



THE NECESSITY OF OPPOSITION

Posted on September 1, 2021 by Ryszard Legutko



Under communism, the political system in which I spent the first four decades of my life, there was no political opposition. This statement requires a short explanation. After W/WII ended and Poland found herself under a de-facto Soviet occupation, there were anti-communist soldiers who continued their struggle for independence. During the entire communist period, occasional protests broke out against the regime's economic policy, censorship, religious persecution etc. When the system became less brutal over time, there appeared small groups whom Western journalists called "the dissidents" and who protested against the regime and demanded its democratization. At one point, a powerful [Solidarity Union](#) emerged but soon was crushed by [martial law](#) imposed in 1983.

There was, of course, the Catholic Church, which in my country was and had been for a long time a place of refuge, a carrier of historical and cultural continuity, and a source of spiritual life for the believers and non-believers. But within the system, as the communist constitution constructed it, there was no place for the official opposition. This does not mean there was only one political party. Obviously, the communist party had a constitutionally inscribed "leading role." But there were other parties, for instance, the Peasants' Party, but they were not the opposition to the communists, rather their allies or, to be more precise, their satellites.

The communists had a justification for such a political construction. The argument was as follows. The communist revolution made a historical change. Poland was on the road to a system where there would be no exploitation, and everyone would receive everything according to his needs. The Communist Party leads the way to a better world. Who needs the opposition? Everyone who accepts communism and wants to work for a better communist world is welcome. The opposition to this process would be absurd and dangerous: absurd because the process, as Marx et al. had proved, is inevitable, and dangerous because it would mean turning us back to the world of exploitation, inequalities, injustice, colonialism, racism, imperialism, class struggle, etc.

Many people accepted this argument, not on its merits, but because challenging it was risky. One could lose one's job, be imprisoned, or suffer other unpleasant consequences. When a larger group challenged this, as the Solidarity Union did, it became even riskier for the entire country because the communists always had the last word – the Soviet tanks.

Living in a society with no opposition was a peculiar experience. For one thing, it was extremely boring: a monotonous repetition of the same phrases and slogans, which did not serve communication, or if it

did, it was in a limited way. The purpose of the political language was mostly ritualistic. The language was a major tool in performing collective rituals whose aim was to build cohesion in the society and close it, both politically and mentally, within one ideological framework.

Another feature of the system was an omnipresent sense of the enemy. The official ideology and its rituals were telling us that the nation is more and more united by and attracted to communist ideas. Still, at the same time, we had to be more and more aware of the enemies who wanted to destroy this harmony and plotted against our communist fatherland. I remember a teacher warning the high-school students before they went to a West-European country that they could become a possible object of the foreign intelligence agents. She advised them not to answer any questions regarding their school or families. And the teacher's behavior was not considered extravagant.

One of the joys of being a dissident or joining a non-communist movement, such as the Solidarity Union, was that one could have access to a different language and talk to people who did not treat language as a repetitive ritual but as a tool of communication. Also, the problem of the enemies disappeared or rather was reversed. It was now the communists that were the enemies. Apart from them, the world did not look threatening.

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. The assumption of my confidence in the vibrant state of the Western world was that its societies were pluralistic, that is, that the Left, the Right and the Center continued to be in a dynamic equilibrium, not only politically, but also culturally; that is, that they have grown out of and cherish different traditions, have different sensibilities, use a slightly different language and employ a different cultural idiom. But the assumption turned out false.

The danger of homogeneity has been looming over Europe and America for several centuries. The inherent tendencies of the Western world – egalitarianism, democratization, spectacular progress of technology, internationalization of the economy, the weakening of boundaries and measures – could not but lead to homogenization. All these processes had to undermine social diversity and were bound to make the societies more and more alike. This might be a paradox: the more accessible the world we live in, the more homogeneous it becomes. In other words, the larger it becomes, the smaller it is.

The problem of the opposition is a tricky one. On the one hand, the existence of opposition indicates

that a large part of the society is represented, that it may influence its development, and that its voice contributes to a better grasp of the problems with which every society has to grapple. On the other hand, when the division between the government and the opposition is too big, it may not only destabilize the system but may prompt one of the conflicting sides to eliminate the other, not necessarily physically, but to marginalize them – intimidate, impose severe legal restrictions targeting them, and ostracize them, etc. – so that they practically disappear as a political and cultural opponent. This will generate the same results as a society without opposition – the destruction of language and an excessive sense of the enemy.

The communists, in their logic, were right in undertaking a crack-down on the Solidarity Union because there was no way these two sides could find some *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*. The differences were too basic, and the objectives – sharply contradictory. Therefore, the communists found it necessary to present the Solidarity Union as an enemy and obliterate the language and symbols the Union used and equipped the Poles with.

How does this apply to a current situation? Suppose my diagnosis is correct and the Western world is sliding into deeper homogeneity, being reflected in the ideological proximity of the major political forces. In that case, it means we nowadays face a similar problem and should expect similar consequences. The political Left has dictated the agenda for the Western world: Socialists, Liberals, neo-Communists, Greens. The erstwhile conservative parties such as Christian Democrats have capitulated and have either incorporated the Left's main points into their program or decided not to oppose and remain non-committal (which, in practical terms, is also a capitulation).

Today's Left may differ from the Left of old in particular objectives and policies, but the frame of mind is similar: it aims at a radical restructuring of the society. Economic experiments of the old Left fizzled out, so there is no nationalization of industry and agriculture; no five-year plans are being considered. But the restructuring is equally radical: the Leftist governments, organizations, and movements have started waging war against a family based on the union of two sexes and in favor of multiple "gender" configurations; against the nation-state and in favor of what they call a multicultural society; against religion in the public square and in favor of radical secularization; against nationalisms and in favor of a united Europe; and in favor of a green world with zero-emission; in favor of ideological purity in art and education; against all forms of thoughtcrimes in history, literature, etc.

These and other items of this program meet with no opposition, that is, no legitimate opposition; those

who question them are the dissidents, freaks, fascists, populists, and notorious troublemakers. This sweeping program of recycling our societies has been accepted by a tacit consensus of all major and not-so-major forces and institutions in the entire Western world. Why should there be any opposition, given that everybody who is somebody is in favor? The program leads to a better world without discrimination (who can object to this?), with harmonious coexistence of races, genders, and what-not (likewise), with a clean green environment (fantastic), with people's minds freed from harmful stereotypes and prejudices (as above), with brotherly relations among groups (at last), etc. The opposition would only harm what looks like a beginning of a new promising stage in human history, superseding all previous ones in grandeur, justice, and human flourishing.

When the then president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, spoke in the European Parliament several years ago and told the MEPs, in rather delicate wording, how important the existence of the opposition was, the deputies felt offended and walked out of the hemicycle. Klaus's words were considered offensive and foolish. In their opinion, modern European parliamentarianism represents a higher form: no longer a Hobbesian dog-eat-dog world, but consensual, dialogical cooperation of the people of goodwill. And this higher form is being jeopardized by irresponsible national firebrands who want to turn us back to an unpleasant world of partisanship and national egoisms.

Whoever, like myself, remembers the political system without opposition immediately recognizes the entire package, perhaps wrapped differently, with different details, but otherwise quite similar. The degree of linguistic rituals is so high that it almost becomes nauseating. When sometimes I have to spend too much time during the plenary in the Brussels or Strasbourg hemicycle, I feel I desperately need some detoxing to clean my speaking and thinking faculties of the EU gobbledygook.

The behavior of the MEPs confirms the second observation. The Left majority of Communists, Socialists, Liberals, Greens, and (former) Christian Democrats, an alliance that composes about seventy-five or eighty percent of the entire Parliament, looks at a minority with growing hostility. They do not treat these remaining twenty percent of their colleagues as opponents but as enemies that can be bullied, lied to, insulted, and kept in check by a cordon sanitaire. Their views are not legitimate views that can be debated, but absurd opinions that are, on the one hand, inconceivable, and on the other, odious and contemptible.

And the EU is just pars pro toto. In today's Western world, the list of enemies increased and the number of possible crimes far surpassed those in the communist system. Today one can be accused of racism,

sexism, eurocentrism, euroscepticism, homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, binarism, hate speech, logocentrism, patriarchy, phallogentrism, misogyny, ageism, speciesism, white supremacy, nationalism, illiberalism – and the list tends to grow. Some of the concepts – such as gender – have been particularly fecund in generating enemies: the more genders we have, the more enemies appear as each gender must have its own enemy.

Language has become loaded with these expressions, which are no longer qualified as invectives but have acquired the status of descriptive concepts. No wonder that the language of political exorcism has gained such popularity. One can insult at will in the belief that one describes. “The right-wing nationalist government in Warsaw, known for its homophobic and populist policies fueled primarily by the Catholic bigots, has launched another offensive of hate speech with clear racist undertones against the European values of openness, diversity, and the rule of law.” Perhaps the sentence is slightly exaggerated, but this is roughly what one usually finds in all major media in the Western world, from FAZ to NYT, from CNN to Deutsche Welle. The maxim *audiat et altera pars* has been abandoned: there is no *altera pars*, so there is no point in giving it a hearing. Needless to say, the Poland they depict is not a real Poland.

This monotonous and deafening drumbeating spills over the entire society and penetrates all layers of social life. Among other things, it unleashed verbal and not only verbal aggression against the dissenters, which over the last decade has got out of control. And since the mainstream groups believe themselves to represent the enlightened world in its entirety, the dissidents are, by the same token, an inferior kind of people with inferior minds, and therefore, no foul word is too abusive to give them what they deserve. The fact that those inferior creatures can win elections or receive an important position or award seems not only unacceptable; it is a blasphemy that triggers an impetuous reaction of radical rejection and puts a protester in a state of frenzy. A massive hysteria and furious verbal aggression against president Trump were perhaps the most visible example of this. But such aggression can be directed against a university professor, an athlete, an actor, a priest, if their dissenting voices are heard.

No country is a better place to observe this than Poland. One of the few conservative governments in the Western world found itself outside the mainstream even before the party that composed it succeeded in winning the election. The Polish opposition to this government is, as they called themselves, “total,” which also expresses itself in the language it uses: escalation of insults, threats, wild accusations, physical attacks, all foul words one can think of shouted out loud in the face of those who are believed to be despicable puppets of Jarosław Kaczyński, that dangerous psychopathic despot – as

they say – not really different from Hitler cum Stalin. No opposition in my country behaved like this before, not even when the neo-communists won the elections and ruled Poland for one parliamentary term. Whence this wild fury?

The answer is simple. One can easily imagine what goes on in the minds of the enemies of the conservative government. They believe they represent the world at large, and in a way, they do. They represent the real majority – the European Union, Hollywood, the Council of Europe, rock stars, international and national courts, TV celebrities, the United Nations, Ikea, Microsoft, Amazon, Angela Merkel, the new American administration, universities, media, governments, top models, parliaments. It is difficult to find any institution, corporation, or organization in the world that would not support them directly or indirectly. The “total” opposition knows they can do and say anything, and they would get away with it. When one looks at the Polish government from this perspective, it no longer presents itself as a legitimate government having a democratic legitimacy, trying to reform the system that had been inefficient, but as a villainous usurper, cancer on the healthy body of European politics. This is the government that, by its sheer existence, is a slap in the face of the European civilization. It had no right to come into being, and it has no right to exist. Insulting it and subverting it is a service to humanity.

The Polish government and its supporters are not powerful despots. They more resemble a David defending himself against an aggressive Goliath. But the problem is more general, and a reaction to Poland is just a symptom. The crucial question that one has to ask oneself today is whether this Goliath can be stopped and some kind of plurality returns, particularly whether Western conservatism will revive to the degree that it can prevent the Left's march to a brave new world.

Ryszard Legutko is a philosopher and member of the European Parliament. He is the author of the well-known works, the [Demon in Democracy](#) and [The Cunning of Freedom](#), as well as, [Society as a Department Store: Critical Reflections on the Liberal State](#).

The [featured image](#) shows David and Goliath, in the Maciejowski Bible, or the Shah Abbas Bible, ca. 13th century.

