

Book Review

The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics, by Mark Lilla

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The reckless mind: Intellectuals in politics is a disturbing and moving book.

We cannot ignore that the main question of the work is that of ideology.

Lilla acknowledges that political thought in the West today lacks adequate concepts and even a proper terminology to describe the world we live in now. He says that “ever since the end of World War II, and perhaps since the Russian Revolution, political thought has seemed so shallow, so aimless” (Lilla, 2017, p. 189).

The age in which we live, for Lilla, is markedly anti-political and anti-intellectual. Distinct groups—American right-wing fundamentalists advocating the minimal state, European left-wing anarchists, absolutist civil libertarians, and neoliberal free market evangelists—all resemble each other; the differences among them are superficial. They share the same mentality, the same state of mind, the same presumption, the same prejudice.

Lilla, therefore, realizes that the problems of today's capitalist democracies—the emptying of the middle class, the erosion of family and community, hatred towards the elites, the eclipse of political parties, widespread indifference to the public interest—are some of the main challenges to intellectuals' understanding and interpretation of the current scenario. And he reminds us that the seduction of tyranny is not the only force that can misguide intellectuals. Self-deception assumes countless forms.

Lilla, therefore, sheds light on an important aspect of study and research: intellectual responsibility. Can a thinker's ideas be separated from the political use that creates them? At a certain level, the answer is yes. But we must not fail to reflect on how certain authors have made certain choices and why they are independent of their works.

In *The reckless mind*, Lilla shows a series of European thinkers of the 20th century (whose thought remains alive among us even today). They inaugurated a new social type—the philosophical intellectual—capable of justifying the most bloodthirsty tyrannies with their academic production.

After all, how are intellectuals identified? They are the holders of scientific knowledge, and the opinion formers and mentors of the masses. It seems the primary task of the intellectual is to mediate individual and collective interests, to give meaning to politics and culture. That is, in theory, they are individuals who are open to new ways of thought, willing to review their own ideas, responsible for their thoughts, and fully humanistic. They are important individuals who should be alert to the evils of tyranny.

Lilla was inspired to write *The reckless mind* by Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz's seminal book, *The Captive Mind* (1953).

Milosz did a study of how postwar intellectuals in Poland adapted to the Stalinist orthodoxy of dialectical materialism and socialist realism. Milosz traces the profile of four successful writers, thoroughly describing their intellectual and political trajectories in pre-war Poland (in the nationalist and anti-Semitic right), their experiences during the war, and their adaptation to the communist regime imposed by the Soviet Union.

Starting from Milosz's work—"this book tries to deal with these questions and can be read as a modest complement of *Captive Mind*" (Lilla, 2017, p. 11)—, Lilla in *The reckless mind* presents a profile of thinkers who were deceived by the ideologies of their time and closed their eyes to authoritarianism, brutality, stupidity, and state terrorism.

The reckless mind traces the careers of six leading thinkers of the 20th century, aligned with the left or the right, "to show that the phenomenon they represent is not limited to a country or a political bent" (Lilla, 2017): Martin Heidegger (pp. 15-47); Carl Schmitt (pp. 51-71); Walter Benjamin (pp. 75-100); Alexandre Kojève (pp. 103-119); Michel Foucault (pp. 123-137); and Jacques Derrida (pp. 141-163).

Mark Lilla, author of the book, is a professor at Columbia University and writes regularly for *The New York Review of Books* and other publications around the world. An author of profitable production, in 2015, he won the award for best international news commentator granted by the Overseas Press Club of America, due to the column "On France", published in *The New York Review of Books*.

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