
Who Is Leo Strauss?

Strauss and the Straussians

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Professor Havers's defense of Leo Strauss against his historicist critics offers considerable food for thought. Although Havers says nothing here that has not already been aired, his words are sufficiently provocative to warrant examination. We are told that Strauss's historically minded critics, particularly Claes Ryn and I, have been unfair to him on several counts, confusing what he said with misrepresentations perpetrated by his self-described students, treating Strauss's defense of "liberal democracy" as inconsistent with conservative thinking, and ignoring those apparently favorable references to aristocratic and religious traditions that occasionally surface in Strauss's work. Havers appends material on political theorist and rightwing populist Willmoore Kendall, who embraced Straussian teachings and also the Catholic faith. While Kendall was a fascinating mid-twentieth-century historical figure, whose writings on the American political experience continue to be studied, it is hard to see how a defense of his thinking contributes appreciably to a vindication of Strauss. It therefore may be permissible to leave him out of the discussion and to go immediately to the heart of our critic's complaint.

Havers correctly observes that I challenge the claim made for Strauss as a conservative and do so partly by adducing Strauss's attacks on Burke and historical conservatism. But if my critic wishes to engage my arguments, he should not be confining himself to a few excerpts from Joe Scotchie's anthology. Although

Strauss's conservatism belied by his attacks on Burke.

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Scotchie's work is to be commended for throwing light on contemporary Old Right thinkers, it offers no more than scattered excerpts from my remarks on the Straussians. I certainly have done other, more detailed expositions on this subject. My book *The Search for Historical Meaning*, an essay on Strauss and Hans Morgenthau in an anthology commemorating Morgenthau that appeared last year, and my reviews in *Modern Age* and *Catholica* of Ryn's *America the Virtuous* all state at considerable length my critical views about Strauss as a political teacher. These sources also contain the documentation for my interpretation of Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, which Havers maintains I interpret unfairly. The ties between Strauss's position on "liberal democracy" and his experience in Weimar Germany do not seem to me as self-evident as they do to Havers. Strauss's praise of contemporary American democracy and of what he takes to be its Lockean foundations first surfaces in his Walgreen Lectures in 1950, a text that was later turned into *Natural Right and History*. I see no evidence of a consuming enthusiasm for democracy in Strauss's earlier work, for example, his study of Hobbes. This study, which is in fact my favorite book by Strauss, comes from the mid-thirties when the author was fleeing from the Nazis. However, one can cite an attempt (which is not entirely convincing) in one of Strauss's last publications to present Thucydides in a discussion of his *Histories* as an engaged democrat, committed to popular government. That work came many decades after Strauss's flight from Germany. It might be advisable not to draw too close a connection between the rise of Nazism and Strauss's emphasis on the goodness of the American political model expressed many years later. What I am suggesting is not that Strauss never sounded like his disciples, who make a universal religion out of American democracy. Rather, I am proposing that this enthusiasm was less obsessive in the master and probably not directly traceable to his response to the collapse of the Weimar Republic. Thucydides warns with considerable justification in the *Histories* (Book One), "Thus the investigation of historical truth proceeds effortlessly [*atalaiporos*] for most people, who happily turn to what is ready at hand [*epi ta hetoima trepontai mallon*]."

From my writings, it should be clear why I consider Strauss's "return to the classics" less than what is claimed for it. To me his publicized turning back to antiquity was largely about reading

“Return to classics” a means of reading eighteenth-century rationalism back into ancient texts.

eighteenth-century rationalism back into ancient texts. Socrates and Plato, as seen through the interpretive lenses of Strauss and his students, can no longer be viewed as pre-moderns, or as thinkers who pointed to those eternal ideals that hover above and render intelligible the material world. Strauss leaves us with a picture of Plato, as a questioning skeptic, which points forward to the modern interpreter rather than backward. Moreover, Strauss’s emphasis on “esoteric” readings allows for the unjustified ascription of *his* attitudes and values to premodern authors, and those “truths” that the Straussians wish us to venerate reveal their own late modern ideological preferences—now decked out as “human rights”—rather than what most of their pre-modern authors were likely to have believed.

A point I have tried to document over decades is that Straussianism, from the founder onward, is dubious as a methodology and unrelated to what I can recognize as either “conservative” or interpretively persuasive. The fact that Strauss’s disciples typically behave thuggishly (not to mince words) when put into an academic setting is not at all surprising. Many of them are no more concerned about the life of the mind than were the party officials assigned to German universities under the Third Reich. What most, albeit not all, Straussians do in academic positions is to try to enforce political dogmas, partly by getting rid of critics and installing fellow Straussians. Although one can find exceptions to this impression, it is difficult to think of many.

A term that needs clarification, because it has begun to function, particularly among Straussians, as a god term, is “liberal democracy.” When confronted with that term, I am never quite sure to what it is supposed to refer. Does it designate the type of mixed regime that the Constitution’s architects had in mind, one that combines popular government with built-in checks, dual sovereignty, and other arrangements that now operate as a shadow of what they once were? If so, why don’t we call that regime “constitutional republicanism,” which is what the Founders preferred to call their work. Perhaps the Straussians wish us to honor something substantially different from this model, the consolidated central government, increasingly run by administrators and judges, into which the American government has developed, particularly since the Progressive Era. Now it is entirely possible to admire what George Carey has called the “original design” while despising

ing what has taken its place. And one can do this without forfeiting the claim to accept popular government in some circumstances as highly desirable. The point I am making is that being against what the Straussians call “liberal democracy” does not show that one is hostile to popular government in general. It means that one opposes a particular distortion of self-rule and the pretence that this distortion is the real article.

*Straussians’
vagueness on
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with Ameri-
can Founders.*

Finally, I would stress that in this case as in others one knows the tree by the fruit that it bears. Like most generalizations, including even those derived from the Bible, this one may require some qualification. Sometimes would-be disciples twist particular thinkers, and radically divergent followers have laid claim to the same master. Thus Nazis and anti-Nazis both cited Luther, Nietzsche, and Hegel with usable text proofs. While one might blame the masters in question for being ambiguous or intemperate in their statements and lending themselves to movements that they would not have welcomed, we may also be describing the fate of many great thinkers who have left behind sources to be mined. The fact that Jefferson provided texts for the fascist enthusiast Ezra Pound and for American Marxists does not prove that he would have thrown in his lot with either. Past figures serve as authorities to be cited, even for causes that were not theirs.

In Strauss’s case, however, the paternity seems to fit more than it does for other figures. Most of his disciples who invoke his works, and in most cases studied with him or his students, bear a sociological and ideological resemblance to each other that must strike any honest commentator. The prominent Straussians who are not urban Jewish Scoop Jackson Democrats (or, today, neocon Republicans), preoccupied with Israeli “security” and American support for the Israeli right, are the exceptions. And some of those who do not entirely fit the stereotype have Jewish spouses and express the same enthusiasm and concerns. The Arabist, and methodological Straussian, Charles Buttersworth, Herbert Storing, and George Anastaplo are three exceptions to this rule of whom I am well aware. As a widely publicized assessment of his teacher two months after his death done by Anastaplo makes abundantly clear, the intense Jewish nationalism that marks his most devoted disciples animated Strauss as well, and thus an elective affinity based on something beyond the quest for truth or “political philosophy” brought Strauss and his students together.

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Everything I have seen of the Straussians over the years leads me to the unfortunate conclusion that they are agenda-driven political intellectuals. And they have taken over what they have occupied of the American right because others have given in to them. Those on that doubtful right deferred to their leadership out of fear of being tarred with an anti-Semitic or racist brush or because of the neoconservative funding that Straussians brought to "conservative" institutions and organizations, with strings attached, and which then worked as a mixed blessing.

Their ascent to influence has come about not because Straussians sound like Edmund Burke, Irving Babbitt, Russell Kirk or even Robert Taft—or indeed like anyone as far to the right as a classical liberal. Many Straussians now would be associated with the official left except for two complicating factors. The Democrats are less inclined than the Republicans to push the war policies favored by the Straussians. Although this reluctance may be due to their preoccupation with social questions at home, the Democrats are less open than the Bushites to Straussian imperial projects at the present time, if not necessarily for the future. Moreover, the establishment right and its Republican organizational structure have become scavengers, living off yesterday's leftist rhetoric. What Ryn calls the "new Jacobinism" of the neoconservative- and Straussian-controlled pseudo-Right is no longer "new." It is the warmed-over rhetoric of Saint-Juste and Trotsky that the philosophically impoverished American right has taken over with mindless alacrity. Republican operators and think tanks apparently believe they can carry the electorate by appealing to yesterday's leftist clichés. But the Straussian grid into which they have placed themselves should not be confused with any intelligible or historical right. Nor should Leo Strauss be placed on this side, to whatever extent he shared the views of his disciples.