

The Alternatives to Communism

The world will not be wooed away from totalitarianism by Utopian claims that American democracy is suitable for general immediate export.

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June 24, 1970 | 3:47 pm



This article was originally printed on October 1, 1962

It has become a settled conviction, at least among American democratic idealists, that the contest which engulfs the political life of the whole world is between Communism and democracy.

What is Communism? It is an absurd religio-political creed, within the framework of the utopian tradition of Western culture, which erupted with the breakdown of traditional culture in 17th-Century England, 18th-Century France and 19th-Century Russia. The specific content which filled this framework was prompted by the highly contingent circumstances of early European industrialism when an open society, moving too tardily, had not yet proved the capacity of democracy to come to terms with the power realities of modern industry, particularly the aggravation of the disbalances of power in feudal society. Most of the subsequent history of Western democracy has refuted the Communist dogma, particularly that part of it which attributes all historic evils to the one institution of private property. It should be fairly simple to display this refutation and to prove the absurdity of the Communist claims of world redemption from exploitation, imperialism and war.

But unfortunately democratic idealism complicates this simple task by oversimplifying it. It does so by presenting democracy as a universally valid and viable system of government which we are destined to present to the world as an alternative to Communism. This interpretation tends to reduce our cause to utopian dimensions very similar to Communist utopianism. We reduce

29 democracy to utopianism whenever we obscure the fact that it required an
30 advanced European culture centuries (roughly from the 16th to the 19th Century)
31 to make political freedom compatible with the power realities and the collective
32 loyalties of race, language, religion, and class; centuries to validate political
33 freedom (by correcting the disbalances in the economic order) as an instrument
34 of justice. If Communism obscures the triumphs of an open society, democratic
35 idealists likewise tend to obscure the whole tortuous history of that society in
36 European culture: its early chapters of the achievement of ethnic homogeneity,
37 its later chapters in which sufficient tolerance was established to make cultural
38 diversity compatible with communal harmony, and its final chapter of the
39 triumph over the power realities of modern industrialism by achieving a tolerable
40 equilibrium of power in both the political and the economic sphere. The latter
41 development involved the right of laborers to organize and bargain collectively,
42 thus supplementing their equal, but insufficient, political power with equal
43 economic power. This offset the power of centralized management, which
44 according to the Communist dogma represented the final form of evil in history.
45 The whole of the 19th Century was required to achieve this equilibrium. In
46 America it was not achieved until the fourth decade of the 20th Century, when a
47 world depression finally disturbed the complacent bourgeois ethos which had
48 reigned supreme in politics for some 65 years after the close of the Civil War.

49 Clearly an open society is not the simple option for all peoples and cultures which
50 our democratic idealists assume. It seems to be a combination of an ultimate
51 ideal and a luxury which only a culturally and economically advanced community
52 can afford. It is an ultimate ideal, since no way has been found to make
53 irresponsible power a servant of justice. It is a luxury because only a community
54 with an advanced cultural cohesion and a complicated system of economic
55 mutuality and competition can master the divisive forces which exist in any
56 community. Only such a community can establish its authority over all
57 competitive and divisive forces—and do this without military coercion.

58 Incidentally we might remember that our nation experienced a bloody civil war
59 because we could not solve the slavery issue by democratic accommodation of
60 interests, or suppress an interests which clearly violated the principles upon
61 which the nation was founded.

62 Merely from the news of the past few weeks, consider the hazards which
63 democratic communities face all over the world. In Algeria, a new nation born in
64 violence, triumphing over the intransigence of French *colons* and presumably
65 forging a common loyalty through its long liberation struggles, has been
66 threatened with civil war. On the other side, the regime in France, which
67 performed the miracle of extricating itself from the fiction that Algeria was not a

68 nation and liberated Algeria from a power which both tutored her and oppressed
69 her, has suppressed many of the democratic liberties of France in the process.

70 In Latin America, a democratic leader—President Betancourt—has been
71 threatened by both right and left in Venezuela and just barely managed to
72 triumph over a leftist military revolt. In Argentina, the army has sent the
73 President into exile because, in his effort to establish a democratic regime, he
74 seemed to have flirted with the followers of Peron. In Brazil, that burgeoning
75 wealthy nation none of whose essential problems are solved, the army prevented
76 a leftist Vice President from succeeding a President who had mysteriously
77 resigned, until the constitution was changed to narrow the power of the
78 Presidency to the dimensions of the European rather than the American system.
79 The regime is now in crisis because of friction between the President, the Prime
80 Minister and parliament; and the constitutional amendment which settled the
81 previous crisis is being challenged.

82 In Peru, where the traditional Latin American feudal pattern of a tight Spanish
83 aristocracy and miserable Indian peasants was challenged by both the top-
84 running Presidential candidates, the army declared the election invalid and has
85 set itself up as a ruling *junta*. The case of Cuba is too well known to require
86 elaboration. A charismatic leader, Fidel Castro, overthrew the noxious Batista,
87 forgo this promises of constitutional democracy, and is now the prisoner and
88 embarrassed collaborator of the Communists who filled the ideological and
89 organizational vacuum in Castro's movement. In Asia the examples of democratic
90 failure are almost too numerous to record here. In Burma a new military dictator,
91 Ne Win, recently suppressed a student revolt. Ne Win was once the ally of U Nu,
92 the resourceful Buddhist-Socialist leader of what seemed a promising democracy.
93 Recently he overthrew U Nu's democratic regime, charging that U Nu had made
94 concessions to the disaffected regional groups among whom the Communist
95 revolt began a decade ago. He also criticized U Nu for establishing the Buddhist
96 faith in a pluralistic culture.

97 Korea has had two revolutions since it was rescued from Communist aggression.
98 The present military *junta* abhorred the corruption of the previous regime. It also
99 rigorously suppressed all political freedom, obviously equating freedom with
100 corruption.

101 In Pakistan an imaginative and ambitious military dictator, Ayub Khan,
102 suppressed a democratic regime which seemed incapable of triumphing over
103 regionalism and corruption. It is not yet certain whether Ayub can bring about
104 the promised land reform.

105 In Turkey the military overthrew the Menderes regime and a military *junta*
106 executed a democratic leader who wanted to use the army to suppress a political

107 revolt. The country is now in a serious parliamentary crisis. The heritage of hate
108 generated by the execution of vanquished opponents is hard to bury.

109 Vietnam is our client state. We have given it generous military and other aid and
110 defended it against the Communists. But there is evidence that it is little better
111 than a police state and that its standards of honesty are not very high. In Taiwan,
112 the great champion of anti-Communism, Chiang Kai-shek, has established a
113 "free China," but it too is a police state. In Iran an amiable and ineffectual Shah
114 has tried vainly to transmute a feudal economy, suppress student revolts, and
115 engage in unpromising land reform schemes.

116 This list is clearly sketchy and inexpert. It does not do justice to the achievements
117 of democracy in many parts of the world. Such a list does not, moreover, confirm
118 the Communist charge that Americans are the reactionary leaders of reactionary
119 forces in the world. We are merely trying to save the world from the supreme
120 fraud of the ages, the Communist movement which enslaves in the name of
121 redemption. But the evidence does prove that democracy, as it has been
122 elaborated in the advanced nations of the West, is simply not an option for all
123 nations, whatever their level of cultural and economic development. Perhaps the
124 evidence of democracy's failure should serve to modify our own messianic claims.
125 Perhaps we should be more modest and say only that we are trying to help people
126 achieve the highest degree of justice and technical competence they can.

127 It might be wise to make prudent distinctions between reversible and irreversible
128 experiments in community and order. The irreversible ones are those which are
129 supported by a fixed dogma and a policy which claims omnipotence for an elite,
130 proportioned to its claims of omniscience.

131 It might also be prudent to analyze more rigorously the hazards which justice
132 (not democracy) confronts in a world in which the rapid universalization of
133 technical ability may aggravate the injustices of traditional communities and may
134 mean both promise and peril to primitive cultures.

135 In brief, we cannot compete with the Communist utopia by mounting our own
136 utopian claims. We can only modestly admit that history is charged with
137 emergent vitalities on all levels of culture and politics and that it is our task to
138 keep history open for every kind of experimentation, not allowing it to be close
139 prematurely by an absurd and coercive dogma.

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