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Communism and Liberal Democracy: An East European Perspective

There are many ways to talk about the discontents of liberalism. Those of us who consider ourselves conservatives are concerned about the dominant position liberalism has been occupying for some time in many areas of life and thought—in politics, art, mores, education. Those who cherish the value of liberty necessarily find this total domination stifling.

Ryszard Legutko

Let me give an account of what I see as a major problem of liberalism, viewed from an East European perspective. The transition of Eastern European countries from communism to modern liberal democracy is a fascinating phenomenon but unfortunately—to my mind—not accurately explained. What has been overlooked is that, despite radical changes whose importance cannot be minimized, in many areas of human life we have seen continuity rather than discontinuity. In Eastern European countries—and in Poland, in particular—a comparison of the old regime and the new system indicates that the two political projects overlap to a certain degree. Both had and have as their objective the modernization of countries, which also means that both had and have the same adversary: whatever is considered—rightly or wrongly—part of pre-modern, traditional, and anachronistic social structures.

Treating the two systems on equal footing—one based on terror, the monopoly of one party and one ideology, and the other with many parties and civil liberties—might provoke

both anger and bemusement: anger because to do so would be an insult to the victims of a brutal and inhuman regime, and bemusement because it would seem so absurd as to not even deserve a response. Let me hasten to admit that I think such a reaction justified. When I say that the systems overlap I do not mean they use the same means or even that they have a comparable level of freedom. In these respects, the distance between communism and liberal democracy should be measured in light years.

My thesis is the following: Both political projects display formal similarities as regards their ideological structures and the mental attitudes these structures evoke.

The similarities are many. Let us begin from the most obvious. Socialism and liberal democracy are both conceived as final and optimal systems. Both mark the ‘end of history’ in the sense that no other system is envisaged, and no alternative possible. Nothing better exists even as a hypothesis, and any further development is only the perfection of that final mechanism which represents the outcome of accumulated collective wisdom. Hence, being against socialism was, and being against liberal democracy is, understood to verge on being a crime—or even a sign of insanity—because opposition to the ‘final’ system is seen as tantamount to fascism. In both ideologies fascism is the archetypal enemy symbolizing political evil itself. Being accused of fascism was, under communism, severely punishable. Under liberal democracy, a much less brutal system, this accusation has less drastic consequences but is also quite serious.



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In any case, one does not talk seriously with anyone who is not an unqualified supporter of socialism, then, or liberal democracy, now.

Since both systems are final and ultimate, they meet the standard criteria of utopia. Karl Marx rejected the notion of utopia, but what he meant by utopia was something different. John Rawls applied the notion of utopia to liberal democracy; and Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Robert Nozick, and other libertarian thinkers used this notion in their conception of liberal society.

Both systems also assume a progressivist concept of history: the development is linear and whatever is new drives out the old. This is visible even on the rhetorical level. There is no better way of disqualifying and delegitimizing an opposing view or practice than to stigmatize it as pre-modern, medieval, backward, obsolete, anachronistic. The dustbin of history is thus the place where the enemies

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of either socialism and liberal democracy find themselves. What is remarkable is that it is not necessarily superior ideas and arguments that are said to consign older practices to historical oblivion, but rather the flow of history, time itself. Under socialism, the free market was held to have been invalidated not because good arguments were formulated against it, but because the process of history was said to have rendered it backward. And today, under liberal democracy, for instance, capital punishment or marriage as the union of a man and a woman have been driven out not by arguments but by the ever-evolving standards of the progressive march of democracy.

This, in turn, entails an ideology of historical necessity. “There is no way back” and “certain processes are inevitable” are phrases that are common in the political rhetoric of both systems. This inevitability is internal rather than external, i.e., all areas of life—families, churches, schools, universities, organizations, communities, and moral codes—have to become socialist under socialism and liberal democratic under liberal democracy. Any institution or group that was not socialist, or is not liberal democratic, is a threat to the system and is bound to adapt itself to the socialist or liberal democratic environments. Therefore, most theoretically non-political organisms or institutions under the old regime were expected to become socialist, and most theoretically non-political organisms or institutions today are expected to become liberal democratic. And, it is believed, there is little we can do about it, since democracy requires that we follow its inexorable logic.

But historical necessity is also external. This pertains particularly to Eastern Europe. Before, we were made to believe that the march of progress was marked by the example of the Soviet Union and we were to follow its phases of development. Later, this doctrine was liberalized and national versions of socialism were allowed. But it was generally accepted that there was an avant-garde of progress, a vanguard. We have the same pattern today. In Eastern Europe, the process of building institutions and societies that began after 1989 was, in fact, not a matter of creation but of imitation. Most of the reforms were justified with the argument: It has to be done in this way, because those who are ahead of us have already solved this problem and we must follow suit. Whoever objected was shut down by the

rejoinder: but it is inevitable. Joining the EU did not change this attitude; in fact, it even strengthened the feeling that there are objective processes expressing themselves in impersonal decisions over which we have little influence. Therefore, paradoxically, the language of liberal democracy which we accepted after the fall of communism turned out not to be a language of freedom and creativity, but rather a language of necessity. Freedom was adventurism, while necessity was wisdom and a mark of decency.

Both communism and liberal democracy are highly political. A deep sense of socialist class struggle has its equivalent in liberal society, in which the legal system and political discourse constantly mobilize themselves in the fight against discrimination, intolerance, or fascism. We have race, class, and gender as the main concepts that organize political thinking today: blacks against whites, women against men, homosexuals against heterosexuals, teenagers against teachers and parents. As a result of revolutionary Freudianism, the counterculture, and feminism, the private has become politicized because nowadays the class, race, and gender struggle is fought in what used to be considered the private sphere (as well as in the broader culture). The humanities are all about emancipation, discrimination, toleration, marginalization, etc. We have created a monstrous legal and bureaucratic structure—at the national as well as at the European level—that responds to this call for class, race, and gender struggles.

Both communism and liberal democracy are highly ideological. The ideology of liberation, taken from Marxism, is thriving in the modern world. This is apparent once we become aware that the bulldozer of ideological and political levelling has been destroying those identities which have been built on common traditions, historical heritage, socially embedded practices, and national cultures. With both historical identities and religion gone, ideology seems to be the only way to organize our thinking and to provide us with a new identity. Under communism, one was not primarily a Pole, but a socialist, a representative of a working class, a comrade; under liberal democracy, one is primarily not a Pole either, but a feminist, an environmentalist, a gay, a multiculturalist, a liberal, etc.

Both communism and liberal democracy are egalitarian. Equality is a goal to be attained and a natural state of affairs. It is often identified

with justice. It is not only economic equality that matters; in fact, economic equality has lost the appeal it once had. It is social equality, cultural equality, artistic equality, and moral equality that matter. Hierarchy is, by definition, dubious; egalitarian policy is, on the other hand, recommended. The distance between the high and the low—between parent and child, teacher and student, high culture and low culture, good and bad—is becoming smaller and smaller. To insure that we are all equal, the communist regime established a monstrous, ideological bureaucratic and political system which dominated people’s lives. This illustrated a well-known thesis that to have absolute equality you have to have absolute despotism.

It is remarkable how liberal democracy has managed to attain the very ends that the communists themselves also tried to attain without success. Consider the following:

1. Language control and thought control. Political correctness has reintroduced the notion of a thought crime, so common under communism and now repeated today. The belief that discrimination is a crime against equality is so deeply embedded today that it is thought necessary to change the language, minds, and soul of people in order to change people’s thinking.

2. Politicisation of education. Education is seen as being in the service of liberal democracy, in much the same way that we had education in the service of communism. This ideological and political crusade has turned out quite successfully—more successfully than communism in some respects, because it is not brutal and seems completely impersonal.

3. Undermining the role of the family. The communists tried to destroy the family, but had limited success; today, the family barely survives. It has been consciously destroyed by legal and political means (and through a fundamental redefinition of the concept of marriage).

4. Secularisation. The communists tried to abolish religion, but some societies managed to preserve their religious identity. Today, the process of secularisation is rampant, and not only because of spontaneous processes; there is such a thing as a secularisation project in education, culture, and politics. There is Christophobia.

Having identified some of the continuities between the old regime and the new system in

Eastern Europe, an exercise that has not been flattering toward uncritical partisans of liberal democracy, what exactly is to be done? I do not have time to develop prescriptions fully, but I leave you with four thoughts.

1. We have become mesmerized by the concept of modernization, which is considered good by definition. But nothing is good simply by definition. Prudence is actually the best approach to modernization, carefully discriminating between what is beneficial and what is harmful. Modernization and liberal democracy offer opportunities, which—we sometimes forget—did not exist under communism. But we must remember that modernization is only good if it is approached as a matter of freedom, not necessity.

2. We have become mesmerized by the concept of liberal democracy, and the idea of a mixed regime and a good state. This state of mind is found in the Federalist Papers, with the creation of a political regime. But as we chart our own path forward, we must try not to resort

to political dogmas.

3. We have become mesmerized by the notion of liberal democratic pluralism but have overlooked its powerful and paradoxically homogenizing tendencies. Liberal democracy has a natural tendency toward homogeneity and conformity. We must remember that Alexis de Tocqueville said, “I know no political system where there is less freedom of thought.” It is a reflection of a disjunction of realms. We must stand for true liberty.

4. Eastern Europe has been a disappointment. Some people in Western Europe and in America had hoped that a liberated Eastern Europe would bring new ideas to the stifling atmosphere of late-modern Western culture. But we Eastern Europeans failed to do this because we felt inferior. Some people say we are inferior. I do not think they are right. What we need is courage and wisdom. These virtues are rare, but they are no less rare in France or Germany than in the Czech Republic or Poland. ■



Ryszard Legutko

Born 1949, in Krakow, Poland, Legutko is currently a member of the European Parliament. He is affiliated with the Law and Justice Party of Poland, and the European Conservatives and Reformists Parliamentary Group in the EU. He sits on the EU's Committee on Foreign Affairs and has served as Minister of National Education in Poland's former government. Professor of philosophy at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Legutko has published many essays and conference papers on the moral crisis of modern civilisation.

Conservatism and Liberalism

First, let me say how much I regret not being able to be present at the Vanenburg Society Meeting in Tyniec. These meetings seem to me to be one of the most encouraging initiatives of our time, and were it not for my duties in Washington, DC, I would certainly be with you today.

Roger Scruton

I first visited this monastery in 1979, in the grim, tense days before the Solidarity Union changed the face of Poland. It was then an island of peace in a sea of devastation. The symbols of that devastation were everywhere round about—the drunken despair of the villagers, the belching poison from the steel works at Nowa Huta, the drab, soot-blackened faces of the ancient buildings in Krakow, the pervasive sadness in the faces of the people who passed them; and here in Tyniec the never-ending cheerfulness of a community dedicated to God.

In Krakow today you won't find the same worn, anxious faces, nor will you smell the sulphurous fumes of Nowa Huta. The buildings have been cleaned and a noisy bustle of commerce fills

the streets. But you will see devastation of another kind: shoe-box architecture in steel and glass destroying the line of ancient streets; vulgar post-modern gadgets inserted into every available place; digital adverts fidgeting and flickering beside lovely old façades, like that which spoils the great railway station—symbols of multi-national capitalism, spreading its aesthetic pollution and addictive vulgarity even into the most intimate recesses of what was once Poland's most beautiful town.

Many young people today ask themselves the question, 'if this is freedom, do we really want it?' That question becomes yet more urgent when you consider other freedoms that have been gained since 1989: the freedom to make and watch pornography, the freedom to build houses and shopping malls along all the highways, the freedom to work anywhere across Europe, which has deprived Poland of its workforce, the new sexual freedoms and the freedoms (such as the 'right to abortion') now being imposed by the European Court of Human Rights. If this is freedom, does it not come with a heavy and maybe unacceptable price?

That question lies at the heart of modern politics, and defines—at least in part—what is at issue between conservatism and liberalism, as these should now be defined. The free market has always been central to the conservative cause, on the understanding that it is the only way in which economic life reaches a consensual equilibrium. In a market, you are maximally free to exchange the goods that you control, but also maximally responsible for the result. It has been recognised since Adam Smith that freedom and responsibility here go hand in hand: if I sell you a poison, pretending that it will do you good, I am liable to make good your loss on using it; if I cheat on a deal, I am liable for breach of contract; and so on. In other words, market freedoms are only one part of a wider system of liabilities, administered through the civil law. And one of the causes of the sadness of communist Poland was the absence of that civil law: the person who had been cheated, or whose environment had been destroyed, or who was injured at work, had no recourse except to retreat into the home and nurse his wounds.

Restoring market freedoms, for a conservative, means restoring the legal institutions which ensure that each person is accountable for what he does. Liberalism emphasizes the freedom, but often forgets the accountability. But there is more to it than that. Market freedoms are one kind of freedom; but they depend upon institutions and customs which limit them, and which are also expressions of freedom. Where there is freedom of association people can get together to withdraw things from the market—whether or not the state permits a market in those things. People do their best to resist the market in porn, for example, as they resist the market in people. They combine to resist the market in irreplaceable goods like historic buildings and beautiful nature.

Much of what goes wrong in the world of market freedoms occurs because the other freedoms that would limit them have been confiscated by government. For example, very few local communities have the freedom to oppose desecrating adverts like the one by the central station in Krakow. Of course, they can, in due course, elect another town council which might pass a local law against adverts of that kind. But the decision whether to allow or forbid the advert has been confiscated from the people who are most directly affected by it. In Switzerland, the people would have to be consulted before such a thing could be done—and they would probably have said no.

Another example: Market freedoms have enabled supermarkets to install themselves all over central Europe, destroying local food economies and leading to the death of town-centres and a massive increase in road traffic around the towns. Is this not market freedom? The answer is 'no'. The roads that serve the supermarkets were built at public expense; the planning laws permitting out of town development were obtained by bribery and corruption; the laws imposing health and safety standards were designed to favour the supermarkets, and—in short—the market is a subsidised market, in which ordinary people are not free to compete. A farmers' market, in which food is sold without packaging in the centre of town, is no longer a legal possibility. A vital freedom has been confiscated by government and conferred on the multinational chain-stores.

My own view is that conservatism is about freedom, but primarily the freedom to associate. Through association, we set limits to the market. Our institutions, customs, and traditions arise from the moral life and need to be protected from the top-down schemes of government as much as from the market-mania of the 'neo-liberals' (as John Gray calls them). Translating that thought into policy is the hard part of conservative politics. But I hope you will get somewhere with it this weekend. ■



Roger Scruton

is currently a Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Fellow of Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford and a Research Professor at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences where he teaches philosophy in their graduate programs in both Washington, DC, and Oxford (UK). He is a writer, philosopher, and public commentator. He has specialised in aesthetics with particular attention to music and architecture. He engages in contemporary political and cultural debates from the standpoint of a conservative thinker and is well known as a powerful polemicist. He has written widely in the press on cultural and political issues, as well as capitalism and the market economy.

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Participants of the 5th Vanenburg Meeting



A conference session

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www.europeanrenewal.org | info@europeanrenewal.org