

1989/91 as a Caesura in the Study of History: A Personal Retrospective

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SURPRISE AND METHODOLOGY

There have been exceptions, but, on the whole, historians were as surprised by the upheavals of 1989–1991 as most of their contemporaries. It all happened in just a few months, something that most of us—*for all our historical arguments*—had still, in the middle of 1989, considered extremely unlikely: a revolution in East Central Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the re-establishment of a German nation state without war and without paying the price of being neutralized in a “third way” between the West and the East.

That was a surprise. For historians who not only wanted to describe how things had been and how it all happened but also claimed that they could explain past events out of preceding constellations, this surprise—regardless

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of what people desired politically—had something professionally irritating about it. This irritation has to be understood in two different respects:

If it is so difficult to predict vital changes in our own time from our knowledge of preceding and existing structures, as is the case here, doesn't this point to the limitations of the structural historical and processual historical explicability of past changes, too? Might it not be better to simply say *what* happened—and *how*—instead of trying to analyze *why* it took place and which constellations brought it about?

Even more irritating was that precisely because we tried to learn from past history for the benefit of the present, the upheaval caught us on the wrong foot. In the light of our historical knowledge about declining regimes and civilizations, wasn't it extremely unlikely that the Soviet empire's power would disintegrate so quickly and relatively peacefully—thus making the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe possible? Wasn't it considered to be more or less impossible for a revolution to succeed in a highly developed, complex industrial society? Hadn't there been many failed attempts to make compatible, in the middle of Europe, the existence of strong nation states, democratic freedom at home and peacefulness abroad, and didn't it seem extremely unlikely that something like this could occur in our lifetime?

And yet all this actually happened! Those who had attempted to orient themselves on the basis of historical experience at the time were in for a very big surprise and turned out to have a particularly bad orientation. Wasn't this a case of historical knowledge impeding a correct view of reality—instead of opening our eyes?

Still, in the years that followed, we obviously did not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by this irritating experience. Over the last 24 years, much scholarly work has been done in order to *historically* explain the surprising upheavals of 1989–1991, not without success. The usual approaches of historians were applied. Researchers attempted to compile all of the relevant factors, reconstruct their interrelationships and estimate their impact: factors, which over the preceding years and decades had contributed toward making the period 1989–1991 what it was. We discussed the fragility of the Soviet model and the role played by Gorbachev, the widespread dissatisfaction and impressive courage of the dissidents, the dynamics and impact of the mass movements in the socialist countries, their impact on international politics, the role of globalization and the strength of capitalism—and much more besides.

And we found many *ad hoc* explanations to show why we hadn't been better placed to foresee this development. In this context we, for example, identified the counterproductive specialization of knowledge in the historical and social sciences: not only the deceptive self-presentation of the socialist states as strong and powerful as we had uncritically believed but also the political passions and ideological biases that may have blurred our analytical judgments, although contemporaries of the most diverse political shades and colors, be they doves or hawks, leftists or right wingers or simple middle of the road, were all surprised to a similar degree.

Still, at the end we have to admit the true state of affairs: contemporaries including historians are only partially aware of what is actually happening around them; they usually fail to understand the full spectrum of conditions and consequences of what they observe and experience. Their knowledge and understanding of the present is imperfect since they are part of this present, cannot have full information and cannot know where it is heading. But after conducting extensive research with historical methods, with the passage of time and with the benefits of hindsight historians can know more, understand better and be wiser than the contemporary eye witnesses. If one argues in this way, one should not use the inability to foresee a development at the time it happens for excuse not to explain it later in historical terms. As contemporaries, historians may not be (much) better than others. But after serious research and with the advantages of hindsight, they may know and understand more.

However, other historians drew different consequences from their experience of surprise in 1989/91. They pointed to a methodological insight which was dramatically underlined by the events of 1989–1991, although it had not been unfamiliar beforehand either, and also applies to other areas of historical knowledge: it is necessary to admit that historical events—like the birth of a human being, an economic crisis or a revolution—do not *with necessity* follow on from events and processes preceding them. They are not *fully* conditioned by antecedent factors and their contexts. They cannot be simply derived from them. This is why future developments cannot be predicted *with certainty* from the present state of affairs (even if it were fully known) and why past developments cannot be *fully* explained from the structures and processes preceding them.

It is due to this element of indeterminacy or freedom, this hiatus between events and actions on the one hand and structures and processes on the other, that history contains surprises, and that historical explanations—even when we have all the knowledge of the factors relevant to these

explanations—can generally only say why a past change was possible and likely, but rarely that and why it was necessary. In a world of probabilities, the improbable sometimes happens. This demonstrates the limits of historical explanation—and not only the boundaries of historical prognosis. Hence, the experience of surprise from 1989 to 1991 calls for methodological modesty.

SCHOLARS AND POLITICS

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Soviet empire and the reunification of Germany suddenly opened up vast new fields for study: new sources, new working contacts and new questions. But before I begin to discuss these, I would like to report a great, important and fascinating distraction that prevented some of us from immersing ourselves in these new and tempting historical labors right away: the distraction of politics. In many respects, the break that occurred in Germany in 1989–1991 created a surge of interest in politics for many scholars, among them many historians. I am thinking here of two things: the politics of reunification in the sciences and new challenges of *Geschichtspolitik* (history politics).

At the time, I was a member of the *Wissenschaftsrat*, an important body composed of scholars and political actors, which advised the science policy of the federal government and the *Laender* and had, under the guidance of the legal scholar Dieter Simon, a great influence those days on the policy of merging West and East German academic institutions. It was in this context that I, in the early 1990s, was involved in the process of reorganizing the humanities and, above all, extra-university research institutes in what was by then a declining and dissolving East German state, where such institutes were very numerous, important and well staffed. Certainly, basic decisions on science policy were taken at a very high political level, such as the decision to create as quickly as possible an integrated system of academic institutions and processes on the West German model, instead of living with two academic systems for a few years under the umbrella of a common constitution, or instead of having both sides negotiate something new, which would prolong neither the West nor the East German state of affairs. These were fundamental decisions taken by elected politicians and their top officials together with the heads of the largest science organizations.

However, the specific, concrete decisions about individual disciplines, institutes and projects, about the definition and the staffing of positions and, thus, about the occupational fate of many academic staff members

from the declining East German state were taken with the considerable participation of academics involved in providing consultation, making recommendations and exerting influence.

Numerous evaluations were carried out to wind up, recompose and, at times, newly found institutes. These evaluations, generally involving extensive meetings at the institutes under assessment, were primarily undertaken by West German academics and experts and supplemented by the occasional East German or foreign colleague—generally from Western countries. Evaluations were supposed to meet international standards. They should lead to the reconstruction of an integrated landscape of research which would be of top quality by international standards and be compatible with the constitutional and democratic principles. And they actually did this—within the framework of the above-mentioned political decisions (made in advance), in the form of a legitimate evaluation that produced extensive plans for renewal. Much of this would be implemented in the years to come.

Some of these ideas are still controversial today, even though heat of the moment has meanwhile cooled down quite considerably.

As was the case in reunification as a whole, it was, from start to finish, an asymmetric process marked by West German dominance and East German inferiority. We were aware of this every time we carried out an inspection. There were winners and losers. The West had won, even though we—as colleagues—communicated with one another, in principle, on an equal footing. Was there any way that this asymmetry could have been limited and the considerable human costs of the unification process reduced? In my opinion: yes. However, there was little room for maneuver—and not only because of the all-defining East-West divide but also because of the countless and sharp East-East conflicts that suddenly erupted after several decades of dictatorship and made themselves felt when, for example, staffing decisions were made.

Basically, the West German system was extended to the acceding East, which had to be incorporated. Wouldn't it have been possible to take greater advantage of this unique constellation to improve the Western system, which was extending eastwards—with or without the adoption of useful elements from the declining Eastern system? Many of us presented this argument at the time, generally in vain. Looking back, I doubt whether the energy to carry out further internal reforms was there at the time. The actual process of transforming the East in a Western sense was complex and costly enough. And after the events of 1989–1991, the West Germans were riding a high wave of confidence. Why should they change their approach self-critically after such a victory?

Some things simply failed—such as the declared program of integrating academics from the extra-university institutes into the universities. Some things happened that were not intended: such as upgrading the institutional evaluation to a normal instrument of permanent inner-academic evaluation and control. Many other things have succeeded, however. With satisfaction, I recall the newly founded research centers in the humanities, including the Centre for Contemporary History Research in Potsdam, which was founded in the face of opposition. I was deeply involved in its founding and administration during the early 1990s, and it now continues to exist as an internationally recognized high-performance institute for contemporary history.

It is now time to add some thoughts about the role played by German *Geschichtspolitik* (history politics). The decline of the East German state and German reunification under the dominance of the Federal Republic of Germany was not merely a political, economic and institutional challenge but also a challenge at the ideological and cultural levels. Ever since the peaceful revolution took place in East Germany in the autumn of 1989, the decline of the (smaller) East German state, its absorption by the (larger) West German Federal Republic and the integration problems that have presented themselves have also been controversially dealt with in the medium of public interpretations of history, where science and politics overlap—although it must be said that conflicts have by no means arisen only between Western and Eastern spokespeople, but also between East Germans and East Germans, and between West Germans and West Germans.

This cannot be described in great detail here and now. I merely wish to point out that this happened at a time when the Germans' conflicts over their National Socialist past—a conflict conducted very differently in the East and the West—had already reached an advanced stage and in the 1980s—remember the speech by the Federal President von Weizsäcker on the 40th anniversary of 1945 and at the time of the so-called “historians' dispute” during that period—had experienced a very intense phase, in West Germany, at least. As a result, the conflict over the historical location of the (East) German Democratic Republic (GDR) rapidly shifted to become a long-term comparison of perspectives that revolved around the similarities and differences, the continuity and discontinuity between the two German dictatorships. The debate over the history and the heritage of the “second German dictatorship” (the GDR) did not suppress the debate about the history and the heritage of the “first German dictatorship” (National Socialism), but both debates intermixed and mutually promoted each other.

The historical dimension in the intellectual interpretation of the German reunification was very striking. Correspondingly, the public role of historians in public debates has been influential and prominent.

So much for the boost in politicization, which the revolution of 1989–1991 meant at least for some of us. So much, too, for my excursion into politics. As a result, a few strictly professional books and articles were not written, which might have been written otherwise. But, for historians involved in these practical processes, the gain in experience was quite considerable. We became—on a small scale, of course—historical actors, a part of the process, which we would otherwise merely study. We could try to find out whether and how the universalising orientation toward scientific principles (to which we had become accustomed), could be realised in political practice—across and beyond political and ideological trenches. There were times when we were successful, and others when we were disappointed. We intellectually benefited from the pressure to think beyond our own specializations and to act politically. I am well aware that many of my East German colleagues had very different experiences, and that many West German academics did not take such steps in practice. I am glad that I succeeded in keeping my excursion into politics short.

A NEW FUTURE—A NEW HISTORY?

It can be shown that, over the centuries, interpretations of history that set the tone are partly shaped by the ideas—even if they are often only fragmentary, vague and implicit—that historians have had of the future. Future expectations co-determine the way that our past experiences are interpreted and related—as history—to the present. For instance, the expectations placed on progress shaped interpretations made by eighteenth-century Enlightenment historians of the history of civilization. The longing for a German nation state structured the primarily national-historical interpretations of the Borussia school of historians in the nineteenth century. The vision, or rather proto-vision, of a post-capitalist social order gave the Marxist synthesis of history vitality and strength. And the highly fragmented concept of the future of post-modernist authors is reflected in the late twentieth century in the dissolution of, or departure from, history as a conceptualized nexus. Notions of the future always co-determine our interpretation of the past.

Without any doubt, the break that occurred in 1989–1991 placed a burden on some future expectations and opened others anew. Francis

Fukuyama's essay "The End of History" was immediately criticized and later revised by the author himself, but his theses have been (and will be) very frequently cited and taken seriously because they formulated future expectations on history which were—to some extent at least, and often only vaguely—very widespread in 1989–1991: namely that state socialism, totalitarian dictatorships and authoritarian rule had lost out, whereas the market economy and liberal democracy had won—once and for all—because they would be strong enough to "overcome, in the future, all contradictions and to satisfy all needs." As a consequence, there would be no war of ideologies in the future. This would mean the "end of history" as we know it within which ideological debates had always been central.

In other words, there is some evidence that the break of 1989–1991 has changed expectations of the future. Has it also changed the way that historians think about and write about history?

An answer is hard to find for a number of reasons: on the one hand, because it is impossible to know exactly how historical thinking and the practice of historians would have developed without that upheaval; on the other hand, because very many different things are happening within historical science across the globe; and, finally, because, perhaps, 25 years after that break, it has become evident that the ideas and practice of historians have changed less than some of us imagined under the immediate impact of the turbulent events of the those years.

It goes without saying that the end of institutionalized Communism under Soviet hegemony, the "Wende" in Central Eastern and Eastern Europe, and the reunification of Germany have consummated old developments and initiated new ones, in the study of history.

For German historians, this opened up an extensive new field of study. Almost overnight, the sudden end of the East German state made a gigantic, complex and hitherto inaccessible stock of documents and other sources available. Without the otherwise customary statutory closure periods, the gashed interior of four decades of East Germany became, in the form of vast mountains of files, accessible to curious historians, who threw themselves into the new fields of work in great number. Within a few years, they created an image of the history of East Germany that was, generally speaking, different and much gloomier than the images of the GDR that had existed in the East and the West up till then.

In the meantime, the GDR has become one of the best researched areas of German history. In the countries neighboring East Germany, the rupture was not so dramatic. Research into the Communist decades proceeded

more sluggishly. But here, too, the emerging views were critical in principle and frequently, as in the case of East Germany, guided by historical questions related to dictatorship and totalitarianism. Trans-national, comparative research remained rare.

Research has produced many new results, often politically volatile and important for the societies' self-understanding. Still, I am not aware of any paradigmatic changes or exciting new theoretical developments. In these countries, Marxism-Leninism had been more or less compulsory. Now that the historians were enjoying a newly found freedom, they made use of it, generally by distancing themselves from Marxist premises altogether. They moved in the direction of precise, highly empirical studies without too much theory, and generally within a national-historical framework, with the core focus on political history, and with a tendency to expand into cultural rather than into social history. The diversity was great, however, and the harvest bountiful: East German historical research evolved into a large, highly subsidized special field whose integration into the long-term processes of German and European history has also made a certain degree of progress during the past few years.

Just as the collapse of the Soviet empire between 1989 and 1991 resulted in the spectacular confirmation of the principle of the nation state—with an increase in the number of independent nation states and a great gain in national sovereignty and identity in Central, East and South-Eastern Europe—the break as a whole has, to a certain degree, elevated the *concept of the nation state* which has been anyway dominant in the study of history ever since the nineteenth century. This trend has many faces, but, on the whole, it has tended to strengthen tradition, even a return to convention, for a while, at least.

Soon, however, counter-tendencies also appeared: approaches reaching *beyond the national-historical framework*, which was also directly or indirectly related to the break of 1989–1991:

The East-West division of the continent during the decades of the Cold War had structured not only politics and other areas of life but also patterns of historical thought, especially since such patterns could build on older traditions that situated *Europe* in East-West categories. Historians' practice and thinking during the decades-long division of the continent were shaped by the East-West divide. For my cohort of social historians, this meant, for instance, that we—inasmuch as we were drawing comparisons—generally compared the German situation with corresponding situations in neighboring Western countries. We looked to the West, much less to the East. The

self-critical thesis of a “special German path” (“deutscher Sonderweg”) in modern history was a product of intellectually orientating ourselves to “the West.” For German idiosyncrasies, weaknesses and shortcomings, which were identified as aspects of “Germany’s special path”—the belated creation of a nation state, the weaknesses of liberalism, the failure of representative democracy and the downward spiral into dictatorship in the early 1930s—turned out to be German particularities and weaknesses only in comparison with England, France, the USA, and other Western countries while they would not have been seen as such in comparison with neighboring countries in the East. Logically, some authors translated “Germany’s special path” as “German divergence from the West.”

With the fall of the—already perforated—Iron Curtain in 1989–1991, this changed. The eastern part of Europe came closer; people came nearer to seeing Europe as whole. This corresponded with real historical processes: after all, the battle cry issued by east-central European dissidents against dictatorship and soviet hegemony in 1989 had been “back to Europe.” And soon, the European Union would decide to expand eastwards and south-eastwards. In historical studies, Eastern Europe was now becoming increasingly recognized as a major area of research, also among historians who did not belong to the small group of specialists who had always concentrated on the history of this European region. The German situation was now being increasingly compared with Western *and* Eastern Europe, especially here in Berlin. This has been one of several reasons why the thesis of a “special German path” has faded over the past two decades. Historical comparison has become richer. In this sense, the end of the division between East and West has led to progress in the field of historical studies. But there is still much to be done.

Indirectly, the break of 1989–1991 has also encouraged the rise of *global history*. For with the end of the great East-West divide, minds became free and more receptive to other lines of tension which, admittedly, had not lacked altogether over the decades, but were now increasingly entering peoples’ consciousness and having a growing influence on historians’ coordinate systems. I am referring here to the North-South tensions, among them the consequences of colonization and decolonization, post-colonial debates and theories. With the disintegration of the Eastern Block, important trade, communications, and migratory barriers were overcome that had hitherto slowed down genuine globalization. With the East-West conflict, rigid patterns of behavior and thinking were overcome, which had prevented historians from opening up to global-historical questions. Certainly the move toward global historical approaches had begun earlier,

especially in the USA. But this trend has noticeably accelerated since the early 1990s, as a consequence of the end of the East-West conflict which had structured power relations and political thought over the decades. That is, in any case, the way I see development in Germany and Europe.

The upheavals of 1989–1991 confronted social historians like me with *additional-methodological-challenges*. They testified to the great role played by factors of *political* change relative to social and economic ones. Through Gorbachev, it became apparent again and in a dramatic way what a central role individual actors can play in socio-political crisis situations. The break of 1989–1991 made it absolutely clear how difficult and even misleading it would be to proceed from a general belief in the “primacy of domestic politics.” It is beyond any doubt that foreign policy questions, international relations of power, as well as border-crossing perceptions and links played quite an important role in the period 1989–1991. I am thinking of the way in which the Soviet Union declined at the foreign, foreign trade, and military levels. This had certainly a lot to do with domestic factors within the Soviet Union, but, at the same time, it strongly conditioned the domestic political and social situation within the Eastern European countries. As a consequence, the changes within the GDR and, therefore, in Germany, as well as in other “satellite” countries of Central and Eastern Europe, were conditioned by the international system of power and changed with the latter.

This is not the place to explain this in detail. But inasmuch as economic and social historians had tended, still in the 1980s, to grasp domestic and foreign policy primarily as functions of social process occurring within the societies they studied, they were now cured of this one-sided perspective inasmuch as they openly faced the experience that the upheavals of 1989–1991 had in store for them. We became more skeptical about general formulae and withdrew—in general statements—to the figure of thought of a historically variable relationship between socio-economic or social, political, and cultural dimensions of change as well as between internal and external policies, inasmuch as we had not already positioned ourselves accordingly before—in the tradition of Max Weber, for instance.

All this was undoubtedly related to the *decline of Marxist thought*, which was accelerated by the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the politically institutionalized form of Marxism-Leninism prevailing there. But the decline of historical-materialist paradigms had started much earlier. On the other hand, Marxist models of interpretation continued to be applied in a non-dogmatic form after the break of 1989–1991—one need only take Eric Hobsbawm’s work *The Age of Extremes*, or Immanuel Wallerstein’s latest

analyses as examples. In the contexts of post-colonial discussion, Marxist arguments continue to have considerable weight. As a subject of historical research and presentation, capitalism has increasingly been gaining in significance recently and, as a result, Marxist concepts are becoming important again, even though they—originating in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century—can only be applied worldwide with considerable modifications to contemporary findings. In other words, the impact of the caesura of 1989–1991 on the decline of Marxism has been quite limited.

The upheavals of 1989–1991 are grist to the mill of modernisation theories. Such theories have been—and still are—repeatedly used by historians to structure their findings, especially when they dare to produce comprehensive syntheses. In fact, 1989–1991 appeared to confirm what modernisation theoreticians since Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, Neil Smelser, Barrington Moore and Wolfgang Zapf have repeatedly claimed: that, *in the long run*, the market economy, an open society, constitutional government, the rule of law and cultural pluralism belong together, mutually condition and strengthen one another, and are—taken together—superior to competing alternatives. This has, however, not led to a general breakthrough of modernisation theory approaches among historians. Criticism of this approach was, and remains, powerful due to its pro-western bias, its conceptual schematism and its apparent blindness to contradictions, alternatives and diversity. Shmuel Eisenstadt's conception of "multiple modernities" attempted to take account of this, albeit at the price of a far-reaching renunciation of conceptual substance. The example of China seems to show that capitalism can flourish under dictatorial conditions. Many other new conflicts have emerged. The victory of modernisation theory in the study of history as a consequence of 1989–1991 has been very partial and short lived.

FINAL REMARKS

The caesura of 1989–1991 has influenced historians' thought and practice. I have examined some of the consequences from a German and a European perspective. However, the upheavals that occurred at the time have not led to a distinct trend or change in paradigms of historical thought, research and presentation. The impact of that caesura has been limited in these respects. This is very apparent when viewed from a temporal distance of roughly 25 years—correcting the occasional, exaggerated expectation that some of us may have had in those years of upheavals.

This is not really surprising. In contrast to the revolutions of 1789 and 1917, the upheavals of 1889–1991 did not go hand in hand with a new utopia, a vision of a new, civilizing transformation or a new design for political change. For this reason, many people are hesitant, also in retrospect, to speak of a revolution. Basically, the events involved implementing pre-formulated principles in a part of the world that had hitherto blocked them. If anything, it was a “revolution aiming to catch up,” as Jürgen Habermas has suggested. And although its impact reached far beyond the region in which it occurred, it did not offer a new interpretation of the world. The belief, which arose for a short period, that the end of history had been reached with this break, soon proved to be a deception. In the historical studies, this caesura has neither contributed to new paradigms nor to a new consensus, but to single advancements, greater diversity, and healthy skepticism.

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