

Lost legacy: How 1989 marked the rise of environmental politics

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7/25/2014

Olaf Corry argues that Eastern European revolutions of 1989 did not just mark the defeat of the socialist utopian ideal but also the rise of new political ideas associated with political ecology: the physical and human limits to the modern expansionary project, people-powered politics and a growing global awareness. 1989 was a staging post in the relaunch of older concerns about resources and planetary limits, bringing a substantive critique of modernist ideas of untrammelled material expansion and state power into the history of European revolutions.



When the Berlin Wall and then the Soviet empire came crashing down almost 25 years ago, thinkers from both the left and right saw 1989 as a backward-looking ‘[rectifying revolution](#)’ that simply cast off the experiment of 1917 and reinforced the liberal (and nationalist) ideas launched by the upheavals of 1789 and 1848.

The thesis that 1989 was a historical ‘dud’ that bequeathed no distinct political ideas or practices, has since gradually [been reconsidered](#). With the rejection of state socialism and the exhaustion of utopian energies of the time it was too easy to lose sight of other impulses and legacies of the series of events later labelled the ‘[global 1989](#)’, most notably ‘people-powered’ revolutions.

A more overlooked impulse closely linked to 1989 was environmentalism – or, less anachronistically – concern with the sustainability of the modernist project of continual physical expansion and top-down command and control national government. Early European dissidents on the 1960s and 1970s, many of them natural scientists by training, were worried about more than human rights and democracy. Civic and democratic aims were intertwined with concerns about the Soviet-led system’s dire environmental consequences on the one hand and grave doubts about the sustainability of modern growth capitalism on the other.

A ‘green 1989’ can be traced back to early dissidents. Scientist Andrej Sakharov pointed early on to the severe ecological strains being exerted upon the Earth by both economic systems. He even [predicted global warming](#) in 1968, pointing out long before the IPCC was invented that rising carbon dioxide levels ‘from the burning of coal [are] altering the heat-reflecting qualities of the atmosphere. Sooner or later, this will reach a dangerous level’.

The ‘East Germany Sakharov’ Robert Havemann and other dissident activists such as Rudolf Bahro advanced an ecological critique of state socialism and were also worried by what they saw as an ecological-civilisational crisis. During the early 1980s playwright [Hanns Cibulka](#) published a daring critique of environmental politics under state socialism called *Swatnow*. In response the GDR set up the Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt (Society for Nature and Environment) to keep control of the environmental debate.

Similar processes unfolded in other Eastern Block countries as dissident activity evolved into organized opposition, often focused initially on environmental issues. Reputedly the Czech ‘Velvet Revolution’ began in Teplice when escalating pollution angered local citizens. In Bulgaria ‘Ecoglasnost’ became the central component of the Union of Democratic Forces which took power in 1989. ‘The Ecology Club’ in Poland started in 1980 in close cooperation with a ‘Freedom and Peace’ movement against military service and environmental destruction. ‘The Danube Circle’ in Hungary formed in 1984 opposing the Nagymaros hydroelectric dam as the first organization to challenge the regime’s monopoly on power. In the Soviet Union planned nuclear power reactors in Yerevan, Khar’kov, Kiev, Minsk, Krasnodov, Ignalina and Odessa were all sites of mass demonstrations. In Latvia opposition to the Daugvapils hydroelectric dam fused with nationalist aspirations to spawn significant anti-system protests.

At the same time the state leaders of the Eastern Block themselves contributed in various ways to the gathering green 1989. [Glasnost](#) in the USSR freed sensitive environmental information and the 1987 amnesty for political prisoners in the Soviet Union allowed older dissenters to form the vanguard of the surge. By the time of the 'Earth Day' celebrations in 1990 there were branches of the interestingly named 'Socio-ecological Union' in over 100 Soviet cities and in 11 of the 15 Soviet republics.

Greening also took place at the very top. In his [speech](#) to the United Nations in December 1988 President Gorbachev warned that 'the growth of the world economy is laying bare the contradictions and limits of the traditional type of industrialization. Its further expansion "in breadth and in depth" will push us toward an ecological catastrophe'. Gorbachev outlined a new vision for the United Nations as the guardian of environmental quality. His Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze (who [died this year](#)) penned an essay entitled 'Ecology and Politics' which stressed political and ecological interdependence: 'There are seven basic colours in the spectrum, but the colour which lies on the border between warm and cold, which joins light and dark, is the green colour of life', the Soviet apparatchik waxed lyrically.

Even before Michael Gorbachev came to power in 1985, however, new social movements had sprung up which Carlo Jordan, a GDR political and environmental activist who later founded the GDR Green Party, described as being essentially 'green movements'. They highlighted ecological concerns while also encompassing other causes such as demilitarisation, liberation of women and of cultural, sexual and regional minorities and nationalism.

There was of course a strong element of opportunism in all this. Environmentalism was seen as the safest form of protest. Perhaps predictably Green parties and 'anti-politics' movements of the revolution withered quickly in multi-party elections and the realpolitik of the early 1990s. But the fact that green ideas were able to link intellectuals, local opposition groups and national and international civic rights campaigns – as well as linking democratic issues with quality of life ones, was significant. They also allowed a critique of state authoritarian socialism while avoiding accusations of capitalist propaganda. The environmental agenda turned out to be the thin end of a large wedge, which would eventually help dislodge the regimes from power in an unprecedentedly peaceful revolution in which populations demanded democratic rights, a more responsive form of government and better living conditions.

The revolutions of 1989 also coincided with the rise of globalism – discourse treating the world as essentially a single political arena – something environmentalism and its iconic images of '[Spaceship Earth](#)' and the '[Blue Marble](#)' have played a role in promoting. Discourses of environmentalism and globality continue to be strongly interlinked and post-1989 global social movements, often drawing directly on the mythologies of 1989, rely on pushing many of the same pressure points: growth economics, unaccountable state power and scepticism towards technologies/weapons (such as nuclear).

So while environmental issues may have been a convenient cover for other concerns, and 1989 surely did indeed mark the exhaustion of a particular utopian project, at the same time 1989 also pointed forwards. Rather than simply being a 'rectification' or burial of some other project, 1989 was a staging post in the relaunch of [older concerns about resources](#) and planetary limits. It brought a substantive critique of modern economics and politics – untrammelled material expansion and state power – into the history of European revolutions.

Instead, 1989 could be seen as the latest chapter of what Martin Albrow calls [The Global Age](#) and what Joachim Radkau has recently dubs the [Age of Ecology](#) in which the limits and sustainability of the modern project emerge as key bones of ideological contention. There is still a long way to go, but the direction of long-term travel is at least discernable with climate change representing just one aspect of a renewed concern with physical limits or '[planetary boundaries](#)' as well as social limits to governability.

As another observer [puts it](#), the major political conflict to emerge since 1989 is the one between 'the last great utopian vision of endless growth' and 'the dawning realization that industrial progress has been transforming the physical environment [and] threatens the demise of the world that liberal capitalism promised to create'.

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