

## GOODBYE TO ALL THAT: CONSERVATIVE THEORIES OF IDEOLOGY

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Gordon Graham, *Politics in its Place: A Study of Six Ideologies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, pp. x — 192.

Kenneth Minogue, *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985, pp. x — 255.

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The First Duke of Wellington remarked that, although English politics seemed suddenly to be about principles — “Whig principles, and Tory principles, and Liberal principles, and Mr. Canning’s principles” — he was quite unable to arrive at a clear idea of what any of them meant.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, he intended to carry on the business of government without reference to principles at all. The Duke’s robust scepticism about the value of principles in the conduct of affairs would make him something of a model politician to both Graham and Minogue. Their studies of ideology are concerned to draw our attention to the dangers and absurdities attending the employment of abstract doctrines in politics. In this sense, although both might deny the charge, their arguments advance a viewpoint which is often thought to be distinctively conservative. This fundamental similarity between two otherwise quite different books derives from a shared appreciation of politics which is characteristically Oakeshottian: the view that politics is a practical activity in which prudence, foresight and other attributes of knowing one’s way about a practice under specific historical conditions take precedence over general theorizing about the aims and ends of political life. This makes their disagreements all the more interesting. For Minogue, absurdity is conceptually inseparable from the style of political thinking he wants to call ideological, while, for Graham, error is a contingent matter to be demonstrated as it arises. I shall explore this basic

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disagreement before returning to the limited politics of which both authors so wholeheartedly approve.

I had best state at once that both books reach uniformly high standards of exposition and argument. Minogue's (hereafter *AP*) is characteristically witty and urbane, a fine illustration of Hobbes's dictum that fancy must "take the Philosopher's part" on those occasions when our arguments confront the accepted wisdom of the age.<sup>2</sup> Graham's (*PIP*), written in a plain and spare prose style, is a model of philosophical clarity. The advantage, as I shall try to show, lies with Graham, but both seem to me to deny one of the most important features of modern ideologies, the extent to which they increasingly provide the theoretical basis of our own self-understandings. Neither quite see the force of arguments which are sceptical about the possibility of our obtaining full critical distance from beliefs about what is right and what is desirable in politics. Both search for an Archimedean point from which judgement can be rendered uncontaminated by the presuppositions of a particular cultural context. Minogue thinks that he can tackle this problem of partiality by withdrawing to a level of abstraction where practical considerations become simply irrelevant. Graham (and herein lies his advantage) agrees that competing ideologies may be based on presuppositions which pass each other by, so that what for one is self evident truth is for another an absurdity (*PIP* 64-8). However, he argues that the imperative to be of practical relevance forces ideologies to meet on the common ground of politics where they can be duly assessed.

The difference in approach is nowhere better illustrated than in the authors' conceptions of the central misunderstanding about ideology which they feel they must correct before proceeding to their own accounts. Minogue takes as his problem the claim that all social thought is ideological, so that the attempt to characterize ideology as a distinctive kind of thought will inevitably be one more contribution to a particular ideology, illegitimately claiming the objectivity it denies to its competitors. Those in the grip of such a misconception are, Minogue claims, like the hero of *The Charterhouse of Parma*: finding themselves, as they suppose, in the midst of a tremendous battle, "they find a regiment and tag along — the Hussars against Patriarchy, the Dragoon Guards of the Proletariat, and so on" (*AP* 1). Minogue's deep disagreement with this inclusive conception of ideology is familiar from many of his other writings.<sup>3</sup> He argues that he is engaged in "academic inquiry" into the *formal* character of ideological thinking, a kind of inquiry so far removed from the events it describes that its central problem is not so much to distinguish the combatants but rather to determine whether there is even a battle going on at all. It is, he suggests, entirely typical of ideologists to seek to conscript such observers, but the call to arms both can and should be avoided (*AP* 5-6).

Graham, identifying this very argument with a popular, but not

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necessarily authentic reading of Oakeshott, is not tempted to follow Minogue to so lofty a level of abstraction. In fact he sees abstraction as the central misunderstanding to be overcome before ideology can be properly studied. He draws our attention at once to the dangers of trying to stipulate the proper relation between theory and politics in advance of discovering how flesh and blood actors actually conceive of that relationship. We do not have to deny Oakeshott's powerful criticisms of one kind of mistaken relationship in order to bring out the many other ways in which theoretical reflection can inform conduct. He is particularly interested in what he calls "evaluation," a lower level activity captured in Bernard Williams's description of "reflection which might show up in greater depth what would be involved in living with (certain) ideas." (*PIP* 12-13). In other words, rather than abstracting something called "the pure theory of ideology" so that it can be confronted by philosophy or "academic inquiry," as Minogue sets out to do, Graham seeks to find a kind of reflection which is both relevant to conduct and susceptible to philosophical criticism. Such criticism may succeed in showing that "what would be involved in living with" an ideology is either incoherent or, once clarified, undesirable. It may not persuade anyone, which is a practical accomplishment, but it is no inconsiderable achievement in its own right.

At this point it clearly behooves Graham to show that ideologies are susceptible to philosophical criticism and, especially, that their evaluative character does not endow them with immunity. But first I want to consider the advantage of his 'stooping to conquer' approach over that of Minogue. Graham is concerned to guard against the danger of denying the political relevance of any particular kind of reflection without giving it a fair hearing, an error he calls "the worst sort of apriorizing" (*PIP* 5). And this is exactly the problem with Minogue's argument as it unfolds. Ideology, we are told, is characterized by hostility to modernity, hostility to "liberalism in politics, individualism in moral practice, the market in economics" as conditions fostering an all-pervasive "oppression" (*AP* 4). It arose out of the eighteenth-century fascination with the systematic attributes of the unintended consequences of human action. Ignoring the parallel connection between intention and consequence, ideologists proceeded to argue that all important features of the social world are unintended consequences explicable in terms of an underlying structure accessible only to those who look beyond the busy surface of affairs with the aid of a social theory. As Minogue shrewdly notes, by itself such a conception of the human world might actually generate extremely pessimistic conclusions, as it did, for example, in Gobineau's theory of inevitable racial degeneration. The additional step was taken by Marx in purporting to discover an inevitable process of liberation from the tyranny of a system of unintended consequences at work within that selfsame system, and then aligning himself and

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his associates with it. The secret of ideology lies, according to Minogue, in its claim to be able to fully understand the world at the same time as acting as part of it, and "it is hardly any exaggeration to say that ideology is a footnote to Marx" (AP 31). At the heart of his argument, then, lies a familiar claim: that ideology can be identified in terms of a mistake about the character of social explanation, a mistake which, exploited by a distinctive rhetoric of 'oppression,' results in an ideological style of politics.

This is an odd claim, and Minogue recognizes its oddity at once. He remarks that, in contrast to a description of philosophical argument, where all that is needed is an account of "the logic of the questions it asks and the answers it finds relevant," ideology is a practical business. We must be concerned with its "matter and milieu" as well as its manner, or else we court the "banality" of supposing that ideology has an essence which we will inevitably encounter everywhere we look (AP 31). "Nevertheless," we learn on the very next page, "there underlies the whole endeavour a central theoretical conviction which allows us to discover a formal centre of ideological understanding" — and this is the mistake about social explanation I have just described (AP 32). Minogue is like the man who, having carefully marked out the thin ice, finds it more exciting to skate on the wrong side of his own barrier. Disaster is inevitable, and it comes in two forms. First, the book is exclusively concerned with what might be called totalizing ideologies, of which Minogue thinks that Marxism and feminism are the best examples, views of the world *sub specie malorum*, as he puts it. But it does considerable violence to many well-known ideologies to force them into this Procrustean "form." It might be valuable to bring out the sense in which liberalism, for example, sees all relations of dependence as part of systematic oppression, but it would be peculiar to conclude that this is what makes liberalism an ideology, not least because liberals themselves have been notably suspicious of systematic social theory. It is peculiar that the distinguished analyst of the "liberal mind" should have so little to say about the most important ideological tradition of our age, but such is the distorting effect of his approach in *AP*. Secondly, a corollary of the first point, Minogue's noncombatant status is looking decidedly suspect by the end of the book. If what he stipulatively calls ideology is a mistake, and if that mistake is more central to some historically identifiable traditions than others, it is hardly surprising that his battlefield safe-conduct should be challenged. At the very least, as the cover of the American paperback edition with its endorsements by reviewers from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *National Review* shows, he has been recognized by his friends if not by his enemies.

If *AP* is nonetheless a considerable achievement, perhaps this is most evident in the way in which Minogue never once succumbs to the banality

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that he rightly associates with projects of this kind. Which student of ideology will not recognize "vertical integration" in the ideological incorporation of academic disciplines, or the characteristic exploitation of perceptual metaphors in which opponents fail to see, perceive, acknowledge or notice some self-evident truth (*AP* 138-46)? Who will not smile at the complaint that "reading (ideology) resembles conversation with someone suffering from St. Vitus's Dance. The page is full of twitches, nudges and winks indicated by quotation marks which do not signify quotation, but rather dissent from, and hostility to, the ordinary meaning of a term" (*AP* 105)? *AP* is a book to be read and enjoyed.

Graham, however, resists the temptation to offer an *a priori* account of the mistake involved in ideological argument. He is unconcerned with problems of academic neutrality. Indeed, he believes that arguments like Minogue's condemn political philosophy to "sterility" and "incoherence" (*PIP* 4-6). He expects a variety of different arguments to be employed by ideologists. What makes them ideological for Graham is simply the belief of those who hold them that they have "wide implications for the conduct of political life" (*PIP* 48). Against the objection that this sweeping and inclusive account of ideology only serves to bring out the sense in which the different ideologies rest on incommensurable presuppositions and are hence immune from philosophical criticism, Graham deploys his argument against apriorizing. In advance of looking at ideological arguments, how can we assume them to be incommensurable? He makes the particularly telling point, to which I have already alluded, that apriorism "runs the constant risk of over-generalization," lumping together ideologies like nationalism, which depends on a single idea applied to politics; like Nazism, which appears to have no rationally defensible foundations at all; and those like socialism, which exploit a particular hypothesis about the character of social life, and which come close to what Minogue calls the "pure theory" (*PIP* 60-1).

But, beyond these negative warnings, Graham does want to assert that there is a positive common ground on which ideologies meet and can be assessed, connected with his useful idea of "lower-level" political philosophy. That ground is politics as the ideologist finds it, where he will be confronted with an audience with whom he must share at least some sense of what is to count as a political problem and what would be an acceptable remedy. From here, Graham derives four conditions which an ideology must meet in order to provide a convincing understanding of politics: it must be consistent, its factual or conceptual claims must be true, it must be applicable in an imaginable political context, and it must appeal to political values that go beyond those of self-professed adherents (*PIP* 76). Graham believes that political philosophy is eminently suited to assessing the extent to which an ideology meets these conditions and thus

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in helping us make rationally defensible choices amongst them. Thus the second half of *PIP* consists of a series of chapters dealing in turn with liberalism, socialism, nationalism, "Fascism and the New Right," anarchism and "True Conservatism." Each contains something of interest, but rather than reviewing them, I want to reconsider Graham's claims that we are able to go beyond negative criticism of apriorism to the assertion that ideologies do meet on the common ground of politics as it happens to be practised.

To illustrate what he means, Graham draws an analogy with medicine, based on the suggestion that ideological beliefs are "always in part diagnostic" (*PIP* 75), and he defends it in the following terms. Just as in medicine, the fact that popular beliefs often bear little relation to the phenomena they purport to describe does not rule out the possibility of scientific medicine, so the generally gimcrack character of ideological beliefs does not rule out the fact that some political proposals are demonstrably better than others: "the cure of illness may be a more determinate business in general than the remedy of political troubles, but it is no easier to deny that a war has ended than that a rash has disappeared" (*PIP* 75). Now, there is something very wrong with this analogy which can be seen from the fact that, unless Graham is advocating pacifism, the ending of a war is not at all like the cure of a disease. In some circumstances, 1918 in Germany, for example, it may plausibly be represented as the onset of the illness itself. Where Graham has been misled here is in supposing that the problems of evaluation and interpretation in medicine are any less intractable than those in politics. A false security in the one leads to an overemphasis on common ground in the other.

In other words, despite Graham's sturdy pragmatism, health is a normative concept and, as anyone who has ever suffered from a mysterious rash will testify, what counts as a cure will vary according to a number of possible criteria. The question of whether it has "disappeared" is often far less important than whether it is no longer uncomfortable, disfiguring, or preventing the sufferer from leading a normal life, especially earning his living. Even the presence of a specific microorganism is only contingently, rather than criterially, related to whether someone is actually ill.<sup>4</sup> While these considerations do not entirely disable Graham's argument — they do not touch questions of coherence or truth, for example — they do seriously call into question the sense in which political philosophy is the right conceptual instrument to analyse the third of his conditions, the extent to which an ideology possesses some "political *vim*" in the real world of politics.

Most important of all, when Graham does appeal to the idea of political health to make these assessments, it follows that he is actually appealing to a disguised normative standard. And the interesting part of his evaluation of the place of politics is that it is not at all dissimilar to

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Minogue's in *AP*. There Minogue contrasts the ideologist who uses truth as a weapon in political disputes with "men of goodwill" (the phrase occurs twice) who recognize that they must come to terms with the values and prejudices of their opponents if they are ever to persuade them of the desirability of a course of action. Party politics is said to depend upon the existence of such men, and to be radically undermined by those who accept the privileges of opposition without understanding the appropriate decorum (*AP* 127-8, 178-9). Graham, in distinguishing "true conservatism" from the arguments of the new right, tells us that he means to imply that there is something true about this kind of conservatism which is not found in competing ideologies. This truth turns on the claim that conservatism, properly understood by its great English exponents, is an "anti-ideology," providing no general answers to the question of what is desirable in advance of being confronted with specific political problems: "once this is clear, we can see that the expression 'ensuring the well-being of society' is just a shorthand way of referring to the business of making wise decisions about what to do with the railways, the national health service, the universities, the Church and so on" (*PIP* 185). This genial parochialism — paralleled in Minogue's rosy vision of party politics (before the First Reform Act?) — is underlined by Graham's conclusion that conservatism of this kind has little appeal in other countries because "only English and hence British political institutions have ever been decent enough to allow a decent man to be a conservative" (*PIP* 188).

What has gone wrong here? Both Minogue and Graham are concerned to defend and elaborate a conception of the autonomous individual as the locus of certain rights and freedoms, a conception which Minogue explicitly links with the idea of modernity. Both think that a particular conception of politics is appropriate to such individuals: decent, limited, and concerned with immediate problems, rather than setting the world to rights. And, of course, there is much to recommend this view, especially to those of us who have been fortunate enough to enjoy these arrangements for extended periods of time. However, it is only within such a context that the diagnostic common ground of which Graham speaks can ever arise in the first instance. It is a *consequence* of an Aristotelean like-mindedness amongst citizens which is an historical artifact. To the extent that ideologies, and events themselves, succeed in dissolving this like-mindedness and begin to constitute our identities in other ways, many of the claims made by Minogue and Graham about the superiority of "anti-ideology" will lose their force. There is no question that political philosophy will have an important, perhaps crucial part to play in assessing what it would be like to live with selves understood in various anti-individualistic ways, but this critical activity now looks rather different from the accounts of it offered by Minogue and Graham.

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For Graham, this objection is serious but not by any means disabling. If like-mindedness is a consequence of a particular tradition of political activity and not a general condition of politics, the extent of incommensurability will increase to the point where assessments of the political force of an ideology lose their independence. This does not rule out other kinds of philosophical criticism, only the debunking kind which becomes increasingly prominent in the second half of *PIP*. It will not do, for example, to suggest that the socialist simply must admit that a society characterized by "grossly disproportionate incomes, but in which those with the lowest incomes are fabulously wealthy by common standards and no one's needs remain unsatisfied" is one in which inequality is not a serious fault (*PIP* 119). The committed socialist still has arguments turning on the idea that gross inequalities fatally damage the attachment to communal interests and pursuits which he values. And to go on to simply assert the priority of liberty as Graham does is to compound the error.

For Minogue, the problem is rather different. His description of the character of his own argument is wrong. To show that certain popular criticisms of modernity rest on a mistake is to give good reasons for not agreeing with that kind of criticism. Prevented from saying this by his curious notion of the status of "academic inquiry," Minogue is reduced in the latter stages of *AP* to what might be called *Encounter* conservatism: modernity has only to recover its confidence and trumpet its virtues as loudly as possible and all will be well. Its superiority will be self-evident, as will be the contradiction involved in exploiting its freedoms to complain about hidden oppression: "the most remarkable fact about ideology is its attempt to demonstrate that what by most ordinary tests — an end of hunger and the heavier burdens of labour, respect of human rights — has been a giant leap forward by mankind, is actually a monumental retardation . . . ideology is the purest possible expression of European civilization's capacity for self-loathing" (*AP* 221). In other words, *AP* is a report from a battlefield after all, and one not at all dissimilar to Waterloo: the Hussars against Patriarchy and the Dragoon Guards of the Proletariat are surging around the beleaguered squares of the Honourable Company of Gentlemen of Goodwill. Modernity may yet be saved but, as the Duke himself was reported to have said, it will be "a damned near run thing."

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### Notes

1. Cited in W.H. Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition*, volume 2: *The Ideological Heritage* (London: Methuen, 1983), xiii.
2. Thomas Hobbes, "The Answer of Mr. Hobbs to Sir Will. D'Avenant's Preface Before Gondibert," in David F. Gladish, ed., *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 50.
3. The argument is clearly stated, together with its Oakeshottian provenance, in Kenneth Minogue, "Michael Oakeshott: The Boundless Ocean of Politics," in Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue, eds. *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1975), 120-46; cf. Minogue, "Relativism on the Banks of the Isis," *Government and Opposition* 18 (1983), 359-65.
4. Georges Canguilhem, *Le normal et la pathologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), passim.



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