Introduction

Exile and Interpretation

Jewish Exiles and European Thought in the Shadow of the Third Reich contextualizes ideologically and politically Hans Baron (1900–1988), Karl Popper (1902–1994), Leo Strauss (1899–1973), and Erich Auerbach's (1892–1957) scholarship. These German-speaking Jewish intellectuals, who are not normally considered together, were among the many who fled continental Europe with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. For each, the political calamity of European fascism was simultaneously a profound intellectual crisis, which required an intellectual response.

We deliberately chose four forced exiles from diverse disciplines – intellectual history (Hans Baron), the history of political thought (Leo Strauss), philosophy (Karl Popper), and literary criticism (Erich Auerbach) – in order to explore how, despite their different disciplines and distinctive modes of thinking and writing, they responded polemically in the guise of traditional scholarship to their shared trauma. They exemplify particularly well, especially when critically juxtaposed, just how extensively and sometimes how subtly scholarship was used in the 1930s and 1940s not only to explain but also to fight the political evils that had infected modernity and had victimized them and so many others from the German-speaking academy, which they had so deeply venerated and identified with so completely. Their scholarship was substantively and methodologically multilayered, feigning the academic conventions of their disciplines while doing politics which had for them become impossible to avoid. They were not so much public intellectuals fighting openly but rather highly specialized scholars caught up tragically despite themselves in the whirlwind of their times, who otherwise might have been content being committed academics plying their respective fields of

expertise with dispassion. But dispassionate professionalism became a luxury after 1933.

We wish to stress that we are far more interested in the way in which their respective scholarly efforts were *broadly* ideologically reactive rather than more narrowly ideologically apologetic on behalf of one particular political persuasion or another. We are far more interested in what they had in common in terms of what they were fighting *against* rather than what they were fighting *for*. Each of our four exiles knew pretty well who their mutual enemy was. Each vehemently opposed fascism and tried to explain some of its roots, even if it is not entirely clear how much else they shared politically. We certainly do not mean to leave readers with the erroneous impression that our four scholars had a unified understanding of the political and social crises that victimized them nor a cohesive stratagem of what to do about it politically.

Our book, in short, endeavors to be more than primarily biographical and historical like several recent studies of twentieth-century continental intellectuals victimized by the tragic events of the 1930s and 1940s. Though our book complements such valuable and excellent studies, it also tries to philosophize albeit often indirectly while avoiding as much as possible conflating philosophizing with interpretation. It seeks, in other words, to broach philosophical and hermeneutical problems and to suggest solutions to them.

Forced Exile and the Interpretation of Texts

But we want to do more than disclose *how* highly specialized scholarship of very diverse kinds was enlisted so deftly in this struggle against unprecedented brutishness, which scarred all who were touched by it even as they managed to escape to welcoming universities far removed from immediate danger. We insist that forced exile magnifies the polemical and political nature that surely runs through all "normal" scholarship, reminding us that all scholarship is *performed* however much scholars may prefer to see themselves as doing otherwise. Forced exile pushes to the surface what typically goes unnoticed and therefore ordinarily requires enormous contextual spade-work to expose. Forced exile amplifies deeper political timbres and preconceptions constitutive of all great scholarship, including that written in quieter and more comfortable times. Our study is a cross-section of modern scholarship composed under exceptional duress and anxiety. Our study exploits this exceptional duress and anxiety in order to magnify prejudices that otherwise escape notice.

As we shall see, Hans Baron appropriated the crisis of the early Italian Renaissance both in order *to make sense* of the crisis of his own times and *to defend* the humanist tradition that he cherished from the political malevolence imperiling it. He read Europe's unparalleled crisis that culminated in WWII into the crisis of Renaissance Florence. That is, he reconstructed the latter through the improbable lens of the former. The crisis of Florentine civic humanism purportedly mirrored, or anticipated, the crisis of the 1930s and 1940s, enabling him to illuminate and thereby combat this second crisis by making scholarly sense of the first. Likewise Auerbach reinterpreted the entire history of Western literary realism in terms of the disaster that exiled him as a means of combatting this very disaster. He stenciled his epoch's disaster over the grand literary narrative he so brilliantly reconstructed. Much like Baron, he too invoked humanism, which he instead called "historicist" humanism and which he insisted Aryan philology imperiled in its effort to purge the Old Testament's essential link to the New Testament.

Popper and Strauss used the history of political thought no less polemically than Baron used intellectual history and Auerbach used literary criticism. With Popper, though, these polemics are palpable. For him, bad political philosophizing beginning with Plato and culminating in Hegel contributed powerfully to modern fascism, making his idiosyncratic history of political thought what he called his "war effort." The crisis of his times required that we practice philosophical interpretation politically. In our view, however, Popper read fascist ideological thinking backwards into the history of political thought. He reconstructed Plato and Hegel anachronistically through later conceptual categories and modes of thinking that they never could have anticipated or would have recognized.

Whereas Popper's polemical history of political thought is sufficiently obvious and self-consciously deliberate, the same can hardly be said of Strauss. With Strauss, the history of political thought is likewise political, which is to say that it is invariably a mode of biased political philosophizing in disguise. Indeed, it is always ineluctably political as every political philosophy must be. But, with him, one never knows whether the history of political thought's polemical nature is something to be celebrated or veiled. One never knows for sure whether Strauss thinks that he is combatting something dangerous with his political philosophy and history of political thought or, rather, shrouding something dangerous that he takes to be the regrettable and disconcerting truth.

Forced exile puts the scholarship it produces on edge. Like any anxiety, it focuses thinking as much as it disorients thinking. It turns scholarship

inside out, exposing some of our deepest collective ills that otherwise tend to slumber unnoticed or at least underappreciated. And forced exile from unprecedented catastrophe invariably does this with extraordinary intensity and idiosyncrasy. Baron, Auerbach, Popper, and Strauss were children of their dire times. They were also simultaneously victims and combatants and some more obviously victims and combatants than others. But we too are surely both in some measure these days. We typically just do not see this in our far less precarious political circumstances.

Now war-fighting scholarship and interpretation are most likely going to seem idiosyncratic, especially for readers such as ourselves who no longer share the war-fighting motives of the exiles we examine. Forcing past texts, as they did, through the highly charged sieve of such motives most certainly transforms these texts into strange messengers their authors would never have recognized. Nor is it unsurprising that we should find these purported messengers a little strange and misappropriated since our later far less agonizing historical context offers us the possibility of reading past texts more serenely and therefore closer to the meanings their authors intended. That is, we now arguably enjoy the opportunity of recapturing with considerably less prejudice than our four exiles what Machiavelli, for instance, meant to say. Though we surely have our own different prejudices, trapped as we are in our twenty-first-century horizons of discourse and meaning, our horizons are less infused with the high stakes that make Baron, Popper, Strauss, and Auerbach's scholarship so idiosyncratic. While all scholarship, in our judgment, is necessarily an idiosyncratic contemplation and image of its times in some measure, war-fighting scholarship is bound to seem to later readers sharply and perplexingly idiosyncratic. As we have been insisting, we can never neutralize the biases that frame our interpretations. We can never defuse their power entirely. But we should certainly acknowledge them in hopes of mitigating them. And we certainly ought to endeavor to tame them as best we can, at least if our goal is to interpret texts as their authors intended them to be read as opposed to reconstructing them aggressively in the name of combatting one or another great political evil.

Jewishness

Idiosyncrasy, then, is what forced exile and war-fighting interpretation not surprisingly generates. But what should we make of the Jewishness of our four disparate exiles? Does having been driven into exile because of their Jewishness color their scholarship appreciably and meaningfully,

making it, in effect, identifiably Jewish? After all, Baron, Auerbach, Popper, and Strauss were forced to flee because they were deemed Jewish regardless of whether they considered themselves particularly Jewish. But we will abjure overdramatizing their Jewish identity since we want to resist speculating about motivating smoking guns, which our extensive archival research in particular has failed to discover. Our study is not an exercise in German-speaking, Jewish thought.

Baron, Auerbach, Popper, and Strauss identified themselves as Jewish with varying degrees of conviction. Strauss saw himself as unquestionably Jewish and was a Zionist. Baron and Auerbach neither celebrated being Jewish nor eschewed their Jewishness either. Being Jewish was for them nothing to hide but it was also not especially significant. They were Jews, yes, but assimilated bourgeois, German Jews. Popper, by contrast, acknowledged his Jewish "origin" but did not consider himself Jewish and despised Zionism as parochial tribalism wholly unworthy of the principles of Neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism, which he so strongly identified with. More than the other three, Popper clearly rejected the notion of a Jewish nation, though he sometimes seems to have conceded reluctantly that there was indeed a Jewish *Abstammungsgemeinschaft* (community of common descent) and that he belonged to it however much he wished he did not. He was indeed born Jewish yet was not really a Jew. As far as he was concerned, he came undeniably from Jewish roots but these origins were irrelevant to his identity and his thinking and writing.

Yet all four were deemed Jewish enough by the Nazis and therefore had no choice but to flee for their lives and for the sake of their scholarly careers. Nazism stamped them as Jewish, insisting that they were unquestionably Jewish, and then tormented them for it. Surely, we should not ignore these scars in trying to make sense of what they wrote and of why they wrote what they wrote. But, again, we should refrain from making more of their Jewishness than the evidence clearly and demonstrably allows. We explore in depth the significance of being Jewish and of being of Jewish origin in our chapter on Popper.

Idiosyncratic Interpretation and Methods of Interpretation

We shall also argue that idiosyncratic interpretations favor idiosyncratic hermeneutics. Different methods of interpretation, that is, are more or less congenial to the different kinds of substantive interpretations one is trying to construct. The more idiosyncratic the interpretation, the more likely the method shoring it up is probably going to be idiosyncratic

too. Substance and method tend to go together, mutually reinforcing one another. If one sets out to interpret specific texts controversially, if one is deliberately trying to settle scores politically, then we should not be surprised that the hermeneutical procedures backing up one's efforts, to the extent that these procedures are articulated, are going to seem controversial as well.

Popper and Strauss exemplify this interconnection rather strikingly. Popper's method of "critical interpretation," which stresses the importance of deliberately imposing unity on texts by making their arguments appear far more consistent and forceful than the authors ever intended them to be, legitimizes reading them out of historical context to one's polemical and idiosyncratic advantage. Aspiring to make texts speak as coherently as possible, as Popper admittedly and deliberately tried to do, lends itself to making texts say things their authors could never have imagined. What better way to make Plato anticipate Hitler than to start off by reducing Plato to oversimplified coherence and systematic unity. Strauss's hermeneutics too reflect and reinforce conveniently the unconventional history of political thought he tries to tell. Whether we view Strauss as narrating the history of political thought unconventionally as a regrettable and steady decline into historicism and nihilism beginning with Machiavelli and then much exacerbated by Hobbes, or whether we see Strauss as not so much regretting this decline but regretting Machiavelli and Hobbes for making this dangerous truth public, Strauss's equally unconventional hermeneutic reinforces and justifies either contentious result. "Esoteric" reading between the lines simply *authorizes* purportedly privileged readers to impose on texts meanings that few, especially their authors, would recognize and endorse. Reading esoterically, in short, licenses reconstructing texts willy-nilly according to one's favored polemical ends just as much as "critical interpretation" does. Both warrant making texts say whatever one wants them to say for whatever purpose. Both facilitate all manner of exotic interpretation.

Popper frequently insisted that the very best textual interpretations were those that proved philosophically "fertile" in much the way that the best scientific theories were "fertile." "Critical interpretation" when executed well stimulates innovative philosophical thinking much like "critical rationalism" in science as a method of "conjecture and refutation" tends to promote groundbreaking scientific discovery. Interpretations were not better so much for being true or accurate as they were for being fecund, encouraging readers to reconsider accepted philosophical positions and supersede them. Not only was philosophizing at its best

whenever it triggered new philosophical thinking, but interpreting past philosophical texts was also at its best wherever it succeeded in provoking fresh and innovative philosophizing. For Popper, then, interpreting philosophy was simply philosophizing itself in an alternative mode. The history of philosophy was doing philosophy, and the history of political philosophy in particular was just a distinctive, less obvious way of practicing political philosophy. Accordingly, we should *impose* coherence on past texts, rewrite them through reading them, and re-spin them by reconstructing them. And this rule of thumb is executed most commendably to the extent that it successfully rouses contemporary generations of philosophers out of the lethargy of their comfortable bad habits and mollifying conceptual tropes. So making past texts synthetically coherent was a method of bringing them forward and making them provocative and useful to us in our very different historical circumstances from those in which they were crafted. And if one was also dead set on being politically provocative – and not just philosophically provocative – in taking up polemical combat, then one had all the more reason to make past texts say things wholly alien to their authors' intentions.

In our considered judgment, Baron, Auerbach, and Strauss also wanted to be provocative as scholars as much as they wanted to be politically provocative through their scholarship. Indeed, scholarship and politics merged for them, making both kinds of provocation exceptionally hard to disentangle. Forced exile in times of unmitigated peril is an astonishing stimulant, overwhelming and complicating everything it disturbs. But, as we have been suggesting, forced exile simultaneously makes plain what otherwise may be harder for us these days to see, namely the extent to which reading all past texts necessarily rewrites them often polemically however subtly and imperceptibly.

We also insist that intellectual history such as the one we have written can be philosophically useful in its own right. That is, intellectual history can be fertile philosophically, especially when it addresses writers and scholars from our recent past whose work has been not only controversial and idiosyncratic but also more recently become marginalized in part because of its very idiosyncrasies. We can learn much philosophically from them by resurrecting them, especially when we resurrect them by simultaneously working hard to contextualize them historically. There is much to learn from strangers, particularly strangers whose strangeness stems in part from their having been marginalized from contemporary mainstream scholarship or from their coming from disciplines outside the dominant Anglo-American analytical philosophical tradition. These

philosophically marginalized strangers are nonetheless still strangers cast off from *within* our own intellectual tradition. While we have not forgotten Baron, Auerbach, Popper, and Strauss, their idiosyncratic intellectual and literary history has rendered them strange and perplexing to many of us these days, which is precisely why not ignoring them can be "fertile" for us. They are nevertheless strangers we can still find our feet with.

Historicism

Baron, Popper, Strauss, and Auerbach are, of course, a sampling of the countless scholars who fled for their lives from the German-speaking academy that had nourished and shaped them. So, why privilege focusing on them beyond the fact that all four deployed scholarship to combat fascism and beyond the fact that all four were Jewish or of Jewish origin? All four were also firmly in the grip of the legacy of historicism, which makes them worthy of critical consideration together despite their different scholarly expertise. We contend that their shared preoccupation with historicism is not only reason enough to take them up together; we also argue that this shared anxiety about historicism is deeply intertwined with their war-fighting polemics and hermeneutical strategies. Disquiet about historicism's suspected truth-corroding implications informed the substance of their writing and thinking and the manner in which they went about both. However alternatively they conceived it, they nevertheless viewed historicism's legacy with varying degrees of alarm.

Historicism is a "loaded term" that has been used differently, leading to much confusion.[1] Baron, Popper, Strauss, and Auerbach did not ascribe uniform meaning to the term, nor do contemporary thinkers and scholars use the term consistently. Accordingly, we eschew serving up our own definition or trying to come up with a universal definition that compresses the various historical iterations of the term. Doing so would only compound confusion with more confusion. But more importantly, it would de-historicize the term itself and risk imposing a decontextualized template on our study, stripping it of the interpretative nuance we aspire to. We prefer to let each of our four scholars' conceptions of historicism speak for themselves.

[1] We would like to thank Arie Dubnow for reminding us to stress at the outset the ambiguities in the way historicism has been used. Dubnow also notes that historicism, however it has been used differently, is essentially a European mode of historical thinking. See Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Baron and Auerbach, though, were ambivalent historicists. They had ingested too much of it themselves. Both were influenced profoundly by Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Meinecke, champions of modern German historicism who also worried about the menace it posed to the objectivity of moral judgment. Baron's thinking in particular was shaped by Troeltsch and Meinecke, having been their student in Berlin following WWI. Like Troeltsch and Meinecke, Baron labored to accommodate historicism with universal moral truth. Like them, he regarded historicism as fundamentally true in principle but simultaneously worried that historicism threatened to undo the objective "values" that "modern European civilization" had found out and without which combatting fascism would prove more difficult. On the one hand, he accepted that morality was in some sense historically relative, but on the other hand, he regarded the values articulated by modern European humanism as universal and objective. If they weren't, then nihilism might take root and with it fascism as its toxic fruit.

No less than Baron, Auerbach tried to accommodate historicism and universal humanism. If universal moral truth was an illusion, if humanism was little more than a passing fancy and perhaps an enervating ruse at worst, then his philological struggle to save the Old Testament from Nazi scholars who sought to sever it as prefiguring the New Testament becomes inexplicable. We are convinced that Auerbach's philological combat was grounded in his underlying humanist convictions, which took for granted the latter's truth.

Popper too, as is well-known, was preoccupied with the threat posed to humanity by what he called "historicism," as opposed to what he called "historism." Historicism was the worst form of philosophical thinking whose origins began with Plato. What Plato regrettably introduced in Western thinking culminated in the ideology of fascism, making Hitler Plato's thoughtless child. For Popper, historicism was not merely "impoverished" philosophizing. It was politically irresponsible and hazardous philosophizing, exemplifying what Isaiah Berlin called the "power of ideas" gone astray.

But, of course, what Popper meant by historicism was not quite what the German historical school of Troeltsch and Meinecke (and Baron, Auerbach, and Strauss after them) understood by the term. By historicism, Popper meant historical determinism; and what German historicists had understood by historicism, Popper idiosyncratically preferred to call "historism." For Popper, the two terms were nevertheless conceptually inseparable. We shall show that, following J. G. A. Pocock's suggestion,

Popper was not anti-historicist in the conventional meaning of the term (or, in his own anomalous terminology, he was not anti-historist). His hermeneutics of "critical interpretation" confirms our view.[2] Nevertheless, despite his historicism, he rejected moral relativism, fearing its political implications exemplified at worst by Nazism. Popper was too much indebted to Kant, too much of a Neo-Kantian cosmopolitan humanist, to permit the logic of his "critical rationalism" to compromise his confidence in the existence of universal moral principles. His denunciation of fascism's inherent evil and his decision to combat it head-on through his scholarship are otherwise difficult to make much sense of. So Popper too was ambivalently anti-historicist, though the sources of his ambivalence seem to have had little to do with the German historicist tradition.

Historicist conundrums plague Strauss's political thinking and hermeneutical technique as much as any of the other exiles we consider. But these conundrums are exceedingly difficult to unravel because, with him, there is so much posturing and feigning about what he really means by recommending reading between the lines and what his motives really are for counseling that we do so. One can never know what Strauss thinks careful reading requires and why. That is, one never can tell for sure whether Strauss believes, in his heart of hearts, whether historicism and moral relativism are dangerous falsehoods that require defeating at all costs or whether he supposes them perilous truths that are best kept secret and only accessible to those few readers and privileged philosophers skilled enough like himself to handle them in safety. Sometimes Strauss seems as much intent on merely suppressing historicism as he does in exposing and falsifying it.

The German historical tradition runs deep and is long. It begins well before Hegel but takes the historicist turn with Johann Gottfried Herder. With Herder, historicism's principal themes emerge: that the values of each culture are unique, that past ages should not be judged by the present, and that understanding the past requires reliving it as much as possible rather than attempting to describe or explain it. And with Herder, we first encounter anxieties about moral relativism implied by historicism. Herder tried to escape moral skepticism by appealing to providence as

[2] Perhaps concluding that Popper was just another historicist is not especially instructive for, according to Frederick Beiser, "historicism was not an abject failure but an astonishing success" that "never really died." This is because it "continues to live in all of us, and it is fair to say that, as heirs of Meinecke's revolution, we are all historicists today." See Frederick Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 26.