
Three Decades Later: A Reflection on Transatlantic Democracy Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN SHATTUCK

FLETCHER FORUM: *It's been thirty years nearly to the day since the fall of the Berlin Wall. I know you spent time in Eastern Europe in the years leading up to 1989. Did you feel that change was imminent or did the fall of the Wall still catch you by surprise?*

JOHN SHATTUCK: Both. There was no question that things were changing not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Soviet Union. The Soviet watchers were paying close attention to changes in the economy and the “Gorbachev phenomenon,” which began in the mid-1980s after Chernobyl. There were winds of change to be felt. In my own experience, there's an anecdote that captures the situation.

I was in Czechoslovakia doing some human rights work. I had been sent there by Amnesty International in 1988, which of course was only a

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year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but the country was still very much in the grip of a Stalinist regime. There was no question that the regime was fully in charge. My job as an Amnesty researcher was to find out what the condition was in prison for various Czech dissidents, including Václav Havel. I met in Prague with a dissident leader outside in a café. We wanted to make sure that we were not bugged indoors because the risk of surveillance was always high, and my contact would have been in danger if she'd been discovered meeting with me. She gave me information about Havel. I left the country successfully, but I had no doubt that I was being surveilled as an Amnesty researcher on the way out. So, that was the political climate in 1988: repressive and difficult.

What makes this a compelling anecdote is that two years later—after the fall of the Berlin Wall—I was riding on a train between New York and Washington. I opened up *The New York Times* and there was a picture of the woman I had met in Prague. She had just been named the first Ambassador to the United States of the newly democratic Czechoslovakia by the new president, Václav Havel. So, the pace change was quite dizzying.

This was a stunning democratic Velvet Revolution that came to Czechoslovakia. I think there was a feeling that change was in the air, but the reality was that when the Wall fell, it was quite sudden, and change happened quickly. The fact that so much of the change came about relatively peacefully in Czechoslovakia was remarkable. The Velvet Revolution was quite literally a massive demonstration of people who took back control of their government. The same was generally true in Hungary, in Poland, and in other countries in Eastern Europe. There was violence, of course, in Romania and in a few other places, but by and large this appeared to be a very rapid, very dramatic, and very peaceful, massive change.

FORUM: *Given this rapid change toward democracy, several years after the fall of the Wall, there seemed to be a lot of hope in the world. Political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, pondered whether we had arrived at the “end of history” or, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western-style liberal democracy—despite occasional setbacks—would universally prevail. How prevalent was this thinking at the time and how has it changed?*

SHATTUCK: There was a lot of hope. Fukuyama, in many respects, reflected a widely held hope that the kind of change that had swept through Eastern Europe would be coming rapidly and continuously. There were plenty of signs of that in the early days. We sometimes forget how rapidly the political transformation came in Eastern Europe, and also in South Africa.

There was the dramatic moment when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990 and then proceeded to negotiate a change of government and was elected the first president of a democratic South Africa. There were simultaneous changes in Latin America that were triggered by the changes in Eastern Europe.

The only real exception—one that cast a shadow over the world—was what happened in China in Tiananmen in June 1989, just as the changes were beginning in Eastern Europe. The crackdown on the democracy movement among young people in China, and specifically in Tiananmen Square, was the one big exception. Otherwise, it seemed that the progress of democracy was going to continue.

I don't want to take credit for being far-sighted, but I was skeptical. Partly because of my time on the ground in Eastern Europe and partly because, as a former civil rights lawyer in the United States, I knew how difficult the struggle to advance civil rights, civil liberties, and democracy was. It's a constant struggle and it's not something that's going to happen overnight. Nor do I think that Fukuyama, who is often misrepresented by the way in which his "end of history" has been characterized, had a simplistic view about this either. What he was saying was that, with the end of the global ideological struggle that had been going on all through the Cold War, and then with
the subsequent collapse of the bipolar world, things became more unipolar in an ideological sense. That seemed to indicate that democracy was the only remaining game in town.

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What was missing here I think—and this was where my own skepticism came in—was the sense that democracy isn't really just about somehow
taking charge from a former authoritarian regime that has collapsed. It's about building institutions, and particularly institutions that channel the representative qualities of democracy, whether it be independent courts, or uncensored media that provide information for an informed citizenry, or strong and independent civil society organizations. These things don't just grow up overnight; they have to be built. Unless they're built, the prospect that democracy is simply going to continue is very limited.

My own skepticism deepened after I went into the U.S. government—into the Clinton administration—and I became the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Democracy and human

rights were my beat. The things that were happening in the world then did not suggest that the forces of democratic integration, as I've called them, were going to prevail. In fact, there were dangerous forces of disintegration occurring just as I entered the government, the most dramatic of which was the collapse of Yugoslavia and its rapid disintegration into separate entities. These very rapid developments, instigated by power struggles among nationalist leaders, led to mass atrocities that culminated in genocide. This was all going on soon after the predictions about the "end of history." So, here were the forces of disintegration manifesting themselves very powerfully and right in front of my eyes. There was no question that, unless something was done to restrain these forces, they were going to overwhelm the democratic changes, and integration was going to lose.

FORUM: *You have already mentioned the forces of disintegration, but you also reference the forces of "integration." Can you explain exactly what those entail?*

SHATTUCK: Yes. I think the forces of integration were reflected in the hopeful view that democratic development was going to occur as a result of the apparent transformation of Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The biggest forces of integration were the fall of the various borders—borders between countries and people and economies—opening up the prospect of economic cooperation and the increasing integration of West and East. The movement of capital and the development of global labor markets certainly affected Eastern Europe. We were seeing a change from a purely nation-based economic development toward what was going to be a globalized development. This had happened previously in history, and now it seemed to be happening again.

You also had the development of new transnational systems: the expansion of the European Union into countries of the former Soviet bloc, the enlargement of NATO, and the development of the World Trade Organization into a global network of trading partners. All of these were integrating forces. And then you add what was just beginning at that time, which was the communications revolution. This was pre-Internet, but things were developing very rapidly in terms of new modes and channels of global popular culture and communication. And by the time the Internet came along, it seemed to spur these forces of integration. There was some euphoria about the prospect that the internet might itself, as Fukuyama had said about democracy, be the "end of history." We were all going to communicate together effectively, integrating our economies, and maybe even our nation states.

The trends in the other direction, exemplified in the extreme by the collapse of Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda, were the forces of disintegration. To some extent, I think this relates to the destructive side of human nature. Human beings are tribal and can be manipulated by fear of changes to their surroundings. Nationalism has been built on this tribal fear. So, the idea that the forces of integration could somehow overcome tribalism seemed unlikely. Yugoslavia, and the even more devastating situation in Rwanda, exemplified this.

As time went on, you had reactions against the forces of integration by groups that ultimately became populist and nationalist movements. There existed an anger at the elites who were building a globalized world. There was the feeling of “look what’s happening to us,” particularly by people whose jobs were being cut, whose salaries were not increasing, and in places where factories were moving overseas from Ohio to Malaysia. These were the forces of disintegration that made people angry.

Here were these two clashing forces, and the hopes that the forces of integration would prevail became increasingly distant. The United States and Europe failed to recognize, in political terms, the impact of these disintegrative forces. I saw this particularly

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in my own job because nothing was being done in the early 1990s about the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia. These human rights catastrophes had developed without any effective policy response on the part of Western powers. Eventually, led by the Clinton Administration, there was a new policy of diplomacy backed by force to end the war in Bosnia. The old containment theory that had been used vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War had reemerged in a different form as an effort to contain the forces of disintegration. The questions were: “How do we stop these human rights crises? How do we prevent these from destroying whole countries or people?” By the mid-nineties, there were at last some responses. But, early on, it was mostly, “this is really not our problem. We’re just going to hope that the forces of integration will prevail.”

FORUM: *At least in Central Europe, you also seem to have witnessed more contemporary effects of these disintegrative forces. Can you speak to how you became involved with the Central European University and that institution’s place in the so-called “illiberal democracy” that Hungary’s Viktor Orbán has built?*

SHATTUCK: Well, actually, it's a remarkable institution that's doing fine today. The university recently had to move large parts of its operations from Hungary to Austria in order to continue to thrive. CEU, as we call it, was developed at the end of the Cold War as the changes we're talking about developed. It was a university intended to provide unique academic opportunities at the graduate level for people coming out of the former Soviet Union and former Soviet bloc countries—and now from more than a hundred countries across the world—to receive an education about democracy and the importance of democratic institutions and leaders. CEU was founded in 1991 with an endowment provided by George Soros. Its cofounders were the Czech President Václav Havel, the Hungarian democratic leader Arpad Goncz, the former Polish dissident Bronislaw Geremek, and other leaders of new democratic movements in Eastern Europe.

I was recruited to become the president of CEU in 2009. That was just before the election in Hungary in which Viktor Orban emerged as the prime minister of the country. Hungary had been one of the earliest and, apparently, most promising new democracies in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There had been a period earlier, during the Cold War, known as the “Goulash Communism” era in Hungary in which the free market began to operate, with continuing strong political control exercised by the state and by the Communist Party.

Hungary seemed to be a success story, but Hungarians had no experience with democracy. Their experience was, in fact, quite the opposite. Hungary had had a long series of authoritarian regimes, including a fascist government during the 1930s and early 1940s. Throughout Hungarian history, Hungarians faced a lot of pressure from the outside. The Ottoman Empire came into Hungary. The Russians constantly exercised a controlling influence. The Hapsburg Empire dominated. The Germans pressed against the country. Hungarians felt they were victimized by history and by outsiders.

Orban was elected in 2010. It was in this election that he stimulated a new form of nationalist reaction against the forces of integration—one of the first manifestations of authoritarian nationalism in Europe. Orban made Hungarians feel victimized by the European Union. He called Brussels, where the headquarters of the European Union is, the “New Moscow,” claiming that these outsiders were dictating orders to Hungary. He also stoked the fears of Hungarians that they might be invaded by refugees coming from Turkey, even before any refugees started coming. Essentially, he played on the fear and anger of the Hungarian public who were not sure that this new experiment of democracy was working for them. The

Hungarians had been particularly hard hit by the financial crisis in 2008. At that point, they were beginning to say, “wait a minute, we’re not really any better off now than we were under Communism. This financial crisis, which is coming at us from the U.S., Western Europe, and all these fancy banks. We’re getting angry at Western, economic liberalism.” Orban stirred all that up.

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He was elected in 2010 and essentially used his election to begin, over the next couple of years, to transform the Hungarian government by taking over all the institutions of democracy and centralizing his authority. He largely took over or began to control and manipulate the media. He significantly changed the courts and made them far less independent. He accused civil society organizations of being tools of outside influences, particularly if they received any funding from abroad. He rewrote the constitution. Ultimately, he developed what he called “illiberal democracy.” He was the first democratically elected leader to do this and is now becoming a model for what’s happening in other parts of Europe and perhaps the United States.

Orban asserted, in effect, that, “We’re a democracy because I was elected, yet we don’t want any of these fancy institutions that are being imposed on us by the West.” These included an independent judiciary, checks and balances, civil rights and civil liberties, protection of minorities and the rule of law. Orban told Hungarians, “that’s no good for you.” And many people accepted that. Overtime, he began to take over other institutions in the country, including universities.

Central European University was an independent international university. There were no funds coming from the government. CEU didn’t accept Orban’s line of thinking, and there was no way he could take over CEU in the way that he took over all government-funded institutions. Instead, what he did was to use what I would call “regulatory oppression” to make it almost impossible for the university to operate in Hungary. He did this by preventing CEU from issuing U.S.-accredited diplomas in Hungary, and by de-certifying certain academic programs, including gender studies and refugee studies. As a result, there was a struggle for CEU’s academic freedom. I was able to protect the university as an American institution during my time as president in part because of the strong support of the U.S. State Department. After I left, Donald Trump

was elected and his administration withdrew its support. In many ways, Trump's politics reflected the Orban playbook, and Orban concluded, "we have an American President who agrees with us now." He increased the regulatory repression, and finally, earlier this year, CEU was forced to leave Budapest and take up in Vienna. I'm not worried about the university; it's going to be fine. But democracy and academic freedom in Hungary are being strangled by the Orban regime.

FORUM: *You already brought up the administration of Donald Trump. Can you compare the events and trends that occurred in Hungary with what's now occurring in the United States, where there seem to be numerous challenges to the democratic rule of law? Is there a large divergence between the strength of institutions in these two countries and in the prospect for future democratic rule of law?*

SHATTUCK: Well, I think there are parallels, to be sure. In some ways, as I've mentioned, Donald Trump is playing out of the Orban playbook, but he's not following Orban exactly. We've certainly seen Trump's attacks on mainstream media, his assault on facts and truth, and his use of extensive propaganda. We've seen Trump's effort to transform the judiciary, and to attack the values and norms of democratic governance.

There are three models of the Trump presidency. One is an authoritarian model, which is comparable to what Orban has done in Hungary. The second, which is at the other end of the spectrum, is the anti-government model. This is a model that is the culmination in an extreme form of a long trend in the United States of "running against Washington." Trump's anti-Washington model has authoritarian elements: "root up the deep state, do everything you can to transform and change, and to make the government more responsive to the executive." That comes out of the Orban model. Trump's third model is the polarizing model, which is, "we want to make everything as politically partisan as possible in order to prevent democracy from working effectively." Democratic compromise is seen as weak governance. In this way, democracy is turned on its head. It's comprised of two ingredients: polarization of the electorate and stimulation of the base to support the political destruction of anyone who opposes the president. In this way, we're seeing aspects in the Trump presidency of Viktor Orban's "illiberal governance."

FORUM: *Generally speaking, the forces of disintegration have had a deleterious effect on the democratic rule of law throughout the world. But how important*

would you say the forces of integration are on the restoration of the democratic rule of law? Is it possible to arrive at the democratic “end of history” scenario without further global integration?

SHATTUCK: Well, after this long analysis of how difficult things are right now for democracy, I’m still cautiously optimistic. I think it’s possible that the populist anger and populist movements that have developed may lead to some important reforms of democracy. I think we have to recognize that the anger at elites, reflected both in Hungary and the United States, is very real. These trends—particularly economic trends which have led to the deregulation of the economy, increasing economic inequality, and the upward redistribution of wealth—have angered a lot of people. I think that, with some of the transformations that have happened in our society as a result of greater diversity, there’s a reaction against these regressive trends. We need to understand that.

How could that ultimately develop into the possibility of reform and revitalization of democracy? I think we can look to history and see some interesting parallels. If you go back to the late nineteenth century, you have the development of a populist movement, a populist party in reaction to the economic and political inequalities of the time. Midwestern farmers, urban workers, and sharecroppers from the South came together and said, “this Gilded Age that we’re living in where all the wealth is being transformed upstairs is unfair and we want to change it.” The original populist movement in the United States didn’t succeed at first, but it morphed into the Progressive Era.

The Progressive Era in the United States began when Theodore Roosevelt brought about some fundamental changes to the regulatory system in an effort to make democracy and the economy more responsive to the people. Then, of course, there were the challenges of the 1930s and the rise of fascism, not to mention worldwide depression. Here again, the populist forces contributed to a political and economic transformation: the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt. The recognition that “freedom from want” should be a central commitment of democratic governance inspired a wide range of transformative legislation. So there is some historical evidence that populist anger can be transformed into democratic reform, and indeed, this is what occurred from the 1880s to 1940, leading to the Civil Rights

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Movements of the second half of the twentieth century. Are we in another such period today? Hard to say. But there's a lot of fermentation.

I think there's certainly a big distinction between the United States and Hungary. Civil society in the United States is much more vibrant than in Eastern Europe, which is perhaps not surprising. In Eastern Europe, civil society was oppressed for so many years under communism and fascism that it didn't really develop by the time the Berlin Wall came down, whereas civil society in the United States has a long and vibrant tradition going back to the origins of the country and to the early nineteenth century observations of Alexis deToqueville, who saw that the greatest strength of American democracy was its local civil society organizations. So, we have a vibrant civil society in the United States, and we've seen evidence over the last several years that it's as activist as ever. Now, can it overcome the polarization that has been developed in recent years, and particularly during the Trump era? Big question. I think democracy has to be re-learned, in a certain sense. We need to understand that democracy is not just about making demands. It's about voting and electing leaders committed to negotiating and championing policies that can result in positive changes for the whole society. That will have to occur, and it will be difficult, but based on history, it is certainly possible. *f*