FROM MY BOOKSHELF 23.02.2018 | Paul Hockenos

Review of 'Aftershock: A Journey into Eastern Europe's Broken Dreams' by John Feffer

Twenty-five years after fall of communism, journalist John Feffer returns to Eastern Europe – a region plagued by political and social divisions

What better way for a chronicler to take stock of Central Europe's trajectory since the Berlin Wall's breach than to retrace his steps 25 years later, tracking down his former interlocutors in Romania's rust-stained high-rises and Poland's depopulated farmlands – in order to learn how they fared in the transitions to market economies and liberal democracy.

This is exactly the project that US author and analyst John Feffer endeavoured, who lived in Poland in 1989 and traversed the freshly liberated region in 1990 and 1991 conducting hundreds of interviews in the name of a Quaker NGO. Some of those he interviewed in the day were easy to find a quarter of a century later, usually those who'd done well; while others, the less successful and disillusioned were often either beneath the radar or further afield, for instance in North American exile driving a school bus.

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Feffer's book *Aftershock*, though, is much more than a collection of portraits laced with snatches of interviews. It's a searching, analytical work that tries to make sense of where the former East bloc countries are today and why they arrived there. The lucid, gripping narrative is a joy to read and packed with ideas, including some that speak against his theses.

Indeed, from many vantage points, Central Europe is a thriving success story. The eleven EU countries from the Baltic coast to the Western Balkans have joined the EU and NATO, and hold regular democratic elections; living standards and GDP have soared for most in the aftermath of the hard transition years of the 1990s.

The Czech Republic's per capita GDP is higher than that in Greece and Cyprus, with Poland and Slovenia close behind. Downtown Warsaw and Prague with their yuppie bars and high-end restaurants reflect the fortunes of those who've prospered most.

But Feffer, director of the foreign policy programme at the leftist, Washington DC-based Institute for Policy Studies, is not of the opinion that all is well. The lapse of countries such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic into authoritarian nationalism with illiberal leaderships that defiantly buck EU norms, and tolerate racism and corruption, has come as an unanticipated shock to Western policymakers.

In almost every Central European state, xenophobic far right parties vie for power and shift the countries' political culture to their pole. Contra Anne Applebaum, it's of a different quality and quantity than that in Western Europe, which obviously isn't immune to right-wing extremism, but has so far – with the exception of Austria – kept the demagogues out of the highest positions of power.

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Feffer holds the neo-liberal shock therapy programmes sold to the naïve newcomers by the World Bank, IMF, EU planners, and Western experts such as economist Jeffrey Sachs, largely responsible for the disillusionment that fans the fires of the region's national populists, such as Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán and Poland's Law and Justice Party.

The rushed, rough-shod privatisations put many tens of thousands out of work while depriving them of the social safety nets that existed during socialism. The process concentrated wealth in the hands of those with connections and means, often former communist administrators. Corruption was part and parcel of the project, which undermined many peoples' belief in the rule of law and turned them cynical about liberal democracy as such.

The transitions tended to benefit younger, highly educated people from urban centres – those who tended to be mobile, flexible, technically skilled, and speak English. These are the transition's winners who Feffer calls 'Poland A' (although the point pertains to all of the countries). They tend to be satisfied, support the country's further integration into the EU, and vote for liberal parties.

But then there's Poland B, which either benefitted less or not at all. The threat of poverty is twice as great in rural Poland as it is in cities. Less

well-educated and professionally adaptable, many have fled hard-up rural regions (that still can't complete, say, with Bavarian dairy farmers) to find low-wage work in the West or elsewhere in their own country, leaving large swaths of the country depopulated and angry.

This freedom to move about in EU Europe without a visa and work in other EU countries isn't something they're grateful for – on the contrary, argues Feffer, they perceive it as degrading, part of a larger Western plan to exploit them and treat their countries as second class. Globalisation has only exacerbated it.

It's from Poland B and Hungary B that the national populists draw their votes, often employing wild (and anti-Semitic) conspiracy theories to explain the plight of the nation's left-behind. The parties 'channel the frustration of the losers of the transition,' argues Feffer.

'Their politics have been called 'populist,' and they have prospered because of the absence of a strong political left and the grave disappointments attached to the promises of the liberal centre. Indeed, these new nationalists attack liberalism from both sides of the political spectrum,' he writes, sounding leftist on economic issues and rightist on immigration, national minorities, the Roma, religion, and the nation.

Hungary's virulently xenophobic party Jobbik, for instance, which took 20 per cent of the 2014 nation vote (and nearly half of the youth vote) decries growing economic inequality, lashes out at the moneyed elite, and calls for government programmes to aid the disadvantaged.

Hungary doesn't have a progressive leftist party like greens, social democrats or democratic socialists as in Western Europe, and the reformed communists of the Hungarian Socialist Party were the very ones who signed up for shock therapy in the first place. This is why Orbán's Fidesz party and Jobbik together took 65 per cent of the 2014 vote.

As much as I learned from Feffer, he understates or neglects some important points. The region's intolerance and illiberalism, I think, is in large part an inheritance of four decades of communist culture that rewarded uniformity and penalised diversity. It was narrow-minded and its societies were racially mono-ethnic with the exception of the Roma and handfuls of Third World students, who were suffered egregious racism. It was a whole lot easier for people to jump from one intolerant, authoritarian political culture to another – namely from communism to ethnic nationalism – rather than learn the complexities of multicultural tolerance.

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Also, the Central Europeans have shown themselves completely unwilling to critically evaluate unflattering aspects of their own nation's past, be they anti-Semitic pogroms, collaboration with Nazi Germany or the maltreatment of minorities. Germany's coming to terms with its past was a prerequisite to Germany's embrace and internalisation of liberal values and human rights.

Also, something we should all keep mind: the Central Europeans' old-school conservatism is in part attributable to the absence of the liberal cultural revolution that followed the 1960s student movements in the West. Nor did they benefit from the mass social movements – the women's, peace, environmental, anti-nuclear energy, and Third World campaigns – that deserve enormous credit for liberalising, modernising and democratising Germany.

The Central Europeans never had these experiences, and thus issues like gay rights are hard for them to digest all at once. We should keep in mind that gay rights didn't happen from one day to another in the West either, but over decades and with conservatives fighting every step along the way. In Central Europe we want to see movement in the right direction – which, admittedly, in some countries simply isn't happening.

Feffer concludes on a melancholy note. A cliché with some merit: the future hinges upon the region's young people. But young people in Central Europe are just as likely to identify with the nationalist hard right as with a liberal centre or progressive left. For them, the far right is the voice of anti-establishment because it opposes the liberal consensus and political elites of the 1990s and 2000s – in other words, their parents' generation. 'Liberalism,' concludes Feffer, 'became the received wisdom, the ideology of an older generation of political and economic leaders. Ultimately, the failure of this ideology can be traced to its inability to appeal to the next generation.'



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