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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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The most impressive and the most enjoyably stylish book I read this year | Lilla is a superb commentator on politics and society. A wise and cautionary volume." • John Banville, The Irish Times, "Our Favorite Books of the Year" "The Shipwrecked Mind showcases Lilla's gift for sketching out such long histories and historical mythologies with a few artful brushstrokes, covering centuries of thought and politics in a few pages. (His chapter titled "From Luther to Walmart," channeling academics such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Brad Gregory to describe the post-Reformation descent into today's rapacious capitalism, is a minor classic all on its own.)" • Carlos Lozada, The Washington Post "Mark Lilla's graceful, elegant, and concise appraisals of a variety of reactionary figures could not be more timely." • Andrew Sullivan "Mark Lilla is one of America's foremost intellectuals and he has written an essential book. He argues that we live in an age when revolutionary ideas have lost their allure but reactionary ideas that protest and reject core elements of the modern world are gaining strength. As you read these essays, you will be reminded that ideas matter. John Maynard Keynes once explained that 'madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.' To make sense of the madmen, you need first to understand the scribblers." • Fareed Zakaria "Mark Lilla leads us on a fascinating tour of the modern reactionary mind, shining a fresh light on the ideas and beliefs of a wide range of thinkers, both famous and forgotten. Engagingly written and impressively erudite, this is intellectual biography at its finest." • Robert Kagan "Lilla has assembled this brief but far from lightweight volume from essays. Taken together they have new force, sketching a cast of mind that has shadowed European thought for a century, and one that may seem disturbingly familiar to students of American politics today, as compact and elegant as they are erudite." • The New York Times Book Review "Lilla, a professor of the humanities at Columbia, skillfully untangles the apocalyptic 'mytho-histories,' 'just-so narratives,' and 'political bedtime stories' favored by the modern right, in Europe and America. The best pages in The Shipwrecked Mind are elegant, concise portraits of refugees from Weimar Europe who fled to America after the Nazi takeover and brought with them 'some very large and very dark ideas about the crisis of the age.'" • Sam Tanenhaus, The New Yorker "Critical theorists need not accept Lilla's liberal solution to find his analysis and many of his proposals compelling; his plea to adopt new analytical tools beyond the old-fashioned Left/Right dichotomy is even more relevant now, such a short time after the election, and he is right to show

that the crisis of democracy cannot be solved by a division to identity groups and selective sets of interests. Nitzan Levbovic, *Critical Inquiry* "Timely and illuminating... Lilla's book offers a fascinating framework for making sense of our contemporary political landscape." Sean Illing, *Vox* "At a time when the United States is dealing with radical populism and Europe is beset with a new far right, Mark Lilla's *The Shipwrecked Mind* is the book to read for a more profound understanding of what ails us." E.J. Dionne "Mark Lilla is the model of an engaged intellectual. These essays brilliantly explore the unhappy present in the light of history and philosophy." George Packer "Philosophically timely and politically urgent." Avishai Margalit "Lilla's fascinating exploration of political conservatism shows how various so-called reactionaries have helped shape history. In revealing the mechanics of political reaction, Lilla approaches the subject through a unique religious lens. He is a fantastically gifted essayist, and this short volume collects the best of his recent work not simply on political reaction or revolution, but on subjects including Judaism, Gnosticism, Islam, and Don Quixote." Publishers Weekly "Though the revolutionary impulse has been analyzed to the point of overkill, Lilla suggests that its opposite pole has been all but ignored. Lilla provides a welcome corrective in restoring analytical balance." Kirkus "In trenchant prose, [Lilla's] work combines a shrewd assessment of French current events with an impressive command of French history and literature a rare example of commentary that is at once journalistic and scholarly, and deeply informed." Overseas Press Club citation for Best Commentary on International News

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).

This book discusses the basis of reactionary politics in the West and, to a lesser extent, in the Middle East. Reactionary politics is much more thought out than most people think. As Mark Lilla

wrote in this book revolutionary politics has been written about much more than the politics of reaction. Lilla traces the origins of reactionary political thought back to the aftermath of the Reformation, particularly the Counter-Enlightenment. The writings of the apostle Paul also get special consideration. For inheritors of the Enlightenment-Protestants, Liberals, and Bucky Fuller fans ( I'm all three )-little encouragement is provided. Lilla offers the correct diagnosis but little in the way of a cure. A good but depressing book.Note(9/09/2016): I want to point out that this book IS NOT a criticism of the conservative outlook. Lilla points out that reactionary thinking has, in essence, Gnostic roots.

While some will read this as a 'history of reaction,' this insightful and easily digested volume of essays is more like several essays on the subject. Generally, following a format related to book views and discussions in the history of ideas, collected around the central theme. I was little surprised to find that Lilla had published most of the chapters in New York Review of Books. While this is a limiting factor to the book, it does not make it un-insightful or particularly dross, or even repetitive as like some similar books. In fact, the obvious comparison is to Corey Robins "The Reactionary Mind," which while also being largely a series of essays as review, had a more coherent thesis but was far more repetitive in its assertion and conflated conservatism with reactionarism. Still as Lilla points out, the reactionary impulse may be more dominant in political thinking these days even on the left, but far more ink as been spilt on the revolution mind. Indeed, even I can only think of Berlin and Robins as clear precursors to Lilla's focus here.Lilla starts with an assertion going back to DeMaistre, the reactionary is NOT a conservative. The reactionary is a utopian of nostalgia as opposed to the utopian of progress. While this is not actually the clearest of definitions, Lilla is able to use it trace a variety of kinds of thought which rhyme in function and affect. Lilla starts the book with careful and highly sympathetic studies of Rosenzweig, Voegelin, and Leo Strauss. Indeed, in the case of the latter two men, Lilla goes to pains to disentangle them from the use of their work. Lilla, like Isaiah Berlin who influenced him, can't help but admire something of the vitality of counter-Enlightenment thought and may almost be too sympathetic to his case studies for many of his political allies. He is far fairer to Voegelin and Strauss than to Alain Badiou in the later chapters.It is the series of essay in the second half of the book that are both the interesting but also the most frustrating. Lilla seems limited by the magazine form that chapters were originally published in, but almost all the arguments need to linger. Lilla's thesis on the reactionary impulse to the "road not taken"--generally in some relationship to the Enlightenment although sometimes against the entirety of post-Socratic European history--is fascinating and

seems apt, but he does not fully develop it. Lilla's assertion that "epochal thinking is magical thinking" is fascinating and feels true, but he doesn't give enough examples nor does he explicitly call back the three case study thinkers in the beginning of the book which could be used to justify the claim. Lilla is erudite, and more or less expects his reader to be as well. Yet book that makes fairly strong demands on readers, its magazine style does have the benefit of being immediately accessible in style and a joy to read. This is particularly true in the essay on Michel Houellebecq and the two opposed currents of reactionary thinking in France. Indeed, Lilla does not explore this enough, but often the reactionary impulses biggest enemy is based in a different reactionary impulse with an opposing nostalgia. Lilla is a subtle thinker and a strong writer, but one wishes he developed his thinking beyond collecting his reviews on the topic and writing some thematic essays to tie them together. Despite these caveats, I strongly recommend the "The Shipwrecked Mind."

I was disappointed when I found this book is composed of old NYRB essays (and one from Harper's) without any effort to deepen and synthesize them. (If you have not read them already, so much the better, but you can find them online for free.) I was expecting something more along the lines of *The Stillborn God*, which is excellent. The first chapters on Voegelin and Rosenzweig are close to outstanding, and the third one on Strauss is very good. As introductions to and appreciations of these thinkers, they alone are worth the price of admission. If you are very familiar with these thinkers, Lilla's treatment can seem spotty, coy, and even a bit eccentric, but the way he reads them is fair enough and interesting for what it reveals about Lilla. Strauss is often beat up because of his disciples, and Voegelin is usually ignored, because of or for lack of disciples. There are some omissions I found odd -- Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness and sources, as well as his life story. Strauss and especially Rosenzweig are comparatively more humanized with biographical detail that provides context for their work. The final four essays are much less balanced -- so even more revealing about their author -- but of dubious value in understanding the subjects they purport to analyze. While I enjoyed Lilla's invective directed at Brad Gregory, it's not very deep and probably not all fair, but in general I think it is accurate. Alain Badiou definitely figures as Lilla's whipping boy, but to get to him Lilla has to take on St. Paul as the key to all political heresies. This is a little far out, as is Lilla's apparent sympathetic identification with Michel Houellebecq and the antihero of *Soumission*. Ultimately Lilla has done little in these essays to delineate the boundaries of the reactionary from a legitimate conservatism. (Following Corey Robin I don't believe such a distinction is possible.) However, Lilla's meditations say a great deal about the unsettled, bad conscience (or is it the *mauvaise foi*?) of a neoliberal convert for whom there are more enemies on

the left than the right.

Refreshingly non-partisan, the author offers us the valuable lesson that our troubles and fears have been well known and described over the ages. Those in search of definitive answers will find that, well, there are none and never have been. But it's good to see pointed out, all the cul de sacs on the intellectual landscape which we should just avoid.

Mark Lilla is one of those rare intellectuals: a dispassionate political philosopher who has intimate knowledge of the Western philosophical tradition. This knowledge and understanding is displayed in each of the books essays.

It was good to read from a historical perspective. I learned new terminology like reactionist and political nostalgia. But I didn't see any solutions or his opinion about how to encounter those people.

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