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"The Failed Promises of 1989 and the Politics of 2016"

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On the night of November 9, 1989, it was apparent to everyone on the scene in Berlin, and to spectators across the world, watching on TV, that history had reached a turning point. The ramifications of the opening of the Berlin Wall, as was also widely understood at the time, would not be limited to central Europe, but would reverberate around the globe. A little less than a year later, U.S. president George H.W. Bush, addressing Congress, articulated this understanding in calling for a 'new world order.' Separating this phrase both from its rhetoric of Cold War triumphalism and the various conspiracy theories that have grown up around it, I would suggest that the 1990s actually did see the development—tentative, hesitating, contradictory and incomplete—of a new world order, one reflecting the turbulent events of 1989 across the Eurasian land-mass, as well as the aspirations that propelled these events, the promises of 1989. But by the end of that decade and the beginning of the new millennium, a reaction to that order was beginning to emerge, which would strengthen across the early years of the twenty-first century. The two political upheavals of 2016, the Brexit vote, and the election of Donald Trump as American President, are major signs of the triumph of that reaction, the end of the new world order, and the failure of the promises of 1989.

We can delineate four distinct elements of those promises. One was, obviously, the end of the Cold War, the confrontation begun by the two chief victorious powers of the Second World War over the treatment of their defeated enemy that had gone from Germany across the globe and returned to its origin to come to an end. The end of the Cold War seemed to have terminated another global conflict of the post-1945 world: the confrontation between the countries of Western Europe and their offshoots in North America and the Pacific on the one hand, and the nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America, on the other, known today, although not very accurately, as the 'North-South conflict.' It was the superpower conflict of the Cold War that allowed governments of the 'global

South' and insurgent political movements their room to maneuver, by playing off the U.S. and the USSR.[1] Iraqi President Saddam Hussein discovered this very painfully following his 1990 invasion of Kuwait, when the post-Cold War USSR, in its last year of existence, was neither able nor willing to oppose the United States. The upshot of the simultaneous end of both these conflicts was to create a worldwide American hegemony; as French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine put it in 1998, the U.S. was a "hyperpower," a globally dominant force.[2]

The ramifications of 1989 were not just felt in power politics and *raison d'état*; two other promises of that year went in quite different directions. One was the priority of human rights. The scattered and isolated dissidents of 1980s eastern Europe had suddenly emerged at the end of the decade at the head of mass movements, brandishing the demands for human rights articulated in the "third basket" of the 1975 Helsinki Accords.[3] Very surprisingly, this led to the end of Communist regimes in much of Eurasia; perhaps even more surprisingly, the idea of action to preserve human rights—'the responsibility to protect'—emerged on the diplomatic agenda, in hesitating and very imperfect fashion, as was apparent in both Rwanda and Bosnia.

But the consequences of 1989 also came in another direction, the triumph of the idea of the open flow of goods, capital, and people within states and across state borders. Unlike the priority of human rights, the endorsement of an increasingly globalized capitalism was not a feature of the 1980s dissident movements. Quite the opposite; neither the Christian-pacifist-feminist-environmentalist socialists in the German Democratic Republic, nor the Czech signers of Charter '77, nor the trade unionists of *Solidarność* were particularly taken with the idea of a deregulated, privatized, free market economy. The people they led into the street, on the other hand, did very much aspire to the consumer cornucopia of western capitalism, and in the chaotic conditions following the collapse of the governments of the Eastern bloc (circumstances were different in China, where the transition to a market economy occurred under a still-functioning government that had destroyed dissident movements) an unlimited capitalism seemed the way to get there.[4]

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[1] In spite of its title, Matthew Connelly's *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), is a very helpful account of insurgent maneuvering during the Cold War.

[2] "To Paris, US Looks like a 'Hyperpower,'" *New York Times*, 5 February 1999, http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/05/news/to-paris-us-looks-like-a-hyperpower.html; for Védrine's later reflections on this idea, see his 2008 interview, "What the New Geopolitical World Really Looks Like," 18 July 2008, http://www.hubertvedrine.net/article-306.html.

[3] For instance, Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[4] Two interesting works dealing with the contrasting attitudes about consumerism of anti-regime activists and their supporters, are Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People: Vocies from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989*

The 1990s were very much the decade of privatization, deregulation, and globalization: sale of state-owned enterprises and cutbacks on social welfare programs just about everywhere; the 'Washington consensus' in the countries of Africa and Latin America; 'shock therapy,' the immediate transition from a planned to a market economy, for the former Communist countries of the Eastern bloc; the European Union's (EU) movement toward an end to all barriers on trade, capital movements and migration along with the creation of a joint currency—and this not just in the EU core countries of northwestern Europe, but in the poorer lands on the Mediterranean and the newly post-Communist countries in the east as well—the deregulation of financial and capital transactions in the U.S. Many of these policies had begun in the 1980s, pioneered by the conservative governments of President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, but they became more widespread in the following decade and were implemented, quite vigorously, by the center-left governments of Bill Clinton in the U.S., Tony Blair in the UK, or Gerhard Schröder in Germany, evidence that policy aspirations toward a globalized, privatized, deregulated market had gone from being a partisan position to a broad consensus.[5]

Bit by bit, the world order embodied in these four promises fell apart during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. An initial sign was the terrorist attack of 9/11 on the United States, which made it clear that the 'North-South conflict' had not come to an end, and that Islamist political movements had taken up the mantle of the anti-imperialist cause.[6] From the founding of the Moslem Brotherhood on, Islamism had always contained a strong anti-imperialist element, but it had been overshadowed by nationalist and Communist ideological currents in Africa and Asia, until the latter had largely collapsed in the 1990s. The asymmetrical warfare of terrorism has, since then, been a constant presence, amplified by a worldwide mass media, a reminder of the return of global ideological conflict, seemingly so passé in the 1990s, the age of Francis Fukayama's "end of history," when liberal democracy supposedly had proven to have no alternative.[7]

Yet for all the dramatic, media-amplified effects of asymmetrical warfare, it would be fair to say that the challenge to the 'new world order' has not come primarily from Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

(Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) and Karsten Timmer, *Vom Aufbruch zum Umbruch: die Bürgerbewegung in der DDR 1989* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

[5] Just a few studies of this development would include Rawi Abdelal, *Capital Rules: The Construction of Global Finance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Yousseff Cassis, *Crises and Opportunities: The Shaping of Modern Finance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); or John Williamson, "What Washington Means by Policy Reform," http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?researchid=486, accessed 27 September 2014.

[6] Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (eds.), *Al Qaeda in its Own Words* trans. Pascale Ghazlen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Dlominique Avon and Anaïs-Trissa Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah: A History of the Party of God* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) emphasize the strongly anti-imperialist elements of both Sunni and Shiite Islamism.

[7] Francis Fukayama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Fukuyama may habe been suffering from an overdose of Hegel, when he wrote this book, but he articulated a common idea at the time.

In particular, the very modest presence of state actors has been noticeably apparent. In 2001, there was the Taliban's failed state of Afghanistan; the assumption of the administration of President George W. Bush that the Iraqi government was supporting terrorism proved incorrect (assuming policy makers believed it in the first place). Just the opposite, it was the destruction of the state in Iraq that allowed Islamism to flourish there. Other anti-imperialist governments, such as the Cold-War leftovers in North Korea and Cuba, or the Chavezista regime in Venezuela, have been more pathetic than threatening. China, by far the most powerful non-western state, has not so much challenged the new world order as sought to exploit the globalization it has wrought for its own economic development. The Arab Spring of 2011, far from being a rejection of the ideas of 1989 was, at least for a brief initial period, their reaffirmation.

Rather, the challenges to the post-1989 international regime have come primarily from Europe and North America. They began with the presidency of Vladimir Putin in Russia, pursuing an authoritarian course of the rejection of human rights and democratization, a nationalist policy of seeking to expand Russian influence in the 'near abroad,' and a rejection of cooperation with NATO and the EU. Authoritarian, nationalist political parties, hostile to civil liberties and human rights, skeptical of the EU and of open borders and free trade, have expanded across the formerly Communist eastern Europe, with the Law and Justice Party in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary gaining political power and using it to reshape political and social institutions. Similar political parties have been gaining support in western Europe—the Swiss People's Party, the French *Front National*, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD*) in Germany, the Austrian Freedom Party, the "True Finns," the Swedish Democrats, and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands.[8] While the post-2008 global economic crisis brought left-wing critics of 1990s economic policies to the fore in Spain or Greece, and sometimes encouraged cooperation between left-wing and right wing critics of these policies, as can be seen in the opposition to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership or the Trans-Pacific Partnership, it has mostly strengthened right-wing forces. Many of their leaders have proclaimed their admiration for the person and policies of Vladimir Putin, giving an idea of what they would do were they to gain power.

To date, these west European right wing parties have remained in opposition, or, at most, junior government coalition partners. But in 2016, their views, rejecting the aspirations of 1989, gained political ascendancy in two very unexpected venues, the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. Both campaigns floated on a wave of hostility to the free flow of people across national borders; each emphasized very strongly the primacy of national self-interest against international agreements or assertions of human rights. If the government of the United States, the

[8] Two journalistic summaries are "Guide to Nationalist Parties Challenging Europe," BBC News, 23 May 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006, accessed 10 February 2017 and "Europe's Far Right: A Guide to the Most Prominent Parties," *New York Times*, updated 4 December 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/world/europe/europe-far-right-political-parties-listy.html?_r=0, accessed 10 February 2017.

one-time hegemonic guarantor of a new world order, is no longer willing to support a world order, then what remains of it? One distinct feature of the "Leave" forces in the UK and of the Trump campaign is their criticism of globalization in the name of the free market economy. The Brexiters denounced the EU as a band of meddling socialist bureaucrats, keeping the UK from its free market destiny. While condemning international trade agreements, the Trump campaign also railed against high taxes and government regulations holding back American capitalist entrepreneurs. There are continental European parallels, particularly the German *AfD*, which has sometimes sounded similar notes, but the rejection of free markets in the name of free markets has been primarily a feature of the Anglosphere.

At the beginning of 2017, it does look like the new world order envisaged in the 1990s lies in ruins, and the promises of 1989 have not been fulfilled. Analyzing global developments across the last three decades would be an essay—or a multi-volume study—in itself, but I can, just briefly, point to what seem to me to be three main features of these developments. One is that the 1990s position of the U.S. as a hyperpower was, *pace* Fukuyama, not the end of history, but the result of very particular developments: the ignominious collapse of the Cold War adversary, the USSR, the temporary economic difficulties of the two enemies of the Second World War and main capitalist rivals, Japan and Germany, and the still nascent position of a future rival, China, which would require two decades of unparalleled economic growth to reach its potential. The wars of the George W. Bush administration undoubtedly hastened and aggravated the decline of the hegemonic position of the U.S. in the world, but that hegemonic position was being undermined by developments in other countries, regardless of American government policies

A second reason is the failure of the post-1989 globalized, privatized, economic order to bring about the promised widespread prosperity. There were two particularly apparent failures. One was the collapse of the economy of the former USSR in the 1990s under the aegis of a shock therapy conceived, as Joseph Stiglitz put it, by "market Bolsheviks," which became the chief reason for Vladimir Putin's rise to power.[9] The other was the global financial crisis of 2008, a direct result of the deregulation of financial markets, and its destabilizing ramifications, persisting down to the present. But besides these very dramatic individual events, there has been the steady growth in income and wealth inequality throughout the world's economically most developed countries, recently charted in some detail by the French economist Thomas Piketty—admittedly, beginning before 1989, but persisting and accelerating in an era of economic globalization. Anger at this latter development played a large role for both Brexit and Trump voters. It may well be that the policies of the new regimes brought to office will accentuate the development of inequality, contrary to voters' intentions (or a mark of their *naiveté*), but that is another story.

[9] "Sound the Alarm: Economist James Stiglitz rips Washington's 'market Bolsheviks'" *Barron's*, 17 April 2000 http://www.barrons.com/articles/SB955757044395088744, and, in more detail, Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), esp. chap. 5.

Finally, one should not underestimate the prevalence and persistence of nationalism—a political sentiment repeatedly pronounced dead across the second half of the twentieth century, but which has proven able to triumph over most of its rivals. Since its development in its modern form during the age of the French Revolution, nationalism has had a tense and ambivalent relationship with human rights, sometimes acting in their favor, but all too often against them. Nationalism was a powerful driver of the events of 1989 in the Eastern Bloc, going along with calls for independent civil societies and governments that would be regimes of human rights. But this relationship has been increasingly reversed, and the inability of multinational institutions, from the EU to the World Trade Organization (WTO) to the UN, to provide satisfactory resolutions to the post-2000 collapse of the new global order has made nationalism a powerful fallback position, as became quite apparent in the political upheavals of 2016.

In this respect, as in so many others, the current global scene seems quite unappealing: the downplaying or downright rejection of human rights, increasing influence of a xenophobic and chauvinistic nationalism, growing tendencies toward protectionism, and a more general hostility toward the flow of goods, capital, ideas or humans across borders of sovereign states, rejection of international agreements and assertions of national sovereignty to the point of military action. Responding to such developments might require first a consideration of the way they emerged from a very different scene, and understanding the failure of the promises of 1989.

Jonathan Sperber is the Curators' Distingiuished Professor of History at the University of Missouri. He has written a number of works on the social, political and religious history of nineteenth century Europe, most recently *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* (Liveright, 2013), which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in the biography category and has been translated into nine foreign languages. His current scholarly project is a global history of the second half of the twentieth century, tentatively entitled "The Age of Interconnection."