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ELECTROMAGNETIC FORCES AND RADIO WAVES *OR* DOES TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY ACTUALLY HAPPEN?

In the summer of 1998, I was conducting research in Budapest, trying to understand how the revolutionary changes in Hungary in 1989 fit into the overall pattern of revolution in the region. I had spent a year in Poland interviewing hundreds of opposition activists, especially those of the younger generation (who were in their teens or twenties when communism ended). I knew that many in the Polish opposition were interested in the opposition movements among their neighbours; all one had to do was read the underground papers to see this was true.

As I began to research the Hungarian case, I was struck by how much the leading youth opposition of 1987-88, Fidesz (the Association of Young Democrats), resembled the most significant youth movement in Poland, Freedom and Peace (WiP). WiP, the most important new opposition force in eastern Europe after Solidarity, was formed in 1985 to protest the required military oath, and grew into a multi-issue movement active all across Poland. Its focus on concrete issues, its emphasis on aboveground work and its indifference to political divisions (embracing anarchists and conservatives) distinguished it. And as I learned about Fidesz – founded in 1988 by a group of law students – the similarities were obvious. Though today Fidesz is a right-wing party (still led by Viktor Orbán, one of its founders), in its first year it was precisely as I have described WiP. It demonstrated on environmental issues, supported conscientious objectors, and displayed a confrontational yet non-ideological style that contrasted with the politics of its elders.

Circumstantial evidence, though, should not be enough for the historian of modern multinational events. Societies are not chemical compositions, giving rise to similar phenomena under similar conditions; nor are they elements in a demonstration of a domino effect. Historians need to ask themselves, yet rarely do so: how and why are phenomena similar to one another? Even when we know that two societies have similar political and

economic systems, how can they give rise to similar phenomena – especially when those two states place restrictions upon travel and media access and have mutually unintelligible languages?

So I went to Budapest to look for clues. I began to interview members or ex-members of Fidesz. I confirmed the basic similarity of Fidesz and WiP and became more impressed with their ingenuity and certain of their impact upon the political transformation. But I found no direct link. On my last day in Budapest, shortly before catching a train to Zagreb for my next phase of research, I sat down in a coffee shop with a former Fidesz member named Péter Molnár. As we chatted, I explained that my research had begun with Poland, and, in fact, my wife's family lived in Wrocław. Molnár perked up: 'Wrocław! Yes, I remember. I visited there in – what was it, 1985?'

Suddenly I had my link. Molnár, it turned out, remembered the story wrong, as he had not been to Wrocław. But the story turned out to be even more interesting: Molnár's teachers, two young political scientists named István Stumpf and Tamás Fellegi, had developed such an interest in Poland and Solidarity that they went to visit in 1983 (for the second papal pilgrimage). Back home, they had received permission to create a college for law students from outside Budapest. These students, mostly from provincial towns, had little understanding of politics, but Fellegi and Stumpf thought of them as Hungary's future. Polish oppositional politics fascinated them, and they decided that their students should discover it too. So over the next few years, they took their students on field trips to Warsaw, Poznań, Kraków and Gdańsk (as far as I can tell, they did not visit Wrocław). They participated in masses and demonstrations and got to know students in Freedom and Peace.[1]

Well, here was the smoking gun. As I learned, these students and their teachers explicitly studied Polish opposition, with the intention of applying these lessons to their own situation. Fidesz was built, in other words, on a Polish model. There were other Polish-Hungarian connections, but this one was the most significant. The communication and travel between opposition activists in Poland and Hungary played an important, if little-known, role in the fall of communism in 1989. I would submit that 26-year-old Viktor Orbán would not have made his famous incendiary speech in June 1989 at the ceremonial reburial of Imre Nagy without his Polish experience. Fidesz would not have broken with the older opposition that autumn without that experience, either.

[1] I tell this story in more detail in *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe, 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

This is transnational history at its purest. We do not see dominoes falling, or *Zeitgeists* maturing, or unstoppable forces of history, but young men from one country entering an apartment in another country, finding people who are like them in age and background but who act very differently. We see them learning how to act in this new way and then taking that mode of action home with them. We see them borrowing not concrete techniques or traditions (most of the Hungarians were not practicing Catholics, for example), but ways of thinking and acting. And the crossing of borders itself is as essential to the story as is the interaction.

There are many other examples of such activity in the years 1985–1989 in central Europe. There were Ukrainian hippies corresponding with Polish peace activists or with Lithuanian nationalists; Polish couriers carrying backpacks full of literature to Czechoslovakia, or arranging clandestine border meetings along the Karkonosze/Krkonoše Mountains; East Germans travelling through Poland in search of *Zivilcourage* – on the same pathways, incidentally, taken by west European peace activists. I have spent a longer time on this particular anecdote for three reasons. Firstly, it shows that the year 1989 did have a transnational element, and I have been focused on that element for a long time – most recently with a book on the events of 1989 on four continents.[2] Secondly, it is worth emphasizing that this kind of transnational connection is hard for the historian to find. Such individual border crossings are ephemeral and usually undocumented; they are also, I believe, quite potent, as the individual traveller shares his or her experience with a large circle of contacts. And thirdly, I also want to question the very nature of transnational history, even as I acknowledge its role. But in order to discuss what transnational history is not, and cannot be, I must first acknowledge what it is. To forecast my conclusions, the revolutions of 1989 in eastern Europe show us that transnational activity takes place during periods of heightened political activity and over short distances among people who share common interests and skills. They are like atoms in a molecule, bound together and exchanging information over short distances; thus if the opposition in the Soviet bloc was a molecule (of what, I will leave to the reader), transnational interactions are like the electromagnetic force binding them closer together.

The question for me is whether this force also works at greater distances and among less similar places. When I first became interested in the phenomenon of transnational borrowings, inspirations and movements, it came to seem like this might be a key to liberating historical processes from traditional limits, as well as an essential tool in comprehending the contem-

[2] Padraic Kenney, *1989: Democratic Revolutions at the Cold War's End: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's 2010).

porary world. As far as reimagining history is concerned: we can all think of times in history when events in a number of countries have seemed to follow one another. Before 1989, there was 1968, and 1956, and 1945, and 1933, and 1917–20, and 1848, and 1830–31… surely I have left out a few, and I am thinking so far only of Europe. Each of these has a traditional narrative, which falls into one of two types: either there is a single force (like the Bolshevik Party, Nikita Khrushchev, Mikhail Gorbachev, Adolf Hitler) that either forces change or provokes reaction in a number of places nearly all at once, or there is an undefined 'revolutionary situation' (the *Zeitgeist*, in other words) that miraculously appears from nowhere. My dogged and successful search for the multilingual messengers or pilgrims of revolution in Budapest led me to believe that in every revolution we might find similar figures, working under the radar to bring new ideas. Thus a recent book on 1968 tells us that *before* students struck at the Sorbonne in May, they were visited, in March, by a busload of students from Louvain, Belgium, who spread the news of their struggle against university authorities.[3] Czech students, that same year, visited the wounded Rudi Dutschke in his hospital bed in Berlin.[4] Further back, we can wish we could know what ideas or perspectives or ways of acting might have been shared among people of different nations on the streets or in the cafés of Petrograd, Paris, or Padua.

All these are moments of revolution: but do we not exchange ideas all the time? If so, then historians of modern feminism or of the anti-nuclear movement might wish to avoid the traditional focus on national campaigns against this or that law or nuclear reactor and ask how repertoires of protest are learned and imported. So too historians of socialism, or of millenarian religions, or of science would gain from thinking beyond national borders.

This is hardly a new idea, but it does have a new name. 'Transnational' implies that the journey across borders is itself significant, and the conscious interaction that sidesteps or burrows under walls and bureaucracies makes it new. At its most romantic, the 'transnational' appears to be a celebration of the impossibility of keeping humans apart, even with armies and border guards and separate educational systems.

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[3] Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[4] Paulina Bren, '1968 East and West: Visions of Political Change and Student Protest from Across the Iron Curtain', in Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney, eds., *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 119-135.

We are also conscious of living in a different world today. Yes, there is a global history that goes back to prehistoric times. But the number of ways through which we can communicate, and the speed with which we can do so, bring qualitative differences, or so it would seem. If in 1848 I would have needed to devote weeks in order to travel to Paris to hear Adam Mickiewicz lecture, now I could download his podcasts instantly (and check out Słowacki's YouTube response as well). Ideas and styles can spread with a greater immediacy and intimacy than we thought possible, reaching more people. The globalization trope has taken over public discourse over the last two decades. We have a sense that ordinary humans, especially those seeking solutions to political or economic problems, are ever more comfortable with accepting influences from other cultures and with joining in international activities. Even xenophobia stands out in greater contrast than before in its explicit resistance to globalizing forces.

In my field of interest, revolutionary changes in eastern Europe, nothing is more emblematic of the apparent power of the transnational than the presence of young men and women from Serbia in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004. They represented the OTPOR (Resistance) movement that had played a decisive role in toppling Slobodan Milošević in 2000. Incidentally, their style and tactics seemed rather familiar – but more about that later. The students of OTPOR had developed their attack on Milošević – and also on the elder opposition politicians who seemed to hesitate – very carefully, even turning to friends in the advertising business for advice. The world was a very different place by 2000, both in terms of technology and in terms of international support for anti-authoritarian movements. In part because OTPOR members found themselves unable to get easily into national politics (much like WiP in Poland), some of them were eager to take their experience on the road. They quickly found supporters both in the NGO world and in government and were thus available to coach activists in other post-communist countries (particularly in the former Soviet Union) as the 'Colour Revolutions' took shape.[5]

Some have seen in this story the evil hand of American imperialism. I will ignore that debate here, because I do not believe that a few thousand dollars for T-shirts, laptops and 'revolution consultants' can create a revolution out of nothing where there are no willing activists. I am more interested in how perspectives, mine included, on transnational political change have modified themselves since these events have taken place. If we return to 2005, one could see prior to that an almost continuous wave of democra-

[5] The essential work on the transnationality of the Color Revolutions is Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik's *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

tizing revolutions, stretching at least from the Philippines in 1986 (or from Portugal in 1974 and Spain and Greece in 1975) through to Chile in 1988, then eastern Europe and the Soviet Union through to the Colour Revolutions. The late winter of 2005 saw an upheaval in Kyrgyzstan after a parliamentary election and the 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon against Syrian influence. At about the same time, some observers saw Iraqi political change reaching a milestone with a successful parliamentary election.

So if someone would like to write the history of transnational studies, I would suggest that its heyday spanned a fifteen-year period, and we are now in crisis. I use the term 'crisis' here as a scholar, not as an observer of contemporary politics. There may be a crisis of democracy across the world, but that is a different problem from the one of how we interpret the world. Nevertheless, let us begin by taking stock of where revolutions are today. The Colour Revolutions seem to have faded; their leaders are mostly out of power (like Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine or Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia), often carrying the taint of authoritarianism themselves. New terms like 'illiberal democracy' or 'competitive authoritarianism' have been employed to analyze many of the regimes that have experienced some kind of unsatisfactory political transformation. Scholars have thus raised doubts about the value of such things as elections or even the existence of opposition parties as markers for democratic change.

Beyond this, we now have a recent history of democratization movements that have not succeeded. The best known are the Burmese 'Saffron Revolution' in the summer of 2007 and the 'Green Revolution' protests following the Iranian presidential election in 2009. Both of these drew extensive international coverage and some significant support, yet were effectively quashed (though Burma is now democratizing). More interesting, for our purposes, is a third recent example, the so-called Twitter Revolution in Moldova in April 2009. There, dissatisfaction with the election outcome (and failure to oust the communists from power) crystallized in a 'flashmob' demonstration on April 6. That the protesters used their cell phones to organize demonstrations and that some used Twitter (or other texting modes) to share microviews of the demonstrations and repressions as they happened, caught the imagination of western technological elites and commentators. If the entire world could thus participate in a revolution, would not dictators be finally outmatched by their opponents? Moldovans could thus participate in transnational change – symbolized by imported technology and an online environment in which borders became meaningless. Rather than waiting for support or begging journalists to intercede on their behalf (a familiar part of revolutions just two decades earlier), Moldovans could propagate such change themselves.

Despite the small size of the country and its proximity to the EU, the evident proliferation of new technologies, and the size of the protests, the revolution failed. New elections were called and the communists won again, albeit with more opposition represented. More importantly, though, the Twitter Revolution turned out to be a myth; a transnational technology itself does not bring about change, politics does. In Moldova, the pieces needed for political change simply were not present. One observer (a Belarusian, as it happens) quotes Moldovan activists as saying that what they needed was not Twitter, but a loud megaphone.[6] In other words, local and basic technology, combined with the right content, would have been the key.

In the age of the transnational, then, we should remember that revolutions tend ultimately to be locally generated. The attitude and resources of the local regime matter; the coordination of opposition elites matters; generational experiences, rooted in one place, matter; so too do national/local economics and the weather. The evident limitations of transnational processes should force us to examine again the extravagant claims that have been made about a thirty-year wave of democratization. A wide-angle look at the core of that wave, the eight years from 1986 (the Philippines and Haiti) to 1994 (South Africa), finds few examples of the kind of transmission we can see between Poland and Hungary in 1989.

For example, Filipinos often imagine that their 'People Power' revolution influenced the revolutions in eastern Europe – as they themselves occasionally compared their struggle to that of Solidarity. Closer to home, it is easy to assume a link from the Philippines to democratization elsewhere in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia's transformation in 1998. Research has shown, however, that there was no (or only limited) transference of ideas or styles. At most, one can find the appropriation of symbols, as when some South Koreans employed the Filipino 'Laban' sign during protests in 1988.[7]

China provides a second example. Chinese protesters were very interested in the course of events in eastern Europe, reading Václav Havel, following the Polish Round Table, and welcoming Mikhail Gorbachev to Beijing. We may also remember their 'Goddess of Liberty' statue, which echoed the American one while also evoking the protests around inspira-

[6] Evgeny Morozov, 'More Analysis of Twitter's Role in Moldova', *Net.effect,* 7 April 2009, available at www.neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/more_analysis_of_twitters_role_in_moldova (last visited 12 December 2012).

[7] On the absence of transnationality in Southeast Asia see Vincent Boudreau, *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

tional statues in Europe. Yet a close reading of student statements during the occupation of Tiananmen Square shows a poverty of ideas. They were quite uncertain what to do with 'democracy', and at moments of crisis, such as during meetings with leaders or while on hunger strike, they tended instead to invoke strident nationalism and to speak of bloodshed and sacrifice. The Tiananmen occupation was not an eastern European event that ended tragically, but rather an entirely different animal with its own logic. A final example comes from South Africa. Leaders of the African National Congress were quite aware of eastern Europe. (Working in the Robben Island archives recently, I found notes from a discussion about Solidarity that took place in a cell there in 1981.) And when they had achieved victory, they turned to, among others, participants in Poland's Round Table for advice on how to reconcile with one's former torturers. Yet at the heart of the transformation, the African context mattered most to the exclusion of any other. South Africa was a special case, with (fortunately) few analogues.

Much as I would like to tell a different story, I cannot find much evidence for a global 'dance of democracy'. Oppressed people do rise up, but they do so on their own terms, in their own contexts. Why, then, is there simultaneity if it is not thanks to transnational processes? In brief, I would point to four global factors: generational turnover, technological advances, human rights discourse, and the waning of the cold war. I think that the import of each of these is self-evident, so I will simply outline how I see them influencing change, before returning to the problem of the transnational.[8]

Thinking of generational change, I have in mind the significant differences between the '1968' generation and that of 1989. The students in 1968 were in part rebelling against the cold war concerns of its parents (who were in turn a product, around the world, of the common experience of the second world war). People who came of age in the 1980s – and I think this can be observed not only in eastern Europe, but also in western Europe, South Africa, and Latin America – were less interested in ideology than the generation of the 1960s, and more interested in concrete action. This was less true in China, and one could hypothesize that the failures of Tiananmen were in part due to this difference.

I have already alluded to the role technology played in the 1980s. It is striking to note how many communication technologies, largely unavailable to protest in the 1960s, were invented or made affordable in the 1970s: cable television, satellite dishes, video cameras, video cassettes, cassette and microcassette recorders, fax machines, photocopiers, offset printers

[8] The following paragraphs are based on the introduction to Kenney, *1989*.

and personal computers (cell phones and the internet do not play a role at this point, of course). I would add to this list one that is often overlooked: the container ship. In the face of our current belief in the liberating power of technology, it is instructive to see what an impact relatively modest technological advances could have for opposition, such as smaller, mobile printers or fax machines. No one thought, however, that the printer was itself the message, which is the implication of our current fascination with Twitter. I would suggest that the megaphone – not necessarily the easiest thing to acquire or hide from the police – made as great an impact as did the first desktop computers.

A discussion of technology must lead us to content. The 1970s were crucial, too, to the development of a global human-rights discourse. Amnesty International, though founded in 1962, gained critical mass only in the late 1970s at the time that Helsinki Watch and its sister organizations (Asia Watch, etc.) were emerging. As discussion of human rights became a normal part of global discourse – used regularly, even if superficially, by American presidents, U.N. leaders and of course the Pope – it became accessible, at the same time, to opposition groups around the world. Even if Czechs, Chinese and Chileans thought of human rights in slightly different ways, they had a common toolkit and a common way of interacting with international media.

Finally, though I prefer to think of democratic opposition itself as contributing to the end of the cold war, one has to acknowledge that the weakening of the cold war in the mid-1980s made change easier. The lessening international reach of the Soviet Union even before Gorbachev's ascendancy and Ronald Reagan's declining interest in his anti-communist allies in his second term of office fed on each other. As Reagan was able, reluctantly, to cease supporting Ferdinand Marcos despite the latter's pleas for help against communist guerrillas, so too Gorbachev would be reluctant to write the East German communists a blank check, and F.W. de Klerk would find it easier to legalize the South African Communist Party.

I have simplified the story a great deal, but what do these factors have in common? First, they are global. Second, though, they are less visible at the national level, where they are translated into terms that vary from one another in significant ways. They are, in other words, weak factors – weak in the way that radio waves might be in comparison to the electromagnetic force I mentioned earlier. They exist in the background, as a constant presence and are by themselves not enough to bring about change.

Much of the time when we think we are talking about transnational history, I think we are talking about radio waves – in a figurative sense, though also literally. Over long distances (and, as it happens, often through radio technology), people do learn about the ideas and activities of others

who face broadly similar obstacles. But the similarities – even similarities in outcomes, as we saw in the years 1986-1994 – are not evidence of a transnational moment. The occasional appearances of transnational actors (like Mikhail Gorbachev going to Beijing in May 1989) are exceptions that prove the rule: Gorbachev's presence, after all, did not help China move down the path taken by Poland and its neighbours. Instead, we are looking at a global history, shaped by larger, worldwide structural factors. And those factors, whether they are new ideas, new technologies, or social and political changes become quite different from one another within different national contexts.

Transnational history does exist. In certain situations, marked by close affinity, shared experiences and relatively short distances (though not on the molecular scale!), intense interactions that spread concrete solutions to practical problems can take place. Moreover, the electromagnetic forces of transnational history give rise to new phenomena that can move around the world. The Round Table formula, begun in Poland and quickly adopted elsewhere in the region, is an example of such a reinvented form of action that becomes global.[9] But historians who would search for the 'transnational' in everything run the risk of trivializing such communication and of missing content in favour of form. Approached with care, the transnational approach allows us to appreciate the intense beauty of regional political change.

[9] See Michael D. Kennedy, 'Contingencies and the Alternatives of 1989: Toward a Theory and Practice of Negotiating Revolution', *East European Politics and Society* 13, 1 (1999), 301-310.