

“Economic memories” of the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions in East Germany and the Czech Republic

Till Hilmar, Bremen University, SOCIUM – Research Center on Inequality and Social Policy, till.hilmar@uni-bremen.de

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Abstract. How does the aftermath of 1989 shape the meaning of this event today? On the basis of an interview study with 67 respondents from former East Germany and the Czech Republic administered in 2016/17, this article asks how individuals articulate “economic memories” against the background of the 1990s, a time in which the transition to democracy was accompanied by labor market ruptures. It documents how salient themes of change are narrated in terms of work and its moral dimensions; and how memories of the time are concerned with mobilizing one’s skills in the face of economic change. The article distinguishes five accounts by which respondents differently incorporate the historical event of 1989 into a vernacular, biographical logic. This framework offers a “bottom-up” perspective as a contribution to our understanding of the ongoing contestations over the meaning of the 1989 revolutions.

Introduction

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, historical references to the revolutions of 1989 continue to have great political import in central-Eastern European societies¹. As an icon of public memory, the event has come to symbolize the very possibility of democratic change, free markets and consumerism, liberalism, and the rule of law. Political attempts to craft a unifying, European *lieu de memoire* around it have recently intensified.²

At the same time, 1989 is an increasingly contested symbol. It has entered the stage of the “politics of the past”³ forcefully as a space in which competing visions of national historical-political cultures, and their respective teleological visions for the future, are negotiated. In some post-socialist societies, Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik have argued, “memory warriors” are capitalizing on popular sentiments of injustice of the post-1989 era.⁴ Some political elites derive

¹ F. Laczo and J. Wawrzyniak, “Memories of 1989 in Eastern Europe between Hope, Dismay and Neglect,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 31, No 3 (2017), 431-438.

² A. Assmann, “*Europe’s Divided Memory*” in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed U. Blacker, A. Etkind, and J. Fedor (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25-41; A. Sierp, “1989 versus 1938 as a *Lieux de Memoire*,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 31, No 3 (2017), 439-455.

³ E.g., G. Mink and L. Neumayer, eds., *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Memory Games* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

⁴ M. Bernhard and J. Kubik, eds., *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

a normative model of “illiberal democracy” from sentiments of disappointment around 1989.⁵ As with any myth of origin, references to this particular event have the power to raise fundamental normative conceptions of social order.⁶ The wonder of beginnings, to use Hannah Arendt’s terminology, is a primary point of reference for political philosophy. It has inspired numerous scholars of central-Eastern Europe to investigate how normative visions of the political find varying institutional manifestations across the region.

However, there are limitations to regarding the event of 1989 primarily as a source of contested visions of political order. In her oral history study of a Czech-Austrian border town, Muriel Blaive reports the story of a lady interviewed who, when asked if the term “Velvet Revolution” meant anything to her, tried to make up her memory and replied: “Ah yes! But that was in Prague!”⁷ This is not a contested vision of 1989. Rather, it seems that the specific political-iconic reading – that of mass demonstrations, and a claim for political change – is not part of her experience. Hers is likely a much more “vernacular” understanding: smaller, less official, and focused on her local social environment.⁸

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how references to 1989 and vernacular memories interact. It draws on Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s recent intervention to the field of memory studies, in particular her argument that the meaning of an event depends on the way its aftermath is understood.⁹ Rather than a single point in time which engenders a stable

⁵ J. Mark, M. Blaive, A. Hudek, A. Saunders, and S. Tyszka, “1989 after 1989: Remembering the End of State Socialism in East-Central Europe,” in *Thinking through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, ed. M. Kopeček and P. Wciślik, 463–504 (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015); Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁶ V. Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Nationalism, Democracy, and Myth in Postcommunist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁷ Mark et al. 2015, *1989 after 1989*, 490.

⁸ L. Breuer and A. Delius, “1989 in European Vernacular Memory,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 31, No 3 (2017): 456-478. Similarly, M. Lorek, “Die Wende in Lebenserzählungen ehemaliger DDR-Bürger,” *Der Osten. Neue Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf einen komplexen Gegenstand jenseits von Verurteilung und Verklärung*, eds., S. Matthäus and D. Kubiak, 125-140 (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016) has reported a surprising “absence” of the political event 1989 in East German biographies.

⁹ R. Wagner-Pacifici, *What is an Event?* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2017) provides an excellent theoretical framework. { }

mnemonic frame, an event is an ongoing process. Through the dynamics of form and flow, an event stretches into the present, and is charged with shifting interpretations.

On this basis, I ask: How do individuals with a first-hand experience of living through the aftermath of 1989 identify *change* in this process? Within vernacular accounts of change, and the “small” events that they foreground, I identify patterns of meaning attached to the “large” event 1989.

One important source of these references can be found in the realm of work. Drawing on cultural sociology and the sociology of valuation, I explore how a critical autobiographical moment of telling the self in the tension between change and consistency is linked with the problem of economic agency, in particular with skills.¹⁰ I label the salient memories that are concerned with coping with labor market challenges as “economic memories”. They are central to a person’s autobiographical narration {}. Economic memories are never based on imaginations of lavish wealth, but instead the relatively modest wish to attain a Western middle-class lifestyle in which work is regarded as a primary source of moral value and deservingness, similar to what Ivan Krastev pointed to when he argued that 1989 must be understood as a revolution of “normalcy”.¹¹

This research is based on interviews with 67 respondents from former East Germany and the Czech Republic who have experienced the year 1989 as a rupture relatively early in their work biography. The collective framework of an idiomatic post-1989 time is a necessarily insufficient English adaptation of terms such as the German *Nachwendezeit* or the Czech *porevoluční dobá* (lacking the historical experience, the English language has no meaningful

¹⁰ M. Bamberg, “Identity and Narration,” P. Hühn, et al. eds., *Handbook of Narratology*, 132–143 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009); J. C. Alexander, “Market as a Narrative and Character,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 4, No 4 (2011): 477-488; M. Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men. Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class and Immigration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); A. Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹¹ I. Krastev, “Deepening Dissatisfaction,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, No. 1 (2010): 113-119.

equivalent to offer). Respondents often use this terminology to reference the challenges of labor market change.

The discussion proceeds as follows. First, I offer a cultural framework for the analysis of economic experiences post-1989. Next, I provide historical background on the Czech and the East German case, the methods on which this research is based, and the sampling of individuals from two professional groups, engineers and care workers. In order to explore patterns of accounts of change, the approach taken in this article foregrounds the similarities across these groups and the two national cases. In the empirical part, I distinguish five ways (and their associated temporal logic) in which respondents narrate 1989 through its aftermath: as a “beginning” (linear time), an “initial obstruction” (accommodating in time), “the freedom from, but not to something” (neutral time), “the beginning of an end” (declining time), and finally, “betrayal” (captured time). I close by discussing the implications of the findings.

A framework of analysis: Economic memories post-1989

The economic aftermath of 1989 is a well-researched theme. Historically exceptional in its simultaneity with political change, economic adjustment has brought a rapid and massive decline of the industrial and agricultural sector (economic output declined by 40-50% in some regions in the first three years after 1989), a significant reduction of the work force, and the weakening of state agency and welfare systems.¹² These processes played out differently across the region. Writings on the varieties of capitalism, comparative research on the emergence of postcommunist elites, social mobility research, and research on class in post-communism all have explored different facets of economic restructuring.¹³ Yet from mapping the structure of

¹² See T.I. Berend, *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union: The Economic and Social Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe since 1973* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 146, 163.

¹³ C. Offe, *Varieties of Transition. The East European and East German Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); B. Heyns, B., “Emerging inequalities in central and Eastern Europe,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005), 163–197. P. Ther, *Europe since 1989: A History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016); On varieties of capitalism: D. Bohle and B. Greskovits, *Capitalist Diversity on Europe’s Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), P. Vanhuysse, *Divide and Pacify. Strategic Social Policies and Political Protest in Post-Communist Democracies* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006); on

economic change alone, we cannot fully understand how such processes are apprehended. According to historian E.P. Thompson, material conditions do not directly translate into consciousness. Drawing on a related seminal argument by Karl Polanyi, economic anthropologist Chris Hann has warned against an “economistic fallacy” in the analysis of post-socialist societies and called for attention to social “patterns of embedding” that accompany economic change.¹⁴

In fact, writings on post-socialist nostalgia have provided a rich account of the cultural dimensions of economic references to the past.¹⁵ Yet they are concerned primarily with references to *before* 1989, while the present article seeks to foreground how references to the time *after* 1989 constitute a critical source of these memories. A conceptual framework to interrogate the ways in which the aftermath of 1989 is narrativized is needed, similar to Adam Mrozowicki’s “grand narratives of the transformation” or Elaine Weiner’s “market dreams”. To recognize the cultural and historical import of processes relating to the time before 1989, the approach can be joined with a “legacy” perspective. Legacies, according to Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin, are defined as a “durable causal relationship between past institutions {and} subsequent policies and beliefs”, one that was, at some point, exposed to significant rupturing dynamics. Jason Wittenberg maintains that the link between an “antecedent” in the past and an “outcome” in the present can be “identified either as a cause or as a correlate”, and suggests that it is possible to distinguish between cultural, material, and institutional legacies.

elites: L.P. King and I. Szelényi, “Post-Communist Economic Systems,” *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, N. Smelser and R. Swedberg, eds., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 205-229; on social mobility: M. Diewald, A. Goedicke, and K.U. Mayer, *After the Fall of the Wall: Life Courses in the Transformation of East Germany*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), on class in post-communism: J Morris, “An Agenda for Research on Work and Class in the Postsocialist world,” *Sociology Compass*, 11, 2017, 1-12, A. Stenning, “Where is the Post-Socialist Working Class? Working Class Lives in the Spaces of (Post-)Socialism,” *Sociology* 39, no.5, 983-999, 2005.

¹⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); C. Hann, “The Economistic Fallacy and Forms of Integration under and after Socialism,” *Economy and Society* 63 No 4 (2014), 626-649: 644.

¹⁵ E.g. M. Todorova and Z. Gille, eds., *Post-communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); M. Velikonja, “Lost in Transition, Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-socialist Countries,” *East European Politics and Societies* 23 No 4 (2009): 535-551.

The present article traces cultural perceptions of the economic realm before 1989 in this way; as a set of conditions in the past that likely affect how change in the aftermath of 1989 is evaluated.¹⁶

To examine narrativizations of the transformation time, it draws on cultural sociology and the study of moral-economic valuation.¹⁷ Studying narrative, this approach explores how value is attached to economic forces: Individuals negotiate questions of worth, dignity, autonomy, and social connectedness, through references to the economic realm. A crucial point of departure is that the wish to protect the self and one's associates from being deemed as "undeserving" by society is often much stronger than the inclination to engage in a competition over social status.¹⁸ Narrating temporal and moral consistency allows individuals to counter potential ruptures to their sense of dignity.

One important way by which individuals navigate the problem of the deserving self is through skills. Skills are exchanged for money on the labor market, and, at the same time, constitute a valued object in themselves. They are a type of "negotiated agency", providing a sense of what one is granted to do in terms of institutional credentials (a tacit and instrumental dimension), as well as in terms of what one can do in the sense of one's innate capabilities (a reflexive and personal dimension).¹⁹ Crucially, skills provide a temporal sense of cohesion as a

¹⁶ A. Mrozowicki, *Coping with Social Change* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011), E. Weiner, "Market Dreams". *Gender, Class and Capitalism in the Czech Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). M.R. Beissinger and S. Kotkin, "The Historical Legacies of Communism. An Empirical Agenda." *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe*, eds. M.R. Beissinger and S. Kotkin, 1-27: 7 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). J. Wittenberg, "Conceptualizing Historical Legacies" *East European Politics, Societies, and Cultures*, 29 No 2 (2015): 366-378: 368. The present discussion does not scrutinize causal factors pre-1989. Its main focus are apprehensions of the time post-1989.

¹⁷ J.C. Alexander, *The Meaning of Social Life* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Alexander, *Market as a Narrative*; Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*; Sayer, *Moral Significance*.

¹⁸ The approach is based on a Durkheimian idea of social cohesion through a shared system of meaning. It does not regard conflicts of distribution exclusively through the assumption of status competition, instead it foregrounds that individuals also care about moral outcomes and group membership, see also Sayer, *Moral Economy*, 117-120.

¹⁹ See Mrozowicki, *Coping with Social Change*, 47-51; M. Archer, *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 28.

structure of meaning: They represent what a person was trained to do in the past, feels empowered to do in the present, and will be capable of doing in the future.²⁰

In the following, I call the vernacular memories that reference agency in the past as overcoming labor market challenges “economic memories”. As memories of coping, potentially recalling negative experiences, they point to salient autobiographical events.²¹ Their frame of reference is a changing measure of valuation of one’s skills. The work of memory lies in creating a selective narrative structure from experience, in devising a temporal logic of beginning, middle, and end; and its retrospective embedding in a life-history arch.²²

Data and Methods

This research is based on an interview study administered in 2016/17 in former East Germany and the Czech Republic. The state-socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Czechoslovakia (CSSR) exhibited many similarities between 1948/49 and 1989. Claus Offe introduced the label “economic integration” to describe, first, an extensive industrial basis found in these two cases:

“The GDR and the CSR, the ‘state socialist success stories’, are integrated primarily economically and for all the notable differences between them, in the following ways they have more in common with each other than with any of the other countries. (...) Their industrial potential was well established and constantly expanded owing to wide-scale pre-war industrialization, and per capita industrial output was correspondingly high. In addition, the fact that they are the only two of the six countries in which a strong labour movement existed before the Communists seized power also has to do with their pre-war history as industrialized societies.”

Both regimes achieved almost full employment and an exceptionally high share – even for state-socialist levels – of the adult population, both male and female, was active in the workforce. Second, economic integration functioned as a type of surrogate nationalism. There was a relative absence – in contrast to Poland and Hungary – of the rhetoric of a nationally-

²⁰ On the concept of meaning structure, see Alexander, *The Meaning of Social Life*.

²¹ M.A. Conway, and C.W. Pleydell-Pearce, “The construction of autobiographical memories in the self-memory system,” *Psychological Review* 107, no 2 (2000): 261-288.

²² L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), Bamberg, *Narrative*.

branded socialism as an official justification of the Communist Party's claim to power.

According to Offe,

“Both countries exhibit a low degree of national integration, if for opposite reasons. What was involved in the case of the GDR was less than a nation and in the CSR more than one nation, namely the coexistence of two titular nations, the Czechs and the Slovaks.”

A further shared characteristic was absence of reform. The two regimes remained ideologically fairly hardline until the very end. In contrast to Poland, Hungary or Yugoslavia, the Czechoslovak and East German Communist leadership effectively never lost grip on power. Attempts at reform, most prominently in 1953 in East Germany and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, failed. In the period of late-socialism after 1968, the regimes turned to social conservatism and the promise of economic stability in return for the popular toleration of one-party rule.²³

The economic identity forged through these factors likely functions as a cultural legacy – an association between an antecedent pre-1989 and a cultural outcome post-1989 –, not

²³ Offe, *Varieties of Transition*, 140, M. Brie, “Staatssozialistische Länder im Vergleich. Alternative Herrschaftsstrategien und divergente Typen,” *Einheit als Privileg? Vergleichende Perspektiven auf die Transformation Ostdeutschlands*, ed. H. Wiesenthal, 39-104 (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus 1995), on similarities in terms of power concentration see C. Boyer, “Sozialgeschichte der Arbeiterschaft und staatssozialistische Entwicklungspfade: konzeptionelle Überlegungen und eine Erklärungsskizze,” *Arbeiter im Staatssozialismus. Ideologischer Anspruch und soziale Wirklichkeit*, eds P. Hübner, C. Kleßmann, K. Tenfelde, 71-86:78 (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2005). See also M. Vaněk and P. Mücke, *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and K. H. Jarausch, “Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship,” *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR* eds., K.H. Jarausch and E. Duffy, 47–69 (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999). On social conservatism see: T. Lindenberger, “‘Asoziale Lebensweise’. Herrschaftslegitimation, Sozialdisziplinierung und die Konstruktion eines ‘negativen Milieus’ in der SED-Diktatur,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 31, 2005, 227–274; M. Pullmann, *Konec experimentu. Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* (Praha: Scriptorium, 2011); P. Bren: *The Greengrocer and his TV. The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). By the 1980s, trust in the late-socialist social contract was on the wane, as the Party could not deliver on its promises of stable prices and economic benefits. What is more, the political opposition was morally vocal and culturally influential, particularly in the Czechoslovak underground. On the significance of those traditions in 1989, see J. Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face. Politics, Culture, Community in Czechoslovakia 1989-1992* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013). In both cases, the events in the fall of 1989 led to a break with old elites. The model of negotiations between old and new elites in the form of round-table talks was, unlike in Poland and Hungary, quickly abandoned. Soon, old elites would also be held accountable (though primarily symbolically so in the Czech case) in what were the most expansive lustration policies in the post-socialist world. See K. Verdery, “Postsocialist Cleansing in Eastern Europe. Purity and Danger in Transitional Justice,” *Socialism Vanquished, Socialism Challenged: Eastern Europe and China, 1989-2009*, eds. N. Bandelj and J. Dorothy, 63-82 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

merely in terms of patterns of consumerism, but also in terms of productivity and work as sources of collective pride.²⁴

After 1989, the trajectories diverged markedly: East Germany was incorporated into West Germany; the Czech Republic divorced from Slovakia and became a state of its own. However, there are again similarities with respect to the public memory of the 1989 revolutions. In both cases, there is a relative consensus in the public sphere that 1989 marks the beginning of a democratic regime, that there was an actual transition of power from old to new elites, and that the majority of the population welcomed, and mandated, these changes in the spirit of political and economic liberalism – unlike, notably, in Poland or Hungary, where these meanings were increasingly subject to contestation soon after the initial transition.²⁵ Taken together, the mode of historical transition in these two societies resulted in elite turnover, thus creating favorable conditions for the spread of a unifying, predominantly positive narrative of 1989, one based on the idea of a morally and historically justified departure from the Communist past, in public memory.

The economic aftermath of 1989 was characterized by stark ruptures on the emerging “free” labor market. In both societies, an extraordinarily large share of the population was active in the labor force before 1989. After the revolutions, the workforce shrank dramatically: In East Germany, it was reduced by around 30% between 1989 and 1992; in the Czech Republic, the decline was by about 10% between 1989 and 1991.²⁶ People left into early retirement or

²⁴ Beissinger and Kotkin, *Historical legacies*; Wittenberg, *Conceptualizing historical legacies*. “Productive labor” was a Communist trope not only in these two societies; but here, as Claus Offe’s framework suggest, it was the primary basis of collective identity. What is more, historians Thomas Lindenberger and Michal Pullmann have demonstrated that drawing moral-economic boundaries to “negative milieus” – individuals defined as “unwilling” to work, “asocial”, or “parasitic”–, increasingly turned into an effective power-tool linking the Party to “normal” citizens in 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia and East Germany, as the number of trials based on these charges steadily increased. Such negative boundaries could be used to conjure a pure and righteous “we” in terms of work and economic identity. See Lindenberger, *Asoziale Lebensweise*, Pullmann, *Konec experimentu*.

²⁵ See Bernhard and Kubik, *Twenty Years*, Mark et al., *1989 after 1989*.

²⁶ B. Lutz and H. Grünert H., “Der Zerfall der Beschäftigungsstrukturen der DDR 1989 – 1993,” *Arbeit, Arbeitsmarkt und Betriebe. Berichte der Kommission für die Erforschung des sozialen und politischen Wandels in den neuen Bundesländern* eds., B. Lutz, H.M. Nickel, R. Schmidt, A. Sorge, 69-120 (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1996), 71. Before 1989, Czechoslovakia had the highest share of women employed in

unemployment. One key difference in the mode of economic transformation between the two cases was the level of unemployment: Unemployment was the defining experience of the East German transformation. The official unemployment rate was around 15% in 1995 and around 20% in 2000; around half of unskilled and around a third of skilled workers experienced unemployment at some point. In the Czech Republic, in contrast, the official unemployment rate remained exceptionally low at around 3-4% up until the end of the 1990s. While in East Germany, wages were rising after the monetary union with West Germany; in the Czech Republic, they remained low for decades to come.²⁷

Labor market experiences were shaped by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and educational credentials attained before 1989. There is arguably also an important collective dimension to them. From the perspective of those who grew up in a system that mandated work as right and as duty, and in which work was at the center of one's moral universe (relatively independent of larger communist ideological goals, as Martha Lampland has demonstrated), the economic aftermath of 1989 brought the possibility that one's labor might be superfluous, and thus an uncertainty about the value of one's skills. Such concerns were also warranted: Skills and educational credentials attained pre-1989 proved to be a decisive factor, in the long run, for individual labor market outcomes post-1989 (this is particularly true for East Germany and the Czech Republic and much less so in post-Soviet societies like Ukraine or Russia).²⁸

Interviews were conducted with 67 respondents in 2016 and 2017 (with 41 respondents in the East German case, and 26 in the Czech). Individuals who experienced the revolutions of 1989 after having finished their education and having already entered the workforce (more than 80% of respondents were between 20 and 35 years of age in 1989) were invited to participate.

the work force globally, see J. True, *Gender, Globalisation, Postsocialism: The Czech Republic after Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 78.

²⁷ Diewald et al. *After the Fall*; J. Večerník: *Czech Society in the 2000s. A report on socio-economic policies and structures* (Prague: Academia, 2009).

²⁸ Heyns, *Emerging Inequalities*, M. Lampland, *The Object of Labor. Commodification in socialist Hungary*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 310-135; King and Szelényi, *Post-Communist Economic Systems*, for "political capital" in post-Soviet societies.

The study draws on a combination of autobiographical and episodic interviewing.²⁹ In autobiographical interviewing, respondents are encouraged to narrate freely and to generate an overarching life story. Conversations are initiated by asking respondents to recount their economic biography, starting from the time when they finished their education. Respondents create a personal line of narration. Later, using the tools of episodic interviewing, some topics, such as possible experiences with economic restructuring, job loss or retraining, can be introduced (to achieve greater comparability of interviews). Respondents still are encouraged to narrate (instead of describe) and to create significant links between topics and events on their own, without guidance by the interviewer. Event-specific knowledge, or “flashbulb memories”, can be recorded in this way.³⁰ Like in any episodic interview, foregrounding certain focused topics and events – in the present case, work experiences – also carries theoretical assumptions into the conversation. From this follows that it cannot be concluded that respondents’ economic accounts of 1989 and its aftermath are in any way more significant than political apprehensions of this event, as the latter are de-emphasized. However, this approach allows to recognize that economic accounts are weighty in their own right – charged with rich and affective narrative meaning –, and that they may also gain political salience.³¹ Conversations usually lasted one to two hours and were conducted at respondents’ work-sites, cafes or homes.

In the present article, I focus on how respondents link aspects of their work biography to the year 1989. This means, first, exploring what significant *process of change* respondents identify with reference to the aftermath of 1989. To do so, I coded for narrations of economic agency, which is remembered as a reaction to critical adjustments relating to one’s work. I identified similarities and differences across my material: What “small” events such as a firm’s

²⁹ Abrams, *Oral History*; H.J. Rubin and I.S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012).

³⁰ Conway and Playdell-Pearce, *Autobiographical Memory*. In the second and third part of the conversation, I deepened or introduced some topics, such as changes to social relations post-1989 and justice beliefs, using semi-opened questions. The present article focuses on the biographical part.

³¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for giving me the chance to clarify this point. The present approach also seeks to lay bare the symbolic power of an economic *framing* of issues of personal identity, exploring it in the context of a cultural legacy of economics as a source of collective identity.

restructuring, retraining, maternity leave, job loss, or entrepreneurship, are brought up and deemed as important, and how are they linked to the problem of economic agency and skills?³² In a second step, I coded for the ways in which such accounts of work-related change are connected to the historical event of 1989 by distinguishing patterns of sequencing, thereby ensuring that respondents' narratives are not required to follow a predetermined temporal order, such as 1989 as a point of departure. Third, I coded for respondents' explicit statements about the meaning of 1989.³³

Respondents sometimes introduce idiomatic vocabularies to explicitly denote the time before and after 1989. They serve as an orientation for the analysis. Table 1 provides an overview over some of them.³⁴

Table 1 about here

Respondents from two professional groups, engineers and care workers, were contacted. They differ in the way their skills were valued after the revolutions. Individuals with higher education degrees in technical fields were significantly advantaged in post-1989 labor markets; relative to them, low-qualified individuals working in fields such as social services, education, or health care, tended to be disadvantaged. Nevertheless, individuals in both groups were required to assess the value of their education pre-1989 after the revolutions, a process often

³² A more active voice of agency is distinguished from a more passive one, see Mrozowicki, *Coping with Social Change*. This distinction serves as an important foundation for the typology presented in Table 2, below.

³³ At the end of each conversation, respondents were asked to evaluate the meaning of 1989 from a present perspective. They would usually respond to this prompt by weighting positive and negative dimensions.

³⁴ There are, however, two ways in which respondents can locate an event or process in the aftermath of 1989. In a first, neutral understanding, they use it to refer to a point in time that came after the revolutions. This is a chronological usage: One came after the other. It does not necessarily imply a causal chain. In a second understanding, the idea implies that the event of 1989 has had some sort of effect on what followed. This is an explanatory usage. It is also more of a collective, memory-induced use of the term, in which "after" the revolution really means "because of" the revolution. The best an interviewer can do is to ask for clarification during the conversation; but it must be acknowledged that the difference can be subtle.

accompanied by mixed sentiments of a perceived loss and gain of autonomy at work.³⁵ There is also a gender disparity in this sample. From 67 respondents, among care workers, all 30 respondents are female with the exception of one male care worker; among engineers, 12 out of 37 respondents are female. The implication is that gender and profession is largely collapsed in this sample and cannot be substantively disentangled. Methodologically, this article is primarily interested in similarities in how the transformation time is narrativized across these groups and contexts, therefore demographic and social mobility differences are only superficially discussed.

Findings

Most respondents in this study remember the time post-1989 as one of great economic challenges. For many, the advent of market society has changed conditions at work. Engineers identify a primary change post-1989 in the scarcity of contracts in a competitive environment; among care workers, a new scarcity of time that can be committed to single patients is a recurring theme. Respondents reference their core skills when remembering their economic agency in dealing with the challenges of the transition. For instance, engineers refer to “technical competency” not only as a core value of their education pre-1989, but also as the basis of economic success post-1989. Care workers regularly point to what many call a “generalist” education pre-1989 that provided them with the means to think outside the box and remain flexible, instead of being narrowly focused on specialized tasks (an issue that many

³⁵ For labor market developments see: Diewald et al., *After the Fall*, J. Večerník, *Markets and People: The Czech Reform Experience in a Comparative Perspective* (Avebury: Aldershot, 1996), for the issue of autonomy among Czech care workers see for instance R. Read, “Labour and Love. Competing Constructions Care in A Czech Nursing Home”, *Critique of Anthropology* 27, No 2 (2007): 203-222. For East German engineers see B. Giessmann, “Berufliche Handlungsmuster ostdeutscher Fachschulingenieure an der Nahtstelle von Wissenschaft und Produktion – Potential im Transformationsprozess?” *‘Man konnte und man musste sich verändern’*. *Natur- und ingenieurwissenschaftliche Fachkräfte aus der DDR in der Marktwirtschaft der BRD*, ed. H. Lange, 125-144 (Münster: LIT, 2000). In contrast to the German, working in the Czech state sector generally meant (and still means) extremely low pay, see True, *Gender*, 81-83. These two groups represent different strata of the emerging middle-class post-1989. They are still in a relatively privileged position compared to unskilled workers and those who experienced long-term unemployment.

criticize about health care education today).³⁶ In this way, skills create a smooth transition between the two systems from this internal point of view – creating a sense of continuity through time – by linking one’s education before 1989, to the mastering of potential economic difficulties in the 1990s, to the present day.

There are important differences between the Czech and the German material. East Germans have experienced many more breaks in their professional biographies post-1989. Themes such as job loss and re-entering the labor market are much more present in the German than in the Czech interviews. What is more, East Germans are, until today, reminiscent of negative experiences in encounters with West Germans (many recall their first encounters with West Germans in the early 1990s as their new bosses, managers and/or owners, and as profoundly ignorant of East German experiences). Only very few Czechs report personal encounters with foreign investors. Overall, the sense of economic devaluation after 1989 is stronger among Germans in this material.

Given the central role of economic agency for the way the transformation time is understood, I now turn to the principal question: How is the year 1989 remembered through its aftermath? In the following, I distinguish five temporal accounts (see Table 2). They are derived from all 67 interviews, based on my coding of how respondents articulate the memory of mobilizing skills in a changing work environment, and how they subsequently weave notions of economic agency into a temporal order around 1989.

Table 2 about here

1989 as a beginning, the “modernization” of self and society

³⁶ See on this point also Read, *Labour and Love*.

The modernization account is grounded in the belief that 1989 was the beginning of a time of economic opportunities. It is most clearly expressed in stories of economic pioneering and entrepreneurial activities.

Markus, 61, is a German construction engineer. His evaluation of the events of 1989 is thoroughly positive, he calls it the “most exciting time of my life” and recalls, in rich detail, the days in the fall of 1989, when “we participated in each and every peace prayer”. He associates himself with the core circle of 1989 dissidents in the city of Leipzig, referring to them as “friends”. The memory of his political activities at the time transitions into a story of how he decided to take matters into his own hand and found his own business:

“And then it all went so fast. A lot of colleagues and friends were making decisions in the fall of 1989, ‘are we maybe going to enter politics, or even join a party?’ Our major is a good friend of mine, he’s an engineer! Those were the kinds of decisions we had to make. I said, ‘I have reservations about the Federal German party system’. We were active in Demokratie Jetzt {a GDR civic movement organization}, it was soon thwarted, I relatively quickly decided to become self-employed. I even started my own business back in the GDR days! My first request was rejected because it was still against the law to found a private business. But in March 1990, four months later, it worked. And I got the official license number five in my county (...) So that went well economically back then, well, of course, I worked like crazy (...) back then I did 4am to 4pm so I would have some time with the kids, but 12 hours was the rule!”

He continues his story with an episodic memory of taking out his first loan at the bank, and acquiring a basic financial literacy in those early days. He still runs what is today a family business. The critical skills allowing him to succeed are his commitment to hard work, creativity and technical competency, which, as he emphasizes, are characteristic qualities of a GDR engineering education, as well as his readiness to reorient himself. In his account, the aftermath of 1989 required a person to evaluate her capabilities and to be ready and willing to face challenges. This he formulates as an economic, but also a moral imperative. Only those who were ready to play by these rules could expect to be rewarded by society:

“I don’t know anyone personally, but say I have a degree in Marxism-Leninism, well, there is absolutely no demand for that anymore. I’d reorient myself! I’d go to school, try to do something else. And whoever starts to drink and smoke and doesn’t make it, is stuck with social welfare, that’s the way it is. It really was about individual motivation, and some relations broke because of this, like marriages (...) You have to take a moment to reflect, ‘what am I capable of doing, what am I good at?’ Then you transition!”

For Markus, this is a biographical lesson with more general import. Referencing the 1989 revolution, he thinks that it is important to regard it as a “win”, for “our entire people” and that he is not acquainted with anyone who “wants the Wall back”. His account is one of linear, hopeful time; of pioneering in 1989, and being rewarded for his decisions later on. The time post-1989 provides continuity for the very principles he associates with the revolution. Time is ever progressing, making his story closely aligned with the public narrative of German unification.³⁷

A second example comes from Václav, 58, a Czech structural engineer. To Václav, the Velvet Revolution similarly symbolizes the moment of freedom. At the time, he felt that the “world is out there for me”. In Czechoslovakia, Václav was employed at the combine *Sportoprojekt*, a state-owned company in charge of planning and implementing projects related to sport buildings such as pools or stadiums around the country. After the Velvet Revolution, Václav joined a former colleague of his who founded a business. He soon became a shareholder in the new enterprise:

“In 1992 and 1993, when society was changing, that’s when you started to see certain patterns. The competent ones started to look and see what options there were, like a colleague of mine who went to work in Austria. I also left Sportoprojekt. With two other colleagues, we decided to create something. We’d be self-employed, really start our own business (...). Well, I of course remember, or better, I know, that when founding a business, a person has a certain level of fear – ‘what if I don’t make it, what if I don’t get contracts?’. I know that’s normal. This uncertainty. Everyone who starts something has to worry, ‘should I really do this?’. Nothing happened to us, though, we were lucky. I think that the field just worked, it just grew!”

Václav keenly avoids to credit only himself for the success of his activities, narrating himself as part of a group of people who he refers to as a “bunch of guys, relatively young, without a big plan, who started from zero”, ready to learn and to overcome the challenges of the time. Unlike Markus, he emphasizes luck in this process. But for Václav, this does not

³⁷ See Mark et al. *1989 after 1989*.

contradict his evaluation of the time as one of principally favorable economic opportunities. Instead, his account of economic agency centrally revolves around a seemingly neutral category, an engineer's technical competency. This he regards as the only basis of deserved economic success post-1989. He contrasts technical competency with a type of economic success that is politically determined by disassociating his own trajectory from that of former communist party members who thrived economically post-1989 on the basis of their networks, as well as from individuals who were profiting from privatization processes. Privatization, in his view, was tainted by corruption and political interference, which is why he keenly emphasizes that "we started from zero, we did not privatize anything". His version of pure economic pioneering is based exclusively on the principle of technical competency. This allows him to assume a temporal continuity between the events of 1989 and today, and to carry the pioneering spirit of 1989 into the present.

Overall, the account of "modernization" of self and society is prevalent among Czech and particularly Czech engineers in this material, more than among East Germans. But it can also be found among some East German engineers who have experienced unemployment – it is thus not necessarily contradicted by single rupturing events. It is more prevalent among male than among female respondents – as noted earlier, profession and gender largely overlap in this sample–, but some female engineers also advance a pioneering story. Modernizing accounts employ a linear logic of time. Many are grounded in entrepreneurial stories or draw on the language of entrepreneurship. They convey that the revolutions of 1989 made possible to implement a set of economic faculties that individuals were in part already possessing, allowing them to carry such principles onwards through the aftermath of 1989. Economic change retrospectively confirms the initial promises of the political revolution.

1989 as an initial "distraction"

A second account is organized around a less favorable view of 1989. Here, the primary challenge post-1989 is understood as successfully warding off some of the perceived injustices brought about by the revolution. Because the subject emerges triumphantly in the long run, she is today in a position to reconcile herself with some of the political implications of 1989.

Agnes, today the director of an elderly care facility in her early 60s, was trained as a nurse in East Germany. In her economic narrative, 1989 appears as an unwelcome obstruction of planned goals. She regards the changes of 1989 as coming from the outside, emphasizing that she had personally never asked for them. Before the revolution, she was employed in the state railway medical services, a branch of the socialist state that was quickly dissolved after 1989:

“And then came the Wende {transition}. That was not so great! Because-, well, at that time, when I was working at the medical services of the public transportation company, I was trained as a ‘company nurse’, {I had} two semesters of schooling in work-related medicine. I was already married, so I worked part time and somehow balanced {work and family}. We had a great social plan there, a scheme for the staff. If the Wende had not arrived, I’d have known, on day X, I’d be the head nurse there, I’d have received all kinds of trainings and appropriate qualifications, etc. etc. etc. And then, of course, the Wende had to happen! Like that. We were taken over by the federal railway company, and me and my colleague were more or less given notice that we were overqualified, and too expensive for them! They said it to our face! We more or less took matters into our own hand and went looking for something else.”

Her reference to 1989 comes close to a nuisance, something that unnecessarily stood in the way. As she remarks, everything was planned and accounted for, but then, “of course, *die Wende* had to happen!”. She has a vivid memory of her labor becoming “too expensive”. Her story continues with a memory of the time after 1989 as an unpleasant time in terms of social relationships. Interactions in her circle of friends and acquaintances were marked by distrust and even hostility. Together with her husband, she was working hard not to “let the ignominies into our circle”.

Yet Agnes managed to invest in her professional career and finds herself in a leading position today. She is proud of the elderly care facility, which, she points out, she has “built up” herself. But unlike in the modernizing account, her economic agency after 1989 is detached

from the principles of the revolution. She does not credit 1989 as a beginning of her story. Instead, her career and professional ambitions are narrated as a powerful, agentic response to the problems of the time post-1989. Skills such as perseverance and flexibility, which she regards as a product of her socialist education, allowed her to master these challenges. In her account, she achieved this not *because of*, but initially *despite* 1989. Today, she believes that willpower is key for economic success, and she posits that she “never {wants} socialism again”. Her success today provides a basis for accommodating, for moving her biography closer to the political legacy of 1989.

The original meaning of the event can be reevaluated in light of its ramifications. In this account, time is not linear, but instead initially interrupted by 1989, and the outcomes today are not directly associated with the initial promises of the revolution. This account is quite prevalent among East Germans, likely so because it allows respondents to communicate a sense of looking back to a deserved economic biography within the economic framework of unified Germany, without having to accept the political, “West German” interpretation of 1989.

1989 as the freedom “from”, but not “to” something

In a third account, 1989 is a background frame. It appears detached from other processes that are deemed more significant, primarily those affecting the private, interpersonal realm.

Kateřina is a Czech nurse in her late forties who has experienced the revolution during her maternity leave with her second child. To her, 1989 marks the end of the reign of socialist terror. The Communist Party’s political violence had directly affected her family, as her grandfather, a hotelier, was persecuted and imprisoned in the 1970s. 1989 also represents the departure from a system that was doomed because of its helpless economic inefficiency. However, she argues that she was always incredulous as to whether the Velvet Revolution would really change much:

“Basically, I was married, I was having my second child, I was on maternity leave and that was it (...) {After the revolution}, there was this euphoria, that for sure. But, you know what, we were educated, our generation was educated in this genuine way, and even if I was from a completely different family, and I was not allowed to enter higher education, the feelings were mixed for me. You just didn’t believe it anymore. That anything would be different, that anything would change for real. I don’t know, we were a little bit skeptical about it.”

Kateřina has experienced great continuity at work. She remained employed during the transformation and has been working for the same hospital ever since returning from her maternity leave. Nonetheless, she has a pronounced sense of her skills as a source of continuity. To her, the ethical and professional gist of being a good nurse lies in paying close attention, and treating patients as persons, very similar to a family relationship. It became harder and harder to pursue these values, as she found herself in what she perceived as an increasingly disrespectful work environment:

“I think {those changes} went slowly. They went slowly. I feel for instance terribly sorry today that we have lost the traditional family. I can see it every day at work, it really bothers me. Yes of course, it’s our times, young people want to be independent, they want to be on their own. I can understand that, I wasn’t different in that respect, but it really is a shame. (...) We lost that innate quality, that feeling of respect for the family. It’s not there anymore”.

In the decline of the traditional family, and a healthy, respectful relationship between the generations, she identifies a “small” pattern of change. Kateřina observes this process in the hospital, where it affects the quality of her work. She perceives her younger coworkers to be primarily interested in money, in “rights but not duties”, and laments how this attitude makes them less inclined take over responsibility. Like others working in this field, she acknowledges a range of technological improvements post-1989. But to Kateřina, these shifts matter to the extent that they affect social relationships at work. The rise of computers, particularly, is part of her overarching story of declining mutual interest and attention: Young doctors today are “staring at their screens” instead of interacting with patients. She points out that the same developments also took hold outside of work, framing it as a generational issue.

Thus, she singles out a process of change but argues it is not “caused” by 1989, emphasizing that with the revolutions, “life just went on in a normal fashion”. Kateřina thinks that the one biographically pertinent shift that the revolution represents, the end to political terror and arbitrary rule, is really only to be found in the political domain where it signifies a freedom “from” something, but she does not derive any particular freedom “to” something from it. Because she locates the genuinely important process of change in the frame of the family post-1989, the political event appears less weighty today.

This rather depoliticized account is shaped by gender dynamics post-1989: it tends to be articulated by female care workers. 1989 is a “neutral” time, as it does not allow a specific temporal order to emanate from this event.

1989 as the “beginning of an end”

Some respondents narrate the period after 1989 as a termination. Accounts like this usually revolve around an episodic memory of a moment in one’s work biography at which something important came to an end. The true significance of the process of change was revealed only many years after the revolution.

Martin is a 67-year-old East German who was trained as an electronics engineer in the GDR. He has experienced 1989 as a profound rupture, but with much delay. In the 1990s, he oversaw the process of computerization in construction projection and planning at a spinoff of a formerly state-owned firm. Economic restructuring after 1989 brought “mounting stress”, leading up to a climax in 2003, when he became sick and was forced to leave his job:

“And then came the Wende {transition}. This meant that my department, with all its functions, was not needed anymore all of a sudden, because now, everything was available, everyone could get his own computer. (...) With time, I had to do more and more projecting work, and in addition to that, take care of the IT. That was pretty stressful, I have to say (...) Lots of small things had to be done on the side, but there was no one for me to consult on these issues! It turns out you can’t sleep calmly at night anymore. Because you never knew for sure whether what you did was really in order. (...) And everyone kept asking me, ‘how does that work’, and ‘my printer doesn’t work’, and things like that. So that went on, until 2003, when I collapsed physically. Then I was sick for a year. During my sickness, I was laid off because, allegedly,

they were running out of contracts. But the firm went bankrupt in 2004. (...) Probably because of mismanagement, so if it wasn't for the layoff, the overall situation would not have been much different. I was 53 back then, to find a job with 53 around here, at that time, in my field, that was hopeless!"

Initially, Martin was successfully adjusting to the rapid pace of technological advancement in computer electronics. He also had to learn English from scratch. He feels proud about the way he managed to cope with these challenges. The fact that the firm had to close down only a year after laying him off, due to what refers to as the technical incompetency of his former bosses, helps to take the blame off him. But at some point, he had to surrender to the pressure. There is a lag in the initial rupture engendered by 1989, a creeping change that only reveals its true significance much later: "it simply went on without much change, the big rupture only came in 2003", as he puts it.

Interestingly, his view of 1989 is not negative; in fact, he embraces the revolutions. He believes that the socialist economy was a "catastrophe" and doomed to fail, and that the revolutions generally made "life easier". However, his work experience in the aftermath of 1989 is deeply convoluted. Remarking that numerous people felt disappointed, but that this was not "due to the *Wende*", he wishes to separate the political meaning of 1989 from the economic meaning of its aftermath. This is, of course, a balancing act, as his own experience required him to cease working in the profession that he was trained, and had decades of professional experience, in. On these grounds, the story of his economic agency post-1989 is structured as a "declining time".

A second example comes from Jaroslav, a 72-year-old Czech architectural engineer, whose story of the "beginning of an end" revolves around a culture of working together that was lost after socialism. He notes that his view of 1989 is "absolutely positive, as is that of most of my friends": 1989 is a time of possibilities, and signifies the end of arbitrary one-party rule. Yet the aftermath of 1989 reveals a different story. Jaroslav was employed at a cooperative specializing in socialist housing construction for more than 20 years before the revolution.

Employing hundreds of people, the firm ran projects all over the country. Jaroslav points out that cooperatives, as a type of organizational form, enjoyed more autonomy from the Communist party and looser internal hierarchy structures than did state firms. In 1989, when the boss was dismissed for political reasons, he became the director of the firm. It soon became clear that, under the new legal framework, the cooperative would cease to exist. The firm was up for privatization and Jaroslav had to oversee its dismantling.

This is a bitter memory for him. Negotiations about the future of the firm were tough, unsuccessful, and proved, in retrospect, that he was up against impenetrable forces. First came negotiations with foreign investors. He recalls that had nothing to “offer except for his employees’ labor power”, which was, of course, in oversupply. Being offered prices that were too low, he made the decision not to sell:

“I was the director really only for two years, then they dissolved it and turned it into a private company. And then, basically, it was all about those personnel-related issues, like people had to be laid off, they had to be paid, it had to be closed down. And then it slowly melted, right up to the end. (...) People from England came to me, and they said ‘we’ll buy it’. (...) But the one building stood empty for 15 years, because we did not sell it. Not so much for patriotic reasons, rather, we did not want to get into those legal mills. And a lot of things ended like this!”

Participating in negotiations with ministry officials who oversaw privatization procedures across the country, he was forced to work with individuals who in his eyes did not care much about the assets they were deciding about, let alone the people working there. He found the process morally deeply troubling.

Financially, Jaroslav did well after 1989. He continued to work as an architectural engineer in various ateliers and is content with the professional possibilities that emerged in his field in the 1990s. But the dismantling of the cooperative to him represents a much larger loss. In his view, a Czech culture of working together was eradicated with 1989. As he puts it, referring to the cooperative structure, “the work process tied us together”, it provided a space for workers to value each other’s work. The structural changes resulted in an “atomization” of individuals at work, as well as, as he sees it, in a diminished quality of labor. Personally, he

decided never to have employees anymore, because he believes that he could not provide for a collaborative environment. Jaroslav's economic agency post-1989 is forever tied to the dismantling of the cooperative. Though his is not a story of an individual loss, it is arguably also personal, because it concerns a collective entity that he strongly identified with and felt responsible for.

1989 as a “betrayal”

Finally, in a fifth account, the aftermath of 1989 appears as a “captured time”, a period of external and hostile control. Stefan, a 52-year-old employee in a church-affiliated elderly care home, was originally trained in the GDR as a mason, but entered the care sector in 1987. To him, the revolutions of 1989 signify a betrayal of East Germans by West Germans on two levels. First, in the early days of the revolution, Stefan supported the movement to install a “third way socialism” of democratic reform within the framework of the GDR constitution. Its primary goal was to abolish one-party rule. This movement failed because of internal weaknesses and because it was politically sidelined by conservatives who dominated the German reunification discourse. Stefan thus harbors a feeling of genuine political disappointment with the outcome of German reunification. But the realization that reform socialism would fail came relatively soon, particularly given the poor results of the movement in the first democratic elections in spring 1990. Second, his feeling of having been “cheated on economically”, as he puts it, extends well beyond this initial phase, it is a story of perceived external control over various aspects of his professional life ever since.

Stefan's narrative begins with a memory of how his East German nursing license was not recognized in unified Germany: “it's worth nothing today”. This situation required him to undergo training one more time. Though this did not have any negative long-term consequences, it still bears symbolic meaning. In his account, the aftermath of 1989 is generally marked by an economic irrationality orchestrated by West German elites. He recalls an influx

of kindergarten workers into care work, a measure that was supposed to keep these workers from unemployment after the closing of kindergartens attached to large, state-owned plants:

“Some random kindergarten educators were put in leadership positions. They had no idea of care work, of handicapped people. I knew so much more than they did! Soon, a lot of people left, because it was such a catastrophe. From one day to the next, something was imposed, it was just there. The West really deliberately wanted it to play out that way!”

He identifies another instance of economic irrationality in the documentation tasks required of care workers, in particular, having to fill out forms for insurance purposes, something did not exist before 1989. This type of unnecessary bureaucracy, he is convinced, keeps him from doing his proper work, spending time with patients:

“You might think that there was a lot of bureaucracy in the GDR. But that was a different mode of working, it’s really like that. I could still bring the clients out into the park in summer. That’s not possible anymore, I simply have less time, and there’s more and more documentation to do. You don’t have time anymore. Saving money, and bureaucracy, that’s what matters more than a human being today! But really, it quite simply doesn’t make a difference what words you put down {on a legal form}, the clients care about getting out there into the park!”

This is the result of a political restructuring process initiated in 1989. From that moment on, in Stefan’s narrative, control over his work conditions was lost. It has ever since been guided by an externally imposed, political scheme, organized by the West German state. Because for Stefan, the Federal Republic of Germany is but the West German state in disguise, he insists that the distinction between “East” and “West” must still be upheld.

Outside of work, he felt cheated on as well. His vivid memory of West Germans who sold him financial tools in the early 1990s is connected to a larger, collective fate of the East German people and industries:

“I was gullible, some random insurance people from West Germany could talk me into anything. Because I was very credulous. I signed up for funds and the likes, I said ‘well, that sounds terrific.’ I was duped just like so many East Germans, because that had not existed {before the revolution}. You were not cheated on, we were simply not cheated on! Politically, ok maybe; but economically, we were never cheated on! (...) They took 5000 Euros from me. Others have lost even more. They told fairy tales, people who had failed in the West came to the East and made a fortune here, those cheaters! But all of this was tolerated! You have to think about it, a lot of people were shocked, they closed down entire firms that used to do a terrific job, in crane construction and ship building, or agriculture. They tore it down, intentionally, because there was competition!”

This narrative of a “captured” time 1989 marks the loss of control over one’s work life. Such an account also makes what came before 1989 retrospectively appear in a favorable light. Stefan “regrets” the departure from socialism, he thinks that he was doing just “excellent” back then, though he also explicitly points out that such sentiments are born out of disappointments post-1989. This is why he can easily relate to East Germans who vote for the far-right wing party. The transformation time, in his view, is a “sellout”, an ensuing political and economic betrayal. He makes sure that this framework of interpretation is not limited to 1989, instead, he is presently still living through the process of a West German “takeover”. In this temporal account, the matter is still unresolved.

Discussion

Biographical narrations situate the self in time and space. They venture beyond mere private accounts, intermingling conceptions of the self with public scripts, political evaluations, and grand historical explanations for why things went the way they did.³⁸ In societies that have experienced Communist rule and the transition to market economies in the 1990s, stories of the self are strongly marked by generational frameworks. As Marci Shore writes, “the most poignant generational question brought about by 1989 was not who has the right to claim authorship of the revolution, but rather who was old enough to be held responsible for the choices they made under the communist regime”.³⁹ In addition, we must today ask how choices made *after* 1989 become an object of moral evaluation.

Exploring Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s suggestion that the meaning of an event is co-determined by its aftermath, the present article has asked how everyday, work-related meanings gain salience in this regard. It has traced how 1989 is apprehended through various

³⁸ Bamberg, *Narrative*; Abrams, *Oral History*.

³⁹ M. Shore, “(The End of) Communism as a Generational History. Some Thoughts on Czechoslovakia and Poland,” *Contemporary European History* 18 (2009): 303-329.

temporalities. Similar to the notion of 1989 as an “unfinished revolution”, the article has argued that the event is not necessarily associated with a narrative of beginning; it can also be an intermediate period, or a process of termination.⁴⁰ Temporality makes possible a sense of agency. As Hannah Arendt remarked, there can be no conception of individual responsibility, of willpower as intervening in time, without a concept of a delineated order of time. Willpower structures time into a “before” and “after”; otherwise humans would be deprived of agency, trapped in historical determinism.⁴¹

What is more, the sense of agency is intertwined with labor market experiences. Existing oral history accounts, though mainly focused on the late-socialist period, have already pointed to the significance of references to the realm of work and skills in the onset of the 1990s transformation.⁴² This article has proposed a conceptually grounded analysis of “economic memories”. It found that individuals with a first-hand experience of the 1989 revolutions derive a strong sense of temporal order on which contemporary *interpretations* of economic experiences are based. In particular, against the background of structural change, the question of individual agency post-1989 is vividly negotiated from a present perspective. For many, the memory of this period is marked by struggling to protect the self against threats of material and symbolic devaluation: The fear of social downward mobility, as well as that of being perceived as “undeserving”.

Cultural legacies shape respondents’ evaluations in the present. In this research, the broader focus on economics and work was foregrounded through the interviewing technique. Still, there is a link between the critical role of skills and technical expertise – allowing respondents to narrate a smooth, moral transition from the pre-1989 to the post-1989 order –,

⁴⁰ Wagner-Pacifici, *What is an Event?*; J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution, Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2010).

⁴¹ H. Arendt, *The Life of Mind. Part Two: Willing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981).

⁴² Vaněk and Mücke 2016, *Velvet Revolutions*, 117-143; A. Arp, *Mein Land verschwand so schnell... 16 Lebensgeschichten und die Wende 1989/90* (Weimar: Weimarer Universitätsverlag, 2009), K.U. Mayer and E. Schulze, *Die Wendegeneration. Lebensverläufe des Jahrgangs 1971* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009).

and economics as a source of collective identity in the East German and Czechoslovak brand of state-socialism. For respondents in this research, the value of their education pre-1989 is a question of belonging; and many maintain that it only allowed them to master the challenges of the transition time.⁴³

In this material, the transformation-time accounts provided by East German respondents are more unsettled than those by Czechs, as East Germans struggle markedly with protecting the symbolic value of their expertise against West German claims of superiority. This is arguably grounded in differences between the two transformation contexts. The process of incorporation of East Germany into the Federal Republic of Germany, with its fast and encompassing (“shock-therapy”) dismantling of economic infrastructure and continuing low levels of upward social mobility for East Germans, has deeply shaped Eastern identity and political culture; and the symbolic humiliation that accompanied it – East Germans were deemed as lazy and “backward”, and the flaws of privatization were exclusively blamed on the “deficiency” of GDR firms – in many ways feeds into the success of the far-right wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in the former East today. The Czech transformation, in contrast, was characterized by an early agenda of “economic nationalism” that guaranteed much structural continuity. As Czech sociologist Jiří Večerník has wryly remarked, “for the majority, jobs continue to be ‘socialist’: easily available and poorly rewarded”. This was particularly true for women working in the public sector, such as care workers. Their economic agency is articulated around being both a (poorly paid) worker and a mother; and in this they see much continuity with the time before 1989. Yet smaller symbolic ruptures, such a sense of loss of autonomy at work, are a critical issue in the Czech case, too.⁴⁴

⁴³ It arguably matters in this regard that the political vision of reforming socialism had all but disintegrated in 1968 in Prague and Berlin.

⁴⁴ For stereotypes about East Germans, see T. Ahbe, R. Gries and W. Schmale, *Die Ostdeutschen in den Medien: Das Bild von den Anderen nach 1990* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts-Verlag, 2009). For Czech economic nationalism, consider the speeches made by Václav Klaus, the Czech prime minister during most of the 1990s. Klaus generally communicated his reform proposals through a discourse of masculinity, the dignity of work, and the idea of domestic ownership. In 1994, for instance, the prime minister quoted a Czech member of the Habsburg Parliament in Vienna, Ladislav Rieger, with the following words: “What we need above all is work –

What might be the relation between such vernacular accounts and political, public representations of 1989? Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard regard the German and Czech cases as examples of “unified” memory regimes, noting a relative consensus on the meaning of 1989 in public discourse. Yet today, thirty years after the revolutions, it seems that narratives of the aftermath of this event can take on political dynamics of their own. There is no evidence in this material that labor market trajectories or work experiences necessarily *determine* views of 1989. Though by no means meant to be an exhaustive typology, the five different temporal accounts laid out in this article demonstrate, however, that these problems stand in relation to the meaning of 1989. A critical issue seems to rest with the sense of control, or lack of control, that a person associates with the time, and the political lessons that are drawn from this. In the present case, the East German “betrayal” account most effectively undermines the political legitimacy of the post-1989 political order, as it goes as far as to imply the necessity of resistance to this order.⁴⁵ Further research can explore more systematically how narratives like that travel between biographical experiences and the public realm.

Notwithstanding the differences, the temporal accounts documented in this article reveal a similar logic of meaning-making across the two cases; the { } richness of the economic frame for narrating a personal transition is not specific to one of them. If the revolutions of 1989 are a moment of political promises, then the aftermath of 1989 is where the “rubber hit the road”. When he first proposed an understanding of 1989 as revolutions of “normalcy”, Ivan Krastev called for a shift of perspective.⁴⁶ Today, as the universal, progressive heritage of the

real, sustained work both spiritual and industrial. That will help us most rapidly to adulthood, to manly force, to power and to honor”, see M.A. Orenstein, *Out of the red: Building capitalism and democracy in postcommunist Europe*, 79 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011). For foreign ownership after the Czech banking crises in the late 1990s and the role of the financial sector see J. Drahokoupil, *Globalization and the State in Central and Eastern Europe. The politics of foreign direct investment* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009); Večerník, *Markets and People*, 30; True, *Gender*; Read, *Labour and Love*, Weiner, *Market Dreams*.

⁴⁵ On 1989 and political legitimacy, see Kubik and Bernhard, *Twenty Years*; Mark et al., *1989 after 1989*, Breuer and Delius, *Vernacular Memories*.

⁴⁶ Krastev, *Deepening Dissatisfaction*.

revolutions of 1989 is increasingly endangered; it seems all the more critical to widen the perspective and to apprehend the multiplicity of transformation time experiences and memories.

	East German material	Czech material
pre-1989	GDR-times (<i>DDR-Zeiten</i>) pre-turn-time (<i>Vorwendezeit</i>) before the turn (<i>vor der Wende</i>)	under totalitarianism (<i>za totality</i>) under communism (<i>za komunismu</i>) before the revolution (<i>před revolucí</i>)
post-1989	post-turn-time (<i>Nachwendezeit</i>) new time (<i>neue Zeit</i>) West-time (<i>Westzeit</i>)	post-revolution time (<i>porevoluční doba</i>) after the turn (<i>po převratu</i>) after-November-time (<i>polistopadová doba</i>)

Table 1: Idiomatic Designations of Temporal Orders

References to 1989 as anchored in biographical accounts of economic agency	
1989 as a beginning, the “modernization” of self and society	progressing time
1989 as an initial “distraction”	accommodating time
1989 as the freedom “from” something, but not “to” something	neutral time
1989 as the “beginning of an end”	declining time
1989 as a “betrayal”	captured time

Table 2: Accounts of economic agency