

*The Demon In Democracy* by Ryszard Legutko – Introduction

notes by David Alexander

Ryszard Legutko writes that his book is about the similarities which exist between communism and democracy. He noticed, on the part of liberal democrats, an extraordinary meekness and empathy toward communism. He had thought that their visceral reaction should be one of condemnation. He had thought at first that the failure to do so was out of fear of Soviet power, but then he began to discern behind the rage against anti-anti-communists a deeper relatedness, some shared principles and ideals. Legutko observed that being anti-anti-communist even became a kind of political test for admission into leadership in the new democratic liberal reality. He noted that the assimilation of communists to the "liberal democratic game" was surprisingly easy. Legutko and others questioned the moral and political credibility of these co-opted ex-communists and they were met with a rage whose vehemence he came to believe was due to a kind of sacredness with respect to an epoch-making contract which existed with the coopted partners.

Legutko defines a system as an institutional structure and everything which makes this structure function as it does: ideas, social practices, mores, and people's attitudes. He notes that the belief still lingers regarding the system of liberal democracy that it is one of breathtaking diversity, but the opposite now seems closer to the truth: it is a powerful unifying mechanism which blurs differences between people and which imposes a uniformity of views, behavior, and language. It deracinates and it significantly narrows the area of what is permissible. It brought with it a new rhetoric of necessity.

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 shares many ugly features in common with communism. One witnesses there "*the destruction of language* turning into a new form of Newspeak" in order to bolster a surreality that obfuscates the real world and, at the same time too, an uncompromising hostility toward dissidents. Legutko asks if the Soviet-like similarities that are half-jokingly acknowledged even by EU devotees are not more core than has been realized and whether they will intensify rather than disappear.

Despite the fundamental differences, it is perfectly legitimate to ask about what similarities exist between the Communist and the liberal-democratic systems. He asks why liberal democrats are given to sounding the alarm about dangers such as xenophobia, nationalism, intolerance, and bigotry, which are often suspected and felt rather than perceived while, at the same time, they ignore dangers that are easy to spot: namely, the increase of developments similar to those that had existed in communist countries. Legutko believes that this is because there is an interplay between these systems and he says that this book explains this interplay in detail.

One obvious shared trait that belongs to the two systems is the being of modernization projects whose intents are to change reality for the better. The language of modernization derives from technology and it compels us to see the world as an object of engineering and innovative activity. Modernity made Prometheus a hero and *techne* was believed to be the best thing that has happened to man because it was believed to be a vehicle of infinite progress. The creators of modernity - Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bacon - saw themselves as pioneers who boldly turned their backs on the past. They bore a contempt for the past as something that was both foolish and harmful, mixed with condescension, thinking that perhaps it once had nobility and charm. Some like Descartes took advantage of the past but, at the same

time, they strove to obliterate any trace of their debt. (See the MacIntyre essay on Descartes's debt). A "conscious detachment" is inevitably entailed. There is a "proud sense of individual independence and sovereignty." Affirming individual independence and sovereignty itself becomes a kind of therapy, and the modernist derives a deep-seated belief in his participation in the march to the future from this conflation of detachment with progress.

In both systems, a "cult of technology" translates itself into an acceptance of social engineering as a proper approach to reforming society (and so a debased human anthropology is the price of self-superior progress). In both systems, society and the world are considered as being under constant reconstruction. In one system, this meant reversing the current of Siberia's rivers; in the other, a formation of alternative family models. In both, it is the constant remolding nature which is conceived to be "barely a substrate to be modeled into a desired form."

Both regimes distance themselves from the past and embrace the idea of progress that is based on a belief in the power of *techne*. In the consequent psychological and moral stance, the old becomes "suspect" and the "modern" becomes an adulatory term. Becoming a devoted member of a communist and a liberal-democratic society generates a sense of liberation from old bonds and it entails rejecting a vast share of loyalties and commitments, especially those that had been inculcated in him by religion, social morality, and tradition. Communism, which was supposed to have started history anew, is in essence and practice "against memory." Memory again is one of the main enemies for the liberal-democratic order.

[One thing I notice about Legutko's critique is how much he analyses attitudes and psychological dispositions. It is very virtue centered and one can tend to make out the man beneath the politics that is writ large in the politics].