawned by post-1989 globalism (Shotter & Majos, 2019: 9).

## Conclusion

As with any social enterprise, the failure to change and innovate usually leads to stagnation, decline and potentially collapse. The alternative modernity advanced by the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but this does not mean that Russia has given up on modifying Western modernity. Neither does it mean that Russia has once again become messianic. Its proposals today are transformative rather than revolutionary. These ideas may well be a way of using intellectual innovation as a way of enhancing status, but they are also posited as severely practical responses facing Europe and the world today. These ideas are rooted in the liminal period of 1989–1991, and suggest that a return to the possibilities embedded in that period may present a way out of the present impasse in European affairs. In other words, having failed to take advantage of an earlier inflexion moment in European affairs, a return to that moment is the only serious possibility of a way forwards. In other words, a new form of returnism is required – this time to revisit the potential of an earlier period (a temporal project), rather than the spatialized conception of a 'return to Europe.' The potential for transformation can be rediscovered when axiological and dialectical politics gives way to a new pan-continental dialogism. Then finally the promise of 1989 may be fulfilled.

## Biography

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