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Daniel J. Mahoney

Assumption College, dmahoney@assumption.edu

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The Specter of Soft Totalitarianism

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Daniel J. Mahoney

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Alexis de Tocqueville ends his classic work *Democracy in America* (published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840) with an evocative description of a new “species of oppression” that he believed would menace the democracies of the future. This “mild” or “tutelary” despotism would not torture or kill human beings or be despotic in the usual sense of the term. But it would oppress nonetheless, undermining the vitality and self-respect of democratic souls. It would not only be a “soft” or “gentle” despotism (no gulags or political prisons in this horizon); it would be, as the French political philosopher Pierre Manent has suggested, a despotism of the soft, whose pestiferous rules and regulations would aggressively aim to make life both more equal and more humane.

Some have identified Tocqueville’s “mild despotism” with the welfare state. But I think that is to misunderstand the great Frenchman’s intention. Prudent public provision for the poor, or for those who are old and infirm, or a public system of social insurance to compensate for the vagaries of life, is not necessarily “the road to serfdom.” Instead, Tocqueville has something more radical and dangerous in mind. In the name of a more “humane” society, in the name of respect for every human being and every lifestyle (as we say today), democratic man may lose sight of the moral distinctions and the human qualities that allow freedom to flourish. He may identify virtue with softness and lose any sense of the primordial distinction between good and evil. He may come to see the state as a great instrument to flatten distinctions, to equalize all, to bring dignity to the exploited and oppressed (an infinitely flexible category in modern times). Freedom becomes identified with moral relativism and with an indiscriminate egalitarianism. The state becomes the great instrument of social engineering, of a project to create a new man purged of old prejudices (you will have heard resonances of twentieth-century totalitarianism). We have arrived at

Tocqueville's future; his nightmare (*cauchemar*) is increasingly our reality. To put it succinctly: democracy is at risk of becoming a tyrannical project. How are we to save the democratic project, and a true conception of human liberty and dignity that ought to accompany it?

All this is brought out with learning and grace by the Polish philosopher and statesman Ryszard Legutko in his important new book, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (Encounter Books, 2016). Legutko speaks mainly of the European situation, but his analysis is perfectly relevant to nations such as Canada and the United States. As John O'Sullivan points out in his introduction to Legutko's book, it may now be necessary to differentiate two forms of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy in its classic form (the regime praised by Lincoln, FDR, Churchill, and Reagan) is a form of constitutional and majority rule informed by a broadly Judeo-Christian anthropology, or account of human nature. In contrast, liberal-democracy with a hyphen denotes a quasi-tyrannical project to undermine religion, the traditional family, and even a coherent account of human nature (in the world of transgender ideology, human nature has been replaced by a project of radical autonomy that respects no natural limits). Liberal democracy in its original sense did not countenance abortion on demand, same-sex marriage, or any of the myriad rights that are discovered every day (and are ludicrously declared by rogue judges to be required by the constitution of 1787). Liberal-democracy, in O'Sullivan's second sense, has little respect for self-government or the moral traditions of free peoples. Like the totalitarians of old, emancipatory democrats think in terms of "progress" and "reaction" and will not rest content until moral and political opposition to their "liberationist" project is declared both retrograde and unacceptable. Hence the ubiquity of political correctness on our college campuses and the decided turn of the campus left against free speech. There is, as we see, nothing particularly liberal about this contempt for traditional understandings of human liberty and moral virtue.

In his book, Legutko points out that the *Solidarity* movement in Poland did not fight for this second, perverted version of liberal-democracy. This great social movement of the late 1970s and 1980s fought against the totalitarian lie in the name of patriotism and human dignity, nobility and truth. In their view, liberty could not be separated from the moral contents of Western civilization. But Poland now finds itself part of a European project that is coextensive with what Roger Scruton has so suggestively called a "culture of repudiation." Eurocrats and the full range of "progressive" intellectuals paradoxically have the same enemies that the communist totalitarians had: the Church and religion, the nation as a self-governing entity, classical metaphysics, moral conservatism, and the family as it has been understood for two millennia in the Christian West. Liberal-democracy has become an ideology, and an aggressively illiberal one at that.

We see manifestations of the new illiberalism all around us. The new Canadian government of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is committed to strengthening "hate laws" in Canada, in defense of the transgendered and other "sexual minorities." If one believes that God created human beings "male" and "female" (in the language of Genesis), or if one denies that human beings can remake themselves at will (a nihilistic premise of twentieth-century totalitarianism, by the way), then one is simply beyond the pale and has no right to think or speak. This is when soft despotism ceases to be so soft. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that opposition to same-sex marriage (or the moral choice-worthiness of homosexuality) can be rooted only in prejudice or irrational animus, it implicitly condemned the great religions of the Western world, as well as the philosophical wisdom and moral reflections of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas, Kant, and Burke. The courts have made themselves illiberal instruments of "the culture of repudiation." They have also made themselves very bad moral philosophers who repudiate the very idea of Socratic inquiry into the true and the just. Hiding behind their moralistic dogmatism is an unrelenting and unthinking relativism. Liberal democracy, in their hands, loses its nobility and luster.

We have reached the *reductio ad absurdum* of the liberal subversion of liberty with the coming of the bathroom wars in North Carolina. In the name of equal dignity and equal respect, the transgendered (whose freely constituted "gender" has no connection with biology or human nature) have the right to use the public restroom of their choice, or so the Department of Justice tells us. The rights of parents and children, or those reasonably concerned with safety and propriety, are dismissed out of hand. The notion of dignity affirmed by Attorney General Loretta Lynch is

incapable of honoring commonsense distinctions. Every choice and affirmation is worthy of our respect (except, of course, the views of those who challenge the regnant relativism) even if it flies in the face of common sense and common decency. In the name of equality, and a groundless and relativistic conception of dignity, we erode the self-government of the American people. And more reasonable accommodations for the transgendered are dismissed out of hand. A point has to be made at all costs, and it must be directed at those Americans “on the wrong side of History.” One will have noticed one more affinity with the totalitarianism of old.

As Joseph Knippenberg [recently argued in *Public Discourse*](#), we must recover a classical and Christian conception of human dignity that does not empty dignity of any moral substance. It would be a tragedy or worse if the victory of liberal-democracy, with its affinities with soft totalitarianism, was made possible by an appeal to a morally empty conception of human dignity. Facing the specter of soft totalitarianism, we must strengthen liberal democracy with a renewed appeal to the moral resources of the West. In the meantime, we must also appeal to the American people’s proud love of liberty to keep the new despotism at bay. Nothing less than the honor of liberal democracy is at stake.

*Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College. He is the author, most recently, of *The Conservative Foundations of the Liberal Order* (ISI Books, 2011) and *The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker* (St. Augustine’s Press, 2014).*

Complement with Daniel Mahoney's perspective on [the limits of democracy](#), Jane Clark Scharl on [trusting our five senses in the gender neutral bathrooms debate](#), and Ben Sasse on [what threatens the American idea](#).