

Review - 1989 as a Political World Event

Written by Flavia Gasbarri

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FLAVIA GASBARRI, MAR 25 2014

1989 as a Political World Event: Democracy, Europe and the New International System in the Age of Globalization
Edited by: Jacques Rupnik
Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012

In autumn 2009, the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall provided the international relations community with the opportunity to gather and reflect on the events that marked the *annus mirabilis* 1989 in Eastern Europe. *1989 as a Political World Event: Democracy, Europe and the New International System in the Age of Globalization*, edited by Jacques Rupnik (Sciences Po) is one of the outcomes of that reflection. The volume originated from an international conference held in October 2009 at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) at Sciences Po in Paris.

This collection of essays thus aims at providing a general assessment of the first two decades of the post-1989 era. As the title explains, along with Rupnik's one-paragraph introduction, the peculiarity of this overview is its focus on 1989 as "world event", rather than on the events themselves. Each of the four parts of the book, therefore, deals with one specific aspect of the transformations and legacies brought about by 1989. The first part deals with the general interpretation and narrative of 1989. The second and the third parts provide an extensive analysis of the two main legacies of the 1989 revolution: democracy and capitalism. The fourth and last part focuses on the status of the broader international system brought about by the end of the Cold War.

Part I begins with a transcript of a speech significantly titled "On the unpredictability of history" delivered by Vaclav Havel at the aforementioned conference. In the three following articles which compose Part I, Jacques Rupnik, Karoline Postel-Vinay (Sciences Po) and Zaki Laidi (Sciences Po) introduce and discuss some general issues about 1989 as a political world event: was the 1989 revolution in Eastern Europe an actual revolution or was it just a process of imitation, through reforms, of Western models? Are democracy and capitalism the ineluctable and most desirable path for all countries moving away from dictatorship and socialist economies? Are American global predominance and European integration still at the core of the international system? To what extent did 1989 have a global significance outside Europe and the Western world?

The first three articles of part II ("Democracy and its discontents") seem to share the idea that 20 years after 1989 it is possible to detect a general "fatigue of democracy", as well as of the possibility of spreading the democratic model across the globe. The authors provide different explanations for this trend. According to Ivan Krastew (Centre for Liberal Strategies), the post-1989 inclination to consider democracies like "satisfaction machines" in comparison to authoritarian regimes has undermined that very advantage of a democratic system to manage the normal and inevitable dissatisfaction within its society. Rupnik identifies the cause of said "fatigue" in the fact that the Eastern European states imitated an already fatigued model from the Western countries. Thomas Carothers (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) stresses instead the influence of those events that have naturally undermined some post-1989 assumptions about democracy's unique value – such as the strong economic performances of authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China – or certainty about how democracy occurs and can be supported by external intervention – such as the Bush administration's 2003 failure in Iraq. The following article by Grzegorz Ekiert and Roberto Foa (both of Harvard University) intends to provide a more balanced assessment of the standard

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argument about the weakness of civil societies in post-communist Europe. The final two contributions of this section, written by Richard Banégas (Sciences Po) and Oliver Roy (European University Institute), focus on the more recent democratic experiences in Africa and in the Arab World respectively. While in the first case, little reference is made to 1989, in the latter Roy does discuss the long-term impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall on the Arab World, as well as possible similarities between 1989 and the Arab Spring.

Part III explores the “varieties of capitalism in the age of globalization”. The introduction to the first article, written by Leszek Balcerowicz (Warsaw School of Economics), underlines a shared view throughout the book: namely that “democracy can be lastingly combined only with capitalism, while capitalism can co-exist both with democracy and a variety of authoritarian regimes” (p. 129). Showing how the biggest economic crises occur in systems where state intervention is almost unlimited, the author concludes that the 2009 economic and financial crises do not challenge the assumptions of the post-1989 economic reforms in Eastern Europe but rather vindicate them. In the following articles Claus Offe (Humboldt University) and Jean-Francois Huchet (INALCO-Langues’O) discuss respectively “the post-socialism capitalism” in Eastern Europe and the “authoritarian state capitalism” in China. While Offe aims to show the current impasse of what he defines as an entirely novel type of political economy brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall, Huchet offers a quite positive view of the reforms implemented by the Chinese Communist Party in response to the collapse of socialism in Europe.

The four articles comprising Part IV deal with four global actors of the current international system: the United States, Russia, China and the United Nations. John L. Harper (John Hopkins SAIS Bologna) argues that there is a substantial continuity in tendencies of thought in pre- and post-1989 US foreign policy. As for Russia, Marie Mendras (Sciences Po) gives a picture of a country trapped between the trauma of 1991 and its “quest for lost power”. Jean-Philippe Beja (French Centre for Research on Contemporary China) focuses on China’s policy of “doing everything” to reinforce the dictatorship of the party since the Tiananmen Square massacre, which was the event that in the Chinese perspective marked the year 1989. He concludes by stressing the “impressive results” achieved by China on the international stage. Finally, Jean-Marie Guéhenno (former UN Under-Secretary General for peacekeeping operations) summarizes the history of “paralysis and failure” which has marked the development of the UN since 1989, and shows the unrealism of the hope raised by its post-Cold War activism.

Overall, the book is an interesting journey through a broad and multifaceted variety of issues affecting the post-Cold War era. It conveys the idea that, without questioning the caesura represented by 1989, it is however necessary to acknowledge the nuances within that turning point, as well as to reconsider some early Manichean interpretations like the theories on the “End of the History” or the “Clash of Civilizations”. To this end, the authors point out the elements of continuity between the pre- and post-1989 era, or the partial dispersion of the main legacies of 1989, or the trends that do not fit within the paradigms born in that year.

One of the merits of the book is thus its effort to establish an extensive picture and a continuous narrative of the last 20 years throughout a highly fragmented scenario. It is interesting how this picture and narrative also includes and embraces events like the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2008 global economic crisis and the Arab Spring, that are often considered caesuras as relevant as the end of the Cold War. The book generally considers these events as part of that continuum and helps to place them in the historical and theoretical perspective of the 1989 legacy.

In this regard, the collection would have benefited from a proper, extensive introduction to present and summarize the variety of the issues taken into account in the book. Equally, the absence of a final chapter to draw some common conclusions from the arguments made across the essays is notable. This would have probably helped to also put together an updated interpretation of 1989, in order to rectify those aforementioned early theories the book aims to question. Despite its premises, therefore, these deficiencies result in the value of the project lying more in some of the single contributions of the authors rather than in an organic, global vision of the book.

Furthermore, the intent to go beyond the single occurrences of 1989 by focusing on 1989 as “world event” leads to a quite contradictory outcome. On the one hand the book makes the praiseworthy attempt – still not so common in the comparable literature – to take into account extra-European scenarios and actors. In this regard, Rupnik’s assertion that “1989 had a global impact, but meant different things to a variety of actors in different parts of the world” (p. 7) is

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quite relevant and clearly expresses the need to confront the Western perception of 1989 with the ones from Asia and Africa. On the other hand however, the manifestly Euro-centric perspective of the book – explicitly stated in the title – does not allow for a truly extensive analysis of this aspect. Considering the growing literature on the developments of the Cold War in the Third World, the parallel analysis of the global consequences of its end will probably need further attention in the future.

Despite some limitations, the book is a good read for its intended audience – namely political scientists, scholars of international relations and European politics – and can also furnish some useful insights to scholars of international history.

About the author:

Flavia Gasbarri is a PhD candidate and teaching assistant in the Department of War Studies at King College London. Her PhD thesis, titled “*The United States and the End of the Cold War in Africa*”, investigates how the end of the Cold War – and the consequent transformation of the international system – affected US foreign policy towards Africa between 1988 and 1994. In April-September 2012 she spent one semester in the United States as Junior Visiting Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC.

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