

My multiple, manifold, and endlessly contested 1989s

Don Kalb

Nineteen eighty-nine was for me, like for so many other Europeans and in particular Central Europeans, a year of miracles. In mid-November of that year I was traveling through the United States and giving papers on working class culture, anthropology, and history. Whenever I was asked where I came from I always answered “from the continent of the revolutions.” What a joy. But I was sad that I had traveled west rather than east.

There was little thought as yet about the outcomes of those revolutions except in the obvious and general terms of the fall of the Berlin Wall, European unification, and democratization. My own private thoughts about those outcomes were probably shaped by my experiences in 1980 and 1981 when I was traveling as a second-year student of anthropology through the revolutionary Poland of *Solidarność* (Solidarity). I had stayed among others at the premises of Warsaw University in October 1981, which had been occupied by the students, and I had been enthused by the discussions with them and with Jacek Kuroń. The democratic impulse among them had been strong, and apart from some economists who saw salvation in Hayek (I didn’t meet these in Warsaw but in Poznań), most voices were recapturing a democratic socialism combined with a slight streak of social Catholicism.

I was born in the Netherlands and at that time I was an activist in the university town of Nijmegen and participated in the broad movements against nuclear rearmaments, a renewed

left wing student movement and the squatters’ movement, which altogether made 1981 one of the most turbulent years in Dutch socio-political history. I was not the only activist in the Netherlands wearing a little *Solidarność* batch proudly on his coat. Some of us hired trucks and brought collected clothes and food to the Poles after the military crackdown. I probably experienced 1989, now as an older person in a more right wing and more neo-liberal global environment, with a hint of those left-democratic experiences of 1980 and 1981, both from Poland and the Netherlands.

I was not alone. As we now know, many of the participants and onlookers in the Central and Eastern European revolutions hoped for democracy, sovereignty, and a Scandinavian welfare state, bordering on market socialism if need be. They wanted the Soviets, the party, and the police state out, and “Europe” and the “social market” in. It may be hard to recall now after twenty years of neo-liberal capitalism and Western triumphalism, but that was, indeed, what “Europe” unambiguously seemed to stand for, also for many people in the West of the continent. Alexander Dubček and Jacek Kuroń were much more representative of popular desires in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) than Václav Klaus and Leszek Balcerowicz, who were from a democratic perspective basically irrelevant. I was not working on the region in those days; I was working on the historical anthropology of class relationships in the Netherlands and on

Philips Corporation and I was one of the first anthropologists to write on the high peaks of corporate capitalism in the core. Nevertheless, based on my experiences in 1980/81, I instinctively felt this to be the case and later work by others such as David Ost, Chris Hann, and myself confirmed that initial sense.

But how fast the institutional processes moved in another way! Real or imagined bankruptcy and deep distrust among organized but untransparent actors in CEE, combined with an ever more openly self-glorifying neo-liberal West on its way to the Washington Consensus, generated “shock therapy,” nomenklatura privatizations, and state collapse (in Russia). The unification of Germany helped to create the euro and the chimera of “ever closer Union.” But this happened under strict and therefore limiting and perhaps ultimately self-destructive Bundesbank/ECB auspices. Bundesbank/ECB oversight was explicitly meant to prevent similar transfers to the south and east that were being sent, against the warnings of the Bundesbank, to the former GDR. The dominance of monetarism in the EU project would therefore never be conducive to generous attitudes to Central and Eastern European needs.

German reunification also caused great power rivalry in the Balkans. It therewith helped to set the post-Yugoslav catastrophe in motion (as did the neo-liberal rejection of debt reduction/forgiveness or just a freeze on payments). It also put the US security establishment under a perceived pressure to demonstrate its continued power and centrality in a world that was actually hoping for a peace dividend. It then projected that power in the spaces vacated by socialism and the Soviet Union, primarily the western Balkans but eventually including Iraq, also to prevent overriding German influence in much of that space as well as a feared German *Alleingang* in Eastern Europe. A few long years after 1989 “Europe” had transformed into a much more openly capitalist West, closely regathered together under the wings of the United States, and perceiving the transformations in the East as a risk rather than an opportunity.

My own trajectory became, in unanticipated ways, part of the East as a perceived risk. In 1998, I became director of the SOCO program at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna. This was a program that sponsored social policy research in Central and Eastern Europe, mainly the Visegrad countries. Much of the money came from the Ford Foundation and some came from the Austrian state, interested in recreating a bit of the Habsburg sphere. It had been running since 1993 and was part of the response of Western elites to the return to power of the former communists in Poland and elsewhere in CEE. In 1993, after a large wave of social protest against shock therapy in Warsaw, the communists had won the Polish elections. The West at once got scared of “losing” the East and felt forced to acknowledge that a purely neo-liberal transition might not be sustainable for the “social costs” that it produced. SOCO was helping the institutionalization of social policy research in CEE by sponsoring local teams to work on issues of pensions, health, and poverty connecting that with advocacy. By 1998 when I took over, the issues of institutional design of social policy schemes were still important, but a new attention for specific social groups and for more small-scale research on women, Roma, the countryside was on the agenda and I was hired to make that happen. Apart from two dozen projects on “the new social question” in CEE that I helped to initiate and fund, I also got a grant from the Dutch Science Organization to start ethnographic work on the popular experiences of privatization in Poland. The East as a perceived risk for the West thus facilitated my reconnection with my experiences with *Solidarność* almost twenty years earlier. My own research analyzed how “transition” had been one variety of what David Harvey has called “accumulation by dispossession,” to which workers responded by a populist rejection of liberalism and a popular politics of the nation (as, in a slightly different frame and in a different discipline, David Ost has also shown; see Kalb and Halmai eds in Press). Much of my work as one of the builders of the sociology/anthropology program at Central European University since 2003 has been

supporting doctoral research on the popular, contested, and comparative experience of 1989.

Nineteen eighty-nine was also the year of the Tiananmen crackdown on Chinese protesters against corruption and marketization. It was also the last year in which the US trade balance with China had been positive. And it was the year in which J.P. Morgan first developed the value-at-risk assessments, which gave a mistaken quantitative sense of control against all-out deflation in a capitalist world now increasingly running on speculation rather than long-term investment. The democratic revolutions of CEE (“refolutions” in the felicitous wording of Timothy Garton Ash) were happening against a global horizon that was transforming rapidly, partly precisely because of these revolutions, and in which these other 1989 events figured crucially. While the collapse of Comecon and the market reforms in China added some 1.5 billion new workers to the world system, Western capitalism was shifting into a financialist and speculative mode, as the late Giovanni Arrighi has importantly argued. Economic and financial globalization implied that social transformation in CEE coincided with a worldwide downward pressure on social wages (and upward pressure on capital returns) as capital could seek out its best bets globally. This was true for the West as well, but the West for a while could reap the benefits of hosting and owning the big financial and industrial corporations. CEE would inevitably become a dependent capitalism (as Bela Greskovitch’s recent work with Dorothee Bohle has also underlined). But it became a dependent capitalism with Chinese low wages and Asian state-led competitiveness written into its terms of operation. After the collapse, it did enjoy some eight good years, from 1998 to 2006/7, as Western capital poured in and massively renewed the regional industrial export base, all in expectation of European accession. But as the West stumbled gradually but deeply into indebtedness and financial crisis while being focused on its imperialist endeavors in the Middle East and western Asia, it became clear that much of the new regional prosperity had been facilitated by

cheap credit rather than real wage growth (let alone median wage growth). The EU was ready to help guarantee Austrian and Swedish bank loans to CEE by making IMF/ECB loans available to Hungary, Romania, the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine so that local currencies were supported as long as private capital flowed out rather than in. Although state finances had been largely sound in CEE for quite a while, it insisted that old-style neo-liberal IMF conditions would be applied to its own subprime borrowers in CEE, and welfare and social wages would be reduced, in some cases, like Romania, very substantially (See Verdery in this Forum). The outcomes over time are still profoundly uncertain but reflect raw capitalism rather than the social market that the popular idea of 1989 had embodied. The picture may not be entirely different in the West, where states have taken the bank debts into the public budget and where public indebtedness may soon exceed the levels of the late 1970s/early 1980s that occasioned the first waves of neo-liberal retrenchments.

It is therefore little surprise that the recent commemorations of 1989 in the region as well as in the West convey similar messages of hopes and aspirations not realized. Will we in 2019 or 2029 finally feel compelled to conclude that 1989 had in fact been the last flickering of the 200 year old popular desire for liberty, equality, and fraternity in Europe, so concertedly denied by the transition intellectuals?

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