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The Global 1989

LSE Ideas

By George Lawson

Last night at IDEAS, a roundtable of leading academics debated a new edited volume: *The Global 1989*. Here one of the editors, George Lawson, explores the ways in which the central dynamics of contemporary world politics have been shaped, for better or worse, by the social forces unleashed in Central and Eastern Europe some twenty years ago.

One of the central motifs of Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is the ways in which the present works to distort the past. To that end, Kundera tells the story of a photograph taken of two leading Czech communists, Vladimír Clementis and Klement Gottwald, celebrating the takeover of state power by communists in Czechoslovakia in 1948. The picture was later doctored to remove Clementis, following charges brought against him for 'deviationism' and 'bourgeois nationalism'.

The erasure of Clementis from the photograph sought to remove one of the leading architects of the Czech post-war state from the country's history. Clementis was denounced, put on trial and, eventually, executed. In some ways, of course, the very everydayness of this episode is its most disturbing aspect. The routinisation of coercion within totalitarian states – the use of murder and imprisonment, the control of populations via vast coercive apparatuses, the establishment of insidious networks of corruption – was the norm rather than the exception. As such, the events of 1989 and the disappearance of 'tyrannies of certitude' from most parts of Central and Eastern Europe are acts well worth celebrating.

Alongside the pronounced celebrations that marked the passing of state socialism in 1989 lies a second widely held view – that 1989 serves the *ur*-demarcation point in contemporary world politics. Indeed, both academics and policy-makers tend to use 1989 and its surrogate frames (such as Cold War/post-Cold War) as the principal normative, analytical and empirical shorthands for delineating past and present. And as with the celebrations over 1989 and its associated events, such abbreviations are made for often sound reasons. Not only was 1989 a significant event for those people living in the immediate Soviet sphere of influence, it had important ramifications for those inhabiting (now often former) socialist states around the world.

In *The Global 1989*, my colleagues and I used these two assumptions as the starting point for our discussions. But the book also seeks to go further, questioning three issues which lie behind, or perhaps lurk beneath, their easy acceptance. First, although the events of 1989 are, to be sure, acts worthy of celebration, they have also engendered some unintended, yet important, consequences, perhaps most notable amongst them exposure of the chronic weaknesses contained in a hyperventilated form of liberal capitalism. One of the core wagers of the *Global 1989* is that the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War have produced mixed, paradoxical, even contradictory outcomes. Although the political, economic and cultural orders generated after the fall of communism have, for the most part, been an improvement on what was in place before, this has not always been clear-cut. Substantively, 1989 has bequeathed an ambivalent legacy.

Second, although 1989 can serve as a useful barometer between old and new, we should be cautious about the general utility of this shorthand – there have been considerable continuities between the pre- and post-1989 eras, whether this is seen in the maintenance of power by a post-totalitarian *nomenklatura* in Russia and China, or in the ways in which post-Cold War capitalist expansion serves as a return to long-established exploitative practices, albeit on novel scales. In this way, a complex picture emerges in terms of the temporality of 1989, one which embraces important continuities alongside, and to some extent instead of, simple notions of 'all change'.

Third, although the principal events and effects of 1989 took place in Europe, going beyond 1989's immediate zone of impact reveals the many spaces of the 'global 1989'. The failures of Western capitalism, political institutions and cultural mores since 1989 have fostered new forms of opposition to Western order: political Islam, freed from its focus on the communist enemy; Latin American populism, no longer subject to Western concerns over 'extended deterrence'; and renewed forms of authoritarian rule in China and elsewhere, even if these now appear more as forms of political coercion than as alternative means of economic or ideological competition. In this sense, although the end of the Cold War has been felt mostly strongly in Europe, trends elsewhere have been unanticipated. We have been here before, of course. But this time, relative Western decline may be for real.



Yogi Berra, the famous American baseball player and pundit, once said that 'it is tough to make predictions, especially about the future'. 1989 is no exception to his maxim. Some twenty years after the fall, it is difficult to recall the sense of surprise and excitement which emerged from the removal of the Soviet empire, first in Eastern and Central Europe and, some two years later, from its own backyard. As the international media moved from city to city, and increasing numbers of Europeans came onto the streets in order to chase away the old order and to welcome in the new, there was a sense of the world shifting beneath people's feet.

But although there have been, and there remain, claims to the exceptional in 1989, a fundamental rupture in world order does not appear to have taken place. Rather, much akin to the bionic man, the post-1989 era is quicker, stronger, faster but not, alas, more peaceful. What is clear is that we should neither laugh (in triumphalism) about the events of 1989, nor forget (in an attempt to control the past) the lessons of the post-1989 era. After all, as Kundera notes, 'the struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. Remembering the complexities, contradictions and paradoxes of the post-1989 remains an urgent task.

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