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Reflections on Democracy

The Iron Curtain has lifted, revealing scenes undreamt of even a year ago. Last August Solidarity became the leader of Poland's new coalition government. In the next two months Hungary codified civil and human rights and scheduled free, multiparty elections. November saw mass demonstrations in Prague and the resignation of the Communist leadership. By year-end Vaclav Havel, a dissident playwright, had been elected president of Czechoslovakia; the Romanian dictator Ceausescu had been executed; and ten thousand protesters were marching in Sofia, demanding an immediate end to Bulgaria's Communist regime.

In a matter of months, the Eastern Bloc's Communist governments fell like so many dominoes. Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania all took their first steps on the long, hard road to democracy. Multiparty elections have been scheduled for this spring. The principles of free-market economics have been widely, and fervently, embraced.

The historic drama reached a symbolic peak in early November, when the East German government knocked holes in the Berlin Wall. As thousands of citizens streamed through to visit the West, their jubilant compatriots danced in celebration on the Wall's top. A month later shoppers could find chunks of the Wall on sale in Washington, D.C., department stores: nestled in velvety pouches, each complete with a certificate of authenticity — the perfect stocking-stuffers for the Christmas that brought the end of the cold war.

A triumph of capitalism? Or a sad comment on the American way of life?

As we watch the nations of Central and Eastern Europe struggling to reorganize their economies and political systems, many of us long to offer advice. Some of them can hardly remember how democracy works;

some never really knew. We'd like to encourage them, guide them, tell them all that Americans have learned from two centuries of experience with democracy. Yet we must pause to ask ourselves: Just what can these newly democratic nations learn, and what should they not learn, from the United States?

In what follows, five authorities — on political science, law, and economics — suggest answers to this question. And, true to the American tradition, they sharply disagree.

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly newsletter. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Institute or its sponsors.

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