



Open Societies versus Digital Autocratic Experiments



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Introduction

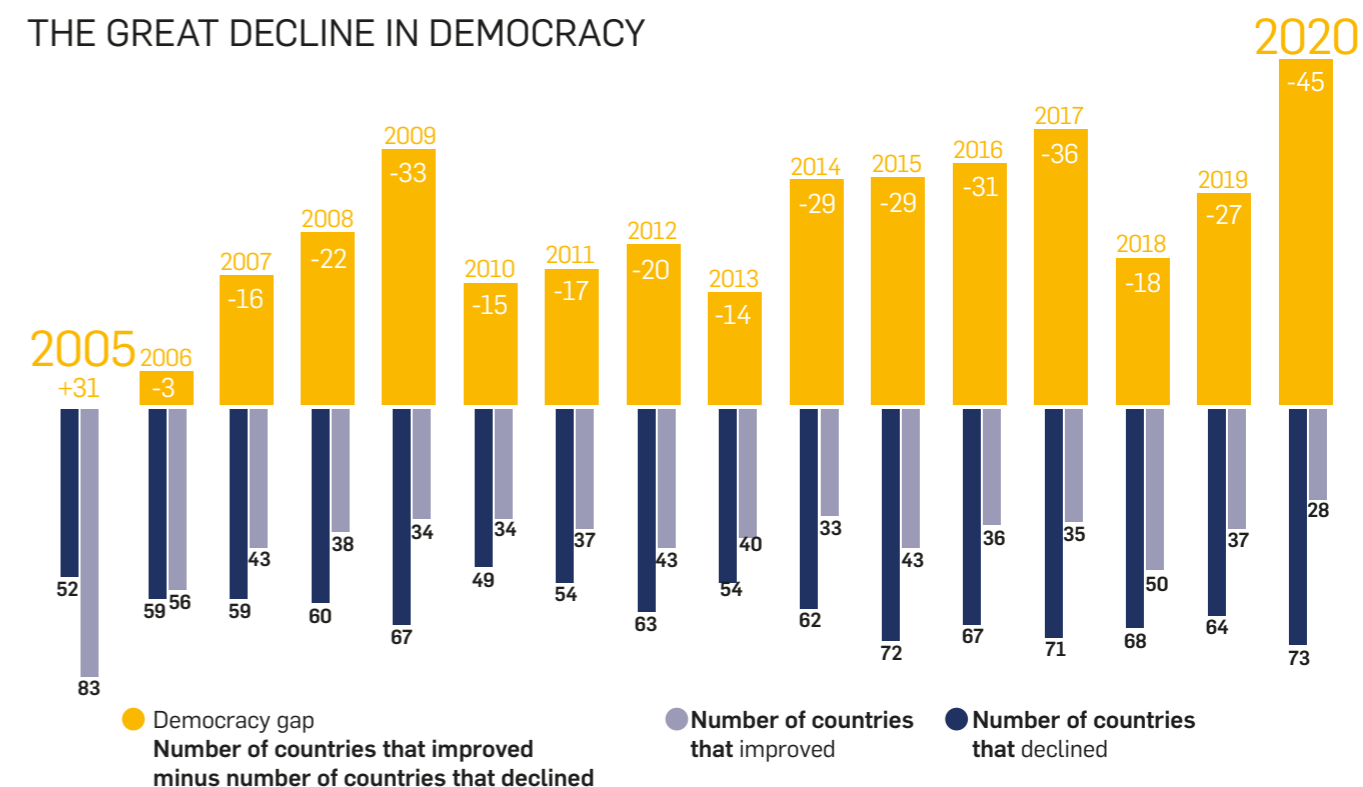
Considering the course of events over the past decade, it is obvious that Western democracies, sometimes also called the “free world,” are facing fundamental challenges. Far from liberal democracy marking the “end of history,” this system of governance is coming to be replaced by alternatives, primarily autocracies. This transformation is occurring hand in hand with increasing global challenges such as global warming, asymmetric wars, unprecedented inequality, forced migration, pandemics, the unknown impacts of automation on the traditional labor force, etc. In their book titled *That Used To Be Us*, Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum 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?” In other words, what is the right political agenda for the 21st

century? Should there be more “open societies” or more autocracies?

Freedom House stated that over the last 14 years, 64 countries have experienced a decline in their ratings regarding human rights, fair elections, rights of minorities, and the rule of law, and only 37 countries have experienced a net improvement with respect to these aspects. Considering the world population, 39 percent live in free countries and territories, 25 percent live in partly free countries and territories, and 36 percent live in countries and territories that are not free. If we attribute half of the population living under partly free political conditions to the free regions

and countries, and the other half to those that are not free, respectively, it can be said that, although approximately 50 percent of the world population lives in free countries and regions, the remaining 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. Regarding the percentage of the world that was free, 2020 received the lowest ranking in more than 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.” The following graph illustrates this: >>

THE GREAT DECLINE IN DEMOCRACY



Source: Freedom House, 2021 Annual Report



In open societies, the state legitimizes itself by enabling, safeguarding, and balancing the often conflicting forms of individual freedom and responsibility of each of its members.

Problem-solving in the Anthropocene era

Currently, these autocratic experiments enjoy significant support — not only within prominent autocratic countries, but also within the Western “free world.” In some countries, support for an autocratic agenda is even higher than support for the “free world.” Much has been written about this shift in acceptance of autocracies on the one hand, and their lack of legitimacy on the other, but one of the main reasons for this hype about autocracies is the fact that its advocates believe that the system of autocracy is capable of solving problems such as poverty, unemployment, global warming, inequality, corruption, and loss of biodiversity in a better manner as compared to open societies. Finding solutions to the abovementioned issues is a high priority for all humanity, and it appears that autocracies are able to do a better job in curbing these issues. Empirically speaking, the autocratic system has its attractions: fast political decision-making, a rapid rollout of solutions, and streamlined scaling of the economy. However, after examining the autocracy system more closely, it is observed that there are self-limiting factors built into the autocracy itself. The question arises as to which of the two contrasting alternatives has a relative competitive advantage to cope with the upcoming challenges of the Age of the Anthropocene, which is characterized by the limits set by planetary boundaries, spillovers, and all-time interconnectedness. In this era, the human species has taken the driver’s seat, not only in determining the course of the planet — leading to global warming, reduction of biodiversity, pandemics, etc. — but also by offering ways of life for humans in large coordinated societies and for meeting human socioeconomic needs. This an

era in which there is no real exit option, plan B, or restart button. To summarize, of the two systems discussed — open societies and autocracies — which of them is doing a better job in solving global challenges?

The 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 Popper (1945–2013) — are a conceptual response to the experiences of German fascism and Russian Stalinism, in which 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 well-being, economic welfare, and peace, but also superior tools for solving problems and pursuing truth and coherence in both science and religion. In open societies, the state legitimizes itself by enabling, safeguarding, and balancing the often conflicting forms of individual freedom and responsibility of each of its members.

Although historically the concept of an open society has been a contribution of the West, it is a political agenda that can be applied to any country in the world. In an open society, individuals engage in a critical, open, fearless, and public dialogue to solve problems. Each member of such 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. They are also aware that this search for personal freedom will potentially enable greater creativity, happiness, wealth, health, and truth than any alternative. The open so-

ciety is built upon pluralism, reciprocal respect, and humility, in the awareness 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 facilitate a better understanding of life’s miracles and magic; and an education system that unleashes the creativity of each and every individual. Open societies install checks and balances that prevent the abuse of power. In open societies, the prices of goods and services are generated in a free, fair, and regulated market system with product liabilities and entrepreneur responsibility, without hiding the truth about the social and ecological externalities. Moreover, they are societies in which a social security system is operational, that is, nobody is left behind, minorities’ rights are respected, and the votes of the majority are accepted. Open societies formulate — and if need arises, implement — laws to replace elected political officials if they fail to perform their duties. Open societies protect human rights and are built upon the conviction that the coexistence of other opinions, the creativity of individuals, and the institutionalized forms of criticism guarantee a life with overall greater levels of personal freedom, truth, and wealth.

This ideal concept of the Western world enjoyed broad reception in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. A further significant influence on the narrative of political debates in the West has been the convergence hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that free trade with autocratic regimes organically leads to a global convergence of the rule of law, the protection of minorities, the separation of powers, human rights, and

free markets. Therefore, according to this hypothesis, this Western value system is ultimately being implemented worldwide, making open societies themselves more stable and secure. This narrative even justifies the deployment of the military in humanitarian interventions (R2P: Responsibility to Protect). However, it seems that this form of expansive liberalism 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 toward an open society still needs more time. However, it has been demonstrated with evidence that these were not missteps — autocratic regimes simply followed a different narrative. For example, in 1989,

the fall of the Berlin Wall was used as a symbol in the West to proclaim the end of communism. Regarding China, 1989 was the year of the suppression of the popular uprising in Tiananmen Square, which signaled the strength rather than the demise of communism.

However, open societies’ understanding of democracy and human rights is subject to Western sovereignty with its claim to universal validity. If you visit a country with a high rate of poverty, illiteracy, and hunger, you may conclude that it is worth fighting for universal human rights. However, at the same time, you may acknowledge that there can be a temporal prioritization and geographical weighting of different values. Thus, the aims of overcoming poverty and hunger, providing housing for every indi- >>





on the nation's security, stability, and economic welfare, which outweigh the need for the political participation of citizens, individual freedom, and human rights in the traditional Western sense. All types of autocracies have the population's approval for the ruler's decisions, which is higher than that in most, if not all, 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 that determine the political agenda.

Consider the example of China. In Chinese culture, successfully copying the master is considered a special learning achievement. The more flawlessly this process is accomplished, the greater is

the person's learning curve and their reputation in society. This "copy and paste" culture means that the person who succeeds in imitating their superiors enjoys a head start because they can avoid the entire burden of imagination, invention and production, trial and error, and failure, and can instead concentrate completely on the imitation process. Additionally, the autocracy in China is impressive in its magnitude and the speed with which decisions are sometimes implemented. The reductions in the rates of poverty, the growth of the middle class, rising enrollment in education institutions, increased productivity, and the overall increase in life expectancy in China seem to demonstrate the superiority of the autocratic system as compared to the clumsy decision-making in open societies. The same seems to be true for other autocracies that we are currently witnessing in Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

However, at the same time, a number of other cultural achievements are lost or never attempted in the first place, and critical debate, error-friendliness, public discourse, individual judgment, and autonomous thinking are characteristics that can only flourish in an open society. Autocracies must rely on copying and imitation strategies because the original results of critical judgment are not available firsthand. It is generally assumed that, because we are living in an uncertain and complex world, we need more critical thinking and less copying, more independent thought than imitation, and more freedom and critical autonomy than control and domination. The autocratic

vidual, and ensuring universal access to basic education and health facilities will quickly take precedence over ascertaining the rights of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and geographical mobility across national borders. The people living in open societies in Europe, the United States, and other Western countries need to admit to themselves that there may be societies that have other priorities and preferences. For example, there are societies in which its members might not think it is highly important that everyone has freedom of expression, but whose concern is instead that their children will no longer starve, will go to school, and have access to potable water.

The autocratic system and its constraints

Whereas in open societies, we witness shared, balanced, and controlled forms of political power, autocratic regimes rely on reduced or no constitutional constraints to their political power, which is exerted by the chosen 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), which emphasize the ruling individual — often described as a benevolent autocrat — 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. The common trait among all these types of autocracies is a focus

ruler must rely on knowledge and information that is only accessible to them through critical judgment. They pretend to possess knowledge that they are not able to generate from within. Instead, it needs to come from other sources. For example, considering basic research, the low number of patents and publications in countries and territories under autocratic rule support this argument. For example, most researchers working in China have been educated in open societies and represent a hidden import of Western values and standards into autocracies. They play the role of game changers in autocracies from within by making them more open (while sending their kids to Swiss high schools).

Cannibalizing, parasitic, and self-limiting factors of autocracies

My argument is that the autocracies currently in operation all over the world are flourishing on the basis of preconditions they did not generate themselves. These autocracies are self-limiting and cannibalizing, demonstrating that they will end sooner rather than later, as they are dependent on knowledge that originally came from the free world.

The aspects of price allocation in free competitive markets; a rigorous debate on facts in an interdisciplinary scientific discourse; free public speech; a free, critical, and investigative press; a creative and pluralistic cultural scene; and the building of social capital based on interpersonally generated trust and reciprocal tolerance — they all draw on a human- and person-centered approach and are superior to any attempt to regulate society through a collective, non-democratic, top-down process. Lifelong political leadership or wielding political power for decades without the

possibility of being replaced by an elected representative is not a sign of power, but of the weakness of the system in question. This shows that this system has abandoned a public and critical debate to impose and implement its will.

The multiple critical feedback loops that maintain balance in an open society and provide sufficient flexibility to respond to asymmetric shocks (such as global warming or pandemics), which themselves require decentralized, uncensored information, are poorly developed in autocracies. It must be noted that the censorship imposed by autocracies does not facilitate 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 an in-group/out-group scenario of those who follow the ruler's mandate and those who rebel against it. Autocracies are places where films and media, publishing houses and Wikipedia, curricula for schools and universities, and even history is censored, resulting in citizens who have no memory and humans who have no critical mind. In this case, censorship is exclusive and moralizing.

In autocracies, 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 charted themselves but which in reality relies on the quest for truth that is generated elsewhere, namely in open societies. 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 as well as for the corporate world. This is also true for individuals, small and large groups >>

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and entities, and large institutional bodies. Political clan structures, in which family members of the original ruler of the autocracy are chosen to rule the country or the territory without any kind of external auditing, signify that the innovation and creativity of the best and brightest people are never developed, and that the lack of involvement of a critical third sector leads to systemic corruption. Further examples demonstrate that a critical mind is superior to a mind that is subjected to mechanisms of collective control.

Open societies, in contrast, are driven by a dynamic and decentralized process led by critical and freethinking individuals who are prepared to fail and 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 their own doubts, uncertainties, and incomplete knowledge, in day-to-day decision-making in the private sphere, and in setting political agendas.

Despite the acceptance of autocracies by the respective populations due to their economic and political power and sheer magnitude, autocracies are built on at least two forms of illusions, which lead to these autocracies being self-limiting, parasitic, and cannibalizing: *the illusion of control* and *the illusion of knowledge and wisdom*. Both of these illusions lead to the false assumption that the political control of autocracies and the power they exert over the dissemination of knowledge enable them to manage the challenges of the 21st century, making them 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, the unchecked application of artificial intelligence, social credit systems, large-scale state interventions and regulatory efforts, a closed internet, and public video surveillance are examples of how autocracies claim 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 challenges in the near future. 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 as compared to open societies 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. However, this autocratic knowledge is an illusion, because these regimes rely on the information and knowledge generated in open societies, which is then misused and instrumentalized for the purposes of autocratic systems. The knowledge, wisdom, and information acquired by individuals in open societies to solve problems are superior to the knowledge, wisdom, and information generated firsthand in autocracies. A one-party system is unable to generate wisdom in the way open societies do so, that is, 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 the program to be corrected. In an autocratic system, the only

reliable source of information that the political apparatus has is its own political party programs. Contrastingly, an open society 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 correcting the errors in the program. In open societies, there is more than just one voice. These multiple voices guarantee progress, determine solutions to problems, and lead to the path of collective 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 — it cannot be assumed that such a system is ready to cope with the global challenges of the 21st century. No party program, no military regime, and no ideology whatsoever can 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.

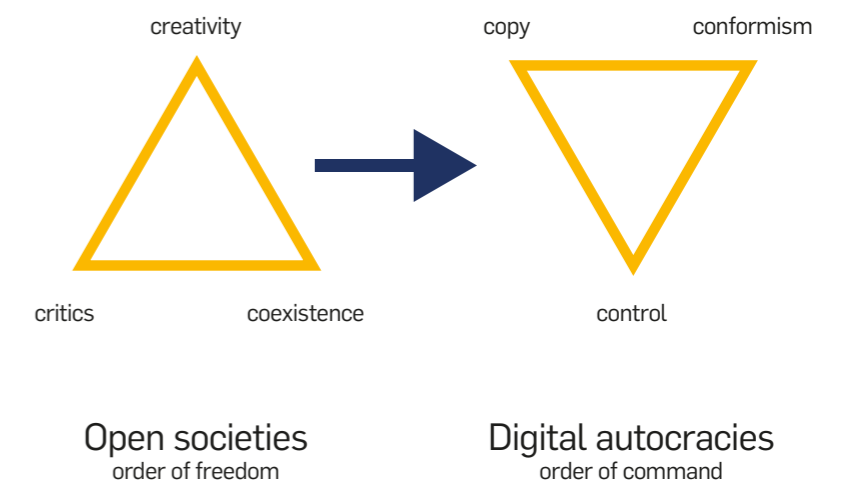
This argument can be taken one step further. Autocracies function only because they are able to fall back on achievements they have not guaranteed or generated themselves in the first place; they lack *the endogenous factor for critical self-correction*, which is key for the development of knowledge in open societies. On the other hand, open societies accept the opinions of right- and left-wing populists, while also considering the aspects of closed homogeneous ethnic habitats, knowing that nobody is 100 percent 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. If this test fails, a position will be proven false and disqualified within the open society. In this sense, autocratic systems are parasitic and self-limiting. The importance of their political influence is abolished as soon as they are confronted with all the cultural achievements that are characteristic of open societies: individual criticism, creativity, and the coexistence of heterogeneous ethnic and socioeconomic groups. In autocracies, basic research takes place, patents are filed, prices are created in markets, and journalists do their work. Thus, such operations are already unacknowledged islands of “open social relations” within an autocratic dystopia. The following graph illustrates the findings:

Conclusion

Illiberal democracies, controlled democracies, and one-party democracies — all of which can be considered as autocratic regimes in one sense or another — are not identical to the understanding of democracy and the rule of law in open societies in the West, even if they bear a similar name. These autocratic regimes represent a historical experiment that was highly promising but soon started showing its negative consequences. Although this experiment may sound great at first, it is a regressive response to the challenges of the 21st century. Contrastingly, open societies thrive on the idea of a liberal order based on a human-centered approach. They are not driven by the leftist narratives’ notion of a >>

OPEN SOCIETIES VERSUS DIGITAL AUTOCRACIES: WHY AUTOCRACIES ARE PARASITIC, CANNIBALIZING, AND SELF-LIMITING



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forced equality, nor by an exclusionary ethnic identity of right-wing narratives. Both these narratives — if they assume an authoritarian character — depend on the illusions of being able to control societies and their citizens and of possessing information, knowledge, and insight about processes that do not belong to them. The free movement of goods, basic R&D activities, critical press reporting, and the unleashing of human creativity presupposes an order of freedom and is only really created in open societies. Anyone who refuses to understand this relationship between liberal democracy and progress will not survive the challenges of the 21st century. If the world was made up solely of autocratic systems, we would have neither real scientific progress nor objective and critical news, nor maximum creativity and cultural diversity.

Thus, it boils down to the question of *governance through control, conformism, and copying* versus *governance through criticism, the coexistence of heterogeneity, and creativity*. The course of history will show which model proves more successful in coping with the challenges of the 21st century. The existing evidence suggests that autocratic systems are second-best to open societies in dealing with the problems of the 21st century. Although it is true that open societies appear to be more fragile on the outside, they demonstrate greater internal robustness due to autonomous and self-critical individuals. They appear 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 autocracies — both in terms of geography

and time — will fall short or prove to be a nonstarter. They remain parasitic as they depend on open societies, cannibalizing themselves as they have to import relevant information generated only in open societies, consequently remaining self-limiting in nature.

Despite the 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, and greater health 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 or misguidance regarding a human-centered approach. However, any time 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 possible because they are more critical. They are able to mobilize their own self-healing powers in ways that are not available to autocracies. Thus, open societies do not need an agenda for world peace or global governance, but simply have to demonstrate their attractiveness through their own exemplary character.

There is a need to admit that autocracies do not automatically become open societies with their inherent canon of values through the mere presence of open societies. Rather, it is the other way round: Autocracies need open societies in order to make themselves more stable by usurping the knowledge and discus-

sions of open societies to consolidate their own power.

As long as the free world does not mimic and copy these autocracies, we will come out of this historical phase ahead. This rising influence of autocracies will once again demonstrate that there is never an end of history or an end of ideology, but that the free world faces ongoing challenges that may never end. However, in the meantime, we must admit that we need both systems by considering the current status of the world. Open societies have generated sufficient knowledge and wisdom through public debates, a free

investigative press, uncontrolled creativity, price signals in a free market system, uncensored information, and rigorous scientific discourse in social and basic science, all based on a person-centered approach; consequently, autocracies use these cultural achievements to roll out and scale-up solutions to major challenges in their own countries (e.g., global warming, eradicating poverty, etc.).

Subsequently, the clash between open societies and autocracies will lead to the development of a non-hegemonic era, in which asymmetric and reciprocal interdependency predominate, rather than

another era of imperialism, in which each proponent is convinced that their worldviews 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 have got the wrong species and the wrong time.” ■

Extended and updated version of the Cadmus article (Brunnhuber, 2021)

