1989: Revolution and regime change in Central and Eastern Europe

From the mid-1970s, the world’s political and economic architecture underwent a twin shift. In economic regimes, the dominant models shifted away from Keynesianism and corporatism. From Chile and the US to Britain and beyond, governmental, business and media elites embraced economic reforms that were later dubbed neoliberalism. Meanwhile, the domain of democracy expanded. From Athens to Madrid to Lisbon, from Santo Domingo to Quito to Lima, authoritarian regimes crumbled, making way for liberal democracy. Political elites in such countries succeeded in co-opting opposition parties and movements—even quite radical ones—and re-stabilising the body politic around a moderate, pro-capitalist centre. This was a development from which reformist actors in ossified regimes, including in Hungary and Poland, were able to learn.

The acme of this dual movement arrived in 1989 with the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The upheavals there quickly came to serve liberal opinion as exemplars of democratic revolution. They appeared to validate the liberal promise that free markets and political liberty walk hand in hand. They seemed to have infused history with a newly vital and progressive political spirit, one that was uprooting the atavistic and absolutist past in the backward zones of Europe and realigning them with the moving benchmark of Western modernity, introducing the territories lost between 1917 and 1947 to the liberal agenda of capitalist progress. They appeared to represent, in Jürgen Habermas’s phrase, a “revolution of recuperation,” a transformation that reconnected CEE to the locomotive of modernity,1 enabling the region to ‘catch up,’ by way of the (re)introduction of liberal institutions—the market economy and constitutionally-secured parliamentary democracy.

In countering this narrative, critics have kept a vigilant eye on post-1990 trends and statistics, highlighting those that contradict the liberal-triumphalist view. For example, while one may concede that economic growth across CEE had been low in the 1970s and 1980s, and standards of health and life expectancy had been stagnating or even declining in the same period,2 few areas of social and economic life experienced upticks following the 1989-90 transition, and some underwent bitter regression. One can point to persistently low productivity, repeated economic crises and an increased vulnerability to global downturns, self-serving Western involvement, the decimation of the professions, retrenched forms of servitude and ‘managed democracy,’ an undergrowth of rent-seeking and corruption that has flourished in the new market environment, and ongoing environmental deterioration. (On this last, former Soviet-bloc territories account for fully one third of the World Wildlife Fund’s fifty most ecologically destructive countries.)3 Despite the roughly equal presence of women and men in the 1989 demonstrations in CEE, their aftermath saw little change in the proportion of women in positions of power; instead, many

---

1 Habermas, Jürgen (1990) Die nachholende Revolution, Suhrkamp.
countries saw the removal of maternity entitlements, restrictive abortion laws, and the revival of ‘family-values’ conservatism.\(^4\) The social consequences of the region-wide depression of the 1990s were cataclysmic. Double-digit inflation scythed through personal savings in Belarus, Bulgaria, the Baltics and beyond, and in no country affected by the Great Depression of the early 1930s did real wages decline as steeply as in CEE in the 1990s. Even ten years after the transition, only in the Czech Republic had the average wage crept back above its 1989 level, and in many countries it remained below half that. In the light of immiseration and social regression on this scale it is little wonder that, when asked if life in their country is now harder than it had been before 1990, many answer in the affirmative: 62 per cent of surveyed populations in Bulgaria and Hungary, 72 per cent in Ukraine.\(^5\)

Homing in on such exploitative and inegalitarian outcomes of 1989 may help to puncture the liberal-triumphalist argument, but it still leaves questions concerning the revolutionary content of that year. From one angle, 1989 was, at most, a ‘passive’ revolution, a transition convened from above. In some versions, the accent is placed on Western intervention, in the form of political confrontation (Washington ratcheting up the New Cold War) or economic seduction (Bonn’s mammoth loans to Hungary and the GDR).\(^6\) At the extreme, the argument is that Western agencies directly organised the upheavals: the Romanian revolution, for example, as a coup orchestrated in Langley and executed with assistance from the Hungarian intelligence community. Others emphasise Soviet structural exhaustion and the ensuing reform programmes—perestroika and glasnost. From the mid-1980s the Kremlin’s imperial grip loosened rapidly. (And its intentions were becoming harder to divine. As Georgi Derluguian quipped, “few believed that Gorbachev could really mean what he was saying but everybody assumed that this seasoned apparatchik knew what he was doing. The truth was exactly the opposite.”)\(^7\) Elite divisions in Moscow reverberated throughout the bloc, paralysing hard-line leaderships from Berlin to Bucharest and exacerbating the ‘loss of faith’ that was gnawing at Communist party members and functionaries. One Czechoslovak survey from early 1989 revealed that as many as 57% of party members and 52% of functionaries possessed “no trust” in their party and state leaders.\(^8\) Across Eastern Europe, reformists made bids for power, in some cases with encouragement from their backers in Moscow. At the extreme, the argument is that the Russian intelligence services organised the upheavals: that the Romanian revolution, for example, was a coup orchestrated by the KGB, with assistance from high-ranking Romanian functionaries.

The ‘extreme’—external subversion—claims can for the most part be briskly dismissed. There is no significant support for them—although when we come to the


\(^6\) For example, Peter Gowan (1999) Global Gamble: Washington’s Faustian Bid for World Dominance, Verso. Gowan underestimated the degree to which Comecon was fragmenting, and reorienting towards the global economy, independently of US blandishments.


‘coloured revolutions,’ below, the picture changes somewhat.⁹ Equally obviously, imperial interventions mattered, and these connected to structural factors internal to the countries of CEE. But what of the role of social movements? Some accept that revolutions took place in 1989 but play down the element of collective action. Habermas managed to write a tome on 1989 without as much as mentioning the role of protest movements, while Claus Offe accorded them a marginal, reactive role. It was not the movement, writes Offe of the East German events, that brought victory but vice versa: “the obvious weakness of the state apparatus encouraged and triggered the growth of a democratic movement.” East Germany in 1989, he concludes, was an “exit revolution” not a “voice revolution.” The GDR was not brought down by “a victorious collective struggle for a new political order; instead, massive and suddenly unstoppable individual emigration destroyed its economic foundations.” Similarly, for the Marxist philosophers Robert Kurz and Fritz Haug the GDR’s collapse was occasioned by an exodus that expressed not conscious action but, respectively, “blind and helpless flight” and a mix “of psychosis and plebiscite,” and was later overlaid by a protest movement driven by “nothing but unconscious and untamed resentment”—rather like, Kurz adds superciliously, crowd behaviour during a New York power outage “or when fire breaks out in a prison.”¹⁰

In a counterblast to these eruptions of elitism masquerading as argument, Harvard historian Charles Maier has inveighed against the (largely West German) scholars and pundits for whom “the East German popular movement seemed actually embarrassing,” such that the vocabulary they grasped for spoke of the GDR’s “implosion,” as if “some worn-out machine” had simply broken down.¹¹ The implosion thesis presumes structural shifts in CEE to have occurred which only then, in 1989, contributed to an expanded space for social movements. In reality, its history had from the outset been shaped by struggles between the regimes and movements. In the late 1940s the Communist parties and their associated ‘mass organisations’ (such as the state-run ‘trade unions’) were re-shaped through their role in subjugating resistance, a redesign that was then consolidated in the 1950s, most dramatically through the crushing of revolts in the GDR, Poland and Hungary. But although mass protests were crushed, and protest in general was systematically suppressed, with even quite ‘innocent’ forms of collective self-organisation corralled by state institutions, nonetheless, ‘infrapolitical’ forms of resistance, and small-scale industrial action, still influenced the regimes across CEE, affecting myriad social and cultural issues—from the toleration of western rock music, to the role of the Church, to work quotas. Then, in the 1980s, Solidarność in Poland lit the fuse that was to bring Soviet domination of the region to an end. In East Germany in the middle of that decade, emigration and niche

social movements became serious irritants to the regime, and served as seedbeds from which organised resistance was soon to spring.

In 1989, state crisis and the blossoming of social movements were mutually conditioning processes. Even where, as in Poland and Hungary, Communist structures were negotiated away behind closed doors the process was accompanied by manifestations of popular will—in Poland, strike waves and the June 1989 elections; in Hungary, the demonstrations of 15 March, and the public theatre surrounding the re-interment of Imre Nagy. If, in Poland and Hungary of the late 1980s, the masses played a cameo part, in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania, at each critical juncture, collective action, however hesitant at first and however wracked by doubts later on, played a pivotal role. Mass action precipitated the revolutionary conjuncture to a head, and influenced its course of development. This was particularly evident in East Germany. Here, the spirit of protest manifested itself in the summertime border breakthroughs and embassy occupations before shifting to the Saxon town of Plauen, and thence to Dresden, where a large-scale pitched battle took place. 1989 was not quite as velveteen as is sometimes supposed. Wherever the police attacked, protestors fought back. In Dresden, the ‘People’s Police’ beat, and fired water cannon at, the crowds that had gathered at the main station. These responded robustly, building barricades, hurling stones and Molotov cocktails, torching a police car, and demolishing some of the station (including all of its doors, as well as a shop, and ticket machines). It was a moment that abruptly illuminated, in stark relief, the relationship between state and society—a relationship that had long been enacted behind masks and through choreographed protocols. The police recoiled, taken aback by the torrent of abuse they faced (“Nazi swine,” “fascists!,” “red pigs,” etc.), with one officer even reporting that, on his receiving an injury, the doctor who treated him quipped that as a member of the “cudgel police” he had received his just desserts. Under pressure of this sort, the security forces began to buckle. In one week in Dresden and Plauen alone, forty-five soldiers of the National People’s Army, including five officers, refused to obey orders.

That same week, in early October, witnessed similar scenes in Leipzig. Baton-wielding police attempted to prevent protestors from gathering. The latter replied with cobble stones, in a series of confrontations that, according to sociologist Detlef Pollack, “strengthened the demonstrators’ will to resist, even though many of them had been injured.” On 9 October, again in Leipzig, public protest achieved its breakthrough, when the scale of the demonstration overawed the local SED leadership and security forces, sapping the will to use arms. It was only now—after a series of

---

13 Maier, Dissolution, p.xiv.
showdowns with the mass movement in which the state’s aura of omnipotence was irreparably punctured—that the old regime truly began to ‘implode’. It was collective action in Leipzig, and again on 9 November in Berlin, that pushed the process of state erosion beyond the point of no return. In terms of numbers, the movement crested in the first week of November. In addition to demonstrations of around two million, that week alone saw some 230 reported political meetings, attended by over 300,000 people. The East German mass movement peaked twice more, in early December and in January. And it helped to trigger a chain reaction, with a similar movement in Czechoslovakia (it kicked off in mid-November when police attacked a demonstration in Prague) followed by the distinctly less velvet uprising in Romania in December. Together, these movements toppled dictators, political regimes and their associated rules and habitus of oppression, as well as sharply accelerating the collapse of Soviet power.

**Exceptional Poland**

The revolutions in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania were noteworthy for the level of working-class participation, on which more below. But they evinced a contrast with earlier uprisings in the region, such as East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956, or indeed the rising that in a sense fired the starting pistol for this final unravelling of the Soviet system: Poland in 1980-81. It had centred on collective action in workplaces and was led by an organisation, Solidarność, that had arisen from strike committees. The movement began in dockyards and factories, its most powerful weapon was the strike, and its key coordinating centres were strike committees and, in several towns, inter-factory strike committees. What accounts for this difference between 1980-1 in Poland and 1989 in East Germany and Czechoslovakia?

If one looks at the institutional structures and forms of rule that characterised Poland on the one hand and East Germany and Czechoslovakia on the other, it is the similarities that stand out. The economic and political systems were cut from the same cloth. In the factories and offices of Poland, workers were subjected to similar types of oppression and compulsion as existed west of the Oder-Neisse and south of the Tatra. In all three countries, independent workers’ organisations were obliterated in the late 1940s and replaced by a state union, and lateral connections among workers were systematically suppressed. There are also parallels in the experience of mass struggles: in Poland and the GDR, workers in the mid-1940s set up independent works councils, which were abolished (although not without robust resistance); in the mid-1950s all three nations were rocked by labour unrest, which culminated in workers’

---

rebellions in the cities of Pilsen (Czechoslovakia) and Poznań (Poland), and a nationwide workers’ rising in East Germany.

But from around 1970 the Polish experience began to diverge quite sharply. 1970 and 1971 saw strike waves, protest marches and riots in the cities of the Baltic coast of greater dimensions than those of 1956-57. In Szczecin a city-wide strike committee was established, and a series of short general strikes were called, during which “workers’ militias patrolled city streets and strikers published their own newspapers and broadcast their own radio programmes.”22 In 1976 further workers’ risings occurred, centred on the region around Warsaw, in Radom and in Łódź. In the next four years around a thousand strikes took place, which culminated in the strike waves of summer 1980 that gave birth to Solidarność and broke the Communist Party’s monopoly of power.23

In Poland, then, the development of workers’ organisation tended to curve upwards from 1956 to 1980-81, both in scale and geographical scope. The 1956 movement was concentrated in a few major plants in the big industrial centres only; that of 1970-1 centred on the coastal belt around Gdansk and Szczecin and reached workplaces elsewhere; in 1976 perhaps three-quarters of the country’s largest plants were affected; in 1980-1 the movement encompassed the whole nation.

To explain the contrast between the Polish and Czechoslovak/GDR experiences a variety of arguments offer themselves. The latter two regimes were more repressive, whereas the former placed greater emphasis on containment of protest through reforms—for example, with substantial concessions granted to private farmers. In Czechoslovakia and East Germany social conditions were never quite so desperate. They did not experience the roaring boom followed by sharp crash that so destabilised the Polish economy in the 1970s, and their tighter labour markets enabled greater scope for workers’ demands to be achieved through factory-level bargaining. In Poland, external resources capable of assisting workers’ movements were present to a greater degree: the Catholic Church was a more powerful institution than were the churches in its neighbours, and afforded some protection to the independent trade unions. Workplace-based movements were able to draw radical intellectuals behind them, too.24 Supporters of KOR (the Committee for the Defence of Workers), to take the best-known example, helped to produce the newspapers and leaflets of Poland’s underground workers’ movement.

Yet an equally important, and widely neglected, difference was the degree to which networks of militants in Poland succeeded in keeping alive collective memories of resistance. The familiarity of sections of the workforce with the industrial action repertoire and with trade union norms and values were important factors that contributed to the success of strike action in the 1970s and 1980-81. Thanks to the research of Lawrence Goodwyn, Roman Laba and others we know that the uprisings of 1956, 1970-71, 1976 and 1980-81 were no mere litany of disconnected events. They

---

seemed to erupt as if from nowhere but each in fact followed upon months and years of intricate organising.\textsuperscript{25} Even during periods in which industrial action was subdued, militants in certain factories and regions succeeded in maintaining contact with one another, keeping alive memories of past struggles. An accumulated memory of strategic knowledge, tactical repertoires and organisational skills came to be embodied in such networks. It was particularly amongst these groups of militants, who had acquired self-education through self-activity,\textsuperscript{26} that class identities were reproduced and regenerated and those tactics developed and tested, notably the sit-down strike, that were to prove so successful in challenging the regime in 1970-81. Why, Goodwyn asks, did Lech Walesa and other militants at the Lenin shipyards act with such assurance in 1980? Because they had a wealth of experience, and had been discussing “the politics of self-organisation” at least since the massacre of 1970 if not before.\textsuperscript{27}

Summarising the findings of Goodwyn and Laba, Cyrus Zirakzadeh has described how “the strikes of 1970 and 1976 were etched on the collective memory of the Polish working class.” The “ongoing warfare between workers and the party-state,” especially the strike waves of 1956-58, 1970, and 1976, “played a key role in the political education of the future leaders of Solidarity.”\textsuperscript{28} This argument is echoed by Linda Fuller, in her instructive comparison between workplace politics in the two countries. In the decades prior to 1980, Polish workers “amassed a tremendous, varied, and interconnected store of political knowledge and skill.” They learned how to organise sit-down strikes, how to establish interfactory strike committees, and how to set up communication networks. They absorbed lessons about politics—such as “how, where, when, and with which management and party personages to negotiate”—as well as some “subtle lessons about one another as individuals, upon which the success of their next action sometimes hinged—who did what well and not so well, who could be counted on for what, who had the personality for which tasks.”\textsuperscript{29}

East Germany: fading traditions

Compared to Poland, the trajectory of workplace-based protest in Czechoslovakia and East Germany could scarcely have been more different. In the GDR it slanted downwards from 1953, and there may well be truth in Axel Bust-Bartels’ contention that it was from around then “that the tendency toward withdrawal into the private sphere, and accommodation with the existing order began to prevail.”\textsuperscript{30} From the early 1960s onward, strikes were few and far between. In the 1980s only a smattering occurred, almost all of which were defensive in nature, small in size, only a matter of hours in duration, and restricted to individual workplaces.\textsuperscript{31} That said, it would be

\textsuperscript{25} Goodwyn, 1991, p.205 and passim.
\textsuperscript{26} Goodwyn, 1991, p.83.
\textsuperscript{27} Goodwyn, 1991, p.245.
\textsuperscript{28} Zirakzadeh, 1997, p.115-6.
\textsuperscript{29} Fuller, 1999, pp.160-1.
\textsuperscript{30} Axel Bust-Bartels, 1980, Herrschaft und Widerstand in den DDR-Betrieben, Frankfurt/Main: Campus, p.28.
misleading to suggest that the workforce was thoroughly atomised or individualised. Camaraderie was a natural part of most workers’ existence, based on a perception of common conditions and grievances as well as strong shopfloor bargaining positions and endemic ‘infrapolitical’ struggle. Despite the quashing of open resistance, wars of attrition were pervasive. By the late 1950s, decentralised, factory-level bargaining between management and work-teams had become an axial industrial relationship, and over subsequent decades industrial relations settled into a pattern that Jeffrey Kopstein has described as “a continuous, yet hidden battle over work norms and wages,” in which neither workers nor employers gained clear-cut victories.

As a result of workplace resistance, “a conscious frontal antagonism towards management” prevailed among the bulk of industrial workers, in the words of one sociologist of GDR industrial relations. This was commonly accompanied by a rudimentary class consciousness, a sense that the life-chances of ‘us down here’ and ‘them up there’ contrasted sharply and that the interests of the two groups were at least sharply divergent if not diametrically opposed. It could be heard in the ubiquitous grumbling that managers and functionaries were to blame for economic mismanagement such as bottlenecks and other problems hindering the production process, the costs of which would be unfairly borne by workers, and that the privileges and isolation of the nomenklatura blinded them to the real situation of ordinary people—that “them at the top [...] have their luxury suites [but] don’t know how bad it is for us at the bottom.” This, however, was not a class consciousness brimming with self-confidence. There was little sign of what one sociologist has called ‘corporate class consciousness,’ where a worker identifies herself and her interests “with the corporate body and the interests of the working class as a whole,” let alone hegemonic consciousness, in which “a worker identifies the revolutionary interests of the working class with the interests of society as a whole.” Ideas of this sort tend to flourish when working-class organisation spreads beyond the walls of individual workplaces, and above all when workers’ movements directly confront the state—such as, in the case of Germany, the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods, the immediate post-war years, and June 1953. Folk memories of the labour-movement achievements, values and norms of these periods could only survive unharassed in spaces sanctioned by the SED. Maintaining collective memories of the 1953 rising was all but impossible. Even whispered exchanges were tracked down and punished by the ever-vigilant Stasi.

Connected to the absence of corporate or hegemonic class consciousness, moreover, was the eclipse of memories of pre-1933 labour traditions. The milieux of


social democracy, having survived Nazism albeit in a drastically weakened condition, were marginalised in the late 1940s, through incorporation into an increasingly Stalinised SED. The co-opting of social democrats into positions of power may have contributed more effectively to the demise of their traditions than the repression directed against those who resisted. Grass-roots SPD members witnessed SED policy being explained and defended by well-known functionaries from ‘their own’ camp. In the 1950s and 1960s, identifiably social democratic identities and heritage gradually faded from the scene. Even in their traditional strongholds, established networks of social democrats crumbled and dissolved, as some took positions as functionaries in economy, state, SED or FDGB while others retreated from the political and industrial fray.37

The outcome was that although low-level forms of industrial action were endemic, and although managerialist and quota-busting behaviour was widely frowned upon and egalitarianism and solidarity were positively valued, organised socialist (or syndicalist) currents distinct from and critical of the SED were marginalised and, by the 1980s, only a tiny minority of the working class had experience of militant industrial action. Few would even have known a participant in strikes, unless a parent or grandparent had been involved in 1953 or in the struggles of the Weimar years. Even thinner on the ground were individuals with experience of independent trade unions or works councils. Following 1948 (in the case of councils) and 1953 (in the case of strikes), memories of these forms of contention faded. Whereas the shipyard workers of Gdansk in 1980 remembered previous struggles (1976, 1970-71 and 1956), either on their own account or in the form of practical knowledge kept alive by networks of militants, their counterparts in Rostock or Bratislava rarely did.

There were exceptions. The first works’ council to be established in East Germany in the autumn of 1989 was initiated by an elderly worker who had been active in the works councils movement in the 1940s.38 There are also cases of workplace activism in 1989 that tapped into recent experiences.39 For the most part, however, strike action and works councils in 1989 drew less upon hands-on experience than abstract knowledge. The strike and works council were familiar concepts but they derived from the West German media and from history lessons and literature. Workers who picked them from out of the industrial-action toolbox were not always sure how they functioned. The collective of workers who instigated the formation of one of the early works councils in 1989 illustrated the uncertainty that resulted. They had some idea of its nature and purpose and, one of them recalls, were adamant “that we needed it.” However, “we didn’t even know what a works’ council looks like, we just didn’t know.”40

Where was the working class?

Some have taken the low degree of working-class organisational presence in the 1989 upheavals to signify a low level of working-class involvement tout court. In the case of East Germany, the most sustained and forceful argument of this sort is advanced in Linda Fuller’s *Where Was the Working Class?* She begins from the axiom that the class structure of the GDR was dichotomous, pitting workers against “intellectuals, who, on the basis of specialized knowledge acquired primarily through higher education, carried out the redistribution of the surplus that workers produced.”\(^\text{41}\) Equipped with this analytical device, she makes the case that the 1989 revolution was a battle between two segments of the ruling intelligentsia. The protests that toppled the regime were “sponsored” by intellectuals and dominated by the educated middle classes, while workers “stayed out of politics altogether, aside from sometimes discussing events among themselves.”\(^\text{42}\)

On one point, this case is unarguable. There is no doubt that many of those who emerged from the 1980s opposition to found and lead the GDR civic movement were educated to tertiary level and were more likely than the average citizen to hail from the middle classes and to pursue professional careers. Two-thirds of the founding members of the civic movement organisation Democratic Awakening and almost half of the forty-three founding members of the (1989-refounded) SDP were theologians.\(^\text{43}\) When Democratic Awakening established a regular leadership body in October it included two lawyers (one of whom also worked for the Stasi), a sociologist, a musician, two pastors, a physicist, a lecturer, an engineer and a mechanic. New Forum was the only group that was not founded by clergy, but only ten per cent of its leading members were classed as workers. In Czechoslovakia a similar picture applied. Although a good many spokespeople of Civic Forum / Public Against Violence (hereafter CF/PAV) self-identified as labourers, as well as “farmers, drivers, smiths and pensioners,” there were many church ministers, doctors and managers, too, and overall an over-representation of individuals with university degrees.\(^\text{44}\)

This was less true of the rank-and-file membership. Many had either not entered or had dropped out of higher education. In the GDR, a good few worked in menial jobs, often in the employ of the Church, yet the ‘intellectual’ sections of the middle classes were also present to a disproportionate degree, with a significant over-representation of graduates. One survey of the membership of ‘Democracy Now’ gave the following breakdown: 51 per cent academics, 20 per cent managers and white collar workers, 15 per cent skilled workers, 9 per cent students.\(^\text{45}\) A survey of the Berlin New Forum membership found that almost three-quarters were educated to the tertiary level. Thirty-nine per cent described themselves as ‘intelligentsia’, ten per cent

\(^{41}\) Fuller, 1999, p.19.
\(^{42}\) Fuller, 1999.
as ‘managers,’ and ten per cent as ‘students and apprentices’. Only an eighth described themselves as ‘workers’ and one per cent as unskilled workers.\footnote{Marianne Schulz (1991) ‘Neues Forum’, in Müller Einbergs \textit{et al}., eds, \textit{Von der Illegalität ins Parlament}, Berlin: Links., pp.20-1.}

Fuller castigates the civic movement for ignoring the working class, and explains this behaviour in terms of the intelligentsia’s privileged material circumstances.\footnote{Fuller, 1999, pp.98-100.} Intellectuals were rewarded for their state-supporting roles as guardians of scientific progress, gatekeepers of opportunities and information, and managers of legitimation. Social life in a middle-class milieu instilled intellectuals with a confidence in their ability to negotiate with powerful people and to engage actively within the body politic. In the process, they gained familiarity with speaking to public gatherings, chairing meetings, debating alternatives, constructing coalitions, evaluating options, isolating opponents, and so on.\footnote{Fuller, 1999, p.84.} Furthermore, the ‘political confidence’ of intellectual dissidents was in some cases (although by no means always) buttressed by a relative immunity from state sanctions. In the case of pastors, the contract between state and Church provided a significant degree of security. For others, it resulted from personal contacts, public prominence, or their unique skills. In short, oppositional intellectuals benefited from an array of resources, including skills and leadership qualities, which had been cultivated in their professional lives and social milieux. Elitist justifications of privilege were commonplace in these circles, as was disdain for the masses—widely regarded as uneducated, greedy, slothful and pampered.

This, Fuller surmises, explains why workers’ sympathy with the opposition was essentially passive. But this is an assumption that much evidence contradicts. Opposition groups such as New Forum gained a hearing in countless workplaces, New Forum activists themselves encouraged workplace militancy, and some groups of workers approached New Forum in order to seek advice. The street demonstrations and civic movement, on one hand, and workplace discussion, protest activities and FDGB meetings, on the other, were not separate worlds. They overlapped. The events, demands and discourses of one fed into the other. In Francesca Weil’s phrase, workplaces were the “relay stations” of the protest movement. In some Leipzig workplaces those who attended the ‘peace prayers’ in the early autumn would return to work the next day and describe the experience to colleagues, sparking political debate.\footnote{Francesca Weil (1999) ‘Wirtschaftliche, politische und soziale Veränderungen in einem Leipziger Betrieb 1989/90,’ in Günther Heydemann \textit{et al}., eds., \textit{Revolution und Transformation in der DDR}, Berlin, Duncker and Humblot, p.536.} Indeed, many workplace networks of militants were born not on the shopfloor but from encounters at peace prayers or civic movement meetings.

Fuller does concede that “some workers” attended the public protests. But, she insists, according to the survey data of “Opp, Voβ, and Gern, opposition group members, whom we have seen were overwhelmingly middle-class, joined demonstrations more often than those who were not.”\footnote{Fuller, 1999, p.37.} In fact, the data set of Opp and his colleagues shows that “people holding a university degree on the average reported the lowest frequency of demonstration participation”—lower indeed than all categories...
of workers.\textsuperscript{51} It may be that intellectuals were underrepresented on demonstrations.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, there is reason to suppose that most ‘intellectuals’ present were white-collar workers rather than from the middling layers, let alone members of Fuller’s ‘ruling intelligentsia’.\textsuperscript{53} The core participants at the Leipzig demonstrations, according to Bernd Lindner, were “overwhelmingly manual and white collar workers.”\textsuperscript{54} Elsewhere in Saxony and Thuringia, the smaller industrial towns often witnessed higher rates of participation in protests than did the big cities, which, being administrative centres, contained higher concentrations of functionaries.

Simple arithmetic suggests that these findings may be generalised. Between August 1989 and April 1990, 2600 public demonstrations and over 300 rallies took place in the GDR, as well as over 200 strikes and a dozen factory occupations.\textsuperscript{55} The largest three demonstrations each attracted well over one million people. No accurate figures exist for the total number of participants in demonstrations and public protests. That it was in the millions is indisputable. One researcher has estimated the figure at over five million.\textsuperscript{56} Yet there were only 1.6 million graduates in the land. Even had they all mustered on the streets, they would have comprised only a minority of the crowds. To see in 1989 a ‘revolution of the intellectuals’ is to elide ‘the people’ with the intelligentsia, to mistake the composition of social movement organisations for that of the movement as a whole, and to allow the light directed at its spokespeople to leave the crowds in shadow. (The public prominence of intellectuals, moreover, was not a novelty of 1989. It is hardly uncommon for lawyers, doctors, priests and teachers to act as spokespeople in revolutionary situations.)

The thesis of working class non-involvement in 1989, in short, holds no water. Workers, in very large numbers, were actively involved. But one can go further and argue that, at critical moments, their role was decisive. A case in point is the early phase of the revolution in East Germany. In September and October, Stasi units were showered with reports attesting to the increasing urgency with which economic and political reform was being demanded in the workplaces.\textsuperscript{57} Their sources warned that if supply shortages were not overcome, “spontaneous strikes could occur.”\textsuperscript{58} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} According to a survey of some 5,000 demonstrators conducted by Kurt Mühler, Steffen Wilsdorf and Leipzig students, members of the intelligentsia made up between 17 and 33 per cent of Leipzig demonstrators between November 1989 and February 1990. While the former figure is low relative to the intelligentsia’s weight in society the latter is not, and would appear to contradict the findings of Opp \textit{et al.} Alternatively, it may signify a greater willingness of graduates to return questionnaires.
\item \textsuperscript{53} In Wayne Bartee’s survey of Leipzig demonstrators (Wayne Bartee (2000) \textit{A Time to Speak Out; The Leipzig Citizen Protests and the Fall of East Germany}, Praeger, p.125), most were clearly in working-class occupations (30% blue collar; 15% teachers, nurses, technicians, museum and clerical workers). Some categories cannot clearly be identified in class terms, e.g. ‘salaried employees’ in industries such as publishing (30%), or those in church-related jobs other than clergy (5%). But in such cases it is fair to assume that the bulk of occupations covered were working class (e.g. copy editor, secretary, cleaner) rather than middle class (e.g. book shop manager).
\item \textsuperscript{54} Lindner, Bernd (1990) ‘Die politische Kultur der Straße als Medium der Veränderung’, \textit{Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte}, 27, p.23.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Lohmann, 1994, p.62.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Bastian, 1994, pp.33-4.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Mitter and Wolle, 1990, p.226.
\end{itemize}
strikes that did break out were typically in response to political issues rather than, or in addition to, workplace problems. Stasi reports indicate that discussion of the pros and cons of industrial action was roiling in workplaces across Saxony and Thuringia. Several strike threats were issued, not only in reaction to the closure of the border to Czechoslovakia (on 3 October) but also in protest at the deployment of paramilitary ‘factory battalions’ against the street demonstrations. News of these activities undoubtedly gave state leaders food for thought. They must have realised, writes Bernd Gehrke, that a crackdown on mass protests in Plauen, Dresden or Leipzig “would have sparked strike action which, to have been checked at all, would have necessitated a state of emergency.” In late October, an assessment for Soviet diplomats in East Germany found the “mood in the workplaces” to be so “unfavourable that there is the danger of the formation of parallel structures.” Similar concerns were voiced at SED Central Committee meeting in early November. One member warned that “the working class is so enraged they’re going to the barricades! They’re shouting: get the Party out of the workplaces!”

Despite the anxieties of Stasi generals and SED chiefs that the ferment in the factories could boil over, the decisive part played by workers in 1989 was not in workplaces but in the public squares and streets. It was when the public protests in Leipzig and elsewhere were joined by tens of thousands of working people that the regime’s hard-line tactics were defeated. The demonstrations, in the words of sociologist Hartmut Zwahr, “gained their decisive, system-destroying power thanks to the mass participation of workers.” In East Germany, in short, the movement was not simply a ‘Feierabend’ (after-work) affair. Rather, one of its chief bases was the workplace, and the decisive factor in its success was the entry of workers—and in this, the GDR was not atypical.

In late November 1989, Czechoslovakia experienced a two-hour general strike supported by around half of the entire labour force, with a further quarter or so expressing symbolic solidarity. In Romania, the late 1980s witnessed major expressions of working-class discontent, as in the 1987 mass strike in Brașov, while the event that unleashed the uprising in December 1989, the liberation of Timişoara, commenced with workers leaving their workplaces en masse and marching to the town centre. In a range of other countries of the region, notably Albania, a high proportion of overall protest activity in the late 1980s and early 1990s consisted of industrial action.

---

59 E.g., Rathenow, 1989, p.286.
62 Otto König, speaking to the SED Central Committee on November 9. BA-SAPMO, Parteiarchiv. IV 2/1/709.
During the early, ‘flower’ phase of the 1989 transitions, the overwhelming sentiment was that all social layers were finding solidarity and common purpose in defiance of and opposition to the despised old regime. In some countries, social interaction became extraordinarily intense, even intoxicating. “Suddenly we all want to assemble as much as possible, to listen as much as possible, and to speak as much as possible,” reported one Slovak journalist. The language of renaissance was ubiquitous. “We were all born on 17 November,” rejoiced one Czech student. Others characterised the atmosphere as a “beautiful fever” akin to “falling in love” (as Tomas Hradilek, a spokesman for Charter 77, put it), or being “drunk on new wine” (in the words of Czech folk singer Jaromír Nohavica).

It would be an exaggeration to say that civil society was being invented anew. Under the old regimes, people had been involved in clubs, self-help groups, citizens’ initiatives and the like. Nevertheless, 1989 in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania witnessed an extraordinary eruption of civic activity. Opportunities were opening up for all manner of projects that had been illegal or indeed still were. In the GDR, two to three applications to register new associations reached the interior ministry every day. Houses were squatted, in some of which art galleries and bars were opened, and students created independent unions. Feminists set up women’s centres, cafes and libraries, and an Independent Women’s Association was formed, which helped to make formerly taboo topics, such as same-sex love, or spousal abuse, subjects of open discussion. Another feminist group, Lilac Offensive, demanded that 8th March be made a women-only holiday. Waves of protest in some cases led directly to the formation of new institutions. In Erfurt, a member of ‘Women for Change’ noticed containers being loaded and driven away from the local Stasi headquarters, and smoke rising from its chimneys. She urged acquaintances to action and before long several dozen people were blocking the road; all lorries were prevented entry or exit; cars were allowed through only after being searched. This precipitated the formation, nationwide, of committees were formed to launch investigations into brutality by the security forces.

These periods of combative and delirious unity, these utopian conjunctures in which traditional authority structures were crumbling and campaigning groups could force their way into new-found political and cultural space, were, even in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Romania, relatively brief. Outside that group, they were relatively tepid, and were vitiated by nationalism and racism. In Bulgaria, for example, the opposition movements of 1989 were weakened by their susceptibility to anti-

---

Turkish racism. In Yugoslavia, a formidable upsurge in industrial action in the 1980s, with wildcat strikes and a widespread public hostility toward the entire ruling elite, precipitated the fall of ‘communism’ but its progressive thrust was ultimately derailed by wily operators such as Franjo Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic who were able to stabilise the new order by playing the ‘national card,’ thereby postponing Yugoslavia’s ‘1989’ — in the case of Serbia until the ‘bulldozer revolution’ of 2000.

The dominant strategy through which to engage the opposition movements, however, was to gradually concede their democratic demands, in the mode of ‘trasformismo’: the organisation of a loose alliance between regime and moderate oppositional forces, in order to marginalise radical currents. In this respect, as in so many, Poland blazed the trail. In 1988 it underwent roughly what its neighbours experienced in 1989. The situation in both cases was objectively similar: mass collective action was forcing a divided and faltering regime to reform, with the old order cautiously coming to recognise the advantages of containing revolt by means of political concession in the form of parliamentary democracy.

The imposition of austerity and other proto-neoliberal reforms would proceed so much more smoothly, it appeared to Poland’s military dictator, General Jaruzelski and his team, if the Solidarność leaders were to propose it. Just as glasnost could help to advance the case for perestroika, democracy could prove an indispensable means of selling the pain of market reform to a recalcitrant population. In Jaruzelski’s recollection, the regime had learned from the past:

The first crisis arose in 1956. We had to send tanks onto the streets; there were deaths. The second serious crisis then followed in 1970, and the third in 1980. In 1981 we had to send tanks onto the streets again. In 1988, a new crisis. In May and August—strikes. But this time we attempted to resolve the crisis without violence, without bloodshed. For if we had endlessly followed that road, the gap between us and the working class would have perpetually widened.

On another occasion, in late 1989, he put the point in a most illuminating way.

As a result of major economic problems we have faced difficult experiences. I’m thinking of December 1970 and August 1980. We undertook a series of attempts to reform, but these ended in failure. In each case, the obstacle was our population. The Party, the government, was not in a position to win the majority to acquiesce to unpopular decisions. However, these decisions, now being carried out by the current coalition government, are being accepted fairly quietly, even though living standards are worsening. Strikes are rare. This shows that the population places greater trust in this form of government.

In addition, he anticipated, “with this [coalition] government we are more likely to receive western assistance.”

Here, then, is the chain of events, from 1956 to 1989, highlighting resistance on the part of the Polish masses. But it also hints at another chain. It, too, connects 1956, 1980-1 and 1988-89—but this chain modifies the heroic narrative, outlined above, of Poland’s protest trajectory. In this narrative, 1956 is the year in which Moscow sent tanks to crush the uprising in Hungary, repeated in Czechoslovakia twelve years later. These acts spread a fearsome pall over opposition movements across the region. In 1970s Poland, the prominent activist Adam Michnik declared that opposition must develop as a gradual process, for if it does not, the tanks will roll again. Michnik’s KOR comrades, such as Jacek Kuroń, agreed: yes, do agitate, organise, talk, and what have you, but keep within the law!\(^75\) This was the ‘self-limitation’ precept that came to guide the Solidarność leadership in 1980-81, and which emboldened the regime in its bid to inflict a humbling defeat on the popular movement.

It was in the aftermath of Jaruzelski’s crackdown of December 1981 that the ground was prepared for the closed-door ‘negotiated transition’ to democracy based on round table talks that was to become the model across the region at the decade’s close. Both sides were weakened. The regime had been exposed as enjoying minimal popular support. Solidarność had been revealed to have insufficient will to overthrow the regime when it came to the crunch—and its efforts to avoid confrontation, as Jack Bloom has documented, “made it increasingly suspect in many people’s eyes.”\(^76\) Both sides were bruised and humiliated—and external events played a part too. Regime hardliners were weakened by the developments in Moscow. For their part, movement radicals were dispirited by the global social-movement downturn of the late 1970s and 1980s, which encouraged oppositionists in Poland and across CEE to turn away from conceptions of grassroots social transformation and toward liberalism—initially around the slogans ‘market socialism’ and ‘civil society,’ and later for ‘democracy, markets and Europe’. In Poland, the notion of ‘self-limitation’ shuffled, step by step, toward a scepticism and even hostility—egregiously, in Michnik’s case—toward working-class activism tout court.\(^77\) By 1986, the regime was issuing amnesties to Solidarność members, at precisely the moment at which their organisation reached a nadir in terms of effectiveness and popularity\(^78\)—and then, when in May 1988 a rash of economic strikes broke out, “official Solidarity knew almost nothing about it.”\(^79\) Solidarność, as David Ost has documented, was able to push instead for political strikes, forcing the Round Table talks, in which, however, “workers all but disappeared.”\(^80\) This is the secret of the riddle of Poland’s 1989. The election result of

\(^{80}\) Ost, David (2005) The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe, Cornell University Press,
June was extraordinary, dramatic, momentous and historic. It took the Communist Party by surprise (it didn’t believe that it could possibly lose so badly as it did)\(^1\) and Solidarność swept the board. But Solidarność was a shadow of its previous self. It had come to accept the basic structures of social order, had shelved radical aspirations, and now idealised the liberal institutional framework.

In demonstrating that an authoritarian regime could be brushed aside, and in its willingness to uncritically embrace liberal institutions, the Polish experience typified, and powerfully shaped, the 1989 upheaval as it rippled across the region. In East Germany, the attitude of the opposition leaderships towards public protest was initially tepid,\(^2\) and towards industrial action they were dismissive. This was particularly apparent during a strike wave in early December that began to enthuse local branches of New Forum. “The readiness to strike,” one New Forum leader recalls,

was at that time greater among the workers than in the divided opposition movements in which intellectuals and pastors set the tone ... The call for a general strike at this time, which came from places like Plauen and Magdeburg, was ridiculed within our own ranks. When the time was ripe we did not act.\(^3\)

Instead, the opposition groups opted to pact with regime forces, at ‘Round Table’ talks, and in the form of ‘security partnerships’ with the police and the Stasi. (This, incidentally, permitted these institutions to regroup and to destroy a good deal of evidence of their crimes).\(^4\) In Czechoslovakia a similar trajectory was seen. Following the November general strike, which led directly to the toppling of the regime, the CF/PAV attempted to demobilise the citizenry. They called for an end to mass demonstrations and encouraged strike committees to metamorphose into branches of CF/PAV for the purpose of negotiating with municipal leaderships.\(^5\) While the streets pulled CF/PAV toward more radical positions in certain instances, its general trajectory was toward behind-the-scenes machinations and inter-elite negotiation. Its decision-making assemblies were summoned less and less, with committees close to Václav Havel now making all the key decisions. When discontent among the grassroots membership arose in response, Václav Klaus was able to tap into it, steering it in a populist-rightist direction—notably with his privatisation plan, presented as a tool with which to break the power of the nomenklatura. Velvet revolution gave way to velvet corruption. The demos was levered out of ‘its’ revolution—and when celebrations were called to mark its first anniversary, students in Prague pointedly

---


refused to join in, arguing that basic demands of the previous year remained unfulfilled. The revolution was not velvet, they spat, but “stolen.”

Having achieved the institutional breakthrough, many of the reformers who had headed the struggle for democracy began to push a market-fundamentalist agenda, encouraged by Western advisors, foundations and governments. The market-fundamentalist juggernaut that was storming toward CEE encountered surprisingly little organised resistance. More than the intellectuals of the old dissident coalitions or even than the bulk of the former party elites, it was workers, especially women, who bore the brunt. The ensuing bitter disappointment and rage, as Ost describes in the case of Poland, was consistently directed, above all by Solidarność, “away from class cleavages and toward identity cleavages.” Ultimately, the main beneficiary was conservative nationalism, headed by the Kaczyński brothers in Poland, Klaus in the Czech Republic and Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

**Conclusion**

Following 1989, the structures of bureaucratic state capitalism and one-party rule in Central and Eastern Europe transmuted into liberal market economies and parliamentary democracy. The direction was broadly the same, even if the modalities and tempi varied widely, whether in respect of market reform, the predation of state assets, the extent of lustration, and the degree to which the political system resembled an orthodox or a ‘managed’ parliamentary democracy. The underlying causes of the transformation included the weakening of Soviet hegemony and of the command-economic system, which prompted a turning of reformist heads toward Western-style systems. But, as with episodes of democratisation elsewhere and in earlier eras, mass, working-class collective action played a central role in the transformation. Popular movements brought to a thunderous end the torrid decades in which independent political and industrial activity had been systematically stifled throughout CEE. At least in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania they did so with elan, displaying tremendous courage, creativity and wit, as well as tactical nous in their confrontations with the forces of ‘law and order.’ In the uprush of grassroots activism, debate and initiative, protestors discovered hitherto unsuspected capacities and provided a glimpse of the potential that arises when established order crumbles in the face of collective action. In all three countries a sense of ‘alternativity’ arose, a feeling that ‘anything might happen’ and ‘everything is possible,’ accompanied by a widespread sense of ‘collective effervescence.’ Those who had been impotent discovered new powers, and

---

89 Ost, David (2005), p.35.
the ability to influence the political process. Radical questions welled up. What is the nature of this or that aspect of society? Should it be so? Can it be changed? If so, how do we get there?

The democratic gains attained were momentous: civil liberties, the formal accountability of government to the citizenry, and the right to organize politically and industrially. But once the impetus from the mass mobilisations subsided and new institutions of social control and the disciplining of labour were consolidated, those achievements were put under pressure. This coincided in the 1990s with soaring inequality and a regional Great Depression that impoverished millions, further sapping the strength of labour. In this context, and exacerbated by the global crisis of 2008, economic grievances fed into the surge of support for conservative nationalist and authoritarian populist currents, from Putin in the east to Orbán in the west. With hindsight, then, 1989 serves as a reminder that the masses taking temporary ownership of the streets means only so much unless it is the precursor for their taking permanent ownership of society.

Postscript: The ‘colour revolutions’

The 1989 revolutions were at the meridian of an arc of change that commenced in Gdansk in 1980 and concluded in Moscow in 1991 (or, arguably, with the ‘electoral revolution’ in Belgrade nine years later). Some would go further, and propose that CEE and the post-Soviet territories, perhaps even extending into the Middle East, experienced an ongoing liberal-democratic revolution in the 2000s too. The evidence for this consists essentially of the ‘colour’ (or ‘flower’) uprisings of the mid-2000s: the rose revolution in Georgia (2003-04), its orange successor in Ukraine (2004), and the tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) as well as the cedar revolution in Lebanon (also 2005). In each case, in a context of forthcoming or recently held elections, opposition parties and civil society campaigners, organised or headed by NGOs, accused corrupt old-regime forces of rigging the system and demanded a free and fair electoral process. In each case, the regime remained obdurate, prompting thousands of people to protest, while opposition groups, legitimated by the crowds on the streets, negotiated political change.

The case that these colourful episodes should be understood as revolutions rests on three main arguments. First, they exhibited high levels of popular mobilisation, and significant levels of confrontation with the security forces. In Georgia, over 100,000 took to the streets, and when the president, Eduard Shevardnadze, opened parliament, hundreds of followers of the opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili stormed the building. In Ukraine, demonstrations in Kiev numbered in the hundreds of thousands, with smaller protests taking place across the

---

country. In Kyrgyzstan, a succession of demonstrations, in 2002, demanding justice for citizens killed by police at an earlier event, combined with outrage over the Askar Akaev regime’s parliamentary manipulation, to ignite an explosion of protest. There were mass meetings, demonstrations (of 10,000 or so in Jalalabad), and occupations of airports and roads. These culminated in insurrection in the capital city, Bishkek. Government buildings were occupied, a TV station was seized, and the presidential palace (the White House) was stormed. Second, they exhibited hearty doses of what Lenin once referred to as the “festive energy of the masses.” The Orange Revolution, explains Andrew Wilson, should be seen as “profoundly revolutionary,” in part because it was a manifestation of “real people power.” There were “carnival-like street parades” and a genuine desire “for regime change, not just for a new president.” The mood in the Maidan, he goes on, did not just indicate personal support for the leading opposition politicians Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tyoshenko; rather, “it was the articulate anger of a people finding their voice. ... The key sentiment was ‘kick the bastards out,’ and that is what revolutions are all about.” Third, the movement for regime change went beyond mere expressions of desires and grievances but culminated in real political-systemic shifts, particularly in respect of democracy. All of the colour revolutions, it has been argued, not only overthrew corrupt incumbents—Shevardnadze, Akaev et al.—but hoisted into office new governments that were populated by committed democrats.

Critiques of this position take two principal forms. In one, domestic conflict is reduced to geopolitics, with protests explained as the fruit of external intervention and manipulation. There may have been a popular element to the movements, but they possessed little autonomous spirit. In all three countries, the fingerprints of US and Russian embassy officials could be described in some events, and the funding and training of numerous NGOs, including those that agitated against vote rigging, by the EU and the US was well documented. In Ukraine, the Western powers favoured Yushchenko while Russia backed his rival, Viktor Yanukovych. The West monitored the elections, through the OSCE, while Russia provided political advisors and some funding, alongside its media organs’ presence in the South and East.

Although it is self-evidently the case that significant external meddling and influence peddling occurred in all three uprisings, its role should not be exaggerated. In Ukraine, for example, Western organisations did provide funding for NGOs but only a fraction of their overall income. The weightier counter-argument to the notion that these were in any meaningful sense revolutions is a different one, namely, that regime change was cosmetic, not structural and socially transformative as it had been in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Romania. Georgia, following its roseate redecoration, was presented to the world by its Washington backers as a democratic success story,

---


97 Copsey (2010), p.36.
even though its new president had been elected—in echo of the vote shares achieved in the USSR under its notorious Georgian leader—by a staggeringly implausible 96 per cent of the popular vote, and he then proceeded to co-opt the NGOs, neutering ‘civil society’ opposition, before launching a harsh crackdown on demonstrators in 2007. In Ukraine, ‘revolution’ and ‘counter-revolution’ rapidly came under the sway of the major political parties, which themselves were acting overtly as vehicles for business elites. The Orange Revolution, in essence, represented the “transfer of power from an unpopular government to an opposition through elections”; it “replaced one part of the Ukrainian elite with another.”

Even in Kyrgyzstan, the one case in which popular movements pushed toward full-scale insurrection, there was, for all the personnel change at the apex of the political hierarchy, no significant change of regime. Here too, the movement was steered by wealthy elites, and the new regime, of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was no slouch in deploying authoritarian techniques when its support base began to erode—and all this with the vocal support of Washington, concerned as it was for its military base at Manas.

It is in this sense that the colour revolutions could appear to have been overtaken by geopolitics. This is not to say that geopolitics, most obviously Soviet hegemonic decline, was not a fundamental determinant of the 1989 revolutions. Nor is it to say that agency in the colour revolutions can be reduced to external interference. Rather, in the context of a movement sector that had not thrown up significant organisations of its own but attached itself more or less closely to existing elite-dominated parties, the economic and geopolitical connections of those elites, including of course to the great powers of Russia, Western Europe and the US, came to play an important role. This included, against the mainstream narrative of ‘permanent liberal-democratic revolution,’ western support for the stalling or even reversal of democratic reforms in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan following their colour-revolutionary episodes.