

Strange Harmony: Human Nature and Tyranny in the Eyes of Czesław Miłosz

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ABSTRACT: If every age has its signature works, *The Captive Mind* by Czesław Miłosz is such a work for the Cold War. Published in 1953 and valorized in the West as an incisive critique of the Soviet Bloc, it analyzes the inner world of Eastern Europeans caught in the grip of Stalinist tyranny. This subjectivity is what Miłosz calls “the captive mind.” But with the Cold War long over, it is time to rethink and reassess his classic. This is the purpose of this paper. Casting a critical look at it, the paper argues that *The Captive Mind* is afflicted and debilitated by an implicit, but all too serious, aporia. As a part of his analysis of Eastern Europe’s incarcerated mind, Miłosz articulates a conception of human nature. In a profound irony, however, that conception aligns with—harmonizes with—his portrayal of the evil Stalinist tyranny enthraling Eastern Europe. Unwittingly, Miłosz in effect naturalizes that tyranny. He suggests that, rather than being evil, it is all too human—corresponding to elemental propensities of human nature. This paper problematizes this dramatic contradiction. Ultimately, it reflects on the implications of this momentous paradox for understanding the character and history of political oppression.

KEYWORDS: Czesław Miłosz, Tyranny, Totalitarianism, Subjectivity, Eastern Europe, The Cold War

Introduction

The middle decades of the twentieth century constituted the nadir of modern European history. Political tyranny, embodied most radically by Stalinism in the Soviet Union and especially by Nazism in Germany, threatened to destroy Western civilization. At this darkest historical hour, Western intellectuals naturally sought to understand the evil of tyranny. One crucial aspect of it that drew their attention was the subjectivity of the subjects of tyranny. Thus, as Nazism was raging in Europe, academics associated with the Frankfurt School of social theory analyzed the psychology of the supporter of tyranny in a now-classic of twentieth-century social science—*The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford 1950).

Another thinker who probed the inner world of tyranny’s subjects was the Nobel laureate for literature, Czesław Miłosz. He did so in his best-known work, *The Captive Mind*. Published in 1953, it is a work of non-fiction. It is a critical, politically dissident, historical and cultural analysis of the Eastern Europe of its time. Its main objective, as formulated by Miłosz, is “to explain how the human mind functions” in Eastern Europe (Miłosz 2001, xv). A more general aim is to understand “the power of attraction” of totalitarianism over “the twentieth century [*sic*] mind” (vii-viii). To achieve these goals, Miłosz focuses mainly on a milieu all too “familiar” to him: the “world” of the intellectuals of Eastern Europe at that time (xv). Miłosz, it should be noted, understands the term “mind” in a general way. He equates it with the entire inner life of humans, including cognition and rationality, as well as human psychology.

Critics have commended Miłosz for achieving his objectives. No less a luminary than Karl Jaspers applauded his book as an “analysis of the highest order” (Jaspers 1953, 13). Recently, Tony Judt has called the book “by far the most insightful and enduring account of the attraction of intellectuals to Stalinism and, more generally, of the appeal of authority and authoritarianism to the intelligentsia” (Judt 2010). This paper, however, takes a contrary view. Casting a critical look at *The Captive Mind*, it argues that Miłosz’s analysis of the human “mind” in tyrannized Eastern Europe slips into a significant aporia. While probing how it

“captivates” that “mind,” Miłosz shows, unwittingly, that the political tyranny over Eastern Europe corresponds powerfully to what he understands to be human nature. Ironically, he thus reveals that tyranny exists in a strange harmony with our nature. The purpose of this paper is to explore this momentous paradox.

***The Captive Mind* and “Immanent Humanity”**

The Captive Mind is, indeed, a resolute critique of the Stalinist political tyranny established in Eastern Europe after World War II. Using an ideologically loaded term of the Cold War, Miłosz freely terms that tyranny “totalitarianism” (Miłosz 2001, viii; Gleason 1995). And he minces no words in repudiating it: he calls it “stupefying and loathsome” (Miłosz 2001, xv). In what is his main argument, he claims, *à la* George Orwell (1990), that the foundation of this hateful regime is mind control. Eastern European totalitarianism, he asserts, imposes a “rule,” a “mastery,” “over the mind” (161, 191, 197). And it does so by enforcing a “total rationalism” on human thinking (215). Miłosz has in mind a specific kind of rationalism—that of communist ideology. He calls that ideology “the New Faith” and “Diamat”—the latter being a shorthand for “the revision” of Marx’s “dialectical materialism ... by Lenin and Stalin” (xii-xiii, 52). “Diamat” is Leninism and Stalinism.

Miłosz insists that Diamat is, indeed, a “total”—a totalitarian—kind of rationalism. It is a logically consistent system of ideas that imposes itself aggressively on human beings and their world. It seeks to explain society and human life exclusively according to its precepts (48, 219-220). It also interprets the historical evolution of humanity mechanically, rigidly in line with its doctrinaire philosophy of history (201). And it forcefully ideologizes intellectual inquiry and art (49). Thus, it locks up human thinking in the prison of its dogma. The mind is forced to work, and to perceive humans, their past, and their present reality, only through the ideology. This is the “captivity” of mind that titles Miłosz’s book.

In stressing this imprisonment, Miłosz implies that Eastern European totalitarianism abuses humans. That it twists them out of shape, distorting their rationality and suppressing any non-rational dimensions of being human. Thus, Miłosz’s thinking on Eastern Europe’s “captive mind” is related to the philosophical problem of human nature. In fact, this problem, as scholars have observed, is an important theme in Miłosz’s oeuvre. The work of Aleksander Fiut is the prime case in point (Fiut 1987, 1990). Noting its “anthropocentric” character, Fiut has argued that Miłosz’s poetry “persuades us—in spite of numerous doubts and reservations ... —to believe in the existence of an undiminished element in human nature” (Fiut 1987, 65, 67). In other words, in his poetry Miłosz implies—posits, hesitatingly—the actuality of a human nature.

This is precisely what happens in *The Captive Mind* as well. Admittedly, the book is not a treatise on human nature; it does not develop a systematic theory thereof. But Miłosz does identify aspects of being human that, for him, undoubtedly *exist*. As we will see, he hesitates in ascribing them to human nature unequivocally; he is not absolutely sure whether they stem from nature, or nurture. Yet, as he understands them, the traits that he sees as elements of being human are all too real; he postulates their existence. In this sense, he articulates a conception of what could be called “immanent humanity.”

In his analysis of Eastern Europe, Miłosz discovers, and acknowledges, that political tyranny and immanent humanity synchronize in some ways. And he explores how they do so. Yet, simultaneously, he insists that tyranny deforms immanent humanity. His text, however, belies this insistence. Inadvertently, it shows that totalitarianism and human nature harmonize far more strongly than Miłosz thinks. To my knowledge, scholars have not noticed, let alone explored, this inadvertent harmony. And this harmony is, indeed, momentous: it subverts the main goal of Miłosz’s book—to analyze the *modus operandi* of Eastern Europe’s “captive mind.” In what follows, I explore this subversion. But before I do that, let us first examine Miłosz’s discovery that tyranny and immanent humanity sync.

In Sync: Harmony between Tyranny and Human Nature

At the very outset of his book, Miłosz rejects the myth that the political tyranny over 1950s Eastern Europe rests on terrorized obedience. This notion, he notes, is common in the West; but, it “is wrong” (Miłosz 2001, 6). “There is,” he declares, “an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction” (6). This is the human, all too human, wish for what Western philosophy has for centuries dreamt of as “the good life”—a wish for individual and social bliss. Eastern European totalitarianism, Miłosz proffers, aligns with, and satisfies, precisely that impulse in important ways (6). Thus, for him, “the nature of humankind” actually feeds that totalitarianism (6, 22-23).

Focusing on Eastern European intellectuals, Miłosz explores how this harmony transpires among them (6-7). He divides his peers in two classes (6-7). The first consists of true believers in Diamat—for whom the ideology is *the* path to “the good life.” Miłosz confesses that he actually admires such people. In their case, the tyranny of Diamat is no tyranny at all; it satisfies directly their impulse for “harmony and happiness” (6-7). The second class are half-hearted believers. They do not embrace Diamat sincerely, and with all of their heart and mind; for them, acceptance of Diamat is a tolerable arrangement, an okay deal. Miłosz calls them “intellectuals who *adapt* themselves” (7). To him, these chameleons merit little respect (7).

Still, Miłosz profiles their chameleonic subjectivity. One key factor that spawns it, he claims, is “social usefulness” (9). In days of yore, he reasons, religion served as a cement of society, providing a common set of ideas for all of its members, thereby bringing their thinking together. In Miłosz’s secular present, Diamat has taken on the function of a social glue. Intellectuals, the luminaries of society, feel connected to it—through Diamat. They are not social outsiders; they have a role to play in society, and even to become its leaders—as Diamat’s prophets (7-9). As Miłosz sees it, this prospect of their social utility, and even prominence, converts Eastern European intellectuals to Diamat.

In Prison: Tyranny’s Deformation of Human Nature

While satisfying human traits, Stalinist totalitarianism, Miłosz claims, also deforms them. The human mind, he thinks, has a *non*-rational dimension—and one that totalitarianism seeks to crush. Miłosz identifies what he takes to be the main aspects of that dimension. Thus, he notes that humans have what he calls “spiritual needs” (40). And that Eastern Europe’s tyranny “is incapable of satisfying” them (40). Chief among them is a wish for new, worthwhile “cultural values”—non-Diamat values, ones promising a better future (40). In Diamatized Eastern Europe, claims Miłosz, these values simply don’t exist (40).

Apropos of culture, another aspect of non-rationality for Miłosz is what he calls our “aesthetic needs” (68). These include a “need of ... harmonious forms”—a desire for beauty (68). They also include a “hunger for *strangeness*” (67). And they consist, too, of a yearning for “mystery”—for a chance of experiencing something “unexpected”—a surprise (66). Eastern European totalitarianism, Miłosz stresses, has declared war on these impulses. Coldness stamps the architectural demeanor of its cities; the closure of small businesses, now seen as germs of capitalism, stamps out the once-picturesque hustle and bustle of everyday urban life. Austere and uniform clothing gives people a standardized look. Conformist behavior, down to body language, transforms them into automatons. Beauty, “strangeness,” surprise, are killed in Eastern Europe. Boredom reigns (65-67).

This Reign of Boredom also victimizes art. The official doctrine of art, explains Miłosz, is “socialist realism.” For him, socialist realism is a devilish dogma. It “is not ... merely an esthetic theory,” he writes, but “involves ... the whole Leninist-Stalinist doctrine.

... In the field of literature it forbids what has in every age been the writer's essential task—to look at the world from his own independent viewpoint, to tell the truth as he sees it, and so to keep watch and ward in the interest of society as a whole" (xiii-xiv). Socialist realism is highly detrimental to art, as it demands a thoroughly ideological art, one that murders truth. By enforcing it, Eastern European totalitarianism stifles the aesthetic urges of its subjects.

Significantly, in his analysis of this deformation of humans, Miłosz refrains from affirming that our aesthetic impulses are natural. He stops short of ascribing them to human nature. He suggests that they *might be* natural, but he does not claim unequivocally that they *are*. Reflecting on them, he poses a rhetorical question, which he leaves unanswered: "How can one still the thought," he exclaims, "that aesthetic experiences arise out of something organic" (69)?

Besides aestheticism, another side of the non-rational mind, as Miłosz conceives it, is emotionality. Humans, he thinks, have a "rich" "emotional life" (201, 205). Foisting itself upon the human mind, he claims, the extreme rationalism of Eastern Europe's political tyranny represses that life severely. Yet, it cannot stifle the human emotions out of existence. Though badly mutilated, they survive. In fact, they metamorphose into inner, emotional "resistance" to the tyranny, into a "terrible hatred" against it (201, 205).

For Miłosz, the most important part of humans' "emotional life" is our "religious needs" (205, 206). Once again, Miłosz is not sure whether human religiosity is natural or nurtured; as with aesthetics, he hesitates (206-207). But he is sure that it is all too real. "... [I]t matters little," he asserts, "whether religious drives result from 'human nature' or from centuries of conditioning; they exist" (207). Militantly atheistic, Eastern European totalitarianism is their open enemy.

Strange Sync: Tyranny's Inadvertent Harmony with Human Nature

While claiming that Eastern European totalitarianism abuses the human mind, Miłosz's book also shows that that mind harmonizes with that tyranny far more than he realizes. Let us now look at this inadvertent puzzle.

The puzzle appears significantly in relation to human emotionality. For Miłosz, as we just noted, our "religious needs" are its core; driven by a militant atheism, the tyranny of Diamat wars against them. Yet, it does not simply extirpate them; it also tries to satisfy them, at least partially. Miłosz calls Diamat a "New Faith"—an entire, new, surrogate religion. Its tyranny has invented "a new institution[—]the 'club'" (197). Born in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the club was a cultural-political organization, of various sizes, whose purpose was to promote socialist culture, to serve as a venue for leisure activities, and to provide political education into socialist ideology (Bokov 2017; Siegelbaum 1999; Tsiupursky 2016). This establishment, notes Miłosz, is ubiquitous in the Eastern Bloc. Significantly, it works as a kind of religious temple, bewitching people into embracing the values and ideas of the New Faith (Miłosz 2001, 197-199). "On its walls," writes Miłosz, "hang portraits of Party leaders draped with red bunting. Every few days, meetings following pre-arranged agendas take place, meetings that are as potent as religious rites. ... [These] [c]ollective religious ceremonies induce a state of belief [in the New Faith]" (198). More generally, the totalitarianism of the Eastern Bloc mobilizes education, the mass media, the whole culture of the Bloc, to convert its subjects to Diamat (197-199, 207-208). In effect, observes Miłosz, it has come to resemble a new species of "church" (207). As such, implies Miłosz inadvertently, it meets, at least partway, the immanent religiosity of human beings.

No less surprisingly, Stalinist tyranny also meets partway humans' immanent aestheticism. Miłosz's ostensible claim is that it kills that aestheticism. His text, however, belies this claim. It aligns the two. Thus, it synchronizes Eastern European totalitarianism with our desire for "mystery." Despite his great stress on its rationalism, Miłosz represents the

Eastern Bloc as mysterious. “Mystery,” he observes, “shrouds the political moves determined on high in the distant Center, Moscow” (16). The government of the Soviet Union resembles a secretive, ghostly, sorcerous control center manipulating the entire Eastern Bloc. Mystery also inheres in the Bloc’s ruling ideology. Diamat, writes Miłosz, “is mysterious; no one understands it completely—but that merely enhances its magic power. Its elasticity, as exploited by the Russians, who do not possess the virtue of moderation, can result at times in the most painful edicts” (51). Not comprehended and expounded fully, Diamat allows interpretation, misinterpretation, and manipulation. In Miłosz’s Russophobic words, it is an enigma. Curiously, Miłosz himself acknowledges in his words that this enigma is a source of Diamat’s power of attraction. In describing the Soviet government and Diamat in this way, he mystifies them. By doing so, he aligns them with his conception of immanent humanity. In his text, even though he does not acknowledge it, there is not too much mystery in Diamat’s appeal: the ideology corresponds to humans’ bent for “mystery.”

Even further, the Diamat tyranny corresponds to another human aesthetic impulse: our craving for “strangeness.” This affinity is also striking, given Miłosz’s strong stress on the aggressive dullness of the Eastern Bloc. But, contradicting that emphasis, he also stresses that the Bloc’s realm of tyrannical boredom is exceedingly strange. Indeed, for him, it is downright weird. Describing it, he writes: “The inhabitants of Western countries little realize that millions of their fellow-men, who seem superficially more or less similar to them, live in a world as fantastic as that of the men from Mars” (78). Here, Miłosz is mocking the Eastern Bloc. For him, it is truly an alien universe. In fact, he stresses this weirdness dramatically by foregrounding it in the very preface of his book. There, he confesses:

If I have been able to write this book, it is because the system invented by Moscow has seemed, and still seems to me infinitely strange. Any civilization, if one looks at it with an assumption of naive simplicity (as Swift looked at the England of his day), will present a number of bizarre features which men accept as perfectly natural because they are familiar. But nowhere is this so marked as in the new civilization of the East, which moulds the lives of eight hundred millions of human beings. (xv)

Miłosz, then, approaches the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as an absurd universe. For him, they come straight out of Kafka. By seeing them in this way, however, he also harmonizes them with what he sees as immanent human aestheticism. Indeed, if the impulse to “strangeness” does belong to human nature, then Miłosz’s claim that the victims of Eastern European tyranny “accept [it] as perfectly natural because they are familiar” with it, makes little sense. On his understanding of human nature, they should accept it not because of its familiarity, but because of its absurdity. What is more, on that understanding, Stalinist totalitarianism should be appealing, naturally, to outsiders—including Miłosz himself. Thus, how he finds it hateful, rather than attractive, appears itself rather bizarre.

Conclusion: Understanding Political Tyranny

Setting out to explore the Stalinist political tyranny enthralled Cold-War Eastern Europe, Miłosz shows, inadvertently, that that tyranny actually aligns with his understanding of human nature. By implying that it corresponds to key traits of “immanent humanity,” he naturalizes that tyranny. This paradox has important implications regarding understanding the character and history of political tyranny. In *The Captive Mind*, as this paper has suggested, essentialized “immanent humanity” obstructs Miłosz’s analysis of tyranny. Thus: postulating a putative human nature—essentializing being human—is a possible impediment to understanding the historical pathology of political tyranny.

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