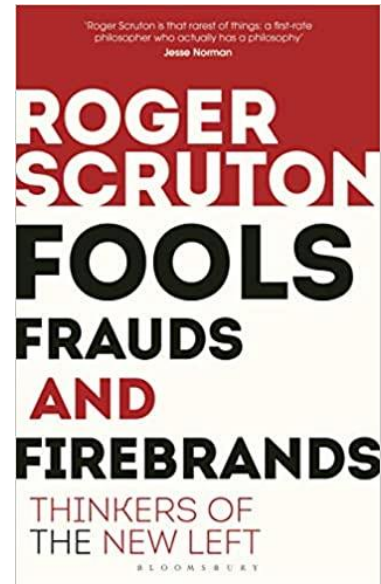


“Abstract Nonsense”
a review by Dick Burkhardt of
Fools, Frauds, and Firebrands -
Thinkers of the New Left
By Roger Scruton (2019)



This book exposes, with both logic and wit, the abstract nonsense that masquerades as philosophical profundity, especially of the revolutionary, Marxist sort. The moral: Be suspicious not just of impenetrable prose and jargon but also of rhetorical flourishes that soar high above the realities of everyday existence – the simple joys of chores and handy work, the food on the table, the struggles and celebrations of family life, the camaraderie of the enterprise or voyage, the tragedies of accident, disease, and war.

Prime examples of hypocritical nonsense are the tracts of French or German philosophers of thoroughly “bourgeois” origins who pretend to speak for the “proletarians” who are presumed to have a “false consciousness” when they lack the revolutionary fervor of the elite leftist intellectual. Instead of these philosophers laying out practical programs for reforming the economy and government, real-world trade-offs and learning curves are obscured by utopian visions, mazes of abstract “contradictions”, eternal power struggles, or ethereal speculations on what is knowable or unknowable (“deconstruction”).

A common theme is the attack on Enlightenment values – such as reason, science, democracy, and universal values. These attacks continue today in the form of the “critical theory” originated by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse) and its development into postmodernism by the French (Foucault and Derrida). James Lindsay labels the result as “Identity Marxism” with “Critical Race Theory (CRT)” being its best known manifestation. In popular usage, as broadly conceived, this could be described as the “identity politics of race, as rooted in postmodernism, victimhood culture, and race reductionism”.

Yet most people who use the language and doctrines of CRT are ignorant of its origins in critical theory or postmodernism, or even that they are speaking CRT. That is, except at the graduate level, its doctrines are often taught as revealed truth,

without calling it CRT, to obscure its roots in illiberal, unethical, and anti-Enlightenment philosophy. This book shows how many intellectuals who claim to be fighting for “liberation” end up in a morass of Orwellian doublespeak, including implicit presumptions that the “ends justify the means”.

A prime example is that the word “revolution” has acquired a reputation for extreme violence and ultimate failure (French Revolution, Russian Revolution, etc.). Thus postmodernism, which sees the manipulation of language as a key aspect of power, has now replaced “revolution” by the word “dismantle” – more ambiguous and without the same aura of violence, meaning “tearing down” nevertheless. Still, this indicates that unethical and undemocratic force will be required, not just reform. In fact, practical reform is often dismissed as “incremental”.

A similar tactic is to weaponize existing language by purported redefinitions. Here a prime example is the accusation that the US, or other European-type societies, have a “white supremacy culture (WSC)”, as if the US has always been dominated by doctrines and practices of white racial superiority and oppression. In truth this has never been dominant in the US and has been in long term decline, now only at the margins. Yet some theorists of CRT have claimed to see WSC in “traits” that have no relation to white supremacy as commonly understood.

Meanwhile others execute their WSC attack using the false logic that “correlation means causation” - suggesting that if institutions or practices dominated by white people seem to be oppressive, then the cause must be racial, not other factors, such as economics, which has been the dominant factor historically, or religion, which has also driven much persecution.

This use of language often leads not just to oppression (“cancel culture”) of those committed to Enlightenment values but serious misdiagnoses of problems. A particularly nefarious way this happens is by discounting concepts based on their origin, not content, leading to ad hominem or racial attacks. For example, the work of eminent social scientists may be dismissed if they are identified as “white”, assuming a victimhood culture of whites as oppressors, exactly like the Marxist identity of the “bourgeoisie”.

This became a notorious feature of the 1619 Project of Nikole Hannah-Jones, for example. Scruton attributes this kind of cynical ploy to Foucault: “Hence by sleight of hand, he is able to present any feature of social order – even the disposition to heal the sick – as a covert exercise of domination”. At one point Foucault even asserts that the revolution “can only take place via the radical elimination of the judicial system” (p 109-110).

While Foucault created rationalizations for destructive power plays against the bourgeois, Sartre found a pseudo-religious way to gain support from the demonized bourgeois themselves: He became “the confessor of the middle class”

over its “sinful condition. The bourgeois of Sartre’s iconography is a myth; but he bears a resemblance to the ordinary city-dweller who, seeing himself distorted in this portrait, is troubled by the thought of moral possibilities...He enthusiastically confesses to purely hypothetical crimes” (p 98). Today’s version of this phenomenon is the “white allyship” of CRT, as promoted by Robin DiAngelo - a way of “virtue signaling” and protection from the accusation of racism and “white fragility”.

In the last chapter Scruton summarizes his conservative philosophy, as an alternative. At first it sounds quite reasonable: “Our concern as political beings should be, not to abolish the powers that bind society together, but to mitigate their exercise” (p 277). Because “the attempt to achieve a social order without domination inevitably leads to a new kind of domination, more sinister by far than the one deposed...the iron law of oligarchy” (p 278). That is, it takes an oligarchy to overthrow an oligarchy, in fact a more powerful and violent one.

Instead, a “changed way of life does not come from politics. It comes from religion and culture” (p 280), especially spiritual resources. The revisionist Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci understood this and made cultural takeover into a strategy for revolution. This has now been implemented by critical theorists in the US, who’ve already taken over much of the educational system.

Scruton judges three ideas to be fundamental to such change: (1) civil society, (2) institutions, (3) personality (p 280). Civil society is the network of local associations of all sorts – from governmental to recreational to artistic – that bind people together and set the norms. But it is the institutions which form a “mediating presence that softens politics” (p 282). These institutions necessitate forms of discrimination, hierarchy, and accountability outside the control of the state, obstructing dictatorship and totalitarianism. In this system, “collective agents are also corporate persons, answerable for their actions and subject to law” (p 284). An independent judiciary is essential.

So far so good. But then we come to a critical assumption: that “common law is usually self-correcting” (p 55), a kind of legal “invisible hand” (p 56). In fact, this barely hints at the dominant role of the economy in any system of governance, by far the most important insight of Marxism, which has been a failure in so many other ways. That is, governance, though not determined by economics, must adapt to it, the central fact that Scruton does not address. Other conservatives assume that the free market is the way to adapt, yet never address how to design the governance system to mitigate the spectacular failures of the free market in practical and timely ways, instead of self-correction by depressions, wars, societal upheavals, and the like.

Roger Scruton is so effective at skewering the abstract nonsense of radical philosophies of revolution, that I’d hoped for a more effective analysis of “lessons

learned”. For example, over the last 40 years since Reagan was elected, the free market in the US has been handed all kinds of perks and subsidies, only to yield a dramatic escalation of economic inequality. This, in turn, has led to cultural and political polarization, even demagoguery and threats to democracy itself.

In other words, this conservative era of impressive economic growth, though amazingly successful for the 1%, has been a spectacular failure for the left-behind majority. This is precisely because the law, instead of self-correcting, has been captured by the “bourgeoisie” to enrich itself, with so little mitigation that homelessness has now spread across the land. Both radicals and conservatives are stuck in their ideological ruts, unwilling to consider political economies which actually do work, such as the social democracies of Scandinavia.