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Introduction

Reopening the Case of Leo Strauss

This book reconsiders the views of Leo Strauss on the relationship of philosophy and law to political violence – the aspect of Strauss's scholarship that has been most publicly controversial and where his intentions have been most vehemently disputed. Around the time of the Iraq War, a bevy of books and articles appeared claiming Strauss and his followers had inspired the foreign and defense policies of the George W. Bush administration. Scholars and journalists alike scoured Strauss's difficult and erudite works about political thinkers such as Machiavelli and Thucydides. They purported to discover cleverly placed and shrewdly veiled messages of bellicose imperialism, war without limits, and unbounded executive power – the doctrines they suspected Strauss of teaching orally to a closed circle of disciples.

Here I contest these charges through reinterpreting Strauss's published work in light of the lectures and seminars he gave to his students, which have become available over the last few years. Strauss, I argue, offers a new, classically inspired philosophy of political violence, but one based on a strong preference for peace over war. This philosophy holds that there are circumstances in which the use of violence is a justified necessity, a radically different proposition from arguing against all moral and legal constraints on war. As Strauss puts it, "Socrates was a man of peace rather than of war. It should go without saying that a man of peace is not the same as a pacifist" (XSD, p. 89).

The fundamental tension or opposition between philosophy and violence that Strauss identifies is inspired by the Socratic/Platonic view of thinking in relation to action. Strauss writes in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*: "The classics understood the moral-political phenomena in the light of man's highest virtue or perfection, the life of the philosopher or the contemplative life. The superiority of peace to war . . . is a reflection of the superiority of thinking to doing or making" (TOM, p. 295). Philosophical reason is intrinsically oriented toward

gentleness and peace, agreement and dialogue rather than polemics and clashes of ideological absolutes. This is a counterpoint to the stances of an array of modern philosophers who see philosophy as intellectual warfare: "the daughter of tumult and war . . . a battlefield," as Bernard-Henri Levy puts it in a recent book, describing his own position.[1]

At the same time, Strauss believes that, to be socially responsible and protect the freedom of the mind, philosophy must address the problem of violence and consider how, through legal and moral restraints, humanity can be preserved even in the most extreme situations. Thus, Strauss would agree with Bernard-Henri Levy on the point that at least one essential function of philosophy is to *think about* the "violence, instability, unpredictability, sometimes the horror, of events." But Strauss's insistence on legal and moral restraints is diametrically opposed to the Machiavellian teaching attributed to him by his accusers.

In the mature period of his scholarship, Strauss turns from Plato and Aristotle to ancient political writers and men of action, Xenophon and Thucydides, who faced more directly the moral and legal problems of political violence. Strauss fuses their thinking on political violence with the Socratic/Platonic conception of philosophy's critical distance from partisan or sectarian political projects, hence from ideology. He sets up this viewpoint as a response to and in debate with modern philosophers making alliances with political violence, above all Machiavelli and the Machiavellians of the right (represented by the fascist/Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt) and the left (represented by Strauss's friend, the Marxist-Hegelian philosopher Alexandre Kojève).

STRAUSS AND THE PROBLEM OF "STRAUSSIANISM"

Leo Strauss was born into an observant Jewish home in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century.[2] As a young man he participated in the Zionist movement; he studied philosophy in several German universities, encountered

[1] Bernard-Henri Levy, *De la guerre en philosophie* (Paris: editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), pp. 36, 52 (my translation).

[2] There are several works that contain useful biographical presentations of Strauss. See particularly Eugene R. Shepherd, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Boston: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2006), a balanced, independent view. A reverential and selective account by Strauss's most famous student, Allan Bloom, is "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899–October 18, 1973," in Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960–1990* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 235–255. An indispensable work is Strauss's own "Preface to the English Edition of Spinoza's Critique of Religion", PSCR. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, Strauss describes the "Preface" as "as close to an autobiography as is compatible with propriety." Strauss letter to Scholem, 26 November, 1962, in GSIII, pp. 746–747.

Husserl and Heidegger as well as the academic philosophy of the neo-Kantian school, and began his scholarly career as a researcher in Jewish studies in Berlin in the 1920s. Strauss left Germany in 1932 and did not return after Hitler came to power (except for a brief visit after the war). He lived in England and France for a number of years before moving to the New School in New York, where he obtained a regular faculty position in 1941. Later, Strauss accepted a professorship at the University of Chicago, where he wrote the works that have made him famous, such as *Natural Right and History*, *The City and Man*, and *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. He is best known in America, at least by those who have taken the trouble to study carefully his writings, for his critique of the roots of modernity based on a perspective that is largely drawn from premodern philosophy – Greek, Jewish, and Islamic.

At the University of Chicago, Strauss shaped the intellectual orientation of students already inclined in many cases toward the intellectual and/or political right who were searching for alternatives to the prevailing progressive academic orthodoxy. Some were disillusioned Communists looking for a new direction. Absorbed in the research and writing of his most important works and dealing with his own and his wife's health issues, Strauss did little himself to encourage the use of his teaching to found a highbrow conservative sect.[3] Allan Bloom presents Strauss as distant from students and more interested in his own scholarship.[4]

Even though he accepted the label of "conservative," Strauss took pains to distance himself from typical conservative political positions and ideology. He went so far as to characterize calling himself a conservative as purely rhetorical – a sort of rebelliousness against political correctness or progressivism as the prevailing orthodoxy on campus (SHG, Lecture III, p. 1). As Strauss explained in one of his classes, he could not accept the dogmatic belief in inevitable progress that was apparently held by liberals in the academy at that time. Nevertheless, on the crucial question of justice, as opposed to faith in

[3] Anne Norton and Heinrich Meier (whose distortions of Strauss's thought will be discussed in the next chapter in connection with Strauss's relationship to Carl Schmitt) claim that Strauss himself was behind the founding of the cult. But, revealingly, they present no evidence from correspondence, interviews, or other sources to support this assertion. See Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 26, and Heinrich Meier, "Why Leo Strauss? Four Answers and One Consideration concerning the Use and Disadvantages of the School for the Philosophical Life," in Pawel Armada and Arkadeiusz Gornisiewicz, eds., *Modernity and What Has Been Lost: Considerations on the Legacy of Leo Strauss* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2011), pp. 19–31.

[4] "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899–October 18, 1973" supra n. 1, p. 236: "although unfailingly polite and generous with his time, one always knew he had something more important to do."

progress, Strauss said he was with the liberals (SHG, Lecture III, pp. 1–3). Strauss also exhorted contemporary conservatives to reject imperialism and support the project of European integration (SK, pp. 2–3).

But this side of Strauss has been mostly invisible to the academy, not to mention the larger world of ideas. Very painfully visible is what could not unfairly be described as a Straussian cult, ever expanding into liberal arts colleges and state universities in the farthest corners of America. I use the expression "cult" here without polemical intent. For unlike the original sect of Chicago highbrow conservatives, whose sensibility is well represented by Catherine and Michael Zuckert, the public face of Straussianism has increasingly been composed on the one hand of noisy right-wing public intellectuals like Harvey Mansfield, William Kristol, and the late Allan Bloom,[5] for whom Strauss is a kind of mascot or warhorse of conservative *Kulturkampf*, and on the other hand a large number of college teachers who do not really agree on what Strauss meant but are united by the belief in his vast superiority in heart and mind to all other recent thinkers.[6] I also believe the use of the expression "cult" is justified in light of Strauss's own suggestion that reverential assent or obedience to any human teacher or book is idolatry, and such reverence is just what Straussianism typically demands. Strauss wrote, "[I]f the Bible is a work of the human mind, it has to be read like any other book – like Homer, like Plato, like Shakespeare – with respect but also with willingness to argue with the author, to disagree with him, to criticize him. If the Bible is the work of God, it . . . has to be read in a spirit of pious submission, of reverent hearing."[7] Strauss clearly believed that reverent hearing should be reserved for God.

I do not in the least want to disparage individual scholars who are Straussians; in many cases, their writing and teaching meets the highest intellectual standards; in some cases they have incrementally moved away from Straussianism by questioning if not openly criticizing aspects of Strauss's thought, an

[5] It is perhaps not insignificant that neither Mansfield nor Kristol were actually students of Strauss. As for Allan Bloom, Strauss (I am told by someone who was very close to him) had serious misgivings and broke off relations with Bloom for a significant period of time; there was some kind of reconciliation toward the end of Strauss's life, a period of great worry and declining health. See Werner Dannhauser's rather evasive public account of Strauss's fallout with Bloom: Werner J. Dannhauser, "Allan Bloom: A Reminiscence," in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Memory of Allan Bloom*, edited by Thomas Pangle and Michael Palmer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 1–14.

[6] The competing understandings are well presented by Zuckert and Zuckert in Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy & American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), ch. 7, "Straussian Geography."

[7] Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," *L'Homme*, Jan–Mar 1981 XXI, no. 10, 5–20, p. 6.

attenuation of cultishness in their individual behavior. As will become clear in Chapters 3 and 4, where I address Strauss's *On Tyranny* and *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, I owe a considerable debt to the Strauss scholarship of Nathan Tarcov, for example. My concern with the *collective* behavior of Straussians as opposed to their individual merits as scholars is not about descending into petty academic politics: it is simply that this collective behavior has made an open-minded engagement with Strauss's works by the mainstream academy almost impossible.

As Anne Norton has rightly noted, "this phenomenon – the desire to be a master, to form an exclusive intellectual cult – is by no means peculiar to the Straussians. I have seen it among the students of Arendt, Wolin, Habermas, and Derrida, and in less elevated places."[8] What sets apart Straussianism from the intellectual cults Norton mentions is the Straussians' relations with others in the academy. The Straussians do not usually go out into the marketplace of ideas and try to engage with contrary positions, attempting to persuade that Strauss was right; instead, apart from withering polemics, usually against scholars of a liberal, postmodern, or positivist orientation, they tend to keep to themselves, with an attitude of superiority. They spread Straussianism (whatever version they subscribe to) by converting undergraduate students to their Straussian outlook rather than through engagement and dialogue with different scholarly positions. The notion of superiority or even election does make Straussians different from the other intellectual cults: for instance, I have known many students and followers of Habermas who argue vigorously for his approach to democracy and social critique, but I have yet to encounter a single one who viewed her- or himself as personally superior or special by virtue of following Habermas as opposed, say, to Dworkin, Rawls, or Derrida. The Straussians' superiority or perhaps supremacy complex is captured by Allan Bloom's grandiose suggestion that "I believe our generation may well be judged by the next generation according to how we judged Leo Strauss," which Bloom was content to have non-Straussians take as a threat.[9]

The approach is acknowledged, even with a hint of self-critique, by one of the leading Straussians, Thomas Pangle: "To be sure by placing themselves in so intellectually aggressive, and consequently embattled or isolated, a salient, those conspicuously influenced by Strauss may incur the danger of slipping into a defensiveness *that can perhaps distort thinking*, as well as impinge upon collegiality; but this is a cost well worth paying in return for the invigorating

[8] Norton, supra n. 3, p. 24.
[9] Bloom, supra n. 2, p. 255.

pressure to self-questioning and to intellectual probity."[10] Pangle goes on to cite the end of a lecture by Strauss in which he quotes a Latin phrase that means "Aristotle seeks a fight" (*Aristoteles quaerere pugnam*). But Strauss mentions this phrase to explain that it ought not to be taken out of context; intellectual disagreement is valuable *only* when conducted with a view to seeking agreement on the truth – peace – rather than scoring polemical victories to the cheering of one's own followers. As he wrote to Gerhard Krüger, "Relative to agreement [*Verständingung*] at any price, conflict is truer; however, *the last word can only be peace, i.e. agreement through truth*. That this agreement of reason is possible, I firmly believe [*firmiter credo*]."[11] One cannot but observe the complete opposition in tone and substance to Pangle's (albeit slightly qualified) praise of intellectual aggression.

The thinkers with whom Strauss himself engaged intensively – whether the rebellious Heidegger student Karl Löwith, the Hegelian Marxist Alexandre Kojève, or the Jewish mystic Gershom Scholem – were individuals with whom he carried out epistolary debates permeated by the greatest respect, a profound sense of intellectual equality. None of these men were Straussians, yet it was with them (and a few others, also non-Straussians, such as philosopher of mathematics Jacob Klein or the hermeneutics theorist Hans Georg-Gadamer) that Strauss preferred to engage in extended intellectual conversation, trying insistently but always respectfully to persuade them of the *truth* of his positions.

Strauss was not unaware of the dangers of Straussianism as admitted by Pangle. Thus his advice to former students beginning their teaching careers: "Always assume that there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart" (LER, p. 9). And Strauss pointedly reminded his conservative epigones, who liked to think of themselves as apostles of the Western canon, "Karl Marx, the father of communism . . . was liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire" (LER, p. 24). In his public written exchange with Alexandre Kojève *On Tyranny*, the subject of Chapter 3 of this book, Strauss acknowledged: "There will be a variety of groups of philosophic friends: . . . . Friendship is bound to lead to, or to consist in, the cultivation and perpetuation of common prejudices by a closely knit group of kindred spirits. It is therefore incompatible with the idea of philosophy. The philosopher must leave the closed and charmed circle of the 'initiated' if he intends to remain a philosopher" (OT, pp. 194–195).

[10] Thomas L. Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 5. Emphasis added.
[11] Letter to Krüger, 19 August 1932, GSIII, p. 399 (my translation; emphasis added).

Taking these words seriously means no longer allowing Straussianism to be an obstacle to engaging freely, reflectively, and critically with Strauss himself – a thinker who confronted the extremes of his century through reconnecting with older thought but in a very different way than, say, Hannah Arendt or Eric Vögelin. Leo Strauss was held in high regard by twentieth-century minds that have a secure place in the academy's pantheon, whether on the left or the right or even in the center, including, as already mentioned, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Alexandre Kojève, Gershom Scholem, and Karl Löwith. One could add Raymond Aron and Walter Benjamin to the list and even, despite their frosty collegial relations, Hannah Arendt – who described Strauss to Karl Jaspers as "a truly gifted intellect."[12] Isaiah Berlin, who criticized Strauss as "wrong-headed" and did not understand him well, nonetheless grasped that he was "a careful, honest, and deeply concerned thinker."[13]

Yet, to the extent that the contemporary academy has grappled with Strauss at all, it has come to his intricately and subtly crafted books with suspicion and read into them the prejudices and diluted and distorted views in and around the Straussian cult about the meaning of Strauss's writing and teaching, as well as rumors from people offended by or personally disillusioned with "Straussianism."[14] This includes that Strauss was teaching secrets concealed in his writing (perhaps through using other thinkers like Machiavelli or Nietzsche as mouthpieces for his own ideas). Strauss's emphasis on the use of writing between the lines or hidden meanings by older thinkers who were protecting themselves against political, religious, or social persecution was assumed to be a clue as to how he himself was using dissemblance. At the same time, the purely historical hypothesis that older thinkers wrote with caution and covered their meanings to avoid persecution was also received by many in the academy with either hostility or mockery or both.[15]

[12] *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, tr. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1992), Letter 156, p. 244.

[13] Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Recollections of a Historian of Ideas: Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), p. 31.

[14] See especially Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

[15] See, for instance, Adrian Blau, "The Anti-Strauss," *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 01, January 2012, pp. 142–155, which consolidates and amplifies these attacks. Cf. my "Reading Between the Lines: Exotericism, Esotericism, and the Philosophical Rhetoric of Leo Strauss," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32, no. 01, 1999, where I show that Strauss cautions that reading between the lines should be employed only in the presence of historical evidence of persecution and where obscurities and contradictions remain after every effort is made to make sense of the surface of the text. Unfortunately, many of Strauss's disciples often do not employ this caution, looking for secrets everywhere in classic texts.

This is the background to the accusations that Strauss was the intellectual inspiration for the George W. Bush administration's Iraq adventure. It got going with a *New Yorker* piece by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh, who claimed that Strauss had taught the art of tyrannical rule, deception in politics, and the merits of a bellicose foreign policy to Paul Wolfowitz, Assistant Secretary of Defense and a leading advocate and planner of the Iraq intervention.[16] James Atlas, writing in the *New York Times*, asserted that Strauss endorsed "the natural right of the stronger."[17] In a book published by Yale University Press that got notice far beyond the usual academic circles, University of Pennsylvania political theorist Anne Norton wrote that Strauss and his disciples were "proponents of war without limits."[18]

Strauss supporters responded by citing different passages in the same works of Strauss suggesting that he was a friend of liberal democracy and suspicious of expansionist, moralistic foreign policy.[19] Some of the critics claimed that the Straussians were lying, especially about what Strauss was saying in class.

WHAT STRAUSS TAUGHT TO STUDENTS: NOW ON THE RECORD

We now we have an extensive record of Strauss as a teacher; audio recordings of his lectures and seminars are available on the website of the Strauss Center in Chicago, and transcripts circulating on the Internet over the last year or so can often be checked against these recordings.

The use of this material to clarify or confirm Strauss's teaching as presented in his published writings is consistent with Strauss's own methods of interpretation. Thus, Strauss justified teaching an entire course on Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* in the following manner: "While the books he wrote for publication are extremely difficult [Hegel's] lectures are fairly easy to understand, much easier at any rate than his published writings. Hegel apparently had this great art that he could make the distinction between what was good for writing and what was good for speaking. He thought that when you write you do not have to be so easy-going as you must be when speaking."[20]

[16] Seymour M. Hersh, "Selective Intelligence," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2003, pp. 44–51.
[17] James Atlas, "A Classicist's Legacy: New Empire Builders," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2003, sec. 4, pp. 1–4.
[18] Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, supra n. 3, p. 144.
[19] Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy & American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Steven B. Smith, RLSPPJ; Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians Against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).
[20] Leo Strauss, Hegel: Seminar on *The Philosophy of History*, University of Chicago 1958, transcript, I; 1.

It is not too hard to apply these considerations to Strauss himself, with some adjustment. A particularly good example is Strauss's treatment of Thucydides, which we will examine in depth in Chapter 5. The essay of around a hundred pages that he published in *The City and Man* is terse and concentrated. It is quite evident from the essay that, contrary to critics such as James Atlas and Anne Norton, Strauss did not present "the natural right of the stronger" either as Thucydides' teaching or his own. But the course transcript of more than 600 pages, in which Strauss is expansive and clarifies his views in response to student questions, makes much clearer the importance he attaches to international legality, especially the position of Sparta, Athens, and their confederates and colonies under the treaty regime; Strauss is explicit in his views about which side broke the treaty and at what time in the war and why this matters to the overall moral-political judgment of the conduct of the war.

The release of the recordings and the spillage of the transcripts onto the Web reflect the shock therapy of the Iraq accusations on the Straussian cult. This became one of the only available avenues of countering the allegations that terrible secrets remained hidden in Strauss's classroom. It was thus not the work of the Straussian-world equivalent of Edward Snowden but the Straussian elite itself, above all, Nathan Tarcov, the director of the Strauss Center at the University of Chicago, known within the Straussian world as their current pope, so to speak (hence, with the authority to take such a bold step). Notably, Tarcov had advocated publicly against U.S. intervention in Iraq.[21] With the support of Strauss's daughter Jenny Strauss-Clay, a distinguished classicist at the University of Virginia (but herself not a Straussian), Tarcov moved forward with the project of putting the recordings of Strauss's lectures and seminars on the Internet and with editing the transcripts of these classes (where existent).[22]

Lo and behold, the audio files and transcripts confirm what an unprejudiced reading of Strauss's writings also tells us: Strauss was no friend of bellicose imperialism. He was skeptical of imperial expansion and opposed fanatical nationalism; he believed that what is most admirable in man

[21] Julie Englander, "Defending Strauss," *The Chicago Reader*, August 23, 2007, available at http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/defending-strauss/Content?oid=925732.

[22] Tarcov gives a brief overview of the project in "Note on the Publication of Strauss's Courses," *Klesis – Revue philosophique*, 2011: 19, available at http://www.revue-klesis.org/pdf/Strauss-12-Klesis-Tarcov.pdf. In this book, I generally refer to the unedited transcripts, which I have in some cases obtained from the Strauss Center, in others from former students of Strauss, or from the Internet. I possess fixed electronic copies of all of those that I cite from. Where audio recordings are available on the Strauss Center website, I have generally attempted to check the transcripts against the audio before citing. In instances where transcripts are unavailable, the citation is to the audio recording on the Strauss Center website.

transcends national and racial boundaries. Strauss had nothing but contempt for those who admire sheer power or force: he said that a "man who is concerned with power as power" is "someone whom no one can respect and who cannot respect himself" (SXW, p. 322). He was against the idea of a world state not because, like Carl Schmitt, he wanted to ensure the permanent existence of war but (seemingly like Kant) because of the possibility that a world state would operate despotically, suppressing human diversity or heterogeneity and, ultimately, freedom of the mind. In the last two decades, the emergence of new conflicts and the temptations of humanitarian intervention to protect human rights and oppose tyranny have led to a renewed engagement by philosophers and intellectuals with the use of armed force, a revival of the concept of just war and a rethinking of the moral and legal limits on the use of force prompted by new technologies (drones, for example) and new patterns of transnational violence, including terrorism. Once properly explicated (the aim of this book), Strauss's writing and teaching on political violence should offer valuable insights for understanding these contemporary challenges.

STRAUSS'S SELF-OVERCOMING OF ANTILIBERALISM

Straussian defenders of Strauss freely admit that he was attracted to an antiliberal viewpoint as a young man.[23] They note that, beginning with the confrontation with Carl Schmitt, Strauss was moving to a different position, perhaps an autocritique of his earlier attraction above all to Nietzsche, of whom he wrote that until the age of thirty, he believed everything that he read and understood of him. The story of Strauss's Straussian defenders is that Strauss had, through his studies of Hobbes on the one hand and Maimonides, Plato, and Farabi on the other, come to the view that the moderns' rejection of earlier thought was not premised on science or refutation of metaphysics or natural theology in ancient philosophy; rather, it was premised on a disagreement about the right way of life for man, an alternative moral orientation. This, according to the defenders, led Strauss away from a concern with war and warrior morality to the ancient Platonic ideal of the perfect city at peace and the mission of philosophy as peaceful contemplation rather than spiritual or ideological warfare. According to Zuckert and Zuckert, "Strauss's signature idea was his call for a

[23] See, for example, Susan Shell, "'To Spare the Vanquished and Crush the Arrogant': Leo Strauss's Lecture on 'German Nihilism,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, edited by Steven B. Smith (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 171–192. "There is no denying that Strauss began his scholarly career as a staunch critic of Weimar liberalism" (p. 171).