
Not the Last Word: Point and Counterpoint

Children in History

Chris Goddard

Writing about the French Revolution, Edmund Burke suggested that the state that cannot change will not survive. As I write this, at the end of 1989, it is evident that for many people the world is changing at a great pace, and that some states may not survive. There can be no doubt that 1989 will appear in history books as a year to be remembered, a year to be weighed alongside 1789, 1914, 1939 and so on. There is a sense that we are living through a momentous time in history. For those of us too young to remember 1939 or 1945, let alone 1914, this is the first experience of enormous upheaval. The map of Europe, East and West, appears to be changing every day.

With the established order, in Eastern Europe at least, disintegrating so rapidly, writing anything is a risky business, particularly for a journal such as *Australian Child and Family Welfare* where lead times are long and labour is voluntary. Much of what is written at the end of 1989 may appear irrelevant at best, in 1990.

Putting this risk aside, the world will never be the same. The Berlin Wall, a symbol of so much in our lives, is to be reduced to rubble and sold as souvenirs. Ceausescu and his wife, for so long the brutal and tyrannical rulers of Rumania, have been executed by firing squad. Attacks on identified communist leaders and secret police are reported in East Germany. Free market reforms are planned in Poland. In Prague students continue to campaign and in Hungary more appeals were made for Western financial assistance. People are asking whether the Soviet Union itself will survive.

These events remind me of the story, not necessarily apocryphal, of the Right-wing President of an African republic at a diplomatic reception several years ago. An Asian leader, whom he had not seen for some time, greeted him and asked after his family. The African President provided a brief up-date, and closed with the news that his eldest son was about to start university. "Where is he going?" the Asian leader asked. "We had a choice," the African leader replied, "Oxford or Bucharest, so we

chose Bucharest". "Why on earth did you choose Bucharest?" the Asian statesman asked incredulously, "We thought Bucharest was safer than Oxford" the right-wing African leader replied. "We don't want him exposed to Marxist ideas."

Exactly why the world is changing now is the subject of much speculation. Some claim that the Soviet sphere of influence is disintegrating for economic reasons. The Soviet Union, a grossly inefficient and unproductive place according to this theory, can no longer afford to subsidise other inefficient and unproductive countries like Rumania and Czechoslovakia. Nor can it afford further massive defence spending in its superpower race with the United States.

Christopher Booker (*Daily Telegraph* 18th November, 1989) has a different view. According to Booker, the reform movements in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union itself, for example in the Baltic states, have been prompted by one pressing issue: the demand that something be done as a matter of urgency about the environmental damage sustained by the communist world. Booker describes how a recent BBC television film portrays Poland as a country withering after forty years of communism with a third of the country described as environmental disaster areas, and 70 percent of the rivers unusable for anything. In the Soviet Union itself, vast tracts of the Siberian forest are reportedly reduced to semi-desert by logging, the Aral sea destroyed, the sea of Azov almost lifeless, smog over the Siberian city of Magnitogorsk killing thousands - Booker's list goes on and on. According to Booker, it is growing awareness of the pointless and rampant destruction of the environment that is toppling communism - there is, he claims with some exaggeration:

...horrifying evidence that the only real achievement of communism has been to poison its land, its water, its air and to kill off its people on a colossal scale.

Nancy Reagan puts forward another view. Nancy Reagan has just published her memoirs, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (Reagan and Novak, 1989). Reading

books like this makes one believe that it cannot be long before the East Germans realise they have made a mistake and build another wall. According to Nancy, Ronald Reagan spent a great deal of time reading cowboy books in bed, and in the evenings watching his old movies with his secret service guards. The reader, Nancy appears to suggest, should believe that reconciliation between the United States and the Soviet Union would not have occurred if it were not for her role, although an astrologer from California appears to have had a great deal of influence over the Reagans.

Whatever caused this social and political upheaval, be it economics, green politics, or Californian astrologers and fading film-stars, there is a sense of optimism amongst many people, a feeling, or hope, that the world is now a safer place. But the changes mean different things to different people. The following news reports remind us of this.

In *The Times* (15th November, 1989) Anne McElvoy reported on a hidden side to the flood of people from East to West Berlin. It appears that some forgot to take their children:

Markus, Denny and Steven... are brothers aged eight, four and two respectively. They were left alone in their East Berlin flat the night the border opened. Their mother said she was going to West Berlin for the day but never returned. She told no one she had gone for good and left the children only bread and cheese to eat. Two days later, neighbours found the three boys crying for their mother and the two smallest covered in sores.

McElvoy reports that more than 100 children have been deserted in East Berlin alone:

Nancy, the eldest of the children in the home, is 13 years old and talks about her parents' departure - they took her small brother and sister but left her - with a terrible calm borne of stifled desperation.

The irony of it all, McElvoy suggests, is that until the Wall crumbled, East Germany had been particularly proud of the low rate of child abuse and neglect and

the widespread availability of social services.

In the days leading to the downfall of Ceausescu, and his eventual execution, Rumanian police indulged in fearful atrocities. This report is taken from Melbourne's *Sun News-Pictorial* (unattributed, 22nd December, 1989):

More than 30 barefoot children carrying candles in a passive protest have been massacred by Rumanian police, according to eyewitness reports. Travellers arriving in neighbouring Yugoslavia from the troubled country brought reports of the outrage to the outside world yesterday. The reported massacre of 36 children on Saturday was part of continuing brutal repression in Rumania...

Finally, I will return to Christopher Booker's article referred to above. Writing of the pollution in Poland portrayed on British television, Booker describes towns:

... where two thirds of all the children are suffering by the age of 10 from serious physical and mental disabilities - no image in (the) film was more shocking than the sight of dozens of mentally retarded children lying on the floor of an orphanage...

It has long been acknowledged that children have no place in history. Bakan

(1971) suggests that there is a huge discrepancy between the magnitude and significance of child abuse in history and its documentation. Laslett (1965) describes the silence of the children in history and Elmer (1979) believes that children were not regarded as very important, so nobody thought it necessary to describe their daily lives. De Mause (1974) suggests a reason for this:

Historians have concentrated so much on the noisy sandbox of history with its fantastic castles and magnificent battles that they generally ignored what was going on in the homes around the playground... (1974: 1)

There is a danger that 1989 could merely be history repeating itself, at least for children in those countries where the upheavals are occurring. Children abandoned by their parents in their rush to a better life in the West, children holding candles massacred by police, children, poisoned by industries, who are left lying on floors... If 1989, in historical terms, is to be seen as *really* changing anything, then it would be good to believe that these things are less likely to occur in future. For many people change is occurring at a great pace. It would be a better and safer world if children could be the beneficiaries of that change rather than victims once again.

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