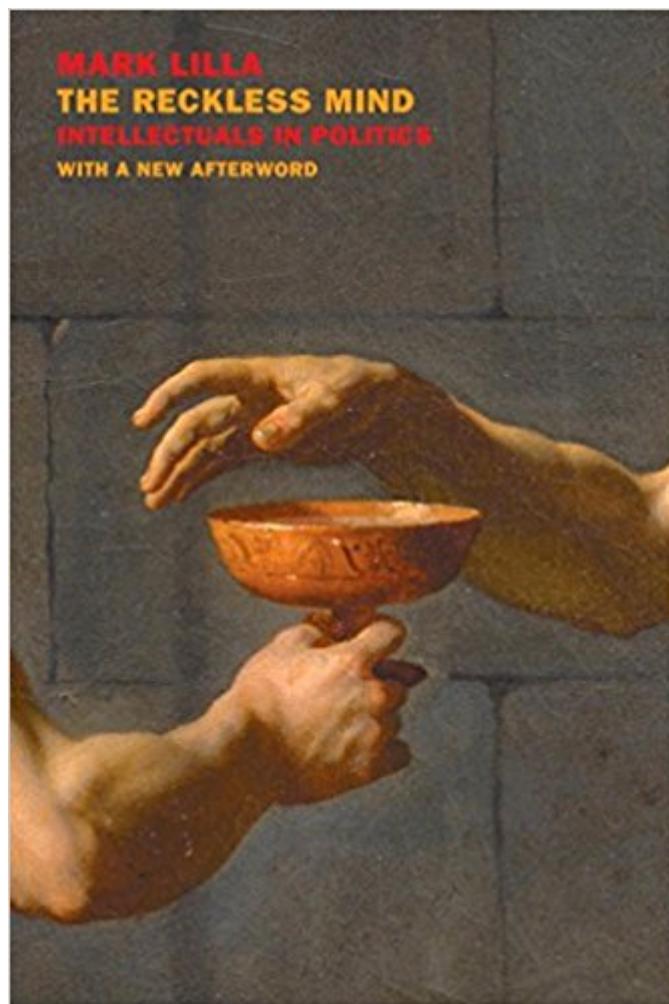


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# The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals In Politics: Revised Edition



## Synopsis

European history of the past century is full of examples of philosophers, writers, and scholars who supported or excused the worst tyrannies of the age. How was this possible? How could intellectuals whose work depends on freedom defend those who would deny it? In profiles of six leading twentieth-century thinkers—Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Alexandre Kojève, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—Mark Lilla explores the psychology of political commitment. As continental Europe gave birth to two great ideological systems in the twentieth century, communism and fascism, it also gave birth to a new social type, the philotyrannical intellectual. Lilla shows how these thinkers were not only grappling with enduring philosophical questions, they were also writing out of their own experiences and passions. These profiles demonstrate how intellectuals can be driven into a political sphere they scarcely understand, with momentous results. In a new afterword, Lilla traces how the intellectual world has changed since the end of the cold war. 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A skilled exploration of why notable 20th-century European philosophers and intellectuals—figures such as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault,

among others — had at times succumbed to what [Lilla] calls ‘*Œtyrannophilia*,’ a narcissistic embrace of totalitarian politics, assuming that tyrants would put their big ideas into action.” — Carlos Lozada, *The Washington Post* “The essays that make up Mark Lilla’s book . . . are driven by his sense of disappointment, a lover’s kind of disappointment, that such profound and influential minds should have been so politically insouciant when confronted by the hectic barbarity of the 20th century. . . . Lilla has a gift for nimble exposition, and each study in his collection is illuminating, often revelatory.” — The New York Times Book Review “Mark Lilla is today the leading intellectual commentator in the United States on European thinkers and ideas. . . . He understands them better than they are understood in their own countries.” — Die Zeit “This is important. Lilla’s short, elegant and readable book is about what happens when philosophers get tangled up in the real world. It is also a matter of recognizing that the world is in the shape that it is because of the influence of the most rarefied of minds.” — Nicolas Lizard, *The Guardian*, Paperback of the Week “Lilla’s accessible, summary look at eight 20th-century thinkers is a compilation of cautionary tales...shrewd advice...a very canny book showing us how not to think and chew politics at the same time.” — Carlin Romano, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* “As Mr. Lilla ably shows, what is common to these thinkers is a rejection of political philosophy. They deny the possibility of a patient, sober and rational exploration of political possibilities. And even when they become disillusioned with specific tyrants—Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Khomeini—they continue to reject political moderation and balanced analysis.” — Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Wall Street Journal* “Lilla has a gift for nimble exposition, and each study in his collection is illuminating, often revelatory,” Sunil Khilnani wrote here in 2002.” — The New York Times Book Review

Mark Lilla is Professor of Humanities at Columbia. With New York Review Books he has published *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (2016), *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (2nd. ed., 2016), and, with Robert Silvers and Ronald Dworkin, *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (2001). His other books include G.B. Vico: *The Making of an Anti-Modern* (1994), *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (2007), and, most recently, *The Once and Future Liberal: On Political Reaction* (2017). He was the 2015 Overseas Press Club of America winner of the Best Commentary on international News in Any Medium for his New York Review series “On France.” Visit [marklilla.com](http://marklilla.com).

Originally released a few days before September 11, 2001, Mark Lilla’s The

Reckless Mind was re-released by NYRB roughly corresponding with his new book of essays on reactionary political thinking, *The Shipwrecked Mind*. In the intervening years, these essays feel both more and less relevant: Foucault has lasted, but the problems of his politics have been explored more completely by the left and the right. Revelations about Heidegger have been made deeper and more notably “problematic” with the translation of the black notebooks. Derrida, the only living figure in the book when it was released, has passed and his relevance to critical theory waned incredibly quickly. Yet the essays in this collection on Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Kojève, Foucault, and Derrida are still readable and fascinating. There are, however, some puzzling indictments in this book. Lilla’s essay on the relationship between Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, and Heidegger is clear-eyed in its assignment of Heidegger’s politics, but Heidegger is not the intellectual about the which the essay concerns itself. Are Jaspers and Arendt also guilty of political recklessness? Lilla, despite the very clear-eyed focus of the essay, does not say. Walter Benjamin’s exact offense seems unknown as if Lilla thinks that flirting with Marxism was in and of itself reckless even when distancing from Soviet and Maoist forms. Is it that Benjamin was reckless in his combining messianism and recursion to Frankfurt Marxism? It hardly had political effect and Benjamin never made apologetics for regimes in the way that Schmitt, Heidegger or Foucault had done. Furthermore, while some of the digs at Derrida are apt particularly Derrida’s highly symbolic and affective reading of Marx’s again it is hard to see what the consequences are to these politics. Derrida’s deconstruction seems muddled, but not reckless. It is, now, however, largely irrelevant. Again one suspects notices that these were essays for *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New York Review of Books*, and are excellent profiles, but the essays connecting the key figures do not thematically relate the figures enough. Lilla’s final essay about Syracuse and the nature of tyrannical philosophers is excellent, but he does not really lay out priorly exactly what was tyrannical about Benjamin. His treatment of Kojève was interesting and clarifying, but the exact nature of the Strauss and Kojève exchanges needed more development as well. Furthermore, Kojève’s correspondence has been collected in “On Authority” giving a more complete view of the exchange than when only Strauss’s “On Tyranny” was translated. In short, this is an insightful but highly frustrating book. Lilla seems more annoyed with the left than the right, even if he thinks the right’s sins are greater. He does not make the digs at Schmitt or even Heidegger that he does Foucault and Derrida. Lilla’s thematic unity is merely interest in alternative and possibly

totalitarian worldviews, but any more coherent and cogent theme is resisted beyond that.

My only complaint is that it is not longer.

A cogently argued well written group of essays that are highly informative. I would highly recommend this short book to anyone interested in the political thinking of a group of highly influential twentieth century thinkers.

An important book beautifully written.

This is the kind of book that you would have wanted to write when it comes to intellectuals and politics. Many times I thought about those guys who suffered, e.g., the Gulags or the Concentration Camps during WWII, just in the middle of the indifference of those who should have said something. Both Fascists and Marxists had their philosopher. The thing is that intellectuals often forget that they have not side --if they are interested in looking for the truth whatever it means. A loved idea, on the other hand, is something hard to abandon. Maybe the facts are wrong but the ideas... Well, in this brief but solid essay, Mark Lilla studies this phenomenon on six philosophers of the twentieth century: M. Heidegger, C. Schmitt, W. Benjamin, A. Kojć, M. Foucault, and J. Derrida. In each chapter he succinctly summarizes their lives and then enters in the works from each of them. You can guess: everyone was involved whether with Fascism or Marxism and no one showed repentance or doubt, at least in its loved works or seminal ideas. Not one. What they did was to justify with rhetorical tricks or verbal dexterity what they promoted. If they had seen (as they did one way or another) how their ideas contributed to the sufferings of people, they should have taken a step back. But they didn't. As I said, love for ideas is stronger than love for a man or a woman. The last one vanishes as long as we feel betrayed. But when facts betray ideas, what? The topic of this book is not an easy one because leftist or compromised philosophers have an army of followers living in any corner of every college or university. How do you fight them, how do you defeat them if there is always an answer, a book, a seminar, defending them? They are intellectuals but they fight as soldiers that have nothing to lose. "In Reckless Mind" you'll find, in a beautiful and accurate prose, the ideas they promoted and how hard they work to keep them alive against all odds. Lilla doesn't show the facts, he is not comparing ideas with facts, he is comparing ideas with self awareness, with that alarm within that, once activated, should make us think about what we are saying. The book has been organized in such a way as to bring the reader up to the end when the whole stuff is

balanced in a final and brilliant chapter. I read the previous reviews and I agree with almost all. The difference maybe it is the enthusiasm that the book inspired in me. Intellectuals are not untouchables no matter how deep the words or the rhetorical construction are. This book is a good proof of that. Highly recommended.

It is dangerous for intellectuals to get involved with politics. First, there is the thing with hemlock, then stuff like carpet bombing, hubris, grandiosity, etc. Stay away from Syracuse. At the end, though, ... what is the point, why do all that reading, all that work? Tell me that Trump does not represent the end of democracy as we dreamed it, he is the ugly face of failed Reason.

I have been following Mark Lilla's work, especially in the New York Review of Books, for a long time now and I have consistently thought that he is one of the most original and stimulating thinkers in the American academy today. The essays in this book are often beautifully written and always refreshing to read.

One wonders if the pleas are somewhat circular - how do we think deeply and with passion and caution for days on end? Do we not need a group of good souls who work like a writer's group to accompany every philosopher...

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