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LEO STRAUSS: FASCIST, AUTHORITARIAN, IMPERIALIST?

In a letter he wrote to Karl Loewith on May 19, 1933 (just after the Nazis had come to power in Germany), Leo Strauss insisted in strong terms that he could not return to Germany so long as the Nazis were in power:

I see no acceptable possibility of living under the swastika, i.e., under a symbol that says nothing more to me than: you and your ilk, you are physei [by nature] subhumans and therefore justly pariahs. There is in this case just one solution. We ... “men of science” – as our predecessors in the Arab Middle Ages called themselves – non habemus locum manentem, sed quaerimus [have no place to rest, but must seek].

But, Strauss continued:

The fact that the new right-wing Germany does not tolerate us [Jews] says nothing against the principles of the right. To the contrary: only from the principles of the right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and *imperial* principles, is it possible with seemliness, that is, without resort to the ludicrous and despicable appeal to the droits imprescriptibles de l’homme to protest against the shabby abomination. I am reading Caesar’s Commentaries with deep understanding, and I think of Virgil’s Tu regere imperio... parcere subjectis et debellare superbos [You rule the world, sparing the vanquished and crushing the proud]. There is no reason to crawl to the cross, neither to the cross of liberalism, as long as somewhere in the world there is a glimmer of the spark of the *Roman* thought. And even then: rather than any cross, I’ll take the ghetto.¹

The publication of this letter in 2001 thus caused something of a furor. In an article published in an electronic journal in Spring 2004, Nicholas Xenos conclu-

¹ L. Strauss, *Hobbes’ Politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 625.

ded that the letter showed that “in the 1930s Strauss was not an anti-liberal in the sense in which we commonly mean ‘anti-liberal’ today, but an *anti-democrat* in a fundamental sense, a true reactionary. Strauss was somebody who wanted to go back to a previous, pre-liberal, pre-bourgeois era of blood and guts, of imperial domination, of authoritarian rule, of pure fascism.”² Then, on Sunday, July 16, 2006, Scott Horton, a professor of law at Columbia University, posted a blog, including a translation of the letter, which provoked 47 pages of commentary. Like Eugene Sheppard, Horton concluded (more moderately than Xenos) that Strauss had been attracted to authoritarian, fascist ideas in the 1930s, but that he had later changed his mind.³ One of the scholars Horton thanked at the end of his blog, Alan Gilbert, organized a roundtable on the letter at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association held in Chicago in late summer 2007 (which was videotaped by and thus is presumably available from the University of Chicago).⁴ Responding to the review of Sheppard’s book by Harvey C. Mansfield published in the *Claremont Review of Books*, December 10, 2007, in January 2008, Horton published another article in *Harper’s* in which he stated that he was not persuaded either by the Sheppard critique of Strauss or by the defense of Strauss by his students. Horton first quoted Mansfield’s interpretation of the letter:

The letter certainly confirms Strauss’s disgust with the liberalism of Weimar Germany, a pitiful and cowardly liberalism unable to defend itself against the Nazis because it had abandoned its own fixed truths and absorbed much of the relativism of Germany’s nihilism... Obviously this was not the case with all liberalism in 1933, for Strauss fled the Nazi enemy to France, then England, and finally, the United States – all liberal democracies and the last two, it turned out, not incurably infected with appeasement. In effect, Strauss’s letter warns Löwith against putting his trust in the liberals (and Christians) of Germany who had given false assurance of security to German Jews.⁵

But he then added his own gloss:

Mansfield does an amazing job of projecting back to the first years of Strauss’s emigration attitudes that he developed over a career of writing after he came to the United States. Essentially he’s presenting Strauss as a dynamic new kind of liberal, who is prepared to act robustly (and militarily) to defend democratic institutions. This argument presents a strange contortion of liberalism, just as the main themes of neoconservatism present a departure from the traditional conservatism of the Anglo-American world. But it seriously distorts Strauss’s attitude towards fascism at the time of emigration.⁶

² N. Xenos, *Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror*, “Logos” 2004, Vol. 3.2 (Spring), p. 3. Xenos has since expanded his argument, identifying Strauss with the critique of liberalism given by Carl Schmitt, whose book on *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss had reviewed both positively and critically in 1932 in (New York 2007).

³ S. Horton, *The Letter*, www.balkin.blogspot.com; E. R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: the Making of a Political Philosopher*, Lebanon 2006, p. 54–67.

⁴ These remarks were originally prepared for that roundtable.

⁵ S. Horton, *Will the Real Leo Strauss Please Stand Up?*, www.harpers.org/archive/2008, p. 2, quoting H. C. Mansfield, *Timeless Mind*, www.claremont.org/publications, p. 2.

⁶ S. Horton, *Will the Real...*, p. 2.

Like Xenos, Horton was interested, finally, in maintaining the link between Strauss and the “neoconservative” foreign policy of the Bush administration. He thus concluded his article by reiterating his earlier judgment that Strauss had “clearly changed his attitudes as he came to see that the American project was not the unsustainable horror he first made it out to be. But,” Horton insisted, “much of Strauss’s tinkering and his thoughts about ‘bolstering’ American democracy go back to the Caesarism that was common coinage in the days of his university schooling. It clearly has been extremely influential. And not necessarily in a good way.”⁷

In 2006 my husband Michael and I wrote a book entitled *The Truth about Leo Strauss* in which we argued that Strauss was not the “mastermind” behind the war in Iraq; both the individuals most closely associated with Strauss, Paul Wolfowitz and William Kristol, testified to this fact. Not only had Strauss been dead for 30 years, but, we also argued, a fair reading of his works would show that he did not support the Wilsonian idea of “making the world safe for democracy” or the Machiavellian politics attributed to him by members of the mass media.⁸ We did not address this letter specifically. It was written not only before Strauss emigrated to the United States and observed the results of World War II, but also before he had discovered “persecution and the art of writing” (although in his article Xenos obscured that inconvenient fact).

The letter nevertheless raises the question: What did Strauss understand as “the right”? Did he endorse fascist, authoritarian, or imperialist political principles – in 1933 or later? The question about his understanding of “the right” proves to be quite far-reaching, for, in a letter to Gershom Scholem written on June 22, 1952, Strauss explained:

I have moved, so to speak, contrary to G[uttman]’s moderate rationalism, on the path via a Jewish Thomism to radical “rationalism,” [and I] am now therefore on the right wing (for the right is truth, the left is *sinister*; as no one knows better than you), whereas I stood on the left wing in *Philosophie und Gesetz*: Guttman ever in the middle. (I am *now* attempting to reach a moderate “rationalism,” but one that, I am afraid, would be even less acceptable to G. than my two earlier positions.)⁹

What did Strauss understand as “right,” “left,” and “middle” – or “moderate”? In his letter to Scholem, Strauss was clearly making a joke based on the well-known association of “left” with “sinister” in Latin and Italian to a friend he knew was a “man of the left,” a friend of Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. And he was applying those usually political terms to the question of the relation between reason and revelation or, as Strauss preferred to say, philosophy and law, to Judaism.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁸ C. H. Zuckert, M. P. Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, Chicago 2006.

⁹ L. Strauss, *Hobbes’ Politische...*, p. 728. On the development of Strauss’s thought, especially in the course of the 1930s, see C. Zuckert, *Strauss’s Way Back to Plato*, [in:] *Postmodern Platos*, Chicago 1996, p. 104–128; H. Meier, *How Strauss Became Strauss*, [in:] *Enlightening Revolutions*, ed. S. Minkov, Lanham MD 2006, p. 363–382; D. Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Ch. Nadon, New Haven 2007.

But – and this is the point – Strauss also identified “the right” with truth – what is correct – and expected Scholem to agree. Following the Athenian Stranger in Plato’s *Laws* (803c-e), Strauss often emphasized the playful character of philosophy. But, if the “principles of the right” are the truth, to ask what Strauss understood to be the “principles of the right” is, in effect, to ask what he thought was true not merely about politics, but about everything.

Let me confine myself, therefore, to the question of Strauss’s understanding of politics – practical politics – in the period between the two world wars in Germany and after the war in the United States. What should we make of his now infamous letter to Löwith? Should we take it to disclose Strauss’s real, hidden, or not-so-hidden attachment to “fascism, authoritarianism, and imperialism”? I think not, for at least two reasons.

The first reason I do not think that this letter should be taken as the “key” to the real or secret meaning of Strauss’s later writings and thought is that the letter was written before Strauss made and worked out the discoveries that led him to believe that the traditional or received views of the Islamic and Judaic medieval philosophers, Farabi and Maimonides, were wrong; they were not Aristotelians, but Platonists. And his new understanding of medieval political philosophy led him to a new understanding of ancient Greek thinkers like Hesiod, Herodotus, Xenophon, and, most important, Plato.¹⁰ It is difficult to believe that Strauss’s new understanding of the *political* character of philosophy would not have had some effect on his understanding of politics, especially as it related to his own position as a “man of science” or student of philosophy. And that is the explicit question addressed in the letter to Löwith.

Some critics of Strauss have suggested, on the contrary, that the fact that he had not yet discovered the “art of writing” or “secret teaching” is a reason to take the letter to Löwith as a statement of what Strauss truly believed: the letter reveals his true thoughts precisely because it was not an open or public document. Later he learned to hide his true thoughts – or opportunistically praised, somewhat, the country that granted him asylum.

That suggestion brings me to my second reason for not taking the letter as a statement of Strauss’s true political principles. The letter concerns a question of political practice, i.e., what should be done by certain individuals or kinds of human beings in a specific set of circumstances. It is not a statement, much less an explanation of his political principles.

In his later writings, beginning as early as 1941 in a lecture entitled “What Can We Learn from Political Theory?” but re-stated emphatically in “An Epilogue” to the *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* and his introduction to *The City and Man*, Strauss insisted on the difference between theory and practice.¹¹ According to

¹⁰ See especially the letters written to Jacob Klein included in: L. Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. H. Meier, Stuttgart 2001, Bd. 3, p. 455–605.

¹¹ *What Can We Learn from Political Theory?*, “The Review of Politics” 2007, Vol. 69, No. 4, p. 515–529. Nathan Tarcov gives an account of this lecture as well as that on “The Re-education of Axis Countries

Aristotle, whom Strauss takes as his authority on this subject, prudence is political or practical science; it is distinct from theoretical science, because it concerns particulars and things which could be other than they are. Prudence – or political science – is not, in other words, a demonstrative science like geometry. It concerns only the human things and not the whole. “Yet,” Strauss observes, “prudence is always endangered by false doctrines about the whole of which man is a part, by false theoretical opinions; prudence is therefore always in need of defense against such opinions, and that defense is necessarily theoretical. The theory defending prudence is, however, misunderstood if it is taken to be the basis of prudence.”¹² Like Aristotle, in most of his writings, Strauss appears to be a defender of prudence rather than a demonstrably prudent man, like Pericles (Aristotle’s example, *NE* 1140b7-10) or Churchill (Strauss’s example).¹³ In order to defend the realm of prudence, Strauss criticized not merely contemporary social science, but modern political philosophy more generally. On the basis of that critique, he recommended a return to “classical political philosophy.” But in his introduction to *The City and Man*, Strauss warned:

The return to classical political philosophy is both necessary and tentative or experimental ... We cannot reasonably expect that a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today’s use. For the relative success of modern political philosophy has brought into being a kind of society wholly unknown to the classics, a kind of society to which the classical principles as stated and elaborated by the classics are not immediately applicable. Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the principles as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point.¹⁴

The mature Strauss’s most succinct statement of classical principles and their application to modern circumstances can be found in his “Restatement” in *On Tyranny*: “Liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age. In the last analysis, however, the classical argument derives its strength from the assumption that the wise do not desire to rule.”¹⁵

In 1933, when Strauss wrote the infamous letter to Löwith, he had not yet worked out his mature understanding of the principles elaborated by the classics, much less their application to contemporary politics. He was immediately – one

Concerning the Jews,” [in:] *Will the Real Leo Strauss Please Stand Up?*, “The American Interest” 2006, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 121–123.

¹² *An Epilogue, Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, New York 1968, p. 206.

¹³ Strauss did not always judge what the circumstances would allow correctly. In his hitherto unpublished lecture on “The Re-education of Axis Countries Concerning the Jews,” delivered at the public sessions on that topic at the annual meeting of the Conference on Jewish Relations, Sunday, November 7, 1943; “The Review of Politics” 2007, Vol. 69, No. 4, p. 530–538, Strauss explicitly departed from widely held beliefs or hopes in America by stating that in his view it would not be possible to establish a liberal democracy in post-World War II Germany. As I point out below, his estimation of conditions in post-World War II Germany fortunately proved to be wrong, but his own analysis and the principles upon which it was based did not change.

¹⁴ *The City and Man*, Chicago 1964, p. 11.

¹⁵ *On Tyranny*, ed. V. Gourevitch, M. S. Roth, New York 1991, p. 194.

might even say, urgently – concerned about what members of the “German-Jewish intellectual proletariat,” including himself and Löwith, should do after the Nazis’ rise to power in Germany. These Jews could no longer honorably live, much less earn their bread in the land where they had been born. To understand the significance of the letter, it is necessary to take account of the shared characteristics of the author and his addressee as well as the particular circumstances.¹⁶

As several other commentators on the letter have already pointed out, the full magnitude of the horror that was National Socialism was not evident in 1933. Strauss had, nevertheless, already concluded that there was “no acceptable possibility of living under the swastika, i.e., under a symbol that says nothing more to me than: you and your ilk, you are by nature subhumans and therefore justly pariahs.” Strauss was not, in other words, **ever** a supporter, even tolerant of Nazism. He thought, on the contrary, that “there is in this case just one solution.” He and Löwith and other German Jewish students of philosophy would have to become wanderers and exiles, living under the dominion of others as Maimonides had lived (and been forced to move from place to place) within the Islamic empire. “We ... ‘men of science,’ – as our predecessors in the Arab Middle Ages called themselves – *non habemus locum manentem, sed quaerimus* [we do not have a place to rest, but seek].” In the context set by the example of Maimonides, i.e., the need to emigrate from a land where they would be persecuted, but the possibility of working under a transnational empire, which might nevertheless force them to move about, it is not difficult to understand why Strauss would read with some pleasure about Caesar’s victories over the barbarians in what became Germany or recall with particular appreciation the line from Virgil urging Roman conquerors “to spare the humbled and wear down the proud.”

The line in the letter that has provoked the most outrage is Strauss’s admonition to Löwith, following his recognition that they will all necessarily become exiles:

The fact that the new right-wing Germany does not tolerate us says nothing against the principles of the right. On the contrary: only from the principles of the right, that is, from fascist, authoritarian and *imperial* principles, is it possible with seemliness, that is, without resort to the ludicrous and despicable appeal to the *droits imprescriptibles de l’homme*, to protest against the shabby abomination.

The question, I would point out, is how to protest against the shabby abomination. Strauss clearly does not endorse Hitler or his party. Quite the contrary.

¹⁶ Critics who accuse Strauss or his students of ignoring the historical context in which texts were written misunderstand his argument concerning the “art of writing.” To know whether an author has shaped his presentation to avoid persecution, much less to give a socially responsible teaching or to provoke readers to think for themselves, it is necessary to know something about the audience he was addressing, and that, in turn, requires knowledge of the historical context. What Strauss emphatically denied was that knowledge of the historical context was sufficient to understand the ideas of the author or the content of the text. See: L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, “Social Research” 1941, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 488–504, reprinted in: *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Glencoe 1952, and *Political Philosophy and History*, “Journal of the History of Ideas” 1949, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 30–50, reprinted in: *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, Glencoe 1959.

Strauss does, however, characterize an appeal to the “inalienable rights of men” as “ludicrous and despicable.” That characterization cannot fail to pain readers who are themselves attached to the promulgation and preservation of such rights – like most liberal Americans. Strauss was not living in liberal America, however. He had been living and was talking about an appropriate protest in the context of postwar, that is, post-World War I, Germany.

Having moved to liberal America, Strauss explained his understanding of the context, that is, the intellectual and political climate in postwar Germany, in a lecture he gave on “German Nihilism” on February 26, 1941, at the New School for Social Research.¹⁷ Although that lecture was published in the Spring 1999 issue of *Interpretation*, I have not seen references to it in the internet exchanges about the Löwith letter (with the notable exception of the Mansfield review).

In this lecture Strauss argued that National Socialism was the best known species of a broader phenomenon he and others called German nihilism. He tried to explain not only what it was but also how it arose and why it was preeminently a German phenomenon. According to Strauss, German nihilism consisted, at bottom, in a desire to destroy modern civilization. This desire arose out of German militarism and fed on a desire to see Germany rule the world, but the desire was neither simply destructive nor simply imperialistic in origin. It arose primarily out of a moral revulsion against the debased character of modern life.

Why had nihilism emerged particularly in Germany? *Civilization* had come relatively late to Germany, Strauss observed, but (*pace* Ralf Dahrendorf) Strauss did not think this fact was sufficient to explain the rise of German militarism, much less German nihilism.¹⁸ *Civilization* had come equally late to the Slavonic nations, and they did not appear to be as militaristic as the Germans. Strauss thought it was necessary to look at the history of German civilization itself. “Germany reached the heyday of her letters and her thought during the period from 1760 to 1830, i.e., *after* the elaboration of the ideal of *modern* civilization had been finished almost completely, and while a *revision* of that ideal, or a *reaction* to that ideal, took place.” The problem was not merely that the ideal of “*modern* civilization” was of foreign, i.e., English and French origin, however. The problem was with the character or content of that ideal. Strauss recognized that “the meaning of that ideal is a highly controversial question.” He nevertheless thought that one could

define the tendency of the intellectual development which as it were exploded in the French Revolution, in the following terms: to lower the moral ... claims, which previously had been made by all responsible teachers, but to take better care than those earlier teachers had done, for the putting into ... political and legal practice, the rules of human conduct. The way in which this was most

¹⁷ According to S. Shell, *To Spare the Vanquished and Crush the Arrogant*, [in:] *Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. S. B. Smith, Cambridge 2009. “Strauss’s audience consisted of fellow members of the General Seminar, a group of distinguished scholars, most of them refugees, whose common topic that year was ‘Experiences of the Second World War.’” (p. 173).

¹⁸ R. Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland*, München 1968.

effectually achieved was the identification of morality with an attitude of claiming one's *rights*, or with enlightened self-interest.¹⁹

We now see why Strauss thought an appeal to the "rights of man" would be despicable; such an appeal involved an identification of morality with a mere calculation of self-interest.

Strauss did not think that the reaction of German thinkers to this lowering of moral and philosophical standards was successful, however, either in its first 19th century "idealist" or in its second 20th century "nihilist" form. In "opposing the identification of the morally good with the object of enlightened self-interest," he observed, "German philosophers ... insisted on self-*sacrifice* and self-*denial*. They insisted on it so much, that they were apt to forget the natural aim of man, which is happiness." Because "the difference between the noble and the useful ... is *most* visible in the case of one virtue, courage, ... German philosophers ... [like] Fichte, Hegel, and Nietzsche ... succumbed to the temptation to overstress the dignity of military virtue."²⁰

Nineteenth-century German philosophy "conceived of itself as a *synthesis* of the pre-modern ideal and the ideal of the modern period." But, Strauss pointed out, the synthesis did not work.

In the 2nd half of the 19th century, it was overrun by Western positivism, the natural child of the Enlightenment. Germany had been educated by her philosophers in contempt of Western philosophy; she now observed that the synthesis effected by her philosophers, of the pre-modern ideal and the modern ideal, did not work; she saw no way out except to purify German thought completely from the influence of the ideas of modern civilization, and to return to the pre-modern. National Socialism is the most famous, because the most vulgar, example of such a return to a pre-modern ideal. On its highest level, it was a return to what may be called the pre-literary stage of philosophy, pre-Socratic philosophy [i.e., Heidegger].²¹

Strauss indicates his own disagreement with and departure from this German philosophical tradition when he concludes, "On *all* levels, the pre-modern ideal was not a *real* pre-modern ideal, but a pre-modern ideal *as interpreted* by the German idealists, i.e. interpreted with a polemic intention against the philosophy of the 17th and 18th century, and therefore distorted.

¹⁹ L. Strauss, *German Nihilism*, "Interpretation" 1999, Vol. 26, No. 3, p. 371 (Wiebke Meier's corrections to the version initially printed were published in "Interpretation" 2000, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 33–34).

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 372. Strauss pointed to the same connection – and distinction – between lower and higher forms of German "nihilism" when he later wrote that "it was contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation. The biggest event of 1933 would rather seem to have proved, if such proof was necessary, that man cannot abandon the question of the good society, and that he cannot free himself from the responsibility for answering it by deferring to History or to any other power different from his own reason" (*WIPP*, p. 27).

As in his later essay entitled *What Is Political Philosophy?* so in his lecture on German nihilism, Strauss emphasized the influence of Nietzsche on post-war Germany.²² “Nietzsche asserted that the atheist assumption is not only reconcilable with, but indispensable for, a radical anti-democratic, anti-socialist, and anti-pacifist policy: according to him, even the communist creed is only a secularized form of theism.”²³

Having been taught by their greatest thinkers that there is no virtue higher than courage, in the early twentieth century German youths saw their nation defeated in war and forced to adopt a form of government that proved patently ineffective. Strauss summarized his understanding of the character of post-World War I Germany and thus the context in which he wrote the letter to Löwith as follows:

No one could be satisfied with the post-war world. German liberal democracy of all descriptions seemed to many people to be absolutely unable to cope with the difficulties with which Germany was confronted. This created a profound prejudice, or confirmed a profound prejudice already in existence, against liberal democracy as such.²⁴

We see now why Strauss did not think it would be appropriate or effective to protest the rise of the Nazis in 1933 by appealing to liberal principles or the rights of man.

In post-World War I Germany, Strauss reported, there were “two articulate alternatives to liberal democracy... One was simply reaction,” i.e., an attempt to turn back the wheel of history. “The other alternative was more interesting.” Its proponents “asserted that the conflicts inherent in the present situation would necessarily lead to a revolution, accompanying or following another World War – a rising of the proletariat and of the proletarianized strata of society which would usher in the withering away of the State, the classless society, the abolition of all exploitation and injustice, the era of final peace.”²⁵

Critics who characterize Strauss as a conservative should take note of his critique of the first alternative. Objecting to Hermann Rauschning’s characterization of National Socialism as “nihilistic,” because it led to the “destruction of all traditional spiritual standards,”²⁶ Strauss commented:

²² *WIPP*, p. 54–55. Both in this lecture and in his restatement of the point in *WIPP*, Strauss insists that Nietzsche was not directly responsible for, nor would he have welcomed the “vulgar” form of German nihilism. Nevertheless, Strauss also insisted that Nietzsche’s influence was an important factor contributing to its emergence.

²³ L. Strauss, *German Nihilism...*, p. 361–362.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 359.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 359–360.

²⁶ H. Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West*, New York 1939. According to Shell, “To Spare,” 173, “Rauschning was a former Nazi who criticized the movement from the standpoint of a disillusioned conservative nationalist.” His text had recently been translated into English and was the assigned text for the seminar.

It is evident that not all traditional spiritual standards are, by their nature, beyond criticism and even rejection: we seek what is good, and not what we have inherited, to quote Aristotle ... I believe it is dangerous, if the opponents of National Socialism withdraw to a mere conservatism which defines its ultimate goal by a specific *tradition*. The temptation to fall back from an unimpressive present on an impressive past – and every past is as such impressive – is very great indeed. We ought not, however, cede to that temptation, if for no other reason, [because] *the* Western tradition is not so homogeneous as it may appear ... To mention one example out of many: the great tradition of which Voltaire is a representative, is hard to reconcile with the tradition of which Bellarmine is a representative, even if both traditions should be equally hostile to National Socialism.²⁷

Strauss also objected to Rauschnig's reference to a "spiritual" tradition. He believed that "materialism is an error, but [he had] only to recall the names of Democritus and Hobbes in order to realize that materialism is *not* essentially nihilistic."²⁸

It would not have been effective to protest the "shabby abomination" that was Nazism with an appeal to the left any more than with an appeal to the liberal "rights of man," Strauss suggested, because German nihilism arose in reaction to the "more interesting" communist alternative. "The prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planetary society devoted to production and consumption only ... was positively horrifying to quite a few very intelligent and very decent, if very young, Germans ... What to the communists appeared to be the fulfillment of *the* dream of mankind appeared to those young Germans as the greatest debasement of humanity" (360). We now see – or should see – why Strauss thought that the only effective or suitable ground of protest against the Nazis would have to come from the right. The young decent Germans who were repelled by the debasing of human aspiration in the modern project needed to be shown another alternative. They were not.

Strauss thought that it was easy to locate "the fallacy committed by the young men in question. They simply took over the communist thesis that the proletarian revolution and proletarian dictatorship is necessary, if civilization is not to perish." But these young men took the "if" to signify a choice; they could bring about the destruction of civilization rather than accept the historical "inevitability" of pacification with what they called "irrational decision." These

adolescents were in need of teachers who could explain to them in articulate language the positive, and not merely destructive meaning of their aspirations. They believed [they had] found such teachers in the group of professors and writers who knowingly or ignorantly paved the way for Hitler (Spengler, Moeller van den Bruck, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Juenger, Heidegger).²⁹

These authors all urged the supreme nobility of courage and berated the emptiness, if not vulgarity of liberal, bourgeois existence. Strauss thought that "only

²⁷ L. Strauss, *German Nihilism...*, p. 367.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

one answer [to the nihilist thesis] was given which was adequate and which would have impressed the young nihilists if they had heard it. It was not however given by a German and it was given in the year 1940 only.” Strauss thought that “those young men ... would have been impressed as much as we were, by what Winston Churchill said after the defeat in Flanders about Britain’s finest hour.”³⁰

It is possible to seize victory out of seeming defeat. Strauss never accepted the thesis of historical inevitability, common to both the left and the right reaction against it, in post-World War I Germany. He thought that individual leaders could and should make a difference. Reporting on his own experience in postwar Germany in the preface he wrote in 1965 to the English translation of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Strauss observed that “the weakness of the Weimar Republic made certain its speedy destruction,” but that weakness “did not make certain the victory of National Socialism. The victory of National Socialism became necessary in Germany for the same reason the victory of Communism had become necessary in Russia: the man who had by far the strongest will or single-mindedness, the greatest ruthlessness, daring, and power over his following, and the best judgment about the strength of the various forces in the immediately relevant political field was the leader of the revolution.”³¹ If a man like Churchill had arisen in Germany, instead of Hitler, history might have been different.

In a lecture he gave two years later on “The Re-education of Axis Countries Concerning the Jews” Strauss conceded that the philosophical education of the most promising young people in Germany for the last century made the emergence of such an individual highly unlikely. Before I move to that lecture, however, I want to emphasize two conclusions Strauss drew in his talk on *German Nihilism*, because they show what kind of imperial rule he did and did not endorse. First, he stated:

I believe that Nietzsche is substantially correct in asserting that *the* German tradition is very critical of the ideals of modern civilization, and those ideals are of *English* origin. He forgets however to add that the English almost always had the very un-German prudence and moderation ... to conceive of the modern ideals as a reasonable adaptation of the old and eternal ideal of decency, of rule of law, and of that liberty which is not license, to changed circumstances. This taking things easy, this muddling through, this crossing the bridge when one comes to it, may have done some harm to the radicalism of English thought, but it proved to be a blessing to English life ... Whatever may be wrong with the peculiarly modern ideal: the very Englishmen who originated it, were at the same time versed in the classical tradition, and the English always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counterpoison.³²

Strauss therefore concluded: “In defending modern civilization against German nihilism, the English are defending the eternal principles of civilization. No

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 363. The editors of the lecture, David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, suggest that the next sentence, “For one of their greatest teachers had taught them to see in Cannae the greatest moment in the life of that glory which was ancient Rome” refers to “Schmitt” added by hand above the line. (*Ibidem*, p. 375, No. 11).

³¹ *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Chicago 1997, p. 1.

³² L. Strauss, *German Nihilism...*, p. 372.

one can tell what will be the outcome of this war,” he admitted, again expressing his opposition to any notion of historical inevitability.

But this much is clear beyond any doubt: by choosing Hitler for their leader in the crucial moment in which the question of who is to exercise planetary rule became the order of the day, the Germans ceased to have any *rightful* claim to be more than a provincial nation; it is the English, and not the Germans, who *deserve* to be and to *remain*, an *imperial* nation: for only the English, and not the Germans, have understood that in order to *deserve* to exercise imperial rule, *regere imperio populos*, one must have learned for a very long time to spare the vanquished and to crush the arrogant.³³

You will recognize the phrase from the infamous 1933 letter and now understand its significance. It distinguishes rightful from cruel and violent rule.

The fact that Strauss rejected any thesis about historical inevitability did not mean that he thought the facts were irrelevant or without power.³⁴ When he was asked to speak on the prospects for “The Re-education of Axis Countries Concerning the Jews” at the annual meeting of the Conference on Jewish Relations, Sunday, November 7, 1943, Strauss once again expressed his pessimism about the possibility of establishing a liberal democracy in post-World War II Germany. He remembered “the argument of German students in the early 1920s: a country whose policies are *not* fettered by moral considerations is, other things being equal, twice as strong as a country whose policies are fettered by moral considerations.” But he pointed out that “it is evident that this doctrine is subject to the test of sense-experience and hence that the Nazi doctrine is a force only as long as Nazi strategy is successful. The victory of the Anglo-Saxon-Russian combination, if followed by a just and stern and stable peace, will be *the* refutation of the Nazi doctrine, and thus will uproot Nazi education. No proof is as convincing, as *educating*, as the demonstration *ad oculos*: once the greatest German blockheads, impervious to any rational argument and to any feeling of mercy, will have seen *with their own eyes* that no brutality however cunning, no cruelty however shameless can dispense them from the necessity of relying on their victims’ *pity* – once they have seen *this*, the decisive part of the re-educational process will have come to a successful conclusion.”³⁵

Strauss recognized that his auditors might well respond,

it is one thing for the Germans to realize that the Nazi doctrine was erroneous ...; [but] it is another thing for the Germans to discover the true doctrine and the right type of education. ... We are then confronted with the question ‘what is the true doctrine?’

With regard to the questions raised concerning Strauss’s understanding of “right,” his “political principles,” and his stance toward “liberal democracy,” I urge

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 373.

³⁴ L. Strauss’s book on *Natural Right and History*, Chicago 1954, constitutes his extended response to this thesis.

³⁵ *Re-education...*, p. 532.

you to pay particular attention to Strauss's response: "**We shall not hesitate to answer: liberal democracy.**" But Strauss then asked, "will liberal democracy have any appeal to, any attraction for, the Germans?"

A German form of collectivism – perhaps an authoritarian regime of the bureaucracy based on a resuscitated authoritarian interpretation of Christianity perhaps – but not liberalism.³⁶ Strauss was, fortunately, proved wrong in his estimation of the receptivity of Germans to liberal democracy by events, but he was certainly consistent in stating his own view of their resistance to it.³⁷ With regard to his supposed sponsorship of the American war in Iraq, it is also important to emphasize the cautionary statement he gave of what Americans or others could do in Germany. He stated without equivocation: "A form of government which is merely imposed by a victorious enemy will not last."³⁸

In his post-war published writings Strauss consistently maintained that liberal democracy was the best possible, practical political option under the present circumstances and criticized both the left and right alternatives to it. Strauss's description of *The Three Waves of Modernity* gives a succinct account of his understanding of the "crisis of modernity," its philosophical roots, and its practical, political implications.³⁹

Although history as a whole did not have a necessary or inevitable direction, Strauss argues, there is a logical and in this sense necessary progression to modern thought. The natural rights philosophy originated by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke could not withstand the critique leveled at it by Jean Jacques Rousseau and his German followers.

Moreover, Rousseau's critique gave rise to the romantic reaction against modern rationalism, in both its liberal and historical forms, that culminated in Nietzsche. But Strauss drew the following "political conclusion" from his analysis of the "progress" of modern political philosophy.

The theory of liberal democracy, as well as of communism, originated in the first and second waves of modernity; the political implication of the third wave proved to be fascism. Yet this

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 532–533. The reasons Strauss gives for his pessimistic judgment concerning the possibility of establishing a liberal democracy in post-World War II Germany in his lecture on "Re-education" echo his description of political conditions in post-World War I Germany in "German Nihilism": "Where are the roots, in German soil, of liberal democracy? Of course, there is a tradition of German liberal democracy – but we have to add, a tradition of political *inefficiency* of German liberal democracy. It came to power only once: after Germany's defeat in the last war. Seven years later, long before the economic world crisis, it was already doomed: the election of Hindenburg to the presidency of the Reich in 1925, and, more visibly, the demonstrations in the streets of the German cities after the election, showed to everyone who did not deliberately blind himself, where Germany was going. Nothing really *known* permits us to indulge the hope that the politically efficient part of the German people has changed their minds as regards liberal democracy."

³⁷ Strauss may have recognized and sought to correct this error when he later observed in "What Is Political Philosophy?" that Nietzsche "prepared a regime which, as long as it lasted, made discredited democracy look again like the golden age" (p. 55).

³⁸ *Re-education...*, p. 533.

³⁹ *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. H. Giddin, Detroit 1989, p. 81–98.

undeniable fact does not permit us to return to the earlier forms of modern thought: the critique of modern rationalism or of the modern belief in reason by Nietzsche cannot be dismissed or forgotten. This is the deepest reason for the crisis of liberal democracy.⁴⁰

Strauss brought out the problems in the philosophy upon which modern liberal democracies had been founded not only as a matter of intellectual probity but also, and most importantly, because he thought these problems could not be addressed, much less remedied, unless they were recognized. He did so, however, explicitly as a friend of liberal democracy. In an oft-quoted statement, he explained:

We are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy, precisely because we are friends and allies of democracy. While we are not permitted to remain silent on the dangers to which democracy exposes itself as well as human excellence, we cannot forget the obvious fact that by giving freedom to all, democracy also gives freedom to those who care for human excellence.⁴¹

As in his earlier talk on *German Nihilism*, so in his later talk on “The Three Waves of Modernity,” Strauss emphasized the difference between the defective theoretical foundation of modern liberal democracies and their practical political advantages when he concluded *The Three Waves of Modernity* by insisting:

The theoretical crisis does not necessarily lead to a practical crisis, for the superiority of liberal democracy to communism, Stalinist or post-Stalinist, is obvious enough. And above all, liberal democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism derives powerful support from a way of thinking which cannot be called modern at all: the pre-modern thought of our western tradition.⁴²

Strauss clearly tried not only to revive that pre-modern thought but also to show how it supported a liberal democratic, i.e., a mixed and hence limited, form of government under law. Although Strauss thought that a liberal democracy was the best regime that could be established and maintained in the twentieth century, he did not think that it could or should be instituted in all places under all conditions. There was, in his mind, no general “law” or “solution” that could substitute for the prudence and leadership of an eminent individual statesman like Churchill in determining what should be done in any particular set of circumstances. There was, however, the even broader understanding of political affairs characteristic of “classical political philosophy.” And it was in describing that understanding that Strauss applied the phrase he took from Virgil about sparing the vanquished and crushing the arrogant for a third and last time. In *What Is Political Philosophy?* Strauss wrote:

Classical political philosophy is ... comprehensive; it is both political theory and political skill; it is as open-minded to the legal and institutional aspects of political life as it is to that which

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

⁴¹ *LAM*, p. 24.

⁴² *Three Waves...*, p. 98.

transcends the legal and institutional; it is equally free from the narrowness of the lawyer, the brutality of the technical, the vagaries of the visionary, and the baseness of the opportunist. It reproduces, and raises to perfection, the magnanimous flexibility of the true statesman, who crushes the insolent and spares the vanquished. It is free from all fanaticism because it knows that evil cannot be eradicated and therefore that one's expectations from politics must be moderate.⁴³

As Strauss suggested in his 1952 letter to Scholem, he understood the “principles of the right” to consist in a true knowledge of politics or – as he often put it – of natural right.

⁴³ *What Is Political Philosophy?...*, p. 27–28.