

Current Books

nies of both left and right—is amply supported but finally depressing.

Lilla deftly eviscerates the ambitions of Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault, and mercilessly exposes the rather banal liberalism that emerges, almost unwillingly, from Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism. He is more forgiving of Walter Benjamin, whose messianism, Lilla argues, should be rescued from the bad Marxist uses to which it has often been put. And he writes with some admiration of Alexandre Kojève, the influential interpreter of Hegel, and of Carl Schmitt, the conservative political theorist whose antiliberalism, based on a conviction that conflict and enmity are essential to political life, has been adopted at both ends of the political spectrum.

The essays in this book began as reviews in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and now and then that etiology shows through. But this is not debilitating, and Lilla's assessments of the main currents of 20th-century intellectual life, especially French and German, are accurate and cogent. The book functions as a sort of primer on Continental thought from 1900 to 1989.

In a long concluding essay, "The Lure of Syracuse," Lilla attempts to untangle the threads of Plato's complex position on philosophy and politics. (Plato sailed several times to Syracuse in a futile attempt to institute an ideal state there by educating the philosophically minded tyrant Dionysius the Younger.) Lilla is right to argue that Plato's cel-

ebrated defense of the philosopher-king is meant as a cautionary tale, not a blueprint for political reform. And he is likewise right to emphasize that eros, the force of desire, can lead to either wisdom or tyranny: The philosopher-king and the tyrant are not so dissimilar, except in the crucial sense that eros inspires one to seek the truth and the other to seek only his own satisfaction.

But Lilla provides little in the way of wisdom about how truth seekers can avoid becoming, in his term, "philotyrants." We have indeed grown wary of big ideas entering the political realm, especially as wielded by those with little taste for the messy details of life—such people tend to be dangerous. And yet, one doesn't have to be an intellectual to fear a politics devoid of ideas, hope, idealism, and some norm of justice that takes us beyond the materials given.

Lilla's provocative book is valuable less for its conclusions than for the deep response it implicitly demands. What is philosophy for? Should wisdom be pursued for its own sake, or is there an intellectual duty to try to change the world? Socrates tells us that the philosopher, once escaped from the metaphysical imprisonment of the cave, seeks to make the difficult downward journey in order to free his fellows. Everyone with a feeling for philosophy must decide whether to take that trek. Unfortunately, an awareness of the dangers only makes the choice more pressing.

—MARK KINGWELL

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

SPUTNIK:

The Shock of the Century.

By Paul Dickson. Walker. 310 pp. \$28

Dickson was a freshman at Wesleyan University in 1957 when he saw the first Soviet-made satellite scooting through the night sky at 18,000 miles per hour. That was the year Elvis Presley recorded "Jailhouse Rock," Jimmy Hoffa got elected head of the Teamsters, Beaver Cleaver first shuffled his feet on CBS, and the National Guard escorted black students into Central High School in Little Rock. American

democracy was forward looking and righteous, communist collectivism was backward and evil—so why had the Russians beaten us into space with this 184-pound basketball called Sputnik?

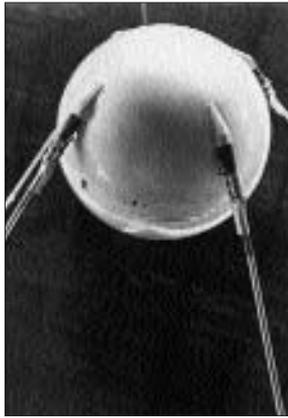
As Dickson recounts in this entertaining, admirably straightforward account of how and why America entered the space race, Sputnik changed the terms of the Cold War, mostly for the better. Until Sputnik (a Russian word meaning "traveling companion of the Earth"), the Eisenhower administration had other things on its mind—

namely, whether the Soviet Union was really turning out long-range nuclear missiles “like sausages,” as Nikita Khrushchev boasted. Only when a RAND Corporation report stressed that satellites could track Soviet military activities did American leaders grow interested.

But there were procedural hurdles. Until the creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, many different scientific groups and branches of the military vied for the job of launching satellites. And Congress could not easily be persuaded that satellite reconnaissance was even possible. A senator from Louisiana, listening to the testimony of America’s top rocket scientists, broke in to ask whether they were out of their minds. The Soviets faced obstacles of their own, including the kind of paranoia that led Joseph Stalin to lock up the country’s best rocket scientist in Siberia, for fear that the man was scheming to overthrow the Soviet government.

Dickson focuses mostly on America, unveiling the personalities behind the blueprints (former Nazi Wernher von Braun ran the U.S. Army’s missile program) and moving back and forth in time to trace the short- and long-term effects of Sputnik. Though it’s always irritating to be told what Americans felt at a given time, the writer makes a good case for how radically the satellite destabilized and redirected the national psyche. Sputnik not only opened people’s automatic garage doors as it passed over, it also persuaded taxpayers to hand over billions of dollars for John F. Kennedy’s moon-landing program. It yielded a generation of science majors and tipped the balance in education away from rote learning and toward independent thinking. It ultimately created a nation of e-mailing, Web-siting high-technophiles who couldn’t build a road or repair a bridge if their lives depended on it.

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money,” Samuel Johnson is said to have observed. Dickson is no blockhead, but



A model of Sputnik I

rather a journeyman writer of more than 40 books on such topics as ice cream, baseball, jokes, names, slang, think tanks, golf, and Frisbees. Here, he melds the work of innumerable scientists and scholars (his bibliography runs to 18 pages) with the “incredible amount” of material declassified during the past decade. As for the book’s illustrations, many are from a collection of Sputnik-related photographs the author

bought on eBay.

Who, in 1957 or 2000, could have predicted that the first shock of the next century would result not from space-age technology but from a handful of men bearing box cutters and airline tickets?

—A. J. HEWAT

***THEATER OF DISORDER:
Patients, Doctors, and the
Construction of Illness.***

By Brant Wenegrat. Oxford Univ. Press.
292 pp. \$35

Wenegrat, an associate professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine, argues that many human illnesses of past and present are in fact “illness roles.” Patients adopt and play out these roles for their own benefit, often with the encouragement of deluded or naive doctors. He doesn’t contend that all disorders, or even all mental disorders, qualify as illness roles. Rather, he limits his attention to those forms of suffering that have no underlying organic basis and that are relatively circumscribed in time and place. Some patients knowingly fashion their symptoms, whereas others take on their roles with utter sincerity. But Wenegrat has little sympathy for any of them. Illness roles, he maintains, are “inherently antisocial.”

Despite massive detail and documentation, Wenegrat makes several careless errors—he botches a date, misconstrues the work of Anton Mesmer, and uses the obsolete term *hysteria*—but the book suffers from several larger problems. On the con-