Is the 1989–1991 frame of understanding still relevant? Did history already throw away the empty bottles of the 1991 celebrations? *Et que reste-t-il de nos amours?* With this series of articles and a comment, we set out to explore the ways in which European societies, and Europe itself, differ from what had been hoped and designed in the years 1989–1991. The contributions included put the emphasis on the different horizons of expectation and realms of experience that have their roots in 1989–1991, exploring whether this period continues to define individuals, societies and historical representations of Eastern Europe and beyond. We thus reflect on the relevance of the study of past expectations in order to understand what has happened during the last decades around us, promising new directions of research regarding social transformation, political rhetoric, collective memory and how historical and personal narratives match or contradict.

While reviewing articles and books from the late 1980s, I had the impression of practising a sort of emotional archaeology – so far, so close. The literature from that time talks about death, risks, prison writings, centres of gravity and circles of friends, absurdity, moral dilemmas, Second World War... showing high hopes and a sense of history in the making overall (Buford 1990). One would say that those texts aged rather badly; or was it ourselves who did? There are dozens of books and articles on the topic; yet the year 1991 has not had the attention it deserves, being most often reduced to two ideas: ‘return to normality’ and the ‘end of History’. It has often been associated with endings, collapse and revolutions; however, the break-up of the USSR did not bring about a stable (political, economic and military) order, but a different sort of instability. Furthermore, the sense that we are leaving behind a certain regime without entering a new one – in fact, still very much enmeshed in it – is giving post-socialism an unexpected relevance for understanding global penetration into localities and how national identities are not relics from the past but being reshaped, reconciling unity and diversity in new ways.

Post-socialism is now twenty-five years old, an appropriate milestone to reflect on this social phenomenon and the multidimensional...
processes that were set in motion by the break-up of the Soviet Union. It is time then to ask about the lessons of the post-Soviet period; to examine the triumphalist rhetoric of the early 1990s; to attest how those expectations were articulated, conveyed and reconstructed. At first glance, post-socialist processes appear as a successful story: the countries of Eastern Europe are nowadays members of the EU and NATO; these societies reorganised as liberal democracies and market economies; no border controls inside Europe and a single currency were established. Expectations of an era of peace, cooperation and progress emerged from the break-up of the Berlin Wall, the USSR and state socialism. However, a taste of bitterness is extending across Europe today because of the increasing difficulties of social integration, xenophobia and delusions, putting the achievements at risk and turning the expectations into a conjunctural mirage (Ash 2017).

**Our Shared Experience of Endings and Beginnings**

The theme issue presents a selection of recent research on the changing mood of the period 1989–1991 and its legacies examined retrospectively by researchers with different backgrounds, combining therefore theoretical discussions with autobiographical insights, survey data and ethnographic findings. The seed of this special issue was the First Tartu Conference on Russian and East European studies (June 2016), organised under the title ‘Europe under Stress: The End of a Common Dream?’ In 2017, it is painful to consider that the European Union, based on principles of solidarity and a common dream of promoting cooperation and avoiding war, violence and nationalism, might break apart. If that would happen, and besides the corresponding feelings of frustration and loss, I would have to learn how to be Spanish myself, since I have lived for 12 years already in other European countries, studying, working and getting a family along the way.

This transnational organisation was created in response to shared experiences of war, genocide and displacement, reminds us Kattago in this issue. In this vein, Tiina Kirss, who acted as a discussant in our panel, assesses the degree to which the dark past is considered best forgotten, or if the non-acknowledgment of past darkness leads to an underestimation of the human tragedies of the present. In her comment, Kirss highlights the need to work for the generational transmission of social achievements and shortcomings, and the importance of
instilling values in the upcoming generations, in order that the new
generations may do better. This phenomenon of loss of continuity in
the generational transmission of cultural heritage is being increasingly
discussed (Murin 2016; Martínez 2016b), correlated with the vanishing
of the cultural specificities in Europe, the penetration of new cultures
and the expectation of embracing change and innovation *ad infinitum*.

Symptomatically, the number of European citizens dwelling on the
negative is increasing, manifested in a ressentiment of cosmopolitanism
and an entropic accumulation of fears. Even so, contemporary populist
movements are gaining in strength not just by appealing to nationalist
sentiments but by engaging in a politics of (re)distribution and (re)pre-
sentation too. Twenty-five years ago, civic activism and solidarity were
mobilising mantras in East and Central Europe, spiced with different
nationalist claims; nowadays only the spices remain, clouding the con-
tinental atmosphere and making the concepts and categories to which
we have adhered increasingly inoperative. As an answer to the increas-
ing condition of anger within European societies, Kattago proposes
that practices of solidarity are substantiated and communal European
bonds reinvigorated (as they already show distinct signs of fatigue after
decades of marriage). The idea of linking solidarity with a sense of com-
monality appears as an invitation to dialogue in order to foster mutual
inspiration and to challenge our ways of thinking.

We draw on the assumption that both Anthropology and Area Stud-
ies have to yield interdisciplinary synergy and renew the comparative
endeavour for strengthening their critical, theoretical and methodolog-
ical basis. In this theme issue, we chose to explore the intersections
between anthropology, philosophy and political science, to put differ-
ent regions in one frame, and to correlate diverse temporal regimes
for the understanding of the contemporary bewilderment and for
imagining new ways of being together at a global scale. An example
of this effort is the contraposition of a politics of ressentiment with a
politics of hope, underpinned by Kattago to describe the new political
schisms that separate the advocates of open societies from those who
defend a retreat to national organisation and closed values. Furth-
more, whilst hope appears as a mood oriented towards the future, a
demand that represents an imaginative way to a new beginning (Liis-
berg et al. 2015), ressentiment is a reactive feeling that sets affective
delineations of difference, a self-deceiving revenge once individual
expectations and experiences fail to converge (Brudholm 2008).

Our interdisciplinary study is meant to clarify actual noises and
clouds by looking back (without nostalgia) at the days of hope and
Revolution. From post-socialist societies we try to scale up our attention to Europe in order to open up the categories of analysis, define terms of comparison and perceive the interrelation of the different sets of problems. Local and global dimensions acquired new meanings, and therefore require new analytical tools, challenging national parameters and traditional disciplinary divisions. The transformations which unfolded after the break-up of the Soviet Union profoundly altered the study of Europe at large as well as anthropological thinking about social changes and their relation to the experience and representation of time (see Martínez, this issue). And yet, is Eastern Europe a zombie idea, no longer alive but continuing to move? Or rather an abused concept that serves to hierarchise? As a region, Eastern Europe is still gathered under a geopolitical vocabulary and a former ideological system, yet nations persist, in some cases astray in the introspective doubts of the post-Soviet maze.

This issue combines an empirical and interpretative approach with a work of reconceptualisation to explore different aspects of the afterlives of the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe and beyond. It is in this sense a play of mirrors, a conversation between past and present, expectations and delusions, our biographies and Europe’s maturing, personal beginnings and political endings, as Marcos Farias Ferreira poetically foregrounds. He remembers how debates around 1989–1991 were related to civil society, human rights, authenticity and responsibility. He muses about the fragility of cosmopolitan ideas, confronted with the walls and fences being erected in the name of fear and difference. Personal biographies are constantly reconstructed so that our pasts become coherent life stories that help us to understand and explain our present circumstances. Yet the Soviet Union and its end represents a powerful landmark still in personal narratives of growing up and giving meaning to the world, concludes Farias Ferreira.

We Replaced Solidarity for Fear, and Multilateralism for Disorder

Current developments on the continent are putting pressure on the possibilities for accommodating social and cultural differences, deploying the past to reinforce antagonisms and ressentiments, including the return of nationalism and the construction of cultural ‘others’ (Fabian 1983). The stateless, the unwanted, the superfluous ... Zygmunt Bau-
man presented the production of ‘wasted humans’ as an inescapable side-effect of order-building, modernity and of economic progress (2004). One of the differences with previous modernisations, however, is that during colonial times our ‘waste’ was shipped abroad to newly colonised areas. In contrast to those times, contemporary European countries have to deal with the ‘problem’ within their societies without such empire-driven possibilities. This results in a large number of people who are living in a global borderland and temporal marginality. Also it undermines the EU claim to represent and to speak with one voice on behalf of ideals such as freedom, prosperity, peace and tolerance (see Deriglazova, this issue).

After twenty-five years, not only do Western and Eastern European assessments of the socialist experience differ, the approach towards the recent past among the former members of the socialist block is not homogeneous either. Some European countries are regressing to a policy of strident nationalism, with both politicians and intellectuals enhancing well-established rituals of eurobashing and ontological deconstructions of what Europe is (Kockel 2010; Testa 2015). Hence we should ask what is the actual ideology of Europeanism composed? Also if current ideas of Europe clash with the political imagination of Russia? The idea of Europe has a long history of producing Others, as well as distinguishing Europeans from non-Europeans, establishing cores and peripheries and hierarchies of belonging. In the actual picture, stateless refugees appear as the central outsider or pariah, the exemplary opposite of the European citizen that cannot participate in public space and does not belong to any political community (see Kattago, this issue).

Feelings of belonging fluctuate, and might be used politically, as Larisa Deriglazova points out in her study of the involution during the last twenty-five years of the attitude towards Europe by Russian people. Moscow’s staged confrontation with the West has made the increase of nationalist feelings necessary for Putin’s regime at the expense of a cultural European identity. The paradox, however, is that the European and Russian societies are becoming closer again, not because of Russia’s approximation to EU political values and economic criteria, but because Europeans themselves have been losing confidence in the capacity of the EU to put these ideals in practice. This leads Deriglazova to conclude that for the Russian people the EU hardly represents anymore the partner that will help Russia to become a part of an ‘ideal Europe’.

All these challenges are already altering the position of Europe ‘as a place and as an idea’ (Green 2013: 345). Furthermore, if assuming
that the institutional idea of Europe has been manufactured for decades too, we can start asking if the continent is politically in need of reworking its togetherness, global vision and the actual ideology of Europeanism (based on the production of new figures of otherness). The impression of something being broken floats in the air since the financial meltdown, Brexit, the refugee crisis and the conflict in Ukraine. ‘It was not meant to be this way’, stresses Tom Frost in his article about Brexit. Looking back, Frost hesitates as to whether, in fact, there were any ‘ideals’ or bonds of solidarity to start with; he reminds us that the current situation of the EU is due to myths of exceptionalism and wrong decisions such as prioritising the single market, instead of favouring a deeper political and fiscal union. Frost concludes that as a result of the increasing technocratic organisation and democratic deficit of the EU, people demand to take back control (as they did in 1989–1991).

The Accelerated Post-wall World

One of the aims of this issue is to shed light on the limitations of post-socialism as a theoretical framework, while drawing attention to how useful the concept is, even twenty-five years after the breakdown of state socialism. The analytic and descriptive value of post-socialism enables meaningful comparisons and juxtapositions among diverse societies spreading across the former Second World and beyond. In a narrow sense, the term post-socialism affects twenty-five states, more than 30 per cent of the world’s land mass and more than 50 per cent of the human population. However, it is not only a regional or transitory issue. After all, these processes not only altered the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Eastern Europe but also the lives of those beyond that region. Post-socialism is a framing, and as such it is not incompatible with other contemporary frames; in most cases, all these paradigms complement each other. Unsurprisingly, post-socialism has been linked to wider theorisations and phenomena such as globalisation (Bodnár 2001), neoliberalism (Smith et al. 2008), postcolonialism (Chari and Verdery 2009), postmodernism (Hirt 2012) and late-modernity (Martínez 2014).

We can hardly explain actual political processes without being aware of post-socialism. The break-up of the Soviet Union was a critical juncture that opened a window for expanded social choices; and yet, the possibilities of transformations were nonetheless bounded, condi-
tioned by different interests, factors, and the persistence of the past (Johnson 2001). Transformations occurred within a frame and a repertoire of possibilities, partly shaped by active choices and agencies, partly conditioned by social and material legacies, and the obduracy of existing structures. There was thus an organic interplay between different scales and legacies, and transformations took place asymmetrically. Hence, we pay attention to trajectories of change, which make us aware of the ambiguities and contradictions of the journey: ‘If post-socialism does indeed continue to exist, we need to think about it not as following a trajectory toward market capitalism, but backing up, fast-forwarding, simultaneously cancelling itself out, slowing down and then speeding up again in completely renewed and reassembled cycles of development’ (Materka 2012: 141). Also, geographer Alison Stenning (2005) suggests investigating post-socialist aspects through the study of the contours and boundaries of the concept, exploring differences and commonalities and interrogating its connections to other worlds. As Stenning puts it, ‘post-socialism cannot be reduced to neoliberal economic restructuring, nor just to the legacies of socialism (or pre-socialism), nor indeed to the passage of “transition”. It is all of these’ (ibid.: 124).

Post-socialist transformations cannot be reduced to a ‘sum of “positive changes”, inspired and evaluated from the West’ (Lauristin 1997: 25). Changes were rather contradictory and ambiguous (Berdahl 2000), characterised by insensitive policies of limited success (Pickles and Smith 1998) and by a situation of uncertainty (Humphrey 2002b). The study of the dialectic between the Old and the New allows us to reflect on the existence of ambivalences, ironies and sources of tension in these rapidly changing societies, as well as to dig into the relationship among legacies, global processes and political regulations. It also confirms that the outcome of ‘transition’ has been shaped not only by the design of the policies and the opening up to the international market and finance capital, but also by the actually existing high expectations and the abject rejection of the past. The focus on journeys and trajectories stresses therefore the eventful process of becoming – with its unexpected outcomes and incongruities – instead of the linear direction of change. It also takes post-socialism as a distinct condition, spatially and temporarily hybrid, drawing attention to continuities alongside changes, and also to wider scales and connections. Post-socialism resonates therefore with global changes and the neoliberal restructuring of societies, making this concept applicable to broader debates.
Caroline Humphrey (2002a) justifies the use of the term ‘post-socialism’ by arguing that socialist-related practices were deeply embedded in these societies and could not be replaced by new ones overnight. But for how long will it still be tenable to speak of post-socialism? Humphrey proposes taking post-socialism as a non-homogeneous experience, while Chris Hann asserts that the concept will remain relevant as long as ideals, ideologies and practices of socialism serve as a reference point for the evaluation of the present (2002). As my ethnography in Estonia shows (Martínez 2016b), the descriptive and conceptual value of post-socialism is unequivocally tied to generational change, hence showing a decreasing analytical functionality, as young people already demonstrate a more neutral and practical approach towards the Soviet world. New generations are making the relationship between past, present and future less unidirectional and ordered than the previous ones. They are blurring the strict delineation between past, present and future, approaching them in a more porous and situational way. The riddle here is to figure out how present-day expectations and experiences might invest the past with novel meaning.

Post-socialism is an anthropological comparative term originally coined in the West to study what followed the break-up of the Soviet Union, namely the privatisation of the means of production and public goods, the discredit of critics of capitalism, the dismantlement of the Cold War geopolitical barriers and the reduction to zero-value of the remnants from the past world. But even if the concept is first of all associated with East-Central Europe, the experience has had several collateral effects on the world as a whole as, for instance, an increase of labour and economic inequality; a growing vulnerability for individuals (discrediting of collective thought); a rise in the transnational circulation of capital; a technological shift which accelerates everyday life; an escalation of production (correlated by one of consumption); the incapability to verbalise political alternatives; and an extensive desynchronisation of temporalities. It is in this sense that Stenning and Hörschelmann (2008) argue that we are all post-socialist now, that is as a boomerang effect, in the same way postcolonialism was not external to the societies of the imperial metropolis but instead inscribed within.

The integration into the EU of countries east of the Iron Curtain was not perceived as a source of critical insights; on the contrary, they reinforced the emerging neoliberal hegemony. Processes of privatisation and dispossession were not simply contemporaneous in different
parts of the world but also justified by parallel arguments and ideologies, pursued by interrelated groups of elites, personally and corporately linked to each other. Global and post-socialist processes are taken here as reciprocal processes, in an approach acknowledging the effects that the ‘collapse’ of the USSR have produced beyond the borders of the former Tsarist Empire. Anthropologist Zsuzsa Gille has presented the break-up of state socialism as ‘the corollary of globalisation’ (2010: 13), which led to the effect of over-valorising everyday quietness and calculability. Post-socialism, globalisation and late-modernity can be analysed thus as overlapping processes that in their interplay have generated new opportunities as well as novel structures of inequality and exclusion.

Also in this vein, Thomas Hylland Eriksen describes the last twenty-five years as a period of ‘overheating’ (2016), calling attention to the accelerated change and the heightened level of activity in the realms of economy and communication. Such overloading, as we call it here, referring to the difficulty in apprehending these changes, is not only affecting global processes unevenly but reshaping the temporal regimes within particular localities. As a result, feelings of temporal marginality are being intensified, with more people perceiving that their expectations are cast aside, and they are living toward a future that differs from the one envisioned by societal discourse (Frederiksen 2013).

Overall, transformation in the experience of time has been one of the most important areas of change since the collapse of socialism across the region between 1989 and 1991. As Liviu Chelcea (2015) shows in his ethnography of bank workers in Romania, post-socialist transformations also meant the acceleration of the experience of time. This acceleration was accompanied by the installing of new routines, disciplines and standards, and a diffuse long-term future where meaningful plans appear as fantasy or daydreaming. This has led to significant changes in the organisation of economy, culture, space and time, manifest in discourses of flexibility, the demand of ‘self-regulating selves’ and the creation of a new category – the ‘old timers’ (those who stick to prior skills and temporal regimes). The introduction of computers also contributed to making previous routines and jobs obsolete, and intensifying time planning. For instance, in her ethnography of an Estonian oil shale mine, Eeva Kesküla (2016) notes that the introduction of new technology was just as significant a breaking point in the history of the miners as was the year 1991.
The Need to Establish Something Durable

The volume *A History of Eastern Europe* presents crisis and discontinuity as a long-term condition in the region (Bideleux and Jeffries 2007). East European societies have been ever transforming systems, living in a constant process of change, making the familiar unfamiliar and vice versa – incorporating rupture and discontinuity eventually into the structures of society. This condition has been intensified by global circulations and technological shifts, which brought new forms of separation and extended a need for constant adaptation. The continuous changes experienced in the region, overlapping with global and technological shifts, have increased the perceived uncertainty and desynchronisation within these societies, making the effects of late-modern phenomena more radical. In the course of a prolonged experience on the edge, the logic emerging from the suspension tends to be incorporated into the very structure of society (Martínez 2014). Eastern Europe has been in an adjusting mood for a century. A specificity regarding the year 1991 is the competence developed by local people to cope with uncertainty, a sort of ‘thick skin’ that allowed for a certain distance toward change. As noted by Karl Schlögel, a ‘new urban society is built on previous experiences of crisis’, which is not totally new in Eastern Europe, whereby this experience ‘has been stored across generations [...] fatally exhausted by the catastrophes of the century’ (2012: 29).

For Schlögel, 1989–1991 was the result of a long incubation period; and yet it was also a time of iconoclasm, historic moments and emerging spaces. For instance, it was the beginning of a tempestuous re-evaluation of the past, re-ideologisation and new myth-construction. We can recognise diverse forms of retrofitting the past within the post-Soviet societies, depending on the mise en scène, utilitarian goals and cultural specificities (see Martínez, this issue), yet, as Kirss notes, institutional efforts of ‘retrofitting’ the past ‘hardly shut the genie into a bottle’.

‘Revisiting the expectations of 1989 is a bit like walking into a history museum ... one remains highly aware of the passing of time’, Kattago observes. The 1990s were days of deeply voluntaristic change, in which most of the previous political frames, vocabulary and symbols were overthrown, discarded and wiped out by shock ‘therapies’ in economic and nationalistic agendas. Eventually, discourses of normality created the impression that socialism was a non-real condition, something unnatural and caricaturesque. Already since the Perestroika, normality appeared associated with ‘success’, ‘happiness’, ‘comfort’, ‘order’ and high material standards. In that logic, transformations were simply
a transitional phase towards ‘normality’ (Kiossev 2008). Shock therapies were legitimised by the eagerness to become ‘normal’, according to which the socialist countries were ‘delayed’ in relation to the achievements of the West and the need to catch up with globalisation.

And yet, post-socialism was not simply driven by convergence with Western values but also by revenge and dismantlement too (see Martinez, this issue). The years 1989–1991 mark a break in historical continuity, in the sense that part of the known world not only changed but disappeared. Paradoxically, the practices and policies of post-socialism, as well as its disappointments were directly inflected distinctively by the past (Creed 2002). Facing the paradox that the Soviet ‘collapse’ was completely unexpected, but simultaneously unsurprising, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2001) has noted how quickly some people were able to operate a profit-making business, even before the break-up of state socialism. This was due, in his view, to the Soviet ‘entrepreneurial governmentality’, which comprised a particular form of knowledge, skills and ways of thinking capable of distinguishing between formality (abstractions and rituals) and practice (day-to-day experimentation).

The anomaly, as Aet Annist reminds us (2014), is that entrepreneurial success was in many cases derived not from hard work but from social capital accumulated during the Soviet period. For Annist, the failure of post-socialism lies in the lack of equal opportunity, seeing as the burdens of change have been most often unequally distributed. In her work on how communities in rural regions of Estonia are negotiating convoluted changes, Annist demonstrates that the transition caused many people to lose the means of production, so they could no longer remain self-sufficient in the face of dispossession and precarity. This phenomenon was accompanied by a ‘hands-off strategy’ by the state, forcing citizens to assume public responsibility individually. On the top of that, the ghost of socialism was turned into an ‘ideological antioxidant’ for justifying inequality and exclusion, reducing support for redistributive policies and pre-empting social claims (Chelcea and Druta 2016).

**Living Memory**

This issue proposes to interrogate the social and cultural changes occurred in Europe not only by examining the distinctions between past and present, but also the relationships that mutually constitute...
the aspects between them (Verdery 1996). It is therefore a context sensitive research, which puts the emphasis in studying the dialectic relationships and frames of value that form the contemporary understanding of the period 1989–1991. It is in this sense that this work can be considered an emotional archaeology of the present, looking back at people and events that relate to living memory.

David Berliner (2005) explains that the success of memory among anthropologists resides in its conceptual efficiency in understanding continuity – persistence of representations, practices, emotions and institutions. Yet, as Johannes Fabian noted, ‘an overextension of the concept of memory will make it indistinguishable from either identity or culture’ (1999: 51). In this vein, historian Lee Klein asserts provocatively that memory is ‘replacing old favourites’ such as ‘nature, culture, language’ (2000: 128), in connection with retromania and the reassessment of national identities in Europe. Zsuzsa Gille (2010) claims that memory has replaced ‘society’ as the primary focus of scholarship, fusing class and identity politics after state socialism. Other critics go so far as to assert that ‘memory has become the discourse that replaces history’ itself (Kansteiner 2002: 180).

For Nietzsche (1874), the need to forget is a mandatory complement to remembering. That approach takes forgetting not as a failure of memory but as an affirmation, a way to deal with our hauntings. Furthermore, the German philosopher believed that nations might get intoxicated with an overdose of history; indeed, the politicisation of past experience is very much connected with modern perceptions of time and identity. Otherwise, forgetting can also be approached as a faculty and as a symbolic expenditure; liberating negativism, accessing other ways of knowing (Forty and Küchler 1999). A precedent to this was the first postwar Europe, built upon forgetting as a way of life. However, ‘since 1989, Europe has been constructed [...] upon a compensatory surplus of memory: institutionalized public remembering as the very foundation of collective identity. The first could not endure – but nor will the second’ (Judt 2005: 829).

In this vein, historian Jeremy Black points out that empowerment through historic grievance is a source of division as well as a reluctant sign to search for compromises. ‘It focuses on where one comes from, and not what one can do, on an incapacity, and not an active potential’ (2008: 227). Likewise, he notes that past ‘wrongs’ cannot be put right by generations not responsible for them, and the result of that approach can only generate new ‘wrongs’. The right to memory might be turned into an oppressing tool if used to create further exclusions
within our societies, essentialising roots and enhancing xenophobic discourses based on othering and the institutional articulation of a supposedly pure past. In this sense, contemporary memory discourses in Europe should avoid the reefs of ossification, not fall in the populist trap and repeat the ‘grand narratives’ of the past and the success story of one group only (Martínez 2016a).

When looking back to those events today, they appear increasingly as a bunch of decoloured images losing their caption. Things have not played out exactly as might have been intended. In some cases, expectations were used for particular political agendas, in others, the hope turned into disappointment once it was realised. In this issue, we reflect on how different experiences in political perspective have been reconstructed in light of the outcomes, from the vantage point of the present moment. Twenty-five years on we look back and realise that the past is not what it used to be and the future is not what most of us expected. We can even talk of the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) produced by 1991, the high expectations of a good life whose outcome was instead a ‘fantasy bribe’, making it impossible to attain the very transformations people strived for. Twenty-five years ago people did not sense that democracies can also go backwards, that civil society and the public sphere could be constrained again, that the global penetration into localities might produce a revenge of history.

The way the world is now is not the way it has always been, nor the way it will always be. We believe that delving into these expectations opens up the door to understanding better the aspects of change such as uncertainty, inequality, the clash of solidarities and how personal and societal time diverge. Still, any attempt to comprehend ongoing phenomena in Europe has to consider representations and values that refer to the past, specifically to the landmark 1989–1991. And, even so, the past, constantly contested and re-written, just helps partially to contextualise the existing practices and the imaginable normalcy.

Francisco Martínez, School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Helsinki (pacomartinez82@gmail.com)
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