

Book review “The Cunning of Freedom”

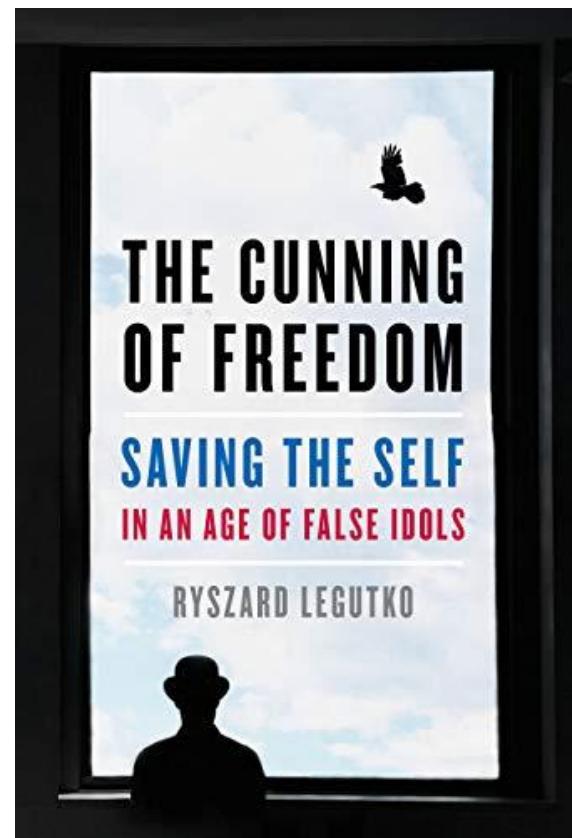
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Each Habsburg in his upbringing and education had to not only learn a craft and undergo a military service but also had to take deepening studies on the fields of religion and history. As this reflects a true conservative self-understanding, there is one field a conservative would consider his very own, namely political philosophy. The contemplation on ideas that form the political for the better or worse and in particular asking perennial questions invigorates his mind. Therefore, he turns to all those inspiring minds, mainly of the past, seeing himself in a line of certain tradition of thought, primarily going back to the ancient Greek thinkers and Christianity.

Now, there are indeed great contemporary thinkers that would arise a conservative interest and one of them with no doubt would be the Polish Professor and member of the Parliament of the European Union for the PiS-Party Ryszard Legutko. A broader international intellectual audience knows his publication “The Demons of Democracy”, in which he compared the striking similarities of communism and liberal democracies. In his recent publication “The Cunning of Freedom. Saving the Self in an age of false Idols” Legutko thoroughly analysed the most dominant idea of the West, namely freedom and the ideology of liberalism surrounding it.

In the introduction of his book, Legutko points out that there has been big scepticism and hostility towards concepts, which allegedly restrict individual freedom such as metaphysics and its talk of truth demanding man to live a virtuous life and fulfil his obligation towards the community. In addition, as the unreflect and superficial prejudice goes the alleged truth-holders impose severe discipline on all sinners and pave the way to keep dissenters in concentration camps – they are authoritarian and even totalitarian. However, such kind of arguments wanting to advocate freedom are mere platitudes and falsehoods. In consequence, Socrates and also Christianity and the entire tradition of our culture who followed them must be mistaken.

An intellectual effort is needed to unveil all those liberal falsehoods of a warped concept of freedom and thus for freedom to really exist – and this is exactly what Legutko’s book does. The concept of freedom rightly understood does not merely exist as negative freedom, which is absence of coercion and thus also possibly tyranny. There are two others ways how freedom can be understood, – which is politically dangerous to think, because its articulation is harshly penalizes – namely as positive



and inner freedom. However, a serious intellectual debate on a holistic understanding of freedom lost its seriousness not only in the post-communist countries after the Fall of Berlin Wall, but the entire West – nonetheless the crusade for a limited and also abstract understanding of freedom continued, “penetrating every nook and cranny of our existence”.

Legutko illustrates his stance outlining that neither the entrepreneur’s economic liberty nor the artist’s creative license is a paragon of freedom. The former freedom is illusory because the entrepreneur’s mind is captivated by his immediate goals and dependent upon the stability of the status quo, which makes their attainment possible, which Legutko argues, is why the business class has so often gone along with authoritarian systems. The latter is controlled by his customers and is held hostage to the cultural and political movements that often use art for their own revolutionary purposes. Nor is the ideal of the pleasure-maximizing, rational-choosing self an example of freedom, as these ideals that are supposed to guide the individual to greater and ultimate authenticity impose upon him its own ideas of pleasure and reason, and thereby constrain his choices.

So, what is true freedom according to Legutko’s arguments? Positive freedom is defined as the ability to determine oneself and others. In the ancient understanding, freedom (*ἐλεύθερος*) applied to the social status but also to the moral and psychological constitution of one’s soul. A set of qualities and conditions was and is required to be free, the central one being the virtues. Further, the reflection on the meaning of virtue, and thus on what lies beyond the necessities of everyday life is needed, and that is contemplation, represented in the ideal of the philosopher. A man is free, when the noble, divine part of the soul becomes master and that is the case when wisdom or, as you say in German, the *Geist* rules. This mentality was why Socrates for instance could be free while being imprisoned, and even while awaiting execution – not fearing death.

Freedom is something of a state of limitation and self-control that frees the mind while disciplining the body. In contrast to the comparatively unfree entrepreneur and artist, Legutko posits the philosopher and aristocrat as better exemplars of freedom. Just as the philosopher the aristocrat – a title, which is not a result of birth but of the development of virtue – prioritizes the soul, acts according to a clear set of principles, and fulfills his obligations and duties, regardless of whether or not they have been voluntarily chosen. Citing Alexis de Tocqueville, Legutko writes that the aristocrat plays an important role in the modern liberal democracy – and, indeed, may be the only figure able to redeem it – because he is able to provide the kind of leadership and virtue against false conceptions of freedom.

Both the philosopher and the aristocrat are examples of Legutko’s ideal conception of the self, which again is not one that rushes to pursue temporal pleasure, nor embrace popular movements, but rather disciplines the self and develops the virtue necessary for inner freedom. The difference between the two are stark. “Virtues such as courage, prudence, justice, piety, and self-control,” he writes, “have an unmistakable touch of individuality since they are so demanding and require great effort and strength of character. Their opposites – cowardice, recklessness, injustice,



godlessness, and immoderation are herd-like qualities, which lead to a deculturization. All cowards are the same, and whatever the differences among them do not count.” It may be added that love and what goes with it, sacrifice, is also a virtue.

Furthermore, Legutko outlines the third dimension of an inner freedom, which means the ability to be one’s “true self” and to make one’s own decisions. In addition, this is based on the concept as a strong self. Legutko contrasts the strong self with what it is not, namely a non-existent and a minimal self-reflected concept, which can be found in the thinking among others David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche or Bernhard Russell. This concept stripped man of his existential part of identity. A robust view on human nature has perceived man consisting of larger, social, historical, ethnic and religious identities. It thus sees man as a political animal – as a *ζῷον πολιτικόν* (Aristoteles). According to this understanding, man is more than a collection of individuals. Moreover, here the greatest difficulty in Western societies can be found: to relate oneself to a proper understanding of selfhood.

Legutko claims that modern man, putatively free and authentically himself actually is enervated by the fact that the rights, which he claims, do not satisfy him and actually make him very lonely as it promoted senselessness. Moreover, this difficulty is caused by a modern liberalism with its dogmatism that claim to be exclusive and superior promoter of freedom. Modern man is getting the suspicion that the decisions he makes, which are alleged to be based in his own personal and authentic choice, are somehow not his own. He is actually being forced, also by governments and states, to be “free” as he is absorbed into a “general will” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau). Behind this there is a strategy of universal conquest and its fires are directed at countries such as Hungary, Poland and also Russia, who have also committed various “thought crimes” (George Orwell) as promoting patriotism and the family, protecting its borders and not accepting “gay-marriage” or certain propaganda being promoted in schools harming the souls of children.

In order to regain a strong concept of the self, modern man will according to Legutko need to abandon the wrong liberal founding assumptions. He ought to understand that the loss of the philosopher, the aristocrat, and thus metaphysical and political man, all of whom have been executed by the progress of liberalism, has led to a dramatic curtailing of true freedom and personal choice. Even more, it made modern man an object of tyranny and despotism: “It destroys the real historical and social bonds among people, vulgarizes their cultures, waters down their moral consciences, and deprives them of a substantive basis for the formulation of alternatives. What liberalism and its thin view of the self cannot do is give people a reasonable stable sense of freedom.”

