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The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction



Synopsis

We don't understand the reactionary mind. As a result, argues Mark Lilla in this timely book, the ideas and passions that shape today's political dramas are unintelligible to us. The reactionary is anything but a conservative. He is as radical and modern a figure as the revolutionary, someone shipwrecked in the rapidly changing present, and suffering from nostalgia for an idealized past and an apocalyptic fear that history is rushing toward catastrophe. And like the revolutionary his political engagements are motivated by highly developed ideas. Lilla begins with three twentieth-century philosophers—Franz Rosenzweig, Eric Voegelin, and Leo Strauss—who attributed the problems of modern society to a break in the history of ideas and promoted a return to earlier modes of thought. He then examines the enduring power of grand historical narratives of betrayal to shape political outlooks since the French Revolution, and shows how these narratives are employed in the writings of Europe's right-wing cultural pessimists and Maoist neocommunists, American theoconservatives fantasizing about the harmony of medieval Catholic society and radical Islamists seeking to restore a vanished Muslim caliphate. The revolutionary spirit that inspired political movements across the world for two centuries may have died out. But the spirit of reaction that rose to meet it has survived and is proving just as formidable a historical force. We live in an age when the tragicomic nostalgia of Don Quixote for a lost golden age has been transformed into a potent and sometimes deadly weapon. Mark Lilla helps us to understand why.

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Customer Reviews

Mark Lilla's The Shipwrecked Mind examines the coherence of the reactionary mindset on its

own terms. Like Wojak or Pepe the Frog, a reactionary attitude feels a break in the continuity of time that leaves it wandering the deserts of the imagination, alienated in the present from what was once one's own. The romance of reaction is the romance of revolt: dare to make a second break with history and leave the decaying present behind. A traditionalist always faces a paradox: why believe in the deplorable condition of modernity, given the supposed excellence of your culture? A reactionary answers with what Lilla calls the Road Not Taken: a story that identifies the point where rot set in and civilizational decline began. Maistre blamed Francis Bacon; Ayn Rand blamed Kant; Richard Weaver blamed Ockham and the medieval nominalists; Leo Strauss blamed Machiavelli; Heidegger blamed Socrates; Nietzsche blamed Jesus of Nazareth; Allan Bloom more or less blamed the Frankfurt School; Edward Feser like many a Thomist blamed Descartes for breaking with scholasticism. And, of course, the entire crew of Enlightenment thinkers has been a villain for reactionaries such as David Stove, Gerhart Niemeyer, Edmund Burke... What help is it to divide history into discrete slices, and then imagine that a particular slice failed? Is epochal thinking magical thinking? Lilla turns Voegelin's philosophy on its head and suggests reactionaries profess to have an esoteric historical insight that demands wholesale change to realize a Golden Age -- the exact criticism reactionaries level at other ersatz religions. I know you are, but what am I? I'm not convinced this hits bedrock. Consider this. A reporter once asked Pat Buchanan if he was worried about being on "the wrong side of history."

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