

Some Lessons of 1989's East European Revolutions: Reflections of a U.S. Peace Activist

IN THE 1980s, the U.S.-based Campaign for Peace and Democracy/East and West was deeply involved in the struggle for "détente from below." CPD/EW collaborated with the European Nuclear Disarmament network to build solidarity and mutual support between, on the one hand, peace groups and progressive trade unionists in the West and, on the other hand, the democratic movements in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. As CPD/EW co-director I traveled frequently to East-bloc countries, Western Europe, and Latin America to promote grassroots solidarity across Cold War boundaries. Now, more than two decades later, I would like to look back at our experience and explore critically the role of activists, East and West, in the years leading up to 1989.

I will try to answer the question of why the outcome of the 1989 upheavals, despite their undoubted benefit of consigning the old Communist regimes to the dustbin of history, was in many ways disappointing, and why they failed to realize the hopes of millions for a new era of peace, social justice, economic betterment, and meaningful democracy. I will also discuss some implications of the 1989 revolutions for the historic movements of the last few years, from the 2009 Iranian mass demonstrations to the Arab Spring, to popular protests in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and the rest of Europe—and to our own Occupy movement.

In the 1980s here in the United States CPD/EW succeeded in enlisting leaders of many peace groups—including the War Resisters League, Fellowship of Reconciliation, American

Friends Service Committee, and Sojourners—in defense of Polish Solidarnosc trade union leaders, Charter 77 members in Czechoslovakia, and independent peace activists throughout the Soviet bloc. This defense of East-bloc activists transcended the crippling binaries of Cold War thinking that could be summed up in the unfortunate slogan “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” One example of such CPD/EW work was a 1983 *New York Times* ad entitled “U.S. Peace and Labor Activists Support Polish Solidarity Leaders on Trial” signed by 78 individuals, including Ed Asner, Barbara Ehrenreich, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Allen Ginsberg, Maggie Kuhn, Manning Marable, David McReynolds, Robert Meeropol, Holly Near, I.F. Stone, and Cornel West.

Moreover, CPD/EW argued that solidarity wasn’t a one-way street, and in addition to organizing initiatives like the one described above it also succeeded in promoting solidarity in the other direction by engaging East-bloc activists in campaigns to oppose anti-democratic U.S. policies in countries like Chile and Nicaragua. In that vein, the Campaign in 1986 took out another *New York Times* ad entitled “Independent Voices, East and West, Speak Out Against Reagan’s Nicaragua Policy” with dozens of Western signers and a large number of signatures from dissidents and independent activists in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, the USSR, and Yugoslavia.

Though I wish we had been even more successful in our efforts, I am very proud of that record. Today we at the Campaign for Peace and Democracy (the name was shortened by dropping the “East and West” after the Cold War ended) continue to oppose war threats and imperial sanctions by our own government, while supporting the fight for democracy and social justice everywhere, whether it occurs in countries within the U.S. orbit like Egypt, Bahrain and Tunisia, or in countries to which the U.S. is hostile, like Iran.

Critical Solidarity

AS WE MOVE FORWARD, we need to think more about HOW we build international solidarity. Does solidarity mean automatic agreement with everything the leadership of a democratic movement says? A rubber stamp? I don't think so. There is a need for what Danny Postel, quoting Fred Halliday, called "critical solidarity" in his Summer 2010 *New Politics* article, ["Revolutionary Prefigurations: The Green Movement, Critical Solidarity and the Struggle for Iran's Future."](#)

In retrospect, I think we in CPD/EW could have been more critical in our solidarity work with East-bloc movements. While we did discuss and debate with East European activists about issues of peace and disarmament, and never concealed our own anti-capitalist perspective, we didn't talk as much as we should have about our view of what kind of society should replace Communism, nor did we discuss in any depth the disastrous consequences we believed would follow if their countries were to adopt the neoliberal prescriptions of privatization and slashing the social safety net. In thinking back, I believe one major explanation for this shortcoming was that while we were supporting struggling movements for democratic change in the Soviet bloc and on one level strongly believed in the possibility of their victory, it was nonetheless hard for many of us to really absorb the idea that East-bloc repressive governments, seemingly so invulnerable, would actually collapse within a very few years. Therefore it didn't seem so urgent to discuss future visions.

When the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe fell, the new governments, virtually without exception, did not question the need for wholesale integration into the capitalist world economy and to one degree or another accepted the legitimacy of demands from the West that they undergo "shock therapy" to speedily achieve that integration. The result of that acquiescence has been that millions of people have suffered from unemployment, insecurity, and loss of social services that were provided by the old Communist governments. Moreover,

many East European economies are further threatened by today's global economic and ecological crises.

Within movements for democratic change in authoritarian societies there is powerful pressure not to pursue discussions of differences of opinion about long-term goals, given the imperative of fighting to end the rule of a terrible, repressive regime. But sidestepping those discussions comes at a high price—not only internally, within opposition circles, but more broadly because it means that ordinary people can't be aware of the debates, participate in them, and begin to think about and propose future alternatives themselves. Different political currents of course do need to unite in a broad movement against authoritarian governments—but there is also the need to explore and expose differences about agendas for the future.

WHY WAS IT THAT EAST-BLOC dissidents, mostly leftists in the 1960s and 1970s, failed to pose a left alternative by the time the system was coming apart in the 1980s? I am unsure of the answer to this question, but I will make a stab at an explanation.

First of all, the decline of the global left was an important element in weakening the left in Eastern Europe. Despite the "Iron Curtain" there was historically a general awareness in the Soviet bloc of the existence of socialist ideas and movements elsewhere. Their appeal, however, was limited to the extent that the very idea of socialism was associated with pro-Communist elements of the left. For a time, in the 60s and 70s, the new Western independent left, especially the student movement, exerted an influence in the East. But as these left movements declined they had less standing in Soviet-bloc countries. Moreover, the failure, with some honorable exceptions, of what global left there was to actively and energetically support democratic movements in the East bloc

tended to alienate people suffering from Communist repression. Finally, the advance of globalization made it even more difficult to mount a successful anti-capitalist struggle in a single country than it had been before, and this doubtless contributed to the feeling that trying to forge a socialist or left alternative would be doomed to defeat.

I don't mean to argue that a better outcome would have been easy, much less automatic, had the dissident community maintained its leftwing politics into the years of Communist collapse. However, it's important to remember the great international moral and political power of the democratic upsurge of 1989. What if the democratic movements and new governments had made egalitarian demands on the world's political and economic leaders, rather than acquiescing with no programmatic resistance to the logic of capitalism and the nostrums of the IMF and the World Bank? Even if they had been forced to make concessions to the power of capitalism, if the new governments had resisted and challenged capitalism's legitimacy instead of embracing it they could likely have won at least some interim concessions for themselves while moving the terms of global debate to the left. This was a great opportunity lost.

Implications for the Future

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS of the 1989 experience for the upheavals and revolutions of our time? It is clear that international solidarity is needed now more than ever, not only to defend labor, dissidents, student, ecological and women's rights activists, and religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities against state repression, but also, while respecting the rights of people within a country to determine their own destiny, to strengthen through grassroots solidarity left and liberatory currents such as socialists, greens, and feminists within broad anti-repression movements. Moreover, critical solidarity today ought not to be a one-way street. So, for example, democratic activists in Egypt or Iran should be

encouraged to speak out against repression and inequality in the United States (as the Egyptians so wonderfully did when they sent pizzas to the protestors in Madison, Wisconsin) and also to express their views about debates within Occupy and other U.S. protest movements.

There is ample reason to expect that the new governments in the Middle East will be under pressure from below to resist neoliberal prescriptions for their economic and social ills. An important contribution solidarity activists can offer to this resistance is to make it difficult, through public protests and campaigns, for wealthy countries and international financial institutions to impose their retrograde solutions.

A MAJOR CHALLENGE grassroots movements everywhere face today is the absence of political parties that can champion their cause and offer progressive solutions to the larger society. In countries emerging from decades of authoritarianism one reason for the lack of left wing political parties is that they were illegal under the old governments, so left activists often have to start building parties almost from nothing. But the problem goes beyond this legacy. In the past year we have seen an explosion of protest in countries with more democratic liberties like Greece, Spain, and Portugal, as well as here in the United States with our Occupy movement—and these protests also have no electoral expression. All too often the consequence is that after massive demonstrations and inspiring protests the new governments that come to power are far to the right of the popular upsurge that propelled them to power, while the left remains politically disorganized.

Notwithstanding technical obstacles to forming new parties, there is another, deeper explanation for why the contemporary left generally doesn't have parties of its own or the intention to form them, and that is the "anti-politics"

sentiment of many of today's protestors—an outlook that incidentally was also shared by many of the East-bloc dissidents of the 1980s. This outlook is understandable given the terrible failure of existing parties to represent and defend popular aspirations, but it leaves protest movements at a political dead end. To paraphrase the old Greyhound bus ad, it “leaves the driving to them.”

We are entering an age of tremendous turmoil because of the failure of global capitalism to fulfill the economic, social and personal needs of ordinary people around the world, and because millions have asserted their claims to dignity and security and are inspiring millions more to do the same. We need to shake off the old Cold War “the enemy of my enemy must be my friend” way of thinking and build a truly international left that can honestly fight for the rights of people everywhere and connect their struggles—not in a sectarian way that counterposes the left to mass democratic movements, but as integral, independent participants in these movements. Those of us who are socialists face the challenge of rescuing the image of socialism from the bureaucratic authoritarianism of societies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that assumed the name, but this rescue effort is worthwhile because its success will help people to see a way out, to see that, despite Margaret Thatcher's deadening assertion to the contrary, there is a democratic, radical, and egalitarian alternative to the grim realities of contemporary capitalism.—April 19, 2012

Footnotes

This essay is adapted from a talk given at the Campaign for Peace and Democracy panel on the lessons of 1989 on March 17, 2012 at the Left Forum in New York City.

The Campaign for Peace and Democracy's papers are available at New York University's [Tamiment Library](#) and its current

activities are posted on its [website](http://www.cpdweb.org), www.cpdweb.org. For more on the “détente from below” perspective of European Nuclear Disarmament see E.P. Thompson’s *Beyond the Cold War: A New Approach to the Arms Race and Nuclear Annihilation*, Merlin Press, 1982 and *The Heavy Dancers*, Merlin Press, 1985. For a similar post-Cold War view, see the incisive essay, “[Solidarity and Its Discontents](#),” from Raha Iranian Feminist Collective, *Jadaliyya*, Feb. 19, 2011 and visit the website of the new group [Havaar: Iranian Initiative Against War, Sanctions and State Repression](#).