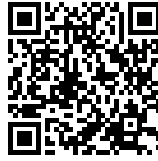




# A PLEA FOR HETEROGENEITY

*Posted on October 1, 2021 by Robert M. Kerr*



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Upon reading Professor Legutko's [comments in last month's issue of \*The Postil\*](#), I was reminded of the apophthegm of the Danish polymath Poul Henningsen, "Democracy can only be measured by the existence of an opposition." Prof. Legutko notes correctly that *audi alteram partem* no longer really holds true. His experiences in communist Poland of course serve as a stern warning to what happens when no opposition is allowed.

To avoid misunderstanding though, opposition for the sake of opposition is a nihilistic pursuit (he correctly notes that "the problem of the opposition is a tricky one"), it must be rooted in the separation and balance of governmental and societal powers. This can be seen for example in the 1936 Soviet constitution – at first glance it, along with those which it inspired in Soviet satellite states seemed quite progressive for their day and age. There was however no division of power; all power resided with the Party, hence the "rights" enshrined therein had no practical currency and no notion of civic society (outside of Party institutions) was permitted.

He notes further that "the danger of homogeneity has been looming over Europe and America for several centuries." One might even say that for Europe this ideal harkens at least as far back as Diocletian's "Edict on Maximum Prices," issued in the beginning of the fourth century AD.

Here though, one must distinguish clearly between the ideals of "homogeneity," or rather "mass conformity" – this is of course nothing else than the notion of consensus, the foundation of any social contract, taken to an extreme – in "Europe" and "America." The European homogenetical – "ism" – experiments (nationalism, communism, fascism, etc.) are for better or worse fundamentally rooted in continental European culture and history. The material philosophy of Marx, heavily influenced as he was by the Young Hegelians, for example, is firmly rooted in the tradition of Continental Philosophy. Anglo-Saxon and thus American culture and philosophy took a different path – one might say that Britannia became part of the Roman Empire too late and left too soon or that the Anglo-American thassalocracy took a different road.

The movement to which Prof. Legutko alludes with his remark "at that time, it never occurred to me that the Western world may produce a society and a state of mind where the opposition as a permanent constituent of political and social life may disappear or become unwelcome" is essentially an Anglo-American import to Europe. In Great Britain and the United States, the above-mentioned "-isms" never really took hold, except among some immigrant groups such as the "German Workers'

Educational Society" in London. The reception of Marx in the English-speaking world was always quite distinct from the Continental tradition – Latin America, firmly rooted culturally in Europe followed this path to some extent, too.

By this I by no means wish to claim that Albion and its American parcener do not belong to the "Abendland," but that rather it took a different path. The West, a marriage of Hellenistic and Christian idea(l)s under the Roman imperial umbrella produced a division of power which mediated between the temporal and the eternal.

The Church always remained separate from the Roman state, which had formerly prosecuted it, because while Christians were willing to accept the worldly authority of Rome, they refused to accept its supernatural authority (e.g. divine emperors). This was historically speaking a rather unique set of affairs, combatted by some (Caesaropapism), and disposed with in the Middle Eastern parts of the Empire with the rise of Islam (Judaism, i.e., Judean religion after the loss of its state, left politics to the [non-Jewish] states in which they lived and concentrated on religious matters). Much of Western history and politics since then has been establishing a modus vivendi betwixt Church and State, a balanced division of power.

So, as has been pointed out by, among others, [Remy Brague](#), the Church secularised the medieaval state by assigning to it a domain of its own, keeping the peace. We forget that "secularisation" (like indeed philosophy) was not in its inception anti-ecclesiastical; it was initiated by the Church and from the 11th century on, it strove to "laicise" the political power by taking away from it all initiative in spiritual matters. This, however, states were never eager to do, given that, for their part, they dreamt only of sacrality.

In the Early Modern Period, after the Thirty Years War and the Counter-Reformation – it is not a coincidence that the borders between Catholicism and Protestantism, excluding the flanks such as Poland and Ireland and cuius regio, eius religio notwithstanding, roughly equate those of the Roman Empire – political stability now being ensured by the principles of Westphalian sovereignty, the new protestant states recalibrated the politico-religious balance in that the secular head of state was also the head of the national church. Furthermore, in Protestantism, the notion of the individual (originally formulated by St Augustine to theologically explain the Trinity) played a crucial role in the economy of salvation. This was especially true in England during the Protectorate (or Interregnum) under Cromwell.

What we though see roughly after, let us say, 1648, are two different approaches to reduce the sacral authority of the Church(es) – one culminating in the French Revolution, the other in the Foundation of the American Republic. Where the French sought to create a secular republic on the ruins of the tyrannous Catholic Church, America founded by the Pilgrim Fathers and their Congregationalist Churches in New England, soon overtaken by Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, followed in turn by Pentecostalists, Restorationists and others, including native creations such as Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses, denied the State any role in matters religious – as Thomas Jefferson, by no count a religious fanatic, noted: "Pure rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them. The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg" (*Notes on the State of Virginia* Query XVII). The uniqueness of America must be seen in light of the "Pilgrim" Fathers (cf. *Hebrews* 11:13–16) and the other Dissenters who pilgrimed to the new Promised Land, each with their own *Heilsgeschichte*.

As Ian Buruma [has noted](#), "American Protestantism favour(ed) histrionic emotion over superior learning and democracy over authoritarianism, but it was also a brand of individualism that tolerated inequality as long as men were free to compete for 'the good things of the world;'" that is, the "honest pursuit of prosperity." This was also noted by de Tocqueville during his travels to America in the early nineteenth century; the pursuit of material success and the hope of salvation in the world to come were not distinct, but rather closely linked.

Furthermore, de Tocqueville [noted that](#), unlike in post-revolutionary France, "for the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other." The Catholic Norman nobleman visited the United States during what is known as the Second Great Awakening, and he saw in the puritan ethics the underlying principle of American society. While these on the one hand enabled the building of a civil society, which in turn led to stable democratic institutions, there was also an aspect which worried him, a survivor of the French excesses – namely, a disturbing social conformity and the lack of distinction between public and private life. "The same people, who insisted on their individual rights as citizens of a democratic republic, were capable of inflicting horrible violence on others on the basis of their sexual practices or simply the color of their skin." The excesses, such as the Salem Witch Trials, are well known. But on the whole one must say that the American experience was much less violent and bloody than the successive revolutionary excesses which plagued Europe.

It is not my goal to pass judgement here, just to note that the Christian Puritan ethics are part of the cultural DNA of the United States and make it quite distinct from Europe. It is also the reason why neither European socialism or communism could ever really make any inroads – they are too antithetical. American secularism, in which the sacred became an individual affair, produced a new dynamic between individual prosperity and social responsibility – the two poles or tension fields between which American culture and society oscillates.

From this, to oversimplify matters for the sake of brevity, morphed for example two diametrically opposing movements: those of the “Social Gospel” and the “Prosperity Gospel,” which are actually but two sides of the same American coin. Both, true to the Puritan ideal and postmillennial theology, enshrining in an egalitarian fashion a fluid transition between private and public; personal holiness and public engagement strove to create an ideal society based on their respective constituent salvific histories – the one opposed to capitalism, the other avowing it. These diametrically opposed poles, however, basically form the basis of civic society and represent the societal division of power in the United States, where European notions of “right” and “left” are inappropriate – but never in terms of Hegelian dialectic, as in Europe, since a real synthesis could not emerge.

Due to this polarity America could emerge as a great nation, the majority of the population including large numbers of immigrants, could settle somewhere between the two extremes, usually along the imaginary equator, mainstream America. Over the years, decades and centuries, the pendulum moved back and forth, seemingly endowed with some uncanny instinct, continually recalibrating, understanding which pole was most seasonal to the present needs and national interest. This equilibrium slowly became unbalanced after the Second World War, culminating in the 1960s when social issues were once and for all politically transformed into moral problems, as both poles tried to immanentize the eschaton, each with their respective (holy) “Wars on...” – and then becoming metamorphosed into respectively the “New Left” and the “Neocons.”

Slowly, the political division of power enshrined in the Constitution, written by enlightened cynics (in Europe such tended to be authored by idealists) began to be eroded inter alia by primaries, plea-bargains, and an activist legal culture espoused by both groups. Both poles, though developed and evolved, remain true to their puritan ideals of public and private holiness, seeing the world as being comprised of the good (the elect) and the evil (the other). The respective elect, of course victims of persecution, strive in a merciless combat against evil, each supported with their own salvific history. With regard to the latter, we see that “fake news” and conspiracy theories are not a recent

phenomenon in America and hearken back to the various salvific understandings of history, espoused by the dissenter settlers in New England. So, for example, both Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump claim that an election was 'stolen' from them; the former due to alleged foreign influence; the latter due to mail-in ballots. Each group lives in its own alternate reality.

The point which I wish to make clear here is that we have here the two faces of Janus – one cannot exist without the other – the New Left, or Wokes and the Neocons or neoliberals. The term “woke,” etymologically related to “Awaking” (in its American religious sense), is but one indicator of the intrinsic religiosity of both. In any case, such culture wars are not new to the United States, nor is this present one more severe than previous ones. They come and go like wildfires, leaving behind “burnt-over districts.” The one strives religiously for an unbridled market as a means to prosperity for all – the elect succeed; those who fail have only themselves to blame. The other sees injustice everywhere and proposes a theology of redemption based on perceived victimhood and public confession of “sins” (hence, self-abasing Prince Harry bemoaning his ‘white privilege’ on Oprah. In many ways he seems to wish to resemble Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s novel, *The Scarlet Letter*). What has changed though, and this is rightly noted by Professor Legutko, is that they have become an export product, waging their endless struggle overseas.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that after the end of the Cold War, no new world order, such as after previous conflicts (Treaty of Westphalia, Vienna Congress, League of Nations, United Nations) was established – instead another a postmillennial manifestation of the “End of History illusion” (originally a premillennial notion formulated in St Augustine’s *City of God*) gained currency. Secondly, the rise of the internet and social media – which have reinvigorated the Puritan fluidity of public and private. An often-heard cynic quip in Eastern Europe is that if the KGB, Stasi or the Służba Bezpieczeństwa had had social media, such as Facebook, the Iron Curtain would still be in place.

This misses the point – if such states had invented it, probably no one would have used them. We do not have some totalitarian mastermind at work here; rather the digital incarnation of the Puritan ideal – no secrets, yea even having secrets is a sin. Both the wokes and the neocons espouse “transparency” (as well as compliancy and best practice in an absolute moral sense) as an arbitrary instrument to be employed by their respective witch hunters. Jefferson’s point (see above) is now construed as “powers extend to *all* acts as *are seen to be* injurious *by* others” – i.e., mass conformity and mob rule redivivus.

The new digital dimension means that sins can now be hunted down regardless of time and place,

when and where they may have occurred. As with Hawthorne's Reverend Dimmesdale, past injustices must not be forgotten, for they influence the present. Here there can be no freedom, no notion of liberty. We are condemned to our past, without hope of a future. By contrast, "among democratic nations," as de Tocqueville pointed out, "each new generation is a new people."

Europe (and indeed the rest of the world) is faced with this double alien onslaught. On the one hand, traditional social market economy and welfare states are deemed protective and uncompetitive. On the other, autochthonous European cultures are viewed as intrinsically racist, heteronormative and transphobic. Now that Europe seems to have created a peaceful *modus vivendi* for ethnic minorities (without fighting over borders or ethnic cleansing), the concept of new self-declared "historically victimised" minorities has been imported, much to the detriment of received notions of civic society.

These twin American ideologies, exported via the internet, seem to have taken hold in Great Britain, among Cromwell's heirs, and in those countries which share long-standing historical and cultural ties with the Anglo-American world, such as, the Netherlands. But also Germany, which since the Second World War, has been politically and economically aligned with the United States – the traditional Anti-Americanism of the classical German left and right (e.g. Heidegger's warning about "*Amerikanismus*" (Martin Heidegger: *Hölderlins Hymne 'Der Ister'*, GA 53, S. 68) has all but disappeared – while remaining culturally attached to Europe, limping in two minds as it were (much to the dismay of the French), is increasingly feeling the strain.

But this too applies to Eastern Europe, where English supplanted Russian as the first foreign language – in countries which have traditionally been more sceptical to Perfidious Albion, such as France, stubborn resistance can be seen – the notion of "laicity," by which the Catholic Church fares rather well, is the antithesis of Puritanism. Hence, it is no coincidence that European countries, which boldly ascribe to neo-liberalism, also have a thriving woke culture, or vice-versa, even if markets and victims have to be invented to lie in the American-made Procrustean double-bed.

This admittedly brief exposé, may the reader forgive the author for painting a canvas with very broad strokes, is not to criticise Professor Legutko's fine analysis of the present European situation, but rather to render a more precise diagnosis of the symptoms. Yes, we are faced with a new homogeneity, but it is a quite different beast; the ghosts of the past have not come back to haunt us. Homogeneity, as the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel teaches us, is that when the whole world is of one language and one

speech – succumbing to hubris, we strive to be gods but succeed only in losing our humanity.

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*The [featured image](#) shows, "Embarkation of the Pilgrims," by Robert Walter Weir; painted in 1857.*



