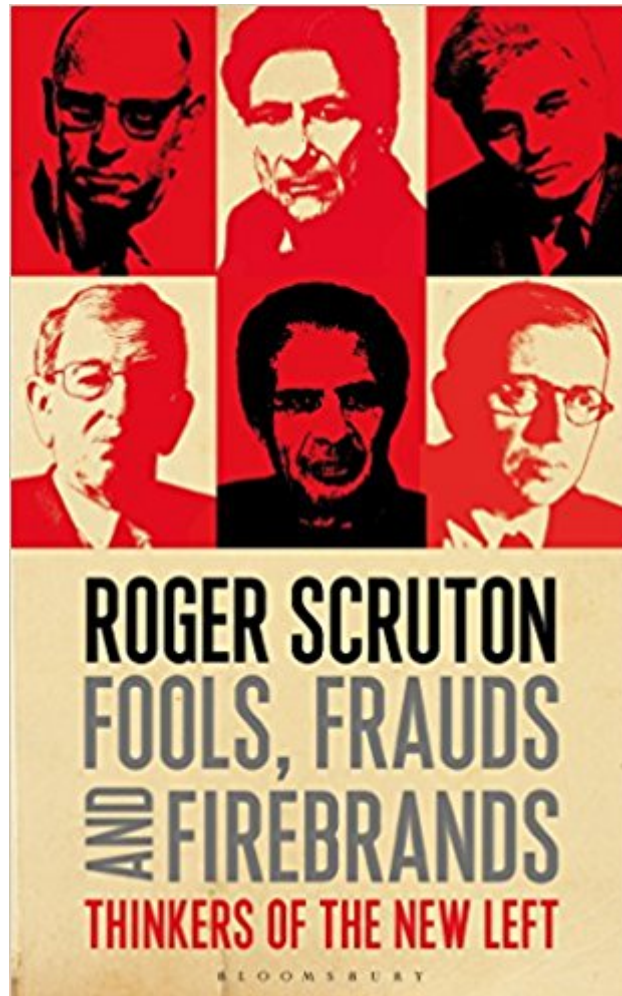




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Fools, Frauds And Firebrands: Thinkers Of The New Left



Synopsis

In *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands*, professor and philosopher Roger Scruton asks: what does the Left look like today, and how has it evolved since 1989? What can replace radical egalitarianism and the dominance of antinomian attitudes in the intellectual world? Can there be any foundation for resistance to the leftist agenda without religious faith? To answer these questions, Scruton, one of the leading critics of leftist orientations in modern Western civilization, examines the thinkers who have been most influential on the attitudes of the New Left. Scruton begins with a ruthless analysis of New Leftism and concludes with a critique of the key strands in its thinking. He conducts a reappraisal of such major left-wing thinkers as: E. P. Thompson, Ronald Dworkin, R. D. Laing, Jurgen Habermas, Gyorgy Lukacs, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Zizek, Ralph Milliband and Eric Hobsbawm. In addition to assessments of these thinkers' philosophical and political contributions, the book contains a biographical and bibliographical section summarizing their careers and most important writings. Scruton's exploration of these important issues is written with skill, perception and at all times with pellucid clarity. The result is a devastating critique of modern left-wing thinking.

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Customer Reviews

"The book is a masterpiece, its rather too clever title notwithstanding. In crisp, sometimes brilliant prose, Mr. Scruton considers scores of works in three languages, giving the reader an understanding of each thinker's overarching aim and his place within the multifaceted

movement known as the New Left. He neither ridicules nor abuses the writers he considers; he patiently deconstructs them, first explaining their work in terms they themselves would recognize and then laying bare their warped assumptions and empty pretensions." *—* *The Wall Street Journal* "Scruton's book is not the dispassionate examination and measured assessment of philosophical arguments typical of analytic philosophers. It is a polemical dissection and indictment of the perceived destructive aims and tactics of the left. Earlier chapters on Sartre and Foucault, and on members of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno, are the most engaging." *—* Samuel Freeman, *The New York Review of Books* "Eminent British philosopher and polymath Scruton gives a sharp-edged, provocative critique of leading leftist thinkers since the mid-20th century . . . complex and erudite." *—* *Publishers Weekly* "Caustic, highly researched, and simply great fun to read for the questing intellectual soul." *—* *Kirkus Reviews* "[H]onestly assesses the political and philosophical contributions of the Left [and] addresses what is likely our most pressing question: 'Can there be any foundation for resistance to the leftist agenda without religious faith?'" *—* *Catholic World Report*

Professor Roger Scruton is a graduate of Jesus College, Cambridge. He has been a professor at Birkbeck College, London, and Boston University. He is currently visiting professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford and Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington DC. He has published novels and has written and composed two operas. He writes regularly for the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Spectator* and was for many years the wine critic of the *New Statesman*.

As an undergraduate, I wondered why the curriculum in the humanities was so narrowly focused, and why some of these alleged-brilliant minds were not only convoluted in their theories, but sometimes deliberately obtuse/obscurantist in their writing. As I progressed to graduate school, things got even worse. The "mathemes" struck me as the Leftist's attempt to give their non-theories a kind of mathematical/scientific patina. The gibberish of "the sign and the signifier," the incessant invocation of "the other," all of this stuff eventually became a bit wearing. Scruton does a good job in this short work of separating the wheat from the chaff, in addressing the dominant intellectual schools of thought, and the thinkers who made their "institutional march," first through Europe, who are now well-entrenched in American universities. This book is not the paranoid hit piece that either the title nor the cover art would lead one to believe. Scruton gives credit where it is due, especially to Foucault and Sartre, whose conclusions and solutions may be off-base, but whose keenness of mind and command of history is pretty staggering. The ultimate picture that Scruton paints, however,

is one that would be absurdly funny if so many people weren't hurt (literally and psychologically) by the unrelievedly nihilistic philosophies and theories perpetuated by the Frankfurt School, existentialists, Marxists, etc. All of the thinkers whose works and beliefs Scruton details have several features in common: they believe in the sanctity of some abstract "worker" or proletariat, despite having little or no daily interaction with their subjects, and they believe that the Left can never be held accountable for the catastrophic gulf between theory and praxis (especially regarding Marxism and Communism), and above all, they believe that people who don't believe what they believe are not merely viewing things from a different perspective, but are wrong, and either need to be ignored or somehow eliminated from the discourse. The works that Scruton engages are many times pretentious, and, once parsed for content, revealed to be empty shell games. Naturally then, when Scruton critiques the works, he himself has to "wade in the mud" so to speak, so sometimes the reading is itself a chore. But it was a necessary public service Scruton performed in this book, and his sense of humor helps leaven what would otherwise be a punishing wade through the mire. And if you're going to college and you're going to accrue debt and a plethora of nihilistic, useless gibberish as well, you owe it to yourself to read this book and inoculate yourself. Or, if you've already been through the ringer, his book will reassure you that no, you are not alone, and that yes, Bertrand Russell was right: "Man is born ignorant, not stupid. He is made stupid through education." Recommended.

This is an impressive and important book. Roger Scruton accepts the task of investigating the thought of a number of prominent 20thc leftist intellectuals, paying particular attention to the writings of Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Ronald Dworkin, Jacques Lacan, George Lukacs, Sean-Paul Sartre, Slavoj Zizek, Jurgen Habermas and Michel Foucault, with shorter examination of Edward Said and a short-short mention of Jacques Derrida. This is a very difficult task because many of these writers have voluminous bibliographies and write with a lugubrious, sometimes impenetrable style (the near totalizing *Abstraction* of which leads to a set of key points). A prominent literary critic once compared a task such as this to fighting with Joel Chandler Harris's *tar baby*. If you engage with the shape-shifting beast you may never come out again. On the other hand, you cannot engage with it without reading these writers' works, lest you be called a dilettante, a *vulgar* conservative, or all manner of other ugly names. Scruton is none of these, but he is very brave and tenacious to suffer through the volume of material which is here under investigation. His bottom line is that there are many common threads here, nearly all of which begin

with Marx, sometimes as adumbrated by Hegel or filtered through such a shared teacher as Alexandre Kojève. Scruton is fair in recognizing that some of these individuals' works are impressive intellectual accomplishments, even if their conclusions are ultimately antinomian. He argues, very impressively, that many of these individuals have invented new ways of saying the same old thing. They have enlisted linguistics, epistemology, psychology, sociology, communication theory, etc. to argue, at bottom, that we will never be happy until we achieve a utopia in which the bourgeoisie is liquidated, false consciousness is transcended, the proletariat is ruled as a result of its leadership by the leftist elites/intellectuals/cognoscenti. Scruton demonstrates that the proponents of these views care little for the fate of those who are tortured, imprisoned or murdered in the process and that many of them do believe in the greatness and rightness of such individuals as Stalin and Mao Zedong. They operate at a level of abstraction that sees actual human beings and their plights as incidental or unimportant. Still, they argue for an end to any sentient being's impossible to achieve. While he attempts to be as intellectually honest and transparent as possible he does not pull punches, suggesting that one explanation for their labor is Nietzsche's observation that "that resentment is the real default condition of social beings, who know only that the other has what they want, and must be made to suffer for it" (p. 287). I would have preferred a different title, since this one suggests that the book is a polemic or screed. It is not; it is a studied examination of the thought of a number of prominent leftists and the examination is undertaken with rigor and sophistication. In other words, this is a challenging book that deals with complex thought; it is not a triumphalist exposé of actual fools and frauds (though he does suggest that some, e.g. Lacan, are very close to the latter).

for those who have been indoctrinated with "new Left" madness, this book applies careful analysis and exposes the specious blather of these enemies of reason.

Incisive, erudite, accessible, and compelling! The best book I know of to introduce readers to recent events in literary theory, cultural relativism, and the intellectual history of the twentieth century. This work unmaskes the pretensions of the Left in clear, well-informed, literate prose. It provides excellent summaries and analyses of the work of Dworkin, Foucault, Habermas, Derrida, Rorty, Deleuze, Gramsci, E. P. Thompson, Lacan, Marx, Freud, and others. Useful, valuable, necessary. The discussion on pp. 200-201 of the affinities between communism and fascism is worth the price. For

anyone interested in the history of capitalism, socialism, political economy, and the academy in the last one hundred years, this book is a must-read. It is a work not of critique only but more importantly of affirmation. It will give you new confidence as a member of bourgeois society and a participant in democratic capitalist society, with all its crucial mediating institutions and treasured little platoons.

I loved this book. Scruton is remarkably fair to those he criticizes and tries to find redeeming features of their work. He also, somewhat mind-bogglingly, perseveres in reading interminable prose that, as he persuasively argues, is often not really intended to be understood. Scruton has read these writers so you don't need to.

enlightening. Uses precise language and reasoning as a scalpel, rather than a cudgel, against the soul-deadening orthodoxy of the progressive herd. I couldn't keep up w/ the discourse on Sartre.

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