‘The future was next to you’

An interview with Ivan Krastev on ‘89 and the end of liberal hegemony

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Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue that illiberalism in central eastern Europe today is part of a global contestation of western liberal hegemony. In an interview with Eurozine, Krastev elaborates on this thesis, discussing what happened to the hopes of ‘89, why dissidence cannot be equated with anti-capitalism or even liberalism, and why explaining the new authoritarianism as a backlash against the ‘imitation imperative’ is not to trivialize its ideological substance.

Simon Garnett: In The Light that Failed, your new book co-authored with the political scientist Stephen Holmes, you provide a compelling interpretation of political developments since 1989, specifically the rise of illiberalism – in central eastern Europe and Russia, but also the US and China. There is a passage in the introduction that neatly summarizes your argument. You write that, ‘after an initial bout of excitement at the prospect of copying the West, revulsion against the politics of imitation arose in a world characterized by a lack of political and ideological alternatives. This lack of alternatives, rather than the gravitational pull of an authoritarian past or historically ingrained hostility to liberalism, is what best explains the anti-western ethos dominating post-communist societies today.’ Can you elaborate, particularly on what you mean by the ‘politics of imitation’?

Ivan Krastev: I was very struck by something that Ben Rhodes, Barack Obama’s close friend and advisor, wrote in his account of the Obama presidency. On the day Obama left the White House and Trump was entering, the question he asked was, ‘What if we were wrong?’ Not, ‘What went wrong?’ Not, ‘What did we do wrong’. This was a self-critique by people at the centre of the paradigm we are looking at in the book, whose illusions we also shared. For us, the question was, ‘What if we had got the nature of the post-Cold War period wrong?’ And, if we had, ‘To what extent did we get wrong the sources of support for Trump?’

A legacy dispute
This article is part of a discussion between scholars, journalists, experts and witnesses, debating what is left from the promises of 1989, and who can claim ownership over those remains.

**Explaining eastern Europe**

Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes *discuss illiberalism* in central and eastern Europe as a reaction to ‘Westernization’.

**Go East!**

Aleida Assmann *criticizes their analysis*, citing the dissident intellectual heritage of the region.

**The two faces of European disillusionment**

Jaroslaw Kuisz *recounts* the desperate attempts to ‘catch up with the West’.

**Thirty years on: Germany’s unfinished unity**

Claus Leggewie discusses how the German unification process resulted in West Germany imposing its ways on the East.

**Of hopes and ends**

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**The Great Substitution**

Holly Case offers a key to how the anti-totalitarian heirloom got lost.

**Divergent narratives**

Ulrike Liebert makes the case for a new Europeanization defined as a ‘process of
collectively learning from past mistakes’.

The end of the liberal world as we know it?

James Wang recalls ‘another from 1989’: the reform movements which ended at the Tiananmen massacre.

Wests, East-Wests, and divides

Niall Chithelen discusses a whole new East-West front between China and the US.

Read our editorial summary on this legacy dispute, read more on 1989 in our focal point The legacy of division, and watch the videos from our conference Europe ‘89: the promise recalled.

Stephen Holmes and I argue that there was something very specific about the post-1989 period. Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History has been ridiculed, particularly recently, but he captured something very important in the air at the time. [1] Contrary to how it has been portrayed, this was not a triumphalist book. Triumphalism emerged in the late 1990s, but it was not the atmosphere of the early 1990s. Quite the opposite. Reading the titles of major books and articles published in the West between 1989 and 1993, you see nervousness. The classic example was Zbigniew Brzezinki’s Out of Control. [2] People were both excited and very scared.

The Cold War period was defined by a clash of two universalist ideologies – western liberalism and Soviet communism – both born out of the tradition of the European Enlightenment. The post-Cold War period, in contrast, was defined by a lack of ideological alternatives. This is our first major argument. Part of the success of Fukuyama’s book, particularly in the East and among post-communist elites, was that it touched on something running very deep in people’s Marxist-Hegelian upbringing. For many former communist thinkers and politicians, it was much easier to accept that capitalism and democracy were the end of history, than that history had no end at all. The idea of historical-teleological development, of progress, of moving in a certain direction, was very strong. Out of this came the sense that there were no alternatives. Our second major argument is that the division between democracy and communism, between freedom and totalitarianism, typical for the Cold War, was replaced by the division between societies that were already liberal democracies and those that wanted to become ones. This is the distinction between the original and the copy.

Fukuyama was not enamoured with the idea of the end of history. On the contrary, he believed that the post-’89 era would be boring, that it would lack heroism and be predominantly consumerist. He also didn’t believe that every country would become a liberal democracy in the next ten to twenty years. But he did say that those that didn’t would have to fake being liberal democracies in order to survive. This was the key thing about the end of history: there were still going to be non-democracies, but they were no
longer the model. Cuba and North Korea can survive, but who wants to be like that? In the book, we argue that this period is now ending.

When we talk about the age of imitation, we don’t think that something was imposed on post-communist societies. Imitation is not imposition, it is not colonization. It was our choice, which is partly why the story is so painful. The West didn’t come and command us to do it. We wanted to do it. The keyword of 1989 was ‘normality’. It wasn’t about a projected future. We wanted a normal society, meaning one like the West, or at least the way we imagined the West. But still, imitating the West was our choice. Being an imitator in a world that has fallen in love with originality was a humiliating experience. Political parties and leaders have been able to exploit resentment towards the imperative to imitate. But they base their politics not on actual alternatives but on plain resistance. The idea that we don’t have to copy, that we have our own ways, is crucial to the political language of Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński.

**SG:** You contrast the ‘intolerant communitarianism’ that is the response to the imitation imperative in central eastern Europe with the ‘imitation democracy’ in Russia in the 1990s, and Russia’s ‘mirroring’ of the West from the beginning of this decade. Can you explain how the Russian reaction to the fall of communism differed to that in central eastern Europe?

**IK:** It was a particularly painful for Russians to be unable to quite understand how or why the Soviet Union collapsed. The USSR was a nuclear power, there was no foreign invasion and yet, suddenly, it collapsed. This humiliating and incomprehensible defeat gave rise to conspiracy theories about the elite betraying the country. By 1989/1992, communism had exhausted its power to mobilize. The majority of the Russian population wanted it over with, without having a clear idea of what they wanted instead. But for Russians, the Soviet Union and communism were not the same thing. The Soviet Union was their country and they didn’t understand why it should collapse along with a tired ideology. While this may seem obvious to outsiders, it wasn’t for Russians.

After 1989, the western approach was that ‘we are all winners’, that the Americans, Russians and eastern Europeans had triumphed together. However, after Russia lost a third of its economy in the 1993 depression, it wasn’t easy to convince Russians to see themselves as winners. For eastern Europeans, this was different for many reasons. First of all, communism was framed as a foreign occupation. Second, there was the prospect of joining the European Union. Third, they were free to travel. And fourth, after the first transition period, there was positive economic change, at least for certain parts of the population.

Many in Russia were very interested in democratizing their country, but they knew it was going to be a painful process, because of the extent of the changes and the consequences of disintegration. For them, imitating the West was a way to survive. The mirroring strategy that began with Putin’s second term marked the end of this imitation model. From now on it was about proving to America that Russia was its equal. The point of Russia’s interference in the 2016 American elections was not to have a president that they could control, but to show America that Russia could do to it what it had been doing to them.
SG: The last chapter of the book deals with the illiberal turn in the United States and particularly its connection to the rise of a China ready to contest US hegemony. You argue that this development ‘signals the end of the Age of Imitation as we understand it’.

IK: We go beyond central and eastern Europe because the legacy of 1989 is not limited to this region. 1989 transformed the West no less than it did the East, and this tends to get lost in the debate. Western discourse focuses on what is happening in the East, an obsession that is rooted in the fear of facing the problems of western democracies. The most important question is how far liberal democracies were preconditioned by the existence of the Cold War. We examine how the United States has been affected by end of the age of imitation. How did the imitated model start to see itself as the victim of the world it had created? Trump tells Americans that they are not the leaders of the world but a hostage to it – because of all the wars they think they are supposed to be fighting; because of their trade policy, which is restrictive in light of the Chinese economy. For Trump, the only response can be for the US to focus on its own interests. This is the end of American exceptionalism. Trump’s radical message was that America is not better than others, but simply stronger than, and if need be as nasty.

These changes are crucial to our understanding of not only why the post-’89 period ended, but why it is disintegrating in the way it is. It may be easy to tell the story of the crisis of liberal democracy in simply economic terms, but that won’t explain the political path of Poland, for example. And it is easy to say that everything is the result of Russian interference, which provenly takes place. But we should not fall into the trap that Russians have been caught in for the last three decades, framing everything that happened to Russia as a western conspiracy. Russia’s ability to mobilize constituents against their own constituencies is based on certain flaws in our own democracies. The problem is internal, though it may be tactical to externalize it.

Stephen Holmes and I don’t believe that we are back in the Cold War. The China–US confrontation will shape our world in the future, but we don’t believe there will be a clash of two ideological projects. One of our major arguments is that China is not dreaming of being imitated by the rest of the world. China does not believe it can be imitated. This is not only because of its belief in the superiority of Chinese culture, but also because its model of having and projecting power is not based on the creation of copies. China lacks the universalist aspiration that was integral to western politics after the end of the Cold War.

You often hear the crisis of liberal hegemony being described as a crisis of liberalism, but I don’t buy this. Liberal hegemony was an exceptional moment, born out of an exceptional development. The fact that not all countries in the world have become liberal democracies does not mean that human rights are no longer seen as relevant, or that authoritarianism is going to prevail everywhere. On the contrary, populist movements talk about rights all the time. The problem is, whose rights? The rights being advocated by populists are those of majorities, of the nation. The anti-colonial movement has become the model of the western European far-right. In this appropriation of the language of the rights, the West is now the colonized, the anti-colonial. [3] Trump is the best example of this. This inversion of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged with the most powerful and privileged is a perversity of the political imagination that I find typical of the contemporary moment.
Réka Kinga Papp: You warn against reading history backwards from a certain turn of events. The liberal triumphalism of the 1990s was a product of this teleological thinking. But are you yourselves not also re-reading the past thirty years, if not the last seven decades before 1989, back from the present situation? How does one avoid teleology when talking about ’89 today?

IK: In teleological stories, one knows what’s going to happen, and one thinks in terms of progress and regress. We view history much more openly. We didn’t want to tell the story of the decades since 1989 in terms of why things went wrong and what could have been done differently. They probably could have been different, but we don’t know. Our major argument is that there was a trade-off between hegemony and pluralism. We lost hegemony but gained the chance to reinvent pluralism.

We are not fatalistic. 1989 was not about the end of history; it was about the future opening up. Suddenly, people could imagine themselves in different worlds, could reinvent themselves. This may often have been illusory, but it was also empowering. It felt as if you could decide anything. 1989 was a unifying moment of hope – or rather hopes. Some people hoped for better living standards, some for freedom, some for national glory – although they did not share an ideology, they were sharing a moment.

1989 shaped people, regardless of their politics. Freedom wasn’t just a political term. People’s mindsets changed overnight. Let’s say you were a middle-aged clerk somewhere in Bulgaria: suddenly you could imagine you were going to be a great businessman. You would probably never try, and the chances of success were minimal anyway, but the point is that you started to entertain dreams that you never had before. These hopes also played a part in the frustrations that followed, undermining the legitimacy of what happened in ’89.

Most revolutions are legitimized not by the fulfilment of their promises, but by the sense of revenge they give. But the liberal revolutions of ’89 were led by people traumatized by the experience of communism. They didn’t want to start a revolution that devoured its own children. The nomenclature of the ancien régime were therefore able to integrate into the new world. This became a vulnerability: the idea of the revolution being betrayed by keeping the same people in power. The revolution of ’89 didn’t promise that the last would be first: it promised that everybody could be first.

SG: ‘Demographic panic’ is central to your explanation for the emergence of illiberalism in central eastern Europe - the idea that ethno-nationalism is a displaced expression of the fear of national disappearance.

IK: Normally, revolutionaries want to live in the future. Trotsky believed he was at the centre of the world, that he was the future. After revolutions, there is usually an exodus, but mostly of the defeated party. After ’89, however, it was the winners who left. You can’t imagine Trotsky taking a fellowship in Oxford after the Russian revolution, which is what Orbán and others did around ’89. The world opened up and the future was next to you, in the form of your immediate neighbour to the west. Many of those who invested in the democratic turn were the first ones to leave after it took place. The impact of this exodus of capable people from central and eastern Europe is underestimated, not in
economic terms, but as a political factor.

The majority of central and eastern Europeans say that the best thing that happened to them after 1989 was the freedom to travel and work abroad. At the same time, around half of all Hungarians and Poles would support government actions to limit people’s ability to work abroad for longer periods of time. The best and the worst are the same: the best being that I can get out, the worst being that too many people are doing precisely that. This has become part of the nationalistic rhetoric of Orbán and Kaczynski. It is not so much about immigrants, who don’t come anyway, but about trying to stop one’s own people from leaving.

Eastern Europe is facing the same problem that the GDR faced in 1961: the working-age population are leaving the country – either for political or economic reasons. People simply don’t want to stay in a country that tells you how to live and how to breathe. Labour shortages scare away investors, which collapses the economy even further. All the money invested in people’s education is leaving with them, and you end up with an aging population. This leads to what demographers call a high dependency ratio, where a very small number of working-age people have to sustain a large number of old people. At the heart of populist support is not fear of a borderless world, but the fear of doctorless towns. Ten thousand doctors have left Bulgaria in the past two years. Then the same governments who caused the problems pose as the benevolent patriarch, claiming to be the only one to care for you.

**SG:** By arguing that illiberalism is a rational response to a real demographic crisis, are you somehow legitimizing it? This, at least, is what Aleida Assmann has claimed in response to an earlier article of yours and Stephen Holmes, in which you outline your theory of the ‘imitation imperative’. [4] What is your response to Assmann’s charge that you fail to sufficiently condemn the ideological substance of illiberal ethno-nationalism?

**IK:** I am very grateful to Professor Assmann for her response to our imitation hypothesis. Her arguments are well taken and her article is beautifully written. But, of course, we have our disagreements. I have never subscribed to the idea that ‘to understand’ is to ‘justify’. Analysis of populism cannot not be reduced to moral rejection. One needs to be careful about labelling all one’s opponents as irrational. Of course, populists instrumentalize peoples’ fears. But can all those people in the Hungarian countryside who have voted for Orbán all these years be deemed entirely irrational? Can we reduce everything to power mechanisms? It is one thing to do so with Hungary, but how about Poland, where the media is fairly pluralistic? Of course, the Polish government controls the state media, but you can’t say that Poles don’t have access to other points of view.

Arguing that you are in some way helping populist leaders by telling people that their fears are legitimate is to go in a direction that both Stephen Holmes and I find very risky. If we start saying the truth, or what we believe to be the truth, only when it works for us, then at a certain point we’re not going to be much different than some of those people whom we strongly dislike. This is a moral dilemma and one that we are increasingly seeing in everyday political life. Are we legitimizing the other side simply by sharing a podium with them? Are we going to take part in a discussion with Steve Bannon or Mária Schmidt? Under what conditions should we do that or not? I think this is a very important question.
RKP: In central and eastern Europe, demography has been a central question throughout the formulation of nationhood. Romantic nationalist literature revolves around this problem. Hungarians have spent two centuries terrified by Herder’s prophecy that they would sink in the flood of Slavic speakers. Later, Nicolae Ceaușescu said straight up that the Carpathian Basin would belong to those who birth it full. This is a central element of biopolitics.

IK: What the populists don’t have is a model society with universal appeal. This makes authoritarian nationalism very different from communism, which – whether you agree with it or not – was a universal worldview. I don’t believe that Orbán’s model can travel in the way he would like. It is much too preconditioned by a political tradition and too rooted in particular circumstances. Central eastern Europe is extremely ethnically homogenous, as a result of World War II and developments afterwards – ethnic cleansing, destruction and so on. Hungary is basically a monoethnic state, and this creates a fear of ethnic diversity and national disappearance. You can’t even move the Orbán model to Austria. We are talking about two very different social realities.

The relation between nationalism and democracy in central eastern Europe after 1989 is very different from what happened in western Europe after WWII. After 1945, nationalism was the evil. But in central and eastern Europe, internationalism was the language of the communists. Nationalism was always part of the anti-communist coalition, and it was particularly strong in Poland. Liberals and the nationalists formed a coalition to overthrow communism and in 1989, unlike in 1945, many nationalists felt they were the winners. In the first few years this was quite apparent. If you look at some of the post-communist leaders in 1990, their main way of claiming legitimacy was through nationalist rhetoric. But then came the Yugoslav wars. What happened in the Balkans massively shaped the post-Cold War period. First because of the fears that the wars raised. But secondly, because nationalism was now very much associated with former communists – Milošević was the model nationalist. Orbán was much more opportunistic, but Kaczynski remained consistent in his worldview: he could not speak the language of nationalism because he could not identify with Milošević. Doing so would have invalidated his entire biography.

It took 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia for these people to go back and couple the idea of democracy with national sovereignty. What makes these leaders very different from classic authoritarians is that you cannot imagine any of them without elections. And here we come back to the demography question. You’ll remember that in 1953, after the anti-communist uprising in East Berlin, Brecht asked whether it would not ‘be simpler for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?’ Paradoxically, the freedom of movement now made this possible. By playing different games with institutions, governments in many eastern European countries were able to elect ‘another’ people.

If you’re a Hungarian living in Transylvania, voting in Hungarian elections is easy. If you’re one of the many Hungarians living in London, on the other hand, there is only one voting station. This is a major change in the way democracies function. In a polarized society with information gaps, it’s not about changing people’s minds, but about mobilizing your own side and demobilizing the other. You can do this through institutional decisions. If you’re going to disempower a large diaspora living in western Europe, and at the same time empower a diaspora living in a neighbouring country, then
in a sense you are electing your own people.

Many of the things we see on our side we also see on the western side – not only in the US but also in Europe. Of course, ethnic homogeneity in central and eastern Europe makes it much easier to mobilize. According to polls, more Hungarians claim to have seen a UFO than to have personally met or encountered a refugee. In central and eastern Europe, the Other is totally imaginary, abstract. Populists are exploiting something that is already there.

**SG:** Germany comes off badly in the book. You have a section on the ‘new German ideology’, which you describe as ‘de-historicized post-nationalism and culturally bland constitutional patriotism’. But the European Union was never a post-national project, on the contrary. [5] This is something rarely admitted in liberal discourse in Germany. The other aspect of your criticism of Germany concerns the attempt at the wholesale replacement of communist elites after ‘89, in view of the reintegration of former Nazis in the 1950s.

**IK:** We are critical of Germany because we genuinely admire and sympathize with it. But nobody can understand eastern Europe without understanding the central role that German policies and the German model played in the post-communist transition. A major question for me was why German reunification failed to become a model for central and eastern Europe. It is very difficult to universalize the German experience. First, Germany’s view of nationalism was deeply coloured by the Nazi period. It was impossible to expect the Poles, who had fought the Soviets and Germans at the same time, to view their nationalism in the same terms. The total illegitimacy of nationalism, which was absolutely understandable in the case of Germany, could not be transferred to the East. I’m not criticizing Germans for what they did, but I do believe that they overlooked the exceptional context in which this happened.

The second thing is that after 1989, Germany tried to teach eastern Europe not how it did things after 1945, but how it should have done them. For twenty years, there was an amnesia about people’s behaviour during the Nazi period. I’m not saying that it was wrong; to be absolutely honest, I don’t believe there was a choice. Whether or not this was part of West Germany’s success, it certainly wasn’t something Germany was prepared to export after ‘89. This created resentment, and it partly explains the problems that east Germany is now facing. Germany is the only place where de-communization took place. But because it took place asymmetrically, you end up with one of the most extreme versions of rightwing populism. The crisis of the German model was all the more severe because Germany was the perfect copy. In a certain sense it was better than the original. But the moment it became a model for everybody else, it backfired.

**RKP:** After World War Two, the legitimacy of regimes in both the East and the West rested upon Germany’s confession of its exclusive and incomparable guilt. This sanctioned a taboo on complicity with the crimes of the Nazis. This is true in Austria as much as in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere. Refusing to admit this today is a typical feature of the populist right.

**IK:** This is why Germany will be critical for the future of the European Union. After World War II there were two countries that did not have the luxury to talk about themselves as
victims. One was the US, because it was so powerful, and the other was Germany. Now, under Trump, the US portrays itself as the ultimate victim of the post-Cold War world. In Germany too, certain political forces have increasingly begun to say that Germany is the major victim of European integration – that everybody wants to spend their money, that they are blamed for everything. Some of this is valid. But the moment the most powerful becomes the greatest victim, the legitimacy of the whole project is lost. This is one of the darkest sides of the imaginations of those in power today: they want to be viewed as victims, but be allowed to act as villains. This is what scares me most.

SG: The role of the eastern European dissidents is a major part of Aleida Assman’s critique. There are two aspects to this: first, that you don’t consider the transnational processes involved in the human rights movement from the mid-’70s, a process that predates ’89. By failing to account for this East-West history of human rights and the contribution of the dissidents – and this is the second aspect – you are endorsing the narrative of western ‘cultural imperialism’ and, indirectly, the illiberal narrative. Instead, so Assmann’s argument goes, your duty as a European intellectual should have been to provide an integrative, therapeutic type of narrative. The history of dissidence and human rights, she argues, provides an ideal vehicle for this.

IK: Aleida Assmann argues that, in order to save liberalism, we need to restore the centrality of human rights as a founding idea in our understanding of 1989. On the other hand, she says that we need to distinguish between liberalism and neoliberalism, however one defines it. This was the predominant reform agenda after 1989. But it is easier said than done. She is absolutely right to say that there was a strong anti-capitalist trend in the dissident movement. This was certainly the case with people like Václav Havel, Jacek Kuroń and a part of the Solidarity movement. But in 1989, some of the key dissidents decided that one of the top issues on their countries’ political agenda was to become more like western societies, which they regarded as ‘normality’. Kuroń was great on this: he said that we should first try building capitalism, and after that fight it. The dissidents decided that their former anti-capitalism was dangerous and that they didn’t want it to be instrumentalized. So, they decided to be politically effective instead.

Shock therapy was strongly supported by Adam Michnik, Kuroń, Bronislaw Geremek – some of the key names of the dissident tradition. This was a political decision. It was also a moral dilemma. For example, Michnik didn’t accept shares in Gazeta Wyborcza when it became a commercial enterprise. He was supporting capitalism but didn’t want to be a capitalist. One of our major arguments is that westernization was by invitation. Nobody was enforcing anything on anyone, we had been pushing for most of the things that came.

There was an interesting controversy around a book by Stephen Kotkin and Jan Gross called Uncivil Society. [6] Their major argument was, let’s stop fooling ourselves: Poland is not the model for central and eastern Europe. Poland is where there was a mass anti-communist movement, with 10 million members of Solidarity, but it was highly exceptional. There were hundreds, probably thousands of dissidents in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, but it was the attraction of western consumerism more than that of western liberalism that decided the outcome of the Cold War. Human rights were certainly present in ’89, and very important for legitimizing it. But there were also less high-minded motivations behind the will of eastern European societies to become like the West.
Part of the legitimacy possessed by the human rights campaigners of the ‘70s and ‘80s was therefore used to justify the same policies that Aleida Assmann believes delegitimized the transition. We should recall that for many people in central and eastern Europe, particularly the older generation, capitalism was a great deal more legitimate than democracy. For them, democracy meant voting differently but getting the same.

**RKP:** Part of the dissident legacy are Orbán and Kaczyński themselves, who both grew out of 1989 and cannot be simply dismissed as anomalies. Another huge part of this heritage is made up by people like Ferenc Kőszeg – the founder of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, and others who today are central figures in organizations that are blacklisted by the Orbán government. Or Paweł Adamowicz, the late mayor of Gdańsk, a dissident student leader in the ‘80s, who was targeted by smear campaigns in PiS friendly media for years before being murdered in January 2019. The human rights legacy and civic self-organizing are Fidesz’s and PiS’s designated enemy.

**IK:** The dissident legacy is much more diverse than it looks. Part of the anti-communist resistance were people like József Antall, a traditional conservative – compared to what you see today, he was a full-blown liberal! He came from a tradition that was about family and nation, based on natural rights. Of course, there is also a much more liberal and cosmopolitan tradition of dissidence. Aleida Assmann is absolutely right to insist that this is shared between East and West. I would even argue that East was intellectually more influential in the West in 1970s and ‘80s than in the 1990s. What is interesting is that, in the early 1990s, there were many leftists in the West who believed that the end of communism would reinvent democracy and liberalism. One example was Bruce Ackerman, in his book *The Future of The Liberal Revolution*. [7] There was a big debate about whether we were going to build something new, or whether the East was going to be assimilated. There were far more people in the West interested in getting something out of the eastern European experience.

This is important, because the dissident legacy was to a great extent transformed by the fact that many dissidents had been in a position of power, if only for a short period of time. You can’t simply blame neoliberalism for what happened, as if it had nothing to do with the dissidents, because the fact is that the dissidents decided to use their political capital in support of neoliberalism. And I’m not saying they were wrong. It’s very easy to blame them for what they did, but what should they have done? None of these people had an economic education, none of them were interested in going into government. János Kis is an example.

**RKP:** The charisma of people like Michnik or Kis evaporated very suddenly after ‘89 – not overnight, but in a very short period of time. Others’ influence gradually inflated: Václav Havel, Gáspár Miklós Tamás or Agnes Heller, for instance.

**IK:** We intellectuals are mesmerized by intellectuals, but politically that’s not always the way it works. In the first partially free elections in Poland in 1989, the Solidarity campaign was very simple: all the candidates were photographed next to Lech Wałęsa. The charismatic leader of the Polish revolution was not a dissident with a particularly sophisticated view of capitalism and democracy: he was a worker, an electrician. In the 1980s, Adam Michnik was not so much a liberal intellectual as the Pole who stood against Soviet power. What you cannot take away from Michnik, even if you hate him as much as
the far-right does, is his prison years. He was in prison and he behaved incredibly. Even his most radical critics cannot deny this. At the same time, in a current environment defined by severe polarization, we are seeing that the dissidents’ heroic biographies are ceasing to matter.

It should also be recalled that dissident intellectuals easily found a common language with the West. Those who, during communism, had been reading in English, French and German had always felt part of this European conversation. It was a totally different experience for ordinary people. Look at the Hungarian opinion polls. The Orbán government uses massive anti-communist rhetoric, but at the same time is very positive about János Kádár. What you hate about communism are the post-communists. In a sense, anti-communism became the attack after ‘89 and not before.

SG: There has been a similar discussion between historians in Germany about the role of the dissidents in Leipzig and elsewhere in ’89. It has been argued, controversially, that their political impact was minor compared to that of the mass of citizens who had been watching from the sidelines, and who in a more opportunistic fashion then took advantage of the collapse of communist rule. [8]

IK: Every revolution is, at least in the first ten years, the story of active minority groups. Think about the Bolsheviks, or the French revolution. But when you focus only on these groups, you stop being able to understand certain things, for example sudden shifts in voting behaviour. But often it wasn’t that people changed their minds, but that many people who voted a certain way left the country. Second, there are new generations emerging for whom all this is ancient history. Young people are very mobile, but they are a very small cohort. In central and eastern Europe today, you can win elections without getting a single vote from anyone under 25. This is why young people should be on the street – because if they’re not, nobody is going to see them.

Going beyond eastern Europe, you’ll see that the future is back, not as a project, but as a nightmare. There are two types of apocalyptic scenario. One comes from the right, which says that the future is going to destroy our way of life. The world is going to be full of foreigners, transsexuals, robots and so on. On the other hand, you have the new political generation, which says: it’s not about destroying our way of life, it’s about destroying life.

People forget the strong psychological impact of the atomic bomb on European societies, particularly in America and western Europe. But if you compare the anti-nuclear movement to the environmentalist movement today, there are two important differences. First, in the 1970s, it was enough to simply to demand that the government not to use the bomb. Now, governments are being attacked not for what they’re doing, but what they’re not doing. So, protesters on the streets must also know what they want the governments to do. Second, in a nuclear war, we would all die together. In a climate catastrophe, those of us in middle age are still going to enjoy our lives. But we cannot be so sure about our children and grandchildren. So, the idea of political community is changing. On the one hand, we have people like Orbán, who argue that we want to be the way we were eleven centuries ago. On the other hand, we have young people who want to include the unborn in the political community. This is a very interesting change. It is now about on whose behalf we talk, how we describe the political community.

Footnotes


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