

Velvet Revolution: The Prospects

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In the autumn of 1989, the term “velvet revolution” was coined to describe a peaceful, theatrical, negotiated regime change in a small Central European state that no longer exists. So far as I have been able to establish, the phrase was first used by Western journalists and subsequently taken up by Václav Havel and other Czech and Slovak opposition leaders.¹ This seductive label was then applied retrospectively, by writers including myself, to the cumulatively epochal events that had unfolded in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany, as in “the velvet revolutions of 1989.”

Twenty years later, in the summer of 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran staged a show trial of political leaders and thinkers it accused of fomenting *enghelab -e makhmali*—that is, precisely, velvet revolution. Across the intervening years, dramatic events in places including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, South Africa, Chile, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, and Burma were tagged with variants of adjective + revolution. Thus we have read about singing (Baltic states), peaceful, negotiated (South Africa, Chile), rose (Georgia), orange (Ukraine), color (widely used, post-orange), cedar (Lebanon), tulip (Kyrgyzstan), electoral (generic), saffron (Burma), and most recently, in Iran, green revolution. Often, as in the original Czechoslovak case, the catchy labeling has been popularized through the interplay of foreign journalists and political activists in the countries concerned.

These events could, with widely varying degrees of plausibility, be described as attempts—by no means all of them successful—to make a 1989 kind of peaceful, negotiated regime change, including elements of mass protest, social mobilization, and nonviolent action. Velvet revolution, it seems, has not just a past but also a present and perhaps a future. Starting as the moniker for a single historical event—*the* velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989—it has cast off the definite article to become simply “velvet revolution”: the genus VR.

1.

Painting with a deliberately broad brush, an ideal type of 1989-style revolution, VR, might be contrasted with an ideal type of 1789-style revolution, as further developed in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Mao’s Chinese revolution. The 1789 ideal type is violent, utopian, professedly class-based, and characterized by a progressive radicalization, culminating in terror. A revolution is not a dinner party, Mao Zedong famously observed, and he went on:

A revolution is an uprising, an act of violence whereby one class overthrows another. . . . To right a wrong it is necessary to exceed proper limits, and the wrong cannot be righted without the proper limits being exceeded.²

The 1989 ideal type, by contrast, is nonviolent, anti-utopian, based not on a single class but on broad social coalitions, and characterized by the application of mass social pressure —“people power”—to bring the current powerholders to negotiate. It culminates not in terror but in compromise. If the totem of 1789-type revolution is the guillotine, that of 1989 is the round table.³

Nonviolent revolution feels to many like a contradiction in terms. For two hundred years, revolution has been associated with violence. That is one reason people want to qualify these new-style revolutions with a softening adjective. During an internal debate among the leaders of the original velvet revolution, in Prague in autumn 1989, one Czech dissident even queried whether they should use the word “revolution” at all, since it implied violence.⁴ “Let us refuse any form of terror and violence,” declared the Information Bulletin of the Civic Forum on December 2, 1989. “Our weapons are love and nonviolence.”⁵

In the case of Pope John Paul II and of Aung San Suu Kyi and other Burmese Buddhists, one can say that the choice of peaceful means was primarily a moral and religious one. “Defeat evil with good!” was the Polish Pope’s often repeated message. In most cases, however, this is a strategic rather than a moral choice—and none the worse for that. Definitionally characteristic of the 1989 type of revolution is a strategic preference for nonviolent action on the part of those who desire change. VR can therefore also be considered as a category of, or overlapping with, another genus: civil resistance.⁶

Trotsky once characterized revolution as “the forcible entry of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.”⁷ In VR, this happens too, but a vital line is preserved between the forcible and the violent. We speak colloquially of “the force of numbers,” and that is the kind of force we are talking about here. “If I see 200,000 people, I will resign,” Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma said dismissively of a relatively small opposition demonstration some years before the “orange revolution.” In 2004, there were some 500,000 orange-waving protesters on the streets of Kiev—and Kuchma’s chosen successor had to resign soon after his fraudulent election victory.⁸ These events are characterized by vast turnouts, so that journalistic estimates of numbers become a branch of poetry. How many demonstrators, garlanded in green, filled the streets of Tehran from Revolution (Enqelab) Square to Freedom (Azadi) Square on that unforgettable June 15, 2009?⁹ Two million? Three million? No one could know exactly; no one will ever know.

1 1789 in France, 1917 in Russia, 1949 in China—all were at some point professedly utopian; all promised a heaven on earth. VR is typically anti-utopian, or at the very least

non-utopian. In a given place, it aspires to create political and legal institutions, and social and economic arrangements, that already exist elsewhere (for example, in established liberal democracies) and/or that are claimed (often wrongly, or with much retrospective idealization) to have existed in the same place at an earlier time. François Furet, the historiographer of the French Revolution, doubted if the velvet revolutions of 1989 should properly be called “revolutions” at all, since they produced “not a single new idea.”¹⁰ In this sense, they were closer to an earlier, pre-1789 version of revolution, the one that gave the thing its name: a revolution, a revolving, a turning of the wheel back to a real or imagined better past.

Hannah Arendt quotes, as a perfect encapsulation of this idea of revolution-as-restoration, the inscription on the 1651 great seal of Cromwell’s Commonwealth, at the height of the English Revolution: “freedom by God’s blessing restored.”¹¹ Poland in 1989 could have put those very same words on its seal, had it had one. “The return to Europe,” one of the great mottoes of Central Europe’s 1989, is also a version of the revolution-restoration theme. Most of the subsequent claimants to the title of VR display some such mixture of an idealized national past and a better present located elsewhere. While these movements manifest some unrealistic, idealistic expectations, none of them are decisively shaped by a utopian ideology, a vision of a new heaven on earth. The “new idea” is the form of revolutionary change itself, not the content of its ideological aspirations.

To say that the 1789–1917–1949 revolutions were class-based is of course a gross historical oversimplification, and even misrepresentation. As we know, the Bolshevik Revolution was not actually a heroic mass action of the working class. But it is fair to say that revolutionary leaders such as Lenin and Mao often claimed to be acting in the name of a class or classes—“workers and peasants,” and so on. In VR, the appeals are typically to a whole society, the nation, the people. Nationalism (or patriotism, according to circumstance and interpretation) is often a driving force of these, as it can be of more violent movements. In practice, the strategic key to mass mobilization—to getting those inestimable peaceful crowds out on the streets, to generating “people power”—often lies precisely in building the broadest possible coalitions between classes, sections of society, and interest groups that do not normally cooperate, and among which nondemocratic powerholders had previously been able to “divide and rule.”

In old-style revolution, the angry masses on the street are stirred up by extremist revolutionary leaders—Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Mao—to support radicalization, including violence and terror, in the name of utopia. Bring on the red guards! In new-style revolution, the masses on the street are there to bring the powerholders to the negotiating table. The moment of maximum mass mobilization is the moment of turn to negotiation; that is, to compromise. Or in some cases, to violent repression—at least for the time being. For also characteristic of VR is that it often takes a long time to succeed, after many failed attempts, in the course of which opposition organizers, but also some of those in power, learn from their own mistakes and failures—as, for example, in Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine.

Protesters “fail again, fail better,” to adopt Samuel Beckett’s memorable phrasing. Both sides do it differently next time. Eventually, the moment comes when there are two to tango.

So another name for the genus is “negotiated revolution.” Exit prospects for the ruling elites are critical. Instead of losing their heads on the guillotine, or ending up hanging from lampposts, transition-ready members of an ancien régime, from a president such as F.W. de Klerk all the way down to local apparatchiks and secret policemen, see a bearable, even a rosier future for themselves under a new dispensation. Not merely will they get away with their lives; not only will they remain at liberty; they will also get to retain some of their social position and wealth, or to convert their former political power into economic power (the “privatization of the nomenklatura”), which sometimes helps them to make startling returns to political power under more democratic rules (as, for example, have post-communists all over post-communist Europe). In VR, it is not just the Abbé Sieyès who survives. Louis XVI gets to keep a nice little palace in Versailles, and Marie Antoinette starts a successful line in upmarket lingerie.

These uneasy and even morally distasteful compromises with members of the ancien régime are an intrinsic, unavoidable part of velvet revolution. They are, as Ernest Gellner once memorably put it, the price of velvet. They produce, however, their own kinds of postrevolutionary pathology. As the years go by, there is a sense of a missing revolutionary catharsis; suspicious talk of tawdry deals concluded between old and new elites behind closed doors; and, among many, a feeling of profound historical injustice. Here I am, a middle-aged shipyard worker in Gdan’sk, left unemployed as a result of a painful neoliberal transition to capitalism, while over there, in their high-walled new villas, with their swimming pools full of half-naked girls quaffing champagne, the former communist spokesman and the former secret policeman are whooping it up as millionaires. And their first million came from ripping off the state in the period of negotiated revolution.

There is no perfect answer to this problem, but I will suggest two partial ones. First, absent both the catharsis of revolutionary purging (that orgiastic moment as the king’s severed head is held aloft) and retroactive sanctions of criminal justice, it becomes all the more important to make a public, symbolic, honest reckoning with your country’s difficult past. This alone can establish a bright line between bad past and better future. That is why I have argued that the essential complement to a velvet revolution is a truth commission. Second, establishing the rule of law as fast as possible is vital to lasting success, and corruption is deeply corrosive of it. “Speed is more important than accuracy,” the famous motto of the no-holds-barred Czech privatizer and free marketeer Václav Klaus, sacrifices the long-term prospects to the short.

One other feature of some velvet revolutions needs to be mentioned. Traditionally, we would think of a revolution as diametrically counterposed to an election: here, the violent

overthrow of a dictatorship; there, the peaceful transfer of power in a democracy. But many examples of VR over the last decade, from Serbia to Ukraine to Iran, had an election as the catalytic moment of the new-style revolution.

In hybrid, semiauthoritarian regimes, the holding of an election—albeit not under fully free conditions, with a key distortion being regime control of television—provides the occasion for an initial mobilization behind an opposition candidate, whether Vojislav Koštunica in Serbia, Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine, or Mir Hossein Moussavi in Iran. Real or alleged rigging of the election by incumbent powerholders is then the spark for a wider social mobilization, with burgeoning demands for change not merely in but *of* the system. The color symbolic of the opposition candidate—orange in Ukraine, green in Iran—becomes, or at least is now claimed to be, the color of the whole cheated nation, the color of the “color revolution.” So yet another name for this phenomenon, or a large subset of it, is “electoral revolution.”

Looking at the recent history of electoral revolutions, a prudent authoritarian ruler might reasonably draw this conclusion: Don’t risk holding any elections at all! But it is striking how few of them actually do draw this conclusion. Formal democracy, in the sense of holding public ceremonies called elections from time to time, has become established as one of the most widespread international norms. Elections are not just, so to speak, the tribute vice pays to virtue; they also seem to be part of the accepted panoply of legitimation for any self-respecting dictator. And nine times out of ten, authoritarian rulers can emerge victorious from these elections, or “elections,” with some combination of genuine popular support, tribal loyalties, media control, propaganda, bribery, intimidation, and outright vote-rigging. In the case of Serbia, for example, Slobodan Milošević did win a series of at least semifree, even three-quarters-free elections, with only some vote-rigging, before losing power in an electoral revolution in 2000. Hubris, based on past successes, helpfully nudges such rulers down the road to nemesis.

2.

My purpose here has been to sketch out, schematically and impressionistically, a hypothesis, in order then to qualify and interrogate it—including an indication of conditions under which the hypothesis might, over time, be found more or less persuasive. (More or less persuasive being the historian’s qualitative, probabilistic counterparts of the scientist’s hard, quantitative proof or disproof.) The hypothesis is that 1989 established a new model of nonviolent revolution that now often supplants, or at least competes with, the older, violent model we associate with 1789.

A first, essential qualification consists in stressing the word “established,” as opposed to “invented.” Semantically, the Czechoslovak revolution may have been the first to be called “velvet,” but Central Europe in 1989 did not spirit this model out of the ether. Relevant

earlier history includes not just Central Europe's own learning process through the failed emancipation attempts of 1953 (East Germany), 1956 (Hungary), 1968 (Czechoslovakia), 1970–1971 and 1980–1981 (Poland), but also the mobilization to unseat General Pinochet in Chile, where the 1988 plebiscite preceded Central Europe's 1989; the toppling of the Marcoses in the Philippines in 1983–1986, which gave us the wonderful Filipino-English term “people power”; and the “revolution of the carnations” in Portugal in 1974–1975, arguably the first “velvet revolution” in postwar Europe; and all the way back to the seminal example of Gandhi in India.

So the suggestion is only that 1989 *established* the model, in the sense that, being such a giant, world-changing event, or set of events, 1989 becomes the major historical reference point for this kind of change; and in the sense that there does seem to have been a lot more new-style revolution around since 1989, and less of the old-fashioned kind. Or so, at least, we are told by those who label these events velvet, color, peaceful, electoral, negotiated, orange, rose, saffron, cedar, tulip, green, etc. revolutions.

Here a second qualification is overdue. Not everything that is called revolution is, in fact, revolution. Our glossy magazines are full of folderol about “a revolution” in shoe design, English cooking, retail banking, or vacuum cleaners; we all know that this is just hyperbole. Now, over the last twenty years, foreign reporters have been quick to slap the label “revolution” (plus catchy adjective) on mass street protests that look like, say, Prague in 1989, but in substance may not be. Sometimes those reporters are themselves veterans of earlier revolutions, including 1989; sometimes they may merely wish they had been. And for getting your story on the front page, the word “revolution” is the next-best thing to actual bloodshed.¹¹ This, in turn, may be partly because readers and editors still consciously or semiconsciously associate the word “revolution” with bloodshed. Old stereotypes die hard.¹²

This cautionary remark is, however, complicated by the fact that the external journalistic labeling sometimes helps people involved in an event to characterize, and even to understand in a different way, what they themselves are doing. The foreign journalist's story becomes part of their own story. Framing it as a revolution helps to make it so. There is a spectator–actor–spectator loop.

That said, we do need criteria beyond the naively nominal to determine what properly qualifies as a new-style revolution. The literature on revolutions usefully distinguishes between a revolutionary situation, revolutionary events, and a revolutionary outcome. The last is the most demanding. I like the new definition of revolution—or definition of new-style revolution—offered by George Lawson in his valuable book *Negotiated Revolutions*. Revolution, he suggests, is “the rapid, mass, forceful, systemic transformation of a society's principal institutions and organizations.” (This rightly implies that mass nonviolent action can be “forceful” without being bloody.)

It will take specialists to apply the Lawson Test to each individual country and region. For most of East-Central Europe, including the Baltic states, I believe the test is clearly passed, as it is for South Africa. In southeastern Europe, the adjective “rapid” may often seem less appropriate, but for the most part, there surely has been systemic transformation. In Georgia and Ukraine, very large question marks must be in order. Kyrgyzstan surely does not pass the Lawson Test. And what about Lebanon? There are also cases where (at least for the time being) the movement for rapid, mass, forceful, systemic transformation has clearly been crushed. Burma is one of the plainest examples, but in Europe we should not forget the effective repression of an attempted velvet revolution in Belarus in 2006. And many would argue that the movement of Chinese students and workers whose repression began with the massacre on Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989 (the very day of Poland’s breakthrough semi-free election), was the most consequential failure of all.

The list of definite successes is not overwhelmingly impressive. The largest cohort is in just one region of the world—post-communist Europe—and most have so far been within the cultural-historical West, if that is taken (*pace* Samuel Huntington) to include Latin America and the world of Orthodox Christianity. A possible exception might be the Philippines, but the Philippines is a largely Christian society. Whether or not Lebanon’s “cedar revolution” passes the Lawson Test, it took place in a country that is nearly 40 percent Christian. The great significance of the attempted “green revolution” in Iran is that it has occurred in a very Muslim society, in a self-styled Islamic Republic, and even takes the color of Islam for its own. But can one yet point to a plainly *successful* velvet revolution in an overwhelmingly Muslim country? (Mali? Maldives?) Or in a preponderantly Buddhist or Confucian one?

There does appear to be a statistical correlation between the choice of nonviolent action and broadly liberal democratic outcomes.¹³ However, we must beware the fallacy of confusing correlation with cause. It might be that the kinds of society that adopt nonviolent means are also more likely, and better equipped, to consolidate liberal democracy. Both apparent cause and apparent effect could be symptoms of a deeper cause.

A further question is whether the aspiration to more democracy is also definitionally characteristic of VR—in which case, however, the argument for a link between nonviolence and liberal democracy would risk becoming circular. Could you have a velvet revolution to establish a different kind of dictatorship? Hamas and Hezbollah hardly qualify as nonviolent, although they have done well in elections, but what would emerge from, say, a “scarab revolution” led by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt?

3.

What should one conclude from all this? That VR is just a political-journalistic tag? That

VR exists, but is really just a type of transition characteristic of what one might call the democratization of the wider West over the thirty-five years since the revolution of the carnations in Portugal in 1974? In which case, since most of the wider West has now been democratized, we would be coming to the end of the line. Or should we rather conclude that, as Zhou Enlai is notoriously supposed to have answered when asked what he thought of the French Revolution, “it is a little too soon to say”? Twenty years, even thirty-five, is a short time for assessing large-scale historical phenomena. If, over the next two decades, there are many old-style, violent revolutions and few new-style, nonviolent ones, my VR hypothesis will be found wanting. If, however, there are more successful examples of VR in non-Western societies, including Muslim, Confucian, and Buddhist ones, then it may seem persuasive.

Yet to say “we must wait and see” misses a vital point. We—if we mean by that liberal democracies and democrats—are not mere observers in this history. We, like the foreign journalists reporting these stories, are also to some extent actors in them.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that these movements are born from the conditions and the actions of people in the places concerned. These are not Western plots, as authoritarian rulers from Russia to China to Iran now claim—supported in their paranoia by a few conspiracy-minded Western observers. To be sure, there is often Western involvement, some of it public, some covert, but in no single case can one plausibly claim that it has been decisive. Moreover, the allegations of Western conspiracy are themselves part of the local political game, intended to disqualify opposition leaders in the eyes of an anti-Western public opinion and justify locking them up on the grounds of treason. A classic example is the indictment in the show trial of Iranian reformists, which says at one point:

The velvet revolution has three arms, intellectual, media, and executive, and each of these has relations to a number of American foundations, and there is a kind of division of labor among them. . . . In this triangle of sedition, each of these American organizations performs a certain function and a number of people cooperate with them. Of these, the most important is an institution called Hooffer [*sic*, i.e., the Hoover Institution] at Stanford, created during the Cold War.¹⁴

And so on.

What emerges clearly from an international comparative study, however, is that the chances of success or failure depend to a significant degree on external factors—but that these must be understood much much more broadly than just alleged subversive American plots. The prospects for an attempted velvet revolution depend not just on the nature of the state and society it happens in, but also on the place of that state and society in a wider international setting.¹⁵ Painting once again with a very broad brush, one might suggest that the best chances are to be found in semiauthoritarian states that depend to a significant degree,

politically, economically, and, so to speak, psychologically, on more democratic ones—and most especially when the foreign states with the most passive influence or active leverage on them are Western democracies. Thus, attempts have failed in large, independent, self-referential states such as China but also in small, isolated, peripheral ones such as Burma, sandwiched as it is between China and India.

As Burma found to its cost in 2007, non-Western democracies such as India have generally been less keen than Western ones to exert active leverage to the benefit of velvet revolutions. Themselves often emerging from a colonial experience, they place a high value on sovereignty, and tend to see even well-intentioned forms of noncoercive external intervention as potentially neocolonial. And, of course, they pursue their own national interests. India, for example, apparently feels that it has an economic, military, and geopolitical interest in maintaining good relations with the Burmese military regime. Will this continue to be the case? Or will non-Western democracies in time warm to the (profoundly anticolonial) enterprise of helping people in less free countries to help themselves? The answer they give may be decisive for the future of VR.

How democrats and democracies can enhance the prospects of VR in other places, if they wish to, is the subject for another essay. So is the question whether they should, even if they can; for some would dispute that this goal is either desirable or legitimate. In any case, it has certainly become more difficult over the last decade, as authoritarian rulers in Russia, China, Iran, and elsewhere have identified VR as a hostile Western stratagem, and carefully studied its history so as to nip it in the bud.

In attempting to counter it, they have mimicked some of its techniques: for example, founding their own NGOs (which are in fact, to use a British term, *quangos*, *quasi*-nongovernmental organizations) and sending their own election monitors. Now more than ever, I suspect that the long-term, indirect measures that free societies can take will prove more important and effective than the short-term, direct ones. That is also a lesson from the history of the cold war and its ending.

What we cannot credibly do is sit back and pretend that we are no part of this unfolding history, merely neutral spectators of it. That stance itself has an impact, thus belying its own claim. Whether velvet revolution has a future as well as a past will depend, in the first place, on the will and the skill of people in the places concerned; but it will also depend, in smaller measure, on us.

—*This is the second of two articles.*

1 Despite extensive inquiries with leading Czech and Western historians of the velvet revolution, I have not (yet) been able to pin down the first use. ↩

2 Mao Zedong, *Report of an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, quoted in George Lawson, *Negotiated Revolutions: The Czech*

- Republic, South Africa and Chile* (Ashgate, 2005), p. 51.↵
- 3 I am well aware that the guillotine was not introduced until a later stage in the French Revolution.↵
- 4 See my account in *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (Random House, 1990), p. 113.↵
- 5 Quoted in an excellent article by John K. Glenn, "Competing Challengers and Contested Outcomes to State Breakdown: The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia," *Social Forces*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (September 1999), pp. 187–211. Note also that the Slovak counterpart of the Civic Forum was actually called the Public Against Violence.↵
- 6 On this see *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, edited by Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (Oxford University Press, 2009). For this essay, I have drawn on the findings of that multiauthor volume, and the Oxford University research project behind it: cis.politics.ox.ac.uk/research/Projects/civ_res.asp.↵
- 7 Quoted in Lawson, *Negotiated Revolutions*, p. 72.↵
- 8 See Timothy Garton Ash and Timothy Snyder, "[The Orange Revolution](#)," *The New York Review*, April 28, 2005, now reprinted in Timothy Garton Ash, *Facts Are Subversive: Political Writing from a Decade Without a Name* (Atlantic Books, 2009).↵
- 9 See Roger Cohen, "[Iran: The Tragedy and the Future](#)," *The New York Review*, August 13, 2009.↵
- 10 Quoted in Lawson, *Negotiated Revolutions*, p. 90. On this, see also my *The Magic Lantern*, p. 154, and Krishan Kumar, *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).↵
- 11 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Viking, 1963), p. 36.↵
- 12 When my earlier *New York Review* essay "[1989!](#)" (issue dated November 5, 2009) was reprinted in a supplement to the *Guardian* (October 24, 2009), it was illustrated with a dramatic photograph of a young man with a machine gun running through the streets of Bucharest, Romania, in December 1989. Ah yes, the reader inwardly exclaims, *that's* revolution. But what happened in Romania was profoundly unrepresentative of 1989: it was the exception, not the rule.↵
- 13 See Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman, *How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy* (Freedom House, 2005).↵
- 14 I am most grateful to my colleague at the Hoover Institution, Professor Abbas Milani, for his translation of this interesting document.↵
- 15 This emerges very clearly both from the studies in Roberts and Garton Ash, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, and from those in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, edited by Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul, and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (Cambridge University Press, 2009).↵