

Jun 2 2008

## The global 1989?

LSE Ideas

By George Lawson

As we approach the twentieth anniversary of '1989 and all that', it might be worth ducking for cover. Lest we forget, the year '1989' has become something of a cliché, caught in a sense of its own triumphalism, considered by all and sundry (or at least by most) to be the ur-contemporary demarcation point in world historical time, a normative, analytical and empirical referent point par excellence.

Of course, to some extent, this is a perfectly reasonable assumption – it would be pretty odd to claim that 1989 was insignificant, particularly for those living in the former Soviet sphere of influence. But looking back now, some two decades on, is it possible to generate a balance-sheet of 1989's broader, global significance? In other words, can we assess the impact of '1989' against longer-term historical trends, on key issues in international politics, and on places beyond its immediate zone of impact? And taken from this perspective, perhaps a more complex picture emerges than the conventional wisdom allows: a story of both continuity and rupture, varied across time and place, uneven in origin and outcome.

### The 'when', 'where' and 'what' of 1989

To that end, it is worth assessing the impact of 1989 in three domains: the 'when', the 'where' and the 'what' i.e. in terms of its temporal, spatial and substantive impact. First, in terms of the 'when', 1989 should be understood as a conjunctural rather than as an epochal shift. In other words, 1989 did not mark the emergence and institutionalisation of a novel set of political, economic and social relations. Rather, it materialized out of collapse and implosion – the disappearance, virtually without a shot, of the Soviet Union and, with it, the final strand of the Cold War order, much of which had already melted away, whether by this we mean the ideological rather than the geopolitical dimensions of the Cold War, or the Keynesian post-war settlement institutionalised in the Bretton-Woods agreement. The key ideas and ordering mechanisms of the post-1989 period (marketisation, post-Fordism, neo-liberalism and privatisation) were both ascendant and had taken institutional form well before 1989, and the central legitimating ideas of the epoch (freedom, democracy, self-determination, sovereignty, justice, the market etc.), while powerful and important, were either time honoured or associated with notions of 'return', 'normalcy', 'joining in' and the like. In short, actors at the centre of 1989 sought not to remake international relations in their own image but to actively relinquish power, not least by signing away authority to international organisations ranging from the EU to the IMF.

As such, the shifts and reconfigurations of social, economic and political power associated with 1989, dramatic and extensive though these have been, remain locked primarily within existing relational configurations. To put this in old language, the organic tendencies of the old have reasserted themselves, in a new context, and on a vaster scale. 1989 may have sped up world historical time, but it marked neither its end, nor its beginning. Rather like the bionic man, the post-1989 era is quicker, stronger, faster – we have seen the acceleration of means of organising politics, economics and social life, but not their reformulation.

Second, can we map the 'where' of '1989'? Certainly there is much that we know: the emergence of US primacy, the break up of the Soviet Union, the hastening of EU enlargement, and a set of important regionally variegated experiences in Asia, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and so on. And we have many ways to describe this world: as US imperium; as "one superpower, many great powers"; or as Richard Haass offers us, "nonpolar". But as Saskia Sassen, Phil Cerny, Eric Swyngedouw and others argue, the spaces of 1989 are complex, fractured and, to a great extent, issue- and/or region-dependent. The global interlaces with the regional, the transnational, the international, the national and the local in complex spatial amalgams. It may be that at the heart of this picture lies a process of denationalisation: the withering away of the national frame as the primary site for the articulation of security, redistribution, status and identity claims. But even here there are countervailing trends: the renationalisation of security functions via anti-terrorist legislation, the Patriot Act or the CCTV-isation of everyday life; the emergence of sovereign wealth funds and other such etatist economic policies; or the continued hold of the national over cultural and social domains as witnessed by the fervency of debates on migration, multiculturalism, citizenship and the like.

In this sense, 1989 has brought us both closer and further apart: closer in terms of an intense acceleration of intersocietal integration, particularly in terms of economies, peoples and ideas; further apart in that this homogenisation has a *doppelgänger* in the form of a return to the local, whether visited in claims of local autonomy, ethnic identity, or anti-immigration movements. Again, therefore, there is a fundamental contradiction in play: combined interactivity alongside uneven differentiation; universality and fragmentation; singularity and fracture.

This picture does not alter considerably when considering the 'what' of 1989: its substantive agenda: the globalisation of finance sits uneasily alongside the emergence of sovereign wealth funds; the re-emergence of nationalism next to heightened internationalism (whether in favour of intervention in Iraq or in protest against it); the rise in secularism is matched by increased religiosity. The key point here, on which George W. Bush has been unusually prescient, is that "we know that they're out there, we just don't know who they are".

### **Blessings and curses**

Given this picture of complexity and contradiction, it is unsurprising that our concepts and frames are struggling to keep up. And that is both the blessing and curse of 1989: it has allowed us to leave behind some of the more obscuring blinkers of the pre-1989 era, but it has not yet offered us much in their place. We are in an era where we know what we are post (modern, Westphalian, imperial and so on), but have little sense of where we are and what is to come. Whether we understand 1989 as bionic man, historical landmark, symbolic stamp or remain sceptical about its importance, one thing is clear: 2009 should be a year of careful reflection rather than hubristic triumph.

*The Global 1989, edited by Chris Armbruster, Mick Cox and George Lawson will be published in 2009.*

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