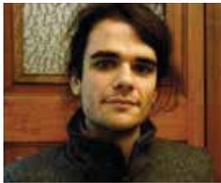


The monolithic other of the Cold War. East versus West

Fontana, Josep
Por el bien del imperio:
Una historia del mundo
desde 1945
[For the good of
the empire: a history of the
world since 1945]

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Por *el bien del imperio* has an intellectual depth that can stand alongside Tony Judt's *Postwar* (2005), and extends over 1,000 pages (including over 200 pages dedicated to references to diverse sources), ending with the current financial crisis. It was an ambitious project that took more than fifteen years to complete and is a fascinating read in a historiographical style that uses the narrative rhythm of fiction. The book includes a number of sections that will appeal to readers with a particular interest in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, both during the Cold War and after the fall of the Soviet Union. This review will highlight some examples.

Fontana describes the Cold War as a historical period that was not particularly "cold": on the contrary, its periphery was very violent and it constituted a system of social control in both East and West due to each side's contrived image of the other as a monolith. In this bipolar world, there was a war against internal dissidents and a cultural war based on prejudices that were deeply rooted not only in the public sphere, but also in the intelligence services. Governments poured vast sums of money into these secret agencies for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the "enemy's" psychology, yet even with their swarms of supposed experts and agents, their preconceptions rendered them incapable of understanding what transpired on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Examples include the CIA's Manichean view of the Latin American backyard, the disastrous failure in Vietnam, the fact that nobody at the US

embassy in Tehran spoke Farsi and none of the CIA's employees was able to make direct contact with a local, and the failure to understand the true significance of perestroika. All of these reflect the permanent denial of the existence of a heterogeneous Eastern Bloc. There are also examples of this simplification of the *other* in the East: Stalin's paranoid reactions to countermoves such as the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, the beginnings of NATO, and the establishment of the Truman Doctrine, all of which triggered the bloody persecution of artists, writers, and composers who had "fallen into the error of cosmopolitanism", or even in the field of science, where a grotesque distinction was made between bourgeois pseudoscience and socialist science. During this same period, Stalin accelerated the destruction of antifascist alliances in favor of a hegemonic Communist Party in satellite states, centralized in and fiercely controlled by Moscow, thus ending all hope of building a more just and free world in the East.

During the Cold War, the times of greatest tension between the two superpowers were mostly born of misinterpretations that exaggerated the actual level of danger in order to justify a permanent arms race. A good example of this was the Euromissiles Crisis of the mid-1980s which, coupled with President Reagan's aggressive rhetoric, made the Soviets believe that it was a real attack maneuver. Paradoxically, Reagan himself was surprised that the Soviets were so convinced of an imminent attack. Playing to the gallery (elections, hidden messages to the military), unnecessary risks, jumping to conclusions based on preconceptions, misunderstandings, and plenty of misleading information were the ingredients that at times took the world to the brink of a nuclear war.

Fontana also delves deep into the peripheral impact of the Cold War. The wars and violent corruption that erupted in Africa and Asia as part of the decolonization process, led by the old colonial powers and by the United States to serve their own interests, were part of one of the "hottest" chapters of the Cold War (Fontana's chapters 2 and 3). Yet the most severe inter-

ventionism occurred not on the periphery, but in Europe's core. The bloody military intervention and subsequent repression in Hungary in 1956 (Chapter 4), and the regular and indiscriminate use of the military to do away with all social malaise, demonstrate an unyielding attitude against conceding any sort of liberty to satellite states or the Soviet Union itself. The Soviet Union's fear of change was sustained in large part by the resistance of its bureaucracy, which acted as a true counter-power. The fall of Nikita Khrushchev was due in part to that bureaucratic resistance to reform (Chapter 5).

There was also interventionism in Western Europe. The financing of pro-fascist terrorist groups and the ballot stuffing in Italy involving the Vatican and Christian Democrats were CIA moves devised in the heart of Europe to foil a Communist Party electoral victory in Italy (Chapter 1). The support of right-wing dictatorships in southern Europe and the distrust it generated, including Henry Kissinger's direct threats of military intervention, and the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal are evidence of just how afraid the Western allies were of any change in government.

The Prague Spring and May 1968 ended all hope

Fontana's rather pessimistic interpretation of the tumultuous year of 1968 is that the May protests and the Prague Spring represented the collapse of all hope for change, which led to periods of reaction that marked later decades on both sides of the Iron Curtain.



PHOTO: PEP PAPER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Josep Fontana Lázaro, born in 1931 in Barcelona, is one of the most renowned historians in Spain with a career of more than 40 years and hundreds of publications. Fontana is a pupil of Pierre Vilar, perhaps the most important Hispanist working in the 20th century specializing in the history of Catalonia. He was influenced by the historian Jaume Vicens i Vives, a central intellectual figure in Catalonia during the early dark years of the Francoist dictatorship.

He is also a respected teacher who

has formed several generations of historians in Spain. He has taught and researched at several universities, including Universitat de València and Universitat de Barcelona. He was recently awarded honorary doctorates at Universidad de Valladolid (2011) and Universitat de Girona (2013). Nowadays he is professor emeritus of Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. His work has been prolific and varied: economic history, nineteenth-century Spanish history, all the way to the present *Por el bien del imperio*.

MEET JOSEP FONTANA in his office in the most emblematic building of Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the "Dipòsit de les Aigües" (water works), restored and converted into a central part of the university library, holding many archives, including Fontana's personal archive of some 37,000 documents. Fontana's office is well lit and situated



Illustration: Karin Sunvisson

There are interesting parallels between Prague and Paris: both were fruitless attempts of a young and somewhat naïve generation to cause change in the old order so that a new order could be created in a better world (Chapter 7).

Alexander Dubček's "socialism with

a human face" tried to bring about partial democratization: a model of socialism that was open to greater participation of civil society in the decision-making process through the decentralization of the party, and to more freedom in the press and the cultural world. Dubček's socialism was mostly an effort to recover the merits of the Popular Democracy projects at the

end of World War II that were based on anti-fascist alliances. Dubček, unlike Imre Nagy in 1956 Hungary, did not want to break away from socialism or the Warsaw Pact. Nevertheless, Leonid Brezhnev, who had managed to recover part of the Stalinist praxis with the help of the bureaucratic counter-power, interpreted the events in Czechoslovakia as a conspiracy to destabilize the Soviet Union's area of influence and quashed the reform. The defeat of the Prague Spring ended all attempts to build a democratic socialist alternative, a "third way" that was closer to the people and could have revitalized the socialist project which had been swept away by rigid structures that hardly ever spoke of socialism or of a better world any more. These same structures of power collapsed only a couple decades later and exposed what they really had inside: little more than authoritarian bureaucratic systems designed to retain power. This, and the absence of an alternative, no doubt contributed to the effortless introduction of neoliberal capitalism in Eastern Europe.

The May '68 protests were a movement that initially surprised the established order, especially when the largest French trade unions gave the students their explicit support. However, by mid-May, the first disagreements began to emerge between workers and students, who did not share the same list of demands. The students were unable to articulate a clear program, and the French unions negotiated their salary raises directly with the government. It was in this context that then president of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle,

CE IN TODAY'S WORLD — A CONVERSATION WITH JOSEP FONTANA

inside one of the massive glassed-in arches in the recently restored façade of this building designed by Josep Fontserè in 1874 with the help of a young architect named Antoni Gaudí. In these privileged surroundings, the interview begins.

According to Fontana, the myth that was born during the Cold War is very much alive today. There is a political need to keep the myth alive, and many deterministic views are connected to it. In fact, myths were in play even during the Cold War: from the moment they started using satellites, each side knew the other's military capabilities. Even President Kennedy was surprised when he first arrived at the White House and realized the United States wasn't as vulnerable as was thought. From a strategic point of view, a Soviet invasion of the US was impossible. Even so, the production of arms had to continue due to the pressures of the arms industry.

What do you think of Vladimir Putin's Russia?

"The origins of the Putin era can be found in the previous decade's recklessness. During the second half of the 1990s, a large part of the state's power was in the hands of powerful oligarchs who were in collusion with the Kremlin, largely due to its reckless transition and policies. Putin's arrival signified the state's recovery of political control with authoritarianism, as well as the restoration of a certain measure of economic stability, which is something that a large part of the Russian populace considers satisfactory when set against the constant chaos and crisis of the 1990s. Putin reached a pact with the oligarchs: I'll enable you to continue to make money, but leave politics to the Kremlin. The Kremlin has unceremoniously and unlawfully persecuted unruly oligarchs like Mikhail Khodorkovsky. In any

Continued. The monolithic other of the Cold War

sure of the military's support, staged a dramatic power play when he declared that he would not resign, and instead dissolved the National Assembly. For this move, he received the support of a great part of the "average" population, who were afraid that a period of revolution would ensue. And so the state regained control of the situation and crushed the student movement.

The values that the May '68 protests reflected, which were reshaped over the course of the 1960s, did leave their mark, however: women winning new spaces of liberty and the United States' civil rights movement are seen as parallel processes. In addition, these same values became the basis of environmental movements and transcended part of the established moral order that was still quite dominant in the 1950s. Nevertheless, none of the movements in this mixed bag that emerged in May '68 was ever able to articulate an alternative that truly threatened the establishment. In many cases, they were co-opted by the order they sought to bring down.

A few years after the defeat of the May '68 movement, the Thatcher-Reagan Conservative Revolution commenced (although in the US it was President Carter who started it), inspired by an economic mindset that undermined the Keynesian model that had been in place since the end of World War II. It was an authentic neoliberal counter-revolution that in recent decades has increased social gaps and progressively concentrated economic and political power in an elite that is increasingly removed from the general citizenry (Chapters 11 and 12). This fact shows

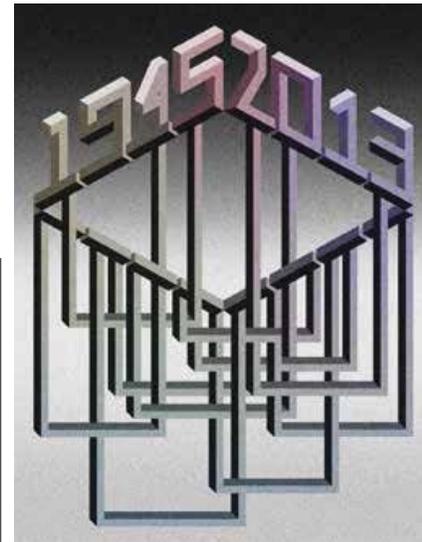
how little the political and economic elites fear social discontent, which was true even just a few years after the "revolutions" of the 1960s.

The fall of communism: the collapse of a system

Fontana's interpretation of the events that led to the end of the Eastern Bloc and of "actually existing socialism" is one of self-destructive implosion, of elites that, seeing themselves incapable of sustaining their stronghold within the established order, decide to destroy it and stay at the cusp of the new order. Fontana downplays the idea that communism fell because of social revolutions (only Romania literally removed the head of government) and states that the main reason can actually be found in a system that had become more and more difficult to sustain after the 1970s.

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika was meant to tackle these issues, specifically in the economic arena: the objective was to change the logic behind the Soviet Union's economic relations with its satellites, which had until then been based on economic paternalism. This paternalism ensured the political control of economic reforms undertaken by the governments of its satellite countries, but forced the Soviet Union to spend an enormous amount of money to fill the economic gaps that the relation generated. These circumstances made it difficult to create policies that upheld the well-being of Soviet citizens, who were generally worse off than the people of other Eastern European communist states. When we add to this the cost of maintaining all Eastern Europe's military bases, or the Cold War's logic of deterrence, we can guess how urgently Gorbachev felt the need to neutralize these matters (Chapter 13).

The problem was that Gorbachev's proposed reforms were hard to fit into the rigidity of the *nomenklatura*, which saw any reform as a loss of power. The reforms were not aimed at destroying the Eastern bloc; they were an offer to reformulate socialism. The problem was that there wasn't a reformist interest



within the system, nor a clear alternative. Hence, they opted to leap forward, or rather leap into the abyss. Fontana's book details how perestroika quickly went from being a reform process to an out-of-control process plagued by nonsense, contradictions, powerlessness, and much improvising in order to intercept problems that emerged in every area of Soviet influence. It was a critical error in judgment that had an undesired outcome for its initiators, and would later be used to the advantage of a few new *apparatchiki*. Thus began the colossal theft dubbed "privatization", the proportions of which had never been seen before.

The embrace of neo-liberal capitalism

The book clearly relativizes the interpretive framework of the end of communism, which postulates that the overall citizenry of communist states "embraced" the Western model of capitalism as the only possible means of obtaining freedom and democracy. People thought that they would gain well-being

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ... CONTINUED

event, it's ironic that for so many, Khodorkovsky is a symbol of the fight for democracy and freedom when he amassed his fortune by systematically ripping off assets that belonged to all Russians."

And what about determinism?

"Hiding behind this determinism that we find in studying transitions is the fact that, during the course of many of these processes, atrocities were committed that did not serve any democracy-related need, and they are legitimized simply by demonizing the communist past. All this to justify a hegemonic discourse that is also a weapon of social control."

Does the academic world buy into this?

"The academic world does not exist apart from it. Every day it is more and more connected to political and economic powers. There

is a conservative orthodoxy, a defender of the established system, that increasingly shuns other interpretations. The competition to obtain financing and the challenges of surviving in the academic world all play a part in keeping these prevailing interpretations out there."

What is the role of history in science?

"Any analysis of a political and social phenomenon is always a historical analysis. Models that are built to predict the future can only be validated in the short term, never in the long term. What sets apart historians from political scientists or economists is that historians are always analyzing from a greater distance and can always connect their narratives to social and cultural change. So the historian's contribution is necessary to understand the present. From their

and new spaces of liberty with the change in systems, but the actual result was different. Ensuring the well-being of the people was the last thing to be considered in the transition from a planned economy to a free market. Fontana thus opposes the deterministic thesis that the general decline in well-being in the majority of Eastern states was a “necessary evil” or an inevitable effect inherent in any transition towards a free market economy. During the privatization process, a great many irregularities resulted from the combination of dramatic inequality and loss of social services, especially in Russia. This was predictable in a situation where in just a few months all the wealth of such an enormous country was transferred to private hands at bargain prices. These violations did away with most social services and the savings of 118 million Russian citizens, and gave way to the creation of a new oligarchic class that held most of the state’s power during Boris Yeltsin’s presidency (Chapter 15).

The import of neoliberal capitalism in Eastern Europe is in line with the process of deteriorating living standards that began in the 1970s and that has continued ever since. The plan that was made for privatization was not the only conceivable formula, as indicated by different economists in both the East and the West. The most orthodox form of this neoliberal economic policy was, however, touted as the only possible way – the triumph of what Fontana calls “actually existing capitalism” in the East – in the context of globalization (Chapter 19).

The failure to achieve parliamentary

democracy with a Western slant also carries global significance. Parallel to social deterioration, many states are experiencing a general democratic regression. Civil society is increasingly fragmented and not even close to holding a balance of power. Political and economic control is in fewer hands today than it was in 1950, although there are technically more democratic systems than ever before. In post-communist states, communism’s legacy was a political and moral vacuum that has left few obstacles to the creation of phony democracies subject to great oligarchic powers.

One of the book’s strong points is the way in which Fontana is consistently able to link geopolitical dimensions to their impact on the state, both in the political-economic and in the socio-cultural arena, while considering the fundamental importance of ideology to them all. In its nineteen chapters, Fontana convincingly elucidates the real motivations behind the regime changes, coups d’état, economic policy shifts, and wars that characterized the period. One can only hope that his work will be translated into English without delay. ✖

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vantage point, historians can help people think historically, a necessary ingredient for a critical analysis of the present, and to be able to confront prophecies such as Fukuyama’s. The other side of history is that it can be used as a vehicle to try to sell us any political product, like political irrationality and its frequent supposedly historical pretexts, aimed at loading voters with prejudice. Just look at the tone of the electoral campaign in the US and its constant references to socialism. As my teacher Pierre Vilar¹ would say, ‘We have to think historically, so people can think for themselves.’” ✖

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references

- 1 Pierre Vilar (1906–2003). Hispanist; considered one of the great authorities on the history of Catalonia.

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University cooperation on the agenda

FIFTY SCHOLARS, practitioners, and supporters of past and present Baltic Sea region academic cooperation met at the University of Turku on October 28, 2013, to discuss the possibilities for future cooperation, in particular in the context of the 2009 European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). Participants agreed that the region has worked as a kind of social laboratory for new regionalism, multi-level governance, and soft power. The success of previous cooperation can be validated by the intention of the EU to use the EUSBSR as a model case for future macro-regional projects.

Longstanding challenges such as environmental degradation, resource management, and transport security have been infused with new relevance as the Baltic Sea has begun to play a more significant role for Russia’s fossil fuel exports and hence for the global economy. From the discussions at the conference, the new EU-level interest in the region as well as increased Russian attention to the Baltic Sea was a strong indicator of the contemporary relevance and future importance of Baltic Sea cooperation. ✖

CARL MARKLUND

Note: Read the report in full at our website.