

Liberal Read

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The Age of Imitation: an Explanation of Today's Political Phenomena

BOOK REVIEW

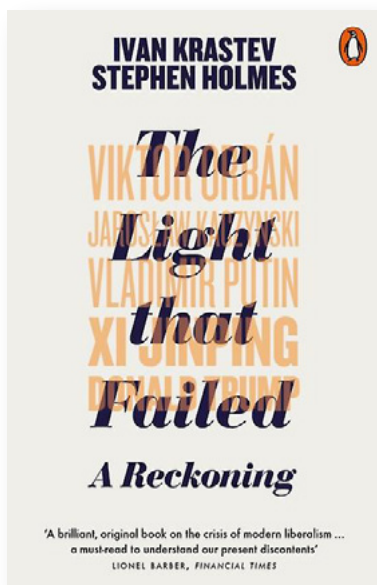
Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes
The Light That Failed: A Reckoning
Penguin UK, 2019

by Mara Pepine

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

The Age of Imitation: an Explanation of Today's Political Phenomena



Growing anti-liberalism

The title of this book, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*, is directly inspired by the novel *The Light That Failed* written by Rudyard Kipling in 1891, depicting a tragic unrequited love story. What Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev hope to achieve is to explain how liberalism became a victim instead of the victor it was purported to be after the Cold War.¹ A preliminary look will highlight certain events of the last thirty years as underlying causes of the decline of liberalism: 9/11, the second Iraq War, the 2008 financial crisis, the annexation of Crimea, the Syrian War, the 2015 migration crisis, the Brexit referendum, and the 2016 American elections, all evolving against the background of China's economic miracle and growing influence. With the most border enforcement since the end of the Cold War, and with decreasing public faith in the systems of democracy, the question this book aims to answer is the famous quote from Ben Rhodes 'What if we were wrong?', referring to the possibility that liberals might have gravely misread the post-Cold War situation.

The authors, Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev – one American, the other Bulgarian – were both born at the advent of the Cold War and their political thinking was profoundly marked by the Berlin Wall and later by its absence, and as such, they seek to unravel the causes and mechanisms of the illusion of a liberalism-as-absolute-champion that they themselves harboured.

At the end of the Cold War, Western liberal democracy was crowned the victor in the ideological war that spanned half a century. Since Western liberal democracy was considered infallible and the pinnacle of political evolution, as Francis Fukuyama famously claimed, what was left to be done was to extend the geographical reach of Western liberalism to encompass the entire world.²

The year 1989 marked the beginning of a new era, one that Holmes and Krastev named 'the Age of Imitation', which lasted 30 years. The main argument of this book is that imitation politics is the reason for the declining acceptance of liberalism. The way the authors see it, Western domination made liberalism seem the best moral idea, one that could bear no competition from any alternative, and this imposed 'choice' is what spurred

1 R. Kipling: *The Light That Failed*. In *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, January 1891.

2 Francis Fukuyama 1989, p. 5

the anti-liberal, anti-Western sentiment in post-communist countries, more so than the allure of an authoritarian past. Since choice, or even the mere illusion of it, is essential, people revolted against the imposition of the model of Western liberal democracy and turned to the nationalist xenophobia that marks Central and Eastern European politics today and that has also gripped other parts of the world.

The reason imitation politics fail

To support their argument that the politics of imitation spurred anti-liberal sentiments, the authors turn to two personalities: the Polish philosopher and conservative member of the European Parliament Ryszard Legutko, who laments the lack of alternatives to liberal democracy, and the Hungarian historian Maria Schmidt, a close adviser of Viktor Órban, who believes that the Hungarians are sick of the 'imitation politics'. Holmes and Krastev highlight that anti-Western sentiment is not just a way for non-Western leaders to shift the blame for their own failed policies, but rather the most prominent reaction to liberalism's abandonment of pluralism. After the Cold War, the split in the geopolitical world was no longer between the communists and the democrats, but rather between the established democracies and the societies struggling to imitate them. No matter the name given to 'imitation politics', the authors point out, the mechanisms at play are always imitation – integration through assimilation. The liberal West became a model of morality and the East was left to imperfectly imitate their values, institutions, and political mechanisms, creating a moral asymmetry.

Next, Holmes and Krastev explain why exactly imitation politics are detrimental: there are four main issues with the way imitation politics are expected to unfold that illuminate why they are so despised by the imitators. First, the imitated are acknowledged as morally superior to the imitators. Second, Western liberal democracy claims to have eliminated all viable alternatives. Third, the imitation is expected to be unconditional, not adapted to local traditions. Finally, the imitated countries (considered morally superior) presume to

have the right to oversee and monitor the progress of the imitators' process of imitation on an ongoing basis. The authors draw a thought-provoking parallel to the elections of the Soviet era, which were marked by the illusion of choice as opposed to an actual opportunity to choose between political candidates.

In order to better make their point, Holmes and Krastev, first establish two distinctions: between the supervised imitation of an orthodox model and the ordinary 'copying' process through which countries profit from each other's learnings, and between the 'imitation of means and the imitation of goals', with the authors calling the first of these merely "borrowing". The borrowing of means does not in any way modify a nation's identity, whereas the imitation of moral goals can end up having profound transformative effects. The difference

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between imitating just the means or both the means and the goals can be observed by contrasting China with Eastern Europe.

Disillusionment with Western liberalism

However, especially for Central and Eastern Europe, imitating the Western liberal ideal has proved a damaging contradiction in that the West demands to be imitated, but Western ideals hail originality as a core value. The attitudes of the West during the EU integration process for Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland and Hungary proved to also be quite infantilising: they were told to emphasise self-governance but were made to follow direct instructions on what laws and policies to enact from Brussels. The oppressive influence of the USSR seemed to be replaced rather than removed. In this context, the authors refer back to Kipling, noting that in such a situation, elections appear to be a 'trap for fools'.³

The attempt to internalise the imitation of values and goals of the West proved extremely detrimental to the East's sense of identity. While political imitation is by no means a product of the twenty-first century, it had never before occurred to this extent. The innumerable earlier cases of mimicry served to empower the weak, but never threatened their sense of identity. The authors emphasise the distinction between superficial mimicry and deep-rooted imitation, which turned the 'Imitation Imperative' into an oppressive force and has brought forth fears of the annihilation of the imitators' cultural identity. While the politicians of Central and Eastern Europe could champion the imitation of Western values as a return to those countries' authentic Europeaness, the same could not be achieved in Russia, where the communist regime had always been inherently autochthonous.

However, regardless of their original outlook on the Western model, more and more eastern imitators began to be disillusioned and dissatisfied with the model, mostly because it became increasingly hard for the imitated to deny their sense of superiority over the imitators and also to champion an ideology as the only alternative when it had already started to show signs of internal failure. With the advent of the 2008 financial crisis, Western liberal democracy lost all claims to its previous mythological levels of regard.

The concept of imitation has not been widely studied in sociology, but the French philosopher René Girard has paid special attention to it and the damage it can spark.⁴ Girard has concentrated especially on the conditions where imitation leads to social conflict, which he identified as the moment when the model starts impeding the self-realisation of the imitator. The type of imitation most likely to engender such a result is the imitation of goals. The authors thus argue that it is this type of imitation of goals that is at the root of the anti-liberal sentiment currently permeating European societies.

³ Rudyard Kipling, *If*.

⁴ See R. Girard: *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.; R. Girard: *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*. Michigan State University Press, 2009; R. Girard: *Violence and the Sacred*. Norton, 1979; R. Girard: *Resurrection from the Underground. Feodor Dostoevsky*. Michigan State University Press, 2012.

Political imitation – what does it mean?

The goal of the book is not to offer a comprehensive picture of the causes of the contemporary anti-liberal sentiment, but rather to concentrate and shed light on a particular matter that the authors feel has not been discussed enough. To highlight the concept of political imitation (whose formulation they admit to be far from definitive) they have chosen three case studies.

Indeed, the authors explain that the reason for American resentment of the imitators is the fear of being replaced as the model, with the source of this apprehension being immigrants and China.

The first is the communitarianism of Central European populists, especially in Poland and Hungary – they seek to explain how the rise of these illiberal populists was a direct response to the abrupt transition from Soviet-era communism devoid of alternatives to the Western liberalism devoid of alternatives, but they also explicitly claim that this is in no way an excuse, or worse an endorsement of such political opinions.

The second study is of Russia after 1991. First, it installed a façade of democracy without too much fuss, having already been used to upholding a façade of communism. Then, this mimicry having outlived its usefulness by the early 2010s, the new Kremlin adopted the tactic of ‘mirroring’, which takes

the worst facets of what it is imitating and reflects them back as a form of vengeance. What the authors find interesting about this is that the Kremlin seems to be pursuing this vengeance through mirroring as a goal in itself, often to the detriment of the country. Russia is no longer interested in parroting Western democracies; instead, it prefers to confront the Americans with the West’s own failings and abuses of power, exposing their unfounded sense of superiority.

The last case study turns to just that part of the world, analysing the 2016 American elections and the reasons the Americans preferred a candidate whose platform championed no longer being the model for imitators. This seems counterintuitive, given the widespread opinion in Central and Eastern Europe and in Russia that while imitation is indeed detrimental to the imitators, it ultimately profits the imitated. Indeed, the authors explain that the reason for the American resentment of the imitators is the fear of being replaced as the model, with the source of this apprehension being immigrants and China. Donald Trump had been a proponent of the idea of America being at the mercy of its imitators since the 1980s, but only recently did people become sympathetic to it. The reason for this change of heart lies with the economic miracle that put China on the map as a much more important economic competitor than other countries had been. The increasingly widespread fear of China stealing jobs and technology from honest American citizens and businesses are what ultimately gave plausibility to Trump’s idea of vulnerability.

This newfound sentiment against a liberal world order in the unlikeliest of places supports the author’s theory that the politics of imitation ultimately harms everyone involved, not only the imitators. It is natural that China permeated these discussions, as its increasing importance marks the end of the Age of Imitation. While the budding conflict between

America and China will undoubtedly reach great proportions, it will not occur in an arena of moral ideology; instead, it will be exclusively preoccupied with how best to amass the necessary amount of power and influence to serve their own interests. This is the reason the authors reject the label of a 'new Cold War' – there is no ideological basis to it.

The anti-liberal sentiment of Central and Eastern Europe

The book is structured in four parts: the introduction, followed by a comprehensive chapter each for the three case studies. The first of these is 'the Copy Cat Mind'. As previously stated, the first case study focuses on the anti-liberal sentiment of Central and Eastern Europe. It states, in the words of the American John Feffer, who wrote a more or less anecdotal account of the sentiment pervading the former Eastern Bloc in 1990 and in 2015, that while for the Second World War generation communism had been the disappointing ideology, 'For the current generation in the region, liberalism is the god that failed'.⁵ After the events of 1989, the spread of democracy was imagined as an awakening of a silenced majority that wholeheartedly supported liberalism. No one anticipated the resentment that would only grow after twenty years of imitation politics, which ultimately gave birth to illiberal populist movements, some of which would even reach power, such as in Poland and Hungary. The idealised version of liberalism that lived in the minds of Central and Eastern Europeans in the 1990s soon became synonymous with inequality, corruption, and a process of redistribution (this time from public to private) that was just as unjust as that practised by the communist regimes.

The 2008 financial crisis only increased this resentment, and it was too late for the image of liberalism to recover, as it suddenly dawned on Central and Eastern Europeans that Western leaders were far less in control than anyone had suspected. Proponents of liberalism might still say: 'Yes, liberalism might not be the infallible system we thought it was but it still is superior to the abusive authoritarian regimes from before', but people have forgotten the gravity of the injustices perpetrated by those regimes, which has only given more impetus to the new illiberal politicians. The authors feel the need to again highlight that their explanation of the anxieties and the subsequent response from Central and Eastern Europe is in no way an endorsement of the anti-liberal policies implemented by those in power, particularly in Poland and Hungary, especially as they often parade their distaste of Western influence as a way to mask their own corruption and abuses of power.

Post-Soviet Russia

The chapter 'Imitation as Retaliation' focuses on the second case study, that of Russia after 1991, revisiting the idea of imitation politics also being used in the form of vindictive measures. The end of the Cold War with the fall of the USSR in 1991 suddenly saw the West with its liberal democracy devoid of any viable ideological competition. This gave the West the illusion that Russia would embrace their values and institutions and embark upon its own politics of imitation in the hope of emulating Western liberalism. However,

5 J. Feffer 2017, Zed Books, pp. 34 (qtd. in I. Krastev & S. Holmes 2019, pp. 75-76).

what Western leaders failed to realise is that Russia would adopt an attitude focused on revenge more than anything else.

Russia indeed uses imitation, but its approach is very different from that of other post-communist countries. While most countries of the Eastern Bloc imitate the West in an effort to assimilate, Russia mimics the worst parts of the West in a 'mirroring' process, meant to reveal to the West, with its superiority complex, all its own failings. An example of this attitude is the involvement of Russian trolls in the 2016 election, which more than ensuring the election of Russia's favourite candidate were meant to wake Americans up to the realities of foreign intervention in the country's most important electoral process.

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To rehash the last thirty years, the authors explain that Russia's imitation politics followed a tripartite course: first, in the 1990s, the Yeltsin regime simulated democracy in a way that drew the West's attention away from the creation of the nowadays famous Russian oligarchs. The second part coincided with Putin coming to power and was marked by ever-looser simulations of democratic processes. The third part, whose beginning can be dated to 2011–2012, is characterised by mirroring politics targeting Western, especially American liberalism. Russia publicly shed its flimsy simulation of Western ideals in 2007 with Putin's famous Munich speech. The reason imitation politics didn't take root in Russia as they did in other post-communist countries is that, what others experienced as a liberation, Russia experienced as a traumatic loss. The severe instability of the 1990s affected even the life expectancy of its citizens.⁶ The trauma of losing their country, their identity and, for most, their livelihood, was compounded by the ease with

which the regime change took place, without violence and without upsetting the position of most people in power. The authors highlight that that was perceived as a humiliation by the Russian people and the refusal to accept such a reality led to the prevalence of conspiracy theories. This phenomenon, together with the rise of communist China after the collapse of communism in Europe, consolidated the idea for these Russians that it was not that communism as a political ideology failed, but that a series of incompetent or malicious decisions led to the dissolution of the USSR. This is why Putin's public acknowledgement of Russia being the loser of the Cold War garnered a lot of sympathy from those who resented the unfounded Western sense of superiority.

⁶ 'In the early 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the communist collapse, the life expectancy in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe fell precipitously.' I. Krastev & S. Holmes 2019, pp. 297-298.

The 2016 American elections



The final chapter, 'Imitation as Dispossession', presents the third case study, that of the 2016 American elections. It seeks to show the multifaceted results and consequences of the Age of Imitation. At first glance, Trump's presidency has aligned itself with the programme of destroying the liberal world order that the United States itself had put a lot of effort into establishing. The authors claim that the American example can be fruitfully contrasted with the Eastern European ones that came before, because they all centre on the pervasive disappointment in Western liberalism brought forth by the Age of Imitation.

Obviously, the difference between the different case studies is glaring and the authors do not shy away from it; rather, they consider it particularly relevant. While they find no issue in explaining the resentment of the imitators towards the imitated, the fact that the opposite phenomenon is also an important political reality is what requires in-depth analysis. Trump's rejection of American exceptionalism, in line with Putin's own views on the matter, is very telling of the new illiberal trend in American politics. The authors claim that that rejection of the previous exemplary status of the USA is not at all incompatible with the 'America First' slogan: the slogan implies a necessity for America to 'win' at all costs, abandoning the pretence of being a superior country that leads by example.

The most important idea underlining Trump's platform, and ultimately one of the keys to his success, was stripping America of its proselytising imperative, transforming it into a 'normal' country, a country that doesn't see itself as fundamentally better than all other nations.

ABOUT ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 47 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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