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I

Introduction

In the last few years, numerous books and articles have appeared that seek to vindicate in the face of attack the German Jewish political thinker Leo Strauss (1889–1973) and his disciples. One such defender, Peter Minowitz, recently published a work aimed at Strauss’s detractors, *Straussophobia*. In the first chapter, which sets the stage for later assaults or counterassaults, Minowitz lets it be known that “All hate Leo Strauss.”¹ The rest of the book is commentary on this allegedly widespread, unjustified prejudice. What Minowitz cites in the text and endnotes would suggest in any case that neither Strauss nor his followers are winning academic popularity contests.

Straussophobia was published three years after the appearance of an earlier and denser apologetic work, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy*, by Michael and Catherine H. Zuckert, two former students of Leo Strauss who are now professors of political theory at Notre Dame University.² The Zuckerts set out to demonstrate two key points, the first of which is also broached by Minowitz: (1) Leo Strauss and his followers are innocent of the charge that the political Left has leveled against them,

¹ Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians against Shadia Drury and Other Defenders* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 19–38.

² Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and David Lewis Schaefer, “Shadia Drury’s Critique of Leo Strauss,” *Political Science Reviewer* 32 (1994): 80–127.

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[More information](#)

of being antidemocratic elitists; and (2) the Straussians and neoconservatives, contrary to the customary association, have separate identities. The Zuckerts insist that although the Straussians are tireless advocates of American democracy, they are not political activists in the same way as the neoconservatives. The Zuckerts portray the Straussians as true scholars who should not be equated with government advisors and certainly not with political journalists.

The impression conveyed by these and other thematically related tracts is that the Zuckerts' and Minowitz's subjects are a beleaguered band of thinkers. Their professional survival within the Academy depends on their ability to keep certain powerful enemies at bay. These foes are almost always seen as being on the political left. Although Straussians have incurred criticism from non-leftists, they usually dismiss such critics, particularly if they carry right-wing associations, and typically in footnotes, as eccentrics who are obsessively anti-Israeli and in some cases stridently anti-Semitic.

The only meaningful critics Straussians acknowledge are on the left. These are sometimes, but not always, depicted as hardened enemies of American democracy. In Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, the advocates of cultural disintegration are seen as connected to antidemocratic German thinkers and French postmodernists. Straussians write with undisguised bitterness about these leftist anti-Americans, who have declared war on them and what Straussians consider to be quintessentially American values. Only by remaining on guard against their foes can they pursue their mission of awakening interest in political theory while affirming the universal validity of American democracy.

This confrontation in which the Straussians have embroiled themselves is largely one of their own choosing. The enemy they wish to engage does not threaten them professionally or intellectually. Their most cogent critics are in no position to challenge them, and therefore the Straussians have elected not to grapple with them. Unlike their mostly ignored critics but like the ones they accuse of marginalizing them, the Straussians are heavily represented in elite universities, including the Ivies; and they write periodically even for that part of the press that they depict as their sworn enemy.

Critical commentators on the left, and perhaps most notably Shadia Drury, have often treated their subjects as giants bestriding the

Cambridge University Press
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 America: A Critical Appraisal
 Paul Edward Gottfried
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

3

world of scholarship.³ Such critics have reinforced the image that the Straussians have cultivated for themselves, as patriotic Americans with vast humanistic learning. And the Straussians have returned the favor by showering attention on their preferred critics. While Minowitz aims his shafts at Drury, he also explained in an interview with Scott Horton in *Harpers* that he admires his antagonist: “She is learned, creative, courageous, and very readable.”⁴ The Straussians have recognized two types of critics, both on the left: those who occupy the “unpatriotic” or “undemocratic” left, whom they never tire of denouncing; and those who, like Stephen Holmes of the University of Chicago, they consider worthier opponents.

This work will not focus primarily on these welcome encounters. Rather it will present the case of those whom Straussians prefer not to notice, that is, their critics on the intellectual right and a less classifiable but nonetheless pesky opposition made up of recognized scholars whom the Straussians hope to ignore. Of the two groups, the critics on the right may be the more persistent, if not the more decorated with academic honors. As my book (now out in paperback), *The Search for Historical Meaning*, intimated in 1987 and as the Italian scholar Germana Paraboschi asserts in *Leo Strauss e la Destra Americana* (1993), the battle between Strauss and his followers and the “anti-Straussian Right” is a battle that continues to be deferred.⁵ Although not the only adversaries in the faces of the Straussians, they are the ones who refuse to go away.

These despised critics have also been more correct than their leftist counterparts when explaining why Straussians emphasize founders and the crafting of regimes, particularly with regard to the United States. This practice has less to do with antidemocratic elitism than it does with what Strauss and his followers seek to ignore, namely the ethnic and cultural preconditions for the creation of political orders. Straussians focus on those who invent regimes because they wish to present the construction of government as an open-ended, rationalist

³ Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

⁴ See Scott Horton’s interview with Minowitz on Harpers Online, <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2009/09.90005789>.

⁵ Germana Paraboschi, *Leo Strauss e la Destra Americana* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1993).

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

process. All children of the Enlightenment, once properly instructed, should be able to carry out this constructivist task, given enough support from the American government or American military. The last thing Straussians would ever say (or care to have said) is that successful constitutional orders are the expressions of already formed nations and cultures. But here we are not speaking about anything that would bother those critics whom Straussians are engaged with. Although not as smitten with the indispensable role of founders as those they criticize, these critics would likely share the Straussians' constructivist view of governments and societies.

Although the historically minded right has argued strenuously against this and other aspects of the Straussian worldview, there are two qualifications that should be made at the outset. One, the American intellectual right has generally welcomed Strauss and his followers with open arms. This right, and particularly its Catholic and, more recently, neoconservative representatives, have treated Strauss's interpretations and political stands as a godsend, as a means of combating what are considered to be the all-pervasive dangers of relativism and nihilism. We are speaking therefore not about all "conservative" publicists, but only about traditionalist critics who have undertaken to dissect Straussian arguments.

Two, the counterarguments that have emanated from these critics are not consistently original. These refutations draw on a wide range of thinkers, going from Burke, Hegel, and Marx down to Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer, Quentin Skinner, and John Gunnell. Clearly some of the arguments devised by less well-known scholars can be found more fully developed in the work of more prominent ones; nonetheless, those on the American intellectual right who in recent decades have applied the ideas in question have not always been aware of these derivations and connections. To their credit, these scorned figures have the virtue of staying around to fight another day. They do not accept contemptuous silence as an answer from their opponents.

Because the following text is itself partially a polemic, it may be advisable to indicate certain guidelines about what follows. This work will investigate *representative* Straussian texts, as opposed to those that do not exemplify the distinctive methodology or worldview of the group being considered. Extraneous for our purposes are works by Straussians that could have been written by nonmembers, or works

Cambridge University Press
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America: A Critical Appraisal
Paul Edward Gottfried
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

5

that incorporate some Straussian techniques but are not identifiably Straussian in their general orientation.

These qualifications seem justified when examining the representative texts of any school of thought. Although English classicist Francis Cornford sympathized with the Communist Party, it would be fruitless to examine his translation of Plato to understand Cornford's politics. Likewise, one could read Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon* or look at Picasso's art, obviously with the exception of something as ideologically loaded as "Guernica," without being able to guess that the artist was a Communist. Partisans in the past often produced works that told little or nothing about their partisanship. In a similar way, one could read Steven Smith on Hegel, usually Catherine Zuckert on Plato, and Eugene F. Miller on David Hume without being struck by the Straussian dimension of their exegesis.

There are also Catholic political theorists, like Daniel J. Mahoney, who have been affected by Strauss but who are not unreservedly of the Straussian persuasion. The same would apply to the French intellectual historian and Sorbonne professor Pierre Manent, although here the Straussian grid may be more apparent than in Mahoney's case. Straussian tendencies may be easily discerned in such writers but are less conspicuous in their work than they would be in nonhyphenated members of the school. At the same time, one finds particularly striking illustrations of Straussian hermeneutics among other Catholic scholars with Straussian leanings, for example, Father Ernest Fortin, a former Jesuit professor at Boston College, who suggests that Dante may have been a religious skeptic pretending to be an orthodox Christian. Discovering atheistic or skeptical subtexts in "political philosophers" conventionally deemed to be committed theists is characteristic of the Straussian exposition of texts.

It is certainly not being argued in this book that nothing that Strauss or his disciples produced has intrinsic value. Being critical of a school of thought is not the same as rejecting everything it has brought forth. It would be wrong to offer such a sweeping condemnation, and particularly as someone who has benefited from Strauss's early works and the insights of some of his students.

This work will approach its subject in a way that may upset hardcore anti-Straussians. Although there are intimations of the characteristic positions of his epigones in the works of the master, these are often

Cambridge University Press
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 America: A Critical Appraisal
 Paul Edward Gottfried
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

6 *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America*

more subdued in their original presentation than how these tendencies reveal themselves in succeeding generations. There is something to be said for Stanley Rosen's contention that his fellow Straussians read into their teacher ideological positions that may not have been consistently his.

Moreover, the genealogical connection becomes even vaguer the further one moves back in time. While the young Strauss in Germany previewed the intense Zionism of his later followers, one can find passages and indeed entire works by him that could not have come from them. This may be ascribed to the fact that Strauss had far greater erudition than most of his students. Equally important, his positions on politics and culture were less predictable than those of the next generation, and this was especially true of his early work. It was only after he fled Germany as a Jewish refugee that one can find in sharp profile the dominant worldview of his students.

This worldview became increasingly noticeable after Strauss came to the United States in 1937. But even afterward, he published commentaries that are hardly in line with his students' ideological priorities. One may note this difference without agreeing in every detail with the interpretation that Stanley Rosen advances in *Politics and Hermeneutics*. Here Rosen highlights Strauss's subtle defense of aristocracy while presenting him as "almost a Nietzschean," albeit one who hid his hand while defending traditional social mores.⁶

However, there are other interpretive possibilities beside Rosen's, or the even more unlikely idea that Strauss was a "fascist" who trained

⁶ Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 124. A more systematic attempt to locate the core of Strauss's political teaching in Nietzsche can be found in Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). The interpretation of Strauss that is being offered does not follow Lampert's argument. Rather, it takes Strauss and his followers at their word when they denounce Nietzsche as an antidemocratic thinker verging on nihilism. No attempt is made here to generalize from Strauss's early infatuation with Nietzsche to turn him and his school into surreptitious practitioners of Nietzschean elitism. The most that is conceded to the Lampert-Rosen thesis is what the Zuckerts assert in *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 90, namely that Strauss "was not a hesitant Nietzschean so much as an admiring anti-Nietzschean." This contention should not be confused with what is argued in Chapter 4 of this volume, that Strauss and his school were "illiberal liberals" in the sense of being what postwar German reeducators called "streitbare Demokraten (aggressive democrats)" – that is, militant supporters of a particular concept of modern democracy.

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Paul Edward Gottfried
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

7

like-minded followers. My explanation as to why Strauss sometimes differed from his students in his remarks about modern politics is less interesting but also less labored. Strauss was more intelligent and came out of a richer cultural world than his followers – indeed a Teutonic one that most of his prominent students detested.

It is possible to arrive at this judgment even without buying the complete Strauss portrait as found in Ted McAllister's *Revolt against Modernity*. In this study, McAllister defends Strauss as a protector of the Western intellectual "Tradition" against the threat of moral disintegration.⁷ The reverence for Strauss in this work, however, is not extended to all of his students. McAllister has no compunctions about challenging the less-than-rigorous thinking that he uncovers in some of Strauss's disciples. He is particularly hard on those who turn Strauss's pronouncements into window dressing for partisan policy statements.

Although this book does not completely reject McAllister's distinction, it seems that there is more continuity between the master and his epigones than some would care to admit. One may begin this reassessment by questioning whether Strauss was as much an enemy of modernity as is sometimes contended. This book will be returning to this problem with some regularity in Chapters 2 and 3, which go through Strauss's life and hermeneutic. In these chapters, there will be a discussion of the neglected modernity of Strauss's thinking, an aspect of his thinking that reflected the crises of his life in Germany and the reaction to his success in the New World. My interpretation flies in the face of conventional wisdom by suggesting that Strauss became an American thinker, indeed an America booster, despite his German past.

Among the commonplace observations this study will dispute is that there is something unmistakably "conservative" or "traditionalist" about how Strauss read texts. An investigation of this belief requires us to look at the manner in which Strauss interpreted political theoretical texts, going back to his studies on Plato and Thucydides. A key question here is whether Strauss – if we might speak like his disciples – proposed a "classical alternative to the modern enterprise." Did his

⁷ Ted V. McAllister, *The Revolt against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 176–204, 271–80.

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Paul Edward Gottfried
Excerpt
[More information](#)

reading of the Ancients lead him away from his recognizable political persona of the 1950s and 1960s, as a Cold War liberal with strong Zionist sentiments? Did Strauss's attachment to the Ancients result in his embracing and advocating a more classical way of life from the one that existed in postwar America?

Or is there in fact a considerable overlap between Strauss's preferred, selective concept of antiquity and the ideals of modern democratic life? What may have helped Strauss become a celebrated *American* teacher of values is the fit between his interpretation of old political texts and how Americans view their political heritage. It was his Americanness and (dare one to say?) his affirmation of the political status quo that brought him worldly recognition in his adopted land. Contrary to the stereotype that he admired the ancient Greeks more than he did modern Americans, one would be hard-pressed to find such a teaching in Strauss. There is no evidence that he "wished to take us back to the ancients," beside the overblown attacks of some and the misguided praise of others.

One is tempted to ask for concrete evidence that "Strauss reinforced the parameters of the Old Right" and instructed us in "a mode of piety, the beginning of true wisdom, and the knowledge of the whole hierarchy of being."⁸ Supposedly Strauss and his students could do all of this and more because of their "fundamental distinction between antiquity and modernity." One should ask such encomiasts whether they can prove this transformative effect. Certainly the conservative movement as manifested in the media does not show any indebtedness to the world of the polis. Equally noteworthy, Strauss not only moved out of a modern situation to look for his selective lessons from the ancient world. His view of ancient wisdom, as Chapter 4 will try to show, has a distinctly modern look.

Chapter 5 of this book will focus on an objection among prominent Straussians that they are being unfairly identified with neoconservatives. I try to counter this by providing evidence for this association. I also undertake to show that the nexus between neoconservatives and

⁸ See J. David Hoeveler, *Watch on the Right: Conservative Intellectuals in the Reagan Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 18. No attempt is made in this reference to single out Professor Hoeveler. What he expresses about Strauss and his school is a very conventional opinion.

Cambridge University Press
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Paul Edward Gottfried
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

9

Straussians is so tight that it may be impossible to dissociate the two groups in any significant way.

This is not necessarily a condemnation of either movement, but recognition of a continuing symbiotic relation between them. Neo-conservatives draw their rhetoric and heroic models from Straussian discourse. They also have never hidden their debt to Strauss and the Straussians, even when neoconservative journalists have garbled or vulgarized the message. The Straussians have benefited from the neoconservative ascendancy by gaining access to neoconservative-controlled government resources and foundation money and by obtaining positions as government advisors. It is also hard to think of any critical political issue that has divided the two groups. It is therefore worth considering why Straussians are determined to prove that they are fundamentally different from neoconservatives.

Chapter 6 will examine the now infectious Straussian practice of referring to political theory as “political philosophy.” This practice has spread across departments of politics and has taken root even among those who know little about Straussian hermeneutics but who consider it chic to refer to the object of their work as philosophy. This habit is by no means inconsequential. It entails the upgrading of the examination of political opinions to ontological and metaphysical discourse. Underlying this elevation is a glorification of political life as the highest form of human moral and intellectual activity. It is this association that has enabled Straussians to misrepresent as philosophical inquiries what are often homilies about American liberal democracy.

When Strauss referred to the study of political tracts as an examination of “political philosophy,” he clearly had two things in mind: the Platonic discussion of philosophical questions in the context of trying to define the best of all regimes; and engaging such questions within the framework of his interpretation of important political works. But this concept, once brought into vogue, became a slippery slope, eventually leading to the taking of ideological stands as an exercise in speculative philosophy. By now the term in question is so hopelessly tendentious that it may be best to drop it from our vocabulary.

At least some of the arguments presented in this book should be familiar from my earlier works, especially *The Search for Historical Meaning*. What is offered here, however, more than in this earlier study, is an extended critique of Strauss’s interpretive methods.

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Paul Edward Gottfried
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Interpretive perspectives often attract users, or so it seems, because they confirm what people already believe about their time and culture. Strauss's approach to past thinkers, particularly as now applied, does not require historical imagination or any serious acceptance of the possibility that others, separated by time and circumstance, were not like themselves, namely religious skeptics who would have celebrated their good fortune in being able to live in a materialistic democracy.

One may note here a chief reservation expressed by some professional historians about Straussian readings of past thinkers. Too often Strauss and his followers have disregarded what makes the past different from the present, although not necessarily inferior. It is entirely possible and even likely that those in an earlier time, including its great minds, were religious Christians and often staunch monarchists. The late-sixteenth-century political theorist Jean Bodin was a stark political realist who talked the language of the scientific revolution then in progress. Equally significant, however, Bodin feared witches and seems to have remained a believing Catholic. Such characteristics may be less appealing to Straussians than the belief that Bodin was a religious skeptic who, given enough time, might have evolved into a political democrat.

In the hands of his disciples, Strauss's hermeneutic has become a means of demystifying the past, by turning "political philosophers" into forerunners of the present age. One encounters in this less an affirmation of a permanent human nature than a graphic example of Herbert Butterfield's "Whig theory of history."⁹ We should admire in the past what foreshadows a later age and, more specifically, our late modern society. This celebration of the American present, as opposed to any march into the past, is a defining characteristic of the Straussians' hermeneutics. It is a trait that nonetheless goes mostly unnoticed among their journalistic critics – and precisely among those critics whom the Straussians see fit to highlight. And while this tendency cannot be entirely laid at the doorstep of the founder, it was not altogether absent from his writings or from what he transmitted to his followers.

⁹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Theory of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd., 1968), 64–71.