

Deviants and the mind-bending tyrants

A WARNING

by Dr.

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AN IRREGULAR English verb conjugates, "I am an individualist, thou art eccentric, he is nuts." If a person behaves in a very different way from myself, I tend to regard him as a criminal or a lunatic.

This does not really matter, unless I happen to be in charge of the Government, in which case I shall probably incarcerate the dissident individual in prison or a lunatic asylum. This propensity to put dissidents out of the way may well be useful, or even essential for the survival of human society.

Unfortunately, Governments often consider that the worst of all kinds of dissident behaviour is disagreement with the opinions held by the Government itself. If you were an atheist in Calvin's Geneva, or a Christian in Xhoxa's Albania; a Nazi in Communist Russia or a Communist in Hitler's Germany, you would be well advised to keep your views to yourself. Even in free Britain, the Race Relations Act discourages you from expressing the opinion that black people are either better or worse than white people.

In the cruder kinds of tyranny, dissidents are put to death. The number of people who suffered that penalty for speaking or acting in a manner of which Stalin disapproved will probably never be known; estimates as high as forty millions have been given.

The Times of 17 July reports the experiences of the Soviet psychiatrist Dr. Yuri Novikov, who defected to the West a year ago. Novikov explained how

psychiatric gobbledegook (my word, not his) could be used to support detention and "treatment" of dissidents in the Soviet Union. "Prisoners . . . who engage in political activity," the report observes, "may disappear practically forever, certified by the Ministry of the Interior doctors, their letters diverted, their appeals ignored."

This phenomenon deserves rather closer attention. One of the few dissidents who survived unharmed during the Stalin period was the behavioural scientist, Pavlov: the man who did some of the most famous research on "conditioned reflexes." Such a man was too useful to be disposed of. Pavlov showed how experiences could condition animals—and, by implication, people as well—to behave in quite new ways.

So where do we go from there? The first step is one of which most people would approve. We discover how to condition criminals or "obvious lunatics" to cease behaving in ways we do not like.

But suppose you are a convinced Marxist—or, for that matter, a convinced upholder of almost any other political, religious or irreligious opinion? You can see The Truth so clearly that it is obvious to you that anybody who does not agree with your opinions must be either egregiously wicked or mentally deranged. In many parts of the world, the leading members of Governments have thought themselves into that sort of intellectual certainty, and are therefore

willing to take whatever action may seem necessary to bend the minds and bodies of their subjects in the appropriate direction. Even Governments which do not evince this degree of certainty about political or religious matters are usually certain that "the State" (which often means their own administration) must be preserved at all costs. Any action which—in their judgment—endangers "the State" must be restrained by all available means.

HERE, then, is the problem.

Governments are certainly necessary: "better a hundred years of tyranny than one day of anarchy." Yet those Governments must constantly be watched in their exercise of power. In a society like our own, where the natural and social sciences are developing at an enormously rapid rate, it is inevitable that governments will attempt to use the knowledge and skills deriving from those sciences to maintain and extend their power. It is exceedingly difficult to know where to draw the line between authorising the exercise of tyranny, and forbidding developments which operate for the general good. On the one hand, we wish to use modern knowledge to turn deviants into useful citizens. On the other hand, we do not wish to authorise governments to bend our minds to fit their own predilections of how we ought to think and behave. It is not easy to steer between Scylla and Charybdis; but our chances of doing so are better if we know where both rocks lie.