



The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism

By Richard Wolin

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Fifteen years ago, revelations about the political misdeeds of Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man sent shock waves throughout European and North American intellectual circles. Ever since, postmodernism has been haunted by the specter of a compromised past. In this intellectual genealogy of the postmodern spirit, Richard Wolin shows that postmodernism's infatuation with fascism has been widespread and not incidental. He calls into question postmodernism's claim to have inherited the mantle of the left--and suggests that postmodern thought has long been smitten with the opposite end of the political spectrum.

In probing chapters on C. G. Jung, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Georges Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot, Wolin discovers an unsettling commonality: during the 1930s, these thinkers leaned to the right and were tainted by a proverbial "fascination with fascism." Frustrated by democracy's shortcomings, they were seduced by fascism's grandiose promises of political regeneration. The dictatorships in Italy and Germany promised redemption from the uncertainties of political liberalism. But, from the beginning, there could be no doubting their brutal methods of racism, violence, and imperial conquest.

Postmodernism's origins among the profascist literati of the 1930s reveal a dark political patrimony. The unspoken affinities between Counter-Enlightenment and postmodernism constitute the guiding thread of Wolin's suggestive narrative. In their mutual hostility toward reason and democracy, postmodernists and the advocates of Counter-Enlightenment betray a telltale strategic alliance--they cohabit the fraught terrain where far left and far right intersect.

Those who take Wolin's conclusions to heart will never view the history of

modern thought in quite the same way.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

While not another Heidegger and the Nazis-type exposé, this volume does explore the theoretical underpinnings that many European thinkers provided to the emergence of fascism and probe the historical and biographical parallels between post-modernism and anti-democratic and fascist thought. Wolin, a professor of history and comparative literature at the City University of New York and the author of *Heidegger's Children*, is a thinker of extraordinary depth and precision, fluent in the language of Continental philosophy's extremes. His accounts of the careers of such thinkers as Jung, Gadamer and Bataille are expertly researched and refreshingly fair-minded. And Wolin's pragmatic hold on contemporary politics shines in his analysis of the rise of the New Right in Europe and its trans-Atlantic ramifications. Closing with a measured attack on the "disillusioned denizens of modern society,"—Derrida, Baudrillard and Zizek among them—Wolin emphasizes the potentially disastrous retrogression of dystopian anti-Americanism into political apathy. His ability to resist the "seductions of unreason" reveal him to be an enduring humanist with a democratic core, one that, he argues, is threatened by partisans of both the traditional right and the postmodern left.

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Review

The Seduction of Unreason is a wide-ranging yet subtle consideration of the intellectual's abiding fascination with absolutism, and as such it is a perceptive, compelling and invaluable document. His indignation at the folly and perversity of so many major European thinkers is wholly justified and peculiarly invigorating.

From the Inside Flap

"Richard Wolin's superb book is urgent reading for those who would toss the Enlightenment out with Descartes. In this tour d'horizon, as deep as it is wide, Wolin refuses to be impressed by the glamour of extremity. He shines light into many dark corners where intellectual fraud, self-deception, and hauteur passed for liberty during a murderous century. Talk about genealogy! Unreason will never be the same."--Todd Gitlin, Columbia University, author of *The Twilight of Common Dreams*

"Richard Wolin demonstrates conclusively that contempt for liberalism and parliamentary government, whether it comes from the right or the left, whether it is anti-modern or postmodern, is very bad politics. His learned and provocative 'genealogy' of contemporary anti-Americanism should cause deep anxiety among its intellectual purveyors in Europe and here at home."--Michael Walzer, Institute for Advanced Study

"I recommend this powerful critique with great enthusiasm. It is that infrequent book that is of enduring scholarly significance while deserving of a broad readership outside the academy. It also offers American readers insights into French and German mentalities at a time of transatlantic irritations."--Jeffrey Herf, University of Maryland

"This is a wide-ranging and hard-hitting critique of postmodern thinking--especially of its political limitations and failures--based on broad reading and straight thinking. The author adds relevance to his critique of thinkers by juxtaposing those thinkers with interesting accounts of contemporary European politics."--Jerrold Seigel, New York University

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