

THE RECKLESS MIND: INTELLECTUALS IN POLITICS

(MARK LILLA)

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Mark Lilla's books are all polished gems, perfectly and fluidly written, brief yet complete within the ambit Lilla sets for each of his works. This book, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, was written about a decade after the collapse of Communism. From its title, the casual browser might think it was a general attack on intellectuals. It is not that at all—Lilla is nothing if not an intellectual himself, and he sees a lot of merit in the world of ideas, if he also sees its limitations. Rather, this is an examination of why brilliant men and women of the modern world so often willingly dance with tyranny, and an attempt to draw a distinction between mere intellectuals, who often toady to raw power, and true philosophers, who pursue virtue.

Lilla uses Polish writer's Czeslaw Milosz's 1953 *The Captive Mind*, an examination of archetypal responses to intellectual life under Stalinism, to frame his key question. Although it is relatively easy to understand why intellectuals (or regular people) often responded with cooperation when they actually lived under Communism, "how are we to explain the fact that a chorus for tyranny also existed in countries where intellectuals faced no danger and were free to write as they pleased? What possibly could have induced them to justify the actions of modern tyrants or, as was more common, to deny any essential difference between tyranny and the free societies of the West?" (While the tyrannies of which Lilla speaks include both Communism and National Socialism, in practice, though he nowhere adverts to this, his almost sole focus is Communism, for the simple reason that Nazism had few intellectual supporters outside the area of its rule, whereas for Communism it was the opposite, and Communism lasted far longer with far broader appeal to the "philotyrannical" intellectuals on which Lilla focuses.) The book proceeds to examine a series of eight intellectuals, and ends with an outstanding essay, a discussion of Plato's failed attempt to instruct a tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius the Younger, in the ways of justice and philosophy, where Lilla applies that ancient episode to today.

Lilla begins with the personally-linked trio of Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Jaspers, all German intellectuals prominent in

the middle of the twentieth century. He narrates their intertwined history at some length, with a focus on their shared love of philosophy, turning around the pivot of Heidegger's period of Nazi participation (most notoriously his year as rector of Freiburg University, in 1933). There are some interesting bits here, including a colloquy between Jaspers and Heidegger, in which Jaspers asked "How can such an uncultivated man like Adolf Hitler govern Germany?", to which Heidegger responded, "Culture doesn't matter. Just look at his marvelous hands." This conjures up shades of the *New York Times's* house conservative, David Brooks, who similarly narrated his own first encounter with Barack Obama: "I was looking at his pant leg and his perfectly creased pant, and [I thought] a) he's going to be president and b) he'll be a very good president." Peas in a pod, these public intellectuals. Another interesting point, relevant today, especially to those convinced that intellectuals should govern, is Arendt's belief "that intellectuals generally have trouble thinking clearly about politics, in large part because they see ideas at work in everything." Whatever some may think, ideas, especially abstract ideas, and most especially new ideas, are not all that important to day-to-day or normal political life, and mostly just cause trouble, as intellectuals try to force the messy and complex real lives of people, driven by their natures and chance, into some clever, new, and usually destructive, framework of ideas.

None of these three are particularly sympathetic (although Arendt comes closest). Heidegger, aside from his time spent with Nazis, maundered on a lot about "authenticity." I've never been able to understand why that should be some sort of important personal goal. Honor, love, hard work, prudence, fortitude, and a zillion other virtues are much more important than eternal navel gazing to satisfy oneself that one is "authentic," whatever that even means. And what if being "authentic" means you admit you're a jerk, as it seems to mean for most people obsessed with authenticity? Far better to strive to conform oneself to the correct path than to look inwards for authenticity. That's the problem with all these people—the pure life of the mind is its own end and reward for them, but it is properly neither end nor reward in the life of man.

But a description of their minds is really all we get about Heidegger, Arendt, and Jaspers. What we don't get is any linkage of this long essay to the putative theme of Lilla's book. It is not explained why tyranny

attracted these people, because it only attracted Heidegger, and not for long. The only relevant portion, to Lilla's theme, is Arendt excusing Heidegger on the basis that philosophers have always been attracted to tyranny, which is empirically true enough, but this book is supposed to be telling us why. Not to mention Heidegger lived under Nazism, and thus is not an example of the type of person Lilla is supposedly examining, attracted to tyranny from the outside. This points up the problem with this book—it is a collection of essays not written for this book, shoehorned into a loose group. Lilla says up front his book “is not a systematic treatise,” but it's not a treatise at all, it's mostly a collection. Not a bad collection, but not really more than a polished examination of the eight people it profiles.

More interesting is the next essay, on Carl Schmitt. Schmitt achieved a brief moment of American political notability early in 2017, when sometime Republican and former conservative William Kristol compared Michael Anton, reactionary author of the famous “Flight 93” essay and national security functionary in the Trump White House, to Schmitt. It was not a compliment, since to most, Schmitt is seen mostly as a crude Nazi philosopher, the “crown jurist” of the early Nazi period. But Lilla points out that not only is this not really the case, but that elements of both the modern Left and Right see a lot of interest and value in Schmitt's thought.

No doubt Schmitt was much more closely tied to Nazism than Heidegger. He was instrumental in the 1930s in providing legal justifications for various Nazi seizures and abuses of power, although he faded from relevance and view before the war. Like Heidegger, he was investigated post-war, but not punished, for his dalliance with tyranny, and also like Heidegger, he viewed himself as on a higher plane than the Nazis. In their world, or at least the mental world they constructed after the war, the superior mind of the philosopher was being used to guide those lower, and to bring them from their rough and brutal ways to a philosophical approach that would raise them up from tyranny to justice and clear thought—not necessarily to liberal, democratic thought, of course, but to a type of thought acceptable to a philosopher in the mold of Plato.

In Lilla's analysis (I know nothing independently of Schmitt's thought, but perhaps I should learn), the core of Schmitt's approach to politics is

that all peoples have enemies, and, as Schmitt said, "Tell me who your enemy is and I'll tell you who you are." This means that "everything is potentially political because everything—morals, religion, economics, art—can, in extreme cases, become a political issue, an encounter with an enemy, and be transformed into a source of conflict." (I found this fascinating, because it is also the approach of the modern Left to the world, except that their approach is not confined to "extreme cases," but to every case—no area of life must be allowed to be free from their insufferable politicization.) The logical conclusion is that "every human grouping requires a sovereign whose job is to decide what to do in the extreme or exceptional case—most important of all, to engage in war or not, with one enemy or another. The state's sovereign decision is just that: a decision resting on no universal principle, and recognizing no natural bounds." This philosophy, called today "decisionism," opposes the liberal state as unnatural and contemptible, and views its supposed focuses such as individualism as fictions. In particular, Schmitt was enamored of the Roman practice of temporary dictators—he viewed the existence of the sovereign decision as what mattered, not its content. Thus, today Schmitt is viewed with favor by certain German conservatives, and, more interesting, by many German leftists, because his "brutal realism can help us today to rediscover 'the political' and restore a sense of legitimacy through the popular will. . . . His critique of parliamentarianism and the principle of neutrality can be seen in a left-wing light as unmasking domination in liberal societies; his unabashed defense of the friend-enemy distinction is said to remind us that politics is, above all, struggle." Thus, the same people who lionized the Cuban "struggle" found a lot to like in Schmitt, because emancipation can be achieved through sovereign action much more easily than through liberal democracy.

Lilla thinks this is, though not wrong, a too-simplistic reading of Schmitt, and that Schmitt was primarily interested in creating an organic society. Citing Schmitt's interplay with Leo Strauss in the 1930s, and Schmitt's *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, an obscure work, Lilla says that "Schmitt argued that the Church's authority is legitimized symbolically through ritual rather than legally through neutral rules; it sees itself as representing the entire body of the faithful, not particular individuals. Schmitt saw the Church's understanding of the good political order as

having come under attack in the modern age, threatened by the idea of political individualism and by a capitalist economy that subordinated social ends to calculating means." As Lilla points out, much of Schmitt's thought is not actually compatible with Christianity, and is closer to Gnosticism, but all this is nonetheless interesting, and relevant to today, as liberal democracy dies. In this reading, Schmitt was not Nazi at all; he merely had "a willingness to encourage any force that might do battle against the secularized liberal age. He describes himself repeatedly as a *katechon*, the Greek term Saint Paul uses when speaking of the force that holds off the Anti-Christ until the Second Coming." (Again, though, it tells us little about the supposed theme of Lilla's book.) Lilla does say "But for nearly two centuries now, the advocates of liberal ideas have also found themselves confronted by opponents like Schmitt, who are so convinced that the modern age represents a cosmic mistake that they are willing to consider any extreme, intellectual or political, to correct it. While few of Schmitt's contemporary promoters may share his peculiar theological vision, many display his violent distaste for liberal society; and like him they long passionately for a new dispensation." As I say—relevant to today, unlike Heidegger, or, for that matter, anyone else profiled in this book, except perhaps Plato and Dionysius.

Lilla's next essay, on Walter Benjamin (Lilla has a keen interest in obscure yet fascinating Jewish thinkers, such as his focus on Franz Rosenzweig and his mystic *Star of Redemption* in Lilla's *The Shipwrecked Mind*) is no more successful in fitting into Lilla's purported theme. Benjamin committed suicide in 1940; before that, he wrote various philosophical works, flirted with Communism, and spent the last decade of his life in an insane project to voluminously record and synthesize life in nineteenth-century Paris. All of modest interest, in particular Lilla's tying of Benjamin's occasional Jewish apocalypticism to reactionary thought, but this says nothing of why philosophers not under direct pressure endorse tyranny.

We come closer to the theme in Lilla's explication of Alexandre Kojève, a Russian émigré whose seminars on Hegel, given in France during the 1930s, were hugely influential. Roger Scruton better summarizes those lectures: "But what impressed Kojève's audience of spiritually hungry atheists in the 1930s was the vision of radical freedom and the self-created individual. It dawned on them that, by exploring the self and

its freedom, it was possible to re-enchant their disenchanting world, and to place the human subject once again at the centre of things.” Unlike all the other philosophers profiled in this book, Kojève turned to actual participation in politics, and entered active service in the French government after World War II, where he worked until his death and ignored philosophy. “When asked for revolutionary advice by the leaders of the Berlin student rebellion in 1967, he replied only, ‘Learn Greek.’” Kojève “was convinced that the entire developed world was moving, by fits and starts, toward a rationally organized bureaucratic society without class distinctions. For him it was a mere detail whether that end was to be reached through the industrial capitalism promoted by the United States (which he called the right-Hegelian alternative) or the state socialism of the Soviet Union (the left-Hegelian one).” While this is (internally) reason enough to disregard tyranny, it is mostly an oddball rationale, not generally applicable, and therefore, again, not truly serving Lilla’s theme. And here, as elsewhere, Lilla makes no effort within this essay to tie it to his theme. On the other hand, Lilla does offer a fascinating analysis of Kojève’s dialogue with Leo Strauss, centering on the latter’s *On Tyranny*, a commentary on Xenophon’s dialogue *Hiero* (about another tyrant of Syracuse), in which Kojève maintained that modern tyrannies, such as Stalin’s, are qualitatively different, and more moral, than ancient tyrannies, and that philosophers, such as Kojève, are uniquely qualified to help such tyrants “complete the work of history.” Strauss did not think much of this line of thought.

Lilla’s last two profiles are of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. (Lilla loves the French very much, and it’s annoying sometimes, as in his frequent use of untranslated French phrases. He does not seem to know that almost nobody learns French anymore.) Foucault was a more independent thinker than all the other French Communist philosophers, and thus worthy of perhaps more interest. By the same token, though, he’s once again irrelevant to Lilla’s putative theme, and the only truly remarkable point is that Lilla scoffs that *Discipline and Punish*, the book which has been “his most influential in America,” was not influential abroad, in part because the near-simultaneous publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* made it “difficult to maintain that Western classrooms were prisons and still remain within the bounds of good taste.” As far as Derrida, the so-called postmodernist, Lilla mostly

uses his essay to criticize supposed academic subjects such as “feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, science studies, and postcolonial theory” as “ephemeral,” and to lay responsibility for these atrocities at Derrida’s feet. “Postmodernism is long on attitude and short on argument. What appears to hold it together is the conviction that promoting these very different thinkers somehow contributes to a shared emancipatory political end, which remains conveniently ill-defined.” At least, though, we are treated to more of Lilla’s sparkling prose: “Socrates equated justice with philosophy, on the grounds that only philosophy could see things as they truly are, and therefore judge truly. Jacques Derrida, mustering all the chutzpah at his disposal, equates justice with deconstruction, on the grounds that only the undoing of rational discourse about justice will prepare the advent of justice as Messiah.”

It is from the joke made at Heidegger’s expense, when he returned from being rector at Freiburg University, that Lilla’s last essay flows. This last essay, “The Lure of Syracuse,” is worth the price of admission, and is among the best things I have ever read. A colleague asked Heidegger, meaning to be nasty, “Back from Syracuse?” The reference was to Plato’s three trips to Syracuse, in the fourth century B.C., at the behest of his friend, a nobleman named Dion, to attempt to teach the new tyrant there, Dionysius the Younger, the value of philosophy, and through philosophy, the need for justice. He failed, miserably. Dionysius had little real interest, and then quickly started to fancy himself an autodidact philosopher who should himself instruct Plato. In the end, Plato barely escaped with his life, and ultimately Dion rebelled (after being exiled) and overthrew Dionysius (and was himself ultimately assassinated). (Dionysius the Younger was also the king who featured, along with the eponymous courtier, in the legend of the Sword of Damocles, although this does not figure in Lilla’s essay.) Lilla notes that “The problem of Dionysius is as old as creation. That of his intellectual partisans is new. As continental Europe gave birth to two great tyrannical systems in the twentieth century, communism and fascism, it also gave birth to a new social type, for which we need a new name: the philotyrrannical intellectual.”

Lilla then explores a variety of explanations for the rise of this new type of individual, from Isaiah Berlin’s concept that the Enlightenment, with its desperate attachment to hyper-rationality and total rigidity, led

to the gulag; to the more common theory that modern tyrannies are substitute religions. Along another axis, Lilla explores the "social history of intellectuals in European political life," contrasting those who ascribe modern tyranny to too much, or too little, political engagement. Here we begin to actually reach for, if not determine, the answer to Lilla's question—why do intellectuals often love tyrants?

Returning to Dionysius, Lilla concludes that what is needed, and what is lacking in modern politics that as a result often leads to tyranny, is the old ideal of "self-mastery in the face of love," where love, eros, the longing to "beget in the beautiful," can engender both good and bad, as in the image Socrates used of the two horses pulling a charioteer. "The tyrannical man is the mirror image of the philosopher: he is not the ruler of his aspirations and desires, he is a man possessed by love madness, the slave of its aspirations and desires, rather than their ruler." And Lilla draws a sharp distinction, following Plato, between "teachers, orators, poets—what we today would call intellectuals," who "cannot master that passion; [rather such a man] dives headlong into political discussion, writing books, giving speeches, offering advice in a frenzy of activity that barely masks his incompetence and irresponsibility. Such men consider themselves to be independent minds, when the truth is that they are a herd driven by their inner demons and thirsty for the approval of a fickle public." What they, and everyone, needs is an "education in intellectual self-control"; failure to obtain that education leads to tyranny (and to a love of tyrants by intellectuals). Dionysius was one such, and the arc of his life paints the path that modern philotyrannical intellectuals have followed, marching like lemmings. Lilla ends noting "what Plato saw long ago: that there is some connection in the human mind between the yearning for truth and the desire to contribute to 'the right ordering of cities and households.'" But this urge can easily become a "reckless passion," and "so long as men and women think about politics . . . the temptation will be there to succumb to the lure of an idea, to allow passion to blind us to its tyrannical potential, and to abdicate our first responsibility, which is to master the tyrant within."

The author's conclusion is succinct enough, and of universal applicability. Unfortunately, he does not apply it to its most relevant present use, to the modern ideology of liberal democracy, which is just as much an ideology as National Socialism or Communism, if not,

precisely, in Lilla's term, "a master ideology." If Lilla's analysis is true, which I think it is, modern liberal democracy is doomed, because it is based on precisely the opposite of "mastering the tyrant within." The Enlightenment project is to offer ever more individual freedom and so-called emancipation, and require ever less self-rule of one's aspirations and desires. If atomized total freedom is the inevitable end point of liberal democratic society, it is necessarily coterminous with tyranny, both of the individual inside himself, and of the society as a whole. This is a line of thought more and more conservatives are coming to agree with, and while Lilla does not take this step, it necessarily follows from his analysis. What this implies is the need for some form of reaction (something Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss both appeared to endorse), and the creation of a form of societal and individual self-governance based on virtue, not maximum freedom. Lilla shows, and history has shown, that anything different always ends in tyranny, even more so in the modern world than in the past. The exact parameters of this, and how it will play out, are obscure (and they could not be otherwise—if they were precise, it would be an ideology), but such a path is almost certainly our future.

And a side note: In 2016, Lilla released a revised version of this book. I read the original 2001 version, but the *New York Review of Books* (in which all these essays, or versions of them, originally appeared), summarizes the revision as Lilla adding a new essay, to the effect that "The ideological passions of the past have been replaced in the West, he argues, by a dogma of individual autonomy and freedom that both obscures the historical forces at work in the present and sanctions ignorance about them, leaving us ill-equipped to understand those who are inflamed by the new global ideologies of our time." This sounds interesting, and is in line with my last paragraph above (though he probably focuses on Islam, not liberal democracy). I may buy the revised version and add to this review.