

Mosaics of Change

New Preface 2012

How quickly time passes. In 1999, a group of scholars came together across disciplines and countries in Cracow, Poland to reflect on a decade of cultural changes. Our goal was to understand the multiple ways that the 1989 revolutions across Central and Eastern Europe had unleashed changes in the symbolic sphere. This book was the result of the fascinating research that these scholars had produced. Now, another 12-plus years has gone by. A little more than 2 years ago, the region commemorated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and ultimate collapse of the state-communist systems across the region.

As the cross-national cases included in this volume reflect, we included scholarship on the former members of the Soviet Union as well as those whose systems collapsed in 1989. This region has also passed through a recent anniversary.

December of 2011 marked the 20th since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As that date was marked in 2011, crowds of Russian protesters were taking to the streets in the first massive uprising since the system collapsed, protesting the absence of the level of change needed to declare their country unequivocally “open.”

Just as we document quite remarkable, and rapid, cultural changes in these countries—from technology to religion, collective memory to the arts—the 1989 revolutions have been called

“unfinished,” and sometimes even

“betrayed.” At this writing, such was precisely the charge that many Hungarians and European Union officials were lodging against the present Hungarian government as it tightened its grip on journalists’ rights.

In the ensuing decade-plus since this anthology was published, further changes in the symbolic realm could be mapped. All seven countries of the former Eastern Bloc, for example, are now members of the European Union, as well as three former republics of the USSR (the Baltic countries). Between the countries of the Schengen region, borders are virtually irrelevant. These changes are dramatically evident if one visits the region’s landscapes: Former border stations—among the ghostly remnants of a near-forgotten era—still stand, but are crumbling and hauntingly empty; the constant hum of daily traffic



T-shirt in Budapest, Hungary 2009

drives straight through those once dark and threatening stations as if they had never existed. Yet, a mere 20 years earlier, these had been among the most daunting of the region's inhabited structures.

Among the changes that have transpired since our intensely energetic 1999 conference is that the very organization that facilitated its existence, the Civic Education Project, is no longer in existence. The Project was formulated initially to provide social-science instructors for the region's higher-education institutions as they re-organized their approach to social sciences and other disciplines, such as library science. Since the time of our conference, the project's parent organization, the Open Society Institute (now Open Society Foundations) redirected its resources to support local scholars through its Academic Fellows Program, and expanded its support of scholarly initiatives across a widening geographic area. Among the reasons for this shift was the growing incorporation of Central and Eastern Europe into the European Union, which offered its own resources to support higher education.

Despite the "unfinished" adjective used to modify the term "revolution," the 2009 commemorations of the second decade since the epochal fall of the Berlin Wall did take on a particular "milestone" status. In part, this had to do with the year 20—roughly the space of a generation—as the younger age groups

were taking on the task of adopting the memory of the event, and even imbuing it with new meaning. And since this is a book about culture, it should be emphasized that the arts are playing a major role in the meaning of pre-1989, 1989, and post-1989. For example, in Budapest, Hungary, one artist organized a conceptual photography exhibit where she played with the era's Lenin, Marx, and Stalin statuary icons, juxtaposing them with pop-culture references. Among the more active civil-society organized events for the 20th anniversary were artistic, musical, and theatrical displays, ranging from documentary photography of everyday life under communism to street theater and choral performance. Across the region that was remembering 1989, the iconography of the Berlin Wall was very present, particularly the graffiti that was remembered from the west side of the wall. So was the memory of resistance, and the humor evoked through those acts of resistance, such as famous kiss between Brezhnev and Honecker.



Entrance to Museum of Communism, Prague, Czech Republic 2009

One of the significant cultural changes that this book addressed was collective memory, which was displaying its two sides. The first was the "forgetting" side. When the scholars came together in 1999 in Cracow, relics of pre-1989 had been making on a disappearing act. Certain icons, such as the Lenin lapel pin, were certainly becoming collectors' items, but with some exceptions, other visible reminders

headed for the rubbish bins—particularly in Central Europe. The act of collecting itself was a participant in this disappearing act. If you visit the John Lennon wall in Prague, Czech Republic today—a place that was known as a defiant gathering place for the youthful resistance before 1989—his image has been almost fully chipped away as visitors helped themselves to one free souvenir after another. The wall itself is still a tourist draw, and a famous backdrop for a photo op, as much of the resistant graffiti from that era is still present. It has been supplemented by the addition of new social causes graffitied into the remains.

Shifts in the region's ethnic landscapes were among the most characteristic cultural changes across the region. The rights of the Roma and of Jews, the recognition of minority languages, and the ethnic cleansing waves in the Balkans were among the many moods of these shifts. There has been a certain bipolarity to these developments. They include the construction of a major museum to Jewish history in Warsaw that will remember the Shoah, as well as efforts to integrate the Roma into society, educate them, and incorporate their rights into courts of human rights. On the other hand, we have also witnessed the revival of public expression of anti-Semitism and anti-Roma sentiment. Since similar trends are evident in the former “western” Europe, coupled with resistance to growing Muslim minorities, there is a sense in which the former East-West divide is becoming culturally extinct.

Also waning has been the power of Moscow. Russia's overwhelming political presence has, in the post-Cold War era, diminished, faded, and lost its more certain moorings, as it sought a new foothold in new global realignments. In response to this phenomenon, there are ambivalent feelings among some of the smaller countries regarding whether the break was good or evil, particularly if they had depended upon the Soviet Union as a market for their products. A sign of the diminution of power has been the creation of a new minority in countries of the former Soviet bloc where Russian language and culture had been imposed as hegemonic; now, Russians living in those countries have become new minority, and their language is a minority language. There is no question that a culture of authority remains in Moscow, as political leaders wield a level of control over decision-making and certain civil-society institutions such as journalism. Further, where many citizens of the region once feared the “Russian boot” militarily, today that intimidating power is likely to be felt through the control that Moscow wields through its command of rich oil resources. The country has enjoyed a certain ascendancy as an economic power, contributing the “R” to the acronym “BRIC” used to designate the new economic powerhouses that include Brazil, India, and China.

New fronts in cultures of gender roles and rights have been clearly forged. Our 1999 conference included a play performed by a company from Gdańsk, Poland which dealt with the sexual abuse of children. Conference participants across countries admitted that the subject was taboo in public discourse in their countries. The same could be said about domestic violence more generally at the time. This is one arena where we can document progress since that time. Services for and awareness of the problem of domestic violence have grown, as citizens in the region have organized and protested, and various foreign donors have helped to jump-start the initiatives. Feminist movements, and other gender-related movements such as the gay and lesbian rights movement, had had no room to grow in the limited civil-society spaces of the communist era. Thus, after 1989, there was fertile new terrain to cover, as well as the challenge of introducing a much-hesitant society to such ideas.

Do these developments in the arena of gender rights activism constitute western (cultural) colonization? The jury is out on this question, as opinions vary. Immediately after 1989, many western feminists hesitated to export, or “impose,” gender-rights agendas on the region for fear of this very critique. What they met, however, was an invitation from many women of the region who were looking to these experienced activists and scholars for support in order to jumpstart their own gender-based movements. They asked, “Your men came over to help our men in the revolutions. Why won’t you help us now?” I retold this story in a conference in 2010, following the presentation of two researchers who were studying the roles of women in Romania; the Romanian-American on the panel responded to my story by pointing to her Romanian collaborator and saying, “talk to her; she would be glad to be colonized.” Laughter ensued.

What happened to the cultures of protest that brought down those systems, the unprecedented social movements such as the Solidarity Movement that had enlisted one-fourth of the entire population of Poland? In interviews I have conducted in Poland, I learned that there had been a hesitation to commemorating and publicly remembering that era, for a variety of reasons. Although this was in the process of changing during the 2009 commemorations, many of the issues remained, including bitterness over some internal dynamics of the Solidarity party. The tragic plane crash in Smoleńsk, Russia that claimed the lives of 96 Poles, including the President and a number of Solidarity-era heroes and heroines, has both strained relations with Russia and exposed rifts between the Polish religiously devout and secularists. Further, trade-union cultures have also faded, as the region’s countries joined the global factory and marketplace. In late 2011 and early 2012, however, something was afoot among the younger generation that would not have remembered the communist era. Caught up in the waves of protest that were sweeping the Middle East in the so-called “Arab Spring,” young people were taking to the streets in their “Guy Fawkes” masks in an attempt to protect internet freedom: another arena that we could cite as representing near-revolutionary cultural change since 1989.

Re-reading this book more than a decade since its publication moves us into what we might label “second-order memory”: how do we assess those reflections that we made 10 years into the changes, after another 10 years has passed? What has changed further, and what has remained the same? Wandering the Charles Bridge in Prague during 2009, one would come across the Dixieland jazz refrains of the same band that we pictured in this book back in 2000. Cultural continuity is, clearly, another key element of the story. We invite more reflection, and we look forward to year 30.

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Magazine display in Gdansk, Poland 2009