

Festival of Ideas

Lea Ypi

In conversation with Andrew Kelly

Andrew Kelly: Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. My name is Andrew Kelly. We're honoured to have with us today Lea Ypi, Professor in Political Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Adjunct Associate Professor in Philosophy at the Australian National University, and award-winning academic and writer. We're talking today about her new book, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History*, published late last year. It was book of the year for many reviewers and commentators. It's a memoir, family history, the story of the end of Albanian communism, but also about generational disillusionment and, most of all, what it means to be free. It has many lessons for us today. Lea, thanks for joining us.

Lea Ypi: Thank you very much for having me.

Andrew: We should start with Albania. When I was much younger and getting interested in politics, I was keen, very much, to learn about socialism and communism. I read Marx and others. But of all the communist countries I looked at, Albania was the one I knew least about. I knew it had a unique position in the communist world. But how did communist Albania emerge? And why did it make its own way?

Lea: It was indeed unique. By the time I was growing up, it had severed relations with every other socialist state that there was, more or less, in the world, as well as being an enemy of capitalist states, so it was completely cut off and isolated, and it had come to this isolation progressively. The Albanian Communist Party was founded in 1941, heavily influenced by Yugoslav communists, but, like Yugoslavia, Albania was the only other country in Europe that was liberated from fascists and Nazis without the help of foreign powers, either of the West or of the East, as with the case of the

Soviet Union, and so it had this more or less autochthonous communist tradition which had developed in parallel with other traditions.

But Albania was also a recently founded state. It became independent as a country from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, and the communists came to power officially in 1946. So as you can see, it's only these 34 years of its history that were a combination of liberal right-wing governments and a monarchy for a while, and then it was occupied by the fascists and then the Nazis, and then there was the post-war period. And as I say, the Albanian Communist Party came to power with the help of Yugoslav communists both in the way in which the Party was founded, but also afterwards, in conducting the resistance against the fascists, there was a joint effort with Yugoslav communists. But then, when Tito severed relationships with the Soviet Union and decided to take Yugoslavia on its own more or less non-aligned independent path to socialism, Albania stood loyal to Stalin and to the Soviet Union, and broke relationships with this neighbouring country, Yugoslavia, where a number of ethnic Albanians lived in Kosovo.

Then it had this period of alliance with the Soviet Union, which was broken when the Soviet Union de-Stalinised – in other words, when, following the Twentieth Congress, Khrushchev decided to revisit the cult of Stalin and to take the socialist government in the Soviet Union in a slightly more moderate direction compared to the Stalinist period. So that happened in 1956, there were a few years of sort of transition, and then in the 1960s Albania went its own way again. It had an alliance with China for a while during the 70s, which also broke when Chinese communists became more moderate. And so after the death of Mao, with the Deng transition and change in China, at that point Albania was completely on its own.

And that's when I was born – in 1979, just after the break with China. That is why my childhood in Albania was a childhood in this country

that was completely isolated from every other country in the world, and which was marked by this ideology of fights against both the imperialist West and the revisionist East. And it was a country with a lot of hardship and isolation. So economics, as you can imagine, it was self-sufficient economically. We didn't have a lot of trade relationships with other countries. We produced everything in Albania, more or less. And also politically quite oppressive, though I wasn't aware of this, as you know from reading the book. These were all truths that I learned later and put together afterwards.

Andrew: But you were a great believer, weren't you, in Albania being on the road from socialism to communism?

Lea: Yes. I was living in this country which I knew to be isolated, but because I also knew it was isolated because of the rest of the world, in a way. There was this idea that Albania was the only country in the world that was really committed to socialist freedom and was really committed to making this transition from socialism to communism work. We couldn't travel. We couldn't leave Albania. As I say, there were lots of queues, economic scarcity. And these were all sacrifices that were mentioned in school as sacrifices that were worth making in the name of this bigger ideal and in the name of this fight. The slogan was that Albania was the last lighthouse of anti-imperialism in the world, and it fashioned itself as this model for other smaller Marxist-Leninist movements in other countries which tried to model themselves after Albania when they tried to distinguish themselves from the Soviet Union, for example, of which Albania condemned this imperialist effort. So, for example, when the Soviet Union invaded Prague in 1968, that's when Albania left the Warsaw Pact, in the name of this tradition of alliance and solidarity with smaller countries who were suffering from Soviet Union imperialism.

Andrew: We don't often get an insight like you've provided us. What was it like to write a memoir as against a more traditional political history?

Lea: It was a gradual process for me. And it was also a process of discovery. I didn't set out to write a memoir. I wanted to work on freedom, and I wanted to write a book on freedom which could be read by lots of different people from lots of different traditions, and also from lots of different political persuasions, because I wanted it to be a book of dialogue and challenge and to make it as accessible as possible. I wanted to leave behind my academic background and write about ideas as they are reflected in history. Not just the macro-history of the countries, but also the micro-history of the people who live in those countries and its ordinary day-to-day relations. And as I started writing this book about ideas, there was more and more detail from my life in Albania that came, to talk both about the good and the bad, about the promises and about disillusionments. I've always been a great fan of literature that tried to talk about philosophy as well, and of philosophy as conveyed through literature. And that's why I think the book turned out to be what it is. It's not that I wanted to write a memoir – I didn't really want to write about myself. I just wanted to write about freedom as seen in a particular place and at a particular time, with both the belief in it as an ideal but also the disillusionments that come with it when it turns into political reality. And then, gradually, this work of filling out the concept turned out to be more and more detailed and more and more connected to my own life.

Andrew: Your book, in the main, covers the period 1990 onwards when the great shift happened, and you talk about it both in the macro sense and in the micro sense. You talk about the great change in the country, the political system, the economy, but also about the great personal changes as well – your family, what you knew about your family and their past, how your parents changed during the transition, even about land ownings that your grandmother had in Greece, and your great-grandfather. Talk us through some of those shifts that happened, economically, politically and personally.

Lea: The first shift was the move from socialism to something else, to a liberal, capitalist market economy. And that was in a way the strangest shift, because I had lived through the first 11 years of my life thinking that the point of view of the family and the point of view of the state, as it were, were aligned, and thinking that I was this socialist citizen in a socialist country whose citizens were also all committed to this set of socialist ideals. There were, in my childhood, glimpses of... not knowledge, but some kind of insight that something was different, that there's something about me that was a little bit strange. One of the things that was strange was that I spoke French from a very early age – in fact, it was my first language – and at one point, I became very reluctant to speak it because I realised that I was unique in speaking French. And my grandmother wasn't French. She'd never been to France, she didn't come from French family, but somehow I had grown up with this other language, which was strange and mysterious, and often a source of conflict and sometimes bullying in the neighbourhood or in school, and so on.

And I had also occasionally wondered whether my parents and my family were as committed as I was to the party and to Enver Hoxha, who was a socialist leader. One of my earliest memories was the funeral of Enver Hoxha. I remember watching it with my family on television, and lots of people being really upset by his death and women crying on the streets. I remember at one point my parents were talking about the funeral music, which to me seemed very strange, because there was this kind of big grief of the whole country and this massive loss of this leader. Anyway, during my childhood there were all these episodes in which sometimes I wondered whether my family wasn't a bit strange, but I didn't really ever have an answer to that. Sometimes they spoke about strange things that happened to relatives.

A big theme in my family, throughout my childhood, was universities and the fact that we had lots of relatives who've gone to university.

My grandfather, I was told by my grandmother, had been to university for 15 years to do research and had had to leave my father and so on. And it was only when the system changed, and the Secretary of the Politburo announced that the system was changing by saying that Albania would no longer be a one-party state but would be a pluralist country, that my parents and my grandmother gradually began to reveal who we were and who they were and what they believed. And it turned out that they weren't at all committed to socialism, that in fact they had grown up in this country, and my parents had grown up for the last 40 years, effectively hating the system and looking forward to the day when it would come down.

And they also told me that the reason for this was that they came from these different families, both of whom were enemies of the state as it were. My grandmother's side were aristocrats and intellectuals and political leaders, my mother's side were property owners who had owned lots of property before the arrival of socialism and had been expropriated. And both of these two families were class enemies, according to the rhetoric of communist Albania, which was a rhetoric that I had grown up believing in. It was very strange for me to discover that this enemy that I had always projected outside was, in fact, an enemy within my family, and the people I had to be most wary of were the people I lived with and who brought me up. So this was the first big transition.

And from then on, there was this moment of symbolic conquering and freedom, and the idea that Albania had been a completely isolated state which had craved freedom for its whole post-war history, and that my family was a family that wanted to have these political freedoms and pluralism and so on, who had lived a life of being on the wrong side of history as it were. And then in 1990, things changed. There was a moment, a turning point for my family, where they went from being enemies of the state to being people who were now somehow supposed to be in charge of post-

communist Albania. My mother got involved in politics and my father was involved in some of the economic reforms that were implemented in Albania in the post-communist period. And for me, it was a time of great change, because I went from being in this country that was completely isolated and cut off from the rest of the world, to having all the opportunities of the West and all the things that people from the previous generation had been craving, which had arrived in a somewhat distorted fashion to me and to my generation. And from having lived this childhood that was really protected and, in a way, ignorant of the world, to being in this teenage period where you were open to all the influences and also to knowledge about the world, which didn't always come in in a pleasant form.

Andrew: One of the things which comes across strongly is the profound impact this had on you. You not only were growing up as a teenager, which is often not the easiest period to grow up in, but also this enormous shift that was happening. You talked about this time being a time of fear and confusion, and that things were one way and then they were another – I was someone, then I became someone else.

Lea: Yes, this is really something that I feel I'm still processing and that maybe people from a whole generation from that part of the world are also still processing – this idea that you had a childhood and the life that was predetermined in the way it was going to go if the system had stayed the same, and which in my case wouldn't have been at all a good life because I think, as my parents explained to me when things changed, there was a sense that your biography, the family that you came from, really shaped your life opportunities and also how many opportunities you'd be given in the new society and if you remained a kind of enemy of the state.

And so there was a sense in which I was going to be someone... my father always said, the best thing that you could hope to be is

someone who works in the mine as an engineer or something, because people from these dissident families could never study humanities, they always went to sciences. If they were given the opportunity to study, it was always maths or some other sciences. So I would probably have done, at best, if I had been allowed to go to university, a scientific degree, and ended up working somewhere completely different, building an industrial state or whatever it was that the state of Albania would've been by that point. And you have this rupture, where everything that you expect the future to be as a child, and also everything that you somehow projected yourself into being, turns out to not be possible anymore, because the system has changed and because everything else around you is different. So you find yourself somehow completely different with a completely different set of beliefs and ideology around you.

And the thing that I found most difficult, and that I feel I'm still processing in a way, was the sense that my parents lived with this idea that they had craved freedom and they missed this freedom their entire lives but they were too late to enjoy these freedoms and it was now my responsibility to make the most of it and to make the most of these opportunities. Part of me, while I was a teenager, didn't feel free in that way, because there was a lot of insecurity. It was not safe to go out on the streets, new things were emerging like drugs and sex trafficking and local mafia. So there were all of these social ills that came with opening up very rapidly to market economy and this new set of political freedoms and also a new discourse around individual responsibility, which I felt that I wasn't disoriented by, but I found it really hard to take responsibility for myself under these new circumstances.

And, because of the circumstances in which this freedom was being materialised, to actually believe that it was really freedom. I grew up with this sense of detachment from the kinds of things that my family had believed and my parents' generation was committed to,

and with a sense of wariness – that not everything was as it looked and not every promise had been maintained, and while it was freedom for some, some others suffered, and while we were told that we could travel, the borders were shut to Albanians. There were a number of cases where the discourse was one of ongoing liberation but to me the practice just looked like a different form of un-freedom – perhaps not controlled by the state, perhaps not imposed by a particular agent, but a sense that there were constraints that were shaping people's lives in fundamental ways and not always in a good way, even though in my case, it was a lie that turned out for the better because I had all these opportunities, and I could study and I could study what I wanted, I could read what I wanted and so on. So this was the second part, I guess, of this, the circumstances in which one's identity forms, which is this movement from being a childhood that is marked by dogmatism to teenage years that are marked by this scepticism around everything around you.

Andrew: You've talked about this in terms of your parents...doing a complete shift on what they believed...after the big change. But you first encountered it, didn't you...at the start of the book: you contrast hearing the demonstrations for freedom and democracy while you're near the statue of Stalin.

Lea: Yes, that was the first time I noticed this divorce between a point of view that I had absorbed through school and through state television – state television referred to these protesters as hooligans, and hooligan was a word that we didn't really have in Albania, didn't really know. When I asked my parents, they explained that it had to do with stadiums and football matches that turned violent and Western countries being degenerate somehow. But I also remember that I ended up in this protest by mistake and I could hear these protesters, and that was the first time that I thought, well, this is supposed to be a free country and we are supposed to have freedom, so why is it that people are shouting outside? And for a few

weeks, there was some going back and forth between what the school said and what the teacher said, because the rhetoric was still there and the ideology was still there and it was all still being maintained, to the moment in which things changed and the state collapsed. And from then on, overnight, the discourse also changed in school.

And I don't think I would have remembered all of these things if they hadn't been in my diary. So this moment of confusion of the truths that I was being told, and the revelations of the family, were all recorded in my diary as sources of uncertainty and doubt about, you know, what are my parents telling me? Are they right or are they wrong? Should I believe in them or not? And this is one thing that people often forget about this change that it wasn't, although it did happen overnight, it took a few weeks to build up to that kind of case where the state says, 'OK, this is not viable, this system is now collapsing,' where the leaders declare it to be a collapse, as opposed to efforts to maintain the status quo and to make concessions and so on. And all of this, as I said, I don't think I would have remembered it, writing now, if I didn't have all these childhood diaries which I could read and think, 'this is what it was like back then.'

Andrew: And the diary extracts in the book, they come from the diaries of the time, don't they?

Lea: That's right, yes. The part that is just a direct drop is from 1997, which was another collapse in the history of Albania, when the pyramid schemes that people had invested all their money on all failed. They were Ponzi schemes, they promised very high returns for people's savings. At one point, two-thirds of the country had invested all their savings in these pyramid schemes, which eventually collapsed, and when they collapsed they brought with them a collapse of the state. And the country was on the brink of civil war. People had Kalashnikovs, there was a lot of shooting outside the windows, it was a time of great uncertainty.

And when I tried to write about this and write about this as a war or some kind of very fundamental civil conflict, again I found it very difficult to write about it from the point of view of now. Because when you think of war, when you think of these fundamental conflicts, it's always an all or nothing – you often think of it as either dangerous or not dangerous, you're either in it or you're outside. And one thing that stood out for me re-reading those diaries is that it wasn't like that. It was always one area is safer than another area, one time is more dangerous than another time, one day is more hopeful, one day is less hopeful. And from a writer's point of view, I found it really hard to reconstruct this while maintaining a coherent narrative. Because how can you explain to the reader that one day all you're worried about is your teenage crush, and whether the boy that you're in love with is going to turn up at school that day or not, but the day after, you're actually worried about your life. I found it really hard to convey all of this complexity of human feeling. And that's why I decided at one point, I said, 'OK, fine, I'm just going to copy and paste my diary as it was at the time, and I'll just leave it there and people can make what they want of it.' If they don't believe it, I can show them a copy of my diary, that it really was like that and it felt like that!

Andrew: I thought it was a brilliant way of portraying that period. Just taking it back a little bit, post-1990 we'd already had things like the Berlin Wall had come down, other Eastern European countries were opening up... how aware were you of these things happening, in Albania?

Lea: We were a little bit aware. But with the Berlin Wall, not so much. I think the moment I remember, again I have this kind of vague memory – this was before I started keeping my diary – I have these vague memories of my parents watching on Yugoslav television the murder of Caeușescu and his wife. That was the point at which, they later explained to me, that Albanians felt that things

might change for Albania as well. So while the Berlin Wall, and there were these waves of immigrants at the Austria-Hungary border I don't know if you remember, back then, just before, in the run up to the Wall things were changing, but it didn't feel like it was going to be a domino effect that would involve Albania as well. In part because of these unique characteristics of Albanian socialism, and in part because it had traced its own path, and it was developing in a slightly sui generis way compared to other socialist states. It wasn't clear that even if there had been a change in the rest of socialist Europe that it would arrive in Albania as well, because of this isolation and because of these extreme features and unique features as well.

So it was only, I think, when... these things were occasionally part of the news in Italian television, and we could have the news, occasionally with signal problems... there was always this struggle with trying to capture foreign news either through Yugoslav television or through Italian television. But suddenly people were aware of these changes. It's just that they weren't completely sure that they would come to Albania as well. The one time where I think it really shook the consciousness of the people was when this happened in Romania, because of the features of Romanian socialism that were believed to be much more similar to Albanian communism, in its isolation and in its cult of the individual and in its sheer degree of oppression. So that's where things began to change, and intellectuals were starting to give interviews for the Voice of America. And as I explain in my first chapter, one of the first moments of thinking that my parents were having different beliefs from mine was when I caught them listening to the radio quietly in the background and trying to figure out what these intellectuals were saying and how Albania was received in the West, and what the response was going to be, and how to negotiate this. It was a time of great fear. If you're attempting a revolution like that, you only know

afterwards that it's worked. When you're in the moment, it can go either way, and that's why the fear was there.

Andrew: So when Albania started going through the great changes after 1990, the freedom began to appear in things like supposedly free and fair elections, which were not free and fair. And then the 'shock therapy' - which a number of countries went through - meant the freedom to create businesses and to run businesses, but also left your father in a very difficult position of having to sack a lot of the people that he was responsible for.

Lea: Yes, and the whole discourse also changed. The interesting thing with the free and fair elections was precisely because of this fear that people had that a change that had been promised wasn't really a definitive change. In fact, the first free elections in Albania resulted in a win for the former Communist Party. It didn't bring the massive win for the opposition that people were hoping for, because there was still such a degree of concern amongst the people that if you voted freely, there might still be repercussions as there would have been in the 45 years before that.

But eventually there was political pluralism and it was clear that the opposition movement was very strong. And then eventually they came to power. And also with the help of internationals, including advice from the World Bank and the IMF and so on, this change began to take shape in the whole of Eastern Europe, and Albania was part of that. And these reforms... the idea behind them was that you needed to have a very quick intervention which would radically change the shape of the state and of the economy, and that with this – and it was called shock therapy for a reason, because the idea was to have this shock effect, which will be a short-term sacrifice, but in the long term it will deliver, because instead of protracting the disease, and instead of protracting this idea of state companies that were inefficient and bureaucratic and so on, what you needed was to just shut down the state sector, empower the private sector,

liberalise everything you could liberalise and swallow the costs, and in the name of that, hopefully, the broad promise freedom of the free market would arrive.

And so [Albania] went from being extremely isolated, and producing everything inside, state-controlled economy, to a completely opened economy with all the costs of the transition to a market economy that that brings. And this coincided with a time in which my father was a CEO at the port, and he found it very hard to make these decisions because what that meant in the short term was that a lot of people would be unemployed and lose their jobs. And he was someone who could see the cynicism of this idea of freedom, that you promised everyone that they will now be free but in fact what it means is that hundreds of people are losing their jobs, and if they're losing their jobs they don't have the means to keep themselves alive, and if they can't keep themselves alive then they can't be free either.

And this works in a number of spheres. The job market sector was one, but immigration was another one, where people left and made these very dangerous crossings and sometimes they lost their lives in these crossings or they took up dangerous jobs, or they'd lost their jobs in Albania and they'd taken up something very different just in order to survive. And in part this was due to the legacy of these years of hardship and isolation during communism. But combined with this new discourse around individual responsibility, where the state can't guarantee anything – freedom cannot come from above, what you need to do is to just sort yourself out, basically, and find the freedom that you can in society. And this radical change in terms of responsibility, going from this idea that the state is responsible for everything, to the idea that the individual is responsible for everything, including failure, that was the new change in discourse that accompanied this change in the state.

Andrew: Another area you cover in your discussion of freedom in the book is contrasting what your parents eventually came to believe,

post-1990, with your experience, our own experiences, of liberalism, where you talk about the broken promises, the destruction of solidarity and so on.

Lea: Yes, so this was one of the sources of contention, actually, with my family as well, because they always said to me, what you think is un-freedom is not as bad and these are just costs of adjustment. And for me, there was this transition that was going on and on for longer than it should have gone on. But even if it hadn't gone on for that long, that was not the way, the right way, to think about freedom, in my view. Because when you think about freedom, you think about how it affects every individual – every life matters. To me, it was always really hard to justify, in part because of this great promise, the great betrayal, while for people who had lived their entire lives under communism and they had been dreaming of the West and dreaming what the solutions from the West would be like, in some ways they found it a lot easier to adjust to the costs of transition and to say, well, this is just a sacrifice. This is what being responsible is, this is what individual responsibility requires and this is what freedom means. For me, freedom didn't have to mean either the freedom of socialism that we were promised and that nobody believed in except for me as a child, nor the freedom of liberalism where everybody believed but not me as a teenager because of what I perceived. And so in a way, I guess it made me sceptical, for different reasons, of the promises and of the ideological packages with which these promises came and, in the end, with a more critical stance which tries to recover a more moral conception of freedom that's not reducible to these ideological formulae of either one system.

Andrew: I want to come on to a couple of general questions soon. But I've got one other question about Albania. In the book you mention what was lost – a number of the people who left Albania included some of the best educated people, some of the youngest

people, some of the people who were able to make their way in the world. What's happened since in Albania? Where's Albania now?

Lea: I find it's a country that is still in its transition. And it's also still in its discourse of transition. So there's still this belief that the right kind of freedom is the freedom that comes from Western liberal institutions. And that all we need to do is to catch up with this path of development that for whatever reason we missed out on historically, but now we are going to be part of with the right amount of sacrifice. And so in some ways, at the level of ideas, it continues with what I experienced in the 90s.

At a social level, it's not the same. When I left Albania, I left the country in the hands of anarchy and it was completely on the brink of civil war. And so it's much more stable at that level. But in terms of social inequalities and social injustice, the drive to leave the country, and also this belief that there's this alternative set of institutions, namely Western liberal institutions that come in the form of either modelling oneself after the European Union but without really being critical of those sets of institutions, or modelling oneself after, you know, Albania is the strongest ally to the United States in the Western Balkans, in part as a result of that complete closure, there has been this complete embracing of this alternative way of life.

And so in some ways, I feel there is a relatively similar lack of criticism towards the system that one is part of, and this belief that it's just about catching up with a model of development that other countries have, which to me doesn't really take into account enough of the problems that that model also has. Living in Britain, you can see this much more than someone who lives in Albania and wants to be in Britain, whereas if you're someone who moves to Britain, is an intellectual there and in some ways enjoys all the benefits of the system but also sees how the system fails to deliver for some people,

then you become much more critical. And I feel that's what's lacking in Albania.

Andrew: Now there's great stress placed in the book – and it's a lesson I think you learned from your grandmother – on the importance of exploring the past and asking the right questions. And these are questions that you say that you had never thought to ask until you wrote this book. This is something we've been trying to do in Bristol, particularly in terms of Bristol's history in the trafficking of enslaved people, for example. How important is this in terms of coming to terms with the present, but also trying to think about how you build a new future?

Lea: I think it's crucial. It's first of all crucial in terms of ideals and ideals of freedom. And one of the most important lessons that I inherited from my grandmother is that freedom has a moral dimension that is not reducible to any ideological form that you find it in, any set of political institutions that it may be surrounded by. And that moral freedom is actually the foundation on which you can build criticism of society. And you can do that by first seeing what it is and what it consists of, and how it rests on human dignity, regardless of these different institutional forms in which it's then shaped and distorted. But also which makes you critical of the societies in which you live, and enables you to read the past by looking at the extent to which human dignity has been part of institutions, and how institutions have actually manipulated dignity or transformed it or shown it to you unilaterally. And I think in terms of something like Bristol and the legacy of colonialism and so on, it's really important to engage with the liberal institutions that we have inherited in the light of their past, which is sometimes a past of delivery of opportunities and victories and so on, but very often also a past of injustice and oppression and having certain advantages being built on the basis of these injustices and oppressions. And these are parts of our institutions as much as the good side.

This is why I think that lesson is really important, because when you think about the future, you start from where you are, from the conflicts that you experience, and the injustices that you are surrounded by, but it's also really important to see that these injustices are there and these institutions are there because of the way in which they came to be. And if we don't engage critically with a whole history, and we only look at the present and the present circumstances, it's perhaps more difficult to have an appropriately deep perspective on what it is that is causing these current problems and this current crisis. For me, it's often about seeing how current institutions and current structures are what they are as a result of the past that they have inherited, and of developing a kind of critical perspective on the past, not just to celebrate it, not just to remember it and not just to commemorate it, but also to think about how it shapes where we are at and what kind of conflicts we experience now.

Andrew: And you went through this, didn't you, in terms of trying to determine your own future? In the book at one point it looked like your future was bleak and you talked about how you might have managed to get into university but to study a subject you might not have been happy doing and ending up in a job that you didn't particularly want to do. In the end you study philosophy, much against your parents' wishes.

Lea: Yes, it was a combination of being in this very strange predicament in Albania. Going through A-Levels in the middle of a crisis, civil war, distance learning, some of the things that we talk about now, but much more exacerbated and a potentially bigger despair, and not being able to make these decisions because of the inability to project yourself into any of these determinant futures. So all I had, as I write in the book, were questions about, you know... it's really hard to be an economist or believe in wanting to be an economist when you're surrounded by markets that collapse. And it's

really hard to be a lawyer if you're surrounded by guns and a state that is failing to provide for basic law and order. And it's really hard to be a doctor if you all you see is people killing each other. So I found that at the time, all I had were questions about all of these specific futures, and the only thing that I could do was to keep asking more questions, which is partly what philosophy enabled me to do, because I thought of it as the science of asking questions and coming up with more appropriate questions, so an ongoing conversation. So it was in part driven by those kinds of changes that were just circumstantial and contingent, and in part to do with these difficulties that I had thinking about freedom and thinking about kinds of societies and being drawn into certain readings, which were all about crisis, and trying to understand the world in which I lived that, I guess, made me pursue this. It's not that I found autonomy, but at least I felt like I was studying something that would help me find autonomy or authenticity.

Andrew: And one of the areas coming out of this is about the future for the left and the future for socialism. I thought it was funny that your parents said you could study philosophy as long as you don't study Marx. Well, you've done an awful lot of studying of Marx in terms of your work. But when you look at the history of the left and if you're involved in it, you read about it, you do get this sense of almost, have I wasted my life, I've lost my belief, nothing seems to have worked, there is no future for the left. I remember, we interviewed Vivian Gornick last year and talked about her remarkable book, *The Romance of American Communism*, and this came through strongly in this. What do you think about the future of the left, and particularly about the future of socialism?

Lea: I think it's, in a way, a future that is marked by this fundamental identity crisis, which is in part the result of the end of the Cold War. And so this sense that the left had invested everything into a world that they thought was like the world that ended. And I think part of

that is true. But the story that I try to tell in my book is about a left that was also hostage and held captive by that story. And so you can read the history of the Cold War and the failure of Eastern socialist states as the end of the left, or you can read it in the way in which I tried to read it as, look, this was the story that held hostage the left itself, because it committed to this whole way of being and to these institutions, and without sufficient critical distance in one case, or with too much distance in the other case, and instead of turning it into a lesson from the past for the future, it became what held hostage the entire left, it shaped the identity of the left. And I think that's something from which the left hasn't recovered yet, because it's become extremely difficult for people to believe that there is a systemic alternative that can be coordinated, and that can take shape across borders, and that can involve agents from all parts of life, and that can merge these different kinds of struggles, even though they look very different. There's a kind of narrative that is a narrative of change of the system that can be global and informed and so on.

And I think that sense of profound scepticism about systemic alternatives is something that is still with the left now. There is a left that is fragmented, that's very critical, but there isn't really a belief in something being different and a project that can be taken in a different direction. And as I say, for me the story is one where you can read the history of the left, and you can say, look, well, it's a bit like, I don't know, religion. Jesus is both responsible for the Crusades but also for ideas of equality and fraternity and so on. And I think there is a sense in which one needs to own up to both the legacy of the critical left, in terms of being able to identify the problems with the current system and identify ways of making it better and identify the models of society that are at stake and how they can be improved and how they can respect dignity more, but also owning up to a past that hasn't done that and taking responsibility for that past.

I think only these two things combined can actually bring the left more hope and make it progress in the future.

Andrew: And you do talk about there being a moral duty on us to fight cynicism and political apathy.

Lea: Yes, for me, and that's partly why I've been drawn to a certain kind of philosophical orientation, which is this kind of Kantian criticism, critical theory and so on. Because it really is about, in Kant's philosophy, it's about a kind of twin danger of dogmatism on the one hand and scepticism on the other. And my childhood was a childhood of dogmatic belief. And my teenage years were years of scepticism. And I think both of these are wrong for different reasons. In the case of dogma because you're not doubting the truth that we're being given. And in the case of scepticism because you're never believing in anything. And for me, it's really important to discover criticism as the foundation of possible alternatives. But a criticism that is both self-doubting but also that can build on that doubt, rather than just remaining at that level of doubt about everything. And as I say, we were talking about the left, I think that's maybe where the left is now. There's a sense of fundamental doubt and criticism of everything, but also scepticism about the possibilities of things being different.

Andrew: And yet, we do need these alternative systems, at least to debate, given the crisis that capitalism is in, with democracy under attack, growing inequality and looming climate disaster.

Lea: I think we can really make progress if we problematise the societies in which we live. And if we enable democratic debates around all these radical different visions, which will then be taken up by political agents, which can then be part of institutions and so on. But I think it's important that people believe in something so that they can feed into these democratic debates, these different sets of beliefs, and then institutions can respond to them. So this is why I

think it's really important to recover this moral core of an alternative, which can then be part of a democratic debate that then discusses alternatives and then moves forward.

Andrew: Thank you, Lea, thank you very much for joining us. *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* is available from bookshops and online. We strongly recommend this book. The *New York Times* said *Free* is 'packed with insights, on family as much as on politics. Ypi is a beautiful writer and a serious political thinker, and in just a couple hundred readable pages, she takes turns between being bitingly, if darkly, funny... and truly profound' particularly, as we've discussed, on the meaning of freedom. Thank you for watching. And thank you most of all, Lea, for joining us today.

Lea: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.