THE WEST'S GUILTY CONSCIENCE: SOURCES OF POLITICAL DEMORALIZATION

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Abstract:
Our lives are – to a considerable degree – shaped by the manipulation of such basic motivators as guilt, pity, desire, fear, lust, envy, anger, addiction, greed, and rage. The political world is also governed by powerful binding forces, such as belief and trust, that belong to the fiduciary life of a Western world originally shaped by the fine arts and philosophy of Greece, the architecture and law of Rome, and the faith, morality, and prophetic tradition of Judaism and Christianity. This article draws material from several previously published articles, including a series entitled "Pernicious Politics" published in December 2020 at Townhall Finance, "The Power of Vague Things" at The Market for Ideas (Nov.-Dec. 2019), and "Government Regulation, Part I", at The Western Australian Jurist (2013).

THE FIDUCIARY LIFE OF THE WORLD

In the shadow of the Great War and a flu pandemic, the poet Paul Valéry opened the first letter of his two-part English language essay, "*The Crisis of the Mind*" (1919), with a somber pronouncement: "*We later civilizations… we too now know that we are mortal*". Meditating on the disappearance of earlier civilizations, he observed:

> *We see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers*[1].

[1] Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valery*, vol. 10: *History and Politics*, ed. Jackson Mathews, Bollingen Series 45 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), 23.

Apart from this reminder of how much perishes by accident, the most searing lesson for Valéry was the paradoxical spectacle of great virtues and skills tumbling into the madness of self-destruction. The tree of knowledge had borne evil fruit. "With our own eyes, we have seen conscientious labor, the most solid learning, the most serious discipline and application applied to appalling ends".

> *So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues. Doubtless, much science was needed to kill so many, to waste so much property, annihilate so many cities in so short a time; but moral qualities in like numbers were also needed. Are Knowledge and Duty, then, suspect?*[2].

The entire sweep of Europe's cultural heritage had been rejiggered for wartime mobilization. During that intercontinental war, "the death agony of the European soul" summoned forth "the whole register of her memories, past acts, and ancestral attitudes" in a desperate defense of territories and resources. Now, in its aftermath, Valéry conjured up the West's guilty conscience: "an intellectual Hamlet, meditating on the life and death of truths" as his "terribly lucid mind" contemplated the darker, more dangerous "passage from war to peace"[3].

In 1919 Valéry was only then returning to his literary vocation after a long hiatus in both government and private service. Within six years he was elected to the French Academy. As a young man he had been inspired by the examples of Leonardo, Descartes, and Degas to make Intelligence – the latent powers of the conscious mind – the object of his ruminations. His fanciful creation and alter ego Monsieur Teste personified the methodical Mind: the "power of transformation" that combines or sets energies against each other to save time or increase "the power, precision, freedom, or length of our lives"[4].

[2] Ibid. 24.
[3] Ibid. 29.
[4] Ibid. 94-95.

Valéry offered the cold-eyed vision of an intellectually insolvent, post-Christian, postwar West: "What has made that disorder in the mind of Europe? The free coexistence, in all her cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and learning. That is characteristic of the *modern* epoch"[5]. He likened modernity to the jumble of cults and beliefs in Rome at the time of Trajan or Alexandria under the Ptolemies. Pitirim Sorokin later portrayed this disorder as the "chaotic syncretism" of a decaying materialist culture: "Western culture has ceased to be a selective organism. Instead, it has become a vast dumping place where everything is dumped, without restriction. It has lost its own physiognomy, its own soul, and its discriminative ability"[6].

Valéry endeavored to identify the qualities that had endowed Europe – a "little promontory" on the Asian continent – with pre-eminent power. He attributed its advantages to seemingly incompatible gifts:

> *a driving thirst, an ardent and disinterested curiosity, a happy mixture of imagination and rigorous logic, a certain unpessimistic skepticism, an unresigned mysticism… are the most specifically active characteristics of the European psyche*[7].

The chief determinant, he argued, was a "singular *physical* property: the most intense power of radiation combined with an equally intense power of assimilation" within an area that once included the whole Mediterranean littoral: "Everything came to Europe, and everything came from it". Rémi Brague, who cited a note to a later French edition of Valéry's essay, attributed this synthesis to a Roman fusion of Athens and Jerusalem: "Every race and every land that has been successively Romanized, Christianized, and submitted, in matters of spirit, to the discipline of the Greeks,

[5] Ibid. 27.
[6] Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age: The Social and Cultural Outlook* (New York: Dutton, 1941), 250.
[7] Valéry, 32-33.

is absolutely European"[8]. Valéry considered the consequences of the discipline required by Greek geometry as an example:

> *We see it gradually, very slowly but very surely, assuming such authority that all research, all the ways of acquiring knowledge tend invariably to borrow its rigorous procedure, its scrupulous economy of "matter" its automatic generalizations, its subtle methods, and that infinite discretion which authorizes the wildest audacity. Modern science was born of this education in the grand style*[9].

Valéry wrote that Europe's complex of cultural attributes and inventions became progressively richer "as thought gained possession of itself and had more confidence". He realized that "the whole social structure is founded on belief and trust". Only when we realize that "*power itself, which is ordinarily thought to result from force, is essentially a spiritual value*" do we "*glimpse into the fiduciary life of the world, founded on confidence in man and in the future*"[10].

Belief in the human word – fragile though it be – is "as indispensable to human beings as trust in the firmness of the ground", just as the rule of law relies more on moral force than a police force and, likewise, a free market tends to what Michael Polanyi and Friedrich Hayek called spontaneous order. Such customary expectations belong to the cumulated spiritual capital of the West, upon which civilization has been built and rebuilt from one generation to another.

David S. Landes later attributed this "European exceptionalism" to "an amalgam of classical legacy, Germanic tribal laws and customs, and what we now call the Judaic-Christian tradition", resulting – after the fall of Rome – in the rise or rediscovery of property, consent, divided powers, freedom, and hostility to

[8] Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 27.
[9] Valéry, 31, 34.
[10] Ibid. 106.

autocracy. Even before the Renaissance, the "invention of invention" during the Middle Ages awakened what Kenneth Minogue called the "genie of limitless human possibility"[11]. A symbiotic interaction of faith, trust, and enterprise encouraged the unprecedented release of ordinary people's creative energies. Landes added the refrain: "Literate mothers matter".

This multitude of integrated factors belongs to a largely hidden dimension of society that helps hold it together symbiotically rather than through force or fear. As Francis Fukuyama puts it in *Trust* (1995):

> *A strong and stable family structure and durable social institution cannot be legislated into existence the way a government can create a central bank or an army. A thriving civil society depends on a people's habits, customs, and ethics – attributes that can be shaped only indirectly through conscious political action and must otherwise be nourished through an increased awareness and respect for culture*[12].

What disturbed Valéry was a level of disorder and a sense of fatality – an inability to respond or take responsibility – that disrupts the ordinary calculations which enable both civil society and the thinking individual within it to thrive.

THE POSITIVIST MINDSET

By 1919 the scales that had once tipped in Europe's favor were shifting. Its technology could now be imitated and produced almost anywhere. This was presaged by the rise of ambitious new powers, such as Germany and Japan.

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[11] David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*, Norton, 1998) 33; Kenneth Minogue, *Politics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 48.

[12] Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 5.

> *Once born, once tested and proved by its practical applications, our science became a means of power, a means of physical domination, a creator of material wealth, an apparatus for exploiting the resources of the whole planet – ceasing to be an "end in itself" and an artistic activity. Knowledge, which was a consumer value, became an exchange value. The utility of knowledge made knowledge a commodity, no longer desired by a few distinguished amateurs but by Everybody*[13].

In "A Conquest by Method" (1897), Valéry wrote presciently about the prowess of the newly unified Germany. The much-admired scientific organization of its military, educational, and administrative apparatus was the harbinger of a series of power shifts[14]. Now in 1919, he considered the "diffusion of culture, and its acquisition by ever larger categories of individuals" and wondered whether it might inevitably bring on decadence. He concluded the first letter glumly:

> *By giving the name of progress to its own tendency to a fatal precision, the world is seeking to add to the benefits of life the advantages of death. A certain confusion still reigns; but in a little while all will be made clear, and we shall witness at last the miracle of an animal society, the perfect and ultimate anthill*[15].

"Democracy, the exploitation of the globe, and the general spread of technology", as he foresaw, were already diffusing "the European Mind – or at least its most precious content"[16]. Indeed, following the ravages of the Second World War and the rise of American power, Europe was gradually consigned to a more passive role while nursing a guilty conscience over the barbarism that twice had been unleashed. Pascal Bruckner describes the difference: "While America is a project, Europe is a sorrow…

[13] Valéry, 34.
[14] Ibid. 61.
[15] Ibid. 35, 30.
[16] Ibid. 36.

There is nothing more insidious than a collective guilt passed down from generation to generation"[17].

This trajectory has lately brought the world to an inflection point. Half a century ago the West began divesting itself of heavy industry and other manufacturing sectors, which migrated to the developing world, and then concentrated on the third industrial revolution. While the burgeoning high-tech sector may have helped win the Cold War, its innovations have intensified social disruptions aggravated by the rise of the administrative state to oversee a growing social service sector. It has been accompanied by parochial, "other-directed" corporate cultures uneasily superimposed on the existing nation-state grid, resulting in growing concentrations of wealth within major hubs of commerce and the gentrification of urban neighborhoods to house a tech-savvy Clerisy of intellectual workers. Unfortunately, the high-tech corporate world of credentialed and skillfully deployed professionals leaves little place for the creative idiosyncrasies of Valéry's "few distinguished amateurs". At the same time, it frustrates the prospects of increasingly large segments of the population in view of their own diminishing status.

Among the spillover effects of this third industrial revolution are new varieties of old economic and political forms of servility, utopian programs to remedy ordinary bad behavior acted out on ever-larger stages, competing demands for greater national sovereignty or global governance, and a hollowing out of customs and self-governing institutions. In addition, political calculations have been unsettled by such demographic challenges as aging populations in the postindustrial world, youth bulges in the developing world, and a growing culture of fear and political gaslighting over mounting security threats, political unrest, and lifestyle issues.

[17] Pascal Bruckner, "Europe's Guilty Conscience", *City Journal* (Summer 2010), https://www.city-journal.org/html/europe%E2%80%99s-guilty-conscience-13302.html.

Another consequence of the diffusion of culture has also borne out Valéry's fears: "*We have foolishly made force proportional to mass!*"[18]. European rivalries had already weakened its place in the world. Subsequently, the systematic theft, transfer, and imitation of technological innovations would aid the rise of China, Iran, and other rivals. The politicization of universities, the imposition of speech codes and a cancel culture, falling educational standards, and inattention to basic R&D have contributed to making America, in particular, less competent, less competitive, and less intellectually diverse. The contributions of information technology to intelligence gathering and increasingly sophisticated forms of surveillance are also bringing something like China's social credit system within reach.

In retrospect it is not difficult to imagine why Valéry concluded his second letter by asking: "have we some freedom against this threatening conspiracy of things?". The ordinary tendency to allow drift to shape events accounts for many of the consequences that followed. Yet Valéry also immediately added: "Perhaps in seeking that freedom we may create it"[19].

THE POSITIVIST MINDSET (OMIT)

The methodical conquest Paul Valéry had forecast in 1897 was realized in the total mobilization of all sides in the First World War. There followed a general political and cultural run on the bank in the 1920s that culminated in the Great Depression and almost universal peacetime experiments in economic and political regimentation. In "Politics of the Mind" (1932), he remarked: "we are blind and impotent, yet armed with knowledge and power, in a world we have organized and equipped, and whose inextricable complexity we now dread"[20].

[18] Valéry, 35.
[19] Ibid. 36.
[20] Ibid. 91.

Valéry regarded the social, judicial, and political worlds as essentially mythical – the products of "*a host of more or less venerable sentiments that all oddly intermingle and combine". Yet* it was against a reductionist, ideological cast of mind – dismissive of traditions and beliefs which cannot be tested empirically and confirmed – that he directed his disdain, both then and later:

> *The growth of the positivist mentality, a growth resulting, as you know, from the ever tighter organization of the world, where measurable things more and more dominate the scene, where the vagueness of vague things is more and more obvious. (…) the growth, as I said, of the positivist mentality is undermining the ancient foundations of society.*
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> *It must be acknowledged that our ruin has been hastened by the greatest minds (Voltaire, for example). Even in the sciences the task of criticism has proved singularly necessary and fruitful. The greatest minds are always skeptical minds.*
>
> *Yet they do believe in something; they believe in whatever makes them greater*[21]*.*

What perhaps troubled Valéry the most was the arrogant irresponsibility that substituted a shallow, manipulative, technocratic model of social engineering for the shared values, beliefs, and trust – the "social capital" – which bind society into functioning communities. As Francis Fukuyama later summarized in *Trust* (1995):

> *While governments can enact policies that have the effect of depleting social capital, they have great difficulties understanding how to build it up again*.
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> *(…) If the institutions of democracy and capitalism are to work properly, they must coexist with certain premodern cultural habits that ensure their proper functioning. Law contract, and economic rationality provide a necessary but not sufficient basis for both the stability and prosperity of postindustrial societies;*

[21] Ibid. 106.

> *they must be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty toward community, and trust, which are based on habit rather than rational calculation. The latter are not anachronisms but rather the sine qua non of the latter's success*[22].

Still later, Valéry saw that the "increasingly thorough and effective exploitation of natural energies" stimulated an appetite for excess that creates new needs. The increasing pace of work and change, the loss of inner leisure, and the dulling of people's sensibility were evidenced, he believed, "by our growing general indifference to ugliness and brutal sights".

> *In our present state of industrial civilization, it is as though having invented some substance, we should also, on the basis of its properties, invent an illness to be cured by it, a thirst to be appeased, a pain to be killed. So, for purposes of gain, we are inoculated with tastes and desires that have no roots in our deep physiological life but rather result from psychic or sensory stimuli deliberately inflicted. Modern man is drunk on waste. (…) All contemporary life is inseparable from these excesses. Our organism, subjected more and more to constantly new physical and chemical experiments, reacts to the forces and rhythms inflicted on it almost as it would to an insidious poison. It gets used to its poison, and soon craves it. Every day it finds the dose too little*[23].

Such urgency is a form of conditioning, arousing desires that bear us along toward a state of things "whose complexity, instability, and inherent disorder bewilder us, allowing us not the least foresight, taking away our ability to reason about the future.(…) All this necessarily reacts on the mind itself". Valéry recognized the political character of education. Programs and disciplines were designed to instill conformity. "Freedom of the mind is strictly subordinated to State doctrine… *The State shapes men to its own*

[22] Fukuyama, 11.
[23] Ibid. 140.

ends". He regarded "the exaggerated mania for regulations" as "a symptom of degeneration in our sense of responsibility"[24].

A similar intellectual arrogance toward the general electorate informed the Progressive movement in America. The journalist Walter Lippmann, the public relations specialist Edward Bernays, and the political scientist Harold Lasswell were prominent among those who showed how consent can be manufactured through the manipulation of public opinion. In 1969 the political theorist Sheldon Wolin critiqued the behaviorist school of American political science, represented by Lasswell among many others:

> *A wide variety of theories [now] exists for the political scientist to choose from. To call them political theories [in the behavioral manner] is, in the language of philosophy, top commit something like a category mistake. Systems theories, communications theories, and structural-functional theories are unpolitical theories. (…) They offer us no significant choice or critical analysis of the quality, direction, or fate of public life*[25].

THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE

Another critic of positivism, Michael Polanyi, paid homage to traditional crafts and skills as he pursued practical responses to the larger cultural crisis in a series of books. He believed the transmission of "indwelling" knowledge – a heritage – from one person to another, and one generation to another "must be predominantly tacit" and accepted on faith.

> *In order to share this indwelling, the pupil must presume that a teaching which appears meaningless to start with has in fact a meaning which can be discovered by hitting on the same kind of indwelling as the teacher is practicing. Such an effort is based on accepting the teacher's authority*[26].

[24] Ibid. 146, 144.
[25] David M. Ricci, *The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship, and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale, 1984), 149.
[26] Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967), 61.

Echoing a familiar Gospel passage about being humble and teachable like a child (Mark 9:36-37), Polanyi remarks in *The Tacit Dimension*:

> *Think of the amazing deployment of the infant mind. It is spurred by a blaze of confidence, surmising the hidden meaning of speech and adult behavior. This is how it grasps their meaning. And each new step can be achieved only by entrusting oneself to this extent to a teacher or leader. St. Augustine observed this, when he taught: "Unless you believe, you shall not understand"*[27].

Authority is personal and carries the presumption of virtue or skill. It can also provide a safeguard or resistance against the state-compelled conformity of which Valéry complained. Yves Simon defined it as "an active power, residing in a person and exercised through a command, that is through a practical judgment to be taken as a rule of conduct to the free-will of another person"[28]. To use the mimetic language of René Girard, authority resides in a person who originates or models something desirable and worthy of emulation, much as the Apostle Paul recommended in Phil. 3:17.

By contrast, the idea of man implied by modern politics is fragmented by a wide array of rival models and ideologies. An early critique of the field of political science by a respected practitioner – Floyd Matson's *The Broken Image* (1964) – effectively dismantles the mechanical model of man and society which still prevailed. In fact, Matson concluded the first part of his study by citing Michael Polanyi's analysis, which culminates in a summons to greatness – that is, to a vocation that requires "personal judgment involving responsibility; self-compulsion and independence of conscience; universal standards"[29].

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[27] Ibid. 61.
[28] Yves Simon, *Nature and Functions of Authority*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1940 (Milwaukee: Marquette, 1948), 6.
[29] Floyd W. Matson, *The Broken Image: Man, Science and Society* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966), 110.

Polanyi detected a source of reductionist thinking in the instability of the liberal revolutions of 1848:

> *The background of 1848 was the French Revolution, which had challenged an immemorial static order by proclaiming the right of society to perfect itself according to reason, and the liberalism of the nineteenth century fought for this aim and against this order. But when the appetitive conception of man denied the reality of moral motives in public life, the ideals of liberalism were inverted into the doctrines of modern totalitarianism. Liberalism had then to fight its way back to a position which had proved disastrously unstable in the light of modern philosophies*[30].

Traditional social institutions – to some degree – still regulate public mores but, being manifestly imperfect, they also make easy targets for cultural revolutionaries.

> *Unjust privileges prevailing in a free society can be reduced only by carefully graded stages; those who would demolish them overnight would erect greater injustices in their place. An absolute moral renewal of society can be attempted only by an absolute power which must inevitably destroy the moral life of man*[31].

Polanyi acknowledged that "this truth is unpalatable to our conscience". Rather than recoiling from the existing institutional framework, however, Polanyi recommended we draw an analogy between tolerating doubtful beliefs and paying "allegiance to a manifestly imperfect society, based on the acknowledgment that our duty lies in the service of ideals which we cannot possibly achieve"[32]. By contrast, the ideologue is averse to credit whoever or whatever is tainted by association.

Specialized intellectual passions such as scientific research "can survive only with the support of a society which respects the

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[30] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New Yortk: Harper, 1964 [1958]), 244.
[31] Ibid. 245.
[32] Ibid. 245.

values affirmed by these passions". Individual members of society may vary greatly in their level of interest, but "a society has a cultural life only to the extent to which it acknowledges and fulfills the obligation to lend its support to the cultivation of these passions"[33]. Imposing an ideological litmus test on society would cause both liberty and humanity to wither in its deadly embrace.

Polanyi recalls us instead to the foundational precepts of western civilization – to what properly belongs to human nature: OMIT– and where we fall short:

> *He is strong, noble and wonderful so long as he fears the voices of his firmament; but he dissolves their power over himself and his own powers gained through obeying them, if he turns back and examines what he respects in a detached manner. Then law is no more than what the courts will decide, art but an emollient of the nerves, morality but a convention, tradition but an inertia, God but a psychological necessity. Then man dominates a world in which he himself does not exist. For with his obligations he has lost his voice and his hope, and been left behind meaningless to himself*[34].

People's rights of life, liberty, and property forever hinge upon personal character and political courage.

IDEOLOGICAL STRAITJACKETS TURN CITIZENS INTO SUBJECTS

The reductive, ideological mentality of mass political movements – which typically take a therapeutic rather than a juridical view of besetting social problems – pose a threat to life, liberty, and property that has, if anything, grown more insidious. Our public disputes have become semantic minefields with everything hinging on connotation and context.

At the beginning of *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) the chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi recounted a conversation with

[33] Ibid. 203.
[34] Ibid. 380.

the soon-to-be purged Soviet theoretician Nikolai Bukharin in Moscow in 1935. Bukharin's contempt for scientific norms surprised him:

> *When I asked him about the pursuit of pure science in Soviet Russia, he said that pure science was a morbid symptom of a class society; under socialism the conception of science pursued for its own sake would disappear, for the interests of scientists would spontaneously turn to problems of the current Five-Year Plan*[35].

Polanyi was struck "that this denial of the very existence of independent scientific thought came from a socialist theory which derived its tremendous persuasive power from its claim to scientific certainty".

> *The scientific outlook appeared to have produced a mechanical conception of man and history in which there was no place for science itself. This conception denied altogether any intrinsic power of thought and thus denied any grounds for claiming freedom of thought*[36].

Powerful moral motives led adherents to accept an intellectual straitjacket as a token of allegiance. By paradoxically stipulating that "the mechanical course of history was to bring universal justice", the ideology conjured an atheistic proxy for the Christian doctrine of Providence that presupposed "the pre-existing harmony between scientific and social aims". Its radicalizing combination of scientific skepticism with moral perfectionism borrowed its social aspirations from Christianity even while attacking it. "Scientific skepticism would trust only material necessity for achieving universal brotherhood. Skepticism and utopianism had thus fused into a new skeptical fanaticism"[37].

The unscrupulous utilitarianism – Polanyi called it "moral inversion" – exhibited by this fanatical cult of power

[35] Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension,* 3.
[36] Ibid. 3-4.
[37] Ibid. 4.

"acknowledged no higher obligation than that of defending its own supremacy, which it must do at all costs. Those who rule in its name are entitled to scorn mercy and honesty, not simply for expediency, (…) but on account of their moral superiority over the emotionalism, hypocrisy, and general woolliness of their moralizing opponents"[38]. They exemplify "the vision of the anointed", as Thomas Sowell characterized it in his book title.

In *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), Polanyi described a moral and cultural crisis that is "most sharply manifest as a menace to all intellectual freedom based on the acceptance of a universal obligation to the truth". It arose "because the strictly limited nature of intellectual freedom had never been fully accepted by those who helped establish it" during the scientific revolution. The medieval system "was replaced by a society founded on general principles interpreted by public opinion". Truth was "to be built up on the foundations of critical reason alone". But this proved self-destructive. "They did not recognize that freedom cannot be conceived except in terms of particular obligations of conscience, the pursuit of which it permits and prescribes. (…) Freedom of thought meant in their view the rejection of any kind of traditional beliefs, including, it would appear now, those on which freedom itself is based"[39].

Polanyi took issue with an epistemology that leaves no place for the tacit dimension. Since moral questions and, by extension, a universal obligation to the truth are not "self-evident propositions", statements of value are typically culled from the "fact" category and consigned to the outer darkness of mere speculation. It is chilling to consider the implications for the survival of western traditions of limited government by consent and the rights of citizens:

> *In order that a society may be properly constituted there must be competent forces in existence to decide with ultimate power*

[38] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge,* 231.
[39] Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1964 [1946]), 74.

> *every controversial issue between two citizens. But if the citizens are dedicated to certain transcendent obligations and particularly to such general ideals as truth, justice, charity, and these are embodied in the tradition of the community to which allegiance is maintained, a great many issues between citizens, and all to some extent, can be left – and are necessarily left – for the individual consciences to decide. The moment, however, a community ceases to be dedicated through its members to transcendent ideals, it can continue to exist undisrupted only by submission to a single centre of unlimited secular power. Nor can citizens who have radically abandoned belief in spiritual realities – on the obligations to which their conscience would have been entitled and in duty bound to take a stand – raise any valid objection to being totally directed by the state. In fact their love of truth and justice turn then automatically, as I have shown, into love of state power*[40].

Michael Oakeshott's essay, "Rationalism in Politics", is especially useful in helping clarify the assumptions that underlie the cultural shift which has reshaped the moral and intellectual landscape in favor of a peremptory moral inversion, even nihilism. Following Polanyi's lead, Oakeshott distinguished two different sorts of knowledge: technical and practical. The first, technical knowledge, is "susceptible of precise formulation". As a means of distinguishing initiates into cults or professions, it may be deliberately esoteric. Here we meet again Valéry's positivist:

> *The Rationalist holds that the only element of knowledge involved in any human activity is technical knowledge. (…) The sovereignty of "reason", for the Rationalist, means the sovereignty of technique. The heart of the matter is the pre-occupation of the Rationalist with certainty*[41].

Practical knowledge, by contrast, exists only in use and requires mastery through guidance and practice. The "method by

40 Ibid. 78-79.

41 Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: LibertyPress, 1991), 15-16.

which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of formulated doctrine".

> *And if we consider it from this point of view, it would not, I think, be misleading to speak of it as traditional knowledge. In every activity this sort of knowledge is also involved; the mastery of any skill, the pursuit of any concrete activity is impossible without it. These two sorts of knowledge, then, distinguishable but inseparable, are the twin components of the knowledge involved in every sort of activity*[42].

The two types differ in how they are transmitted. Technical knowledge can be both taught and learned in the simplest sense. "On the other hand, practical knowledge – whether the artistry of a pianist, the style of a chess-player, or the judgment of a scientist – can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired".

Rationalism in Politics is characteristic of intellectuals whose thinking is formulaic and whose "cast of mind is gnostic"[43]. The ideologue attempts to divorce technical from practical knowledge in much the same way that the positivist divorces what can be verified empirically from what cannot. The result is a tendency to substitute abstractions and ideological prescriptions for practical solutions to intractable problems which may require reaching out to find convivial solutions.

Oakeshott attributed the uprooting of social and moral conventions to the intellectual arrogance of Rationalists – positivists, behaviorists, reductionists – who have "no sense of the cumulation of experience, only of the readiness of experience when it has been converted into a formula: the past is significant for him only as an encumbrance". Oakeshott refers to this as "idolatry". What has come to pass for "a higher morality is merely morality reduced to a technique, to be acquired by training in an

[42] Ibid. 12.
[43] Ibid. 40.

ideology rather than an education in behavior"[44]. Much of the Rationalist's "political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal, and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect"[45].

C. S. Lewis similarly wrote that "the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means… the power of some men to make other men what *they* please". It should be evident by now that the Enlightenment project to control nature through science has caught humanity into its dragnet, as well. As Lewis expresses it:

> *I am only making clear what Man's conquest of Nature really means and specially that final stage in the conquest, which, perhaps, is not far off. The final stage is come when man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself. Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man. The battle will be won. (…) But who, precisely, will have won it?*[46].

Thus people are reduced from citizens to subjects. Having begun by seeking liberty from a distant and intrusive Parliament, Americans now defer – often mockingly – to remote, ubiquitous, disputatious images of authority projected on a screen. As Oakeshott knew: It takes practical wisdom honed by experience and a sense of history to resist beguiling ideological snares that reduce reality to a slogan or a soundbite.

Let us direct a series of historical mirrors at our common problems to help free us from certain idols of the mind, as Francis Bacon called them. As Valéry understood, we have a penchant for idolatry; our problems are ultimately spiritual and perennial. It

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[44] Ibid. 6, 40.

[45] Ibid. 8.

[46] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 72.

helps to remind ourselves that "out of the heart come the issues of life", whether it is envy, slander, larceny, adultery, or murder – both individually and collectively.

THE MORAL HAZARD OF LEGAL PLUNDER

Following the Great Depression and the Second World War, Henry Hazlitt, the principal editorial writer on economics and finance for the *New York Times* from 1934 to 1946, wrote a book entitled *Economics in One Lesson*. The lesson is simply this: "The art of economics consists in looking not merely at the immediate but at the longer effects of any act or policy; it consists in tracing the consequences of that policy not merely for one group but for all groups". Beginning with "The Broken Window", Hazlitt took aim at many of the economic fallacies – what Frederic Bastiat called *Economic Sophisms* – that had been used to justify "capricious government intervention in business".

Bastiat was a mid-nineteenth century economist and member of the French National Assembly who brought clarity to "the dismal science". For example, he satirized the self-absorbed pettiness of so much interest group activity in "The Candlemakers' Petition", which proposed to block the sun's rays in view of the harm it inflicted upon their trade[47]. Just as powerful is Bastiat's argument in *The Law* in favor of a state of social and economic self-governance[48].

The Law begins with an expression of alarm: "The law perverted! And the police powers of the state perverted along with it!".

At the time Bastiat's essay was published in June 1850, the Revolution of 1848 was still in the air. Idealistic abstractions and

[47] http://bastiat.org/en/petition.html.

[48] The following quotations are taken from Frederic Bastiat, *The Law* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: The Foundation for Economic Education, 1998), https://fee.org/media/14951/thelaw.pdf.

political slogans – what Jacob Burckhardt called "clear but false ideas" – were on everybody's lips. The French monarchy fell that year and Louis Napoleon was elected president. Napoleon seized power outright three years later and briefly jailed Alexis de Tocqueville, a former cabinet official who had earlier written the classic of liberal political philosophy, *Democracy in America*. By then, Bastiat himself had died of tuberculosis. Tocqueville, who suffered from the same disease, was forcibly retired.

The Law expresses Bastiat's dismay that the world of political liberty had been turned upside down: "The law, I say, [is] not only turned from its proper purpose but made to follow an entirely contrary purpose! The law [has] become the weapon of every kind of greed!". The law, so to speak, had been conscripted into the service of those greedy for power. "Instead of checking crime, the law itself [is] guilty of the evils is supposed to punish!". It is the age-old problem: Who will guard the guardians?

A legal positivist or utilitarian defines law in terms of a human sovereign's power to control people. Bastiat instead makes a natural law argument rather than a utilitarian or consequentialist one: "[I]t was the fact that life, liberty, and property existed beforehand that caused men to make laws in the first place". Here the intellectual battle lines have been drawn.

> *We hold from God the gift which includes all others—physical, intellectual, and moral life. (…) The Creator of life has entrusted us with the responsibility of preserving, developing, and perfecting it. In order that we may accomplish this, He has provided us with a collection of marvelous faculties. And he has put us in the midst of a variety of natural resources. By the application of our faculties to these natural resources we convert them into products, and use them. This process is necessary in order that life may run its appointed course. Life, faculties, production — in other words, individuality, liberty, property — this is man. And in spite of the cunning of artful political leaders, these three gifts from God precede all human legislation, and are superior to it*.

Bastiat defines law very practically as "the collective organization of the individual right of lawful defense". More succinctly, it is organized justice. Its purpose is to substitute a common force for individual forces to protect God's gifts, maintain rights, and enable justice to reign. Bastiat then adds the proposition upon which his subsequent argument rests: If no individual can lawfully use force to destroy the rights of others, then the same principle applies to the common force. He thus argues from the lesser to the greater.

When the law exceeds its proper functions, it acts in direct opposition to its own objective, thus destroying itself and annihilating justice. It places "the collective force at the disposal of the unscrupulous who wish, without risk, to exploit the person, liberty, and property of others", converting plunder into a right and lawful defense into a crime. Greed and false philanthropy are what motivate people to do so.

Humanity has a common aspiration toward self-preservation and self-development: "if everyone enjoyed the unrestricted use of his faculties and the free disposition of the fruits of his labor, social progress would be ceaseless, uninterrupted, and unfailing". But history also bears witness to a fatal tendency of mankind: "When they can, they wish to live and prosper at the expense of others". This covetous and rivalrous sort of desire is the first root cause: greed.

Bastiat contrasts the origin of property with the origin of plunder. Property originates in the fact that "[m]an can live and satisfy his wants only… by the ceaseless application of his faculties to natural resources. (…) But it is also true", he continues, "that a man may live and satisfy his wants by seizing and consuming the products of the labor of others. This process is the origin of plunder". This is what one might expect the law and the sovereign state to prevent.

> *When, then, does plunder stop? It stops when it becomes more painful and more dangerous than labor. It is evident, then, that*

> *the proper purpose of law is to use the power of its collective force to stop this fatal tendency to plunder instead of to work. But since the law is made by men and since law cannot operate without the sanction and support of a dominating force, this force must be entrusted to those who make the laws*.

This necessity, combined with the fatal tendency in the heart of man, "explains the almost universal perversion of the law. Thus it is easy to understand how law, instead of checking injustice, becomes the invincible weapon of injustice". Bastiat calls the result *legal plunder*. What, in turn, further weaponizes legal plunder is "the seductive lure of socialism" to make the law "philanthropic", demanding that "the law should directly extend welfare, education, and morality throughout the nation".

Let us now see where the logic of Bastiat's argument impels us: "when plunder is organized by law for the profit of those who make the law, all the plundered classes seek to enter into the making of laws". Why? Either to stop the plunder, or to share in it. As socialism's coercive "philanthropy" becomes more widespread, "men seek to balance their conflicting interests by universal plunder". This should be understood as a subtle way of buying off political rivals while making them complicit in the plunder. Margaret Thatcher later slyly deflated its reputation for probity: "The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money".

MIMETICISM: CHOOSING OUR MODELS WISELY

To better understand the futile ways people react to partiality, oppression, and injustice it is useful to introduce the French literary scholar René Girard's concepts of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry, which he developed in the first chapter of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, among other places. Drawing on Scripture as well as the great novelists, Girard finds expressed in this literature a dynamic process that drives human motivation.

We seek what we desire. The political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, among others, called this desire "appetite". The accounts of Eve and Cain in Genesis 3-4 may be carefully read to see how desire is characterized and the consequences it can entail. Girard contends that desire takes the place of instinct in humans. Unlike an instinct, it is non-specific rather than predetermining. Its essence is have no essential goal. Instead, we borrow or learn our desires from other people, who model for us what is desirable through their desires. From infancy we derive our own desires through imitation. This is what Girard calls mimetic desire.

> *The only culture really ours is not that into which we are born; it is the culture whose models we imitate at the age when our power of assimilation is the greatest. If the desire of children were not mimetic, if they did not of necessity choose for models the human beings who surround them, humanity would have neither language nor culture. If desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human or what is divine*.
>
> *Mimetic desire enables us to escape from the animal realm. It is responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are a ransom of our freedom*[49].

Those discords are apt to arise when we desire or covet the same thing possessed and modeled by another, thus provoking mimetic rivalry that leads to persecution and scapegoating.

> *This rivalry, if not thwarted, would permanently endanger the harmony and even the survival of all human communities. Rivalristic desires are all the more overwhelming since they reinforce one another. The principle of reciprocal escalation and one-upmanship governs this type of conflict*[50].

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[49] René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lighting* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 15-16; See also René Girard, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 1-23.
[50] Ibid. 8-9.

Few circumstances are as harrowing as the eclipse of a society at war with itself. In the opening chapter of *The Scapegoat*, Girard cited a medieval account of a massacre of Jews accused of poisoning wells. Something is amiss in this tirade against the Jews. Hidden from view to contemporaries, the events actually coincided with the spread of the Black Death into the area.

In his analysis, Girard identifies "stereotypes of persecution", including accusations of such monstrous crimes as parricide, treason, and incest. Typically, the indulgence of such accusations, rightly understood, reveals the lies and coverups that conceal scapegoating and persecution[51]. Given the mimetic nature of desire, human relationships are fragile and easily bruised. Families and communities tend to protectively circle the wagons to fend off attacks. To keep the peace, blame may be redirected outside the immediate community, whether upon cross-border rivals, resident minorities, regional outliers, or marginal insiders, such as political or religious leaders. Ostracism is named after the ancient Athenian practice of exiling its (often) best leaders.

Girard makes an acute observation here: "Ethnic and religious minorities tend to polarize the majorities against themselves". He notes that few very societies "do not subject their minorities, all the poorly integrated or merely distinct groups, to certain forms of discrimination and even persecution"[52]. Yet there is an irony here. People are bothered less by visible difference than by an unsettling lack of difference. Thomas Sowell has noted that successful middleman minorities, who provide valuable but underappreciated services, have historically been subject to considerable envy and discrimination. At many times and places, clothing, yellow badges, hair braids, zoning, redlining, and other identifiers have been imposed in order to set apart the lower or undervalued orders of society, rendering their lives even more precarious.

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[51] See René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986).
[52] Ibid. 17.

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard tied mimetic desire directly to Biblical accounts, especially the Gospels. "The commandment that prohibits desiring the goods of one's neighbor attempts to resolve the number one problem of every human community: internal violence". Mimetic desire for the same object may spark envy and rivalry, threatening to spread a contagion of reprisals, especially in small or isolated social units. The one constant factor is the neighbor: "One always desires *whatever belongs to that one*, the neighbor". It is the neighbor who gives it value[53].

The Bible discloses how vulnerable people are to addictive criminal, subversive, or tyrannical temptations. Although we ordinarily seek to bask in the glory of this world, it is "a glory that multiplies scandals as it makes its way". What Girard calls "the double idolatry of self and other" is the "principal source of human violence" and tends to contaminate third parties "who are just as addicted as we are to the entanglements of mimetic rivalries". The consequences are of biblical proportions: "Mimetic rivalries can become so intense that the rivals denigrate each other, steal the other's possessions, seduce the other's spouse, and, finally, they even go as far as murder"[54]. This reverse sequence illustrates the integrated character of the Decalogue and the Golden Rule.

By revealing the scapegoat mechanisms that divide and rule over human society, Girard contends that the Bible uniquely and unsparingly tells the truth about the clay feet and even the crimes upon which human institutions are founded.

> *"Woe to the one by whom scandal comes!". Jesus reserves his most solemn warning for the adults who seduce children into the infernal prison of scandal. The more the imitation is innocent and trusting, the more the one who imitates is easily scandalized, and the more the seducer is guilty of abusing this innocence*[55].

[53] Girard, *Satan,* 9.
[54] Ibid. 11.
[55] Ibid. 17.

Hobbes recognized much the same reality – focusing instead on the potential for anyone to treacherously kill anyone else. He regarded it as a consequence of human equality in a pre-political "state of nature", characterized as a state of war "of every man, against every man". René Girard used the term mimetic contagion to describe this unfortunate condition, noting that violence is often purged only through an act of sacrifice, as when a scapegoat is identified, accused, and cast out. Similarly, what Bastiat called legal plunder creates resentments that may lead to universal plunder. Echoing Edmund Burke, former Speaker of the House Robert Winthrop declared: "men… must necessarily be controlled, either by a power within them, or a power without them; either by the Word of God, or the strong arm of man; either by the Bible, or by the bayonet"[56].

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

A study of the Declaration of Independence and the other American founding documents should lead us to reflect upon something remarkable: Whence came this idea of unalienable rights? It begins with the creation of man in the image of God. It runs as a thread through the history of western law generally and English law specifically — from St. Patrick to King Alfred to Magna Carta and the Petition of Right. The Founders cited the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" as the justification for dissolving the political bands that had, until that moment, connected them to the English Crown. Vishal Mangalwadi calls the Bible *The Book That Made Your World*.

Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders believed in the rule of law under God, as may be seen in a careful reading of the American Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to

[56] Robert C. Winthrop, *Addresses and Speeches on Various Occasions* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1852), 172, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa&cc=moa&view=text&rgn=main&idno=AAN2934.0001.001.

be self-evident, that all men created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". The word "unalienable" means that these rights belong to everybody individually. They cannot be permanently given away, sold, or transferred to some collective entity such as a group, a political party, or the State.

The story of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21) dramatizes both Rene Girard's concept of mimetic rivalry and Frederic Bastiat's critique of legal plunder. It should be read with the word "unalienable" in mind. Naboth held stewardship over the property God had given his ancestors, as established by law in Leviticus 25. Just as the vineyard had been passed down to him, Naboth, in turn, held it in trust for his heirs. Under the Mosaic inheritance law (Lev. 25:10, 23), it was unlawful for landed property to be permanently given away, sold, or transferred to another tribe.

The reason for such restrictions on the conveyance of real estate within the Promised Land had to do with the peculiar relationship between the people of Israel and the God who had chosen them and then, after a period of slavery in Egypt, rescued them from bondage and established a covenant relationship with them. It is a story of repeated testing, infidelity, alienation, bondage, exile, redemption, restoration, and the transforming power of truth.

To understand the relevance of this story to the subject of public policy, we need to first recognize that Leviticus 25 establishes the rule of law and a system of checks and balances regarding land tenure as an expression of this covenant relationship and in order to protect specifically against oppression and injustice. It operated as a law of the land. We see this pattern most dramatically in the book of Exodus, repeatedly in the writings of the prophets, and continuing into the New Testament era. As the Apostle Paul summarized in Romans 8:38-39, "nothing can separate [or alienate] us from the love of God". God redeemed His people from bondage and established a comprehensive system to instruct the people, construct a community, and administer justice.

The larger context of the story of Naboth's vineyard is the reign of an idolatrous king of Israel, Ahab, and his treacherous wife Jezebel. Beginning in 1 Kings 16, the biblical narrative covers a series of events that begin inauspiciously with spiritual adultery and human sacrifice – indicative of the resurgence of pagan fertility cults.

Once the stage has been set, the Naboth pericope (1 Kings 21) begins with a covetous Ahab who wishes to purchase the vineyard. This is forbidden under Leviticus 25, so Naboth sternly rejects the offer. Afterward Jezebel finds the king in a sullen mood, pouting. Here the words of the Apostle Paul are especially helpful to understand the dynamic that is at work: "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet". But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Rom. 7:7-9).

What does this mean in practice? Ahab's unfaithfulness to the laws of God had already been clearly illustrated by this time beginning in 1 Kings 18. Now Ahab's covetousness sets into motion a tragic series of events. When his efforts to persuade Naboth to break the law fail, sin rears up in the heart of his duplicitous queen. Jezebel usurps her husband's authority and even misuses his seal to instruct the city fathers to honor Naboth with a banquet while arranging to have him falsely accused of blasphemy. For their part, the city fathers conspire with her to slander an innocent man. The logic of cronyism forges bonds of complicity. Naboth is hustled out and stoned to death. Sin reproduces, multiplies, and fills the land: a good description of Girard's mimetic contagion. The story culminates nearly a generation later with the outworking of God's judgment upon the royal house. This story is both a byword and a microcosm of the despotism and oppression that stains the pages of history.

Returning to the property laws in Leviticus 25 it should be clear that, even in a case where someone should sell himself into servitude, Biblical law provides no reason to suppose it is a heritable status that may be passed down through the generations. The institution of chattel slavery has no basis in the Bible. The year of Jubilee proclaimed in the same chapter might, to use James Madison's language, be described as an auxiliary precaution against such an interpretation. This provision was clearly designed to restore liberties and property that had in fact been previously alienated. The grip of slavery as an institution was broken through the Bible's cultural influence.

Within the Israelite regime we may discern a constitutional rule of law and a system of divided and limited power that later influenced the English common law and American constitutional systems. The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia is inscribed with words from Leviticus 25:10 that evoke the Jubilee: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof". The redemption and emancipation of captives and slaves – along with judgments against the oppression of widows, orphans, and strangers – is a theme that runs through the Bible into subsequent history.

In more recent times, the challenges are perhaps more likely to come as much from rent-seeking – controlling access to public goods, which may extend to include specifying acceptable opinions or schools of thought – as from the high-handed disregard of the law exhibited by Ahab and Jezebel. The danger is that the practice of rent-seeking has been rationalized and universalized into a system, as Bastiat noted when he equated socialism with legal plunder. By favoring group identity politics, our pernicious political rent-seeking has helped break down constitutional safeguards that protect individual rights. Indeed, property rights were divorced from human rights by Progressives more than a century ago.

POLITICAL MORALISM LEADS TO DESPOTISM

A brief book entitled *Politics: A Very Short Introduction* by Kenneth Minogue explores the changing scope and character of politics by tracing its history through its classical, medieval, and modern stages of development as analyzed by a handful of great political thinkers. The book is a succinct commentary and critique of the ever-expanding scope of politics. The ancient Greeks understood politics (from *polis*, meaning "city-state") as a system of collective citizen participation in public affairs. It is contrasted with despotism (from *despotes*, meaning "master"), a centralized system of magisterial rule over subjects or slaves. Historically,

> *Politics has been the business of the powerful: citizens, nobles, property-owners, patriarchs – all had power and status. It was essential to the idea of the state, in all its forms, that it should be an association of independent disposers of their own resources. The rights of this élite were, over the centuries, generalized to become the modern rights of universal citizenship, but they first became operational as the status enjoyed by the powerful few. It was precisely because the state was composed of masterful characters that it could not turn into a despotism. Having projects of their own, powerful individuals of this kind had no inclination whatever to become the instruments of someone else's project*[57].

Beginning with Magna Carta, powerful leaders have established strict constitutional limitations to contain the zero-sum games associated with René Girard's mimetic rivalry because this "theater of envy" otherwise generates a politics of legal plunder and class legislation that embodies a Nietzschean "will to power". St. Augustine observed this same *libido dominandi* [lust to rule] in ancient times. Thomas Hobbes argued that political

[57] Minogue, 112.

conflict results from people grasping for advantage – due to scarcity, distrust, or a passion for glory. This description suggests a paraphrase of Parkinson's Law about work: "Politics expands to fill whatever medium (or receptacle) is available to it". It is unlimited and imperialistic in character.

Political actors have a natural desire to simplify collective life and reduce its unpredictability by asserting greater control over any marginal factors that might deflect them from their goals. Thus politics – individually and collectively – oscillates between a grasping for ever-greater power and pushback against those who might gain the upper hand. This resembles the lawless state of nature that Hobbes described: "From this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him". Hobbes believed that only a powerful state could control such endless strife.

Shakespeare wrote that "all the world is a stage". Our quarrels tend to concern who writes the script or who directs the play. Politics prospectively gives voice to all individuals, groups, and interests within a civil society. Yet a flourishing civil society is a rare achievement. Independent voices are easily muted by fear, silenced by derision, or ignored as unnewsworthy. Despotism is history's default position. Although the Athenians prided themselves in their self-government, they struggled with home-grown tyrants, plundered their own allies, and persecuted principled critics like Socrates.

For the reader's convenience, Minogue simplifies his "pure theory of ideology", which tracks the Marxist model. "The first stage reveals to us that the past is the history of the *oppression* of some abstract class of person"[58]. Ideologies typically feature a taxonomy of oppressors ("them") and victims ("us"). While mobilizing the oppressed class to struggle against the system, an

[58] Ibid. 107.

ideology tends to harden into a militant secular religion that offers a comprehensive explanation of the world while imposing intellectual straitjackets of political correctness on their devotees. Instead of attaining a fully just society, liberation usually means exchanging masters. In *Leftism* (1974), Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn warned that the us-ness of modern "identitarian" politics is especially conducive to the despotic temptation.

Minogue's discussion of despotism and politics comes full circle in the present day to a Hegelian synthesis of the two. Political moralism, as he calls it,

> *takes the independence of citizens not as a guarantee of freedom but as a barrier to the project of moralizing the world. Independent individuals disposing of their own property as they please are identified with selfishness and taken to be the cause of poverty. A socially just world is thought to require a rational distribution of the goods which pour so abundantly forth in a modern society. But states whose constitutional authority is limited to ruling by law are imperfect instruments for the immense task of rational distribution, and of the resulting necessity of rectifying the attitudes on which injustice is founded. The entity called "the state" could, however, become adequate to this formidable task if it were to change its character. And this character does in fact tend to change with every access of central power to dispose of the wealth an economy generates*.

The ranks of independent disposers of their own resources have been depleted in face of the voracious administrative state that reduces all to a state of dependency. Edward S. Corwin once distinguished the original Constitution of Rights from a wartime Constitution of Powers superimposed upon it. As Robert Higgs shows in *Crisis and Leviathan* (1987), constitutional limitations today are just as likely to be sacrificed to domestic crusades. Further, as Zachariah Montgomery showed more than a century ago in *Poison Drops in the Federal Senate* (1886), the ability to disguise innovations and amass power by redefining our

constitutional language is a great boon to policy entrepreneurs. The paradoxes that concerned Paul Valéry a century earlier have now reached a point of contradiction, as Minogue demonstrates:

> *Modern politics is thus generating a remarkable dilemma. Moralizing the human condition is only possible if we can make the world correspond to some conception of social justice. But it turns out that we can only transcend the inequalities of the past if we institute precisely the form of social order – a despotism – which Western civilization has immemorially found incompatible with its free and independent customs. The promise is justice, the price is freedom*[59].

CONCLUSION

Alexis de Tocqueville and Francis Lieber left us early warnings against "democratic despotism" and "Rousseauism". Michael Polanyi, Michael Oakeshott, Eric Voegelin, Thomas Sowell, Gerhart Niemeyer, and Roger Scruton made similar diagnoses in more recent decades. Sophisticated gaslighting tactics may be used to instill fear and unsettle people's critical faculties. An implicit lesson of Bastiat's concept of universal plunder is that even long-established, ordinary political tactics – such as the practice of trading votes known as logrolling – may be used to compromise supporters of limited government as the price for getting business done. It is easier to manipulate people once you get them to violate their consciences. As David Chilton put it: "Guilt produces *passivity*, and makes a man *programmed for defeat*"[60].

Political moralism and similar moral inversions associated with Fabian socialism and various totalitarian ideologies thrive on a disregard for constitutional restraints. Extorting the cooperation

[59] Ibid. 113.
[60] See David Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1981).

of public officials, as illustrated by their role in the unjust taking of Naboth's vineyard, exemplifies the moral hazard that an unscrupulous utilitarianism entails.

The political class displays a missionary zeal for correcting historical imbalances while remaining self-interestedly secure in the protective coloring and privileges of power. Our universities and media channel Herbert Marcuse's "repressive tolerance" as they determinedly purge views, values, and speakers that run contrary to the new orthodoxies. As Minogue put it: "When social justice meets political correctness, the old liberal idea that relations between individuals are a purely personal matter is overridden. There is a right thing to do, and the state will make sure it is done"[61].

Our lives are – to a considerable degree – shaped by the manipulation of such basic motivators as guilt, pity, desire, fear, lust, jealousy, resentment, hatred, envy, anger, addiction, greed, and rage. "Europe is not aging gracefully", as Bruckner has put it. "Brooding over past crimes (slavery, imperialism, fascism, communism), Europe sees its history as a series of murders and depredations that culminated in two global conflicts"[62]. Even so, the political world is also governed by powerful binding forces, such as belief and trust, that belong to the fiduciary life of a Western world originally shaped by the fine arts and philosophy of Greece, the architecture and law of Rome, and the faith, morality, and prophetic tradition of Judaism and Christianity.

The West's guilty conscience is creating what Roger Scruton called a "culture of repudiation" that rejects its moral and spiritual foundations, root and branch, in an identitarian confession of collective guilt[63]. By alleging a false moral equivalency with the

[61] Kenneth Minogue, *The Servile Mind: How Democracy Erodes the Moral Life* (New York: Encounter, 2010), 129.
[62] Bruckner *op. cit.*
[63] Roger Scruton, *A Political Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006) 23-25; Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 68-83.

barbaric monsters the West vanquished or disgraced, its indignant progeny and heirs have chosen to treat its greatest assets – often perfected in adversity – as liabilities. It is an attitude that illustrates Scruton's culture of repudiation, Oakeshott's Rationalism, and Polanyi's moral inversion.

What has come to pass for "a higher morality", according to Oakeshott, "is merely morality reduced to a technique, to be acquired by training in an ideology rather than an education in behavior"[64].

> *Moral ideals are a sediment: they have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition, so long as they belong to a religious or a social life. The predicament of our time is that the Rationalists have been at work so long on their project of drawing off the liquid in which our moral ideals were suspended (and pouring it away as worthless) that we are left only with the dry and gritty residue which chokes us as we try to take it down. First, we do our best to destroy parental authority (because of its alleged abuse), then we sentimentally deplore the scarcity of "good homes", and we end by creating substitutes which complete the work of destruction*[65].

[64] Oakeshott, 40.
[65] Ibid. 41.