

**Hollander, Paul.** *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez: Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 338 pages. \$29.99 (paper). ISBN: 978–1–1074–1507–2.

Reading Paul Hollander's *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez: Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship* brings to mind Mark Lilla's wonderful essay entitled "The Lure of Syracuse," from which Hollander quotes before his first chapter. In "The Lure of Syracuse," Lilla introduces us to "a new social type": "the philotyrannical intellectual," who placed himself in the service of, and used his abilities to defend, one or another of the twentieth century's tyrannical regimes.<sup>1</sup> The existence, not to say prevalence, of the philotyrannical intellectual raises the question: "What is it about the human mind that made the intellectual defense of tyranny possible in the twentieth century?"<sup>2</sup>

Hollander's book takes its bearings from similar questions. Says Hollander: "There is considerable evidence ... indicating that many well-known twentieth-century intellectuals admired dictators of various ideological persuasion, as well as the political system they represented. Such admiration, often merging into hero worship, was an integral part of a substantial body of political misjudgments" (2).<sup>3</sup> The question is: Why? This question is all the more important, says Hollander, because "we do not expect intellectuals to sympathize with dictators, let alone admire them"; rather, "we expect them to possess sound political and moral judgment" (10). To shed some light on this question, as well as to illuminate "broader questions about politics and intellectuals," Hollander takes us through a century of what he calls "political hero worship" on the part of intellectuals, beginning with the admiration expressed by some European and American intellectuals for Italian fascism and ending with contemporary intellectuals' support for various current or recent tyrannical regimes.

Hollander begins by cataloging support on the part of intellectuals both within Italy and beyond for Mussolini's fascist rule. He concludes this chapter by suggesting an answer to his central question, one that he had also raised in the book's preface: "While deteriorated objective conditions" contribute significantly to the propensity of intellectuals in such circumstances to defend or admire tyranny, "in the final analysis, modern political hero worship" is "nurtured by dormant religious impulses that surface in the virtual deification of the dictators here discussed" (82).<sup>4</sup> In the following chapter on Hitler's Germany, Hollander focuses on "misgivings about

modernity” on the part of Heidegger and others, some German and some not: the sense that “Hitler and his system could repair the damages of modernity, and create, or recreate, a more communitarian and just society ... free of the symptoms of the corrosive moral decay or decadence they diagnosed and experienced in their own societies” (100, 116).

Hollander next turns to twentieth-century communism as practiced in Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China, Rakosi’s Hungary, and Pol Pot’s Cambodia. In Hollander’s account, many intellectuals supported these regimes for reasons similar to those that prompted intellectuals to express affinity for Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. Some of these reasons have primarily to do with individual psychology—religious or secular-religious impulses, self-importance and susceptibility to what Hollander calls the “techniques of hospitality” (flattery, misleading tours, etc.), desire for “purity”—while others we might call more ideological in nature, such as the rejection of decadent modernity or inhumane capitalism, dissatisfaction with the styles of leadership available in democratic regimes, and what Tony Judt called “distaste for the lukewarm” (115, 182, 21). In Hollander’s telling, the attractions of tyranny on the left are quite similar to the attractions of tyranny on the right.

What twentieth-century communism provided, and twentieth-century fascism lacked, was a coherent and thoroughly elaborated ideological system. Thus, communism presented for intellectuals a uniquely intellectual temptation, a total and totalizing framework through which to experience and analyze the world. This comes through in Hollander’s discussion of the Hungarian intellectual Georg Lukacs, who (here Hollander quotes Leszek Kolakowski) “accepted Communism whole-heartedly as a moral, intellectual, and political solution .... He believed that Marxism was the final answer to the problem of history, that Communism guaranteed the final reconciliation of all human forces ... that the conflict between the individual and society ... had in principle been resolved” (151). Because of his hold on absolute intellectual, political, and moral truth, Lukacs was able to overlook—in Hollander’s account, felt compelled to overlook—the often brutal realities of communism as practiced in the twentieth century. Hollander here discusses a phenomenon that characterized the relationship of many intellectuals to both Stalin’s USSR and Mao’s China: the indifference to evidence that might run counter to one’s intellectual or political commitments. A statement that Hollander attributes to Lukacs captures this admirably: “that even if every empirical prediction of Marxism were invalidated, he would still hold Marxism to be true” (151).

From here, Hollander takes us to revolutionary Cuba. From the previous chapters on twentieth-century communism, we carry the theme of “the appeal of lofty ideals,” which caused smitten intellectuals to “suspend critiques of ... repressive political systems,” as well as the “entitlement to ruthlessness conferred by ... strongly felt good intentions” (189; 241).<sup>5</sup> The theme of hero worship, even infatuation, also carries into this chapter and here reaches its apogee in the breathless tributes paid to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara by their many (contemporary and, in Che’s case, posthumous) admirers.<sup>6</sup>

What’s new is the striking way some of the psychological factors previously discussed—“a belligerent and resentful estrangement from his own country and ... inflated notions of self-realization,” as Hollander says of Norman Mailer—combined with infatuation and ideological consonance to produce the strongly personal connection some intellectuals felt, in Hollander’s account, with Cuban communism (218). For instance: Hollander brings to our attention a book authored by the sociologist C. Wright Mills in which Mills adopts “the voice of the Cuban revolutionary” (218). Here Mills becomes “the representative voice, alter ego, and self-appointed spokesman of Cuban revolutionaries,” expressing “authentically their feelings, thoughts, and ideas,” an “unusual instance in role-playing that probably reflected the longings of Mills to be part and spokesman of a revolutionary community” (218, 208). Hollander also shines a spotlight here on the support expressed by Mailer, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others for the “empowering, redemptive, invigorating, and therapeutic” violence that appeared in the Cuban revolution and in other leftist, anti-colonial revolutions across the developing world (222).

In Hollander’s penultimate chapter, he draws our attention to the support expressed by intellectuals for a wide variety of more or less contemporary tyrannical regimes. The regimes and leaders discussed in this chapter span the ideological spectrum; thus, with a couple of notable exceptions (Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela, for example), we see fewer ideological affinities between intellectuals and regimes than was the case in earlier chapters. But psychological factors remain: for Hollander, “it is safe to say that the impulses and illusions that in the past gave rise to political hero worship persist, at any rate in an attenuated form” (245). Many of the intellectuals discussed in this chapter seem also to share a distaste for the United States, which, Hollander suggests, may have prompted some of them to find admiration for America’s enemies, regardless of their ideological bent.

In his final chapter, Hollander sums up the factors that he says drove intellectuals to suspend “the use of their critical faculties” and support dictatorial leaders and regimes, and he singles out one explanation that appears at various times throughout the book: “the individuals who were inclined to make the political misjudgments and admire the dictators, harbored, and sought to gratify, unacknowledged religious needs and impulses” (266, 291). Thus “the roots of the political attitudes and illusions here dealt with may be found at the intersection of conflicting personal and political impulses and concerns,” so that “the political commitments of intellectuals are colored by their emotional disposition” (312). Hollander does not mean (I don’t think) to reduce intellectuals’ political concerns to reflections of their personal or emotional lives, nor does he mean to conflate the two; rather, I think he means to suggest that in attempting to explain the persistent phenomenon that is the focus of his study—support on the part of intellectuals for tyrannical regimes and leaders—both political or ideological factors *and* emotional or psychological factors must be considered, and both come to our attention when we examine what these intellectuals say and how they say it.

The several explanations Hollander offers for the question his book poses—Why did so many twentieth-century intellectuals admire tyrannical regimes and leaders, even in the face of evidence about the unsavory (to say the least) nature of such regimes and leaders?—are both plausible and satisfying. Returning to Lilla’s “The Lure of Syracuse,” we might say that Hollander’s account tends toward the notion that intellectuals’ support for tyrants and tyrannical regimes follows from (in Lilla’s words) “religious impulses” and the “irrational passions that had migrated from religion to politics.”<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that Hollander overlooks the “heartless intellectual rationalism” that characterized some of the intellectual support for tyranny discussed above: Lukacs, for instance, seems certainly to have believed that “all moral and political questions have only one true answer,” which answer was “accessible through reason” and in his possession.<sup>8</sup> If anything, Hollander pushes us to collapse the distinction between “irrational passions” and “religious needs and impulses,” on the one hand, and the irrational devotion to various forms of political rationalism, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

But there is one more point that emerges from Hollander’s accounts, and it’s a point that I think bears further discussion. This point also brings us back to Lilla’s essay, and to Plato, who, in Lilla’s telling, was tempted, against his better judgment, to try to affect a conjunction of philosophy and

political rule in the Sicilian city of Syracuse. I speak here of an awareness that “the psychological force that draws certain men to tyranny ... is the same force ... that draws other men to philosophy,” such that the “philosophic life,” as exemplified by Socrates, “is the noblest one because it is supremely self-aware of”—and resists—“its own tyrannical implications.”<sup>10</sup> Plato recognized, says Lilla, the “connection in the human mind between the yearning for truth and the desire to contribute to ‘the right ordering of cities and households,’” and therefore understood that intellectuals would always be tempted to try to actualize their ideas, and would be drawn to regimes that offer, in Hollander’s words, the realization of “the perennial desire of intellectuals, namely the linking of words and deeds.”<sup>11</sup>

This is not the “compromise” that Socrates reaches with his interlocutors near the start of Plato’s *Republic*—“a mixture of powerless wisdom and unwise power”—but rather what appears to be “the absolute rule of wisdom,” political rule that takes its bearings, not from the “tangle and variety of experience,” but rather from a set of philosophical truths about how human beings ought to live together.<sup>12</sup> This sort of rule opens up the possibility for human life to be reshaped in accordance with an idea, for human nature and the human soul to be rebuilt and—this time—perfected.<sup>13</sup>

This is a point that Waller Newell makes in his book *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror*, about what he calls “millenarian tyranny,” the distinctly modern sort of tyranny that characterizes the regimes and leaders on which Hollander focuses. The millenarian tyrant, says Newell, sees himself as a “sculptor of human souls” or “engineer of human souls”; millenarian tyranny is concerned with reshaping human beings and human communities so as to create a “miracle man” suited for a miracle society.<sup>14</sup> Such tyranny takes its bearings, not from the limits imposed on politics by human nature—not, for example, from Aristotle’s “nuts-and-bolts” sort of objections to Socrates’ ideas that he raises in Book II of the *Politics*, or from James Madison’s sober assertion that the need for government itself is “the greatest of all reflections on human nature”—but rather from its sense of the infinite (or nearly so) malleability of the human soul.<sup>15</sup>

The figuring of the tyrant or dictator as educator, “gardener,” “artist,” molder and shaper of souls, appears often in Hollander’s account.<sup>16</sup> Many of Hollander’s intellectuals share a “conception of human nature, or rather the implicit denial that there was such a thing”; they therefore placed great hope in regimes and leaders “committed to the fundamental and coercive transformation of societies and human beings,” based on “the premise that human beings are malleable, their character easily shaped ...” (305–306).<sup>17</sup> The tyrannical regime dedicated to such

a transformative project promises to close the gap between political thought and political action, to infuse the idea into flesh, to make the thought real.

The intellectual therefore has a special connection to this sort of tyrannical regime, as such a regime begins, not with reality on the ground, but rather with the idea—often an idea of a future that is immeasurably better than the present—and acts upon the raw material of human life so as to fit it to this idea. For the intellectual, this kind of regime offers the tempting possibility that all impediments to progress may be swept away, that the ideal may be actualized now that obstacles to this actualization—so persistent in free societies—may be eliminated.<sup>18</sup>

The irony of this special connection is that tyrannical leaders seem to think little of intellectuals, and seem to have little notion of the value (as opposed to the use) of intellectuals for their transformative projects. Hitler ridiculed intellectuals as “‘eggheads and ‘despondent weaklings,’” and speculated that “we might one day ... exterminate them,” while Lenin’s “hatred of the intelligentsia ... runs like a thread through his persona and public life” (86, 102).<sup>19</sup> Intellectuals may sense for themselves a special place in the plans and projects of tyrannical leaders, but these leaders themselves seem to believe otherwise. As Plato learned in his encounters with Dionysius of Syracuse, tyrants don’t often care to receive philosophical instruction; rather, they prefer to instruct others. Intellectuals, like tyrants, may fancy themselves “engineers of souls”—but intellectuals’ flirtations with tyranny less often transform ideas into reality than saturate ideas with blood.<sup>20</sup> Hollander’s book reminds us that the regrets of the twentieth century should serve as a salutary warning for the twenty-first.

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## Notes

1. Lilla 197.
2. Lilla continues: “How did the Western tradition of political thought, which begins with Plato’s critique of tyranny in the *Republic* and his unsuccessful trips to Syracuse, reach the point where it became respectable to argue that tyranny was good, even beautiful?” (198).

3. Many of my quotations from Hollander in this review include Hollander's quotations from other authors. No distinction will be made here, and the interested reader is invited to consult Hollander's book for further detail.
4. "The new emphasis on 'political hero worship' ... was intended to highlight the secular-religious components of the attitudes I have been interested in for a long time. I expected that comparing the converging appeals of leaders of different political systems legitimated by different ideologies would lend support to the idea that the attitudes of the intellectuals here examined had more of a religious, or secular-religious, than political inspiration" (ix).
5. "Sartre and Merleau-Ponty declared that 'we should judge communism by its intentions and not by its actions'" (291). Hollander says that Marxist theory imbued many twentieth-century intellectuals with "a conviction that a largely flawless social system can be created and that its creation demands and justifies ... violence and repression" (43).
6. This is perhaps most ironic in the case of Che, who, as Paul Berman notes, "was an enemy of freedom and yet ... has been erected into a symbol of freedom. He helped establish an unjust social system in Cuba and has been erected into a symbol of social justice" (204).
7. Lilla 200–202.
8. Ibid.
9. Lilla 202; Hollander 291.
10. Lilla 208, 213.
11. Lilla 214; Hollander 214.
12. Bloom 312; Oakeshott 6.
13. Hitler described National Socialism as "the will to create mankind anew"; Sartre, says Hollander, saw in revolutionary violence the potential for "a reborn humanity" birthed through "heroic acts of will" (87, 194).
14. Newell 164–166.

15. Madison 319.
16. As Mussolini said of Lenin, “Lenin is an artist, who has worked with human beings as other artists work with marble or metal,” and of himself, “The most important thing is to rule the masses as an artist dominates his material” (Hollander 75, 71). According to Stalin, “man must be grown carefully and attentively as a gardener grows his favorite fruit tree” (122). Western supporters of communist China believed in the creation of the “New Maoist Man”; Che Guevara, says Hollander, was dedicated to the creation of a “new socialist man” (198, 239). Hitler was described as “the great master of the education of his people,” who “has in a few years transformed our souls” (90).
17. Hollander says that “the dictatorships which appealed to many Western intellectuals ... were not ordinary authoritarian regimes but, as a rule, totalitarian ones, which proclaimed commitment to ... the sweeping transformation of social institutions and even human nature” (16).
18. Hollander quotes the journalist Walter Duranty on the Soviet reorganization of agriculture: “Future historians ... may well regard the Russian struggle for collectivization as a heroic period in human progress ... whether the villages preferred their dirt and ignorance to Progress or not, Progress would be thrust upon them” (124).
19. Mao, says Hollander, “had little appreciation of intellectuals” (166). General Omar Torrijos of Panama, considered a “close friend” by writer Graham Greene, said: “intellectuals are like fine glass ... which can be cracked by a sound” (260–261).
20. The full quotation comes from a book Hollander cites about the French writer Romain Rolland: “By forging a community of mental and manual labor, the Soviets showed their understanding of the seminal role of the politically active writer, those ‘*engineers of souls*’ who helped to ‘inaugurate a more just, freer, better ordered humanity’” (135). The Cuban revolution, too, promised “a special relationship between the state and the intellectual” (228). Hollander also quotes Thomas Sowell about intellectuals in general: “their vision of the world is ... a vision of *themselves* as a self-appointed vanguard, leading toward a better world” (13).



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