

Introduction

Brian Porter

"In 1989, the world as we then knew it came to an end," proclaimed the poster we designed to advertise a conference called "Communism's Negotiated Collapse: The Polish Round Table, Ten Years Later." This event was originally imagined as part of our "Copernicus Lecture" series, which is organized each year by the Polish Studies Program at the University of Michigan. It quickly grew into something much larger, thanks mainly to the millennial sentiment captured in that hyperbolic promotional sentence. If it was indeed true that the world had come to an end – and if that apocalypse had been centered in Poland – then we felt obliged to commemorate this moment with something appropriately grand. And grand it was: we ended up hosting twenty distinguished guests, including the president of Poland and many of the leading government and opposition figures from the 1980's and today. Most of the US-based scholars specializing on Poland came to the conference, with several participating directly as discussants. Our final banquet was attended by Senator Carl Levin, Governor John Engler, and other dignitaries. It certainly seemed to be an event of which we could be proud.

Nonetheless, with time I came to look more critically upon that sentence, "in 1989, the world as we then knew it came to an end." Few would question the drama or the importance of the months between the signing of the Round Table Accords in Poland (April 5) and the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania (December 25), and everyone seems to agree that November 9 (the opening of the Berlin Wall) belongs among the red-letter days on our calendar of commemorations. When the USSR finally collapsed two years later, the final verdict was in: as Francis Fukayama so famously put it, we had reached the "end of history." But had we? The liberal-democratic-capitalist hegemony imagined during the 1990's has proven to be, in many cases, only a thin veneer covering everything from "cowboy capitalism" (as East Europeans often call it) to religious fundamentalism. Perhaps, after all, the Hegelian *Geist* has not yet attained full realization of itself. It would seem that divergent world-views will continue to struggle with each other to define the spirit of the next age, as they did in the last one. And where there is struggle, there will always be the potential for violence.

There was virtually no violence in Poland in 1989—so they say. Negotiations between the communists and the opposition led to a peaceful transition from one social, economic, and political system to another. Never in history, many proclaimed, had the world seen such a fundamental transformation without fighting and bloodshed. But, as is so often the case, a closer look is less cheerful. After 1989, Eastern Europe experienced a dramatic increase in the abuse of women, in poverty, in homelessness, and in violent crime. The state has been stripped of much of its frightening power, but this has only revealed the many ways people can be exploited and oppressed in the “private” realm. Are people more “free” than they were a decade ago? In this case the standard scholarly hedge is the only possible answer: it depends on how you define “freedom,” and which people you are talking about. For the women who can no longer walk the streets safely, for the families evicted from their apartments, for the workers who have lost all hope of employment, our praise for the nonviolent transition of 1989 seems ironic. Such people have found little peace, and even less justice and prosperity, in the world that remained standing when the Berlin Wall fell.

It is easy to dismiss those who are dissatisfied with the new world order as nostalgic communists who fear the dynamism of opportunity and long for the security of mediocrity. Discounting the views of the dispossessed is made all the easier by the fact that most East Europeans feel generally satisfied with their new lives (though the majority gets smaller the further south and east one travels). But if it is our goal to study the processes and consequences of non-violent change—and the sponsor of this volume, the United States Institute for Peace, has mandated that we do just this—then we need to pay attention to those who are left behind when “negotiated radical change” sweeps over their country. The goal is not to debunk peaceful change, but to explore how the model of the “round table” has worked in specific historical circumstances, and to uncover the sometimes explosive tensions that are concealed—perhaps necessarily—when violence is averted. More fundamentally, we must consider the ways in which violence and non-violence are linked, and sometimes even mutually constitutive. We must approach 1989 not as celebrants, but as critical scholars.

And we must teach our students to do the same. The primary objective of this volume is pedagogical rather than polemical. Neither Michael Kennedy nor I have any clear recipes for how to enact peaceful systemic change, nor do any of those we invited to contribute essays to this collection. Instead, we all have questions to ask—sometimes tough questions with no easy answers. Hopefully, the materials provided below will help readers bring the Polish Round Table of 1989 into their classrooms, and help students use the fall of communism as an entry point to a vigorous discussion of the virtues and limitations of peaceful revolution. The starting point for all this, as suggested above, is the conference we organized in April 1999. Below you will find a few suggestive excerpts from our transcript of that event, along with information about how to obtain the complete text. To help you and your students better follow the

reminiscences and arguments of the Round Table participants, we have included a chronology of events and glossaries of names, institutions, and terminology. Finally, we present a collection of papers written by a group of scholars representing a wide range of disciplines and area specialties: history, sociology, anthropology, political science, and law; Poland, Armenia, South Africa, Hungary, and the US. These prominent academics were given the full transcript of our 1999 conference, and told to prepare an essay explaining the implications of the Polish Round Table in their own area of expertise. How, they were asked, might scholars in your field use the fall of communism more generally, and our conference transcript more specifically, in their own classes? We all met in February 2000, to present and discuss our papers, and what you have before you is the result of that conversation. There is no consensus, nor (given the diversity of this group) could we have expected there to be one. But there is, I think, a shared sense that the Polish Round Table is worth studying and worth teaching. Our modest hope is that we can assist you in doing so – not by offering you any ready-made “lessons” from 1989, but by suggesting some of the provocative questions that one might ask of the events, and of the participants’ memories of those events. In approaching the study of non-violent change from a number of divergent disciplinary and regional perspectives, we hope that some of the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of peaceful negotiation will emerge. Perhaps one might even heighten student understanding of how violence of many kinds can hide within the accomplishments of peacemakers.