The 1970s and 1980s as a Turning Point in European History?

With Contributions from Göran Therborn, Geoff Eley, Hartmut Kaelble, Philippe Chassaigne and Andreas Wirsching

Edited by Andreas Wirsching

With this issue, the Journal of Modern European History opens a debate on the significance of the 1970s (and 1980s) for the history of Europe. Historians, economists and political scientists largely agree that these two decades saw a major political shift from the Keynesian consensus on state intervention, which simply could not be financed any more, to a new consensus based on neo-liberal austerity policies. The Journal of Modern European History aims at discussing these problems from a comparative point of view. In order to reach such a point of view, results of empirical research will be combined with a systematic evaluation. The Journal’s next issue will contain five case studies dealing with Great Britain, Italy and France, Sweden, West Germany and, as a comparative example from late-communist Europe, Hungary. Even if these case studies deal with different aspects and formulate different questions, they all tend to agree that the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s constituted a turning point in European history.

In the current issue the debate will be opened by the editor, who will concentrate on the role of life course changes, and four more experts who were kind enough to address the problem in a short statement. All of these authors have recently published important monographs on European post-war history.1 In their contributions to this issue they turn their attention to different aspects of the period. Göran Therborn and Geoff Eley hint at the surprisingly strong revival of capitalism during the 1980s and at its profound social repercussions ever since. Others, like Philippe Chassaigne, focus on the cultural elements of change or they underline, as does Hartmut Kaelble, the «unique character» of the period. For Kaelble, the 1970s were a «soft turning point» equalling a «silent revolution».

In general, the rather large area of agreement defined by the authors of the statements tends to corroborate the individual case studies to be published in the next issue. And this convergence seems to be well grounded in historical evidence, allowing us to say for the time being that the 1970s and 1980s indeed marked a turning point in contemporary history.

Andreas Wirsching

Göran Therborn
The Tide and Turn of the Marxian Dialectic of European Capitalism

The 1970s can lay four claims to a special position in modern European history – two often noticed, one mostly underestimated and a fourth ignored.

First, the 1970s marked the end of the unprecedented post-war boom (of «les Trente Glorieuses», as Jean Fourastié has called those years), precipitated by hostile and concerted action from outside the North Atlantic, namely the OPEC oil price hike. However, the price increase spelled only the end of the economic period of unexpected post-war prosperity, and not, as we now know in hindsight, a plunge into long-term crisis or stagnation.

Secondly, these years witnessed the end of industrial society, which had marked Europe much more than any other continent, and the beginning of deindustrialisation and the post-industrial society. European countries, starting with Britain, substituted an employment pattern at least relatively dominated by industrial employment for agrarian domination. The US, the Commonwealth nations and Japan, on the other hand, went from agrarian societies to societies with a preponderance of services. By the 1970s, almost all Eastern European countries had become industrial societies: the USSR around 1970, Poland in the early 1970s, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the 1960s, and the GDR from its inception. To what extent the final crisis of ruling European communism was due to the fact that the industrial economy on which it had expended so much energy and set such great hopes was now being overtaken by post-industrial capitalism does not seem to have been clarified yet. The most immediately tangible economic problem the Eastern European regimes faced in the 1970s was matching the new discretionary mass consumption in Western Europe.

Thirdly, the decade set the stage for the rebellion of 1968, itself more a watershed than a calendar year. Most importantly, these were the years that finally saw the ignominious demise of official and explicit patriarchy and misogyny in Western Europe. In France, the Napoleonic chef de famille clause of the Civil Code was struck down in 1970, as was the «decisive vote» of the father in West Germany in 1976. Similar legislation, passed in Eastern Europe right after World War II, and
in Scandinavia after World War I, was belatedly adopted in Austria, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. In 1973, a British Tory government granted mothers the same parental rights as fathers. The Western European marriage rate fell sharply, after an historical peak in the 1960s. Pre-marital sex became commonplace, and non-married cohabitation emerged as a significant phenomenon, which was pioneered in Scandinavia.

In a long historical perspective these changes of sex, gender and family relations are arguably the most important of the three elements mentioned so far. They each have a claim to epochal significance. Interestingly, relatively little attention or homage has been paid to them so far, presumably for two almost contradictory reasons. For non-feminist male historians and social scientists they tend to stay below their radar screen. Radical feminists, meanwhile, do not allow them to distract from ongoing struggles against persistent male dominance and privilege.

There is, however, another epochal turn of the 1970s, that hardly anybody has taken notice of. The reasons lie in the indifference to the dismantling of centuries of patriarchy. The predominant mainstream is not tuned into the problematic, and the people most concerned find it hard to accept that their cherished theory can explain the victory of their enemies.

I am referring to the Marxian theory of the dialectical development of capitalism. Marx predicted that capitalism would develop its own fatal contradiction and would provide its own grave diggers. The forces of production would become increasingly «social», meaning that technological development and efficiency would become more and more dependent on large-scale coordination, organisation and investment, including in sciences. They would thereby enter into «contradiction» with the private modes of production, i.e., with private ownership of the means of production. This contradiction would manifest itself in economic crises, but above all it would be acted out or acted upon through class struggle. The development of capitalism would mean an ever larger and more concentrated and cohesive working class, replacing individual small-scale producers and family helpers, pitted against a much smaller but hostile and resource-rich bourgeoisie.

Freed of its agitational guise, of a monolithic growth of «misery and pressure», of its prophetic eschatology, of communism as the final emancipation of mankind, this Marxian vision of capitalist development is one of the most powerful – that is also to say true – long-term predictions ever made in the social sciences. It was particularly prescient about European twentieth-century social and economic history.

The need for coordination of, and for more resourceful investments in, the forces of production did generate a general tendency of capitalist development towards increasing public regulation, municipalisation and nationalisation. While national differences were persistent, the tendency remained consistent across the ideologies of the governments. The London Passenger Transport Act of 1933 and...
the municipalisation of the Paris Métro in 1949 are landmarks of socioeconomic history, not of Marxist politics. Telephone lines, energy supply, urban transport, railways, aviation and many important industries or industrial enterprises, such as mining, steel-making and occasionally car-making, and ship and aircraft construction, went from private start-ups to being municipally or nationally owned or supervised.

Between the 1970s and the early 1980s, this process culminated in Western Europe with the launch of the two most radical concrete and politically realistic socialisation projects in Western history. In Sweden, the powerful trade union movement adopted a plan for a gradual takeover of all major corporations by means of union-controlled «wage-earners» funds. The Social Democratic party leadership was far from happy with it, but did not dare to reject it. Once back in power in 1982, it felt obliged to present a much more diluted bill, as a symbolic epitaph. In France, the French socialists were explicitly committed to a «rupture» with capitalism, a commitment that helped François Mitterrand get elected president with communist support. His government did introduce important nationalisations in 1981–82. Meanwhile in Eastern Europe, agriculture was collectivised, save in Poland, and most small-scale private enterprise was nationalised.

But in the 1980s, this long-running trend was not only brought to an end, but reversed. Privatisation and deregulation came to govern Western perspectives, even those of the social democratic parties, and in the East former communists were starting to turn to markets. A stock exchange opened in Budapest in 1988.

This is not the place to describe and to explain this change. But it certainly had something to do with the new vigour and resourcefulness of private modes of production through the rise of huge transnational financial markets, which could afford to deal with and invest in the most costly means of production. On the eve of the current financial crisis, a single German (Deutsche) or Spanish (Santander) bank had assets equivalent to the country’s whole GDP, whereas the two largest French banks held values worth twice the French GDP, and the three largest British banks almost five times the UK’s GDP. The forces of production also made new, more pluralistic forms of coordination and management possible through the use of digital technology.

Working class developments also by and large unfolded along Marxian lines until the 1970s, though of course not evenly geographically or uniformly over time. Industrial employment grew in most European countries until about 1970, although it peaked in the UK already in 1911; this was then followed by a slow decline until the 1960s. Except in Britain, non-agrarian manual workers grew in number until the 1950s and that number remained stable through the 1960s. Class organisation in the form of trade unions strengthened on the whole until the late 1970s, when it reached its peak of social influence. In most parts of Western Europe, class conflict as measured in strikes and other forms of working-class
protest – from mass demonstrations to workplace occupations – culminated in the late 1960s to mid-1970s, from May 1968 in France and the hot Italian autumn of 1969 to the British miners’ strike and the workers’ revolution in Alentejo and the industrial belt around Lisbon. Other national historical peaks were close in time, including the Walloon general strike in 1960–61, and the 1956 general strikes in Denmark and Finland.

Then, in the 1980s circumstances changed very rapidly. Outside Scandinavia, unionisation collapsed. In 1985, the victorious British miners of 1974 were fatally beaten. Capitalist order was firmly restored in Italy and Portugal. Polish Solidarnosc, which started out as a working-class trade union with a democratic socialist vision, became primarily a Catholic anti-communist movement financed by Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal forces and the Vatican, before disintegrating in the 1990s. Militant right-wing liberalism emerged as the dominant political ideology in Europe as well as in the Americas and the UK with its largely successful union-busting and plank.

The specific convergences, forms and constellations upon which this reversal of the conditions of class struggle turned are outside the scope of this essay. But two things seem clear: First, the right-wing political transformation has to be understood as a revenge against recent working-class advances and perceived threats. Second, the backlash succeeded for historically significant socio-economic reasons. Rapid, crisis-spurred deindustrialisation sent crucial sectors of the working-class into early retirement or other forms of permanent unemployment. Swift and massive financing under capitalism – brilliantly illustrated by the London City Big Bang of 1986 – generated enormous amounts of leveraged capital.

The 1970s were also the salad days of academic Marxism. Never before – and it is very unlikely to ever happen again – had Western European universities harboured so much Marxist thought. But it was not able to recognise or to explain its own historical defeat.

Geoff Eley
End of the Post-war? The 1970s as a Key Watershed in European History

My own answer to this question would begin from the more concentrated transition of 1967–74, when the stabilities of the post-war settlement first began coming apart. One starting point would clearly be the popular insurrections of those years. Usually tagged as the student revolt, these actually encompassed a massively wider diversity of social movements and militancy, including the largest pan-European strike wave since 1917–20, as well as the many country-by-country disorders, from the variegated extra-parliamentary challenges in France, Italy and West
Germany to the Prague Spring, the 1974 Portuguese Revolution and the long crescendo of the anti-Francoist protests in Spain. Viewed within this longer narrative of political dissolution, the rebellions of 1968 figure less as coherent and consciously directed movements than as the disorderly symptoms of changes whose effects would only become apparent much later, in precisely those decades addressed by this *Forum*. The new radicalisms of sixty-eight – whether as socio-political turbulence or many-sided cultural excess – were far more the unanticipated effects of the socio-cultural changes generated during the long post-war boom – rising standards of living and greater disposable incomes, the opportunities of the new consumer capitalism, the highly visible and aggressively self-conscious subcultures of youth, and the enormous expansion of higher education. Those changes were transforming the landscapes where politics could occur. But the new consumer economies were only just starting to emerge. The explosions of 1968 were flashes from a future still in the process of being shaped – class structures being recomposed; manufacturing and extractive industries entering their long decline; labour movements losing their distinctive organisational cultures and community ground; service industries dominating the labour markets; new technologies and labour processes transforming the habits and rhythms of everyday life; and novel discourses of self-management and alienation shaping an emergent cultural critique. But it was only through the dramas surrounding 1968 that social theorists, political actors and ordinary citizens could sense what that future was likely to contain.

The world economic downturn following the oil crisis of 1973–74, combined with the continuing reverberations of the Indochina War and the collapse of Bretton Woods in 1971, was the heavily structural or materialist counterpoint to this narrative of political dissolution and societal change. As the post-war boom came to its end, so, too, did the promises of permanent growth and continuously rising prosperity, receding alarmingly before the new norm of high inflation, rising unemployment and low growth. This magnified the consequences of underlying changes in the economy – the reorganising of labour markets, manufacturing decline and deindustrialisation, the reconfiguring of class and general capitalist restructuring. With economic stagnation, Europe’s welfare states also passed into crisis. They were now relentlessly attacked for being too costly, too inefficient, too bureaucratic, too corrosive of individual morale and too open to abuse. Their machinery of public provision and language of public goods were denounced, loudly and repeatedly, as corrupting. Demands for privatising services grew ever louder. As the post-war boom’s Keynesian orthodoxies also fell into disarray – deficit financing, demand management, strong public sectors, full employment – the well-established common sense of politics was brought vociferously into question. The reliable verities of the Fordist era started to crumble, from the economics of mass production and the associated corporatist arrangements with trade unions
to the prized securities of rising real wages and full employment. The new priorities of a «post-Fordist transition» began establishing their claims.

Profound ruptures occurred with the past. The polities that emerged from 1945 had brought the Left fundamental gains, endowing organised labour’s new influence with powerful democratic meaning. The post-war settlements had celebrated democratic sovereignties of the people, formally so in the new constitutions of West Germany, Austria, the Low Countries and Scandinavia. If the synthesis of Keynesian economics, welfare states and corporatism was less relevant in Southern Europe, the French and Italian constitutions also delivered vital democratic goods. After 1945, the Left dominated local government, too, via strongholds in particular industries, cities and small communities, often covering entire regions. Taking a longer view of the earlier twentieth century as a whole, the Left’s advance had first become institutionalised where poor relief, housing, schooling, wider services and public jobs could be expanded using local taxes and disbursing central government funds. These were the urban-political contexts of class formation, the bedrock of socialism’s appeal and promise after 1945, and the ground from which a much broader acceptance of societal responsibilities and public goods could unfold. This practical legitimacy of a state that seemed anchored in popular democratic experience – in a concerted response to the shared hardships of the pre-1939 Depression and to the anti-fascist solidarities of the wartime and liberation – was the normative cement that first began to crumble during the turbulence of 1967–74, before being consciously demolished by the political divisiveness of the next two decades.

In other words, the years 1967–74 effectively provided the hinge of a post-war periodisation that contrasted two distinct eras. The earlier of these rested upon a broadly articulated societal consensus that coalesced around the political logics of reconstruction. One of its key agencies was the mass membership political party realised most successfully in the socialist and communist traditions, deeply rooted in working-class communities while magnetising much broader social hopes. The associated values, or political common sense, clustering around democracy, social justice and national independence formed a robust template for the collective imagination. The implied social contract was constitutive for Eastern Europe as well as the West: absent the unforgiving juggernaut of Stalinism, anti-fascist optimism might easily have sustained a more coercively centralist version of the Keynesian-welfarist politics reigning in the West, however dangerously beholden this might be to top-down communist rule. In these terms the post-war settlements had stabilised around a broadly persuasive collective script emphasising hardships and struggle, plus reform and improvement, which the dramas of 1967–74 now helped to unravel.

Thus the later of the two eras, the one addressed by this Forum, called each aspect of the post-war consensus into question. The mass party entered into long-
lasting and eventually terminal disarray; the popular culture of collective improvement and appreciation, cemented around the welfare states and associated practices of government, dissolved; and the national state’s operative sovereignties succumbed before powerful supra-national logics of governmentality epitomised by the EU. The intense political conflicts and polarising divisiveness of the 1970s may be understood most fundamentally in these terms. The new political common sense of our own time – secured during a third era that began from the anti-communist triumphalism of 1989–91 – was forged from those destructive political battles lasting well into the 1980s. Country by country, the emblematic politicians – Thatcher in Britain, Kohl in West Germany, Mitterrand in France, Andreotti-Craxi in Italy, Gonzalez in Spain – were the architects of an extraordinarily effective restructuring that was usually neo-liberal and authoritarian at the same time.

Among the many ways of exemplifying this profound transition, four stand out. First, the post-1973 recession brought drastic changes in the capitalist economies and their social structures, with huge implications for the effectiveness of government in national states. Changes in the world economy undermined the Keynesian orthodoxies moving public policy since the 1940s. The resulting social logics permanently damaged the viability of a Left in the sense solidified since the 1860s. As what we now call globalisation deprived social democrats of their ability to manage national capitalisms in the interests of their working-class supporters, deindustrialisation began drastically reducing the size of the old working class itself. During the last third of the twentieth century, capitalist restructuring transformed the accustomed meanings of class.

Second, the distinctive organisational world of the socialist tradition also dissolved. By the 1990s, the modern mass party, with its continuous and ramified presence in its supporters’ lives, sustained by sociability and everyday identification as well as by election campaigns, had definitively gone. Even the most impressive of those movements, like the post-war counter-culture of the Italian communists, no longer existed in the old way. Between the 1880s and the 1930s, those cultures of socialism, linked to residential working-class communities, trade unionism and pliable local government resources, formed the solid foundation of socialist party success, with a long afterlife lasting well into the 1960s. Once they were gone, socialists needed to design other strategies for building and holding popular support, a project of reformation that still eludes those political actors who hold onto the name. In light of the structural changes mentioned above – capitalist restructuring and globalisation, deindustrialisation and the recomposing of the working class – this death of the party spelled the end of the socialist tradition in its already available form.

Third, the consequences of the changing place of women, changing gender relations and changing sexualities lastingly redrew the terrain on which politics had perforce to be conducted. As a result of the conflicts and mobilisations of the
1970s and 1980s, neither the transformations of family and household since the 1950s, nor the vastly changed relationship of women to education and employment, nor the startling alterations in attitudes towards women in public could be kept at bay any longer. Dramatically made visible by the 1960s, the changing European «socio-sexual order» (Göran Therborn) now shapes the political common sense in myriad ways. The active presence available to girls and to women of most ages in European societies, varying regionally and culturally across the continent, has shifted and expanded radically since that time. The visibility of women and their legitimacy as public actors has fundamentally transformed, whether in the representational domains of the media, in their recruitment to politics, in their modalities of participation in the public sphere or in their forms of physical and symbolic access to public space. The impact of contemporary feminisms, including the wider repertoire of feminist political interventions per se and the complicated diffusion of ideas about sexual equality and gender equity, remains one of the most vital of the logics initiated during 1967–74. We may then further add the wider changes in sexual practices and sexual mores, whether in ideas about sexual pleasure, in alternatives to heterosexuality, in the crumbling of older marital orders, in the widened legitimacy of experimentation or in the general queering of what used to be the boundaries of the permissible.

Fourth, the passage into the 1970s also saw the violent denouement of European decolonisation, signified most dramatically by the war in Southeast Asia, the final liberation of the Portuguese colonies, British withdrawal from «east of Suez», and the long-term destabilising of the Near and Middle East. Fed by the post-colonial labour migrancy accelerating during the 1960s, the complex discursive presence of «race» in European societies, in troublesomely material as well as ideological ways, shifted the ground of politics. The social citizenship of Europe’s working-class majorities realised during the 1960s – their job security, higher wages and greater benefits, access to healthcare and housing, expectation of pensions, protections under the law – always presupposed a mobile, low-waged, insecure and unprotected Mediterranean and post-colonial reservoir of cheap and disposable labour power. In those terms the post-1945 Western European experience of relatively humanised capitalism remained no less beholden to globalised systems of exploitation of natural resources, human materials and grotesquely unequal terms of trade than the preceding era of imperialist expansion. Post-war gains were embedded in the privileged prosperity of a metropolitan boom whose very possibility rested on historically specific repertoires of extraction and exploitation operating on a world scale. If histories of capitalism are customarily presented as a progressive story of industrialisation centred around social improvement, it becomes increasingly clear that the presumed centrality of waged work in manufacturing and extensive industry has proven a transitory rather than a permanent feature, one extremely particular to the roughly 150 years between the British and
Belgian industrialisations and the dismantling of manufacturing economies in the 1970s and 1980s. The socially valued forms of organised labour prevalent after 1945, still more the redistributive vision of a regulated capitalism celebrated by social democrats, stand revealed as a finite and passing phenomenon. At an ever-accelerating pace, the social relations of work have transformed since the 1980s into the new low-waged, semi-legal and deregulated labour market of a mainly service-based and trans-nationalised economy. This de-skilling, de-unionising, de-benefiting, and de-nationalising of labour via the rampant processes of metropolitan deindustrialisation and global capitalist restructuring have comprehensively undermined the model of corporatism around which so much of the post-war settlement was built.

Not the least of the changes under way during the 1970s and 1980s was thus a re-proletarianisation of labour. Post-war reconstruction had seemed the precursor to an indefinitely unfolding future of economic growth, social prosperity and social peace. Labour had won unprecedented legitimacy in the life of the state, both collectively organised and socially valued via unions, public policy, the wider common sense and the acceptable ethics of a society’s shared collective life. Yet from a vantage point in the early 2000s, that immediate post-war history appears more as a contingent interlude in the life of capitalist social formations whose ordering principles look very different over the fullest span of their history. From the mid-1970s, every element in the democratising architecture of the post-1945 settlement – planning, full employment, social services for all, redistributive taxation, recognition of unions, public schooling, collectivist ideals of social improvement, a general ethic of public goods – was brought under brutally effective political attack. By the 1990s, little remained of either the practices or the principles, let alone the material structures and institutional architecture that previously organised the political common sense. The social contract binding the Keynesian-welfarist synthesis together was gone. Instead the post-communist era now brought compelling evidence of a radically stripped-down version of the labour contract. New forms of the exploitation of labour relentlessly accumulated around the expanding prevalence of minimum-wage, disqualified and deskilled, disorganised and deregulated, semi-legal and migrant labour markets, in which livelihoods were systematically stripped of precisely those forms of security and organised protection that the politics of anti-fascist reconstruction had sought centrally to instate. This was the most decisive transition the 1970s and 1980s brought about.
The 1970s in Europe are becoming an attractive topic for historians. This is not only because many archives are going to be opened for this period, but more so because the 1970s are discussed as a major but also a controversial and very special turning point of nineteenth and twentieth century European history.

A period of lasting change: The 1970s mark a major turning point in an impressive number of ways. The European economy, which had been one of the world’s fastest growing economies during the 1950s and 1960s, now suddenly became one of the slowest growing economies in the world along with Africa and Latin America. In addition, the oil shock impacted not only the price of a basic form of energy – oil – which leapt from 3 to almost 50 US dollars. It also had also many consequences for economic growth, employment, environmental awareness and for the role of Arab power in world economics and world politics. Furthermore, the Bretton Woods monetary system of fixed currency exchange with the US dollar as the leading currency and the central role of the US for the global monetary system was abandoned by the American government. Finally, the 1970s were an important period of transition from an industrial society with predominantly industrial employment to the tertiary society with employment predominantly in the service sector.

Societies in Europe also changed dramatically. The 1970s became the high point of the new social movements: the new women’s movement, the regional movement (which had started in the 1960s), the environmental movement, the Third World movement and later on the peace movement, following the brief students’ movement in the late 1960s. At the same time, the classic labour movement weakened. Moreover, the 1970s reflected a new period of critique of the welfare state in a large sense – not only a critique of the social insurances, but also of public education, public health services and public urban planning. The critique came from various political groups, not simply, as is often assumed, from neo-liberals, but also from the new social movements and the supporters of the classic welfare state. In addition, the 1970s may also be seen as a turning point in international migration, not only in terms of the active recruitment of foreign labour by European governments, but also as regards the gradual public awareness of permanent immigration as opposed to the temporary residence of foreign labour. The 1970s are seen as a new Americanisation of Europe: the new American predominance in film production, fast food and also in the beginnings of the PC was received in a different way than the Americanisation of European society in the 1950s and 1960s with the introduction of the TV and the mass consumption of motorised vehicles, household machines and standardised consumer goods.

Culture in Europe also changed fundamentally. The most well-known alteration was the change of values, namely the shift from optimism about the future,
expectations of uninterrupted economic growth and a rise in the standard of living and the height of economic and social planning and futurology to a more pragmatic or even more pessimistic view of the future, that is, reduced hope in economic growth and a higher standard of living, and reduced trust in efficient social and political planning, with the label of «no future» as an eccentric interpretation. The 1970s also saw the rise of postmodernism in the arts and the human sciences, the critique of the idea of a continuous rise of rational modernity, the belief in contingencies and chaos as an option for development and of the dark aspects of rational enlightenment and the application of sciences. Linked with postmodernism, pop art did not follow the principles of classic aesthetics and emerged as a new form of the arts focusing upon everyday objects and advertising. In addition religion became more important, not merely because of the revolution in Iran. In Europe, churches became more engaged in social and political activities, more of ecclesia activa than ecclesia contemplativa. At the same time, secularisation and the decline in membership and in the attendance of services in the big Christian churches was less rapid.

Political change was another important feature of this decade. The fall of dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Greece was a major reinforcement of democracy. New dissident movements developed in communist Eastern Europe; then came the rise of the workers’ Defence Committee, KOR, in Poland and the creation of Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia. The resistance of the churches in communist regimes was encouraged by the papal election of the Polish Karol Wojtyla. At the same time, in four major Western European countries the democratic state was challenged by terrorism, in Italy by the brigadi rossi, in West Germany by the RAF, in Britain by the conflict in Northern Ireland and in Spain by the violent ETA. On the whole, civil liberties were not relinquished. Governing became more difficult after the 1970s, not only because of the above mentioned economic and political challenges, but also because of the weakening of classic political milieus. The 1970s were also important for international relations, not only because of the end of the Vietnam War, which had strongly influenced Europe’s image of the US. The European Community also proposed major new projects promoting economic and political union, which, although failures in the short run, succeeded in the longer term. This was also the time of détente, which was initiated by the two super powers in new treaties limiting the rearmament of atomic weapons, but also shaped by the Ostpolitik of the West German government.

Most of these changes were not just important events of the 1970s, but they also had consequences for the following decades leading up to the present. Thus the 1970s mark a time of lasting change and can be seen one of the pivotal decades of the twentieth century.

A special turning point: The transformational years of the 1970s have a unique character in nineteenth and twentieth century history: This was not a turning point
imposed by wars, revolutions or the breakdown of empires, such as in 1789, 1815, 1848, 1918, 1945, and 1989, but by rapid economic changes, and cultural and social upheavals. It was a «silent revolution»; instead of an upheaval dominated by spectacular political events, it represents a soft turning point. This is why the period of the 1970s is found in historiography, but is not remembered in memorial days and very rarely the topic of speeches by politicians. Even social scientists and historians, who at the time became aware of the fundamental changes, could not find a comprehensive term that capture the turn in all its dimensions.

A turning point for all of Europe: The 1970s marked in fact a European turning point. On the one hand, it was a more distinct turning point in Europe than elsewhere in the world in economic, societal, cultural and political terms. The change of growth, rise of critique of the welfare state, change of values and secularisation, terrorism, the new volatility of voters, détente and European integration projects made the 1970s a significant turning point in Europe. On the other hand, it was a turning point for all of Europe, though with somewhat different relevance for Western, Central/Eastern and Southern Europe. It was not only a Western European turning point, i.e., a European history viewed with Rhenish eyes. It was a turning point for Central Europe and Eastern Europe with significant lasting contradictions because of the new focus on social policy and living standards, the new scarcity of consumer goods, the beginnings of foreign indebtedness, as well as the new dissident milieus, the new role of the church and the Helsinki Accords. It was also a turning point for Southern Europe, not only because of the fall of dictatorship, the new access to the European Community and the reorientation towards Europe, but also because Southern Europe shared with Western Europe the economic upheavals mentioned above.

A controversial decade: The 1970s might become increasingly controversial, as the decade can be seen as a period of disillusionment or a period of promise. On the one hand, this decade is seen as one of disillusionment given the decline of economic growth, the destabilisation of currencies, the end of the glorious industrial society, the decline of trade unions and Keynesianism. It is also marked by the decline of optimism, the classic egalitarian welfare state, the waning of trust in the values of the enlightenment, the decline of the American model, the failure of the European integration project, the failure of détente, the decline of classical governability and of stable political milieus. On the other hand the 1970s are seen as promising, as beginnings of our modernity, as a new spring of democracy with the new social movements and dissident milieus, with the end of dictatorships in Southern Europe and the continuity of civil liberties in the confrontation with terrorism. It also marks the beginning of normal economic growth and a service society, a new awareness of the environment and the limits of energy, a new pragmatism in economic and social forecasting and planning, a new combination of private and public initiatives, and a period of less conformism and more options for the individual.
Philippe Chassaigne
Why the 1970s Really Matter

In its December 19, 1969 issue, the American newsmagazine *Time* published a special section report entitled «From the ’60s to the ’70s: Dissent and Recovery,» which provided a summary of the closing decade attempted to define the coming one. «The Next Decade,» it boldly stated, would be «a search for goals.» And it went on: in the context of a continued expansion of the US economy (with an annual GDP growth in the region of 4,5 per cent, i.e., superior to the post-war average of 4 per cent), and a reduction in working hours, the emphasis would be less on the satisfaction of materialistic desires and more on self-fulfilment. Individualism would continue to wane (it was assumed to be already on the decline in the 1960s), personal identity would merge into group identity and communal living would spread, even if «the Hashbury [Heights, in San Francisco, the epicentre of the late-1960s «Counter Culture»] scene has faded into history.» Actual possession of material goods (forecast to be more and more abundant and varied, though, thanks to technological innovation) would matter less, because «ownership is obsolete;» the way ahead would be to rent things, not own them. So, if the thirst for material possession – something so typical of the generations that had known post-war hardship, if not World War II itself – was quenched, what would become (the Western) man’s driving force? Since materialism was definitely the last decade’s thing, faith in ever-progressing science and technology had to go as well: The consequences of the development of science and technology were to be feared and despised, distrusted just like traditional institutions and even authority itself. Immediate pleasure would be glorified over the traditional notions of duty and work, with all the things that go with it, including the continuation of sexual freedom and the liberation of drug use. Basically, the idea of redesigning a way of life was to be the dominant theme of the 1970s. This way of life was supposed to be more casual, but also more inward-looking. But to what end? The article pointed the several possibilities, such as «participatory democracy» (a remnant of the late 1960s spirit here) making the major institutions of contemporary societies, such as unions, corporations or governments, look increasingly obsolete, or a «religious revival» that would encompass much more than «existing institutional churches». Pentecostal revivalism, «Eastern mystery cults», «eclectic spiritual systems», or maybe even «small, home-centred worship groups with their own rituals, perhaps even their own theologies» would provide for the people’s metaphysical aspirations. New goals would also include adopting a sense of responsibility for the natural environment.

Of course, this article dealt with the United States, not with Europe; but the Atlantic Ocean, if not really a mere «pond», is not an insuperable barrier either, and countries on both sides of the ocean belong to the same «Western world». And
it is not our aim here to make a list of what actually happened in the following
decade and what did not – even if Time usually got it right, if we compare it with
other «futurologist» essays published at the time. But it does not matter here. The
interest of this article lies in its author’s prescience of the 1970s as a decade
of transition. It was to be a decade of transition in the economic field; admittedly,
and this was the major shortcoming of the report, Time did not predict the
economic crisis of 1973 that signalled the end of the literally uninterrupted post-
war period of sustained economic growth, and the beginning of an era of «limp
growth», to quote the late French economic historian Jacques Marseille. The end
of the decade would also hear the knocks of globalization. However, the issue
featured Milton Friedman on the cover, which was another clear case of prescience!
In that decade, everyday life became increasingly technologised: high-tech, micro-
technology, ephemeral gadgets or lasting inventions have played since then an
ever-increasing role in our material surroundings, and the «innovating con-
sumer», i.e., the one who first tests these innovations and whose positive reaction
the product to eventually be mass produced, has become a key player in the eco-
nomic game, as technological leadership has become crucial to economic growth.
But the most important changes that took place in the 1970s were probably in
the realm of mentalities and behaviour. It is still cool to be cool (a word, however
undefined it may be, that circulated widely in the 1970s) in dress, in speech and
in attitude. «Understanding» and relativism have become *de rigueur* in education
and in intellectual life. And who would contend that Western societies have
become less sexualised? There was indeed a moral backlash in the 1980s due to
the fear of AIDS, but nudity is now blatantly displayed on the screen or in the
pages of magazines, openly discussing sexual matters is a sure way of grabbing an
audience’s attention success and ever more up-to-date technology (videos, DVDs,
the Internet) has made images of the crudest sexual acts available for everyone
who wants to have access to them, rearly rendering *Deep Throat* (1972) a trifle.
Citizens have gradually lost faith in the credibility of governments and other
«major institutions» in the face of successive scandals, failures or cover-ups,
the chronology of which would turn into a painful litany. Such a crisis of confi-
dence had multifaceted consequences: the rise of abstention and anti-parliamen-
tarism, the prevalence of the «conspiracy theory», apparently ubiquitous in real
life (the death of Pope John Paul I or of Diana, Princess of Wales, the 9/11 attacks)
or in fiction (*The X Files*, *The da Vinci Code*), or the emergence of new political
actors advocating a different agenda (where, for instance, environmental ques-
tions loomed large; the first *Grünen* for instance entered the German *Bundestag* in
1983).

But the field in which the «search for goals» was to prove to be the most blatant
has undoubtedly been the quest for spiritual achievement. Institutional forms of
religion, then deemed to be on the wane, have proved remarkably resilient, be it
Catholicism (mainly thanks to Pope John Paul II – and, no, in spite of what insiders supposedly in the know might have said to the *Time* reporter in 1969, the Pope still doesn’t wear a coat and tie!), various sorts of Protestantism (barring Anglicanism) or Islam. But pseudo-religions (sorry: «New Religious Movements», NRM) have enjoyed increasing popularity. Basically, the taste of the occult and of the esoteric – «diffuse» (or à la carte) religiosity – betrayed a desire of not letting one’s free will be trapped by a set body of doctrine. But more serious, or deeper-reaching, questions were being addressed: the relationship between Man and Nature (even if, in its most radical forms, the ecological movement can be likened to a NRM), the ethical implications of the progress of medicine (Louise Brown, the first test-tube baby, was born in Britain in 1978), the potential threats that computer science could pose to individual liberties (the French National Assembly passed the law *informatique et liberté* in 1978). Here, probably, lies the 1970s paradigm: how to reconcile an exacerbated individualism (one of the pieces of journalism to perfectly encapsulate the *Zeitgeist* was Tom Wolfe’s now well-known article about the «Me Decade» in 1977), which was to become more and more shamelessly self-assertive during the following decade (see Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street*, 1987) and an indisputable drive for more material possessions (see the continuous rise in household consumer durables), with an experience that goes beyond these materialistic aspirations. One would not talk about «bobos», or «bourgeois bohemians», until 2000, but their roots are firmly planted in 1970s culture.

At the same time, it is impossible not to equate the 1970s to a period of unprecedented freedom, for it was a time when the State was not overly protective. Drinking, smoking or driving fast were not reprehensible acts, overweight persons were not stigmatised, trash did not need to be recycled – and thus trash cans were not likely to be inspected –, taking a bath instead of a shower was not considered irresponsibly, getting a sunburn was not the antechamber of skin cancer and domestic accidents were not a topic for TV ad campaigns.

It is surprising, then, that the 1970s have been waiting to get proper recognition. They have been labelled as tacky, non-existent (another 1977 piece of journalism was entitled «Who Erased the 70s?»), lacking any dominant theme or precise direction, and a cold shower after the frenzy of the 1960s. Tellingly, all these deprecating assessments were issued by people who lived in the period under review and, consequently, could not properly grasp its significance because they lacked any chronological perspective. This is now no longer the case. The 1970s were indeed an era of transition. But they were in fact much more: they witnessed the end of the post-World War II order and became the matrix for our present world.
Andreas Wirsching

The Significance of a Life Course Change

It seems to be a well-established fact that in Europe a profound transformation has been taking place since the 1970s. This is particularly true for Western European societies. Here, the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s were marked by the convergence of several dynamic developments. These developments concerned the economic sector that, on the one hand, was hit by the oil price crisis and, on the other, was transformed by the liberalisation of international capital markets and commercial relations. While industrial companies had to cope with tougher international competition, the shift towards a post-industrial service society was accelerated. Consequently, the labour market suffered or was, at least, profoundly transformed. The strategies of surviving companies, which included internationalisation and globalisation, as well as progressive deindustrialisation and rationalising, caused the loss of several million industrial jobs. The demand for both skilled and un- or semi-skilled male industrial labour declined dramatically.

The economic change posed a big challenge to political systems and welfare policies in all Western European countries. Political strategies included the trend towards the politics of financial austerity, the consolidation of the welfare state and the privatisation of public services. At the same time, however, these policies coincided with the social and cultural results of the previous period, that is, the «golden years» of the post-war boom. This major cultural change has alternately been described as a trend towards post-modernism, post-materialism, post-fordism and so forth. Regardless of the concept one prefers to use, we can observe in any case an accelerated process of individualisation and a strong increase in the number of social options.

It was in this context that what we may call a «Fordist» life-course regime began eroding: that is, the idea of a male breadwinner with full, lifelong and fairly secure industrial employment and a nuclear, single wage family. The idea of the single wage implied the concept of a (male) wage norm sufficiently high for a husband to support his wife and children. I am far from claiming that this model ever worked without difficulties. In times of depression and disruption it did not. But as was the case with the ideas on separate spheres and distinct gender roles, as a normative model, the idea of a single wage family exerted tremendous long-term influence. Well into the last third of the twentieth century it was an underlying assumption found at the base of both trade unions’ policies and West European welfare legislation.

2 For recent discussions see: K. Jarausch, ed., Das Ende der Zuversicht?: Die siebziger Jahre als Geschichte. (Göttingen, 2008); T. Raithel / A. Rödder / A. Wirsching, eds., Auf dem Weg in eine neue Moderne. Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland in den siebziger und achtziger Jahren. (Munich, 2009);

This social and cultural standard had been coming to an end since the 1970s. It is no coincidence that it had its heyday during the time of the so-called Keynesian consensus, which was characterised by anti-cyclical policies, the state-run production of infrastructural goods and services, the expansion of the welfare state, and the corporate inclusion of labour into economic responsibility. Thus, a clear parallel existed between the Fordist life course and the Keynesian consensus. Yet since the 1970s, the central economic basis of this model, the stable lifelong male industrial workplace, had fallen victim – and is still falling victim – to the accelerated structural changes of the Western European economies between the 1970s and today.

Among the consequences, we can emphasise five aspects.

First, a relatively high structural unemployment that is partly due to the occupational mismatch between the proficiencies of former industrial workers and the skill demands of new service sectors. Second, there was a strong collusion between employers’ interests and governments’ labour market policies for withdrawing part of the surplus male industrial labour force from the labour market. That collusion resulted in early retirement schemes that have substantially decreased the male labour force since the 1970s. Third, there is a general trend towards more flexible working schedules, allowing firms to adjust their output more efficiently to business cycles. Fourth, a strong emphasis has been placed on education and vocational training aimed at both adolescents and adults. The underlying ideas of life-long learning and occupational mobility imply, of course, a reduction of job security. Finally, in the booming service and information technology sectors, unpaid training, frequent job changes, temporary work and spatial mobility have become widespread phenomena.

All of these elements tended to reinforce the crisis of the male life course, marked by an increased shifting of jobs, decreased firm tenure and decreased occupational stability. At the same time, the expansion of the service sector called for women to enter the labour market. This is one main reason for the strong increase of the female labour force participation rate that has continuously been rising since the 1960s. While the expansion of the service sector calls for women to enter the labour market, many women will feel obliged to do so in order to contribute to a much needed increase of their family income.

Just like industrialisation caused a profound change in family structures and gender relations by detaching the workplace from the home, the move towards post-industrialism has been shifting family structures by destabilising the male life course and drawing women into the labour market. There is no doubt that it was above all the female work force that has been used to coping with the fundamental structural change that has taken place in Western economies since the 1970s. One certainly can argue that women have been used to introduce new and much needed flexibility into the labour market. And there is evidence that, in the context of the dynamic growth of the service sector during the last third of the twentieth century,
the expanding female labour force has constituted a sort of flexible, post-industrial «reserve army of labour».

In any case, by the 1980s it had become clear that Jean Fourastié’s «Great Hope of the Twentieth Century», which predicted an absence of unemployment, as well as a higher level of qualifications and an increase in the quality of life, had turned out to be nothing but an illusion. On the contrary, unemployment rates exploded during the late 1970s and the 1980s, and we can truly say that the whole period since the end of the post-war boom has been characterised by the phenomenon of long-term mass unemployment. Individuals are certainly less secure in the labour market than they were forty years ago. There is, as the French social scientist Robert Castel has put it, a new social insecurity, even vulnerability, in the labour market.4

As a working hypothesis, the idea that contemporary politics was (and is) caught in a sort of «pincer movement» may deserve some attention. On the one hand, Western European political systems have to deal with the structural repercussions of global economic change, which is causing unemployment and fiscal constraints. On the other hand, they have to face accelerated socio-cultural changes involving «Europe’s second demographic transition»5, the individualisation of life-styles and important life course changes. In all Western European countries, the effects of this pincer movement posed a huge challenge to the established welfare state, which has been under fire and in permanent transformation since the early 1980s. Thus, policies and politics were (and are) to be reformulated within a set of fundamental changes and strong political and financial constraints.