TRANSCRIPT

"AFTERSHOCK—A JOURNEY INTO EASTERN EUROPE'S BROKEN DREAMS: JOHN FEFFER IN CONVERSATION WITH TINA ROSENBERG"

A conversation with John Feffer and Tina Rosenberg

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ANNOUNCER:

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STEPHEN HUBBELL:

So hello and welcome to the Open Society Foundations. My name is Steve Hubbell with the Open Society Fellowship Program. And one of the singular privileges of my job is to observe, over a period of time, rather like a stop action film or a kind of time lapse photography, the gestation of a fellowship idea that comes to us, sometimes not completely, not fully formed.

And then during the fellowship term-- the idea takes shape, often veers into directions that weren't anticipated early on. And then under normal circumstances, the fellow disappears from our presence for a short while. And then a number of years later-- comes back, often with a book like this one in hand.

And we have the chance to celebrate-- in proper fashion, the-- the ideas contained within that book, and the-- the impact that that book will have on the marketplace of ideas. So we are gathered here today-- to celebrate *Aftershock* by John Feffer, *A Journey into Eastern Europe's-- eastern-- Eastern Europe's Broken Dreams*. In the spirit of time lapse photography, when John came to us in-- I think October 2011 with an idea, which was (COUGH) based on his interviews from-- y-- 20 years earlier-- about 250 interviews with

dissidents, academics, activists-- and others who were caught up in the maelstrom of change in Eastern Europe in 1990 and 1991-- and he wanted to revisit that.

He wanted to go back and talk to them. And it seemed like an intriguing idea, rather like that old BBC series, you know, *28 Up* where they keep-- talking to the same people every seven years. And-- during the process of writing the book and doing the interviews, we and the fellowship team were able to kind of observe-- that remark-- the remarkable transformations. Obviously in 1990-- in 1990 and 1991, those activists were-- at the very-- at the very cusp of a kind of vindication of their work over a period of-- of decades, and-- and-- many, many years. When you came to us, John, it was at a time when austerity seemed to be the reigning motif in much of Eastern Europe, in the former communist bloc. And-- (COUGH) and you-- your interviews helped us understand the nature of those times.

And now several years on, we are now almost seven years since you came to us with the-- with the book idea in the first place. And we're struggling, frankly, to characterize the current climate in words that make sense, stemming, as they do, from a long trajectory of historical forces. And we could hardly be better served or better positioned in interpreting and putting language to the-- to the current crisis-- than to have the two speakers today, not just John but also-- Tina Rosenberg.

I first met Tina in 1993, I think it was, when you were working on the first essays that went on to become-- *The Haunted Land-- Facing Europe-- Europe's Ghosts after communis-- Eastern Europe's Ghosts After Communism*. I was an editor at *Harper's Magazine* at the time. And those essays-- became that book, which won the Pulitzer Prize, as well as the National Book Award.

So I'd like to thank Tina, who also is the co-writer of the *New York Times*' Fixes Column, and cofounder of The Solutions Journalism Network. Thank you for being here. And also, thank your booking agent, Rob Berenick (PH), who is our college here at the Open Society Foundations, and also-- Tina's spouse, for making your visit possible. Rob, wherever you are, it's not Danceteria, it's not the Palladium, but it's not a bad-- you know, it's not a bad setting for-- for something like this.

And-- I'm delighted, of course, to welcome John back to our offices. You know, this is a-- rather imposing looking book. And I think that when Tina got it, I-- I sort of pictured this in my mind. She may have said-- this is a heavy-- this is a rather heavy lift. I don't know if I have time to read it. But then when she got going, she said, "This is-- (THROAT CLEARING) (NOISE) this is worth the effort," and was-- was-- very pleased to serve as moderator today.

Unfortunately we do not have books for sale-- unless they have been discovered in the mail room. They-- I would encourage you to turn to your local bookstore, particularly your local independent bookstore, to find it if-- if you're so inspired. With that, thanks to all of you, and thanks to Tina and John, and over to you, Tina.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you, Steve. When I started reading this book, and Steve was right, I had initial, "Oh my God. How am I gonna get through this thing?" Sorry. When I started reading it-- I found it's not only worth the effort, as Steve said, but it actually is not a heavy lift. It's a lot of fun to read. John is a reporter and a writer, and-- does both very well.

And it's-- it's a really fascinating book. And you will learn a lot from it, and you will be thinking about it for a long time afterwards. And I highly recommend it. So I want to start-- first of all, and just by noting that one of the stories I did for-- for Steve was a-- was a profile on this exciting new Hungarian youth party called Fidesz-- with Viktor Orban at the helm. So times have changed. (COUGH) I wanna start by-- quoting Karl Marx. "The tradition of all g-- (COUGH) generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." So John, can you start out by talking about what-- how the history of these countries affects what they do and what they have done after the end of communism?

JOHN FEFFER:

Sure. Well, thank you, first of all-- for reading the book, (LAUGH) and for coming today. And thanks, Steve, for-- for organizing this, and for Open (COUGH) Society for making this possible. So-- in terms of-- of history, well, you know-- I-- I guess I'd begin with-- with what-- a Polish friend of mine-- told me, Kosta Gabert (PH), a Polish Jew living in Warsaw. And he said, "You know, you Americans, you-- you have th-- the most bizarre phrase. You say that's history. And when you say that, you mean it doesn't mean anything. (LAUGH) It's insignificant.

"You don't care about history. But history here, you have to understand history here means something. It is present all the time." Now, you can imagine for a Polish Jew still living in Poland, history weighs very heavily upon Kosta Gabert's shoulders. But it's not just for, you know-- persecuted minorities that-- that history is important.

But let's start with that, because that is-- a headline issue right now, the issue of Poland's new law that would make it-- difficult for-- possibly difficult for people to talk in Poland openly about the Holocaust and the impact of the Holocaust. Because here's an example of-- of the history question in present day.

It comes out of, from my perspective, a-- kind of-- an (NOISE) important insight-- on the Polish side. And that is that, in keeping with what I said at the beginning, that when we-- we-- we Americans often don't pay much attention to history, we often will use phrases that are-- inaccurate or-- can be very-- insulting even.

So Poles frequently bristle against the use of the term Polish death camps. And they're, like, "Look, the death camps were located in Poland. But they were not run by Poles. They were run by Nazis. So please-- and this was-- this precedes the current government in-- (COUGH) in Poland, please pay close attention to that." That, of course, morphs into a very different

kind of reality for the current Polish government, which is very uncomfortable about-- the ways that-- history is being used against its particular interpretation, not only of Holocaust but of the post-communist period.

In terms of-- the history question more generally in the region, I would say that-- right now, as Steve said, it's-- it's-- it's somewhat difficult to characterize the current moment in Eastern Europe. But we've seen the resurgence of far right wing parties. And-- quite nationalistic parties, including, as Tina said, Fidesz, Fidesz which began as a youth library party, and then swung all the way over to the other side of the political spectrum.

And-- it's-- in order to understand why these movements have come to the foreground at this particular moment, history is an extraordinarily important-- component. Viktor Orban-- (PH) who I think was actually a recipient of Open Society (LAUGH) money, the current prime minister of-- of Hungary-- invokes history constantly in his positioning of-- Fidesz as a party, and Hungary as a country, as center of kind of-- Christian Europe-- and positioned against either immigrants coming f-- from (NOISE) predominantly Muslim countries, or against even-- outsiders that are interested in undermining Hungarian institutions.
That nationalist history often-- and I'll-- I'll end here so we can go onto another question. But that-- that use of history, we often look at it as this kind of-- new approach that's unconnected somehow to the communist period. That Orban has revived, for instance, the inter-war period, the-- the Horti (PH) of the nationalism that dominated Hungary in the 1920s and 1930s.

But in fact, the nationalism that we see today is intimately connected to the communist period. Rather than being a-- (NOISE) time, 40, 45 years of-- of internationalism, of, according to the official rhetoric of the communist regimes, we saw-- nationalism within each of the countries, within each of the communist countries-- used very explicitly by the communist governments, usually at times of declining legitimacy.
When the-- when the governments felt that they-- that communism as an ideology or that their-- particular programs-- political and economic programs were losing legitimacy, they fell back on something they were relatively certain could-- rally people. And that was nationalism.

To give you an example, again in Poland in 1968, there was a uprising of students-- in some sense part of a larger 1968 uprisings around the world. And (NOISE) this was not an anti-communist uprising. These were students who were looking to reform communism in some sense, reform socialism. But they were challenging the communist government. The communist government realized that-- that one easy way of delegitimizing these students was to say, "Look-- they are not actually Poles. They're Jews--" that several of the leaders of the 1968 uprising were Jewish.

And this was a way of appealing over their heads to the larger Polish population-- to-- that played on older history of anti-Semitism. But more importantly, the notion that there were others inside Polish society who did not have Polish national interests at heart. After 1968, we saw the outflux of 20,000 more Polish Jews from the country.

And the government was able to survive that crisis by specifically using nationalism and anti-Semitism. That was not by any means a unique use of nationalism. We saw it in-- in p-- pretty much every country throughout the region, and in some cases as in Romania or Albania-- a real fusion of nationalism and communism-- into the 1980s. So that when we look at the right wing-- turn in the region today, I wouldn't say that there was a-- kind of a-- gap between the right wing trend of the 1920s and 1930s and what we see today. I would see a continuity that runs not only through the communist period, but even through the so-called liberal period from nineteen-- '89 until, say-- the 2000 or so. Because I would argue that there was nationalism even embedded in that project as well. But that's perhaps for another question.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you. Going further into w-- to how these points of view break down, one of the big themes of this book-- one of the big themes of this book is the-- the rise of Arcadia. That is the new utopia for many people in-- formerly communist Europe. And what that means is a return to the pastoral village life, and values of the past, just as-- as John was saying. That's in part because they are part of, as you call it, Eastern Europe B-- the losers in society. And I'd like to read a paragraph here. "In 2015, the inhabitants of Poland B took their revenge at the polls. They'd missed out on the country's vaunted prosperity, and blamed their predicament on the liberal architects of economic reform. They were anti-abortion and pro-religion. They were suspicious of Middle Eastern immigrants, haughty intellectuals and intrusive international institutions.

"And they embraced a rather narrow nationalism that promised to make their nation great again." All right. Everybody here's thinkin' the same thing. (LAUGH) Why now? (LAUGH) And is it-- how much is this really a backlash against-- (NOISE) that comes from the expectations they had of what would happen-- that didn't happen?

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah. Well, that's-- that's-- so-- so Poles like to talk about Poland A and Poland B. Poland A is the part of the country (COUGH) that succeeded as a result of the changes in-- after 1989, the economic reforms, the political reforms. And that Poland A is largely clustered around the big cities-- Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk.

Poland B, on the other hand, is the rest of the country. And honestly, if you go to Eastern Europe today as a tourist, you go to Warsaw, you go to Prague, you got to Budapest, you think, "Gosh, these-- these cities, they're doin' so well." In fact, for a while Warsaw was (NOISE) far more expensive than any other city (LAUGH) in Europe.

And you'd be fooled into thinking, "Well, Eastern Europe has succeeded beyond all possible imagination." But that's because you're only looking at Poland A, or Eastern Europe A. You're only looking at the success stories. The rest of the region, the rural areas, the small cities, and even pockets within the big cities have not done as well. And why haven't they

done as well? Well, there are a number of reasons why they haven't done as well. They haven't-- they have been-- the-- the areas that in some sense, have been scarified as a-- as a result of the transition-- the people who could not make it because they were too old-- didn't speak the right foreign languages.

They didn't have the right skill set. They were the wrong ethnicity. Roma, for instance. Roma were employed m-- approximately 90%-- or more in all of the countries of Eastern Europe, which is not a surprise during the communist period, because, of course, these were times of full employment. And then within a few years after 1989, Roma employment of 90% went to Roma unemployment of 90%.

They were the first fired, and not re-- not hired after that. So certain populations with the-- within Eastern Europe suffered even more than others. So this is the larger group of-- of Poland or Eastern Europe B. Now, the-- the notion of-- of the countryside then becomes important for parties that want to-- take political advantage, to get the votes of Eastern Europe B. They're going to say, "Look, you know, the countryside has been important to us as part of our national identity. You people out there who have not really-- benefited from the globalizing economic transformations in our country, you are the heart and soul. You are the salt of the earth. You are-- you are what makes Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania strong." So the notion of arcadia, of a kind of utopian-- pastoral-- community becomes important at a kind of political messaging level. Now, in terms of expectations, 'cause this is-- this is-- you know, key to understanding-- this division between-- A and B, if you will. When I traveled in 1990 throughout the region, I asked people, "Well, where do you think you're gonna be in the next n-- five or ten years?"

And they would say, "Well, I mean, it's hard to know precisely, but probably at the level of Vienna, of Austria." I said, "Really, in five or ten years, you in Bulgaria think you're gonna be at the level of Austria?" "Yeah." I said, "Do you really think in ten years you will bridge the gap?" And, "Yeah, why not?"

And I thought about that. And I thought, "Well," especially when I returned to the region, and obviously today Bulgaria is not at the level of Austria. It's about halfway there-- if they're lucky. I thought, well, were they really so naïve to have those expectations? Because take the example of Ireland. Ireland, when it joined the European community, the precursor to the European Union, Ireland was a-- (LAUGH) was arcadia.

Wasn't a-- pastoral utopia, but it was primarily agricultural. It was primarily pastoral. And within a generation, thanks to the EU, Ireland became one of the-- it became the Celtic tiger. It became one of the more successful European economies. And, of course, you know, hit, as many of the countries did, financial crisis. But even today if you look at per capita GDP in Ireland, it's roughly comparable to the leading economic-- European economies.

So if you're in Eastern Europe, and you're, like, "Well, we've been promised accession to the European Union. What are the examples we can look at?" Well, Ireland. Okay. Why not? Why won't we have the experience of Ireland? And then you say, "Well-- that was maybe--

that took maybe ten or 15, 20 years." They have another experience that was even more accelerated to look at, and that was Germany.

Germany, which was destroyed as a country in 1945-- during World War II. And between 1945 and 1955, ten years, Germany went from the bottom of the economic order to the top. It was the top performing European economy in 1955. Now, there are a lot of reasons why (LAUGH) Germany was able to make that Virchow's Wunder, that economic miracle. But from the perspective of Eastern Europe, of Eastern Europeans, that expectation that they would be given the same kind of deal that Ireland got, or that Germany had-- the defeated Nazis got, was not so outlandish.

So if you have that expectation that you're going to make this jump, not just become a member of Europe, but become a member of Europe at roughly the same level as the top performing European countries, the reality that hits you 15, 20 years later, when you're not there, when you're not Austria, that's devastating. And you-- you wanna understand why that has happened. You can blame Europe, and that is in part why there is a lot of Euro-skepticism and Euro-skeptical parties throughout the region. You can blame foreign capitalists, who've come in and undermined your industries because they've bought them up-- for their own purposes. You can blame European farmers who have dumped their produce into your country, undermining your farming-- communities.

You can blame Jews. You can blame Roma. You can blame George Soros. (LAUGH) There are a lot of people that you can blame. And-- all of that starts to feed into these news political arguments that the right wing parties put forward, also largely based on this notion of Eastern Europe B and this kind of pastoral utopia.

TINA ROSENBERG:

You do make a-- sort of under the table argument throughout the book. It d-- doesn't really-- you don't really come out and say here's what I think should have happened against the neo-liberal shock therapy, and in favor or more progressive reforms. And you talk about the three different types of transformations that-- take place in situations like this.

One of them is economical-- is economic. The second one is political transformation. And the third, and probably the most difficult is the space inside people's heads. But-- so (NOISE) I wanna ask you about if they had not had that kind of neo-liberal shock therapy, what would have happened to the other two transformations?

Let's talk about a country that is at the level of Austria, and that's Austria-- which has, (LAUGH) you know, also very recently (THROAT CLEARING) narrowly missed having a far right government. So how much would economic success have-- have salvaged the rest?

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah. I-- that's-- that's a really tough question. And, you know, the-- I wanna-- I wanna move away from the notion, however, that the Eastern Europe economic transition was a unique experience. Yes, it w-- it has unique f-- aspects to it. But it took place within the larger process of globalization.

Other countries were going through this marketization process. They were going through privatization processes. What made Eastern Europe unique was that it was compressed into a very short period of time. And in some countries, they wanted it to be even shorter, and for political reasons, as in Hungary and-- Bulgaria-- shock therapy didn't actually happen as quickly as it happened in-- in Poland.

So-- yes, to answer your first question before going into your second one, yes it's true that I think that-- there could have been-- better approaches. But we do have to understand that it's taking place within a larger framework that we can't just dispense with. You know, it would have been extremely difficult for Poland to say-- (NOISE) we're not going to listen to you, Jeffrey Sachs (PH). We're not going to listen to you, IMF. We're not gonna listen to you, European Bank of Reconstruction and Development. They set the ground rules. You had some wiggle room within those ground rules, but those were the ground rules.

I'll give you one example, and-- and circle back to the-- the essence of the rest of your question. I'll give you an example of how it could have been different. But it's really more of a-- of an amelioration rather than-- a profound transformation. I talked with-- Laszlo-- Orban (PH), not to be confused with Viktor Orban. So Laszlo Orban was-- chief economist for Fidesz, back when Fidesz was a liberal party.

When I talked to him in 1990, he was-- a chief proponent of shock therapy. And he wanted to follow in-- in Hungary-- just as it happened in Poland, as quickly as possible, and, you know, all the metaphors they used were, you know, if you're gonna cut off the tail of a cat, you do it with one cut, not m-- several cuts. It's more humane if you do it with one cut. If you're gonna jump over a chasm, you jump over it in one jump.

You c-- if you try it in several jumps, you'll f-- go to the bottom of the ravine. So these are all kind of violent metaphors for-- (LAUGH) for transition. It gives you some sense of-- of how they understood-- they understood at some basic level that this was gonna be disruptive and violent. So Laszlo Orban, at that time, was all for that kind of transformation.

I come back to him 25 years later or so. So I said, "Laszlo, well, how do you feel about this now-- as-- as you look at-- at the transformation of Fidesz-- and the transformation of Hungary?" And he's, like, "Well--" he's still an orthodox economist. It's not like he's become Bernie Sanders. He says, "Well, you know, I realize that we really shouldn't have closed all of those factories all at once. You know? Because, well, first of all-- those people were never gonna get jobs again."

Because these were factories employing workers that just did not have the skill sets that could be-- employable in the new factories and industries that Eastern Europe were developing, or frankly, that Germany was bringing over, you know, to employ Eastern Europeans in car factories, et cetera. Second, we-- we immediately cut away-- c-- you know-- disappeared all this revenue, tax revenue that the government desperately needed at that particular time.

And third, politically speaking, we created an entire kind of cohort of people who hated us, hated us for what we did. And their resentments were not just their resentments, but were passed on generationally, and within communities. And he-- he said, "And I realize that was a mistake." And I said, "So what would you do instead if you had another option?" He said, "Well," and he-- he was kind of grinding away, (LAUGH) tryin' to figure out.

And I said, "Well, would you have done a Chinese style, kind of state support of-- of industries for political reasons, essentially?" You know, that China keeps these industries going not because they're economically successful, necessarily but because if they were to close these factories, they would have all these really angry Chinese people who would then protest in the streets and possibly be a political problem.

He said, "Well, honestly, that for-- at least for a period of time might have been-- a good solution for Hungary." So there you have someone who is-- who was wedded and in some sense, still is wedded to a pretty orthodox economic approach struggling to-- to address-- what was obviously a economic, political, in some sense cultural mistake. So-- the-- the other-- the other side of your question, which is-- kind of the political and the-- the cultural ramifications. This was a problem that all of the countries in the region faced, and that was a lack of personnel.

With the exception of Poland, which had, of course, a trade union movement of 10 million members in a country of 40 million people. The rest of the countries, the civil society, the dissidents, they numbered just a handful. (NOISE) You know, d-- a couple hundred, maybe a thousand. And so the-- that was the major political problem.

Who were you going to have to-- to implement these new liberal programs that were established in 1990 and 1991? When I talked to-- and I'm sorry that the names sound somewhat familiar, (LAUGH) but-- or so similar, Yan Orban (PH), who is Czech, not Hungarian-- when I talked to Yan Orban, who was a leading member of Civic Forum in-- in the Czech Republic, in Czechoslovakia-- he said, "Well, you know, I had this plan where we would take a thousand young people, and we just bring 'em to the United States.

Or we bring 'em to Germany, and we train 'em for two years. And we bring 'em back, and they would be our new civil servants. That there just wasn't enough people. There weren't enough kind of-- either people with skills or people without compromised pasts to staff all of the-- the necessary positions.

And that went all the way up to the top, frankly. Give you an example, f-- in Poland-- I mean, in the-- first-- real presidential election, you had Todaish Muzuvyetski (PH), who had been the prime minister, who was a competent enough-- prime minister, but the Poles really had decided that he lacked charisma. And this was a guy who fainted on his first day of office. He didn't have enough energy to be, you know-- (COUGH) the leader of the country. And who is he up against? Lack Vowensa (PH), you know, this-- who was a-- of course, Nobel Prize winner, and storied leader of solidarity.

But here was a guy who was really not a democrat. He was-- he was promising (COUGH) at that time to-- solve all of Poland's problems with an ax. Okay? So that-- that was his-- his slogan. And then the third person, Stan Tymiński. You probably don't remember. Stan Tymiński was basically Donald Trump avolaletra (PH). He was-- he was unbelievable. He-- he-- he carried around a briefcase. And he said, "In this briefcase is the solution to Poland's problems." And he refused to open it up. (LAUGHTER) "If you elect me, I'll open it up." So this was the (LAUGH) quality at the very top. And-- and Muzuvyetski lost to Tymiński and Vowensa. Vowensa and Tymiński r-- had a runoff. So the problem ran all the way through. And, you know-- and that's why, in some sense, you know-- the people I talked to 25 years later, if-- if there was one thing they said about the economy-- the politicians, the civil society people that I talked to, they said, "Well, you know, the mistake we made is we gave too much authority to the economists." And the reason they did that is because there (COUGH) weren't enough trained politicians to stand up to the economists. The economists said, "Well, we know what to do. We have a plan. We will do it."

TINA ROSENBERG:

And we'll open the briefcase (UNINTEL)--

JOHN FEFFER:

And we will (LAUGH) open the.

TINA ROSENBERG:

John, talk a little bit about the question of if the economic transformation had been more successful, would we still have this-- this rise of illiberal-- il-- illiberal political culture?

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah. Well, again-- you know, it's not like-- the United States is, you know, connected to Eastern Europe's economic-- rise and fall. I mean, we have a illiberal president here for reasons that are not connected to.

TINA ROSENBERG:

But you do have-- America B.

JOHN FEFFER:

That's absolutely correct, which is-- in other words, the-- as I said before, what took place in Eastern Europe in the 1990s was a subset (COUGH) of what was taking place in the world at large--

TINA ROSENBERG:

Right. But I don't-- the question is, I don't know if Austria has an Austria B. I don't know enough about Austria. But l-- if it doesn't, or if it doesn't have a very big one, then-- then you s-- can still get this support for the far right.

JOHN FEFFER:

Absolutely. Yeah--

TINA ROSENBERG:

Even when you don't have the people who are left behind.

JOHN FEFFER:

And-- and it's not just Austria. I mean, even within the region itself. I mean, if you look at the Czech Republic, Czech Republic is actually doin' quite well economically. It has the lowest unemployment rate in Europe, not just in Eastern Europe, the lowest unemployment rate in all of Europe. That doesn't mean that there aren't pockets of what we might call Czech Republic B. But there are other issues that have-- swelled the far right movement. And so, you know, you have Miloš Zeman, and-- Anjay Babish (PH), the leaders of-- of the Czech Republic, both of them now on the far right. Now, of course, here's the interesting thing. Miloš Zeman, an economist, I interviewed in 1990. The guy was a social democrat.

He had, you know-- his own plan for a different kind of economic transition.
There was-- okay, he probably-- he drank a little too much even then. He said things that were a little intemperate. But he was not a right winger. He was not a crazy Islamaphobe as he is today. In other words, the economic and political circumstances in Eastern Europe encouraged someone like Miloš Zeman, just as in Hungary they encouraged Viktor Orban, to move away from their liberalism and over to the far right. I would argue that it's not just the economic circumstances that-- did that. And again, I would use-- an example from-- the

United States. You might remember the David pr-- David Brat's an economist. And he ran against--

TINA ROSENBERG:

Eric Cantor.

JOHN FEFFER:

==Eric Cantor. Thank you. And no one thought that-- that David Brat had a chance. I mean, Eric Cantor was a powerful politician. And this is in Virginia. He had his base in the Republican party. The idea that this-- this obscure economist, who frankly was incoherent when he talked about ec-- economics. Not that he was incorrect.

It was just that no one really could understand (LAUGH) what he was talking about, 'cause he-- he was talking in very abstract terms. There was no way he could win, until he discovered the one issue that could bring him to the top, and that issue was immigration. That was the issue that Virginians, at least in his district, felt anxious about.
And I think that's the issue-- not just immigration, but-- kind of the-- the-- what immigration represents for a lot of Eastern European countries. And that is-- undermining, again, the-- the national fabric of the country, the historic-- history of the country, the Christianity of the country.

Immigration has become a-- hot button issue in Eastern Europe in much the same way that it has in the United States. So it's not just economics. But there are other kind of wedge issues that have been, I think, critical to the rise of the far right.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Okay. I'm-- let's separate the-- what the processes that happen in a transition from a repressive society to a freer one-- from issues like immigration, which is a today issue, but not necessarily a transition issue. What-- there was a lot of expectation that Eastern Europe would do better than other regions in this kind of transition. Has it? Have there been other places that have done-- that have come out better than-- than Eastern Europe? And h-- and how have they done that?

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah. Well, I mean, if you look at-- if you look at contemporary transformations, then Eastern Europe definitely has come out better. You know, the Arab spring, which obviously there was a lot of expectation, a lot of hope around. If you look at that today, I mean, that is-- beyond disastrous for most of the countries concerned with the exception, of course, of Tunisia.

If you look at the transformations in the post-soviet space, generally speaking-- even if they haven't been-- you know-- disastrous in-- in the case of, you know, the wars that engulfed Georgia, for instance, or the war that is tor-- tearing apart-- continuing to tear apart Ukraine-- even in the countries where there hasn't been war, the-- the economic (PHONE RINGS) transformation hasn't necessarily been-- as successful as Eastern Europe--

TINA ROSENBERG:

Sorry.

JOHN FEFFER:

So in-- in a contemporary sense, I would say no. We-- we don't see-- transitions that have been s-- as successful. If we're looking historically, that's a different matter. You know, and of course, the-- the examples coming out of World War II are the ones that everyone looks at. Obviously the transformation of Europe, Western Europe-- Germany in particular, but not just Germany. And in the far East, Japan and South Korea.

And the question people ask is, "Well, why-- why couldn't we learn from those particular examples?" And I think there are reasons why we-- we couldn't, in part because, you know, the transformation after 1989 came at a time when there wasn't as many resources available, but more importantly, there wasn't a kind of governing ideology that could-- justify the application of those resources in that particular way.

You know, if-- if we wanted to look at country-history or counter-factual example, let's say the-- the transformation in Eastern Europe had taken place in 1968-- as a result of the Prague Spring. If that had spread throughout Eastern Europe, and-- and you began to have a transformation then. (COUGH)

Well-- that I think would have-- you would have had an ideology at the time which would have been somewhat (COUGH) more similar to Marshall Plan-- and the early architects of the European community-- where state led development-- picking winners and losers-- in-- in the economy, it would have been an acceptable way of-- of approaching a trans-- a transformation.

But by 1989, 1990, after Reaganism and Thatcherism, there was little likelihood of that kind of approach. To give you an example-- yigi-- Jiří Dienstbier, who was the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia, the first one-- after 1989-- he had proposed-- that-- he said, "Look, you know, we produce-- textiles. We produce clothing here in-- Czechoslovakia. And it is sold to the Soviet Union," which was still standing at that point.

"And what if you all, in the west, gave us money to support these factories producing these textiles, and also provided support to the Soviets to continue to buy it? And therefore, you could not only keep our industries going, but the Soviets would be, you know, also they would have nicer clothes." (LAUGH) It was an interesting idea. But it got nowhere,

absolutely nowhere. And they're, like, "Well, we're not gonna support-- you know, we're not going to support losing industries. That's a losing proposition." (COUGH) So that's an example of how, you know-- maybe if it had been 1968 and Jiří Dienstbier's, you know-- equivalent at that time had made a proposal like that, it would have gone over much more-- successfully.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you. Let us open it up to comments and questions. I see many people in the audience who are eminently qualified to-- to opine and comment and ask questions on this issue. So-- let's do that. And please use the microphone. (COUGH) Yes Bill.

BILL:

Yes. Bill Harten (PH). So John, you mentioned people not having the skills. (COUGH) So could you elaborate what skills those are, and was any effort made to impart such skills to the people that were being left behind?

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah. So yes. I mean, there-- there was-- there were efforts th-- throughout 1989, throughout the early 90s to do trainings. I mean, it was nonstop trainings (LAUGH) in Eastern Europe at that-- for those of you who were in that p-- in the region at that period, you might remember. From all over. I mean, it wasn't just Americans who were coming in to do trainings.

It was Europeans and-- and all sorts of folks. And-- and there were accounting firms coming in to make sure that countries could, you know-- do proper budgeting, et cetera, et cetera. So there was-- there was lots of (NOISE) training going on. It's just that there was-- the problem was-- one of-- I guess, a syncing problem, S-Y-N-C. In other words, you had a very short window for some of the countries to implement these rather radical proposals. But the training modules were kind of based on a much longer, you know, training period. So you really had to get stuff up and running very quickly. What that meant is that you created-- well, for want of a better term-- economic opportunities.

Economic opportunities, because people realized, I can make a lot of money in the gap between the implementation of these programs and the proper personnel and oversight of these programs. So whether it was privatization-- people-- or-- or it was-- you know-- dealing with government budgeting, there was enormous amount of money that was available and it al-- a good portion of it disappeared into private pockets.
And that also contributed to, shall we say, the disenchantment of large numbers of people in the region. Disenchantment with market reforms in general, because they saw it as inherently corrupt. To give you an example-- so I met Dinu Patriciu in 1990. And Dinu Patriciu at that time was-- head of Romanian-- youth party, youth liberals. He seemed like a

very effective politician to me at the time. He was young. He was articulate. I-- I foresaw that he had great political potential.

When I did research to interview him the second time, I discovered that Dinu Patriciu had become the richest man in b-- in Romania. And he'd become rich because he'd bought Romania's-- petroleum company at an unbelievably low, below market rate, and then turned around and sold it for a huge amount of money. (LAUGH) In other words, there was this (COUGH) opportunity that he saw because he was, you know, in politics.

And he-- and he knew the right people. He had the right connections. And he made billions of dollars, (NOISE) just by buying and selling a company, not doing anything with it. So the-- that, I think, is-- it was really that period of time for that-- those first four or five years, depending on the country, and depending on how quickly the economic reforms went through. That's when the-- the-- the lack of personnel, of trained personnel (COUGH) was really-- critical, that moment when kind of-- processes of corruption or structures of corruption became embedded in-- in many of the countries in the region. (NOISE)

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you. Yes, there's somebody waiting at the-- at the mic there.

DR. POLNER:

Thank you.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Why don't we ins-- why don't we, instead of having people line up, raise your hand, and someone can just bring the mic around. But you've been waiting. So please go ahead--

DR. POLNER:

Yes. Thank you very much. Yes. My name is Dr. Polner (PH), and I'm president of Cinema Verite International League. And I'm associated with Columbia. I was-- in Eastern Europe making films-- with Algahovel (PH) and others. One is called-- Developing Education in Eastern Europe. Another one was on the Roma, and-- and there was a whole slew under my website, www.challengingfilm.com.

Your presenting Eastern Europe-- in a difficult light, which is true, probably. But my question is what has happened to European education? Because Algahovel had introduced some wonderful programs for h-- the handicapped, which I filmed. So if you could give us somewhat of a broader (SLURS) spear in respect to that. (COUGH) And again, my website, for anybody's who's interested is www.challengingfilm.com. Thank you very much.

JOHN FEFFER:

Well, first I-- I should say that-- the-- the book-- my book is divided kind of in two parts. The first part is the-- glass half empty look at Eastern Europe. And the second part is the glass half full. And-- the second part really looks at many of the stories of-- of kind of inspiration, of-- kind of new growth, new challenges-- new initiatives throughout the region. So yeah, we've focused a lot on the negatives here, but.

TINA ROSENBERG:

It's in part because the-- even the-- the-- the glass half full part isn't very full. (LAUGH)

JOHN FEFFER:

That's right.

TINA ROSENBERG:

It's little pockets of people who are doing interesting things, and have energy, and young people with progressive views. But you don't really get the sense f-- from that, oh, you know, we're gonna be moving in a really good direction from now on.

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah, I mean, it is hard to-- it's hard to be optimistic-- unless you're talking about, you know, individuals and-- and different groups-- because of the political transformations that have taken place in the last couple of years. I-- (NOISE) at the educational level-- you know, to be honest with you, I didn't do a lot of interviews around that. And most of them were around Roma, and education of Roma--

DR. POLNER:

I did the Roma also.

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah. And, you know, and that's something that Open Society is-- has focused a lot on, especially-- kind of desegregating-- school systems throughout the region. It's-- it's tough. I mean, you know, Roma have--

DR. POLNER:

They don't wanna be desegregated.

JOHN FEFFER:

Well, there's that. But, I mean, there's also-- you know, there's a tradition especially in the post-communist period of-- identifying Roma immediately without any testing as being learning disabled, and then just routing them through-- the learning disabled, you know, track. And so that's one thing that-- Roma activists have been-- have been working on. There are also some new schools, or, I mean, some of 'em aren't so new. I mean, there's-- a Gandhi school in-- in Hungary, which are run by Roma-- have a curriculum that includes-- a lot of-- Roma language, Roma history, Roma culture-- (NOISE) that are-- that's, you know, very-- very successful model.

You know, the-- the-- the-- I think one of the major challenges for the region is that there's been such an out-- outpouring of people from Eastern Europe. I mean, if you look at Bulgaria, for instance, Bulgaria was population roughly 9 million in 1989. And it's a roughly 7 million today. It's been a drop of 2 million people-- over the last 25 years, which is the largest drop in a country's population not due to war or famine-- in modern times. And many of those people are young people. They leave immediately. You have villages throughout Bulgaria, and-- frankly in pretty much all of the countries in the region, which are just villages of older people. Because all the young people have left. And that has really transformed the education system, because young people are not there either to participate in the education system, or then to help build the education system.

Gradually they're starting to return. And they're returning for lots of different reasons. But-- and that's the hopeful sign that they're coming back-- with a lot of, you know, the-- the new training they done (SIC), the new entrepreneurial energy, et cetera, et cetera, which they are now investing in-- in their communities. But-- but it's-- it's gonna be a long haul.

DR. POLNER:

I did the first addictive--

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you.

DR. POLNER:

Service filming in--

TINA ROSENBERG:

Can we-- I'm sorry. Can we move on? There's other people who wanna ask questions. Yes. (COUGH) The lady in the back there, right-- (LAUGH) right there. Thank you.

ANNA SOVAYA:

Thank you. Hi.

DR. POLNER:

I never finished my question.

JOHN FEFFER:

Well.

TINA ROSENBERG:

I'm-- I'm sorry--

DR. POLNER:

Can-- can you say something about addictive services?

TINA ROSENBERG:

Can we-- can we-- can you talk to John privately after this? Because we really wanna move on to other questions--
(QUESTION: UNINTEL)

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you.

ANNA SOVAYA:

Hi. My name is Anna Sovaya (PH). I am Hungarian. And I work in this organization. (COUGH) I would like to get your perspective on the future, because it seems to me, based on my conversations with my family and-- and friends in Hungary who are part of the old dissident movement that there is a complete hopelessness.

And it seems that-- Hungary is being-- called a mafia state, and it seems that anything can go without v-- real-- res-- real impunity. That Hungary is not being held responsible for any of the horrible things that are happening, the stealing, the (COUGH) cheating, the corruption, everything. And I would like to know where you see any hope in the future. How this can change in a country which does not have the foundation of democracy well rooted like in western Europe. And so how can Hungary get out of this?

JOHN FEFFER:

Yeah, that's-- that's a really-- (LONG PAUSE) that's the key question for which all of us want an answer, particularly Hungarians. You know, the-- it-- it's-- having spent a lot of time in Hungary before the rise of Fidesz, it was-- really mystifying to me how quickly the country could-- could churn, could-- could become a mafia state, as you put it.

Or-- or frankly, just a-- traditional patronage state, in which the Fidesz party controls state assets, and uses those state assets to enrich itself and its-- its networks. Because whatever, you know, disagreements I had with, you know, the-- the liberals or the socialist party-- when they were-- governing in the 1990s, those seemed to be fixable problems. And-- and it seemed as though there was-- that democratic culture in the Hungary in the (COUGH) 1990s was strong enough to-- to correct the problems within the society. Whereas today, it seems that Fidesz has such a stranglehold, politically-- and that the opposition is fragmented, civil society is demoralized-- that-- that the-- the recourse seems to be, well, if it can't be done within the society, is there something like deus ex machine outside of Hungary that can somehow save Hungary?

For instance, the European Union sens-- censoring the-- censuring the country. And that doesn't seem to be, frankly, effective either. Because we now see a kind of block of Eastern European countries pulling together against the EU on a range of issues, pushing back against-- on judicial reform. The EU has censured Poland on its judicial reforms.

And Hungary and Poland have-- have declared common cause against the EU on this. Poland-- Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, all banding together-- to push back against the EU on immigration issues. So-- that-- that external leverage doesn't seem to be particular effective either. So all I can say is that-- the example of Slovakia in-- in the 1990s is perhaps the most hopeful-- example.

When you had a somewhat similar kind of political force, Vladimir Meciar, first leader of Slovakia after the velvet dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Meciar essentially establishes a similar kind of mafia patronage state-- and attempts to kind of transform Slovak society along those lines. Very nationalistic.

And in response, Slovak civil society, which had been somewhat quiescent-- revivifies and pushes back, and-- and many people I interviewed said, "Well, you know, we felt like we didn't even participate enough in the Velvet Revolution in 1989. This was our chance. This was our second chance to really own democratic transformation." I'm hoping that we see

something similar with young people today, and not just young people. 'Cause I-- and I-- I wanna-- actually I should-- I should-- footnote that. Because there's often a-- an assumption that it's young people who are going to be the-- the-- the-- the leading liberal lights, you know, against Fidesz.

But unfortunately, throughout the region, young people often are the most conservative, and even the most far right wing. And-- and in-- in Hungary, there's lots of young people, of course, who are involved in Fidesz. But there also tremendous number of young people involved in-- in Jobbik, the-- the further right wing party, although it's now harder to distinguish between Fidesz (LAUGH) and Jobbik in terms of their political perspectives. So I don't wanna put all the onus on young people. I mean, it has to be broad based. And it has to be-- focused on a set of issues-- in order to kind of overthrow Fidesz' stranglehold. I do think it's possible. I mean, we've seen a couple of waves of-- attempts at this. One of the more-- ambitious was Elempe-- (PH) you know-- politics can be different.

A political party, a green party that seemed very promising when it-- when it emerged, only for it to kind of dissipate in its energies. There have been a number of other kind of movements, student movements-- (COUGH) movements on behalf of homeless within Hungary, I think, have been promising. I'm hopeful that there will be a kind of pulling together, especially as-- (COUGH) as we reach, and-- maybe I'm being too optimistic here, but especially as we reach a kind of high water mark for right (COUGH) wing nationalism in the region as a whole. (COUGH)

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you. Don't you feel better now? (LAUGH) Who else had a question? Yes, there and then we'll get to you. Okay.

QUESTION #2:

You still realize (COUGH) so much on economical development, of improving of life of people. In same time when you're really hungry, when you suffer from starvation, your head mostly occupied by ideas and drives to have some food. But when you already don't worry so much about food, that's when you begun to think about, and other people, their tradition. You can hate people because of hip hop and rap more than (UNINTEL) than you. You can hate multicultural society. You can c-- hate people who belong to different tribe only because it's different tribe. So very little connection here. Rich society can be chauvinistic, nationalistic, xenophobic, and that's very much a question if economical progress is the solution. For Marx (?), it was a solution. For globalist, it was their hope. It did not work like this.

JOHN FEFFER:

I-- I agree with that. (LAUGH) I think that-- there-- there is a-- economic determinism that was-- at the heart of-- of communism in the region. But it was at the heart of anti-communism as well, the kind of post-communist economic development models. And that was al-- along the lines of what you were saying, that-- economies go through certain stages.

And-- the faster we go through those stages, the better, and that this progress through stages will ultimately lead to-- the betterment of the society, without regard to-- A, the people who are left behind-- the consequences of rapid economic development-- and everything that was non-economic in terms of how we define the quality of life.

You know, in part, the rise of the green parties, first in Germany and elsewhere in the world were a repute-- were an attempt to repudiate that. Was to say that this economic determinism of rapid economic growth, of associating GDP growth with human happiness, that this is a f-- a f-- a false equivalence. And I-- we've seen that these green parties have not kind of achieved what they initially imaged they could achieve, which not only the transformation of politics, but the transformation of society.

But those ideas, I s-- think still play an important role in political movements-- throughout eastern Europe, throughout Europe. So, all of which is to say I agree with you. I do think that there are-- there are alternative ways of thinking that are out there. How do we create the conditions, the political conditions within those kinds of ideas can thrive? That's the challenge.

IAN WILLIAMS:

I don't-- it's Ian Williams (PH). I write for John's organization (LAUGH) amongst other things. When I first came to New York, the *New York Times* had a sort of epitaph factory in which they coined Margaret Thatcher the Prime Minister who privatized the loss making state industries.

So we set up a little letter writing factory to point out-- never got published-- actually the industries that she privatized were making loads and loads and loads of money. That's why people wanted to buy them. They were very successful. And later on, as a business reporter we looked at these. And all of these industries were ac-- actually did better under state ownership, in business terms, than they did subsequently.

And yet, the chiveleth (PH) is still, you know, 100%. It's-- it's almost a-- sort of reverse Maoism that w-- (LAUGH) you know, it's-- it's not what actually happens, it's what we want to happen, what we say happens. And, you know, that this was at the root of those things in Eastern Europe. And I was doing stuff for the y-- UNDP editing documents.

All the developing countries were pleading for help from UNDP to guard them against the World Bank economists who were pushing this dogma. And of course, they didn't. They just

got more of it. So, I mean, how did this idea get so engrained in the face-- you know, who are you gonna believe, me, or the evidence of your own eyes? And right across the world, even in the heartlands of social democracy, the Germans and the Swedes were beginning to-- accepted this dogma, that things were better in private hands, despite the manifest evidence that it's not so, as 30 years of declining wage rates in Western Europe, never mind Eastern Europe have demonstrated.

JOHN FEFFER:

Well-- well, like I said, I mean, the-- the-- it was perhaps Eastern Europe's misfortune to have its transition at-- at perhaps the height of Thatcherite, Reaganite-- ideology. But there was also, you know, there was a resource gap for a lot of the countries for the governments. They had ambitious economic plans. They were not getting money from-- they were not getting a Marshall Plan from the United States.

They were not, at-- at least initially getting a lot of money from the E.U. And they were sitting on what they thought was a gold mine. You know, if they could somehow transform these state enterprises into cash, they could use that money to further the modernization of the economies. That, at least, was the idea.

As it turned out-- it-- it didn't go quite so rosily as they imagined, partly because-- either the-- the industries they were privatizing, in some cases, were not actually very desirable. I mean, in Poland-- for instance, Poland was a leading cement producer. And-- it-- but it was selling cement mostly to the Eastern bloc.

Privatization comes along, and you have these seven cement factories. And the cement producers in Western Europe looked at those and said, "Well, you know, we produce cement cheaper. And we will buy this. But you're-- you're-- you have old stock, and you have poorly-- you know, your workers are not trained up to our level. So, you know, maybe--" and this was the-- the-- from the World Bank economist who was in charge of this. She told me maybe one, two out of six or seven of those were going concerns. So that was one problem. Not all of them were going concerns. The second problem was, as I said-- there was an opportunity for grand theft. (LAUGH) You know? To basically extract that money and put it into not only-- not only privatize it, and-- and put it in the private sector, but privatize it, and put it in private packets.

I mean, it's a very specific kind of privatization. That isn't to say that all of the privatization was-- was, you know-- worthless. I mean, there were things that-- that did go-- m-- more or less according to schedule with the privatization. But generally speaking, it was a-- project that was fraught with problems. And, you know, there were countries that approached it slightly differently. Slovenia, for instance, did not privatize its state owned enterprise (SLURS) immediately.

And then-- (LAUGH) and this is a irony perhaps. But when Slovenia then hit economic problems at the end of the 2000s, they had to get money from the E.U. to bail themselves

out, the E.U. actually made it one of the requirements for money, you know, for the resources, that Slovenia finally privatize (COUGH) some of these-- some of the crown jewels of the Slovenian economy.

But, of course, it was doing so at a time when these crown jewels were not worth as much, because, of course, the economy in Slovenia had tanked. So that was-- that-- that hit Slovenia hard. You know? So the-- the-- the issue of privatization became not a k-- not just an-- a technical economic question. It was a political issue, and an issue that was deeply connected to corruption as well. And so that ultimately was-- made it-- somewhat different, say, from the privatization that took place in-- under Thatcher.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Thank you -- Ren.

LAWRENCE WESHLER:

Hi. M-- I am Lawrence Weshler (PH). By the way, first of all, just to say it was fantastic book. Definitely g-- get it. An observation, then a question. The observation kinda comes off of what you're sayin'. It seems to me that the great crisis after 1989 w-- f-- first one thing. You keep saying Reagan Thatcher.

I think you have to say Reagan Clinton Thatcher Blair. And let's be clear on that. The neoliberal thing was one continuous project-- all the way through. And-- and what it lacked, the way I would describe it, in a sentence, is it lacked a sense of social solidarity. The neoliberal prescriptions that were being put on people, and you have to do it right away, and it has to be shocks therapy, you know, is you just have to, you know-- well, what about those people?

Well, they're just gonna fall by the wayside, you know? And-- and when you do that to people, as has been the case here in the United States and so forth, they will fall away from the-- if-- you know, from that model as something that's obviously hurting them. In Poland in particular, it seems to me that many of the heroes f-- you know, and I include people like Micknick (PH), even, the social solidarity fell-- well, really, the only person who-- who-- who kept the faith was Kuron, the-- the labor secretary.

And-- say-- so that's the problem. And-- and-- and-- and a right wing party can claim to do social solidarity on the basis of the country as a whole, or their pride or something like that when they're not, in fact, doing anything. Which, of course, is happening here too. The question, I guess what-- looking forward, is it seems to me-- that the two major things that are coming down the turnpike in the next ten years are not any of the things we're talking about.

They are g-- climate change, and they are automation. And automation, in particular, is going to crush all of us. And if we don't have a doctrine of social solidarity to protect the

losers in that thing, we are going to have-- be entering extremely violent times, and we'll probably see it first in k-- places like Eastern Europe. And-- and it-- so it's important to look at that.

JOHN FEFFER:

Yes. Th-- thank you very much for-- and-- and your-- you know, in your own writings on-- on-- on Poland and Eastern Europe, the-- you have, I think, done a g-- (COUGH) a excellent job of emphasizing the decline of solidarity as a principle. And-- and to go back to Kosta Gabert (PH) who-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) yeah. (LAUGH)

I mean, he emphasized that as well. You know, that-- that this was the tragedy of solid-- of-- of Poland, between 1989 and 1993. That the principles of solidarity, articulated by a trade union movement, were-- were not carried into political power by people associated with that movement. So-- I-- I-- I would agree with you wholeheartedly. The other questions of-- of climate change and the so-called dark factories of automation-- (LAUGH) that we go into dystopia territory.

And that's the other hat I wear, with writing dystopian fiction. (LAUGH) And so-- and it's something that, you know-- I didn't actually come across so much in when-- in my interviews in the region. In part, I think, because people felt as if they were-- they were dealing with the current tidal wave, and they couldn't even imagine the next tidal wave coming in on. Yes, there were environmental movements, but those environmental movements were largely not focused on climate change. They were focused on-- you know, the privatization of-- national parks in Bulgaria. They were focused on continuing pollution-- nuclear power plants.

So they-- they still had some of the old environmental problems-- that they were still dealing with. As for automation, well, you know, of course, you know, the-- the major challenge for folks in the region were A) having jobs, but also-- getting jobs that paid better form the-- their German employers than-- then, you know, or to-- to gradually get their wages up to the western Europe level doing comparable work in Eastern Europe.

So the idea that their jobs would disappear all together, that was a catastrophe that really wasn't present in their mind yet. (COUGH) But I-- I think you're absolutely right, that this is the-- the challenge, and that-- that it has pushed-- some unlikely people, and some unlikely economists to embrace-- economic alternatives that I wouldn't have expected them to embrace, like-- you know, a guaranteed-- guaranteed income, for instance.

If we're-- if so many of us are not gonna have traditional jobs as-- as we understood it, and-- in the-- industrial age, well, how do we-- how do we deal with all of the people who are-- are left outside of-- of this-- this knowledge economy that we're building? And again, I-- I didn't hear that conversation.

Now, that's not the conversation that Fidesz is having in Hungary. It's not the conversation that Picz (PH) is having in Poland. Because they are dealing with much older questions in some sense. They are still working out the issues of the 19th century-- of-- of national identity, of dealing with foreigners, of-- how to integrate minorities into-- into society. These l-- these other questions are 21st century questions. Well, they're gonna hit. And they're gonna hit hard. But these-- these parties are not prepared to deal with them.

LAWRENCE WESHLER:

Just-- just-- just to comment on that. One is that immigration is climate change, and that's the form it's--

JOHN FEFFER:

Well, that's true.

LAWRENCE WESHLER:

--that's the form it's gonna take in Europe is that people from-- you know, it-- the Arab peninsula is gonna be unlivable. And people are coming. So that's one thing. But the other thing is that it's not as though these countries, and I include the United States in all these countries, it's not as though they are losing money in the transition. (COUGH) You know, the fact of the matter is it's going to that 1%.

And-- and when I call Reagan Clintonism was a 30 year process where the smartest people in the country were not going into science and so forth. They were going into finance and into plumbing, into figuring out ways that rather than taking those huge leaps in-- in wealth and spreading them around the whole country, they were being pl-- the plumbing f-- was set up. And it took literally rocket scientists figured out how to do this. But they figured out a way to get it all to go to this top 1%. And that is gonna be the issue of-- in Europe too.

MARTIN LEE:

Thank you. About Germany, I have sort of dual question.
(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MARTIN LEE:

--do you think.
(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MARTIN LEE:

Martin Lee. I'm just an ordinary person with curiosity. I've always that Germany leapt to the fore because of the fact that it had Marshall Plan money and a destroyed industrial complex that started out new. Nobody could compete with that. And I have no knowledge of what kind of third party money came into the rest of Europe.

And they must-- I'm sure it didn't-- equal Marshall Plan kind of financing. And so they were at a huge disadvantage. And then secondly, as to Germany, are they going to be any different when there is displacement of personnel, workers, when artificial intelligence and robotics displaces so many jobs? Do you think they'll stay at the forefront?

JOHN FEFFER:

So-- so Marshall Plan money went to Germany, but it did go to other Western European countries as well. And in fact, it was even offered to Eastern European countries. This was the-- the-- an attempt to kind of drive a wedge between Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. And-- and if I remember correctly, at least Czechoslovakia was interested in taking it, but then was persuaded against it.

But the-- it wasn't just the money went as part of the Marshall Plan. It was the mechanism by which-- Marshall Plan funding took place, such that-- money was made available for manufacturing. But there were mechanisms by which the financing and the-- the purchasing-- built up connections between countries, and within-- and within the country as well, so that the money wasn't-- flowing out, necessarily-- for instance toward the United States.

So-- as a mechanism, it was a m-- a much more interesting-- plan than just-- providing funds, you know? In t-- and yes-- Germany-- did, of course, benefit as well from leapfrogging. I mean, if-- if a country can-- jump over the existing technol-- (COUGH) the previous technology to the latest technology, that gives 'em an extraordinary advantage. And that was an advantage that Japan, for instance, was able to take-- able to use as well. I-- I don't think Germany will be any-- will be-- immune from the ch-- the-- transformations of robotics an arf-- artificial intelligence.

I think, you know, the p-- the problem is-- you know, the-- what-- what both the united-- what developed countries, what industrialized countries are trying to do is-- control the-- those few jobs which are the design jobs. If you might-- you might call them the 1% jobs-- in this process.

And then manufacturing production, whether it's robito-- robotics, or it's done by low wage workers is done elsewhere in the world. As long as those 1% jobs are held by countries like Germany or United States, then the wealth will remain in those countries. And at least at GDP level, the countries will be successful. How the money is distributed within the society, that's another question. Germany has a s-- far more equitable distribution of wealth inside the country than, say, the United States does.

Although all countries, even social demo-- even countries that have more or less embedded social democratic-- systems are subject to the same kind of trends, the same kind of plumbing, if you will-- in which, largely because of the financialization of economies, money is pushed upwards toward the 1%, accumulates m-- in the hands of the 1%. So-- so even in a social democratic country like Germany, you see that polarization as well.

TINA ROSENBERG:

Are there other questions? In that case, let us briefly return to the question of the lady in the back, which was about, I believe, addiction services. Is that correct--
(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

JOHN FEFFER:

So-- I did interview-- a woman who-- at-- at-- at two points, in 1990 and in 2013, who was involved in one of the most interesting-- s-- experiments in Poland. It began in-- during the communist period. And it worked with-- the excluded in Polish society. And so those were drug addicts, but then-- increasingly-- HIV.

And it was-- a kind of community approach. It was very-- innovative. It was-- allowed by the communist authorities. And it had a pretty good success rate. So that was in 1990 when-- when I interviewed her about that. When I came back-- sh-- she, you know, h-- was pessimistic-- because-- despite 25 years, or she had been working for-- for 30, 35 years on addiction services in Poland-- it just-- things had gotten worse, not better.

The country had been-- overwhelmed by drugs coming in. And-- even though, you know, her services were still successful, you know, on a person by person basis, there was just so many drugs and so much despair that it was hard-- to have an effect on-- on a country-- on a national level. They were successful in HIV, very successful in HIV-- providing those services in Poland.

But-- but on-- on drugs-- you know-- especially with-- you know, new drugs coming up through the Balkans-- all the drugs made available as a result of the-- of the war in Afghanistan-- Poland was just inundated. And so, you know, it was-- that-- that was a depressing interview, (LAUGH) I'm afraid, with her.

TINA ROSENBERG:

And-- and on that note-- (LAUGH) thank you all for coming and spending the time with us. I heartily recommend reading *Aftershock*. As you can tell from hearing John talk, it's smart, it's nuanced, and he's got a lot of great stories. It's-- it's actually-- a great read. So thank you all. (APPLAUSE)
(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *