

A Pathology of Democracy

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Kenneth Minogue examines with learning and wit a mentality which he calls “[the servile mind](#),” which accompanies the existence and progression of Western democracy. Minogue contrasts the servile mind with the “the moral life,” as in this definition:

By “the moral life” I simply mean that dimension of our inner experience in which we deliberate about our obligations to parents, children, employers, strangers, charities, sporting associations, and other elements of our world. We may not always devote much conscious thought to these matters, but such involvements make up the substance of our lives and also constitute the conditions of our happiness. In deliberating and acting on what we have decided, we discover who we are and we reveal ourselves to the world The modern West is distinguished by the practice of individuals exhibiting just such moral autonomy. To the extent that this element of our humanity has been appropriated by authority we are diminished, and our civilization loses the special character that has made it the dynamic animator of so much hope and happiness in modern times. It is this element of dehumanization that I am calling “the servile mind.” (4)

(Note the obligation to spouses is curiously missing from his definition; one cannot help wondering why.)

Willingly relinquishing one’s moral autonomy and therefore freedom to government authority characterizes the servile mind. The servile mind has features in common with the “mass man” of Jose Ortega y Gasset (*The Revolt of the Masses*), and Minogue’s otherwise excellent book might have benefited from a knowledge of Ortega’s insights.

Minogue’s approach relies heavily on pointing out paradoxes in our contemporary Western democracies.

Take the “Wisdom Paradox.” Ruling a nation requires particular wisdom and prudence. Yet democratic rulers are elected by people, many of whom are neither wise nor prudent. It is not necessary to point out that, as psychiatrists do, at some point or another in their lives a quarter of the population suffers some mental disorder. Democratic governments already assume that to be the case: they regularly direct the actions and choices of citizens, instructing and channeling people towards better behavior, and even taking their wealth and “investing” it for them. “Between 30 and 50 per cent of the wealth of modern democratic states is taxed and addressed to policies that the government considers necessary.” (36)

But how can these servile people, who need such close guidance because they cannot make prudent choices for themselves, be trusted to choose wisely those who will govern them?

One could use the Illinois electorate (John Kass’ “chumbolones”) to illustrate Minogue’s paradox. Congressmen and Chicago aldermen are re-elected even when under Federal investigation. The Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives, a Real Estate attorney, has served for forty years and won every election while helping his customers navigate Illinois real estate laws crafted under his rule; his daughter is the attorney general of Illinois and possibly the next governor. A Secretary of State was elected governor although his office was under investigation for selling driver’s licenses, which sale caused the death of six children by a driver who obtained his license illegally. Incompetent judges are regularly re-elected. In 2000, 2006 and 2012, bar associations found a Cook County judge unqualified because of poor performance, but her voters have consistently re-elected her with a salary of \$182,000; she has recently been exonerated

from a charge of battery for reasons of insanity, but is likely to be re-elected again.

These examples justify Minogue's most pessimistic passages: "A persistent strain of realism in the study of democracy suggests...that every democracy is in the end an oligarchy in which officials and politicians, as controlling the agendas and the rhetoric of public discussion, actually determine what happens." (29)

Another paradox concerns the servile mind's attitude towards authority. It wants to be free of sources of authority and security deserving of "deference," such as parents, the family, organized religion, older people, manners, social hierarchy, and cultural tradition. Historically, it has thrived after the overthrow of political systems that it considered servile, such as monarchies. These types of authority and deference the servile mind equals to "oppression," from which it constantly wants to "liberate" itself.

But paradoxically, as it "liberates" itself from traditional sources of authority and safety, it submits willingly to oppression from a hierarchy of departments and agencies to a myriad of laws, regulations and prohibitions, to taxes (often euphemistically called "fees"), in exchange for the promise of guaranteed politically correct new behaviors and taboos, as well as all sorts of "free" goods and services—which are not really free since they are paid with taxes—and especially in exchange for the governmental promise of "security." Government functionaries, and the "intelligentsia" supporting them, understand that the destruction of traditional sources of authority and security works in their favor, because citizens become isolated, and then government can occupy the vacated space. Government therefore produces a steady stream of laws, regulations and hierarchical agencies that promise future security in exchange for gladly accepted servility. To government, Minogue could have added entertainment and the media, which are equally destructive of traditional authority, and which function also as its substitutes.

Western democracy's pursuit of cultural diversity creates another contradiction. Democracy, Minogue argues, cannot exist without a common culture. The United States used to make homogenization a condition of entry. Switzerland has been culturally European and therefore homogeneous despite its various European languages. Yet current democratic policies have not only accepted large numbers of immigrants with cultures and religions very different from those of Europe, but also have granted them collective entity, status, and rights to preserve their cultures and religions. "In this way, the...states of Europe turned back into structures more like empires than traditional states." (30) Again paradoxically, immigrants from the Third World bring with them beliefs and cultural practices which are supported and even subsidized by the Western democracies, but which undermine and can overwhelm the Western cultural uniqueness that makes the attractiveness drawing in these immigrants possible.

Whereas many among the political and intellectual elites of the Western democracies have lost pride in their cultural and therefore political traditions, and even show preference for those of the Third World, masses of immigrants confirm with their feet under which culture and political traditions they want to live. This paradox is analogous to an earlier one, when many among the Western elites favored the collectivist and altruist ethos of Marxist societies, whereas people living in those societies wanted nothing more than to live in the capitalist West.

The servile mind is a "politico moral" entity. It is collectivist. It joins morality with social and therefore "political power." For it the moral is the political. The politico-moral

can be seen as a kind of religion, with affiliations to paganism and vegetarianism, and an outlook particularly sensitive to the vibrations of the idea that the planet is basically organic, a kind of creature, called Gaia. It is particularly attractive to certain types of high-minded clergymen. The idea of a crusade is closer to the essence of the matter than its generally secularist supporters would like. Its ramifications in extending ideas of justice into all corners of life have as yet hardly been fully explored: international and intergenerational justice is merely the beginning of it. It will spouse any conception of justice that might promise to save

a divided mankind, riven by conflict and mutual hatred, by turning it into a single harmonious community. Most striking are its sympathies and antipathies: sympathy toward international organizations, and antipathy toward moral individualism, along with a suspicion that objectivity and rationality tend to serve the interests of the powerful. (326).

Therefore it blames the individualist ethos for every social evil, making an object of its paranoia the dog-eat-dog or “Wild West” world of “savage capitalism.” But paradoxically, the highest levels of corruption exist where the collectivist-altruistic ethos has been adopted. “Russians, after three generations of bombardment by doctrines promoting altruistic collectivism, turn out to be a good deal less reliably guided by duty than those in the selfish capitalist West. That Western firms and bureaucracies are often to be found behaving in undesirably self-interested ways is no doubt true, but these moves in the game of advantage usually collide in time with media critics and competitors whose interests run counter to them.” One could add socialist Cuba, which for two generations has bombarded its people with the collectivist-altruistic message, yet is similarly pervaded by government and private corruption.

“Abstraction,” Minogue observes, is necessary to the servile mind.

‘The poor’, for example, are entrapped in the idea that they are essentially poor, because it is an identity that guarantees benefits to them. In the past, those with few resources (and especially the ‘respectable poor’) understood themselves in many ways. They were poor, but also a part of society on whose labor much rested. Many saw themselves in religious terms as immortal souls, others as the backbone of the country, superior to the rich, and as people deserving the respect of their neighbors. Above all, they were respectable. In modern public discourse, they feature dominantly as poor and vulnerable, and treasure such a victimhood status because it brings benefits. (337)

Perhaps Minogue could have elaborated this insight more easily if he had used “essentializing” (hypostatizing) instead of “abstraction.” The politico moral view thrives in essences, which are necessary for its collectivist approach. Essentializing is, one might say, essential to “identity politics.” And identity politics, centered on “issues” of “race,” “class,” and “gender,” has become part of the mechanisms used by governments to increase their power and is relentlessly promoted by the progressive “intelligentsia” by means of university policies, “humanities” courses, and the media.

Minogue distinguishes between desire, rejected by the collectivist-altruist mind (“materialism,” “greed,” etc.) and mere passion or impulse. Desire can be beneficial. It leads one to search for rational means, some of them long-range, for its satisfaction. It gives rise to the use of reason as instrumental. Minogue cites Hobbes, approvingly: “From desire ariseth the thought of some means we have seen produce the like of that which we aim at; and from the thought of that the thought of means to that mean; and so continually till we come to some beginning within our power.”

Minogue does not reject democracy. But he points out, relentlessly, not only its faults, but also the dangers that the mentality which it fosters pose to the viability of the West, and therefore to Western democracy itself.

Thus, while democracy theoretically means that those who govern are accountable to the governed, in today’s practice the governed have become accountable to those who govern. Governments now condemn many forms of personal behavior, such as eating too much, or the wrong kind of foods. *“We borrow too much money for our personal pleasures, and many of us are very bad parents. Ministers of state have been known to instruct us in the elementary matters, such as reading stories to our children. Again, many of us have unsound views about people of other races, cultures, or religions, and the distribution of our friends does not always correspond, as governments think that it ought, to the cultural diversity of our society. We*

must face up to the grim fact that the rulers we elect are losing patience with us." (2) Minogue could have mentioned the paradox that democratic governments studiously refrain from condemning the type of sexual intercourse which propitiates the spread of the HIV virus.

An American reader could think of many examples of how government is now in charge of telling people what to do, counting on the prevalence of the servile mind among the electorate. In New York, its mayor makes it illegal to buy sugary drinks in containers of more than 16 ounces, and he restricts even more the ownership of guns by law-abiding citizens. In Illinois, a bankrupt state whose credit worth is the same as that of Botswana, the governor makes it a priority to ban from vending machines energy drinks with a certain amount of caffeine. In Chicago, a bankrupt city which in 2012 had over 500 homicides, *none* caused by semi-automatic rifles, the mayor finds time to write letters to private businesses urging them to divest from companies that make semi-automatic rifles. A Chicago alderman wants to ban Chick-Fil-A from doing business because its owner lobbies against homosexual marriage. The same action has been taken by the mayor of Boston. The federal government decrees that private employers must provide contraceptives to female employees in their insurance plans. It also decrees that American citizens must buy health insurance or pay a fine. Long ago it decreed that an employer cannot pay less than a certain amount to an employee.

The servile mind obsesses about equality. Wisely, democratic governments and their intelligentsia find an inexhaustible supply of inequalities whose elimination, which is a never ending task, makes the servile mind happy, and in exchange for which open-ended elimination it accepts new forms of servility. Hence the interminable series of "gaps" noticed by the intelligentsia's "research" between all sorts of collective and therefore essentialized entities, gaps which government must urgently proceed to combat, with new "gaps" constantly being discovered and in need of destruction. The most recent gap I notice exists in Hollywood, where male directors still outnumber female directors; studies indicate that Hollywood has also been "slow" to incorporate women into other film jobs.

Within U.S. government premises, democracy's war against "gaps" proceeds rapidly. Physical standards for women have been lowered to make them "equal" to men in the civilian uniformed forces. The military practices "gender norming," giving women extra points for being women, so they can be "equal" to men. "Sexual assault" has increased since government integrated women in non-combat roles; consequently, renewed government efforts have been made to put men in "sensitivity classes" to combat the rise in sexual assault, which resulted from the efforts to equalize the armed forces in the first place. Government has now made women eligible to serve in combat as well, the decision having to do not with increasing the army's combat efficiency, but with giving women equal opportunity with men.

A problem is that freedom has "costs" in the form of inequalities, from wealth to education to natural gifts. Democracy's drive to eliminate inequalities eliminates freedom, which is a source of individuality and creativity. (342-343). Maintaining freedom requires an independent people, who have courage "to defend our own legitimate desires and opinions against the disapproval of others. Fear of looking foolish, of offending the powerful, is a source of the servility that is the opposite of freedom. Without a vigorous political life, we succumb to the power of bureaucrats, a development to be observed in the current spread of more or less unaccountable...agencies of the state." (178-179)

One could think of how the U.S. government now kills Americans abroad, without trial, if they are suspected of being involved in terrorism, but polls show these actions are supported by the electorate. Or how the U.S. government has been accused by the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child of killing hundreds of children during drone and other "strikes" abroad, but the American electorate does not seem to mind.

"The practical assumptions sustaining political correctness is clearly that if sentiment and belief can be adequately entrenched in the human mind, they will determine conduct, more or less without any intervening (and unpredictable) process of deliberation." Minogue does not mention it, but underlining this reasoning is a belief, which I have examined elsewhere in connection with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that human nature is infinitely malleable, so that it can be shaped to create what the progressives consider a better

world.

Acceptable is what the politico moral system has already labeled acceptable, not what the individual decides will be his behavior given the circumstances, as he makes sense of them. The responsibility for making the decision of what is proper or not no longer falls on the individual, who has happily and willingly relinquished such burdensome responsibility to the system. “Equality officers” of various kinds, functioning as the armed force of religion used to function, make sure that the “unacceptable” is punished and that the “acceptable” is enforced:

In the politico-moral, what is rational has been established in advance. It is given in the moral and political package constituted by political correctness, along with a few additional imperatives responding to current fashions.... This is a package taking the form of an orthodoxy so complete that attitudes and acts falling inside and outside it can be specified merely as ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’.... It is a form of moral control in which government regulations operate as if they were commands. An example would be the legislation prohibiting ‘hate speech,’ or the further march of right thinking found in declaring some beliefs as—well, beyond belief! In some European countries it is a crime not to believe that the Holocaust happened, and others have suggested that denial of anthropogenic climate change should be criminalized. (220)

Minogue believes that the “free world turns out to be in some respects an unjust world” (xiv) and that “freedom, not justice, is the secret of Western dynamism. Can the current enthusiasm for ‘social justice’ really be distinguished from those reactionary systems of comprehensive ‘justice’ that dominated traditional societies? If not, the future of our freedom—and our uniqueness—is distinctly bleak.” (xix) But he also believes that freedom “is compatible with the kind of justice—civility and the rule of law—that has long been established in European states.” (xix)

It seems that Minogue gets himself into an awkward position by opposing freedom to justice and thereby he yields ground to the enemies of freedom. The solution would be simply to distinguish “social justice,” that open ended source of government power, from old “distributive justice,” which in itself does not necessarily conflict with freedom, and can, in fact, operate within political freedom’s parameters via the market place—a realm which, in addition, does not stop individuals or voluntary associations of individuals from acting as generously as they see fit to help those they believe need help.

The servile mind, like Ortega’s mass man, can be found at all social levels:

Many modern politicians belong to a new class that John Fonte has called “trans-national progressives,” or “tranzies”... I have elsewhere called them ‘Olympians,’ in honor of their contempt for the democratic voice. Lawyers are prominent in their ranks, because they think that a new legal order will be able to solve the problems of violence, war, genocide, and other forms of oppression. The new class also includes large numbers of academics, intellectuals, and journalists... who have detached themselves from any serious patriotic allegiance and regard themselves as critical citizens of the world, as open minds uncluttered by local religious or political commitments.... All of these are people who may pay lip service to democracy (so long as it moves in the direction they approve) but whose real allegiance has moved from the actual democracy in which we live to the ideal of democracy as a telos. For democracy as a telos is an essential component of a more perfect world order. (112-113)

Alas, universities, too, have been drawn to the promotion of servility. In the 1960’s, “Suddenly becoming

available to unsophisticated and uneducated people, universities succumbed to democratic and liberatory slogans and lost the academic authority that made them distinctive. In succumbing to such servility of mind, they were unprotected against governments bidding to take power over them.” (287) Minogue passes over the opportunity to illustrate this point with the case of Catholic universities: seduced by “liberation” currents, but equally seduced by government largesse and the ambition to attain “intellectual parity” with lay universities, Catholic universities opened themselves to government power, which, once established, proved impossible to remove. As Minogue writes, “there are few liberations without some undertow of a new servitude.” (60)

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