

## *What Do We Mean By Historical Legacy?*

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In the nearly quarter century since the collapse of communism a great many outcomes, from patterns of democratic consolidation and electoral behavior to state-society relations and cultural attitudes, have been attributed to legacies of the past. Some of these outcomes, such as a mistrust of politics or the dominance of the state sector, are attributed to legacies from the communist past. Other outcomes, such as nationalist conflict or enduring support for rightist parties, are traced back to the interwar period and beyond. What unites this research and related efforts to account for outcomes in other parts of the world is an abiding sense that to fully understand the present it is necessary to take account of the past. Yet beyond this common goal there is little consensus on what we as researchers mean when we conclude that an outcome is a historical legacy. This essay offers a preliminary assessment of that meaning.

To do this it is helpful to lay out the structure of an archetypal legacy argument. There are three components to such an argument. One is an outcome (or pattern of outcomes) that appears inexplicable, or at least not fully explicable, given circumstances contemporaneous with that outcome. For example, why should populations in Eastern Europe after 1989 have been so mistrustful of politics and political parties (Jowitt 1992)? One would not necessarily expect this given the fact that most of the parties were new, and that after roughly four decades of dictatorship the citizenry finally had an opportunity to determine its own fate. The propensity of some peoples to resist Soviet occupation is likewise not readily explainable by reference to any obvious distribution of social or economic characteristics (Darden forthcoming). The same might be said for the pattern of voter turnout in the former German Democratic Republic (Kashin and Ziblatt 2011) and of why some post-communist countries have become consolidated democracies while others have not (Pop-Eleches 2007).

A second component is a purported antecedent to the outcome that is identified as either a cause or a correlate of that outcome. The antecedent might take the form of a measurement of the outcome at a prior period, in which case it is sometimes claimed that the outcome has persisted. For example, Wittenberg (2006) showed high correlations between post-communist support for rightist parties across Hungarian municipalities and electoral results from the last democratic national parliamentary election before the advent of state-socialism. In the case of inter-war anti-Jewish discrimination in Germany, Voigtländer and Voth (2012) find a correlate in the pattern of anti-Jewish violence that occurred during the 14th century Black Death epidemic, in which Jews were blamed for spreading disease.

The identified antecedent might be a potential causal factor rather than a correlated outcome. For example, Grosfeld

and Zhuravskaya (2012) link differences in contemporary support for conservative religious parties across Polish territories to whether the territory had once belonged to the Habsburg or to the Russian empire. Likewise, Becker et al. (2011) find that there is greater mass trust of public institutions in areas governed by the Habsburg Empire than in neighboring areas ruled by either the Ottoman or Russian empires. Peisakhin (2013) demonstrates that Ukrainians on the formerly Habsburg side of the long-defunct border between the Habsburg and Russian empires have more antipathy to Russia (and greater sympathy for Ukrainian nationalism) than their Ukrainian neighbors who happen to live on the formerly Russian side, even though those areas had been in the Soviet Union (and undergone Soviet socialization) for decades.

A third component is a mechanism or channel that fills in (or at least purports to fill in) the causal links leading from the antecedent to the outcome to be explained. For example, Voigtländer and Voth (2012) claim that medieval anti-Semitism disappeared in those German towns where trade openness raised the cost of discrimination against outsiders and persisted into the interwar period where such openness never took root. Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya (2012) contend that support for religious parties in regions of Poland formerly in the Habsburg Empire can be traced back to Austria's more tolerant attitude to the Roman Catholic Church, which led to higher church attendance and ultimately more conservative politics. Likewise, Wittenberg (2006) maintains that pre-communist attachments to right-wing parties were more likely to survive state-socialism where the communists failed to destroy local church institutions. Peisakhin (2013) finds that pre-Soviet Ukrainian historical identities were transmitted even through the ideologically hostile Soviet regime if parents were consistent enough in the political messages they telegraphed to their children.

Identifying the mechanism is invariably the most speculative due to the difficulty of tracing the effect of the candidate mechanism through time. The degree of difficulty is related to the temporal distance between outcome and antecedent. In the case of the medieval correlates of interwar anti-Jewish discrimination, for example, it would be necessary to measure trade openness and eliminate alternative explanations over a period of nearly six centuries, a daunting task in the best of circumstances. Having a more temporally proximate antecedent can help, but not in all circumstances, because the difficulty of validating the mechanism is also related to the magnitude of social disruption between outcome and antecedent. Those who study Habsburg legacies on contemporary political behavior can trace their mechanism over decades rather than centuries, but these decades were marked by destructive wars and dictatorship, rendering less visible evidence for mechanisms such as churches.

Considering the three components together we can now say something more about what counts as a legacy. First, what we call the "legacy" is the outcome to be explained, not the antecedent or the mechanism of influence. This is not always clear in individual studies because not all legacy arguments are explicitly framed as such. Nevertheless, it is possible to

rephrase the result of any legacy-type argument in a way that makes the intended legacy clear. Thus, for example, the legacy identified by Wittenberg (2006) is the pattern of support across municipalities for rightist parties in post-communist Hungary. The legacy in Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya (2012) is the current pattern of support for religious parties across regions in Poland.

Second, an outcome qualifies as a legacy only if it cannot be fully explained except by reference to an event or state of affairs that occurred prior to the outcome but ceased to occur at some point before the outcome is observed. In the phrasing of Stinchcombe (1968), the outcome must have “historical” causes, such as the religious policies of the long-extinct Habsburg Empire or Soviet-era repression. Thus, although a legacy connotes continuity with the past, it cannot exist without a discontinuity of causal factors. In studies of the communist and former communist world the most important causal discontinuities coincide with the fall of communism. Popular fear of the police in post-communist Eastern Europe, for example, might be viewed as a legacy of Soviet-era police practices that ceased to exist once communism fell. But regime change is not a necessary (nor perhaps even a sufficient) condition for ensuring the causal discontinuity necessary for an outcome to be a legacy. For example, one might well point to late Soviet economic output as a legacy of Stalinist ideas of central planning. In short, a legacy is best characterized as an aftereffect of an antecedent cause that no longer operates, regardless of whether or not the underlying continuity spanned two regimes.

Finally, the temporal label we give a legacy relates to the time period of the antecedent, not of the mechanism of transmission. We refer to post-communist popular fear of the police or mistrust of political parties as *communist* legacies, for example, because we have traced the fear and mistrust back into the communist period. Similarly, Voigtländer and Voth (2012) trace the interwar pattern of German anti-Semitism back to the Middle Ages, yielding a medieval legacy. It is worth noting in the case of many legacies the identified antecedent may itself be considered an outcome with an earlier associated antecedent. In Eastern Europe mistrust of political parties, for example, may well have originated long before the advent of state-socialism. Likewise, the observed pattern of anti-Jewish violence in medieval Germany almost certainly had roots going back to even earlier centuries. It is not wrong to label the legacy according to the antecedent we have identified, but the label should not be used to infer that the outcome of interest is not in fact a legacy of an even earlier period.

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## *The Nexus of Time: Generations, Location of Time, and Politics*

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In 2008 Barack Obama was elected to be the first African American president of the United States of America. While most of us grasped the historical significance of this moment, there were clear differences in how its meaning was interpreted. To draw on a personal experience, when I talked to my ailing grandfather at the time, he expressed a tremendous amount of admiration for President Obama and seemed to hold him in the highest regards. But when we ended the conversation he said: “I am still surprised that the Americans are willing to elect a *Negro*.” A couple weeks earlier, my five-year-old daughter had asked me why this election was such a big deal. When I tried to explain to her that it was important because for the first time in history a “black man” would be president of the most powerful country in the world, she pointed to a picture of Obama and his family and said “He is not black, he is brown!” These differences in interpretation of one and the same event do not reflect differences in race, class, nationality, gender, or even personalities, but instead they result from the fact that the three of us were, and still are, members of different generations and thus are anchored in different temporal locations.

The concept of generations has been used widely in political science and the social sciences more generally.<sup>1</sup> However, at the same time, the general value and contribution of a generational approach to the study of politics has remained unclear. As a matter of fact, generational scholars themselves disagree heavily on what the correct definition of the term “generation” actually is.<sup>2</sup> In the few pages to follow, I intend to solve this conceptual confusion by arguing that the “generation” is first and foremost a unit of analysis that designates the temporal location, or position, of actors in time. This temporal location is constituted by the intersection of three temporal processes which are crucial for shaping how we experience