

Why Globalise? 1989 in Eastern Europe and the Politics of History

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In this three-part interview, conducted, transcribed and edited by Zoltán Ginelli, history professor James Mark talks about his latest book

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James Mark is a British Professor of History at the University of Exeter. His research focuses on the history and memory politics of state-socialism in East Central Europe from the perspective of broader global histories, transnational processes and comparative methods. In 2019, James finished leading two 5-year international research projects: [1989 After 1989: Rethinking the Fall of State Socialism in Global Perspective](#) and [Socialism Goes Global: Cold War Connections Between the 'Second' and 'Third Worlds'](#). The two projects focused on how to reinterpret state-socialism, the Cold War, the 1989-91 system changes and the postsocialist period in Eastern European history as part of global processes and in the histories of colonialism and anti-colonialism. The titles of the two projects came from two published articles. In 2019, these projects published several books, such as [1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe](#), and [Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World](#), but three further volumes are in also production, one of them entitled *Historicizing Whiteness in Eastern Europe*. Readers might also be interested in the exhibition [Tito in Africa: Picturing Solidarity](#) organised as part of the second project and bearing an exhibition book ([The Wende Museum](#), [Pitt Rivers Museum](#), [Museum of Yugoslavia](#)). The exhibition presents the African round-trips of Yugoslavian president Tito in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of the development of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Third World.

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PART I - Socialist globalisation and 1989

ZG: As mentioned in the introduction, the 1989 After 1989 and the Socialism Goes Global projects focused on reinterpreting the Eastern European histories of state-socialism, the Cold War, and the 1989-91 system changes from a global historical perspective and as part of the histories of colonialism and anti-colonialism. Could you introduce us to these projects, their main concepts and aims, and the specific contexts they emerged from?

JM: Well, I guess the first thing to say is that this is not only an Eastern European issue. There is a broader issue of how we write European histories, and over the last decade more and more

historians have called for the decentring of Europe and the writing of European history through decolonial and postcolonial approaches. And we've started to get such works now over the last fifteen years, which, whilst recognising the immense role of Europe in global history, do not use that as an excuse to write histories of the continent ignoring how its identities and institutions have also been shaped from the outside. Particularly, the impact of empire and its end has been a fruitful way of rethinking European history 'at home'. How genocide in Europe was conditioned by the European exercise of colonial violence in Africa, how the European Union is shaped through decolonisation and an engagement with Africa, [1] or how neoliberal Europe is a product of a counter-revolution against the threat of decolonisations according to Gurminder Bhambra. [2] You can also think of Elizabeth Buettner's work on postcolonial migration and the reshaping of European cultures, [3] or the recent work of Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch on the unresolved legacies of the British Empire in Brexit. [4]

Scholars of Eastern Europe have been slower off the mark, but excellent work has been done recently. I think this is partly the result of the increasing critique of the idea of "transition" as an inevitable, relentless and endless convergence towards Western liberal capitalism, which has come under serious critique most powerfully from the populist right, but also from the left. But of course quite self-contained national and regional histories still dominate.

As the region is looking to new, hybrid relationships across the world with new forms of global integration and geopolitical positioning, this is an urging political moment to rethink Eastern European history in global context. We need to reconsider Eastern Europe's place as part of the broader histories of global capitalism. This means examining the collapse of state socialism not through the heroic stories of national liberation in 1989, but rather as part of a new cycle in capitalist globalisation that already began in the early 1970s.

You can also see this new approach bubbling up from a young generation of scholars, particularly from the left, who are interested in critiquing colonial and anti-colonial aspects of their region's history, and thinking about what is at stake in globalising or not globalising regional histories. [5] We saw this issue very powerfully during the Syrian 'refugee' or 'migrant' crisis (of course how you describe it tells a lot about your position), in which populist governments of the right, but also of the left, said that Eastern Europe is different, because it has no colonial history, no relationship to European colonialism, and hence no 'white guilt' which underpinned the West's compulsion to take migrants.

You saw in that moment the politicisation of Eastern European history: was it just purely a set of national stories, was it contained in a very bounded idea of European history, somehow both of the West but also separate from it when suitable? Or could this history be critiqued by throwing it open to a much broader conception of Eastern Europe's place in the world, in a more complex relationship to European colonialism and anti-colonialism?

ZG: Your projects are part of this new wave of now vast literature in global history emerging in the past 10-15 years. In universities there are more and more student programs in global history, a field becoming increasingly popular and receiving growing attention. Why do you think this type of research is important in understanding today's problems, new geopolitical contestations in Europe in general and Eastern Europe specifically? Were there some common or mainstream understandings you wished to contest?

JM: Well, there are many examples, but to take one from our book, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*, we wanted to question something that was really embedded in most of the

literature from 1989 onwards: this notion of Eastern Europe as an eternally Westernising region, the history of which could be written almost entirely within European frames. In the wake of 1989, this idea of a “return to Europe” also shaped the way in which the region’s history was written – the region’s central role in Norman Davies’ *Europe A History* being a high point. Scholars in the 1960s and 1970s had been much more concerned to write the region into global dynamics, often through a Marxist lens, but the region’s gradual Europeanisation also meant the deglobalisation of research and historiography. But we wanted to explore the wider dynamics of the region’s geopolitical and cultural positioning, particularly given the way in which populist elites have questioned the region’s orientation to western liberalism.

Eastern Europe has always been enmeshed in much broader processes under the pressures of global capitalism. It has attempted to resist or accommodate itself as a periphery or semiperiphery. We were interested in questions raised in Eastern European history about how to avoid economic peripheralisation and becoming a hinterland? Can an alternative system or alternative set of relationships challenge the West? Or is an accommodation with the white, capitalist West inevitable to the economic and political development of the region?

However, this was not only a question of politics and economics. We also wanted to show how ideas of race and culture were shaped in global terms. Only by taking such wider approaches could we see the vast number of different projects over the 20th and 21st centuries that related the region to the global in strikingly different ways. We conceptualised Eastern Europe as a “swing region” that is often marked by a sense of in-betweenness, sometimes looking to the West, but sometimes elsewhere, and sometimes a combination of the two.

ZG: It is very popular to frame the system changes between 1989 and 1991 in the process of globalisation, of becoming part of “the free world”, and in the neoliberal narrative of market transition. How can you contest these dominant narratives of 1989, and how does your research reinterpret 1989 as a particular moment in global history?

JM: I think the most powerful, dominant image in the West of 1989 is the one of Germans surmounting and destroying the Berlin Wall.

ZG: Yes, which just had its 30th anniversary on 9th November.

JM: We saw it recently, once again, but these images get replayed year upon year. However, they’re not the most popular ones in Eastern Europe itself, where the 1989 moment is much more contested, but in the West – in North America and Western Europe – the Wall’s fall provides the dominant image, and was the main one presented in the Western press at the thirtieth anniversary last year. Why is this image so popular? Of course the Berlin Wall had been a defining image of the Cold War long before 1989, but its continuing popularity lies in the fact that it underpins a set of mythological stories about 1989. First, that this was a completely isolated world, hidden behind walls and barbed wire, but had no relationship to globalisation and insofar it tried to cope with new forms of globalisation, these attempts always failed. Second, it shows the heroic Eastern Europeans desiring freedom and to be like Westerners – “they want to be like us”. This is an image that underpins the ideology of transition: an eternal desire for Western liberalism. But it also hides another truth: that these changes were very often elite transitions that feared excessive popular participation.

This was the dominant script we wanted to challenge by showing that 1989 is not the moment of globalisation, but a moment of choice between different forms of globalisation, and that communist states had always been global, although often in ways quite different from forms of Western liberal globalisation.

From the late 1950s, with the end of Stalinisation and the acceleration of decolonisation, states started to open up and look for relationships with the Third World, but also look to repair relationships with Western Europe as well from the early 1970s. Geographical mobility for ordinary citizens was limited, but definitely not impossible: for example, over a million Poles travelled westwards every year as tourists from the early 1970s. And in the context of the slow pace of accession talks to the EU for large swathes of the Balkans over the last two decades, there is now nostalgia for the mobility that was provided by the Yugoslav 'red passport' from the early 1960s. So the relationship of the socialist world to globalisation is much more complex than dominant media images would suggest.

We also wanted to understand how in the long-term one form of globalisation replaced another, and a very important point for us was to 'decentre' 1989. Yes, of course, it's an immensely important breakthrough moment – although this was still not entirely sure in 1989 and other outcomes were also possible – since that year saw the fall of one-party systems and the final confirmation that the region will orientate itself towards a Western-led form of globalisation. But we saw that this process had been going on for a long time. From the 1970s onwards, multiple processes indicate this, like what Per Högselius called "the hidden integration to Europe" in terms of energy supply and new joint ventures, or the new financialised globalisation based around debt that oriented the region westwards, and so on. [6] Some countries were more open and affected than others, particularly the Western-most states within the Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia, whilst the Soviet Union remained relatively more closed. Bloc states had been more comfortable with a post-colonial globalisation in the 1950s and 1960s that had focussed on trade and bilateral developmental exchange, since the region had traditions and expertise it could draw on. But afterwards their specialists found it more difficult to control the new financialised globalisation that moved the control of the world economy to the World Bank and IMF, which came under increasing control of the West in the 1980s.

Another important thing we wanted to look at was the broader role of Eastern Europeans in creating and appropriating many of the central ideas of the late twentieth century, such as neoliberal economics, liberal democratisation, the re-establishment of bordered civilisational units, and the 'return to Europe'. These were not only part of oppositional discourses, but also shared by many reform communists, in fact the boundaries between the two groups are quite difficult to draw. These groups were not simply recipients of Western advice, since they often actively co-produced these ideas, and they weren't always looking westwards. Their experience of some form of globalisation after the collapse of Western European empires and the global relationships in the moments of mid-century high decolonisation – from Latin America, Africa and the Far East – placed them in networks through which they could look for other models of transformation, too.

Some of these models proved to be very attractive in the 1980s. For example, emerging groups of economists in Poland were very attracted by the neoliberal reform in Chile, and wondered whether Poland's leader, Jaruzelski, might become their own General Pinochet. Neoliberal reforms could then be implemented, opening up the economy to the world market but retaining the one-party state, as in the "Chinese solution". [7] It is indeed interesting that some Western observers also thought this most likely to happen. In 1982, for example, discussions at the IMF, which we explore in the book 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe*, show how Western investors and banks in Poland saw opportunities in the establishment of Martial Law in Poland. On the one hand, it was a tragedy that violence was being enacted on Polish citizens; on the other, however, they didn't like Solidarność (Solidarity) very much with what they thought were its very lofty and impractical ideas of workers' democracy, and they thought that communism at an heightened authoritarian form under Martial Law might be just the ticket for bringing about a neoliberal order in Poland. The broader story of neoliberalism's ambivalent relationship with democracy is explored well beyond Eastern Europe – Quinn Slobodian's *Globalists* being a recent excellent example. [8]

So there were all these sorts of very interesting hybrid relationships emerging in the 1970s and the 1980s, some of which were between the West and the East, but sometimes experts looked to the South or the East for inspiration. But the response to the political, social, and moral crises of late communist societies in Eastern Europe could have gone in a whole variety of directions. We can see this much more clearly if we look globally, and not restrict ourselves to bounded, national, country-based stories.

ZG: So there was this globalising socialist world, but later there evolved this big meta-narrative of globalisation as a Western-led project, which many essentialise or naturalise as simply being a result of technological development or the triumph of “the free world” and opening up economies to capitalism. However, recently we could see these new geopolitical shifts contesting U.S. postwar global hegemony, like the rise of China, or South and Southeast Asian states like India, or Sub-Saharan Africa creating new fields for hegemonic interest. There’s also the current political turmoil in Latin America, and the still important - and probably underestimated - geopolitical agency of Russia. All these cases give us a good sense of how global roles can change relatively rapidly in global history, and together with this the concept of globalisation has always been contested.

How does your understanding of the global history of socialism contribute to a history of diverging and competing globalisations? You argue that West-led globalisation has been contested throughout history, but what does your concept of “socialist globalisation” actually mean and why was it different from Western globalisation?

JM: First of all, “globalisation” is anachronistic:: the term does get used in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, but very infrequently, and is meant simply as a set of rules around which a global system works. Globalisation only becomes a powerful mainstream term in the early 1990s, when it comes to mean a capitalist-led, financialised, neoliberal form of globalisation. However, I think it is useful to use the term simply because it is dominant in the literature, so if one wants to engage with it, then one has to link to it – even if only to say there are multiple forms of globalisation. For this reason, we decided to use it for our [Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World](#) volume. The Francophone literature uses the term *mondialisation*, which is in some ways preferable, as it allows for the possibility of multiple ways of ‘world making’, and hence helps us to critique our own very recent ‘globalisation’ variant.

The high point of socialist globalisation, or *mondialisation*, begins from the late 1950s, because as European empires collapse, opportunities open out to reshape the world economy. Particular institutions, like the UNCTAD at the United Nations take on that role by trying to create new forms of free trade after empire that can be used to break former imperial trade monopolies, and to encourage previously marginalised countries to work regionally in order to take on a world still marked by big imperial players. But figures such as Raul Prebisch, who led the campaigns for such progressive transformations, were often critical of Eastern European communists for their excessive bilateralism, refusal to work together as a region, and insufficient commitment when it didn’t suit them, particularly when opportunities presented themselves in the West. In this sense, we talk of an ‘in-between’ region.

These ideas of free trade and remaking the world economy were very much pushed by socialist or non-capitalist actors. The 1960s was also a high point in a particular socialist conception of rights – collective rights, rights for economic justice after colonialism, the right to racial equality – which were addressed by international organisations, and were sometimes mediated through relationships between Eastern European socialist states, and those in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

These alternative forms of linkage weakened from the mid-1970s as the postcolonial project entered a moment of crisis, but in many ways continued into the post-Cold War period. Susan Bayly has coined a very useful phrase, the *socialist ecumene*, to describe the still existing socialist values in trade between socialist or former socialist states. [9] There are many other such legacies we could mention. In Eastern Europe these are stripped of socialist content, but even new right-wing populists in the 2010s drew on these earlier socialist era linkages as they searched for alternatives to complement their involvement in the European (EU) project.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a very powerful form of West-led globalisation emerges as a reaction to the challenge from a progressive world of decolonising states, and their seemingly excessive claims – at least as they are seen from Washington to London – to have the right to reshape the global economy. This challenge takes its most powerful expression in the call for a so-called New International Economic Order from the mid-1970s. [10] This alternative form of globalisation is deemed a threat and shapes Western responses and desires – particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands – the global order needed to be remade, non-Western claims on the global system side-lined, and socialist attempts to reshape the global delegitimised. This was the point where many Eastern European communist elites and experts – with the notable exception of Romania and Yugoslavia – began to turn away from the radical demands of the ‘Third Worldist’ economic project. It was also the moment when African and Asian states committed to this project of global redistribution began to refer to the ‘Global North’ and firmly place Eastern Europe in it, now less and less distinguishable from the rest of the white industrial capitalist Europe and North America.

But we shouldn’t understand this global struggle as an inevitable decline of the links that had held together broader visions of an anti-colonial world or socialist camp. If you just look at the Eastern European story through the 1970s and 1980s, the relationships between the region and socialist and progressive states across the world continued to develop. Nevertheless, this happened under very different ideological conditions, and much of their socialist content had eroded.

1989 can also be seen as a moment of deglobalisation, because many of these global relationships of Eastern Europe that had been developing up until the 1980s were shut down.

Let’s take the example of the GDR and Vietnam. One of the biggest exports from Vietnam is now coffee, an industry set up by the massive help of GDR in the 1980s. These relationships are then severed in 1989, but as in this case, have very powerful legacies in the present. Some connections continued after 1989: Czechoslovak, Serbian as well as many Russian producers of ordnance continued to export successfully, both to former partners in Africa and to the Middle East.

ZG: In your interpretation, 1989 in Eastern Europe is not just a particular moment in a linear history of democratisation and capitalist development, of becoming free from the Soviet Union, but also a reaction to a crisis in global realignments both in the West and the East, as a result of interactions between different visions of globalisation. If we look at 1989 from this perspective, we may recognise the “hidden integration” of socialist states - definitely not as isolated as the anti-communist legacy of 1989 suggests, but already beginning to be integrated globally.

Neoliberalism was an important concept in the process of “transition”, it was what “had to come” after 1989. As the story is commonly told, amidst the Cold War antagonism between socialism and capitalism, and the mythological battle between the centralised-planning state and the free market, 1989 signalled the triumph of neoliberalism which represented the power of the “free” market economy and liberal democracy – with a much smaller state. We know from various scholars that

this reading is far from true, in fact highly ideological and very misleading, since the historical relationship between neoliberalism and state socialism was much more complicated.

In this regard, the focus on neoliberalism in global history is interesting if we want to elucidate the continuities of knowledge, experts or elites and interests in the Eastern European “transition”. How can this global socialist history help us understand neoliberalism as it emerged? Can we reconceptualise this “transition” period not simply as a Western-led development, as Fukuyama’s “the end of history” or the failure of socialism, but as a neoliberal project influenced globally by various, often non-Western and non-European sources?

JM: The history of neoliberalism is not just an Anglo-American or Global North story. There are multiple origin points of neoliberalism: we know the story of Singapore, of Chile, South Africa, and so on. Scholars, such as Artemy Kalinovsky, argue that neoliberalism also comes out of the crisis of socialist societies and centralised developmentalism in the late Cold War. [11] Eastern Europe was part of this global story. Scholars like Johanna Bockman, or recently Ádám Fábry, have argued that some of the basic tenets of neoliberalism were shared between Eastern Europe and the West as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s. [12] And, as I mentioned before, experts in the region was not only looking westwards in the late Cold War, but many were attracted to ideas, later to be called neoliberal, coming from Latin America and East Asia already in the 1980s. The ideas of markets and market discipline, efficiency, and remoulding the economic subject were not things that were alien to socialist systems. Certainly in some countries, Hungary and Poland being ones where market mechanisms were more developed, there was already a body of knowledge that enabled them to jump very quickly from ideas of the socialist market to a capitalist market when 1989 came along. It actually wasn’t a very big leap for many Eastern European economists. And as Phillip Ther has argued, the acceleration of neoliberalism in the ‘Eastern European laboratory’ of the 1990s boomeranged back on Western Europe, most notably Germany, and accelerated the development of low wage sectors there. [13]

Market liberalism was a compelling ideology because it had the power to break the nomenklatura. For many opponents of communism in 1989, the central question was how to get rid of the large overbearing state. At the final point, groups with very divergent positions allied against state socialism. For example, in Poland, Solidarność contained a spectrum of beliefs, and a very dominant one was fighting for workers, but there were the emergent groups of Gdańsk and Kraków neoliberals had a very different view of the economy. Nevertheless in 1989 they came together because both of them saw this as a moment to crush the nomenklatura. There remained some economists who advocated resisting an uncritical integration into the European Union and western capitalism, fearing that economic decisions were being transferred to an undemocratic transnational level, and that Eastern Europe would be kept as peripheral, low-value locations in the newly emerging ‘global factory’. But they had less and less influence.

The great difference between 1989 and 2019 is that today there is a desire for a big state again: the state is no longer something to be feared, but is rather something which gives protection from the supposedly nefarious forces of globalism – whether these are constructed as inequality, gender ideology, multiculturalism, or climate change.

The big state can again protect us by strengthening the national community or providing cradle to grave welfare.

But why was there so little resistance to neoliberalism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s? Apart from individual strikes or protests, resistance was generally very low, especially in comparison to Latin America or Africa – given the similar strictures that the IMF or the World Bank brought there. And also in comparison with labour unrest was rampant across Eastern Europe in the 1980s. it is

important that that local elites had already been preparing these ideas: the project of Michal Kopecek and Vita Sommer in Prague has explored how late socialist societies were individualised and 'prepared' for neoliberalism in advance. High expectations of a Western-style consumerism – an aspiration that had been stoked for the last three decades of the communist era – gave many a firm faith in, and initial patience with, the capitalist transition.

But it was also a civilizational questions: neoliberalism was not only seen as an economic cure, but as a way of rejoining the West as well.

ZG: If 1989 was elite-driven and transnational networks complicate the story, this picture shows us that ideas of development trajectories or reformisms, broadly from the 1960s, also came from elsewhere.. Socialist states were not that isolated and they actually had a relative degree of autonomy to manoeuvre, and they developed their own models of globalising or integrating into the world economy.

JM: The question of escaping peripherality or relative backwardness to Western Europe has been a very powerful theme throughout modern Eastern European history, and the moment that catching up to the West meant greater Western integration –rather than searching for alternatives –was an immensely important turning point.

The debates of the early Cold War had been influenced by the region's experience of poverty and hunger of the interwar period: how had much of Eastern Europe become an agricultural hinterland of the West? Could it escape that fate by shutting off from Western economies and pursuing autarchic national development strategies? These were also influenced by Latin America – which had itself been earlier influenced by Eastern European economists – as work by Joseph Love and Manuela Boatcă has explored. [14] In the 1960s, this road of autarkic shutting off from the West gets criticised, it is eventually seen as a dead end, and reformist elites from the 1970s learn not to fear the West. It's a very slow, gradual, incremental, often contested process.

For Eastern Europe, it is about how to integrate into the world economy and create successful export industries to achieve a higher degree of development. From the 1970s on, the Soviet Union allowed greater flexibility to their Eastern European client states partly because Moscow became increasingly frustrated that despite being at the centre of the socialist system, their country was seemingly confined to being the primary producers of raw materials and energy for more technologically advanced states on the western edges of the Bloc. The Soviets did not prevent the bloc countries forging new relationships in the Middle East to get oil, to trade with the West, and in the early 1980s for Poland (1986) and Hungary (1982), to join the IMF. [15]

An interesting feature of the 1980s was how Eastern European experts strengthened their belief that through Westernisation catch up is possible. Polish geographers, for example, were very much in the forefront of this; Tomasz Zarycki did research on how an idea of European regions, no longer marked by strict hierarchies and East-West civilisational slopes, would be possible in a newly imagined Europe even before 1989. [16] This was part of a wider process of reimagining why Eastern Europe won't be reconstituted as a hinterland if it gives up its separateness and integrates into the West.

PART II - 1989's "dirty little secrets": Debt, migration, and race in global (post)colonialism

ZG: In our previous discussion, we talked about the way in which a global historical perspective can help critique the dominant Western narrative of the system changes in

1989. Let's now turn to how this socialist globalisation developed in the competition of different forms of globalisation.

In your chapter with Yakov Feygin in the *Alternative Globalizations* book, you write that the socialist world was a great rival of Western globalisation, and there were powerful attempts to construct an alternative global economic system, but due to the process of West-led financialisation as a result of the oil crisis, the socialists couldn't win in the end. [17]

JM: Eastern Bloc elites really struggle from the 1970s on, because they don't have expertise in this area. The Bloc could play a global role in the 1960s, because that era was all about development economics and supporting various national revolutions or national developments, in which their regional elites had expertise dating back to the interwar and before. But new forms of financialisation, and technological revolutions, prove very difficult for them. Their systems struggle with the massive technological changes in transportation, microchips and miniaturisation – as new work from Peter Svik and Viktor Petrov is exploring. [18]

But in terms of these new forms of financialisation and indebtedness in the late 1970s, Eastern European experts at world economy institutes from Budapest to Moscow don't really know how to respond. They reflect on having lost control, on not having the sufficient expertise to really control how this new financialised world economy and its capital flows work. In the end, in order to deal with debt, Poland and Hungary have to join the IMF, and through this their reform elite is further educated into a capitalist form of globalisation in the 1980s.

ZG: This wave of financialisation had a huge impact on the global relations of indebtedness, and thus you also deal in your projects with the global history of indebtedness connected to Eastern Europe. How did global relations of indebtedness condition socialist globalisation and the journey towards 1989?

JM: Debt was a very important factor in undermining a form of socialist globalisation and integration, and providing a re-education for reform elites in late socialism towards the norms of contemporary global capitalism.

The story is well known that states became indebted in order to modernise industries that were supposed to have the potential to create export industries producing high-quality goods. [19] Eastern European states – not all – borrowed cheap petrodollars following the oil crisis in the early 1970s, and they became increasingly indebted already by the late 1970s. The sudden rise of interest rates in the early 1980s – the so-called Volcker shock – hits them hard, and the hope for rises in productivity in their factories never materialises, so they can't pay the loans back.

But what is less known is how this Eastern European debt crisis intersects with global crises. There are parallel debt crises going on at this particular moment, not only in Eastern Europe, but also in Africa and in Latin America, and these interact with each other.

So this is not simply an Eastern European story. Many Eastern European states are owed money by African states. Huge amounts had been loaned as part of solidarity projects from the late 1950s.

With the crisis, the question of whom they were going to pay suddenly became an important one. African, Latin American and Eastern European states want to pay back Western banks and financial institutions through the so-called 'Paris Club' first, because they need to stay in their good books in order to continue receiving loans, to roll them over, and to keep themselves solvent. In turn, they became much less interested in paying each other back and they all start looking to the West, and

this starts to undermine what is left of the values of solidarity that brought non-Western countries together. As hard currency repayment to the West became the order of the day, non-Western states either looked to what hard currency they can get from each other, or they engage in barter relationships in order to cling on to what hard currency they have to pay back the West.

Another consequence was that they start to treat migrant workers in Eastern Europe in very different ways. Vietnamese, Mozambicans, and Cubans who initially came to Eastern Europe – from the early 1970s – were often part of training programs. The sending countries were often exporting unemployment, but they also wanted these people to have a good quality technical education, so they could return as useful assets into the service of their local liberation struggles or revolutionary projects. But by the 1980s, under the pressures of indebtedness, these workers were increasingly seen as economic units to service loans, and started working in export industries in order to provide hard currency. As Alena Alamgir and Christina Schwenkel explore in our *Alternative Globalisations* book, they became unofficially reconceptualised as economic migrants, to service the needs of struggling, indebted Eastern European economies – rather than as comrades to be trained in the service of a wider socialist global project.

This 1980s shift in indebtedness is important in explaining how previous migrants start to become othered, resented, seen as part of an alien socialist internationalist world, how they simply become economic migrants, people who shouldn't be here in Eastern Europe.

And they are treated less well, they don't have to be paid so much, they have fewer welfare benefits than citizens of Eastern Europe, and indeed often receive less than other migrant workers from white Eastern European countries who work alongside them. In 1989, many of these workers were forced to leave across the region. [\[20\]](#)

ZG: The history of 1989 is dominated by narratives that give primary agency to the West, while what is also perhaps important in this global history is that different regions or countries had different roles in these global processes. Recent literature has shown why the Third World is important in understanding Eastern European relations towards the West, because it emerges as a sort of intermediary space, sometimes a place of exchange, or a place of testing ideas or theories, or a source of originating ideas, which then come back to reshape European contexts.

Is there a special role of Eastern Europe in this global history, and why is the role of the Global South or the Third World important?

JM: Our projects focused on Eastern Europe in a global context and on the many ways in which the region's relationship with Latin America, Asia and Africa needed to be integrated into its histories. In the years after WWII, particularly in the 1950s with the acceleration of decolonisation and the breakup of Western European Empires, the relationship deepens between the countries of the rapidly expanding 'socialist camp', with similar statist developmental projects or linked by a common anti-colonial sensibility. Our volume *Alternatives Globalisations* explores economic, cultural, social, and intellectual aspects of this encounter.

Eastern European communist elites saw their region as part of this broader postcolonial world.

Many Eastern European countries had themselves been born out of empires only a generation previously, and then had only just thrown off their recolonisation by Nazi Germany. Many saw the presence of the Red Army as a further colonisation of the region: in 1956, in the wake of the invasion

of Hungary, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden noted that the Soviets had become the most successful colonisers of the postwar period in terms of the expansion of territorial control and the sheer number and extent of its 'subject peoples'. But for the new Communist rulers, Eastern Europe was again seen as a group of fragile states that need to be defended from Western imperialism. For example, when the Polish Communists sought alliances to defend their Western borders, which were not recognised by Western Germany until the early 1970s, they looked to the UN and many decolonising countries for support in their struggle for 'self-determination', because these countries understood the fragility of establishing new states. [21]

At the same time, Eastern European elites saw their countries as more developed – “slightly more developed developing country” as Yugoslav politicians put it – than these countries emerging from Western European Empires and wanted to offer economic support through developmental assistance and non-conditional loans. However, this was not only a communist-era story, but embedded in the longer history of Eastern European developmental economics.

Eastern Europe has been a foundational space of thinking about how to escape peripherality, and it was seen as such by the League of Nations, following its involvement in the post-WWI reconstruction of the region. It is no coincidence that many of the most influential postwar developmental economists originated from Central and Eastern Europe.

Often they became important through their careers in other countries, in Britain, the United Nations or other places, but nevertheless these models developed in conversation with questions of Eastern European peripherality and agrarian backwardness, and became of global relevance and got promoted in the UN after WWII. This was a world in which Eastern European experts felt comfortable, since they have globally useful expertise. We should note of course that these models were not only developed in Eastern Europe: Latin America's promotion of autarkic import substitution industrialisation is very important as well. The relationship between Eastern Europe and Latin America in the evolution of this developmental approach is also an interesting story – as we see in Joseph Love's *Crafting the Third World*. [22]

The relationships with the Third World were also important for internal legitimization. After the traumas of Stalinism, the idea that there is a rapidly expanding, progressive world beyond Europe was directed especially at a younger generation under state socialism. [23] Eastern European elites could play global roles at prestigious international bodies, and in this sense anti-colonialism enabled them to overcome restrictions on a desire for globality that Western European Empires had previously frustrated.

We might remember that some Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian elites in the interwar period had argued for colonies in the name of economic sovereignty and in order that they become 'proper', full white European nations. After WWI, these new states were regularly looked down upon in the West.

Poles were called 'kaffir' by Jan Smuts, and 'orientalised Irish' by Lord Robert Cecil; the former argued that Mandates should have been used in Eastern Europe in the place of what he called 'embryo and derelict states'. In a strange reversal, the collapse of empires in the 1950s then appeared to offer, perhaps for only two decades, another route to find this globality and thus seemingly become fully respected Europeans. This is one reason why this 'anti-colonial globality' could be so appealing.

But of course Eastern European elites, at different speeds in different countries, turned away from such anti-colonial internationalism across the 1970s and 1980s and sought to “return to Europe”.

Europeanisation in the late Cold War is not only a rediscovery of linkages in a continent severed by the Iron Curtain, but is also a process of othering, of getting rid of socialist internationalism, of distancing Eastern Europe from regions of colour, and from Islam. This is a “dirty secret” of 1989, which was also about the expulsion of colour and the restriction of others’ mobility.

The hopes for greater mobility for Eastern Europeans stood alongside the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of labour migrants from the Global South and of 300,000 Muslims from Bulgaria in that momentous year. Now that the Iron Curtain was no longer there to protect Western Europe, Eastern European countries quickly turned themselves into border guards in the 1990s, returning non-European migrants who had been heading westwards, as they performed their Europeanness for a European Union they wished to join. By 1994, UN Secretary General Boutros-Boutros Ghali could claim that the Iron Curtain had moved from Central Europe to the Mediterranean.

The “return to Europe” story has a very important side to it, which is very little addressed: it still remains a kind of heroic national story of liberation, and not one also embedded in a history of colonialism and postcolonialism.

ZG: 1989 is also indicative of the “postsocialist amnesia” of forgetting all these past relations, particularly with the Third World (or later called the Global South). The ruling, anti-communist narrative is that these relations were only about socialist internationalism as the ideological expansion of the socialist or communist world, through which anti-colonialism and anti-colonial solidarity also gets politically discredited. It is also interesting to look at what the political discrediting of the concept of the Third World as an emerging anti-colonial world, and its depoliticisation through the term Global South, meant for socialist Europe. The “return to Europe” was a process of not only returning to whiteness and the position of the ruling civilisation in the West and Europe, but also concealing all these previous interconnections through dismissive civilisational narratives and discrediting socialism as a global process. What do you think?

JM: But that amnesia is selective: ruling nativist, populist governments in the region have also re-discovered these links as they seek out a new in-betweeness that gives them bargaining power against what they consider the ‘new colonialists’ in the form of a liberal EU. China and Eastern European governments subtly refer back to their bonds under socialism as they build new economic links. But, from the point of view of scholarship, I think that there is a younger generation of scholars, especially from the left, who are seeking to overturn these processes of forgetting. Not that their new histories want to justify return to any kind of former state socialism, but rather they are critiquing exactly this amnesia, which is embedded in the types of history that Eastern European historians chose to pursue after 1989, which mainly focussed on nation and region.

These new approaches are interested in thinking about Eastern European histories as part of the global history of empires and their ends, or as a ‘semi-periphery’ in the global capitalist system. In this respect, 1989 may be understood as an interesting mixture of neocolonial and anti-colonial revolutions – if one wants to be provocative.

On the one hand it was anti-colonial, because for many oppositionists it was about removing the influence of the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe: independent nations’ struggle against Moscow. One of course should always note that many communists encouraged nationalism, especially in the last decades of the Cold War, which set the tone for dissidents to express or reinforce this idea of independent nations, so nationalism is not just a dissident discourse.

On the other hand, this new anti-colonial discourse also stripped off any sense of being connected to

other anti-colonial movements worldwide. In the 1980s, Noam Chomsky was very critical of Eastern European dissidence for only thinking of itself. Oppositional movements in the Eastern Bloc could of course support common anti-Soviet struggles, such as the fight of Afghans against Soviet occupation. Remember that the Polish Solidarność movement's stamps for their underground mail used images of the Mujahideen and those Polish fighters who went to Kabul. But that was the limit. Of course this is perfectly understandable, because the communists in Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Moscow all officially supported anti-Western anti-colonialism, so oppositionists wanted to define themselves against that world. Kim Christiaens explores in *Alternative Globalisations* why Poland's Solidarność movement could not ally with the anti-apartheid in the 1980s, partly because the Warsaw communists supported the anti-apartheid struggle, but also because there had been a large right-wing Polish emigration to South Africa, especially in the early 1980s, which had been funding them. Despite commonalities in trade union struggles against illegitimate power, Solidarność could not be seen as too supportive of anti-apartheid, since they would have risked losing an important source of funding. [24] There are lots of important stories like this, showing an anti-colonialism that had become de-globalised, and nationalised.

On the other hand, the African left in the late 1980s had another perception of Eastern Europe's transformation and responded differently to the fall of state socialism: they saw it as the reconstitution of a Northern, white, neocolonial world.

They had seen the benefits that Africa had accrued from the division of Europe. Progressive regimes had socialist supporters, and could play off the socialist East and the capitalist West against each other. They feared that with the fall of the Iron Curtain, they would be excluded. And in many ways they were right.

From the late 1980s foreign direct investment to Africa falls precipitously and gets diverted to Eastern Europe: it is perceived by investors as the safer bet, with a more educated workforce becoming available to Western companies, and a market with greater prospects that is now opening up. Long before critics of EU migrant policy started to use the term, it was Africans in the late 1980s who revived the concept of Fortress Europe – a term first used in the last years of WWII in the defence of Nazi Fortress Europe, *Festung Europa* – to protest their coming exclusion. As Boutros Boutros-Ghali said in 1994, the Iron Curtain has moved: it no longer divides Europe, but divides the Mediterranean, running between the Global South, Africa and Europe. [25] This is something we don't think much about when celebrating 1989.

1989 is celebrated as this great European moment in coming together, but not only do we not think about the bordering of Europe and the humanitarian crises in the Mediterranean and North Africa, we also don't think about the importance of 1989 in leading to this outcome.

German activists have in the last decade connected the hypocrisy of celebrating the Wall's Fall against the background of erecting external borders, noting that more people died in recent Mediterranean migrations than in attempts to cross the Iron Curtain before 1989. But still we don't want to connect these two events and these two processes. That's an important part of rethinking 1989 today and how we got to the Europe we have now.

ZG: This leads me to ask about how and why your project focuses on coloniality and decoloniality in Eastern Europe in connection to socialist globalisation? This topic relates to recent academic debates about connecting postsocialism and postcolonialism, both in terms of epistemology and history, looking also at the historical connections, parallels and similarities between the two.

An important element of these debates is the conceptualisation of race in postsocialism: as you noted, Eastern Europe has become this colour-blind, but white region. Race and racism as an issue has also been marginalised in public discourse since the 1980s, or interpreted only in local terms, like in the case of understanding the histories of our own Jewish and Roma ethnic minorities, but not in a global sense of how our relationship to global racial ideas and positions have changed. In this regard, I'd like to return to the often racist migrant discourse you mentioned, which emerged in recent years (particularly since 2015), and how after the system change the history of incoming non-European migrants during socialism and our historical relations to race have been completely forgotten.

This is a critical issue if we consider that despite anti-migration propaganda, Eastern European countries are now increasingly taking in migrants, both as labourers and students, due to growing labour shortage as a result of increasing emigration and low birth rates, international competition in education and the labour market, and in order to relieve the burdens of indebtedness. Since migration patterns are based on historical connections, socialist era migratory links still condition some of these migration flows. For example, it is no coincidence that Hungary still receives migrant workers from Mongolia and Vietnam. How can the history of socialism and 1989 in a global perspective help us understand contemporary Eastern European relations to race?

JM: First of all, many of the things I've mentioned are Pan-European phenomena. Some scholars, such as David Theo Goldberg, have looked at how whiteness, and the colonial experience that produced it and gave it power, are not sufficiently interrogated in the constitution of what it means to be European. [26] Some scholars critique the omissions in the way in which many Europeans remember, exploring how Western Europeans in particular place the Holocaust at the centre of Europe's memorial culture, necessarily stating 'never again'. Yet this framing has also acted as a distraction from thinking about colonial violence and its relationship to global racial hierarchy and whiteness.

Historians may write about the connection between the two – that the Holocaust was colonial violence 'boomeranging' back into Europe – but the continent's memorial culture is based on the idea that the Holocaust in a 'civilised place like Europe' is most worth remembering. Michael Rothberg has argued that Europeans need a 'multidirectional memory' that can include both. [27] Over the past decades, Eastern Europeans have argued for the inclusion of Communist violence – sometimes controversially dubbed 'genocide' – into a pan-European memory based on 'never again', as Laure Neumayer and Jelena Subotić have explored in fascinating recent books. [28] But this Eastern European intervention ensures that Europeans' consideration of historical violence and its relationship to the present remains very Eurocentric. There have of course been many – from Aimé Césaire in the late 1940s to those who advocate for justice for the genocide in German South-West Africa today – who call for this wider understanding of European violence that connects these experiences inside and outside Europe – but they do not have the same clout.

If you want to think about race, racism and whiteness as core elements of Europeaness, then we have to think about it as a pan-European story.

And I say that partly because as a historian who is from the UK, I'm also very aware of the ways Western Europeans externalise the racism of the European project to the east of the continent: for example, they can point to Orbán's campaigns against migrants in order to point to those irrational, barbaric, uncivilised racists to the East. And it's often a trick that Western Europeans play to avoid looking too closely at the racialised constructions of their own ideas of Europe.

But having said that, there is a specifically Eastern European story here worth telling. The region was embedded in a longer-term history of colonialism and race, despite its frequent claims to

exceptionalism on account of not having had colonies. For example, there is the story of Poles who were sent by Napoleon to crush the Haitian revolution and ended up fighting for it: the revolt's leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines called them the 'white niggers of Europe' and their story becomes a staple of nineteenth century Polish nationalism: solidarity with others fighting for statehood against large Empires. It is then taken up by the Communists, and then has recently been the subject of [an opera performed in Haiti](#), which Adam Kola has explored in a book on Polish postcolonialism. At the same time, Eastern European nationalists supported white imperialism, and in the late nineteenth century Polish and Hungarian nationalists hoped to gain colonies as 'capsules' of national survival until their mother country gained independence. Yet they often claimed that theirs would be a 'civilised colonialism' informed by their own experience of suffering under Empires, and be less rapacious and violent than under the British or French. Nationalists may have failed to gain colonies, but they were not free from European colonial desire.

What then about anti-colonialism and its relationship to race under socialism? Was there a real racial solidarity with the South?

Socialist states campaigned for anti-racist programmes at the UN in the 1960s and 1970s, partly arising out of Eastern Europe's experience of Nazi racism in WWII. Yet anti-racism was often performative in order to gain alliances on a global stage. When the anti-colonial project entered a period of global crisis in the 1970s, the appeal to Eastern European elites of demonstrating anti-racism declined precipitously.

In Eastern Europe, as soon as this anti-colonial project no longer has any appeal and does not confer global status in the 1980s, a much more exclusionary othering of black students and labour migrants, and forms of violent racism had also emerged. As I mentioned previously, the so-called "return to Europe" and the rediscovery of a common European culture in the late Cold War - however heroic a story - went hand in hand with bordering and excluding the coloured non-European others.

There was also this idea that socialism has "darkened" or "blackened" white Eastern Europeans. You see in conservative dissident texts in the 1980s the use of the term "white negroes": they believed that one has to throw out this multi-coloured socialism in order to recover a true white Europeanness.

In this sense the right-wing populist claim after the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 that Eastern Europeans were the last ones to protect a white Christian European civilisation in the face of Western multiculturalism had its roots in the late Cold War.

You see this strengthening re-equation of whiteness with Europeanness in Eastern Europe in relation to the treatment of migrant labour in the 1980s. Increasingly they faced a violent racism in that decade which saw them as civilisational others who don't belong. And then the year 1989 is marked by the massive expulsion of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from the Global South from Eastern Europe, a story that is very little remembered. In Germany there was a very desperate desire in the first months of 1990 to expel 8,000 contract workers who had come from Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, and Cuba to the GDR prior to German unification, lest these migrant workers sweep West once borders are taken down and Germany is a re-united. Attacks against Roma and Vietnamese exponentially increased in Czechoslovakia, leading to public condemnation from Charta 77 and the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee, which declared that such violence contradicted the ideals of democratic revolution.

And then there is also an Islamophobic side of the story. Often we think about the rise of anti-Islam sentiment as a postcommunist or a post-9/11 story in Europe. But if one looks further back, one can

see it as a reaction both to the Iranian revolution in 1979 and to the rise of a transnational, radical Salafism supported by Saudi Arabia. Then we also have to recognise that parts of socialist Europe had large Muslim minorities, particularly in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and also in the Soviet Union, in Central Asia. By the mid-1980s, these minorities are seen as potentially threatening, because they are viewed by elites as embracing a set of pan-Islamic cultural values, which are alien to socialism. There's also an increasing fear that this new form of Islamism will start to attract populations from the Third World in a way socialism once did. And this image of a violent, politically untempered and culturally distinct Islamic world is constructed and used – especially by reform communists – to define their place as part of a peaceful 'civilised' European region a decade before the collapse of the system.

PART III

ZG: Previously we discussed why the neoliberal transition after 1989 should be reinterpreted in a global historical perspective, and what alternative globalisation trajectories socialist globalisation was part of. We also spoke of how Eastern European postsocialist transformation could be understood from the region's "in-between" - or semiperipheral - position in the world economy as regards to coloniality, race, and migration. Now let's turn towards how these issues affect today's politics more directly, and how the 1989 got globalised in the postsocialist period.

Perhaps many people thought that there will only be a few cases of successful right-wing, illiberal populist governments in Eastern Europe, but now we can clearly see how this has become part of a global trend. But in a global perspective we should also add that elements of this conservative right-wing populism, comes not only from Western neoliberalism as it developed by the 1980s, but – like illiberalism itself – from authoritarian capitalist development states in East Asian contexts, like Singapore.

But what is perhaps also interesting is how these right-wing, conservative populists try to control and exploit existing discourses and historical experiences of race, whiteness and coloniality. The phrase we started with, which you mentioned, "we never had colonies", and "we are not responsible for the consequences of colonisation and imperialism". This is embedded in an anti-Western discourse: "Brussels is the new Moscow". This builds on the socialist-era understanding that Eastern Europe was a colony of the Soviet Union. This colonial discourse then gets mobilised against the "failed" neoliberal transition period and fears of Western globalisation to protect "freedom-loving" nations' sovereignties and conservative cultures, with Viktor Orbán even calling 2010 a new system change of a right-wing revolution, which could fulfil the "true" promises of 1989 – so there was a "double system change". What do you think are the reasons behind the success of these populist discourses that have emerged in reaction to the liberal heritage of the 1989 system change?

JM: There are many shades of this populist revolt. The most prominent are those on the right. Hungary is perhaps one of the most far advanced in this regard, Poland is some way behind but "catching up". But it can also be found on the left, for example in the social democratic government in Romania. So I think it's a regional phenomenon that transcends some parts of the political spectrum, and what unites these groups is a challenge to the transition paradigm: we don't have to necessarily become like the West, but we don't have to define ourselves according to the West's standards anymore.

I think this is part of a broader, global revolt against the transitions and their political paradigms in the late 20th century. From Latin America to Southern Europe to South Africa and elsewhere you find

perceived limitations of transition ideologies being challenged in diverse ways and from different parts of the political spectrum.

Last year for example in Chile, we saw the importance of returning to the unmet promises of democratisation: they didn't really get rid of the Pinochet constitution, nor challenge the patterns of economic ownership that existed within the dictatorship, which then led to corruption and economic inequality. In South Africa, a younger radical generation in the African National Congress became very critical of the way in which apartheid ended and see the "Truth and Reconciliation" process as a poor substitute for economic justice, land reform and so on – it just entrenched massive inequality. These critiques hint at new political possibilities: we don't have to ally ourselves to the idea of this inevitable market capitalist, transitional, "no alternative" neoliberal discourse.

In Eastern Europe this revolt takes more of a right-wing form. This is partly because the left was very slow to address the problems thrown up by the financial crisis. Part of the reason for the lack of responsiveness was because of these continuities across 1989. These ideas were already circulating in some reformist circles before the Fall, and then former communists found it easy to transform themselves into liberal-leftist parties, which became the carriers of a kind of Blairite, globalising third way market liberalism. When the crisis came, they were too far down that road to turn around. The political right had already developed these alternative discourses and was much quicker to move in.

But, as you say: to understand these new political movements and their appeal you need to look at the region within broader global histories of coloniality and anti-coloniality, which they draw on to frame their new projects.

The long-term continuities between pre-communist, communist-era, and post-communist anti-colonialisms are very striking, and inform the politics of these new populist movements. Their object of anti-colonial wrath might have changed – it is no longer Berlin or Rome, and then Moscow, but now rather Brussels that is the imperial power to be contested – but defining one's national identity through the external oppressor is still central.

We can certainly also recognise the legacies of communism in the present-day struggle against a "dissolute" West: whilst the communists complained of the West's imperialism and racism, populists now critique a caricature of a multicultural, Islam-supporting and "gender-obsessed" Western liberal Europe failing to protect a white, Christian conservative vision of the continent.

We might also look to dissident discourses to understand this. The idea of Central Europe was not always about demonstrating one's natural Western orientation: for some dissidents in the late Cold War, it was also about distancing the region from both the West and the East. Some of the Polish opposition in the mid-1980s argued for a "Central-Eastern European Community" with a joint economy and common passport that is distinct from both East and West, and could protect itself against both in order to maintain freedom, peace, and prosperity in the region. And the racialisation of this new Europe was also already there in the 1980s, as I discussed previously.

But at the same time you're right that at the centre of these claims is a denial of Eastern Europe's coloniality. They argue that we are "different": we are a separate cultural space, and we are different from the rest of Europe, because our nations never had extra-European empires. That's also a claim about racial and national purity in the present: that we can be protectors of a white Christian Europe, because we do not need to assuage white guilt, as western Europeans do, as we have no imperial burden, and nor do we have a tradition of postcolonial migration. So we do not have any postcolonial responsibility.

This avoids many discussions of the region's involvement in settler colonialism across the world, Eastern Europe's 'excess' populations who moved to Latin America, North America, and elsewhere in the colonial and postcolonial world. It avoids the fact that Eastern Europe always participated in, and consumed, a much wider European colonial culture.

This was expressed through fantasy and longing – think of the colonial literature, shows, exhibitions that you could have found equally in Western and Eastern Europe, as the work of Irina Novikova and others has uncovered. Coloniality was a shared experience: even if the region's nations didn't have colonies, they participated in trajectories and fantasies of being European colonials. For example, the most popular interwar Hungarian fiction writer Jenő Rejtő (P. Howard) depicted Eastern Europeans working alongside Western European empires, finding freedom and meaning as adventurers or as legionnaires, fighting side by side with colonial troops.

In some ways these became political fantasies too. After WWI, some countries, particularly in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, had substantial sections of their elites who desired colonies in order that their nations become fully European and have the material base to survive.

The communists' desire for worldliness through alliances with the anti-colonial struggle after WWII was in part driven by a longer-term peripheral frustration to gain the privileges of mobility and influence that imperialism had provided Western Europeans. But today there is a politically very useful amnesia around this.

ZG: In Eastern Europe, after the “return to Europe” and Western realignment during the “transition” period, there developed a global realignment after the 2008 crisis, when partly due to disillusionment with the neoliberal period, these countries started to redevelop their global relations with non-Western countries and realign their foreign policies to relieve - or at least complement - Western dependency. For example, Viktor Orbán announced the “global opening” after 2010, and re-established contacts and increased trade relations with many African and Asian countries, some of which had been disestablished in the 1980s and 1990s - during the “return to Europe”.

How does your idea of the history of socialism as struggles over alternative globalisations contribute to understanding this new global manoeuvring? Can we draw historical parallels between this current opening up and previous ways of global integration, and the ways Eastern European countries try to globally position themselves today?

JM: We argue that the very notion of Eastern Europe is defined by in-betweenness: sometimes looking to the West, but sometimes looking elsewhere, eastwards, or the South, or often in hybrid forms. And there are competing political and cultural groups who contest the geopolitical positioning of the region. This is not a new idea of course, but in the Socialism Goes Global project we view this in-betweenness through the prism of the collapse of empires on a global scale in the 20th century.

We examined how actors in the region were caught between desiring to be colonial Europeans, looking westwards, and at the same time being anti-colonial, shaping their own liberations of their own nations from empire into an alliance with others that have similar decolonising experiences in Africa and Asia.

With the collapse of the liberal world order in the mid-1930s, there is an increasing attraction for some in Eastern Europe to an anti-colonial position, because of the threat of Nazi Germany or Mussolini's Italy in their backyard, which echoes the broader global struggle against imperialism. You can see this in the massive outpouring of support in the region for Abyssinia's struggle against Italian imperialism, for example. So this anti-colonialism precedes the communists, but is

strengthened by the experience of occupation during WWII and liberation from Nazi rule. Then under the communists this becomes part of the political mainstream and is institutionalised in solidarity policies and movements with new African and Asian states.

But there is also an idea – albeit always contested – that being too close to the West will mean being confined to the periphery, and so they have to look East and South to help escape their backwardness. You then have a period when Westernisation becomes more and more important from the late 1960s, and 1989 becomes the high watermark with the transition ideology of Westernisation up until maybe the financial crisis between 2008 and 2010. Since then we've had a return to a hybrid situation, but most Eastern European countries aren't turning away from the West per se, at least none of them wish to leave the European Union. It should be said that there is great scepticism in some countries, such as in the Czech Republic, where Václav Klaus is leading his Czech version of Brexit.

But now Western integration is complemented by new alliances with China, Russia, or Turkey – not only in Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic, but also in the Western Balkans, where disillusionment with the prospect of joining the EU opened up space for greater geopolitical competition. We can see this in the growing relationship to China in the region. China has this 16+1 policy, in which it divides Europe into Europe 1 and Europe 2, basically rejecting the EU's conception of Europe, and rather looks to countries, such as in the Balkans, in Central and Eastern Europe and outside of Europe, which used to be part of the socialist world and thus can form an entry point for Chinese business capital.

These are often rediscoveries of older relationships: you can find the remaking of earlier socialist relationships in Eastern Europe, rediscovered friendships through which they can understand themselves because of this earlier world. For example, in the revival of Russian African policy over the last decade, which to some degree relies on these earlier relationships forged in socialist internationalism. So these connections are made very concrete, to facilitate new investments and economic relations in the present. But you might have a better idea about similar things going on in Hungary.

ZG: In Hungary, you can see that the political leadership heavily relies on previous relationships to Asia, with China or Central Asia, for example, and draws on the tradition of Hungarian Orientalism, which partly consisted of interwar era Turanism, an ideology that proposed that Hungarian roots were in Asia. But socialist-era relations are appropriated too. These are used to construct this in-between “swing region” position you mentioned, which I would call ‘semi-peripheral’. There is also reliance on these previous socialist networks, but these structural manoeuvrings today are kept rather concealed under symbolically anti-communist, anti-migration, and nationalist identity politics. But these are also concealed due to the opposition's West- and Eurocentrism, which recurrently dismisses Hungarian foreign policy in these countries as simply supporting authoritarian regimes or foreign Christian organisations and not investing in Hungarians and a European future.

But I also see parallels in how after 1989 Eastern Europeans needed new global ideologies to reconnect to these countries. Illiberalism is one of them, if we look at the Hungarian relation to Turkey, Russia, Brazil or East Asian states, but there is also the case of Christianity used in global diplomacy, because many of these non-European countries – despite Western projections of anti-Islamism – are actually dominantly Christian countries, in fact postcolonial ones. Think of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, the Philippines, or growing Christianity in China. So there are these new, emerging global ideologies, which have replaced socialist internationalism and are the basis for new global connections.

But turning back to 1989 in this regard, there is also the question of how 1989 had a global effect and became a global ideology? It is of course central to Eastern European history, but it has been embedded in local, nationalist, and Eurocentric histories. But you mentioned how the idea, concept and liberal narrative of 1989 was mobilised in the Arab Spring during 2011, and elsewhere in the Middle East in order to spread the Eastern European experiences of becoming independent, free countries building liberal democracies.

JM: One of the reasons why 1989 remained such a powerful symbol is because the ideas it underpinned became central to the constitution of the West after the Cold War. In particular, it naturalised the coming together of liberal democracy and market capitalism, now extended by the West to a region that by and large welcomed this liberation. This particular assemblage had not seemed very likely before 1989, but as soon as it happened, it was mobilised in the service of a Western-led globalisation project.

I mentioned before how the African left saw 1989 as a disaster for them, because in the early 1990s the requirements of economic restructuring combined with what was then called “good governance,” was forced on Africa in order to reschedule debts and take up further loans.

In parts of Africa in the early 1990s there was resentment towards Eastern Europe that their experience was being used to force African countries – especially indebted ones – to undertake reform programmes that were not necessarily relevant to their cultural and political present.

1989 was also invoked by both liberals and neoconservatives alike to spur the West to understand new challenges to Western capitalist civilisation. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush declared the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall to be “World Freedom Day”. If the West’s resolve, fortified by the anti-communist struggle of the late Cold War, could be maintained – neoconservatives argued – then “freedom” could be brought to the Middle East.

A revolutionary generation of Eastern European elites were, until the 2010s, happy to perform this reading of 1989 on the global stage as they supported the export of Western market democracy.

Leszek Balcerowicz, the architect of Polish shock therapy provided advice on the privatisation of the Iraqi economy after the US-led invasion. Lech Wałęsa, a hero of Poland’s Solidarność movement and post-communist president, visited Tunisia during the Arab Spring to advise on undertaking a peaceful, negotiated transition in 2011. Yet following the failures of democratisation in the Arab Spring, and the rise of a new generation of anti-liberal politicians in Eastern Europe, there are no more triumphalist “global 1989” tours.

There is also the reaction of China, where 1989 is not as important as the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which for them is the disastrous global event of the late 20th century that must never, never ever happen in China. Gorbachev’s failings became repeatedly played out as part of elite political training: there are still courses on this at elite party schools, military academies and so on. Xi Jinping, soon after coming to power in the early 2010s required his central committee to watch videos of what went wrong under Gorbachev’s leadership.

We now see China very threatened by the revival of this 1989 ideology in Hong Kong. Alongside references back to struggles of democratisation at Tiananmen, we see many references back to the anti-communist struggle of the late 1980s in Eastern Europe in the ideology and repertoires of Hong Kong protesters. Here protestors imitated the “Baltic Way” of 1989 in their “Hong Kong Chain” exactly thirty years later on August 23, 2019. Whereas once Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians expressed their desire for independence from Moscow by linking hands across their Eastern

borders, the citizens of Hong Kong formed a 30 miles chain across Hong Kong Harbour, seeking to preserve “one country, but two systems”. So-called “Lennon Walls”, once filled with messages of support from Czechoslovak citizens for their dissidents in the 1980s, now find new form in post-it notes plastered on the walls of Hong Kong metro stations. In the struggle to protect their islands’ sovereignty against the legal incursions of the last communist superpower, 1989 was still relevant.

But as the 1989-styled resistance to Beijing’s encroachment on the legal autonomy of Hong Kong has seemingly failed, major Western actors have moved in for – in many ways biased – support. Trump has recently signed into law a bill, The Human Rights and Democracy Act, which would produce annual reviews on autonomy to defend the liberty of Hong Kongers, but only in the context of U.S. trade wars with China and also of ignoring U.S. history of imperialist interventionism. Some on the British right, under the conditions of Brexit, are suggesting a rather different balance of support to that which is once provided Eastern Europe in the late 1980s: not full throated support for democracy movements, but rather the offer of a “charter city”, free of economic regulations and low tax, for Hong Kong refugees within the UK. The fantasy of Singapore-on-Thames can finally be made real.

Zoltan Ginelli
James Mark

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P.S.

Left East

<https://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/why-globalise-1989-in-eastern-europe-and-the-politics-of-history/>

<https://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/why-globalise-1989-in-eastern-europe-and-the-politics-of-history-part-ii/>

Footnotes

[1] Hansen, P., Jonsson, S. (2014): *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism*. London: Bloomsbury. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/eurafrika-9781474256803>; Böröcz, J. (2009): *The European Union and Global Social Change: A Critical Geopolitical-Economic Analysis*. Milton Park, New York: Routledge; see also the Böröcz, J. Goodness Is Elsewhere: The Rule of European Difference. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48(1): 110-138; and the special issue edited by József Böröcz and Melinda Kovács in *Central Europe Review*, “[Empire’s New Clothes: Unveiling EU Enlargement](#),” also published in Hungarian in [Replika](#) journal.

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- [3] Buettner, E. (2016): *Europe After Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/europe-after-empire/30F3633B2D5184B0D799815B1B7E1C8F>
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- [5] These questions are pursued by the [Dialoguing Between the Posts](#) network, which consists of researchers focusing on the relations between postsocialism and postcolonialism in the Balkans and more widely in Eastern Europe. In Hungary, the Working Group for Public Sociology 'Helyzet' ([Helyzet Műhely](#)) deals with the global history of the Hungarian integration into capitalism from a world-systemic perspective, focusing on centre-semiperiphery relations, capitalist accumulation cycles, and hegemonic changes. See also the network of the [Balkan Society for Theory and Practice](#), and the special issue of *Diversia*, "[Decolonial Theory and Practice in Southeastern Europe](#)," amongst others. – Remark by Zoltán Ginelli.
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[15] Amongst Eastern European socialist countries Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia was a founding member of the IMF in 1945, Poland joined in 1946, but left in 1950 and returned in 1986. On Hungary's Western integration during socialism, see the research of Pál Germuska in the PanEur1970s international research project (paneur1970s.eui.eu). See: Germuska, P. (2019): Balancing between the COMECON and the EEC: Hungarian elite debates on European integration during the long 1970s. *Cold War History*, 19(3): 401–420. – Remark by Zoltán Ginelli.

[16] The concept of the “civilisational slope” comes from Attila Melegh, see: Melegh, A. (2003): *Kelet-Nyugat lejtő. Élet és Irodalom*. Április 28.; Melegh, A. (2006): *On the East/West Slope. Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Eastern and Central Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press. – Remark by Zoltán Ginelli.

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[19] Tamás Gerőcs and András Pinkasz explain this process in the case of Hungary and the Eastern Bloc with the long-term decrease in uneven terms of exchange. See: Gerőcs, T., Pinkasz, A. (2017): A KGST a világrendszerben: Egy félperifériás kísérlet gazdaságtörténeti elemzése. *Eszmélet*, 29(113): 15–36.
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[23] On this issue, see Mark, J., Apor, P. (2015): Socialism Goes Global: Decolonization and the Making of a New Culture of Internationalism in Socialist Hungary. *Journal of Modern History*, 87(4): 852–891.

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