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Introduction: the 'what', 'when' and 'where' of the global 1989

George Lawson

Laughter and forgetting

One of the central motifs of Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) is the ways in which the present works to distort the past and, in particular, how ideologues seek to control the present by manipulating 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 temporarily removed 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 what Daniel Chirot (1996) calls 'tyrannies of certitude' from most parts of Central and Eastern Europe are acts well worth celebrating.

Alongside the pronounced celebrations which 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)

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socialist states around the world. Elsewhere, too, the events of 1989 served to disrupt existing patterns: the European Union saw its centre of gravity shift, at least to some extent, from west to east; recent years have seen a rise (or return) of Asian powers which may, in turn, prefigure a shift in the metageography of international politics from the Atlantic to the Pacific; and in the West itself, and in particular its fulcrum – the transatlantic alliance – the loss of the Soviet 'other' has engendered an overriding sense of anomie. No longer quite clear what it is against, the transatlantic alliance seems equally unclear about what it is for. Alongside this topographical shake-up can be found important intellectual challenges: how to conceptualise the primary fact of the post-Cold War order – US power; how to employ suitable normative frames for capturing issues of sovereignty, intervention and responsibility in the contemporary world; and how to comprehend a complex security climate signified by novel notions of war, shifting meanings of combatant/non-combatant, and the changing character of terrorism both by and against states. In short, it is nigh-on impossible to imagine a world without 1989 – there are few issues which appear untouched by it.

This book does not seek to overturn these two core assumptions – they stand as the principal indicators of the influence of 1989 and its associated processes. But the book does seek to question 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 this volume 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 – as the contributions to this volume make clear – 1989 has bequeathed an ambivalent legacy.

Second, although 1989 can serve as a useful barometer between old and new, we should be careful about the general utility of this shorthand – there have been considerable continuities between the pre- and post-1989 eras. Four chapters in this book make this point forcefully. John M. Hobson (Chapter 1) argues that policies of post-Cold War intervention should be seen as the latest exemplars of an older suite of ideas rooted in nineteenth-century Western international thought. Aviezer Tucker (Chapter 7) highlights the impact of totalitarian legacies

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on Russian and Chinese development since 1989, looking at how the restoration of autocratic rule in these countries has produced a ruling class of post-totalitarian *nomenklatura* which seeks to strip the country's assets rather than engage in contractual politics. Richard Saull's discussion of the Middle East (Chapter 8) argues that, by removing the one-dimensional straitjacket associated with Eurocentric thinking and replacing it with a view that embraces the chronic unevenness, multiplicity and complexity of world politics, we begin to see the importance of *local* patterns of development on *global* politics. In Chapter 2, Saskia Sassen points to the ways in which post-Cold War capitalist expansion constitutes 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, the volume looks beyond this immediate zone of impact in order to explore the many spaces of the 'global 1989'. Laure Delcour (Chapter 6) indicates the ways in which 1989 has brought into question core aspects of European integration, while William Outhwaite (Chapter 3) concentrates on the crisis of the European left invoked by the loss of socialism as an 'actual existing alternative' to market democracy. Michael Cox (Chapter 4) widens this lens to investigate how the post-Cold War era has weakened the Western alliance, perhaps fatally. Fred Halliday (Chapter 5) goes further still in exploring the diverse impact of 1989 on the thirty-plus former allies of the Soviet Union in the Third World. As with a need for subtle assessment of the multiple times of 1989, so there appears to be an equally pronounced need to understand the fracturing of space engendered by 1989 and its aftermath.

What have we learned from '1989 and all that'? Perhaps the wrong lessons, as Chris Armbruster (Chapter 9), Marc DeVore (Chapter 10) and Barbara J. Falk (Chapter 11) explore. Armbruster argues that the European experience of violence during the twentieth century engendered legacies that contributed significantly to the revolutions of 1989. In contrast, the revolutions of 1989 provided a model of large-scale transformation relatively unscarred by such violence. Marc DeVore traces how the revolution in military affairs led US hawks to believe (erroneously) that cutting-edge technologies could be used to reshape international order. Barbara J. Falk traces ten poorly conceived lessons which US policy-makers drew from the collapse of communism, lessons which were subsequently employed to legitimise the invasion of Iraq. These themes are picked up by Arne Westad in his concluding

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chapter to the volume. As Westad notes, twenty years after the events of 1989, it is possible to see as many continuities as there have been changes to the basic marrow of world politics. His chapter joins the others in replacing the 'cliché of 1989' with a more sober assessment of the past two decades. 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 (1980: 3), 'the struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. The remainder of this introduction substantiates the importance of this struggle and lays out the general framing for the volume as a whole, understood as investigation of the 'what' (substantive issues), 'when' (times) and 'where' (spaces) of 'the global 1989'.

The 'what' of 1989

In many ways, the events of 1989 stand as exemplars of what Nicholas Taleb (2007) calls 'black swans': events which stand as 'outliers' from prevailing frames of reference; generate a set of impacts beyond their immediate field; and which are subsequently rationalised via pre-existing tools of explanation. Certainly, all three of Taleb's categories are fulfilled by 1989: the changes which took place in 1989, particularly during the second half of the year, were as surprising to most observers as they were to many participants; their impact has been extensive, if uneven; and over the past twenty years, there have been no shortage of attempts to explain, and sometimes to explain away, their occurrence (e.g. Dahrendorf 1990; Garton Ash 1990; Habermas 1990; Bunce 1999; Sakwa 1999; Tismaneanu 1999; Kumar 2001; Outhwaite and Ray 2005). One of the aims of Taleb's book is to illustrate how black swans, for all the surprise they invoke, occur more frequently than we imagine. And certainly, surprise is a constant feature of world history – take as an illustration Lenin's (1968: 842) comment in January 1917 that 'we, the old, may not live to see the decisive battles of the coming revolution'. Before the year was up, of course, the Bolshevik Revolution had begun the process not just of reshaping Russian politics and society, but also broader strands of international relations. Along with the Bolshevik Revolution, the events of 9/11 and the German invasion of Russia in the Second World War, 1989 stands as an archetype of the continuing capacity of human history, even events and processes of considerable magnitude, to surprise.

Less surprising has been the cottage industry which has sprung up around 1989 over the past twenty years. Some Kremlinologists

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found that Soviet Studies could quite easily be translated into post-Soviet Studies. Many transitologists who had previously worked on the break-up of authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe and Latin America transplanted their models fairly straightforwardly to the canvas provided by events in Eastern and Central Europe. Political theorists and sociologists surveyed the possibilities and challenges of a global era (e.g. Held *et al.* 1999), International Relations scholars pondered the stability – or not – of a unipolar world (e.g. Wohlforth 1999; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008), while many economists saw 1989 as marking the final victory of Hayek over Keynes, often becoming directly involved in far-reaching privatisation and liberalisation programmes (e.g. Sachs 1994). Regardless of diverse orientation and intention, most of these accounts concentrated on three core issues: first, establishing the (usually endogenous) causes of the collapse of communism; second, assessment of the broader meanings of 1989, mostly in terms of its revolutionary quotient; and third, investigation of the consequences of 1989, particularly in Europe. This book goes beyond these studies by concentrating on the most important, yet often the most neglected, of these foci – the consequences of 1989 – and by exerting much of its efforts on examination of the world beyond Europe. As such, the book does not provide a history, revisionist or otherwise, of the events of 1989, nor does it seek to establish (again) why 1989 happened when and how it did. Rather, the volume is geared at unravelling the complexities of time, space and substance associated with the global 1989.

As John M. Hobson points out in Chapter 1, for both scholars and policy-makers, 1989 serves as an influential 'temporal othering' device, a shorthand used across the political spectrum. For liberals, 1989 marked the shift from 'bad Cold War' to 'good post-Cold War', liberating the world from an era of conservative order and intervention to a novel epoch in which international institutions, multilateral forms of governance, human rights and humanitarian intervention could bury 'backward' ideas such as sovereignty, power politics and *realpolitik*. For foreign policy realists, 1989 marked the reverse journey, from 'good Cold War' to 'bad post-Cold War' as bipolar stability was replaced by the instability of a unipolar and/or multipolar world, a crisis in global governance, and heightened levels of insecurity stemming from a range of security threats: a rising China, a restored Russia, a plethora of rogue and failed states, and the emergence of transnational terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda. John Mearsheimer (1990a) was not the only high-profile realist to argue that we would soon miss the sureties of the Cold War. And nor was Francis Fukuyama (1989) the only liberal to laud the

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unprecedented possibilities for prosperity and peace inaugurated by the demise of the Soviet Empire.[1]

For all their differences, both of these positions agreed that something substantial had taken place in 1989. The great debate about how to categorise the events of 1989 – as revolutions (rectifying (Habermas 1990) or otherwise), refolutions (Garton Ash 1990) or as part of a wave of liberal democratic transitions (Rustow 1990; Huntington 1991; Ackerman 1992) – tended to concentrate on three issues: the failure of revolutionaries to conjure novel utopian visions; the considerable continuities between old and new regimes; and their relative lack of violence. To start with the first of these, what many observers failed to note was the *liberal* utopia that underpinned 1989. Ideas of freedom, justice and equality may not have been new, but they were certainly utopian. As such, participants took these ideals seriously, whether this meant invoking shock therapy programmes in the interests of promoting radical economic freedom or establishing regimes which legitimised freedom of expression, even for former communists, neo-Nazis and other unsavoury types. Not all anti-communist activists proved to be cuddly – xenophobic nationalists and market fundamentalists were implicated just as much as liberal intellectuals in the fall of communism. Not only this, the experience of 1989's 'heartland states' over the past twenty years has served to illustrate the contradictions of revolutionary (in this case, liberal) utopianism in a way which will be familiar to students of past revolutions: the restrictions of political freedoms in order to provide security and order; the continued importance of state activism in the economic sphere in order to redistribute public goods, manage inequality and reduce other distortions of the market; and the requirement of a strong public sector which can curtail the abuses of uncivil society when it tends towards extremism and violence. Indeed, one of the ironies of 1989 has been exposure of the *limits* of unfettered political, economic and cultural liberalism. By ushering in an era of liberalism without critique, 1989 actually served to *renew* critiques of liberal utopianism, critiques which continue to gain strength both in the West and the wider world. These issues are tackled directly in this volume by John M. Hobson, William Outhwaite, Laure Delcour and Barbara J. Falk (Chapters 1, 3, 6 and 11, respectively).

A second question mark over the effects of 1989 focuses on the considerable continuities between old and new, whether seen in terms of

[1] Fukuyama would likely reject the depiction of himself as a liberal. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am taking neo-conservatism to be an offshoot of a broader family of 'kinetic liberal interventionism'. On this, see Dodge (2009).

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state personnel or broader social relations. In Chapter 7, Aviezer Tucker examines the 'privitisation of the *nomenklatura*' in post-communist Russia and China, arguing that the late-totalitarian elite managed to align its interests (maximising wealth and status) to its rights, successfully transferring power from the political sphere to the economic realm. Tucker's point is powerfully made. Although the newness of past revolutions is often exaggerated (Kumar 1987; Halliday 1999; Lawson 2005), there is something particularly old-fashioned about the 1989 variant. Rather than seeking to establish a new order, revolutionaries in 1989 rushed to embrace what they *imagined* the West to consist of: better politics (represented by pluralism and democracy), better culture (particularly in terms of music, fashion and food) and better economies (whether understood as Nordic or Anglo-Saxon variants of capitalism). Both old elites and activists approached the events from positions of mutual weakness – neither had the stomach for an extended conflict and neither had the capacity to win victory outright. As such, roundtables replaced guillotines. And roundtables provided plenty of scope for old regimes to transform themselves into new elites. Sunset clauses for the old guard, the restoration of 'recovering communists' in Russia, China and elsewhere (Jowitt 1992), and the emergence of so-called 'red barons' are common themes in those states which experienced negotiated transformations.

The third issue that clouds the revolutionary legacy of 1989 surrounds the limited use of violence. For many scholars and laypeople alike, the very essence of revolution lies in its violence. But such a view disguises a much more complex relationship between revolution and violence than is commonly understood. If violence and revolution are co-determinous, then of the 1989 revolutions, only the Romanian uprising would qualify as a revolution. Yet given the partial nature of social, political and economic change in Romania since 1989, it is difficult to see how it warrants the label revolution. Social change, in the form of great scientific breakthroughs or widescale parliamentary reform programmes, has no necessary link with violence. In fact, as Johan Galtung (1969) and others point out, violence in its structural forms such as repression, exploitation, marginalisation, sexism, racism and so forth is used to *suppress* rather than instigate change. Violence is a means of order – the stifling of change – as much as a signifier of upheaval. Often, revolutions have been relatively peaceful seizures of power; violence stems from battles *after* the initial takeover of state power, resulting from the need by these regimes to shore up their rule in the face of domestic and international attempts at counter-revolution, a cycle that can be observed in France (in particular in the Vendée) after 1791, Russia during its four-year civil

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war after 1917, and in Iran, by way of its war with Iraq and the brutal measures employed against the regime's 'un-Islamic' foes after 1980. Hannah Arendt (1963), in a survey of the connection between violence and revolution, found that violence only became associated with revolutionary change through the 'Terror' of the Jacobins during the French Revolution. The close link between revolution and violence is, therefore, a relatively modern connection. Violence has been neither a constant nor indispensable aspect of revolutions. And as such, the relative lack of violence in 1989 need not disqualify the transformations from being seen as revolutionary. Indeed, as Chris Armbruster makes clear in Chapter 9, the most significant legacy of 1989 may be the provision of a novel means of organising synchronous political and social change without recourse to high levels of overt violence.

Armbruster argues that it is best to see the events of 1989 as 'negotiated revolutions' (see also Lawson 2005). And certainly, the transformations succeeded in generating political, economic and social orders some way removed from their communist era predecessors: ideological monism gave way to open societies; the homogeneity of political life under communism was replaced by the pluralisation of political relations; and the stagnant formula of central planning made way for the uncertainty of market relations. However, it would be foolish to claim that everything has changed in post-1989 orders. In reality, some power relations proved to be so entrenched as to be unalterable, other measures have been blocked, and there are many things incoming elites neither wished nor attempted to change. No revolution can start from year zero and reinvent social structures from scratch. Rather, the story of revolutionary change, in 1989 as in other times, is bound up with compromise between social action and structural constraints, utopian ideals and the politics of the possible.

If 1989, therefore, can be understood as the relatively peaceful victory of a revolutionary form of liberal utopianism, one which in keeping with past revolutions has witnessed continuities as well as important ruptures, what have been its principal legacies? As William Outhwaite notes in Chapter 3, one of the unintended consequences of 1989 has been a depression of left-wing politics in the West. To some extent, as Outhwaite points out, the events of 1968 in Europe and the emergence of a virulent form of economic neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s began these processes in the generation before 1989, but they were certainly underlined, reinforced and emboldened by the events of 1989. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that it is no longer clear what it means to be 'left' after the fall of actual existing socialism. The attempt to construct

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a Third Way by the Blair and Clinton administrations, as well as by their continental imitators, proved to be short-lived experiments, while the new millennium saw the left fracture painfully and powerfully over international issues – something it appears to do in each generation. In the 1930s the split came over the Spanish Civil War and Stalinist purges; in the 1960s over the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the 1968 uprisings in Western Europe. In the 2000s, the war on terror split the left on familiar issues: internationalism and imperialism, sovereignty and solidarity, universal aspirations and particularist struggles. In more general terms, the left has turned away from issues of representation and redistribution in favour of those of recognition (Fraser 2008). This hollowing out of political and economic opposition in the West appears, at least in part, to have been met by renewed interest in issues abroad, whether this be campaigns for debt relief, the war on poverty, or the fostering of support for global civil society. These social movements are, of course, important. But as a substitute for a radically left-wing alternative to current conditions, they provide thin gruel indeed.

In this sense, as Fred Halliday argues in Chapter 5, if 1989 was a failure for socialism, particularly in Europe, it can also be seen as defeat for liberal capitalism. The dark side of capitalist accumulation, captured powerfully in Chapter 2 by Saskia Sassen, has been sharp increases in inequality and criminality – much of the world is poor and insecure. Most troublingly, it is clear that the 2008 financial crisis was not something external to the system, but a process which arose from a conjuncture of inefficiencies and perversities endemic to the system itself, most notably the shift towards a form of 'casino capitalism' (Strange 1986).[2] The latest failure of capitalism was also a failure of the economics discipline – the 'efficient market hypothesis', ideas of 'self-correction' and support for no-holds-barred deregulation became commonplace ideas within an economics profession that 'mistook beauty for truth' by employing a range of techniques which, although looking good on paper, turned out to bear little resemblance to how economies actually functioned (Krugman 2009). As Saskia Sassen notes, the 2008 crisis had its roots in fundamental shifts in ideas about, and practices of, the international political economy during the two decades preceding 1989. Indeed, the central ideas and ordering mechanisms of the contemporary international political economy (self-regulation, marketisation,

[2] Strange borrowed the idea of capitalism and, in particular, financial markets functioning as a casino (i.e. as a constant gamble based on ever riskier speculations) from perhaps the world's most influential economist during the early part of the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes.

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neoliberalism, privatisation, etc.) were already ascendant – and had taken institutional form – well before 1989, hence the immediacy of shock therapy policies in (and on) 1989 heartland states. In general, the idealisation of the market – by academics and policy-makers alike – acted as a blinker on real world events; markets turned out not to be perfect and rationality turned out not to be utilitarian, at least not much of the time. And the consequences of this utopian occlusion – on peoples, societies and markets around the world – proved to be painful in the extreme.

Given this, it could be argued that 1989 should be understood as a conjunctural rather than an epochal shift (Rosenberg 2005). In other words, 1989 did not mark the emergence and institutionalisation of a novel set of political, economic and social relations. Rather, it emerged primarily out of collapse and implosion – the disappearance, virtually without a shot, of the Soviet Union and, with it, the *final* strand of the Cold War order, much of which had already melted away. The shifts and reconfigurations of social, economic and political power relations associated with 1989, dramatic and extensive though they have been, are for the most part contained within existing forms of social, political and economic order rather than marking a fundamental epochal transformation in the nature of these configurations. Those states and other actors at the centre of 1989 sought not to generate novel institutional alliances or to remake international relations in their own image but to actively give away power, for example by joining international organisations, ranging from the European Union to International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the World Trade Organization. To put this in old language, the organic tendencies of the old have reasserted themselves, in a new context, and on a vaster scale. In more concrete terms, the failures of Western capitalism, political institutions and cultural mores since 1989 (Jentleson and Weber 2008; Khanna 2008; Zakaria 2008) have fostered new forms of opposition to Western order: political Islam, freed from its focus on the communist enemy (Gerges 2005); 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 both unanticipated and, on occasion, counter-cyclical. We have been here before, of course (e.g. Spengler 1926; Kennedy 1989). But this time, as Michael Cox and William Outhwaite both make clear, relative Western decline may be for real.

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