

Reflection

1989 – Thirty years later

Federico Romero

1989 was a historic moment of liberation for the countries of Central-Eastern Europe. In one peaceful and clean shot they got rid of their authoritarian regimes, escaped from overpowering Soviet control, recovered their sovereignty, and eventually 'rejoined Europe,' as the saying went at the time. Those democratic revolutions were - and no doubt will continue to be considered - a crucial turning point in the history of our continent, the much-delayed conclusion of an exceedingly long post-war era as well as the final curtain on a twentieth century marked by blood, dictatorship and tragedies.

A further, exhilarating feature of that fateful year was the unexpectedly peaceful ending of a bipolar antagonism that for forty years had nurtured widespread violence across many continents, enforced Manichean divisions, and exposed us all to apocalyptic risks. Moreover, the reverberations of 1989 in many areas outside Europe – starting perhaps with South Africa, where the apartheid regime was to be replaced by inter-racial democracy – opened up new frontiers of freedom and democratization on a global scale.

These momentous achievements are part of the historical record, are rightly celebrated, and should never be belittled. Yet 1989 was also widely interpreted as setting a new pattern, as the *cathartic* inauguration of a better world. As we look back on those expectations thirty years hence, we must acknowledge that that moment was far less portentous and prophetic than we assumed at the time. The promises and prospects of 1989 have undergone so many negative metamorphoses as to call for a serious rethinking, over and beyond the canonizations of public memory.

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The peace

Even before the dust had settled upon the Socialist regimes' ruins and rubble, Chancellor Helmut Kohl took the initiative with a unification plan that, by incorporating East Germany directly into the Federal Republic, drew the essential matrix for the future unification of Europe within the existing institutional framework of the West. In March 1990, East German voters endorsed the plan, making it irreversible. US President George H.W. Bush, in turn, employed the considerable influence of the US to reaffirm the centrality of NATO in post-Cold War Europe. "We prevailed, they didn't," he stated with the self-assurance of the victor who designs the new peace along the lines of the previous conflict.¹

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Thus, the forthright incorporation of Central-Eastern Europe into the institutions of the Cold War West – NATO and the EU – was set in motion. Post-Cold War peace-making was not about reconciliation and negotiation of a shared order. As Laurien Crump demonstrated, it did not pursue an inclusive, pan-European security architecture, grounded, for instance, in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It was rather based on extending the Western order eastward, as far eastward as possible. In this respect, Europe was not so much unified as Westernized. The persistence of the NATO alliance, even though it had lost its original *raison d'être*, was never seriously disputed, not even after the collapse of the USSR removed any serious security threat.²

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Smooth and over-determined as this process appeared at the time, it nonetheless carried consequences. The first one was the re-forming of a deep rift, even though much further East, with the marginalization of a Russia which – after a shockingly harsh transition – would resurface under the spell of an aggrieved, resentful nationalism, hostile to a Europe from which it felt excluded, and to which it could (and sometime does) inflict considerable damage and tensions. The second, far-reaching consequence was the unquestioned assumption – cultivated throughout the West and particularly in the US - that 1989 certified the triumph of Western principles, institutions and practices of global governance.

The notion was not new. A globally pre-eminent West had already emerged in the 1980s, with a rising cultural hegemony to match its economic and strategic dominance. Then the fall of the Berlin Wall provided it with a historical consecration. Elites throughout the West, and particularly in the US, internalized the 'end of history' notion that liberal capitalism was the new normal, the unchallenged, natural order of things on a global scale.³ Throughout the 1990s, the concept of a world unified around market individualism, corporate freedom, unfettered competition, liberal democracy and human rights became paradigmatic. By the turn of the century, a single, unified, triumphalist imaginary had come to prevail in the Euro-American sphere: the future would amalgamate everyone and everything, in every continent, within a global society shaped by the ideas, rules and practices of Western liberal capitalism.

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Multilateral liberal globalism

This dominant assumption had many roots, but two of them were paramount. One was primarily American, and revolved around the historical lessons US conservatives drew from 1989. They had read the Cold War as an epic confrontation between good and evil whose outcome had been determined solely by American strength. The US had overwhelmed the USSR with military power and economic dynamism; their societal model had triumphed over any alternative. It followed that US strategic preponderance had to remain the bedrock of the future order, its reach so overwhelming as to be conceived by some as unilateral dominance.⁴ Far more nationalist than internationalist, they believed US power to be so unchallenged as to allow it to go its own way, since the other actors had no options but to consent, or bend. This meant, among other things, that the US would use multilateral arrangements when suitable and advantageous, but did not feel bound by their rules and logic.

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Thus, within a few years a new breed of neo-conservatives came to conceive the conflict with Islamic fundamentalism as a 'clash of civilizations' to which they paradoxically offered a purely military solution.⁵ They initiated a 'war on terror' that had neither a strategic center of gravity nor any geographical, temporal or even ethical boundaries. They invaded Iraq and,

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as a consequence, the entire Middle East was further destabilized without either the vision or the means to reorganize it. Terrorism metastasized, and the area plunged into in a mix of entangled conflicts – sectarian, international and civil wars – whose solution seems today more distant than ever. The early hopes of the ‘Arab springs’ did not take hold and democratization on the whole did not advance. There, even more than in other areas, the US presumption to knock down a regime without organizing the peace, led to choices that appear to have diminished, rather than extended, the country’s hegemonic influence.

The Obama presidency deliberately tried to mitigate these adverse effects and devise a new course, based on global and regional multilateral cooperation schemes in which the US would steer its partners to cooperative solutions with more widely shared responsibility. The agreement with Iran was the most emblematic result of this approach. However, President Trump repudiated this strategy and dismantled it. He opted for an exclusionary nationalism rooted in a concept of great-power antagonism; launched an all-out confrontation with China; engaged in competitive rivalry with the EU; deployed coercive economic pressures on Iran, Cuba and Venezuela. Altogether, he is proceeding to take the multilateral fabric of globalization apart.

Thus, we are now witnessing the sunset of that multilateral liberal globalism that had been the second cornerstone of the 1990s triumphalist Western imagination. Its roots were deep, all the way back to nineteenth-century free trade and then Wilsonian internationalism. During the Cold War, multilateral liberalism was institutionalized as a Western compact. From the 1980s it enlarged its scope and reach under a free-market doctrine that promoted privatization and deregulation, liberalization of capital movement and fiscal austerity. The Socialist regimes’ collapse of 1989 gave a most powerful validation to that rising market culture and its criticism of sovereignty, state prerogatives and public intervention in the economy.⁶ Dubbed as neo-liberal, this market ethos found a precious companion in the interconnectedness nurtured by the end-of-the-century technological revolution, with its distinctive culture of cathartic renewal. Together, they prodded trans-Atlantic liberalism towards the idealized view of a world unified, ever more molded in a single cast, essentially pacified, and allegedly prone to reconcile its differences by embracing a doctrine of human rights. The ideals and norms of twentieth-century Western internationalism were thought to

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have become the shared grammar of a virtually accomplished global community, so vigorous and appealing as to obliterate the material and figurative boundaries that had defined modernity.

The European Union as positive synthesis

None among the main actors epitomized these views more than the European Union, which internalized some of those expectations. In the 1990s, the EU was growing not only larger, but more self-confident and relevant – both within its own domain and beyond its borders. The space and process of European integration had always revolved around a complicated coexistence between state and market, public and private, cohesion and competition. By the 1990s, when the Community developed into a Union, the latter of those *dichotomic* terms were becoming pre-eminent in political discourse, and their ascendancy was institutionalized in treaties, legal doctrines, and administrative norms. The key projects that would define the European Union – the Single Market and the Euro, European citizenship and Schengen – pivoted on the notion that individuals and businesses were to be stimulated and equipped to compete in a social arena increasingly interpreted as a market.

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In the complex economic and political EU eco-system, the responses to the challenges of globalization clustered around making capitalism more dynamic, rather than safeguarding social cohesion and the economic security of individuals. The very notions of sovereignty and self-determination were being redefined within a new language of individual freedom and trans-nationality that privileged the market analogy over the state's agency and space. In the 'age of fracture' – to use Daniel Rodgers's apt formulation – Europe too embraced "social visions centered on the disembedded individual," symptomatically replacing the inherently social notion of *progress* with the far more technical and atomized one of *innovation*.⁷

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This confidence in a self-regulating mechanism as the key metaphor of international life in a globalized world reached its peak at the turn of the millennium. It was then brutally shaken by 9/11, and more profoundly undermined by the great financial and economic crisis. In recent years, ever-larger sections of voters – in Europe as in the US – have come to perceive global trends through the lenses of vulnerability, insecurity and fear. These sentiments

were, and are, nurtured by the capricious volatility of employment and income for many citizens, by spectacular and rising inequalities, and by the apparent absence of credible remedies. On these issues, the responses provided by the national and international institutions charged with economic governance have been limited if not negligent, and often condescending. The ascending “populist” rhetoric, on the other hand, appropriated those sentiments and offered not so much practical solutions to the difficulties that fed them, as symbolic promises of repossession. They took refuge in ethno-cultural identities, in racial separation and hierarchy, in the victimization of scapegoats, in ambitions to territorial control and social disciplining.

This political discourse shaped around ethno-national identities and racial contempt has taken a large or significant hold in most of our polities. Its emotional core resides in the alleged danger of migratory “invasions,” alien terrorism, and supposedly “unfair” foreign competition. This rhetoric of exogenous threats, to be countered by the claim to “retake control at home,” speaks of a wounded, anxious perception of global trends. Our societies stimulated and shaped globalization throughout the modern era because we benefited the most from it. For centuries, we grew so accustomed to a dominant role as to consider globalization and Western pre-eminence as synonymous. The former simply implied the latter. Now we are facing the rise of other actors. We can reach an accommodation with them, or chase after a supremacy that is slipping from our hands. This is, in a nutshell, what the new white nationalisms are about.

This resurgence of nationalist sentiments, codes and visions was also fed by a subterranean cultural dislocation that operated over the recent decades, and that brings us back to 1989. As it moved to structure its own monetary union and incorporate a large portion of the formerly Socialist space, the EU legitimized itself as a regional response to global challenges. It meant to be - and it claimed to be - an original, trans-national institutional architecture adept at reconciling market freedom *with* democratic representation, competitiveness *with* cohesion, efficiency *with* rights. Around the turn of the century, some even assumed that this large integrated entity would gradually side-line, if not replace altogether, the nation-state. Within the long 1989 undertow that posited the market as synonym of freedom and the state as despot, the EU seemed to stand as a positive synthesis, guarantor of rights and indispensable regulatory body without the heavy historical baggage associated with the nation-state. In a few years, visions of a freer, open, unified space achieved operational

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substance thanks to the new vectors of European-ness: from Erasmus to the Euro, from the vanished internal borders to Ryanair. They embedded that vision in the mind-set and daily practices of many Europeans – albeit not all of them, perhaps not even a majority.

The revival of the nation

What remained unnoticed under the glitz of this transformation, though, was a different legacy of the dynamics that 1989 unleashed. That is to say, the resolute persistence of the nation, you could even say its revival, as a central element of identification for many, perhaps most, Europeans. To begin with, the pillars of the post-1989 order had been negotiated and determined by the four victors of 1945 plus Germany. International organizations and the European Community in particular had had a technical, facilitating function, but no decision-making role whatsoever. The new shape of the continent was drawn by the most classical pattern of great-power diplomacy. Even more emblematic, German reunification progressed - and was perceived by most, Germans and non-Germans alike - as a wholly obvious, 'natural' transformation: national unity was seen as a supreme right of the German people and therefore a historically ineluctable event.

Of course, the Federal Republic's impeccable, peaceful, liberal democratic record mattered. Nonetheless, one can hardly imagine a more eloquent, meaningful manifestation of the relevance of national sovereignty and identity – a primacy accepted and recognized throughout Europe. No less significant was the strong re-appropriation and celebration of national independence and sovereignty – often enough with an ethnic connotation as well – by the former socialist countries and Soviet republics. And what was the war in the former Yugoslavia if not a conflict for the nation in the name of nationalism?

Current nationalist discourses have roots in the economic crisis, in the entrenched uncertainty that market globalization injected into the lives of individuals and societies, in re-emerging patterns of racism. However, the persistence of the nation as the key site and symbol of legitimacy, citizenship and collective identification had been vigorously reaffirmed by 1989. It is a persistence that for a while remained disguised, behind a Europeanism that appeared as energetic in the 1990s as it has become tarnished and contested in more recent

times. But it is precisely this binary reading, this widespread view of Union and nation as alternatives (rather than complementary factors) that has proved analytically mistaken and cognitively pernicious. First, the binary disregarded the basic fact that the EU means cooperation, but it is also an inherently competitive arena. It posits competition among individuals and businesses in the market, but also competition among public institutions and administrations, be they national, regional or sectoral (like universities). For Europe to be a resource, you have to outcompete, at times even undercut, other Europeans. Second, even as we advanced to deep levels of federalization, with the Euro, key prerogatives and decision-making authority remained intergovernmental. National governments and polities retain a crucial role. They can use it to build coalitions across Europe, and perhaps bring positive results, or to affirm specific interests and, often, obstruct solutions. In the crisis, we have seen both aspects in action, but above all, we have seen the extent to which the market paradigm hindered the change of tack that evolving perceptions and collective expectations called for.

As the fervent or simply patient Euro-optimism of previous years waned, the crisis brought to the fore public demands for security and predictability. We divided along the stereotypes of thrifty or profligate nations. The perimeters of commonality and solidarity were redesigned, and increasingly bent towards selective, discriminatory redefinitions of rights and legitimacy. Even when they are not expressed in the exclusionary language of outright nationalism, public demands tend to reaffirm the nexus between collective identities and public institutions. They therefore restate the importance, if not the primacy, of the nation-state because they are demands – symptomatically expressed in terms of security, control, protection and often exclusion – that cannot be satisfied, or even met, by the current supranational architecture, which was not built in order protect and reassure.

The EU, in particular, is meant to structure and regulate markets, to promote competition and – preferably – growth, to guarantee a space of mobility and individual rights to its citizens. It is simply not designed for enhancing social rights, sheltering people from the vagaries of a competitive economy, or moderating the inherent uncertainty and precariousness of so many aspects of our life. In its complex structure, the protective functions – be they external or domestic security, social protection or territorial control – are the prerogative of national governments. The EU can be many things to its citizens, but

it is not a protective agent. There are no European police officers, firefighters or soldiers; nor are there European pension systems, unemployment checks or family benefits. Europe does not even have – at least in actual, operational terms - a European system of migration governance.

As much as post-1989 Europe portrayed itself as a historically unprecedented constitutional space and political project, or even a vector for the continent's cathartic regeneration, its actual scope has remained primarily economic and juridical, usually within liberalizing parameters. The member states jealously retained the protective prerogatives that are a central pillar of the modern social contract, and therefore of public consensus and collective identification. The problem is that they simultaneously delegated to the EU, or handed over to the markets, those key functions of economic policy-making without which claims to protection become ineffective, in the worst cases even unsustainable.

The erosion of liberal democracy

Finally, another presumed legacy of 1989 that turned out to be deceptive and misleading concerns the larger international dynamics. In spite of the telling explosion of Yugoslavia, the prevailing internationalist consensus read the post-Cold War horizon under the expectation that wars among states and great-power conflicts were a thing of the past. The EU, in particular, stood out and was widely hailed as a model of transnational governance that had overcome conflicts among nations to assert instead a post-modern concept of power, normative and collaborative rather than coercive, inherently peaceful and peace-spreading, indicating a future of entangled if not shared sovereignties.⁸

We can now see that it was a projection, and a pretty Euro-centric one to boot, rather than a model. The long cycle of global economic opening, towards an ever-deeper interconnectedness, has been halted and is most likely going in reverse due to its socio-cultural rejection in the very Western poles that promoted it and built it, especially the US. During that cycle – slightly longer than the three decades that separate us from 1989 – nation states devolved or lost to the markets a considerable amount of their control prerogatives. Yet those powers could be refashioned. More importantly, the larger states

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have maintained, and are now visibly strengthening, the operational and symbolic tools of sovereignty. From India to Russia or Turkey, from China to the US, the regional giants pursue projects of national assertion that, oscillating between competitive rivalry and outright conflict, replicate the matrix of antagonistic relations.

Perhaps multilateralism is not dead yet, but it is being ever more segmented into bilateral fragments, and bent to logics of unilateral success. Most visible on issues of trade and migration, this process goes together with the increasing relevance of discourses of securitization, and the actual build-up of high-tech national security and surveillance regimes. The very language of politics seems to have discarded the traditional promise of growth as a common, shared goal, and is instead re-centered on national economic destinies, most often articulated in the *mercantilistic* terms of a zero-sum game. In such an antagonistic context, it is not surprising that the EU suffers from a specific deficit of identification by many of its citizens, since it was never meant or designed to be an international power, and particularly a protective fortress, a defender of an insecure identity vis-à-vis the global.⁹

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When we talk and write about 1989, we usually do not bracket the Tiananmen Square massacre together with liberation in Eastern Europe, but perhaps we should. The Chinese suppression of democratic demands was seen in the West, at the time, as a sort of temporary Asian exception to the general democratization trend. It was widely assumed that in due time the latter would reach also China, and change it for good. The spread of capitalism and market relations, with the rise of a large middle class, was presumed to impair and eventually dissolve the single-party authoritarian model. It did not work out that way, in Beijing or elsewhere. Today, we rather see different shades of despotic capitalism taking root and rising. The space and legitimacy of liberal democracy are eroded even in its historic Western cradles – whether by authoritarian nationalist politics or by the *surveillance capitalism* of the big digital platforms.¹⁰ Perhaps the long-lasting, deeper legacy of 1989 is that while a cycle of democratization peaked at the time, the overall prospects for democracy, rights and solidarity are always very open-ended. They are not a historical destiny, but mere possibilities that depend on a constant reinterpretation, mobilization, and active societal agency.

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Federico Romero is Professor of History of Post-War European Cooperation and Integration as well as Dean of Research at the European University Institute in Florence. A specialist on twentieth-century international and transnational history - in particular Cold War history and the history of European integration - he is the coordinator of the ERC project PANEUR1970S.

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¹ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf 1998), p. 253.

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² Laurien Crump, 'A missed opportunity for a new Europe? The end of the Cold War and its consequences for Western European relations with Russia'. In Eleni Braat and Pepijn Corduwener (eds.), *1989 and the West. Western Europe since the end of the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 188-206.

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³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, Free Press, 1992).

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⁴ Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment', in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, 1 (1990/91), pp. 23-33.

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⁵ Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, n. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 22-49.

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⁶ On the end of the Cold War and the demise of Socialist regimes. See Federico Romero, *Storia della guerra fredda* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009); Mark Kramer, 'The Demise of the Soviet Bloc'. *The Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 4 (2011): 788-854; Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War, 1985-1991* (London: Macmillan, 2015); Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

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⁷ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*. (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 162.

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⁸ The most illuminating discussion was by Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

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⁹ Cfr. Ulrich Krotz, Kiran Patel and Federico Romero (eds.), *Europe's Cold War Relations: The EC Towards a Global Role* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

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¹⁰ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).

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