

# **THE DEMON IN DEMOCRACY: TOTALITARIAN TEMPTATIONS IN FREE SOCIETIES**

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There is a scene in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, in which a character comes across a book of philosophy (Schopenhauer) and realizes in a soaring epiphany that it contains the answers to all of life's questions. For me, this book served much the same purpose—it explained to me why certain things are the way they are in the modern world. Although, sadly, it did not explain “all of life's questions,” such as what is contained in Area 51. (I will also gloss over that the character in Mann's novel quickly forgets the supposed answers and then drops dead of a tooth infection.)

Why, after the fall of Communism, were Communists in the restored West never punished, and instead rewarded with wealth, power, and global approbation? Why, in the modern world where freedom is supposedly increasing for all, is freedom instead decreasing for anyone who believes in objective moral standards? Why is every aspect of human life in the West now politicized by those who control our culture?

Legutko answers these questions. That's not because Legutko provides an overarching ideological framework that answers all questions, à la Marxism. Quite the opposite. It's because Legutko pulls together the threads of demonstrable reality in a fresh way, a way that is largely hidden, or suppressed, by the way discourse is conducted in the post-Communist West. In a sense, Legutko has shown us the fairies in the garden. You can't go back, once you know they exist. Unlike leftist ideologies, that doesn't tell you what you have to do, it's just knowledge about reality. But very useful knowledge.

In short, Legutko's answers to the questions are: Communists were not punished, and were rewarded, because Communist philosophy is much closer to, and more palatable to, the governing philosophy of the rulers of the West than the true alternatives to Communism. Freedom is decreasing for some because that is a necessary consequence of that Western governing philosophy. And life in the West is wholly politicized because of the ends at which that governing philosophy aims—which are not wholly dissimilar to the ends envisioned by Communism. Legutko's book is devoted to demonstrating these claims.

Legutko is a Polish professor of philosophy who was a dissident under Communism; he is today also a parliamentarian both in the Polish parliament and in the European Parliament. His overarching project in this book is to analyze and compare the similarities of totalitarian Communism (a tautology, of course) with “liberal-democracy,” the wholly dominant socio-political system of today’s West. His point is not that Communism is better than we think; it is that “liberal-democracy” is worse than we have been taught to think.

Hearing that is like hearing an attack on water and air. How can anyone be against liberalism and democracy, the core of our modern, free, open, society? But that’s Legutko’s point—liberal-democracy is neither free nor open. Instead, properly examined and explained, it is a largely baneful ideology, and shares a very uncomfortable set of core characteristics with the ideology it supposedly vanquished twenty-five years ago, Communism. Moreover, those shared characteristics are not just philosophical; they include some of the least pleasant tendencies toward brutality and coercion.

Legutko’s book is another wedge in what might be called the Great Fragmentation—the splintering of the Western conservative movement as it has existed since approximately 1950. If today’s political system is the inevitable outcome of certain political premises, basically those of the Enlightenment, and that outcome is profoundly opposed to everything a certain strain of conservatives hold dear, why should not the very foundation be re-examined by those conservatives, and Enlightenment political thought wholly or totally rejected? That has huge implications for conservative unity and therefore conservative power and political action. But that’s a question for another day, and not something on which Legutko really focuses.

This is a pessimistic book, written in 2012 (though the English translation only came out in 2016). It sees little pushback being possible in the current environment. Legutko’s attitude towards liberal-democracy is much like Whittaker Chambers’s toward Communism. Since 2012, though, a series of earthquakes, the largest being Brexit and Donald Trump’s ascendancy, have suggested that the foundations of liberal-democracy are more rotten than Legutko believes, or at least believed in 2012. It’s not that Trump has, or British voters have, absorbed and endorsed philosophies that oppose liberal-democracy. Rather, they

have seen that the Emperor has no clothes—that liberal-democracy is a bad deal for them and for society. They may think this in an inchoate manner; they may think it in a stupid manner. But as with the fairies in the garden, once you realize that the Emperor has no clothes, there is no going back to the way things were. The trick, for us (or me), the self-perceived paladins of the West, is to harness that tide of realization, and ride it to the creation of the new world, of real freedom and real self-government.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Anybody who has bothered to read this far is asking what exactly is meant by the hyphenated term “liberal-democracy.” Legutko means an ideology, of course, but what constitutes that ideology? “Liberal” traditionally means expanding freedom. A “classical liberal” is an economic free-marketeer. “Traditional” liberals in the United States (as opposed to the New Left, a strain that rose to power in the 1960s and is now wholly dominant) focus on increased freedom, but view government as a mainspring of providing that freedom, and believe that continuous societal improvements can thereby be made. To Legutko, the “liberal” part of “liberal-democracy” has passed beyond those relatively narrow goals, and now means unalloyed, even anarchic, freedom—but to believe and act in exactly the way permitted, and no other. And “democracy,” similarly, means pure democracy, not a mixed, republican government—but only one where the people have the right to vote in a way that is approved by the liberal ideology of perfect freedom to do anything other than that proscribed.

But this begs the question—what is that ideology, and what is proscribed? Liberal-democracy, to Legutko, is the end result of the historical process begun in Enlightenment thinking. Originally, liberalism was not connected to democracy—in fact, democracy was regarded as inimical to liberalism, in all political thought from Athens to Tocqueville. Liberalism was man’s freedom from tyranny and the ability to express himself, in as eccentric a way as he pleased. Democracy was coercive egalitarianism. Liberalism, according to Mill, would combat democracy’s tendency toward mediocrity and would encourage excellence and achievement. Therefore, the best system was not democracy, but a mixed system, that included elements of monarchy and oligarchy, combined with freedom from tyranny. The American system was such, as was the British, and some European systems.

In the twentieth century, though, these systems became increasingly egalitarian, focused on equality of result, not equality of opportunity. This destroyed the original Enlightenment conception of combining a mixed government with increased, but not absolute, freedom. The view became prevalent that more democracy, that is, more direct government by popular vote, is always better, even though the defects of this are well known. And liberalism came to mean freedom to do anything but criticize certain choices of others. Hence: "liberal-democracy."

And it is this liberal-democracy that is Legutko's target. The process he outlines has resulted, over the last few decades, in

an emergence of a kind of liberal-democratic general will. Whether the meaning of the term itself is identical with that used by Rousseau is of negligible significance. The fact is that we have been more and more exposed to an overwhelming liberal-democratic omnipresence, which seems independent of the wills of individuals, to which they humbly submit, and which they perceive as compatible with their innermost feelings . . . Through people's actions and minds this will ruthlessly imposes liberal-democratic patterns on everything and everyone, including those who should firmly stand for alternative proposals. . . . This grand design, its supporters say, should be implemented at all costs because it is believed to bring with itself freedom, autonomy, tolerance, pluralism, and all other liberal-democratic treasures. Therefore, all barriers that block its coming can and must be broken down, also for the benefit of those who put up those barriers."

This is "coercion to freedom," visible, Legutko says, in such disparate policies forced on us as abortion, celebration of homosexual acts, quotas for representation of the supposedly disadvantaged in all areas of life, and suppression of so-called hate speech.

Today's liberal-democrats define liberal as anything expanding freedom from authority and portray liberal-democracy as the only "realization of the eternal desire for freedom." But this is slander, since "liberalism was certainly not the only orientation expressing the desire for freedom, nor was it particularly consistent in this devotion. The supporters of republicanism, conservatism, romanticism, Christianity, and many other movements also demanded freedom, and did a lot to advance

its cause.” (As I say, this, and Legutko’s entire analysis, leave open the question of to what degree the Enlightenment itself can or should be accepted by conservatives; it may be that “liberalism” even in its earlier sense is ultimately incompatible with human flourishing, a view that is given credence by the vast majority of Western civilization’s towering cultural and civilizational accomplishments being accomplished by non-liberal societies. But again—a question for another day.)

Legutko begins his comparison project (for the framework of this book is a comparison to Communism, even though much of it is simply an attack on liberal-democracy) by evaluating “History.” He analyzes how we got here, and talks about how Communism views history, how liberal-democracy views history, and that both view it as “history has a unilateral pattern and that a better world is shaped by conscious human activity.” History necessarily consists of reaching a final stage of total social development and structure, under which human nature would be fully realized, necessarily led by the group most aware of its historical role and therefore entitled to command the benighted. Orthodox Marxists saw these as “laws of history.” Both Communists and liberal-democrats no longer talk of history as having “laws,” since that has been discredited by modern science, but “both the communists and liberal democrats have always upheld and continue to uphold the view that history is on their side”—that is, history has a pre-determined arc, and in the view of both Communism and liberal-democracy, its parameters are the same, with the only difference being that the structure at the end of history is (somewhat) different. This is best characterized as the view of “historical necessity.”

This creates an internal tension, because

any opposition to this process was extremely harmful to humanity and inconceivably stupid. . . . The very idea of liberal democracy should presuppose the freedom of action . . . yet the letter, the spirit, and the practice of the liberal-democratic doctrine is far more restrictive: so long as society pursues the path of modernization, it must follow the path whereby the programs of actions and targets other than liberal-democratic lose their legitimacy. The need for building a liberal-democratic society thus implies the withdrawal of the guarantee of freedom

for those whose actions and interests are said to be hostile to what the liberal democrats conceive as the cause of freedom.

This is analogous to Communism, since as with Communism, “everything that exists in society must become liberal-democratic over time and be imbued with the spirit of the system.” And this explains why, in both the liberal-democratic system and in Communism, no engagement other than coercion is permitted with opponents on the Right. “Why should anyone seriously enter into a debate with the opponent who represents what is historically indefensible and what will sooner or later perish?”

Legutko sees the idea of historical necessity as “dubious, not to say ludicrous, to any sane mind.” Yet it characterizes both Communism and liberal-democracy, and is particularly attractive to the intellectual class. Legutko ascribes this to that it “gives an intellectual more power, or at least an illusion of it. He feels like a part of a powerful global machine of transformation.”

And, this also answers why everything is politicized in the West, just as it was under Communism. “As a result, liberal democracy has become an all-permeating system. There is no, or in any case, cannot be, any segment of reality that would be arguably and acceptably non-liberal democratic.” Any vestige of limitation, so-called tyranny, from the traditional structure of the family to traditional churches and schools, to any group that is not wholly devoted to individual choice, must be consigned to the dustbin of history, and quickly, by force if necessary. Hence, the politicization of everything, for anything not politicized is failing to fulfil its necessary role in moving history forward to the inevitable goal.

Legutko makes other points about the historical nature of the two systems. Liberal-democracy seeks total liberty along with total equality. “The triumph of liberalism and democracy was supposed to be emancipatory also in the sense that man was to become free from excessive demands imposed on him by unrealistic metaphysics invented by an aristocratic culture in antiquity and the Middle Ages. In other words, an important part of the message of modernity was to legitimize a lowering of human aspirations. . . . The main principle behind the minimalist perspective was equality: from the point of view of the liberal order one

cannot prioritize human objectives.” The natural result is a lowering of standards. Despite the hopes of liberal thinkers such as Mill that man would by nature seek the better, “One can look at the history of liberal democracy as a gradual sliding down from the high to the low, from the refined to the coarse.”

Related to this is the exaltation of “dignity”—a false dignity, not as traditionally, an ennobling attribute that carried corresponding duties, but a term used to allow people to “submit whatever claims they wished, and to justify those claims by referring to a dignity that they possessed by the mere fact of being born without any moral achievement or effort. . . . And since having this dignity carried no obligation to do anything particularly good or worthy, he could, while constantly invoking it, make claims that were increasingly more absurd and demand justification for ever more questionable activities.” Legutko doesn’t mention it, but this exactly explains the behavior of the United States Supreme Court over the past few decades, with the radical majority’s focus on “dignity” and “stigma”—the latter meaning daring to uphold any standards that would limit people in pursuing whatever they want to do.

Returning to history, Legutko concludes the chapter by noting that the post-Communist regimes (focusing on Poland, of course), immediately prior to the overthrow of Communist power, “stood up in defense of human dignity (in its original and not the corrupted sense), access to culture, respect for truth in science and for nobility in art, and a proper role given to Christian heritage and Christian religion.” But as soon as Communism was overthrown, they aspired only to the liberal-democratic model, striving to follow “the West,” buying into the myth that the opposite of Communism was their liberal-democracy—when, really, it wasn’t that much different. And, ultimately, former Communists had more in common with the liberal-democrats in control of the West than did their opponents under Communism, who hewed to religion, family, tradition, and the permanent things, and thus were first excluded, and then demonized. (Again, this book having been written in 2012, Legutko does not mention the recent rise to power of political parties in both Poland and Hungary that are not in thrall to liberal-democracy, instead truly representing those anti-Communist forces, and are therefore viciously attacked for their heresy, in an ongoing battle, the result of which will be very telling. I’m optimistic, for their approach seems

to be to realize this is not a struggle for accommodation, but a zero-sum game.)

Next Legutko covers "Politics," by which he means both the mechanics of politics within liberal-democracy, and even more so the politicization of all aspects of life that necessarily characterizes liberal-democracy. This is largely an expansion of some of his earlier points. "Communism and liberal democracy are related by a similarly paradoxical approach to politics: both promised to reduce the role of politics in human life, yet induced politicization on a scale unknown in previous history." Originally liberalism actually did expand freedom in the non-political sphere, but "in its essence, liberalism is unabashedly aggressive because it is determined to hunt down all nonliberal agents and ideas, which it treats as a threat to itself and to humanity. The organizing principle of liberalism—as in all other philosophies aiming to change the world radically—is therefore dualism, not pluralism."

Any community, such as family or nation, that may interfere with the liberal-democratic program must be made anew, and made no longer an obstacle to progress. Organic, historically constituted communal bonds are to be replaced by identity group bonds, but only of approved identity groups, which are willing to be active participants in the corrosion of society and any form of traditional belief or practice, and are not communal groups, but political groupings organized from above. All this is, in practice, indistinguishable from Communism, though the goals are somewhat different.

As far as daily political behavior, cooperation towards the defined goals is essential, because failure to cooperate leads to a litany of horrors in the liberal-democratic mind.

Effective politics becomes thus a comprehensive task because the preconditions on which cooperation is dependent are not only numerous, but constantly growing in number. Literature, art, education, family, liturgy, the Bible, traditions, ideas, entertainment, children's toys—all can be deemed conducive to cooperation or strengthening intolerance, discrimination and domination. . . . This explains the rise of the infamous phenomenon of political correctness. There is nothing mysterious about it. It is simply a practical consequence of the view that the duty of the citizens of the liberal-democratic society is to participate in the



great collective enterprise, where everyone cooperates with everyone else at all levels and under all circumstances. . . . Because the logic of this system turns on “dialogue,” “respect,” “equal rights,” “openness,” and “tolerance,” everything is by definition political, and nothing that relates, however remotely, to these notions is trivial, minor, or irrelevant.

Democracy is inherently political, since it is supposed to engage the people as a whole in the political process. Democracy’s advantage is peaceful transfers of power; its disadvantages include (as has always been known) a tendency toward exalting mediocrity and suppressing minority beliefs, most especially minority beliefs opposed to unalloyed democracy itself, and any belief opposing beliefs viewed as core to the right kind of society—in liberal-democracy, that of equality first and foremost. Any political group that does not adhere to the ideology of liberal-democracy is shunned as outside the “mainstream” (hence the vicious attacks on the Fidesz party in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party in Poland).

The End of History is here (maybe), and it’s liberal-democratic, as Francis Fukuyama said, but it’s bad. “The European Union reflects the order and the spirit of liberal-democracy in its most degenerate version.” This is because it is designed to prevent any change of ideology by election, thus itself contradicting the democracy it claims to be central to itself. Legutko writes that while the EU seems to be secure in its redoubt of tyranny, “perhaps the future will bring some significant movement from within when the arrogance exceeds the tolerable level.” Today, January 17, 2017, the Prime Minister of Britain, Theresa May, announced plans for “hard Brexit,” so apparently that day is now.

Legutko’s final two chapters cover “Ideology” and “Religion.” These again compare Communism and liberal-democracy, noting in the first instance how they both are ideologies, and therefore, again, intolerant of any opposing view. They admit of no defense for opposing views, and despite in the case of liberal-democracy being supposedly devoted to freedom, make all dissenting views functionally impermissible, just like Communism. “The characteristic feature of both societies—communist and liberal democratic—was that a lot of things simply could not be discussed because they were unquestionably bad or unquestionably good.”

Why? Such suppression of questioning is a direct result of their focus on supposed equality. “Some call it a paradox of equality: the more equality one wants to introduce, the more power one must have; the more power one has, the more one violates the principle of equality; the more one violates the principal of equality, the more one is in a position to make the world egalitarian.” Moreover, this ability to achieve a utopian goal is multiplied where traditional structures, which resist this process, are torn down and all structures are denied autonomy. And then ideology is offered to offer the people “a new identity and a new sense of belonging”—a counterfeit version of real civil society.

Finally, Legutko makes the too-little-noted point that liberal-democracy had nothing to do with the fall of Communism—in fact, with few exceptions, the liberal-democratic West did not fight against Communism as a system, and the peoples under Communism did not strive for liberal-democracy, but rather for freedom in the form of traditional, non-liberal-democratic structures. The idea that people under Communism only wanted more choices in the stores is a myth. And they most definitely were not fighting for the ideologically-conceived “human rights” encapsulated in the United Nations’ *Declaration of Human Rights* (which, Legutko points out, make no sense, since it and its authors reject any objective basis on which such rights can be claimed). Rather, they desired “patriotism, a reawakened eternal desire for truth and justice, loyalty to the imponderables of the national tradition, and—a factor of paramount importance—religion.” Free elections and a multiparty system were not the goal; they were the mechanics for achieving what people really wanted. Nonetheless, liberal-democracy was what they got, because of the co-option of the leaders of the restored states.

In the last chapter, “Religion,” Legutko in particular focuses on the baneful effects that result from religious believers and leaders attempting to find common ground with either Communism or liberal-democracy. All concessions are only made by religious believers, never by the opposing ideology, and religion is thereby corrupted. (Legutko might also have noted that in the West, such concessions have led to the organized churches who make them hemorrhaging members, for why belong to a church when it is nothing but a leftist social club?) It is demanded that religious belief be made purely private and that religion support the political order, which means not only not objecting on doctrinal

grounds to state action, but affirmatively helping the state perform its pernicious goals, under the guise of neutral functions. This is mostly common sense, though little heard today, when we still hear calls (even, and increasingly, from Catholic bishops) to make churches more “relevant,” meaning more compliant with liberal-democracy, meaning destructive of the core beliefs of those churches.

I think in some ways this book is incomplete, but then, it’s a short and focused book. For example, I think another reason that Communists were not punished is because their opponents did not, and do not, view the world through an ideological lens of struggle. Most just want to get on with their lives, as contrasted with the Communist (and leftist) view generally, which tends to view life as totally politicized, and therefore its adherents derive meaning from that politicization. Therefore, every minor functionary in any fallen right-wing government must be (and is) globally hunted for the rest of his life (e.g., those who participated in Chile’s wholly justified and heroic actions suppressing Communism). But no Communist functionary was punished because there was nobody focused on punishment in the same way. Similarly, Communists weren’t punished in Russia, but it’s not because liberal-democracy triumphed there. How does Russia play into how Legutko views the future of Europe, given its opposition to what he decries, while it simultaneously maintains a very threatening position towards Poland?

Similarly, Legutko is not much interested in the Western buzzword, “progress.” I am not sure if it occurs at all in the book as a goal desirable for society. Legutko does not answer to me what seems a key question—is the fantastic economic progress of the West over the past two hundred years related to liberalism? If so, what does that imply for such progress? Is it necessary for our society as constituted? Could a society be hugely creative technologically but not “liberal”? (He does suggest that technology is problematic, but does not explore the matter.) What would happen if economic progress ended? Has it already ended? Are there other measures of “progress” acceptable to Legutko other than economic ones? All these questions are important, because offering a viable, rational alternative is just as important as identifying the deficiencies in today’s ruling elites.

Finally, Legutko does not much touch on nationalism, although it’s implicit in his whole argument that nationalism is one of the virtues

opposed to liberal-democratic vices. He therefore does not emphasize the trans-national nature of liberal-democratic leaders, best exemplified by Angela Merkel's attempted destruction of German culture through importation of millions of migrants from an alien culture unalterably opposed to all that made Europe the light of the world. This seems to me to be an important area of exploration. But maybe that would have made another book entirely; perhaps centered around Robert Nisbet's dictum that "rootless men always betray."

Trump's inauguration is tomorrow. If there is to be pushback against liberal-democracy, and the creation of actual freedom and a non-coercive form of government without forced egalitarianism, this is the place it will begin. Maybe I'll update this review in a year or two!