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MEET THE PARENTS: IS THE RADICAL LEFT THE CHILD OF THE RADICAL RIGHT?

A review of Richard Wolin's *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*. Princeton University Press, 2004. 375 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-691-11464-1.

INTELLECTUALS, IT SEEMS, REALLY OUGHT TO KNOW BETTER. From Aristophanes's caricature of Socrates up through such twentieth-century works as Julien Benda's *la trahison des clercs* (*The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*) (1927), Raymond Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), and Tony Judt's *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (1992), we have been shown the sorry spectacle of intellectuals behaving badly. Richard Wolin's *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* is the most recent work in this vein.

Wolin's book is an "intellectual genealogy" that intends to trace "the uncanny affinities between the Counter-Enlightenment and postmodernism." The contemporary academic Left's hostility toward Enlightenment values such as humanism, reason, and liberal democracy, suggests Wolin, echoes the hostility of such Counter-Enlightenment thinkers as Joseph de Maistre and later thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Nietzsche, and Heidegger toward those values, while postmodernism's celebration of "difference" bizarrely echoes the Far Right's insistence upon the "difference" between, for instance, Aryans and Semites. For Wolin, the right-wing, anti-democratic orientation of many literary and philosophical intellectuals in the 1930s has re-emerged where we might least expect it: among the anti-universalist "identity politics" of the academic left in the 1980s and 1990s and in a kind of "Left Heideggerianism" that internalizes many of the assumptions of the intellectual Right in 1920s Germany. That Nietzsche and Heidegger are the intellectual forebears of much postmodernist thought is commonly accepted; Wolin's original argument is that the darker, political sides of Nietzsche and Heidegger are clearly evident in the putatively left-wing politics of postmodernism, and that in fact postmodernism's genealogy can be traced all the way back, via a "subterranean affinity," to the far-right politics of

de Maistre and the Counter-Enlightenment, for whom flawed human beings cannot rationally shape their own history, and for whom human history is always determined by larger, impersonal forces—a position which, Wolin points out, sounds suspiciously similar to Michel Foucault's.

For Wolin, postmodernism's anti-liberal rhetoric has harmed the left rather than advanced its goals. For example, postmodernism's deep suspicion of "universalism," along with its endorsement of "difference" and "identity politics," has worked against human rights and the values of toleration and mutual recognition. To stress one's Tutsi or Shiite or gay or Croat identity, or to stress one's difference from one's Hutu or Sunni (or Christian or secular or Hindu) or straight or Serbian neighbors, is politically debilitating. Traditionally, notes Wolin, the left has been rationalist, universalist, and dedicated to egalitarianism and human rights. But postmodernism's suspicion of Enlightenment values plays into the hands of the New Right. Postmodernism's antiliberal rhetoric and its cynicism toward the kind of melioristic progress attainable in a democracy offers scant help to the politically marginalized. Indeed, claims Wolin, the left's romantic, uncritical embrace of such "others" as Mao, Che, Fidel, and various Third-World dictators has sapped its credibility and led it dangerously close to political irrelevance. For Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as for the Third World, the documents of the American and French revolutions (with their commitments to the rule of law, human rights, and popular sovereignty) are far more politically relevant than the work of Baudrillard, Derrida, or Žižek.

One wonders, however, whether Wolin has inflated postmodernism and "the seduction of unreason" into a kind of bogeyman. He concedes that postmodernism is an overused and confusing term, and that "the postmodern juggernaut seems to have run aground," especially on the continent. As for the "intellectual romance with fascism," or with its successor, the New Right, Wolin concedes that the New Right's intellectual influence in Germany has been on the decline since its attempt during the 1995 anniversary of the end of World War II to depict the Germans as that war's victims. What Wolin calls "the danger of Germany uncoupling itself from the West" seems quite slim. As for France, Wolin argues that the cultural relativism that began with Levi-Strauss's cultural anthropology in the 1950s, developed in the "philosophies of difference" of Derrida and Deleuze in the 1960s, and reached its flower in Foucault's defense of Iran's "revolution of the mullahs," provided the New Right with a cynical means of defending its xenophobic racial hatred. By shifting its argument from "race" to "culture," the *Nouvelle Droit* now claims that its anti-immigration stance merely aims to preserve the "sanctity and integrity" of cultures which have a "right to difference." But even if the New Right is using the language of the postmodern

left to advance a racist agenda, voters' attraction to that agenda remains doubtful. Wolin points to Jean-Marie Le Pen's stunning defeat of Lionel Jospin in the April 2002 national elections, but he concedes that when it really mattered, Le Pen was clobbered by Jacques Chirac. Certainly the European New Right is a troubling phenomenon, but Wolin overestimates what he calls its "broad appeal."

The bulk of Wolin's book is devoted to a chapter-by-chapter discussion of European thinkers who are central to his genealogical argument: Nietzsche, Jung, Gadamer, Bataille, Blanchot, and Derrida. The chapter on Nietzsche is among the book's best. Wolin argues that Nietzsche's postmodern readers have taken him as an apolitical aesthete, a kind of epistemological nihilist or relativist anti-metaphysician. While it is certainly possible to read Nietzsche in this way, such a reading ignores his celebration of the "will to power" and the "great politics" of such anti-democrats as Julius Caesar, Cesare Borgia, and Napoleon. Nietzsche's is clearly a politics of hierarchy and violence, of aristocratic radicalism predicated on the rule of "Higher Men" and the dismissal of what he calls in *Zarathustra* "cows, women, and other democrats." Wolin draws a clear genealogical line from Nietzsche to Foucault, for whom "truth" and "knowledge" are merely emissaries of power, and for whom power (Nietzsche's *Macht*) is the fundamental principle of a Hobbesian world of all against all. Of the six writers to whom Wolin devotes separate chapters, Nietzsche is the only one to whom he concedes intellectual greatness: he is "a towering writer and thinker," as well as a proto-fascist.

The chapters on Jung and Gadamer are interesting but disappointing. Jung has been the subject of considerable recent scholarship regarding his support of fascism, his anti-Semitism, and his racism. Wolin points to Jung's praise for Hitler and Mussolini during the 1930s, and to the British Foreign Office's consideration of war charges against him in 1946 (these charges were never brought), and concludes that if Jung was not an outright Nazi, he was at least a "fellow traveler." However, Wolin never clarifies the connection between Jung's politics and his psychology, beyond the overly broad connection that Jung's psychology rejects "scientific reason" and "scientific sobriety," as do the Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the postmodernists, all of whom are tied to fascism in Wolin's genealogy. Wolin writes as if only a purely "scientific" account of the human psyche can have any intellectual respectability, and he indulges in pointless name-calling: Jung is "a fraud" guilty of "intellectual charlatanry" and "pseudo-religiosity." That is far from genuine critical engagement with a thinker who is certainly controversial, but whose work does not deserve the blanket dismissal of "verbal hocus pocus and intellectual chicanery" that Wolin gives it.

Hans-Georg Gadamer is treated more temperately, but also somewhat unfairly. Wolin points out that no rigid dichotomy exists between Nazis and “national conservatives,” the group in which he believes Gadamer belongs. Gadamer was no Nazi, and his conservatism was nothing like Heidegger’s. Nevertheless, for Wolin, Gadamer went along with Nazi policies “with remarkable ease.” In 1933, for example, he joined the National Socialist Teachers’ Association and signed a petition of support for Hitler, organized by German university professors. His 1934 essay “Plato and the Poets” defended Plato’s argument in the *Republic* regarding state censorship, and though Gadamer never mentioned contemporary politics in that essay, the argument offered tacit support to Nazi censorship. In 1936 Gadamer enrolled in a camp run by the National Socialist University Lecturers Association aimed at “re-education.” Wolin suggests he did this to further his career, and points to his receiving university appointments at Marburg in 1937 and Leipzig in 1938. Finally, in 1941 Gadamer delivered his lecture “Volk and History in Herder’s Thought” at the German Institute in occupied Paris, in which he argued that Germany’s military success was a function of German culture’s superiority. This essay, notes Wolin, appears in Gadamer’s ten-volume *Collected Works* in a re-titled format, with its more offensive passages deleted.

Wolin argues that Classical Philology was not, as some have claimed, a “sphere of retreat” for German scholars who, during the Nazi years, embarked on a kind of “inner emigration.” If Gadamer was not a Nazi, for Wolin he was an opportunist who went along with Nazi policies in order to get along in his career. Certainly Gadamer, like many Germans, did not emerge blameless from those years, and one may wish that he had acted with greater courage and moral conviction. Still, one thinks of American professors who willingly signed loyalty oaths as a condition of employment during the McCarthy years, or who worked in racially segregated universities, or in departments with quotas on the number of Jews in tenure-track lines. The point is not to dismiss such behavior, but rather to recognize its near ubiquity. Moral and physical courage are relatively rare traits, and Huizinga was correct when he noted that a more optimistic age than our own bestowed the name *homo sapiens* on our species.

If Wolin is perhaps too harsh in his judgment of Gadamer’s behavior, his judgment is nonetheless supported by particular facts. But his criticism of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is as unfair as his criticism of Jung’s analytic psychology. Wolin takes Gadamer’s claims regarding the “objectivistic delusion” of such thinkers as Ranke, along with his ideas of the inevitability of “prejudice” in our thinking, i.e., the inevitability of any thinker’s situatedness or frame of reference, as an “uncritical veneration of the powers of tradition” that impedes “rational analysis.” The hermeneutic emphasis on “prejudice” is, for

Wolin, merely one more aspect of the Counter-Enlightenment's rejection of reason. In fact, he argues that Gadamer's "inflexible defense of prejudice and tradition" renders his hermeneutics incapable of criticizing dogmatic belief or social injustice, which is an extremely reductive—one is tempted to say simply wrongheaded—reading of the hermeneutic project.

Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot are important precursors of French post-structuralism who were openly sympathetic to fascism in the 1930s. Bataille, a "self-proclaimed 'apostle of excess,'" rejected the theoretical, the abstract, and the merely rational in favor of sensuality, ecstasy, intensity, the transgression of limits and norms, and "experiential immediacy." He also endorsed violence and conflict as aesthetic ends in themselves, and celebrated pre-modern life's "proximity to the sacred," even as he advocated "profanation for profanation's sake." In these various positions, we can find parallels with the thought of D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats, and William Carlos Williams, but Bataille aligned himself in the 1930s with right-wing political groups in ways these other writers never did. These groups included *Contre-Attaque*, which he helped to found in 1935, and from which Andre Breton broke in 1936, after accusing Bataille of fascism, as well as *Acéphale* in 1937 and the "College of Sociology." Bataille opposed what he saw as the stultifying, decadent homogeneity of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, and throughout the 1930s he wrote and spoke in defense of fascism as an alternative to both bourgeois democracy and communism. The coming of war, however, seems to have changed his opinions somewhat. Though never a *resistant*, neither was Bataille a supporter of the Vichy government. Instead, he retreated to purely literary concerns, and later acknowledged the "disturbing nature" of his political writings of the 1930s.

Maurice Blanchot, ten years Bataille's junior, was also a "non-conformist aesthete" dissatisfied with what he saw as France's "dysfunctional republicanism" in the 1930s. Like Bataille, Blanchot praised fascist Italy and Germany, and in 1936 called for French intervention in support of Franco's Falangists. He wrote for the Pétainist *Journal des débats*, and while living in occupied Paris was active in *Jeune France*, a cultural organization authorized by the Vichy Ministry of Youth. After the war Blanchot claimed to have been "playing a double-game" and "combating Vichy from within," but Wolin is plainly suspicious of that claim. Wolin finds in Blanchot's case a prime example of what he calls the "Vichy syndrome" that links fascist sympathies before and during the war to post-war postmodernist thought. In 1941 Blanchot proposes, in his essay "How is Literature Possible?" that literature is always self-referential and never "about" the world and its problems. This line of thought, which has its French antecedent in Mallarmé's *poésie pure* and its descendant in Roland Barthes's "To Write: An Intransitive Verb," complements the postmodern suspicion of "objective" or

"truthful" knowledge or representation. Wolin suggests that this suspicion is a kind of subconscious "will to nonknowledge" regarding historical events that people involved in the Vichy collaboration, such as Blanchot, would rather forget. Writers like Sartre, on the other hand, who were active in the resistance, were advocating a *littérature engage* around the same time. Thus postmodernism and post-structuralism are complicit, for Wolin, in a refusal to "work through the past" of the French 1930s and 1940s. The Vichy Syndrome has a surface plausibility, but as Wolin himself concedes, doubts about "objective knowledge," the idea of art for art's sake rather than morality's sake or the sake of some notion of the "truth," and the idea that language is not simply a correspondence between words and things all precede the rise of fascism and World War II. Perhaps certain writers were attracted to these ideas because of something like the "Vichy Syndrome," but Wolin seems to want to argue that postmodernism itself is a symptom of that syndrome, and he is simply unpersuasive on that point.

Wolin's antipathy toward postmodernism comes across most clearly in his chapter on Jacques Derrida, titled "Deconstruction and the Problem of Justice," in which he briefly recapitulates some of the arguments that have been leveled against Derrida's philosophy of language and then takes up Derrida's more recent work on politics and law. Derrida claims that deconstruction, *pace* its critics, is not apolitical but "hyper-political" and aligned with "a certain spirit of Marxism." He has criticized the xenophobia of Europe's New Right and defended immigrants' rights in the name of "hospitality" and "openness toward the other." For Wolin, however, Derrida's thinking is "politically valueless" because of what he calls its excessive, ethereal abstraction and because of Derrida's refusal to get down to the level of concrete policy and to write in the idiom of normative political theory. Instead he engages in an "esoteric appeal to a messianic condition to come (*à venir*)," which exists in sublime, utopian contrast to the "perdition of the historical present."

The most compelling part of Wolin's argument in this chapter is his discussion of Derrida's essay "The Force of Law," in which Derrida draws a sharp distinction between law (which is inevitably logocentric, universalist, and incapable of recognizing difference or otherness) and justice (which operates always at the level of the specific, the individual, and the exceptional). Wolin calls this distinction, with some justification, "a naïve binary opposition," and suggests that Derrida's dismissal of formal legal procedures and rationality, and his emphasis on "undecidability," leads him to a position almost identical with Carl Schmitt's decisionism: we must simply *decide*, outside the framework of any body of law or appeal to legal precedent. Such a model, suggests Wolin, is unlikely to advance the cause of human rights or the interests of the

marginalized. Fair enough. But Derrida is correct when he argues that a real distinction between law and justice exists, and that the danger of law is precisely its blind, programmatic application to individual cases that are enormously complex. Derrida's argument is a reaction against "law" as expressed in such rigid legislation as California's "three-strikes-and-you're-out" or other kinds of mandatory sentencing.

Wolin's genealogy is carefully laid out and in some ways quite compelling, but it is not without its weaknesses. He concedes, "It would be foolish to assert that all doctrines that radically question the primacy of reason exist in a symbiotic relation with forces of political reaction, let alone fascism. Nevertheless, it would be equally misleading to deny that one of fascism's central ideological tenets entails a rejection of reason and all that it historically represents." Throughout the book, Wolin remembers the second of these sentences but sometimes seems to forget the first. He uses the term "Counter-Enlightenment" to signify not only such thinkers as de Maistre but also as a kind of shorthand for any opposition to the dominance of Enlightenment thought. But William Blake is only one example of a major writer who vigorously opposes such dominance but is politically nowhere close to de Maistre. The last two centuries are full of thinkers who reject that strand of Enlightenment thought that culminates in logical positivism, or the strand that suggests any genuine knowledge of, say, history or literature or psychology ought to take the form of science. We can imagine "modernity" as encompassing not only the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment, but also something we might call the post-Enlightenment, which would include literary and artistic modernism, phenomenology and existentialism, as well as postmodernism. All of these are engaged in one way or another with the Enlightenment, in varying degrees of both alignment and opposition. Derrida himself has claimed to be working in the tradition of the Enlightenment. Intellectual genealogies are almost always interesting, but they are also tangled and complex, and the temptation to simplify them is powerful. Wolin's chief error is his tendency to think of any and all opposition to Enlightenment values as direct progeny of the Counter-Enlightenment.

One may agree with Wolin when he argues that Baudrillard's essays on the Gulf War or September 11 are morally vacuous, or that Foucault's celebration of the "sovereign enterprise of Unreason" is politically dangerous. On the other hand, one can imagine a companion volume to Wolin's, titled *The Seduction of Reason*, which would trace Karl Marx's political economy and philosophy of history to their Enlightenment and rationalist foundations, along with various other utopian schemes. Such a book might offer, in opposition to Wolin's bitter attack on Jung, a chapter on the thoroughly rationalist and scientific B. F. Skinner, proponent of the soulless utopia *Walden Two* and the Skinner box. It might

mention J. B. Bury's 1902 inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, in which he declares that "history is a science, no less and no more." It might mention the objective, scientific pretensions of structuralism (and the so-called "human sciences"), in reaction against which post-structuralism emerged. Or it might include, as a counter to Wolin's discussion of "America" in the imaginations of Heidegger and other European thinkers, a chapter on Frederick Taylor's influential *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), with its chilling pronouncement "In the past, the man has been first; in the future the system must be first," which helps us to understand the dark image that "America" evoked for Heidegger and others.

If thinkers such as de Maistre and Foucault are dangerously wrong when they argue that history cannot in any significant way be shaped or controlled by the rational will of human subjects, it is just as true that the progressive Enlightenment position of thinkers such as Comte regarding our ability to shape and control history to our own rational ends is dangerously optimistic, and always liable to unintended consequences which can be terribly serious.

Richard Wolin has written an important and interesting book that will have considerable heuristic impact. It is unfortunate that his editors have not lived up to the standard that he sets. The book is riddled with basic errors in spelling ("afterward" instead of "afterword"; "right of passage" instead of "rite"), extra prepositions ("survive only in dimly in Gilbert Highet's ... translation"), missing prepositions ("remain ontologically beholden the values and beliefs of previous generations"), subject-verb agreement ("Nolte's recent excrescences ... is better understood"), extra definite articles ("the today's modish 'politics of difference'"), incorrect articles ("a oft-cited essay," "an new authoritarian regime"), and missing subjects ("the problem ... raises more questions than solves"). Surely Princeton University Press is capable of better work than this; Wolin and his readers certainly deserve better.

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