Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev argue that illiberal politics in central and eastern Europe should be understood primarily as a reaction to the ‘imperative to imitate’ the West after 1989. But to downplay the ideological substance of the new authoritarianism is reckless in the current situation, responds Aleida Assmann. Recalling the contribution of eastern European dissidents to Europe’s culture of human rights offers a corrective to the damaging myth of the ‘victorious West’.

Over the last few years, the political scientist Ivan Krastev has made a big impact with his brilliant interpretation of the migration crisis in Europe. Krastev has observed and analysed Europe’s split into East and West like no other commentator. A Bulgarian, he speaks from an eastern European perspective, which is what makes his voice and diagnosis so important. His commentary is interesting for its succinct and paradoxical argumentation, and for its focus on collective psychology, rather than political strategy. However, as far as I am aware, there has been little critique of his ideas.

Krastev has repeatedly described the mass migration movement of 2015/2016 as ‘Europe’s 9/11’. [1] He argues that this was not just a major caesura in the history of the European Union, but also a trauma of historical dimensions. This is a problematic description, first because it tacitly transfers the category of trauma from the refugees to the host society, and secondly because it equates refugees with terrorists. The refugees were reacting to danger and existential emergency: the fact that there might have been ‘sleepers’ or ‘time bombs’ among them does not justify the simplistic analogy. That leads to another reason why the description is troubling: it supports a radical rightwing discourse that literally equates refugees with terrorists and casts host societies as victims.

Go West!

Krastev revisited his theory of the imitation imperative in a 2018 essay co-authored with the legal scholar Stephen Holmes. The two start from the assumption that the current rejection of liberal democracy in numerous EU countries has less to do with ideology than collective psychology. The East-West opposition is no longer explained in terms of
differing political doctrines, but of the dynamics of emotion, with national pride taking centre stage. Pride is the basis of national self-esteem; any violation of this pride is experienced as a form of humiliation.

In the early 1990s, the philosopher Avishai Margalit defined the ‘decent society’ as one whose institutions did not humiliate individuals and whose citizens did not humiliate one another. Now, it is a question of the humiliation of groups, of entire societies and nations. This collective humiliation is caused not by physical constraint, public exposure, scorn or other forms of denigration, but by more subtle processes such as paternalism, the pressure to normalize and – crucially – an ‘imitation imperative’. The western way of life that in Poland and Hungary was until recently seen as a vision of a better future, now meets resistance, defiance and open hostility. Krastev and Holmes even talk of the populists’ ‘ultimate revenge’ against western liberalism.

In order to explain the abrupt transformation of the East from eager Europhiles to militant Eurosceptics, Krastev and Holmes shift their analysis to the unspoken, focusing on elementary feelings such as aversion, animosity and resentment. The post-socialist nations, they remind us, suffer from an acute lack of recognition. Having been denied any national pride during the Soviet era, they were still not free after 1989, but were instead expected to become like the liberal West. Under this moral and political paternalism, one particular desire became increasingly urgent: to be what you are but have never been allowed to be, namely a homogenous nation state and an illiberal society in a closed territory. Holmes and Krastev do not believe this to be the best form of statehood for the post-communist countries. They do, however, construct a narrative of Europe in which this was the only course available after 1989.

I argue that this construction of history is fatalistic. We do not have to tell the story of the European Union in the way they do; we can also tell a different story, in which this negative teleology intersects with alternative possibilities and perspectives. Only then can we extricate ourselves from the favourite mindset of many male intellectuals: one of gloomy prognosis, twilight, decline, and apocalypse.

Copy the West! If this edict really has caused so much resentment and humiliation, then it needs to be examined more closely. To start with, it is surprising that Krastev and Holmes place so much emphasis on the concept of the West. The West had its heyday as a normative rallying cry during the Cold War, when it was held up in opposition to the East. Like Nato, the West was defined in transatlantic terms and included the United States. Although Nato still exists, the ‘West’ rapidly lost its meaning after the USA lost political interest in Europe.

The American historian Michael Kimmage has looked closely at the dissolution of the concept of the ‘West’ after the USA’s decoupling from Europe. In his article, *The Decline of the West*, he demonstrates that ‘the West’ was a polemic term that condensed many things: the mobilising political rhetoric of the Cold War era; the transatlantic alliance; a Eurocentric concept of history and the Enlightenment; and cultural institutions at American universities such as the ‘great books’ courses that cultivated a western intellectual heritage. [2] According to Kimmage, the renunciation of the concept of the West began with Obama and the political elite that advised him. This was a generation
that in the 1980s attended universities that had banished the West from their curricula. Western culture and enlightenment values were replaced by a focus on multiculturalism and a commitment to human rights that no longer required a detour via Europe. Kimmage observes that, ‘current US and European foreign policy is shapeless or rudderless because the narrative of western liberty has been removed from it and no comparable narrative found to take its place.’ The European states, which no longer see themselves as US satellites, have also abandoned the old rallying cry of the West, and have long been setting their own agenda in Europe.

The idea of the compact West, celebrated during the heyday of modernisation theory, no longer holds sway on either side of the Atlantic. So why now declare it to be a norm? Could it be that the concept of the ‘West’ has re-emerged only because it has the power to mobilize aversion? Reading Krastev’s and Holmes’s essay, I am unsure whether their intention is to analyse resentment or incite it. This ambiguity might of course be deliberate. In any event, the resuscitation of the concept is destructive, because it obscures something that we urgently need today: a more precise memory of European history, as a way of dealing with the current crisis.

The pathos of freedom

If we free ourselves from old polemics and look more closely at the post-war history of Europe, we see not only a steadily deepening rift between East and West, but also an astonishing set of interconnections. Holmes and Krastev make no mention of human rights as a key driving force in the history of the European Union, for example. They are completely on-trend here. Human rights are not considered sexy. However, the argument about the imitation imperative appears in a very different light if we recall an episode from EU history that Krastev and Holmes completely ignore.

Human rights do not have an uninterrupted history. Although they have existed since the American Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution, in 1948 they were declared anew by veterans of the First World War and members of the French Resistance such as René Cassin. Anything but a historical constant, human rights have consistently had to be rediscovered and re-contested under new political circumstances.

Cassin was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968. Few people noticed this in Germany, because human rights had again slipped off the agenda. The student movement had other concerns, including the global class struggle against capitalism and imperialism. But things were very different in the Warsaw Pact countries. In March 1968, Polish intellectuals around Adam Michnik organised student protests and until 1986 regularly spent time in prison. In Prague in January 1969, Jan Palach immolated himself in a protest at the Soviet occupation of his country.

In August 1975, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe in Helsinki signed a Final Act guaranteeing the Eastern Bloc countries new forms of cooperation, including recognition of frontiers and mutual non-intervention. In return, the Eastern Bloc countries undertook to uphold human rights. The living conditions in the Soviet dictatorships had brought freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief to the fore. The seventh chapter of the Final Act had consequences that the governments of Warsaw
Pact countries did not foresee. In many countries, ‘Helsinki Groups’ of dissidents emerged that took the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a key point of reference.

One of them was Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, a civil rights movement which included Václav Havel, the future president. Charter 77 campaigned for the rights of artists and others subject to political persecution. Another example was the strike by workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, who founded the first trade union in the Eastern Bloc under the name of Solidarity. The citizens’ movements in the GDR, and their peaceful protest against the repressive structures of the state, are part of this same struggle for human and civil rights.

The funeral of George Bush Senior at the end of 2018 served as an occasion for the media to recall the former president’s famous statement in 1989, ‘We have won the Cold War!’ Bush meant not only that the Americans had won, but something much broader: that capitalism had defeated communism. This is the history written by the winners today. But it is superficial and tells only half the story. I would argue that the fall of the Iron Curtain and the enlargement of EU were underpinned by the power of human rights, which by then were no longer merely being paid lip service by politicians, but also increasingly being claimed from below by citizens’ movements across the world.

The Helsinki Declaration marked the beginning of a détente between the East and the West that paved the way for the subsequent unification of Europe. This was the exact moment when human rights were reactivated and rediscovered as the collective foundation of a new and broader Europe. In other words, the Cold War was won not only by the Americans, but also by the European politicians that signed the Helsinki Final Act in 1975; and it was not only capitalism, but also eastern European dissent that ushered in the end of the conflict between East and West. The dissident intellectual Gáspár Miklós Tamás, who lived under the Ceauşescu regime in Romania, has emphasized this: ‘Many political scientists today talk about how the system was changed from outside and from above. Nonsense. It might not have been the whole population that changed the system, but there were two, three million of us back then, there were clubs, debates, meetings, demonstrations, society was in unbelievable ferment. The irrepressible desire for freedom in 1989, this pathos of freedom, that was a moment of great beauty. That remains.’ [3]

In the narrative of the imitation imperative, however, nothing remains. The Eastern Bloc states were not, as the winners would have it, ‘gifted’ with western democracy, let alone colonialized, overrun and overpowered. On the contrary, they fought for democracy themselves, and in doing so brought their own utopia into the European Union. This is why the human rights struggle up to and including 1989 is such an important chapter in the EU’s history.

Liberal – illiberal – neoliberal

If the real roots of resentment and humiliation in eastern Europe are to be uncovered, then this history must be recalled. Because there is no doubt that these feelings exist. However, I would argue that they result less from the imitation imperative than from the slipperiness of the term ‘liberal’. Krastev and Holmes characterise the illiberal transformation of eastern European democracies into authoritarian systems as a
'counterrevolution against liberalism’. But setting up the ‘liberal versus illiberal’ opposition is not enough. To complete the picture, and to get a better handle on the collective psychology referenced by the authors, we need to add the term ‘neoliberal’.

What eastern and central European dissidents hoped and fought for was liberal democracy; but what they got was a neoliberal economic order that opened up new opportunities for the globalisation of capital. This was the other side of the 1989 coin. The process began in the 1970s in parallel to the Helsinki Final Act. The starting gun was fired by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who laid the foundations of unchecked neoliberalism. In this sense, capitalism was indeed victorious. Ever since, there has been no overarching strategy for closing the gap between increasing wealth and increasing poverty. In the process, German reunification erased many traces of the history of the East and the biographies of its citizens. Criticism of the repressive and doctrinaire GDR regime, justified as it was, tended to overlook this. Moreover, we should not forget that, for all its problems, state socialism also guaranteed rights to housing, healthcare and education. Though standards were often low, and higher education was withheld from bourgeois and dissident students, these rights were as self-evident in the East as free speech was in the West. With neoliberalism, all that ended. [4]

A rift is opening up between ‘liberal’ in the sense of democratic, and ‘neoliberal’ in the sense of the ‘politically uncontrollable functional imperatives of a global capitalism that is being driven by unregulated financial markets’. [5] Instead of speaking of an ‘imitation imperative’, which only amplifies polarisation between East and West, we should be discussing the possibility of a ‘solidarity imperative’ based on EU integration as a means of support and protection against global turbo-capitalism.

The political changes of 1989 appear in such a negative light in Holmes’s and Krastev’s narrative because the two authors frame the relationship between liberalism and nationalism as one of irreconcilable opposites. Indeed, members of the younger generation in what was West Germany did and still do consider themselves Europeans first and Germans second. In Austria, too, many liberal left intellectuals also struggle with the concept of the nation which they automatically associate with illiberal nationalism or national socialism. This is a historical problem specific to these countries, but the emphasis on anti-national cosmopolitanism it is by no means the official doctrine of an EU controlled by Berlin, as Krastev and Holmes suggest.

Every EU nation links liberalism as a matter of course with its own cultural identity and autonomy. It is these nations, with their languages, cultures, landscapes and histories, that light up the stars of Europe. Today no-one seriously believes, as in the heyday of modernity, that progress is endless, or that globalization will sooner or later dissolve nations and religions into an abstract, cosmopolitan, world society. On the contrary, normality in the EU is not the normative pressure of indiscriminate westernisation and individualisation, but the importance, the recognition, the appreciation and the preservation of the cultural diversity of nations. One only needs to consider how much European funding has gone into stabilizing the cultural heritage of so many different cities and regions.

There are now important reasons to abandon this identification of liberalism with antinationalism, which Krastev and Holmes present as the EU’s default position and
norm. Nations only exist as states, which provide them with their form and scope. The EU project has been created for liberal democratic nations. In his recent book *Identity*, Francis Fukuyama argues that aggressive identity politics now threaten to fragment the liberal democratic nation. [6] Yet one searches his book in vain for any differentiation between ‘liberal’ and ‘neoliberal’.

The differences between ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘neoliberal economy’ are not only semantic, but also ethical. The writer Ingo Schulze has articulated this in clear and cogent terms. In a liberal democracy, he writes, ‘we must choose representatives who will safeguard the interests of society and protect it from being looted. We need representatives who can and want to prevent a market-compatible democracy and to create a democracy-compatible market. We need representatives who believe that freedom and social justice are inseparable – and not only at a national level. And there must be a majority that wants and demands this.’ [7]

The sociologist Wolfgang Streeck makes a similar point. Capitalism and democracy, he argues, coexisted peacefully in the post-war era for as long as the welfare state ensured ongoing and sustainable downward redistribution of wealth. At the end of the 1970s a new phase of deregulation began, involving a liberalization of markets and a roll-back of the state. This led states to stop placing legal or de facto limits on the mobility of capital. Streeck does not refer to a ‘counterrevolution against liberalism’, as Krastev and Holmes do, but to a ‘neoliberal counterrevolution’, in which capital breaks free of the shackles of post-war social regulation. [8]

It was under these circumstances that capitalism began to decouple from democracy, a process manifested as a decoupling of citizens from their role as consumers. But when everyone is competing unchecked for the same resources in a globalized world, might automatically makes right. Streeck therefore critiques the ‘disempowerment of the democratic nation state as a social site of market-corrective policy in the process of so-called “globalization”’, and demands that markets be integrated into states rather than vice versa. [9]

‘Liberal’ means ‘free’. But it makes a difference whether it is people that are being freed or capital, since the liberation of capital leads to increasingly inequitable forms of existence and opportunities in life. It is not only the liberal nation state that can counter this process. It can also be achieved by an association of states such as the European Union. The German constitutional lawyer Gertrude Lübbe-Wolff has argued that the central problem with globalization is its combination of unlimited markets and lack of national regulatory bodies. The role of the latter ‘would not only be to facilitate market forces, but also to delimit them in the interests of the common good.’ [10] The EU, she argues, is poorly equipped to handle globalization because of its ‘transnationalization of markets with little or no democratically controlled regulatory powers’. Not only are people today divided by ideology; capital also deepens the rift between the rich and poor.

**A new imitation imperative?**

Thirty years after 1989, the ‘pathos of freedom’ which Gáspár Miklós Tamás spoke of has, in many eastern European countries, been replaced by a pathos of authoritarianism. Freedom failed to pay off in the long term because too many people exercised their right
to freedom of movement. ‘Go West!’ was the slogan for a brand of West German cigarettes in the 1980s, and even now the message has a utopian pull. With the collapse of communism, an imaginary longing suddenly became a real possibility. People voted with their feet and moved to western countries, where they could earn more. Holmes and Krastev see the history of emigration as the psychological reason for the current doctrine of anti-immigrant isolationism. Borders, they argue, are being ideologically reinforced not only to keep out foreigners, but also to keep in those who have stayed. Open society becomes the enemy; closed society and support for a homogenous nation disengage people from Europe and divide the EU through ‘walls of loyalty’.

Holmes and Krastev downplay the authoritarian core of this offensive against the European Union. No, they say, there is no ideology behind it, just the defiant habitus of nations that, after a long history of humiliation, now insist on their own strength. I regard this interpretation as recklessly simplistic, because it ignores the doctrinal core of the current upheaval. Expressions of authoritarian chauvinism paired with xenophobia are today ubiquitous. Putin set the political agenda for this in a speech back to 2001. [11] In it he claimed that the task of government was to prescribe a view of history founded on pride and honour, and to instil patriotism among citizens. Collective unity could only be guaranteed by a combination of national hero-worship and a cult of war. Art and science were to be censored as dangerous sources of dissent, while non-conformists were to be persecuted as foreign agents or simply for failing to be patriots. In Putin’s speech, nationalism replaced communism as the new authoritarian mindset. If anything, it is from Russia that an imitation imperative now emanates.

The times are again a-changing. The slogan is now Go East! This, at least, is the logical consequence of Krastev’s and Holmes’s theory. Orbán and Kaczyński are cynically portrayed as the ‘true Europeans’, while the West now imitates the East. The narrative of the imperial and colonial West is certainly compelling. Criticism of the arrogance and hubris of the European Union currently goes down well with intellectuals. Personally, however, I find this clever and eloquent self-critique-cum-self-regard exasperating. It constructs a narrative that parenthesizes and ignores everything potentially able to mediate between East and West. Not everyone in eastern Europe thinks like the ideologues currently in power. [12] It would be much less brilliant, but perhaps more constructive, to strengthen basic liberal attitudes, and in doing so to recall the enormous investment made by eastern Europe in the shared European project, rather than ignoring it and thus eradicating it completely.

Footnotes


4. I am indebted to Susan Neiman for this point.


12. Paweł Adamowicz, Mayor of Gdańsk, was assassinated on stage at a public charity event on 17 January 2019. Gdansk is a city that has many historical layers in Europe: the nearby Westerplatte peninsula was the first goal of Hitler’s invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939; the shipyard workers of Solidarity were at the forefront of the European democracy movement in the 1980s; and it was this same Mayor who made the land available to build a genuinely European Museum of the Second World War, which opened in 2017 and was then immediately dismantled and repurposed.

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