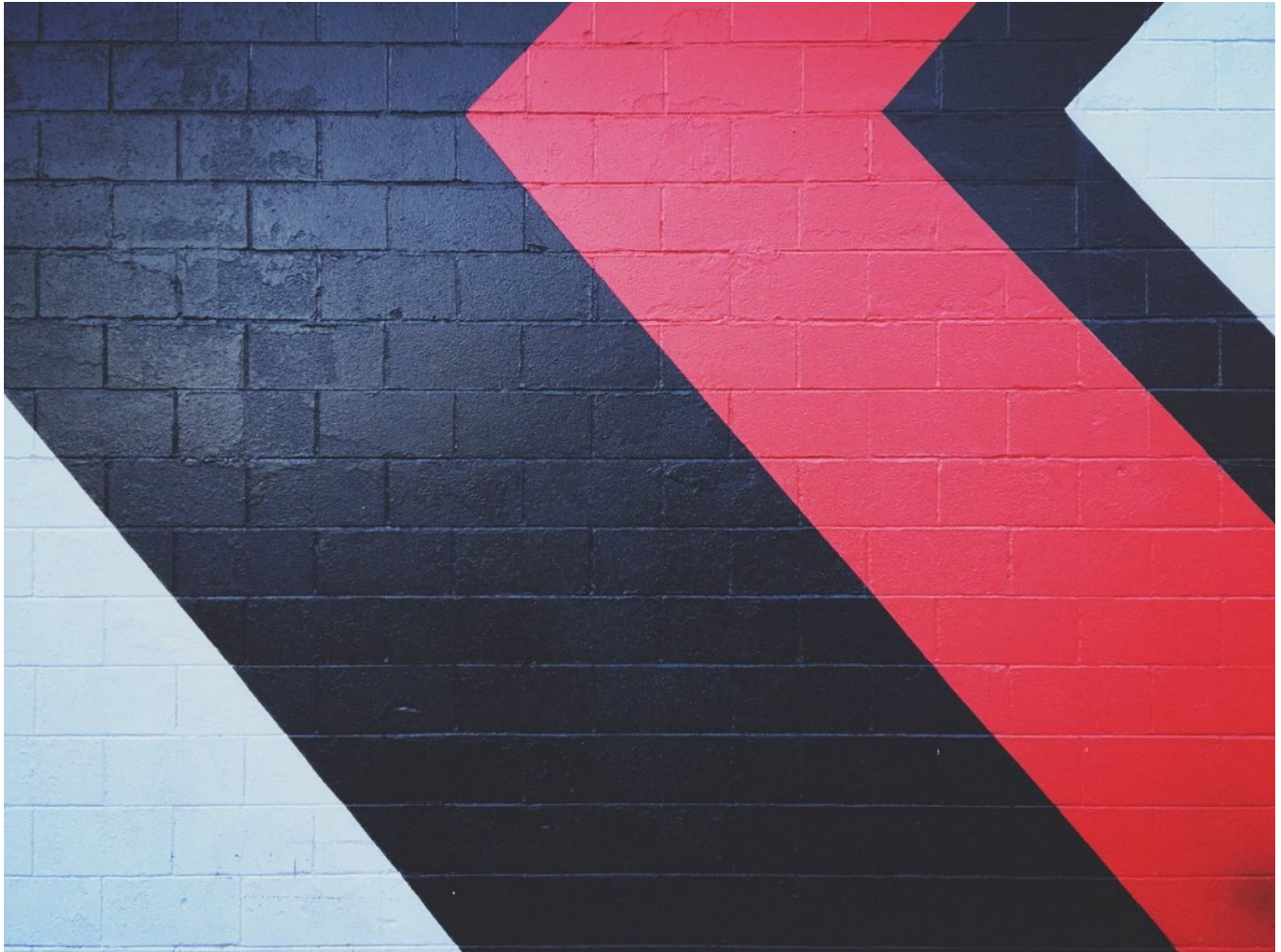


1979 comes after 1989 - Knud Erik Jorgensen



The bold and seemingly meaningless claim in the title is, as a general rule, plainly wrong. However, there are exceptions to the rule, so I owe the reader to explain what I have in mind.

The year 1989 connotes the end of the division of Europe. After 1989, parts of Europe were no longer kidnapped, as [Milan Kundera](#) put it. The year turned out also to be the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union and the bipolar international order. It was, according to Francis Fukuyama, the triumph of and

eventually the fully accomplished hegemony of liberalism. Processes of democratization, institutionalization, and globalization were set in motion, the entire repertoire of the main theoretical perspectives within the liberal international theory tradition. Theory and political practice hand in hand. At the time, the significance of 1989 was discussed in terms of different timespans. First, would 1989 represent the end of 40 years of Cold War? Second, given that 1989 accidentally happened 200 years after the French Revolution in 1789 perhaps we witnessed the end of 200 years of nation-state experience? Third, did the change possibly go deeper, perhaps to the invention of the modern state and the modern international system? It became fashionable, 350 years after the arrival of modernity, to talk about the return of medievalism. Whatever the relevance of the perspectives, the heuristic use of an anchor year and timespans proved to be a useful tool to determine the significance of change and continuity.

How does this heuristic tool work in the case of 1979? With the aim of examining the value of the tool, I will follow three intertwined tracks.

The first track: Home alone in the West, the United States, having experienced defeat in and exit from Vietnam, descended into a deep trauma. Social epistemes were strictly focused on the notion of decline. In some corners of US society, the Vietnam stab-in-the-back myth found an audience. Hollywood productions highlighted how the world no longer understood Americans ([French Connection](#)) or addressed widespread American fears of an imminent Japanese economic takeover ([Rising Sun](#)). Robert Keohane prepared [After Hegemony](#) in which he, misled by the simplicity of game theory, analysed how the world possibly could hang together *without* American hegemony. While China some time ago replaced Japan as the perceived threat, the potential contender, resentments of lost American superiority seem to be a constant, explaining contemporary aspirations that can be categorized under the umbrella called MAGA (Make America Great Again). While in (Western) Europe, the process of losing empires came to an end during the mid-1970s, especially with the revolution in Portugal, processes of finding a role endured. In this context, it is significant that the first enlargement of the European Community was accompanied by a [Declaration on European Identity](#) in 1973 and by 1979 processes of identity-formation were still ongoing.

However, 1979 is predominantly significant for what happens *beyond* Europe and *beyond* the West. The following will therefore be difficult to digest for minds who in a pronounced West-centric fashion are strictly focused on critiques of the West.

The second track: Given the current military frontlines around the world, the DMZ between North and South Korea, the Taiwan Strait, Iran-affiliated frontlines (Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen), Russian frontlines (Ukraine, the Baltic Sea, Georgia, Moldova, Syria), 1979 appears increasingly relevant as an anchor year. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan make 1979 a significant year. The Islamic Revolution was of such magnitude that Michel Foucault in his writings on the Iranian Revolution (*Persian Notebook*) reported with enthusiasm about the revolt of the masses and hailed the anti-hegemonic potential of the revolution. The Soviet-Afghan War can be seen as a proxy war in the context of the Cold War but the war is also called Afghan jihad. This suggests an alternative perspective, for instance, that the Soviet invasion had the unintended consequence of creating the mujahideen, Rambo's brave freedom fighters and Olivier Roy's carriers of modernity, the predecessors of the Taliban. With the Islamic Revolution and Afghan jihad, forces known not to be particularly liberal-minded and neglected by Fukuyama established a bridgehead that step by step would be strengthened.

In China, 1979 could be used to mark the 30th anniversary of the end of the Hundred Years of National Humiliation. In Türkiye, the Treaty of Sèvres, signed almost 60 years before 1979 and even if cancelled after a few years, continues to play a role as a worst-case scenario. While Algeria could celebrate it was 25 years since the beginning of the Algerian liberation war, Cuba could celebrate its 20 years of independence. Obviously, more examples can but need not be found around the world, because the point I am trying to make is, first, that it is these and similar milestones that matter for the current configuration of world politics and, second, that they matter more than 1989.

The third track: A strong ideological track within academia also points to 1979 as an anchor year. Both Edward Said's *[Orientalism](#)* (1978) and Samir Amin's

[Eurocentrism](#) (1984) were published around 1979. However, according to Gilbert Achcar, the epicentre of consequence is again the Iranian Revolution, this time with its derived effects within academia and boosted by especially *Orientalism*. Achcar points out, with frequent references to Sadik Jalal al-'Azm, how Arab intellectuals initiated a complex reception, characterized by both reproduction (the Orient and Occident *are* fundamentally different) and rejection of Said's diagnosis, producing what has been called '[orientalism in reverse](#)'. On the basis of this perspective some claim that the Orient is superior, perhaps not in terms of technology or economics, but certainly in terms of morality. Others claim that the way forward does not go via secular movements or national revolutions but via political Islam. Achcar synthesizes the paradigm into six distinct features of which it seems that particularly three have universal applicability. While focusing on French oriental studies, Achcar points out how the Arab paradigm quickly spilled over into various scientific disciplines in the West.

- The Orient and Occident are ontologically different
- Western social science epistemologies are incapable of understanding Oriental affairs.
- Western standards and values are inapplicable in measurements of the emancipation of the Orient

In Europe, and subsequently elsewhere, the paradigm would occasionally merge with the axioms of poststructuralism, especially after the publication, in 1979, of Francois Lyotard's [La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir](#). While the travelogue of the paradigm in Western scholarship is long and winding, and thus beyond the scope of this short essay, it seems to me that it continues to inform scholarship on Europe and the West, especially scholarship in which notions of orientalism, Eurocentrism, imperialism or civilization appear as pejorative tropes or stereotypes. The employment of these notions seems to have defamatory more than analytical functions. At a structural discursive level, it is difficult to spot differences between 'progressive' scholarly and political far-right narratives about EU imperialism. Moreover, the frequent, almost obligatory, references to a *mission civilisatrice* aim at projecting a time-specific (French, but not only) political practice into contemporary settings while arguing that European practices are no different from those that characterized imperial France.

Likewise, equipped with frequent yet superficial references to *Orientalism*, the book, analysts tend to be so impressed by homemade occidentalism that there is no reason to examine occidentalist practices beyond Europe or beyond the West. This is a pity because there is much to examine, cf. the case of the United States which originally was founded on and nurtured by a strong dash of anti-Europeanism. An ideological instrument that can be activated whenever there is a need or an opportunity. In this practice, the United States has many followers.

And that is why 1979 comes after 1989.



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