Review of: *Intellectual Morons: How Ideology Makes Smart People Fall for Stupid Ideas*, by Daniel J. Flynn New York City: Crown Forum, 202 pp.

Daniel Flynn, author of *Why the Left Hates America*, has written an entertaining new book about a number of influential intellectuals who, he believes, were led by ideology to say and do moronic things. His thesis—not necessarily a shocking one—is that ideologues subordinate common sense and observation to their worldviews. As he puts it (p. 1):

It doesn’t matter how smart you are if you don’t use your mind. Ideologues forego independent judgment in favor of having their views handed to them. To succumb to ideology is to put your brain on autopilot. Ideology preordains your reaction to issues, ideas, and people, your view of politics, philosophy, economics, and history. For the true believer, ideology is the Rosetta Stone of everything. It provides stock answers, conditions responses, and delivers one-size-fits-all explanations for complex political and cultural questions.

Excessive devotion to ideology is bad, whether it is leftist or rightist ideology.

Flynn’s view of true believers clearly owes much to the social theorist Eric Hoffer (1902-1983), whom he briefly discusses. The people he skewers are a wide variety of ideological gurus, including Herbert Marcuse, Alfred Kinsey, Paul Ehrlich, Peter Singer, Rigoberta Menchú, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Leo Strauss, Margaret Sanger, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alger Hiss, Ayn Rand, Betty Friedan, and the postmodernist icons Jacques Derrida and Michel Foulcault. His critiques represent a mélange of intellectual approaches: analyses of ideas, reviews of historical consequences, and (it must be said) *ad hominem* considerations of lives and lifestyles. The results are mixed.

An example of broadly effective criticism is the discussion of Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse (1898-1979) was originally a member of the Frankfurt School of social theorists, a group of leftist German intellectuals associated with the Institute of Social Research established in 1923 (during the Weimar Republic). These thinkers were heavily influenced by Marx and Freud, developing a kind of unorthodox Cultural Marxism, but they still tended to remain loyal to the Communist Party. In 1934, Marcuse fled from Germany to Columbia University. He worked for the U.S. government from 1941 to the early 1950s, when he returned to academia, staying at Brandeis from 1954 until 1965, when he moved to the University of California, San Diego, for the rest of his career.

His 1955 book *Eros and Civilization* sketched his vision of utopia, a non-repressive civilization of polymorphous love and work freed from all alienation—an environment in which, as he thought, creativity was bound to flourish. His 1964 work *One-Dimensional Man* criticized advanced capitalist society (read: the U.S., i.e., the very country in which he himself had taken refuge). These books made him the guru of the sixties counterculture generally and the New Left specifically. Marcuse (and the New Left) rejected Soviet Communism, but held on to Marxism as a tool to attack the U.S. system. Marcuse’s writings of the sixties and seventies elaborated the New Left ideology.

Marcuse and his New Left followers—alas, many of them now tenured professors—rejected free market economics, even in the face of the manifest prosperity of capitalist countries (including their working classes), and the manifest poverty of communist countries (ditto). They exalted the Viet Cong and other “liberation” movements, which oppressed and butchered millions. They denigrated work, marriage, and other such “repressive” features of society. They rejected freedom of speech and tolerance for anybody and any ideas to their right politically. They pined for revolution by some kind of disaffected “victimized” group, in the face of the clear identification of the working class with American society. (When the New Left students marched, their most antagonistic opponents were the hard hats.) To the end, Marcuse and the New Left remained true worshipers in the High Church of Marxism.

Flynn’s treatment of Marcuse is convincing, because he shows how an ideology can dictate absurd views. Marcuse, along with so many others, early on became a devout Marxist. Upon coming to America, he saw things which clearly refuted the classical Marxist analysis of capitalism, and what he had learned about the Soviet Union refuted Marxist predictions about a workers’ paradise. Now, the theory of cognitive dissonance (put forward by the psychologist Leon Festinger in the mid 1950s and well confirmed ever since) tells us that faced with a contradiction between what he sees and his basic beliefs, a person will respond in one of two different ways. Sometimes he will just drop the inconsistent beliefs—many people abandoned Marxism as they saw the results. But sometimes he will try to resolve the inconsistency by re-characterizing or discounting what he sees to make it square with his cherished beliefs. Thus Marcuse denigrated the tremendous freedom and prosperity he saw so that he could reconcile it with his Marxist faith. How horrible to be a true believer in Marxism, force to live in La Jolla!

An example of ineffective criticism is Flynn’s discussion of Margaret Sanger. Sanger (1879-1966), nee Higgins, was born into a poor, large Irish Catholic family, with a socialist father and a devoutly Christian mother. She chose her father’s faith and became, with her husband, William Sanger, a committed labor activist. A nurse, she published articles advocating birth control; when the government banned the articles, she started her own newspaper, *The Woman Rebel,* then (in 1916) the first birth-control clinic, and another journal, *The Birth Control Review*. She later founded Planned Parenthood.

Sanger came to advocate very radical ideas, from terrorizing the ultra wealthy to forced sterilization for eugenic purposes. By the mid 1930s, she viewed eugenics as an essential part of the birth-control movement. Indeed, she wanted to segregate “dysgenic” groups (the chronically poor, the retarded, drug addicts, criminals, and even epileptics) on government farms. And she apparently had a racist side, writing that aboriginal Australians were barely superior to chimps and that Jews and Italians were prone to insanity and feeble-mindedness. She had a peculiar passion for the practice of birth control by blacks. To all this Flynn hastens to add details of her adulterous private life and neglectful parenting.

But none of this analysis is compelling. He admits that Sanger genuinely believed in making contraception legal—though curiously, he doesn’t say much about the laws against it. And it seems clear that her commitment to legal and readily available contraception—the belief for which she is honored today—grew more out of her personal history than out of her socialist or other ideology. Indeed, it is hard to see what ideology she consistently held, as opposed to visceral values and prejudices. Now, Flynn makes it clear that he opposes all abortion; but most people in this country favor at least some form of it. Are they socialists or proto-fascists, too?

This brings up several problems with Flynn’s book. First, some of his analyses are strained. Consider his take on Leo Strauss (1899-1973), whom he ties to the current war in Iraq. From the perspective of academic philosophy, I think it’s fair to say that Strauss is a minor figure. And while Strauss seems to have influenced some political philosophers and other scholars, some of whom became “neo-conservatives,” including a few advisors to the current Bush administration, I see scant evidence that Straussian ideology played a major role in the decision to attack Iraq.

I’m not entirely clear what Flynn thinks Strauss’s ideology was—apparently some kind of secular gnosticism, in which people in the know see beneath the surface meaning of classical writings to apprehend the “true” meanings. But here Flynn seems to fall victim to ideological tendencies of his own: he is apparently so opposed to the war (perhaps rightly, perhaps not) that he maintains the unlikely position that the key decision-makers (Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld) somehow misread the evidence because of a Straussian desire to find hidden meanings contrary to the surface ones. I very much doubt that either Bush or Cheney or Rumsfeld ever heard of Strauss, much less has been given to gnostic impulses of any kind. It seems obvious that they viewed Iraq as a threat, in great part because of WMDs. You might think they were deluded, foolish, or trigger happy, because of a hidden agenda (say, Bush’s hatred of Saddam arising from Saddam’s attempt to kill Bush the elder, or Cheney’s ties to Halliburton); or you might agree with them—but they clearly were convinced that Saddam had WMDs, as were most of the world’s intelligence agencies, along with all the major figures in the Clinton administration, not to mention Mubarak, Putin, and so on. There is plenty of reason to criticize the war without dragging poor old Leo Strauss into it.

The case of Ayn Rand (1905-1982) brings up a second problem, namely, lack of proportionality. The harm done to freedom of speech by the noxious notions of Marcuse (such as “repressive tolerance”) is considerable, as any student or untenured professor who has been victimized by the ubiquitous campus PC police can attest. But even if Rand had been—as Flynn alleges—an egotistical adulteress, so what? Have Randian true believers attempted to silence people on campus or anywhere else? Have Randians fought to establish or support totalitarian states? Moreover, even if we assume that it was Rand’s ideology (which I take to be a kind of hyperbolic ethical egoism) as opposed to common lust that led her to have an affair with an associate, the degree of harm pales beside the harm caused by the eugenics movement supported so vociferously by Margaret Sanger.

And here’s the biggest problem with Flynn’s book. Since he nowhere precisely analyzes what an “ideology” is, I take him to hold the common view that an ideology is a set of beliefs that underlies a political, economic, or other system. The problem is, Flynn doesn’t clearly distinguish the influence of ideology from the influence of other mental causes. How do we know when it is a person’s ideology that is driving his actions, as opposed to simple but powerful emotions such as envy, hatred, lust, or pity? Are Gore Vidal’s continuing attacks on America (its people, values, dominant religion, leaders, etc.) really a product of some socio-economic ideology, or simply a product of hatred?

Again, how can we tell the difference between actions arising from ideology and actions arising from mere self-interest? It seems quite possible that Rigoberta Menchú was agitated as much by a desire for fame as she was by a revolutionary agenda, when she fabricated much of her autobiography. Indeed, how does ideology differ from shtick, i.e., outrageous actions and hyperbolic rhetoric, performed for the sake notoriety? A Noam Chomsky (on the Left) and an Ann Coulter (on the Right) sell enormous numbers of books and collect enormous speaking fees precisely because they are provocative.

Flynn would have done well to remember the Great Shtick-Meister Nietzsche’s idea that we are all very limited in the discernment of real motives. It is hard for a person to tell whether he acts out of a real commitment to eternal verities, or merely out of his unconscious lust and greed. It is even harder for him to discern the true motives of another.

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