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TOPOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1989

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Historical consciousness, I sometimes think, works a bit like the rear-view mirror in an automobile. It wouldn't work to keep your eyes glued to the mirror all the time because you'd soon wind up in the ditch: maybe that's why professional historians tend not to make great statesmen. But an occasional glance to the rear can be helpful in determining what's coming up from behind, and that can be a useful thing for a driver or a nation to know. It makes a difference whether it's the geopolitical equivalent of an aging Volkswagen or a Mack truck. And every now and then, when your vehicle crests a ridge, the view to the rear can be breath-taking: you get a sense all at once of where you've been, if not always of what lies ahead.

The revolutionary year 1989 was one of those rare moments of topographic elevation. It is likely to be remembered, of course, as the year the Cold War finally ended. It was a year of astonishing images: of Soviet leaders being harangued on national television by members of a freely-elected parliament; of General Jaruzelski calmly inviting the Solidarity trade union -- which he had once declared illegal -- to take over the government of Poland; of Hungarians dismantling their barbed wire border fences and voting their communist party out of existence; of Alexander Dubcek returning in triumph to Prague and Vaclav Havel making the abrupt transition from prisoner to the presidency of Czechoslovakia; of Germans gleefully knocking holes in the Berlin Wall and strolling amiably through the Brandenburg Gate; of the "genius of the Carpathians," Nicolai Ceaucescu, and Madame Genius, being hooted down on the balcony of their own palace by once-docile Romanians and forced, literally, up against the wall. And, lest we forget, it was also a year that saw a Chinese leadership we had hitherto regarded as benign -- as if determined never

by, economic and political expansion at the expense of other peoples and polities of the earth."[1] This process extended through the middle of the 20th century, with World War II providing as clear a demonstration as one could ask for of how potent the combination of military with economic power can be in shaping world politics. The very term "superpower" that emerged from that conflict and that characterized some forty years of Cold War implied the interaction of military with economic power in a contest that was seen at the time as literally dividing the world, like Athens and Sparta or Rome and Carthage, into two hostile camps.

Or so it seemed at the time. But from our current vantage point of topographic elevation, though, we can now look back on the Cold War years and view them as something else again: as the point at which the 500 year-old connection between military and economic power as the chief determinant of influence in the world began to come apart.

Wars in the past had been regarded as something like sporting matches: one could compete, but without destroying the playing field, or the arena in which the competition was taking place, or the home you went back to after the contest was over. To be sure, anyone who had actually seen the physical damage wrought by World War I -- or by the American Civil War, for that matter -- would have had a more sober view of what war between modern industrial states is really like. But the memory of those great wars had not been sufficiently widespread, or sufficiently intense, to prevent another great war in the middle of this century; that war in turn gave us nuclear weapons, which is what I think really began this process of divorcing military from economic forms of influence.

The bomb was itself obviously the product of a link between industrial technology and military purpose, but once one got the bomb it was difficult to know

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[1]William H. McNeill, **The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A. D. 1000** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 143.

to move in the same direction as their Soviet rivals -- shooting down unarmed students in the streets of Beijing.

But these developments, however surprising, were only the surface manifestations of underlying trends that had been present for years without our noticing them. They were like the geologic outcroppings one sees along a highway: the strata can run for some distance beneath the ground, but it they have to come to the surface for us to notice them. And it required the topographic elevation 1989 provided to give us the vantage point from which we can now look back and see how we got to where we are. It is a good time to pause, for a moment, at the scenic overlook, and expand our historical consciousness by taking in the view.

From my own vantage point, I can see three long-term historical trends -- underlying geologic strata, if you will -- that came to the surface in 1989, and whose presence combined to produce the remarkable developments of that year. They are: (1) the divorce of military from economic capability as the chief source of influence in the world; (2) the collapse of authoritarian alternatives to liberalism; and (3) the revival of something approaching an international standard of what is considered to be acceptable behavior both internally and in world affairs. Let me discuss each of these, in turn.

The divorce of military from economic capability as a source of influence in world politics.

The history of the past 500 years has largely been one of Europe expanding its influence over most of the rest of the world through a mutually-reinforcing combination of economic expansion and military power. As the historian William McNeill has put it, Europe at the end of the 15th century launched itself "on a self-reinforcing cycle in which its military organization sustained, and was sustained

just what to do with it. Its effects represented a quantum jump in the level of violence nations could command: the retaliatory consequences on one's own home base had to be calculated, and even as early as the 1950s American officials were worrying about the large-scale ecological consequences of an all-out nuclear war. Nations were therefore reduced to threatening the use of the bomb, and as time passed and no one made good on them, the threats themselves became progressively less convincing, and therefore less frequent.

We are left, then, with the remarkable fact that tens of thousands of nuclear weapons have been produced since 1945, but not one has been used in anger since Nagasaki. More than that: not a single great power has gone to war with another great power, even with conventional weapons, since that time. This is not to say that the great powers have avoided all wars: as Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan certainly testify, great powers can still get sucked into wars with smaller powers; recurring Arab-Israeli wars and the recent Iran-Iraq war show that smaller powers can still go to war with one another. But compare the total absence of wars between great powers during the 45 years that have passed since 1945 with the frequency of such wars in the 45 years preceeding that date, and the effect of nuclear weapons becomes clear: the most powerful nations in the world in terms of industrial capacity have become the most constrained in their ability actually to use military force.

It is as if we and the Russians have replicated the evolutionary history of the giant moose: we have evolved a fearsome and intimidating set of horns to make each of us secure against the other, but now that we have them we find that they're always getting tangled up in the vines and bushes; the task of carrying them around all day leaves us with little energy for anything else; and we know that if we were ever to use them, we'd probably break our own necks. Meanwhile, rabbits and mice have been invading our pastures, eating up the grass, exhausting the water

supply, and reproducing like crazy. What is security anyway in such an environment, and which of the animals is best equipped to achieve it?

What happened during the 1980s, I think, is that we and the Russians finally began to realize how little advantage there is in being a moose. We saw how little security, or even freedom of action, we had bought by diverting such a large proportion of our productive facilities to the development and manufacture of increasingly sophisticated -- and increasingly costly -- forms of weaponry. For both sides, the turning point may well have been President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative: because it proved so difficult to show how the advantages of the system would outweigh the costs, the debate over SDI inside the United States caused people who had never questioned the assumption before now to question the argument that more military hardware would lead to greater security and influence in the world. But the effects were even more dramatic inside the Soviet Union, where something like 20% of the gross national product had been going for defense spending for decades, and where the result, quite literally, had been to bankrupt the country. The prospect now of having to compete with the super-efficient Americans on something like SDI -- the Russians have always tended to see us as super-efficient -- may well have been what pushed Moscow into a fundamental reassessment of what security is and how one gets it: the Gorbachev reforms largely flow from that reassessment.

Both Americans and Russians came to realize, in the 1980s, that the real victors in World War II may actually have been the Germans and the Japanese, precisely because their defeat in that conflict freed both states from the burden of providing exclusively for their own security. They were allowed to implement the divorce between military and economic capability that the advent of nuclear weapons suggested might be possible; as a result these two states appear on everyone's list of potential competitors to the United States and the Soviet Union in

the future, despite the fact that militarily both are substantially inferior to the currently dominant "super-powers."

We are left, then, with the conclusion that the path great powers have followed in seeking influence over the past 500 years -- the harnessing of economic capability in the pursuit of military strength -- no longer works; indeed it may well have reduced, rather than adding to, the influence of those nations that have followed that path since 1945. The nuclear revolution has altered the environment in which nations live by ruling out war as a viable option for great powers; as a result, those great powers who continue to prepare for war as if nothing had happened risk following the evolutionary path of the giant moose. It's enough to make anybody want to be a rabbit for a while, and that's part of the explanation for 1989.

Thedeclineofauthoritarianism.

The events of 1989 ought to give us a new perspective, as well, on a second scourge of the 20th century apart from great power war: this is the phenomenon of authoritarian government. Looking back now we can see that, despite being at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, fascism and communism had a lot in common. Both glorified the state at the expense of the individual; both accepted the proposition that there was such a thing as a "science" of politics which, if imposed from the top, could make governments work with far greater efficiency than if they relied on the messy and interminable procedures of democratic politics. And both ideologies, we can now see, were responses to the perceived failures of liberalism as it had developed in the 19th century: to problems growing out of the uneven distribution of wealth which the market system had produced, and to the strong sense of social and intellectual alienation that flowed from it.

Fascism, of course, disappeared from the scene as the result of World War II, a conflict that ideology and its advocates had foolishly provoked. Communism survived -- and for a time even prospered -- during the post-World War II era; its defeat came about more gradually and (thank goodness) more peacefully, with 1989 marking the culmination of that process.

Communism's defeat came about very much in the way George Kennan had predicted at the beginning of the Cold War in 1947: that if the West could only manage to contain Soviet expansionism, the Russians in time would come to see the unworkability of the system they had imposed on themselves and on their neighbors, and would take action to change it. To paraphrase Karl Marx himself, the "internal contradictions" of Marxism-Leninism would eventually cause that ideology to collapse from within.

Given what we now know about the weaknesses of the Soviet system, the interesting question is why it took so long for this to happen. Several reasons suggest themselves: (a) that command economies work all right during the initial stages of industrialization, and that it was not until the Soviet Union and China began to move beyond those stages that the deficiencies of Marxism-Leninism became apparent; (b) that the coincidence of decolonization with the onset of the Cold War gave the Soviet model an appeal in newly-independent Third World countries that it would not otherwise have had; (c) that the energy crisis in the West during the 1970s may have magnified the deficiencies of market economies and concealed -- for a time at least -- the deficiencies of command economies; and (d) that neither the Soviet Union nor China possessed effective mechanisms for changing existing policies once they were set, or for replacing aging leaders.

As a result, it was not until the year 1989 that a universal awareness of the superiority of free market economies -- and with it a sense of the triumph of political democracy -- actually dawned. The underlying topography had been pointing in

that direction for some time; but it was only in that year that the breakthrough to the surface of our political awareness took place.

But just what is it that we have become are of? What is it that now confirms so clearly the victory of capitalism and democracy over communism and authoritarianism? It is, I think, the realization that economic progress and centralized authority just do not mesh.

A fundamental assumption of Marxism-Leninism, after all, had been that hierarchy in politics would produce abundance in economics. Industrialization, Marx believed, required central planning; Lenin in turn specified the state as the provider of this service. The pre-industrial world of divided political authority and individual economic autonomy had no future, both men claimed, because the inexorable advance of technology -- shifts in the means of production, to use Marx's term -- left no other alternative.

Curiously, though, those who advance hypotheses about inexorable forces in history often conclude that history will stop with them. The founders of Marxism-Leninism were no exception, for having identified a powerful engine of historical change, they failed to allow for the possibility that it might lack a shut-off switch. Shifts in the means of production have indeed shaped economic, political, and social conditions, but with the passage of time it has become clear that the forces Marx identified and that Lenin sought to harness have turned both men's conclusions about politics upside down. Far from promoting centralization, the technology required to advance standards of living these days seems -- inexorably -- to discourage this tendency.

It used to be possible to modernize an economy by forcing one's citizens to produce goods and services according to a central plan: that, indeed, is how the Soviet Union created the industrial base that allowed it to defeat the Germans in World War II and to compete with the United States in the Cold War that followed.

But as the U.S.S.R. moved into a new phase of economic development in the 1960s and 1970s -- one that should have begun to benefit consumers -- it became clear that central planners could not respond fast enough to shifts in supply and demand where not just a few but thousands of producers and commodities were involved. Only old-fashioned self-regulating markets could do that, and only by means that were the antithesis of centralization, and therefore of planning. The situation became even worse in the 1980s as the computer revolution took hold: that technology thrives on individual initiative and an unconstrained flow of information, neither of which the hierarchical Soviet system was equipped to encourage.

Marx, it turned out, was right: underlying forces do shape society in important ways, and they are irreversible in their effects. The difficulty is that they have continued into an age Marx never envisaged, and as they have done so they have rewarded lateral rather than hierarchical forms of organization. The effect has been to put unprecedented pressures on those who run command economies either to make them work or to abolish them altogether. And since no one has discovered how to accomplish the first alternative, the second appears increasingly to be the only viable possibility.

But to dismantle a command economy is to allow individual autonomy: the price of prosperity is ultimately democracy. And because the trend away from centralization is so firmly based upon shifts in the means of production, even Marxist logic would suggest that it cannot now be reversed. By a supreme irony, the engine of history Marx described now appears to be propelling those nations that have embraced his ideology into their next historically-determined phase, which turns out to be liberal bourgeois democratic free-market capitalism, or something very close to it. Irreversible historical forces, it seems, can go around in circles, no

doubt causing dead revolutionaries to execute similar patterns of movement in their graves.

Revivingaglobalsenseofwhatisacceptableinternationalbehavior.

Historians of the 18th century have often looked back on that age, with a certain nostalgia, as one in which there existed something approximating an international standard of behavior for great powers. Each of them acknowledged the internal legitimacy of the others; and international law had begun to emerge, for the first time, as a significant force in world affairs. Wars, it is true, were frequent, and often fought over issues that would seem to us petty. But these were, for the most part, limited wars conducted with minimal losses of life and of resources: they did not result, as the wars of our own time have tended to do, in the annihilation of whole states or the destruction of entire peoples. Indeed some of these were conducted in such a genteel way that civilian populations were hardly aware of the fact that they were going on.

All of this changed with the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. War became an enterprise of the masses, not just the professional military elite; and with the democratization of politics that was associated with the collapse of the Old Regime, there arose as well the irresistible impulse of nationalism. War became not only larger in scale and longer in duration; it also became more brutal. Atrocities were committed that would have been unthinkable in an earlier age, sometimes against entire populations. The cause of victory became so important that the end came to justify the means, and that meant that few constraints survived on what states did to bring about the desired results.

Developments in technology as the 19th century wore on only reinforced this trend. The advent of steam-propelled vessels, of railroads, and of armaments whose

killing power exceeded that of their 18th century counterparts by quantum leaps -- all of this meshed with the intensifying forces of nationalism to bring about new standards of brutality in war that first became evident in the American Civil War, but that were reflected also in what might be called the European occupation of most of the rest of the world by the end of the century, and then, in turn and even more vividly, in the carnage of World War I.

The rise of totalitarian political systems after that conflict -- notably in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union -- intensified still further the trend toward brutality but linked it with a new kind of amorality that explicitly justified means in terms of ends: it was no accident that these two regimes not only cooperated to start World War II, but also presided over the two greatest episodes of mass murder of all time: Stalin's campaigns to collectivize agriculture and to purge his opponents, on the one hand, and Hitler's campaign to kill the Jews, on the other. The depths of cynicism reached by that time can well be summarized by Stalin's famous gibe: "How many divisions has the Pope?"

The victory for human rights that occurred in 1945 was a very narrow one, and one brought about only by the militarily-effective but morally-questionable tactic of enlisting the aid of one tyrant to kill another.

But from our current vantage point of topographic elevation, we can now see that World War II may well have marked the turning point in this long and depressing descent from 18th century standards of international morality. For the war itself was so brutal in its consequences that it shocked the international community into a new concern for human rights, a concern symbolized -- at least on paper -- in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights in 1948.

That declaration was not just paper, though; for there is reason to argue that moral considerations have increasingly come to influence the behavior of the great powers in the half century that has followed. Consider, for example, the

precedent the United States set by not using atomic weapons in the Korean War: the decision was based in part, to be sure, upon the absence of any very good targets, but the documents show that considerations of morality -- and certainly the extent to which it appeared advantageous to appear to be moral, played a role in it. Consider the rapidity with which the great European colonial empires disappeared after World War II: this happened not so much because the victims of imperialism gained new military or economic power, but rather because of the moral power that accrued to them as world opinion shifted against the whole idea of empire.

Consider the process of de-Stalinization inside the Soviet Union, which over time turned out to be nothing short of the dismantling, from within, of a police state, not so much because autocracy had proven inefficient at that time as because it was judged to have been immoral. Consider the growth of the civil rights movement inside the United States, as well as the other minority rights movements that have followed it. Consider the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, or the relative success of the Carter administration's human rights campaign in Latin America. And, finally, consider the most sweeping victory of all for human rights: the events of 1989 in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

To be sure, the process has not been consistent: witness the increasingly brutal Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, or the very different path -- compared to what was happening elsewhere in the world -- that events in China took in 1989. Still, the progress that has taken place since Stalin made his crack about the Pope is astonishing: not the least of the astonishments of 1989 was the pilgrimage that the current leader of the Soviet Union made a point of making to pay his respects, at the Vatican, to Pope John Paul II -- who is himself, and in the role he has played in Eastern Europe over the past decade, as convincing demonstration as anyone might need of why popes do not need divisions in the first place.

What appears to have happened here is another of these underlying shifts in historical patterns that have been going on for a long time, but that have only now become visible: it is that repression no longer represses. Repression always worked best when one could prevent all contact between those to be repressed and everyone else. But the means of communication have shifted, like the means of production: increasingly efficient and decreasingly expensive information technology makes it almost impossible to wall a nation off from what is happening in the rest of the world. As the experiences of China, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania all demonstrated in 1989, closed political borders have become open to ideas in ways even police states cannot prevent. The result has been to create a new kind of "domino" effect: the achievement of liberty in one country can cause repressive "dominos" to topple, or at least to wobble, elsewhere. The sheer impact of example, in an information age, has itself become an engine of history.

None of this means that all the uses of force have become obsolete. After all, the United States itself acted with unusual efficiency late in 1989 to depose General Noriega in Panama, and some have even argued that with the Cold War waning Washington will be more willing to do this kind of thing in the future. But there is a big difference between using forces to remove constraints on the popular will, on the one hand, and using forces to impose them, on the other. It is a sign of our times that no less a figure than the American Secretary of State commented, in an unguarded moment during the fighting in Romania, that the United States would not object if the Russians should intervene there to make certain that Ceaucescu did not regain control.

It does seem to be the case, though, that the instruments of repression have become about as unusable for the great powers in the Cold War era as the instruments of war were for them during the Cold War itself. And any effort to reverse that trend -- as the geriatrics who lead China are discovering -- is likely to be

an uphill battle indeed. Imagine for a moment what must be going through the minds of an extraordinarily talented group of Chinese young people as they endure month after month of "political re-education" classes. Any parent who has ever attempted the "re-education" of a rebellious teen-ager should be able to tell you how that one is going to come out.

Conclusion.

We're not attempting political re-education in the Contemporary History program at Athens, thank goodness, but we are trying to get our students to see that there are certain very practical advantages to developing an awareness of subterranean forces in history, and of the ways in which they can suddenly pop to the surface, like outcroppings along a highway.

Traditional history doesn't do this, because -- by definition -- it doesn't concern itself with the present. Journalism can't do it because of the pressure of covering day-to-day developments. There's a real gap that lies in between current events as they appear in the newspapers and on television, on the one hand, and history as it's normally taught in our high schools and colleges, on the other. That's the gap our program is trying to fill.

The last thing we would claim is that we can predict the future -- that we can tell you what lies over the next ridge. We're all subject to running into unexpected potholes, or even -- if you're driving in the right part of the country -- a giant moose now and then. But we may be able to tell you something about where you've been, about what direction you're going in, and about what other drivers have done when confronted with unanticipated potholes, or meese. Those, we think, are useful things for a driver -- or anyone else, for that matter -- to know.

For history, after all, is just accumulated experience. And since we all draw on our own personal experiences in coping with the unforeseen, it only makes sense that expanding that experience as widely as possible will better equip one, whether in government, or business, or other fields of endeavor, to perform that task. We claim, in short, no crystal ball. But a good rear-view mirror may be the next best thing.