The demon in democracy: totalitarian temptations in free societies / by Ryszard Legutko.

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In the first few pages of this important book, Ryszard Legutko describes the oddity whereby former communists adapted far more easily and successfully than former dissidents and anticommunists to the new liberal-democratic regimes established in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Others have noticed this phenomenon too, but they have usually attributed it to such reasons as the former communists’ having greater administrative experience, or the rules of “transition” protecting their power temporarily, or that, having privatized state enterprises into their own hands, they brought more resources to playing the game of politics in media and government.

These practical factors were certainly important. But they did not explain why there was so little moral resistance to the continuing dominance of the old nomenklaturas in post-communist democracies. Quite the contrary. Lightly rebaptized as social or liberal democrats, they dominated debate and formed governments. In Western Europe, public and private institutions, including European Union bodies, seemed to find former communists more congenial than former dissidents as partners in politics and business. on the rare occasions when resistance did erupt, it was usually in response to official efforts to expose still-influential communist networks, notably in intelligence agencies, or to restore state property to its original and rightful owners. It was almost as if anticommunist democrats were seen as a greater threat to the new liberal-democratic regime than those who had been its open enemies only the day before. In addition to their practical advantages, therefore, the former communists enjoyed a mysterious ideological edge.

Professor Legutko is both a prominent Polish and European statesman and a distinguished philosopher who, in addition to more conventional credentials, was once the editor of Solidarity’s underground philosophy journal—a position that would have delighted G. K. Chesterton, as well as demonstrating the professor’s devotion to truth and freedom. So he is ideally equipped to analyze the mystery of this ideological edge. He finds it in an unexpected place, namely in the structure and practices of the dominant political philosophy of the modern West: liberal democracy. This is a startling discovery. It surprised Legutko himself, and he is at pains to point out that, even with all the flaws he identifies, liberal democracy is manifestly superior humanly and politically to all forms of totalitarianism.

That said, he is able to demonstrate that liberal democracy, as it has developed in recent decades, shares a number of alarming features with communism. Both are utopian and look forward to “an end of history” where their systems will prevail as a permanent status quo. Both are historicist and insist that history is inevitably moving in their directions. Both therefore require that all social institutions—family, churches, private associations—must conform to liberal-democratic rules in their internal functioning. Because that is not so at present, both are devoted to social engineering to bring about this transformation. And because such engineering is naturally resisted, albeit slowly and in a confused way, both are engaged in a never-end ing struggle against enemies of society (superstition, tradition, the past, intolerance, racism, xenophobia, bigotry, etc., etc.) In short, like Marxism before it, liberal democracy is becoming an all-encompassing ideology that, behind a veil of tolerance, brooks little or no disagreement.

This must strike a newcomer to the argument as absurd. But in chapter after chapter—on history, politics, religion, education, ideology—the author lays out strong evidence that this transformation is taking place. And transformation is the correct term. The regime described here by Legutko is not liberal democracy as it was understood by, say, Winston Churchill or FDR or John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan. That was essentially majoritarian democracy resting on constitutional liberal guarantees of free speech, free association, free media, and other liberties needed to ensure that debate was real and elections fair. Legutko hyphenates “liberal-democratic” as an adjective in the book; maybe he should do the same with the noun “liberal-democracy” to distinguish it from the liberal democracy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One of the most crucial differences between these two regimes is openness. Liberal democracy is a set of rules designed to ensure that government rests on the consent of the governed. Except within the broadest limits, it does not inherently dictate what policies should emerge from government or what social arrangements should be tolerated or prohibited. It is open to a wide range of policy outcomes and willing to accept a genuine diversity of social arrangements, including traditional ones. Here the people rule both as voters and as citizens making free choices. Liberal-democracy, however, has policies and prohibitions built into its ideological structure. It is not really open to institutions and policies that run counter to its “liberationist” instincts. It increasingly restricts their freedom to maneuver on anything from parental rights to national sovereignty. It is even hostile to some fundamental values of liberalism such as free speech. Accordingly it sometimes comes up against the wishes of the voters expressed in elections and referenda.

That is where the second crucial difference between liberal democracy and liberal-democracy enters the equation. In the former, the wishes of the majority, albeit qualified by negative constitutional restraints, ultimately determine law and policy. In the latter, policy is determined both by electoral majorities in accountable bodies and by a range of nonaccountable institutions such as courts that make laws rather than interpret them, transnational institutions such as the EU, UN treaty-monitoring bodies, and domestic bureaucracies with wide regulatory powers under delegated legislation. Increasingly, power has drained from elected bodies to courts and other nonaccountable institutions, the former have lost confidence, and the latter have become bolder, not merely restraining the majority but also dictating law and policy. The imperfect balance that has always existed within liberal democracy between democracy and liberalism has tipped heavily in favor of liberalism. Liberal-democracy is the result.

Paradoxically this is both less liberal and less democratic than liberal democracy. The range of acceptable political expression and the ability of voters to choose between different policies have both been greatly narrowed. In return, the voters have become increasingly alienated and inclined to rebel against the new structures of power. As all these outcomes become clearer, there will be a major debate in the Western democracies on the legitimacy of their governing institutions. When that debate happens—and it is already in train—this culturally rich, philosophically sophis ticated, and brilliantly argued book will be an essential guide to understanding where we went wrong and how we can go right.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about the similarities between communism and liberal democracy. The idea that such similarities exist started germinating timidly in my mind back in the Seventies of the last century, when for the first time I managed to get out of communist Poland to travel to the so-called West. To my unpleasant surprise, I discovered that many of my friends who consciously classified themselves as devoted supporters of liberal democracy—of a multiparty system, human rights, pluralism, and everything that every liberal democrat proudly listed as his acts of faith—displayed extraordinary meekness and empathy toward communism. I was unpleasantly surprised because it seemed to me that every liberal democrat’s natural and almost visceral response to communism should be that of forthright condemnation.

For a while I thought that this anti-anticommunism, which was characterized by a lenient stance toward communists and a hard one against anticommunists, stemmed from the fear of the Soviets’ power, or, to express it more graciously, from recognition that it was morally unthinkable to accept the possibility of a global military conflict as the inevitable consequence of a confrontation with communism. I realized, however, that such considerations did not fully explain the raw anti-anticommunist rage I perceived, which exceeded most negative political emotions known to me. A hypothesis came to my mind that both attitudes—the communist and the liberal-democratic—are linked by something more profound, some common principles and ideals.

Before long, however, this thought seemed to be so extravagant that I did not find enough inner strength or knowledge to explore it more deeply. What is more, at that time, from the perspective of someone like myself, a resident of the Soviet bloc, the West was the best of all possible worlds. Comparing it with communism smacked of blasphemy. The writings of the mostly left-wing authors who made such comparisons, such as Herbert Marcuse, elicited a strong antagonistic reflex among anticommunist Poles and were perceived as an offence to common sense and elementary decency. We treated the procommunist sympathies in Western societies as an accident rather than a fundamental defect.

I experienced the same budding thought for the second time during Poland’s postcommunist period, right at the very beginning of its existence in 1989. Anti-anticommunism was activated simultaneously with the rise of the new liberal-democratic system (although to me and many of my friends, Poland seemed to be the last place on earth to harbor such ideas), and was almost immediately recognized as an important component of the new political orthodoxy that was taking shape. Those who were anticommunists were a threat to liberal democracy; those who were anti-anticommunist passed the most important and the most difficult entrance examination to the new political reality. These were the times when the communists were destroying the archives containing information of their activities and leaped forth to associate themselves with the new political and economic establishment from a much better position than the rest of us; and yet every negative word one uttered about them was not only stigmatized as villainy, but actually viewed as an attack on the best of the political systems to which we were humble newcomers.

The newly created Polish political elite embraced the communists with a show of impressive hospitality in part for tactical reasons (in order not to leave a large group of people outside the system), but also in no small part for ideological reasons: they predicted that following some slight touch-ups and finding themselves in new circumstances, the communists would become loyal and enthusiastic players in the liberal-democratic game. I quickly realized that this ideological assumption was true. Indeed, following some slight touch-ups and finding themselves in new circumstances, the former members of the Communist Party adapted themselves perfectly to liberal democracy, its mechanisms, and the entire ideological interpretation that accompanied these mechanisms. Soon they even joined the ranks of the guardians of the new orthodoxy. The same newspapers that for decades, on their front pages, had exhorted the proletarians of the world to unite began, with an equal zeal, to call on all enlightened forces to defend liberal democracy against the forces of darkness, including the anticommunists.

The fierce defense of the communists who were absorbed into the new system and the violent attacks on those whose opinion of their co-optation was far from enthusiastic, led many to believe that this was indeed the moral necessity of the new times. The communists who transformed themselves into the liberal democrats were considered trustworthy partners in the task of creating a new system, and an alliance with them was called an epoch-making contract, comparable in Polish history to the founding of the Republic in the history of the United States. Hence, the otherwise incomprehensible reaction of rage against the men of little faith who, like me, ques tioned the moral and political credibility of the newly co-opted partners. The rage still continues. It is symptomatic that in the history of the postcommunist societies the greatest political and journalistic hatchet jobs were against those who had doubts about granting the communists first immunity, then privileges.

The new system began to show symptoms that most political analysts ignored and that some, including myself, found most disturbing. When I talk about the system, I do not solely, or even mostly, mean an institutional structure, but everything that makes this structure function as it does: ideas, social practices, mores, people’s attitudes. Communism and liberal democracy proved to be all-unifying entities compelling their followers how to think, what to do, how to evaluate events, what to dream, and what language to use. They both had their orthodoxies and their models of an ideal citizen.

Few people today doubt that communism was such an integrated political, ideological, intellectual, and sociolinguistic unity. Living in that system meant that one had to obey the minute directives of the ruling party to the extent that one was expected to become indistinguishable in words, thoughts, and deeds from millions of fellow citizens—Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China, communist Albania, and North Korea being the closest approximations to the ideal. As for liberal democracy, the belief still lingers that it is a system of breathtaking diversity. But this belief has deviated from reality so much that the opposite view seems now closer to the truth. Liberal democracy is a powerful unifying mechanism, blurring differences between people and imposing uniformity of views, behavior, and language.

At the beginning of the Nineties I discovered something that was not particularly difficult to discover at the time: namely, that the nascent liberal democracy significantly narrowed the area of what was permissible. Incredible as it may seem, the final year of the decline of communism had more of the spirit of freedom than the period after the establishment of the new order, which immediately put a stop to something that many felt strongly at that time and that, despite its elusiveness, is known to everybody who has an experience of freedom—a sense of having many doors open and many possibilities to pursue. Soon this sense evaporated, subdued by the new rhetoric of necessity that the liberal-democratic system brought with itself. It did not take me long to make another, more depressing discovery: that this unifying tendency was not limited to the postcommunist world, and did not result from its peculiarities. Its adverse effects one could see throughout western civilization.

My subsequent experience of working in the European Parliament only endorsed my diagnosis. While there, I saw up close what—from a distance—escapes the attention of many observers. If the European Parliament is supposed to be the emanation of the spirit of today’s liberal democracy, then this spirit is certainly neither good nor beautiful: it has many bad and ugly features, some of which, unfortunately, it shares with the spirit of communism. Even a preliminary contact with the EU institutions allows one to feel a stifling atmosphere typical of a political monopoly, to see the destruction of language turning into a new form of Newspeak, to observe the creation of a surreality, mostly ideological, that obfuscates the real world, to witness an uncompromising hostility against all dissidents, and to perceive many other things only too familiar to anyone who remembers the world governed by the Communist Party. Interestingly this association with communism can quite often be heard in private conversations conducted in the EP corridors, even among loyal EU devotees. While annoyed with this system, they still do not challenge its fundamental rightness, probably hanging onto the belief that its disagreeable qualities are superficial and will, they hope, disappear with time. And they do not ask themselves, at least not openly, whether by any chance what annoys them is not the core of the system and consequently whether all these bad things half-jokingly referred to as Sovietlike will not intensify rather than disappear.

Similar thoughts are being disqualified by a seemingly irrefutable argument. How can one possibly compare the two systems, one of which was criminal, while the other, in spite of all the objections, gives people a lot of freedom and institutional protection? Surely, the difference between the Polish People’s Republic and the democratic republic of today is so vast that only an insane person would deny it. In today’s Poland, not communist any more, we have different political parties, the censorship office no longer exists, and economic freedom, despite various limitations, is much more advanced than during the communist rule. East Europeans travel without restrictions; they became part of the European Union and NATO and encounter no difficulties when establishing associations and organizations. The advantages of the modern democratic republic over the PPR are so obvious that only a person of bad faith could fail to see them. To give a personal argument for the superiority of one system over the other: in the Polish People’s Republic the author of this book would have had neither a chance to write officially what he wrote in the democratic Poland, nor to serve in the public offices he held after the fall of the former regime.

This argument in such a formulation is, of course, irrefutable and no reasonable person would question it. But at the same time what it says should not be used in the function of an intellectual and moral blackmail. Whatever fundamental differences exist between the two systems, it is perfectly legitimate to ask why there are also some similarities, and why they are so profound and becoming more so. One cannot dismiss them with an argument that because the liberal-democratic system as such is clearly superior to communism, the existing similarities are absolved or explained away by the mere fact of this superiority. Because the liberal democrats are so fond of warning against all sorts of dangers that might undermine their political order, even if these are only suspected and felt rather than actually perceived (xenophobia, nationalism, intolerance, bigotry), one wonders why these same people completely ignore dangers that are easy to spot, namely, the increasing presence of developments similar to those that existed in the communist societies. Why do so few sound the alarm, even a bit prematurely, while trumpeting thousands of other dangers that are indiscernible even to the most trained eye?

The simplest answer is that there is some interplay between liberal democracy and communism. This book explains this interplay in detail. At the onset, I will point to one obvious link. Both communism and liberal democracy are regimes whose intent is to change reality for the better. They are—to use the current jargon—modernization projects. Both are nourished by the belief that the world cannot be tolerated as it is and that it should be changed: that the old should be replaced with the new. Both systems strongly and—so to speak—impatiently intrude into the social fabric and both justify their intrusion with the argument that it leads to the improvement of the state of affairs by “modernizing” it. This word has a very peculiar connotation, initially stemming from technology because technology is and has always been about constant improvement. The language of modernization, by referring, if only associatively, to technology compels us to see the world as an object of engineering and innovative activity, almost like a machine to be improved by new devices and perfected by new inventions. The word “technology” comes, of course, from the Greek technê, which, as the ancients said, had such a powerful potential that it could make men equal to gods. It was Prometheus who made a gift of technê to the human race, the gift that enabled people to survive and then to improve their living conditions and make life better. This wonderful gift had, however, another side to it: the ancients warned that technê could, precisely because of its miraculous, almost divine creative potential, draw man into the sin of hubris.

Modernity made Prometheus a hero, and his gift was thought to be the best thing that ever happened to mankind because it was believed to be a vehicle of infinite progress carrying the human genius to unimaginable achievements. The meaning of modernization in today’s world goes far beyond technology in standard terms, but the faith in it draws its strength largely from the unprecedented technological successes that man has achieved so far and with which it can yet surprise the world in the future.

The concept of modernization also brings with it the idea of breaking from the old and initiating the new. Although the word itself, through its imperfective form, assumes a graduated process (constant modernizing, not having something modernized once and for all), in its deeper layer it refers to Modernity, a completely new era that was born when its makers decided to reject everything that preceded it and to start anew. The creators of modernity—Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bacon—saw themselves as pioneers of the new who boldly turned their backs on the past. Toward that past they felt, on the one hand, contempt of the kind one feels toward something both foolish and harmful, and on the other hand, sympathy mixed with the condescension one may feel toward something that had once, perhaps, some nobility and charm, but which disappeared, never to return. Even if some of the modernizers took advantage of the old—and many did—they, like Descartes, did so without admitting it, and did all they could to obliterate any traces of inspiration. Modernitas thus inevitably involves conscious detachment, passing over the border, crossing the Rubicon, severing the umbilical cord, growing up and leaving adolescence behind, and doing other similar things denoted by dozens of other more or less platitudinous metaphors.

“Modernization” also implies experiencing something refreshing and invigorating in human relations and in social and political arrangements: greater freedom, openness, and lightness of existence. Although in the modernized world technology is becoming more advanced and institutions more complex, modern human life returns to what is simple and elementary. People cast off unnecessary corsets, masks, postures, and costumes. They are once again young, optimistic, straightforward, and liberated, like the unforgettable Youngbloods family from Witold Gombrowicz’s Ferdydurke. The feeling of guilt, metaphysical or religious, disappears, together with irrational moral and psychological barriers that were built on this feeling. old obligations fade, and modern man acts more and more on his own account with a proud sense of individual independence and sovereignty. But at the same time—which may seem paradoxical but is not—considering himself detached from any bligations, he increasingly cultivates the belief that his affirming individual independence and sovereignty is a step on the road to a better world for the entire human race. Thus by considering himself as being separate, he exults in the belief—hidden deep in his heart—that he is a participant, together with millions of others like himself, in a march toward the future.

When we look at communism and liberal democracy from this point of view, we can see that they are both fuelled by the idea of modernization. In both systems a cult of technology translates itself into acceptance of social engineering as a proper approach to reforming society, changing human behavior, and solving existing social problems. This engineering may have a different scope and dynamics in each case, but the society and the world at large are regarded as undergoing a continuous process of construction and reconstruction. In one system this meant reversing the current of Siberia’s rivers, in the other, a formation of alternative family models; invariably, however, it was the constant improvement of nature, which turns out to be barely a substrate to be molded into a desired form. Although today’s ideology of environmentalism fashioned idolatrous reverence for the earth and its fauna and flora, it did not change the enthusiasm for treating human nature and society in a dangerously technological manner.

Both regimes clearly distance themselves from the past. Both embrace the idea of progress with all its consequences, being a natural offshoot of the belief in the power of techne. In both whatever happens is assessed with respect to its relation to the old or the new. Having the brand of the new is always preferable; being with the old is always suspect. The favorite expressions of condemnation always point to the old: “superstition,” “medieval,” “backward,” and “anachronistic”; the favorite adulatory term is, of course, “modern.” It goes without saying that everything—in both communism and liberal democracy—should be modern: thinking, family, school, literature, and philosophy. If a thing, a quality, an attitude, an idea is not modern, it should be modernized or will end up in the dustbin of history (an unforgettable expression having as much relevance for the communist ideology as for the liberal-democratic). This was a reason why the former communists, who for so many decades had been fighting for progress against the forces of backwardness, so quickly found allies in liberal democracy, where the struggle for progress animates practically every aspect of individual and collective activities, progress is largely in the same direction, and backwardness is represented by the same forces.

Both systems generate—at least in their official ideological interpretations—a sense of liberation from the old bonds. By becoming a member of a communist and liberal-democratic society, man rejects a vast share of loyalties and commitments that until not long ago shackled him, in particular those that were imposed on him through the tutelage of religion, social morality, and tradition. He feels renewed and strong and therefore has nothing but pity toward those miserable ones who continue to be attached to long-outdated rules and who succumb to the bondage of unreasonable restraints. But there is one obligation from which he cannot be relieved: for a communist, communism, and for a liberal democrat, liberal democracy. These obligations are non-negotiable. Others can be ignored.

Having cast away the obligations and commitments that come from the past, the communist and the liberal democrat quickly lose their memory of it or, alternatively, their respect for it. Both want the past eradicated altogether or at least made powerless as an object of relativizing or derision. Communism, as a system that started his tory anew, had to be, in essence and in practice, against memory. Those who were fighting the regime were also fighting for memory against forgetting, knowing very well that the loss of memory strengthened the communist system by making people defenseless and malleable. There are no better illustrations of how politically imposed amnesia helps in the molding of the new man than the twentieth-century anti-utopias 1984 and Brave New World. The lessons of Orwell and Huxley were, unfortunately, quickly forgotten. In my country at the very moment when communism fell and the liberal-democratic order was emerging, memory again became one of the main enemies. The apostles of the new order lost no time in denouncing it as a harmful burden hampering striving for modernity. In this anti-memory crusade, as in several other crusades, they have managed to be quite successful, more so than their communist predecessors.

This book will examine these and other similarities between communism and liberal democracy in detail. It will also address the questions that must be asked as soon as the similarities are identified: first, whether an underlying cause exists that makes these two systems, seemingly so different, tend to resemble each other, and second, what conclusions follow for those of us who have lived in the present system, proudly called a Western democracy, for more than two decades, but who have not forgotten what it meant to live under a communist dictatorship.