

The 1989 Revolution as a Non-Lieu de Mémoire in the Czech Republic

Muriel Blaive



The 1989 Revolution as a Non-Lieu de Mémoire in the Czech Republic

Muriel Blaive

The suggestion that the 1989 Velvet Revolution might be anything else but a firm realm of memory in the Czech Republic might seem provocative, if not crazy. Yet I suggest in this text that although the official appropriation of the 1989 revolution as a commemorative event in the Czech Republic has been very vocal, counter collective memories of communism, revolution and democracy have also been very pregnant in society, yet without entering the public sphere nor official memory politics; they are therefore not very visible.

1989 As a Revolution

For twenty years, the historical, sociological and political specialized literature has rightfully interpreted the Velvet Revolution as a break in the relationship between the Czech nation and communism. American-inspired works on the entry into democracy and the market focused on the enormous and urgent rehabilitation of the economy and of the political system and on the adoption of Western legal standards.

Official and semi-official memory politics, through commemoration, archival policy, judicial treatment of the past and historical work, have also increasingly advocated and promoted a vision of the communist past which is rather simplistic; the former regime is described as having opposed the good people to the bad communists and to the bad collaborators of the secret police. Today, better to forget all about it and to turn the page. This is what is subsumed under the term of "totalita" (totality), which is a kind of totalitarianism, albeit not as a concept in the full sense of the word (i.e. doesn't raise a real methodological discussion on the same model as "totalitarianism" does), yet which conveys the evil essence of the communist regime and the powerlessness and therefore the unaccountability of the common people. The term has become so dominant that it was actually integrated in the name of the new historical institute, created in a highly politicized context in 2007, to research the communist past, which is called the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, or

more accurately is in fact called in Czech "Institute for the Study of the Regimes of Totality".

So the "totality narrative" is dominating in the Czech public sphere today. But I would suggest that society's apparent approval for the past twenty years, or at least the seeming lack of alternatives offered to this dominant motive, hides a vision of the communist period which is sometimes quite remote from these (Prague) "elites."

It is remote because the post-1989 period has not been sufficiently historicized. Time did not stop in 1989 as the "totality narrative" would suggest, nor did a new time start in 1989 either. Studying the relationship of the people to communism before 1989 can not only help, but is the only way, to understand their attitude towards the communist past since the revolution. And the attitude of Czech society towards communism today also tells us something about its relationship to communism yesterday. The elements of continuity have sometimes represented an obstacle to the change but they were also a resource for the actors, both in the construction of their representations (memory, nostalgia) and in their daily practices: habits, routines, social networks, etc. (Sandrine Kott). That is why they need to be restituted.

This might seem like an evidence, but if the high communist vote in the past twenty years (15 to 20%) is not analysed in connection with the base of popular support enjoyed by the Communist Party before 1989, if we do not emphasize the sources of legitimacy which the communist government enjoyed before 1989 in terms of welfare, egalitarian economic policy, culture and nationalism – especially anti-German nationalism –, if we do not take into account the fact that the communist regime could never have stayed in power for 41 years if it had not been able to count on some participation by the population, who got something in return (an "implicit minimal contract" as Thomas Lindenberger coined it), in other words if we do not invoke history as an explanatory factor, it is very difficult to understand the post-communist

present. There are many elements of continuity in Czech everyday life but also many elements of continuity in the way of thinking, in social relationships and in the relationship to the communist past which need to be studied. And yet this is not done in today's Czech Republic, or very little.

I base these few reflections on the result of an oral history study which I conducted in the Czech Republic in a small town bordering Austria, Česká Velenice, in the frame of our borders program at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, while my colleague Berthold Molden did a similar study in the facing town of Gmünd.¹ I also conducted another oral history study among Slovaks and Hungarians in Komárno, at the border between Slovakia and Hungary.

The Temporality of Change

Let us mention here only a few issues. The first one is the restitution of this continuity between the pre- and the post-1989 period. It is lacking in historical works but it is being clearly sketched out in the perception of the communist past as seen from Česká Velenice. A certain nostalgia is accompanied by a difficulty to manage the past and to restore the social fabric that has paradoxically deteriorated since 1989: despite the generally poor relations between the people due to the atmosphere of denunciation that had prevailed under communism, they still participated much more in community activities such as tea dances, chess clubs, fire brigades or ceramics than now. In terms of civil society, the pre-revolutionary associative fabric is crumbling down only now, at least in Česká Velenice, as the people who were engaged in this sector before 1989 are slowly dying out and nobody is stepping up to replace them.

The temporality of change (or of the absence of change) regarding the communist past and the perception of political, economic and social conditions in the country shows the relativity of the caesura of 1989. "We cannot draw a thick line over the past," said the local biggest entrepreneur of Česká Velenice; this statement comes in sharp contrast to the official policy of the Czech Republic since 1989, which tried to do exactly that. In Komárno, the contrast is even bigger since many of the Hungarians I interviewed, from all generations, could not even remember clearly when the regime change had taken place. They are so focussed on their identity as a minority and on their status inside their own town, that the events in Prague or even in Bratislava, if not explicitly addressing their identity issue, seem very distant to them.

In my opinion, the misunderstanding or miscalculation that characterizes both many politicians and many social scientists in the Czech Republic stems from the fact that the acceptance of this continuity between the pre- and the post-1989 period is not a value judgement: it is not necessary to disavow democracy to find advantages to the communist regime, and it is not necessary to be anti-communist to appreciate democracy. One can be nostalgic and a democrat, a former communist and happier under democracy, a former opponent to communism and frustrated by democracy. Not a single interviewee failed to underline how difficult it was to stand the old surveillance system; all welcomed the newly gained freedom in 1989; but the experience they describe is that freedom is not automatically synonymous with happiness: money matters, too. More precisely, neither money nor freedom automatically bring happiness. Nothing is easy – and I daresay this came to them as a bad surprise.

In this sense, oral history shows that the "1989 ideology" is undermined. Because 1989 has not kept its promises, the revolution has lost some of its legitimacy in the past twenty years: not its promises of economic and political reforms, which were more or less respected, but its implicit, and yet decisive, promise of happiness and of rehabilitation of the individual and of decency – a wild hope which emerged in 1989, as testified from the interviewees, and which is now hopelessly foregone. Despite all the benefits of capitalism and democracy, most people seem to be only slightly happier than under communism – not much more. Happiness requires effort. And they do not feel that they "count" more as individuals in the life of the country.

The microhistory of Česká Velenice illustrates the conflict of interpretation of the "1989 event" with Prague in a double perspective: not only does the population not necessarily have the negative view of communism that post-1989 democracy seeks to impose through its commemoration policy, but it does not necessarily share either the positive vision of "1989" that the intellectual elites are trying to convey. Neither 1989 nor even 1948 (the communist takeover) or even 1968 (the Prague Spring) have marked the memory of my interviewees with the strength that one could have expected. The strategy of "Eigen-Sinn" of this society, i.e. of protection of its agency, of reclaiming the official timeline according to its own agenda and of reinterpretation of the "event 1989" in a vision of its own, comes out clearly. Even in Česká Velenice, I found a lady

who could not remember what happened in 1989 and when I asked if the term "Velvet Revolution" meant anything to her she answered: "Ah yes ! But that was in Prague."

Attitudes change of course much more slowly than political and economic conditions. The radicalism of the upheavals experienced in daily life, in institutions, in the disappearance of the border, stands in contrast to the slowly changing perceptions, to the opinions about these changes. Communism came and went, but anti-Austrian feelings are still prevalent in České Velenice. Communism came and went, but the reliance on a welfare state is the same. Communism came and went, and politicians are equally distrusted and despised. Communism came and went, but corruption remained the same. Communism came and went, but life itself is more or less the same. The Iron Curtain was put down, but the border is still very much there in the heads. Things changed but at the same time many things did not change. A kind of democracy came, but friendship and happiness cannot be decreed from Brussels or elsewhere.

Quite on the contrary, it is a cynical perception of the current situation and a widespread privatization of individual existence which are prevailing now – but this process may have more to do with globalization than with decommunization, if one remembers that it was denounced by Václav Havel in his political essays already in the 1970s and that it does not characterize only the post-communist countries, by far.

West to East, East to West

Speaking of Western Europe, in this commemoration year I heard in the former "West" numerous reports and in-depth analyses of 1989 and before, of how it was to live under communism, its daily life, dissent, etc. Archival documents, interviews, and analyses were presented in Western media as well as in media of the countries concerned. French radio, Austrian TV, CNN, the BBC, etc. produced some really fantastic reports.

On the other hand, I do not remember that I saw any report in formerly "Eastern media" about how it was to live in Western Europe before 1989. Do my Czech interviewees, for instance, have any idea what it was like for us ? Do they have any idea what my daily life in France was like in the 1970s and 1980s ? The answer, obviously, is no. Why are they, nor even a number of Prague historians, in fact not really curious about this ?

This one-dimensional interest, only from the West to the East, i.e. from the so-called winner of history towards the so-called loser of history (or from the East to the East in a quite egocentric perspective), is a historical reconstruction which we all share, East and West, and yet which I find really detrimental. It is distorting not only the history of the former East, but also the history of the former West. By reinterpreting the entire postwar period in light of the final victory for the West and of the final defeat for the East, we tend to reconstruct a historical process which would have looked completely different taken from as late as 1985 when Gorbachov came to power.

This historical reconstruction in which we all participate is bad because it naturally leads us to compare the past communism with democracy as we know it today, both East and West, with the assumption that, for the West, democracy today is the same as the democracy which was prevailing in 1989. But it is not. Western Europe also has enormously changed in the past twenty years in terms of citizens' rights and political accountability, for instance. The West was not always the modern, winning side as we know it today but had also backward and authoritarian aspects and still have them in many instances and in many countries.

"You Cannot Understand"

I often heard from my Czech friends complaints along the line, "Ah, you cannot understand what it was like, life was so terrible here, we didn't have much of anything. For instance, we didn't drink coca-cola. " Or we didn't have Levi's jeans. Or we couldn't travel abroad. Or our state was serving us a disgusting propaganda and was permanently lying to us. "You cannot understand," they tell me.

But if I may quote a few examples from my own life, France of the 1970s and 1980s definitely had more in common with communist Czechoslovakia than with the United States, which we also looked at with awe. When I was a child in Southern France we did not drink much Coke either. Standard French families were drinking table water – and wine. To have a Coke was exceptional, and was a feast, as was visiting McDonald's, which is something we did only a couple of times in our entire childhood. We did have Levi's jeans, but we did not have much choice, at least not in provincial France where I lived – and our parents refused to pay so much money since you could get much cheaper, although unappealing, jeans; they just could not see the point. Of course we could tra-

vel, but at the time it was not the fashion to go far away at all. Most people went on vacation by car, in France, or went only to neighbouring countries for shopping trips – just like the Czechs did. To fly by plane was a big event, and remained so for a long time. Consumerism was nothing as we know it today, sparing and saving was a way of life.

As to propaganda, coming from France I can really understand what it was like. I would have numerous examples of the lies stemming from the French state but suffice it to mention that when Chernobyl happened in 1986, the French public was pleased to hear that the nuclear cloud had magically stopped right over the French border. The highest state medical authority went up on national TV to assure consumers that everything was fine, children could continue to play in sandpitches, while fruits and vegetables could be consumed freely. As a result, an unaware audience continued to consume mushrooms which were 500 times above the maximum allowed radioactivity. This policy was justified later in the name of “the state knows better, we must not create panic, etc.” Needless to say, the French state is denying to this day even the possibility, or the discussion of the possibility, that the upsurge of certain types of cancer in France in the past years has anything to do with that.

Of course this was not true of Germany, Italy or Austria, where adequate measures were taken to protect and inform the people. Which is another point I want to make: the “West” is as diverse as the “East” was, or the “East” is as diverse as the “West” was. The cultural differences are as large between Poland and the Czech Republic or Hungary and Bulgaria as between France and Germany or Britain and Sweden. There was not “one West”, but many. And there are many common points in postwar history between all of our European countries, communist or not, which make them different from the US.

So to come back to my point, to get an accurate historical picture both of the former East and of the former West, we have to compare them both and between each other. To understand communism adequately, and especially to get rid of a (in my eyes) quite irritating victimization discourse, which blames everything on the communist ideology, the

former Eastern countries also have to compare themselves to Western Europe. They really need to run radio and TV broadcasts on daily life before 1989 as it was on the so-called happier side of the Iron Curtain, and not just the other way around. If the Czechs for instance took this into account, they would perhaps realize that communism’s faults are there and that communism as a system was, and remains, bad but that it is not enough to condemn it abstractly and to abstain from researching social responsibility in accepting and maintaining this terror regime for forty years – and by this I do not mean singling out only a few collaborators who serve as scapegoats.

Conclusion

This short-sightedness and tendency to study only one own’s navel, which dominates on both sides, has yet another consequence, which I call the James-Bondization of history. The reinterpretation of European history as the victory of good capitalism over evil communism comes in many aspects as a contradiction to the memory of this period that the Czech public has. They do not always share the conviction that the pre-1989 period was entirely bad, on the contrary even, a strong nostalgia is present. And the Cold War does not mean anything to them on the personal level. As one interviewee said when I asked her if she used the notion of Cold War in her daily life, first she laughed at the absurdity of my suggestion and then she answered: “The Cold War? I have it at home with my family.”

Yet they are told, and now they are even taught, that the post-1945 period is the Cold War. Their memory of this period is a memory of communism, or of “totality” and not of the Cold War, but of course the “totality” or even communism does not mean anything to a Western audience. So the Cold War, the version of history stemming from the winner of history, is slowly becoming the common past of East and West alike, and little Czech or Polish children are slowly adopting James Bond as adequately symbolizing the history of their country. This very fact, that James Bond is becoming a figure of Central European memory is telling enough about how distant the 1989 alleged “realm of memory” has become from people’s representations of their daily lives, past and present.

1 See Muriel Blaive, Berthold Molden, Hranice probíhají vodním tokem. Odrazy historie ve vnímání obyvatel Gmündu a Českých Velenic, Brno, Barrister & Principal, January 2010.