



(In German, coal is also slang for money)

One of the themes running through the conference was the economic transformations that ran parallel to the political transformations that occurred in 1989/1990 and the years to follow. There was the sense that today's situation and today's problems have just as much to do with the economic changes that occurred as with the political ones. But were these economic changes acknowledged,

debated, and analysed in the same way as the political changes? Or are they often left out of the discussion when we reflect on the upheavals of 1989/90?

The economic discussions at the conference comprised many different themes such as changes on the labour market, privatization, and the question of the commons, and the question of climate justice. A concept of an alternative economic system was brought into the discussion by some of the participants, proposing a form of common-ism, neither returning all power to the state nor leaving all power to the private market.

When discussing changes on the labour market that occurred after the transitions, there was a sense that women were especially affected by the changes. Someone from Poland observed: "During the transformation, anti-women behaviour of new employers started: they wanted young pretty women and then it became obvious during the interview for getting the jobs. First of all, regarding your plan to have children, they would ask: what does your mum do? Can she take care of grandchildren?" And again an experience from Poland: "Suddenly, labour contracts were replaced by short-term contracts (one month, two months). So when I discussed with people, they said: I have never had a proper contract. Also, the government and outside forces such as the World Bank were pushing women to be businesswomen. The clear message to women was: if you are forty, you are too old to be an employee. The only way for you is to be self-employed. For instance, a teacher of foreign languages. And just like that, the previous culture of a stable situation disappeared."

"IN POLAND, THERE'S A BIG GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT FEEL LEFT BEHIND BY THE TRANSITION: PEOPLE ARE IN DEBT, WITHOUT MONEY. AND THEY ARE THE POPULIST VOTERS—AND WE CANNOT BLAME THEM. IT IS OUR MISTAKE THAT WE CANNOT OFFER THEM ANYTHING."
CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM POLAND

This falling away of secure employment was closely tied to the privatizations that occurred and that were a big topic at the conference. One of the questions here was: how did privatization occur in the different countries? In the GDR, there was the Treuhand organization. In Russia, when it came to the privatization of state factories, "there was a voucher-system so that workers had a share in their factory, but these were immediately bought up by people in the know who accumulated shares and power." When it came to the privatization of housing, things were similar: "in Russia, when privatization started, many parents sold their flats because they didn't know about their rights. People became homeless: there were street children in the 90s. It affected the poor groups the most: women and children." In the CSSR, the rule was "privatize first, and then pass laws."

"There was blind belief in the invisible hands of the market." "The economic transition was characterized by chaos, the old system so quickly destroyed without knowledge of how to build a new one." The sense was that everyone was just "unprepared": as someone from Russia puts it, "there was no discussion of the good or bad sides of the market economy," and so people found themselves thrown into a very different and very difficult economic situation.

But though many people experienced chaos and deprivation during the 1990s, it took a long time for the neo-liberal model to be challenged. For instance, in the Czech Republic, "the question mark only came 10 years after 1989": in 1998, when the social democratic party appeared and when people started to see the results and understood that the invisible hands of the market were not a solution, but the problem. "But by then, everything was already stolen...by the invisible hands!"

Discussions then turned to the question: what to do about this situation? For giving everything back to the state does not seem to be a solution either. Participants emphasized the continuous distrust in the state that prevails in their countries. "In Russia, people were so upset about the Soviet system that they ran all over to the private part: the belief is that things are managed much better by private companies; the private will manage resources much better, there is no corruption. So there is the risk that just everything will be privatized in Russia. From my experience, it is so difficult to challenge privatization: people mix the political with the economic. They think that the freeing of totalitarianism has to do with the liberalization of the market. When you start talking about the control of common and natural resources, they call you a Stalinist." In the Czech Republic, "the public discourse is very similar to Russia: if someone talks about public control or community ownership of resources, it is shamed as socialist or communist."

But the vision of an alternative economic system was fuelled by very concrete suggestions that found a middle way between giving all power back to the state and leaving all power to the free market. For instance, there was the example of the Berlin water table, a democratically organised local network of activists fighting the privatization of water. What we need, a participant from Germany said, is "a real organization from below. A very practical solution without any great strategy. Like in 89, when people took matters into their own hand because there was an institutional vacuum. Suddenly, very normal people without any leading positions tried to basic-democratically organize a concrete process." And a voice from the Czech Republic: "We are not discussing 1989 anymore, but I think the idea of self-realisation, not back to state ownership...but to build a bridge back to 1989, when there was a life-flash: good practical solutions for concrete problems." And someone from Poland spoke of an important initiative at the local level: "for example, in Warsaw and many other cities, there is a participatory budget. People from the local community decide what they would like to have and submit their proposals, for instance, building something for the birds, cleaning the forest, (...) you submit suggestions online and then people in the area vote for the suggestions. The projects are done by the municipality and need to be realized within one year."

The possibility of “change from below” was also emphasized when it came to the theme of environmental justice. One important insight here was the way in which the topic of the environment has the potential to mobilize diverse groups of people: an environmental activist from Russia spoke of a recent protest in North Caucasus where more than 1000 people came together to fight for the closure of a factory that was polluting heavily. But one participant also brought up the very mixed reactions to Fridays for Future and the movement for climate justice mainly driven by the young generation in her country, the Czech Republic: “politicians say we are manipulated. We face a lot of hatred.” And someone from Russia concurred: the idea in Russia is “Greta is controlled by some evil West.” In this connection, the question arose whether women played a special role in the debate on climate justice. The participant from Fridays for Future underscored that it was very meaningful for the women in the movement that the movement itself was led and started by a young woman.

There was also the emphasis that the theme of the environment was already an important theme in the 1980s—examples include the “Prague Mothers”, who came together to fight for a better quality of air in their city. Groups of environmentalists in the GDR fought for the reduction of heavy industrial pollution, which led the committee on the draft of a new GDR constitution to include the right to a clean

environment. Lastly, there was an awareness of how environmental ideas are being co-opted and abused by right-conservative groups, for instance, the Anastasia movement that a participant from the federal state of Brandenburg spoke about.

The focus on the economic changes that occurred as part of the transitions of 89/90 thus allowed for another angle on the upheavals and their aftermath and the situation today. It also showed the importance of thinking economic changes in tandem with political changes, and of the mutual impact between politics and economics. And it made room for a vision of profound change, and for many examples of how change can occur from the bottom up.