

# Diagnosing the Ideological Mind

By Theodore Dalrymple

When, in 1969, I travelled through Afghanistan (this was in the days of good King Zahir Shah, good certainly by comparison with all who came after him), it never occurred to me, callow as I was, that the country might be transformed any time soon into, say, a Scandinavian-style social democracy. But twenty years later, when the Berlin Wall fell, I did think, wrongly, that ideological politics in the West, at any rate, would be at an end.



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Propaganda depicting Joseph Stalin before a waving USSR flag. (Wikimedia Commons)

Instead, such a politics has flourished, albeit in a balkanised way, with fanatical ideologies of race, sex, and so forth carving out their little fiefdoms in the body politic, in the hope of one day taking over entirely. It is as if the looming and monolithic presence of the Soviet Union served as a constant reminder of the perils of utopianism which, once removed, gave free rein to the utopian vapourings of educated young Westerners in search of power, the only source of

transcendence these days that is real to them.

In his [\*The Persistence of the Ideological Lie\*](#), a collection of connected essays, Dan Mahoney, our best exegete of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, considers both the nature of and reasons for the survival of ideological thinking in the West. There are brief and succinct chapters on figures such as Robespierre, Marx, Dostoyevsky, as well as the crudities of postcolonialism and the so-called 1619 Project. They cohere because they offer a diagnosis (one hopes not a prognosis) for our current cultural, even civilizational, predicament.

Why should the ideological lie of the title, that pervasive and coercive system of untruth that feeds on ever-present discontents but hands power to a kind of clerisy, persist? And why, when the material possibility of a rich and meaningful existence had never been greater than it is today, does so much of the population feel that their lives are wretched, without significance, impoverished?

One important source of misery, at least among the educated or those who have spent many years in educational establishments (not quite the same thing, alas), is the miserabilist historiography peddled by narrow ideologues which have achieved hegemony in their minds. You cannot count your blessings if you believe yourself heir to a culture or civilization that has nothing to its credit, no achievements to be proud of, and is exclusively responsible for all the woes of the world: as if, without it, the world would have gone swimmingly. Why would you wish to contribute to such a culture or civilization? In fact, the only decent and morally acceptable contribution to it that you can make is its destruction. That is why transgression and the breakage of the last taboo (it never *is* the last taboo, because life cannot be lived without taboo) are nowadays terms of praise in the mouths of art critics.

On the other hand, as Mahoney hints, inheriting such a culture

has its psychological compensations. If it is no longer possible to claim that one's civilization has conferred upon the world all that is best in it, as imperialists once claimed, at least you can claim an inheritance to the culture or civilization responsible for all that is *worst* in it. By this means, your self-importance is flattered: you have then a providential role in repairing the evil done by your predecessors. The greater the sin, after all, the greater the repentance required. And there is no condition worse for an intellectual than irrelevance or insignificance.

This is not an argument for returning to an uncritically self-glorifying historiography so that we can puff ourselves up with pride, national or civilizational. All civilizations and countries that have great achievements to their name also have dark episodes as well, usually many of them. Such episodes cannot any longer be hidden or forgotten and must be incorporated into our historiography without, as the Psalm puts it, using them for a well. What is needed is an imaginative grasp of the situation of our forefathers, rather than an easy and self-righteous condemnation as if we had at last reached a final and indubitable state of moral enlightenment. If history teaches anything, it teaches that we in our turn will be condemned for our moral blindness by our descendants. If we want understanding for ourselves, therefore, we ought to extend it to those who came before us: and it is precisely this understanding that an ideological view of history prevents.

It is in the reduction of history to a single factor that the attractions and harms of ideology lie. Ideology causes the *terribles simplificateurs*—the monomaniacs that you have always with you—to flourish. If they succeed in coming to power, they swiftly turn into, or are succeeded by, timeservers, who for the sake of preservation of their own power continue to enforce the ideology though they know as well as anyone that it is false.

Mahoney explains very clearly the process by which lying in a society becomes general. The rulers not only lie to the population—all rulers do that to a greater or a lesser extent—but insist, by means of violence, that the population repeat and glorify the lies. This humiliates and emasculates the population and renders them docile. They end up despising themselves for their cowardice or at least lack of courage. But heroism is not a permanent condition of mankind: people have to live, and very few people can live by heroism alone. They therefore have to compromise with lies and lying.

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As Mahoney says, this explains why our balkanised ideologies have a vocation for totalitarianism, and this in turn explains why the lessons of the totalitarianism of the recent past should not be forgotten—as they are in danger of being forgotten. A few years ago, I gave a lecture to brilliant international students in Zurich and I had with me Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zurich* as a guide to the city. They asked me who Solzhentisyn was.

Let us take the ideology of so-called transgenderism as an example. All of its adherents are perfectly well aware that it is founded on an evident lie, and that a man cannot become a woman *simpliciter*, or a woman a man *sompliciter*, no matter how many hormones he or she takes, or operations he or she undergoes. A very simple consideration is sufficient to prove this. While there is controversy as to whether transexual women (men who become “women”) may compete in women's sports, there is no controversy as to whether transsexual men (women who become “men”) may compete in men's sports, for the most obvious of reasons. Thus, treating transsexual men or women as if they *are* men or women is a matter of *politesse* rather than of belief. At most, it is an act of personal kindness or

decency.

But of course, this will not satisfy the ideologists, for their aim is not the relief of the suffering of a tiny proportion of the population, but the achievement of power. To force people to say what they cannot believe and to deny what they much believe is already to exert immense power. It also gives the ideologists the idea that they are members of an enlightened and socially important and beneficent elite.

There are one or two occasions on which I do not wholly agree with Mahoney. For example, he mentions *equal opportunity* as a desideratum, but if taken seriously, this notion is even more totalitarian in implication than equality of outcome, for it would require for its achievement equal genetic endowment (cloning from a single ancestor) and an equal environment, such as a battery farm. Equal opportunity would thus make North Korea seem like a haven of liberty. A society in which almost everyone is offered opportunity is ambition enough, that is to say, a society of equality under laws that allow for opportunity. But even in such a society, there would be some whose opportunity would be limited or non-existent, for example, those who are severely handicapped mentally, or those brought up in truly abominable circumstances. Equality of opportunity is a notion that, if taken seriously, would justify any degree of utopianism.

Another point of disagreement: When Mahoney refers to Solzhenitsyn's famous distinction between the limited evil committed by Macbeth and the almost limitless evil committed by regimes such as Stalin's, I think he weakens his general argument. Solzhenitsyn argues that Macbeth's evil (comparative, of course) was because he had no ideology, but this, I think, is to miss the main point of *Macbeth*, which is to draw attention to the logic of the situation that dictates future action. Once the first step is taken in the path of evil, the return becomes very difficult: "I am in blood/  
Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more/  
Returning were

as tedious as to go oe'er."

We should remember that before he embarks on a career of crime, Macbeth is not an evil man, though he is susceptible to the siren-call of ambition. In other words, our attention is drawn by Shakespeare to the slippery slope down which any of us might slip, precisely the slippery slope in the matter of the enforcement of ideological lies that Mahoney draws our attention to, without claiming that we are yet so far advanced down it that we must descend to the bottom.

The book was written before President Trump assumed office and began to roll back the ideology of DEI that had taken over many federal institutions in previous years. Whether Mahoney would have written it differently had he written it more recently, I cannot say. But before anyone becomes too jubilant over a victory of good sense over ideological foolishness, intellectual dishonesty, and bureaucratic rent-seeking, it is worth recalling that no political victory is final: that good sense is not the end of history, to borrow Fukuyama's phrase. It is perfectly possible that all that has been dismantled will return, perhaps even stronger and more dictatorial than ever.

This short book is an incisive, well-written critique of the Wokeist cult, which is composed in equal measure of impatience, ignorance, and lust for power. Let us hope that it will become redundant—at least, until the next outbreak.

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