

ly anything one would expect “in the history of Western modernism.”

Underlying it all seems to be a strange—at least to Western eyes—economic, cultural, and political dynamic. Many galleries are backed by real estate developers who, reports artist and critic Vine, use them “to attract high-end clients to new business or residential spaces.” Many entrepreneurial print and photo artists sell their work directly to customers—and perhaps secretly inflate sup-

posedly limited editions. And all of this happens under the not entirely benevolent eye of the government. President Jiang Zemin’s “Theory of the Three Represents” address in 2000 named artists as one of the “advanced forces” of society. While Jiang’s remarks placed the work of Chinese artists in a new political context, it remains to be seen whether the government will continue to allow China’s contemporary art scene to expand in new and provocative directions.

No Thanks, Comrade

“Explaining Labor Weakness in Post-Communist Europe: Historical Legacies and Comparative Perspective” by Stephen Crowley, in *East European Politics and Societies* (Summer 2004), SAGE Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

With great fanfare, the European Union (EU) added 10 new states to its 15-member lineup this summer. The newcomers are poorer than their Western European neighbors, and eight of them—including the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia—are still shaking off the effects of long communist rule. Hardly anybody thinks it’s going to be easy to mesh them into the EU, and Crowley, a professor of politics at Oberlin College, points to a surprising source of difficulty: massive differences between East and West in the role and power of organized labor.

The EU is built on a “social Europe” model, with powerful labor unions that represent the broader political and economic interests of workers at the national level in addition to negotiating wages with employers. Along with industry and business, these labor groups play a leading role in forging a wide variety of government social and economic policies. But in the former workers’ paradises that recently joined the EU, organized labor is weak, decentralized, and rapidly losing members. It resembles American labor a lot more than it does its Western European counterparts.

The rate of labor union membership has been declining throughout Europe, but in the postcommunist states it has been plummeting, dropping from high levels around the time the Berlin Wall fell to only 29.7 percent of the working population in the pe-

riod 1995–97—and much of that strength is concentrated in the stagnant industries that remain state owned. (The comparable rate in Western Europe at the time was 33.7 percent.) The decline occurred despite a period of postcommunist economic transition and upheaval “equal to or worse than the Great Depression.” Real wages have declined, yet the postcommunist unions have rallied workers for only a small number of strikes.

Crowley brushes aside competing explanations and pins the blame for labor’s weakness on the legacy of communism. During the communist years, unions were vehicles of the state and allies of management more than they were representatives of workers. The taint survives. According to surveys, people in the postcommunist states have less trust in unions than in any other civic institution. Union leaders, including those who helped undermine the communist system, have provided little direction, unsure “whether they should be defending their workers against capitalism or helping to bring it about.”

Some observers think that integration into the EU will promote the transformation of Eastern Europe’s unions into something more like, say, Germany’s. Crowley is skeptical. Lacking legitimacy, fundamentally weakened by their drastic decline, and still directionless, the unions of Eastern Europe don’t have great prospects. As the EU strains to draw the continent together, Eastern and Western labor remain oceans apart.