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Mark Lilla: The Lure of Syracuse Study Guide

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Samson, Steven Alan, "Mark Lilla: The Lure of Syracuse Study Guide" (2009). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 205.
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MARK LILLA: THE LURE OF SYRACUSE
STUDY GUIDE, 2009
Steven Alan Samson

http://ontology.buffalo.edu/smith/courses01/rrtw/Lilla2.htm

Study Questions

1. What is the old myth about **Plato**'s visit to Syracuse? Why did he go? Why did he leave? How did the tale play out to its tragic conclusion? How has tyranny "changed" in modern times? "How did the tradition of Western thought . . . reach the point where it became respectable to argue that tyranny was good, even beautiful?" [cf. Lieber on scientific despotism]. What does **Isaiah Berlin** (Rousseau-like) suggest? What does **Norman Cohn** (Dostoevsky-like) suggest instead? What did **Jacob Talmon** add? Why is the historian finally forced to abandon the history of ideas?

2. Next, Lilla proposes to examine the social history of intellectuals in European life as a way of investigating intellectual "**philotyranny**" (love or *eros* of tyranny). How do the lessons of the **Dreyfus Affair** differ for **Jean-Paul Sartre** and **Raymond Aron**? If Aron was correct about France (and a new group of anti-Communist philosophers soon afterward emerged in the 1970s following Solzhenitsyn's revelations), how did the picture differ in Germany? What made the "unpolitical" position of German intellectuals so disastrous? Lilla credits **Jürgen Habermas** (the second-generation leader of the Frankfurt School) with being correct in blaming political disengagement. But if neither rationalism nor irrationalism, neither commitment nor disengagement, can account for intellectual philotyranny generally, the answer must be sought elsewhere.

3. What kind of intellectual was **Dionysius**? What draws certain men to tyranny? [Here again Girard's mimetic theory may be brought into play]. Why must ***eros*** be bounded and disciplined? What makes intellectuals dangerous? What was Plato's purpose for introducing the outrageous idea of philosopher-kings into *The Republic*? What may the first responsibility of a philosopher whofinds himself surrounded by political and intellectual corruption? But does this mean a life of disengagement? What makes the philosophical life the noblest? Why was Plato able to defend both his own actions and those of his friend **Dion**?

4. What larger lessons does Lilla draw? *Tiers-mondisme* means "third worldism." Lilla's conclusion makes reference to Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (also translated *The Devils*): "The ideologies of the twentieth century appealed to the vanity and raw ambition of certain intellectuals, but they also appealed, slyly and dishonestly, to the sense of justice and hatred of despotism that thinking itself seems to instill in us, and which, unmastered, can literally possess us." To pick one among the countless examples raised up by our popular culture (and the superhero genre is full of them), the film "V for Vendetta," for example, seems to resemble this last statement. Many of Mel Gibson's movies display this quality. The reading that follows focuses on the challenge of a protracted ideological conflict that enlists the *eros* of young (and not so young) intellectuals who wish to save the world.

Lilla Review

Plato	philotyranny	Jean-Paul Sartre
Raymond Aron	Dionysius	Dion