Political Platonism: The Philosophy of Politics

Ethnosociology: The Foundations

Until a few months ago, I knew very little about Alexander Dugin despite coming across references to him with increasing frequency. This ignorance was partly the result of the nature of those very references, which have been ambiguous to say the least. “National Bolshevik,” “NazBol,” and “Eurasianist,” were just three of the terms I’d heard in relation to Dugin, each rather arcane yet retaining the definite air of an epithet. I’ll be quite honest that I didn’t really know what a “Eurasianist” was apart from the fact I was somehow pretty sure I didn’t want to be one. In May, however, prompted by the publication by Arktos of two of his latest books, I decided to investigate Dugin and come to my own conclusions. The following essay is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of Dugin and the entirety of his thought (impossible given the duration of my study to date), but rather as a review of these two books and an honest “View from the Right” on the thought contained therein.

I don’t consider myself an overtly political thinker. I have an interest in politics, I have studied political history, and I understand the vast majority of the concepts and ideas involved. But I have very rarely occupied myself with the philosophy of politics, or with conceptualisations of what might constitute the “ideal” political situation. If anything, I have long considered myself a “political anti-Semite” in the same trajectory as the organised anti-Semitic leagues of late nineteenth-century Europe. In the belief of these organizations, politics remains fundamentally distorted and inorganic as long as certain social, cultural, and economic conditions, proceeding from wealthy Jewish lobbies and associated cultural activities, are permitted to prevail. Political anti-Semitism is thus concerned less with the philosophy and mechanics of politics, than with social criticism, the promotion of national-ethnic unity, and the achievement of a small number of very broad political objectives based on ethnocentric principles.

Dugin is a different thinker entirely. Although touching on social criticism, he is deeply fascinated, if not infatuated, with the minutiae, etymology, and genealogy of ‘the Political’ as both methodology and ideology. In Political Platonism, the more interesting of the two 2019 books by a considerable margin, Dugin offers a panegyric to the political philosophy of Plato and posits political Platonism as a panacea to the multifarious ills of modernity. What is political Platonism? Those familiar with Guillaume Durocher’s excellent TOO writings on the ancients will already have some idea. Whereas Durocher has usefully summarised Platonism as “practical inegalitarianism,” Dugin goes further semantically, offering political Platonism as a proxy descriptor for Fascism, or right-wing authoritarianism in general:

All opponents of democracy are instantly enlisted in the class of persons professing an ideology the very name of which has long since become a curse-word and an insult, and unscrupulous hypnotists use this technique more and more. Instead of this word, grown hateful and made senseless, which I do not even wish to pronounce in this essay, it is better to call us “Platonists.” Yes, we are bearers of political Platonism. (PP, 20)

The volume is a diverse and intriguing collection of essays, lectures, and interviews that amount to Dugin’s exposition of political Platonism. Each brief chapter therefore differs in tone and approach, meaning that while Dugin’s writing style can sometimes tend towards the technical, the volume is a relatively rapid and easy read. I managed to read it over the course of two days, including the taking of notes and some background research. Did I enjoy the text and learn anything from it? Yes. Did I come away a convinced ‘political Platonist’? No, and I’ll explain why as we progress.

The first chapter, “The Philosophy of Politics,” is a transcript from a lecture of a course that Dugin gave at Moscow State University in 2014. This brief section of the book offers a good introduction to Dugin’s writing style (the lecture reads so well that one doubts it was ad-libbed), as well as to Dugin’s high praise of Plato (“Plato is the prince of philosophy”) and Carl Schmitt (“Schmitt is the political philosopher par excellence”). The basic theme of the chapter is that while true politics is always guided by a philosophy, modernity has introduced swathes of politicians who lack a philosophical dimension:

People who do not have the philosophy of politics, who do not have philosophy, they are as much politicians as computer programmers are. In fact, a person who does not know philosophy cannot engage in politics; he’s not a politician. He is a hired government worker who is simply in front of a wall. Someone has told him: go there, do that. What to do, where to go … He might be an excellent user, but in reality politicians who lack a philosophical dimension are merely on a construction site, some foreign construction site. (PP, 4)

Following the first chapter is an essay offering a political Platonist “Deconstruction of Democracy.” I enjoyed the essay, and some of Dugin’s observations are magnificent and presented with flair. Democracy, he argues, is hardly a neutral concept. He sees democracy as

a form of secular cult or a tool of political dogmatics, thus, to be fully accepted into the West, it is necessary by default to be “for” democracy … That is why in discussions about democracy we must say at once whether we are completely for or completely against it. I’ll respond with extreme candor: I’m against it, but I’m against it only because the West is for it. (PP, 11)

The West, in Dugin’s worldview, is a hypocritical, corrupt, and declining giant. Its pretensions to extend freedom to the Middle East and beyond are laughably cynical: “No one can give us freedom. It either is or it is not. A slave will convert even freedom into slavery, or at least into swinishness, and a free person will never be a slave even in fetters.” (PP, 12) Further, “democracy is not a self-evident concept. Democracy can be accepted or rejected, established or demolished. There were splendid societies without democracy and detestable ones with democracy, but there was also the opposite. Democracy is a human project, a construction, a plan, not fate.” (PP, 12) The chapter closes with a detailed analysis of the attitudes of Aristotle to democracy, before Plato is invoked as the exemplary enemy of democracy:

Plato burned the books of Democritus. Democrats, and in particular, Soros’s spiritual guru Popper, in his catechism The Open Society and its Enemies, call to burn the books of Plato … For us, Platonists, democracy is a false doctrine, it is built on a world that doesn’t exist and a society that cannot exist. (PP, 20-1)

In the third essay, “Political Platonism and Its Ontological Bases,” Dugin digs deeper into the meaning of political Platonism, briefly summarizing its attitude to the cosmos, power, politics, and truth. Dugin defines it as “entirely contrary to the spirit of modernity and post-modernity.”

By far the best essay of the volume is to be found in chapter four, “Traditionalism Against Devilopolis.” The essay contains Dugin’s reflections on the First Russian Congress of Traditionalists. It’s an excellent piece of social criticism as well as a celebration of the tremendous growth of Traditionalism within Russian academia, politics, and wider society. He first sets the scene:

A hundred years ago a majority of people looked into the future with optimism, awaiting a transition to something better, in some sense guaranteed by the very logic of history. Today an entirely different mood prevails in societies: if it isn’t directly apocalyptic, it is at least skeptical regarding the “unrestrained burst of humanity forward into progress and enlightenment.” Although technical development continues at full speed, mechanisms are perfected, machines become “smarter,” and means of communication improve their possibilities, this does not affect human happiness directly at all, does not guarantee any moral or spiritual heights, and does not increase justice in the social order. (PP, 32)

Rising from the ruins of stagnant modernity is a resurgent Traditionalism: “a philosophy, worldview, ideology, style.” (PP, 33) Traditionalism arrived in Russia in the 1990s, when the first translations of René Guénon, Julius Evola, Marcea Eliade, and Titus Burckhardt were published. It was a further 20 years before the first representative conference of traditionalists was held in October 2011. Dugin relates that the conference was not only successful, “but represents an original, living, and to a significant extent, reactive orientation, absorbing into its ranks many intellectual youths, students, graduate students, and scholars.” (PP, 33) Following a brief summary of the conference and its importance, Dugin goes on to situate the ideas of Guénon and Evola in his political Platonist critique of decadent modernity — the “Devilopolis” of the essay’s title.

Dugin asserts that “Tradition is integrity. Modernity is entropy, dispersion, and dissipation elevated into the rank of a value and actively spread everywhere.” (PP, 36) As modernity sinks ever deeper into depravity, Traditionalism rises in relevance. “The crisis of modern civilization, the inner contradiction of Western ideology, clearly obvious dual standards of international politics, and the moral crisis of technological society are evident.” (PP, 40) Adding to the extant contradictions, there exists no current mode of critique:

Formerly this function was served in part by Marxists criticism, which strictly criticised liberal capitalism, concealing even more painful contradictions, but in our time the ideational potential of Marxism as a critical theory has been exhausted. It lacks the correct means to describe the processes unfolding in the modern world, and it received a very difficult, or even fatal, blow in the collapse of the socialist system. As a result, critique from the left is becoming unpopular. The time of critique from the right is arriving. (PP, 40)

Dugin wants Russia to be at the forefront of this critique, and asserts that if Russia “wants to survive spiritually,” it must “stand under a different banner, under the banner of Tradition, radical conservatism, Orthodox faith in union with other traditional confessions, and, if you like, under the banner of Revolution against the post-modern world.” (PP, 46) Opposed to Russia is a Western Devilopolis, whose main features are “parody, simulacrum, and counterfeit.” It is a Devilopolis that indulges in “the reduction of things to money, and money to collections of numbers or to a barcode … Our civilisation is built wholly and completely on money. It is the civilization of Mammon.” (PP, 45) Particularly honest is Dugin’s observation that Russia’s current rejection of some of the more flamboyant expressions of the Western Devilopolis (public celebration of sodomy and transgenderism) isn’t due to some unique Russian prescience but rather that

we are on the periphery of Devilopolis, not an alternative to it, but one of its remote provinces preserving, by inertia, some times with traditional society, not through our own will, resolve, or choice, but because the tendencies and directives from the “center” reach us with difficulty and haphazardly. (PP, 45)

Russia must choose its path quickly, because “ahead are a crisis and the quick end of the known order.” And, in the next essay, “Plato’s Relevance for Russia and the Platonic Minimum,” Dugin proposes mass education in the political philosophy of Plato. Those in power who are unfamiliar with his works “should be promptly removed from the state. Even traffic police must know Plato.” (PP, 48) The bulk of this brief essay can be condensed in its final sentence: “The project of a New Russia must begin with the Platonic announcement.” (PP, 51)

The two subsequent essays consist of bullet point theses. The first of these concern “Christianity and Neo-Platonism.” In this essay, Dugin argues that Platonism and Christianity and entirely compatible and complementary, since Platonism is “precisely the foundation of the conceptual apparatus of the entire Nicene dogmatics.” (PP, 53) The second of these “theses” essays concerns “Heraclitus and Contemporary Russia” or “Theses Towards the Modernization of Russian Society.” By “modernization,” Dugin does not mean technological progress, but rather an updating of the nation’s philosophical armoury. Dugin asserts that Western philosophy thrives on the concept of logos, whereas Russia has been philosophically mired in chaos. I have to confess that this particular essay lost me a bit due to the employment of some quasi-esoteric concepts and an increasingly abstract writing style. One senses that Dugin is taking his argument into some fascinating areas – one only wishes he did a better job of taking the reader along for the ride. As an example:

We must not go down the path of Icarus; we must return to the lowlands, along the path of Orpheus (it is possible that we must turn and look at what they did with Eurydice …); return, but illuminated by light, pierced by fire, consumed by lightning. Only then will we be able to understand the secret dimension of Heraclitus the Dark: all is one – logos is chaos. Darkness is light. THERE is here. (PP, 61)

Right.

It is only in chapter 8, an interview on his book Noomachy (Wars of the Intellect), that we see the text’s first mention of Eurasianism, and it is here that my problems with Dugin really began, only for them to be clarified and compounded further by my subsequent reading of Ethnosociology: The Foundations. The heart of the issue lies in Dugin’s anti-Westernism, which is in some ways his great strength and yet which has undergone some rather dangerous mutations. Dugin is scathing of historical Western claims to primacy or supremacy, believing that Western culture is no better than any other. In fact, he asserts that “the basic idea of Eurasianism” is “the plurality of civilizations and the baselessness of the Western pretension to universalism.” (PP, 63) This form of hostility towards the West has led Dugin to adopt reprehensible allies and very sinister intellectual idols. He sees “the plural anthropology of Boas and Levi-Strauss” as being in the same trajectory as Eurasianism (PP, 63), and describes Boas as “the outstanding ethnographer, philosopher, and anthropologist.” (E:TF, 153)

In Ethnosociology: The Foundations, a highly technical book very different in tone and style from Political Platonism, Dugin attempts to divorce the concept of ethnicity from racial considerations, presumably as part of a broader scheme to overcome racial differences and create a new Eurasianist ethnicity (and thus, power bloc) spanning much of Eastern Europe and encompassing also some North Caucasian Turkic peoples and Balkars. In pursuit of this grand ambition, he has produced a text that is actually one of the most scathing attacks on racial thinking I’ve read in recent years.

The book starts with an overview of the development of Russian ethnosociology and an attempt to define ethnicity. It takes just thirteen short pages for Dugin to grapple with the position of race in such a definition. He asserts very quickly that “ethnosociology does not ascribe any substantial or semantic indication to physical resemblance,” and remarks that even someone “altogether uncharacteristic for the main population of Eastern Slavic-Great Russians” should “undoubtedly” be considered “a member of the Russian ethnos” as long as he “considers himself Russian, speaks Russian, thinks in Russian, and is a co-participant in Russian culture.” (E:TF, 14) As regards arguments that race should be considered the foundation of all studies of ethnicity, Dugin retorts:

The physiological, biological, zoological and anthropometric components of this society are not only not the cornerstone; they are not studied at all, since there are no reliable studies (besides racist nonsense) about their credible connection with social peculiarities. (E:TF, 15)

Related to the denial of race is condemnation of the idea that some civilizations are more developed than others. Dugin describes such approaches as “racist,” “absolutely unscientific,” and “inadmissible.” (E:TF, 28) Citing Boas, Dugin asserts “the sole correct form of the classification of ethnoses is their placement on the scale “simple — complex,” with the admonition that “the concepts of simplicity and complexity should not carry anything at all positive or negative; these are two neutral constants, founded on the description of a phenomenon. There are simple societies and complex societies. Neither one is better or worse than the other. They are simply different.” (E:TF, 28)

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Dugin celebrates the fact

Boas achieved a real revolution in American Anthropology, wherein, prior to his arrival, evolutionary and Social Darwinist approaches dominated, and racial theories, which explained sociological particularities by innate, inherited markers and racial belonging, were popular, and an inflexible conviction in the absolute superiority of modern Western (European and American) society, its technology and values over the rest of the world, reigned. Boas built his scientific program on the denial of all three forms of racism: evolutionary, biological, and Eurocentric.” (E:TF, 154)

Dugin draws intellectual nourishment from the efforts of Boas, and has much praise for the “resplendent constellation of his students, among whom are gathered almost all the stars of American Ethnology, Anthropology, Linguistics and Psychology.” (E:TF, 156) He then offers glowing individual profiles on many of them, the majority being anti-White, anti-Western Jews.

Despite possessing such a corrupted ideological core, I persisted with, and finished reading, Ethnosociology: The Foundations. The lingering feeling I had afterwards was that of great disappointment and frustration, because there is much to praise elsewhere in the book, not least its condemnation of a modern Western culture that has eliminated even the most sanitized ethnic considerations from the realm of acceptable discourse. His observation that contemporary civil society “presupposes the absence of the ethnos” is entirely accurate, and his section on “Global Society as the Apotheosis of Civil Society” is nothing short of brilliant. There is, somewhere in this flawed text, a good book, but one that cannot escape the magnitude of its errors. If these are Dugin’s foundations of ethnosociology, then ethnosociology is doomed to collapse. The foundations are rotten.

Having read these two offerings from Dugin, I see his thought as a warning to all who might become overly focussed on philosophical issues, grand geopolitical schemes, and inter-European historical enmities. As I said at the outset, I don’t consider myself an overtly political thinker, nor am I a philosopher. My political objectives are simple, and their simplicity permits me to see dangerous diversions and distortions when they arise. One of the best sentences from Ethnosociology: The Foundations is “Society is capable of itself re-establishing its own integrity with reliance on itself and on the basis of its inner resources.” (E:TF, 19) Unintentionally, Dugin has enunciated a foundational premise of political anti-Semitism – the idea that once distorting outside influences are removed from the body politic, politics and society will organically re-establish its own integrity. One wishes that Dugin would remove outside influences from his own work and thought, and re-establish his own integrity. That being said, both texts are recommended to those seeking novel and challenging reads, and who are equipped to separate the wheat from the chaff.