much of his thinking on current policy issues, *Free to Move* is the book for you.

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The Light that Failed: A Reckoning
Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes
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Some butterflies have evolved to resemble the face of an owl. This form of imitation can deter predators, but no one would expect a butterfly to do all the things owls do. In ecology, this is known as isomorphic mimicry. Development experts have used this phenomenon as a metaphor to explain the folly of installing copycat versions of Western institutions—the norms, laws, and governance structures of liberal democracy—in diverse countries. They may look right at certain angles, but on closer inspection they don't function as hoped.

If underwhelming performance were the only consequence of the West's attempt to spread liberal democracy abroad, we could take pride in the attempt. But in *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue the consequences are much worse. In their words, "[a]fter the fall of the [Berlin] Wall, across-the-board imitation of the West was widely accepted as the most effective way to democratize previously non-democratic societies. Largely because of the moral asymmetry it implied, this conceit has now become a pre-eminent target of populist rage."

That moral asymmetry, they argue, is the untenable difference between the superiority of the imitated over the presumed inferiority of the imitators, in this case the West and those who spent the last 30 years trying to catch up. In short, democratic institutions, built in this way, are likely to fail and that failure then sparks feelings of humiliation and resentment among transitioning populations.

Eventually, the authors argue, this sense of defeat leaves the electorate vulnerable to alternative narratives proffered by authoritarian-leaning strongmen who promise to restore native pride by rejecting the West explicitly. Citing would-be autocrats such as Hungary's Viktor Orban and Russia's Vladimir Putin, Krastev and Holmes build their case for claiming that "[d]ispraising the West and declaring

its institutions not worth imitating can be explained as imaginary revenge born of resentment."

For example, in Putin's victory speech following the 2012 presidential election, he told the crowds, "[w]e have demonstrated that nobody can impose anything on us. Nobody can impose anything." This resonates. One retired Russian military officer is quoted as saying, "I want a Russian idea for the Russian people; I don't want the Americans to teach us how to live. I want a strong country, one you can be proud of. I want life to have some meaning again."

The pursuit of liberal hegemony in the post-Soviet era, what Krastev and Holmes refer to as the Age of Imitation, has been, to be sure, a welcome and cooperative exercise in many of the countries that are now trending illiberal. Still, Krastev and Holmes say that "[e]ven without coercion or enforcement [by the West], being regularly evaluated by foreign judges bereft of serious knowledge of one's country" is enough to trigger an overwhelming sense of indignation. "What we have been trying to explain is why an adaptation to foreign standards that was initially desired ended up being experienced as non-consensual and imposed."

Through this lens, the illiberalism we are witnessing throughout the globe is less about a preference for an opposing ideology, per se—who can define "populism"?—and more about reclaiming independence from foreign superiority. They speculate that much of European illiberalism, for example, is "emotional and pre-ideological, rooted in rebellion against the 'humiliation by a thousand cuts' that accompanied a decades-long project requiring acknowledgement that foreign cultures were vastly superior to one's own."

The authors distinguish between the productive "learning by which states vicariously profit from each other's experiences," and the wholesale adoption of foreign models insensitive to local context. A recent study by World Bank economists, led by former Bulgarian finance minister Simeon Djankov, validates this distinction by showing a higher incidence of liberal reforms among geographical neighbors and commercial trading partners. There must be a lesson here in the emergent nature of idea diffusion.

Krastev and Holmes then devote the second half of their book to detailing what they see as the shared authoritarian stylings of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Key to their argument is the idea that both political leaders represent a downstream consequence of the

Age of Imitation. The mechanics are psychological for both cases. Imitated nations, they claim, are also driven to demand a renewal of national pride and nativism in response to the global denigration of Western culture.

The book makes no attempt to provide a roadmap out of this mess. In a recent virtual interview for *Foreign Policy* magazine, Holmes clarified, "[t]his is not a policy book." They concede there are likely many other factors that either contribute to or have some independent claim for explaining the rise of illiberalism. For example, shrinking native populations and increased immigration have been tied to fears of losing national identity. In George Packer's biting critique of U.S. foreign policy in his 2019 book, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*, he concludes that nationalism, with its "irresistible taste of bitterness," is the "drink of political losers," and speculates, "[m]aybe that's true of nationalism everywhere."

In the end, we don't know how much to fault our ham-handed approach to spreading liberal democracy when explaining the illiberalism we see today, but we would do well to take this new analysis seriously since it affirms what we now about institutional change. The sociologist W. Richard Scott put it succinctly when he wrote that people are both the cause and effect of the institutions that govern them. We should not be surprised then to discover that outsider-led exercises in institution building are doomed to exacerbate, if not inspire, rebellion against foreign influence.

Of course, any post-mortem on our dashed hopes for the "end of history" in the post-Soviet era would be incomplete without accounting for China's somewhat quixotic rise. China has adopted many things from the West, but Krastev and Holmes here make a distinction between economic and institutional convergence. China wants to dominate the world stage, but they aren't looking to spread their doctrines nor adopt anyone else's. The authors write, "[t]he copious benefits of rejecting Western norms and institutions while selectively adopting Western technologies and even consumption patterns is what China teaches the world."

Xi Jinping's rhetoric dispraises the West, but it does not push an alternative ideology for others to follow. "Unlike America . . . China has no reason to think that a world populated by copies of itself would be a world congenial to Chinese interests." According to Krastev and Holmes, this matches the worldview Trump brings to the presidency.

His "nation as a business" approach to political economy interprets imitators as threats, not allies that can help support an "everybody wins" global order.

All of this leads Krastev and Holmes to predict that, instead of another Cold War over ideology, our future global contests will be "bitter struggles over trade, investment, currency and technology." They write, "the idea is not to replace a global liberal ideology with a global anti-liberal ideology, but to radically diminish the role of ideology in the arena of international competition." They believe Trump is primed for this kind of fight. Uninterested in perpetuating the 20th century idea of America as a "shining city on a hill," Trump seeks to normalize the U.S. as a "selfish state among selfish states."

Though not explicitly optimistic about its future, Krastev and Holmes make no bones about their own support for liberal democracy, describing the liberal nation-state as "the most effective human rights organization in the world." But they want to wake us up to the irony of pushing, from the top-down and from far away, a liberal model that denies local control.

How to go about supporting, but not leading, liberal reforms abroad is not obvious. Krastev and Holmes give us no recipes. That ambiguity is likely to favor the status quo among foreign policy and foreign aid circles. Still, we should have enough tragic evidence from the past to learn that excessive intervention turns out badly.

As a young assistant to Henry Cabot Lodge in Vietnam, Anthony Lake, who would later become Clinton's national security advisor during the Bosnian crisis, wrestled with this tension on the eve of the escalating war in Southeast Asia. After touring unspeakable horrors in Hue province along the Perfume River, Lake's view of America's purpose in Vietnam started to change. He was not alone. But like so many others at the time, Lake fought the nagging feeling that maybe America shouldn't be there at all. For many, such a thought was "unthinkable."

Nearly 60 years later, we face the same dilemma in many places. In her recent memoir, *The Education of an Idealist*, former UN Ambassador Samantha Power, widely characterized as an interventionist crusader (she would say mischaracterized), gives a painstaking account of the moral confusions she encountered at the heart of the foreign policy crises she had to navigate. She chooses to keep her faith in America's capacity to do good in the world, but hers is a story

of a journalist cum activist cum diplomat who learns that her sincerity is not enough to overcome the complexities of other people's communities. In the end, she is chastened by the lessons learned in Bosnia, Libya, Syria and other challenging hot spots, concluding that we just cannot "predict . . . outcomes in places where the culture is not our own."

Krastev and Holmes's book challenges us to start thinking what has historically been unthinkable when it comes to our role in the world. They remind us that liberalism is about pluralism, not hegemony, and that "[h]uman beings need choices." If liberal democracy, the most choice-based ideology in the modern era, is to get a second chance, it must be by acts of choosing. Determining the proper role of outsiders, if any, in supporting opportunities to choose liberalism around the world is the foreign policy challenge of the 21st century. As we navigate that challenge, we should remember what the Age of Imitation has taught us. Butterflies pretending to be owls will eventually be exposed for what they really are.

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