



POLITICAL Ponerology and the Rise of Totalitarianism in the West

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Seventy years ago, the thankless task of ideological indoctrination in Polish universities fell upon the communist leadership and their approved instructors. The people would learn what was best for them, even if it killed them. Today, by contrast, the students seem perfectly happy to indoctrinate themselves. No government coercion necessary. Things have a way of coming full circle, and then some! "[The Legutko Affair](#)," covered in last month's issue of *The Postil* should demonstrate that. But before discussing the present state of affairs, we must return to the past. The time is 1951, just a few years after the imposition of communism. The place: the gothic lecture hall at Jagiellonian University, Professor Legutko's alma mater.

Previously, students had heard lectures here by scholars like Roman Ingarden, a student of Husserl. But when the students were herded into the hall that year to attend the recently introduced Marxist-Leninist indoctrination lectures, a new man appeared at the lectern, informing them he was to be their new professor. This particular class of students—soon to graduate with degrees in psychology—were about to learn some important lessons about the nature of totalitarianism. In a twisted way, these were actually lessons in psychology, though that certainly was not their professor's intention.

First of all, the man spoke nonsense unfitting of a university, and the students immediately recognized this—or at least *most* of them did. Second, he wasn't even a real professor. The students soon discovered that he had attended high school, but it was unclear if he had ever actually graduated. Third, this new "professor" treated the students with contempt and barely concealed hatred. His tyrannical teaching style mirrored that of the communist party leadership—whom he had to thank for his new, "socially advanced" position.

The students' encounter with the new professor may not have succeeded in swaying many of them over to communism—communist indoctrination efforts were embarrassingly ineffective—but it was a crash course in the personalities and psychological processes at the heart of the communist system. One of the students in that class, Dr. Andrzej Łobaczewski (1921–2007), who would go on to study the psychology of totalitarianism and write the most important book on the topic, credits that professor as his first instructor in this brutal new reality.

John Connelly has studied this stormy period in his book, [*Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956*](#). Regarding the template for this ideological takeover established in the USSR, he writes:

"After universities had been emptied of enemies, they had to be filled with ostensible supporters: students from underprivileged social strata who would reward the regime with loyalty for upward social mobility. During the early breakthrough periods in Soviet history, preference was given to students of 'worker and peasant background'" (p. 3).

The communists instituted a program of what we in the West call affirmative action, actively seeking to enroll students from the "worker-peasant" class, the underprivileged who were numerically underrepresented in the education system. Remedial courses were set up to prepare such students for university. In the Czech lands, for instance, the party had to enforce downward mobility on middle-class aspirants in order to make room for working-class students (a policy that would be familiar to many Asian Americans today). While a success in many regards—worker students performed on par in many subjects, and excelled at others—in a reflection of affirmative action today, many of these students found themselves in over their heads, especially in technical fields, and dropped out at higher than average rates, many suffering nervous breakdowns from the stress.

But quotas must be met. So Polish and East German functionaries solved this problem by simply lowering standards and graduating students early. Predictably, this gave students a sense of power: *"at a January 1952 meeting of representatives of Poznan University with Vice-Minister of Education Krassowska, Rector Ajdukiewicz told the audience that there had been cases of 'improper behavior' among students who felt that the authorities 'have no choice but to graduate us, because otherwise they won't fulfill the plan'" (p. 275).* (While this was to the advantage of dissident students, one wonders if these students ever reached the obnoxious levels of entitlement displayed by those of Evergreen State College, Washington, in 2017.)

In a section titled "Professors vs. Professors," Connelly describes what was perhaps "the most demoralizing experience" for faculty in those early years: the personal and professional attacks by some professors on their colleagues, leading to involuntary leave, early retirement, or dismissal. University administrations *"voided the teaching qualifications of professors who had demonstrated a 'hostile attitude toward the People's Democratic regime'" and "voted to exclude fellow members who had been identified as politically untrustworthy" (p. 192).* Others used this new political climate to "settle old scores." In East Germany the *"practice of voting against one's colleagues was also widespread"; sometimes professors voted to send a colleague to the state security services for ideologically incorrect remarks, in one case for remarks critical of "distinguished leaders of the working class" (p. 193).* The communist system depended on its ability to find examples of thoughtcrime, punish the offenders

(whether guilty or not), and thus maintain a modicum of compliance and ideological consensus enforced by terror.

Flash forward to today, seventy years after Dr. Łobaczewski's experience of political indoctrination at Jagiellonian University and the dawn of the politicization of higher education in Poland. In the summer of 2021, Polish conservative politician Ryszard Legutko, a professor emeritus of philosophy at Jagiellonian, sent a letter to the university rector decrying the creation and operation of an office of "Safety and Equal Treatment" at the school. According to the [website](#) of JU, the objectives of the "Department of Security, Safety and Equal Treatment," are the "coordination of steps to ensure the personal safety and equal treatment of members of the JU community" and "providing support to victims of conduct that is discriminatory in nature or violates their personal safety." Anyone with a passing familiarity with similar departments of "diversity, equity, and inclusion" in American universities will see the similarities, and the dangers.

The fact is, social justice ideology, with roots in "gender theory," "critical race theory," and the ever-growing list of unscientific "studies" departments, is a Trojan horse. On the surface level it promotes "diversity," but enforces strict ideological conformity; "equity," but only for its believers; and "inclusion," but only of those who agree with them. If you have the temerity to disagree with them, you will be found guilty of "discrimination" (i.e., thought crime) and of endangering the "safety" (i.e., hurting the feelings) of "historically marginalized groups." You will have proven yourself not diverse enough to be included, all in the name of equality or equity. Its logic is Kafkaesque and its morality is Orwellian.

In his [letter of protest](#) Legutko correctly noted that *"in the last few decades, universities have become a breeding ground for aggressive ideology—censorship, control of language and thought, intimidation of rebellious academics, various compulsory training sessions to raise awareness, disciplinary measures and dismissal from work."* He added: *"If we create a structure that is paid for and specially programmed to look for inequalities and discrimination, it is obvious that it will find them quite quickly to prove the reason for its existence, and sooner or later it will take steps that are taken at hundreds of other universities."* All but two of the thirty-plus faculty members of the department of philosophy then penned a response attacking Professor Legutko for his "grotesque" "attacks" on the university. "The Students" (a nameless collective reminiscent of the ubiquitous but mostly imaginary "The People" of communist fame) joined in on the action, responding to Legutko's "discriminatory actions" and "words that violate the dignity of another human being," thus demonstrating the truth of his argument. The students, after all, were "raised in a spirit of tolerance and respect for others." As if that were relevant to Legutko's concerns.

Łobaczewski, who died in 2007, must be turning in his grave. He warned about this over thirty years ago, but had been hopeful that Poland would escape a repeat of the mass madness that led to the communist revolutions, hostile takeovers, and infiltrations of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, his work remains obscure, and the window of opportunity in which it may have helped stave off disaster may already have passed. So who was Łobaczewski, and how can his ideas help to make sense of the madness we see taking over the Western world today?

The History of *Political Ponerology*

In the years after the imposition of communism on the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1940s, a group of scientists—primarily Polish, Hungarian, and Czech—secretly collaborated on a scientific study of the nature of totalitarianism. Blocked from meaningful contact with the West, their work remained secret both from the wider public in their own countries as well as from the outside scientific community.

Before his death in 2007, Andrzej Łobaczewski was the last known living member of this group. His book, [*Political Ponerology*](#), contains the conclusions he formulated over his decades of experience living and working in communist Poland, and whatever other data he was able to gather from the other members of this group. An expert on psychopathy, he chose to christen their field of study “ponerology”—a synthesis of psychological, psychiatric, sociological, and historical studies on the nature and genesis of evil. Upon his request, two monks of the Benedictine Abbey in the historic Polish village of Tyniec provided the name. Derived from *poneros* in New Testament Greek, the word suggests an inborn evil with a corrupting influence, a fitting description of psychopathy and its social effects.

Practically all of what we know about this research comes from his book, though hints of it can be found elsewhere. Łobaczewski’s sole contact with the other researchers was through [Stefan Szuman](#) (1889–1972), a retired professor who passed along anonymous research summaries to members of the group. The consequences for being discovered were severe; scientists faced arrest, torture, or even “an accident at work,” so strict conspiracy was essential. They safeguarded themselves and their work by adopting the mode of operation learned during the past decade of resistance to Nazi and Soviet occupation. (Łobaczewski himself had been a member of the [Home Army](#).) This way, if any were arrested and tortured, they could not reveal the names and locations of their confederates.

Łobaczewski only shared the names of two Polish professors of the previous generation who were

involved in some way in the early stages of this work—Stefan Błachowski (1889–1962) and [Kazimierz Dąbrowski](#) (1902–1980). Błachowski apparently died under suspicious circumstances and Łobaczewski speculated that the state police murdered him for his part in the research. Around this time, Dąbrowski emigrated and, unwilling to renounce his Polish citizenship in order to work in the United States, took a position at the University of Alberta in Canada, where he was able to retain dual citizenship.

A close reading of Dąbrowski's published works in English shows the theoretical roots of what would eventually become ponerology.

Like Łobaczewski, Dąbrowski considered psychopathy to be *"the greatest obstacle in development of personality and social groups."* He warned: *"The general inability to recognize the psychological type of such individuals causes immense suffering, mass terror, violent oppression, genocide and the decay of civilization... As long as the suggestive [i.e., hypnotic, "spellbinding"] power of the psychopath is not confronted with facts and with moral and practical consequences of his doctrine, entire social groups may succumb to his demagogic appeal"* ([The Dynamics of Concepts](#), pp. 40, 47). In one of the first explicit mentions of political psychopathy, he remarked that the extreme of ambition and lust for power and financial gain *"is particularly evident in criminal or political psychopathy."*

"Methods are developed for spreading dissension between groups (as in the maxim "divide et impera" [divide and rule]). Treason and deceit in politics are given justification and are presented as positive values. Principles of taking advantage of concrete situations are also developed. Political murder, execution of opponents, concentration camps and genocide are the product of political systems at the level of primary integration [i.e., psychopathy]." ([Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions](#), pp. 33, 153)

In a passage decades before its time, Dąbrowski observed that less "successful" psychopaths are to be found in prisons, while successful ones are to be found in positions of power (i.e., *"among political and military national leaders, labor union bosses, etc."*). The concept of corporate or "successful" psychopathy only took off in the West in the last couple decades. He cited Hitler and Stalin as two examples of leaders characterized by this "affective retardation," who both showed a *"lack of empathy, emotional cold-ness, unlimited ruthlessness and craving for power."*

Dąbrowski and Łobaczewski experienced this horror firsthand. In September 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland, after which they instituted a regime of terror that resulted in the deaths of an estimated six million Poles. As part of a larger goal of destroying all Polish cultural life, schools were closed and professors were arrested, sent to concentration camps, and some murdered. Psychiatry was outlawed.

According to Jason Aronson of Harvard Medical School, the Nazis murdered the majority of practicing psychiatrists. Only 38 survived out of approximately 400 alive before the invasion (preface to Dąbrowski, *Positive Disintegration*, pp. ix–x). During this tumultuous time, Łobaczewski volunteered as a soldier for the Home Army, the underground Polish resistance organization, and his desire to study psychology grew.

The school that he would later attend, Jagiellonian University, suffered greatly during the war years as part of a [general program](#) to exterminate the intellectual elite of the city of Kraków. On November 6, 1939, 138 [professors and staff](#) were arrested and sent to concentration camps. They had been told that they were to attend a mandatory lecture on German plans for Polish education. Upon arrival, they were arrested in the lecture hall, along with everyone else present in the building. Thankfully, due to public protest, the majority were released a few months later.

Despite the university having been looted and vandalized by the Nazis, survivors of the operation managed to form an underground university in 1942. (Błachowski taught at one such underground university in Warsaw.) Regular lectures began again in 1945 and it was probably soon after that Łobaczewski began his studies at Jagiellonian, under professor of psychiatry Edward Brzezicki, and met Stefan Szuman, a renowned psychologist who taught there. As mentioned above, Szuman later acted as Łobaczewski's clearinghouse for secret data and research in later years.

While Jagiellonian and the other Polish universities enjoyed a few years of freedom, this largely ended with the establishment of the Polish Democratic Republic in 1947 and the consolidation of power under [Bierut](#) the year after. Poland became a satellite state of the Soviet Union, the Party took control of higher education, medical and psychiatric services were socialized, and clinical psychiatry was completely hollowed out. Thus the "Stalinization" of Polish education and research picked up where Hitler left off. Connelly writes:

"Perhaps because of the strength of the old professoriate there, the breaking down of universities went furthest in Poland. ... Restructuring shifted academic resources away from the humanities and social sciences. Previously, one could study philosophy at any university in Poland, save the state university (UMCS) in Lublin. Now, studies in philosophy, psychology, or pedagogy were possible only in Warsaw" (pp. 60–61).

Łobaczewski's class was thus the last one to be taught by the old psychology professors in Kraków,

who were considered “ideologically incorrect” by the powers that be. As Łobaczewski tells it, it was only in their last year of schooling (1951), described above, that they fully felt the reach of the party into university life. This experience of the inhuman “new reality” was to inspire the course of Łobaczewski’s research for the rest of his life, just as the war had inspired his interest in psychology.

Born in 1921, Łobaczewski grew up in a modest manor house in the Subcarpathian Province of Poland, “among old trees, dogs and horses.” He practiced beekeeping, working on the farm during summers. After the war, he graduated from a mechanical high school and earned a living as a builder. During the three decades he spent living under communism after graduating, he worked in general and mental hospitals and as an industrial psychologist in the mining industry. While he was not allowed to pursue a career in academia, the intensified conditions of life in Poland provided ample opportunities to conduct his own research and to improve his skills in clinical diagnosis—skills he found to be essential for coming to terms with this new social reality. He was also able to give psychotherapy to those who suffered the most under such harsh rule.

Soon after the secret research project began in the late 1950s, the group tasked Łobaczewski with researching the various mental disorders contributing to the phenomenon. Originally, he only contributed a small part of the research, focusing mostly on psychopathy. The name of the person responsible for completing the final synthesis was kept secret, but the work never saw the light of day. All of Łobaczewski’s contacts became inoperative in the post-Stalin wave of repression in the early 1960s and he was left only with the data that had already come into his possession. All the rest was lost forever, whether burned or locked in some secret police archive.

Faced with this hopeless situation, he decided to finish the work on his own. Despite his efforts in secrecy, the political authorities came to suspect that he possessed “dangerous” knowledge. One Austrian scientist with whom Łobaczewski had corresponded turned out to be an agent of the secret police, and Łobaczewski was arrested and tortured three times during this period. While working on the first draft of his book in 1968, the locals of the village in which he was working warned him of an imminent secret police raid. Łobaczewski had just enough time to burn the work in his central heating furnace before their arrival. Years later, in 1977, the Roman correspondent for Radio Free Europe, to whom Łobaczewski had spoken about his work, denounced him to the Polish authorities. Given the option of a fourth arrest or “voluntary” exile to the United States, Łobaczewski chose the latter and made his way to the USA. He left the country with practically nothing.

Upon arrival in New York City, the Polish security apparatus utilized their contacts in the city to block Łobaczewski's access to jobs in his field. In the case of scientists living abroad, the Polish secret police's *modus operandi* was to use dupes and "useful idiots," suggesting certain courses of action to American Communist Party members who then gullibly carried them out. Łobaczewski was thus forced to take a job doing manual labor, writing the final draft of his book in the early hours before work. Having lost most of the statistical data and case studies with his papers, he included only those he could remember and focused primarily on the observations and conclusions based on his and others' decades of study, as well as a study of literature written by victims of such regimes.

Once the book was completed in 1984 and a suitable translation made into English the following year, he was unable to get it published. The psychology editors told him it was "too political," and the political editors told him it was "too psychological." He enlisted the help of his compatriot, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had just previously served as President Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser and who initially praised the book and promised to help get it published. Unfortunately, after some time spent corresponding, Brzezinski became silent, responding only to the effect that it was a pity it hadn't worked out. In Łobaczewski's words, "he strangled the matter." In the end, a small printing of copies for academics was the only result, and these failed to have any significant influence on academics and reviewers.

Suffering from severely poor health, Łobaczewski returned to Poland in 1990, where he published another book and transcribed the manuscript of *Political Ponerology: A Science on the Nature of Evil Adjusted for Political Purposes* onto his computer. He eventually sent this copy to the editors of Red Pill Press, who published the book in 2006. His health once more failing, he died just over a year later, in November of 2007.

What Is Ponerology?

In the opening of Chapter V of his book, Dr. Andrew Łobaczewski asks the reader to picture himself in a large, gothic university building: the lecture hall of Jagiellonian University mentioned above. He thus places us, his readers, in his own place, to experience for ourselves what he experienced. He then proceeds to recount the experiences catalyzed by the "new professor," which would determine and inspire the rest of his personal and professional life, and ultimately, the conclusions contained in his book. His hope is that we will thus learn what he came to learn only after many years of suffering and effort, and possibly avoid a fate similar to that of all those who suffered under one of the worst

tyrannies of human history.

It is an apt literary conceit, because within this recollection are all the essential features of his subject: the nature of that phenomenon most often called totalitarianism. Though he didn't know it at the time, his encounter with the new professor and the effect of that professor on a small percentage of the student body represented a microcosm of the phenomenon then metastasizing in Poland. This phenomenon would go on to characterize the nations within the sphere of the Soviet Union's influence for the next forty years.

The tyranny of an entire empire played itself out in that lecture hall. The new professor played the role of petty tyrant, a Dolores Umbridge-type figure spewing ideological drivel with the self-certainty of a revolutionary zealot, ruling with an iron fist, and enforcing rules that violated all prior norms of common decency and scientific respectability. The reaction among most students was one of psychological shock. Social and emotional bonds were broken, and the class quickly became polarized along somewhat mysterious lines. Not all students were repulsed by the professor's personality, boorish behavior, and nonsensical ideas. Some 6% were swayed to his side, aping his manner, adopting his ideology, and turning on their former friends and colleagues. For some this was only temporary, but others joined the Party, becoming petty tyrants themselves. But only ever 6%. There was a natural limit to the number of recruits the professor could fish out of student body.

The odd thing about this new division was that it replicated itself at every social level. Whether in the village or the city, among the rich or poor, religious or atheist, educated or not, the new division sliced straight through all prior social divisions. And for the next forty years, this 6% formed the core of the new leadership, as if they were individual iron filings attracted by the pull of some invisible magnet, the criteria for which bore no resemblance to those which had previously obtained, like talent, merit, virtue, wealth, or experience.

Łobaczewski argues that communism was not just a "different" political or economic system. Those categories cannot adequately explain its inhuman brutality and mendacity. (Nor can they adequately explain the periods of madness that precede such systems coming into being.) Rather, he and his colleagues were convinced that communism represented a "*macrosocial pathological phenomenon*," a social disease and a pathologically inverted social system. The Bolsheviks didn't just take over the Russian Empire; the revolution was not just a coup, as if one political party was violently kicked out and another moved in to take its place, one that just happened to have different policy objectives and plans

for the empire. No, there was something fundamentally different about the Bolsheviks that distinguished them from other political groups, something in addition to, and behind, their ideology. In the decades following the revolution, the Soviets proceeded to completely destroy the existing social structure and replace it with something fundamentally new and different. For Łobaczewski, the only thing that came close to providing an adequate description of the nature of this phenomenon was the language of psychology, specifically the field of psychopathology.

The radical restructuring of society during these years—helped along by violent purges at all levels—was in reality an enforced psychological selection process. In a normal and healthy society, social relations and status are governed by certain psychological criteria based on human nature, like talent, competence, and virtue. A computer programmer should be able to program. His boss should be competent. And people in positions of power and influence should have a degree of personal virtue and good character. Those caught up in legitimate scandal—for corruption, breaches of basic morality, and criminal activity—lose their good standing in society. Those who grossly violate basic social norms are penalized, like psychopaths, who make up something like 20% of the American prison population.

No society is perfect in this regard, but on the whole, this is how humanity tends to self-select in ideal conditions, and the degree to which a society's individuals are well suited to their occupation and social position is a good measure of the health of said society. By necessity this society will be stratified. Some will always be richer than others, smarter, more talented and successful, and there will always be criteria (some more arbitrary than others) for inclusion in the higher classes.

The revolution and its reproduction in Eastern Europe, as a great leveler, destroyed all this. It tore down the previous social strata and their foundations (like merit, education, wealth), and replaced them with deviant psychological criteria. Like a criminal gang in which one must “prove oneself” by participation in violence, the criteria for inclusion in the “new class,” to use [Milovan Djilas](#)' phrase, were distinctly psychopathological. As Gary Saul Morson [writes](#):

“Lenin worked by a principle of anti-empathy, and this approach was to define Soviet ethics. I know of no other society, except those modeled on the one Lenin created, where schoolchildren were taught that mercy, kindness, and pity are vices. After all, these feelings might lead one to hesitate shooting a class enemy or denouncing one’s parents. The word ‘conscience’ went out of use, replaced by ‘consciousness’ (in the sense of Marxist-Leninist ideological consciousness).”

It should come as no surprise that a system that promoted the absence of conscience came to be dominated by those without conscience: psychopaths. In fact, Łobaczewski's "new professor" wasn't just an uneducated Communist Party hack. He was also a psychopath.

The science of psychopathy was still in its infancy at the time of the Russian Revolution, and the first scientific works that would go on to shape the course of future research would only be published decades later in 1941 (Cleckley and Karpman). Łobaczewski, lacking access to these and future developments from the West, came to similar conclusions about the subject independently, finding confirmation of his own thinking only after moving to New York.

But he was well prepared for a study of what was happening in the years to come. Jagiellonian at that time boasted a formidable psychology and psychiatry department—until the new political leadership ideologically neutered it (relevant textbooks were soon "memory-holed" and subdisciplines banned). No one educated from that point on had the necessary facts at their disposal, and the totalitarian nature of the new social and political system meant that research not only couldn't be procured from abroad; it couldn't be shared *within* the country without the risk of arrest, torture, or death.

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by a range of interpersonal-affective traits and antisocial behaviors. Psychopaths are manipulative and charming. They're also ruthless and completely self-centered. They don't feel emotion the way other people do. They feel no guilt, shame, or fear. They're the type of person to sell out their own mother, all while convincingly assuring others of what great, loving sons they are. The most widely used assessment tool is Robert D. Hare's Psychopath Checklist-Revised. Here are its items: glibness/superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, conning/manipulative, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callous/lack of empathy, failure to accept responsibility, need for stimulation, parasitic lifestyle, no realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility, poor behavioral controls, early behavioral problems, revoke conditional release, criminal versatility.

In a normal society, a substantial number of psychopaths are in prison or part of the criminal class. Making up an estimated 1% of the general population, researcher Kent Kiehl [argues](#) that the vast majority (over 90%) of adult male psychopaths are either in prison or otherwise caught up in the American criminal justice system, e.g., on parole or probation. A substantial number of "successful" psychopaths can be found working for temp agencies. Needless to say, they make for poor employees.

However, the most gifted successful psychopaths—more intelligent and less impulsive than those found in prison—may con their way into positions of influence and prestige (though, as with the gifted generally, they will be outnumbered by their more mediocre counterparts).

Canadian psychologist Robert D. Hare, the world's leading expert on psychopathy, once remarked that if didn't study psychopaths in prison, he would do so at the stock exchange. Such "[snakes in suits](#)" may be overrepresented in such places, he [writes](#), *"on the assumption that psychopathic entrepreneurs and risk-takers tend to gravitate toward financial watering-holes, particularly those that are enormously lucrative and poorly regulated."* Conning comes naturally to psychopaths: even experts with years of experience interacting with them are regularly fooled. Cleckley called this expertise in impression management a "mask of sanity" (also the title of his [classic book](#) on the subject).

In communism, by contrast, Łobaczewski found this reality reversed. Practically *all* of society's psychopaths integrated into the new system; the number approached 100%. It was *their* presence and influence that was responsible for alien, brutal, and anti-human nature of totalitarian regimes, their methods, and the surreal quality of the new system. Imagine a system of government where all of these individuals—career criminals, irresponsible freeloaders, incompetent egotists, and savvy manipulators—find themselves in positions of influence within every social institution: at all levels of government, the military, federal and local police, the courts, education, business, factories, homeowners' associations, youth groups.

A resident of Lijiang, Yunnan, described how this looked in practice during Mao's revolution: *"All the scamps and the village bullies, who had not done a stroke of honest work in their life, suddenly blossomed forth as the accredited members of the Communist Party, and swaggered with special armbands and badges and the peculiar caps ... which seemed to be the hallmark of the Chinese Red"* (quoted in Frank Dikötter, [The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945–1957](#), p. 197). This process, which took place over decades in China and the USSR, was artificially reproduced in Eastern Europe over the course of about a decade after WWII.

One of the primary questions ponerology seeks to answer is what gives totalitarianism its defining "flavor," in all its varieties. Though Nazi Germany, the USSR, Mao's China, and Pol Pot's Cambodia all had important and sometimes profound differences, the similarities were significant enough that political scientists have tended to classify them all as "totalitarian." But while the classic studies of totalitarianism have important insights, one can't escape the feeling that they are missing something important, that

they haven't grasped the crux of the matter. It is like trying to focus on an object that remains forever in your peripheral vision—you know it is there, but can't quite make out the details.

The common factor, according to Łobaczewski, is psychopathy, which shapes the motivations, goals, and practices of the new system (other personality disorders also play a role). Just as a personal encounter with a psychopath can leave one bewildered, terrorized, and demoralized (and broke)—especially when one does not know what exactly one has just experienced—so too does an encounter with psychopathy on the macrosocial level.

Psychopaths see and experience the world differently. They think the world owes them something—or everything—and they have zero qualms about using any and all means necessary to get what they want and keep it, whether terror, torture, murder, or extermination. If conditions don't permit those means, they're happy standing over the ruins of your reputation or your career. The type of world they dream about is the one where they're in charge, not "normies" with their naïve morality, religion, tradition, and virtue. Those are for suckers. They want "freedom," "liberation," "equality," "utopia," but not in a form any normal reasonable person would imagine.

In the last century, political psychopaths used convenient ideologies like communism, fascism, and Islamism to achieve absolute power in multiple countries—ideologies with wide appeal and enough public support to carry them to the top, often unbeknownst to the naïve true believers caught up in the madness and clearing the way for them. (When the time comes, it is the true believers' turn to be purged.) Social justice is just such an ideology. This is why it is a Trojan horse. To its critics, it is bad enough on the surface, as the ideologies themselves are simplistic, destructive, and often just plain wrong. But it's worse than even they imagine. Such ideologies are the means by which social structures are completely destroyed and replaced by pathological caricatures.

While Łobaczewski's description of this social disease (pathocracy, rule by the diseased) and the role of psychopathy is groundbreaking and essential for understanding totalitarianism, another feature of his work is even more important for Western society to understand at this moment: how pathocracy develops in the first place. Łobaczewski's own initiation into the mysteries of pathocracy was unwittingly facilitated by the "new professor." As he writes:

"He spoke with zeal, but there was nothing scientific about it: he failed to distinguish between scientific concepts and popular beliefs. He treated such borderline notions as though they were wisdom that could

not be doubted. For ninety minutes each week, he flooded us with naive, presumptuous paralogistics and a pathological view of world and human affairs. We were treated with contempt and poorly controlled hatred. Since scoffing and making jokes could entail dreadful consequences, we had to listen attentively and with the utmost gravity" (Political Ponerology, ch. 5, forthcoming).

Describing the students who fell under the sway of the new professor, he writes: "They gave the impression of possessing some secret knowledge. We had to be careful of what we said to them." Unfortunately, these descriptions are not far off from what is experienced today by students in university classes across the Western world, first within the various "studies" departments and now increasingly university-wide. The ideology of "social justice" has moved from the unscientific fringes of the academy (like feminist, gender, queer, and race studies) into the mainstream: corporations, media, entertainment, politics, the military. "Diversity, equity, and inclusion" are current [ideological buzzwords](#) of the day.

Something is happening in the Western world—something eerily familiar to the events which took their course (with variations) in the various revolutions of the twentieth century, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to Mao's Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

While seeds of this process can be traced back to weaknesses and contradictions inherent in the philosophies that form the bedrock of our current sociopolitical systems, the intellectual lineage of the current social justice ideology tracks back to the postmodernism and critical theory/New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. In their book, [Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody](#), Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay describe these ideological "mutations" as follows:

"[T]hese ideas mutated, solidified, and were made politically actionable in a set of new Theories that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s ["applied postmodernism"]. [Beginning around 2010, [the second evolution of these ideas] asserted the absolute truth of the postmodern principles and themes ["reified postmodernism"]. This change occurred when scholars and activists combined the existing Theories and Studies into a simple, dogmatic methodology, best known simply as 'Social Justice scholarship'" (p. 17).

Eastern Europeans living in or visiting the United States experience a troubling sense of déjà vu. Łobaczewski writes about the social climate of the USA during the 1980s: "Grey-haired Europeans living in the U.S. today are struck by the similarity between these phenomena and the ones dominating Europe at

the times of their youth [i.e., pre-WWII]."

But whereas Europeans in the 1980s saw conditions in America as similar to turn-of-the-century Europe, today they see America as increasingly totalitarian and resembling life under communist ideology. In his book, [*Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*](#), journalist Rod Dreher writes: "I spoke with many men and women who had once lived under communism. I asked them Did they also think that life in America is drifting toward some sort of totalitarianism? They all said yes—often emphatically" (p. xi). The same can be said for [*Chinese immigrants*](#).

Professor Ryszard Legutko's 2016 book, [*The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*](#) (originally written in 2012) was one of the first to identify these tendencies in democratic countries. His first inkling came on a visit to the U.S. during the '70s upon witnessing the "*extraordinary meekness and empathy toward communism*" among several liberal-democratic friends. These thoughts were renewed in the wake of 1989, when Polish anticommunists were seen as a threat to liberal democracy; and further in the '90s through his experience working in the European Parliament—"a stifling atmosphere typical of a political monopoly."

In philosophy professor Zbigniew Janowski's [*Homo Americanus: The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy in America*](#), he writes:

"Only few Americans seem to understand that we, here in the United States, are living in a totalitarian reality, or one that is quickly approaching it. Any visitor from a country formerly behind the totalitarian Iron Curtain quickly notices that the lack of freedom in today's America is, in many respects, greater than what he had experienced under socialism the behavior of today's Americans is painfully reminiscent of the old Homo Sovieticus, and even more of the Chinese man of the period of the Cultural Revolution" (pp. 1, 12).

And on the current political climate, Dreher [*writes*](#):

"In the West today, we are living under decadent, pre-totalitarian conditions. Social atomization, widespread loneliness, the rise of ideology, widespread loss of faith in institutions, and other factors leave society vulnerable to the totalitarian temptation to which both Russia and Germany succumbed in the previous century" (p. 93).

Over the last few years, observers from all parts of the political spectrum have made similar observations about the increasingly totalitarian nature of Western (particularly North American) politics and culture. Several, like [Janowski](#), have been published by *The Postil*, including sociologist [Mathieu Bock-Côté](#), political scientist [Wayne Cristaudo](#), and humanities professor [Paul Gottfried](#). Others include professor of international relations [Angelo Codevilla](#), political scientist [Gordon M. Hahn](#), mathematician [James Lindsay](#), liberal scholar [Michael Rectenwald](#), and feminist author [Naomi Wolf](#).

What they are seeing is not just the emergence of totalitarianism in the West, though it is certainly that. Whether our future more resembles Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984* remains to be seen. Our gulags may simply be [social credit house arrest](#). Or it may be the case that Huxley must necessarily transform into Orwell. Reading Łobaczewski suggests the latter, unless a society's social structure, norms, religion, traditions, and institutions are strong enough to repel the assault. Unfortunately, one look at the state of such things in the West doesn't leave much room for hope.

*Harrison Koehli is a collector of obscure ideas, co-host of the MindMatters podcast, and Canadian by birth. He is currently editing a new, revised and expanded edition of Andrew Łobaczewski's book, *Political Ponerology*.*

The [featured image](#) shows the "Allegory of Bad Government," by Ambrogio Lorenzetti; painted ca. 1338-1340.

