



Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

Civil Resistance from the End of the Cold War to the 21st Century: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Civil resistance made a significant contribution to the largely peaceful end of the Cold War and has become an increasingly important factor of post-Cold War international politics. This essay proposes a historical reflection of civil resistance from the end of the Cold War to the present, in relation to some crucial issues on the contemporary international scenario. Taking 1989 as the starting point, the main aim of this study is to explore the legacy of the “Long 1989” in the evolution of civil resistance. The essay focuses on three main issues: i) the rise and decline of the post-1989 liberal cycle of civil resistance in Europe; ii) the consequences of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the emergence of a new Chinese authoritarian state capitalism; and iii) the impact of the technological and digital revolution on post-1989 civil resistance.

Keywords: Civil Resistance – Transnational History – Social Movements – Global History – the Long 1989.

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1. Introduction

According to Albert Camus, creation and revolution involve the rebirth of a civilization. Camus reminds us that it is in revolt that man surpasses himself: «suffering is individual. But from the moment that a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience – as the experience of everyone [...]. I rebel – therefore *we exist*»¹.

The movements of public protest and civil resistance have left, and will continue to leave, a mark in the collective memory, in the evolution of the social imaginary, and in the construction of the democratic process. The non-violent protests have created their own collective, social and creative measure, capable of unleashing a disruptive force in terms of public participation and, at the same time, of free expression of the individual, the citizen, and the human being.

Civil resistance has become an increasingly important factor of post-Cold War international politics. The phenomenon, which has mainly been examined from a sociological and political point of view, deserves more interest from historians, and should be studied in a wider comparative perspective that has historiographical roots in contemporary history, in transnational and global history, and in international relations². This study proposes a historical reflection on the post-Cold War civil resistance in relation to some crucial issues on the contemporary international scenario from the end of the Cold War to the present.

1989 produced a great transformation, with a strong long-term impact; as pointed out by the historian Vladimir Tismaneanu, «the revolutions of 1989 have fundamentally changed the political, economic and cultural map of the world»³. 1989 was a founding moment of democracy in the heart of Europe. Civil resistance was an important factor in the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989-1991, and hence in ending the Cold War. The rapid and spectacular collapse of the communist regimes in Central – Eastern Europe in 1989 was experienced and remains in the collective memory as a peaceful uprising of peoples moved by the aspiration to freedom and sovereignty⁴. On the contrary, in the same year in Tiananmen Square in Beijing the movement that supported democracy in China was severely repressed with crucial national and international consequences. After the events of 1989, the Chinese leadership decided to prioritize economic growth and the creation of authoritarian state capitalism and at the same time to prevent political pluralism and democracy. All of this had global consequences with a

¹ A. Camus, *The Rebel*, Penguin Books, 2000, 9-10 (or. ed.: *L'Homme révolté. Essais*, Gallimard, 1951).

² T. Garton Ash, A. Roberts (Eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, Oxford University Press, 2011, x.

³ V. Tismaneanu, *The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences*, in *Contemporary European History*, No. 3, 2009, 283.

⁴ J. Rupnik (Ed.), *1989 as a Political World Event. Democracy, Europe and the New International System in the Age of Globalization*, Routledge, 2014, 41.

crucial impact on the post-1989 international order and marked the advent of global capitalism⁵.

Reconstructing the key aspects of civil resistance from the end of the Cold War to the 21st century in a historical perspective means dealing with the legacy of 1989 and exploring dissent in relation to the post-1989 international order. The historian Jacques Rupnik reminds us that in the analysis of the legacy of 1989, we can observe the evolution and limits of three interrelated cycles that shaped the post-1989 world: i) From the democratic momentum of 1989 to the crisis of democracy and the emergence of illiberal democracies and authoritarian regime; ii) From the emergence of a globalized market economy promoted by the West to the international financial and economic crisis that has deeply destabilized the economic international order since 2008; and finally, iii) From the triumph of the West in the Cold War and the “unipolar” moment of the 1990s to the “multipolar” world of the 21st century and the shift of the center of gravity of the global economy from the Atlantic to the Pacific⁶.

In this changing scenario, more than thirty years after the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the post-1989 paradigm has been challenged by new realities. In Central-Eastern Europe, when the democratic transition began to stall during the 2008 economic crisis, the new insecurities created fertile ground for furthering the consolidation process of illiberal democracies⁷. The main aspects of the illiberal turn can be summarized as follows: the crisis of the rule of law, the rise of nationalism, and finally, the cultural wars, a conservative revolution or rather a cultural “counter-revolution” in Europe⁸.

The European civil resistance of 1989 had a strong impact in subsequent years and, directly or indirectly, influenced many aspects of European and international history, but – especially after the 2008 crisis – the post-1989 liberal cycle of civil resistance lost its driving force. At the same time, globalization and the digital revolution since the 1990s have influenced civil resistance and have changed its language, methods of communication and dissemination. The 2008 Wall Street crash and the ensuing international financial and economic crisis caused a major

⁵ J. Rupnik, *Senza il muro. Le due Europe dopo il crollo del comunismo*, Donzelli Editore, 2019, 138.

⁶ J. Rupnik, *The World after 1989 and Exhaustion of Three Cycles*, in J. Rupnik (Ed.), *1989 as a Political World Event*, cit., 22.; I. Krastev, *The Unraveling of the Post-1989 Order*, in *Journal of Democracy*, No. 4, 2016, 5.

⁷ M. Ignatieff, S. Roch, *Rethinking Open Society. New Adversaries and New Opportunities*, CEU Press, 2018.

⁸ See: J.-W. Muller, *The Cold War and the Intellectual History of the Late Twentieth Century*, in M.P. Leffler, O.A. Westad (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. III, *Endings*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; I. Krastev, *Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution. The Long Road to Democratic Decline*, in *Foreign Affairs*, No. 3, 2018; J. Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution. Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford University Press, 2018; F. Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, Profile Books, 2022; F. Fukuyama, *30 Years of World Politics: What Has Changed?*, in *Journal of Democracy*, No. 1, 2020.

shock to the post-1989 paradigm and inevitably influenced the new massive and global wave of dissent of the second decade of the 21st century.

Looking to the “other 1989”, the events of Tiananmen Square prompted a reaction that left a lasting imprint on the People’s Republic of China. The Tiananmen tragedy stunned the world and shocked the entire Communist bloc⁹. The events in Tiananmen Square were overshadowed by the Chinese leadership and cancelled from the official historical reconstruction. The Chinese leadership embraced high economic growth, but suppressed political pluralism, freedom and democracy.

The analysis of civil resistance in the “Long 1989” constitutes an opportunity to explore the legacy of 1989. This essay will focus on three main issues: i) The rise and decline of the post-1989 liberal cycle of civil resistance in Europe, from the triumph of the “open society” ideal to the crisis of democracy and the emergence of “illiberal democracies”; ii) the consequences of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the rise of a new Chinese authoritarian state capitalism; iii) the impact of the technological and digital revolution on post-1989 civil resistance.

This essay does not intend to provide either a comprehensive or definitive account of post-Cold War civil resistance. It is, rather, an attempt to offer some first insights into the phenomenon and to identify some interpretative keys that can be developed in the future.

2. Civil Resistance, Power Politics and the “Long 1989”: A Historical Perspective

American political scientist Erica Chenoweth’s recent book *Civil Resistance. What Everyone Needs to Know* offers an essential starting point for anyone who wants to understand what “civil resistance” means¹⁰. Chenoweth reminds us that:

Civil resistance is a method of conflict through which unarmed civilians use a variety of coordinated methods (strikes, protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and many other tactics) to prosecute a conflict without directly harming or threatening to harm an opponent. [...] Sometimes called nonviolent resistance, unarmed struggle or nonviolent action, this form of political action is now a mainstay across the globe [...]. The term itself has only been in use for about 100 years. Mohandas Gandhi coined the term while struggling against British colonialism in India. Over the years, many academics and practitioners – from Gene Sharp to Rev. James Lawson – came to adopt the term to describe this phenomenon [...]. It was a central form of resistance in the 1989 revolutions and in the Arab Spring, and was practiced widely in Trump’s America¹¹.

⁹ C. Jian, *Tiananmen and the Fall of the Berlin Wall: China’s Path toward 1989 and beyond*, in J.A. Engel, *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989*, Oxford University Press, 2009, 97.

¹⁰ E. Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance. What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

¹¹ *Idem*, 1-27.

The interdisciplinary project “Civil Resistance and Power Politics: Domestic and International Dimensions”, coordinated by Timothy Garton Ash and Adam Roberts at the Centre for International Studies, Oxford University, constitutes an interesting perspective for the recent studies on civil resistance and power politics. The results of this study have been published in two volumes: *Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, and *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring. Triumphs and Disaster*¹². The introduction to the first volume draws on a wide variety of sources, including the works published by Peter Ackerman, April Carter, Michael Randle and Gene Sharp¹³, to define “civil resistance” as follows:

Civil resistance is a type of political action that relies on the use of non-violent methods. It is largely synonymous with certain other terms, including “non-violent action”, “non-violent resistance” and “citizen power”. It involves a range of widespread and sustained activities that challenge a particular power, force, policy or regime – hence the term “resistance”. The adjective “civil” in this context denotes that which pertains to a citizen or society, implying that a movement’s goals are “civil” in the sense of being widely shared in a society; and it denotes that the action concerned is non-military or non-violent in character¹⁴.

As Adam Roberts recalls, civil resistance, which has occurred in various forms throughout history, has become particularly important over the past hundred years. Three major overlapping causes, namely decolonization, democratization and racial equality, have been carried out by civil resistance campaigns characterized by the extensive use of non-violent actions. But there are also other causes: workers’ rights, environmental protection, gender equality and minority rights. Timothy Garton Ash adds:

¹² The project started between the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007. The project was managed by the Centre for International Studies, Oxford University, in collaboration with St. Anthony’s College and the European Studies Centre in Oxford. The results of this study have been published in T. Garton Ash, A. Roberts (Eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, Oxford University Press, 2011 and A. Roberts, M.J. Willis, R. McCarthy, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring. Triumphs and Disaster*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹³ G. Sharp, *Sharp’s Dictionary of Power and Struggle: Language of Civil Resistance in Conflicts*, Oxford University Press, 2011; P. Ackerman, C. Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century*, Praeger Publications, 1994; P. Ackerman, J. DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, Palgrave, 2000; A. Carter, H. Clark, M. Randle, *People Power and Protest since 1945: A Bibliography of Non-violent Action*, Housmans Bookshop, 2006; A. Carter, H. Clark, M. Randle (Eds.), *A Guide to Civil Resistance*, Vol. 1, *A Bibliography of People Power and Nonviolent Protest*, Green Print, 2013 and Vol. 2, *A Bibliography of Social Movement and Nonviolent Action*, Green Print, 2015; M. Randle, *Civil Resistance*, Fontana, 1994; E. Chenoweth, M.J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Non Violent Conflict*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

¹⁴ A. Roberts, *Introduction*, in A. Roberts, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, cit., 2.

Civil resistance does not merely interact with power politics, traditionally conceived. It has changed the very nature of power politics in our time. It challenges a still widespread assumption that military or coercive action (hard power) is the most effective and certain way of achieving change both within and between states¹⁵.

Civil resistance is itself a form of power and as such cannot be considered isolated from other forms of power, which inevitably condition the outcomes of the protest. As reported by Garton Ash, Gandhi liked to remember, with regard to the relationship between power and dissent, that «no clapping is possible without two hands, no quarrel without two people, and no state without two entities: the rulers and the ruled»¹⁶. Resistance can refuse its opponents in terms of legitimacy and cooperation, but it needs to relate to them if it is to achieve its goals. At the same time, civil resistance is not limited to interacting with other forms of power, but with its own action it can contribute to changing the political choices of the rulers. Obviously, the modalities, timing and direction of these changes are manifold and not necessarily in the direction desired by the movements themselves.

As Hannah Arendt wrote in her essay *Civil Disobedience*:

The perspective of very rapid change suggests that there is every likelihood of a progressively expanding role for civil disobedience in modern democracies. If civil disobedience is here to stay, as many have come to believe, the question of its compatibility with the law is of prime importance; the answer to it may well decide whether or not the institutions of liberty will prove flexible enough to survive the onslaught of change without civil war and without revolution¹⁷.

There is therefore a strong connection between civil resistance and the shape of contemporary world politics. Adam Roberts remembers that «The world today has been shaped significantly by this mode of political action. However, understanding exactly how civil resistance has shaped the world is a challenge»¹⁸.

Civil resistance was one of the determining factors in the dissolution of the communist world. 1989 was the *annus mirabilis* for civil resistance in Europe. As Charles Maier wrote, «the fall of the Berlin Wall remains, more than any other perhaps, the world's most famous image of the triumph of civil resistance»¹⁹. On

¹⁵ T. Garton Ash, *A Century of Civil Resistance: Some Lessons and Questions*, in A. Roberts, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, cit., 375.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ H. Arendt, *Disobbedienza civile*, Chiarelettere editore, 2017, 39 (or. ed.: *Civil Disobedience*, in *The New Yorker*, September 1970).

¹⁸ A. Roberts, *Introduction*, in A. Roberts, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, cit., 1.

¹⁹ C. Maier, *Civil Resistance and Civil Society: Lessons from the Collapse of the German Democratic Republic in 1989*, in A. Roberts, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, cit., 260.

the contrary, for the Chinese government, the Tiananmen massacre remains a «frightening portent» and was removed from the country's official history²⁰. The photo of the lone Chinese student who defied the tanks and the statue of the “Goddess of Democracy” (a symbol of the defiance of June 4) will remain iconic symbols of the democratic dream of 1989.

Understanding the revolutions of 1989 helps us to grasp the meaning of the ongoing debates about liberalism, nationalism, open society and authoritarianism²¹. At the same time, the process of globalization and the technological/digital revolution had a strong impact on the ways of expression and interaction of the movements of public protest and civil resistance in the post-1989 order. The Wall Street crash in 2008 and the international financial and economic crisis that followed have led to criticism of the post-1989 paradigm. The cycle of protests that began in 2011 – “The Global Wave of Protest” – captured the imagination of international public opinion and left an indelible mark on the collective memory and social imaginary of the 21st century, playing an important role in the evolution of the contemporary international system.

This essay proposes a historical reflection of civil resistance from the end of the Cold War to the present and is an attempt to offer some food for thought on a phenomenon which is still in the process of definition and evolution.

3. The Democratic Revolutions of 1989 and the Legacy of Dissent in Europe

The full-fledged article by Barbara Falk, *Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe. An Emerging Historiography*, offers both a genealogy of academic interest in resistance and dissent in the region, and an overview of some research directions. Falk correctly pointed out that as archives were opened in the 1990s, a new generation of multilingual and cosmopolitan scholars transcended the old East-West divide and were able to provide a fresh perspective on and nuance toward previously inaccessible material²².

Publishing in collaboration with the *Cold War International History Project* and *Woodrow Wilson International Centers for Scholars*, *Central European University Press* has produced six “Cold War readers” in conjunction with the *National Security Archive* in Washington, five of which focus on momentous episodes of dissent. Among these volumes, for the purposes of this study, we should mention the collection of documents edited by Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton and Vladislav Zubok, *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*²³.

²⁰ K. Spohr, *Post Wall. Post Square. Rebuilding the World after 1989*, William Collins, 2019.

²¹ V. Tismaneanu, *The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences*, cit., 277. See also V. Tismaneanu (Ed.), *The Revolutions of 1989*, Routledge, 1999.

²² B.J. Falk, *Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe. An Emerging Historiography*, in *East European Politics and Societies*, No. 2, 2011, 318-319.

²³ The six volumes produced thus far are J. Navrátil et al. (Eds.), *The Prague Spring, 1968*, CEU Press, 1998; C.F. Ostermann (Ed.), *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, CEU Press, 2001; C. Békés,

Among other remarkable collections of documents, we should mention *Britain and the Revolutions in Eastern Europe, 1989*, edited by Richard Smith, which documents the UK Government's response to the unfolding social and political changes in Eastern Europe during 1989²⁴.

Before exploring the main historiographical questions addressed by the most recent literature on civil resistance in Europe in 1989, it may be useful to first refer to the intellectual debate of the time.

The events of 1989 found an exceptional chronicler in Timothy Garton Ash, who recounted the “revolution of 1989” in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague in his book *We the People*. Garton Ash coined the hybrid term “*refolution*” for the events in Warsaw and Budapest, to indicate a mixture of reforms and revolutions: because there were reforms from above in response to the revolution that was pressing from below. But he used “revolution” for what happened in Prague, Berlin and Bucharest²⁵.

The movements of public protest and civil resistance, such as Solidarność in Poland, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and the democratic opposition in Hungary, distinguished themselves by using the language of rights and autonomy of civil society, which are considered key elements of a democratic society²⁶.

Václav Havel used the famous expression «the power of the powerless» to highlight the importance of civil resistance in Central and Eastern Europe²⁷. His landmark essay by the same title is now regarded not simply as a critical reflection on resistance and dissent under authoritarianism, but more generally as a noteworthy contribution to contemporary political thought²⁸.

One of the most important legacies of dissent was the attempt to think of Europe in terms of culture and civilization. As pointed out by Jacques Rupnik, the ethical and philosophical basis of civil resistance, the language of law and constitutionalism and the overcoming of the cultural division of Europe through the enhancement of the cultural dimension were the basis of an important European dialogue between the two sides of the Iron Curtain and the rediscovery of the

M. Byrne, J.M. Rainer (Eds.), *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, CEU Press, 2002; V. Mastny, M. Byrne (Eds.), *A Cardboard Castle: An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact*, CEU Press, 2005; A. Paczkowski, M. Byrne, *From Solidarity to Martial Law: The Polish Crisis of 1980-1981*, CEU Press, 2007; S. Savranskaya, T. Blanton, V. Zubok (Eds.), *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*, CEU Press, 2010.

²⁴ R. Smith (Eds.), *Britain and the Revolutions in Eastern Europe, 1989. Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, Vol. XII, Whitehall History Publishing, Routledge, 2019.

²⁵ R. Dahrendorf, *La società riaperta*, cit., 8; T. Garton Ash, *We the People. The Revolution of 1989 witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, Granta Books, 1990.

²⁶ J. Rupnik, *After 1989: The Perennial Return of Central Europe. Reflections on the Sources of the Illiberal Drift in Central Europe*, in M. Ignatieff, S. Roch (Eds.), *Rethinking Open Society*, cit., 257-259.

²⁷ V. Havel, *The Power of Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central Easter Europe*, M.E. Sharpe, 1985.

²⁸ B.J. Falk, *Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe*, cit., 333.

European cultural identity of Central Europe²⁹. This resulted in an intellectual conversation across the East-West divide, with Czesław Miłosz, Jacques Rupnik, Timothy Garton Ash, Jenő Szücs, Milan Kundera, Tony Judt, Ralf Dahrendorf and others³⁰. The debate began with the publication of Milan Kundera's influential essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" in the *New York Review of Books* in 1984³¹. In the words of Milan Kundera, if the «tragedy» of Communist Europe after the Second World War was to be culturally Western, politically Eastern and geographically Central, 1989 constituted the reconciliation of culture, politics and geography. Kundera's thesis presents Central Europe as «the kidnapped West»: the idea that the boundaries of civilization cannot be traced by tanks and therefore the rediscovery of Central Europe through its culture, as a space distinct from the Soviet world. Reconstructing civil society, for example, was also about the process of rebuilding the region's distinctively European heritage, indicative of what was later called a «return to Europe»³².

For the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, 1989 was a great moment of freedom. In his famous essay *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, written in 1990, Dahrendorf tried to define the meaning of 1989 and the stakes of the transitions that were then beginning in the Eastern part of the continent. For Dahrendorf «the revolution of 1989 [...] was a change for the better because it was one for open societies»³³. There has undoubtedly been a contribution of dissent to the rediscovery of political liberalism in Europe. Right-wing liberals tended to emphasize the rule of law, left-wing liberals favored the dimensions of civil society and social movements. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Western liberalism and anti-communist dissent found a common understanding in defense of the open society³⁴.

Starting from the second half of the eighties, the contribution of ideas and actions of the main protagonists of the debate on the open society – Ralph Dahrendorf, Ernest Gellner, George Soros and Garton Ash – led to a courageous «exchange of ideas and projects between East and West» and constituted a relevant political-cultural dimension in the relations between Eastern and Western Europe at the end of the Cold War³⁵. The idea of the open society played a role not only in conceptual

²⁹ J. Rupnik, *Senza il Muro*, cit., 131. See also C. Cerami, *The Open Society and "British Soft Power" in Central/Eastern Europe at the End of Cold War*, in *Journal of European Integration History*, No. 1, 2010.

³⁰ T. Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, Granta, 1988; J. Rupnik, *The Other Europe*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988; J. Szücs, *Three Historical Regions of Europe*, in J. Keane (Ed.), *Civil Society and the State*, Verso, 1988; T. Judt, *The Rediscovery of Central Europe*, in *Daedalus*, No. 119, 1990; T. Judt, *The Politics of Impotence? Opposition and Dissent in East Central Europe*, Wilson Center occasional paper, No. 9, 1988, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/OP%2009.pdf>.

³¹ M. Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, in *The New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984.

³² B.J. Falk, *Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe*, cit., 329.

³³ R. Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, Transaction Publishers, 2005, 178 (or. ed.: Times Books, 1990).

³⁴ M. Ignatieff, S. Roch, *Rethinking Open Society*, cit.

³⁵ C. Cerami, *The Open Society and "British Soft Power" in Central/Eastern Europe at the End of the Cold War*, cit., 69.

terms but also by inspiring initiatives in favor of all forms of freedom of expression, the rule of law and the revival of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe³⁶.

The real triumph of the open society in Europe came in 1989. In the enthusiasm generated by the 1989 revolutions, Karl Popper's book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, became a must-read throughout the post-communist world and was among the most cited readings by the movement of dissent and civil resistance³⁷. According to Dahrendorf, the end of communism in Eastern Europe opened the doors to new possibilities of freedom, life chances and modernity.

Yet, Dahrendorf himself was among the first to warn the following:

The countries of East Central Europe have not shed their Communist system in order to embrace the capitalist system (whatever that is); they have shed a closed system in order to create an Open Society, the Open Society to be exact, for a while there can be many systems, there is only one Open Society. [...] The road to freedom is not a road from one system to another, but one that leads into the open space of infinite possible futures, some of which compete with each other. Their competition makes history³⁸.

He also predicted with extraordinary foresight that

The greatest risk is probably of another kind altogether. I hesitate to use the word, but it is hard to banish from one's thoughts: fascism. By that I mean the combination of a nostalgic ideology of community which draws harsh boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, with a new political monopoly of a man or a 'movement' and a strong emphasis on organization and mobilization rather than freedom of choice³⁹.

In the latest generation of books and articles analyzing the meaning of 1989 and the legacy of dissent, a focus on the open society aspiration in the events of 1989 is given by the historian Vladimir Tismaneanu in the article *The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences* (2009) and subsequently in the edited book *The End and the Beginning. The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History* (2012)⁴⁰.

Tismaneanu recalls:

The upheaval in East, and primarily in the central European core countries, represented a series of political revolutions that led to the decisive and irreversible transformation of the existing order. Instead of autocratic, one-

³⁶ C. Cerami, *Open Society, Academic Freedom and the Rule of Law: The Mission of Central European University (CEU), 1991-2021*, in *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie (NAD): Diritto, Istituzioni e Società*, No. 2, 2021.

³⁷ K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge Classics, 2002 (or. ed.: Routledge, 1945).

³⁸ R. Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Warsaw*, Times Books, 1990, 40-41.

³⁹ *Idem*, 111.

⁴⁰ V. Tismaneanu, B.C. Iacob (Eds.), *The End and the Beginning*, cit.

party systems, the revolutions created emerging pluralist policies. They allowed the citizens of the former ideologically driven despotisms (closed societies) to recover their main human and civil rights and to engage in the building of open societies⁴¹. Instead of centrally planned command economies, all these societies have embarked on creating market economies. In these efforts to meet the triple challenge (creating political pluralism, a market economy and a public sphere, i.e. civil society) some succeeded better and faster than others⁴².

In the 1990s the transition in Central and Eastern Europe was strongly regulated and encouraged by the process of joining the European Union. As long as the incentives of the accession process were operational, countries seeking to join the EU followed the path to an open society (the separation of powers, free media, a free civil society, constitutional guarantees of rights and the protection of minorities)⁴³. However, as Michael Ignatieff pointed out, «once the European accession process was completed, the EU gradually lost its ability to entrench open society institutions in enlargement countries. In its place, a new political form, combining single party domination of the political system, media controls, and rent-seeking corruption began to displace open society as the political goal of the ruling elites»⁴⁴. The moment of triumph of the open society, which characterized the end of the Cold War, started to show signs of crisis during the late 20th century and the 21st century⁴⁵.

The other idea linked to 1989 and the legacy of dissent thinking is related to the enhancement of human rights, which in turn is closely linked to the importance of the Helsinki Agreement⁴⁶. The provisions contained in the “third basket” of the Helsinki Agreement, which referred to human rights and the free movement of people and ideas, mobilized public opinion to put pressure on monitoring human rights violations. The connection between peace and human rights and their defense remains an important part of the legacy of 1989. The text revealed the emerging role of public opinion and non-state actors in the diplomacy of European states. Various initiatives of international civil society, from the protection of human rights to anti-globalist movements, can be considered a consequence of this approach⁴⁷.

The focus on collective action is important to understand the strength of the dynamics of the mobilization that occurred in national public spaces and their interactions with transnational processes. It is one of the keys to the “domino effect”

⁴¹ V. Tismaneanu, *The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences*, in *Contemporary European History*, cit., 277.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ M. Ignatieff, S. Roch (Eds.), *Rethinking Open Society*, cit.

⁴⁴ M. Ignatieff, *Rethinking Open Society*, michaelignatieff.ca/article/2018/rethinking-open-society/.

⁴⁵ C. Cerami, *Open Society, Academic Freedom and the Rule of Law*, cit., 133.

⁴⁶ J. Rupnik, *Senza il Muro*, cit., 119-120. The Helsinki Agreement, the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975, generated a new framework of relations between East and West in Europe. The principles included «respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief».

⁴⁷ J. Rupnik, *The World after 1989 and Exhaustion of Three Cycles*, cit., 11.

that overwhelmed Eastern European communism in autumn 1989. The mentality of the '89 generation was characterized by the aspiration to openness, distance, irony and derision towards the regime⁴⁸. Padraic Kenney presented 1989 as the «carnival of revolutions»⁴⁹. These elements help to explain why the 1989 revolution captured the Western imagination.

On the contrary, historian Stephen Kotkin argues that it was rather the “uncivilized society”, i.e., the communist ruling groups that gave up their political power following the economic and financial failure, which determined the events of 1989 and the end of the Cold War. According to Kotkin, 1989 seemed to be an implosion of the communist system rather than a democratic revolution. Kotkin’s analysis undoubtedly offers an alternative perspective, but we could probably think of a convergence of both factors: the crisis of the communist establishment created the conditions for a further growth of civil resistance in Central Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s⁵⁰. Civil resistance made a significant contribution to the largely peaceful end of the Cold War.

Among the best pieces that examine the multidirectional dynamics between elite decision making and the movements of dissent are the set of articles published by Mark Kramer between 2003 and 2007 in the *Journal of Cold War History*⁵¹.

The third volume of *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, provides a deep reflection on 1989 and the end of the Cold War, with some chapters focusing on the role of the European revolutions of 1989⁵².

The emerging studies that explore the notion of the “Long 1989” are of considerable interest; their main feature is to look beyond 1989 and to consider the legacy of 1989 dissent in the post-1989 paradigm. The perspective of these studies often goes beyond Europe, examining the international networks that inspired and transported civil resistance⁵³. Some recent studies look at the revolutions of 1989 with a global approach and analyze them both in terms of world historical impact and in terms of contribution to the shape of contemporary world politics⁵⁴.

If in Europe and the United States, the year 1989 is synonymous with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of democracy, in the eastern part of the world, five

⁴⁸ J. Rupnik, *Senza il Muro*, cit., 131.

⁴⁹ P. Kenney, *Carnival of Revolutions, Central Europe 1989*, Princeton University Press, 2002.

⁵⁰ S. Kotkin, *Uncivil Society. 1989 and The Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, Random House, 2010.

⁵¹ M. Kramer, *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)*, in *Journal of Cold War History*, No. 4, 2003; *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part II)*, in *Journal of Cold War History*, No. 4, 2004; *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part III)*, in *Journal of Cold War History*, No. 1, 2007.

⁵² M.P. Leffler, O.A. Westad (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. III, *Endings*, cit.

⁵³ P.H. Kosicki, K. Kunakhovich, *The Long 1989. Decades of Global Revolution*, CEU Press, 2019.

⁵⁴ See: K. Spohr, *Post Wall. Post Square*, cit.; J. Rupnik, (Ed.), *1989 as a Political World Event*, cit.; G. Lawson, C. Armbruster, M. Cox (Eds.), *The Global 1989: Continuity and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; D. Motadel, *Revolutionary World. Global Upheaval in the Modern Age*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

months before the events in Berlin, the Chinese military entered Tiananmen Square and crushed the pro-democracy movement⁵⁵. This event put China in contrast to the democratic tide of 1989 and marked the beginning of China's spectacular rise on the international stage as an economic and strategic superpower: it was the advent of global capitalism⁵⁶.

4. The “other” 1989. The Tiananmen Square Massacre and the new Chinese authoritarian state capitalism

The Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989 was one of the most important events in the contemporary history of communist China, and its consequences are still being felt. The iconic images of non-violent protest and civil resistance in Beijing in 1989 was immortalized by the media and international press from all over the world. In the West, the students became identified in the Cold War scenario with Western ideals of freedom, democracy and human rights, and the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre is marked as a crucial episode in China's recent past. On the contrary, the events in Tiananmen Square were cancelled from the official Chinese historical reconstruction⁵⁷.

To understand the importance of the Chinese civil resistance in 1989 and its consequences, we need to consider the internal and foreign dynamics of China in the 1980s. Throughout the 1980s, China's reform and opening process developed continuously. However, the “reform and opening” were highly unbalanced with a strong emphasis on economic initiatives and the absence of political and social reforms. Meanwhile, the Chinese society was also changing⁵⁸. As pointed out by the historian Chen Jian, this highly imbalanced trajectory was one of the most important domestic causes of the Tiananmen tragedy in 1989 in Beijing⁵⁹.

Starting in late 1986, students from several major cities in China held demonstrations for political reforms, the resignation of government leaders and against corruption, but the protests escalated in 1989. As recalled by the historian Martin K. Dimitrov, «the April-June 1989 events represented the most serious threat to the hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949»⁶⁰. Everything picked up speed with the death of Hu Yaobang, the popular reform-minded Chinese leader, who, two years earlier, had been cashiered from his post as general secretary of the Chinese

⁵⁵ G. Rachman, *Beijing, Berlin and the Two 1989s*, in *Financial Times*, 3 June 2019.

⁵⁶ J. Rupnik, *Senza il Muro*, cit., 138.

⁵⁷ K. Spohr, *Post Wall. Post Square*, cit.; M.K. Dimitrov, *European Lessons for China: Tiananmen 1989 and beyond*, in P.H. Kosicki, K. Kunakhovich, *The Long 1989. Decades of Global Revolution*, CEU Press, 2019; C. Jian, *Tiananmen and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, cit.

⁵⁸ A greater intellectual fervor, more travels abroad and a new cultural vivacity clashed with the absence of political liberalization, an increasing social inequality and the widespread corruption among party and government officials.

⁵⁹ C. Jian, *China and the Cold War after Mao*, in M.P. Leffler, O.A. Westad (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. III, *Endings*, cit.

⁶⁰ M.K. Dimitrov, *European Lessons for China*, cit.

Communist Party for being too liberal and too open to the student pro-democracy movement. On April 15, 1989, Hu Yaobang died in Beijing. In the weeks after his death, thousands of students from Beijing campuses gathered in Tiananmen Square. By honoring Hu, the students expressed their disappointment in the absence of political liberalization, denouncing growing social inequality, nepotism and corruption and demanding freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law⁶¹.

Although the underlying causes of the Tiananmen Square events were mostly domestic, it is appropriate to place such events in the context of the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, which culminated with Gorbachev's visit to China in May, 15-18, 1989⁶². To this regard, the historian Kristina Spohr correctly points out:

Gorbachev's visit could seal the reconciliation of the two largest communist nations at a time when both were undergoing profound political and economic changes. It can be said that normalization took place at a time when both socialist countries were studying how to approach capitalism⁶³.

Normalization was completed when Gorbachev held talks with Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng. These talks occurred against the backdrop of large-scale protest in Tiananmen Square. Gorbachev's visit to Beijing undoubtedly had a strong impact on the conduct of the Chinese prodemocratic movement. Starting on May 13, two days before Gorbachev's arrival in the capital, a thousand university students from all around China began a hunger strike at Tiananmen Square, which later became a mass occupation of this space in the center of Beijing. Kristina Spohr highlights that «the Soviet leader's visit was a pivotal moment for the young Chinese protestors. Gorbachev represented to them everything the Chinese leader was not: a democrat, a reformer, and a changemaker»⁶⁴. The fact that these two events happened at the same time gave international visibility to the protest of the Chinese prodemocratic movement and ensured that it would be widely covered by the international media⁶⁵. The hunger strikers gained the support of tens of millions of other citizens. However, the Chinese party decided not to listen to them.

Deng waited for Gorbachev to leave Beijing before dealing with the students. On May 20, martial law was declared in Beijing, but the demonstrators did not give up and the students used techniques of non-violent resistance. Exasperated that the protests had been going on for over a month, Deng ordered the use of force to commence on the night of June 3, 1989⁶⁶. Chinese state security forces opened fire on student-led demonstrators in the area around Tiananmen Square and hundreds

⁶¹ K. Spohr, *Post Wall. Post Square*, cit.

⁶² C. Jian, *China and the Cold War after Mao*, cit.

⁶³ K. Spohr, *Post Wall. Post Square*, cit.

⁶⁴ *Idem*.

⁶⁵ M.K. Dimitrov, *European Lessons for China*, cit., 66.

⁶⁶ A.J. Nathan, *The New Tiananmen Papers. Inside the Secret Meeting That Changed China*, in *Foreign Affairs*, No. 4, 2019, 3.

of people were killed over the next 24 hours. By the morning of June 4, the square had been cleared of protesters⁶⁷.

The world was stunned by the Tiananmen Square tragedy. Deng justified his actions by stating that a peaceful and stable environment was needed for China to continue along its path to reform, with the aim of modernizing and opening up to the capitalist world. Meanwhile, the country's traumatic battle for democracy had been immortalized by the international media. As well as the reports of civilian deaths, iconic images emerged of the crackdown that were used by reformers around the world as symbols of China's lost 1989⁶⁸.

After this, the Chinese leadership started to draw conclusions from the Tiananmen events⁶⁹. This process culminated in the Fourth Plenum of the Thirteenth Central Committee, which took place on June 23-24, 1989. It called for strengthening party unity, improving ideological work and resisting western influence. The Chinese Communist regime survived the shockwaves of 1989.

The political crisis produced by the student movement of spring 1989 had a profound impact on the direction of the economic reforms and the structuring of Chinese capitalism with global consequences⁷⁰. The economic reform was relaunched after 1992. In spring 1992, Deng went on a "Southern Tour" to establish the importance of the market economy in China. As pointed out by Chian Jian, «what has followed is China's rapid economic growth – despite stagnation in the country's political democratization – in the last decade of the twentieth century and entering the twenty-first century»⁷¹. China's position on the international stage has today established itself as an economic and strategic superpower, but it neglects human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

More than three decades later, China is still committed to single party rule and its leadership is still guided by the lessons it learned from Tiananmen. The consequences of 1989 continue to shape the politics of both Central and Eastern Europe and China⁷².

⁶⁷ A.J. Nathan, *Tiananmen at 30. How 1989 Shapes China Today*, in *Foreign Affairs Anthology Series*, 2019, 1.

⁶⁸ K. Spohr, *Post Wall. Post Square*, cit., 47-55.

⁶⁹ A.J. Nathan, P. Link (Eds.), *The Tiananmen Papers: The Chinese Leadership's Decision to Use Force against Their Own People – in Their Own Words*, Public Affairs, 2001. For China, the Tiananmen Papers are the closest approximations of an archival source about the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989. However, the authenticity of some of them is yet to be confirmed, therefore caution is needed on the part of historians in using these sources. See M.K. Dimitrov, *European Lessons for China*, cit.

⁷⁰ J.F. Huchet, *1989 and the Advent of an Authoritarian State Capitalism in China*, in J. Rupnik, *1989 as a Political World Event*, cit., 169. See also J. Brown, *June Fourth. The Tiananmen Protests and Beijing Massacre of 1989*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

⁷¹ C. Jian, *Tiananmen and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, cit., 98.

⁷² M.K. Dimitrov, *European Lessons for China*, cit., 86.

5. Globalization and the Digital Revolution: Civil Resistance in the Post-1989 Order

In a historical reconstruction of civil resistance in the post-Cold War, we cannot overlook the socio-economic changes that characterized the international system in the last decade of the 20th century. The years following the end of the Cold War were strongly marked by two disruptive processes in the international scenario: “globalization” and the “technological/digital revolution”. New economic and social dynamics have created unexplored prospects for growth, innovation and well-being, but, at the same time, they have led to the emergence of economic, cultural and social inequalities. The “technological revolution”⁷³ determined a set of innovations that radically changed the distribution of work in society, the mode of production of large industries, the forms of communication, and the character of scientific knowledge⁷⁴. Yuval Noah Harari recalls that in the 1990s the Internet was the factor that changed the world more than any other. This revolution has contributed to creating a new world, has caused a rift between hierarchies, and has elaborated a new vision of man, citizen and global society⁷⁵. As Francis Fukuyama points out, «the 1990s saw the birth of the global Internet which was almost universally touted at that time as offering help and support to aspiring democrats worldwide. The internet’s model for distributed computing and communication seemed bound to upend existing authoritarian hierarchies and to spread information – and thus power – to a much broader range of people»⁷⁶.

Furthermore, during the 1990s the processes of globalization favored the extension and increased the weight of transnational networks that involved both states and civil society. Nation states increased their presence in multilateral and transnational, military (NATO), financial (IMF, WB), trade (WTO) and supranational (EU) organizations, and their sovereignty over many economic and political issues was transferred to these global arenas. As pointed out by Alain Touraine, for the nation states it became easier to attribute the responsibility for possible failures to international and supranational organizations, which thus became the object of the greatest criticism from civil society. Citizens felt the “democratic deficit” with increasing unease, and the excesses of a growing process of globalization⁷⁷.

Gradually, the 1990s showed their ambiguity and the contradictions were destined to emerge, as well as the excesses of capitalism and the presence of strong economic and social inequalities on a global level⁷⁸. In the late 1990s, various

⁷³ D. Reynolds, *Science, Technology and the Cold War*, in M.P. Leffler, O.A. Westad (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. III, *Endings*, cit.

⁷⁴ E. Di Nolfo, *Dagli imperi militari agli imperi tecnologici. La politica internazionale dal XX secolo a oggi*, Editori Laterza, 2013, 375.

⁷⁵ Y.N. Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Random House, 2018, 23-24.

⁷⁶ F. Fukuyama, *30 Years of World Politics: What Has Changed?*, cit., 18.

⁷⁷ A. Touraine, *What Is Democracy?*, Westview Press, 1997.

⁷⁸ The economic liberalism gradually turned into what is labeled as “neoliberalism”. The ongoing debate on the meaning and evolution of “neoliberalism” is wide-ranging and multifaceted and goes

citizen networks and public protest movements around the world began to unite in what became known as the *Global Justice Movement* (GJM)⁷⁹, a global movement against the “neoliberal capitalist economic model”⁸⁰. It is no coincidence that the protest started in the United States⁸¹. The movement broke into the mass protests that led to the collapse of the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations in Seattle on November 30, 1999⁸². The third ministerial session of the WTO was taking place to start a new round of negotiations for further liberalization of the markets, in particular on investments and public services⁸³. The conference closed without any significant results, mainly due to the outcry caused by the protest of more than 700 organizations and about 60 thousand people who took to the streets of Seattle protesting against the conduct of the negotiations. The movement denounced a form of degeneration of the market economy, resulting from the hegemony of the “neoliberal economic model”, to the detriment of the defense of social rights. The Seattle movement later became known as “the movement of movements”; it encompassed a wide range of movements, not only for geographic distribution, but also for the issues addressed: the environmental issue, workers’ rights, criticism of international financial institutions and global economic and political management organizations. The movement demanded greater social justice and greater democratic participation, but also environmental protection and respect for human dignity, including equal access opportunities and chances of life⁸⁴.

beyond the aims of this essay. However, it is enough to mention here that the concept of “neoliberalism” is often abused or used inappropriately. It should be correctly used to describe a school of economic thought, often associated with the University of Chicago or the Austrian School, and economists like Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, George Stigler, Friedrich Hayek and others, who criticized the role of the state in the economy and emphasized free markets and individual freedom. The best guarantee of preserving an “open society” was to minimize the state’s interference in the economy and society. These economists and thinkers provided an intellectual framework for the pro-market and anti-statist policies pursued by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s. See: F. Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, Profile Books, 2022, 19-20.

⁷⁹ See the website of the GJM: globaljusticemovement.org/.

⁸⁰ For an in-depth analysis on the Global Justice Movement see: D. Della Porta (Ed.), *Global Justice Movement: Cross-national and Transnational Perspectives*, Routledge, 2007; D. Della Porta, *Democracy in Social Movements: Theories and Practice Within the Global Justice Movement*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; D. Della Porta, *Meeting Democracy: Power and Deliberation in Global Justice Movements*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

⁸¹ The United States in those years was an expression of the “technological empire”, in terms of economic strength, as the fulcrum of finance and world trade and as a protagonist in the advancement of research, but they were also the economic and political expression of the so-called “neoliberalism”. See: E. Di Nolfo, *Dagli imperi militari agli imperi tecnologici*, cit., 375-377.

⁸² A. Warner, *A Brief History of the Anti-Globalization Movement*, in *International and Comparative Law Review*, No. 2, 2005. Since Seattle, every major international summit has been accompanied by counter-summits and protests around the world.

⁸³ D. Della Porta, *I new global*, Il Mulino, 2003. The WTO at the time was promoting a strong neoliberal agenda for a progressive expansion of trade liberalization.

⁸⁴ C. Flesher Fominaya, *Social Movements and Globalization. How Protests, Occupations and Uprising Are Changing the World*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Meanwhile, two books were destined

After the post-1989 euphoria, the globalized world began to show a dark side of social unease, precariousness and marginalization. Gradually, the difficulty emerged, even in Europe, of “squaring the circle” in reconciling economic well-being, social cohesion and political freedom⁸⁵.

The post-1989 paradigm has been challenged during the new century. The attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September, 2001, an expression of a new international terrorism, set in motion processes that weakened the liberal order of democracy and the rule of law. In Western democracies, the terrorist attacks undermined trust in open borders and open institutions⁸⁶.

The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 constituted a crucial challenge to the post-Cold War international order and was among the main causes of a new and overwhelming wave of protests and global dissent that characterized the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. The financial crisis led to a general loss of confidence in the financial sector and political classes, caused growing economic inequality, rising unemployment and widespread feelings of economic insecurity and pessimism about the future. The global crisis fueled new alliances between a wide range of social movements, in a context of declining trust in political elites and institutions in democratic contexts, and a demand for democracy in more authoritarian contexts: an epochal wave of dissent began.

6. *Beyond the legacy of 1989? From the Arab Spring to the Climate Movements: A New Generation of Dissent*

The magazine *Time* chose “The Protester” as person of the year for 2011. The cycle of protests that began in 2011 – “The Global Wave of Protest” – played an important role in the evolution of the contemporary international system. The phenomenon had an epochal significance, and this was due both to the dynamic nature of the protests – with the presence of millions of individuals who spontaneously mobilized in a rapid succession of events – and to the geographical extension – from the streets of Madrid to the squares of Cairo, New York, Istanbul, Santiago, Kiev and many more. Some main cycles of protests can be identified, starting in 2011: the so-called “Arab Spring” in the Middle East and North Africa, the Indignados movement in Spain and Europe, and Occupy Wall Street in the United States.

The term “Arab Spring” is certainly controversial but remains the most widespread, although other expressions such as “Arab revolts” or “Arab uprisings”

to have a strong impact in the debate on globalization and were often cited by peaceful protest movements: *No Logo* by Canadian journalist and activist Naomi Klein, a strong attack on multinational companies, and *Globalization and its Discontents* by economist Joseph Stiglitz, a critique of some aspects of globalization, and in particular of the role played by the International Monetary Fund.

⁸⁵ R. Dahrendorf, *Economic Opportunity, Civil Society and Political Liberty*, in *Development and Change*, No. 2, 1996.

⁸⁶ C. Cerami, *Open Society, Academic Freedom and the Rule of Law*, cit., 133.

are preferred. “Arab Spring” refers to the wave of public protest movements and civil resistance that took place from the end of 2010 in Tunisia and then spread to Egypt and throughout North Africa and part of the Middle East: Algeria, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, etc⁸⁷. What took place in the Arab World was a revolutionary wave, both in temporal and spatial terms⁸⁸. The literature relating to the protests that took place in the various Muslim countries is vast and articulated⁸⁹. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the specific dynamics of the Arab uprisings. The main aim is to provide an overview of the phenomenon and focus on some themes that characterized it.

Protest movements in the Muslim world were the expression of both a strong economic and social malaise and a widespread need for greater democratic freedoms. At first, the rebellion against corrupt and incapable regimes or governments emerged. The main body of the protests consisted of young middle-class people from urban centers, with high levels of unemployment. This is mainly the generation born between the mid-eighties and nineties. In the initial stages of all the protests, there was a precise and conscious choice of using non-violent methods. The prevailing requests did not have an ideological connotation but a pragmatic one. This new wave of dissent is not attracted by any particular ideology. The new generation calls for debate, freedom, democracy, good governance and human rights. Most of the movements did not have a formal leadership structure; after the immediate phase of the protest this determined the scarce ability to transform themselves into political parties capable of governing change. The appeal of democracy is the political consequences of a process of social and cultural changes in the Arab societies, which is part of the globalization process and digital revolution⁹⁰. As Manuel Castells recalls, in the uprisings of the Arab world, the world of “new media” played a fundamental role along with traditional media⁹¹. Social networks had a strong impact in collaborating with some satellite TV channels such as CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera. All this, together with the widespread use of mobile telephones gave the protests of the Arab world a revolutionary connotation, with new characteristics compared to the past and with a capacity for dissemination, narration and rapid communication, therefore often making them

⁸⁷ A. Roberts, *Civil Resistance and the Fate of the Arab Spring*, in A. Roberts, M.J. Willis, R. McCarthy, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring*, cit.

⁸⁸ J.L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprising*, in D. Motadel, *Revolutionary World*, cit., 244.

⁸⁹ C. Merlini, O. Roy (Eds.), *Arab Society in Revolt: The West's Mediterranean Challenge*, Brookings Institute Press, 2012; A. Roberts, M.J. Willis, R. McCarthy, T. Garton Ash (Eds.), *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring*, cit.; S. Lacroix, J.P. Filiu (Eds.), *Revisiting the Arab Uprisings: The Politics of a Revolutionary Moment*, Oxford University Press, 2018; G. Kepel, *Uscire dal caos. Le crisi nel Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2019 (or. ed.: *Sortir du chaos. Les crises en Méditerranée et au Moyen-Orient*, Editions Gallimard, 2018).

⁹⁰ O. Roy, *The Arab Four Seasons. When an Excess of Religion Leads to Political Secularization*, in J. Rupnik (Ed.), *1989 as a Political World Event*, cit., 117.

⁹¹ M. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Polity Press, 2015, xxvii.

unpredictable⁹². At the same time, authoritarian governments have blocked the use of social media or have used information about citizens available via the Internet to strengthen security and control systems. The question of using “Big Data” in politics began to emerge, both in democratic and non-democratic governments, with increasing possibilities for control, manipulation and coercion.

As pointed out by Oliver Roy, there are some common points between 1989 and the Arab Spring: the system crumbled from inside under the pressure of peaceful protest movements; the upheavals touched different countries belonging to the same political space and culture and the “domino effect” played an important role. According to Roy, 1989 represented a sort of pattern of a peaceful and popular upheavals and had just shown that “You can do it”⁹³.

Interpreting the fate of the Arab Spring and its lessons for civil resistance is a difficult task. The success of some of the movements in early 2011 encouraged the attractive idea of a “domino effect”, but the results were often dramatic, with interaction between nonviolent demonstrators and various forms of power, including military strength⁹⁴. The results of the protests often led to a dimension that was not desired by the movements themselves. Many political authorities lost their role, some dictators fled, new political actors and power groups emerged. However, there were also many failures, and, after the initial optimistic phase, there were some tragic results in Egypt, Libya and Syria, with a growing wave of fundamentalists. According to Adam Roberts, the main lesson of the Arab Spring is the following: «Bringing in a new constitutional order in societies with deep divisions and little experience of constitutional democracy is a complex and multifaceted task [...]. The absence of precondition for peaceful political transition is a key part of the troubles of the Arab Spring»⁹⁵. This is one of the main differences between the Arab Spring and the European democratic revolutions of 1989. Furthermore, Central and Eastern European countries were able to count on the fundamental support of the European Union to initiate and complete a peaceful and epochal process of democratic transition. This aspect should never be overlooked.

Meanwhile in Europe, in May 2011 demonstrators occupied the central square of Madrid, Spain. This initiated the Indignados movement, a great anti-austerity mobilization, which arose from growing economic difficulties of broad social classes. The protest in Spain was characterized by a strong need for social justice, especially in terms of greater equality and better working and welfare conditions⁹⁶. In September 2011, it was the United States’ turn, with the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS). Activists occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City to denounce the abuses of financial capitalism, the excesses of market economy and economic and social inequalities. The OWS movement inspired activists not only in the

⁹² A. Roberts, *Civil Resistance and the Fate of the Arab Spring*, cit., 274-277.

⁹³ O. Roy, *The Arab Four Seasons*, cit., 114.

⁹⁴ A. Roberts, *Civil Resistance and the Fate of the Arab Spring*, cit., 284.

⁹⁵ *Idem*, 319.

⁹⁶ C. Flesher Fominaya, *Social Movements and Globalization*, cit., 166-177.

United States but also in other parts of the world and acquired a global dimension. It had some inevitable similarities with the previous GJM movement, but the financial crisis of 2008 created a different context from in the past, in a climate of greater concern, restlessness and uncertainty.

The peaceful protests continued throughout the second decade of the 21st century. In 2019, there were an unprecedented number of nonviolent antigovernmental movements. Protests, strikes and demonstrations happened at the same time in many different countries⁹⁷.

Among the challenges of this new generation of civil resistance there is also the environmental battle for the defense of the planet. This new generation represented by civil disobedience movements such as *Extinction Rebellion*⁹⁸ or *Fridays for Future*⁹⁹, especially since 2019, has organized regular demonstrations against current environmental politics and to raise public awareness on the climate and ecological emergency. The manifesto of the *Extinction Rebellion* movement goes straight to the point: «It's time. This is our last chance to do anything about the global climate and ecological emergency. Now or never, we need to be radical. We need to rise up. And we need to rebel»¹⁰⁰. The protests on the climate and environmental emergency are influencing the choices of the rulers and are destined to have a strong impact on global governance¹⁰¹.

Civil resistance in the 21st century has built a new narrative of dissent, it has created new areas of contestation, it has given a new role and a new centrality to women (see the #MeToo movement), it has brought about a new generation of racial strife (see Black Lives Matter), it has fueled a renewed sensitivity towards the climate and environmental emergency, and it has created new opportunities of confrontation with other forms of power. The recent protests in Iran are being led, visibly and persistently, by women and are seen as the most serious challenge to the Iranian authorities in decades¹⁰².

The movements of public protest and civil resistance over the last decade have marked a new stage in the development of social mobilization, strengthening the transnational dimension, enhancing digital and technological communication tools and focusing on the globality of issues related to social inequalities, precariousness, injustice, good governance and human rights to the environment. Erica Chenoweth correctly points out:

⁹⁷ E. Chenoweth, *The Future of Nonviolent Resistance*, in *Journal of Democracy*, No. 3, 2020.

⁹⁸ «*Extinction Rebellion* is a decentralised, international and politically non-partisan movement using non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency». See the website: rebellion.global/it/.

⁹⁹ See the website: fridaysforfuture.org/.

¹⁰⁰ *Extinction Rebellion, This is not a Drill*, Penguin, 2019, 1.

¹⁰¹ In 2019 another book by Naomi Klein was destined to have a strong impact on the debate on the climate crisis: *On Fire. The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

¹⁰² Z. Marks, F. Haghghatjoo, E. Chenoweth, *Iran's Women on the Frontlines*, in *Foreign Affairs* online edition, 31 October 2022.

The massive growth of civil resistance campaigns around the world is therefore both a sign of success and a sign of failure. The success is that so many people have come to believe that they can confront injustice using strategic nonviolent methods, while fewer are turning to armed action. The failure is that so many injustices remain – and so few institutions are equipped to address them – that the demand for civil resistance has increased¹⁰³.

It is a multifaceted phenomenon that is still being defined, and many questions require further investigation. Nevertheless, the role of a new generation of women and young people should not be underestimated and it is destined to have a strong impact on global international policies.

7. Conclusion

The civil resistance movements of the 21st century have created their own aesthetic and visual measure. As Timothy Garton Ash pointed out, «the history of civil resistance is also art history. The logos, flags, symbols, improvised posters, street performance, music, slogans and graffiti of these movements are more genuinely Pop Art than Pop Art ever was»¹⁰⁴. The square provides a stage for interaction, improvisation and creativity, an art scene for viewing the public space that is open to everyone. Irony, sarcasm and satire often offer new tools to broaden consensus. The musical dimension, dance, painting and the artistic expression of one's body give the sense of active participation and creative energy. The citizens who have taken to the streets in recent years have made a mark in the collective memory, but also in the aesthetic representation of the rebellion, because the need for revolt can also be, in part, an aesthetic requirement¹⁰⁵. Art can contribute to the construction of new subjectivities; it can make visible in dissent what consent tends to obscure and cancel¹⁰⁶.

Reconstructing in a historical perspective some crucial moments of civil resistance from the end of the Cold War to the 21st century means analyzing the legacy of 1989 and exploring the evolution and impact of dissent in the post-1989 international system. This essay focused on three main long-term issues.

1. The first aspect can be summarized as the rise and decline of the post-1989 liberal cycle of civil resistance in Europe, from the triumph of the “open society” ideal to the crisis of democracy and the emergence of “illiberal democracies”.

¹⁰³ E. Chenoweth, *The Future of Nonviolent Resistance*, cit., 73.

¹⁰⁴ T. Garton Ash, *A Century of Civil Resistance*, cit., 382.

¹⁰⁵ In 2013, “Everyday rebellion. The Art of Change” by the Iranian brothers Arman and Aras Riahi was released: a documentary about creative forms of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience worldwide. Everyday Rebellion was a tribute to the creativity of the nonviolent resistance and a story about the peaceful protest acted out by people from Spain, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Ukraine, USA, UK and Serbia. See: everydayrebellion.net/the-project/.

¹⁰⁶ C. Cerami, *Creatività e dissenso nel XXI secolo. L'arte violata della ribellione*, in *Mente Politica*, 2 April 2015, <https://www.mentepolitica.it/articolo/la-arte-violata-della-ribellione/435>.

The revolutions of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe allowed the citizens of the former ideologically driven despotisms (closed societies) to recover their main human and civil rights and to engage in the building of open societies¹⁰⁷. In the immediate post-Cold War scenario, liberalism, democratic politics, human rights and the free market seemed the “winning formula”. In Central and Eastern Europe, all three objectives of the triple transition (democracy, the market economy and entry into the European Union) were achieved at the beginning of the 21st century. Nevertheless, once the European accession process was completed, the EU gradually lost its ability to consolidate the institutions of the open society in the new member states¹⁰⁸. The 2008 economic crisis also had a strong impact in Central and Eastern Europe and the countries considered “success stories” in the transition and consolidation of liberal democracy (Hungary and Poland) began to challenge the institutions of the rule of law and proposed an illiberal “counter-revolution” in Europe¹⁰⁹. The post-1989 liberal cycle of civil resistance seems to be losing its driving force and the key values of the open society (freedom, open borders, multicultural and social tolerance, democracy and the rule of law) suffered a severe attack. The new enemies of the open society emerged: the illiberal democracies of Eastern Europe, the populists of Western Europe and the one-party autocracies of Russia and China¹¹⁰.

2. Looking to the “other 1989”, the 1989 democracy movement and its suppression marked a watershed in China’s contemporary history. The political crisis produced by the Chinese student movement of 1989 and the collapse of the USSR had a profound impact on the direction of the economic reforms and the structuring of Chinese capitalism¹¹¹. The analysis of 1989 and its aftermath are crucial for understanding the current face of Chinese capitalism and its global consequences. China’s position on the international stage has today established itself as an economic and strategic superpower, but it neglects human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Thirty years on, media and online references to the protests and their suppression are still banned in the PRC.

The events in Hong Kong with the failure of the Umbrella Revolution in 2014 and the repression of the 2019-2020 protests are an example of the Chinese authoritarian approach. China has recently become an attractive model for other authoritarian regimes due to its ability to learn from Central and East European collapses. This is especially true for Putin, who is searching for a formula that will ensure the long-term resilience of his authoritarian rule in Russia¹¹².

¹⁰⁷ V. Tismaneanu, *The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences*, cit., 277.

¹⁰⁸ M. Ignatieff, *Introduction*, in M. Ignatieff, S. Roch (Eds.), *Rethinking Open Society. New Adversaries and New Opportunities*, cit., 9.

¹⁰⁹ J. Rupnik, *Senza il Muro*, cit., 213.

¹¹⁰ M. Ignatieff, *Rethinking Open Society*, michaelignatieff.ca/article/2018/rethinking-open-society/.

¹¹¹ J.F. Huchet, *1989 and the Advent of an Authoritarian State Capitalism in China*, in J. Rupnik, *1989 as a Political World Event.*, cit., 169.

¹¹² M.K. Dimitrov, *European Lessons for China*, cit., 85.

The Chinese activist Wu'er Kaixi, who is among the symbolic faces of the Tiananmen revolt and who is now in exile in Taiwan, was interviewed on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. He pointed out that the awful Chinese pact that provided for economic growth in exchange for political submission has led to an even more totalitarian, capitalistic, dystopic and hyper-technological regime, which suppresses any demand for freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law¹¹³. What is happening in China today in the fight against COVID-19 is a dramatic and Orwellian example¹¹⁴.

The Chinese people's frustration with their government's "zero COVID" policy has reached a tipping point. Starting on November 26, 2022 protests erupted across multiple cities, with people taking to the streets and demanding an end to harsh lockdowns¹¹⁵. The protest that began due to the exhausting restrictions implemented by the Chinese government for Covid-19, gradually turned into an attack against the authoritarian political system. The protests took on a widespread connotation among different social groups and gradually spread to many cities. The request for freedom had not been manifested in China in such a strong way since the events of 1989 and the calls and references to that dramatic moment in Chinese history were inevitable. However, China's recent demonstrators do not yet constitute a revolutionary force. Xi Jinping's response will likely determine the course of events. As pointed out by Yuen Yuen Ang, «perhaps the most optimistic interpretation of recent events is that the seeds of meaningful democracy in China have been scattered and cannot be destroyed»¹¹⁶.

3. Finally, the digital and technological revolution has had a huge impact on the evolution of civil resistance and on the relationship between power politics and dissent. In the 1980s, in Central-Eastern Europe, a critical role was played by "the radios" – Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty – both originally conceived as "weapons" of ideas and information. As recalled by Barbara Flank, the radios played a critical role in broadcasting back to states throughout the region what was actually going on in their societies and provided constant fora for reporting rebellion, dissent, defection, and dissatisfaction. The BBC and other public broadcasters were also important in disseminating texts and ideas as well as airing interviews and special programs¹¹⁷.

Globalization and the digital revolution since the 1990s have influenced civil resistance and have changed its language and methods of communication. The

¹¹³ G. Modolo, *L'attivista Wu'er Kaixi, reduce di piazza Tienanmen: «Può succedere ancora, i cinesi vogliono libertà»*, in *La Repubblica*, 2 June 2022.

¹¹⁴ E. White, E. Olcott, *Covid in China: Xi's fraying relationship with the middle class*, in *Financial Times*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/8f4b6e8b-9b59-433e-b862-425c78a378b4>.

¹¹⁵ Y. Ang, *The Problem with Zero. How Xi's Pandemic Policy Created a Crisis for the Regime*, in *Foreign Affairs* online edition, 2 December 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/problem-zero-xi-pandemic-policy-crisis>; I. Johnson, *Xi Versus the Street. The Protests in China Could Herald a Turbulent New Era*, in *Foreign Affairs* online edition, 30 November 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/xi-versus-street>.

¹¹⁶ Y. Ang, *The Problem with Zero*, cit.

¹¹⁷ B.J. Falk, *Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe*, cit., 326.

1990s saw the birth of the global Internet, that seems to offer a new crucial and global support to aspiring democrats worldwide. Civil resistance also acquired a globalized and international character: public protest movements began to organize themselves beyond national borders, in transnational networks and international organizations to change or at least influence the global system. The increasing use of new technologies, the dizzying growth of new media, the development of non-state actors, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the influence of transnational protest movements seemed to offer non-governmental groups and citizens the chance to participate in international affairs that had been almost unknown in the past. As information and communication technologies spread, individuals had the perception of having more power¹¹⁸.

In the uprisings of the Arab world, the world of “new media” played a fundamental role along with traditional media¹¹⁹. Without a doubt, globalization and the digital revolution have provided new tools for civil resistance and have radically transformed communication models: the “virtual square” has joined the “real square” in the expression of dissent.

At the same time, however, the rise of “Big Data” in politics, allowed governments and large corporations to gather, organize, and instantly access nearly unlimited amounts of information about the preferences and behavior patterns of citizens. The possibilities for manipulation and even coercion is obvious, as is the threat thereby posed to the foundations of democracy¹²⁰. Private companies, such as Google and Facebook have begun to exercise monopolistic control over the Internet, controlling an extraordinary amount of information. In non-democratic countries, governments tend to monitor and enforce censorship in Internet usage. The case of China is the most emblematic. The Chinese Internet is deliberately managed with the goal of supporting China’s authoritarian government. The new battlefield of global civil resistance will likely be the fight against digital authoritarianism.

¹¹⁸ I. Krastev, *From Politics to Protest*, in *Journal of Democracy*, No. 4, 2014, 8.

¹¹⁹ M. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, cit., xxvii.

¹²⁰ I. Krastev, *From Politics to Protest*, cit., 9.