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Malgorzata Fidelis, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN 9780197643402 (hardcover, \$60.00).

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Malgorzata Fidelis has written an important book about socialist modernity and Polish youth. *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland* shows “how young people in Poland engaged with the political and cultural upheavals of the global sixties” (1). The book is “a cultural history of Poland from de-Stalinization until the early 1970s,” as Aleksandra Komornicka succinctly puts it in her review. The changes in the attitudes, morality, ambitions, yearnings, and preoccupations of Polish youth became apparent from the perspective of an extended decade. The *longue durée* illuminates how Polish socialism changed, too. Nonetheless, traveling magazines, critical journalism, student theatres, Big-Beat music, and progressive fashion thrived during the regimes of both Władysław Gomułka and Edward Gierek. Reviewer Joachim C. Häberlen compliments the bravura with which Fidelis demolishes what remained of the myth “that Poland was a country somehow sealed off from the world outside the Eastern bloc.” The Communist state did not cut short the ambitions of young people to become part of the global community; rather it facilitated many of these projects, often hoping to instrumentalize, weaponize, or depoliticize them in the future.

From this story, a complex picture of the regime emerges. Here, the reviewers slightly diverge on their impressions. The book, as Julia Ault notes, foregrounds “not the limitations of living under Communism...but rather what was possible.” Komornicka finds in Fidelis’s account a sense of the Polish long 1960s as “global, vibrant, and full of hope,” while Häberlen poses a question of whether the regime has “ever had more to offer than the grey boredom of Communism.”

Fidelis is attentive to the role of commodities as “global symbols.” (2) She shows how representations of consumer goods—but also cultural celebrities, which were consumed even more voraciously—“formed part of a powerful transnational imagination” and defined “the broader relations between state and society” (2). She examines the dual role of the miniskirts, packs of cigarettes, and canned drinks: on the one hand, they allowed the youth to make a mental connection with the imaginary West; on the other, they served as reminders of the existing material distance between Poland and the broader world. By focusing on “transnational connections, exchanges, and imaginations,” Fidelis expands the nation-state and system-centric approaches that have for long dominated the study of Eastern Europe.¹

All the reviewers are impressed by the range of material that Fidelis employs. Eli Rubin praises Fidelis’s “ability to mine amazing sources” that, in the words of Häberlen, contributes to the “book’s empirical richness.” Indeed, the range of sources is dazzling: “records of the Party-state institutions and youth organizations, contemporary sociological research and sex education manuals, youth magazines and the popular press, and memoirs and oral histories” are complemented by international files from, among the others, the Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute (9). Interviews with participants of the

¹ For example, John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

events additionally enrich the narrative by adding “subjective emotions and meanings that they assigned to their experiences” (10).

Fidelis paints a generational portrait that is “full of color, desire, and rebelliousness,” as Rubin phrases it. At the same time, she is very attentive to the diversity of experiences of youth in the late 1960s. Gender and socio-cultural background are the major categories of distinction of how youth imagined the world. Here, Fidelis returns to dissecting the position of young women in the socialist society that she initially explored in her first pioneering monograph.² In *Imagining the World*, she focuses on reproductive rights and sexuality. As she explains in her thoughtful response, this is a way for her “to challenge the Western hegemonic narrative” by positing that the East was far more progressive than the West as far as the “modern young womanhood” was concerned.

Young people from rural areas are the other youth group that the book follows closely. For Rubin, the letters written by teenagers and young adults from the countryside as a response to magazine competitions are “the most moving, and fascinating, part of the book.” These memoirs shed light on how young people conceptualized the world around them and how they perceived themselves.³ As all the reviewers concur, understanding how global modernity was perceived and experienced in the villages, small towns, and a city enriches the narrative of the Polish sixties. As such, the monograph is a valuable addition to the dynamically developing scholarship on the history of Poland told from the perspective of peasants and rural communities.⁴ Incorporating various viewpoints further complicates the picture of Polish society, and, as Ault notes, reveals “how modernization dynamics played out differently outside of the cities.”

The study of youth allows Fidelis to show the stratification of Polish society in the twentieth century, and she does so with great lucidity and sensibility. Still, as Fidelis acknowledges in response to the reviewers’ comments, the book does not and could not capture every young milieu within the vibrant and rich landscape of the sixties. Nor could the book address every pertinent matter of the time, leaving some events, such as socialist solidarity in the context of Polish youth engagement with Eastern Europe and the Global South mentioned by the reviewers, outside of the picture.

The final remarks of the reviewers concern the persistence of the themes that were debated in the sixties in contemporary debates in Poland, but also globally. Rubin refers to environmental concerns, while Ault discusses to decolonization. Komornicka points that “the role of the Catholic Church, Polish-Jewish relations, women’s rights, or urban-rural divisions...still cause tensions in Polish society today.” Häberlen wishes to see more about the legacy and repercussions of “the development of a novel sense of selfhood, of novel ideals and lifestyles (around the globe)” today. In her response, Fidelis acknowledges that her work on this project was underpinned by the concern of how to “integrate Communist Eastern Europe into

² Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ See, for example, Katherine Lebow, “Autobiography as Complaint: Polish Social Memoir between the World Wars,” *Laboratorium* 6:3 (2014): 13-26.

⁴ On a review of the historiographical trend, see Agata Zysiak’s review essay in *Slavic Review* 82:1 (2023): 184-93.

sixties studies and vice versa.” *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland* masterfully achieves that as it portrays Polish youth as both socialist and global citizens.

Contributors:

Malgorzata Fidelis is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She teaches courses on Modern Europe, Eastern Europe, Gender, and the Global Sixties. Her research focuses on social and cultural issues, particularly everyday life and the relationship between individuals and state power in post-1945 Poland. Her articles appeared in the *American Historical Review*, *Journal of Women's History*, *Slavic Review*, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire*, and *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* among others. She is the author of *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge University Press, 2010; Polish-language edition, WAB, 2015), which explores how Communist leaders and society reconciled pre-Communist traditions with radically new norms imposed by the Communist ideology. Her most recent book *Imagining the World From Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2022) won the 2023 Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America's Oskar Halecki Prize and an Honorable Mention of the Association of Women in Slavic Studies' 2023 Heldt Prize.

Katarzyna Jeżowska is a cultural historian of Eastern Europe and a Lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. Her first book project, entitled *Socialist by Design. The State, Industry, and Modernity in Cold War Poland*, examines the Communist government's interest in material objects as part of cultural diplomacy.

Julia E. Ault is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Utah. Her book, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–1990*, appeared with Cambridge University Press in 2021. She is currently developing a second book-length project on the social, environmental, and political impacts of East German development projects in Communist and nonaligned countries during the Cold War.

Joachim C. Häberlen is a historian of modern Europe. He holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and worked, from 2013 to 2022, at the University of Warwick. After quitting academia, he lives and works in Berlin. His works include, most recently, *Beauty is in the Street: Protest and Counterculture in Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2023); *Citizens and Refugees: Stories from Afghanistan and Syria to Germany* (London: Routledge, 2022), and *The Emotional Politics of the Alternative Left: West Germany, 1968–1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). He also published numerous articles and book chapters on the West German alternative left during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Aleksandra Komornicka is an Assistant Professor at the Maastricht University. Her research covers international and economic history of the post-war Europe in particular the history of the Cold War,

European integration, and business. She is an author of *Poland and European East-West Cooperation in the 1970s: The Opening Up* (Routledge, 2023).

Eli Rubin is Professor of History at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is the author of *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (North Carolina, 2008) and *Amnesiopolis: Space, Memory, and Modernity in East Germany* (Oxford, 2016). He is working on a material culture and spatial history of war and destruction in German cities during World War II entitled *The Arc of Destruction: A Material Culture and Spatial History of War in German Cities During WWII*.

In this exciting new monograph, Małgorzata Fidelis investigates how Polish youth perceived, made sense of, and adapted to the transformations of the long global sixties into their own socialist environment. Over the course of eight thematic chapters, Fidelis vividly recounts the myriad of ways that Polish youth reacted to and participated in a postwar global modernity from the Thaw of the late 1950s through the beginning of Communist Party leader Edward Gierek's years in power in the 1970s. She draws on a wide range of sources from newspapers and magazines to sociological studies and oral histories to illuminate "young people's subjective worlds," and to "uncover the complexity of individuals and society" (10). Fidelis importantly specifies that Polish youth did not simply copy developments in the West but made sense of them in their own way as they pursued their own understanding of freedom. Through this lens Fidelis convincingly argues that Poland never left Europe, as was claimed after 1989 when it "returned," but that it had always envisioned itself as deeply connected to Europe and the world. This approach crucially presents a fresh interpretation of postwar Polish history, histories of Eastern Europe, and gender history. Fidelis also speaks to a growing scholarship on the Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe's connections with—to use Cold War terminology—the first and third worlds.¹ *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* makes particularly significant interventions on how Polish youth interacted with the world beyond Eastern Europe, underscoring the porousness of the Iron Curtain in unique and insightful ways.

The book compellingly illuminates how young Poles participated in globalized trends, though, at least in the 1950s and early 1960s, very few were able to cross the Iron Curtain. This emphasis on engagement despite the limitations on travel and personal experience outside of the bloc recognizes the many ways that youth in Communist Eastern Europe were not oblivious to distant changes but intimately involved in them. With the Thaw in the late 1950s, Polish publications were more open, tackling previously taboo topics that ranged from decolonization to Polish antisemitism. Youth also adopted and adapted the clothing styles, music, and attitudes of a larger shift in modernity in the long 1960s. Here, Poland played a unique role as the most open Communist state, a positioning that Communist officials seem to embrace, too. It was easier to obtain Western media than in some Eastern European countries, and eventually travel into (for foreigners) and out of Poland increased, too. These connections, along with hosting the 1955 World Youth Festival, theater productions, the sharing the political reform ideas of 1968, student-oriented journals and magazines, and more, highlight oft-overlooked means of engagement in Communist Eastern Europe. Polish youth were not cut off from the world but interacted with it through the different avenues that were open to them.

¹ James Mark, Paul Betts, Alena Alamgir, Péter Apor, Eric Burton, Bogdan Iacob, Steffi Marung, and Radina Vučetić, *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Tobias Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Max Trecker, *Red Money for the Global South: East-South Economic Relations in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

Notably, Fidelis considers not only urban, educated youth; she also devotes attention to rural youth by interrogating how modernization dynamics played out differently outside of the cities. She considers both the relatively rapid transformation in villages—within a few generations—and what that meant for youth, especially for women. While still facing domineering fathers and traditional patriarchal family structures, women found opportunity and freedom in education, increased mobility, and the club-café. Fidelis deftly illustrates the uneven character of development in the villages, too. Women experienced significant change in rural areas, but young women still faced a much more conservative social milieu than their urban counterparts. They did not tend to have as many opportunities for education or economic and personal freedoms. The more traditional beliefs of parents and families, the social power of the Catholic Church, and prejudices against urban culture remained very much present. As a result, many women who sought change in the village through club-café or sex education often eventually left for the city.

The Polish youth's enthusiastic embrace of a "globalized sixties" also shaped the period that followed with the beginning of the Gierek era in the 1970s. As Fidelis points out, Gierek's promise to build a "Second Poland" would be fulfilled with young people as its backbone. The regime continued to look globally for solutions, including the heavy borrowing from the West to improve material conditions and the availability of consumer goods. Unlike its closed next-door neighbor in East Germany, Poland offered Western goods such as Coca-Cola and Marlboro cigarettes for purchase. Additionally, over time, more Poles were permitted to travel abroad, including to France, Great Britain, and the United States in the 1970s, while more foreigners traveled to Poland. Though Polish culture and society became more liberalized and globalized, Fidelis argues that in the 1970s, the state took greater political control over potential youth and student movements. Even the popular magazines, such as *Around the World*, that had brought the world beyond the Iron Curtain to Poland, were shut down. The Gierek regime essentially "domesticated" the trends of the long 1960s in part by depoliticizing the "transnational imagination" (201).

Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain impressively complicates and nuances our understanding of Poland, especially Polish youth, from the Thaw through the mid-1970s. Fidelis deftly reveals the myriad of ways that Polish youth engaged with globalized notions of change all while mostly remaining within the country's borders. This emphasis on how globalized ideas influenced Polish youth—and in turn how Polish youth adapted those ideas to fit their own situations—is important to overcoming traditional narratives of gray despair behind the Iron Curtain. Fidelis reveals a vibrant flurry of intellectual activity and an assertion of the subjective experience in defining a modern Poland. She convincingly articulates not the limitations of living under Communism (though of course limitations abounded) but rather what was possible.

Her book fits with a growing literature that examines the Eastern bloc's connections (physical and virtual) to the rest of the world. This body of scholarship reveals how Communist states changed and were changed by trends that have sometimes been discounted as removed or disconnected from their experience.² Much

² James Mark, Paul Betts, Alena Alamgir, Péter Apor, Eric Burton, Bogdan Iacob, Steffi Marung, and Radina Vučetić, *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Quinn Slobodian, ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015);

of this literature has placed Eastern Europe in conversation with the decolonizing world, considering experts sent abroad and foreign students and workers residing in Eastern Europe.³ In contrast to these works, Fidelis importantly shows how ideas from abroad had an impact on youth in Poland. In doing so, she explicitly focuses on how Polish youth imagined the world beyond the Iron Curtain and engages extensively with influences from the “first world” and significantly with the “third world.” Yet a discussion of connections within the “second world” might have contributed additional insight into influences on Polish youth, especially after the disillusionment of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. Contextualizing Poland within Communist Eastern Europe might have further highlighted ways in which Poland was both unique and representative of the region and its regimes. This minor criticism aside, Fidelis masterfully illuminates the vitality and the global interconnectedness of Polish youth during the “long sixties.”

Theodora Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

³James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Eric Burton, Anne Dietrich, Immanuel R. Harisch, and Marcia C. Schenck, eds., *Navigating Socialist Encounters: Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021); Sara Pugach, *African Students in East Germany, 1949-1975* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022); Marcia C. Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World: Socialist Mobilities between Angola, Mozambique, and East Germany* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023); Christina Schwenkel, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

It is perhaps wise to briefly outline the perspective from which I discuss Malgorzata Fidelis's fascinating book about Polish youth and its relation to the wider world from the 1950s to the 1970s. I am not an expert in Polish history. Geographically, my research has focused on German history, and for the period after 1945 on West German history, though I have always sought to place German developments into broader European contexts; thematically, I have worked on protests and countercultures, again with a transnational outlook.¹ Indeed, one of my goals in both teaching and collaborative research was to develop frameworks for analyzing and narrating European history across national borders, including the Iron Curtain divide. I thus approach Fidelis's book as someone who is not familiar with the archives she uses, does not know the Polish historiography she engages with, and many of the topics she is discussing are new to me.²

All that said, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* is a book that deserves a wide readership of those who are interested in the long 1960s on a European or even global scale.³ For what Fidelis effectively does is demolishing the myth, if it still exists, that Poland was a country somehow sealed off from world outside the Eastern bloc. And it would be interesting to know if this is also true for other countries behind the Iron Curtain. Fidelis at least suggests that Poland was somewhat of a special case.

The following review highlights two interrelated narrative and argumentative strands that stood out, even though focusing on them clearly does not do justice to the book's empirical richness: first, how Polish youth participated in a global (counter-)culture, albeit with distinct national twists; and second, that a global gaze at times could have politicizing effects resulting in opposition to the regime, but at times also result in depoliticization.

The story Fidelis tells starts in the mid-1950s after the death of Soviet leader Iosif Stalin, when throughout Eastern Europe Communist regimes loosened their grip on society and allowed for more liberties: a period known as the Thaw. In Poland, this entailed an opening up to the world. In magazines such as *Around the World*, Poles could read "stories from real life [around the world], from games, from entertainment"; they could see "pictures from parties, cafés, and restaurants" in exotic places. The magazine offered fun and practical advice, and all that with almost no political propaganda (14). Young Poles adopted cultural practices from abroad (in this instance mostly the West), high and low, for example in theatre production,

¹ Joachim C. Häberlen, *The Emotional Politics of the Alternative Left: West Germany, 1968-1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Joachim C. Häberlen, Mark Keck-Szajbel, and Kate Mahoney, eds., *The Politics of Authenticity: Countercultures and Radical Movements across the Iron Curtain, 1968-1989* (New York: Berghahn, 2018); Joachim C. Häberlen, *Beauty is in the Street: Protest and Counterculture in Post-War Europe* (London: Penguin, 2023).

² Fidelis draws on records of Party-state institutions, youth organizations, memoirs and diaries, some thirty newspapers and magazines, and more than twenty oral history interviews (9).

³ On transnational and global dimensions of the long 1960s, see for example Timothy S. Brown, *Sixties Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jian Chen et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (London: Routledge, 2018); Samantha Christiansen and Zachary Scarlett, eds., *The Third World and the Global 1960s* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

fashion, or beauty pageants. And not least, Poles could encounter youth from around the world at events like the World Youth Festival that was held in Warsaw in the summer of 1955. Seeking to promote a “socialist internationalism,” such reports and festivals were a turn away from “worn-out appeals to working-class solidarity,” instead celebrating internationalism “through gendered and racialized fantasies of male desire” (29).

The Thaw did more than open Poland to the world, it also came with hopes for political liberalization, hopes that were crushed with the Soviets’ putting a violent end to the Hungarian uprising in 1956. But as Fidelis notes, young Poles still yearned to participate in global modernity; they enjoyed jazz music, danced the twist, rioted at rock ‘n’ roll concerts just like their counterparts in the West, while teenage girls wore pants, or in acts of provocation, red pantyhose (39). Those were developments the regime could not simply suppress. Hence, it sought to deemphasize “political and ideological agendas” (41), while embracing such cultural practices as part of a socialist modernity. Surveys, which had to be officially sanctioned, for example, allowed youth to describe themselves as “an apolitical supporter of the socialist system” (46), a choice that proved highly attractive to respondents. The life goals of young Poles indeed looked remarkably un-socialist: they wanted to “accumulate wealth, achieve professional credentials, and be in love” (47). In that sense, too, Fidelis argues, Polish youth culture resembled that of the West, in that it participated in a common modernity. Labelling such materialist values and cultural practices modern but apolitical, the Communist regime allowed for young people to extent the “boundaries of acceptable modern behavior” (60). Yet, this was a dangerous strategy. For what young Poles effectively learned from youth magazines was that “the West was the core of youth culture” (69). This youth culture promoted “a new understanding of the self and the individual’s relationship with the modern world that could hardly be sustained by the idea of a disciplined socialist citizen” (80). The seemingly apolitical focus on leisure, on fashion, music, and films, in other words, was inherently political, with dangerous implications for the Communist regime.

In the Spring of 1968, politics returned with a vengeance, as it did around the globe. Already in the years leading up to this iconic year of revolt, critically minded students had started confronting authorities. Contrary to the “dominant historical interpretations” that claim that students were mostly interested in “personal growth and consumption” rather than politics, and had to be “politically awakened” in March 1968 (81), Fidelis shows that at least a faction amongst them were eager readers of politically critical literature. In 1962, students at elite high schools in Warsaw, including later leading dissident and journalist Adam Michnik, formed a “Club of Seekers of Contradiction” (97), which eventually evolved into an informal group known as Commandos, a name that alluded to their political tactics: just like “specialized military units” (98), they unexpectedly took the floor at events like lectures and official meetings to challenge Communist orthodoxy from a radical leftist perspective. These students shared a desire for “total freedom,” for “adventure and a pursuit of new experiences” (98) with the counterculture in the West.

When these students protested against the cancellation of Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz’s play *The Forefathers’ Eve*, two of them (Michnik and political economy student Henryk Szlajfer) were expelled from Warsaw University, sparking a wave of protests in March 1968. In a rich chapter, Fidelis places these protests in the context of the global revolts of 1968. Students on the Polish left were as dissatisfied with official Communist ideology as their Western comrades, they equally criticized American imperialism in Vietnam

and Soviet imperialism in Eastern Europe, thereby moving “beyond the Cold War divide” (104). Polish leftists, that is, placed themselves on a “global map of oppression and liberation” (124), a move that allowed them to liken their situation to that of movements struggling for colonial liberation. However, engaging meaningfully with the situation in the so-called Third World proved difficult. Ultimately, Fidelis argues, the perspective of Polish leftists remained Eurocentric, and references to struggles in the Third World were merely “a metaphor for their own geopolitical situation” (124). The regime, which responded with an antisemitic campaign against the student protests, then effectively destroyed any political vision of an “alternative transnationalism” (125) that tried to forge unlikely alliances between those oppressed by American imperialism and those oppressed by Soviet imperialism. While Western leftists ignored the latter, Polish regime opponents (who ceased being part of a global left in the wake of 1968) ignored the former.

With the end of the political revolt, transnational aspirations lost their political dimension. Just as in the West, the counterculture, with its “hippies, artists, and other subversives” (127), cherished a lifestyle that valued love and friendship, respected the environment, and challenged societal norms by ways of dressing and hairstyling. This was not an open critique of the Communist regime; yet, their “search for authentic subjectivity” (128) had a political dimension.⁴ They rejected national allegiances and instead identified with an international movement. According to a man going by the name Prophet, in a document titled *How to Become Free*, it was necessary to leave “the nation so as to sever its ownership over yourself because of the language [or because of] blood, race, or borders” (134). Wearing “long floral dresses,” and walking around “barefoot” in the streets of Warsaw was a way of performing an alternative subjectivity that was easily recognizable by like-minded youngsters looking for comrades. At the same time, it expressed a critical stance towards “the greyness of the Communist system,” as one former hippie recalled (149). The geopolitics of imperialism and anti-colonial resistance, in other words, did not matter much to hippies. Politics, as it were, moved inside, into people’s very subjectivity.

The desire to participate in a transnational young modernity was not limited to cities. Hippies of course travelled the country, but even more importantly, rural life, too, was deeply affected by global trends, as Fidelis shows in a brilliant Chapter 7. To young men, motorcycles or Italian-made scooters promised freedom beyond the confines of traditional village life and allowed for expressing a novel form of masculinity. Meanwhile, young women took leading roles in managing club cafés that offered a social alternative to the Church and expressed their sexual desires by wearing urban fashion that defied conservative village norms. For the regime, this was a welcome development, as it seemed to signal the integration of the countryside into a national culture in which an urban, rational modernity rather than the Catholic Church set the tone; for young villagers, especially for young women, becoming part of the global sixties was a liberating experience of personal “autonomy” (182).

The book’s final chapter takes the story into the 1970s. According to the conventional narrative, Poles enjoyed “unprecedented consumer opportunities, economic growth, and a more extensive global opening” (185) under Edward Gierek’s reign as First Secretary of the ruling Polish United Workers Party lasting from December 1970 to September 1980. Not contesting these developments, Fidelis nevertheless offers a

⁴ Fidelis here refers to my co-edited volume *The Politics of Authenticity* (see footnote 1).

different interpretation: in the 1970s, the regime tried “to domesticate the developments of the global sixties in Poland” (185). After the turbulent 1960s, the regime claimed to have fulfilled the demands for cultural modernity and authentic subjectivity. The revolt had achieved something within the existing social and political structures. State media, for example, portrayed young fathers with beards and guitars—clear allusions to the hippies—as quintessentially modern. Student magazines printed eroticized photos (of women) to promote a healthy and modern sexual life. The time of revolt, in other words, was over, but it was now possible to live a modern life without being in opposition to the Communist regime.

Overall, Fidelis’s book offers an immensely rich and lively portrayal of Polish youth culture from the 1950s to the 1970s. Young Poles, she demonstrates, participated in a global modernity; like their counterparts in the West, they rebelled against an ossified Marxism, looked for transnational allegiances across the Iron Curtain, and searched for authenticity in their individual lives. To conclude this discussion, I would like to raise two questions, one of which is more conceptual, the other of which considers the aftermath of the long 1960s.

Fidelis makes an impressive case for placing Polish history of the long 1960s into a wider geographical context. Yet, as convincing as this point is, at times, the framing of the argument made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. Polish youth found inspiration in the West. But, I wondered, is the reverse also true? There are some examples of Polish voices reaching the West, but with the exception of the 1964 *Open Letter to the Party* by Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, both of whom leftist dissidents within the ruling Polish Workers’ Unity Party who had been actively involved in the Thaw, (cf. 107ff), those were not particularly influential ones.⁵ To play devil’s advocate for a moment: if the history of Poland in these years cannot be understood without reference to “the West,” then Polish historians surely need to know a bit about Western youth cultures and protest movements like those of 1968. But do historians of Western Europe need to know anything about Polish history and Fidelis’s findings? More than once the West functions as an interpretative foil. For example, Fidelis notes that “scholars have interpreted the rise of youth culture in the West as an outgrowth of the postwar economic boom” (44); no such boom occurred in Poland, she points out. How, then, can we explain the Polish youth culture? The answer, that expectations for the future mattered rather than numbers, is convincing.

Here and elsewhere,⁶ however, it is the West that sets the agenda, both historically and analytically. To give another example, Fidelis reports that Western correspondents visiting the Warsaw bookfair of 1962 were “pleasantly surprised” to find both “Eastern and Western books exhibited” in almost equal weight (78). It is hard to imagine a Western bookfair at the time that would have showcased Eastern books in similar numbers. Perhaps the West did set the agenda: after all, youth magazines did portray the West as the “core” of global youth culture. Arguably, Poles looked much more to the West than Westerners looked eastwards (that is, to the Communist bloc) for inspiration. But would it be possible to avoid re-producing this directionality in our analyses and narratives? How does the book change our thinking of Europe’s long

⁵ Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, *Open Letter to the Party. Revolutionary Marxist Students in Poland Speak Out (1964–1968)*, trans. Gerard Paul (New York: Merit, 1968).

⁶ See, for example, the discussion of the counterculture in the West, 137.

1960s in ways that historians of Western Europe need to acknowledge? To be clear, Fidelis's book has much to offer for historians of Europe, Western or Eastern. Yet, I would also urge historians—and would be keen to hear Fidelis's thoughts on this—to develop analytical frameworks that avoid taking the West as the (implicit) starting point.

My second question concerns the longer repercussions of the 1960s' cultural rebellions. At the end of the final chapter, it appears as if the regime had successfully "domesticated" the rebellion, allowing for cultural freedom while tightening its political grip. The conclusion briefly extends the story to the revolutions of 1989 that ended Communism across Eastern Europe. Fidelis mentions the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) that not only included veterans of the 1968 protests but also "built on the sixties ethos of inclusion and political empowerment" (206). While this is noteworthy, it does not address what I would consider the crucial question: did this domestication really work? Was it indeed possible to reconcile the novel subjectivities celebrating creativity and autonomy that emerged in the context of rebellious countercultures with the socialist regime and its societal model?

To commit the sin of using a Western interpretation as a foil myself: in the West, scholars have argued, the values and ideals that countercultural circles promoted in opposition to capitalist society—creativity, autonomy, emotionality, and so on, all things that, critics in the 1970s had argued, were stifled by capitalism itself—ultimately helped transform capitalism in a neoliberal way.⁷ Take yoga and meditation: once seen as a way to escape from the capitalist pressure to constantly perform, they now promise to help dealing with work-related stress, and thus to be more creative and more productive.⁸ Was a similar transformation of Communism in Poland, and elsewhere, possible; or did the promotion of individual freedoms, of consumption rather than hard physical labor (which was, of course, celebrated by old Communist Parties) for the common good of socialism ultimately undermine the regime's authority? In other words, did the regime ever have more to offer than the grey boredom of Communism from which one of the hippies whom Fidelis cites (149) wanted to escape? They joyous happenings Orange Alternative that was organized in the late 1980s seem to suggest otherwise: life was still unbearable boring, and only the happenings offered a brief respite.⁹ Probably those are somewhat tendentious questions. Nevertheless, I think it would be worthwhile to think more about the long-term repercussions that the development of a novel sense of selfhood, of novel ideals and lifestyles (around the globe) had in the Polish context.

Those question, though, are not meant to question the quality of Fidelis's important book. To the contrary, they indicate how stimulating a read the book was. It deserves a wide readership of scholars interested in the 1960s on a global scale.

⁷ See above all Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005); Andreas Reckwitz, *Das hybride Subjekt: eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2006).

⁸ See my discussion in Häberlen, *Beauty*, 330.

⁹ On Orange Alternative, see Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. 190; Major Waldemar Fydrych, *Lives of the Orange Men: A Biographical History of the Polish Orange Alternative Movement*, trans. David French (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2014).

For anyone researching socialist Poland, whether through archives, the press, or oral history interviews, the importance attached at the time to the world behind the Iron Curtain might come as a surprise. Desired, demonized, missed, or patronized, the world outside socialist Poland remained a central point of reference for Polish society as well as the regime. In her new book, Małgorzata Fidelis deliberates on precisely this phenomenon.

Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain is a cultural history of Poland from de-Stalinization until the early 1970s. It focuses on Polish youth and its interaction with the world from behind the Iron Curtain. However, the book takes neither “youth” nor “world” nor “interactions” as fixed categories, instead presenting them with all the nuance they deserve. “Youth” includes not only well-known political activists engaged in the protests of 1968, but also for instance a girl who wore miniskirts in the countryside of Silesia (175); an African student in Wrocław who attracted female attention (86); and a hippie who lived in a commune in the Bieszczady Mountains (144). The “World” is not simply the “West.” Fidelis carefully differentiates between the the “West” and the Global South, demonstrating all the complexities of the interactions between the “First World,” “Second World,” and the “Third World” during the Cold War. Moreover, for some of Fidelis’s actors, the “world” could be another socialist regime or a different town in Poland. Finally, the “interactions” take multiple forms and are more often based on the imagination than on empirical experience. In a truly transnational manner, the book depicts these cultural influences as travelling in various directions, not only from the Western core to the peripheries. As such, Fidelis argues that the relationship with the world outside was critical for the making of Polish youth culture in the 1960s and that this culture of the 1960s shaped the following decades of Polish socialism and post-socialist Poland.

In painting this broad picture of the Polish long 1960s in a global context, Fidelis makes excellent use of the latest literature. The rich historiography on youth and the global 1968 serves as a point of reference for the study of the Polish case, providing it with a comparative perspective.¹ The studies on global socialism, in turn, pose questions about the effectiveness of socialist solidarities and globalization projects, with which the book engages.² By focusing on these global interactions among the socialist regimes as well as those with capitalist countries, the book adds to the booming field of literature which undermines the role of the Iron

¹ See, for example, Jian Chen, Martin Klimke, Masha Kirasirova, Mary Nolan, Marilyn Blatt Young, and Joanna Waley-Cohen, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020); Robert Gildea, James Mark, and Anette Warring (eds.), *Europe’s 1968: Voices of Revolt*, First Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, Detlef Junker, and Daniel S. Mattern, eds., *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

² See, for example, James Mark, Artemy Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, eds., *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); For a review of this literature, see: James Mark and Tobias Rupprecht, “The Socialist World in Global History. From Absentee to Victim to Co-Producer,” in Matthias Middell, ed., *The Practice of Global History: European Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019): 81–113.

Curtain in studying post-war history.³ While Fidelis ends her narrative in the early 1970s, she argues that the cultural changes of the long 1960s played a pivotal role for the 1989 transition and post-socialist Poland. With this claim, the book contributes to another new trend in historiography, which focuses on the continuities between the socialist and the post-socialist, thus blurring 1989 as a major turning point.⁴

On top of adding to these fields of literature, the book makes two major independent contributions. First, it reinterprets the Polish history of the long 1960s. Second, it further broadens the scope of the analysis. These contributions secure the book's place in the canon of literature on Polish socialism and open avenues for further research.

The reinterpretation of Polish socialist history starts with the timeframe of the analysis. Fidelis consciously refuses to subject her narrative to the rigid periodization imposed by political history. Instead, she focuses on the years 1954–1973, which correspond to the lifespan of *Dookoła Świata* (Around the World) magazine. Taking the magazine as an epitome of the long 1960s' culture, the author skillfully shows how the cultural changes outlived the major political turning points.

In escaping the political perspective, the author paints a picture of the 1960s that is radically different from the one found in conventional takes of Polish history and the popular imagination. In contrast to the grey, economically stagnant, technologically backward, and increasingly authoritarian era of the Gomulka regime, which is usually present in the literature of socialist Poland, the reader is confronted with the diverse cultural life of Polish youth. The book's cover fantastically captures the spirit of the Polish long 1960s that we find in Fidelis's narrative—global, vibrant, and full of hope.

However, the author does not shy from engaging with the major political developments of socialist Poland. Władysław Gomułka's take-over as a party leader in 1956, the 1968 protest and antisemitic campaign, and the workers' strikes of the 1970s are all covered in this book. However, in each case, the author's take differs from those found in conventional interpretations. In contrast to the "national way to socialism" narrative,

³ On top of the literature on the global socialism this includes in particular studies on contacts beyond the Iron Curtain in Europe, see, for example, Sari Autio-Saraso and Katalin Miklóssy, eds., *Reassessing Cold War Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); on studies on European détente, see for example, Angela Romano and Federico Romero, eds., *European Socialist Regimes' Fateful Engagement with the West: National Strategies in the Long 1970s* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020); Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, and Helle Porsdam, eds., *The "Long 1970s": Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); and on studies on specific socialist regimes, for example, Victor Petrov, *Balkan Cyberia: Cold War Computing, Bulgarian Modernization, and the Information Age behind the Iron Curtain* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023); Aleksandra Komornicka, *Poland and European East-West Cooperation in the 1970s: The Opening Up* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁴ James Mark, Bogdan Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska, *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); on intellectual continuities, see, for example, Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); on economic continuities, see, for example, Pula Besnik, *Globalization Under and After Socialism: The Evolution of Transnational Capital in Central and Eastern Europe* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

chapter one presents the Polish thaw as a moment of tension between the national ambitions of the Polish regime and youth transnational solidarities fueled by the international promise of the socialist project. By placing the Polish 1968 in a global context, chapter six excellently teases out similarities and differences between Polish and other protest movements across the world. This chapter could very well find its place in the curriculum of courses covering the events of 1968 at universities worldwide. In the end, *Fidelis* depicts the workers' strikes in December 1970 as part of the youth movement, reminding the reader that many of its participants, including Lech Wałęsa, were then only in their twenties (186-187).

Fidelis shows the cultural interconnectedness between Poland and the rest of the world by examining how foreign influences were received and remodelled in the Polish national framework and by contextualizing the Polish experience of the 1960s modernity. References to Western European youth magazines (67-68) or the situation in the countryside (156-157) testify to the impressive breadth of the author's perspective and point to the parallelism of cultural trajectories on both sides of the Iron Curtain in Europe. Moreover, this parallelism concerns not only various faces of 1960s culture but also the political responses which followed (185). *Fidelis* argues that we should see the Polish socialist regime of the 1970s as part of a global phenomenon of responding to the cultural revolt of the previous decade.⁵ Indeed, Edward Gierek's regime assimilated travel, consumerism, and hippie aesthetics. Similarly, Western democracies incorporated women's rights and new forms of politics, leaving the commodification of hippie aesthetics to private actors.⁶

This last part of the author's argument, namely the role of youth culture in the political outlook of the regime, opens questions for further study. *Fidelis*'s contribution makes a strong case for a bottom-up understanding of the history of Poland under socialism and beyond. However, in doing so the author draws a thick line between society and the socialist regime. While paying attention to various socialist youth organizations and recognizing the importance of generational change in the Polish United Workers' Party in the late 1960s, the author portrays the regime, and thus the people behind it, as cynical and interested only in maintaining stability. In the spirit of the 1968 anti-establishment language, *Fidelis* describes socialist officials as instrumentalizing counterculture (151) and "buying societal compliance" (185). The inclusion of the perspectives of young party activists would have brought some nuance to the portrayal of the regime and could have fit with the book's interpretative framework. As *Fidelis* argues, the legacy of the 1960s resonated beyond the socialist period. Poland's political landscape after 1989 was shaped not only by the participants of the 1968 student protests but also by the post-socialist elites, whose many members had also been young in the 1960s. How they experienced the cultural transformations of this period and to what extent this experience informed their subsequent political choices are questions which remain to be tackled.

⁵ Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁶ On long-term consequences of 1968 for Western democracies see Philipp Gassert, "Narratives of Democratization: 1968 in Postwar Europe," in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds., *1968 in Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 307-24.

A smaller piece of the puzzle, which is very characteristic of Poland and is missing in Fidelis's analysis, is emigration. Polish emigration, which was larger than that of other socialist regimes and was also particularly culturally active, was a very important channel through which contacts with the outside world were maintained in the socialist period. Naturally, such contacts were restricted by the regime and limited to the individuals who were privileged and lucky enough to have such connections. However, they played a major role in reducing the distance between socialist Poland and the world outside. Except for key political and cultural emigration centers in Paris and London, Polish-Polish contacts beyond the Iron Curtain are still overlooked in the historiography of the socialist period.

The second major contribution of *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* has to do with the scope of the analysis. On top of dealing with the major events in Polish and global history, this book brings to the fore various overlooked Polish cultural phenomena. These include, for instance, the history of student theatre, female dormitories, youth responses to the 1956 revolution in Hungary and the 1968 revolution in Czechoslovakia, locally invented drugs, and café clubs. Global and local, male and female, and "high" and "low" are all tied up in a lucid narrative offered in Fidelis's book. All this is achieved through impressive research. The popular press, youth magazines, records of youth organizations, memoirs, and oral histories provide a solid base for the advanced arguments.

However, the lucid narrative and rich source base are not the only qualities which make Fidelis's contribution so compelling. *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* is also particularly timely. While the 50th anniversary of 1968 celebrated the memory of the global protest movement, in the past five years that youth protests have started to mushroom again. Challenges to authoritarian regimes in Hong Kong, Iran, and Belarus and movements that are centered around common transnational causes, such as "Black Life Matters" or "Fridays for Future," demonstrate this phenomenon. In her conclusion, Fidelis invites the reader to think about the long 1960s in this context.

Even more than for the global protest movement, Fidelis's book is timely in the context of Poland. Some features that characterized Polish culture in the long 1960s belong to the past. Other topics, which are important for Polish cultural life in the 1960s, however, are not so different from those that are being debated in the 2020s. The questions concerning the role of the Catholic Church, Polish-Jewish relations, women's rights, or urban-rural divisions, which recur in Fidelis's study, still cause tensions in Polish society today. So does the fundamental question of the relationship with the "world," which is now understood as the "West."

The presence of such continuities further highlights the importance of revisiting and reinterpreting periods already covered by historiography, such as Poland's long 1960s. The contemporary context can awaken our sensibilities and draw our attention to previously neglected historical problems. *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* is an excellent example of that.

Malgorzata Fidelis's fascinating new book, *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain: Youth and the Global Sixties in Poland*, paints a portrait of the postwar generation of young people in Communist Poland that is full of color, desire, and rebelliousness. Often the 1960s and the youth counterculture associated with it are assumed to have been mostly a Western phenomenon, with one exception, namely, the Prague Spring. In popular imaginations, the signifiers of youth counterculture—hep cats and beatniks, jazz clubs, hippies, experimenting with drugs and sexual freedom, and a heart-achingly naïve idealism about changing the world for the better—are usually situated in Berkeley, Paris, West Berlin, or Milan, but not Warsaw or Krakow.¹

Fidelis shows us definitively that, even though there were no dramatic, focused events like the Paris student uprisings, the Woodstock music festival, or the Prague Spring, Polish youth in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s were anything but tame and obedient. Analyzing magazines aimed at young people in Poland, interviews which she conducted with members of the youth culture, and a trove of other sources of Polish popular youth culture, Fidelis shows us a milieu in which young people pined for Western movies stars like Brigitte Bardot and Gina Lollabrigida, or wanted to *be* them; smoked cigarettes like real beatniks in jazz clubs, yearned to make connections with other young people from all around the world, grew their hair long and tried to live in off-the-grid communes, rode motorcycles, sunbathed in bikinis, danced the twist and debated politics and culture openly—rarely while doubting the basic tenets of socialism as a superior ideology to the capitalist West. Fidelis also shows us a Polish state and Communist Party that were constantly caught in a dilemma, wanting on the one hand to show that socialism could deliver a “good life,” a modern life with modern amenities, including consumer goods and modern cultural trends, and not trusting either the rebelliousness of the young generation or its overall commitment to the project of building state socialism in the postwar era.

There was a tension in Poland between wanting to demonstrate that socialism was capable of furnishing and allowing for a modern, cosmopolitan life which embraced the mass culture—from jazz to Vespa to bikinis—that was shared by the rest of the world, on the one hand, and on the other, a fear that the allure of the West, of youth culture, of “mass culture” was not just apolitical but amoral, or even perhaps ultimately anti-socialist. This tension is at the heart of Fidelis' work. Whether it was movie stars and motorcycles, or countercultural icons like beat poet Allen Ginsberg and musician Jimi Hendrix, the yearning of young Polish people in the 1960s for the most recognizable and famous representatives of Western, often American, culture was problematic.

Fidelis quotes Jean-Luc Goddard's expression to characterize 60s Polish youth as “the children of Marx and Coca-Cola” (100).² However, this expression is more nuanced than Fidelis perhaps gives it credit for,

¹ Fidelis cites, for example, Arthur Marwick's work which focuses on the 60 in Britain, France, Italy, and the US. See Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Transformation in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States c. 1958–c. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² The term comes from Goddard's 1966 film *Masculin Féminin* (Argos Films).

because while the desire to be a child of Marx and Coca-Cola was real, the possibility presented a real dialectical internal contradiction. Young people wanted to fashion a new generation, a new path forward for their milieu, which was a ubiquitous sentiment in the 1960s. But the book suggests that they lacked any cultural forms other than Western ones with which to construct that new collective identity. And they seem not to have realized that if pieces of Western culture were reaching them, like Coca-Cola or Vespas, then these were probably the result of a long process of commodification, alienation, labor exploitation, and colonial and neocolonial exploitation, and even ecological imperialism. Coca-Cola is only “cool” if you remain trapped in the sway of its fetishism and its aura, which were created entirely by the corporate marketing geniuses of the West, à la the final scene of the television series *Mad Men*.

Fidelis makes clear that aside from some outliers, like Polish activist Adam Michnik, most Polish young people in the 1960s believed in socialism, even if they were—like many of their counterparts in the West—also critical of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and its allied states. But what did socialism even mean to them? For many, as she notes, it simply meant the kind of comfortable consumer-centric modern life that they saw in commodified snippets of Western life, usually from movies and magazines. As she notes, a majority of Warsaw students thought that the US and Switzerland were socialist countries, because they had higher standards of living than Poland (96). Again, this highlights the Scylla and Charybdis for Eastern Europe in the Cold War—citizens, including especially young people, desired the kinds of consumer goods and styles that they saw coming from the West, but that was in part merely because things like Coca-Cola and Vespas (and the companies that made and marketed them) were so adept at stoking, channeling, and focusing desire. But the manipulation of desire, especially when it is a desire for authenticity and self-actualization and “freedom,” is one of capitalism’s superpowers. It is a slippery slope, so it is understandable that Polish government officials like Włodzimierz Sokorski (the head of the Commission for Radio and Television, a Party apparatchik who exerted a lot of influence over what elements of popular culture were permitted) might think that by giving Polish youth an inch, they would end up taking a mile (53). On the other hand, what good was socialism if it did not deliver a better version of modernity than capitalism, and if it did not let people have Coca-Cola or Vespas or jazz records?

So, officials like Sokorski had to walk a fine line in terms of arranging for Polish youth to have access to Western “mass culture” without the deleterious, dangerous “slippery slope” that it entailed. One of the most interesting parts of Fidelis’s narrative is precisely the way it describes how officials and other commentators and observers tried to re-frame morality as the key factor that would allow youth in socialism to have fun, but not too much fun—a move that is made even more interesting by the overwhelming presence of Catholicism in Poland. In some ways, this is the main story of Fidelis’s book, one that might have been emphasized a little more.

Imagining the World is perhaps at its most fascinating when it examines the lives of young people outside the big cities and universities. While the story of beatniks and hippies in Communist Poland is colorful and fascinating, like in the West, we do have to stop and ask why a cultural trend in which a very small percentage of the population, let alone young people, participated, receives such a disproportionately outsized amount of attention in popular depictions, retellings, and even academic histories? The “Commandos,” a rebellious, worldly, and sophisticated group of hipster university students, mostly in

Warsaw, which included Michnik at one time, get a lot of attention here, and their stories are both fascinating to read about and are important. But it almost seems as if they are described in response to the many now legendary tales of such young rebels in the West, as if to highlight the fact that Poland had its Neal Cassidy and Jerry Garcia too. Fidelis thus argues that the years after 1989 were not a “return to Europe” as they have often been labeled in Poland, because Poland always was a part of Europe, at least in this area. It seems however, that there is more here that emerges from the narrative that is interesting and illuminating beyond simply saying that there was youth 1960s culture in Poland, too.

For example, to me, the story of the Commandos is less interesting in of itself, and more telling when we get to observe the impact of the youth culture of the 60s as it filtered into conservative, rural small villages in which a majority of the country still resided, and which Fidelis describes as still lagging far behind modern times in the 1960s—for example, having only one TV per village, if that (170-171). Or, when young people left these villages and came to the city to attend university, something on which the Communist state prided itself. This included one young woman from a rural area, who, arriving in Warsaw to attend university, showed up at a party held at an apartment of one of the Commandos, and felt very much out of place, commenting that the other young women there knew how to wear sweaters that accentuated their figures, and knew how to flirt—and she had neither such sweaters nor the knowledge of where to get them, nor how to wear them, nor how to flirt for that matter (99). This captures the moment of cultural transmission from the elites to the more general population, and it is of great importance in this narrative in my view.

Perhaps the most moving, and fascinating, part of the book is when Fidelis explores piles of letters sent to magazines, as part of prize competitions for the best memoirs, in the 1960s. These competitions were part of an attempt by the state to bring a much higher level of education and sophistication to rural communities, to bring the “world to the village” as Fidelis entitles her chapter. These letters reveal a great deal about everyday life in Poland, in Polish small towns in the 60s. Here we learn that young women in small towns did try to copy the trends they saw in magazines, like wearing miniskirts or sunbathing in bikinis, or even copying the boys and getting ahold of a motorcycle, to star perhaps in their own version of *Easy Rider*. They also wrote about being abused at home, at trying to get their parents to modernize, get a tractor instead of a horse, to stop living an outdated rural lifestyle, and join the modern world. This resource is perhaps the best of the various treasures that Fidelis finds in her research, because it allows us to see into the lives and the minds of Polish youth in the 60s who were not part of an elite of an elite, or a minority of a minority, that is, those who smoked and snapped in jazz clubs or grew their hair long on communes.

It is Fidelis’s ability to mine amazing sources like the magazine letters that makes *Imagining the World* such a rich narrative of youth culture in the 1960s in Poland, a narrative that has been missing, especially in the English language literature on Communist Eastern Europe. The field of Eastern European Cold War history has produced an impressive amount of work on the role that some elements of popular everyday culture have played in Eastern Bloc countries, especially from the viewpoint of consumption, fashion, housing, urban renewal, even car culture, including work by Lewis Siegelbaum, Paulina Bren, Brigitte Le

Normand, Steven Harris, Kimberley Zarecor, Katherine Lebow, Emmanuela Grama, and others.³ But this work does not overlap with the myth of the rebellious 60s, which is largely perceived to be a Western phenomenon. To the extent that scholars have paid attention to countercultural movements in socialism, it has been focused on the environmental movement—which did grow from the counterculture of the 60s, but only really developed into a political force with the power to mobilize the population in the 1980s.⁴

³ See Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–56* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Emmanuela Grama, *Socialist Heritag: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019); Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism in Belgrade* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014); and Lewis Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008) and Siegelbaum, ed., *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁴ See for example Tobias Huff, *Natur und Industrie im Sozialismus: Eine Umweltgeschichte der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) and Julie Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Writing a book about the sixties in Poland was as enjoyable and fun as it was challenging and frustrating. On the one hand, I got to work with captivating sources, including colorful youth magazines, hand-written memoirs of rural young people, and oral interviews with intriguing personalities. On the other hand, interpreting these diverse materials within the broader Polish and global context presented continuous struggles and questions, which are also reflected in this round table. How do we integrate Communist Eastern Europe into sixties studies and vice versa? I would like to thank the reviewers—Julia Ault, Joachim Häberlen, Aleksandra Komornicka, and Eli Rubin—for their incredibly insightful and rich reflections. They not only engage with the arguments in my book, but also wonderfully deepen the broader quest for “thinking the global sixties.” My gratitude also goes to Kasia Jeżowska for writing the Introduction, and to Seth Offenbach for not only organizing this round table but also skillfully overseeing the process. I could not have envisioned a more expert panel from the field of central and eastern European history to discuss my book. The reviewers bring diverse subfields and methodologies to the table, including environmental history, economic history, the history of material culture, and the history of protest movements, among others. All have effectively employed transnational approaches in their own work, an endeavor I also aspired to in my book.

Reading the reviews was a delightful and humbling experience for me. I appreciate both the words of praise and the meaningful critiques that prompted me to look at my work and the sixties in new ways. In fact, in many instances, the round table participants have articulated and even expanded upon my arguments more effectively than I managed to do in the book. In addition, I greatly benefited from the extensive bibliographical references that the reviewers provide.

In focusing on the subjectivity of young people in the “periphery” of the Cold War I was attempting to decenter the Western experience, a task that, as noted by Joachim Häberlen and Eli Rubin, could perhaps have been better executed, especially at the methodological level. I will revisit this point later in my response. At the same time, from the perspective of the historiography of Eastern European Communism, I aimed to demonstrate that the nation-state and system-centric approaches are insufficient. I proposed looking at postwar Poland through the lens of transnational connections, exchanges, and imaginations. Julia Ault highlights the importance of such research “to overcoming traditional narratives of gray despair behind the Iron Curtain.” The transnational approach also suggests a different periodization of the postwar era from the traditional one found in political history. In this regard, I particularly appreciate Aleksandra Komornicka’s description of the book as “a cultural history of Poland from de-Stalinization until the early 1970s.”

The focus on youth agency brought to light the diversity among young people, and I am particularly pleased that all four reviewers appreciate the chapter on rural youth. Joachim Häberlen’s reference to this chapter as “brilliant” is especially humbling for me. I am grateful for the reviewers’ recognition of the unique sources and perspectives “from below” that I used in discussing the experiences of rural youth. Eli Rubin’s comment that delving into the memoirs of rural young women and men constitutes “the most interesting part of the book and the most compelling aspect of the sixties—when we get to observe the impact of the

youth culture of the 60s as it filtered into conservative, rural small villages” is particularly affirming. Equally intriguing, and perhaps an aspect I could have developed further, is the “cultural transmission” evident in descriptions of young rural people moving to universities in urban areas and interacting with (or resisting) the elite culture of the sixties.

I will now discuss several key questions posed by the reviewers, which have made me rethink and expand my perspective on the themes in this book. The reviewers highlight areas in the book that would have benefited from further elaboration. Several note specific categories of youth that warranted more in-depth analysis, including those from other socialist countries (Ault and Häberlen) or socialist youth activists (Komornicka).

The vibrant and rich landscape of the sixties meant making some hard decisions about which areas or actors to feature while keeping the book manageable and coherent. I agree with Ault’s assessment that additional analysis of the East-East interaction “might have further highlighted ways in which Poland was both unique and representative of the region and its regimes.” I chose to focus on Polish youth’s interactions mainly with the West and the Global South for two reasons. First, Polish youth often found places outside their socio-political context more intriguing and enigmatic, as evidenced in youth magazines and personal accounts. These regions, which were less accessible for personal travel, offered a richer repository for diverse ideas and interpretations. Second, I wanted to avoid shifting the book’s focus back to Communist state-driven East-East connections. The state heavily influenced youth exchanges within the Eastern bloc, and I wanted to keep the spotlight on the youth rather than the state’s role.¹

In a similar way, Komornicka raises critical questions about generational shifts within the ruling party, highlighting “the young socialist activists’ succumbing to similar trends in youth culture as the rebellious students.” I agree that this change among socialist activists was crucial for the negotiated transition to democracy in the late 1980s. This idea partially addresses Joachim Häberlen’s query about the long-term consequences of the sixties, as they affected not just students who protested but also those who saw no need to rebel. While my book does not specifically focus on this group, I consciously avoided drawing stark distinctions between party and non-party members, as these boundaries were often fluid. For example, student activists from the official Polish Student Association played a key role in promoting countercultural activities, including persuading party officials to integrate these events into official culture. Boguslaw Litwiniec, the director of the International Theater Festival in Wrocław, who worked within party-state structures to broaden cultural expression and international connections, exemplifies such an activist. Indeed, further analysis of these attitudes could have been beneficial, possibly contributing to a clearer argumentation regarding the permeability of state-society boundaries.

¹ For further discussion of East-East relations see Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

Moreover, the contributors raise important conceptual questions. Häberlen articulates a key challenge I faced in researching and writing this book: moving away from the Western-centric narrative of youth culture that is prevalent in historical literature. Häberlen notes:

Fidelis makes an impressive case for placing Polish history of the long 1960s into a wider geographical context. Yet, as convincing as this point is, at times, the framing of the argument made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. Polish youth found inspiration in the West. But, I wondered, is the reverse also true?

In a similar way, Eli Rubin recognizes that young people sought “a new path forward for their milieu, which was a ubiquitous sentiment in the 1960s.” He observes, however, that “the book suggests that they lacked any cultural forms other than Western ones with which to construct that new collective identity.” Häberlen further asks about the potential for creating an analytical framework that transcends a Western-centric perspective: “Arguably, Poles looked much more to the West than Westerners looked eastwards (that is, to the Communist bloc) for inspiration. But would it be possible to avoid re-producing this directionality in our analyses and narratives?”

These questions, which address the broader challenge of applying global perspectives in historical research that avoid replicating Western methods and mindsets, are critical.² Addressing these issues requires an engagement in dialogue with historians of Western Europe—a term that itself merits deconstruction. To shift the analytical framework, we need more empirical research and a concerted effort from historians to critically examine “the West” as a construct that was shaped by transnational influences. Many historians of Western Europe are now examining how colonies (and post-colonial states) influenced pivotal European developments such as the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and more recently, 1968.³ Ironically, while this shift towards the “empire” and overseas colonies is a welcome trend, it unfortunately tends to further marginalize Eastern Europe. As we strive to “decolonize” our fields, it is crucial to recognize the diversity within Europe itself and to reflect on the dynamics between the “core” and the “peripheries” within Europe.

When writing this book, rather than experimenting with new analytical frameworks, I tried to destabilize some of the existing ones primarily through empirical research. Throughout the book (and I acknowledge that this could have been done more systematically and forcefully), my aim was to demonstrate that youth culture was not inherently Western, even though it was often perceived as such. It emerged from transnational exchanges. For example, jazz and rock music originated in African-American influences, while the hippie fashion and lifestyle drew heavily from South Asian cultures, particularly that of India. My understanding of youth culture was influenced by Andrew Ivaska’s book, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender, and*

² For a stimulating discussion on global approaches to history and the difficulty to de-center Western-centric modes of analysis even as we “add more places and examine the connections between different spaces” see “For a Fair(er) Global History,” The EUI Global History Seminar Group, European University Institute, Florence, 3 February 2021 <https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/cromohs/FairHist> (last accessed 28 January, 2024).

³ See, for example, Burleigh Hendrickson, *Decolonizing 1968: Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam. The book portrays youth culture in postcolonial Tanzania, including the adoption of miniskirts and playing soul music, not as mere Western “borrowing,” but as arising from “a long history of Tanzanians’ cosmopolitan reworking of the signs and symbols of the global mass culture industries.”⁴ It can be argued that the West, like all other regions, has engaged in a similar process.

I have no doubt that Eastern Europe was one of those locations that affected youth culture in the West, although I consider this question to be beyond the scope of my research. The global proliferation of new left movements testifies to the impact of the Communist East, even if only as a reference point, in shaping global consciousness. More extensive research on these topics is still needed. I am eager to see historians of Western Europe explore questions about the impact of socialist experimentation, both grassroots and state-led, in countries like Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia (which also engaged in the non-aligned movement) on Western youth’s “imagining of the world.”

Another area in which I tried to challenge the Western hegemonic narrative is that of sexuality and reproductive rights. I argue that the concept of modern young womanhood was more progressive in the East than in the West, especially at the start of the sixties. My analysis reveals that the sexual revolution (or “the sexual evolution,” as historian Dagmar Herzog has suggested) was not a Western import, but a grassroots movement influenced by postwar social and political changes, including women’s legal and economic independence.⁵ As historian Josie McLellan notes about East Germany “... in some cases, changes in East German sexual behavior were more radical than those that took place in West Germany and elsewhere in the developed world.”⁶ In Poland, as I argue, the search for a secular morality by political and intellectual elites fostered progressive sexual attitudes and supported women’s control over their reproduction. A 2021 interview with Polish feminist and politician Barbara Labuda offers a perspective that calls for a reassessment of both the history of feminism and East-West relations during the Cold War. Labuda, who traveled to France in 1968 at 22, recalled her surprise at the limited women’s rights there compared to Poland. She stated: “I was working at a university, while [French] women needed permission from a father or husband to open a bank account! We had the right to abortion for over ten years, and their fight for it was just beginning. The People’s Republic of Poland was prudish, but back then we were more progressive than them.”⁷

Historians of Western Europe have yet to fully recognize and incorporate new research by scholars such as Kristen Ghodsee and Francisca de Haan which highlights the significant contributions of female leaders from Eastern Europe and the Global South in shaping international human rights definitions, including

⁴ Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender and Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

⁵ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 192. See also Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶ Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

⁷ Quoted in Katarzyna Wężyk, *Aborcja jest* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2021), 229.

those of women's rights with an emphasis on material conditions and intersectional identities.⁸ As I suggest in my book, these formulations might have been started in the domestic arenas of socialist states by historical actors who were situated on the boundary between state and society such as female writers, educators, and journalists. Their observations of youth played a significant role in shaping their conception of the "modern world," necessitating a deep revision of global understandings of both gender and humanity.

I acknowledge that these arguments could have been highlighted further, but I was also mindful of maintaining a balance between narrating my story, which is centered on Polish youth's social practices, and refuting Western-centric approaches. Perhaps the focus tilted more towards storytelling. Nevertheless, I hope that *Imagining the World from Behind the Iron Curtain* opens questions for fruitful future explorations. These explorations are critical to understanding our own world, which, as Häberlen suggests, has been "transformed in a neoliberal way," and not without the help of sixties movements. In a slightly different way, Komornicka notes the relevance of the global sixties to Poland today: "The questions concerning the role of the Catholic Church, Polish-Jewish relations, women's rights, or urban-rural divisions, which recur in Fidelis's study, still cause tensions in Polish society today." The persistence of key debates about social identities and relationships, along with the issues of oppression and liberation in the context of an interconnected world that originated in the sixties, speaks to the long-term impact of that era. If, following Immanuel Wallerstein's claim, the sixties were a period of rupture, then we are currently engaged in searching for and piecing together the fragments that emerged from that break.⁹

⁸ Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); and Francisca de Haan, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, "1968, Revolution in the World System: Theses and Queries," *Theory and Society* 18:4 (July 1989): 431-449.