

# The Treason of the Intellectuals (LA Trahison Des Clercs)

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Julien Benda's classic study of the European 1920s resonates today. *La trahison des clercs* is one of those phrases that bristle with hints and associations without stating anything definite. In his new introduction, Roger Kimball quotes from a contemporary, Alain Finkielkraut, who recalls in haunting words the essence of *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. "When hatred of culture becomes itself a part of culture, the life of the mind loses all meaning." As Kimball reminds us, in the present age, only the title of the book, not its argument, enjoys currency. The book itself is well known without being known well. Its release at this time should overcome that neglect.

The "treason" of which Benda writes was the betrayal by the intellectuals of their unique vocation. From the time of the pre-Socratics, intellectuals, in their role as intellectuals, had been a breed apart. In Benda's terms, they were understood to be "all those whose activity essentially is not the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or a metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages." Thanks to such men, Benda noted, "humanity did evil for two thousand years, but honored good. This contradiction was an honor to the human species, and formed the rift whereby civilization slipped into the world."

According to Benda, this situation began to change in the early decades of the twentieth century. More and more, intellectuals abandoned their attachment to the traditional panoply of philosophical and scholarly ideals. One clear indication of the change was the attack on the Enlightenment ideal of universal humanity and the concomitant glorification of various particularisms. The implications for intellectual life today are transparent, and this long unavailable classic of European thought should interest all those who teach and who preach the human sciences.

Julien Benda (1867-1956) was a novelist and critic. Among his other books are *The Yoke of Pity* and *Uriel's Report*.

Roger Kimball is co-editor and publisher of *The New Criterion*, president and publisher of *Encounter Books*, and an art critic for the *London Spectator* and *National Review*.

"It is rich, quirky, erudite, digressive, and polemical. . . . Partisan in its claims for disinterestedness, it is ruthless in its defense of intellectual high-mindedness. . . . [G]iven the horrific events that unfolded in the decades following its publication, Benda's unremitting attack on the politicization of the intellect and ethnic separatism cannot but strike us as prescient. And given the continuing echo in our own time of the problems he anatomized, the relevance of his observations to our situation can hardly be doubted."

-Roger Kimball, *The New Criterion*

### Other Books

The Columbia History of Twentieth-century French Thought. This valuable reference is an authoritative guide to 20th century French thought. It considers the intellectual figures, movements and publications that helped define fields as diverse as history, psychoanalysis, film, philosophy, and economics.

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