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# Europe at 21: Transitions and Transformations since 1989

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# Europe at 21: Transitions and Transformations since 1989

## 1

If, as I believe (Outhwaite: 2008), there is something that can be called European society, it seems fairly uncontroversial that the two most important things that have happened to it are marked by the years 1989, the *annus mirabilis* of the anticommunist revolutions in central and eastern Europe, and 2004, the year of the EU's eastern enlargement.<sup>1</sup> Both these years need to be understood in an extended sense. '1989' began at least as early as 1988 in Poland and perhaps Hungary and might, though this is more contentious, be extended to cover the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the 'colour revolutions' which are still continuing. 2004, similarly, needs arguably to be extended back to the 'Enlargement without Accession' (Spence, 1991) of 1990 in Germany and forward to the 2007 accession of Bulgaria and Romania and the impending accession of Croatia and other future member states. And the two core years are of course linked: 1989 was not a sufficient condition for 2004, but it was certainly a necessary one. We can ask whether 1989 could have come earlier, say in 1968 with the Prague Spring or 1980 with the rise of Solidarity, or maybe a decade later without Gorbachev.

If 1789 was the defining event of the modern political imagination, it remains to be seen what place will be given to the anticommunist revolutions of 1989. On the one hand, the 'long' 1989 running from Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985, or the reforms which he initiated soon afterwards, to the end of the USSR in 1991 marks the end of the Cold War which, we should never forget, could easily have killed us all. As

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<sup>1</sup> For Robert Cooper (2003: 3), 1989 was the most important date for the European state system since 1648, since it marks the end of the Westphalian state model. Here again, the rise of the EU, along with globalisation, are the positive complement to this. The title of this article reflects my sense that 1989 marks the rebirth of a politically unitary, if not yet fully unified Europe.

events in global risk management go, it doesn't get much bigger than this. On the other hand, a number of commentators have stressed the absence of really new ideas in the 1989, especially after the rapid eclipse of civil society movements like Solidarity in Poland or Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia; Habermas, for example, has called it the 'catching-up' or 'rectifying' revolution; a return to democracy (and capitalism), and to the 'normal' path of post WWII European development.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the 'new world order' proclaimed by President Bush I was already looking threadbare long before the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001.

In Europe, what had begun as a reaction to the consequences of nationalism in the two world wars had been developing gradually and haltingly into a new political model: an 'ever closer union' of more and more European states. The ultimate destination or finalité of what has become the European Union remains more or less as unclear as when Andrew Shonfield (1973) examined it in his Reith Lectures in 1972. Briefly, however, the EU is incipiently postnational, despite or because of its continuing symbiotic relationship with its member-states. It is post-imperial, in that however much it might superficially come to resemble the Austro-Hungarian Empire it will surely retain principles of democracy more characteristic of the national state (Beck and Grande 2004). And it is perhaps (and this is part at least of its appeal), the beginning of a form of post-European cosmopolitan democracy attractive not just to Europe but to many other parts of the world. Jürgen Habermas (1991) has aptly described this as 'Europe's second chance'. The continent or subcontinent exported not just political and cultural modernity, which on the whole people want, and capitalism, which they either want or see as inescapable, but also a nation-state structure which, whatever may be said in its favour, was clearly also responsible for war and genocide. Wherever we might want to locate Europe on the spectrum between 'top of the world class' and the disruptive world bully deserving exclusion, its balance sheet in the second half of what we eurocentrically call the second millennium is at least ambiguous.

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<sup>2</sup> In an alternative analysis, Dick Howard (2009) has argued that 1989 *did* offer an alternative political model but that the west failed to respond to it. 'Without a sympathetic echo from the West for their renewal of political life rather than simply for their casting off of communism, the critical forces in the East were overwhelmed...'

## 2

I shall return to this theme at the end, after looking more closely at 1989 and postcommunist transition. There is a further dimension to an inquiry into 1989. A long-standing lament in the philosophy of social science is that the problems of the social sciences, their low level of development relative to the natural sciences and their relative lack of what Giddens called 'revelatory power' can be partly explained by the impossibility of experimentation, except at the most trivial and small-scale level. Without going into the details of those debates, we can at least welcome the fact that communist and postcommunist Europe does offer something like an experimental situation: Stalinist 'socialism in many countries' after 1945, followed by postcommunist transition more or less rapidly after 1989. The two processes differed of course in that Stalinisation was *supposed* to be a more or less homogeneous and homogenising process (as reflected in the German slogan: 'learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win'). Divergencies such as the abandonment of agricultural collectivisation in Poland were seen as dangerously deviant (and sometimes invoked to explain the weakness of socialism in Poland). Postcommunist transition, by contrast, was supposed to be a process of liberation towards a set of freely chosen alternative futures – which makes the degree of observed convergence interesting in itself.

1989, then, raises issues of the periodisation and explanation of the origins of what Jowitt (1992) called 'the Leninist extinction'. There are substantial disagreements over the role of dissidence and the relative importance of revolution from below and implosion or state collapse (or mutation) from above. This in turn raises the even more fundamental and wide-ranging question, which I shall concentrate on here, of how exceptional 1989 was in the chronology of post-communist transition. On one reading, which I tend to favour, it was the fore-runner of what has happened or is likely to happen relatively soon in the rest of the originally communist world. People power in Ukraine in 2004 is not, I think, fundamentally different from people

power in Leipzig, Berlin or Prague in 1989<sup>3</sup>; Belarus in 2010 confronts many of the same issues as the communist states in 1988 or 1989.

On the other reading, which also has a lot to be said for it,<sup>4</sup> 1989 is exceptional in introducing a genuinely democratic transition process which was continued in the Baltic states but not in other parts of the former Soviet Union. On the one hand we have democracies which, despite difficult challenges, can meet the Copenhagen criteria with more or less ease<sup>5</sup>; on the other are at best 'managed' or 'sovereign' democracies and at worst persistently authoritarian states.

Václav Havel's memoirs (2008: 21-3) provide an interesting angle on this issue in some reflections following a meeting with Yushchenko in Washington in 2005 where he presented the following analysis:

after the fall of communism... there arose in most countries of the former Soviet bloc a transitional phase that we might provisionally call 'postcommunism'. It's a period of unprecedented and rapid privatization not yet contained within a solid, tried-and-true legal framework and in which, naturally, the former communist *nomenklatura*, or communist enterprise managers, took a significant part...In subtle ways, the economic power links up with political power and the power of the media to create something I once called Mafia-capitalism, though it could equally be called Mafia-democracy...

But as the years go by and a new generation comes to maturity, the public gradually begins to lose patience with that state of affairs, until one day it revolts. And what happens then is a kind of second-generation revolution or – more precisely – a completion of the original revolution...And just as postcommunism has a slightly different form in each country, the revolts against it are different as

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<sup>3</sup> Ukraine had in fact seen one of the most innovative dissident groups of the late 1980s: the 'Lion Society' of Lviv (Kenney, 2002: 123-30). For a more sceptical view of 'colour revolutions', see Lane 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Ray (2009: 322) takes this line, arguing that 'the 1989 pattern of regime change appears to be exceptional and actually part of the emergence of an increasingly differentiated and uncertain world system.'

<sup>5</sup> At least the first two (liberal democracy and market economy). If the third (support for closer political integration) was interpreted strictly, it is not clear how many old or new member states would qualify.



well: revolt can sometimes take the form of a surprising shift in voter support (that's how the Slovaks settled with Mečiarism), at other times the peaceful pressure of popular demonstrations (Georgia, Ukraine). The particular importance of the Ukrainian Orange revolution is not, however, that it took place in such a large and important country in the former Soviet empire or that it inspired many countries still burdened with postcommunism, but in something perhaps even more significant; that revolution gave a clear answer to a still open question: where does one of the major spheres of civilization in the world today (the so-called West) end, and where does the other sphere (the so-called East, or rather Euro-Asia) begin?

We might take issue with Havel's Eurocentrism, but the important point, I think, is his notion of a shared postcommunist condition, in the particular way in which he defined it,<sup>6</sup> and a continuity between the earlier and later phases of the transition.

### 3

We do not know, I think, either as analysts or as policy-makers, how optimistic or pessimistic to be about this situation, or about where the line between genuine and pseudo-democracies is likely to fall in the coming years. What we can do, as well as following current developments as closely as possible, is to look back over the period from 1989 to the present and at the interplay between what the biologist Jacques Monod (1970) called chance and necessity (see also Sarotte, 2009: 210-14). In three at least of the 1989 revolutions, sheer accident played a crucial part. The best known is the opening of the Berlin Wall, which rapidly escalated into its destruction. Another is the rumoured death of a demonstrator in Prague on November 17<sup>th</sup>. In the event, like the premature announcement of the opening of the Berlin Wall, it escalated instead into the unexpected success of the revolution. This was a provocation by the secret police, who caused one of their own undercover agents to 'die', in the hope

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rupnik (2007: 30) recalls that he used the term in the same way in an interview with Rupnik in *Le Monde*, 24 February 2005, defining postcommunism as 'un mélange de régime autoritaire et de capitalisme mafieux'.

that this would provoke the crowds into actions which would justify a crack-down by the police and the authorities.<sup>7</sup> And if President Ceausescu had realised how the rally on 22 December would turn out, with the crowds not cheering but jeering, he might have chosen instead to give a fireside TV speech.

As Havel's reflections suggest, the most fundamental question is perhaps the analysis of 1989 itself. To cut a long story short, if we see 1989 less as a victory for the people and more as the outcome of strategies adopted by elites to preserve their position by other means, the less the contrast with the post-Soviet scene. Looking from the West, we tend to ask why the East has so far 'failed' to achieve liberal capitalism and democracy. Looking from China, the question is perhaps a different one: why did communist elites in the Soviet bloc fail to retain power while embarking on a necessary marketisation of the economy?<sup>8</sup> It is clear, I think, that we need to keep both lines of analysis, top-down and bottom-up, in play at the same time. And we should avoid assuming necessary differences, dictated by geography or political culture, where there is more like an interplay between structures and contingencies.

There are models for this sort of analysis in, for example, Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions*. Skocpol stressed the interaction between social pressure from below and state crisis at the top, and she also, though only in a footnote, noted that '...social-scientific analyses of revolutions almost *never*...give sufficient analytic weight to the conjunctural, unfolding interactions of originally separately determined processes (Skocpol, 1979: 320, quoted in Sewell, 2005: 97-8). Looking further back, among the first social theorists to address the theme of the intersection of structural factors and contingencies was Montesquieu.<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville is also relevant here, and his methodological reflections on writing the history of the times remain highly pertinent.

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<sup>7</sup> Garton Ash (2000:438) interviewed the officer, by then working as a pawnbroker, and asked him how he "died". He replies, 'Well, really I just fell over'.

<sup>8</sup> I remember a visit to Sussex by a Chinese delegation at the end of 1989 whose leader stressed the irrelevance to China of what had just happened in Europe.

<sup>9</sup> As well as *The Spirit of the Laws*, see also Montesquieu's 'Essay on the Causes That May Affect Men's Minds and Characters' and Melvin Richter's 'Introduction', *Political Theory* 4, 2: 132-162.

...the details become known only by posthumous revelations and are often unknown to contemporaries. What contemporaries know better than posterity is the movement of minds and general passions of the times of which they feel the last tremors in their own minds and hearts. It is the true relationship between the principal actors and the principal facts, and between the great historical movements, which those close to the times described perceive better than posterity. It is for posterity to write the history of details. Those close to the events are better placed to trace the general history and general causes, the grand movement of facts and current of opinion of which men who are placed too far away cannot form an idea because such things cannot be learned from memoirs. (Tocqueville, 1856: 150-1)

I might mention here two other relevant theoretical resources. One is Saskia Sassen's notion of 'capabilities', developed in one context but then 'jumping tracks' and operating in a different way in another. Sassen (2008) is concerned with capabilities developed in the late medieval period but also operating in the national-state order and those moving similarly from the national-state system to the global order. (An example of the latter would be the Bretton Woods currency system, developed just after World War II in the world of national states but prefiguring the institutions of globalism.) Shifts of this kind produce what she calls the 'illegibility of social change':

That which has not yet gained formal recognition can often be an indicator of change, of the constituting and inserting of new substantive logics in a particular domain of the social...which is thereby altered even though its formal representation may remain unchanged...

One of my concerns here is deciphering deep structural shifts underlying surface continuities and, alternatively, deep structural continuities underlying surface discontinuities. This then also rests on my conceptualization of certain conditions and dynamics as capabilities that can jump tracks and wind up lodged in path dependencies that diverge from the original ones.

(Sassen, 2008: 12).

An approach of this kind is very helpful in thinking about the interplay of the old and the new in postcommunist transition. Ken Jowitt, whose work is substantially in this area, looks out similarly, without much enthusiasm, for the new vanguard:

For each new way of life there must be a social base uprooted from its previous identity, available for a new one, attracted to and validated by the features of the new ideology; a social base from which a new elite stratum emerges: courtiers in absolutist states, ascetic entrepreneurs in liberal capitalist states, Bolshevik cadres in Leninist regimes, and the SS in the Third Reich...

...the emergence of a new way of life requires the existence of a core site generating, concentrating and then 'exporting' a surplus of leadership talent and resources to the 'unreconstructed' society it intends to transform: Versailles, Cluny, THE Party, London, Rome, Mecca-Medina, and Gdansk all played this creative role. (Jowitt, 1992: 267-8)<sup>10</sup>

In the postcommunist case, I suspect one would have to think in terms of multiple strata of 'winners': *some* entrepreneurs, *some* reformist politicians, *some* intellectuals and so on. The sites too would be multiple: stock exchanges and business schools certainly, but also educational organisations and programmes sustained by Soros and other NGOs.

#### 4

What then happened in 1989? I shall begin with a 'Western' perspective and then move to an 'Eastern' one.

One of the central issues here can be briefly stated as follows. What I have tried, somewhat speculatively, in my contribution to a forthcoming collective volume on

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<sup>10</sup> He is, or at least was, 'looking out' for this in both senses of the term: in a slightly later essay, he writes that 'it will be demagogues, priests, and colonels more than democrats and capitalists who will shape Eastern Europe's institutional identity.' (Jowitt, 1992: 300)

*The Global 1989*, to present as ‘postcommunist universals’ may or may not be of relevance outside the area of East Central Europe which has attracted most attention on the literature on postcommunist transition.

Ezra Vogel wrote at the end of the 1960s of ‘communist universals’ (one-party state, planned economy, etc.),<sup>11</sup> and is worth asking what we might categorise as postcommunist universals. Among these are:

- 1) a relatively peaceful transfer of power, sometimes involving a ‘transition pact’ or ‘handshake’ between the old elites and
- 2) a broad-spectrum political opposition movement, such as Solidarity in Poland, Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia or Sąjūdis in Lithuania, which tends to break up soon after the take-over along familiar or less familiar lines of political division.
- 3) an economic (and therefore social) ‘transition shock’, amounting to something from two to five or more years of negative growth (‘transition recession’) and enterprise closures, unemployment, high suicide and mortality rates etc.
- 4) discrediting, often followed by relatively rapid rehabilitation, of previously ruling communist parties, this sometimes including purges and
- 5) ‘lustration’ – the exposure of members of earlier elites and others (including members of the anticommunist opposition movements) found to have collaborated with the security police.
- 6) Finally, a pattern of politics characterised by a quite substantial degree of egalitarianism (or at least opposition to growing inequalities) but without forms of class-based politics still found in much of non-postcommunist Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> See Chalmers Johnson (1970) and Tókes (1997: 109).

These processes modulated differently in different states (or, in the Czechoslovak case, different parts of what was then the same state), but what is striking in hindsight is the degree of convergence.<sup>12</sup> The bulk of formerly communist Europe is now in the European Union, as noted earlier, with economies and political regimes at least sufficiently respectable to satisfy the accession criteria. The striking differences in initial conditions, such as the substantial private sector and opposition in Poland, contrasting with virtually no private sector and an almost entirely underground opposition in Czechoslovakia, may have influenced the initial political shape of the transition but seem to have had rather little long-term effect. The same goes for the violent postcommunist transition shock in Poland (and, in a different form, in Germany), contrasting with a more gradualist approach in the Czech and Slovak republics.

Elsewhere in the former communist bloc, however, models of elite continuity, well analysed by Tucker in another chapter of *The Global 1989* concerned with China and Russia, may be more appropriate. For Tucker (ms. p. 1), 'Post-totalitarian Russia and China emerged from a process of the adjustment of the rights of the late-totalitarian elite - the *nomenklatura* - to its interests...the evolution of the totalitarian ruling class from revolutionary to capitalist.' He concludes (ms. final page): '1989 was actually more global and less revolutionary than has hitherto been acknowledged.'

An intermediate position between the approach with which I began, focussing on the central European 1989 as the ideal type, and Tucker's model of a global process of elite recycling, running 'from China through Russia to Central Europe', is the fairly conventional one of drawing some sort of geographical dividing line. This is what was practised de facto by policy-makers, notably (and after a considerable delay) by the EU, and many academic analysts.<sup>13</sup> The fault-line between 'good' and 'bad'

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<sup>12</sup> In the original models of convergence popular in the 1950s and 1960s, the alleged process was seen as being driven by the functional imperatives of industrial society. In the 1990s, convergence was driven by external imperatives, varyingly identified as globalisation, the influence of outside advisors (Wedel, 1998) and the increasing influence of the European Union (see Outhwaite and Ray, 2005: chapter 4). In Germany, of course, there was a more or less immediate implantation of Western practices (Thumfart, 2002), and the EU was present from an early stage (Spence, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> There is a useful critical discussion by Jeffrey Klopstein (2009).

versions of postcommunist transition, with the 2004 accession states roughly on one side and the rest of the bloc mostly on the other, again raises issues of the interplay between long-term influences of entrenched patterns of social and political organisation and short-term contingencies such as the eclipse of Mečiar, which shifted Slovakia more or less overnight in 1998 from one side to the another – at least in the optic of the EU and other influential international actors.

## 5

Whatever view one takes of continuities, subterranean forces and so on, it makes sense to start with a kind of phenomenology of transition: the way in which it appeared to protagonists and observers at the time. Here one can rely, with all due caution, on contemporary writing and retrospective memoirs, interviews etc.

I begin then with the Stunde Null of the 1989 handovers. (The Czechoslovak case is perhaps the most clear-cut here, since elsewhere there had mostly been a more gradual process of undermining the old regime and incubating the new.)<sup>14</sup> There are crudely three reasons why one might do something in the early days, such as abolish the secret police or central economic planning, or perhaps initiate a privatisation programme or a purge of the former elites:

- 1) You want to do it
- 2) You are under some sort of pressure to do it
- 3) Others are doing it and you go along with it

First, there is the question who 'you' are. In Poland and Hungary, there was a fairly well established counter-elite, whereas in Czechoslovakia there was not much more than a cluster of dissidents with a penumbra of sympathisers. As Havel (2007: 55) puts it, 'we had no entr'acte of perestroika or reform communism, but we started

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<sup>14</sup> There are of course important and controversial issues here about the role of dissidence across the bloc in the run-up to 1989. See for example Wydra, 2007.

directly, after a few days of revolution, to build a normal democratic society'. On the other hand, however, as Wheaton and Kavan (1992: 117) point out, in Czechoslovakia

The existence of networks and a more or less ready-made leaders contrasts with the situation in Romania and East Germany, where the party provided the leaders for the revolutions. Further, the Czech dissidents had contacts and sympathizers, even as high as the upper echelons of the party...

Even in Czechoslovakia, then, there was considerable continuity, notably at the very top, where Deputy Prime Minister Marian Čalfa became transitional Prime Minister in the 'government of national understanding' set up on December 10, 1989, just three weeks after the November 17 rally (and was later reappointed by Havel after free elections).

As Havel (2007:72) recalls it,

He told me quite clearly that the Communist Party had lost power, that there was no point in even talking to it, and that he, as the top negotiator for the state, would make the decisions with us, Civic Forum and the Public Against Violence, on the mechanisms of the transition of power...

Ultimately, it was Čalfa who taught the new government how to govern. There was not a lot that was specifically communistic in what you call the 'technology of power' once the leading role of the Communist Party no longer applied, and things were no longer decided first in the Politburo. The government simply meets on certain days; there's an agenda, there are procedural rules, the ministers have to receive their briefing materials in time, and so on...

There could be no question of just 'dismantling' the existing structures. Instead, 'We tried to fill existing posts with new, uncompromised people and then, by democratic means – that is, by passing constitutional and ordinary laws - to carry out the systemic changes we were able to agree on as the most necessary and the most important.' (Havel 2007: 69-70). He goes on to point out (p.71) something



documented by many surveys, notably those conducted by Richard Rose and summarised in Rose 2009, that where communist party membership was so widespread, it does not mark a significant difference in political attitudes.

Here, then, is one of the less 'pacted' transitions in the bloc, and even here the continuities are striking. The Czech experience may suggest caution in taking too pessimistic or conspiratorial a view of transitions further to the east.

## 6

What then were the options in 1989? I shall mention here only two obvious ones, 'no-brainers' if you like; the abolition of the secret police and of central planning of the economy. Even for the first of these, however, the demobilisations in Central Europe took a month or more and, in the case of the German Stasi, a massive demonstration (Sarotte, 2009: 96-7). At the other extreme is the outlying case of Belarus, where the KGB has not even been rebadged, as in Russia, but proudly continues under its old name. In the Czechoslovak case, interestingly, Havel (2007: 106) explains the fact that it took a month to disband the StB as follows:

The secret police had countless buildings, both known and unknown, all over the country. We didn't occupy them most probably because we had no army or police division that was both loyal to us and well informed.<sup>15</sup>

The later policy of 'lustration', which went further in Czechslovakia than anywhere else except Germany, was introduced substantially because of fears of a communist come-back (Wheaton and Kavan, 1992: 179-182). Of the immediate post-revolutionary period, Havel (2007: 62) comments:

We talked a lot at the time about setting up a kind of 'ethical tribunal' to render a verdict on the moral and political responsibility for

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<sup>15</sup> See also Wheaton and Kavan, 1992: 136-7

conditions under the previous regime, but there obviously wasn't the appetite, or even the energy, for that.

The saddest thing of all is our miserable record in successfully prosecuting actual crimes. The state of our judiciary was clearly a factor here.

On the second issue, the replacement of central planning by a market economy, there were more open choices over the speed and modalities of the transition.<sup>16</sup> Here, the picture rapidly becomes complicated by the intrusion of outside 'experts' and, eventually, of the European Union. We are entering, in other words, a terrain well mapped by analysts such as Janine Wedel (1998) for the 'advice industry' and Wade Jacoby's analyses of processes of imitation or 'ordering from the menu' (Jacoby, 2000, 2002, 2004).

As Larry Ray and I have argued (Outhwaite and Ray 2004), 1989 was in at least one way a bad time for the revolutions: the neoliberal heyday meant that economic policies were quite unnecessarily destructive and the prospect of a second Marshall Plan for postcommunist Europe rapidly faded. There was, however, quite a lot of talk of such a thing; Janine Wedel (1998: 29-30) writes that, although the US had ruled out a Marshall-type action by May 1990, it was only in 1993 that Witold Trzeciakowski, who had been aid coordinator in Poland in 1989-90, realised that it was not going to happen. Whereas Marshall Aid after WWII had been 90% in grant form, this was the case for only 10% of aid to postcommunist Europe up to 1992. In brief, therefore, the economic decline was unnecessarily harsh, and contributed to the limitations of already weakened socialist organisations such as trade unions and women's movements, and of the oppositional and critical civil society which had attracted such optimistic hopes.<sup>17</sup>

I have concentrated mostly here on the national state level, but any fuller account of the postcommunist decades must also explore the international context of 1989 (Sarotte 2009) and the growing transnational impact of the EU. The latter theme has

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<sup>16</sup> On privatization programmes across the bloc, see Frydman et al, 1993. For the Czechoslovak case, see Wheaton and Kavan, 1992: 154-64)

<sup>17</sup> On this, and on its effects on postcommunist politics, see Ost, 2005.

perhaps tended to fall between the two stools of a focus on the EU's enlargement on the one hand, and on the politics of individual states on the other; the excellent study by Vachudová (2005) is a welcome exception. In Vachudová's analysis, the EU's shift after the Copenhagen summit from 'passive leverage', which merely reinforced liberal tendencies in countries already on that path, to 'active leverage' which changed the balance of political forces in more marginal countries such as Slovakia and enabled political elites to groom them for eventual accession, was a crucial contribution.

The EU, like the West as a whole, was slow to respond to the needs of post-1989 Europe, but its long-term impact has been massively beneficial overall. Unlike the situation in Western Europe, no postcommunist state has rejected the option of membership and none seems likely to. Having reinforced differences between postcommunist states in what has been aptly called the 'regatta' towards accession, the challenge for the Union is to develop common policies to reduce the dangerous inequalities which persist between member states. EU accession has often been taken as a marker for the end of postcommunist transition, and with border-free travel, currencies pegged to, or already replaced by, the Euro, it is easy to slip into this way of thinking. But we need also to bear in mind the persistence of the past, both in the theme of postcommunism as a 'return' to capitalism, national independence and so on (Lagerspetz, 1999) and in the viscosity of social structures which was so often overlooked in the early 1990s. The postcommunist or postsocialist condition remains determinant (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008; Ray, 2009).

To cut a long story short, then, the role of the EU is increasingly crucial as the postcommunist decades unfold. While I am not concerned with the minutiae of enlargement and accession, they are clearly at the heart of the processes examined here - first as a long-term prospect (except of course in Germany) and then as a more or less imminent reality, drawing one state or group of states after another into the *acquis communautaire* or the backwash which it creates for those outside. The question of what sort of Europe is emerging in the twenty-first century is not reducible to a set of questions about the evolution of the European Union, as it is in

some of the more EUrocentric literature, but the political shape of the more or less united Europe which is emerging cannot but be a central concern.<sup>18</sup> As Sobrina Edwards (2005; 2009) has shown, there were two ways in which the 2004 Enlargement was presented: first, as simply the next in a series of enlargements and, second, as a historic moment of the reunification of a Europe divided since WW2. It was of course both, with the accession shock in much of postcommunist Europe now falling between the transition shock and the 2008-10-? economic crisis.

Overall, I think one has to conclude that the enlargement process has been remarkably uneventful.<sup>19</sup> There are however two related and worrying developments: a slide in both parts of the formerly divided Europe to what has been called post-democracy and a degree of estrangement between old and new member states. As Jonathan Freedland wrote recently (*The Guardian*, 21.10.2009), in a shocked response to the British Conservatives' bizarre choice of allies in the European Parliament,

It's become bad form to mention it, because we are meant to be friendly towards the newest members of the European Union. But the truth is that several of these 'emerging democracies' have reverted to a brand of ultra-nationalistic politics that would repel most voters in western Europe. It exists in Poland and Latvia, but also Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Romania and beyond.

Since this was the same month in which a British neofascist leader was given a prominent place on a television programme, it is important to stress that this is a problem for Europe as a whole and not just for postcommunist Europe. At the risk of trivialising an important issue, I suggest we apply to postcommunist politics, and that of Europe as a whole, what I call the BBB test, referring not to A Level grades required for university admission but whether a particular political leader is a bigger bastard than Berlusconi. Several suspect postcommunist politicians indeed pass this test, but others fall mercifully short.

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<sup>18</sup> In a paper first delivered just before the 2004 accession round (Outhwaite, 2006), I addressed the issue of cosmopolitanism versus Fortress Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Rupnik (2007: 10) describes as one of its best-kept secrets that this was the Union's 'greatest success' since 1989.

To draw a provisional conclusion, it may be that the search for a *Stunde Null* is fruitless, except through the benefits of the search itself. Postcommunist states are perhaps less like trains, switching at a precise point from one track to another, than planes or ships which can make ongoing course changes. It remains the case that postcommunist Europe offers the spectacle of a wide variety of countries and regions emerging from a relatively similar state into one which is a good deal more open, yet shaped by the past and by underlying structures and contingent events in all sorts of different ways. ‘There is no way I will be a laboratory rabbit for any new experiment’, said an East German emigrant in late 1989 to William Echimson (1990: 25), explaining his unwillingness to return even to a changed GDR. The sentiment is entirely understandable, but the predicament inescapable for those who remained. Postcommunist transition, even in Germany, could not but take the form of an experiment – for better or worse for those embedded in it, but to the undoubted benefit of comparative researchers.

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