

The Ideological Revelation

Grant Morrison

Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology, by Kenneth Minogue, *New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. vi + 255 pp. \$27.50.*

THE CONCEPT OF IDEOLOGY has broadened considerably over time. Marx gave it a specific meaning: ideology was a set of ideas with which a dominant class popularized, and thereby masked, its own interests. A half-century ago Karl Mannheim put forward a "non evaluative" conception of ideology, according to which thought was always tied to the thinker's social situation. The word has since been used with increasing flexibility. Now in *Alien Powers*, the British political scientist Kenneth Minogue counters this trend. In an unusually thorough scrutiny of ideology, he uncovers its essential elements as he searches for the "pure theory" that lies at its core. It is an important book, argued with clarity and vigor.

Although Minogue is decidedly not a Marxist—Marxism and radical feminism are his favorite targets—he uses the concept of ideology more as Marx did, to expose and criticize modes of thought, than as Mannheim employed it in his sociology of knowledge. Minogue refers briefly to Mannheim, whose approach he considers insufficient, but curiously he does not mention the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Yet Geertz, who shared Mannheim's "non evaluative" conception but offered a more subtle cultural argument, has had as much influence as anyone in the past twenty years on the viewpoint toward ideology currently prevalent in academe, which is to regard it simply as any set of shared beliefs held by members of a society.

This is not Minogue's view. Ideology is not to be loosely defined as anything that people happen to believe, but as "any doctrine which presents the hidden and saving truth about the evils of the world in the form of social analysis." It is "a form of social analysis which discovers that human beings are the victims of an oppressive system, and that the business of life is liberation." Ideologies deal in secret knowledge, they purport to reveal "discreditable truths which others would prefer us not to know."

If there is an echo here of Eric Voegelin's analysis of gnosticism, Minogue does not call attention to it. He does make a couple of brief favorable references to Voegelin, and at one point mentions gnosticism along with other ideas that he cites as examples of efforts to illuminate ideology. But he distinguishes his own work from these, and unquestionably, despite important parallels of approach, Minogue's basic position is some distance from Voegelin's.

Minogue argues that ideological thinking is a modern development. It emerged over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was clearly visible by the 1840s, when Marx and Engels began to publish. This connection to modernity is central to his thesis: ideology was the dark corner of a brilliant new world of thought. Minogue points to Mandeville and Adam Smith as pioneers in the exploration of what proved to be a marvelous discovery: the idea of unintended consequences.

The previously dominant conviction in European civilization had been that purpose and design lay behind all that happened. Now an extraordinary new way of looking at the world had appeared: lan-

guage, economic life, and political institutions came to be seen as unplanned developments taking shape gradually over a long span of time. Hegel was a major exponent of the idea of unintended consequences, seeking a "reason" in history which was discernible to the philosopher. Marx recognized the importance of the idea and proceeded to give it a new meaning. Marxism is not the only ideology in the world, but for Minogue it is "the paradigm of ideology itself."

By the time Marx appeared, the coffeehouses of Europe were humming with opposition to the major institutions of society. This was the other response to the idea of unintended consequences, which instead of perceiving invisible hands and the cunning of history saw only greed and exploitation. Both the idea of capitalism and the idea of unintended consequences could be understood in more than one way. If they could be used to explain the production of wealth, they could also be used to explain the creation of poverty.

Marx's mission was to "invert the primary impulse of Adam Smith's work." Whereas Smith saw a glorious paradox in self-interest generating the progress of civilization, "Marx saw man's entrapment by a structure whose consequences were all and everywhere evil." But a saving doctrine, or "science," was at hand. The central idea of this new body of knowledge is what Minogue calls the "pure theory of ideology." It is the "revelation" that we live in a structure that determines what we think and do, and our common sense conviction of freedom is but an illusion.

"Entrapment by a structure" is the key. Minogue's text sparkles with insights into the ideological mind. For example, the corruption inherent in a desire for wealth had long been recognized; the Bible condemns the love of money. But where an older wisdom saw the problem as man's misuse of money, Marx transposed the terms and it became money which misused man. The structure of society made it impossible for human beings to avoid trying to exploit each other. A moral instruc-

tion was turned into a social theory, and moral responsibility disappeared as greed was transferred from individuals to institutions. Humans were not free: *everything* they did was an unintended consequence, determined by the structure.

Minogue does not confine his examination to Marx, but frequently turns a devastating gaze upon contemporary ideologists and dissects their expositions. The ideological revelation remains unchanged. It proclaims that everything in the modern world is a form of domination: institutions, habits, art, ordinary language. Every human practice is for the benefit of some "alien class": workers use up their lives for the benefit of capitalists, women distort their humanity for the benefit of men. Constant criticism is indispensable, because while the oppression of previous societies was open, that of the modern world is concealed by formal, *i.e.*, "bourgeois," freedoms. Never daunted by this, ideologists display rich talents for discovering new forms of domination, for identifying what Minogue calls new "proletariats" (though a better term might be "victims") who are desperately in need of liberation: the handicapped, children, homosexuals, animals—the list relentlessly grows. Ideology points beyond domination. What is required, of course, is a total transformation of society. The "ideological terminus" is a pure community where every individual is completely absorbed into the group, alienation is overcome, and no further criticism is necessary or permitted.

Thus Minogue's most obvious purpose is to reveal the hidden circuits of ideological thought and argumentation—to arm us against a mortal threat. A less obvious but not less important purpose is a defense of modernity. This is integrally linked with the first purpose, augmenting the thesis. Minogue defines modernity as "liberalism in politics, individualism in moral practice, and the market in economics." (He observes that "In the United States, 'liberal' often signifies a sympathy for ideological positions," but he uses the word in the classical sense.) Ideology,

although a product of modernity, is implacably hostile to it. The route that Mandeville and Smith pioneered led to freedom, but Minogue admits that the idea of a world of unintended consequences has also produced a "recurrent modern nightmare" that society is breaking down into a mob of selfish and violent individuals. Ideology feeds on this nightmare. Ideologists of all types, whether communists, fascists, racialists, or radical feminists, loathe modernity. It represents the triumph of private life and independent interests, and these constitute a system of oppression.

Despite the book's excellence it does present some questionable aspects, an important one being a certain narrowness of focus. Minogue insists on the primacy of the idea of unintended consequences and sees ideological thinking as a development from the eighteenth century onward. By not examining prior manifestations in the modern period, especially in connection with religion, he fails to take notice of such very significant early groups of ideologists as the English Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and their American offshoots.

Probably not every conservative will be comfortable with Minogue's whole argument, or the assurance with which he minimizes the fears that have caused many people who are thoroughly non-ideological to know the nightmare of which he speaks. That he plants himself so solidly in modernity may have something to do with a certain ambivalence with which he assesses (only briefly) pre-modern thought. Aristotle on the state is quoted approvingly, for Aristotle understood that a state is essentially an association, which presupposes some degree of independence; he recognized that a state cannot become too unified without ceasing to be a state. Plato, on the other hand, gave the world an unsurpassed description of the ideological terminus, and the idea of community he originated was the one brought "to a fatal perfection" by Marx. Minogue finds "some striking similarities" in the ideological and Christian revelations, although he emphasizes the

fundamental antagonism between ideology and the transcendental aspects of Christianity, something which Marx understood from the first.

At times Minogue evokes deeply conservative themes with his vindication of the private life against the demands of those who claim that building a better society is the only truly human goal. He is reminiscent of Michael Oakeshott when he refers to "the particularities of patriotism, religion, family background" that ideologists see as entrapments from which they must liberate themselves by embracing the universality of the ideological revelation. But at other times Minogue displays an uneasiness about some conservative thought, noting that conservatives frequently share with ideologists a hostility to modernity and a preference for a past that both groups see as less individualistic, more rooted in integrated communities. He has little patience with this view, and challenges those who admire the values of traditional societies by questioning whether modern liberal society is really out of control, plunged into anarchic individualism: "Or is it, rather, a new kind of society, which has succeeded in translating conflict into a competitive game, and in which what we often decry as instability or even a crisis is better understood as the dynamism of released individual energies?" The answer to that question, it would seem, depends largely upon what one believes the "game's" most enduring consequences—many of them, doubtless, unintended—are likely to be.

Yet all those concerned about the deepening ideological tone of contemporary society should welcome this articulate book, whether or not they agree with every part of its argument. Minogue brands ideology "the purest possible expression of European civilization's capacity for self-loathing." In the face of the ideological assault, he has provided a spirited defense of Western civilization at the same time that he has exposed the assailant's positions. It is not the least of the book's advantages that its confidence in our civilization marks a bold contrast to the self-loathing of the other side.