



Open Societies versus Autocratic Experiments or Why the Latter are Parasitic, Cannibalizing and Self-Limiting

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Abstract

Events over the past decade revealed a new systems clash: Open Societies versus digital autocracies which are competing to provide better solutions to tackle climate change and pandemics, overcome poverty, and offer reasonable jobs. However, which is doing a better job? The text argues that the current autocratic experiments are flourishing based on the preconditions that they cannot generate independently: Price allocation in free competitive markets; a rigorous debate on facts in an interdisciplinary scientific discourse; free public speech and a free, critical, investigative press; a creative, pluralistic cultural scene; and the building of social capital based on interpersonally generated trust and reciprocal tolerance. These conditions all draw on a human- and person-centred approach and are superior to any attempt to regulate society through a collective, non-democratic top-down process. Autocracies depend on Open Societies and must import relevant information generated only in Open Societies, and thus remain self-limiting.

1. Introduction

Watching the flow of events over the past decade, it is obvious that so-called Western democracies, sometimes also called the ‘free world’, are facing fundamental challenges. Far from liberal democracy marking the ‘end of history’,¹ this system of government is coming to be replaced by political alternatives sometimes referred to as autocracies. This goes hand in hand with increasing challenges on a worldwide scale such as global warming, asymmetric wars, unprecedented inequality, forced migration, pandemics and the unknown impact of automation on the traditional labor force, to name but a few. Journalist Thomas Friedman asked: *What if the US declared itself to be China for one day in order to solve all the challenges we are facing, and then decided to shift back to an open democratic system in order to enjoy all its benefits?*² In other words: what is the right political agenda for the 21st century? More so-called ‘Open Societies’ or more autocracies?

The Freedom House 2020 report³ states that over the last 14 years, 64 countries have experienced a decline in human rights, fair elections, rights of minorities and the rule of law and only 37 countries have experienced a net improvement. Measured by population, 39% live in a free world, 25% in a partly free and 36% in a non-free world. If we attribute half of the population living under partly free political conditions to the free and the other half to the non-free world respectively, we can say that roughly 50% of the world population represent

a free world and 50% do not. At the end of the Cold War it looked as if authoritarian and totalitarian regimes were on the decline, but the current trend shows the opposite: 2020 was the lowest ranking for the free world for over a decade. These empirical findings reflect a statement made by Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation, in which he claimed that liberalism is simply outdated.⁴

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2. Problem-solving in the Anthropocene Era

In fact, these autocratic experiments enjoy significant support, and not only within prominent autocratic countries, but also within the Western ‘free world’. In some countries, the support for an autocratic agenda is even higher than the support enjoyed by their ‘free world’ counterparts.⁵ Much has been written about this shift in acceptance on the one hand and lack of legitimacy on the other, but one of the main reasons for this hype about the autocratic experiment is the fact that its followers believe the autocratic system is better capable of solving problems such as poverty, unemployment, global warming, inequality, corruption, and losses of biodiversity. These are all undoubtedly significant issues, and it looks as if autocratic agendas are able to do a better job. We have to admit that, empirically speaking, the autocratic agenda has its attractions: Fast political decision making, a rapid rollout of solutions and streamlined scaling in the economy. However, if we start looking more closely, we see there are self-limiting factors built into the autocratic experiment itself. The question arising here is: which of the two contrasting alternatives has the relative competitive advantage to cope with the upcoming challenges of the Age of the Anthropocene,⁶ which is characterized by the limits set by planetary boundaries, overshoots and all-time interconnectedness? In this era, the human species has taken the driver’s seat, not only determining the course of the planet—global warming, reduction of biodiversity, pandemics—but also offering recipes for human life in coordinated large societies and for meeting human socio-economic needs. It is an era in which there is no real exit option, plan B or restart button. In short: which of the two systems discussed, Open Societies or autocracies, is doing a better job?

3. The very Nature of an Open Society: Human-centered and Open to Revision

Historically, ‘Open Societies’—first described by the Austrian philosopher and founder of critical rationalism Karl Popper⁷—is a conceptual response to the experiences of German fascism and Russian Stalinism, where individual human rights were violated on a vast scale.

Open Societies reflect a societal and constitutional order in which personal freedom and reciprocal criticism provide not only the foundation of individual wellbeing, economic welfare and peace, but also superior tools for solving problems and pursuing truth and coherence in both science and religion. And it is in Open Societies that the state legitimizes itself simply by enabling, safeguarding and balancing out the often conflicting forms of individual freedom and responsibility of each of its members.

Although historically the Open Society has been a contribution of the West, it actually is a political agenda that can apply anywhere on this planet. In an Open Society, individuals engage in a critical, open, fearless and public dialogue to solve problems. Each member of an Open Society knows that this quest for a better life should be human-centered, open to revision, failure-friendly and built upon reciprocal tolerance and trust. And each member of an Open Society is also aware that this search for personal freedom will potentially enable greater creativity, happiness, wealth, health and truth compared to any alternative. The Open Society is built upon pluralism, reciprocal respect and humility, being aware that our knowledge will always be incomplete, biased and potentially misleading. This requires an ongoing fair, critical and fact-based public debate, investigations by a critical and independent press, autonomous scientific endeavors that search for the truth and a better understanding of life's miracles and magic, and an educational system that unleashes the creativity of each and every individual. Open Societies install checks and balances that prevent the abuse of power, and are places where the prices of goods and services are generated in a free, fair and regulated market system with product liabilities and entrepreneur responsibility, revealing the truth about social and ecological externalities. Even more: they are societies where a social security system means that nobody is left behind, where minorities' rights are respected and majority votes are accepted. Open Societies have and implement laws on how to replace elected political officials if they fail to do a good enough job. Open Societies protect human rights. It is the very nature of such Open Societies that they are built upon the conviction that the coexistence of other opinions, the creativity of individuals and institutionalized forms of criticism guarantee a life with greater personal freedom, greater truth and greater wealth overall.

This ideal concept of the Western world enjoyed broad reception in the years following 1989. A further significant influence on the narrative of political debates in the West has been the so-called convergence hypothesis.⁸ This hypothesis posits that free trade with autocratic regimes leads, as it were automatically, to a global convergence of the rule of law, the protection of minorities, the separation of powers, human rights and free markets. Therefore this Western value system ultimately is being implemented worldwide, making Open Societies themselves more stable and secure. This narrative even justifies the deployment of the military in humanitarian interventions (so-called R2P: Responsibility to Protect).⁹ However, it seems as if this form of expansive liberalism¹⁰ with its missionary proselytism has been taken too far. The flaw of this convergence hypothesis is that it is no longer falsified. Every time an autocratic regime takes a supposed misstep, it is assumed that the regime is '*not yet there*' or that its journey towards an Open Society still needs more time. But it turns out that these were not missteps—autocratic regimes were simply following a different narrative. For example, the year 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, was used in the West to proclaim the

end of Communism. For China, 1989 was the year of the suppression of the popular uprising in Tiananmen Square and signaled the strength rather than the demise of Communism.

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However, Open Societies’ understanding of democracy and human rights is subject to Western interpretative sovereignty with its claim to universal validity. If you go to a country with high rates of poverty, illiteracy and hunger, you may come to the conclusion that it is worth standing up for universal human rights. But at the same time, you may acknowledge that there can be a temporal prioritization and geographical weighting of different values. Thus the overcoming of poverty and hunger, a roof over one’s head and access to basic education and health facilities will quickly take precedence over freedom of expression, freedom of the press and geographical mobility across national borders. Those of us living in Open Societies, as we demand for Europe, the US, and other Western countries, need to admit to ourselves that there may be societies that have other priorities and preferences with which we disagree. There are societies, for example, for which it is not so important that everyone can (almost) always say what they think, but whose concern is instead that their members can be sure that their children will no longer starve, will go to school and will have access to potable water.

4. The Autocratic Experiment and its Constraints: Parasitic and Self-limiting

Whereas in Open Societies, we witness shared, balanced and controlled forms of political power, autocratic regimes rely on reduced or no constitutional constraints to such power, which is exerted by the few, by one party or even by a single person. We can distinguish between communitarian forms of autocracies (China) with a one-party system, paternalistic autocracies (Russia) that emphasize the individual over institutions, and tribal or feudal forms of autocracies (Gulf states) with a prominent family or clan structure, often including military and/or religious-fundamentalist traits. Security and stability as well as economic welfare are seen to outweigh political participation, individual freedom and human rights in the traditional Western sense, something that is common across the forms of autocracies mentioned above. And all have this in common: the population’s approval for precisely the given constitution is higher than in most, if not all so-called Western democracies and Open Societies. Autocracies prefer to synchronize, correct and align their citizens, with solidarity, homogeneity and the subordination of individual rights to collective narratives determining the political agenda.

Take China: in Chinese culture, successfully copying the master is considered a special learning achievement. The more perfectly this process succeeds, the greater the learning curve

and the greater the person's reputation in society is. This 'copy and paste' culture means that the person who copies enjoys a head start because he or she can avoid the entire burden of work, invention and production, trial and error and failure and can instead concentrate completely on the copy. In addition, the China experiment is impressive in its magnitude and the speed with which decisions are sometimes implemented. The reduction of the poverty rate, the growth of the middle class, rising enrollment in educational institutions, increased productivity and the overall increase in life expectancy seem to demonstrate the superiority of the system compared to the clumsiness of decision making in Open Societies.¹¹ The same seems to be true for other autocratic experiments we are currently witnessing in Europe, Africa and the Americas.

At the same time, however, a number of other cultural achievements are lost or never trained in the first place: critical debate, error friendliness, public discourse, individual judgment and autonomous thinking are characteristics that can only flourish in an Open Society. Autocratic systems have to rely on copying and imitation strategies because the original results of critical judgment are not available first hand. We would assume that as we are living in an uncertain and complex world, we actually need more critical thinking and less copying, more independent thought than imitation, more freedom and critical autonomy than control and domination.

The autocratic ruler has to rely on knowledge and information that is only accessible to them through critical judgment. They pretend to possess a knowledge that they are not able to generate from within. Instead, it needs to come from elsewhere. Even in basic research, the number of patents and publications and the R & D infrastructure do not falsify this argument. For example, most researchers now working in China have been socialized in Open Societies and represent a hidden import of Western values and standards into autocracies. They will play the role of gamechangers towards more open societies from within (while sending their own kids to Swiss high schools).

5. Cannibalizing, Parasitic and Self-limiting Factors

My argument is that the autocratic experiments we are currently witnessing all over the world are flourishing on the basis of preconditions they cannot generate themselves. These experiments are self-limiting, cannibalizing, and demonstrate that these experiments will end sooner rather than later, as they are built upon a set of values that originally come from the free world itself.

Price allocation in free competitive markets, a rigorous debate on facts in an interdisciplinary scientific discourse, free public speech and a free, critical, investigative press, a creative, pluralistic cultural scene, the building of social capital based on interpersonally generated trust and reciprocal tolerance, all drawing on a human- and person-centered approach, are superior to any attempt at regulating a society through a collective, non-democratic top-down process. And a lifelong position in political leadership or decades in political power without the possibility to elect someone else is a sign not of the power, but of the weakness of the system in question. It shows that this system has abandoned a public and critical debate in order to find what it considers the right way.

The multiple critical feedback loops that keep an Open Society in balance and provide sufficient flexibility to respond to asymmetric shocks (such as global warming or pandemics), which itself requires decentralized uncensored information, are poorly developed in autocracies. In fact, censorship is not criticism. Whereas criticism is inclusive and a fundamental component of any Open Society, as it honors different arguments and tries to improve the status quo, censorship creates a so-called in-group/out-group scenario of those who follow and those who refuse. Where films and media, publishing houses and Wikipedia, curricula for schools and universities, and even history are censored, we end up with citizens who have no memory and humans who have no critical mind. In this case, censorship is exclusive and moralizing.

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The process of searching for truth, freedom, fairness and so forth is replaced by autocratic knowledge and a political party agenda that the leader pretends to have but that relies on precisely the quest for truth that is generated elsewhere, namely in Open Society only. Autocracies are too homogenous and too synchronized in a top-down manner to respond and operate in a complex, non-linear world, where uncertainties and incompleteness determine the decisions of daily life. This is true for politics and for the corporate world. This is also true for individuals, smaller and larger groups and entities, and large institutional bodies. Political clan structures, where family members are given preference without any kind of external auditing, mean that the innovation and creativity of the best and brightest never get to develop; the lacking involvement of a critical third sector leads to systemic corruption; these and further examples demonstrate that a critical mind is superior to mechanisms of collective control.

Open Societies, by contrast, are driven by a dynamic and decentralized process led by critical, free-thinking individuals, who are prepared to fail and are sufficiently encouraged to take personal responsibility in entrepreneurship, in the unknown and rigorous journey of scientific discovery, in the creativity of cultural expression, in an open fearless public debate about our own doubts, uncertainties and incomplete knowledge, in day-to-day decision making in the private sphere and in setting political agendas.

Despite their acceptance in the population, their economic and political power and sheer magnitude, autocratic experiments are built upon at least two forms of illusions, which themselves are self-limiting, parasitic and cannibalizing: the *illusion of control* and the *illusion of knowledge and wisdom*. Both lead to the false assumption that the control and the knowledge autocracies exert politically are able to manage the challenges of the 21st century and make autocracies superior to Open Societies.

The *illusion of control*: autocratic regimes are convinced that they can control not only human behavior on a large scale, but also the course of a society as a whole. Facial recognition programs, unchecked artificial intelligence, social credit systems, large-scale state interventions and regulatory efforts, a closed internet and public video surveillance are examples where the politics claims to control and command a societal process that Open Societies organize in a completely different way. However, autocratic political systems lack external feedback loops, such as a critical media and press, free and independent lawyers, or an autonomous civil sector providing indispensable wisdom to cope with the challenges in the near future. And without this formation of social capital, which only occurs when free and autonomous humans decide to collaborate, autocratic systems find themselves much less in control when faced with external and internal challenges.

The *illusion of knowledge and wisdom*: autocratic regimes are convinced that they are able to generate enough wisdom and knowledge from within to rule society and tackle systemic challenges. And once again, this autocratic knowledge is an illusion, because these regimes rely on information and knowledge that is generated in Open Societies only, but is then misused and instrumentalized for autocratic systems' own purposes. The knowledge, wisdom and information acquired to solve problems in Open Societies are superior to the knowledge, wisdom and information genuinely generated in autocracies. A one-party system is unable to generate wisdom in the way Open Societies do, in a decentralized, human-centered, critical and failure-friendly manner. For example, a failed state-driven real-estate investment program requires a point of view that allows that program to be corrected. In an autocratic system, the only reliable source of information the political apparatus has is its own political party programs. An Open Society, by contrast, can rely on free price formation in free markets, a critical investigative press and a research community that provides empirical evidence on how to proceed. In Open Societies there is more than just one voice. And it is these multiple voices that guarantee progress, solutions and prosperity. When scientists get a bonus if they offer courses on political party programs, where ideology and party membership are more important than competence or professionalism, where spending on domestic security is higher than on defense and the military, and where even the constitution itself is subordinated to the party program, we in the West cannot assume that such a system is ready to cope with the global challenges of the 21st century. No party program, no military regime or no ideology whatsoever is able to replace the wisdom generated in Open Societies. In other words, the societal immune system or early warning system is weak in autocracies, as top-down commands prevail in the process of decision making.

We can take this argument one step further. Autocracies function only because they are able to fall back on achievements they have not guaranteed and generated themselves in the first place; they lack the *endogenous factor for critical self-correction* that is key for Open Societies. Open Societies, on the other hand, accept the opinions of right- and left-wing populists as well as aspects of closed, homogeneous ethnic habitats, knowing that nobody is 100% wrong and that each position will have to justify itself in the light of reciprocal criticism, open public debate, a free press, and free and autonomous research and development. And if this test fails, a position will be falsified and disqualified within the Open Society itself.

In this sense, autocratic systems are parasitic and self-limiting. They abolish themselves as soon as they are confronted with all the cultural achievements that are characteristic of Open Societies: individual criticism, creativity and the co-existence of heterogeneous ethnic, socio-economic groups. And even though in autocracies, too, basic research takes place, patents are filed, prices are created in markets and journalists do their work, these are all already unacknowledged islands of ‘open social relations’ within an autocratic dystopia.

6. Conclusions

Illiberal democracies, controlled democracies, and one-party democracies—which all refer to autocratic regimes in one sense or another—are not identical with the understanding of democracy and the rule of law in Open Society we have in the West, even if they bear a similar name. They represent a historical experiment that has jumped too fast and fallen short. While this experiment may sound great at first, it is a regressive response to the challenges of the 21st century. By contrast, Open Societies thrive on the idea of a liberal order based on a human-centered approach. They are not driven by leftist narratives’ notion of a forced equality, nor by an exclusionary ethnic identity of right-wing narratives. Both these narratives, if they assume an authoritarian character, live off the illusions of being able to control societies and their citizens and of possessing information, knowledge and insight about processes that are not actually theirs. The free movement of goods, basic research, critical press reporting as well as the unleashing of human creativity presuppose an order of freedom and are only really created in Open Societies. Anyone who refuses to make this connection will be left behind. If the world were made up solely of autocratic systems, we would have neither real scientific progress, nor objective and critical news, nor maximum creativity and cultural diversity, and so on.

At the bottom line, it boils down to the question of *governance through control, conformism and copying* versus *governance through criticism, the co-existence of heterogeneity and creativity*. The course of history will show which model proves more successful at coping with the challenges of the 21st century. To me, the evidence suggests that autocratic systems are only second best. It is true that Open Societies appear more fragile on the outside, but they demonstrate greater internal robustness, thanks to autonomous and self-critical individuals. They appear to be clumsy and slow in their decision-making at first sight, but demonstrate flexibility and tolerance for failure if necessary and re-correct themselves. In a fully connected and complex world with increasing uncertainty, non-linear adverse feedback loops and spillovers, asymmetric shocks and unknown unknowns, the competitive advantage of autocratic experiments—both in terms of geography and time—will fall short or prove a nonstarter. They remain parasitic as they depend on Open Societies, they cannibalize themselves as they have to import relevant information generated only in Open Societies, and finally remain self-limiting.

And despite backlashes and backward steps, historically it has always been a *person- and human-centered approach* that has enabled greater wealth, greater social achievements, more scientific discoveries, greater health and so on than any other form of political system. Over the last centuries, the course of history has shown that the more perfectly a human-

centered approach is accomplished, the better the results. This does not mean that there have not been failures and that there has not been abuse and misguidance. But anytime a society favored individual creativity, criticism and the coexistence of heterogeneous groups, honoring and protecting minorities and individual freedom, more wealth, health and freedom has been achieved. I believe that Open Societies are more resilient because they are more error-friendly, more adaptable and more restorative, which in turn is because they are more critical. They are able to mobilize their own self-healing powers in ways not available to autocratic experiments. In this reading, Open Societies do not need an agenda for world peace or global governance, but simply demonstrate their attractiveness through their own exemplary character.

We have to admit that autocracies do not automatically become Open Societies with their inherent canon of values through the mere presence of Open Societies. It is rather the other way round—autocracies need Open Societies in order to make themselves more stable by using the knowledge and discussion of Open Societies to consolidate their own power.

As long as we do not mimic and copy these autocratic experiments in the free world, we will come out of this historical phase ahead. And this will once again demonstrate that there is never an end of history or an end of ideology, that the free world faces ongoing challenges that may never end. In the meantime, however, we will start with a more realistic situation, where we have to admit that we in fact need both systems. Open Societies that have generated enough knowledge and wisdom through public debates, a free investigative press, uncontrolled creativity, price signals in a free market system, uncensored information and the rigorous scientific discourse in social and basic science, all based on a person-centered approach; *and* autocratic systems that use precisely these cultural achievements to roll out and scale up solutions to major challenges in their own countries (global warming, eradicating poverty).

And then the alleged systems clash will develop towards a non-hegemonic era,¹² where asymmetric and reciprocal interdependency predominate, rather than another era of imperialism, where each proponent is convinced that their world views have to be adopted by the other. To rephrase the bon mot of the famous biologist E.O. Wilson: 'Autocracies are an interesting experiment, but they've got the wrong species and the wrong time.'

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