

Guido Franzinetti

What went wrong? Misconceptions of the End of the Cold War and some of their implications

The aim of this paper is to address widespread perceptions of the end the Cold War. It argues (from an 'ex ante' or 'real time' standpoint) that opposing political and ideological actors shared a perception which was highly flawed from an empirical and conceptual point of view. The paper addresses the question of why, how and when these misconceptions arose.

1. Hindsight, Wrong Addresses, Predictions, Intellectual Fallout

Hindsight

In hindsight, the three decades which followed the end of the Cold War seem to have turned out to have been a disappointment. Indeed, History seems to have taken a 'wrong turning'. For some, this happened in 1989, when the Berlin Wall 'fell', or when the Soviet Union dissolved. This kind of feeling is by no means confined to a specific political or cultural orientation. It can range from the disappointment on the 'neoliberal' side, to a 'civil society' orientation, or to Vladimir Putin's famous deprecation of the collapse of the Soviet Union as "a major geopolitical disaster of the [20th] century" of the end of the Soviet Union.¹ Eric Hobsbawm saw the entire period as the effect of a 'landslide': "the history of the twenty years after 1973 is that of a world which lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis".²

As one of Barack Obama's advisors pointed out "many of the people who work in American foreign policy today [2018] were shaped by the experience of the 1990s, when the United States was ascendant. The Berlin Wall had come down. Democracy was spreading across Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia. Russia was on its back foot, and China had not yet

risen. We really could shape events in much of the world. NATO could expand into the former Soviet Union without fear that Russia would invade one of these countries. We could bring together the whole world to kick Saddam out of Kuwait.”³

At the end of his presidency, after Donald Trump’s electoral victory, Obama ended up asking himself: “What if we were wrong?”⁴ In the wake of the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011, Obama’s advisors wondered: “Was this analogous to the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the nations of Eastern Europe transitioned to democracy like flowers blooming; or was this like Hungary 1956, or Tienanmen Square in 1989, popular movements that would be trampled by strongmen?”⁵

These retrospective assessments are all too easy to put forward, especially in the context of an ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and the recurring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Resorting to hindsight is a facile answer, but it evades the question of why the demise of the post-Cold War settlements seems to have come as a surprise for so many Western political actors and commentators.

It is instead more useful to reason from *ex ante* assumptions, on the basis what was said, known, thought and thinkable *at the time*. This is not based on the assumption that “there is nothing to compare with being there” (at the right time, of course)⁶ but, rather, on the assumption that the understanding of events and processes involves their reconstruction *in real time*.⁷

The retrospective reflections of political actors (and those of subsequent observers) are unlikely to ever provide any explanation of why ‘things went wrong’ (assuming that they did go ‘wrong’). At best, they provide apologetics for their own behaviour.

Despite the passage of time (three decades), one should also dispense with the hope that archival sources will somehow provide an answer to such broad historical issues. No documentary source can deal effectively with these. As Kim Philby pointed out, “[J]ust because a document is a document, it has a glamour which tempts the reader to give it more weight than it deserves...In short, documentary intelligence, to be really valuable, must come as a steady stream, embellished with an awful lot of explanatory annotation. An hour’s serious discussion with a trustworthy informant is often more valuable than any number of original documents. Of course, it is best to have both”⁸. Archives can provide answers only to quite *specific* issues. What matters is the

context, and possibly the context of a whole set of assumptions, including the “unspoken assumptions”⁹.

This remains true even in an age of mass digital communications, in which every utterance seems to have been recorded in some form.

The assumptions to be addressed are those of ‘political’ actors in the widest sense, ranging from journalism to academia, to policy advocates and politicians. A truly comprehensive overview of their utterances and actions (over three decades) lies beyond the scope of this paper. What will be provided is a description of certain *clusters* of assumptions, often shared by quite different political actors. The result will be a somewhat ‘fuzzy’ picture.

Wrong Addresses

It seems as if in a *negative* sense the current situation provides confirmation for *any* assumption and view. Neoliberals, globalists, antiglobalists, nationalists and internationalists, socialists and anti-socialists have all claimed at some point that the end of the Cold War has simply confirmed their respective assumptions: true neoliberalism/socialism was not properly implemented, and so forth.

The common element of these different positions is what Ernest Gellner called the Wrong Address Theory: the Spirit of History took the wrong turning: “Just as extreme Shi’ite Muslims hold that Archangel Gabriel made a mistake, delivering the Message to Mohamed when it was intended for Ali, so Marxist Marxists basically like to think that the spirit of history or human consciousness made a terrible boob. The awakening message was intended for classes, but by some terrible postal error was delivered to nations”¹⁰.

In fairness to Marxists, it should be pointed out that the Wrong Address Theory has been used by all sides: neoliberals, globalists, antiglobalists, nationalists and internationalists, socialists and antisocialists. The mantra seems to go along the following lines: “If only a true neoliberal/social democratic/socialist/nationalist programme had been adopted at the time, so many problems could have been avoided...”

Predictions

An additional element which somehow integrates the negative post-Cold War consensus is the idea that the end of the Cold War was *unforeseen*. In fact, as

Schumpeter argued, “[W]hat counts in any attempt as social prognosis is not the Yes or No that sums up the facts and arguments which lead up to it but those facts and arguments themselves. They contain all that is scientific in the final result. Everything else is not science but prophecy. Analysis, whether economic or other, never yields more than a statement about the tendencies present in an observable pattern. And these never tell us what will happen to the pattern but only what would happen if they continued to act as they have been acting in the time interval covered by our observation and if no other factors intruded. ‘Inevitability’ or ‘necessity’ can never mean more than this”.¹¹

The idea that essentially ‘nobody predicted the End of Communism’ is absolutely incorrect. What is instead true is that over a longer period, in the post-Stalin era (at least in the West, and to some extent even in the Soviet Union, in a clandestine form) there was widespread acceptance of some version of convergence theory.

The basic idea was that the American and the Soviet industrial systems would eventually converge.¹² The idea could be appealing on all sides, since it envisaged a peaceful outcome to the ‘Great Contest’ between the Capitalist and Socialist systems. It could also appeal to critics of both systems: if they were destined to converge, why bother with a Cold War? Andrei Sakharov started out as a supporter of theory. This led to a debate among Soviet dissidents. The most famous intervention was in fact Amalrik’s essay, “Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?”. (In theory, Amalrik was ‘prescient’, although he envisaged a Soviet-Chinese war as the cause for the dissolution of the Soviet Union.)

There were also predictions at a more sophisticated and accurate level. This was the case of the debate between Raymond Aron and Ernest Gellner in the mid-1970s.¹³ Gellner actually argued that, at least in the case of Czechoslovakia, Communist elites had been prepared to give up power: “The monopolists [i.e., the Czechoslovak Communists] surrendered in Prague in 1967–68, and but for external intervention, would not have dared raise a hand in defence of their own erstwhile power”¹⁴.

This was within the framework of his argument that revolutions belonged to the past, and that liberalization was the most likely option for political developments, not just in the Communist world. Depending on the time frame adopted, one can argue that Gellner was right, or that he was wrong. But what matters is the heuristic value of the overall framework, not the accuracy of the prediction.

At yet another level, Zbigniew Brzezinski's analyses at the time (which were by no means a fossilized reflection of the mythical 'totalitarian' paradigm) could provide remarkable insights. His 1968 article, and his 1970 book (*Between Two Ages*) provided already (with remarkable foresight) one of the clearest visions of what is now known as the 'third industrial revolution'¹⁵. In fact his most remarkable statements on Eastern Europe (in the 1980s) were his repeated predictions (in 1988) that the region was in a "pre-revolutionary" situation¹⁶. He viewed this situation with apprehension; he considered it "disturbing".

The Intellectual Framework

One of the effects of the End of Communism debates has been the shortening of the distance between historical research and policy advocacy. During the Cold War, there was a strong incentive on both sides to simulate, as much as possible, some degree of objectivity and detachment. After 1989, and concomitant with the increasing privatization of academic systems all over the world and the increasing role of NGOs, there has been a clear tendency for historical (and social science) research to slide into advocacy as swiftly as possible, indeed to exaggerate as much as possible the policy implications of research. Especially in Europe, this has been encouraged by the shift in funding from national governments to 'transnational' frameworks (European Union and NGOs)¹⁷. The results of this shift have been, at best, mixed. High Journalism has acquired greater salience; traditional research has declined. This has had a great impact on the post-1989 debates.

2. The Liberal Mirage

What went wrong? The simplest answer might be: the Liberal dream (as it emerged at the end of the Cold War) turned sour. This seems to be the current consensus among Western commentators. But this answer assumes that the term 'Liberal' can be easily and clearly defined, and that such a 'dream' actually existed at the end of the Cold War. All these assumptions are debatable, even in terms of the terminology adopted. Because of its different European, British and American usages, the term 'Liberal' has always been unclear, especially once the term 'neoliberal' re-emerged in the

1980s (from its original formulation in the 1930s). This creates a blurred and confused picture.

The issue is not whether the so-called 'Washington Consensus' was a mirage or not (although it can be argued that it really was). But did a 'dream' of a world reshaped according to Western style democracy and the market economy actually exist in Eastern Europe, at least before 1989/91?

The Cold War, even in the 1980s, had been first and foremost a way of stabilizing the spheres of influence, avoiding conflicts which could lead to a nuclear conflict. The extension of democracy and market economies over the Eastern part of Europe were for many decades a distant dream for a committed minority of the local populations. At best, the hope was that of achieving some degree of political and economic reforms in Poland and Hungary (e.g., the PHARE programme, which was in preparation before 1989). West Germans may have nurtured their own dreams, but always within carefully defined limits. In 1984 the German historian Peter Alter assumed that "[U]nder the present circumstances [...] it is highly unlikely than an all-German national state could be recreated by non-violent means, as the constitutional imperative demands, and the chances of it happening seem to be constantly diminishing"¹⁸. In the 1980s, the *Financial Times* commentator on Foreign Affairs wrote that, if some kind of revolt was ever to erupt in Eastern Germany, Western Germany would immediately strive to limit any conflagration, not to encourage it.

The Western reactions to changes in Poland and Hungary in 1988/1989 were initially extremely cautious. Reactions to events in the German Democratic Republic were even more cautious. In fact, Western reactions to events in Eastern Europe remained cautious after the so-called 'Fall of the Wall', right up to the Malta Summit (2–3 December 1989), and even after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu (25 December 1989). This was quite clear at the time, and it has even been confirmed by the publication of diplomatic papers.¹⁹

Attitudes, especially official Western attitudes, gradually began to change throughout 1990–1991. This process began only after the really unexpected (and undesired) dissolution of the Soviet Union, at the end of 1991. In any case, the priority of the US government proved to be the desire to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons based in the non-Russian republics of the Former Soviet Union. The West German government was anxious to avoid any action which could prevent or delay German unification. For their part, Great Britain and France (which were still occupying powers in West Germa-

ny) continued to offer a much cooler response, as they were not enthusiastic at the prospect of a unified Germany.

3. Explaining the End of the Cold War

One issue which is directly connected to the misreading of the changes of 1989/91 is the *kind* of explanation offered through a negative consensus, a convergence of explanations from opposite points of view. To a remarkable extent, the crux of the different explanations could always be narrowed down to a single factor: *ideology*. For neoliberals, the ideological failure of socialism could explain everything: 'nobody believed (any longer?) in socialism'. This same kind of explanation could also be used by disappointed communists and socialists to explain the failure of socialism and the dominance of neoliberalism in terms of intellectual manipulation or 'hegemony'. Echoing the motto in the 1992 US presidential campaign ('it's the economy, stupid'), one could have said that in both cases the argument was that 'it's the ideas, stupid'. Johanna Bockman has actually argued that "[N]eoliberalism ...had socialist origins. In Eastern Europe [...] not only economists, but also dissidents, members of social movements, and participants in reform circles within Communist parties developed new ideas about socialism, which [in 1989] elites then co-opted and distorted into neoliberalism".²⁰ Once again, a case of a Wrong Address. Clearly, ideas rule the world.

Once this negative (ideological) consensus was established, the implicit (and often explicit) assumption of many commentators and policymakers in the 'West' was that eventually all the former socialist countries would follow some kind of path to liberal democracy and the market economy. This assumption was apparently quite influential in the case of US policy towards China and Russia, and of course towards the rest of the Soviet bloc.

In this perspective, an obsolete ideology had produced an inefficient economy, which was eventually remedied by the acceptance of the 'neoliberal' Gospel and which would lead to the desired economic and political transition: idealism followed by vulgar materialism. It is unlikely that many policymakers literally believed in this formula; but they certainly behaved as if they believed it, as was clearly the case in the policy towards China. Commentators enthused. Needless to say, any reasonably informed observer soon became aware of the fact that the 'transitions' of the 1990s (from state socialism to

market economies and democracy) were working out rather differently from what was envisaged in this mirage.²¹ But the overall framework remained essentially this, accepted both by their supporters and detractors.

The “People’s revolutions”: mythologization and foresight

The establishment of this kind of intellectual framework or ‘consensus’ required some kind of ‘narrative’ (or interpretation, to use an older term). First of all, the Berlin Wall (which had always remained in function until its ‘fall’) suddenly ‘fell’, under the apparently irresistible wave of a popular revolution. In fact, the chain of events was much more complicated than that.²² As has been already mentioned, Western powers were extremely cautious in welcoming this event. US diplomats were instructed to refrain from making any triumphalist remarks. At the State of the Union address of 1991, George H. W. Bush presented the end of the Cold War as a “victory for humanity”. But in the State of the Union address of 1992, the tone had already become triumphalist (not least because of the forthcoming presidential elections): “By the grace of God, America won the Cold War”.

The upheavals of 1989 therefore began to be classified under a general heading of ‘people’s revolutions’. A more ambitious historical framework was offered by Francis Fukuyama, who seemed to have actually anticipated the changes in an article written in May 1989, published in autumn 1989, under the title “The end of History?” (which was in fact a reference to Hegel’s philosophy of history).²³ Fukuyama’s notoriety soared, but his academic standing suffered. The title of his article (with the question-mark omitted) produced innumerable misunderstandings, based on the fact that plenty of *events* were still taking place. In other words, there was a ‘return of History’ (which was to appear in innumerable other titles). This kind of rhetoric was soon followed by a much cruder theorization of a ‘unipolar moment’: the USA was now the sole, unchallenged superpower.²⁴

Needless to say, many other factors were listed to explain the upheavals of 1989: the US Star Wars military programme, which had supposedly brought the Soviet Union to its knees; the influence of Pope John Paul II; the Gorbachev factor, and of course the economy. *Ex post facto*, there is no limit to the factors which might appear to have played a role in the outcome of events. In a broader historical perspective, it is actually more relevant to identify the *structural* factors which were had been identified *ex ante*. One could

mention the decline in social mobility in the socialist systems. Years before the Polish events of 1980–1981, Walter D. Connor argued:

[T]he 'heroic' and convulsive years of social transformation are behind. The socialist elite no longer expands in size so rapidly, generating such demand for new personnel [...] the logic of the maturation process and annual figures on labour-force distribution across sections of the economy suggest that the mass mobility of the past cannot be duplicated [...] There is a risk that frustrated aspirations will lead to unrest [...] Such politics could be explosive [...] we cannot rule out a coalescence of factors that may produce radical changes.²⁵

One should also mention innumerable Eastern European authors who pointed out, with significant foresight, the vulnerability of the state socialist systems. In the wake of the Polish strikes and bloody clashes in December 1970, Leszek Kołakowski formulated a cogent argument against hopelessness, in favour of positive action in socialist Poland, directed at obtaining limited political changes within the Communist system.²⁶ In Hungary, reformist economists argued the need for radical economic reform. Tamás Bauer, for example, underlined the negative effects of investment cycles in Hungary and in other socialist economies.²⁷

Well before the emergence of 'Solidarność', Jadwiga Staniszkis provided lucid analyses of the complex dynamics at work in Polish politics and society.²⁸ In 1982, János Kis initiated a debate on the Hungarian situation, and the need for an active reformist movement to challenge the inertia and stagnation of the system, which was leading to an economic crisis.²⁹ During the period of Solidarność' (1980–1981), it was argued that Zdeněk Mlynař's memoir of the Prague Spring³⁰ had influenced the behaviour of Polish Communists. For his part, in 1985 Mlynař proved very attentive to the role of his old friend from his days as a student in Moscow in the 1950, Mikhail Gorbachev.³¹

Needless to say, all these authors subsequently followed their quite different paths. But they had provided real insights in real time. They never received the attention they deserved, nor have they received any in retrospect. More literary or philosophical authors were preferred (and continue to be preferred, in retrospective accounts).

On the basis of facts which were always in the public domain, one can argue in favour of a less romantic view of what happened in 1989 in Eastern Europe. It amounted to a process of controlled abdication. In Poland

and Hungary, the Communist elites always maintained control of the political process. In East Germany the Soviet military presence (and Soviet decision-making) facilitated the peaceful unravelling of the political system of the German Democratic republic. In Czechoslovakia there was a clear bandwagon effect (compounded by the reluctance of the security forces in getting involved *at that point* in a brutal repression of the crowds). In Bulgaria a basically Gorbachevite palace coup took place. In Romania the course of events reflected a mixture of popular rising and palace coup. Only in Albania (in 1991–92) did anything approaching a ‘revolution’ actually take place.³² None of this means that 1989 was simply the result of some sinister conspiracy. But it does allow a perspective which is somewhat distanced from the excitement of High Journalism.

From Malta to Belovezha, 1989–1991

The key passage in the construction of the post-Cold War fable (or ‘narrative’) lies in the *amnesia* over the Belovezha accords of 1991, and the consequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This was the result not of Western pressure, but of the inability of the leadership of the various Soviet republics to agree on an alternative arrangement. This fact did not prevent it from being transformed into “a geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (as Putin put it). It marked the birth of the Black Legend of the Western plot to destroy the Soviet Union (and eventually, the Russian Federation).

The US and the Western European powers continued to pursue a policy marked by great caution towards the republics of the Former Soviet Union, and towards the Russian Federation in particular. One of the results was the signing of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances for Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan in joining the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Far from being belittled, the Russian Federation was recognized as the successor state of the Soviet Union.

The dogs that did not bark: Communist systems which survived

Leaving aside the mythologization of the events of 1989 (and later of 1991), what is truly remarkable of the innumerable ‘narratives’ of the period is the lack of attention paid to the cases in which Communism systems did *not* collapse. If ideological disenchantment with socialism was the main feature of

the many 'narratives', how should the anomalies (China, Cuba, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam) be explained? Needless to say, a convenient culturalist kind of explanation would be at hand: 'Asian values', or some functionally equivalent factor.

Other kinds of explanations have been put forward. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued, as Mark Kramer has done, that in Communist China "the regime experienced more limited structural difficulties than the Soviet Union and consequently had more room for maneuver [...] as China's experience since 1989 demonstrates, resilience is predicated on sustained experimentation in the economic and ideological realms, as well as on efforts to increase inclusion and to create meaningful institutions of accountability".³³ A more wide-ranging explanation of the differences between the trajectories of the Russian and Chinese revolutions has been put forward by Perry Anderson.³⁴ Both these kinds of explanations are contestable, but at least they offer something more than the simplified 'collapse of Communism' explanation.

Indeed, the Chinese case is especially interesting, not in terms of the immediate Chinese reactions to the end of the Soviet Union but, rather, in terms of the long-term perspective adopted by the Chinese leadership. Between 1993 and 2004 the Chinese Communist Party conducted "an in-depth study [of the causes of the collapse]", and revealed the results at the 16th Party Congress in 2004.³⁵ Between 1991 and 2001, "at least 600 articles and over 30 books dedicated to the subject were published in China".³⁶ Not exactly instant history, but part of a long game.

4. The Liberal Mirage triumphant: mythologies, misperceptions, neglect

The Nineties, in the recollections of many commentators, appear to have been a period of extraordinary optimism. The fable eventually turned into a bitter disappointment, with the collapse of the Liberal Mirage in the space of the first two decades of the 21st century: the Kaczyński brothers in Poland, Orbán in Hungary, Putin in Russia, culminating with Trump in the USA.

Everything seems to have gone wrong: this is not what we had planned, these are not the democracies we expected; indeed, these are not the *peoples* we expected. This turn of events can be easily accommodated by the *nega-*

tive consensus: leftists can argue that the neoliberals hijacked the people's revolutions; alternatively, neoliberals can argue that the (ex)communists hijacked them; or others can argue that the 'nationalists' or 'populists' hijacked everything. It is always a question of Wrong Address, Wrong Delivery. This kind of rationalization may be adequate for practitioners of High Journalism. Historians should aim to something more.

Understanding the 1990s

First of all, the 1990s were by no means an economic and social bonanza for most East Europeans. It was a period of enormous insecurity for many people (for workers in the rust-belt industries, for pensioners, and many others in between these categories). Entry into 'Europe' loomed far in the distance (the eventual dates 2004 and 2007 were by no means an immediate certainty in the 1990s). It took the Kosovo War to bring about a Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe in 1999, offering a glimmer of hope for the economies of the region. But in an overall (or 'global') perspective, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) had much less leverage than people feared (or hoped).³⁷

Secondly, the politics went wrong. The wars of dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (which Western powers and IFIs had initially tried to *preserve*) demonstrated that the post-Cold War 'new international order' did not guarantee any kind of stability. More ominously, events in Russia in the early 1990s (with the bombing of the Russian parliament, Zhirinovsky's electoral victory, and the first Chechen war) were hardly reassuring for Eastern Europeans.

Despite all these unpromising developments, the 1990s continued to be portrayed in triumphalist terms. After all, there had been the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians (1993), and the breakthrough in South Africa (1991–1994). All these developments were connected to the End of the Cold War. Everything seemed possible. In hindsight, the perspectives adopted by many political actors seem an incredibly naive. But even naivety requires and explanation. Coming to the overall issue of 'What went wrong?', this can be illustrated in three categories: *mythologies; misperceptions; neglect*.

Mythologies

The mythologization of the 'revolutions' of 1989 (and the immediate changes) was also the result of the amplification of High Journalism and television re-

porting. To the extent that it was accepted, the mythologization was destined to create highly unrealistic social and economic expectations ('catching up with the West', in the space of a few years). Such expectations, once they were confronted with the realities on the ground, could easily feed into conspiracy theories. After all, if there had been 'popular' revolutions, why was it that the true beneficiaries of changes still seemed to be the (ex)communists and their acolytes?³⁸ Clearly, there must have been some kind of a Conspiracy to Defraud the People of Their Rightful Possessions. The Revolution itself may even seem to have been a mere staging event. Such a view, however strange it may seem to innocent Westerners, has existed throughout Eastern Europe, and may well persist to this day.

For that matter, memories of 1989 have progressively evaporated in Eastern Europe, to the extent that nowadays the date may not mean anything at all for pupils and university students in the region. Conversely, in the Russian Federation the mythologization of 1991 has taken place through the cultivation of the Black Legend of the 'geopolitical catastrophe', similar to the 'stab in the back' legend performed in Germany after World War I. In the West, to the extent that this mythologization has had any effect, it has led to an incomprehension of all post-Cold War changes in Eastern Europe, often dismissed with the blanket explanation of nationalist/populist revival in the region.

Misperceptions

While in the USA there was a widely shared feeling of experiencing a 'Unipolar Moment', in Western Europe the end of the Cold War was characterized by great optimism about the advent of the EU (formally created in Maastricht, in 1992) and, eventually, the establishment of the Euro (not desired by Germany, but desired by other member countries). On top of this, Americans and Europeans shared an enthusiasm for the 'peace dividend': less money for defence, more money for everything else. Military service was progressively abolished in most European countries (after 1993, only six NATO countries maintained it).

In the USA, the defeat of Bush sr and the victory Bill Clinton seemed to herald the advent of a 'Third Liberalism'. It was conveniently forgotten that Clinton won only thanks to the presence of Ross Perot, a third candidate for the populist right who gathered 18.9% of the votes. In fact, this entire period marked the rise of the new, populist right in the USA.

Neglect

The post-Cold war era was also marked by the increasing diffusion of discourses of 'globalization' (which also had practical consequences). In the academic field, one significant shift (at least in US) was the choice to basically jettison 'Area Studies' in favour of the more ambitious 'global studies' and 'global history'. The net result was to dismantle an existing intellectual infrastructure to the benefit of an as yet untested project.

In the field of security structures, for example, this led to the dismissal of specialists of Arabic, substituted by electronic information tools.³⁹ In High Journalism, the typical product of this era was offered by Thomas Friedman⁴⁰, promptly replicated by the 'antiglobalist' camp with a symmetrical, opposing view. More sober assessments⁴¹ did not achieve equal notoriety before the 2007–2008 financial crisis.

In Western Europe, this shift was less marked than in the USA. Nevertheless, the expansion of universities since the 1990s in Europe (and more globally) created a strong incentive to promote a thin (but 'global') kind of knowledge, at the expense of local knowledge (even compared to the Cold War years).⁴² Narratology provided a convenient compensation. Perception mattered more than mere facts.

Meanwhile, the Second Chechen War (1999–2009) and the rise of Vladimir Putin began a process of re-positioning of the Russian Federation on the global scene. But in the 2012 US Presidential election campaign, Barack Obama was still curtly dismissing Mitt Romney's concerns about Russia with these words: "The Cold War's been over for 20 years".

5. The longer view

In hindsight, it is all too easy to dismiss the misperceptions of the recent past as fruits of naivety. Many misperceptions were perfectly visible at the time, but many were not. The only way to make sense of these in a balanced manner is to attempt to outline a series of long-term factors.

In fairness to policy-makers and commentators, one should take into account the fear of 'losing' Russia. This was no longer the fear which had fuelled the Cold War (when the USA felt China had been 'lost') but it reflected the reasonable fear of a new Russia run by Neo-communists and hardliner nationalists (such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy). However, the remedies which the West

offered for these well-founded fears proved to be extremely short-sighted, and ultimately counterproductive. Germany followed the idea that the embrace of German industrial requirements with the Russian need to sell raw materials and provide energy would ensure peace in Europe (*Wandel durch Handel*). This assumption proved to be as naive as the arguments put forward by Norman Angell on the eve of World War I.⁴³

When it came to EU enlargement and NATO expansion, there was even greater naivety. EU enlargement proceeded quite slowly, at least until the acceleration following the Kosovo War in 1999. It managed to alienate many of the candidate countries (starting from Türkiye). Even the countries which did accede had mixed results. NATO expansion, far from being threatening to Russia (as the new Black Legend would have it), was carried out in a 'light' format, with very limited military credibility.

6. Conclusions: The Long Game

Historical perspective requires the 'long game': a longer view. When the Chinese Statistical Bureau published the 'Major Figures in the 1982 Population Census' its leaders knew how to read these results, and followed the policy changes they had already started.⁴⁴ Needless to say, there was no shortage of warnings in Europe (from all sides) of the impending demographic crises, with the obvious consequences in terms of the pension systems, and in terms of social and economic costs. The consequences for Eastern European populations were especially severe.⁴⁵ As it happens, the 'populist' wave came to Poland and Hungary in the wake of the second turn of the pension cycle since 1989. The recurring migration crises in Europe continued to be dealt with on the basis of the starry-eyed optimism of the 1990s. Eastern Europeans (who were already dealing with the severe impact of a brain drain and the loss of a qualified labour force), unsurprisingly, saw things differently.

In the West, the effects of demographic change came slightly later. As the US Bureau of Census pointed out in 2020, "[T]he first Baby Boomers reached 65 years old in 2011".⁴⁶ In 2019 Goodhart and Pradhan had already identified a series of factors which would lead to a Great Reversal:

The evolution of the real trends in the economy (continued real output growth co-existing with deflationary headwinds) has been caused by a combination of de-

mography and globalisation, leading to the largest ever upwards supply shock to the availability of labour (assisted by labour saving technology). The previously favourable demographic developments in the fastest growing areas in the world, e.g., East Asia and Europe, are currently and sharply reversing. As a result of the demographic changes of the past, the myriad of left-behind workers with dampened expectations are turning to nativist, populist politicians on the right [...] This is the Great Reversal.⁴⁷

All of this was taking place well before Covid-19 epidemic, and well before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Needless to say, many other social and political factors played a role in determining the current crises (or 'polycrisis', to use the fashionable term). But it is now clear that the Second Belle Époque is over.⁴⁸

There is a risk of stating that everything causes everything, and that, ultimately, everything is inevitable. The aim of this paper has been simply to point out that many explanations were at hand and were put forward (and unheeded) *at the time*.

So, what went wrong in terms of *the understanding* of the present? It is perhaps useful to remember that *historiā* is inquiry, examination, systematic observation; *narrative* is storytelling. Historical understanding requires the 'long game'.

Guido Franzinetti

*Department of Humanistic Studies
University of Eastern Piedmont
Vercelli, Italy
Email: guido.franzinetti@gmail.com*

Notes

- 1 Putin 2005.
- 2 Hobsbawm 1994, 405.
- 3 Rhodes 2018, 275.
- 4 Rhodes 2018, xvi-xvii.
- 5 Rhodes 2018, 110.
- 6 Garton Ash 2001, xix.
- 7 For a more exhaustive discussion of this methodological issue, see Forneris 2022.
- 8 Philby 2003, 200.
- 9 Joll 1968.
- 10 Gellner 1983, 129
- 11 Schumpeter 1942, 61
- 12 Kelley 1973; Kneissel and others 1974
- 13 Gellner 1976
- 14 Gellner 1979, 65
- 15 Brzezinski 1968, 1970.
- 16 Brzezinski 1988a, 12; 1988b, 69.
- 17 Franzinetti 2015, 841.
- 18 Alter 1989, 131.
- 19 Smith 2020.
- 20 Bockman 2011, 218.
- 21 Kochanowicz 2014.
- 22 Sarotte 2014
- 23 Fukuyama 1989; Anderson 1992
- 24 Krauthammer 1990, 2002.
- 25 Connor 1977, 343-344, 346.
- 26 Kołakowski 1971a, 1971b, 1971c.
- 27 Bauer 1978.
- 28 Staniszkis 1979.
- 29 Kis 1983, 1989.
- 30 Mlynař 1980.
- 31 Gorbachev and Mlynař 2002.
- 32 Franzinetti 2011.
- 33 Kramer in Dimitrov 2013, 304.
- 34 Anderson 2010.
- 35 Li 2022.
- 36 Sun and Zhang 2020, 24.
- 37 Vajda 2023.
- 38 Franzinetti 2014.
- 39 Murphy 2006, 3-4.
- 40 Friedman 2005.
- 41 E.g., Rodrik 1997
- 42 Franzinetti 2015.
- 43 Angell 1911.

- 44 Laslett 1984.
- 45 Melegh 2023.
- 46 Franzinetti 2021, 230.
- 47 Goodhart and Pradhan 2020, 206-207.
- 48 Franzinetti 2021.

References

- Alter, Peter. *Nationalism*. London: Edward Arnold, 1989.
- Amalrik, Andrei. "Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?", *Survey*, no. 73 (1969): 47–79.
- Anderson, Perry. *A Zone of Engagement*. London: Verso, 1992.
- Anderson, Perry. "Two revolutions". *New Left Review*, no. 61 (2010), 59–96.
- Angell, Norman. *The great illusion; a study of the relation of military power in nations to their economic and social advantage*. New York-London: Putnam, 1911.
- Bauer, Tamás. "Investment Cycles in Planned Economies", *Acta Oeconomica*, vo. 21 (1-2) (1978), 243–60.
- Bockman, Johanna. *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "America in the Technetronic Age", *Encounter*, January 1968, 16–26
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*. New York: Viking, 1970.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "From Eastern Europe to Central Europe" [London, 19 January 1988], *A Year in the Life of Glasnost. The Hugh Seton-Watson Memorial Lecture and Other Essays*. London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1988.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "Special Address" [to 'East-West Relations and Eastern Europe: An American-Soviet Dialogue' (Alexandria, Virginia. 6-8 July 1988)], *Problems of Communism*, May-August (1988), 67–70.
- Connor, Walter D. *Socialism, Politics, and Equality: Hierarchy and Change in Eastern Europe and the USSR*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.
- Dimitrov, Martin K., ed., *Why Communism Did Not Collapse. Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Forneris, Elias P. "Raymond Aron's War: A 'History of the Present' (1940-1944)", *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville* 43, no 2. (2022), 7–38. <https://doi.org/10.3138/ttr.43.2.7>
- Franzinetti, Guido. *La crisi rivoluzionaria albanese del 1991-92*. in: *Dopo la pioggia. Gli Stati della ex Jugoslavia e l'Albania (1991-2011)*, edited by Antonio D'Alessandri and Armando Pitassio, 119–134. Lecce: Argo, 2011.
- Franzinetti, Guido. "The Moral Economy of Post-Communism", *Fenomenologia e società* 37, no. 2 (2014).
- Franzinetti, Guido. "The Strange Death of Area Studies and the Normative Turn", *Quaderni storici* 50, no. 3 (2015): 835–847.
- Franzinetti, Guido. "The End of the Belle Époque. The present as history." *Quaderni storici* 56, no. 1 (2021): 229–237.
- Friedman, Thomas L. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.
- Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.
- Garton Ash, Timothy. *The Present as History*. London: Allen Lane, 2000.
- Gellner, Ernest. "From the Revolution to Liberalization", *Government and Opposition*, 11, no. 3 (1976): 257–272.

- Gellner, Ernest. "Plaidoyer pour une Libéralisation Manquée", *Government and Opposition* 14, no. 1 (1979): 58–65.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- Goodhart, Charles and Manoj Pradhan. *The Great Demographic Reversal: Ageing Societies, Waning Inequality, and an Inflation Revival*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Gorbachev, Mikhail and Zdeněk Mlynař. *Conversations with Gorbachev. On perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the crossroads of socialism* [1995]. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, London: Michael Joseph, 1994.
- Joll, James. *Nineteen-fourteen: The Unspoken Assumptions. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered 25 April 1968*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1968.
- Kelley, Donald R. "The Soviet Debate on the Convergence of the American & Soviet Systems." *Polity* 6, no. 2 (1973): 174–196.
- Kis, János. "Quelques idées pour l'opposition hongroise". *Esprit* 74, no. 2 (1983) 46–59.
- Kis, János. *Politics in Hungary: for a democratic alternative*. Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1989.
- Kneissel, Jutta, Andreas Huyssen and Johanna Moore (1974). "The Convergence Theory: The Debate in the Federal Republic of Germany." *New German Critique* 1, no. 2 (1974): 16–27.
- Kochanowicz, Jacek. "Private Suffering, Public Benefit: Market Rhetoric in Poland, 1989–1993." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28, no. 1 (2014): 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325413489146>.
- Kołąkowski, Leszek. "Tezy o nadziei i beznadziejności." *Kultura*, no. 6 (1971a): 3–21.
- Kołąkowski, Leszek. "Hope and Hopelessness." *Survey* 17, no. 3 (1971b): 37–52.
- Kołąkowski, Leszek. "A pleading for revolution: a rejoinder to Z. Bauman." *European Journal of Sociology*, 12, no. 1 (1971c): 52–60
- Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs*, 70, no. 1 (1990): 23–33.
- Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment Revisited." *The National Interest*, No. 70 (2002): 5–18.
- Laslett, Peter. "Super-Performers" [Review of the Communiqué of the State Statistical Bureau of the People's Republic of China on major figures in the 1982 Population census], *London Review of Books*, 6, no. 5 (1984): 5–6.
- Li, Zhuran. "The CCP's Changing Understanding of the Soviet Union's Collapse", *The Diplomat* October 8 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-ccps-changing-understanding-of-the-soviet-unions-collapse/>.
- Melegh, Attila. *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe. A Global Historical Sociological Analysis*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
- Mlynař, Zdenek. *Nightfrost in Prague: The End of Humane Socialism* [1978]. New York: Karz, 1980-.
- Murphy, James. "Wrong Estimates", *Times Literary Supplement*. Friday, no. 5384 June 9 (2006): 3.
- Philby, Kim. *My silent War. The Autobiography of a Spy*. London: Arrow Books, 2003.
- Putin, V. I. "Russian President Putin Delivers State of the Nation Address" (April 25, 2005). <https://irp.fas.org/news/2005/04/putin042505.html>.

- Rhodes, Ben. *The World As It Is: Inside the Obama White House*. New York: Random House, 2018.
- Rodrik, Dani. *Has Globalization Gone Too Far?* Washington D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 1997.
- Sarotte, Marie E. *Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.
- Smith, Richard, ed., *Britain and the Revolutions in Eastern Europe, 1989* (Documents on British Policy Overseas, Series III, Volume XII). London: Routledge, 2020.
- Staniszki, Jadwiga. "On Some Contradictions of Socialist Society: The Case of Poland", *Soviet Studies*, 31, no. 2 (1979): 167–187.
- Sun, Feng and Wanfa Zhang. *Why Communist China isn't Collapsing. The CCP's battle for Survival and State-Society Dynamics in the Post-Reform Era*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020.
- Varga, Mihai. "All Roads to Market: The Soviet Union, China and the World bank's Narrative of Capitalism", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2 (November 2023). DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2023.2263180.