



FALL OF COMMUNISM: THE TRIUMPH OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY?

Events: The collapse of communism was precipitated by a series of revolutions that took place during the momentous year of 1989. The first popular challenge to a communist regime in 1989 was the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, China, which began in April, but were suppressed by a military crackdown on 4 June. Events in Eastern Europe nevertheless gathered momentum the following day, as Solidarity, the newly-legalized independent trade union movement, swept the board in parliamentary elections, leading, by September, to the formation of the first non-communist government in the Eastern bloc. In October, the Hungarian parliament adopted legislation providing for multiparty elections and, eventually, the establishment of a second non-communist government. Pressure for political change built up in East Germany, the USSR's firmest Eastern bloc ally, as thousands of East Germans escaped to West Germany, via Hungary, and a growing wave of demonstrations eventually culminated on the night of 9/10 November in the fall of the Berlin Wall, the chief symbol of the Cold War and of Europe's East–West divide. Whereas peaceful protest led to the collapse of communist rule in Czechoslovakia (the 'velvet revolution') in December, and in Bulgaria in February 1990, the process was more violent in Romania, where the communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena were summarily executed on Christmas Day 1989. The period of revolutionary upheaval eventually culminated in December 1991 with the official dissolution of the USSR, the world's first communist state, following a succession of nationalist uprisings across the multinational Soviet state.

Significance: The ideological significance of the fall of communism has been profound and far-reaching, and, in some senses, it remains a continuing process. The dominant early interpretation of the collapse of communism was advanced by so-called 'end of history' theorists such as Francis Fukuyama. In this view, the collapse of orthodox communist regimes across Eastern Europe and beyond indicated the death of Marxism as an ideology of world-historical importance, revealing Western-style, and more specifically US-style, liberal democracy as the determinant end-point of human history. The events of 1989–91 therefore merely illustrated the irresistible fact that human societies are destined to converge around an essentially liberal model



of economic and social development, as only Western liberalism can offer the benefits of social mobility and material security, on the one hand, and the opportunity for personal self-development without the interference of the state, on the other hand. Such an analysis suggests not only that communism is a spent ideological force, but also that socialism in its wider forms has been seriously compromised by the dramatic failure of the world's only significant non-capitalist economic systems. As a result, some social-democratic parties went through a process of de-radicalization, encouraging some to argue that socialism no longer constituted a distinctive ideological force.

However, there are reasons for thinking that the 'end of history' thesis was at best premature and at worst wholly misconceived. In the first place, the period since 1989–91 has certainly not witnessed worldwide ideological convergence around the principles of liberal democracy. Indeed, in the non-Western world, liberalism has sometimes been contested more ferociously than ever before, not least by the forces of ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism, especially in the Muslim world. In China, and across much of East and Southeast Asia, Confucian and other indigenous ideas have gained renewed political currency, gaining strength in large part from the desire to resist the spread of atomistic and rights-orientated liberal thinking. Similarly, in its Western heartland, liberalism's ascendancy has been challenged by an array of ideological forces, in particular by the emergence of populism (in both its right-wing and left-wing forms) and the rise of identity politics. Instead of establishing worldwide ascendancy, Western liberalism may therefore be undergoing a retreat on a global scale.