Beyond the Double Standard: A Social Democratic View of the Authoritarianism Versus Totalitarianism Debate

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Editor's Note: This article first appeared in New America, the newspaper of Social Democrats USA, in July 1985. It had been presented in January 1985 as a speech to the 'Democratic Solidarity Conference' organized by the Young Social Democrats (YSD) under the auspices of the Foundation for Democratic Education.

Tom Kahn (1938-92) was an assistant to the President of the AFL-CIO. He was responding to Jeane Kirkpatrick's seminal article, 'Dictatorships and Double Standards' in *Commentary* in November 1979. Kirkpatrick, who served as United States Representative at the United Nations from 1981-5, distinguished 'authoritarian' societies from 'totalitarian' societies, and argued that democratic societies are sometimes forced to ally, tactically and temporarily, with the former against the latter. Although she wanted all people to have the opportunity to live under democratic government – and in 1983 argued for 'a steady, prudent encouragement of pluralism, self-expression, self-determination: the infrastructure of democracy' ('American Foreign Policy in a Cold Climate: An Interview with George Urban, *Encounter*, November 1983) – she continued to view authoritarian governments as preferable to totalitarian governments because they were less repressive internally, more susceptible to liberalisation and democratic change, and less hostile to the interests of the western democracies. In a dangerous world, democracies must sometimes make progress 'unsavoury step by unsavoury step' as she put it.

Kahn's nuanced social democratic response to the problem of 'the double-standard' contributed to the shift towards democracy-promotion in US foreign policy. Thanks to William King for finding the article. For an account of Kahn's life see the tribute by Rachelle Horowitz in Democratiya 11.

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I have been asked to explore a subject – democracy in an age of totalitarianism – on which many volumes have been expended, no small number devoted to definitions alone. I shall assume that this audience understands the essential features of democracy and totalitarianism and the differences between the two. Where murkiness sets in is in describing those societies that are neither democratic nor totalitarian.

Such societies account for by far the largest number of countries in the world and are inhabited by a majority of the human population. They are loosely referred to as authoritarian, although that label does not do complete justice to the variety of social and political arrangements to be found in these societies or to their very different historical evolutions.

In contrast to the political democracies, which appeared on the scene only in the last two centuries, and in contrast to the totalitarian state, which appeared only in this century, many of the authoritarian societies are rooted in ancient social structures, while others are in transition to modern forms. Some display a bizarre blend of the modern and the archaic.

In recent years – beginning I suppose in the Carter years and accelerating in the first Reagan term – this question has been addressed in a debate that, in my view, has not always been fruitful.

On one side of the debate – let us, at the risk of oversimplification, call it the 'left' side – are gathered those who contend that the United States should take strong punitive measures against authoritarian regimes with which it is allied in order to press them to adhere to democratic standards of human rights or, failing that, to protect the good name and moral coherence of the democratic cause.

Typically the left also argues that with regard to the totalitarian states, most especially the Soviet Union, 'quiet diplomacy' is a more appropriate means of expressing displeasure at human rights violations than are economic sanctions or strident public denunciations. The latter, it is argued, heighten international tensions, and increase the danger of war which, in the nuclear age, is the ultimate evil. In fact, according to this view, we could be more effective in moderating Soviet human rights violations if we expanded trade and diplomatic and cultural ties with the Soviets and pursued a more accommodating policy of détente.

On the other side of the debate – the 'right' side – the arguments are almost exactly reversed. Toward our authoritarian allies a policy of 'quiet diplomacy' is proposed and towards the Soviet bloc a policy of public denunciation, economic retaliation and diplomatic confrontation.

Both sides do agree that a tough American human rights policy can make a greater impact on our authoritarian allies than our totalitarian adversaries. After all, we can threaten our allies with a cut-off of military aid, and if the threat itself is insufficient to induce the desired changes, we can actually carry it out, cutting the regime in question adrift and perhaps even laying the basis for its overthrow.

No such option exists with regard to the Soviet bloc, which does not receive any direct military assistance from the West. Precisely because the military-aid-cut-off weapon cannot be applied to the Soviets, the Right would argue, we must adopt a more aggressive policy of economic and political confrontation with the Soviets; and at the same time we should avoid any measures that would threaten the stability of regimes allied with us in the East-West struggle because, as bad as their human rights practices may be, they are likely to be replaced by even more repressive totalitarian governments, resulting I a total loss of freedom for the people involved and a strategic gain for Soviet totalitarianism – that is to say, a moral as well as a strategic disaster.

Regrettably, the Left has often responded to this argument by minimizing the depth of the disaster, by pooh-poohing the differences between authoritarian and totalitarian societies. To the political dissident being tortured in a dungeon what difference does it make, they ask, whether his tormentors are called authoritarians or totalitarians – or whether they are left-wingers or right-wingers. Or, for that matter, whether they are officials of a democratic state – for even in democracies, outrages have been committed against prisoners. And because it makes no existential difference to the victim of torture, his nightmare, being absolute, tells us very little about the nature of the society in which he lives.

As for the claim that there is more torture, more bloody suppression of dissent in the authoritarian than the totalitarian countries – that is true. It also illuminates and important distinction between the two types of societies. In the authoritarian type, there is usually more organised dissent to be suppressed – a point to which I shall return.

But first I want to draw attention to certain similarities in the arguments advanced by both sides in the authoritarianism vs. totalitarianism debate.

For one thing, both are open to the charge of employing a double standard. Both would apply quiet diplomacy to one kind of society and would resort to public denunciations and sanctions in the case of another kind.

Secondly, they are both reactive. They debate how the U.S. Government should react to another government's violations of human rights – after those violations have occurred.

And both base their tactics on the political character of the targeted regime.

For these reasons, the debate has sown confusion where it has not proved downright sterile. I want to suggest that it is possible to develop a human rights strategy – a strategy for expanding democracy in the world – which avoids these pitfalls.

But first I would like briefly to address two other issues. One is whether, as a matter of principle, it is morally permissible for democracies to enter alliances with authoritarian regimes.

The answer is clearly yes – not only with authoritarian regimes but even with totalitarian regimes, when what is at stake is the survival of democratic power centres. You will recall that in World War II we entered into an alliance with the Soviet Union, not to mention a host of authoritarian governments. The Soviet Union was not an authoritarian power, it was a totalitarian power. We entered into this alliance to defeat another totalitarian power which at the time posed the greater threat to the survival, not simply of democratic ideas and democratic principles, but to the centers of democratic power in the world, particularly the United States and Europe. As a matter of principle, yes, it is morally permissible for democracies to enter into alliances with undemocratic regimes.

The second issue is how much weight to assign to the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian countries. How much better is one than the other?

Consider the practical case of Poland – a totalitarian country in which the state monopolised social power and the Party monopolised the State. But then there rose for the first time in a communist country a free trade union movement with

ten million members. The church also became more assertive in claiming its rights. Farmers began to organise. In the period when Solidarity flourished in Poland, was Poland a democracy? It clearly was not, because the Communist party, disallowing political opposition, still dominated State power, although there were some limits placed on State power. Poland moved from being a totalitarian country to being, briefly, an authoritarian country. Can anyone doubt that this transition, characterised by the Gdansk accord, was a good thing, that it was preferable to what had existed before and is preferable to what has come to exist since?

The shift from totalitarianism to authoritarianism is a form of progress. We do not have any examples, regrettably, of the shift from totalitarianism to democracy, except perhaps that of the transformation of Germany as a result of its defeat in World War II.

But if the distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism can be useful in devising strategies for the promotion of human rights, those terms have lately become abstractions in a polarizing debate, in which each side accuses the other, with *some justification*, of employing double-standards.

Yet I would assert that it is possible to apply a single standard of human rights that also recognises the distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. To bring that standard into focus, let us pretend that the terms authoritarianism and totalitarianism do not exist.

The single standard I suggest is one by which we can judge other countries and by which we can determine how closely we ought to be allied with them in the normal course of things. It is a standard that focuses not on the political character of the regime in power – i.e. whether it is of the left or the right – but rather on the extent to which there exists in that society the opportunity for people to create, organize and control their own organisations and institutions independent of the State. The more fully that right is recognised, not just in words but in practice, the closer our national relations ought to be with those countries; the more severely those rights are restricted, the more we should distance ourselves from them.

The standard, then, is freedom of association.

I single out freedom of association not because I mean to minimize all other human rights – freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of worship, etc – but

because I believe that all those rights depend upon people being able to organise to defend themselves and to defend themselves against any power that would try to trample on those rights, whether that power be the State or private special interests.

A good measure of the extent to which freedom of association exists in any given society – not as an abstraction but as a practical right – is the status of the trade union movement.

You will find societies in which there are free and independent trade unions – that is independent of the State. In these societies workers have the right to organise; they have the right to strike; they have the right to participate in political life. This is the case in the industrial democracies.

Then there is that large number of societies in which there are fledgling, embryonic, sometimes compromised trade union movements. They are independent of the State, which is not to deny that they are often repressed by the State, restricted by the State, harassed by the State or intimidated by the State. But they are not creatures of the State. And to one degree or another, you find them in opposition to their governments, and often allied with opposition political parties to the extent that such parties exist. This is what we find throughout most of the Third World and in most of the countries where the American labor movement has established programs to help these unions.

This is the situation in Chile. The Pinochet regime is hostile to, and seeks to repress the trade union movement. It jails trade union leaders. But the reason it has to jail them and the reason it has to intimidate them is that a trade union movement exists in some form. If it did not exist there would be no need to torture them, to jail them or to intimidate them.

In South Africa there is a black trade union movement. Its rights are also restricted and its leaders are jailed. Again, they are jailed because the movement exists independently of the State. Otherwise, there would be no need to jail them. I could name dozens of other countries – in fact, most countries in the world – that fall into that category.

And then we come to a third category in which there are no independent trade unions either flourishing or struggling, in which the State has substituted for trade union *its own institutions*, which are in fact instruments of the state. They are called

unions. But they do not exist as unions and they do not represent the interests of the workers. They represent the interests of the State.

The real character of these institutions was clearly revealed in Poland.

When the riots began in Poland over the increase in the food prices – the riots which ultimately led to the creation of Solidarnosc – the workers rejected altogether the suggestion that they take over the existing official unions. Instead they created a brand new trade union structure, one of the most extraordinary feats in trade union organizing in all of history. It's much harder, is it not, to set up a brand new organization out of nothing, than to penetrate and take over existing structures? But the Polish workers chose not to take over the existing structures because they were so totally in the possession of the State and so totally unrepresentative of the interests of working people.

This is the character of the official trade union structure in the Soviet Union and indeed throughout the totalitarian world.

In a sense, the three kinds of societies I have described – those in which unions function freely, those in which unions are targets of state repression but nonetheless independent, and those in which unions have been replaced by instruments of the State – roughly correspond to societies that we call, respectively, democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian. But by shelving these abstract words and focusing on the operational principle of freedom of association, we avoid the pitfalls of the recent debate over authoritarianism vs. totalitarianism.

This focus gives us a single standard not a double standard. We are not saying that we prefer a softer line toward a country because it is of the left or of the right. We are proposing a standard which goes beyond the political coloration of the government and looks instead at the character of the society – that goes beyond government-to-government relationships, and examines the opportunities that are available for people to exercise their human right to organize. Lastly, and most importantly, this approach, much more than the sterile debate over authoritarianism vs. totalitarianism, offers a strategy for change. That is, it focuses on the prospects for building democratic institutions around the world.

That is of course what the AFL-CIO has been trying to do for many years in Asia, Africa and Latin America – to work with trade union movements and enable them

to stand on their own two feet, protect their rights, and advance the interests of their own members. There is a role here for other private American institutions, as well. That's one of the promising things about the National Endowment for Democracy, as ludicrously underfunded as it is.

This strategy of building democratic institutions as the bulwark for the defense of human rights in the world causes tension. It does not relax tension. There is not much that one can do about that. If your primary goal is to reduce tension you might as well give up the commitment to human rights and democracy. But because the vigorous promotion of democratic institutions does increase tension, an effective human rights policy also requires a strong national defense.

I will not go into the question of what constitutes a strong national defense, or whether the Soviet Union has achieved superiority, or whether we have parity, or whether we have superiority. However a strong national defense is defined, it is required as a shield to prevent the tensions that result from a serious human-rights democracy-building policy from breaking out into war. But an adequate military defense is not enough. The United States enjoyed a monopoly of nuclear weapons, and later a clear nuclear superiority, at a time when the Soviet Union made some of its most important advances. When the Berlin Wall was constructed, we had a clear superiority. Cuba became a communist colony at a time when we had a clear cut nuclear superiority.

So a strong national defense, especially in the nuclear field, is not enough. Its also has to be accompanied by a strategy for making changes in the world – for changing authoritarian regimes into democratic regimes, and ultimately for dismantling the Soviet system by non-nuclear means.

If these goals seem obvious to some, they nonetheless imply practical; policy discussions that are far from uncontroversial.

I remember, at the time of the emergence of Solidarity, attending a conference which was addressed by the American ambassador to Poland. In the course of the question and answer period a Soviet expert arose and said the United States has to make a choice with regard to Poland: 'If your objective is to woo Poland out of the Soviet orbit, that's one thing. If your objective is to help Solidarity in Poland, to help the Poles who are struggling for their human rights, that is another thing and they are not compatible. If you want to woo the Polish government away from the

Soviets, you have to be nice to the Polish government, and being nice to the Polish government does not mean sending supplies to Lech Walesa and Solidarnosc.'

Maybe there is, maybe there is not an incompatibility between those two objectives. But the policy I am suggesting clearly inclines toward aiding those people in various countries around the world who are on the front lines struggling for the expansion of human rights, rather than towards a policy which looks to governments, as they are, interacting with each other on the geopolitical chess board.

In the case of South Africa, the principles I am proposing lead to concrete material and moral support to the black trade union movement whether the South African government likes it or not. The same thing is true in Chile. We should be aiding the democratic trade union forces there, regardless of the views of Mr Pinochet. It should also be our objective in El Salvador – aiding the trade union and democratic forces in that country.

We don't know how this will work out. In a recent *Commentary* article, Jean Francois Revel closed on a very pessimistic note, saying that he had good reason to doubt that democracies would survive to the end of the century. But in the struggle for democracy, optimism and pessimism are irrelevant because we really have no choice. We are either going to struggle to protect and perfect and expand democratic institutions, or we are going to let them wither or be crushed by the weight of totalitarianism in the world. That doesn't strike me as much of a choice. One cannot undertake the democratic struggle only because one is feeling optimistic about it. And one cannot yield to the totalitarian temptation because one is feeling pessimistic. Our obligation is to be part of the struggle, to work with and help those people who are on the front lines of freedom around the world ... and let come what may.

Tom Kahn (1938-92) was a guiding spirit of America's Social Democratic community for over 30 years.