

The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989. Edited by Ferenc Laczó and Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič. Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2020. 344 pp.

“By believing passionately in something that still does not exist, we create it.
The nonexistent is whatever we have not sufficiently desired.”
— Franz Kafka

The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989 is a rich, multifaceted volume consisting of 24 essays and two interviews. It reflects the complexity of post-communist Eastern Europe, its 30 years on the path to democracy, and the turbulent present. The book exposes the many prevailing clichés and stereotypes held by those in the West and the East about themselves, each other, what happened since 1989, whose “fault” it was, and how we ended up where we are today, at a moment which feels like an inflection point.

It is impossible to summarize all 24 essays here, as the editors went for breadth and gave authors significant creative freedom. Instead, I have two goals in this review. First, I will highlight a few points made by several of the authors. Second, I will offer a way to move beyond the East-West paradigm by inviting the reader to abandon the exhausted labels of “East” and “West” and focusing instead on conceptually capturing the democratic decline worldwide.

What are the East and the West? The East is loosely defined as a set of countries that spent more than half of the twentieth century behind the Iron Curtain. What is the West? Liberal democracies? The US and the countries of the EU? The only shared understanding about the West, as the reader can guess, is that the West is not the East. This is because both the East and the West are artificial constructs, as is the division which separates them. They are oversimplifications or shortcuts which simplify complex realities which are difficult to grasp by those who live them, study them, or gaze at them.

The opening essay by Dorothee Bohle and Bela Gretskovits is an intellectual tour de force of the past 30 years through the lens of political economy. The authors, eminent scholars of Eastern Europe, highlight three popular misperceptions concerning the construction of capitalism on the European periphery, the mixed blessing of free movement of capital and labor in the EU, and the power of the EU to oppose illiberal tendencies in its (Eastern) member states. I will focus on the first of these, (the construction of) capitalism

on the periphery. Here, the consequence is perhaps best exemplified by the recent transfer of German Amazon to the Czech borderland. Amazon, a global company, does not serve Czech customers. It does not ship to the Czech Republic. Instead, Czech workers prepare packages for German customers. For Amazon, the Czech Republic is a place on the periphery of the Western market, with cheaper labor, more docile workers, and less strict labor regulations. The East is a reservoir of cheap and conveniently located labor.

The essay by Bohle and Greskovits connects thematically with those by Phillip Ther and Claus Leggewie, which focus on German unification. In a way, the transformation of East Germany is a paradigmatic case. Best described as “shock therapy,” the measures that were introduced in the wake of unification changed everything in a short period of time, both in political and economic terms. The East Germans were told to change but also periodically reminded that their past had permanently damaged them. Failure to adapt was used to stigmatize. Critics were ostracized. The “inferiority” of East Germans was used to justify what was done to them, and the wild capitalism in East Germany benefited few. The approach was replicated with minor alterations across the region by powers domestic and foreign. The political consequences of this approach are gradually emerging now, two of which are the revolt of (some) East Germans and East Europeans against “colonization” by the West. Everything was supposed to be better in the West until it was not (for most).

The chasm between expectations and reality led to the rise of protest movements and increasing support for the different types of radical right. People might not have known what they wanted, but they increasingly came to reject what they had gotten. As Claus Leggewie highlights, the East might be showing the West a glimpse of its future, a society in which “losers” revolt. The winners took it all. Those “left behind,” a significant part of society, are alienated. Caught in the second-class citizenship of an increasingly contracting welfare state, they seek refuge in nativism.

Jan Zielonka argues that these processes are not unique to the East. According to Zielonka, both the East and the West are stereotypes the roots of which admittedly lie in some historical reality, but as stereotypes they are nonetheless counterproductive, as they thwart systematic studies of change. Over-generalization and under-conceptualization prevent us from seeing both the differences and similarities across the East and West. Old labels such as “post-communism” have exhausted their explanatory power. A variety of regimes emerged after communism, so there is no singular post-communism. Perhaps

we ought to focus on historical legacies, elite choices, institutional variations, and the differences in active citizenship (the ability of citizens to play active parts in the democratic processes) at the ballot box and in the streets if necessary.

Contrary to Zielonka, Ivan Krastev, in a book with Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed* (2019), sees the East European development after 1989 as an imitation of the West.² In the book and in an interview (which is a part of the book under review), Krastev sees democracy in the East as a copy or an imitation of a victorious Cold War paradigm, which resulted in resentment of the elites who were behind the process of imitation and of the original which was being admitted. However, to explain the illiberal turn as a revolt against liberalism, Krastev and Holmes under-conceptualize liberalism. Beyond a set of values and norms, liberalism has a significant economic dimension. The rise of populism has some autocratic roots, but it is mainly a backlash against the transition-era neoliberalism.³ Perhaps the light did not go off. Rather, it was turned off by the elite presiding over the economic transformation.

This legacy of the era is low wages and poverty for significant parts of the population, and all hiding in plain sight behind macroeconomic indicators, such as GDP growth and low unemployment, not to mention the facades of palaces built by the Eastern European oligarchs. Economic deprivation among parts of the Eastern population, more than political “illiberalism,” shapes negative attitudes to migration and refugees. Inward migration benefits Western companies by keeping labor available and labor costs low. By opposing immigration and globalization, Eastern European workers are defending their economic interests.⁴

Westward migration is often the only option to escape local deprivation. The price is a brain drain of skilled professionals and poor working conditions for seasonal workers. The primary cause of the demographic “crisis” is not mass westward migration (with some key exceptions such as Bulgaria and perhaps to a lesser degree Poland), but the economic circumstances of young families and the lack of a balance between work and life.⁵

2 Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The light that failed: A reckoning* (London: Penguin, 2019).

3 Eszter Kovats and Katerina Smejkalova, “East-Central Europe’s Revolt against Imitation,” *IPS Journal* March 30, 2020, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/europe/east-central-europes-revolt-against-imitation-4205/>.

4 Pavol Baboš, “Globalization and Support for Democracy in Post-Communist Europe,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 39 (2018): 23–43.

5 Nancy C. Jurik, Alena Křížková, Marie Pospíšilová, and Gray Cavender, “Blending, credit, context: Doing business, family and gender in Czech and US copreneurships,” *International Small Business Journal* 37, no. 4 (2019): 317–42, doi: 10.1177/0266242618825260.

As the chapter by Bohle and Greskovits shows, the East is a reservoir of cheap labor, and the attempt to escape late capitalism incentivizes some to embrace illiberal populism and its promise of welfare chauvinism. Not only are these processes similar across the East (from East Germany through Poland to Hungary and beyond), but increasingly similar revolts can be seen across the West. There are differences in intensity and the casts of characters, but an increasingly sizable portion of European society is blaming liberal democracy for its failure to tame economic liberalism in the era of globalization.⁶

The one common aspect over the last decade across the region and the world is the decline in democratic quality. In terms of democracy, defined as a regime resting on pluralistic democratic institutions (a free press, civil society, and the rule of law), the East today is a set of countries with democracies in consolidation, defective democracies, hybrid regimes, and moderate and hardline autocracies. In terms of economy defined as a free market economy, one finds in the East highly advanced, advanced, limited, very limited, and rudimentary capitalist economies. There is extreme variation across the region both in terms of democracy and in terms of economy.⁷

There is little agreement on the symptoms, causes, effects, and trajectory of the ongoing change (or decline) in the quality of democracy in Eastern Europe and around the world in the secondary literature. A growing body of literature focuses on the recent changes, which are labeled backsliding, illiberal drift, deconsolidation, and swerving.⁸

One possible cause of democratic decline is the legitimation crisis triggered by the economic crisis. Habermas outlined a “chain reaction” from economic crisis to a crisis of democratic legitimacy.⁹ An economic crisis (a periodical event inherent to capitalism), triggers a governance crisis. The governance crisis (the inability of governments to cope with the economic crisis) triggers a legitimation crisis. A legitimation crisis is marked by a loss of trust in democratic institutions and a loss of support for democracy as a system of governance

6 Cf. Kovats and Smejkalova, “East-Central Europe’s Revolt”; Baboš, “Globalization.”

7 Petra Guasti, “Democracy under Stress: Changing Perspectives on Democracy, Governance and Their Measurement,” in *Democracy under Stress: Changing Perspectives on Democracy, Governance, and Their Measurement*, ed. Petra Guasti, Zdenka Mansfeldova, (Prague: ISASCR, 2018), 9–27.

8 For the discussion, see Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, “The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?” *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 166–76, doi: 10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156.

9 Jürgen Habermas, “What does a crisis mean today? Legitimation problems in late capitalism,” *Social Research* 40, no. 4 (1973): 643–67.

by citizens. Alongside economic crisis, external shocks which can trigger the crisis of democratic legitimacy can include globalization, deepening regional integration, and immigration, framed by anti-establishment elites as threats to national sovereignty.¹⁰

Democratic decline is not unique to the East. It can be observed all over the world. The symptoms include declining trust in democratic institutions, emboldened uncivil society, increased political control of the media, civic apathy, and nationalistic contestation. It is based on the notion of an *illiberal turn* from liberalism and pluralism.¹¹ The critique of the backsliding/illiberal turn paradigm focuses on its underlining presumption of a more or less linear trajectory and a consolidated democratic system from which recent events are seen as a reverse, a lack of analytical distinction and precision of the loci of democratic decline (demand or supply-side), the resilience of democracy, and the counterbalance between strengths and weaknesses on different levels of consolidation.¹²

If one cannot “lose what one never had,” what is going on in the East and the West? Bustikova and Guasti (2017) proposed a novel model of change characterized by a sequence of “episodes,” some of which can be characterized as an *illiberal swerve*.¹³ The notion of volatile episodes does not follow any distinct, coherent long-durée trajectory. It enables Bustikova and Guasti to investigate “the limits of path dependence and consider the possibility of an inherently uncertain path”. The use of a microscopic approach which focuses on smaller temporal sequences marked by elections or other clearly defined temporal sequences rather than on tectonic shifts in regimes provides valuable insights into the dynamic character of democratic quality and sharpens the analytical lens on recent developments in the East and the West. Perhaps it is a time to bridge the East-West divide by focusing our research on similarities rather than overemphasizing differences and oversimplifying their causes.

Some books answer questions, and some books inspire readers to ask more questions. *The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989* belongs to the latter group. In an essayistic way, it invites a broad audience to consider questions of the present and the past. Readers might include scholars, students, and journalists, but thanks to the essayistic style, any member of the broader public interested in

10 Guasti, “Democracy under Stress.”

11 Bustikova and Guasti, “The Illiberal Turn.”

12 Guasti, “Democracy under Stress.”

13 Bustikova and Guasti, “The Illiberal Turn.”

understanding the varied nature and legacies of the East-West divisions will find the book engaging. The future is open, and our thinking about it is richer thanks to *The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989*.

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