

NATURAL RIGHT AND LIBERALISM: LEO STRAUSS IN OUR TIME

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Not long ago, the actor and playwright Tim Robbins directed a production in New York and Los Angeles called *Embedded*. The play is strange, but nowhere more so than in one, infamous scene: a black mass in honor of the deceased political philosopher Leo Strauss, conducted by candlelight by advisers to President Bush in the run-up to the Iraq war. Characters who are transparent representations of Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz and Condoleezza Rice masturbate with abandon, all the while yelping “hail Leo Strauss!” beneath an outsized portrait of his face. The scene reaches a climax with this verbal ejaculation from “Woof” (Wolfowitz): “I’m hard! I’m rock hard!”

So much for subtlety. The play is satire in its rudest guise, undertaken, Robbins later claimed, in the rebellious spirit of punk rock (the play is dedicated to “the Clash”). Whether it succeeded is doubtful. If anything, it unwittingly satirized a form of left-paranoia as much as its intended target of right-wing bellicosity. Still, the play was an intelligible, if extreme extension of the zeitgeist. It was merely the most radical and unnuanced version of a view of Leo Strauss that became common parlance in the popular press: that his neoconservative disciples looked to his philosophy for inspiration as they orchestrated the war in Iraq, and that they were correct to draw the conclusions they did.

The thesis as stated is implausible, and its advance generated a series of replies, ranging from the heated to the bewildered. Thomas Pangle has traced the origins of the argument back to Lyndon Larouche, who claimed to expose the truth of the “fascist philosopher Leo Strauss as the godfather of the neoconservative war party” in a dossier called “Children of Satan.”¹ Guilt by association, however, does not in and of itself invalidate weaker versions of the claim: for example, that Strauss, in a series of misreadings, was retroactively mobilized by neoconservative

¹ Pangle claims that quotations attributed to Strauss in the Robbins play were in fact those of Larouche himself. He has also performed the service of assembling a series of representative accounts from the European press. Thomas Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore, 2006), 130–31.

intellectuals and their politically active students. A number of recent academic treatments accept just this possibility, whether explicitly or implicitly, insofar as they seek to disentangle the writings of Strauss's sober students from the work of so-called disciples. They include a two-part series of articles in the *New York Review of Books* by the intellectual historian Mark Lilla, not to mention books by Pangle, Steven Smith, Anne Norton, and Catherine and Michael Zuckert.² Where exactly to draw the line is of course an open question: who, specifically, are the Straussians from whom Strauss must be saved? By what means? And to what ends?

Interest in Strauss has waxed for another reason: he is part and parcel of the recent vogue in the academic world for "political theology." The term was popularized by Carl Schmitt, the German jurist and one-time Nazi, in a series of books over a period of fifty years.³ Notwithstanding his troubling pedigree, Schmitt has become a touchstone for recent, leftist critiques of liberalism. It is therefore curious that Strauss, who arguably understood and advocated Schmitt's theses better than Schmitt himself, has nonetheless remained *persona non grata* on the left. Whatever the case, like Schmitt, Strauss devoted his intellectual career to the "theological-political problem," and in this capacity Strauss has enjoyed an outsized degree of recent attention (in a host of articles and in books by Eugene Sheppard, Daniel Tanguay, David Janssens, and Heinrich Meier).⁴

Strauss also figures prominently in a third discussion—renewed interest on the part of intellectual historians in the modern liberal tradition. The problem of liberalism has fueled a good deal of recent work in European intellectual history, whether openly or as a crucial subtext. Richard Wolin, Tony Judt, and Mark Lilla come immediately to mind, not to mention a series of French thinkers introduced to American shores in the context of Lilla's *New French Thought* series.⁵ Some of this historiography emerged as a reaction to the figures and themes debated

² Mark Lilla, "Leo Strauss the European," *New York Review of Books* 51/16 (21 Oct. 2004); *idem*, "The Closing of the Straussian Mind," *New York Review of Books* 51/17 (4 Nov. 2004); Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, 2004); Steven Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago, 2006); Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (Chicago, 2006).

³ See especially Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (1922), trans. George Schwab (Chicago, 1996); and *idem*, *Politische Theologie II: Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie* (Berlin, 1970).

⁴ David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Stony Brook, NY, 2008); Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (New York, 2006); Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Lebanon, NH, 2006); Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven, 2007).

⁵ Some examples: Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children* (Princeton, 2001); Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God* (New York, 2007); Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect* (Berkeley, 1992); Pierre Manent,

in the era of the “linguistic turn,” above all out of suspicion of the inspiration its champions discovered in the thought of Martin Heidegger.⁶ It was emboldened by the rediscovery of “totalitarianism theory” in 1970s France, and by the rise of neoliberal intellectuals in both Europe and the United States discomfited by the political excesses of 1968. Last, it was bolstered by the apparently decisive triumph of liberal democracy over one of its historic, twentieth-century enemies (Marxism) in 1989, and in some respects, after 2001, by the perceived return of its other twentieth-century enemy (fascism) in the form of radical Islam.

Some of this historiography is openly partisan. In itself, this is not grounds for objection. Indeed, it is in some respects refreshing. On the other hand, this historiography is occasionally beset by some problems. At times, it risks the reduction of philosophy to politics, or to the politics on behalf of which canonical philosophers are mobilized by others. It is also notable for its tone. Sometimes it is undertaken in what Peter Gordon has called a “prosecutorial spirit,” and even those who contest its aims may do so in terms indebted to the position they wish to dispute.⁷ The list of intellectuals who come in for criticism in the new liberal historiography is a veritable who’s who of twentieth-century thought. Some of them—Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Carl Schmitt—are obvious candidates. Others—Hans Jonas, for example—are less so. Strauss, however, makes for strange company in this list. To be sure, he is attacked, often vociferously, as one of the century’s premier illiberal thinkers. On the other hand, he is also energetically defended as a friend to liberal democracy, and even more, as a kind of liberal himself. No one, it is safe to say, is doing the same for Heidegger or for Schmitt. How are we to make sense of these apparently incompatible assessments?

There are, in effect, three versions of Leo Strauss on the current scene. First, there is the philosopher mobilized (or not) on behalf of neoconservative politics and culture. Second, there is the scholar of the theological–political problem, forged in the interwar era, and obsessed with the transhistorical option

An Intellectual History of Liberalism, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, 1994); and Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago, 1995). The recovery of liberalism has also been prominent on the western side of the Atlantic. See, for example, Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias* (New York, 1996); and Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). It is worth noting that practitioners of the new liberal historiography are by no means of a single mind regarding Strauss. For example, Manent and Lilla follow Strauss in ways that Wolin and Ferry do not.

⁶ For this reason, Samuel Moyn suggests we think of this literature as a “liberal turn” directed against its predecessor. Samuel Moyn, “Intellectual History and the Liberal Turn,” unpublished paper.

⁷ Peter Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: The Fate of Judaism in German Philosophy* (Berkeley, 2002), xxv.

revelation presents as an authority by which to order our lives. Third, there is the thinker who is at once liberalism's greatest friend and foe. Together, the neoconservative controversies, the fashion for political theology, and the "liberal turn" in European intellectual history have created a perfect storm. In the eye of that storm stands Strauss. But the fact of the storm raises several questions. Ought we speak of three independent, even competing, revivals of Strauss? Is the storm that is Strauss a product of atmospheric happenstance? Or is there a deeper logic, both historical and formal, that can account for their joint appearance? By means of some of the recent literature on Strauss, the books by Smith and Norton above all, I would like to entertain the second possibility, and to do so, in particular, by pursuing the relation of natural right (Strauss's key philosophical recovery) to liberalism (the civilizational project in, through, and against which this recovery was principally deployed).

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Among the recent treatments of Strauss, it is *Reading Leo Strauss*, the book by the political philosopher Steven Smith, that is most concerned with the problem of liberalism. In the hothouse atmosphere in which plays like *Embedded* germinated and thrived, Smith's book appears out of place, if not downright strange. In Smith's view, Strauss is no conservative, neo- or otherwise, and to discover in him the intellectual origins of the Iraq war betrays either interpretive perversity or shocking inattention. Strauss frustrates conventional political labels, Smith suggests, and if his philosophy lends itself to any form of government at all, it is liberal democracy. Straussians sometimes speak of a "crisis of the Strauss divided," roughly split into West and East Coast factions.⁸ Smith writes from the East Coast—"the far East Coast," as he puts it—which in Smith's case means the political science department at Yale. He situates himself among Strauss's center-left interpreters, and his book represents an attempt to rescue Strauss from his captors: from the conservative Californians (the West Coast faction) who snatched him from Chicago, but also from the undiscerning bloggers, pundits and left-wing intellectuals who think the conservatives have it right about Strauss and therefore have it wrong about everything else. As for Smith, he thinks Strauss would be happiest in New Haven.

To be sure, the left of the Straussian school is selective in its reach. Marxists need not (at least not yet) apply for admission. Liberals, on the other hand, should go right ahead. Or at least liberals of a certain stripe: less the exponents

⁸ Catherine and Michael Zuckert have identified in addition a Mid-west school of Straussians. See their useful overview, "Straussian Geography" (chap. 7), in *The Truth About Leo Strauss*.

of a contemporary center-left politics than those committed to the basic tenets of liberal political philosophy. If Strauss had a discernible politics at all, Smith suggests, it was a liberalism of the right. He situates Strauss among Cold War liberals like Raymond Aron and Isaiah Berlin, both anticommunists suspicious of mass rule.⁹ His was a “Tocquevillian” liberalism updated for the totalitarian age. For the most part, however, Smith shies from associating Strauss with any politics as conventionally understood. The East Coast position finds in Strauss a political philosopher of the highest order, but looks with disfavor upon the crude translation of his texts into the vulgar tongue of policy. As a philosopher, he by definition stood above the fray, or at least managed to carve out a “zone of independence” beyond humdrum political allegiance.¹⁰ Strauss, we learn, was first and foremost an educator out to transform the science of politics, ruled at the time by those committed to the Weberian distinction between fact and value, by those who thought science entailed the systematic eradication of normative commitments. His aim was to breed a race of puppies (as he affectionately referred to his charges) exquisitely attuned to the scent of the timeless and enduring problems of human—and hence political—life.

Neither the aim nor the suppositions animating it are obviously liberal. They do not square, that is, with the relative devaluation of politics in the liberal tradition. Liberal stalwarts like John Locke and Benjamin Constant, for example, could speak of the abdication of political liberty in the moment of its exercise; we vote, but in order to spend the bulk of our time tending to matters of private property and wealth. Liberal economists like Friedrich Hayek could, in the tradition of Adam Smith, speak of the displacement of politics by the market, or the pursuit of (once) political aims in the guise of commerce. By contrast, Strauss echoed a critique of modern liberal society running from Rousseau to Carl Schmitt: that it is shallow, disingenuous, technocratically governed, and indifferent to the grave stakes of political life. His liberalism, then, does not frequent the usual haunts, and will have to be discovered elsewhere. Smith’s innovation—one of his innovations—is to locate it in the mode or manner of Strauss’s philosophizing. Smith characterizes Strauss as a “zetetic” philosopher, as a skeptic who approached the world in a spirit of Socratic ignorance. In other words, Strauss knew he did not know that which most demanded to be known.

If Strauss pursued skepticism, he was not totalizing in its application. He insisted that there were enduring *questions*, obscured perhaps but never superseded, the *answers* to which we ought to be skeptical about. Smith thinks

⁹ This is not to overlook, however, Strauss’s own reservations about Berlin, as both Smith and Pangle point out. On Pangle’s reading, Berlin was for Strauss the very paradigm of the “dilemma of liberal relativistic theory.” Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction*, 19–22.

¹⁰ Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 183.

the Straussian form of skepticism translates naturally into liberalism. Others of Strauss's defenders do not. The disagreement can in part be chalked up to differences over what liberalism is, and what it was for Strauss. Strauss himself spoke of ancient and modern liberalism, and also distinguished between different historical moments and philosophical moods within the modern liberal tradition itself. This diversity is replicated among Strauss's interpreters. Sometimes liberalism is a form of modern politics (or antipolitics), sometimes something else. Janssens, for instance, describes it less as a politics than as a modern spirit of "oblivion" from which classical political philosophy must be saved.¹¹ Meier describes it as coterminous with the modern age itself, hostile not only to political philosophy but to political theology too. I think they are right to stress that Strauss understood liberalism as a civilizational project. It was political, theological, social, and cultural all at once. It was also—though this is often overlooked—a technical project. Strauss associated liberalism with a new chapter in the history of man as a creative being—as a creature of artifice—and with a reversal of the ancient dictum that art is to imitate nature. But more about this later.

Smith opts for two tacks at once. On the one hand, he wants to extract from Strauss's writings a Socratic–Platonic liberalism, born of zeteticism, suitable for current circumstances. On the other hand, he occasionally suggests that Strauss had a discernible, mid-century liberal politics. He describes Strauss's liberalism as a careful and measured balance of sensibilities. Strauss recommended muscular moderation, we learn, a resolute but middle path navigating the twin dangers of "visionary expectations from politics" but also its "unmanly contempt."¹² Modern liberalism suffered from the latter. To secure its own future, it ought to gird itself by spending some time in the political-philosophical gymnasium. But, the story goes, some of Strauss's self-styled followers have heeded this directive all too well. Though called neoconservatives, they have in fact pumped themselves up on classically liberal steroids, and have sought to remake the world in an outsized version of the liberal image. To the extent that they do so in Strauss's name, however, they do little more than defile it.

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So proceeds the argument of Smith's book, or at least those aspects designed to speak to current concerns. To its credit, however, *Reading Leo Strauss* is much more than a broadside against wayward appropriations of the philosopher. Smith considers every area of inquiry Strauss pursued over a lengthy career: from an

¹¹ Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 144.

¹² Cited in Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 15.

early interest in Zionism, theology, and the German counter-Enlightenment to his writings on Spinoza, Maimonides, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Plato. Smith also proves to be a judicious, if active and determined, interpreter of the most vexing problems associated with Strauss's writings: the theological-political problem, and the tensions between Athens and Jerusalem, between reason and revelation, and, in a different register, between natural right and history, the question of esotericism, of tyranny ancient and modern, and the diverse appropriations of Strauss not least. The book brims with localized insights.¹³

Here, I would like merely to consider whether the broader thesis of a Straussian liberalism holds, and what it means to articulate such a thesis in the first place. For Smith, it means first and foremost to disrupt the teleological narrative that runs from Strauss to his neoconservative epigones. On the one hand, Strauss counseled skepticism, we are told, in order to inoculate us against the blandishments of utopia. His was a liberalism defined by that which it resists—the sort of intellectual overconfidence that translates perforce into sectarian commitment. The upshot is obvious: a foreign policy fueled by a faith in the capacity to mold the world to our will is folly. On the other hand, Strauss inveighed against a lack of confidence also, the sort prompted by the nihilism diagnosed—or advanced—by the likes of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Strauss thought the diffusion of this sensibility had precipitated in liberalism a crisis of faith in its own foundations, and in his masterpiece, *Natural Right and History*, Strauss issued a directive to recover them, even if what he actually meant remained obscure to the undiscerning eye.¹⁴

This prompts a first question: do hostility toward political utopia, an embrace of the manliness which exercises restraint out of power, but which also demands we choose among a plurality of incompatible goods, or even all these at once, count as evidence of a commitment to liberalism? Perhaps. It is easy to detect such an orientation, for example, in the work of a Cold War, liberal stalwart like Isaiah Berlin. On the other hand, liberalism cannot stake exclusive claim to these virtues. After all, Carl Schmitt espoused versions of them as well. His

¹³ All this is conveyed in lucid prose punctuated by the occasional witty aside and humanizing anecdote. Readers will no doubt enjoy hearing of Strauss's novel approach to *halakha* on the knotty topic of English breakfasts: "The hams taste too good as to consist of pork and are therefore allowed by the Mosaic law according to atheistic interpretation." Alumni of the University of Chicago will take pride in his glowing assessment of the school, as a place "to see young people who are not mentally in their seventies." Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 138.

¹⁴ Smith suggests (*Reading Leo Strauss*, 171), that is, that Strauss hardly calls for a reinvigoration of the Lockean tradition, and esoterically argues that Hobbes was in fact the intellectual godfather of the American regime. There are no "Straussian libertarians," he points out, who might have radicalized Locke's brief for property rights, because Straussians posit the anteriority of the "regime" to the individual.

understanding of the political and the authoritarian solutions it authorized exuded manliness, as his rhetoric of decision, vitality, and seriousness can attest. He also contested utopia: he repudiated the antipolitical, liberal vision of a global order subject to the soporific effects of the market, while his hostility to the collapse of state into society (as elaborated in *The Concept of the Political*) ought to have immunized him against the appeal of totalitarian regimes (as opposed to authoritarian ones), at least in theory. And it was Schmitt, not Berlin, who can plausibly be understood—which is to say, historically understood—as either an inspiration to Strauss or a fellow-traveler.

The question of Schmitt's influence on Strauss is a pressing one. More than a few interpreters call attention to the relation in the interest of damning them both. On the other hand, some of Strauss's more sympathetic readers are hardly apprehensive about the historical link. Heinrich Meier, for example, has taken pains in more than one forum to unearth their "hidden dialogue."¹⁵ David Janssens also devotes some judicious attention to the issue. Still, Schmitt understandably provokes a deep-seated anxiety. The question of Schmitt's influence is more pressing for Smith than for others, since any argument for a Straussian liberalism must account for Strauss's appreciative remarks about one of the most influential and articulate opponents of liberalism in the twentieth century. Smith recognizes the problem, of course. He suggests Strauss derived from Schmitt a suspicion of effete cosmopolitanism, a critique of a technocratic antipolitics with global aspirations, and an appreciation for the seriousness of political life obscured by the liberal era. He also discovered in Schmitt a theoretical framework to justify his support for political Zionism. But he held no truck, Smith insists, with a notion of the political understood as the decision by a sovereign on its enemies, not to mention the authoritarian solutions such a decision implicitly condoned.

This view may well retroject on to the interwar period a stance Strauss developed in later years. It is difficult to square with the reports of contemporaries. Strauss's friend Hans Jonas, for example, recalled that Strauss was once a devotee of Mussolini.¹⁶ It is also difficult to square with Strauss's own remarks. Here, for example, is Strauss in a letter to Karl Löwith:

Just because Germany has turned to the Right and has expelled us it simply does not follow that the principles of the Right are therefore to be rejected. On the contrary, only on the basis of principles of the Right—fascist, authoritarian, *imperial*—is it possible in a dignified manner, without the ridiculous and pitiful appeal to the "inalienable rights of man," to protest against the nasty abomination [Nazism]. I read Caesar's commentaries with deeper

¹⁵ Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago, 1995).

¹⁶ Hans Jonas, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt, 2003), 96.

understanding, and I think about Virgil's [exhortation]: *Tu regere imperio . . . parcere subjectis et debellare superbos* [Roman! let this be your care, this your art; to rule over the nations and impose the ways of peace, to spare the underdog, and pull down the proud (Aeneid VI.851)] There is no reason to prostrate oneself before crosses, including the cross of liberalism, so long as somewhere in the world a spark of the *Roman* idea still shines.¹⁷

What is one to make of such a statement? What kind of empire could Strauss have had in mind in May of 1933? What kind of fascism? It is difficult to say. Perhaps all this was born with disgust for the weakness of the liberal Weimar regime, with its incapacity to protect its Jews, let alone itself. The implication: the liberal position was not invalidated but defeated by the contingencies of circumstance. Liberalism ought not be rejected but reestablished on new foundations. On the other hand, as Eugene Sheppard describes in some detail, Strauss specifically rejected a liberal "crusade," the notion of liberal empire as it were, and precisely in the name of authoritarian principles.¹⁸ Muscular liberalism, it seems, was not enough for Strauss in 1933. The reading is belied also by Löwith's guarded answer. He declared indifference to liberalism but hostility to the principles of the right. It was possible, in other words, to imagine oneself as both ambivalent about liberalism and antiauthoritarian at once. Löwith chose that stance. Strauss, it seems, did not.¹⁹

To make this point, it must be emphasized, is first and foremost to understand Strauss in his historical context. If it is problematic to retroject a liberalism onto the Strauss of the early 1930s, it is no more defensible to equate without evidence the Strauss of the early 1930s with the Strauss of the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s. Perhaps it was simply the case that Strauss held *in situ* to an assessment of the interwar scene affirmed more recently by the historian Mark Mazower: that by the middle

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (hereafter *GS* 3), ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart, 2001), 625, original emphases. The translation above is adapted from Richard Wolin, "Leo Strauss, Judaism and Liberalism," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52/32 (14 April 2006), B13–B14.

¹⁸ Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 60–63. For an attempt at rebuttal see Harvey Mansfield, "Timeless Mind," *Claremont Review of Books* 8/1 (Winter, 2007).

¹⁹ Within eight years, Strauss had come to other conclusions about liberal empire, at least to judge by an unpublished lecture he delivered at the New School for Social Research. Strauss devoted the talk to the problem of German nihilism, and cast the then-present war as a contest of German and Anglo-Saxon principles. Strauss favored English prudence over German radicalism, with the result that "it are [*sic*?] the English, and not the Germans, who deserve to have, and to remain, an imperial nation." For those inclined to discover in such statements evidence of an enduring directive, the implications are obvious: Strauss not only would have countenanced a notion of liberal empire (as a bulwark against Islamic radicalism), but enthusiastically embraced it. The lecture, "German Nihilism," Strauss delivered on 26 Feb. 1941. Leo Strauss Papers, Box 8, Folder 15.

of the 1930s the crucial ideological battles were not fought between right and left, but were taking place “*within* the Right [itself].”²⁰ A great many interwar observers held that the intellectual center and left had gone moribund. Strauss seems to have been one of them, and we might as well face up to the fact.²¹

There is another dimension to Strauss’s relationship with Schmitt that makes it difficult to rescue him for liberalism. That is, that Strauss famously took Schmitt to task for not being illiberal enough. In his remarks on *The Concept of the Political*, he paraphrased Schmitt’s position this way: “we may say in summary that liberalism, sheltered by and engrossed in a world of culture, forgets the foundation of culture, the state of nature, that is, human nature in its dangerousness and endangeredness.” In fact, the forgetting was twofold. Modern liberal civilization had lost a sense of the Hobbesian war of all against all out of which it first developed. Still more, it had lost a sense of the natural ground of human activity altogether. It had arrived instead at an understanding of human artifice as “sovereign creation,” as the “‘pure product’ of the human spirit.” This view—which evolved into a “spirit of technicity”—was born of Hobbes’s description of the state as purest artifact. Only so could Strauss anoint Hobbes as the founder of liberalism, notwithstanding the emphatically illiberal character of the state Hobbes preferred.²²

Strauss’s remark about the sovereignty of human making is, at first glance, a strange one. It is also important, because it alerts us to Strauss’s idiosyncratic

²⁰ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent* (New York, 1998), 28, original emphasis.

²¹ Smith appears to accept just this point in his review of Sheppard’s book: “A Skeptical Friend of Democracy,” *New York Sun*, 14 March 2007. And at least one of Strauss’s prominent students, Werner Dannhauser, has come to similar conclusions. He offers the most sensitive interpretation of Strauss’s letter I have encountered to date: “The reading of such a passage causes pain. It is true that the fascism to which Strauss alludes is that of Mussolini and not of Hitler. It is true that in the same letter, in the same breath as it were, he leaves no doubt about his loathing of National Socialism. It is also true that at times he takes a slightly unseemly pleasure in taunting Löwith, or at least in being hyperbolically provocative toward him. And yet, and yet. We must admit that the young Strauss, not yet thirty-five at the time, was more reactionary than we might wish him to be. For that matter, he was slightly more reactionary than many of us students wished him to be in 1964 when he decided to vote for Barry Goldwater. But we had learned properly to *weight* such facts against the whole, even as we now hope that readers of the letters will subscribe to the principles of weighting I have tried to articulate above.” Werner J. Dannhauser, “Leo Strauss in His Letters,” in Svetozar Minkov, ed., *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner* (Lanham, MD, 2006), 359, original emphasis.

²² Leo Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” reprinted in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 88–9, 106. Strauss developed his ideas about liberalism and the “sovereignty” of modern, human making at greater length in a book written at around the same time: *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany, 1995).

understanding of the liberal tradition. Liberalism was not just about property, or the rights of the individual, or market societies, or toleration, or negative liberty. It was first and foremost a civilizational project—and, as a consequence, it was also a technical project that displaced one understanding of man as a creative being with another. It was part and parcel of the momentous, early modern recasting of the relation of art to nature. Strauss was hardly the only mid-century intellectual to call attention to this reconfiguration. Some of his contemporaries thought it best exemplified in the thought of Francis Bacon. But Strauss discerned it in Hobbes, who had helped emancipate human artifice from the premodern constraints that had bound it—the biblical God and teleological nature. Hobbes's aim, and his error, was to privilege human will and design above them both. As Strauss put it in an unpublished manuscript, in a passage he underlined for emphasis: "Hobbes begins not with the question of the [natural] order or the [divine] law, because he denies the very existence of an order or a law that precedes human will."²³ *Homo hobbesiensis* had arrogated to himself the creative power of God, the *fiat lux* of Genesis, and he used it to establish a commonwealth predicated on the negation of a state of nature instrumentally figured in dystopian and antic cosmological terms.

This also helps us understand why Strauss thought Schmitt was insufficiently illiberal in his aims. Strauss did not mean by this that Schmitt was insufficiently authoritarian. He meant that Schmitt's polemic against modern liberalism was nonetheless indebted to liberalism's basic premise. This is why Strauss felt compelled to remind his readers, Schmitt among them, that "culture is always the *culture of nature*. This expression means, primarily, that culture develops the natural predisposition; it is careful nurture of nature—whether of the soil or of the human spirit makes no difference; it thus *obeys* the orders that nature itself gives."²⁴ To escape the horizon of liberalism meant in part to undo—or at least revise—the early modern reversal of art's inferiority to nature. Hobbes's error had inaugurated the liberal epoch; Schmitt's oversight threatened to sustain it, notwithstanding his own most emphatic wishes to see it die. Strauss sought nothing more, at least in this essay, than to pound the nails into the coffin. Strauss may have rejected decisionism and the distinction between friend and enemy, but he embraced the animus toward the liberal epoch that led Schmitt to advance them in the first place. He sought to provide that animus with a more convincing, more thorough, and more radical philosophical support.

Where did he find such support? The answer—in an idiosyncratic understanding of natural right—raises another problem for the thesis of a Straussian liberalism. Historically, it is implausible to characterize Strauss as

²³ Cited in Meier, *GS* 3, x, original emphases.

²⁴ Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt," 88–9, 105–7.

a liberal (of whatever sort) over the entirety of his philosophical career. On the other hand, we must consider a second possibility. Perhaps Strauss's ideas changed over time. Perhaps his true teaching, his mature teaching, was a form of philosophy undertaken in a liberal spirit. Philosophically, then, the plausibility of a Straussian liberalism rests on the compatibility of liberalism with natural right. At first glance, nothing seems more intuitive. The liberal tradition has mobilized to great effect a version of natural-rights discourse—the one that proceeds out of the interest each of us has in our bodily integrity, and which asserts our right to protect it. But this was not the notion of natural right Strauss hoped to recover. Strauss consistently expressed a preference, in both his published work and private correspondence, for natural right in the classical mode. What this tradition held, what Strauss imagined it to hold, and what of that tradition he hoped to recover—these are the key points of contention that pit Smith against Strauss's detractors, his neoconservative champions, and some of his academic defenders.

What natural right actually was for Strauss is surprisingly difficult to say. It is easier to say what it was not. That it was natural, most interpreters would agree, meant that it was not divine, and not, or not first, human (i.e. not a human invention). That it was “right” meant that it was not, or not yet, law. Smith takes the argument still further. Natural right was not a standard by which to measure the rightfulness of human action, he argues. It was not a recipe, not a blueprint for justice, not founded on any specific cosmology, and above all not to be associated with a teleological notion of nature.²⁵

Against all this, Smith advances a notion of natural right compatible with a moderate form of statecraft. Natural right is the “horizon” for human activity. It was the “common sense” lived out unthinkingly by the ancients. It lends itself to an antiredemptive politics, and does not give cause for the eradication of evil from the world (a point which plays a crucial role in Smith's brief against those who discern the hand of Strauss in the orchestration of America's military adventures abroad). It is no rigid doctrine, but mutable, variable, and plastic (yet not infinitely so). It is not so much a thing as the ever-receding object of a quest. It is the “quest for cosmology” as opposed to any specific “solution

²⁵ This last point is difficult to sustain. After all, Strauss spoke plainly (if often privately) of a desire to recover *physis*—a teleological notion of nature—in its moral and political aspects, if not its biological ones. See, for example, his famous letter—famous in certain circles—to Karl Löwith, reproduced in *GS* 3, 660–64, or his unpublished letter to Hans Jonas: “I saw for the first time the connection between this fundamentally earlier study of yours and your present preoccupations [with the philosophy of the organism]. I would state it as follows: gnosticism is the most radical rebellion against *physis*. Our problem now is to recover *physis*.” Strauss to Jonas, 19 Nov. 1958 (italics added). Hans-Jonas-Archiv 7–13b–10.

to the cosmological problem.” It entails a search for the rightful order but not its legislation or institutional embodiment. Above all, it is a quest guided by a Socratic disposition attuned to the “elusive character of the truth, of the whole.”²⁶ This disposition entails skepticism—not a dogmatic or academic skepticism that repudiates the possibility of knowledge, but a skepticism understood “in the original sense of the term.”²⁷ The core contention of Smith’s book thus runs as follows: Strauss was a zetetic philosopher; he sought to recover natural right in a zetetic spirit; both the zeteticism and the moderate version of natural right after which it sought make Strauss a liberal, or at least amenable to an appropriation on behalf of the liberalism in liberal democracy.

The spirit of “openness” such zeteticism implies makes it akin, Smith suggests, to the spirit of toleration (but not permissiveness) animating modern liberalism at its best. Whether zeteticism is purely a matter of moderation, however, is open to question. Strauss was a philosophical radical, who pursued what he thought were the eternal questions to their roots (on this, I think, the recent literature is agreed). To do so demands we first reveal those questions—or unearth them—in their original formulation, a demand that translates into hostility toward that which obscured them in the first place—the modern, liberal epoch. This becomes clear when we consider the single most crucial question Strauss pursued over his career: the theological–political problem, which Strauss expressed metaphorically as the question of Athens and Jerusalem. Sometimes they represent for Strauss traditions based in Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible, and given to fruitful interaction over time. Sometimes they represent immutable principles regarding the source of authority for a rightfully lived life: natural right on the one hand, divine revelation on the other. Strauss famously insisted that their claims were both mutually exclusive and philosophically undecidable. If we are honest about the limits of our knowledge, we cannot know which is right. We are therefore left to choose, and the option for philosophy becomes akin to an act of faith. The zeteticism figures prominently, of course, in the epistemological uncertainty of the verdict. On the other hand, Strauss expressed very little doubt that this was in fact the choice.

Whether either of these choices is compatible with liberalism is also open to question. Or, to be more precise, neither is obviously compatible with Strauss’s idiosyncratic understanding of the modern, liberal tradition, which had enshrined an unencumbered human will as the source of measure for a rightfully lived life. They are incompatible because both options entail human submission, whether to God or to nature. One is revealed, the other discovered

²⁶ Cited in Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 118.

²⁷ Cited in Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 122. Original from Strauss, *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael Roth (Chicago, 2000), 196.

by means of human reason, but both insist on the fundamental heteronomy of the human condition. This helps us see why revelation and natural right, political theology and political philosophy, ought to be understood not only as rival options, but as parallel projects. Both, after all, served Strauss in his battle against the anthropological orientation of the modern age. This orientation was also that of the liberal age, as Strauss's reading of Hobbes made clear. In other words, from the perspective of both Athens and Jerusalem, liberal principles appeared as the enemy at the city gates. Only after the defeat, neutralization, or internment of that enemy could zeteticism about the various answers tendered either to Athens or to Jerusalem make much sense at all.

In sum, the zetetic mood was not the only one at work in Strauss's writings. It may well lend itself to the Straussian liberalism Smith hopes to devise. If so, however, it is a liberalism that emerges as much out of a determined appropriation as out of an *explication de texte*. And like all genuine appropriations, it is to a degree both traitorous and true. To the degree this story is traitorous, it leaves room for competitors. To the degree it is true, it preempts them. What, then, of the story that a Straussian liberalism was first crafted to contest? Is there a case to be made for a plausible neoconservative appropriation of Strauss, a plausible misreading, as it were? If we reject the sort of argument that posits the necessity of a neoconservative outcome in Straussian origins, is there nonetheless a "weaker" or less ambitious story to be told? This, I think, is the question with which we are left once we have taken Smith's achievement to heart.

* * *

It is a question answered in the affirmative by another recent treatment of Strauss and his legacy: *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, by the political philosopher Anne Norton. Norton begins where Smith leaves off. How are we to account in the first place for the neoconservative misreading? Smith's explanation is not so much an explanation as an observation. The neoconservatives simply get Strauss wrong. They do not know how to read Leo Strauss (to the extent they have read him at all). But to insist they got him wrong does not help us account for why neoconservatives might have found in Strauss a plausible progenitor in the first place, nor does it explain, historically, how their misreading in fact came to be.²⁸

²⁸ Her book has left few observers unmoved. To some, it is the product of insight available only to insiders since gone out; to others, it is simply mendacious. It is estimable or loathsome, but not much in between. For some representative samples from her critics see David Lewis Schaefer, "Careless Reading," *Review of Politics* 67/3 (Summer 2005), 589–92; and James Costopoulos, "Anne Norton and the 'Straussian' Cabal: How *Not* to Write a

In her way, Norton hopes to achieve what Smith wants as well: to save Strauss from the Straussians. She shares with Smith a distaste for the view of Strauss as omnipresent embed in Iraq. She shares with him also an understanding of what Strauss meant by natural right: the object of a quest as opposed to a standard already at hand. As a consequence, she shares with him the sense that Strauss would have shied from the prospect of legislating natural right, or of providing it with institutional form. The error of the neoconservative reading, as she sees it, is not so much what they understand by “getting the natural right.” The error is that they attempt to answer the question in the first place.²⁹

Norton’s way is not Smith’s. It is less philosophical argument than impressionistic memoir, less a work of scholarship than academic journalism. Norton apprenticed with Joseph Cropsey and Ralph Lerner at the University of Chicago. She studied also with Leon Kass, and observed Allan Bloom as a teacher. Her mentors, in other words, were almost exclusively first-generation students of Leo Strauss, and each became prominent in his way. She writes with evident and honest appreciation for the atmosphere at the University of Chicago: heady, formal, in important ways nonhierarchical, intellectual in the best sense of the word:

To listen to them read a text was to go into a garden, into a wilderness, into an ocean and breathe. They were scandalous, they were daring, they took your breath away with their honesty. They were precise, disciplined, ascetic, reverent, heretical, blasphemous and fearless. Nothing stopped them, nothing at all.³⁰

These are words of genuine fealty. But they are also a prelude to the real story, in which some of her teachers and many of their disciples fall from grace.

Some of those who fete her exude the scent of *Schadenfreude*. Finally, the Straussians get their well-deserved comeuppance. The bioethicist Leon Kass, for example, comes off as a narrow-minded phoney who brooks no dissent, who thinks the public consumption of ice cream a “cat-like” affront to Western civilization, and who dresses up old-fashioned prejudice in the garb of learning and the so-called wisdom of disgust. Allan Bloom fares no better. He is a despot with his students. He is a “Jew-boy” admitted to the academic club, but eager

Book,” *Interpretation* 32/3 (Summer 2005), 269–81. For more appreciative assessments see Bart Schultz, “Norton, Anne. *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*” (review), *Ethics* 115/4 (July 2005), 838–42; and Corey Robin, “In the Shadow of Empire,” *New Statesman* 134/4744 (13 June 2005), 48–9.

²⁹ Smith would argue that even to pose the question is to betray Strauss’s express and identifiable intent. The title of his final chapter (“WWLSD?”) seems calculated to make precisely that point. To pose the question—what would Leo Strauss do?—is absurd and not a little obscene, as it substitutes Strauss for Christ.

³⁰ Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, 23.

to close the doors behind him on others who are hot on his heels—principally women and ethnic minorities. Above all, he reacts hysterically to the demands of African American students at Cornell in 1969, the key historical event, Norton argues, that mobilized the “neoconservative turn” among those inspired by Strauss. She is unremittingly hostile. About her Bloom there is little to love, little to like, and nothing at all that redeems.

That Straussianism—insofar as it was a neoconservative phenomenon—was born of the 1960s is the most plausible and useful point Norton has to make. It is also a point with which Smith would concur, at least in part. Smith has little to say about Strauss’s students, but he does have a few things to say about Strauss himself in that period. Strauss reacted with horror, Smith writes, not only to the attacks on constitutionalism but also to calls for participatory democracy that fueled the student uprisings of the 1960s. He did so out of a sense that the mass was simply incapable of rule. They are capable only of a culture that is not in fact a culture at all. The mass cannot cultivate; it can only despoil. Strauss also would have rejected the claims of 1990s multiculturalism, Smith suggests, as just the most recent update of the cultural relativism and nihilism he once described as Heidegger’s unholy bequest. All this makes Strauss sound an awful lot like Bloom, not to mention others associated with a neoconservative approach to culture, from the thoughtful to the frivolous.

These affinities also raise an important point: the lineage running from Strauss to the Straussians is much stronger when we turn our attention from arguments about politics to arguments about culture (to the extent that they can be separated). Or, more precisely, to mobilize Strauss on behalf of a neoconservative cultural politics requires a less violent appropriation than it does to draft him in the service of the war in Iraq. It is easy, for example, to see how Strauss has been put to use in America’s culture wars. Allan Bloom voiced a typical Straussian grievance in his 1987 bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. “Everything has become culture,” he complained. Civilization understood as the careful cultivation of nature had fallen by the wayside, as “culture” had come to refer to “the drug culture, the rock culture, the street-gang culture, and so on endlessly and without discrimination. The failure of culture is now culture.” The premise: human action in and upon the world had lost sight of its natural—hence moral—foundations.³¹

³¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), 184. Others influenced by Strauss have made similar arguments in different registers. In the field of bioethics, for example, Leon Kass has invoked a “more ancient and teleological understanding of nature” to inveigh on behalf of the institution of “exogamous, monogamous marriage” as best suited to rearing “decent and upright children, that is, children who are truly human.” Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York, 2003), 294–5.

Bloom's jeremiad reads as if it were simply lifted from one of Strauss's best-known writings, "What is Liberal Education," originally delivered as a graduation address in 1959. Liberal education is "education in culture or toward culture," Strauss explained, its finished product a "cultured human being." Liberal education is a lesson in both humility and excellence, both of which, Strauss worried, had fallen on hard times:

"Culture" is now no longer, as people say, an absolute but has become relative. It is not easy to say what culture susceptible of being used in the plural means. As a consequence of this obscurity people have suggested, explicitly or implicitly, that "culture" is any pattern of conduct common to any human group. Hence we do not hesitate to speak of the culture of suburbia or of the cultures of juvenile gangs both non-delinquent and delinquent. In other words, every human being outside of lunatic asylums is a cultured human being, for he participates in a culture. At the frontiers of research there arises the question as to whether there are not cultures also of inmates of lunatic asylums. If we contrast the present day usage of "culture" with the original meaning, it is as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden being littered with empty tin cans and whiskey bottles and used papers of various descriptions thrown around the garden at random. Having arrived at this point, we realize that we have lost our way somehow. Let us then make a fresh start by raising the question: what can liberal education mean here and now?

Strauss delivered these words in 1959. We would do well to recall, however, that he had very similar things to say in 1932, in his remarks about Schmitt. Culture, he had stipulated, was always culture of nature. Human making, rightly executed, took its rule from something prior to human design. This was a point repudiated by Hobbes and obscured by the liberal era he inaugurated. It was a point which Schmitt should have embraced, but did not. It was also a point which education in the great books, in the classics above all, might help us recall. Insofar as liberal education was education "in culture and toward culture," it was also an education in and against the perversity of modern liberalism as a technical project.

Strauss wrote in 1932, and again in 1959. Bloom wrote in 1987. On the one hand, the sentiment, even the language, is the same. The deep continuity is simply undeniable. On the other hand, their words were voiced in very different historical circumstances. What was a typical, Weimar-era grievance about mass culture, combined with a less typical, Weimar-era understanding of liberalism, became a typically neoconservative grievance about the direction Western culture had taken in the 1960s. It would be a mad exaggeration to say that neoconservative cultural politics had Strauss as the condition of its possibility. Still: imported to America, Strauss's association of modern liberalism with human license did no less than alter the civilizational calculus for a few, select and wildly influential readers.

This, I think, is the sort of story Norton aims to tell. On some counts, however, she simply goes awry. Even the most charitable readers will discover discomfiting errors of judgment. Take as one example an instance in which she accuses neoconservatives of anti-Semitism. The argument goes like this. Some Jewish neoconservatives hate Arabs. This makes them anti-Semites, since Arabs, after all, are Semites too. Her point, that select neoconservatives privately echo the racist language that has become an ugly staple of the Israeli far right, is hard to deny. But her manner of making it is unfortunate. The argument that Arabs, also, are Semites has for some time been advanced in the heat of polemic to claim that Arabs are by definition incapable of anti-Semitism, as if this meant in addition that Arabs are incapable of racism toward Jews. Surely she knows that anti-Semitism, the locution, was invented in the late nineteenth century to grant a patina of scientific respectability to Jew-hatred. It is therefore bewildering that she would advance the kind of argument that can only cloak such hatred today.

Is there nonetheless something of value to be learned from Norton's book? For those who think of it as an academic gossip column, the answer, of course, is no. On the other hand, the kind of story she begins to tell—a history of the contingencies of circumstance that produced either the phenomenon or the fantasy of a neoconservative Strauss—is the only kind of account that can address both its how and its why. This kind of story would have to document in greater detail how the crucible of the 1960s produced readings of Strauss thought to authorize positions of the sort adopted by the neoconservative movement in American politics and culture. This kind of account could serve as a fitting complement to Steven Smith's: not reading Leo Strauss, or not only that, but a detailed history of how his readers have read him, and the lessons they have drawn from their study. It is a history that in large part remains to be written.