

Political Pathologies

by

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Minogue may be counted along the many political scientists who shy from systematic use of psychological explanation. That hesitancy was sound when Freudian and Jungian theory was the only thing on offer. But in the past two decades the brain and behavioral sciences have quite literally placed the mammalian psyche under the microscope, The time is ripe to apply the penetrating new discoveries to politics.

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Review of Kenneth Minogue, Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology.

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At the graveside Engels eulogized Marx as the Darwin of social science and liberator of millions of proletarians who mourned his passing. This tragic eloquence was yet another fig leaf fashioned by the faithful disciple to cover the master's embarrassments. None of those millions turned up at the funeral, for they had not heard of Marx. Those who had--the activists of the International--shunned the occasion because they detested his arrogant intolerance. Revolutionary politics had in any case been superceded by the entry of working class parties into parliamentary contest. Marx' magnum opus was unfinished and unread by an intelligensia that identified Spencer and Comte as the great thinkers of the century. In a word, Marx died in obscurity, a failure even in his own eyes.

His posthumous rehabilitation as a knowledge hero is undoubtedly due to Lenin's establishment of a Marxist regime. Since then Marxist politics has proved to be the outstanding growth industry of modern times. Marxist ideology enjoys a vigorous market position in capitalist nations despite

the refutation of its doctrine by the practice of Marxist regimes. What then is the appeal? What does the ideologue effectively believe?

Kenneth Minogue, professor of political science at the London School of Economics, offers an assessment in Alien Powers. Those inclined to suspect that the appeal of popular doctrine must reduce to a few fundamentals will be gratified by his distillation of ideology to a hard core of belief, namely, that the world is an engine of oppression. Pure ideological theory is comprised by the minimal subsidiary doctrines that interpret key features of the world in terms of the core belief. These sets of doctrines vary according to the species of ideology, e.g., Comtean positivism, anarchism, feminism, etc. Marxism occupies the central position in Minogue's examination owing to its prestige, but also because he deems it to be the purest of pure theories.

The author wastes little time or footnote space discussing the bulky literature dealing with his theme. Convinced that he has something new to say, he simply gets on with it. His methodological home base is not comparative political analysis or political psychology, although on occasion he has recourse to them. The method is argument analysis in the temper of contemporary British philosophy. This approach is exposed to a difficulty. Argument analysis assumes that the structure of doctrine is comprised essentially by factual reference and logical consequence. Marx's self-location in a rationalist tradition appears to sanction some such approach. Yet ideology, we learn, isn't scientific because its body of "knowledge" is taken on trust as "revealed" or self-evident truth immune to disproof or refutation; hence, no examination of an ideology composed from a perspective other than sectarian conviction can persuade believers. In the case of Marxism, academic analysis is rejected in advance as apologetics for the status quo.

Minogue does not attempt to deal with this difficulty straight away. He comes at obliquely in a chapter meant to distinguish ideology from the academic search for knowledge. We are apprised of the distinctly interesting circumstance that "the real situation is that our civilization is split by civil war" (N01). The warring ideologues and academics do not operate with the same criteria of rationality and consequently cannot rationally communicate with each other. The author is to be thanked for this unusual candor. It does set one wondering, though, whether any logical tool kit, however sophisticated, furnishes an apparatus adequate for describing the irrational object of his study. Moreover, eavesdropping ideologues may fairly demand that he state the criteria of rationality to which the academics in his scenario adhere. The author does not satisfy these demands. Readers must accordingly work out his probable position for themselves.

My impression is that Minogue operates with a roughly Popperian notion of rationality, with emphasis on hypothetical procedure and exposure of theory and evidence to frequent test. As for ideology, he appears to derive it historically, as a candidate social science emerging in the nineteenth century. As such it embodied, or attempted to embody, many of the values of science. But ideology is irremediably non-science because it seizes the entire domain of "the social"--institutions, behavior, history--with a global explanation which may not be discarded because it orients action. Theory is thus swallowed by the practical demand for fanatical certainty. In science, by contrast, global theories have no place. Instead there is a variety of theories describing laws of different phenomena. Confidence in theories increases when the theories of neighboring phenomena are consistent with each other and with the evidence. Theories are essentially disposable artifacts of reason

whereas ideology is dogma. Dogma generates scholasticism based on the valorized texts containing the initial global revelation.

These appear to be the assumptions controlling Minogue's examination of ideology as the specious cognitive component of an action program. The outcome is a manual of sophistic and rhetorical tropes characterizing the structure of ideological argument, in much the way that analytic philosophers anatomized the philosophical classics; for it is Minogue's opinion that ideology is a "kind of philosophy"--"metaphysics" (83). The effectiveness of analysis depends on the midwifery skill of the therapist, who must be gentle enough to disarm suspicion, but firm enough to expel the cant. Minogue is very adroit. Derelict misreasonings are brought on stage and given enough voice to arouse misgivings; then the plug is pulled by a telling bon mot or dead-pan sarcasm. Thus he commends "bold and splendid formulations that defy evidence"; displays the ideologue's "greed for rhetorical advantage"; likens academic Marxism to a corporate giant manufacturing its own line of components for each discipline; notes in this connection the drive to monopoly and its attendant decline in product quality; dissects sundry "alchemies" that transform human achievement into mindless automatism; identifies "metaphysical fauna" in the ideological animal kingdom; classifies the endless repetition of the word "social" as a "prose totem"; and prominently displays the adolescent bombast of the ideologue's Kung Fu language of discovery--unmasking pretense, penetrating smokescreens, finding hidden essences, revealing quintessential natures.

This is a performance, and one whose modulated expression nicely contrasts with ideological vulgarity. No doubt Minogue's essay will make its way into the armories of those engaging the barbarians. But it is a tactical weapon lacking strategic capabilities. A glance at the career of analytic philosophy tells why. Its conquest of philosophy

departments was a victory without substance, since the dominant scientific culture had already written off philosophy as an obsolete activity. The redefinition of its task as logical clarification of thought salvaged a scrap of dignity for twilight pursuits in service to enlightenment. But fine-spun verbalizing proved to be a bond too weak to chain the metaphysical hydra, which today commands numerous battalions in academe. The beast can be captured only in the net of empirical knowledge. I'll try to show this by examining Minogue's assessment of the core ideological thought.

He considers the possibility that the notion that the world is an engine of oppression is not sui generis metaphysical. Clearly it resembles religious conceptions of the unredeemed world longing for salvation, nationalist notions of elect nation, and so on. Should such similarities be deemed to constitute a class cutting across philosophy, religion, and political myth, then inquiry must become empirical. But since his investigative apparatus is logical analysis, Minogue searches for a property to distinguish the metaphysical idea from religious or other simulacra. The nominated property is the claim to certainty, which Minogue declares comprises the "dynamic center" of ideology (39). Readers under the impression that certainty claims are made by mathematicians, prophets, and snake oil salesmen will not be satisfied that this highly variable psychological trait is distinctive of anything. They will accordingly wish to inspect the tests and procedures used to establish that the essence of ideology has been correctly characterized. The author is explicit on this point: "The only test of whether the essential character that I investigate is worth attending to is whether it generates a sufficiency of interesting implications and patterns" (40). This, one may confidently say, is a purely idiosyncratic test and therefore none at all. The career of analytic philosophy is the story of such non-tests and

begged questions, which is a contributing factor in its failure to subdue the hydra called metaphysics.

If Minogue honored in practice the Popperian rationality criteria that he appears to admire, his characterization of the ideological core would be empirical. The data requisite to that task have been assembled in abundance. James Billington's study of the revolutionary faith from Saint Just to Lenin establishes the intimate connection between ideology and religion. Numerous studies of millenarianism from the Albigensian heresy to Cromwell reinforce that point. Roland Stromberg's study of the response of intellectuals of all political stripes to World War I exhibits the same mental set where least expected. More surprising data still have been assembled by anthropologist Anthony Wallace, who described a pattern in what he calls "revitalization movements" of wholly independent cultural provenance. Cargo cults in New Guinea, messianic assemblies in Argentina, and faith healers among Amerindians all operate with the idea of total world decay.

Such evidence suggests that the core ideological idea belongs to the repertoire of basic human psychology. Recent investigations suggest more specifically that it expresses transient or neurotic depression; for experience of the world as alien and oppressive, as a vale of tears loaded with guilt, is diagnostic of depressive pathology. This syndrome may occur alone or with a manic state, in which case it is known as circular manic depression. In the manic state the world is experienced as exalted and triumphant, released from threat, bondage, and guilt.

The manic depressive diptych of sin and redemption is the core of all revitalization movements. Marx's oppressed world is the depressive panel of the diptych. A quotation on the dust jacket of Alien Powers nicely captures the thought. "In history up to the present," Marx wrote in The German Ideology, "individuals have become more and more enslaved under

a power alien to them . . . a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the world market." The world market is an abstraction quite beyond the capacity of ordinary people distinctly to conceive, let alone grasp in its causal consequences. The unintelligibility makes it a suitable vehicle for the delusion of universal evil.

The sinful world is purged by a cataclysmic redeeming event, revolution. Recent discoveries in political psychology provide the basis for an experimentally founded elucidation of the subjective experience of revolution as a manic state. First, the data. In the revolutionary tradition Billington documents, revolution has emphatically the character of apocalypse, that is, the unveiling, the revelation of things in their true character. Call it, then, a "knowledge event." But it is equally dramatic action whose scenario is the destruction of the hounds of hell. The logically meaningless doctrine that the "truth" of theory is practice refers to this unity, as does the Kung Fu heroics of ripping away masks and exploding disguises. Revolution is a knowledge melodrama because it sets the deceitful causes of suffering into the open, pronounces judgment, and exacts retribution. Its experiential basis is the moment of sublime insight or euphoric delusional world-knowledge characteristic of mania. Marx and his contemporaries were keen enthusiasts for this epistemological melodrama, which as Minogue correctly observes, happens to be the script of The Communist Manifesto. For purposes of comparison, consider a second script from 1848, by another theatrical mythologist, Richard Wagner: "The old world is crumbling, a new will arise therefrom; for the lofty goddess Revolution comes rustling on the wings of storm . . . her eye so stern, so punitive, so cold; and yet what warmth of purest love, what wealth of happiness streams forth toward him who dares to look with steadfast gaze into that eye! . . . I will destroy the existing order, which

parts one mankind into hostile nations, into powerful and weak, privileged and outcast, rich and poor; for it makes unhappy men of all. I will destroy the order that turns millions to slaves of a few, and these few to slaves of their own might, own riches." Wagner's metaphors, like the metaphors of The Communist Manifesto, profusely mingle opposites: life and death, peace and violence, grace and retribution. They express what neurologists call "mixed active ecstasis," the mixture being the simultaneous vigorous excitation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Behavioral manifestations in religious cults are self-mutilation, shaking, rolling, destructive rampages, sexual orgy, and ritual sacrifice. Such actions, performed or witnessed, are the apocalypse. Those who have observed "peace" demonstrations, or who have read of crowd exuberance around the guillotine, will know how infectious it can be.

This analysis is abundantly confirmed by Marx's subsidiary doctrines. The totality ingredient to depression controls the arrangement of all political, economic, and psychological explanation as so many paths leading to the center of the maze. Depressive totality also controls the negative valuation of property, class, the state, religion, the market, capital accumulation, competition, and industry. All these things are necessary to any complex civilization; the ideological system consigns them to destruction. Revolutionary ideology conceives this event, in millenarian fashion, as the irruption of the miraculous into the realm of sinful necessity; for the imminent divinity of revolutionary action suspends the law of causality to inaugurate a future that bears no resemblance to the past. This conception is essentially cargo cultism. Cargo cultists believe that cult rituals are causally productive of goods that derive from well known material causes. Marxism substitutes an imaginary cult agency, the proletariat, for another imaginary agency, the bourgeoisie. This substitution suspends the law of causality; for cultists believe that

cargo may thereby be obtained without the operation of the material causes that have been condemned as wicked. Familiarity with the real machinery of production does not disturb this faith. Papuan cultists who are shown manufacturing plants merely shrug the shoulders and declare that their way of obtaining the goods is better.

Minogue may be counted among the many political scientists who shy from systematic use of psychological explanation. That hesitancy was sound when Freudian and Jungian theory was the only thing on offer. But in the past two decades the brain and behavioral sciences have quite literally placed the mammalian psyche under the microscope. The time is ripe to apply the penetrating new discoveries to politics.

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