A Romanianist's perspective on 1989

Katherine Verdery

Like other area specialists, I was astonished when, in the spring of 1989, the Hungarians took down the barbed wire separating them from Austria and the Poles elected the first non-communist prime minister, without arousing repercussions from the Soviet Union. I followed with amazement the news of what was happening in East Germany in late summer and fall—the hoards of people camping out in embassies, the ever-larger demonstrations in Leipzig. In November, as head of an American Anthropological Association committee to promote scholarly relations with Soviet ethnography, I was host to some Soviet scholars at an IREX-funded conference on ethnic relations, held at Princeton.¹ The last day of the conference was 9 November. As we emerged from our final session that afternoon, we learned that the Berlin Wall had just been opened. Although my lack of Russian prevented me from discussing it informally with our Soviet guests, who departed precipitously, one of my colleagues recalls their delegation chief saying as he hurried off that nothing would ever be the same again. In retrospect, one could hardly have chosen a better harbinger of the future on that date than a conference on ethnic relations in the Soviet Union.

December 1989 in Bucharest and its aftermath

I spent the next few weeks glued to my television set in Baltimore, watching what unfolded in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria. In early

December my university's News Office solicited from me an op-ed piece, which was published in the *New York Times*, concerning whether Romania would be next (I said, maybe). I followed with growing excitement the crowd actions in Romania's western city of Timișoara that began on 16 December and culminated in armed repression; like other viewers of live video feed from there, I was horrified at the dead bodies piling up (later revealed to have been exhumed from a cemetery). On 21 December I watched the ABC evening news and saw the huge meeting in Bucharest at which crowds booed Ceaușescu, who faltered as the jeering spread, waving his arms in alarm and calling out "Hello! hello!" At that moment I realized the end was in sight for the Romanian Communist Party. The next morning I got up at 7:00 a.m. to drive north for Christmas and immediately turned on the news, to learn that Ceaușescu had fled the capital. Absolutely jubilant, I picked up the phone and called my friend and fellow Romanianist Gail Kligman in California (where it was then 4:00 a.m.). When she answered from the depths of sleep, without even identifying myself I shouted, "He's fallen!!" (*a căzut!!*) I can still remember where I was standing and how I felt as we celebrated together on the phone. I listened to every radio station between Baltimore and my destination in Massachusetts, and I spent most of the holiday following the story instead of spending time with my family. The chaos, the confusion, the bullets ricocheting off buildings in Bucharest's Palace Square, the uncertainty as

to who was on whose side and what was really happening, the news reports estimating tens of thousands dead ... despite my sixteen years of studying Romania, I felt almost as baffled as everyone else. Then on Christmas day, the bodies of the Ceaușescus, into whom the execution squad had reportedly fired over 200 bullets in a frenzy of enthusiasm—a sentiment I could well understand, though the “show trial” and execution filled me with misgivings.

Frequently on the phone with Romanian friends during those days, I absorbed and shared their state of euphoria. It lasted until I saw a prescient report on the US television program “Nightline” by reporter Ted Koppel, which aired in February 1990 and claimed that the revolution had been “stolen.” At the time, it made me furious and depressed, but he turned out to be right. Indeed, how much of a “revolution” happened in Romania remains a matter of debate to this day. It is certain that various groups in the country had taken note of developments elsewhere and were trying to organize for change. Those who initially emerged in the front ranks of the new government came from a broad cross-section of possible interests, including members of the communist apparatus, clearly not unified in the manner of their opposition to the Ceaușescu regime. Precisely because—unlike Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia, for example—Romania had not seen anything like the growth of a non-communist opposition or protracted Round Table talks in which the opposition extracted serious concessions from the Communist Party, some second-tier party apparatchiks found allies in the secret police and military and were able to force out their opponents, change their rhetoric, and maintain a grip on power, albeit in a much-altered environment.² The familiarity of many of the “new” faces, however, made it very important to *claim* that a revolution had occurred—if not indeed to *stage* one, with all those ricocheting bullets sowing terror that would justify the Ceaușescus’ execution. In other countries the visible change of leadership made such staging unnecessary.³

Thereafter, each Romanian government sought to create distance between itself and the

communist idea, and battles around history and memory were fought over what really happened in 1989. These culminated in the 2006 Final Report of the Presidential Commission set up by President Traian Băsescu to condemn the communist regime. He presented this Report to Romania’s parliament with the following words:

“Taking full responsibility, we meet today to lay to rest a somber chapter in our country’s past... For Romanian citizens, communism was an imposed regime ... a totalitarian regime both begun and ended through violence. It ... stole five decades of Romania’s modern history, trampled the law and obligated citizens to live with lies and in fear... We have the necessary data to condemn Romania’s communist regime without right of appeal. *A democracy without memory is in a state of grave suffering. We must not forget, so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past*” (Tismăneanu, Dobrinu, and Vasile 2007: 11–12; original emphasis).

With these words, certain politicians and intellectuals sought to embrace Europe, on the eve of Romania’s accession to the European Union, while denying a part of the European heritage and silencing those who may have less condemnatory opinions. This official act is one more nail in the coffin of leftist alternatives for Romania’s populace.

Was some sort of change in Romania inevitable, in 1989? Once the other Eastern European regimes had collapsed without provoking Soviet reprisals, some sort of change there was indeed inevitable, but absent those other regime changes, I doubt that anything would have happened. In other words, the collapse of communist party rule had network properties: it was not a story of separate regimes collapsing. This does not mean, however, that the outcomes would be identical—as has been amply shown by the different trajectories of these countries since 1989. In Romania, the manner of Ceaușescu’s overthrow had a tremendous impact on the subsequent transformation. It gave the edge to forces within the party and Securitate at the expense of oppositional groups outside the cen-

ters of power. The result was to prolong party rule significantly beyond its apparent end and inhibit the development of a pluri-political field. In addition, it perpetuated the party's clientelistic system, undermining the formation of true parties in favor of what I have called "unruly coalitions" that bore party façades (Verdery 1995, 1996). Given significant elite continuity in the context of general economic ruin and a weakened, impoverished populace, it made much more sense for the elite—regardless of political party—to focus on short-term plundering of social assets than to plan for longer-term development of the national economy (see, e.g., Ganey 2007). The general population held such limited resources that elites had little interest in cultivating its support and development, and its weakness precluded organized resistance to elite predation. The plundering of the nation's resources is not a story unique to Romania, but I believe it was worse there owing to the limited nature of the regime change, as compared with Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia.

1989 in global context

In his meditation on 1989 David Ost (this volume) raises the question of "structure and agency" in the Polish transformation, observing that once the changes got under way, not only did people's sense of agency disappear but structural causes became more determinant than the actions of individuals. The biggest question about 1989, it seems to me now, is how the events of that year fit into the largest level of structural determination: the global transformation of capitalism that was already under way and that surely played a more significant role in the events of 1989 than could be seen at the time. Although I do not have an answer to this question, I think it must be raised. Don Kalb (this volume) offers some provocative ideas on it as well. The collapse of communism was going on at the same time as the rise of complex financial instruments like the collateralized debt obligations (first issued in 1987), structured investment vehicles (1988), value-at-risk assessments (1989), credit-

default swaps (early 1990s), and other forms of securitization later implicated in the crash of September 2008. David Harvey and others saw in the changes of the 1980s a shift in the nature of capital accumulation, as finance took over from the industrial manufacturing sector the "steering" of capitalist political economy and ushered in what is generally called the era of "neo-liberalism," dedicated to introducing greater flexibility in place of the rigidities of the earlier form of accumulation (Harvey 1989, 2005; see also Arrighi 1994). Kalb observes that this "steering" tended to be away from long-term investment and toward speculation—to which I would add, away from what socialist economies had striven for toward what they had expressly resisted.

As I and others have argued elsewhere, the tentacles of international finance had reached deep into the socialist bloc economies as early as the 1970s, when borrowing from the West to improve economic productivity became the alternative to programs of internal reform of the communist system (Verdery 1996, ch. 1; see also Bunce 1985). The crisis brought on by the rise of Solidarity indicated the possible limits of that strategy, as the size of Poland's foreign debt terrified West German and US bankers as much as it did the communist elite. But the magnitude of the reserves locked up in state-run socialist economies, most of them far more stable than possible sites of investment in the so-called Third World, must have remained an enticement for international financiers in ways we have not yet appreciated, in our efforts to account for socialism's collapse in 1989. I refer not simply to the gradual penetration of manufacturing interests from without, such as the Western computer companies looking for markets behind the Iron Curtain and the various forms of "pre-privatization" signaled by scholars like Staniszkis (1991: 129–130) and Stark (1990: 364–365). Those developments participated in the sphere of production, not that of speculation, where the most momentous changes in the global economy were occurring. How did developments *in that latter sphere* contribute to 1989? Partly in the form of cheap credit that, drawing private capital outward, underwrote the renewal of the region's

productive capacity, as Kalb suggests; but how else? Was it the speculative environment of the globalized financial regime that encouraged the forms of predation by Romanian elites, which I noted above? The extraordinary upheavals in Romania's financial system, as banks were created and fell with dizzying speed, along with investment funds and pyramid schemes that defrauded the public of its savings, suggest as much. And how has the fate of complex financial instruments diminished the prospects of people in the former socialist bloc since then? Partly by further depressing wages and eliminating social welfare arrangements that were already compromised during the 1990s, and by expulsions of migrant labor from Western Europe back into the Eastern EU states, where their social safety nets have been permanently eroded.

These kinds of questions, it seems to me, are essential to gauging what 1989 was really about, to understanding how it came to pass, and to assessing anew its long-term effects. Might these effects include the emergence of new leftist movements, as the populations that were once taught to be "workers in workers' states" organize themselves against a capitalism they were long taught to fear, and have come to fear again? Or have conservative forces successfully squashed such possibilities, with moves such as Romanian president Băscescu's above-cited condemnation of communism?

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Notes

1. IREX is the International Research and Exchanges Board, set up in 1968 to facilitate scholarly exchanges with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.
2. For a discussion of the events in Romania in December 1989 written shortly thereafter, see Verdery and Kligman (1992).
3. Whether or not Romania's new leaders did in fact stage the revolution remains a matter of interpretation.

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