

[Daniel J. Flynn, *Intellectual Morons: How Ideology Makes Smart People Fall for Stupid Ideas*, Crown Forum, 282 pages]

Smart Asses

By Edward Feser

“THERE IS NOTHING so ridiculous but some philosopher has said it.” Things have not improved much in the more than two millennia since Cicero wrote these words. If anything, modern intellectuals—whether philosophers or intellectuals of some other stripe—are even more inclined than were their ancient and medieval forerunners to put forward ideas not only radically at odds with common sense but disastrous in their implementation. Marxism and socialism in general are only the most dramatic examples. Daniel Flynn’s *Intellectual Morons: How Ideology Makes Smart People Fall for Stupid Ideas* surveys several others, associated with the likes of Herbert Marcuse, Alfred Kinsey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and a number of other thinkers who have advanced such causes as environmentalism, feminism, animal rights, and postmodernism.

A serious and sophisticated full-length analysis of why intellectuals are so often attracted to the bizarre and unworkable is long overdue. Unfortunately—and as its rather sophomoric title might lead one to suspect—Flynn’s book is not it. To be sure, the book is better than its moniker suggests, and many of its individual chapters provide clear and useful summaries of the careers and ideas of the thinkers they address. But the analysis of those ideas is sometimes superficial, and Flynn’s treatment of the overall theme of why intellectuals “fall for stupid ideas,” as he puts it, is unsatisfying. In short, the book is something less than the sum of its parts.

At their best, those parts can be arresting. Anyone unfamiliar with recent scholarly research on Kinsey’s life and

work will find in Flynn’s chapter on the famous sex researcher everything he would want to know—and probably more. The story of Kinsey’s rise to national prominence in the late 1940s and early ’50s on the strength of two hefty volumes purporting to document the startling bedroom habits of ordinary Americans and the fraudulence of the methods by which, as we now know, he arrived at his results, are recounted in depth. So too is the extreme depravity of Kinsey’s own sex life, the details of which can put a shudder into even the jaded citizen of AD 2004. (There are, believe it or not, even worse examples than Kinsey’s penchant for inserting toothbrushes into his urethra.)

As Flynn makes clear, to relate such unpleasantness is by no means to resort fallaciously to a crude *ad hominem* attack, as if Kinsey’s work could be sealed off hermetically from his personal predilections. Kinsey’s methods included encouraging his male staff members and their wives regularly to sleep with him and with each other, the point of which was to make them more “open-minded” in their research; amassing an enormous library of pornographic books and films, many of the latter having been made by Kinsey and his staffers themselves; and a massive over-reliance on data culled from the testi-

Kinsey’s mind, the illegality of the appalling acts they recounted. There is even reason to believe that pedophilia was on Kinsey’s own long list of favored perversions. Surely this was a scientist whose personal degeneracy thoroughly tainted his work, coloring his assumptions about what was morally and methodologically sound and destroying his capacity for objectivity.

Where, as with Kinsey, there is a close connection between the personal life and intellectual product of one of Flynn’s subjects, his chapters tend to succeed. In the curious case of Rigoberta Menchu, for instance, we have a Nobel laureate whose receipt of the Peace Prize rested entirely on her authorship of an autobiography that has since been exposed as a sham. Purporting to be a simple peasant’s testimony to the brutality of the forces of militarism and capitalism in her native Guatemala, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* was in fact a hoax perpetrated by a Marxist hack who invented tales of oppression and violent death (including, as Flynn notes, some imaginatively grisly death scenes for her brothers, one of whom is in fact still very much alive), apparently suspecting—quite rightly as it turned out—that Western intellectuals would swallow it wholesale without checking the story too carefully for accuracy.

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mony of criminal sex offenders, leading to a greatly exaggerated estimate of the amount of deviant sexual behavior existing in American society as a whole.

Kinsey was particularly fascinated with the question of whether and to what extent children, and even infants, are capable of sexual pleasure. He went so far as to consult known pedophiles regularly, who would keep Kinsey apprised of the details of their ongoing crimes, secure in the understanding that the scientific value of their reports trumped, in

Flynn’s chapters on such political activists as Du Bois and Margaret Sanger are also helpful, reminding us as they do of the ugly and disreputable positions such people often took on the great issues of their day, positions their contemporary admirers would like to ignore. NAACP co-founder Du Bois found little good to say about his native United States, but plenty of kind words for Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia (both of which he saw, rightly, as exemplars of the socialism to which he was

committed throughout his life), not to mention Imperial Japan and Maoist China. Planned Parenthood founder Sanger endorsed political assassination and other forms of terrorism, and advocated compulsory sterilization, forced segregation, and other eugenic policies as instruments of “racial betterment.”

Flynn is less good, however, in dealing with thinkers of greater intellectual heft. With writers like the nearly incomprehensible deconstructionist Jacques

follow from it, and whether the reasons that have led so many to adopt utilitarianism are as compelling as they assume. But Flynn avoids these issues altogether.

Superficial too is Flynn’s analysis of the views of novelist Ayn Rand, famous for her uncompromising defense of capitalism. It is all well and good to note, as Flynn does, that Rand’s adulterous personal life and the cult-like nature of the movement she founded do not sit well

however, is less a serious intellectual than a vulgar pamphleteer who got lucky. And Sanger was a political activist rather than a thinker, as is the feminist Betty Friedan, to whom Flynn devotes a chapter. There is even a chapter on Alger Hiss, who was neither a thinker nor a political activist, but merely a Harvard-educated State Department official who spied for the Soviet Union. Nor is the work of the genuine intellectuals Flynn writes about of equal merit: Strauss was a serious scholar, and while Chomsky’s views on political matters are worthless, his work in philosophy and linguistics is important and deservedly influential; Du Bois, by contrast, stopped doing any serious work very early in his career, and Kinsey’s investigations into human sexuality seem to have been a complete fraud.

Flynn’s failure to define clearly what makes someone an intellectual in the first place makes it that much more difficult for him to answer to the question of why intellectuals so often advocate bad ideas. He tells us that it has to do with a commitment to ideology and with the psychology of the true believer. But he does not make clear exactly what he means by ideology, an expression that can be used in a variety of ways. If Flynn intends it, as he often seems to, merely as a synonym for bad ideas uncritically held by intellectuals, then telling us, “ideology makes smart people fall for stupid ideas” is not much more than a tautology. The suggestion that ideology is a kind of replacement for religion is more promising, but Flynn does not pursue the idea in depth.

As an attempt to account for the phenomenon that forms the subject matter of the book, then, *Intellectual Morons* disappoints. It may be useful, though, as a primer on the lives and ideas of some of the thinkers and activists who have been, for good or ill (mostly ill), among the most influential in recent intellectual and political history. ■

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PLANNED PARENTHOOD FOUNDER SANGER ENDORSED POLITICAL ASSASSINATION AND OTHER FORMS OF TERRORISM, AND ADVOCATED COMPULSORY STERILIZATION, FORCED SEGREGATION, AND OTHER EUGENIC POLICIES AS INSTRUMENTS OF “RACIAL BETTERMENT.”

Derrida or the New Left theorist Marcuse, whose defense of his view that tolerance of right-of-center ideas is actually repressive is as obscure as it is Orwellian, Flynn can perhaps be forgiven for not examining their positions in detail. But the ideas of some of the other thinkers Flynn discusses are, even when extreme and offensive, sometimes supported with sophisticated arguments that need to be analyzed more thoroughly. Philosopher Peter Singer is notorious for his defense not only of animal rights and euthanasia but of infanticide as an option for parents of disabled newborns and of bestiality when this can be engaged in without harming the animal. Singer’s views are, as Flynn says, utterly reprehensible. But they are also taken by Singer to follow from a consistent application of utilitarianism, which, to oversimplify, holds that what is morally required of us is whatever promotes the maximization of individual preferences or desires. Since this is a moral philosophy advocated by a great many contemporary intellectuals, and not only on the political Left (there are, for example, many libertarians who are committed to some version of it), it is important to consider whether Singer’s obscene conclusions really do

with the moralistic rationalism she preached. But her ideas themselves deserve more serious treatment, especially from a conservative writer like Flynn. Then there is Flynn’s chapter on Leo Strauss, who famously argued that many of the great writers of the early modern period in intellectual history—thinkers like John Locke and Benedict Spinoza, for example—wrote in a style intended to mask their true intentions. Strauss’s methods of interpretation and the conclusions he draws are controversial and sometimes even eccentric, but it is hard to see how they are comparable to the far more extreme and outlandish positions taken by most of the other intellectuals Flynn surveys.

As the examples discussed so far indicate, Flynn’s criteria for counting someone as an intellectual moron seem rather unsystematic. Kinsey, Du Bois, Derrida, Marcuse, Singer, Rand, and Strauss certainly fit the usual stereotype of the intellectual as someone who develops a complex system of scientific or philosophical thought and publishes it in one or more lengthy volumes. Other thinkers Flynn treats—for example, the environmental scientist Paul Ehrlich, the linguist Noam Chomsky, and the philosopher Michel Foucault—fit the same pattern. Menchu,

[*Unafraid of Virginia Woolf: The Friends and Enemies of Roy Campbell*, Joseph Pearce, 151 Books, 480 pages]

Red-Baiting Bard

By Thomas Dineen

Exiled like you and severed from
my race
By the cold ocean of my own disdain,
Do I not freeze in such a wintry space,
Do I not travel through a storm as vast
And rise at times, victorious from the main,
To fly the sunrise at my shattered mast?

“Tristan da Cunha,” 1926

THE STANZA ABOVE could serve as the epitaph of its author, the controversial South African poet Roy Campbell (1901-57). In an era when such top British writers as W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender either joined the Communist Party or were active fellow travelers, Campbell sided with Franco during the Spanish Civil War, despised the cosseted effete-ness of Bloomsbury literati, and found refuge from decadent modernity in Roman Catholicism. This caused him to be exiled from the London literary establishment, a situation aggravated by his acerbic lampooning of left-leaning contemporaries. In this acute and engrossing new biography, Joseph Pearce reveals Campbell to have been not only a brilliant poet, but also a cultural polemicist with an avowedly traditional worldview.

Campbell's childhood in Durban interwove his Scottish Presbyterian ancestry with African surroundings. He “learned Scots ballads from [his] parents and African folklore from the natives.” He also loved riding, fishing, and roaming around the veldt. In 1918, he embarked for England, intending to

matriculate at Oxford. He never did, yet his intellectual life blossomed in the university city. Campbell read voraciously and wrote verse imitations of T.S. Eliot and Paul Verlaine, eventually meeting Eliot, the Sitwells, and Wyndham Lewis. Here Pearce vividly captures the post-WWI English literary milieu and scrutinizes claims of earlier biographers about the poet's youth—notably, the unsubstantiated assertion that he went through a homosexual stage.

Campbell left Oxford for London, where he continued to write poetry while taking side trips to the Mediterranean as a ship-hand. He soon met Mary Garman, whom he married in 1922. Their stormy 35-year marriage proved, as Pearce dubs it, “creatively catalytic.” Evidence of this appeared in 1924 with Campbell's long creation poem, *The Flaming Terrapin*, which made his name. T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia) wrote of the epic's “glorious imagery and colour.” George Russell found Campbell's “savage splendour of epithet” and ability to “marry the wild word so fittingly to the wild thought” unmatched by any young poet.

Returning to South Africa a literary hero, Campbell founded the review *Voorslag* (“Whiplash”), but quarreled with its other editors and sailed back to England in 1926. The tumultuous sojourn bore fruit, however, when he published *Adamastor* (1930), a volume of lyric poetry filled with African imagery. Again, literary London lauded him, as T.S. Eliot praised his “remarkable mastery of meter and language.”

While Campbell's fame grew, his marriage nearly fell apart, as Pearce depicts in colorful detail. Befriended by patrician littérateur Harold Nicolson, the Campbells gladly accepted his offer to live rent-free in a cottage near Knole, an estate owned by his wife, the lesbian poetess (and bedmate of Virginia Woolf) Vita Sackville-West. Campbell once called Mary a “mixture of Sappho and Saint Teresa,” but had no idea how intensely Vita would bring out Mary's Sapphic side: unknown to him, the women soon became lovers.

To make matters worse, at Knole Campbell had his first disenchanting encounters with the Bloomsbury group. Though they were estimable cultural arbiters, Campbell found their “dilettante dabbling” and “self-gratifying principles ... alien to him.” He was also put off by the atmosphere of polymorphous eroticism; he called the estate “something between a psychiatry clinic and a posh brothel.”

Mary told Roy about her affair with Vita, which enraged him. He soon left England for Provence, arriving in Martigues an emotionally battered 27-year-old. He wrote Mary pathetic letters imploring her to join him; eventually, she did, most likely because Vita had grown tired of her. Despite his wife's fickleness, Campbell was overjoyed at their reunion and in the next years composed what Pearce considers some of his best verse. In “Wings,” the poet finds solace in their love:

When gathering vapours climb in storm
The steep sierras of delight,
Wings of your hair I love to form
And on its perfume soar from sight.
For in those great black plumes unfurled
The darkest condor of my thought
May stretch his aching sinews taut
And fling his shadow on the world.

Campbell thereafter embraced a Hemingwayesque life of bullfighting, fishing, and cavorting with macho Provençal locals. While leftists such as W.H. Auden were striving superficially in the '20s and '30s to express solidarity with *hoi polloi* by donning overalls and eating candy to induce tooth decay, Campbell was actually living the life of a Provençal farmer-fisherman. Pearce revealingly contrasts the poet's authentic working-class experiences with the hypocritical parlor socialism of Bloomsbury and the snobbery of its supporters: “[M]y God how workmen smell,” Vita Sackville-West wrote at the time, “How I hate the proletariat.”

Some of Campbell's finest poems of this period reflect his nascent attraction