The Time of Dispossession: The Conflict, Composition and Geophilosophy of Revolution in East Central Europe

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1 The Event of 1989—Revolution or Rebirth?

The fall of communism in the East Central European states in 1989 is usually considered a revolutionary and liberating event. In its aftermath, the region was expected to acquire the values of liberal democracy and market economy. Yet it entered into a process of state- and nation-building that was accompanied by growing racism, nationalism and xenophobia. In this fashion, during the post-transitional period the keenly desired liberal democracy and market economy metamorphosed into populist governments and oligarchic capitalism.

In this paper two models for understanding the complexities, contradictions and paradoxes of this East Central European ‘coming out of age’ will be outlined and contrasted: the model of conflict and the model of composition. Before attention is turned to the model of composition, some features of the model of conflict will be discussed by focusing on its perspective on the developments of 1989 as an event and the relationship between the two (groups of) geopolitical and cultural entities as a difference.

In the model of conflict, social and political transformation is conceived as a struggle for recognition through mutual determination. Hegel’s and Marx’s notions of social conflict and its political resolution could be singled out as the most notable representatives of this model. According to these philosophers, liberal subjectivity is established by self-possession. The liberal subject possesses herself on the epistemological and political level. But, as Hegel and Marx demonstrated, it is dispossessed by conferring her individuality (her rights and work) to the other (the sovereign and the capital owner) that mediates between the individual and her (self-)possession. As proposed by Hegel and Marx and subsequently developed by various social, political and postcolonial theories, in order for identity and community to come into being this intermediation has to be re-appropriated. However, this project of re-appropriation failed because the model is rooted in the notion of negativity, which necessarily entails the permanent and interminable formation identity.

The event of 1989 is not simply related to East Central Europe, but is also a kind of spectral revenant of 1789 that haunted Western Europe for two centuries.
Wolff proposed understanding “the extraordinary revolution of 1989 as an incitement and opportunity to reconsider our mental mapping of Europe” (14). In this decade the welfare state was replaced by the neoliberal type of governance. The Western European left-wing parties entered a stage of denying their communist ‘prehistory’, creating a ‘third way’ as a technique of disavowal. This denial of the past provoked a historical revisionism on the part of the right-wing parties. However, some scholars reject the definition of the event of 1989 as a revolution. As was convincingly demonstrated by Soltan, the event of 1989 is a rebirth, which he conceives as radically different from revolution. While revolutions are breaks between the past and the present, rebirths restore continuity with the past. Revolutions are charged with the Enlightenment idea of a rupture between the ancient and the modern. Rebirth, on the contrary, follows the renaissance model of reclaiming the old rights. The process of rebirth is constrained by constitutional limits that prevent outbursts of rage against the dominant order. It is a peaceful “plural improvement” (Soltan 32) modelled on mass movements, such as those led by Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. Leaders, members and followers of such movements allegedly (re) claim their own rights without jeopardizing the rights of others. Despite the constitutional limits imposed on the social action of rebirth, Soltan is unable to explain “the disappointment of 1989”, which comes from replacing the “sovereignty of the communist party” with the “sovereignty of money” (34).

Isaac, on the contrary, underlines the traumatic background of 1989. His analysis of the dissolution of Yugoslavia is a historical example that would not fit Soltan’s model of rebirth. Moreover, Yugoslavia had the constitutional preconditions for the transition from a federation to a confederation (Bakić-Hayden, Varijacije na temu 37–40; Štiks 138–152). Those constitutional preconditions were based on the right to self-determination granted to the constitutional nations of Yugoslavia. Despite proclaimed republicanism, the breakup of Yugoslavia was neither a revolution nor a rebirth. Isaac supports his analysis with the example of Bosnia: “Democrats can no longer place any faith in either the utopia of communist classlessness or the utopia of beneficent, progressive liberalism” (Isaac 57). East Central Europe was dispossessed through a two-step process of overthrowing the communist regime and socialism and adopting democracy and neoliberal economy as the new forms of

1 Yet, it could be argued that Portuguese Revolução dos Cravos on 25 April 1974, overthrowing the Estado Novo, is closer to Soltan’s definition of rebirth than the fall of communism in East Central Europe.

2 Consider the example of violence in Romania during the overthrowing of Nicolai Ceauşescu’s regime.