The Ideological Revelation

Grant Morrison


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-
language, 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 coffee-houses 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 instruction 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 im-
placably 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 individ-
uals. Ideology feeds on this nightmare.
Ideologists of all types, whether com-
munists, fascists, racialists, or radical
feminists, loathe modernity. It represents
the triumph of private life and indepen-
dent interests, and these constitute a
system of oppression.

Despite the book's excellence it does
present some questionable aspects, an im-
portant one being a certain narrowness of
focus. Minogue insists on the primacy of
the idea of unintended consequences and
sees ideological thinking as a develop-
ment from the eighteenth century on-
ward. By not examining prior manifesta-
tions 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 Puri-
tans of the sixteenth and seventeenth cen-
turies, and their American offshoots.

Probably not every conservative will be
comfortable with Minogue's whole argu-
ment, 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 under-
stood that a state is essentially an associa-
tion, which presupposes some degree of
independence; he recognized that a state
cannot become too unified without ceas-
ing to be a state. Plato, on the other hand,
gave the world an unsurpassed descrip-
tion 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 simi-
larities" in the ideological and Christian
revelations, although he emphasizes the
fundamental antagonism between ideol-
ogy and the transcendentinal aspects of
Christianity, something which Marx
understood from the first.

At times Minogue evokes deeply con-
servative 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 patriot-
ism, religion, family background" that
ideologists see as entrapments from which
they must liberate themselves by embrac-
ing the universality of the ideological
revelation. But at other times Minogue
displays an uneasiness about some con-
servative thought, noting that conserv-
atives frequently share with ideologists a
hostility to modernity and a preference for
a past that both groups see as less individ-
ualistic, more rooted in integrated com-
munities. He has little patience with this
view, and challenges those who admire
the values of traditional societies by ques-
tioning whether modern liberal society is
really out of control, plunged into anar-
chic 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 deep-
ening 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 ex-
pression of European civilization's capac-
ity 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.