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# Beyond the reactionary sea change: Antimodern thought, American politics and political science

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This article examines the migration of reactionary antimodern thought from Europe to the United States of America. It assesses the impact that the work of two antimodern thinkers, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, had on two distinct domains of American thought, namely, conservative political ideology and academic political science. The paper argues that the antimodern perspective, eagerly absorbed by many intellectuals, has pushed American conservatism not only in an anti-liberal, but also in an antidemocratic direction. On the other hand, in academic political science, Strauss's and Voegelin's critiques of modernity, though certainly audible and noted, were neither taken seriously nor confronted in depth by the mainstream of the discipline. This neglect should be corrected, I contend, for contemporary political science is in need of a mature and nuanced theory of modernity that is capable of rising up to the radical challenge of the antimoderns.

## KEYWORDS

conservatism (United States), reaction, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, social science epistemology, antimodernism, crisis of democracy

## Introduction

The forced migration of scholars from Central Europe to the United States in the second quarter of the twentieth century had a tremendous impact on all fields of scientific inquiry. Indeed, it can be argued that central European fascism, by persecuting scientists and scholars for political and racial reasons, unwittingly contributed to making the United States, where many of the persecuted sought refuge, the leading nation in scientific research worldwide<sup>1</sup>.

1 On the transatlantic migration of social thought, see [Stuart Hughes's \(1975\)](#) seminal study. Of course, one must not forget that the success stories narrated by Stuart Hughes and many others in the vast literature on exile and scholarship are rather exceptional. The main protagonists of this paper, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, fit into this salient and yet unusual trajectory of success. However, as [Tuori \(2022\)](#) rightly emphasizes, for most academic refugees past and present the hardships of exile turn out to be incompatible with the attainment of academic success. Indeed, as [Steinmetz \(2010\)](#) shows by focusing on the trajectories of exiled German historical sociologists in the US, entire subfields of research have faded into obscurity in exile.

Political science was no exception. From an institutional point of view, the discipline was more consolidated across the Atlantic. While, until Hitler's rise to power in Germany, only tentative steps had been made to emancipate political studies from the older, more established disciplines of public law, history and philosophy, in the US the distinct scholarly identity of the "political scientist" was already largely recognized before World War One<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, in the 1930s, many established political science departments in American universities were eager to attract the talent that fled from Continental Europe, and these were generally more hospitable to the European émigrés than the more traditional faculties<sup>3</sup>.

The European refugee scholars were ideologically and methodologically diverse. When it comes to epistemological and methodological issues, the Europeans brought with them from the continent the fierce disputes—the various *Methodenstreite*—that had marked the German-speaking social scientific panorama since the turn from the 19th to the twentieth century. All in all, it would be wrong to assume that the incoming Europeans favored more humanist, "soft science" approaches as opposed to a "hard science" orientation of their American colleagues. What characterized the European refugees was rather the insistence on the necessity of meta-methodological reflection, the belief that social scientific practice had to be grounded in a philosophy of knowledge. Ideologically, the picture was equally varied. Even though, if one looks at any comprehensive list of names, left-leaning scholars outnumber their right-leaning colleagues, there were quite a few of the latter also<sup>4</sup>.

In this article, we focus on the legacy of two conservative German-speaking refugee scholars, Leo Strauss (1899–1973) and Eric Voegelin (1901–1985), reassessing the political as well as scholarly impact of their ideas in America. Strauss was studying in Paris when Hitler seized power in his native Germany, and he decided never to return. Moving first to Britain, he then

settled in America as of 1937. A philosopher by training, whose doctoral dissertation on epistemology from 1921 had been supervised by the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, Strauss became a professor of political science in the US, holding a chair at the University of Chicago from 1949 until 1968<sup>5</sup>. Voegelin was born in Cologne, but grew up in Vienna, where he obtained a PhD on social-scientific methodology under the joint supervision of the liberal-progressive jurist Hans Kelsen and the conservative philosopher/sociologist Othmar Spann. When the Nazi troops marched through the Austrian border in 1938, Voegelin decided to leave the country, barely escaping arrest by the Gestapo. In the United States, he eventually joined the department of government at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, where he taught until 1958. Unlike Strauss, but like many other German émigrés, Voegelin returned to Europe to fill a newly-created chair in political science at the University of Munich. He did, however, move back to the US in 1969, spending the rest of his life as a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution<sup>6</sup>.

The main feature of Strauss's and Voegelin's thinking is an uncompromising antimodern orientation, whose contours had already begun to take shape in their formative European years. Notwithstanding the significant differences between their critiques of modernity, they share the view that Western thought took a fatefully wrong turn in the late Middle Ages (or even before that period), which constitutes the root of contemporary intellectual, moral, and political disorientation. Surprisingly perhaps—considering that the United States of America were born out of a modern revolution and founded, as a nation, on modern constitutional principles—such a history of ideas found considerable traction among the educated public on the right edges of the American political spectrum.

In the first part of the article, I will consider the ideological appeal of Strauss's and Voegelin's narratives of modernity to the conservative American intelligentsia. I argue that such appeal must be understood in the light of both thinkers' adaptation to the American intellectual climate of the post-WWII period. In key passages of their more widely circulated works—*Natural Right and History* (Strauss, 1953) and *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Voegelin, 1952)—the authors put their country of refuge at the forefront of the struggle against the moral and intellectual corruption of the modern age. By doing so, they supplied the vague sense of uprootedness shared by many conservative minds in Cold War America with a sophisticated historico-philosophical account, which helped recast the American mission as a return

2 On the emergence of political science in the US before WWI, see Adcock (2003). On the first steps of *Politikwissenschaft* during the Weimar Republic, see Gangl (2008).

3 Hans Kelsen, for instance, arguably the most important legal thinker of the twentieth century, could only secure a full professorship at the department of political science in Berkeley. The prestigious Harvard Law School turned him down. A background in public law was, indeed, the prevailing pattern among those who would work as academic political scientists in the US. For a comprehensive account, see Söllner (1996).

4 The Institute for Social Research, which moved from Frankfurt via Geneva to New York in 1935, is of course the beacon of the leftist émigrés. Yet, amongst the refugee scholars one also encounters personalities such as the flamboyant historian Ernst Kantorowicz, who had taken up arms against the Spartacists in Berlin after World War One and supposedly declared that "right of me is only the wall" (Lerner, 2017). On the history of the Frankfurt School, see Jay (1996[1973]).

5 For a comprehensive intellectual-biographical account, see Tanguay (2007).

6 On Voegelin's life, see his own *Autobiographical Reflections* (Voegelin, 2011). His return to Germany in the context of the post-WWII restructuring of West German academia has been carefully studied by Marsen (2001).

to first principles that had been forgotten or betrayed. This reactionary sea change has outlived the Cold War context where it emerged—and where it could still function as a conservative defense of liberal democracy. Today, as an ideological source of political orientation, it reveals an unmistakably authoritarian, anti-democratic nature.

By contrast, in the second part of the paper, I examine the impact of Strauss's and Voegelin's ideas on professional American political science. In this academic sphere, the antimodern position of the two authors, which included a radical questioning of the basic tenets of modern social-scientific methodology, was met with skepticism and indifference. At a time when the behavioral approach was making its first confident steps toward reshaping the identity of the discipline after the model of the natural sciences, Strauss's and Voegelin's criticism was not taken seriously. They remained marginal figures, whose students were viewed by mainstream academic political scientists as members of a pre or even anti-scientific, esoteric sect. As I will show, this is really a tale of mutual incomprehension. Neither did the two émigrés, who interpreted American political science in light of their prior European experience, seek to understand in any detail the contemporary American developments in the discipline that harbored them, nor did the leading names of the behavioral revolution who responded to the criticism—such as Robert Dahl and Gabriel Almond—care to engage in any depth with their arguments. This mutual incomprehension was also one of many episodes that steadily expanded the rift between “empirical science” and “normative theory” in contemporary political studies<sup>7</sup>.

I contend, however, that even the empirically-oriented political scientist who rejects the antimodern challenge to the discipline has something to learn from Strauss and Voegelin. Namely, their thoughts on the untenability of the fact/value dichotomy call attention to the inescapable immersion of political science in a specific—and specifically modern—political form of society. Severed from its antimodern preconception, this insight might enhance the self-reflectiveness of the discipline and promote a reconsideration of its purpose in a modern democracy.

I conclude, thus, on an ambivalent note. While the ideological implications of the antimodern philosophical persuasion are unavoidably antidemocratic—and this becomes clearer the farther away one moves from the historical circumstances which allowed for its fragile reconciliation with liberal democracy—its critique of modern social science can nevertheless be made to serve the cause of a more nuanced and self-aware defense of the modern democratic political condition.

<sup>7</sup> There were valiant, but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to prevent such rift from widening and fragmenting the field of political studies. See, in this regard, Hauptmann's (2004) insightful account of Berkeley political theorists and their concept of “the political”.

## The reactionary sea change: Antimodern thought in America

The United States of America were the first nation to emerge from a modern revolution. This circumstance must not be obscured by the enduring controversy, which is both scholarly and political, concerning the nature and meaning of the American Revolution. A prominent European exile scholar made a significant philosophical contribution to that debate in the early 1960s (Arendt, 1963), and a few years later Baylin's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Baylin, 1967) would reemphasize, against the predominant view in American historiography, the role that ideas—and not merely economic interests—played in the events of the 1770s and 1780s. Of course, it would be impossible to summarize these debates here and do justice to the complexity of the American Revolution. For our purposes, one aspect must be highlighted: the American Revolution, in contrast to the French one, did not have to overthrow a historically established and ideologically cohesive ruling class<sup>8</sup>.

This relatively simple fact goes a long way toward explaining the absence of an antimodern reaction in the US. Indeed, there were no expropriated noblemen in America, whose resentment could nurture a wholesale attack on modern political institutions and their basic philosophical premises. To be sure, there is in American thought a strand of distrust toward popular rule, framed and feared as tyrannical mob-rule, that stretches back to the writings of Madison and Hamilton. And yet, even according to the more conservative founding fathers, the threat of a “tyranny of the majority” would be checked by the modern expedients of constitutional engineering, not by a reactionary appeal to rule by divine right. Furthermore, there is surely a racist lineage in American right-wing ideology that has survived the Civil War in cyclical waves of Confederate revisionism (Domby, 2020). However, neither of these strands in US conservative ideology that hark back to pivotal historical events—the Revolution and the Civil War—are fundamentally antimodern. In the New World, there simply was no use for the regressive longings of a Maistre or a Bonald, for the political and moral nostalgia of the European counterrevolution<sup>9</sup>.

Antimodern thought had to be brought to America, and it arrived in the intellectual baggage of two exiles groomed in the German philosophical tradition. The German provenance of a radical antimodern intellectual reaction is not surprising. Though the wholesale attack against modernity was launched

<sup>8</sup> “Premodern” Native American communities were of course massacred and dispossessed by the European settlers without second thoughts, but such dark pages of American history fall under the rubric of genocide rather than revolution.

<sup>9</sup> To be coherently antirevolutionary Maistre had, indeed, to be anti-American. See, in this regard, Eaton (2011).

in post-revolutionary France—ironically, as Holmes (1982, p. 166–167) put it, “as a case of the Right imitating the Left” in its “uncompromising stridency and world-rescuing pretensions”—it acquired greater philosophical sophistication in German thought. As already Mannheim (1986[1925], p. 47) noted, the more conservative varieties of German idealism pushed reactionary thought to its utmost “logical conclusions.”

In a way, however, this increase in intellectual elaboration was a sign of weakness rather than strength. In fact, one can argue that, as the new principle of democratic legitimacy triumphed over monarchical ideas at the more mundane political level, reactionary thought recoiled to the abstract, speculative realm of an antimodern history of ideas. And yet, when modernity showed its ominous face with the rise of totalitarian dictatorship in Europe, the more perceptive antimodern thinkers were quick to locate the source of such political developments and embed them in a deeper level of analysis, tracing the fateful political events of interwar Europe back to the relativism and nihilism of modern philosophy (Strauss, 1953) or to the modern “secularization of the soul”<sup>10</sup> (Voegelin, 1939[1938], p. 8).

Thus, both Strauss and Voegelin had begun to develop a fundamental critique of modernity before arriving in America. Strauss had clearly pushed further in that regard while still in Europe. His books on Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* (Strauss, 1930) and on *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Strauss, 1936) were already marked by an incisive attack on the basic tenets of modern philosophy<sup>11</sup>. Voegelin, in turn, struggled to find the appropriate interpretive key to elucidate the political and intellectual crisis of those interwar years, drawing on different—and sometimes diametrically opposed—sources<sup>12</sup>. However, a breakthrough occurs with the publication in 1938 of *The Political Religions*, a booklet where the author interprets modern collective political movements—above all, National Socialism, but also Soviet communism—as distorted, secularized religions. Though still in a rough, epigrammatic shape, Voegelin’s secularization thesis was already directed against the very legitimacy of the modern age.

10 “Säkularisierung des Geistes” in the original (my translation).

11 One must also mention in this respect Strauss’s commentary on Carl Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political*, where he provocatively charges Schmitt’s critique of liberalism of remaining trapped within a modern framework of thought and thus failing to gain “a horizon beyond liberalism” (Strauss, 1995[1932], p. 119).

12 For a glimpse of this diversity, a look at the themes and topics of the essays Voegelin published during the 1920s suffices. Like a true polymath, he wrote on Weber and sociological methodology, American constitutionalism, Kelsen’s legal theory, monetary policy and the business cycle, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789, the philosophy of David Hume, and so (Voegelin, 2003).

Once in the US, both authors, instead of toning it down to adjust to a presumably less receptive environment, deepened and consolidated their antimodern perspective. Perhaps surprisingly, they were able to draw an American audience to a systematic and uncompromising critique of modernity. The city of Chicago was an important site in this engagement of the two German émigrés with the educated American public. Not only did Strauss hold a professorship there at the department of political science for 20 years, but both Strauss and Voegelin delivered in Chicago the public lectures upon which their best-selling books were based, invited by the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation for the Study of American Institutions.

Walgreen, a drugstore magnate, had accused the University of Chicago in 1935 of indoctrinating his niece with communist ideas. Faced with such charges, Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University, not only supported his faculty and their right to teach freely, but also convinced Walgreen to donate half a million dollars to the University in order to foster a greater appreciation of the American way of life among its students. Walgreen’s money funded scholarships and research in various fields of American studies, and it also sponsored a series of public lectures where prominent—or soon-to-be prominent—mostly conservatively-oriented scholars took the word. In fact, though they clashed on the topic of academic freedom, Hutchins and Walgreen were both staunch anticommunists, and Hutchins realized that he could persuade Walgreen to contribute financially to the reform of the Chicago curriculum along Aristotelian-Thomist lines. Along with German émigrés such as Strauss and Voegelin, but also Hannah Arendt, many renowned neo-Thomists, such as Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon, were invited to deliver the Walgreen Lectures. The need to recover and reemphasize, in opposition to Soviet communism, the moral and religious foundations of Western democracy was a concern shared by many invited lecturers<sup>13</sup>.

Now, the critiques of modernity formulated by Strauss and Voegelin went beyond that of Catholic neo-Scholastics. They were all fellow travelers, to be sure, but the trenchancy of the former found no parallel among the latter. While post-WWII neo-Scholastics argued, in essence, that Western societies, in order to resist (Soviet) totalitarianism, had to ground their liberal-democratic political institutions on firm moral and religious foundations, Strauss’s and Voegelin’s critiques<sup>14</sup> emphasized rather the extent to which liberalism and

13 On the Walgreen Foundation and Robert M. Hutchins’s tenure in Chicago, see University of Chicago Library (2006) and University of Chicago (n. d.), as well as fn. 30 below.

14 I am conflating their thought as far as the radical antimodern stance is concerned, but they did of course differ markedly, as several commentators have noted, on the kind of restorative task needed to overcome modernity. In a nutshell, Strauss held on to the superiority of rational philosophy over against the revealed truth of religion, of Athens



totalitarianism shared common ground. As Voegelin (1953, p. 75) put it in his (very critical) review of Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “[t]he true dividing line in the contemporary crisis does not run between liberals and totalitarians, but between the religious and philosophical transcendentalists on the one side, and the liberal and totalitarian immanentist sectarians on the other side.”

In the context of the Walgreen lectures, such a sharp division turned the task of presenting American institutions in a positive light into a rather difficult one. After all, it is not easy to see how American society in general, and the American political system in particular, could have escaped being infused with “liberal sectarianism” to begin with—and how they could be portrayed as bulwarks of the core of a Western civilizational tradition whose modern decay, according to the intellectual-historical narratives of both Strauss and Voegelin, had been in motion before the first European set foot on North American soil.

Strauss deals with this difficulty very elegantly in *Natural Right and History*, the book based on his 1949 Walgreen lectures. The purpose of the work is to defend a classical conception of immutable, time-transcending natural law against the onslaught of historicism. The author finds it most adequate to open the lecture series

by quoting a passage from the Declaration of Independence... “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The nation dedicated to this proposition has now become, no doubt partly as a consequence of this dedication, the most powerful and prosperous of the nations of the earth. Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those “truths to be self-evident”? (Strauss, 1953, p. 1)

In these introductory lines, Strauss seamlessly connects the classic natural right tradition with the political heritage of his country of refuge. Most noteworthy about this passage is that the focus falls less upon the specific rights asserted in the Declaration than on the capacity to believe in a self-evident, perennial truth that escapes all contingency and relativity. If carefully parsed, Strauss's defense of natural law is of course less straightforward than such lines suggest. For him, self-evident truth was not a matter of faith, but rather of rational discovery. Moreover, the modern strand of natural law from which the Declaration derives was, according to the author, in itself problematic since

vis-à-vis Jerusalem, while Voegelin saw no fundamental incompatibility between reason and revelation, between philosophy and theology. On these differences, see their exchange of letters, where disagreement slowly but surely outweighs the convergence in the critical diagnosis of modernity (Emberley and Cooper, 1993).

its Hobbesian beginnings<sup>15</sup>. However, these complexities are expediently passed over in the introduction to *Natural Right and History*, which read—or heard—in isolation would seem to imply that the modern crisis emerges with late-eighteenth century German historicism. Strauss, so it seems, was ready to sacrifice the comprehensiveness of his case against modernity in order to captivate an American audience. And indeed, at the dawn of the Cold War, an audience of conservative American intellectuals was drawn to this thinker whose insight demonstrated, with apparent clarity, that domestic intellectual corruption proceeded from the same German source which nurtured both the previous and the extant totalitarian enemy<sup>16</sup>.

Voegelin's adjustment to the circumstance of the Walgreen lectures—and to the larger intellectual context of Cold War America—was less elegant than Strauss's, and his antimodern critique more extravagant. He came to Chicago in 1951 to deliver a lecture series significantly titled “Beyond Modernity,” which he would publish 1 year later under the title *The New Science of Politics*. With Strauss sitting in the audience and taking notes, Voegelin inverted the polarities of *new* and *old*, *high* and *low*, and *light* and *darkness* established by modern thought. For him, it is the modern age that properly deserves the epithet of an age of darkness, as a “consequence of religious retrogression,” whereas the Christian middle ages—on par with Greek antiquity—had attained “a higher... degree of rationalism” (Voegelin, 1952, p. 24). Concerning the origins of modernity, Voegelin's story stretches much further back in time than Strauss's, namely to the Gnostic movements of early Christianity, which rejected the Augustinian divide of temporal and spiritual and dared to claim that spiritual perfection was attainable here below, by mere mortals. According to Voegelin (1952, p. 111, 166), the misguided twelfth-century monk Joachim of Flora had already “created the aggregate of symbols which govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day,” and, finally, “the totalitarianism of our time must be understood as journey's end of the Gnostic search<sup>17</sup>.”

15 The problematic status of Hobbes's “new”, modern political science had, as noted above, been affirmed by the author already in his 1936 study. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss (1953, p. 166) revises but does not substantially alter his treatment of the English philosopher. On Strauss's critique of Hobbes, see Stauffer (2007). Later, in his second round at the Walgreen lectures, Strauss (1958) would push the decisive caesura between the classics and the moderns further back in time to the thought of Machiavelli.

16 The introduction to *Natural Right and History* shows that Strauss was himself a master in writing between the lines, much like the ancient and medieval philosophers he studied in the essays gathered in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. This, however, suggests that such an art of writing might not be as “essentially related to a society which is not liberal” as Strauss (1952, p. 36) deemed it to be.

17 Voegelin (1953, p. 119, n. 22, 126, n. 29; 1999, p. 36, n. 1) picked up the concept of Gnosticism from the burgeoning literature on the

In contrast to Strauss, Voegelin left the appeal to the American public to the very last pages of his *New Science*. After presenting the gloomy tale of modern political and spiritual decay, the author sees nevertheless a “glimmer of hope” in Anglo-American societies, which he portrays as guardians of “the truth of the soul” and bulwarks against “Gnostic corruption” (Voegelin, 1952, p. 189). Considering the pervasiveness of Gnosticism according to Voegelin’s own account, this final Anglo-American exception seems wholly implausible to the more skeptical reader. After all, the long list of Gnostic culprits includes, among its intellectual exponents, not just obvious candidates such as Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, but also Calvin; among its political champions, not just Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler, but also Woodrow Wilson and F. D. Roosevelt<sup>18</sup>. Voegelin’s concept of Gnosticism is, on closer inspection, an empty signifier; a concept broadened to the point of losing all analytical precision and ultimately unable to specify any meaningful differences between modern political experiences.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, which in retrospect are glaring even to the more sympathetic readers, *The New Science of Politics* was a literary success by political theory standards. Its strange narrative of modernity as a Gnostic conspiracy undoubtedly struck a deep chord in an American context of mounting Cold War anxieties, with McCarthyism in full swing at home and the persisting military stalemate in Korea. *Time* magazine featured the book in its 30th-anniversary issue, published in March 1953. In spite of the “somewhat technical language” employed by a philosopher bred in the Germanic tradition, the journalist praised Voegelin’s account as a “fascinating explanation of the modern intellectual crisis... an intellectual detective story, a quest through the history of

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topic of the 1930s and 1940s in the fields of religious studies, existential philosophy and theology. However, while scholars such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Jonas and Jakob Taubes also traced some continuities and resemblances between ancient, medieval and modern phenomena, their conclusions were much more circumspect than our author’s. In particular, they denied that the concept had much heuristic value to interpret modern political ideologies. Thus, even a sympathetic reader was led to the harsh but warranted conclusion that in his *New Science of Politics*, ‘Voegelin made a public commitment to a set of ideas that was borrowed, confused, wrong, and clearly violated the...rules of analysis he had outlined’ (Roszbach, 2007, p. 229). Strauss, for his part, noted that while Voegelin’s argument was ‘able to make modernity intelligible,’ its ‘web of fantastic assertions’ was also ‘apt to discredit political theory rather than to establish it’ [see Opitz, 2010, p. 144 (emphasis in the original)].

18 For an even more extensive list of Gnostic thinkers and leaders, based solely on a few passages of *The New Science of Politics*, see (Kelsen, 2012, p. 13–14) contemporary book-length critique, which remained unpublished until a decade ago.

Western thought for the culprits responsible for contemporary confusion” (Time, 1953, p. 59). A longing for cast-iron certainty, for the recovery of a lost, rock-solid common ground that would reconcile American society permeates the whole piece. Voegelin’s “quest” seemed to satisfy that longing by showing that it required a return to the uncorrupted, Greek-Christian roots of Western thought.

Despite the hype around Voegelin’s book, it was Strauss’s variant of antimodern thought that proved to be more influential in American public debate. Surely, Christian the conservatives of various denominations drew on the former’s work to chastise liberal secularism, but Voegelin would turn out to be an unreliable ally to religious dogmatists—even if *The New Science of Politics* might have justifiably raised the suspicion, as it did in Strauss’s view, of “theological fanaticism” (Opitz, 2010, p. 145)<sup>19</sup>. As a leading political scientist put it, “the followers of Leo Strauss... are a distinctive breed indeed” (Almond, 1990, p. 21).

The Cold War context, while it amplified the resonance of Strauss’s (and Voegelin’s) variants of reactionary thought, also set the limits to its American reception. The Straussians (and the Voegelinians) called for an uncompromising anti-Soviet foreign policy, and they came in various shades of cultural conservatism, but they did not question liberal democratic political institutions. In fact, as long as the threat of Soviet communism persisted, these would be defended as bulwarks against a more ominous incarnation of modernity. However, the picture would change with the collapse of the USSR. In 1995, an American interpreter of Strauss and Voegelin stated that conservatives “have no choice in the present age but to become thorough reactionaries.” And he continued: “to maintain the integrity of their principles they may need to seek practical or political alliances with groups on the left,” with whom “they share a critique of key characteristics of a consumerist society” (McAllister, 1995, p. 273). We know today that such circumstantial alliances did not materialize<sup>20</sup>. Instead, a more permanent alliance with the emergent far-right populist movements was slowly forged. Some conservatives did become “thorough reactionaries,” though, but in an anti-democratic rather than anti-capitalist sense.

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19 Voegelin would disappoint most of his more religious readers in the last volumes of his unfinished magnum opus, *Order and History*, where he seems to reverse the primacy of Biblical experience over classical Greek philosophy. For a comprehensive review, see Vondung (2004).

20 Unsurprisingly, I would add, since the peculiar variant of reactionary thought that Strauss and Voegelin transplanted to the US had little to offer in that regard. It is not impossible to draw on them for a critique of capitalism, but these authors—in contrast to most early nineteenth-century Continental reactionaries and to some of the later so-called “conservative revolutionaries”—have never presented anything even remotely resembling an elaborate criticism of modern economic institutions.

The veering of a philosophically informed antimodern conservatism toward populism might at first sight appear strange. After all, there is a distinctively elitist turn to the intellectual endeavors of Strauss and Voegelin. The former, in particular, clearly saw rational philosophy as the preserve of an intellectual aristocracy, while the many would be better off following some religious dogma. However, when certain basic traits of the antimodern perspective encountered favorable political circumstances, such an unexpected alliance could be forged. The takeover of public debate on the American Constitution's bicentennial by students and followers of Strauss is a case in point.

A key feature of the antimodern perspective is the belief in transhistorical truth and, along with it, the rejection of contextualist and sociology of knowledge approaches to the history of political ideas. On occasion of the 200th anniversary of the American Constitution in 1987, this belief was at the root of the conception, advocated by the Straussians, that the Constitution should be interpreted according to the original intention of its framers. Such original intention—in other words, the timeless core meaning of the Constitution—is discoverable through textual exegesis and textual exegesis only. Straussians such as Berns (1987), Lerner (1987) and Gary L. McDowell, who is said to have coined the notion of “a jurisprudence of original intention,” have thus opposed all historically derived rights and, more concretely, the purported judicial activism of Supreme Court judges, whose interpretation of the Constitution drifted away from the intent of the Founders<sup>21</sup>.

The political stakes of the “original intent” doctrine were high, as it aimed not merely to contain, but rather to reverse years of judicial practice and established Supreme Court jurisprudence. Thurgood Marshall, the Supreme Court's first African American Justice, perceived this acutely and argued with vehemence against the Straussian mood that marked the bicentennial celebrations: “I not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever “fixed” at the Philadelphia Convention.” And to this he added a sentence bound to sound sacrilegious to Straussian ears: “Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound” (Marshall, 1987, p. 1,338)<sup>22</sup>. This opposition to the Supreme Court and its alleged judicial activism

21 For an excellent, contemporary critique of this literature, see Wood (1988).

22 Justice Marshall (1987, p. 1339), in his provocative speech, also evoked the famous passage of the Declaration of Independence that Strauss had quoted in the introduction to *Natural Right and History*. His point, however, was that the Philadelphia Convention had actually failed to produce a constitution that lived up to the self-evident principle “that all men are created equal.” Needless to say, Marshall was a regular target for the Straussians, along with his colleague Justice William J. Brennan, who also flatly rejected originalist exegesis as the proper way to interpret the American Constitution.

brought the Straussian conservatives close to the right-wing populists, who saw the Court as an elitist institution, which since the 1960s had been forcing social and cultural change upon a “silent majority” of “middle Americans.” Moreover, the constitutional fundamentalism of the Straussians resonated, by analogy, with the Christian fundamentalist views prevalent among American right-wing populist groups.

This proximity, we can say in retrospect, was not epiphenomenal. Many Straussians (and some Voegelinians) converged to the populist platform that supported Donald Trump. Ted McAllister, in whose book on Strauss and Voegelin the idea of practical alliances with the left on economic issues had been floated, has now embraced particularistic nationalism and populist anti-elite rhetoric (McAllister and Frohnen, 2019; McAllister, 2021). McAllister earned his MA from California's Claremont Graduate School, whose Straussian faculty had founded the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy in 1979, now turned into a stronghold of ideological Trumpism. John C. Eastman, the lawyer behind Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election results, was a senior fellow at this institute, whose leading intellectual figure, Charles R. Kesler, was one of the less prominent Straussian originalists from the 1980s (Kesler, 1987). In his latest book, titled *Crisis of the Two Constitutions*, Kesler gives a distinctively Carl Schmittian twist to his Straussian constitutional originalism, in order to justify Trump's blatantly anti-constitutional intentions. The Straussian anxiety over cultural decadence and moral relativism meets a Schmittian, populist-authoritarian understanding of presidential rule, which could not fail to exploit—a characteristically reactionary trope—the distinction between “mere” legality and “true” political legitimacy, or as Kesler (2021, p. xv) puts it, “between constitutional law and the law of the Constitution<sup>23</sup>.”

To be sure, not all Straussians have jumped into the Trump bandwagon. Some, indeed, such as the prominent neoconservative William Kristol, have vehemently opposed Trump. Nonetheless, the point which must underscored is that antimodern political thought can only defend democratic institutions as a lesser evil in comparison to the more threatening, totalitarian incarnations of political modernity. In the absence of such a threat, which has arguably disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the volatility and indeterminacy of modern democracy turns out to be unbearable to the antimodern belief in absolute truth and in immutable—divinely revealed or rationally discernable—standards of justice. To see someone with the record of a Donald Trump appear to today's antimodern minds as a guardian of such standards might very well be laughable. However, it is certainly not

23 Carl Schmitt's *Legalität und Legitimität* (1932), written amidst the final crisis of the Weimar Republic, is the canonical reference in that regard, but the explicit opposition of legitimacy to legality goes back to the first generation reactionary (Bonald, 1817, p. 170).

surprising to see them being drawn to the more elusive forms of authoritarianism that mark our age of democratic backsliding.

Kesler (2021, p. 371), an intellectual middleman rather than original thinker, sees today's America facing "what might be called the Weimar problem." And indeed, a look back at the demise of the Weimar Republic, and at how Strauss and Voegelin interpreted it, is most instructive to conclude this section. Strauss did not publish on the topic, but a 1933 letter to Karl Löwith, which Straussians have conveniently ignored, contains the fantastic assertion that opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism was "only" possible through "fascist, authoritarian, imperialist principles"<sup>24</sup>. Voegelin, for his part, published extensively on political and constitutional matters until 1938, only to arrive at an identical conclusion. His book-length defense of Austria's authoritarian regime, *The Authoritarian State* (1936), is clearly indebted to Carl Schmitt's *Constitutional Theory* (1928), in light of which Italian fascism could appear as a model democracy<sup>25</sup>. In short, for both Strauss and Voegelin, Mussolini was the antidote to Hitler. They were, thus, as disorientated before the actual "Weimar problem" as many of their American followers and exegetes are today. Uncompromising antimodern thought can be productive of philosophical insight—as I will argue next—but at the level of political ideology, it has nothing to offer to those who are genuinely committed to defend democracy.

## Incommensurable Chicago schools: Antimodern thought and political science

The conclusion that there is nothing to learn from Strauss and Voegelin for a robust defense of democracy in current debates does not imply that there is nothing to learn from them *at all*. In fact, as I contend in the lines that follow, certain insights from their critique of modernity might—if reinterpreted without their radically antimodern sting—prove fruitful precisely to those whose meta-methodological assumptions and scholarly identity have made them immune to the philosophical allure of Strauss's and Voegelin's writings. Namely: to mainstream academic political scientists.

There is surely irony in the fact that the discipline which harbored these two exiled scholars in America would turn out to be so unreceptive to what they had to teach. Compared to the influence their ideas exerted upon intellectuals and activists on the American right—and, in the case of Strauss, that his followers wielded in constitutional hermeneutics and foreign policy circles—their impact on the development of professional

American political science was marginal. To paraphrase Almond (1990, p. 13) gastronomic metaphor, Strauss, Voegelin and their students ate at a separate table, the table of the so-called "soft right"—"soft" in its methodological approach to the study of politics and placed ideologically on the right side of the political spectrum<sup>26</sup>. This table lay far away from "the great cafeteria of the center, from which most of us select our intellectual food" (Almond, 1990, p. 16), and the conversational exchanges, which sometimes grew into fierce disputes, between these peripheral table companions would be pretty much unfathomable to the political scientist passing by on his way to the "cafeteria of the center."

When Strauss and Voegelin arrived to America, and especially in the first decade after WWII, the behavioral revolution in political science, led by scholars such as Robert Dahl, Gabriel Almond, Heinz Eulau, David Truman and David Easton, was transforming the identity of the discipline as a modern social science. Following the trend that had already imposed itself in the disciplines of economics and, especially, psychology in the interwar period, the behaviorists reshaped political science along the model of the natural sciences, with a focus on strict objectivity, hypothesis validation through empirical (essentially, statistical) testing, and a philosophical mooring in neopositivist epistemology<sup>27</sup>.

Another ironical element in this story is that the University of Chicago, which Strauss—along with the émigré IR theorist Hans Morgenthau—would turn into a hub of resistance against the dominant behavioral school, had been at the forefront of the emancipation of political science *as an empirical social science* from the disciplines of history, law and political philosophy in the first decades of the twentieth century. Scholars such as Charles Merriam, George Catlin and Harold Lasswell pioneered in Chicago an approach to politics based on the study of behavior rather than ideas or institutions. They committed political science to the task of collecting, sorting and measuring the empirical materials that would allow one to understand and explain why political actors act the way they do. Catlin (1927, p. xi) was perhaps the first to advocate a "behaviorist treatment of Politics," and many students of these Chicago pioneers would be prominent in the post-WWII behavioral revolution. Having completed his PhD in Chicago in 1938, Almond (1990, p.

<sup>26</sup> In his cursory depiction of the "soft right," Almond (1990, p. 21–22) mentions only Strauss and the Straussians, which is understandable considering that their position was less peripheral than Voegelin's, who taught in Alabama and Louisiana, not in the much more renowned University of Chicago. In any case, Voegelin would unequivocally belong to the "soft right" as Almond conceives it.

<sup>27</sup> On the behavioral revolution, see Dahl's (1961) influential account, as well as the oral histories edited by Baer Jewell and Sigelman (1991). For thorough historical examinations of behavioralism and its legacy, see Gunnell (1993), Farr (1995), and Berkenpas (2016).

<sup>24</sup> Emphasis elided on 'imperialist.' I quote here from Xenos (2008, p. 17) translation.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of Voegelin's proximity to Schmitt's ideas in the interwar period, see Magalhães (2022).



328) later said the following: “I got an enormous advantage out of it in the period after World War II when I discovered that I was about a decade ahead in terms of my training as compared with colleagues in my age group.” However, in 1957, Catlin saw clearly that “today there seems to be a “Chicago School” of a markedly different temper”<sup>28</sup>. Paradoxically, as the behavioral approach increasingly set the tone in mainstream political science, it became isolated in the faculty that had pioneered it<sup>29</sup>.

The first, empirically oriented Chicago school did not show much interest in the epistemological foundations of political science. They believed firmly in the practical value of modern science to elucidate social reality and provide useful information to reform-oriented decision-makers. As Almond (1990, p. 27) put it, they wanted “to *do* political science rather than talk about it<sup>30</sup>.” Sustaining this doer-rather-than-talker mentality was the progressive belief in the—however, distant—“possibility of controlling the social situation” (Catlin, 1927, p. 143). In contrast, the second, post-WWII generation of behaviorists wanted something more solid than such a vague creed to sustain their academic profession. In fact, they wished to ground political science upon the most advanced philosophical explanation of scientific knowledge available to them at the time. It is such philosophical foundations, i.e., the meta-methodological assumptions of modern social science—and, more precisely, their alleged normative deficit—that Strauss and Voegelin target in the introductions to, respectively, *Natural Right and History* and *The New Science of Politics*. On this topic, the two Chicago schools talked patently past each other.

Both Strauss and Voegelin proceed from the assumption that modern social science has been thought through to its ultimate consequences by Max Weber, and therefore their critiques of modernity contain lengthy sections confronting this great German polymath, who left behind him a massive, unfinished oeuvre when he died in 1920 (Strauss, 1953, p. 36; Voegelin, 1952, p. 13.). Strauss (1953, p. 36) regards him, in spite of “his

28 Quoted by Gunnell (1993, p. 237).

29 The reason for this, as noted in the previous section (see above, fn. 14), was the change in the university’s scientific and pedagogical policy under the tenure of Robert M. Hutchins. Influenced by his friend Mortimer Adler, with whom he would later found the Great Books of the Western World program, Hutchins became increasingly skeptical of the value and usefulness of social-scientific empirical research. Thus, against strong resistance from within the university, he pushed for a reform of the curriculum along Aristotelian-Thomistic lines, which he would partly be able to materialize. Strauss’s hiring as a professor to the department of political science, and the Walgreen lectures as a whole, must be understood in this context. As Almond (1990, p. 322) would later recall, political science and (pragmatist) philosophy “took the worst beating... when Hutchins came in.” On Adler’s Great Books project, see Lacy (2013).

30 Emphasis in the original.

errors,” as the “greatest social scientist of our century.” Voegelin (2003, p. 117), in the interwar years, saw in him a “great scholar and passionate thinker—the one in whom the destiny of our time found its mightiest symbol.” Later, as an antimodern in America, he would conclude his verdict by declaring that Weber, whose “soul was not attuned to the divine... saw the promised land but was not permitted to enter it” (Voegelin, 1952, p. 22).

Strauss classifies the social science practiced under the intellectual auspices of Weber as “historicist,” while Voegelin labels it “positivist,” and yet for both authors the fundamental problem with Weber’s conception of social science lies in the strict distinction between facts and values. To uphold such a distinction, and to limit social and political science to the elucidation of causal relationships between facts, would entail that “philosophy in the full sense of the term is impossible” (Strauss, 1953, p. 35). Political philosophy, more concretely, requires that rational human beings be “capable”—a capacity which Weber denied—“of understanding the fundamental political alternative which is at the bottom of the ephemeral or accidental alternatives” (Strauss, 1953, p. 35). Voegelin (1952, p. 3–13, 63), in turn, maintains that by subordinating relevance to method, and ditching aside the normative standards which would allow one to differentiate between the relevant and the irrelevant, positivist social science forecloses the very possibility of a science of social order which would correspond to the “true order of the soul<sup>31</sup>.”

Voegelin’s and, especially, Strauss’s critical analyses of Weber are dense and challenging. Clearly, they regarded Weber as a formidable adversary, and their commentaries remain relevant interventions in the vast and ever-growing scholarship on Weber’s ambivalent legacy. Nonetheless, an obvious question must be posed: Was Weber really the thinker whom American political science turned to in search of solid epistemological foundations after WWII? According to Strauss and Voegelin, the answer is an unequivocal yes. In that regard, Strauss (1953, p. 2) comments ironically that Germany, defeated in the battleground, was nevertheless still able—through Weber’s influence—to impose on the victors “the yoke of its own thought”<sup>32</sup>. For Voegelin (1952, p. 13), the “movement of methodology, as far as political science is concerned, ran to the end of its immanent logic in the person and work of Max Weber.” In other words, there was no need to search any further, for Weber had exhausted the issue of modern social scientific methodology. However, a look at the actual methodological and

31 For detailed and thought-provoking discussions of Strauss’s and Voegelin’s readings of Weber, see respectively Behnegar (1997) and Opitz (1993).

32 The more ominous implication here, which Strauss (1953, p. 42) later makes explicit, is that if one follows such thought through to its ultimate consequences, one “shall inevitably reach a point beyond which the scene is darkened by the shadow of Hitler”.

epistemological reflections by contemporary American political scientists reveals a very different story.

Indeed, while there is surely a Weberian influence in post-WWII American social science through the work of exile scholars such as Carl J. Friedrich, Hans Gerth, and Reinhard Bendix<sup>33</sup>, Weber's difficult methodological writings remained, for the most part, untranslated to English. The influential volume *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (1947), edited and translated by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, contains none of Weber's early methodological articles, and Bendix's (1977[1960]) intellectual portrait, which sets forth in careful and elaborate detail various parts of Weber's work, makes only sparse, unsystematic references to them. In short, Max Weber's methodology was largely unknown and inaccessible to the epistemologically conscious post-WWII generation of American political scientists<sup>34</sup>.

Strauss and Voegelin presumed they could understand and criticize American political science in light of their prior European experience. Evidently, they were much more interested in settling scores with Weber, a giant whose shadow extended to virtually all philosophical and social scientific controversies that had marked their formative years in interwar Europe, than they were in reading what contemporary American political scientists were writing on matters methodological and epistemological. If they had done so, they would have realized that the dominant influence came from the twin-schools of Viennese logical positivism, whose protagonists Rudolf Carnap and Carl Hempel also emigrated to the US, and Anglo-American analytic philosophy of science (especially the work of R. B. Braithwaite, and Ernest Nagel). From such sources, which espoused the notion of a universally valid logic of scientific explanation, post-WWII behavioral political science derived its

33 This, of course, added to the previous reception of Weber through Talcott Parson's—highly problematic—translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1930. On this topic, see Baehr (2001) and Gerhardt (2007).

34 The thesis that Weber's conception of social science dominated American political science after WWII is, hence, untenable from a historicist intellectual-historical perspective. However, that is not Strauss's and Voegelin's perspective, and one can argue that what they are suggesting is a broader philosophical point where Weber appears as the key transitional figure between the neo-Kantian denouement of German idealism and the emergence of logical positivism. Several passages of Weber (1978, p. 3) "Basic Sociological Terms," originally written in 1920 to serve as the introduction to *Economy and Society*, would indeed substantiate such a claim to the extent that Weber seems to argue that meaning—the proper object of an interpretive sociology—can only be inferred from and validated by the external component of the behavior of social actors. On this issue, see Grafstein's (1981) perceptive article, which nevertheless does not draw the broader philosophical-historical conclusion.

fundamental assumptions. In a critical reexamination, written already with a post-behavioral horizon in view, Almond and Genco summarized these as follows:

(1) that the purpose of science is the discovery of regularities in, and ultimately laws of, social and political processes; (2) that scientific explanation means the deductive subsumption of individual events under "covering laws"; and (3) that the only scientifically relevant relationships between events in the world are those which correspond to a physicalistic conception of causal connection (Almond and Genco, 1977, p. 497–498).

David Easton, isolated as a proponent of the behavioral tradition in post-WWII Chicago, could agree with Strauss on the nefarious effects that historicism had produced in political science<sup>35</sup>. However, what he understood by "historicism" was very different from Strauss's conception. Both argued that political science lacked good theory, but they differed fundamentally on what constitutes "good theory." For Easton (1953, p. 55), theory must help political scientists rise from the unsystematic accumulation of historical facts to the truly scientific task of producing "generalized statements applicable to large numbers of particular cases." To achieve this, political science had to rely on neopositivist epistemology. For Strauss, on the contrary, political theory should be primarily concerned with the rational discovery of a fundamental normative standard—tying political science to the epistemology of modern natural science was a fatal mistake. The restoration of political theory necessitated a return to the classical, pre-modern natural right tradition.

The strong influence that neopositivist philosophy of science exerted upon behavioral political science can be shown by the way in which behaviorists analogically redefined the key concept of power as a causal relationship. In his seminal study, Dahl (1957, p. 202) does quote, in the original German, Weber's definition of domination (*Herrschaft*) as a special case of power (*Macht*), yet what he aims at are not analytically sharp conceptual distinctions, but rather a general, "covering" concept of power under which as many individual instances as possible can be subsumed. Here, Dahl (1957, p. 203) seems to be wary of the "host of problems" that "the possible identity of "power" with "cause"...might give rise to." Elsewhere, however, he states—and emphasizes—that "[w]hen we single out influence [which is synonymous with power] from all other aspects of human interaction," we actually "want to call attention to a causal relationship between what A wants and what B does" (Dahl, 1976[1963], p. 30). Now, Dahl knows only too well that power relationships are not causal relationships in a strict,

35 Indeed, in the preface to *The Political System*, Easton (1953, p. ix) acknowledges his debt to the "friendly criticism and challenging scholarship of Professor Leo Strauss".

deterministic sense, as neopositivist philosophy would have them. Indeed, for the purposes of a political science attuned to the indeterminacy of its ontological base, the concept of power had been much more productively defined by Weber (1978, p. 926) as “the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others” (emphasis added). However, the concern with the scientific status of the discipline led Dahl to conceive of power, in its formal definition, metaphorically as a natural-scientific causal connection.

If Strauss and Voegelin were not really concerned with meeting behavioral political scientists on their own meta-methodological grounds, neither were the latter willing to confront the former’s challenge in any depth. Dahl’s scathing review of Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics* is filled with sentences—and with a tone of false humility—that attests such unwillingness<sup>36</sup>. The American political scientist chooses the easier path of focusing the review on Voegelin’s inflated treatment of Gnosticism—which, strangely enough, he considers “the most solid and challenging part” of the book—instead of responding thoroughly to the polemic against Weber and “positivism” (Dahl, 1955, p. 486). In that regard, Dahl does scarcely more than (1) register his puzzlement concerning Voegelin’s ignorance of the Viennese neopositivist circle<sup>37</sup> and (2) note in passing that the author charges Weber “with crimes he did not commit.” Many years later, in Gabriel Almond’s reflections on the disciplinary history of political science, such an avoidance of a deep engagement with these adversaries persists. In the end of the day, what Strauss and the Straussians—and Voegelin and the Voegelinians—view as political science and its history simply “cannot be taken seriously” (Almond, 1990, p. 29).

36 By way of example: “Does Voegelin have a concept of “causation” or functional dependence different from that of ordinary science... are the tests of “causality” or functional dependence different in the *New Science* from what they are in the old?” (Dahl, 1955, p. 488).

37 One can, to be sure, understand the perplexity, but geographical proximity does not necessarily entail intellectual proximity. There were many philosophical and intellectual circles in fin-de-siècle and interwar Vienna—some intersected, others did not. In any case, Voegelin (and Strauss) were merciless when the occasional neopositivist stepped into the terrain of political philosophy. In a letter written in 1950, Strauss asks Voegelin what he thought about Karl Popper, who had delivered a lecture in Chicago on the tasks of social philosophy that Strauss deemed to be “beneath contempt.” In his reply, Voegelin took the opportunity to write some devastating paragraphs on Popper’s *Open Society and its Enemies*. To quote but one of many similar sentences, Voegelin writes that “Popper is philosophically so uncultured, so fully a primitive ideological brawler, that he is not able even approximately to reproduce correctly the contents of one page of Plato” (Emberley and Cooper, 1993, p. 66–68).

But perhaps it should. Social science methodology and epistemology has undergone many changes since the post-WWII era, and the grand hope of reshaping the social sciences in the image of the natural sciences has been quietly set aside. Furthermore, in the academic philosophy of science, logical positivism has been on the defensive since Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), and today it has practically dissolved as a philosophical movement. Nevertheless, as Bunge (1996, p. 317) argues, “logical positivism remains the tacit philosophy of many scientists,” including many social and political scientists. The main tenets of that “tacit philosophy,” such as the sharp dichotomies between fact and value and between the subject and the object of knowledge, have undergone relentless criticism not only by antimodern conservatives, but also by neo or post-Marxist “critical” theory, phenomenology and feminist epistemology. However, the antimodern position set forth by Strauss and Voegelin represents arguably the most radical challenge to the self-understanding of contemporary political science. If political scientists intend—as I believe they must—to maintain that there is a difference, albeit not a rigid dichotomy, between fact and value, a difference that sustains a shifting and precarious border between the domains of political science and activism, they must work on—and from within—a mature theory of modernity, one which avoids the dual danger of positivist self-complacency and irrationalist despair. Such a theory must acknowledge the inescapable immersion of political science in a specific—and specifically modern—political form of society, and at the same time reveal that such an immersion is not tantamount to a full absorption of the scientific by the political. This is surely not an easy task, but it is a necessary one.

## Conclusions

The migration of reactionary antimodern thought from the European to the American continent presents us with a puzzling scene. Surprisingly, authors such as Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin made a tremendous impact on American conservative political ideology. This influence, as I have shown, pushed conservative thought not only in an anti-liberal, but ultimately also in an antidemocratic direction, which has reached its latest station in ideological Trumpism. On the other hand, the academic discipline which harbored these antimodern scholars in America has remained largely indifferent to the intellectual challenge they posed to the profession. No real effort was made by political scientists to read them with an open mind and a searching, critical spirit, just as they themselves did not show such a spirit when they challenged mainstream political science. But there is still time to break this vicious, non-communicative circle. In the present context of anxiety over the fate of democracy, many political scientists struggle to

conciliate their scientific scholarly identity with their democratic political preferences. What we need, I believe, is a mature and nuanced theory of modernity, capable of withstanding the antimodern challenge and gaining an intellectual horizon where we are not torn between the simple alternative of returning to the absolute truth of a natural law or accepting that our normative preferences are ultimately arbitrary and rationally unjustifiable.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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