

THE AMBIVALENCE OF LEO STRAUSS' UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Mendo Castro Henriques

mendohenriques@ucp.pt

(UCP – CEFi)

1. Strauss' ambivalences

The name and work of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) have a long and well-deserved notoriety, though for reasons that are not consensual. A Jew born in Germany in 1899, and naturalized American, he began his academic career in the Weimar Republic. He studied philosophy, mathematics, and natural science, following courses on various subjects. After working as a researcher at several Jewish institutes, he obtained a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in 1932-1934 to research Thomas Hobbes' philosophy in France and England. He departed to the United States in 1937, where he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York between 1938 and 1949. He enrolled at the University of Chicago from 1949 to 1967 where he taught classical political philosophy, and he died in 1973.

Strauss' books and articles about great authors of political philosophy, such as Plato, Maimonides, Hobbes, and Spinoza disclosed him as an historian of political ideas and a critic of the crisis of the West. His intellectual trajectory goes along the neo-classical school of political philosophy, with Eric Voegelin, Hannah Arendt, and Aaron Gurwitsch. Aware of the contemporary relativistic critique of reason and spirituality, he realized that positivism and historicism had devastating effects on social sciences. He was attuned to liberal democracy as a way of criticizing immanent ideologies. He stressed that the dignity of politics should be restored in the public space, as participation counts more than the discourse of those who are not engaged in the search for truth.

Leo Strauss' major work is coincident with the 50's and 60's when the USA was a beacon for the world (Wood, 1988). He championed the principles of natural law for a society of free nations that took seriously equality, freedom and the right to happiness of men and women. (Strauss, 1953, 1-2) The Western global reverberation, Leo Strauss pointed out, resulted from convergences between 'philosophy', a synonymous of Greek rationalism, and 'religion', a synonymous of the law of Israel. Significantly, such a lessening of the Hellenic and Jewish legacies omitted philosophical enthusiasm, biblical prophecy and Christian hope.

Strauss' rendering of the main tenets of Ancient philosophy weighs negatively on his purpose. Classical political philosophy accepted human inequality as a starting point: not all people have the same capacity, neither all access the same resources. Modern liberalism, Strauss argues, establishes that everyone has the right to happiness and can create and elect his own values; science must conquer the adversities of nature and put them at the service of human power. Both courses of thought are problematic: classical thinking runs the risk of traditionalism and cynicism; modern thinking incurs in the risks of relativism and fundamentalism. Many of the misconceptions in Leo Strauss's thinking stem from his attempt to shift classical principles to contemporary societies whose genesis, development, and aspirations are very different from ancient societies.¹

In "The Three Waves of Modernity" Strauss simplifies his diagnosis of the crisis in the West with a devastating critique. The first wave includes Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke; the second wave begins with Rousseau, and the third wave with Nietzsche and Heidegger. Together, they proclaimed ideas that paved the way for the evils of present day (Strauss, 1953, 81-82).

Notwithstanding his critique of Heidegger and Nietzsche, Strauss is inspired by them. In his essay on Heidegger, he reveals a mixture of

¹ "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... 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 for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these principles to our tasks..." (Strauss, 1987, 73)

admiration and contempt (Strauss, 1989). He considers him the greatest philosopher of his time as he understood the magnitude of the crisis of modern world and the decadence of Europe; yet, his recommended therapies are not up to his diagnosis. The best that Strauss says of Heidegger's ethics is about anti-conformism: against the *night of the world*, Heidegger wants to be back to the original sense of existence that shone in the early Greek philosophers. However, by socializing the desire for authenticity in *Being and Time*, he transforms it into a collectivist ethics that surrenders to the *Führer* and embraces destiny; Heidegger's infamous political discourses of the Nazi era are an enlargement of this issue (Farias, 1989).

Strauss' evaluation of Nietzsche also reveal an ambivalence. Strauss accepts the image of the *blond beast* as the Western man who lost Biblical morality through the embrace of nihilism and the return to barbarism; he has no place for the *superman*, the philosopher of the future who faces the responsibilities as a *Caesar with the heart of Christ*. Instead of Nietzsche's raptures about tragedy and about the eternal return, Strauss heightens the fragments of the pre-Socratics and the classical philosophers as a beacon for rationalism and prudence which is much more conservative than Nietzsche's proposals.

2. Modern and Classical political philosophy

According to Strauss, the crisis in the West has been exacerbated by the loss of confidence in natural law; politics is no longer governed by the rule of law. The Moderns considered unrealistic the classical appreciation of human virtues and rejected it as a utopia whose achievements would be improbable as it depended on fortune. Machiavelli for instance, instead of praising virtue and value to safeguard political order against the deficiencies of human nature, reduced the expectations of public space; to increase the achievement of the political goals of the *Prince*, he lowered the promise of politics. Classical political philosophy subordinated politics to moral and intellectual virtues. Machiavelli, instead, subordinated virtue to power and held the desire for glory as a substitute for morality. In *Machiavelli* Strauss ponders that

the Florentine reacted against the inhumanity of the Catholic Inquisition, provoked by impossible goals of perfection such as the human aspiration for eternity. At the same time, Machiavelli appropriated Christianity in a Gnostic way, as a form of propaganda that controls human thought (Strauss, 1959, 43-46; Strauss, 1953, 177-178).

The Straussian critique of Modern political philosophy is an anticipation for his recovery of Classical political philosophy. And the more Strauss analyzed the Ancients, the more he felt inclined to see overtures that he did not find in the Moderns. He contrasted the so-called *erotic* (longing) or *zetethical* (questioning) skepticism of the Socratic authors with the dogmatic skepticism of the Moderns. (Strauss, 1959, 116; Strauss, 1953, 73, 80, 121-124, 145-146, 163-164, 169-177, 201, 249). Consciousness of ignorance does not imply that “the real world” is unknowable and that we can only know the “apparent” world. The meaning of Socratic doubt is that we have an incomplete knowledge of the “nature of things” perceived by the senses and expressed in language. No speculation can decide whether our lives should be guided by human reason, or by a divine revelation of the Scriptures as poets and prophets know.

The modern assumptions criticized by Strauss are the conviction of automatic progress (historicism) and the radical separation of facts and values (positivism); together, they produce a relativism that forbids to see the truth of ancient doctrines. As the crisis of the West resulted from the premises of historicism and positivism, Strauss endeavored to recover in Hellenic rationalism the original premises for the search of truth and virtue. Hellenic rationalism discovers in human existence a nature from which immutable principles can be deduced; this discovery, yet, is not a dogmatic assumption; “being” and “being intelligible” are not synonymous with “being object” and “being predictable”; only wisdom can tell us the difference between these two formulae.

It is an apparent paradox that Leo Strauss insists on the study of the history of political ideas to counteract historicism. He considered, in a very conservative and misleading way, that we are living in an era of intellectual decline in which it is doubtful that we can learn anything from the past; thus, historical studies are indispensable to counteract oblivion. We must “think the thought” and explore its relation to the

world. However, such rejection of historicism is ambiguous, as he forgets that historiography allows us to enter another world and into the world of the other and to understand it from within, as John Yolton argued (Yolton, 1955).

The Straussian way of presenting political philosophy contrasts with prevailing proposals of his contemporaries, namely George H. Sabine (Sabine, 1961; Strauss, 1959, 227-228.). Sabine argued that past political theories can hardly be held as true because they include value judgments resulting from ancient traditions. Sabine's intention of writing the history of Western political theory "*from the point of view of social relativism*" required a radical separation of facts and values. On the contrary, as Strauss writes in his first preface to the *History of Political Philosophy* (Strauss and Cropsey, 1987) "*the issues raised by the political philosophy of the past are alive in our society*" and they should be taken seriously in political science.

Strauss, thus, held that Classical authors hold permanent truths. He refused to consider them as reflections of the time in which they lived, and to derive their thought from external causes: he wanted to keep alive their sense of questioning; it would be "*safer to try to understand the inferior in function of the superior than the superior in function of the inferior*". There was a heavy price to pay for this resolution: understanding contemporary anthropological, economic and political issues in the light of the classics, causes a loss of attention for novelty and for the perennial renovation of the promise of politics.

We may safely affirm that Strauss admired classical political philosophy, not the classical polis. As he attempts to revive the flame of the ancient concepts of citizenship and polis, he has no nostalgia for the old polis and its "*active life*", "*public space*" or "*sense of community*". He had in mind Thucydides' analysis of Pericles' *Funeral Prayer* and the barbarities of Athenian imperialism, as patent in the Melos dialogue. He knows that Socrates extols the "*good people*" (*kalois kagathoi*), the educated and leisure minority dedicated to moral and intellectual virtues; he also knows that only a few achieve this status. He does not hope the prudent to play a big role in the community. Typically, the Socratic political voice will be a voice of loyal and prudent opposition, exactly as Strauss did.

Strauss encourages his disciples to examine the texts of political theory in the original and not to worry too much about the context. This lack of concern for the context leads him to unfounded generalizations, particularly the distinction between what the Classics affirmed in specific circumstances – through exoteric writing – and what they silenced as political truth in any time or place – the so called esoteric teaching.

Strauss did not invent this distinction; he recovered an already known device. He began to examine it in his doctoral thesis on Spinoza, which he considered a secret adept of assimilationist democracy and of political Zionism (Strauss, 1930). Then, he went back to Maimonides, whom Spinoza considered the best representative of Jewish theology; and then to Al-Farabi, whom Maimonides considered a philosophical authority; and finally to Plato, the common master of Al-Farabi and Maimonides. He believed that all these philosophers used esoteric modes of communication. *“The most obvious and crude reason”* was to protect themselves from persecution.

The risks of persecution – analyzed in (Strauss, 1952, 157-158) – are obvious in tyrannies and Strauss was against tyrannies; the stimulating point is that, according to him, persecution persists in liberal regimes because philosophy is subversive. Philosophy, according to Strauss, is the *“conscious, coherent, and incessant attempt to substitute opinions about the foundations by knowledge”*; philosophy questions any dogmatic behavior that society demands from its members. As the disruption created by philosophy frees the human spirit from preconceptions, so the social sciences should free themselves from the negative consequences of historicism and positivism.

Strauss believes that human concerns are not resolved with the pronouncements of religious authorities. He invokes the dialogues of Socrates at Delphi, and of Maimonides in the *Guide for the Perplexed* as proof of his agnostic principles. Oracles and Scriptures require a human interpretation, and interpreters disagree according to the divinities and the codes they observe. Theological conflicts between religious authorities are conflicts between moral systems and between political regimes abiding by different conceptions of justice. Any theological question, as Spinoza asserted, may become a theological-political issue related to justice (Strauss, 1965, 7-31).

Divergences between the political regimes' morality and divine commandments led the Sophists to the conclusion that the claims of popular religion about gods, justice and nobility were conventional opinions. The Greek political philosophers put aside the oratory of the political leaders and concentrated on the meaning of political order. According to Strauss, they concluded that each community has a group that exploits and governs and a majority that is exploited and governed. This universal condition of domination is a consequence of the unequal distribution of goods in society. Material goods are scarce; each one is concerned about his social promotion; glory is hard to reach. These harsh social realities belittle any extant beautiful statements about the nobility of fraternity, civic sacrifice, and service to the community. Sophists like Thrasymachus held them as illusions created by the powerful to justify themselves and to exploit the ruled; justice is the dictate of power (Strauss, 1953, 93-113, 126). As for the pre-Socratic philosophers, they took refuge in the pleasure of thinking and lived on the margins of society the best possible life (Strauss, 1953, 10-12, 114-117).

The Socratic dialogues, presented by Xenophon and by Plato, oppose such arguments of Sophists and of traditionalists. The dialogues are a friendly dispute that listens to the arguments of citizens whose life in the public space is very different from what Sophists claim (Strauss, 1953, 120-126). People disclose a natural sociability in political life; they show a need for sharing and affection, for mutual interests and sympathies that point to the existence of a common good. Selfish interest is not everything and human sociability is richer than the instinct of the hive and the herd. Competition for superiority and prestige is undeniable, but between the opacity of interests shines a proper and fragile dimension of politics, the desire for a better world. (Strauss, 1953, 129-130; Strauss, 1991, 213-214)

Even in the most intense political conflict, Socrates tells us, there is an awareness of the bounds of action as humanity tries to overcome threats and scarcity. These bounds are often violated – in war, in social conflict, in natural disasters – but even the attempt to disguise the violations is a sign that natural law exists. Men admire worldly success but also the moral qualities that restrains it. If natural law qualities are

promoted as goals of human action, a sense of community is created and it is possible to aspire for noble deeds; there will be heroes not only in war but also in peace (Strauss, 1953, 128-135; Strauss, 1991, 205; Strauss 1959, 86, 89-90, 111).

When we consider models of human action, some seem preferable to others. We appreciate virtues such as courage or virtue of the warrior; we appreciate moderation in economics; and generosity and patronage of the arts, and common pride, wit and friendship. These civic virtues should guide public life, they should form the substance of public space, argued Socrates and Strauss. That is the essence of citizenship that goes beyond the well-being of the body.

Socratic dialogues do not designate what is lawful by nature as a code of universal rules – as it will later happen with the formulas of Justinian law; they point to a scale of objectives that confer joy and satisfaction, when they are achieved (Strauss, 1953, 140-143, 162-164, 193-194; Strauss, 1959, 80-87, 89-91). Natural Law developed as a summary of these objectives: it does not fall from heaven and that is why it is a created law; neither is a pure human invention and that is why it is natural.

We should be aware of both greatness and misery in public space, concealed by sophists and opportunists. Researching the qualities of character discloses justice and nobility in the human heart, even though it may not triumph. Virtue is the key to personal happiness. Virtue shines more when it implies martyrdom, a tragic dimension of virtue that requires divine recognition (Strauss, 1953, 128-129, 133-134; Strauss, 1991, 109, 147-150, 161-163). The enigmas of responsibility, guilt, and punishment present in tragic action (*Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Bacchantes*) disclose that there is a higher sphere of existence, beyond politics: civic virtues are not the culmination of human life. Life in public space culminates in the Socratic love of wisdom (Strauss, 1953, 140-146, 149-152, 156, 157; Strauss, 1958, 13-14, 19; Strauss, 1959, 29-33, 90-94).

According to Strauss, political regime (*politeia*) should be the basic category for the analysis of social realities. The questions to ask and the criteria for selecting data should be more practical than theoretical; political science should start from the ongoing discussions in each regime and between regimes. The objective is to evaluate positions, and

to conduct the reasoning until clarifying and arbitrating the implications of the used notions. Quantitative methods should play a subordinate role. Political science should lose the obsession of making predictions, based on pseudo-universal laws and abstract models; in politics, almost everything is unpredictable. Political science should devote itself to the analysis of deliberation issues, providing elements for validating principles implied in decisions. Political scientists should focus less on the characteristics of justice, defense, finance or diplomacy and give priority to moral goals that give meaning to public space, i.e., values of humanity about what the best regime is (Strauss, 1953, 191-194; Strauss, 1958, 205-215; Strauss, 1959, 14-17, 27-29, 78-95).

The best regime, according to the classical political tradition, is a mixed republic, Strauss tell us. Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Politics* indicate how the philosopher acts as a referee, attempting to moderate the claims of the majority of poor people and the minority of rich people, craftsmen, soldiers, merchants, laborers, and farmers. All classes and parties should share political responsibility by exercising their virtues and repressing their vices. The "excellent" ones (*kaloï kagathoi*) who dedicate themselves to moral virtues and enjoy the contemplative life will always be a minority; the menace of despotism is looming. The Socratic voice will be a voice of opposition and criticism against the acquisition of money in oligarchies; against blind obedience to tradition in theocracies; against dictatorship in military regimes; against egalitarianism and degenerate liberty in democracies. Each regime and each party sees the evils of their opponents but does not want to see its own excesses and errors (Strauss, 1953, 138-143; Strauss, 1958, 14-15; Strauss 1959, 80-81, 85-90).

3. Debates and opponents

Strauss considered the history of political philosophy as a component of liberal education, a conversation among brilliant minds in great books that evoke human excellence and greatness. Against the syndrome that Tocqueville characterized as the new "tyranny of the majority" – the pressure of conformity that checks the individual from

resisting public opinion – Strauss saw only one answer: “*liberal education is the antidote against mass culture*” as we try to rise from mass democracy to original democracy, i.e., “*an aristocracy broadened into universal aristocracy.*” (Strauss, 1958, 4-5, 24-25; Strauss, 1953, 1-4)

The liberal university should resist the pressures of society to endorse any politically correct dogma. (Strauss, 1958, 3-25, 53-54, 262). The threat to the idea of university is the most acute manifestation of a threat to freedom of thought, enduring in modern liberalism: the opening of society contains a self-destructive germ. Liberalism has a noble facet of resistance to persecution and discrimination. However, democratic tolerance tends to degenerate into a relativism that all viewpoints have the same value; then comes the misleading judgment that whoever upholds the superiority of a moral view is ‘elitist’, undemocratic, and therefore immoral. As the leveling moralism degrades the sense of social justice demanded by political philosophy, virtue and wisdom are suspended and human beings may lose the opportunity to a fair degree in the hierarchy of talents and accomplishments.

Leo Strauss presented his teachings as an attempt to adapt and apply the Socratic tradition to the circumstances of our time. As shown by the context of his life – he went through the great crises of the 20th century – we must examine them in a richer and broader context. He reached maturity in the German Weimar republic, and sought refuge and protection in the United States against the ominous Nazi regime. He became a firm advocate and a friend – without flattery – of democracy. He insisted on a version of the Greco-Roman ideal of active citizenship, imbued with the demand for moral government; he did not accept to reduce the arguments of citizens and rulers to an ideological surface masking economic benefits; he did not accept that political theory assumed political deliberations as masks and illusions for the masses. Such suspicion undermines the already precarious respect in political debate and falsifies the human reality.

Against the winds and tides of the politically correct, Strauss was a major contributor for a new political philosophy in the 50’s and 60’s (Strauss, 1958, 3-25, 53-54, 262). A political scientist must begin by what he hears in common sense. He must use common language, rather

than inventing a theoretical jargon. He should be not relativistic, i.e., neutral in relation to values; nor should he adopt an ideological set of mind; he must transcend common sense, without losing sight of the involvement in public life.

In *Natural Right and History* (1953) Strauss criticized the axiologically neutral social sciences. If political science abstains from indicating the best public policies, public space surrenders to a lack of ethics, to irresponsibility and will of power. The enemies of natural law, according to Strauss, are positivism and historicism. Its three highest representatives are Machiavelli and Machiavellianism; Hegel and Statism; and Nietzsche and tribalism. In Strauss's view, Hitler is an example of how these three evils, an *inverted trinity*, came together, causing the horrible convulsions of the 20th century.

Leo Strauss felt a special duty in confronting orthodox Marxists like Georg Lukács and M. C. Macpherson and maintained debates with Alexander Kojève on the roots of the Marxist thought. At the political or practical level, Strauss agrees with intelligent Marxists who know and show the limitations of the liberal-democratic values: Strauss accepts criticisms of consumerism, of relativist morality, and of the illusion of a value-free social science. However, he rejects the Marxist social goal of banal happiness after the revolution, like Nietzsche's view of the society of the "last men" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Preamble, V. Moreover, Marxism, like its opponent Nietzsche, underestimates the values of compassion and civility as it does not set institutional boundaries against the abuse of power. It was not by chance that Marxism created a new type of despotism in the 20th century before disappearing in 1989 – a revolution that Strauss no longer attended.

Theoretically, Marxists did not understand that social life holds a fundamental tension between the need for answers and the need for questioning: society requires politicized thinking, political doctrines and party programs; but society also needs radical and independent questioning without compromise with a social imperative, except the imperative to know the truth. Societies need the quest for truth as much as people need the air they breathe. However, this genuine rationalism – the purpose of philosophy – should not be a direct basis of any regime, as ideologies claim.

As Strauss believes that modern democracy is threatened by the lack of virtues and that social sciences are not pitted against the crisis, we should ask what his alternative is. Max Weber's radical distinction between facts and values is no longer tenable; it is accepted because it coincides with egalitarian relativism, the simplistic form of democratic moralism. Again: what is alternative? Strauss's peculiar interpretation of Plato displays a philosopher removed from everyday politics and conforming only externally to the regime of Athens (Strauss, 1987, 33-89). Plato wanted philosophy communicated in an esoteric way because, unlike religion, it is destined to a minority and its subversive role can lead ordinary people to nihilism and society to disorder; philosophy justifies a "noble lie". Strauss' ambivalence is obvious again: he did not understand that the "noble lie" fulfills the role of an inspiring myth, as in the formula of Plato in *The Republic*, 414a-415a: "You who are part of the city, you are all brothers." Strauss apparently does not share this aspiration for human fraternity. Similarly, Strauss' rigid separation between excellence-seeking rulers and ruled people extinguishes the notion of participation in public space. "Reserve of knowledge", "useful lie" and the radical separation between the philosopher and the politician are ideas rooted in neoconservative thought.

We are thus back to Leo Strauss's central dilemma about public space: natural law should be the universal rule of human action but mass morality causes its forgetfulness and brings the relativization of moral and political standards. Strauss does not want power to impose what is right but his political alternative forgets the enthusiasm for a better society. Leo Strauss sometimes appears as someone who stands as a faithless man sorrowful that his contemporaries have lost faith. His Jewish legacy is clearly rabbinical and not prophetic neither open to a Christian matrix.

4. The Jewish question

The Jewish question was a wide-ranging debate in 19th and 20th century European society, regarding the appropriate status and treatment of Jews in society. According to Strauss, the Jewish question, "*the most*

evident symbol of the human problem as a social or political problem" exemplified the crisis of the West and of the liberal democracy. As humanity is divided into antagonistic groups, liberal society offered equality to Jews in the private sphere, argues Strauss, but with no guarantees against anti-Jewish sentiment and consequent social inequality. The assimilation of Jews deprived them of the respect that results from loyalty to tradition. Those liberal policies were superseded by the "final solution" that resulted from the destruction of the liberal state by National Socialism and Communism. Zionism, which Strauss supported as a young man, offers Jews a secular state of their own, but without Jewish culture and content.

In *Why we remain Jews?* Strauss indicates bluntly that the Jewish question has no solution. Persecutions, Crusades, Inquisition, and concentration camps always arise just around the corner. In the 20th century, the Nazis reached the pinnacle of extermination, after decades of propaganda that the Jews were cosmopolitan, capitalist and agnostic, and enemies of everything German, traditional and religious. So why stay Jewish, asks Strauss? He echoes Theodor Herzl's statement by saying "*the enemy converts us into a nation, whether we like it or not.*" (Deutsch, 1994)

The Jewish question manifests a tension between human reason and divine revelation, the rival claims of Athens and Jerusalem. This tension is "*the nucleus, the nerve of intellectual history and the spiritual history of the West*" and "*the secret of the vitality of Western civilization.*" Strauss denies that modern philosophy has settled this creative tension; the efforts of atheism only tarnished the Socratic consciousness of ignorance, which is the starting point of philosophy.

Strauss is a specialist in Jewish thought, but his reverence for Judaism is scarce. Unlike authors as different as Paul, Thomas Aquinas and Lessing who present the Scriptures as the history of the education of humanity by God, Strauss has little to say about the Old and New Testaments as adequate documents for distinct phases of humanity. When examining the Middle Age works of Al Farabi, Averroes and Maimonides, Strauss's writings reveal more about himself than about them. He shares with Maimonides his interest in the political advantages of religion; social order is created through the religious

consecration of human authority. Strauss is scarcely concerned with the core of religious experience in mercy and redemption. Despite his dedicatory to Franz Rosenzweig of his first book, *The Critique of Religion in Spinoza*, he largely ignores the dialogical thinking of this master.

Strauss' blindness to the redemptive and dialogical thought and his focus on the rabbinical understanding of the law illuminates his disinterest in Christian political philosophy. Neither Augustine nor Thomas Aquinas aroused his interest and he does not consider 20th century thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Löwith, Henri Bergson, Emmanuel Mounier, and Jacques Maritain. This omission of the Christian philosophy of human rights as an evolution of natural law makes Leo Strauss's thinking vulnerable to neoconservative ideological appropriations (Gruchy, 1996).

5. Criticism and Posterity

Leo Strauss continues to be lavishly praised for his return to the classics, and diabolically accused of being dogmatic, conservative and Machiavellian. His work has influenced authors such as Alexandre Kojève, M. C. Macpherson, Raymond Aron, Eric Voegelin and Hans-Georg Gadamer (Pangle, 2006, ix-xi). We may even speak of a Straussian style of research through concepts and presuppositions that influenced the teaching of political philosophy and the positions of intellectuals and political activists. The style suggests reading the so-called "great books" in order to understand a thinker "as he understood himself" without concern for historical context.

Leo Strauss' achievements attracted apologists and critics of assorted intellectual caliber. Among the apologists are Allan Bloom, Thomas Pangle and Joseph Cropsey. A noteworthy censor is Shadia Drury. *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (Drury, 1988) and *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (Drury, 1997) are a ruthless criticism of Strauss as an anti-liberal author inspired by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. Drury largely ignores the Straussian legacy of natural law and recreates Strauss as a master of the conservative movement in the USA, particularly the Republican party. He is presented as the mentor of authors

such as Alan Bloom, Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, William Kristol, Clarence Thomas and Newt Gingrich who influenced the conservative revolution since 1980 when Ronald Reagan became president, a movement that reached the peak with the neo-conservatives around George W. Bush (Minowitz, 2009).

Media journalists took up Drury's analysis. In 2003, James Atlas in the *New York Times* linked Leo Strauss and neoconservative politicians such as Paul D. Wolfowitz, Michael Ledeen, Stephen Cambone, Abram Shulsky, Richard Perle, Newt Gingrich, Elliott Abrams and editorialists such as George Will and Robert Kagan. Atlas used a typical fallacy: *if some disciples of Strauss are neoconservative, then Strauss is a neoconservative*. Indeed, these people were bad disciples that manipulated Leo Strauss's theses. They forgot that the purpose of philosophy – the desire to “get out of the cave” – cannot be converted into a direct foundation of a political regime.

Classical political theory requires virtues, i.e., objectively desirable character qualities which provide greater personal and public happiness. Neo-classical political theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin lamented the decline of this idea among rulers and citizens and they sought to debate political issues rather in the quality of individual experience in which public life unfolds and not through abstractions such as freedoms, rights and income. As Arendt wrote: *“to understand politics in the sense of the polis is the only genuinely human action* (Arendt, 1958, 76).

It is not too difficult to understand why Leo Strauss' thought is more apt to be appropriated by neoconservative activists than by social democrats and liberals: his Jewish legacy is above all rabbinical with a resigned attitude towards the injustices and tragedies of life; he does not incorporate the prophetic message, neither the Christian matrix; his Nietzschean and Heideggerean legacy is a mistrust of modernity in which, supposedly, man came to be understood as a natural being who, by consent, submits to a sovereign for the pursuit of happiness and freedom.

Leo Strauss reacted to the crisis of modernity through the recovery of natural law, writing as a scholar rather than a political thinker. He assumed that most of those who call themselves philosophers are, after

all, methodical scholars, who only indirectly address the great themes of great thinkers, arguing over differences. (Strauss, 1989, 27-46). In this self-restraint we find the authentic Leo Strauss and the origin of his ambivalence as a political thinker: if a metaphor is adequate to describe him, he knew how to flee from Egypt, the land of the dead (*sheol*), but he did not find the way to the Promised Land, towards which those who wish to live more fully are moving.

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