

The Cold War as Reference for a Political Dichotomy

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This is not the place for an in-depth description of cultural shifts throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Suffice it to say that liberal culture has manifested itself in various contexts during this period. But to understand the depth of this cultural shift, we should take a look at some of the cultural systems that have supported liberalism and lent historic legitimization. We are referring here to some of the dichotomies that gained ascendancy during the Cold War period, including a certain approach to human rights.

A myth is based on the concept of two parties with opposing moral values, good versus evil. No particular myth would be required to react with moral repugnance against those who had run death camps and used political coercion as a weapon of their own. All the same, there is something contrived about the way liberals view the Allies' wartime efforts as a battle for freedom against cohesion. The war was eventually won when the western democracies had become hardened and more disciplined and, in a certain sense, less liberal than before. Moreover, Stalin's clearly anti-liberal Soviet Union had played a vital role in the Allies' victory. During the immediate post-war years, the idea of raising liberalism as a common standard under which the victorious democracies could unite was bizarre. On the contrary, the old liberalism could be deemed a backdrop for the crises that brought Hitler to power. Nationalism, and the will to resist foreign occupation, enjoyed a broader appeal at that time. Alongside nationalism, democracy also enjoyed considerable appeal in the 1940s. These two monoliths were usually perceived as more or less synonymous, even if communism also had considerable appeal at that time, even in the West. Furthermore, Christian standards were of overriding importance to many.ⁱ Faced with Nazi brutality, a number of humane principles became key motivating forces. Nevertheless, the kind of humanitarianism referred to during the War differed from the philosophy of human rights laid down in the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Many conservatives of the time stated that the causes and reality of the War had merely confirmed their warnings of incitement to rebellion against religious and moral principles. For instance, French Catholics viewed Nazism and anti-democratization in Europe as a betrayal of Christian culture.ⁱⁱ Traditional authority was not the culprit that had paved the way for Hitler's rise to power in 1933; rather, the culprit was the irresponsible dissolution of this bastion of authority, just as it had allowed Napoleon to usurp power in 1799. The worship of an irresponsible demagogue was viewed from the perspective of the political power the rabbleroising radicals had lavished on the ignorant masses.

All of this suggests that the interpretation of liberalism as the paramount value of democracy, as opposed to authoritarian principles, is not the most obvious interpretative framework for understanding what took place at that time. Liberal spokesmen cannot lay claim to having been the main opponent of Nazism.

However, it was not our wartime experience of Hitler, but rather our post-war acquaintance with Stalin that gradually laid the groundwork in the West for anti-authoritarian tales from experiences gained in World War II. In the late 1940s, western politicians clearly saw that their erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union, could no longer be regarded as a reliable ally. With the advent and spread of the Cold War, the need arose for political reorientation in which Germany – or West Germany, at the very least – had to be kept under the thumb of the Allies. Their former ally, the Soviet Union, and the Warsaw Pact countries were now viewed as potential enemies. For this turnaround, the established habit of casting aspersions on German and Japanese culture was no longer enough. The American film producer, Frank Capra, churned out propaganda films that were repeatedly screened in theaters all over the country during the war, films in which the German dictatorship was vilified as the upshot of long warring and undemocratic traditions in Germany. In other words, Hitler was merely following in the footsteps of Fredrik the Great, Bismarck and Wilhelm II. Furthermore, even Joseph McCarthy's campaign against un-American activities proved ineffectual in the supranational mobilization against communism that took place.ⁱⁱⁱ

Long after World War II, the western powers suffered from ideological indecision. First, a policy of general disarmament and reconciliation was pursued; mistakes from the aftermath of the Great War were never to be repeated. The United States launched the Marshal Plan for Europe, and played host to a United Nations that was open to all countries subscribing to a democratic charter. Subsequently, the western powers became entangled in the Korean War with the support of the UN, fighting against what was considered at the time an attack on a friendly nation by aggressive world communism.

It was only several years after the Second World War that the notion of communism and Nazism being two sides of the same coin took root. At that time, both ideologies were considered to be authoritarian and anti-liberal dictatorships bent on conquering the free world. The new political us-against-them identity sapped the strength of the long-established image of a familiar enemy. In this light, both the United States and the European democracies could justify their defense alliance against the Soviet Union – not as a change of course, but as an extenuation of their earlier front against Nazi Germany. The western powers came to represent freedom in opposition to totalitarianism and dictatorship. Historical and contemporary opponents were thus defined on the basis of a common denominator.

The Soviet Union had been able to use capitalism as a common denominator for both Nazi Germany and the NATO countries. Soviet-led socialism was the opposite of capitalism.

Earlier, Hitler had used Judaism as a common denominator for his two opponents. Ideologically and economically, Jews were seen as calling the shots with the Bolsheviks as well as the western plutocrats. Hitler's Germany was the opponent of Judaism.

Such a simplification of the political reality is necessary for getting a world view to conform to a mythical duality, with all the motivational force that myths are capable of mobilizing. Strong myths require strong beliefs on the part of those who are spreading the myths. This exceeds the tactical calculations that have characterized a number of ideological interpretations. At the same time, the myth spreaders were bound to what they were spreading, which made correction difficult and eventually led to fatal errors of judgment.

A number of groups put their stamp on the liberal orientation that became predominant during the 1950s. Politicians kept saying that peace depended on moving toward universal freedom instead of remaining trapped within the narrow confines of nationalism. Freedom and rights turned out to be a potent combination indeed. Political programs with this foundation were able to integrate minorities in their own country, generate support among potential allies across national borders, and cast dictatorships in a bad light. An increasingly powerful commercial sector, which had a vested interest in political stability, lent its support to new liberalism. Representatives of the cultural sector, who wanted personal freedom along with market access and government support, did the same. Nevertheless, it was on the research front that new liberalism derived its most important authority.

In social research, which after World War II had largely displaced the previous biological and evolutionary interpretations of human behavior, a number of landmark works appeared. Perhaps it was Hanna Arendt who dug deepest in her quest to understand the prerequisites for the breakthrough of totalitarianism.^{iv} But it was a different work, *The Authoritarian Personality* from 1950, which first suggested the link between non-liberal ideologies and psychological authoritarianism.^v This happened despite strong objections from researchers to the scientific integrity of this work.^{vi} In this book it was claimed that psychological research had shown that Nazis, communists, and even frenzied nationalists actually thought and spoke from a common authoritarian personality structure. Seemingly principled and persistent attitudes manifested a psychological defense of inner insecurity and an inability to come to terms with a multifarious reality. This type of personality, called the F-type – where F stood for “Fascistoid” – was prone to prejudice toward the unknown and to viewing the world in terms of stereotypes. The authoritarian attitude was supposed to be related to an uncritical respect of authority upward, combined with aggression downward, toward those in weaker social positions. In brief, this type of personality was typically undemocratic and politically dangerous^{vii}.

The Authoritarian Personality rested on a very specific interpretation of relationships between personality and philosophy. On pg. 11 we read the following: "... since all ideologies, all philosophies, derive from non-rational sources, there is no basis for saying that one has more merit than another. But the rational system of an objective and thinking man is not removed from the personality. Such a system is still motivated. What is distinguishing in its source is mainly the kind of personality organization from which it springs." The naturalistic interpretation of ideas simplifies the linkage of liberal attitudes with specific notions of soundness and facilitates the adaptation of thought processes to political categories as well.^{viii} This kind of interpretation could function as a principle of immunization against non-liberal thought: such thinking became not only ideologically unreliable; those who thought that way were deemed questionable, as well.

Several authors followed suit. This gave the discipline enhanced relevance and legitimacy. The social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that his discipline could explain all the differences between groups of peoples in terms of cultural differences, without having to draw upon dissimilarities in genetic make-up, unlike the Nazis and other authoritarian theoreticians had claimed.^{ix} The psychologist Milton Rokeach expanded the diagnosis and exposure of radical right-wing dogma with a primary thesis in "The Authoritarian Personality" to include radical left-wing thoughts and attitudes.^x The authorization of this use of psychology legitimized the rejection of thoughts as non-liberal or dubious, based on the distinguishing characteristics of certain standpoints or attitudes. Undesirable thoughts were interpreted psychologically and rejected, without having to be subjected to a dialogue for examining argumentation. Even philosophers joined the bandwagon and supported this exposé of non-liberal thought. Karl Popper divided western thinkers into those who were in favor of an open society and those in favor of a closed one. His book on the subject was made required reading at many universities.^{xi} He attacked "nationalism" for being psychologically irrational, virtually unworkable, utopian and, lastly, reactionary. In fact, many intellectuals of that period used their disciplines to support the view that democracies were fighting for the best, and against the worst, in western culture when they took a stand for new liberal interpretations of various controversial questions as opposed to non-liberal ones.

From the 1950s on, the intelligentsia in the West increasingly reflected a duality, with the free, open and democratic on the one hand, and the authoritarian, closed and dogmatic on the other. During the 1960s, this dichotomy showed up in literature, films and the printed press. Lopsided simplifications of all kinds of conflicts, cast as the pitting of freedom-loving and peacemaking ideals against all that was repressive and prone to violence, fit in well with economic market strategy and cultural and political strategy. Liberal notions of individual equality and the right to self-expression eventually became legitimized as hallmarks of modernity, and not just popular culture.

This way of understanding freedom differs radically from system analyses, in which freedom and order constitute two principles that were in equilibrium. These principles, when out of balance, can lead to dissolution and calcification. Paradoxically, what began as an impetus for openness and relativity became an absolute standard of measurement in cultural life. The victory of freedom over suppression became a recurring theme in historical interpretation. Tales about this same duality have been retold countless times in political settings. In educational circles and the entertainment industry, it has long since assumed the form of a myth.

ⁱ. In a book by Stein Ugelvik Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet and Jan Petter Myklebust, *Who Were the Fascists?* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1980), reference is made to a number of international studies on who supported Nazism in occupied Europe and who resisted it.

ⁱⁱ. Catholic interpretations of Nazism are found in Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Harvard University Press, 1977), in Graham Maddox, *Religion and the Rise of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1996) and in Jaques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, (New York: Scriber, 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ. The ambiguity of Joseph McCarthy's activities is brought out in two books in which the authors have very different sympathies: James Godbolt, *USA in Our Time – Excerpts from Recent American History* (Oslo: Gyldendal 1994), and in Richard G. Powers, *Not Without Honor. The History of American Anticommunism*. (New York: Free Press, 1995).

^{iv}. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1951).

^v. T.W. Adorno, Else Frenel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality. Studies in Prejudice* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1950).

^{vi}. Richard Christie and Marie Jahoda, *Studies in the scope and method of "the Authoritarian Personality"* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1954) – David W. McKinney, David W., *The Authoritarian Personality Studies: An inquiry into the failure of social science research to provoke demonstrable knowledge* (Hague: Mouton, 1973) – W.F. Stones., Gerda Lederer, Richard Christie, eds., *Strength and Weaknesses – the Authoritarian Personality Today* (New York: Springer, 1993).

^{vii}. The attempts to expose headstrong people as Fascist F-types must be seen as a countermove against Erich R. Jaench's strongly anti-Semitic book *Der Gegentypus*, which was published in Leipzig in 1938. Here an unreliable J-type was contrasted with an S-type with strength of character.

^{viii}. Sigurd Skirbekk, *Psychoanalysis and Self-Understanding. A Critique of Naturalistic Interpretation of Man* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1976).

^{ix}. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952).

^x. Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind. Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

^{xi}. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. I, *The Spell of Plato*; Vol. II, *Hegel & Marx* (Princeton University Press, 1945 and 1956).