

Manfred B. Steger

Review

The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics by Mark Lilla

by
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A collection of six extended reviews that originally appeared in shorter versions in *The New York Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, Mark Lilla's *Reckless Mind* has been received with much interest. Indeed, a roundtable discussion of the book organized at the 2002 meeting of the American Political Science Association in Boston drew a large audience. The book is written in an extraordinarily lucid and accessible style without sacrificing intellectual sophistication. Even for those critics, like this reviewer, who disagree with the author's approach, it is difficult not to admire his broad understanding of continental political philosophy. There is no question that *Reckless Minds* represents an elegant collection of essays that manages to inform, provoke, and engage its readers.

Lilla ponders the role of intellectuals in politics—a subject that has exerted great appeal to a broad spectrum of twentieth century philosophical voices ranging from Jean-Paul Sartre and Antonio Gramsci on the left and Raymond Aron and Julien Benda at the center to Michael Oakeshott and Allan Bloom on the right. Lilla's variation on the theme—why did certain philosophers (in this case, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Alexandre Kojève, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida) support political tyrannies?—is not particularly new, coming fifteen years after the international controversy over Heidegger's involvement in the Nazi regime, which erupted after the publication of Victor Farias's revealing account. What makes Lilla's book such a provocative contribution, then, is not the novelty of its subject matter, but some of his most daring—perhaps even reckless—intellectual maneuvers.

For one, Lilla resolutely rejects any historicist explanation in favor of a rather simplistic psychological account resting on a peculiar mix of neo-Straussian soul talk and liberal individualism. Second, he applies the label "philotyrannical intellectuals" in a rather abstruse and indiscriminate manner

to thinkers with profoundly different philosophical frameworks, historical contexts, and political commitments. Third, there is the question of historical accuracy. As someone who has some familiarity with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, I cannot help but wonder when, exactly, did Walter Benjamin support tyranny? In fact, Lilla himself concedes that “Benjamin’s Marxism remained deskbound, and every encounter he had with real Communist politics left him disaffected.” So why include the literary critic in a list of philotyrannical intellectuals headed by the likes of Heidegger and Schmitt, who enthusiastically supported tyrannical regimes?

Unfortunately, this brief review will not allow me to address these three points in sufficient detail. Indeed, I will have to confine my remarks to what appears to me to be the central problem with the book: its ahistorical psychologism. Since it is not until the end of the study that the author gives a full account of his Platonist explanation for the philosophers’ reckless support of authoritarian regimes, I would advise readers to begin with the afterword, titled “The Lure of Syracuse.” Offering an idealized interpretation of Plato’s three famous unsuccessful voyages to Syracuse, undertaken at the behest of his beloved student Dion in the hope of imparting philosophical wisdom to the city’s tyrant Dionysius the Younger, Lilla quickly arrives at what he considers to be the moral of the story: short of a miracle, rational philosophers will never succeed in turning tyrants toward the Just and the Good. The best arrangement that can be hoped for is not the political rule of lovers of wisdom, but the temporary establishment of a somewhat sensible government under the rule of law. According to Lilla, however, a good number of twentieth-century philosophers disregarded Plato’s wise pleas for moderation and instead succumbed to the lure of modern tyrannies. They willingly and openly served Hitler, Stalin, Milosevic, and other modern versions of Dionysius in word and deed. Thus Lilla’s central question: how can we explain their failings?

Much to the author’s credit, he does reflect on the possible utility of historical approaches in answering this question. After all, a careful, case-by-case consideration of pertinent historical forces seems to be an important part of any serious attempt to find adequate explanations for why Heidegger betrayed his mentor Husserl with a joyous “Heil Hitler” on his lips or why Schmitt wasted significant amounts of his mental energy on anti-Semitic diatribes that insulted his intelligence. As Lilla suggests, an historian of political ideas might argue with Isaiah Berlin that the intellectual support of modern forms of authoritarianism is rooted in Western philosophical

traditions characterized by their hostility to diversity and plurality. Other historians of ideas might disagree and instead warm up to the views of Jacob Talmon, who, writing in the early 1960s, blamed troubling alliances between philosophers and tyrants on primordial religious impulses that found an unexpected home in the irrational rationalism of the French Revolution and the extreme political ideologies it spawned. Finally, rather than opting for a history of ideas, a historically sensitive scholar might wish to examine the social and economic context of the intellectuals in question, thus exploring the link between personal choice and material incentive structures anchored in modern economic practices, increasing class conflict, and the growing imperialist ambitions of Western nation-states.

Ultimately, however, Lilla argues that these historical approaches fail to take us to the heart of the matter. As he puts it, “All these attitudes and tendencies obviously had their part in European history, whether as proximate causes or effects, but none tells us why intellectual philotyranny develops at all.” Case closed. The author is now ready to uncover the “deeper forces that draw the mind to tyranny.”

But, I am tempted to interject: not so fast. How can Lilla admit that political attitudes might be the result of proximate historical forces and simultaneously claim that history does not tell us anything about why intellectual philotyranny develops in the first place? Did I miss something? How does Lilla justify his sweeping conclusion? What are his criteria for distinguishing between what counts as “deep” or “shallow” forces? Unfortunately, the author never engages these questions. Having jettisoned history in this rather tricky fashion, he is now ready to identify “deep psychological forces” as the main culprits for the philosophers’ failings. According to Lilla, “love induces madness.” In other words, philotyrannical intellectuals like Heidegger and Foucault suffered from an overabundance of *eros*—the very force that drew them to philosophy in the first place. Unable to “master” the excessive erotic yearnings of their souls, these unfortunate creatures found themselves under the spell of a “blissful kind of madness” that manifested itself in their “reckless passion” to influence public life as teachers orators, and advisors to rulers. “Sunburned” by their immoderate ideas, philotyrannical intellectuals like Benjamin and Derrida “dive headlong into political discussion, writing books, giving speeches, offering advice in a frenzy of activity” that barely masks their “incompetence and irresponsibility.” Lacking humility and intellectual self-control, reckless

philosophers like Foucault and Kojève “whip the minds of the young into a frenzy.”

The final few paragraphs of Lilla’s afterword are rather predictable. Socrates understood this dangerous illness. Plato understood it. Dion understood it. As did Jaspers, Arendt, Aron, Strauss, and a number of other “responsible philosophers” whose moderation Lilla contrasts with the excesses of Heidegger, Foucault, & Co. Never mind that Socrates was seen by many of his contemporaries as a philotyrannical intellectual who whipped the minds of the young into a frenzy. Never mind that Plato himself repeatedly gave in to his erotic yearnings to advise a tyrant who showed little sign of moderation and self-control. Never mind that Dion desired to become the ruler of Syracuse himself—a passion so strong and reckless that it made him organize an ultimately unsuccessful coup d’état against his “dear friend” Dionysius. Never mind that Jaspers publicly supported dropping nuclear weapons on the Soviet Union. Never mind that Arendt endorsed racial segregation in Little Rock in the name of “democracy.”

Lilla, of course, judges the character and actions of his heroes very differently. In his view, Socrates’ educational enterprise of righting inverted souls was completely misunderstood by his fellow citizens; Plato’s repeated attempts to reform Dionysius—even against his better judgment—were but well-meaning acts of soul care, and fitting for a self-controlled sage of Plato’s caliber; and Dion merely sought to free Syracuse from an incorrigible tyrant “without letting the tyranny he combated enter his soul.” In the end, the author assures us, “There is no shame in failure or death in politics so long as one remains free of that tyranny. . . . Dion died a glorious death, loyal to truth and his city.”

How can Lilla be so certain that Dion’s soul remained pure? What, exactly, do we mean by “soul?” Is Plato’s simplistic tripartite division the best way of conceptualizing souls? Who is the most competent judge of people’s souls? What criteria should we use? What traits or actions should count as more significant than others? Who makes the selection? Who judges the judges’ judgment?

Lilla’s summary dismissal of historical approaches and his exclusive reliance on a rather reductionistic psychologism, points, in my view, to another form of intellectual recklessness that could reasonably be described as “psychotyranny.” This term signifies the spiritual arrogance and moral elitism

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of anointed soul experts who feel called upon to establish well-ordered souls and polities. It seems to me that such an excessive yearning for what they consider to be a “moderate” political order pervaded by a “sense of moral proportion” fueled both Plato’s real voyages to the tyrant of Syracuse and Mark Lilla’s literary speculations about the imagined souls of modern philotyrannical intellectuals.