

Can Truth Ever Win Out?

by John Adam Moreau

The Persistence of the Ideological Lie: The Totalitarian Impulse Then and Now, Daniel J. Mahoney, Encounter Books, 2025, pp. 139, \$29.99 hardcover.

After the death of George Floyd in 2020, writes Daniel J. Mahoney, there was a “collective nervous breakdown” in America accompanied by dazed thinking, a near insanity. “Grown-ups,” he says, “took their bearings from eighteen-year-olds repeating mindless and extreme slogans and seeing “systemic” violence and mass killing against black Americans where they didn’t exist.” In the cockamamie world of these know-nothings a slitting finger is drawn across the throat of those who believe that in a sane society “citizens debate and deliberate, sometimes contentiously but never violently, about matters of public import.”

Mahoney’s depiction of 2020 is exemplary of the stark, vivid, memorable prose in *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie*, which lays out a distinct treatment of the we’ve-gone-off-the-rails kind of look at the present. The ideological lie is the assertion that totalitarianism can remake man and society. To do so totalitarianism must destroy the traditional

concepts of virtue and vice, good and evil, sin and imperfection. Blame for problems and ill deeds rests on who you are not on what you have done. Totalitarianism has a “culture of hate.”

“What is involved,” Mahoney said in an interview with me, “is a comprehensive rejection of old standards. This view dismisses the idea of constructive argument. Constructive argument is disparaged because it is an obstacle to fixing things for the better once and for all.”

Also apparently unique is Mahoney’s portrayal of the Great Refusal. This is the creed that there is no natural order of things and that the code of the day must be ingratitude so far as received wisdom is concerned. Adherents of the Great Refusal live in an imaginary Second Reality, a term Mahoney borrows from the German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-1985). He tells us that Voegelin thought deeply about the totalitarian impulse, dating it from 1789, Robespierre and the Terror.

In the Second Reality, says Mahoney in summing up Voegelin, there is a “meta-physically mad” effort to replace human nature and the human condition with a deeply destructive other reality. The Great Refusal, says Mahoney, is in bed with a cult that repudiates what has been considered wise and worthy. The richness of the Western tradition is not cherished.

Mahoney is professor emeritus at Assumption University, senior fellow at Claremont Institute, senior visiting fellow at Hillsdale College, senior writer at *Law and Liberty* and executive editor of *Perspectives on Political Science*. Among a dozen books of his is the one previous to this work, the well-received prize-winning *The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage and Moderation*. He is now preparing a book on two of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s writings, *The Red Wheel* and *The Gulag Archipelago*. Mahoney says “these two great works expose the terrible scourge of ideological fanaticism in the twentieth century.”

The eloquent Mahoney unfurls for the reader the 1619 Project, wokeism, victimhood, Black Lives Matter, transgenderism, cancel culture, racialism, and the dictator-loving intellectuals in universities. In all of these realms, Mahoney writes, are found aspects of the impulse to tyranny. These aspects are 1. a perverse self-righteousness, 2. the notion that fanaticism is a virtue, 3. a “sickness of soul,” 4. an ignorance of human limits, 5. dishonesty about human history, 6. the contention that there is

no legitimate authority, only the boot of authoritarianism, 7. that there is no dignity in republican government, 8. the brief that intellectual tyranny and terror are superior to bourgeois democracy, 9. the blaming/shaming of groups, 10. virulent anger, 11. feverish self-loathing.

“There is wickedness in all these tenets,” Mahoney says, “because evil and failings are not put in the human heart and human acts but in the opposing group or groups.”

Mahoney gets to his wretched targets by talking about what he calls the Spirit of 1989, when the crackup of the Eastern Bloc began. The promise was that the ideological lie about how totalitarianism would deliver a Utopia had died and would stay buried. But the promise of 1989 has turned illusory, says Mahoney. He told me that,

Our society really blew it. Since 1989 almost no schools and almost no publications explain that the results of the ideological lie have been millions of deaths, economic ruin, wars against religion, crushing of free speech. I no longer am amazed how often I hear intelligent persons say Communism was good in theory but was not applied correctly. Although the 1619 project has been torn to pieces by sane and informed and intelligent people, the racialism in the 1619 project is alive. It is the most poisonous form of the ideological lie. That piece in *The New York Times Magazine* won a Pulitzer Prize, grew into a book, and has become common place course material throughout the land.

In *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie*, a cast of familiar figures takes the stage—Camus, Sowell, Orwell, Marx,

Newman, Arendt, John Paul II, Aristotle, Churchill, de Gaulle, Muggeridge, Shakespeare, Tocqueville, and others—each illumined in turn to clarify and deepen the book’s central thesis.

Two of these figures stand out in particular force for their penetrating analyses of the totalitarian impulse. One is Fyodor Dostoevsky, particularly with his novel *Demons*, in which Dostoevsky provides characters flush with the totalitarian temptation and, according to Mahoney, “are indeed carriers of demonic evil.” One character, Shigalov, insists that true freedom can only be found in “perfect despotism.” These characters, Mahoney explains, believe that everything “must be leveled since high aspiration, spiritual or intellectual, gives rise to dreaded inequalities. Human greatness, high and noble, and aspiration must be crushed and beaten out of the human soul. Slaves, we are told, need rulers, and egalitarianism demands despotism of an unprecedented variety.” Dostoevsky foresaw people like the Leninists, who took, as he puts it, “a road leading to nowhere.”

The other figure of particular importance to a discussion of totalitarianism is Solzhenitsyn, who Mahoney says gave us the term “ideological lie.” The Russian, says Mahoney, was “one of the most courageous and consequential witnesses of the twentieth century.” In *The Gulag Archipelago*, in *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, and elsewhere Solzhenitsyn’s brief was that Communism’s four things to be abolished—private property, the family, religion, and the na-

tion—are profoundly at odds with the nature and needs of human beings and the very structure of social and political reality. “Solzhenitsyn,” Mahoney writes, showed clearly that the goal to erase those four things was a great monstrosity.”

What the ideological lie did was to provide a justification for evil-doing and the evil-doer a justification for being steadfast in what he does. What Solzhenitsyn told the world is summarized by Mahoney this way:

Totalitarian ideology negates conscience and dismisses the moral law of which it is a dark reflection as an antiquated justification for class oppression, a tool of the forces of “privilege” and oppression.... In this grotesque transvaluation of value, whatever promotes world-transforming revolution is necessary and good, and whatever stands in its way is, by definition, retrograde and evil. The age-old distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, is replaced by the morally corrupt distinction between “progress” and “reaction.”

Mahoney’s lodestar in getting to what he sees as the core of the origin of the intellectual lie is a Hungarian-British polymath, Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) whose masterwork is *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Theory*. The clunky title notwithstanding, Mahoney is drawn to Polanyi’s notion of “moral inversion.” Here, says Mahoney, also praising an earlier Polanyi book, *The Logic of Liberty*, are the seeds of the totalitarian impulse explained, the ideological lie. What Polanyi-Mahoney say happened goes this way: In

the Enlightenment science was prime in the minds of men, men who hated religious fanaticism. There was a *salto mortale*, a deadly jump intended to force change. The inversion is that positivism and moral nihilism are to be preferred to customary morality and religion. Polanyi could be considered the richest section of *The Persistence*.

Mahoney's book is a stern endeavor. *The Persistence of the Ideological Lie* is tightly packed with people and ideas. There is a lot to take in. I count myself among readers who will say they found themselves in a heretofore unknown land, and I am glad to have gone there.

The reader can look forward to topics such as: Is American Exceptionalism dead? Will the woke triumph? Can our country be won back from the ideologues who disdain it? Will the ritual of self-loathing become the norm? Will we citizens truly understand that "political, intellectual, and religious liberty are the crucial preconditions for attaining truth?"

Mahoney writes:

This book aims to provide nothing less than a full-throated defense of moral and political sanity against the latest eruptions of ideological mendacity in our time... This book ... aims not only to repudiate repudiation and the widespread nihilism of our time but to affirm those enduring verities always worth affirming."

I believe he has succeeded in the task he had set for himself.

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