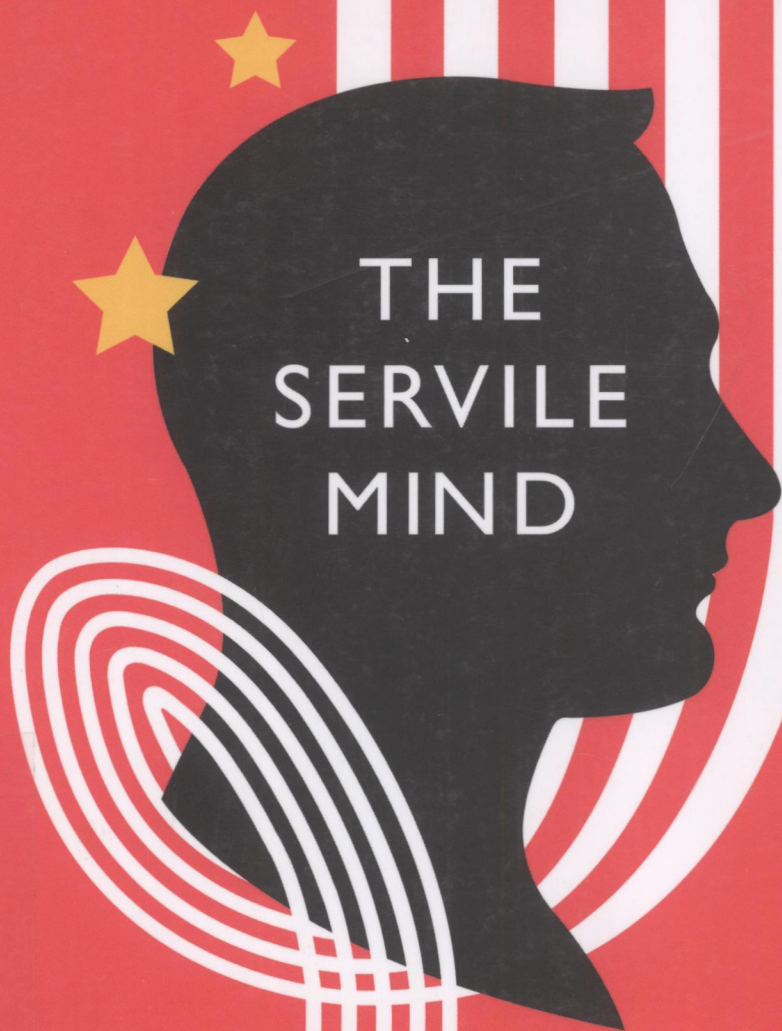


"This is probably the most important work of political and social analysis published in our time, that is, in the two decades since the end of the Cold War.... *The Servile Mind* is not only a book for our times. It is a profound and eloquent exposition of political and moral philosophy by a lifelong practitioner at the height of his powers."

—KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE, *Quadrant*

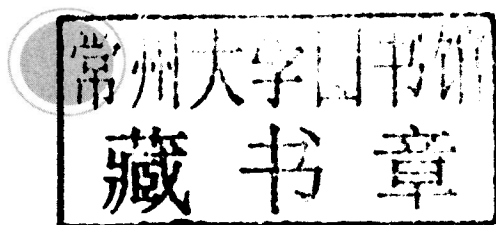
KENNETH MINOGUE



HOW DEMOCRACY
ERODES THE MORAL LIFE
WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

THE SERVILE MIND

**HOW DEMOCRACY ERODES
THE MORAL LIFE**



Kenneth Minogue

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Praise for *The Servile Mind*

"I have been sharpening my wits on Kenneth Minogue's prose for over half a century, and this latest book is as intellectually stimulating as his classic assault on liberalism all those years ago. For anyone who believes, as I do, that the contemporary political culture is profoundly sick, this is an original diagnosis of where it has gone wrong, and how it can be put to right. What is more, in spite of the seriousness of the subject, the writing is as clear as a bell. Don't miss it."

—Sir Peregrine Worsthorne

"This is a work of meticulous logic and vast erudition. It provides an invaluable resource for anyone who has wondered why European elites embarked upon their disastrous cultural revolution in pursuit of an abstract internationalist idealism, destroying in the process their intellectual and cultural heritage."

—David Martin Jones, Associate Professor, Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

"Can democracy survive in a nation of slaves? Aristotle thought not. But what if the slaves don't recognize their servile condition? Kenneth Minogue explores the many ways in which the citizens of the modern West have thoughtlessly exchanged independence of mind and body for government promises of security and harmony. The result is a topsy-turvy democracy where the rulers hold the people to account for their incorrect behavior and attitudes. Will the rulers one day throw the rascally people out? This is an insightful and unsettling book—and it would also be a frightening one if it were not so consistently entertaining."

—John O'Sullivan, *Radio Free Europe*

"Minogue is one of the most illustrious representatives of what survives of the European classical liberal tradition . . . In *The Servile Mind*, Minogue makes clear where he stands."

—Paul Gottfried, *The American Conservative*

"*The Liberal Mind*, *Alien Powers*, and *The Servile Mind* compose a chronological critique that has kept fully abreast of the rapid progress of political illusion and unreality in the West during the author's lifetime."

—Chilton Williamson, Jr., *Chronicles*

"It would be remiss on my part not to use this opportunity to assert that this splendid book confirms the status of Professor Minogue as a most distinguished observer and analyst of our moment in history."

—Claudio Veliz, *Quadrant*

"Historically and theoretically rich analysis."

—Diana Schaub, *National Review*

"Minogue's argument is unfailingly intelligent . . . Forceful, persuasive, and illuminating. . . ."

—Mark Blitz, *The Weekly Standard*

"A remarkable sequel . . . An elegant essayist of the old school, Prof. Minogue advances his argument by small steps that can end abruptly in crisp revelation."

—Neil Reynolds, *The Globe and Mail*

"*The Servile Mind* is a bold and wide-ranging study of the ills of contemporary politics and society in the West. The argument is elaborated in fairly abstract terms, but the abstractions are always aimed at making sense of the concrete irritations and idiocies of modern life."

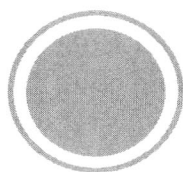
—Noel Malcolm, *Standpoint*

"Minogue writes squarely in the tradition of Tocqueville and Bryce in seeing what is new about democracy as well as placing it within the broader current of Western intellectual life . . . *The Servile Mind* is a crucial book for the task of understanding and reconstructing the proper bases for a free society."

—Gerald J. Russello, *City Journal*

"This book is an update, including rethinking and reformulations, that absorbs the experience and legacy of the late '60s. Readers of the earlier work [*The Liberal Mind*] would not have been as surprised as most people were by that event, but they will now find its author somewhat less libertarian and more conservative. In *The Servile Mind* his targets are not cited by name, but they do not need to be. His expounding of the diverse items in the servile mind does more justice to them, and runs deeper, than do the statements of their exponents—the intellectual elite behind a new kind of democratic politics. Minogue has written a polemic without harsh words, striking blows without wounding feelings."

• —Harvey C. Mansfield, The Claremont Institute



PREFACE: HOW FREE CAN A JUST STATE BE?

The Servile Mind was concerned above all to explore the character of illusion in politics—or at least in contemporary democracy. All human projects are guided by what we think is desirable. Given that what we desire seldom ever yields the satisfactions we dream of, illusion can never be far behind. All political projects, like political careers, thus end in failure. They raise more hopes than they can possibly satisfy. Wisdom therefore demands a constant alertness to the fragility of the hopes that often enslave us. And in introducing the paperback edition of *The Servile Mind* I can do no better than point to one specific conflict in our culture that dooms virtually all our projects to disappointment. That conflict emerges from our basic ambivalence towards the modern world.

The essential point is that Europeans have, uniquely, created a civilization based on the practice of freedom. Commercial freedom, for example, has made us the richest and most inventive culture in history. Our industrial success certainly results from freedom, but in fact freedom extends far beyond commerce and

invades every sphere of our lives. It has generated astonishing knowledge about what human beings are, and of their destiny in time and space. On this point, we immediately think of science, but that is to ignore archaeology, anthropology, critical history and many other specialised worlds of inquiry. Our freedom has created forms of art, music and letters of kinds never seen before. It has also evolved something quite distinct which I shall identify as the moral life. And our political forms have been imitated the world over, with varying success. Cultures whose peoples have very different inclinations find themselves having to learn such unfamiliar practices as elections and political parties. For today there is no way for any society or culture to have standing in the modern world other than by being the thing called a “state”, and thus embracing “modernity.”

All such achievements have emerged from the working out in Europe of our passion for freedom, a practice that can be seen emerging in the later Middle Ages with the appearance of a quite specific new type of human personality: namely, the individualist. As individualists, people become in some degree detached from rank or status because they indulge and explore their subjectivity. They often have individual projects of their own. Confident in their intellectual and moral independence, individualists find it essential to live in a society in which others have the same character. Living in a free society involves a dislike of servility, and that is why the modern world finds slavery intolerable, and led our ancestors, by contrast with other cultures, to abolish that institution. With the growth of the individualist, freedom became the mark of a distinct social, moral and political form of life, and it crystallised during the sixteenth century in the sovereign state. It is notable that free European states long successfully resisted attempts to mould them into one empire, culture or confessional unity. The resulting variety of national cultures may have been highly quarrelsome, but the cultures also stimulated each other as elements of a shared world.

As time went on, these free societies became increasingly different from earlier forms of civilization. What were their fruits? One might briefly mention wealth, tolerance, technology and all

of these as sustaining a specific kind of civility in social relations. The technological achievement could not be ignored by other states, if only because it soon transformed military life. But one might also mention styles of art, music and literature not seen before. The art of the Italian Renaissance, the scepticism of Montaigne, the creation of character types in Shakespeare and much else were aspects of this new world that would lead on to the novels that explored whole new varieties of human subjectivity.

There is, however, a second, very different view of modern European experience, one advanced from within the West itself. It is focused not on the achievements but on the imperfections of the modern world. On this view, modernity is called "capitalism." Modern Western powers are presented as behaving in the world a bit like a clever and bullying child in a school playground, throwing its weight around and causing misery in all directions. European political power was imperialistic, and arguably the wealth of the West resulted partly from plundering the "East" and the "South". It has been argued that our consumerist attitude to wealth was destroying the environment in which all of us in the human and animal world must live. Above all, by the criterion of equality, free societies constitute a dramatic failure. Instead of creating just societies in which human needs were broadly satisfied for everybody, they were marked by immense differences in the wealth and resources available to some, and "denied" to others. This contrast between rich and poor in modern states is even more dramatically true of the world at large. Millions are on the edge of starvation. Could the practices of free societies perhaps be responsible for this terrible condition? And in one sense, indeed, our freedom obviously is involved, since the sudden vast increase in the size of populations in non-Western countries, the precondition of the "bottom billion", has resulted, ironically, from the benefits of Western medical techniques.

Here then we have a dramatic clash of judgements. On the one hand, modernity is a brilliant prosperity-enhancing, life-preserving, freedom-enhancing civilisation. On the other hand, capitalism is an out of control machine that, in spite of remarkable creative capacities, has corrupted some and brought misery

to others. The rejection of capitalism was formulated, of course, by Marxists but a vague and unfocused antipathy to the modern world goes far beyond any kind of socialist theory. And this rejection of modernity as “capitalism” has to be vague and unfocused because it is essentially utopian. The only alternative to “capitalism” is to be found in dreams, in ideals. But human life does not assimilate easily to ideals.

Our problem, then, is to discover what conceptual understanding of the world lies at the heart of this conflict, this remarkable disappointment with our own modern world which has such notable accomplishments to its credit. But one or two features of the conflict can at once be noted. One of them is that the rejection of modernity as capitalist comes not from critics outside Western culture but from within the West itself. Other cultures never worried about inequality; they took it for granted. It might follow from this that the critics would respond by emigrating to other cultures, but in fact the opposite is the case. It is not only that the critics of capitalism stick very firmly indeed to their Western comforts, but that millions of people from all other parts of the world cannot migrate fast enough into our vile capitalist world. There is thus a remarkable difference between critical theory on the one hand and, on the other, the actions of people whose actual lives and happiness depend on the decisions they make.

In trying to understand the basic conflict that generates our ambivalence, we might consider that it is precisely freedom itself that causes the imperfections of capitalism. For there is no doubt that one of the things people do most enthusiastically with the freedom they enjoy is compete with one another. This may not lead to attractive results. Competition sometimes means that some win and some lose. One must say “sometimes” because absurdities can arise when the idea of competition is imposed on situations where it does not belong. The average plumber, for example, is not competing with the average entrepreneur. They are simply engaged in different activities. Social critics, however, interpret everybody as engaged in the single task of making money, in which case wealth amounts to winning and poverty (or even modest prosperity) might be taken as failure that illustrates

the injustice of competition. The complex term “competition” has thus been corruptly used. But leaving muddles of this kind aside, those who actually do engage in competition may face the prospect of failure. A powerful opinion has recently surfaced (especially in teaching circles) that losing in some competition is bad for the self-esteem of the young and vulnerable, and therefore the ideal institutional arrangement is to avoid any activity that might seem competitive. Schools sometimes ban competitive games on just this principle. The same attempt to mitigate imagined unhappiness operates in the “politically correct” project of protecting supposedly vulnerable people from “hate speech.” Collective respect here turns into a kind of right, and must be enforced by society.

Similar considerations arise in the demand that the economy should be made, as a matter of policy, to reflect society, one example being the demand for something called “gender justice.” Free societies have been found defective in that women hold fewer managerial positions than men, and their average earnings are less. The policy assumes—and proposes to enforce upon employers—the judgement that men and women are equal units of economic production. No doubt they are less suitable for military combat and furniture removalism, but they are assumed to be no less talented than men in better paid managerial roles, which is what basically concerns the lobbyist for gender justice. Some women of course are very able indeed, some not, but the proposal is to abandon the test of ability in free societies in favour of a test of “social reflectiveness” that is supposedly more just. The criterion that is here, and widely, invoked against freedom is thus justice. And it is precisely the conflict between these criteria of social value that lies at the heart of the conflict we have been discussing.

The term “justice” supplies the clue as to what is basically at stake in the conflict between current opinions about our modern world. For, as we shall see, in other cultures than that of the West, justice is the normative principle that structures society, and it is sustained partly from custom and partly from religion. Custom and religion are also influential in European states, but here a distinct form of reasoning about normative issues has emerged. Max

Weber's "Protestant ethic" is one celebrated exploration of this development, which descends distantly from the Socratic concern with the good life as rational and independent of both custom and the gods. Secularists appeal to this aspect of our lives in claiming that religion is not a sanction necessary for goodness and decency in our lives.

The modern European world may be free, then, but is it also just? Justice, as John Rawls and others have emphasised, is as basic to society as truth is to explanation, and a whole philosophical speciality has grown up to elaborate the details of how a just society would, in abstract terms, be constituted. The cash value of justice, as it is widely understood in European countries, is equality. One of the more insistent judgements of imperfection in our societies takes the form of sensitivity to a multitude of "gaps" in modern life—the gap between rich and poor, in longevity of different classes, of the taste to enjoy high culture and so on, even down (it has been argued) to the resources with which to take foreign holidays. Each gap is one further instance of injustice in the variable condition of difference classes of people in Western states. Freedom, as creating these gaps, must therefore be recognised as in some degree creating its own nemesis.

Here then seems to be the basic conflict that explains the remarkable variations in how the world today thinks about the modernity which it has nevertheless been embracing with such enthusiasm. A free world turns out to be in some respects an unjust world. Our Western states have a kind of justice, of course, in the form of the rule of law that supplies a certain predictability within which the enterprising individualist can live, but freedom allows for a variety of outcomes that many judge to doom many people to unfulfilled lives. This contrast is a puzzle that has been haunting European societies since the thing called the "Enlightenment" in the eighteenth century, but it certainly does not haunt the rest of the world as those cultures play "catchup." Yet much hangs upon this conflict. We cannot but remember the communist states of the twentieth century in which the domination of a comprehensive form of social justice entranced so many with its promises, and turned out to be despotic, corrupt and murderous.

But we can press the question even further than this. For I have suggested that European states are unique in having created cultures based upon freedom. And their uniqueness derives from the fact that every other civilization in the world has started from the opposite direction. Those cultures have created states in which the basic value was, indeed, justice.

For the point about the Hindu caste system, the Muslim Sharia, those living under the Mandate of Heaven and other variants of what are often called “traditional societies” is that they instantiate a specific form of life that was long regarded not merely as just, but as the only really just way for any human being to live. The same is true of tribal societies. Justice here accords each necessary social role a defined status as contributing to the good of the whole community. This is not the limited civility of the Western rule of law. It is, rather, a comprehensive value that notionally covers all human possibility. Justice of this all-embracing kind satisfies the deep human need to know where one stands and what one’s condition requires. Such systems are validated both by custom and by the kinds of belief we normally call “religious.” In these hierarchical systems, a ruler has distinct and almost unlimited powers, and other roles feature when exercising appropriate power as warriors, peasants, husbands, wives, elder brothers or sisters, priests and all the other functions the particular society recognises. From inside these systems, each is believed to be the perfect exemplar of justice. From the outside, of course, very different judgements will be made.

Needless to say, the reality of these ideal systems of comprehensive justice diverges dramatically from the ideal. For one thing, they are all despotically governed, because, there is no rule of law in the technical sense recognised in Western societies. No independent judges limit the will of the ruler. Further, although the “rights” and “duties” of each social status are closely specified, there is inevitably an indeterminate area in which the higher status may tyrannise over the lower. Indeed, this fact is vital to the success of these societies: it provides a decision procedure in cases of dispute that might lead to what such systems most fear: namely, disharmony. In disputes, the higher status decides.

And it is because these societies lack the kind of law and moral agency that Europeans have developed that they are systematically corrupt—rather than episodically corrupt, as Europeans are. The most reliable way to get what one wants is by pleasing superiors. It therefore makes an immense difference to life whether one's superiors (at all levels) are “enlightened” or not. What I have called “servility” is thus, in this social structure, not a vice but the only sensible way of engaging with others.

What in such societies becomes of freedom and independence? Some independence of judgement will happen, because independence (at least in the form of wilfulness) is no less basic to human life than accommodation and servility. But freedom in this kind of justice can be nothing other than a licence to indulge impulses likely to subvert the just or communal way of doing things. For this reason, Western ideas of freedom have almost universally been mistrusted in such societies.

Freedom, as we have seen, involves competition in which some do better than others. In traditional societies, however, such competition cannot in principle happen between the social roles of the system because each status has its own exclusive and distinct sphere. In practice, no doubt, competition finds many outlets even in such a world, but the dominant self-understanding of such societies is that they constitute, in principle, perfectly cooperative communities. To establish just such a perfect community was of course the explicit aim of Communist and other ideological revolutions in the twentieth century, and this project still seems to be the dominant understanding of justice in our time. In this ideal of social justice, each individual would be focussed not on his or her own enterprises but upon the good of the community itself. To make our societies just would therefore require that individualists should cease to be individualists and become, as it were, “comrades” working together for the perfection of the community itself. It is striking, for example, how far this principle can be taken. The Soviet Union in its early days abolished even private charity because, like everything else, it was the responsibility of the community as a whole. Correspondingly paradoxical is the fact that it has been the supposedly selfish capitalist societies of

the West that have been immensely altruistic and creative in their charitable endeavours to help the vulnerable all over the world.

The whole relation between freedom and justice is evidently a complex of paradoxes. How might one build a just community whose essence would be that competition gives way to cooperation? Such was in large part the aim of those who created welfare states after 1945, and one crisp version of the thinking involved was given by Tony Blair: "I want people to care for society because society cares for them." This remark posits a relationship of gratitude linking the people to the government that redistributes wealth in order to benefit them. But are welfare recipients grateful for what they get? No doubt it varies, but the main response seems to be little more than an alertness to the politics of vulnerability and the hope of raised levels of benefit. Capitalist individualism is often criticised as consumerist, but there is also a consumerism of welfare, and it is a good deal more atomising socially than the luxurious consumerism of commercial societies. Such welfarism is notably destructive of family cohesion.

It is one aspect of this problem that rulers have in the past, for a variety of reasons including the hope of increasing justice, changed the character of politics, yet failed to silence the discontent of which politics is basically constituted. Parliamentary supremacy, democratic extensions of the franchise, votes for women, increasing doses of welfare have all been grand scheme designed to please voters and advance justice, yet time and time again, they fail to achieve general satisfaction among the people they rule. A cynic might well conclude at this point that discontent is our default position in modern Western societies. Without grievances to respond to, and struggles to engage in, many of us would find life rather flat. Perhaps it is injustice rather than justice that is the hidden secret of our world? It certainly generates notable types of satisfaction.

The conflict between freedom and justice lies at the heart of our politics, and like everything political, it is a conflict that cannot be isolated from the many dimensions of political concern. A well-known tension pits supposedly just policies on the one hand against the actual inclinations of people on the other.

Only profound changes in human nature can make possible many versions of justice. The individualist must, as we have seen, give way to the comrade. He or she must find satisfaction not in personal enterprises but in membership of a real community. Politics, however, is never engaged merely with the attainment of one goal, or even one type of goal. To be concerned with the ideal necessarily raises the problem of power, of lifestyle fashions, of competing interests, of the light that will be shed on a problem by considering its causes, and much else. Besides, not even the ideal, in politics or in anything else, is a single seamless object of universal admiration. It is precisely the normative focus only upon the ideal that means it has little of direct interest to say about political reality.

Freedom conflicts with justice not only because they are different values, but because they value different *kinds* of situation. Freedom values a process that leaves individuals unhindered in pursuing their own enterprises within the law, and must therefore lead to unpredictable results in each generation, whereas justice is concerned with what idealists take to be the only desirable outcome. The process of freedom fails to produce the just outcome. But what would constitute the desirability of any such outcome? Does human happiness in fact depend on the way society is constituted? For the fact is that the absoluteness of ideals is illusory in the sense that there is no valid way of choosing between entire social systems. Happy and fulfilled lives can, it seems, be lived in any society while some will achieve misery in utopia. All that one can do in recommending one form of life rather than another is to point to abstract aspects of what is desired. We European moderns prefer tolerant to intolerant, but others demand the universal dominance of what they take to be the one right set of beliefs and practices. Our judgements may not be relative, but they are certainly contextual.

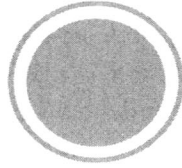
And our context is the clash between values. It is hardly new. In 1861 it was influentially formulated by Sir Henry Maine as the evolution from status to contract, and some of the issues involved appear in contemporary politics as the conflict between the state and the free market as arenas in which preferable results

emerge. But at base, the issue is whether freedom and justice are compatible.

We do know that freedom is compatible with the kind of justice—civility and the rule of law—that has long been established in European states. And the point here is that this kind of justice—what Michael Oakeshott described as “adverbial qualifications” on action—merely requires subscription to a set of rules.* This is society understood as an association of independent individuals, and it is not concerned with outcomes. Today, however, many construe a modern society as an association of vulnerable people trying to create a community based on cooperation rather than competition. Vulnerable people need protection, and protection is the business not of markets but of states. The moral criterion is the supposed benefits that accrue to vulnerable people. People being helped, however, is merely one side of the situation in which those helpers exercise power. And as we have seen, there is no obvious limit to the nature and number of things that will, in a theory of relative rather than absolute poverty, be demanded on behalf of the vulnerable. The essence of welfare benefits is that they are unconditional, because making them conditional is likely to reactivate the disabilities that constituted their vulnerability in the first place.

Spreading vulnerability, and the resulting growth of entitlement in the name of justice, is threatening to bankrupt Western economies. Here is one of those practical dimensions of politics that must qualify even such a bewitching ideal. But the basic point is that freedom, not justice, is the secret of Western dynamism. Can the current enthusiasm for “social justice” really be distinguished from those reactionary systems of comprehensive “justice” that dominated traditional societies? If not, the future of our freedom—and our uniqueness—is distinctly bleak.

* Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 113.



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