

The Great Reconstruction after 1945: Lessons for Post-Covid Politics?

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The Bologna Institute for Policy Research (BIPR) hosted an online seminar in which Mark Gilbert discussed the great reconstruction in Europe after 1945 in light of current events. The talk began with a definition of reconstruction. Gilbert stressed that while Covid-19 has caused sorrow and economic dislocation, it cannot be compared to the Second World War, which – contrary to Covid-19 – was not a natural phenomenon and is considered the greatest catastrophe in human history. After 1945, Europe had to be rebuilt in its entirety, and faced economic, political, and infrastructural challenges, but most of all the challenge of reconstructing its morality after the sheer brutalities of the war.

The reconstruction took place in the frame of the Cold War, which Gilbert considers a struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union for their relative spheres of interest, driven by the need to provide welfare. Western Europe won the Cold War by increasing overall consumption levels and prosperity, while the Soviet Union pursued productivism rather than consumerism. This process of levelling in Western Europe brought about greater equality between social classes, which Gilbert regards as the essence of the great reconstruction. The economic process of levelling also took place on an institutional level, as institutions like the NATO, the Council of Europe, and predecessors of the European Union promoted liberal international ideas and helped foster greater equality. This has also been referred to as Americanization of the world, as the United States assumed a benign hegemony in an attempt to integrate Western Europe and Japan into a global economic system. Gilbert mentioned decolonization, the democratization of Europe, and the rise of the human rights discourse as further characteristics of Cold War Europe.

Lessons to be taken away from the Great Reconstruction revolve less around the possibility of a new Cold War between the United States and China or a Marshall Plan-like stimulus provided by the European Union in times of Covid-19. Rather, Gilbert finds that greater social cohesion was crucial in Cold War Europe and has helped countries like New Zealand, Norway and Taiwan weather the current crisis. Thus, a return to flatter and more egalitarian societies seems relevant. Moreover, American moral and material leadership was essential for post-War reconstruction. Lastly, Gilbert proposed that the biggest challenge of today is not that of Covid-19, but the challenge of Africa, and called on Europe to show the same generosity and altruism that the continent received by the United States in the post-war period.