

Understanding the fall of the wall and other time tales

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, JUN 1 2009

The 20th Anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall offers has understandably generated a number of opportunities to look backwards to what happened, and to ask why it was that IR specialists seemed unable to see what was coming.

Some weeks ago, I chaired a meeting between two Cold War former foes – one a leading member of South Africa's apartheid order; the other, a Communist, a member of the African National Congress (ANC). They'd met before, of course, during the negotiations which led to the ending of apartheid.

But the question at hand – What impact did the Fall of the Berlin Wall have on South Africa's settlement – has not previously been discussed. Both participants were rather dismissive of the question, believing (as do many) that the mechanism for change in the country – the development of a network of negotiations at home and abroad – predated November, 1989. As a result, by the time the Wall came down, President F.W. de Klerk and his colleagues were as ready to settle as were the exiled ANC. I had always thought this was a somewhat celebratory view and, on the day, I pressed the two panellists for a deeper analysis. The closest I came to cracking the mutual support the old foes offered each other was the revealing comment from the former member of apartheid South Africa's cabinet that de Klerk's first meeting with the then all powerful Generals ended in disarray when the new president asked them to present a scenario for peace in Southern Africa. There wasn't one.

We still don't fully understand the reasons for the changes that happened in 1989: and, also, of course, we don't know why it is we still don't understand it. Patently, something really big was underway – something which neither IR nor the study of Modern History has managed to unlock. It seems clear, though, that the really interesting work in both International Political Sociology and Historical Sociology might provide far more satisfactory explanations than those presently on offer.

Two matters follow: first, seems a need to develop Cold War Studies further. The laudable program at the LSE, with its joint IR and History take on the Cold War is an important development. But its location at the centre of Imperial and near-centre of Cold War power, London, makes it imperative to bring the issue of the Cold War closer to the global periphery. In an effort to overcome this domination of the global centre, Rhodes University has run a post-graduate paper on the topic for four years. Frankly, the response from students has been overwhelming.

The second matter was brought home to me after the encounter between the two former foes described earlier. A columnist in a local 'give-away' – who is in his 80 – was dismissive of the panel saying the "audience did not learn very much". How could this be? Of the audience of nearly 200 people, 30 percent were final-year school children: a compulsory section of their final paper – interestingly, to be written in this November – deals with the Cold War.

But a key to the octogenarian's claim was offered as he summoned personal history make his point. His father he claimed, had fought in two world wars – the First and the Second – and "who could no more of have thought of fighting in (sic) the Cold War and of submitting meekly to the Russians taking over the world, as he would have thought of flying to the moon".

As I read this, I thought of Ernst Bloch's (1885-1977) notion that we live in a number of different times. Perhaps, only when we explore the intellectual framings which shaped the old man and those that will shape the 18-year olds in that

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audience will we get to grips with what is today so recklessly called “global change”. So, conceivably, we might add the History of Ideas to the listing of disciplines that might help us unlock both the past and the future.

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