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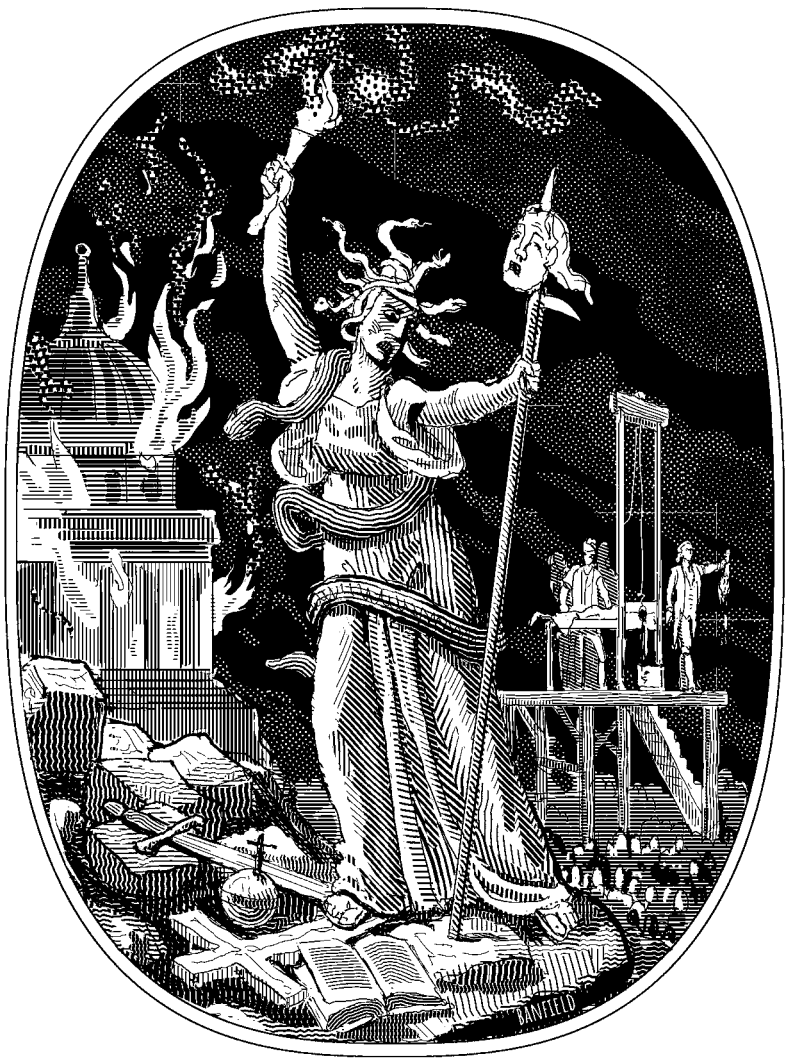
Book Review by Justin Dyer

Will to Power

The Persistence of the Ideological Lie: The Totalitarian Impulse Then and Now, by Daniel J. Mahoney. Encounter Books, 168 pages, 29.99



La République

In the ongoing skirmishes that define American higher education today, confusion reigns about the nature and function of ideology. Some argue that the academic enterprise must be value-neutral—neither advancing nor criticizing any particular worldview or conception of the human good. Others respond that such neutrality is a fiction, that all teaching is irreducibly ideological, a by-product of hidden presuppositions and value-laden commitments. Both positions rest on a false equivalence, reducing all worldviews to mere ideological preferences, none more grounded in reason or reality than another.

Part of this confusion is linguistic as well as philosophical. Consider the Oxford English Dictionary's treatment of the word "ideology." One entry defines the term in its modern, political register as a "systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy; a set of beliefs governing conduct." This sense of ideology, with its practical and political implications, emerged at the turn of the 20th century and came to be associated with socialism, fascism, liberal democracy, and other modern movements that purport to order society according to a comprehensive political vision. Yet this understanding of ideology is susceptible to its own false equivalence, flattening all worldviews into constructed systems, grounded in ideas but ultimately products of the will.

In his timely and bracing new book, *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie: The Totalitarian Impulse Then and Now*, Daniel J. Mahoney offers a much-needed clarifying intervention. Drawing on a lifetime of study in the tradition of political philosophy—and particularly on the insights of Eric Voegelin, the German émigré who fled the Nazi regime and later wrote a sustained philosophical analysis of totalitarianism—Mahoney offers a more nuanced and illuminating account of ideology than is available in our current debates. Ideology, in Voegelinian terms, is not simply a comprehensive set of beliefs guiding action in the world. Ideology is, more profoundly, a willful distortion of reality. It is a rejection of the moral and metaphysical structure of the world as it actually is in favor of an ideologically constructed "Second Reality"—a utopian counterfeit erected against the givenness of nature and the created order.

A professor emeritus of Assumption University and senior fellow of the Claremont

Institute, Mahoney is well known to *CRB* readers and some of the essays in this collection first appeared in these pages, as well as in *Law & Liberty*, *The American Mind*, and elsewhere. They cohere around a central thesis: that "the 'ideological' project to replace the only human condition we know with a utopian 'Second Reality' oblivious to—indeed at war with—the deepest wellsprings of human nature and God's creation has taken on renewed virulence in the late modern world, just thirty-five years after the glorious anti-totalitarian revolutions of 1989." What seemed in the heady aftermath of the Cold War to be a decisive rejection of totalitarian ideology now appears to have been a reprieve rather than a repudiation. The ideological impulse, Mahoney argues, is not merely a feature of particular regimes but a perennial temptation of the human will.

In Mahoney's framing, the term "ideological" refers to a very specific intellectual and moral pathology: the conviction that all human thought is a projection of will and a tool of the powerful. The ideological mind rejects the idea of a moral law that transcends human will, instead seeing all norms as contingent and dismissing all truth claims as veiled assertions of power. This premise—common to both the Marxist materialism of the Left and the Nietzschean vitalism of the Right—erodes the classical foundation of moral and political freedom.

C.S. Lewis offered one of the earliest and most devastating critiques of this posture in his 1943 essay "The Poison of Subjectivism" (parts of which were adapted for *The Abolition of Man*, published the same year). "Many a popular 'planner' on a democratic platform," Lewis wrote, "many a mild-eyed scientist in a democratic laboratory means, in the last resort, just what the Fascist means. He believes that 'good' means whatever men are conditioned to approve." But this is self-refuting. "If 'good' means only the local ideology," Lewis continued, "how can those who invent the local ideology be guided by any idea of good themselves? The very idea of freedom presupposes some objective moral law which overarches rulers and ruled alike."

Mahoney is at his most incisive when diagnosing the spiritual emptiness at the heart of ideological modernity. To abandon the distinction between good and evil is to renounce the inner drama of moral conscience and the human longing for truth. In the place of this drama, ideology offers a counterfeit clarity: the seductive simplicity of oppressor and oppressed, revolutionary and reactionary, superman and herd animal. This simplicity stands against any sober and serious examination of the moral drama within each human soul.

Such a sober and serious examination, which invites moral humility and serves as a defense against the violent allure of utopian dreams, is at the heart of *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie*. Taken together, the eleven essays form a powerful meditation on the nature of ideological politics and its enduring appeal. Mahoney's approach is at once philosophical and literary, historical and theological. He draws not only from political thinkers such as Voegelin, Raymond Aron, and Pierre Manent, but also from novelists and moral witnesses such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

Mahoney surveys the modern landscape of ideological deformation, beginning with Communism, which sought to abolish property, the family, religion, and the nation. These goals, he observes, "are profoundly at odds with the nature and needs of human beings and the very structure of social and political reality." The ideological contempt for reality reemerges in postcolonial thought, which sanctifies violence and willfully distorts history in service of a simplistic moral Manichaeism. The same pathology animates the identitarian ideologies recently ascendant in the West's institutions, which divide the world into crude moral binaries and localize evil in a "a specific (and an utterly dispensable) group of class, race, or gender oppressors."

Mahoney finds a historical prototype for this ideological fervor in the French Revolution. Maximilien Robespierre, "the revolutionary ideologue turned tyrant," exemplified the fanaticism of principles unmoored from prudence and devoid of moderation. He championed the purification of the polity by terror, all in the name of virtue, his despotism veiled by the rhetoric of emancipation. Karl Marx, a great admirer of the Jacobins, becomes for Mahoney a crucial part of the genealogy of modern ideology. Marx's thought is at the root of many of our modern ideological movements, and Mahoney describes Marx's atheistic historicism as "a gnostic revolt against reality." Indeed, Marx believed that human nature could be remade through revolutionary struggle. Yet his vision of heaven on earth brought hell to the tens of millions who suffered and lost their lives to Communist regimes in the 20th century.

As an alternative to ideology, Mahoney invokes the witness of Solzhenitsyn, whose moral and literary authority looms large throughout the book. Shaped by his experience in the Soviet labor camps, Solzhenitsyn understood that the "line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being" and that evil cannot be localized in any one group. The central insight of his final message to his fellow Soviets before his exile in 1974—"Let the lie come into the world, even let it triumph. But not through me"—is echoed throughout Mahoney's work. The first and most important act of resistance to the ideological lie is personal, Mahoney urges. We "must begin at the beginning—the personal decision not to live by lies," he exhorts. "From that wise and liberating decision, all else will flow." *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie* is a call to moral resistance—not through violence or utopian dreaming, but through fidelity to truth, gratitude for inherited wisdom, and reverence for the moral order of creation. It is a call for the renewal of what Mahoney calls "self-critical patriotism," a posture that is grateful for the Western inheritance, committed to its moral revitalization, and sober-minded about the limits of politics.

In a final chapter, Mahoney turns his attention briefly to his fellow conservatives, warning that they are not immune to the temptation of the ideological lie. "To the so-called New Right," he writes, "I caution against the urge to latch on to something superficially new, vital, and exciting at the expense of jettisoning the classical and Christian wisdom of old." There is, he notes, a troubling attraction among some young men to Nietzschean rhetoric, which flatters the imagination with visions of aristocratic strength and spiritual superiority. But this is merely the mirror image of leftist ideology, the same will to power dressed in different robes. If we are to refuse to live by lies, Mahoney suggests all too briefly, then we must also tell the truth to the ideologues on our right.

The alternative to ideology, he insists, is not nostalgia or political passivity, but a recovery of what Russell Kirk once called "the permanent things"—those enduring truths rooted in human nature, divine revelation, and philosophical reflection. The proper response to modern ideology is to recover the moral and spiritual foundations of Western civilization, resolve to live in accordance with the laws of nature and of nature's God, and refuse to listen to the siren songs of utopia and despair.

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