

Why the Right Splintered But the Left United

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After the voters elect the 45th president of the United States next week, a portentous question will remain: Why did the Republican nominee's larger-than-life defects trigger a civil war among conservatives, while progressives—especially elite progressives—fell into line and rallied around a Democratic nominee whose policy blunders, hypocrisy, and proclivity to lie to the American people to cover up cronyism and lawlessness have been amply documented?

One answer, common among Democrats and recently advanced by New York Times columnist David Brooks, is that it's conservatives' own fault. According to Brooks, conservative demagogues on talk radio, cable TV, and the Internet induced hysteria and exploited social resentments. Social conservatives put advancement of the Republican Party ahead of their religious obligations. And conservatives have been slow to recognize -- and craft policies to deal with -- economic hardship and the breakdown of civil society.

This answer is unsatisfactory because it overlooks the conservative movement's persistent turbulence, even in the heyday of William F. Buckley, who made great strides in bringing together the American right's disputatious factions. It also fails to acknowledge Democrats' puzzling ability to set aside apparent differences and unite, even if reluctantly, in support of their deeply flawed candidate.

"The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies" might seem an unlikely source of insight into the deep forces driving American electoral politics. Nevertheless, Ryszard Legutko's erudite polemic analyzing the resemblances that liberal democracy in the West bears to the Soviet communism it vanquished clarifies the roots of progressive unity in America and the causes of conservative discord.

Legutko's brilliant book suggests that progressives and left-liberals unite more effectively because they are in harmony with contemporary liberal democracy's liberationist and egalitarian drift—in other words, its tendency to dismantle inherited authorities and pursue equality of result. By contrast, conservatives find much of what they cherish under assault by government's relentless expansion into areas—such as family, faith, and speech—that were once commonly held to be largely beyond state supervision. Scrambling to resist the ambitious efforts of partisan politicians, government bureaucrats, and courts to entrench progressive norms as default positions, conservatives increasingly lock horns over where to draw lines and what is most urgently in need of preserving.

Legutko relies on expertise he acquired in disparate worlds to illuminate the complex interplay of ideas and institutions in contemporary liberal democracy. An anti-communist dissident in Poland before the collapse of the Soviet Union, he is now a professor at Jagiellonian University in Krakow specializing in ancient philosophy and political theory. He is also a member of the European Parliament and has served as Poland's minister of education and secretary of state.

Having experienced communism from the inside, Legutko knows that liberal democracy is unequivocally preferable to that "regime of crime and terror." But having also lived under liberal democracy in Poland, and having assumed responsibility for government and administration in the European Union as well as in Poland, he discerns—with the assistance of prolonged study of classical and modern political philosophy—that today's version imperils the very individual freedom and equality before the law that have been liberal democracy's great achievements.

Like communism, according to Legutko, contemporary liberal democracy regards history as progressive and as culminating with itself. Convinced that history is on their side and so impatient with the old liberal distinction between the public realm subject to state control and the private sphere where individuals live within broad limits as they deem fit, contemporary liberal democracies increasingly demand that "everything that exists in society must become liberal-democratic over time and be imbued with the spirit of the system."

Like communism, contemporary liberal democracy is utopian in purporting to provide "the final realization of the eternal desires of mankind, particularly those of freedom and the rule of the people." But the openness and diversity it promises have proved chimerical. Hostile to claims of excellence, hierarchy, and tradition, contemporary liberal democracy, maintains Legutko, "is the single most homogenizing force in the modern world." It coerces conformity not only through legislatures, government agencies, and judges, but also through popular culture, the media, and schools and universities. In the name of inclusion, it dictates "language, gesture, and thoughts."

Like communism, contemporary liberal democracy "promised to reduce the role of politics in human life, yet induced politicization on a scale unknown in previous history." Once content to establish a framework within which individuals and their associations could cooperate and compete for mutual advantage, it today seeks "power over minds and institutions." In defense of pluralism, establishments in liberal democracies wish to compel all to embrace the left-wing interpretation of liberalism. The obligatory calls for dialogue, debate, and mutual respect that abound in liberal democracies are often little more than a ruse. In practice, they serve to exclude conservative viewpoints as inherently disreputable, not worth debating, and inconsistent with the minimum standards for meaningful dialogue.

Like communism, contemporary liberal democracy has “a strong tendency to ideology” in two senses. It finds sinister political ideas—especially these days racism and sexism—lurking everywhere in art, philosophy, science, family, religion, and in apparently simple acts of courtesy and kindness. In addition, it generates its own simplifying and mandatory core beliefs. Artists and intellectuals in Western liberal democracies, Legutko argues, have become propagandists for progressivism, substituting for beauty and truth the criterion of conformity to the left-liberal political agenda, a practice otherwise known as political correctness.

Like communism, Legutko argues, contemporary liberal democracy is also hostile to religion. Convinced that freedom and equality imply secularism and that without religion the world would be a better place, contemporary liberal democracy practices toleration grudgingly. The promise of the free exercise and non-establishment of religion, commonly adopted by contemporary liberal democracies, is failing to provide religion the necessary protection. Liberal democracies increasingly regulate religious morality, particularly that of Christianity. Without formally abandoning the promise of religious liberty, they are employing state power, education, and popular culture to emancipate citizens from religion.

Legutko’s indictment of contemporary liberal democracy is severe. His bold criticisms could be qualified in a thousand ways. At the same time, his philosophical forays provide an exceptionally illuminating perspective on party politics in America and this year’s dismal presidential election.

Progressives—especially progressive elites—can come together in support of Hillary Clinton because of their confidence that for all her baggage she shares their liberationist and egalitarian understanding of liberal democracy and will fortify their grip on the commanding heights of politics and culture. Donald Trump is not the cause but a symptom of division and disarray among conservatives, who have been rattled and thrown on the defensive by a culture and governing institutions that have taken the other side in a partisan battle over the future of freedom.

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