

17 Self and Societal Delusion

I just read the first two paragraphs of Thomas Sowell's *The Visions of the Anointed: Self-congratulations as the Basis of Social Policy*, written in 1995, almost 30 years ago:

“Dangers to a society may be mortal without being immediate. One such danger is the prevailing social vision of our time—and the dogmatism with which the ideas, assumptions, and attitudes behind that vision are held.

It is not that these views are especially evil or especially erroneous. Human beings have been making mistakes and committing sins as long as there have been human beings.

The great catastrophes of history have usually involved much more than that. Typically, there has been an additional and crucial ingredient—some method by which feedback from reality has been prevented, so that a dangerous course of action could be blindly continued to a fatal conclusion. Much of the continent of Europe was devastated in World War II because the totalitarian regime of the Nazis did not permit those who foresaw the self-destructive consequences of Hitler's policies to alter, or even to influence, those policies. In earlier eras as well, many individuals foresaw the self-destruction of their own civilizations, from the days of the Roman Empire to the eras of the Spanish, Ottoman, and other empires.¹ Yet that alone was not enough to change the course that was leading to ruin. Today, despite free speech and the mass media, the prevailing social vision is dangerously close to sealing itself off from any discordant feedback from reality.

Wow.

I've been trying for years to understand one simple question: why did alchemy last so long, when it never worked. I've studied other things that lasted millennia which never worked, and what sustained them for so long. I haven't found that key. I've looked at short-term ideas, but found no good single explanation there, either. So maybe it's time to look into a feature of humanity which sustains us all at some time: pure and simple self-delusion.

Sowell continues:

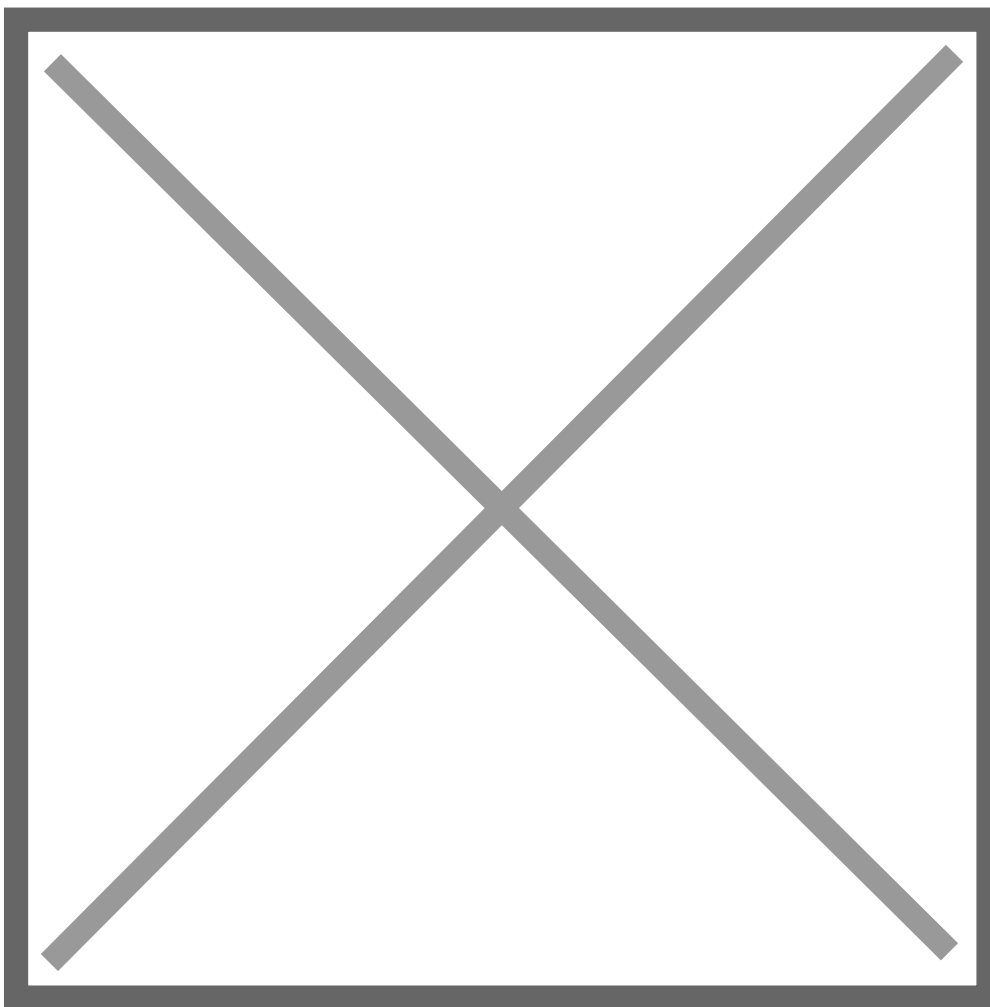
“The focus here will be on one particular vision—the vision prevailing among the intellectual and political elite of our time. What is important about that vision are not only its particular assumptions and their corollaries, but also the fact that it is a *prevailing* vision—which means that its assumptions are so much taken for granted by so many people, including so-called “thinking people,” that neither those assumptions nor their corollaries are generally confronted with demands

for empirical evidence. Indeed, empirical evidence itself may be viewed as suspect, insofar as it is inconsistent with that vision.

This totally describes the problem alchemy had: they had a vision, one which came from Empedocles, Plato and particularly Aristotle, and no empirical evidence seemed to shake it. These are some of the brightest people to have ever lived, and until Peter Rami wrote, "Everything Aristotle Said was Wrong," no one questioned anything Aristotle said 1700 years earlier. The vision of alchemy was modified over the centuries (mercury-sulfur theory, mercury-sulfur-salt theory, etc.) but the core vision remained intact *100 years* after it was *proven* wrong by Robert Boyle (in his *New Experiments*), two millennia after Aristotle established it.

I know my job this weekend: finish that book.

Heavens I do admire Sowell:



The reason this hits home for me so strongly is because I know how strong self delusion can be. I'm autistic, and bright, and I learned to mask very early and very well. So well that my masks *were* my personality; I had lost all sense that there was a *me* in there. This is why, for about five years, I thought I had a false self. You can search the blog for those posts. Masking is a form of defense when I didn't understand the people around me because I never had a sense of what they felt. Masking gave me a modicum of "normality" needed to interact with people. Well, I masked well, and although grad school took me way longer than was needed (again, part of my particular

autism), I got along fairly well in life as a professor. I was alone, of course, because masking is hard work and alone I didn't need to mask, even though I still did, because that was my personality. So being alone, too, was work, and that's where my denial was important.

When life just wasn't good, it was self denial that kept me going. I told myself I was happy, because I had things around me that I liked, and I was doing activities that I liked. And I truly believed that. I felt happy.

I won't go further into my life, but eventually there was a time when reality intruded in the vision of myself, and it wasn't pleasant. One point I want to make: I thought everything was going really well, but no one else thought that. They were anchored in a reality and I wasn't present with them.

I guess my point here is: if everyone around you is having a bad time, and is unhappy, get out of your fantasy that life is great and so are you. It's probably you that is the cause of the unhappiness. And this advice applies to great swaths of society. If people hate you or your party, it's you and your party.

¹See, for example, Carlo M. Cipolla, "Editor's Introduction." *The Economic Decline of Empires* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 15; Bernard Lewis, "Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire," *ibid.*, p. 227; Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History*, second edition (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), pp. 211-212. I'll add that the Golden Age of Islam fits this category, as does the entire catalog of Aristotle and the Greek philosophers, and the Hermetic arts: Alchemy, Astrology, and Magic.

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