

From the Local to the Global: 1989 in a Czech Perspective

by Muriel Blaive

Abstract

The text argues for a more comprehensive historicization of the events of 1989, which in Central Europe have been for long primarily a subject in political sciences. The historical perspective as outlined here includes the entire communist period in all its aspects as it is not sufficient to only study how the past has been remembered. Based on various local oral-history studies undertaken by the author, the problem of continuities and discontinuities of attitudes towards the communist past is brought to the fore. It helps to explain why a considerable number of people in the Czech Republic sees various dimensions of communist period positively without wishing communism back. At the same time, a widespread disinterest in pre-1989 developments in the 'West' is discussed by the author to make clear that the Czech debate about the transformations following the 1989-revolution has been until now asymmetric in various respects.

In the first decades, the analysis of the post-1989 changes in Central Europe was almost only led by political scientists.* Historians did not feel entitled to investigate an event that was so recent. In fact, many felt they could not even study the communist period as a whole; as the director of the Czech Interior Ministry archives told me in 2002, historians should wait for at least fifty years until the „passions settled down.“ Political science filled the gap and the now almost forgotten path dependency theory shaped generations of scholars who endeavoured to account for the post-1989 developments on the sole basis of the 1989 changes, rarely if ever mentioning the communist period. The rehabilitation of the economy and the establishment of new political and legal standards appeared more urgent than to reflect on the cultural continuities shaped by decades of life under a dictatorship. Memory studies then took over but did not dwell on the pre-1989 period either.

Indeed 1989 and the post-1989 period have not been sufficiently

historicized, i.e. placed in their historical context. And yet, studying the relationship of the people to communism before 1989 is the only way to understand their attitude towards the communist past and towards democracy since the revolution. Sandrine Kott underlines that the elements of continuity have been a resource for the social actors in the construction of their representations (memory, nostalgia) as in their everyday practices, from habits to social networks. In České Velenice, a small town at the border to Austria where I led an oral history study, twenty years after the Velvet Revolution the director of the town factory was the son of the director under communism, the train station master was still in the position that he got long before the 1989 change, and the mayor was the son of former prominent communist functionaries.

Absurdly, the high communist vote in the first twenty years (15% to 20%) was not analyzed in connection with the base of popular support enjoyed by the Czechoslovak Communist Party before 1989, nor were its sources of legitimacy in terms of welfare, egalitarian economic policy, culture and nationalism – especially anti-German nationalism – mobilized; instead it is the high age of the pensioned voters that was consistently put forward, notwithstanding the illogical fact that the retired voters of 1989 would now be well past 100 years of age, while the retired communist voters of today were middle aged parents in 1989.

The continuity between the pre- and the post-1989 periods was missing in academic analyses, but it has always been clearly present within society. The temporality of change shows the relativity of the 1989 caesura. „We cannot draw a thick line under the past“, the director of the České Velenice factory told me in 2008, in sharp contrast to the official Czech policy which has tried to do exactly that. In Komárno, a Slovak town at the border to Hungary where I led another oral history study, many of the minority Hungarians I interviewed from all generations could not even remember clearly when the regime change had taken place: indeed 1989 is not nearly as important for them as

1993, the year when Slovakia became an independent state.

The miscalculation shared by most politicians and social scientists dealing with the Czech post-communist path stems from the fact that the acceptance of the continuity between the pre- and the post-1989 periods is not a value judgement: it is not necessary to disavow democracy to find advantages to the communist regime, and it is not necessary to be anti-communist to appreciate democracy. One can be nostalgic and a democrat, a former communist and happier under democracy, a former opponent to communism and frustrated by democracy. Not a single interviewee failed to underline how difficult it was to live in the old culture of surveillance, and all welcomed the newly gained freedom in 1989; but the experience they describe is that freedom is not always synonymous with happiness.

The microhistory of České Velenice illustrates the conflict of interpretation of the „1989 event“ with the elites of the country: not only does the population not share the negative view of communism that post-1989 democracy seeks to impose through its commemoration policy, but it does not always share either the positive vision of „1989“ that the intellectual elites are trying to convey. Neither 1989 nor 1948 (the communist takeover) or even 1968 (the Prague Spring) have marked the memory of my interviewees with the strength that one could have expected. I even spoke with a woman who could not remember what happened in 1989 and when I asked if the term „Velvet Revolution“ meant anything to her she answered: „Ah yes, but this was in Prague. Here they only opened the border.“

The Iron Curtain was put down, but the border is still very much present in the heads. A cynical perception of the current situation and a widespread privatization of the individual existence are prevailing now as earlier – but this process may have more to do with globalization than with decommunization, if one remembers that it was denounced by Václav Havel in his political essays already in the 1970s and that it does not characterize only the post-communist countries.

But does the former „East“ want to know this? In 2019 as in 2009

and 1999 I heard in the „West“ numerous reports and in-depth analyses of the revolution and of everyday life under communism. On the other hand, I have not seen or heard a single report in the media of the former „East“ on how it was to live in Western Europe before 1989. My Czech interviewees have no idea what everyday life was like in France in the 1970s and 1980s. They wrongly assume they know („something like paradise“) but neither they, nor my Czech historian colleagues, display any curiosity.

This one-dimensional interest, only from West to East, i.e. from the so-called winner of history towards the so-called loser of history is a historical reconstruction which we all share, and yet is detrimental. It is distorting the history not only of the former East but of the West. By reinterpreting the entire postwar period in light of a final victory for the West and defeat for the East, we tend to reconstruct a historical process which would have looked completely different taken from as late as 1985. It leads us to compare communism to democracy with the assumption that, in the West, democracy today is the same as the democracy before 1989. It is not. Western Europe has also enormously changed in the past thirty years in terms of citizens' rights and political accountability, not to mention perks such as mass travel, mass communication, and mass surveillance. The West was not always the modern, winning side as we know it, but had also backward and authoritarian aspects and still has them in many instances and countries. Moreover the „West“ is as diverse as the „East“ has been. The cultural differences are as marked between Poland and the Czech Republic or Hungary and Bulgaria as between France and Germany or Britain and Sweden. There was not one West, just as there was not one East. And many common points between all of our European countries distinguish us all from the US or China.

So, to get an accurate historical picture both of the former East and of the West we have to compare them to one another and within each other. To understand communism, and especially to overcome a tendency to a victimization discourse that blames everything on the

communists in power, the former Eastern countries have to compare themselves to the West. They need to run radio and TV broadcasts on everyday life before 1989 on the alleged happier side of the Iron Curtain. They would perhaps realize that communism as a system was bad, but it had genuine advantages and popular support and it is not enough to single out a few collaborators to serve as scapegoats, nor to blame all the insufficiencies of thirty years of post-communism on the past communists. My interviewees certainly do not see the pre-1989 period as entirely bad, on the contrary nostalgia is strong. The victory of the Western term „Cold War“ to describe this period of European history is correspondingly inadequate. Czech children are now taught that the post-1945 period is the Cold War, despite the fact that their family memory of this period is a memory of communism. When I asked one of my grandmother interviewees if she used the term in everyday life, she laughed at the absurdity of my suggestion and then added: „The cold war? I have it at home with my family.“

Yet Czech and other „Eastern“ European children are slowly adopting Cold War icon James Bond as adequately symbolizing their identity, too. This James-Bondization of history is incidental but it shows how vulnerable collective memory is and how fragile the perception of history can be. Populist politicians are always at the ready to reap the fruits of such forgetfulness and rewrite history to their convenience. Only a strong civic society can stop them. It is as yet missing in Central Europe.

*One of my earlier articles on this topic appeared on the website of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in 2012. I take the opportunity to further develop it here. MB