Opinion | Of Course They Gave Up on Democracy

Ivan Krastev, Stephen Holmes

Today’s political crisis is of the West’s own making.

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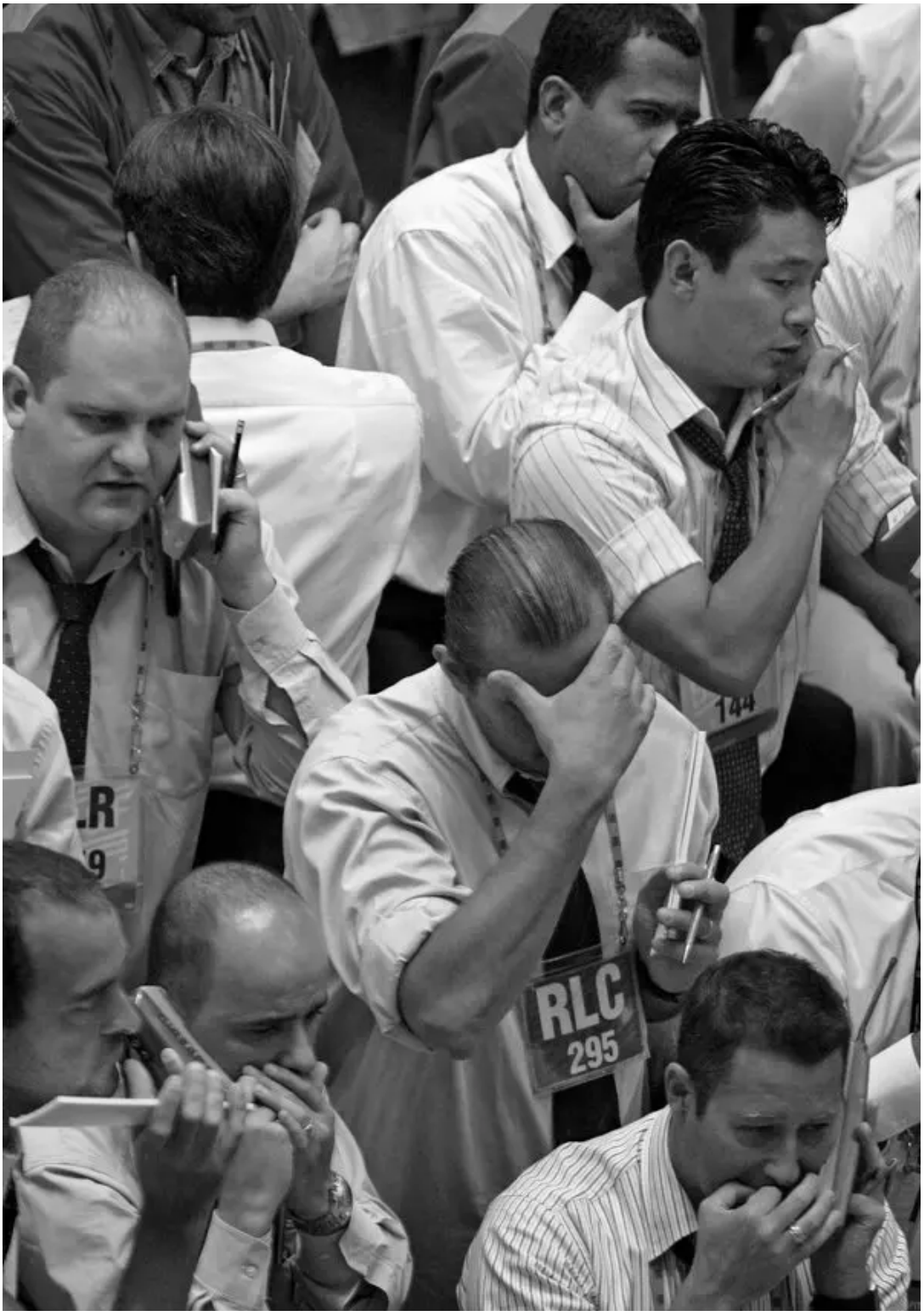

The financial shipwreck of 2008 was bound to destabilize countries in the West's periphery.Credit...Mauricio Lima/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes

Mr. Krastev and Mr. Holmes are the authors of "The Light That Failed: A Reckoning."

"It is a paradox of democracy," the historian Jill Lepore recently wrote, "that the best way to defend democracy is to attack it, to ask more of it, by way of criticism, protest, and dissent." If she is right, then the post-Cold War decades, when democracy's triumph seemed indisputable, left it alarmingly defenseless.

In 1989, when Vice President Dan Quayle nonsensically remarked that "I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy, but that could change," we all dutifully relished the gaffe. But he turns out to have been right. What once seemed foreordained has mysteriously slipped our grasp. And not only have democracy and capitalism fallen into disarray worldwide, the uncritical idealization of democracy and capitalism after 1989 is at least partly responsible for our current woes.

At the end of the Cold War, democratic capitalism suddenly became synonymous with modernity. To be modern meant to adopt Western values, attitudes and institutions. Imitating the West was almost universally judged to be the fastest route to freedom and prosperity. The major divide in the world was no longer between the "Free World" and Soviet Communism but between exemplary Western democracies and their struggling emulators in the East and South. The tacit assumption, at the time, was that the East would undergo a radical "transition" while the West would be cryogenically frozen in its victory laurels. At this time, American constitutional lawyers had little time to reflect critically on their own democracy, so busy were they ghostwriting constitutions for the new democracies in the East.

In the 1990s, the geopolitical stage seemed set for a performance not unlike George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," an optimistic and didactic play in which a professor of phonetics ("the West"), over a short period of time, succeeds in teaching a poor flower girl ("the Rest") to speak like the Queen and feel at home in polite company ("to become a liberal democracy").

But the radical makeover did not play out as expected. It was as if instead of watching a performance of "Pygmalion," the world ended up with a theatrical adaptation of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," a horror story about a man who decided to play God by assembling human body parts into a humanoid creature and fell victim to his own misguided experiment in self-duplication. Turn-of-the-century confidence in the global spread of liberalism has been shattered, two decades later, by a global backlash against it.

But how did the East's zealous wish to imitate the West, which was matched by the West's keenness to export its beloved political and economic models, contribute to the current crisis?

We argue that seeing democratization after the Cold War as a troubled and troubling process of political imitation helps us understand three critical ways in which an unjustifiable over-idealization of capitalism and democracy in the early years after the end of the Cold War helped bring about the wave of authoritarian and xenophobic anti-liberalism currently engulfing our world.

First, a crisis in the Western model itself — such as the financial shipwreck of 2008 — was bound to destabilize those countries in the West's periphery that had committed themselves to copying Western-style liberal democracy. This

explains why even countries that survived the Great Recession economically unscathed were politically destabilized by it. Poles attracted to illiberal populism did not start to question democracy and capitalism because they saw their economic prospects deteriorate. In fact, over the previous three decades, Poland's GDP has tripled. The country has not undergone a recession since 1992, social inequality has declined and a majority of people report being satisfied with their lives. Nevertheless, many Poles and other East Europeans were shocked at the deepening crisis of democracy and capitalism in the West, especially after 2008. An important reason for the unforeseen appeal of illiberalism in the East was therefore the shocking crisis of liberalism within the West that they once idolized.

Radically restructuring a country's political and economic system by imitating Western models had another pernicious, unanticipated effect. Imitation is necessarily an asymmetrical relationship between a superior model and its inferior imitators. Over time, this implicit moral hierarchy was bound to incubate feelings of humiliation, dispossession and resentment.

Many citizens in the replica democracies of the East began to feel that their own cultural and religious traditions were being disparaged by an obligatory conversion to foreign attitudes, values and institutions, including secularism and multiculturalism. A public embittered by the West's treatment of its Eastern neighbors as second-class Europeans began rallying to populist demagogues who posed as defenders of authentic national identities. Their signature slogan was: "We don't want to be copies! We want to be ourselves!" Resentment against democratization as imitation has proved particularly toxic in Central and Eastern Europe where democratization coincided with the process of European integration, which in practice meant that voters could vote political parties in and out of power but that laws and policies never changed since they were set in Brussels.

Third, the three-decade Age of Imitation that began in 1989 inflicted serious damage on liberal democracy in the West by putting to sleep the self-critical faculties of its leading politicians and political commentators. Busy trying to democratize others, Western policy elites became complacent toward the failures and deficiencies of free-market democracy in their own societies. This uncritical idealization of the state of democracy at home was the direct result of the West's preoccupation with democratizing others. It is not by accident that the National Endowment for Democracy, a symbol of America's commitment to democracy worldwide, has no mandate to work on problems within the United States. (Though this is also the reason it still enjoys bipartisan support.) This failure to look inward made efforts to export American-style democracy into an easy target for charges of hypocrisy.

The West's one-sided focus on the struggle for democracy abroad made Western advisers shy away from discussing the ongoing struggle for power within democracies themselves. Liberals who overemphasized individual rights and voluntary market exchange, spoke about "power" only when discussing authoritarianism, genocide or corruption. Otherwise, their message has seemed to be that, if the government does not abuse its authority, the asymmetry of power relations characteristic of every society is of negligible importance.

Taking hold in the two-decade heyday of liberal hegemony following 1989, this sanitized image of liberal democracy has become the favorite straw man of illiberal politicians today, including the president of the United States. It explains why they repeatedly insist that all relations in society are power relations, that right *doesn't* matter, that politics is a zero-sum game, that there are no impartial institutions and that fraud is just a clever way to win elections. This cynical perspective, which has now gained a receptive audience worldwide, represents a backlash against the excessive promises made by liberals after 1989. "Democracy promoters" insisted, unrealistically, that politics and economics, with a little good will, could easily become a win-win game, that periodic elections guarantee that citizens will control politicians, and that impartial institutions could overcome the unfairness associated with asymmetries of power in society. The ease with which these illusions were dashed was another factor opening the door for the steamrollering of illiberal forces to political power.

Western-style democratic capitalism has many well-known virtues. But having been put on a pedestal for post-Communist countries to admire and emulate, it lost all critical distance to itself, dismissing sensible warnings, for instance, about the downsides of military interventionism abroad and economic deregulation at home. By defining democracy as the ideal state of society and the only possible path to prosperity, the post-1989 consensus paradoxically undercut the most basic advantage of democratic governments. Democracies are not and cannot be "satisfaction machines." They do not produce good governance the way a baker turns out doughnuts. What democracies offer dissatisfied citizens is the right to do something about their dissatisfaction. That is why a chastened democracy, having recovered from its unrealistic and self-defeating aspirations to global hegemony, remains the political idea most at home in the current age of dissatisfaction.

Ivan Krastev is a contributing opinion writer, the chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Stephen Holmes is a professor of law at New York University. They are the authors of "The Light That Failed: A Reckoning."

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