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**A REVIEW OF
"THE LIGHT THAT FAILED"**

**by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, 2020, Penguin Books, London
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The political history study "The Light that Failed", written by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes and published in 2020, approaches the political undercurrents unfolding in Eastern European countries in the aftermath of the fall of communism in a comprehensive, original and hugely insightful manner. The authors argue that, after winning the Cold War, Western liberalism faced a bitter failure resulting in the irreversible collapse of the Western ideal itself. Thus, once the illusion that the end of the Cold War was to become the beginning of an Era of Democracy and Liberalism, an illusion that the two authors wholeheartedly shared, collapsed, the world found itself face to face with a future fraught with anarchy and danger.

The introduction, *Imitation and its Discontents*, provides insights into the high expectations everyone had with the fall of the Berlin wall and of communism altogether. Instead, surprisingly, according to the authors, "liberalism ended up the victim of its heralded success in the Cold War". To explain this unusual development which deeply impacted the entire world, the authors provide a list of reasons they believe account for it, at least in theory, as they destabilized the established order worldwide: the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the second Iraq war, the 2008 financial crisis and others. They point out that, with the passing of time and due to these events, people now are more anxious than they are optimistic at the prospects of an open world. Economic reasons are also responsible to a great extent for this shift in mindset, since both Americans and Europeans "believe the lives of their children will be less prosperous and fulfilling than their own", while this fear has translated into the increasingly successful appeal of nationalistic discourse.

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The authors share with their readers what was once their hope and their illusion, that the end of the Cold War would bring about the era of liberalism and democracy, as well as their attempts to explain why not only has this not happened, but tides worldwide have shifted towards an illiberal, anti-democratic environment, replete with ideas of nationalism, extremism, intolerance and even terrorism.

The chapter also introduces the subject of Russia and its current approach to foreign policy. The authors contend that Russia is tired of playing democratic charades and is instead now imitating America's actions, more specifically, its illicit interfering in other countries' domestic policies, with the sole purpose of humiliating the latter and undermining the high opinion they have of themselves, an idea which sets the stage for the topics to unfold in the following chapters.

Chapter 2, *The Copycat Mind*, elaborates on the ideas already put forward, by highlighting that the main purpose of the 1989 revolutions was that Eastern Europe should adopt the Western model and become similar to it. Thus, Western societal models were enthusiastically copied, while Soviet troops were evacuated from the region, in a process widely experienced as liberation. However, two decades later, enthusiasm was replaced by resentment, which translated into a rise of illiberal political actors, as we can see in Hungary and Poland.

The authors provide an explanation for this shift, the roots thereof lie in a series of events that shook the original beliefs and expectations of citizens across the board. Thus, in their view, while in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, "liberalism was generally associated with the ideals of individual opportunity, freedom to move and to travel, unpunished dissent, access to justice, and government responsiveness to public demands", by 2010, a reality consisting in "rising social inequality, pervasive corruption, and the morally arbitrary redistribution of public property into the hands of the few" had set in, while the 2008 economic crisis spawned a deep distrust of business elites that "almost destroyed the world financial order". For all these reasons, confidence in the ruling elites and in the form of government was shattered, a fact which resulted in a fundamental change in mindsets and beliefs.

Krastev and Holmes also allege that it was possible for the illiberal trend to gain strength in recent years because the passage of time had erased from collective memory the dark side of European illiberalism, while the political instability in the West, whom the East was trying so hard to imitate, had resulted in deep mistrust and in the increasing momentum of nationalistic parties with a populist discourse. Regarding imitation, it is the writers' view that Central and Eastern European elites were totally sincere in their admiration of the West, as was their attempt to convert the societies they were leading into similarly organised structures. By contrast, a world without borders, but rife with social and financial inequality, is perceived as a threat by the population, while in Western Europe, the massive numbers of

immigrants flooding the countries did not help, as there was fear they would end up destroying national identity and cohesion.

There are two major fears Europe faces today: while anti-liberals fear “exemplary normality”, in that praising the Western model as the best that can be found opens the door for immigration impossible to control, liberals fear “reverse imitation”, the possibility that parties in the imitation game may have swapped places and imitators may have become the imitated. Imitation, in fact, is a complex topic with mimics and models intertwined in a convoluted game wherefrom there seem to be no winners.

It is Holmes’ and Krastev’s view that the origins of chauvinism and xenophobia in Central and Eastern Europe do not stem from political psychology, but are mainly emotional and pre-ideological, emerging from a feeling of inferiority and a fear of humiliation. There is, they contend, a growing resentment at having had to bow before foreign models which are not fundamentally believed to be superior, and this has spawned the success of illiberal politicians. There is national resistance against an imitation perceived as an imperative, and national traditions are being invoked against countries being incorporated into the liberal West against their will. Thus, clinging to a traditionalistic past and an elusive national identity seems to be nothing but a way to fight the “corrosive influence of the West”.

The second chapter, *Imitation as Retaliation*, looks into the Soviet Union and its unexpected collapse in 1992. It is the authors’ view that the giant’s implosion was impossible to justify in the absence of military defeat or foreign invasion, and that it seemed to signal the end of the ideological conflict between East and West. Moreover, some optimists believed Russia might adopt the Western societal model based on multi-party politics and the market economy. Chapter 2 sets off to show why these buoyant expectations were not met.

Krastev and Holmes contend that Russia does imitate the Western model; however, it does so not aiming for “conversion” or “assimilation”, but out of “revenge” and “vindication”, although it is clear to them that this course of action will never result in Moscow regaining its long-lost power and influence. Therefore, the Kremlin simulated the democratic model in order to avert pressure from Western governments and NGOs, thus making the regime survive for ten years, in what is called the first phase of the “politics of imitation”. In the second phase, elections were organized by Putin to convince citizens that there was no alternative to the people currently wielding power. In the third phase, which the authors allege still holds today, Russia set off to violently mimic Western foreign policy behaviour, in order to expose the latter as hypocritical (because of their claims to moral superiority) and to hide its own humiliation at having lost the Cold War without putting up a fight.

Putin's famous 2007 Munich speech is extensively analysed, a speech where the Russian president formally rejected the commonly accepted narrative that the end of the Cold War had been a triumph shared by West and East equally; by contrast, he explicitly referred to the Russian people having been defeated, thus accepting and expressing the humiliation. The authors refer to this discourse as an explanation of why Russia's imitation of the West is not spawned by a genuine attempt to be like the model, but by a desire for revenge and for showing their rivals how hypocritical their behaviour really is.

The chapter also describes how elections in Russia are periodically rigged, serving Putin's purpose of coming across as the only guarantor of stability, and also aiming to eliminate all threat of a real opposition while appearing to play the democratic game. Russia's meddling with the 2016 elections in the USA also conveys the message that the US should fear a world populated with countries acting the same way they do, since all elections are portrayed as meaningless in the absence of real alternatives and with a focus solely on money. The authors emphasize the fact that the Russian president is not attacking liberal democracies with a view to turning them into authoritarian states, but to make a point, teach them a lesson and weaken them. Russia's imitation of the West is clearly seen as aggressive and pointless, since they can neither defeat the West, nor hope that their actions will result in a world where Russia's interests are protected.

After having analysed, in the first two chapters, the reasons why the liberal international order is now dead and after having looked into Putin's aspirations and resentment, in Chapter 3, *Imitation as Dispossession*, the authors move on to Trump and to the way he acted, like an accomplice of the Russian president, rejecting international treaties and attempting to destroy the institutions created by the USA in the aftermath of World War 2.

The writers allege that Trump also came to power capitalising on the disillusion and resentment thriving in the unipolar Age of Imitation, and this provides one of the explanations for his actions. Trump's supporters "see the Americanization of the world as a catastrophe for America", and agree that America has suffered greatly, rather than benefitted from its central role in global trade and international organisations. Thus, for Krastev and Holmes, it is difficult to understand why the former American president still holds a significant degree of public support despite his xenophobia and belligerent anti-Americanism, though they do mention that one of the reasons could be his eccentricity with regard to foreign policies and America's place in the world.

While they refer to Trump, Putin and Hungary's Victor Orban as "soulmates", they also point out that Trump's idea of making America great again involved bringing it down, making sure it was no longer uplifting and inspiring, or that it no longer had any claim to moral superiority, thus repudiating America's exceptionalism. If you

lead by example, you simply set the stage for others to overtake you and miss your chance to win; besides, normalization for Trump is viewed as America becoming just as selfish as the other states. The former president's goal appears to have been to make his country great especially by bringing it down from its pedestal, by promoting the idea that the country's greatness can only exist in the absence of moral superiority, international leadership, or the right to lecture others on what to do.

The authors also elaborate on fear of immigration as an explanation for Trump's success, in that it spawns fear of being replaced rather than imitated and could result in both economic and psychological consequences. If job loss appears to be a primal fear, it is perhaps more difficult to understand the existential anxiety springing from the fear of identity theft. Holmes and Krastev contend that "alongside contempt for so-called establishment elites, hatred and fear of immigrants represent the most salient point of convergence between American and Central European populisms" – thus, in their view, the populists appeals find their fodder in the same primal emotions.

The authors conclude the final chapter by pointing out that Trump inflicted the greatest damage on American democracy not by lying, but by telling truths selectively, truths that some liberals might agree with (such as, for instance, the fact that globalization has brought about poverty for many workers), this resulting in the weak political response against him from the liberal end of the political spectrum. At the same time, to the extent to which America repudiates its self-image of an exemplary nation, other countries take this as the green light for becoming themselves unprincipled and ruthless.

The concluding chapter shows that now, more than thirty years after the end of the Cold War, we are faced with the realisation that Western liberalism "has failed just as humiliatingly as communism failed three decades ago", while the rise of China poses new threats to the international world order, as there is no reason to believe that Xi's China will be a harmless actor on the global political arena, while the future confrontation between the US and China will likely lead to potentially dangerous global shifts.

The writers highlight the fact that, while the Chinese do not claim they can teach other countries how to live, they do teach a powerful lesson: that you can reject Western norms and institutions while at the same time selectively adopting Western technologies and even consumption patterns. In their view, the rise in China's global influence marks the end of the Age of Imitation since, unlike Western countries, China becomes increasingly more powerful without attempting to change in any way the societies it seeks to outperform.

Despite the fact that the topics covered seem bleak, the outstanding political study *The Light that Failed* does end on a slightly positive note. The final part explains that liberal democracy will not disappear, nor will authoritarianism become all-

pervasive. Rather, the authors appear to believe that we will witness a shift towards “a pluralistic and competitive world where no center of military or economic power will strive to spread their own system of values across the globe.” Thus, the world into which international order will morph is one characterised by normalcy. Although we may be torn between mourning liberal democracy and embracing a wider range of political alternatives, all we have to do in the end is to celebrate rather than grieve – it is the logical choice.

The study is brilliant, original and hugely insightful, providing an overview of the international political arena in the aftermath of 1989; last but not least, it is interesting to follow the way in which the authors combine historical accuracy and an in-depth analysis of the underlying psychological and emotional motivators behind specific courses of action. The language style used is close to a literary one, replete with figures of speech, stylistic devices, analogies, intertextuality and cultural references. For all the reasons mentioned and many others, *The Light that Failed* is a must-have, a compelling read and a study that will greatly benefit its readers.

The author

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