The cryptic cold war realism of Leo Strauss

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Abstract  This paper seeks to shed light upon recent controversies concerning Leo Strauss’ alleged influence on contemporary American and global politics. It exposes and analyses Strauss’ trenchant critique of liberal modernity and then offers a critical discussion on the nature of his legacy and the reception of his ideas in the United States since the 1950s. It is argued that although there are very good reasons to be anxious about the political implications of his ideas, when understood in the cultural and intellectual context of Weimar Germany and post-war America, Strauss’ philosophical enterprise is more ambiguous than it has been suggested by his most fervent detractors in recent feuds over America’s ‘war on terror’. To the extent that Strauss has anything to do with contemporary politics and international relations, the analysis presented here suggests that his influence has less to do with the Bush administration’s war cabinet than with the long-drawn efforts of neo-conservative intellectuals to foment the political and socio-cultural conditions that have facilitated the ‘re-nationalisation’ of America and its incremental departure from the socio-economic and geopolitical pacts of the post-war period since the 1970s.


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Introduction

Few thinkers of the 20th century have had so controversial an impact on America’s intellectual and political landscape as Leo Strauss. Indeed, according to the historian of Jewish America Murray Friedman, Strauss is the one political philosopher who had the greatest influence on the development of Jewish conservatism and the broader conservative movement in the United States since the end of the Second World War (2005, p. 40). As a thinker, Strauss left behind a radical critique of modern liberalism that raises unsettling questions about the prospects and even desirability of the enlightened ideals so closely tied to the fate of the American nation-state
and the liberal world order instituted by the United States and its allies in 1945. Revolving around the tensions and dynamics between politics, philosophy and religious faith, his analysis of the shortcomings of liberalism and modernity appears timelier now than ever.

Yet, over past 15 years or so it is not Strauss’s legacy as a thinker that has received the most attention, but his legacy as an educator. During his time as a teacher at the New School for Social Research (1938–1949), the University of Chicago (1949–1968) and St-John’s College in Annapolis (1969–1972), Strauss earned himself a large following of dedicated students, many of whom went on to become teachers themselves in North American universities and contributed to the development of a ‘Straussian’ school in political science, which is now at least three generations old. In more recent years, a significant number of so-called Straussians have preferred Washington’s corridors of power to those of the university and went on to serve in high-ranking positions in Republican administrations (although a few have served with the Democrats) whereas others have become key players in the network of conservative and neo-conservative think thanks and media organizations, which is in great part responsible for the political success and influence of the Right in America since the early 1980s (Devigne, 1994; Deutsch and Murley, 1999; Lilla, 2004).

Although Strauss had relatively little to say about America and the realm of international relations as such, the growth of Straussianism as a school of political thought and its link to the neo-conservative movement and the Republican Party has led to a wide range of contentious claims about Strauss’s alleged influence on American politics and foreign policy since the late 1980s. Conspiratorial charges against Strauss have been particularly extravagant in the aftermath of 9/11 as observers on both sides of the Atlantic identified this former pupil of Carl Schmitt as the Machiavellian mastermind behind the ‘neo-conservative presidency’ of George W. Bush and the deceptive intelligence that led to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to the University of Pennsylvania Professor Anne Norton, for instance, Strauss’ teachings at the University of Chicago have sowed the seed of an ‘enthusiasm for empire’ in the mind of some of his brightest students which germinated into a full fledged plan ‘to establish a new world order to rival Rome’ and eventually took American troops into Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11 (Norton, 2005, pp. 186, 179). Along similar lines, the international relations scholar Jim George maintains that Strauss’s intellectual legacy was ‘integral to the processes by which the ‘shock and awe’ attacks of March 2003 were rationalised and legitimated within the Bush administration, via some eminently (ign)oble lies’ (George, 2005, p. 175). George’s own account relies heavily on the work of the Canadian professor of political philosophy Shadia Drury who made a career out of a highly polemical, but very influential
interpretation of Strauss’ work and its impact on US politics (Drury, 1988, 1994, 1997). According to Drury, the link between Strauss and the Bush administration’s war on terror is straightforward and hinges on two main facts. First, just as ‘Leo Strauss was a great believer in the efficacy and usefulness of lies in politics’, ‘Public support for the Iraq War rested on lies about Iraq posing an imminent threat to the United States – the business about weapons of mass destruction and a fictitious alliance between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime’. And secondly, the political realism of Thrasy machus and Machiavelli that Strauss defends in his books is ‘clearly manifest in the foreign policy of the current administration in the United States’ (Drury, 2003).

Needless to say, these allegations are at best intellectually lazy and at worst plainly absurd. Like Plato (or at least his Plato), Strauss did indeed believe that lying and the esoteric style of writing was preferable to disseminating philosophical truths that could endanger social order by calling into question the most fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie the ‘common sense’ of a society. But it is a very long way from his interpretation of Plato to the Bush administration’s imperial crusades and dishonest justification of the Iraq War. Deceit in wartime is hardly a Straussian theme. To establish such a direct and de-contextualized translation between Strauss’s esoteric hermeneutics and the contingent world of politics and military strategy is overly simplistic and deeply misleading (see Owens, 2007). Lies and Machiavellian strategic calculations have always been important components US foreign policy making (see Hoff, 2007). From a theoretical perspective, there is indeed something attractive about the identification of one single philosophical mastermind that would have inspired the most controversial aspects of the Bush administration’s response to the attacks of 9/11. But this obscures the more mundane and more complex reality of a set of policies developed by statesmen who hardly had to read Strauss to justify promoting democracy through military action.

On the other hand, it is a well-documented fact that Strauss has been and continues to be an important source of inspiration for some of the leading intellectual figures in neo-conservative circles (see, for example, Kristol, 1983, p. 76; Deutsch and Murley, 1999; Lenzner and Kristol, 2003; Fukuyama, 2006, Chapter 2). And it is precisely because this issue of intellectual lineage between the authoritarian intellectual milieu of Weimar and American post-war conservatism is so important that it should not be unreflexively reduced to a momentary ‘cabal’ of well-positioned politicians willing to deceive the masses in the name of liberal democracy. For, such conspiratorial interpretations of the Straussian legacy deceptively depreciate the intellectual depth of both Strauss’ work and neo-conservative thought. Ultimately, it prevents us from appreciating the more complex, diffused and perhaps more pervasive nature
of Strauss’ influence on what has been one of the leading political factions within the American Right since the 1970s. Coming to the Right with a leftist background in the 1960s, neo-conservatives have drawn upon Strauss’ critique of liberal modernity, as well as on a wide range of other sources, and for the first time in the United States elevated conservatism to the status of intellectual respectability (Steinfels, 1979; Walzer, 1979, p. 5; Habermas, 1985, p. 22). As one observer recently noted, today this new conservatism is no longer the purview of a minority: ‘it has become hegemonic in the public discourse, has displaced a waning post-war liberalism as a public philosophy, and has succeeded in attaining political and ideological power in many branches of government and within many of the organs of the public sphere’ (Thompson, 2007, p. 2; see also Himmelstein, 1990; Diamond, 1995; Edwards, 1999; Abrams, 2006). And it should be emphasized here that the end of the so-called ‘neo-conservative moment’ in US foreign policy is by no means the same thing as the end of neo-conservative politics. Even after Iraq, and to the great despair of the ‘harder’ American Right (Gottfried, 2007), neo-conservatism is still very much the official mouthpiece of the broader conservative movement in the editorial pages of mainstream newspapers like the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post as well as on TV news channels like Fox and CNN. And they have certainly not changed their tune (see Daalder and Kagan, 2007; Muravchik, 2007; Kristol, 2008).

This paper explores Strauss’ complex legacy as a thinker and seeks to provide a more nuanced assessment of what might have been his intentional and inadvertent influence on the development of neo-conservative thought. It exposes Strauss’s critique of liberal modernity against the background of his coming of age in the short-lived Republic of Weimar (1919–1933) and his life as a German-Jewish émigré in post-war America, and then concludes with a discussion of the reception of his ideas in the United States since the 1950s. Like Drury, Norton, George and many other critics, I argue that there are very good reasons to be anxious about Strauss’ Platonic practices. However, I maintain that Strauss’ intellectual legacy is much more ambiguous and his influence on neo-conservatism and US foreign policy much less systematic than it is has been suggested by his most fervent detractors in recent feuds over America’s ‘war on terror’. I argue that to the extent Strauss bears any responsibility for the course of contemporary American politics, this has less to do with the Bush administration’s war cabinet and more with the long-drawn efforts of neo-conservative intellectuals to foment the political and socio-cultural conditions that have facilitated the ‘re-nationalisation’ of America and its incremental departure from the socio-economic and geopolitical pacts of the post-war period over the past three decades or so.
Modernity and the ‘Crises of Our Times’

Leo Strauss was born into an assimilated orthodox Jewish family in 1899 in Kirchain, Hessen, a rural area of Germany. He made his intellectual debut in Zionist circles where he published a number of texts on Jewish religion and politics after serving in the German army during the First World War. Strauss left Germany in 1932 after receiving a Rockefeller grant (upon the recommendation of Carl Schmitt) to do research in France until 1934, and then England where he lived until 1937. The Nazi takeover and the subsequent outbreak of World War II prevented him from returning to Germany and eventually compelled him to seek refuge in the United States in 1938 where he settled and remained until his death in 1973.

Like Hannah Arendt, Hans Morgenthau, Eric Voegelin and a number of other Jewish émigré intellectuals who came of age in Weimar Germany, Strauss saw America with continental eyes. He arrived in the United States with vivid memories of total war, ethnic cleansing and totalitarianism as well as a first hand experience of the vulnerability and weaknesses of liberal democracy in the face of such upheavals. As he recalls in the autobiographical introduction to his study of Spinoza’s biblical criticism, the collapse of the Weimar Republic on the night of the Reichstag fire was a grim deception for all Jews. Thought to be the regime that would guarantee not only the security of Jews but of all minorities, liberal democracy had been welcome by most as a progressive move away from the state-sponsored religious discrimination of previous eras. For the first time, Jews were granted equal rights and full citizenship without having to relinquish their right to remain Jews. Yet, Strauss argues that by confining religion to the private sphere and endorsing a ‘universal human morality’, Weimar in fact fostered conditions that were favourable to organized oppression and eventually totalitarianism. For, although the separation between the public and the private that underpins liberal democratic institutions had ensured political rights, it created a space for the unconstrained pursuit of private interest in which one was free to discriminate and hate as he pleased. In Strauss’ view, the liberal privatization of conscience that underpinned Weimar had been one of the conditions of possibility for the emergence a political regime that ‘had no other clear principle than murderous hatred of the Jews’ (Strauss, 1965, pp. 2–3).

Strauss saw Weimar as a tragic symbol of the Enlightenment’s failure to do away with revealed religious truths and to secularize the state (and inter-state relations). In its pursuit of reason, enlightenment scepticism concluded that one could not travel the road of reason and faith at one and the same time. Either one follows reason on the path of atheism or one chooses faith and abandons reason. But Strauss argued that this was a misconceived dilemma that had led modern rationalism to its own destruction. Emphasizing the
inability of rationalism to ground the legitimacy of its own activity in reason, Strauss insisted that no one ever succeeded in demonstrating the impossibility of God’s existence by appealing to principles derived from human reason alone. The Enlightenment’s refutation of religious orthodoxy relied on premises that are just as arbitrary or irrational than the claims of revelation; faith and reason thus never succeeded in refuting one another. For Strauss, enlightenment was a question of choice. It was the choice of particular and historically situated societies to what he called the ‘theological – political question’. As he put it, ‘philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of will, just as faith. Hence the antagonism…between belief and unbelief, is ultimately not theoretical, but moral’. Strauss insisted that the choice of enlightenment over the laws of revealed religion had serious consequences. The Enlightenment’s doctrinal worship of reason had led to a world without any commanding truth in which all opinions are deemed of equal worth and uninhibited individualism is the norm. This created a moral void at the heart of modern societies. And in Weimar, it facilitated the rise of Fascism (1968, pp. 254–255).

By the time he arrived in America, Strauss had come to the conclusion that the collapse of Weimar and the self-destruction of reason were ‘the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from premodern rationalism, especially Jewish-medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) formulation’ (1965, p. 31). In contrast to classical rationalism, Strauss argued, modern rationalism is bent on making man ‘the master and owner of nature’ and on liberating ‘man completely from all non-human bonds’ (p. 30). Classical political philosophers understood the ultimate end of human life as the contemplation of the order of the cosmos and the rightful place of man within this order. They knew very well that achieving such a way of life was practically impossible and that no sciences or arts could provide effective guidance in establishing the kind of socio-political order that would allow for the realization of this way of life. Nevertheless, the ancients remained faithful to the idea that the best life was a life guided by utopian reflections upon the nature of the good life. Strauss argued that moderns rejected the classical view in favour of an interpretation of the ultimate end of human life, which is no longer based on the imaginary kingdoms of Plato or God but on the satisfaction of man’s natural desires and passions here and now. By ‘lowering’ their sight as to what type of socio-political order can actually be achieved in this earthly life given the right technology of government, moderns reduced the scope of political philosophy from an investigation into moral and political problems to a technical enterprise. Along the way, moderns effectively substituted historical consciousness and human self-assertion for moral virtue as the core value of Western civilization and transformed the beatific sentiment of communion
with nature of the ancients into a terrifying sense of meaninglessness (Strauss, 1975).

Strauss believed that the same crisis of moral relativism that had facilitated the collapse of Weimar was looming over post-war America and threatened to undermine its will to fight a long protracted struggle against communism (1975, 98). Writing some 10 years after the end of the Second World War, Strauss argues that this crisis ‘consists in the West having lost confidence in its purpose’ (1978, p. 3). This purpose he identifies with a number of well known official declarations made during the two world wars – Woodrow Wilson’s 14 points immediately comes to mind – which aspired to a ‘universal league of free and equal nations, each nations consisting of free and equal men and women’ (p. 4). He insists that he does not wish to imply that a healthy society necessarily has to be dedicated to a universal purpose. What he means is that ‘a society which was accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming completely bewildered’ (p. 3).

According to Strauss, the West’s lost of confidence has been triggered primarily by the external threat of communism and the instability inherent to modern liberal democracies in the face of ‘the experience of communism’. From communism, the West has learned that the extension of democracy to the whole planet and the concomitant establishment of the universal or classless state – a promised shared by liberalism – could only lead to despotism. Those who initially thought that the difference between communism and liberalism was a matter of degree – that is, that it strictly concerned the means to achieve the universal free society – came to realize that the ends of communism were inseparable from the means used to achieve it. Communism has taught the West a valuable lesson about the natural limits of the scale of political society and demonstrated that, ‘in the foreseeable future, there cannot be a universal state, unitary or federative’. In words that could have been those of E.H. Carr or Hans Morgenthau, Strauss argues that exaggerated faith in the United Nations in fact poses a great danger to the peaceful and prosperous order that this so-called ‘federation of peace-loving nations’ is meant to bring about. The juridification of the international system and the outlawing of wars of aggression by this ‘incomplete’ federation of nations, which he thought had been made plausible by the prospect of total nuclear annihilation, would have to rest upon the claim that all present national borders are just. This assumption, Strauss argues, ‘is a pious fraud of which the fraudulence is more evident than the piety... Political society remains what it has always been: a partial or particular society whose most urgent and primary task is self-preservation and whose highest task is its self-improvement’ (p. 5).

As if he had anticipated the postmodern theses of Lyotard and Foucault, Strauss argued that the doubt of the modern project was both a cause and a
consequence of modern social science. As he explained, the West’s loss of confidence has ‘acquired the status of scientific exactitude’ when social science abandoned its ideal of a ‘universal and prosperous society’ as ‘the rational solution of the human problem’ because of its professed incapacity ‘to validate any value judgement proper’. At that moment, the modern project and with it the purpose of the West became mere ideology. Freed from its moral and political responsibility by a misconceived relegation of all values to the realm of arbitrary taste and preference, modern social science only overcomes ‘the crisis of our times’ by ignoring it. Yet in doing so, it only furthered that crisis (pp. 6–7).

Strauss was particularly concerned by the steady degeneration of liberal democracy into a ‘creeping conformism’ (1988, p. 38). Modern liberalism, he complained, has transformed liberal democracy into rule through mass culture, a culture controlled by the media and commercial interests that gratifies the lowest desires of society. Originally, he argued, democracy ‘meant to be an aristocracy which has broadened into a universal aristocracy’ (1968, p. 4). By this he meant a democracy in which everybody has had the benefits of ‘liberal education’ – the type of knowledge, virtues and intellectual capacities, which provide the restraint and sobriety necessary for democracy to be viable in the long run. Strauss attributed the decay of liberal democracy to the egalitarian impulse of modern liberalism. As he argued, liberal education presupposes a certain hierarchy of intellectual aptitudes. It is inevitably elitist and therefore incompatible with egalitarian principles. Strauss offered no easy way out of this predicament. As he argued, ‘We must not expect that liberal education can ever become universal education’ (p. 24). For the elitist nature of liberal education necessarily limits both its appeal and transformative power. Our best hope, Strauss believed, rested with the nurturing of an ‘aristocracy within mass democratic society’ (p. 5). As one commentator explains, Strauss thought that through liberal education for the few gifted ones and religious education for the masses ‘citizens and leaders of a liberal democracy could affirm a moral centre’ (McAllister, 1995, p. 168).

**Strauss’ Cryptic Realist Doctrine**

Although Strauss was not much of a contextualist himself, it should be apparent to the sensitive reader that his intellectual critique of modernity, in its discussion of communism, egalitarianism and loyalty to one’s regime, must be read as a response to some of the most pressing international and domestic political issues of the 1950s and 1960s. Walter Lippmann, for instance, read and praised Strauss’s magnum opus, *Natural Right and History* (1971 [1953]), as a much needed attempt to steer American public philosophy away from the
Deweyan progressivism that dominated the intellectual landscape at the time (Smith, 2006, p. 3). For Lippmann, as for many other realist Cold Warriors such as Niebuhr, Kennan and Morgenthau, progressivism was a waiving intellectual child of liberal modernity dangerously inadequate for the coming struggle against the Soviet Union (Lippmann, 1955). It fostered a value relativism that threatened to dissolve the so-called ‘vital centre’ – that ‘place where the diverse interests of the body politic were unified’ and projected an uninspiring image of America abroad (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 49). As Lippmann argued, if America was to meet the ideological challenge of communism, it had to exert influence ‘in the outer world by demonstrating at home that the largest and most complex modern society can solve the problems of modernity’ (cited in Ambrose and Brinkley, 1997, p. 217).

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss seems to be suggesting that America is the best candidate to lead the re-orientation of Western civilization. He argues that the American regime has some classical antecedents which have been important sources of stability since its founding in 1776. However, he warns that the growing prestige of positivism in American universities, coupled with the waning of religious support and republican virtues, was disturbing the fragile balance of modern and premodern beliefs that had for so long protected American liberal democracy against the excesses of modern rationalism (Strauss, 1971).

Yet although Strauss abhorred positivism for its mediocre understanding of the social world, it is above all historicism that he saw as the main intellectual force responsible for the decline of America, and indeed the West as a whole. *Natural Right and History* makes a case for the continuing relevance of the classical understanding of natural right and proposes to renew our appreciation for the pre-philosophic experience of nature as the universal ontological foundation for all philosophical knowledge. Central to his appeal to classical natural right is the claim that there exists by nature a best life which man, once emancipated from ‘the experience of history’ and the artifice of modern scientific construction, can discover by following his most intuitive sense of nobility and baseness. ‘The ‘experience of history”, Strauss writes, ‘and the less ambiguous experience of the complexity of human affairs may blur, but they cannot extinguish, the evidence of those simple experiences regarding right and wrong, which are at the bottom of the philosophical contention that there is a natural right’ (1971, pp. 31–32). It is important to emphasize that Strauss does not claim with certainty that there is in fact a transcendent natural right waiting to be discovered or recovered by means of intellectual investigation. As he explains, ‘The fact that reason compels us to go beyond the ideal of our society does not yet guarantee that in taking this step we shall not be confronted with a void or with a multiplicity of incompatible and equally justifiable principles of ‘natural right’” (p. 6). Rather, his argument is that the
nihilistic consequences of abandoning the possibility of natural right are much
worse than being confronted with an assortment of competing and equally
justifiable claims about the good life.

Very much influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, Strauss recovery of natural right rests on the suggestion that moderns have
created through education and training over time a set of emotional and
intellectual habits – a sort of artificial screen – which distorts how participants
engaged in political life actually make sense of this experience and leaves them
utterly at loss with respect to the most fundamental questions about how one
ought to live one’s life (p. 79). Yet despite the pivotal role of the concept of
nature in his work, Strauss does not offer a clear and straightforward definition
of what constitutes the ‘natural’. In fact, he argues that it is neither possible to
grasp the notion of nature in all its determinations nor to come to a fully
achieved natural right doctrine (pp. 6–8). Strauss’s ontological enterprise takes
the form a critical examination of the givens of human experiences and
proceeds dialectically through pre-philosophic political life to show how the
ancient sought access to nature and to demonstrate how from prejudices,
intellectual disputes, and the exposition of inconsistencies and contradictory
‘opinions about the whole’ one can ascend to ‘knowledge about the whole’
(1988, p. 11). Natural right, Strauss argues, arises out of a fundamental clash of
opinions concerning what constitutes the good and the just life. These
opinions, Strauss insists, are not mere preferences. They are derived from the
way that different people live the experience of right and wrong in their
everyday life. ‘The disagreement regarding the principles of justice thus seems
to reveal a genuine perplexity aroused by a divination or insufficient grasp of
natural right, a perplexity caused by something self-subsistent or natural that
eludes human grasp’ (1971, p. 100). The classic natural right teaching emerges
out of this awareness of the limits of one’s knowledge and the need to respond
to this perplexity. Natural right, in other words, is the way that nature shows

So we see here that the natural right to which Strauss appeals to ground his
normative enterprise has in fact nothing to do with the traditional notion of a
transcendent natural law – that is, a set of moral principles grounded in man’s
most elementary physical needs and desires, especially his desire for self-
preservation (the doctrine of the rights of man as originally conceived).
Neither, however, is it congruent with Kant’s attempt to disconnect moral laws
from man’s most basic instincts and link it to motives that could be completely
independent from nature – that is, established purely on the basis of a spiritual
or intellectual causality (the categorical imperative). As John Gunnell noted,
the natural in Strauss refers not so much to a specific set of moral principles as
to the ‘demands that (are) coincident with the naturalness or givenness of the
political and its relationship to other orders of existence such as the social and
religious’ (1974, p. 70). Morality, in other words, is subsumed to or derivative of the political. It cannot transcend the political order and thus remain grounded in the particularities of a given political society. Thus, just like for Machiavelli political life could not be lined up to the demands of Christian morality, political life for Strauss cannot be lined up with the demands of philosophy. Although the best life is the philosophical life, what is right is what is in tune with the demands of the political life. Natural right has to do with concrete decisions made by political leaders in concrete situations. As Strauss put it in a revealing passage of *Natural Right and History*:

> In extreme situations there may be conflicts between what the self-preservation of society requires and the requirements of commutative and distributive justice. In such situations, and only in such situations, it can be said that the public safety is the highest law. A decent society will not go to war except for a just cause. But what it will do during a war will depend to a certain extent on what the enemy – possibly an absolutely unscrupulous enemy – forces it to do. There are no limits which can be defined in advance, there are no assignable limits to what might become just reprisals… But societies are not only threatened from without. Considerations which apply to foreign enemies may well apply to subversive elements within society. Let us leave these sad exigencies covered with the veil with which they are justly covered. It suffice to repeat that in extreme situations the normally valid rules of natural right are justly changed, or changed in accordance with natural right; the exceptions are just as the rules. (1971, p. 169)

In fact, Strauss’s appeal to natural right is a more or less disguised reformulation of his moralization of Carl Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, which he published over two decades earlier in the midst of the constitutional crisis of Weimar (Strauss, 1996 [1932]). And it is worth briefly revisiting this text here to understand the radical and particularly moralizing brand of political realism that his whole intellectual enterprise generates and that, I contend, is strongly echoed in contemporary neo-conservative foreign policy discourses.

**Moralizing the Political**

In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt argued that the pluralist character of the liberal state allows an interpenetration of state and society that is conducive to the disintegration of the state’s centre of sovereignty and thereby negates the conditions necessary for the existence of the political as a decisive entity (1996
(1927), p. 27). He argued that pluralism of association necessarily leads to a situation in which one ‘association is played off against another and all questions and conflicts are decided by individuals’ rather than by one overarching sovereign (p. 45). Writing in the near civil war context of Weimar, Schmitt maintained that the pluralistic conjectures of liberal theories and practices fail to appreciate the ‘objective nature and autonomy of the political’ and thus transformed civil society into a sort of second state of nature in which the ‘war of all against all’ is projected at the level of inter-group conflicts (p. 29). In his view, the liberal belief that one can ‘reach common agreement through debates and exchange of opinion’ rather than through a conflict over the normative and cultural content of the community was deeply misleading. All political solutions arrived at through compromises and rational communications are bound to be only temporary, never decisive. And when perpetually deferred or camouflaged by moral and universal pretences, Schmitt argued, the political always re-surfaces in a more clandestine, but often even more destructive form. So that in Schmitt’s neo-Hobbesian world, the rationale of sovereign power no longer consists of providing the condition for domestic peace. Rather, it consists of establishing the content of the cultural community by deciding on the distinction between friend and enemy – an activity, which defines the political as such. For Schmitt, just like the sphere of morality can be reduced to good and evil and that of aesthetics to beautiful and ugly, the sphere of the political is reducible to the friend – enemy distinction. As he famously put it, the political refers to ‘the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend–enemy grouping’ (p. 29).

Thus, in this setting, what makes an issue political rather than an economic, administrative or cultural one is the intensity with which one relates to the issue in question. It is its elevation to the status of a life and death struggle over the survival of the cultural community.

On this basis, Schmitt strongly doubted the possibility and most definitely rejected the desirability of a community of mankind. He insisted that just as the political cannot be avoided, there will always be a multiplicity of states. For him, the idea of a world state was incoherent because the concept of the state – based on the friend–enemy distinction – presupposes otherness (p. 53). Schmitt stressed that humanity has no enemy on this earth and therefore cannot be treated as a political category (p. 54). Wars fought in the name of humanity, he argued, are but moralizing ideological chimeras that in fact express the political in its most vicious guise. Schmitt was adamant that the political domain had to remain uncontaminated by other spheres of existence, exempt from moral and rational justifications. For, when imbued with morality the political takes its most destructive and intense form. In other words, the enemy in Schmitt has no normative content. It is simply other. As
Gopal Balakrishnan observed, Schmitt’s thesis rests upon a ‘minimal ethics: not love your neighbour; but respect your enemy’ (2000, p. 108).

Strauss’s *Notes on the Concept of the Political* (1996) remains one of the most incisive commentaries on Schmitt’s work to this day. It is both reproving and flattering at one and the same time, and it has had a significant impact on Schmitt’s own subsequent work (Meier, 1995). Like Schmitt, Strauss had little time for the illusory security of a modern liberal world of leisure and comfort. In his essay, Strauss praises Schmitt for asserting the primacy of the political and for his defence of the state against liberalism’s culture of entertainment, which by constantly deferring quarrels about the most fundamental issues is stripping the world of all its seriousness. In a passage that sums up what would become one of the founding propositions of Straussian political philosophy, he reformulates Schmitt’s emphasis on the primacy of the political with words that capture both his appreciation of Schmitt’s thesis as well as the essence of his criticism:

> Agreement at all costs is possible only as agreement at the cost of the meaning of human life; for agreement at all costs is possible only if man has relinquished the question of what is right; and if man relinquishes that question, he relinquishes being a man. But if he seriously asks the question of what is right, the quarrel will be ignited, the life-and-death quarrel: the political – the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies – owes its legitimation to the seriousness of the question of what is right. (p. 103)

Strauss rejects the ‘minimal ethics’ that Schmitt derives from the exemption of the political from the moral sphere. For him, ‘The affirmation of the political is in the final analysis nothing other than the affirmation of the moral’ (p. 99). The political cannot be affirmed simply by virtue of its persistence through history. It must be asserted because it forces reflection about the most fundamental and most serious questions concerning right and wrong. And this is why it is morally superior to a de-politicize world of ease and entertainment. The nub of Strauss’s critique revolves around the fact that Schmitt’s attack on liberalism and his grounding of the political in otherness ‘as such’ rely on relativist assumptions that in fact are perfectly in line with the neutralizing spirit of liberalism. As he explained in his autobiographical essay some 30 years later:

> Whoever affirms the political as such, respects all who are willing to fight; he is quite as tolerant as liberals, but with the opposite intention. Whereas the liberal respects and tolerates all ‘honestly held’ convictions, so long as these respect the legal order or acknowledge the sanctity of
peace, whoever affirms the political as such respects and tolerates all ‘serious’ convictions, in other words, all decisions leading up to the possibility of war. Thus, the affirmation of the political as such proves to be liberalism preceded by a minus sign. (1965, p. 350)

To be human, Strauss argues, is to be able to reflect and make choices about what is right. And these choices are often a matter of life and death that forces a distinction between friend and enemy. Strauss agrees with Schmitt that the political ‘remains constantly determinative of man’s fate’, but he insists that the enemy’s attempt to negate one’s way of life necessarily implies a certain notion of good and evil and right and wrong (1996, p. 100). One cannot in good conscience engage in a life and death struggle with an enemy if one is not convinced that the principles for which the enemy is fighting are fundamentally wrong. For Strauss, the political requires a transcendent standard that defines what is right. It is rooted in conflicts over normative principles that are before and that define the otherness of the enemy. Schmitt, Strauss argues, did not go far enough in demonstrating the naturalness of the political. He recognized that the political was grounded in human nature, but his formulation suggests that ‘the political is something subsequent or supplementary’ to historical institutions like the state (1995, p. 124).

To the extent that there is a theory of international relations latent in Strauss’ post-war philosophical ruminations about nature, it revolves around this moralization of the political. As suggested previously, Strauss had no faith in cosmopolitan notions of global citizenship or any variation whatsoever on the idea of a universal society living under the aegis of a global, multicultural political entity. Whether in its Kantian or Marxist variant, the notion of an upward transfer of sovereignty to some sort of world state was for him nothing but a symptom of the modern crisis of relativism. Strauss believed that every regime is shaped by a different answer to the theological – political question. He insisted on the inherently particularistic nature of statecraft, and he accordingly emphasized that the success of such a political practice at the global level was not only unlikely but wholly undesirable. The League of Nations, the United Nations and other such cosmopolitan projects that accommodate a variety of competing answers to the theological – political problem necessarily involve the abandonment of a standard of right and wrong independent of positive right. And it was this standard, which for Strauss made politics possible and imbued life with meaning. Although not altogether impossible, the advent of the universal state would transform politics into a soulless tyranny of bureaucracy. It would be the age of Weber’s ‘specialists without spirit’ and Nietzsche’s apathetic and purposeless ‘last man’. As he put it in On Tyranny, ‘The state through which man is said to become reasonably satisfied is, then, the state in which man loses his humanity’ (2000, p. 208).
Carl Schmitt is not someone to be associated with in polite society, especially in America. And Strauss’ followers are understandably keen to distance the master from the so-called ‘Nazi crown jurist’ by insisting that Strauss broke with his former mentor after his departure from Germany or that, even in his Weimar years, Strauss was in fact critical of Schmitt (see, for example, Berkowitz, 2004; Zuckert and Zuckert, 2006, pp. 184–194). But as I think the above makes clear, the line that separates Strauss from Schmitt is much thinner than Strauss’ followers care to admit. Strauss accepted Schmitt’s assertion of the primacy of the political defined as the friend – enemy distinction. However, he denied the autonomy of the political from the moral sphere by collapsing it into a distinction between moral friend vs evil enemy that he sought to ground in a transcendent ‘natural’ standard of right and wrong.

Yet, as suggested earlier, insofar as Strauss’ appeal to nature rests on any foundations at all, these foundations are derived not from a transcendent natural law as traditionally understood but from philosophy’s failure to validate itself and refute revelation through reason alone. As Laurence Berns noted, like the ancients, Strauss understands the natural pre-philosophic cognition ‘to be constituted at its core by an inalienable tension between the demands of piety and the divination of an impersonal nature that leads to philosophy and science’ (Berns, 1991, p. 175). Although he sometimes seems to suggest that philosophy and religion are antithetical alternatives, Strauss in fact maintains that the two are locked into a mutually sustaining relationship that has for hundreds of years been the very source of the vitality of Western civilization (Strauss, 1989, p. 270). This tension is therefore natural not only in the sense that it is constitutive of the ‘natural consciousness’, but also in the sense that it is good for society. Faced with the epistemological dilemma posed by the mutual irrebuttablety of faith and reason, Strauss argues that philosophy must remain opened to the inconclusive challenge of each. It must remain ‘zetetic’. Zeteticm, he explains, rests on a sceptical alertness to the insufficiencies of any philosophical systems and solutions. It is based on the Socratic awareness that one does not and cannot know, and it is guided by the belief that any attempt at resolving the permanent problems that beset humanity can only lead to a dangerous form of ideological dogmatism. As he put it, ‘the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher from the moment that his ‘subjective certitude’ of the truth of a solution becomes stronger than the consciousness that he may have of the problematical character of this solution. At this moment, the sectarian is born’ (Strauss, 2000, p. 196).

Strauss’ zetetic move is in fact a more or less concealed admission that he cannot ground his ascent from convention to nature in any foundations whatsoever which could be validated discursively. As he himself warns at the beginning of *Natural Right and History*, ‘Even by proving that a certain view is indispensable for living well, one proves merely that the view in question is a
salutary myth: one does not prove it to be true' (1971, p. 6). All that philosophy can provide is knowledge and wisdom about the nature of the political; and the most important insight that philosophy can teach us is that politics is a contest of opinions. As Stanley Rosen argues, because he is incapable of discursively defending philosophy in its own term, Strauss is forced to defend it by appealing to the pre-philosophical situation: ‘Since nature is, as it were, theoretically invisible, Strauss attempts to find it in practice’. Yet, the pre-philosophical situation to which Strauss appeals is both implausible and incredible. It is implausible because the pre-philosophical situation contains ‘everything’ – that is, both the unphilosophical and the philosophical; and it is incredible because to believe that the neutral observer could make the distinction between the unphilosophical and the philosophical would be a manifest endorsement of the very positivism that Strauss so vehemently criticized. On the other hand however, as Rosen argues, Strauss’s pre-philosophical turn conveniently allows for the philosophical construction of an exoteric form of political philosophy potentially capable of sustaining a world fit for both the philosopher and the non-philosopher citizen (Rosen, 1991, pp. 162–163).

**Politicizing Philosophy**

We are now getting at the very heart of Strauss’ ‘political’ philosophy. In its effort to make moral autonomy available to all, Strauss argues, the Enlightenment confused moral equality with natural equality. It failed to recognize the unbridgeable gap between the wise and the non-wise and wrongly assumed that everyone could be a philosopher. Philosophy, for Strauss, is not a set of beliefs, but a way of life. It refers to the existential condition of the individual philosopher who by an act of pure will and in full awareness of the limits of his own perspective piously dedicates his life to the quest for the unattainable knowledge of ‘the whole’ (Strauss, 1978, pp. 20–29). This is not a life that is suitable for everyone. When ordinary citizens become aware that their principles rest upon a comprehensive order that is no longer credible or that cannot be recognised as right, they find themselves unable to defend their most valued and identity-conferring beliefs. The responsible philosopher, Strauss argues, is therefore compelled to become political and construct an exoteric rhetorical foundation, which will support the city and mediates between his passionate ‘quest for the eternal order’ and his love for his own city (Strauss, 2000, p. 212).

Strauss’ entire intellectual enterprise rests upon his belief that the contradictions between the ways of life and practices of one’s society or one’s age could perhaps be resolved in thought, but not in practice. As he explained in
the course of his debate with Alexandre Kojève, ‘There is no adequate solution to the problem of virtue or happiness on the political or social plane’ (2000, p. 182). In his view, modern philosophy’s connivance with power to bring about a world governed by philosophical ideals had led to its own destruction. For at the very moment that it yields to the demands of society, philosophy becomes ideological dogmatism. To the extent that philosophy must have a public face, Strauss argued, its politics ought to remain moderate – especially in conditions of mass rule. Hence the philosopher ‘will not engage in revolutionary or subversive activity. But he will try to help his fellow man by mitigating, as far as in him lies, the evils that are inseparable from the human condition’ (p. 200).

To the extent that his critique of liberalism sought to ‘protect democracy from itself’, Strauss primarily sought to problematize the status of individuality and how the latter pertains to the stability of the political community (Strauss, 1971, p. 323). Strauss was well aware that the ancients did not have access to the natural world more than we do today. But he believed that ancient rationalism was more viable existentially and provided a better basis to order the political community. Modern liberalism and classical political philosophy, he argued, converge in their belief that happiness – the ultimate end of human life – is not political but individual. Yet, they diverge fundamentally in their understanding of what happiness actually is. Whereas the ancients find happiness in the contemplative life, modern happiness is rooted in physical individuality. This disagreement about the nature of the highest good, he explains, translates into two very different conceptions of the state (Strauss, 1978, p. 49).

In *The City and Man* and *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues that modern relativism and corporal individualism have consigned happiness and virtue to the private sphere and rendered impossible the notion of a common good to which the political community must aspire (Strauss, 1978, pp. 31–32). In these conditions, the purpose of the modern state is reduced to guaranteeing human life whereas refraining ‘from imposing on its members happiness of any sort’ (Strauss, 1971, pp. 145–146). The city of the moderns, as first instituted by Hobbes, is like the ‘city of pigs’ described by Plato in the *Republic*: it is ‘a society which is sufficient for satisfying the natural wants of the body, that is, of the naturally private’. In this setting, the state is reduced to the role of coercive servant of society, this partly competitive and partly cooperative web of social and market relationships in which individuals strive to fulfil their self-defined happiness (Strauss, 1978, p. 32).

Contrastingly, the classical notion of natural right rests on the premise that men have needs, which are hierarchically ordered by their natural constitution. For the classics, man’s natural constitution allows for the differentiation between the needs of the human body and those of the human soul; the needs of the soul being higher than corporal needs, it is only when life conforms itself
to reason and human intelligence that it concurs with man’s natural hierarchy of needs. However, as Strauss points out, human nature ‘as such’ and its perfection are two different things. ‘Human nature ‘is’ in a different manner than its perfection or virtue. Virtue in most cases, if not in all cases, as an object of aspiration and not as fulfilment. Therefore, it exists in speech rather than in deed’ (1971, pp. 145–146). Thus, the best regime will never be realized completely and will always remain a utopia. Nevertheless, although justice in its most ideal form can never be attained, the well-ordered soul will always remain bent towards its realization. In this context, the ideal of the natural just and right imposes restraint on the fulfilment of corporal needs as well as limitation on the exercise of individual liberties: ‘Man’s freedom is accompanied of a sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted’ (Strauss, 1971, p. 130).

This is the central lesson that Strauss seeks to recover from the ancients. In its most perfect form, the republic requires that man’s corporal needs be subordinated to those of his soul. For it is the need of his body that lead him to expand his own private sphere and elevate his individuality at the top of the hierarchy of human ends. Strauss turns his back on the moderns because they have abandoned the utopian city of the ancient to found the city on the needs of the body. As he explains, whereas the moderns sought to expose the natural condition of man and re-arrange society according to it, the ancients thought it necessary to veil this original condition. This was, of course, the function of Plato’s ‘noble lie’ introduced by Socrates in The Republic (Strauss, 1978, p. 102). The good city rests upon a crucial silence about the natural condition of man; it requires that men be elevated above nature. The good citizen must sacrifice his individuality and accept that he is constituted by the city in all its particularity. By trading his individuality for political virtue and obeying the law of the city, the good citizen becomes more human as he opens himself up to a whole that goes beyond his corporal individuality and his natural desire for self-preservation (Strauss, 1971, pp. 163–164; 1978, pp. 49, 31–34; see also Tanguay, 2003, pp. 183–262). In these conditions, Strauss argued, the success of political leaders had to be measured in terms of their ability to cultivate the civic and moral virtues of a citizenry whose members are unequally equipped by nature for the pursuit of virtue and human excellence (Strauss, 1971, p. 134).

**Strauss’ American Legacy**

Strauss experimental return to natural right and his celebration of Athens’ aristocratic democracy are disquietingly at odd with our modern egalitarian sensitivity. It is nevertheless important to stress that his aim was not to find in Athens ready-made solutions to contemporary problems. As he emphasized,
'We cannot reasonably expect that a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today’s use. For the relative success of modern political philosophy has brought into being a kind of society wholly unknown to the classics, a kind of society to which the classical principles as stated and elaborated by the classics are not immediately applicable’ (Strauss, 1971, p. 11).

Strauss’ intellectual enterprise is constituted at its core by an irresolvable tension between his Platonic moral authoritarianism and the anti-dogmatic, moderating and genuinely critical nature of his zetetic epistemology – that is, ‘human knowledge is knowledge of ignorance’ (Strauss, 1978, p. 20). As we have seen, his zetetic position was mainly a reaction to historicism and what he saw as a series of misconceived and irresponsible attempts to put philosophy at the service of politics and social transformation. Yet, if one follows the multiple rhetorical twists of his narrative, Strauss in fact authenticates the experience of history and remains well within the intellectual parameters of German historicism. As Robert Pippin pointed out, his belief that ‘thought could reach in historical time a culmination, that that culmination should be a kind of self-consciousness, together with the implication that we needed experience this culmination before we could understand properly what modern thought involved, all sound unmistakable Hegelian notes’. Strauss, Pippin correctly noted, was something of a ‘middle-of-the-road Hegelian’ (2006, p. 127). He tacitly accepted the Kantian identification of the human condition as a split between the natural and the ideal and followed in the path of German idealism in his belief that ideas were the motor of history. Unlike Hegel, however, he denied that the terrifying sense of loss and alienation caused by the decline of religions and mythical folklores was a necessary step towards human emancipation. Here, Strauss sided with Nietzsche and rejected the belief that once freed from the moral laws of nature self-legislating human subjects would spontaneously realize themselves as the rational society (see, for example, Strauss, 1975).

In spite of all his misgivings about the post-moral character of Nietzsche’s philosophy, Strauss in fact never refuted its radical historicist premises (Drury, 1988; Berns, 1991; Gunnell, 1994; Lampert, 1996). What he thought he had refuted was its ethical conclusions. For Nietzsche, the realization that self-legislated reason was nothing but an expression of man’s will to power demanded bravery and self-overcoming. For Strauss, on the other hand, it demanded moderation and called for a recollection of the relationship between human experience and philosophy as understood by the ancients – that is, a ‘noble lie’. Yet in order to fully understand the nature of Strauss’ ‘ethico-political’ choice, it is important to emphasize that, unlike Nietzsche’s historicist Platonism, Strauss’ Platonic elevation of the philosopher above the city is predicated upon a belief in the permanent, trans-historical and restrictive
tension between philosophy and the city. Many of Strauss’s critics who, like Drury, depict him as a closet revolutionary Nietzschean fail to recognize this point and consequently fail to grasp the genuinely conservative character of his political philosophy. As Leo Lampert argues, Strauss’s esotericism is derived from two basic Nietzschean premises: (i) the fabric of society is unalterably opinion, and (ii) philosophy seeks to ‘dissolve the elements in which society breaths’ and therefore threatens its stability. Yet whereas Nietzsche believed these truths to be timeless, he denied the timeless necessity of esotericism and concluded that ‘modern opinion necessitates what it also makes possible, the attempt to bring society’s opinion into accord with philosophy’s character, not by making society wise but by making its opinions reflect rather than contradict the truth’. For Nietzsche, if God was dead, suffocated by the public progress of science, there was no point in making concessions to a discredited worldview. Strauss, by contrast, denied that scientific progress or any other human advancements or catastrophes had altered the terms and conditions under which the philosopher must operate (1996, pp. 169–170).

To the extent that Strauss’ Platonic practices were a means to exercise what he saw as his responsibility as a philosopher, it was at best a deeply anachronistic intellectual strategy that was completely unsuited to an audience of young American students who did not have the intellectual baggage to understand the nature of his apprehensive attitude towards anti-foundationalism and German historicism. By opting for the false comfort of reified metaphysical foundations at the expense of his anti-dogmatic zetetic epistemology, Strauss paradoxically rendered his experimental ontological recovery of nature perfectly amenable to the type of sectarian ideological politics that he criticized in his debate with Kojève.

As Mark Lilla noted in an insightful piece that traces the development of Straussianism over the years, until the late 1960s, the great majority of Strauss’s followers devoted themselves to the study of the great books. They adapted their master’s aristocratic interpretation of philosophy to the ‘slightly vulgar’ setting of American democracy in a manner which, although imbued with missionary and rhetorical zeal, was more or less consistent with Strauss’s teachings. However, the violent student revolt of 1968 changed all that. The implosion of the American university and the cultural gulf that this particular event opened in American society radicalized and politicized a great number of influential Straussian scholars who never stomached what they saw as the intellectual levelling that resulted from this nihilistic assault on the establishment. Although many Straussians to this day remain non-partisan and have steered clear of daily political debates, many others began to congregate around neo-conservative circles following the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and Strauss’s death in 1973. What resulted from this alliance is what Lilla described as a vulgarized ‘Straussian catechism’ in which the anti-foundational,
Nietzschean dimension of Strauss’ intellectual legacy has been lost in a maze of religious exhortations and esoteric enigmas conceived to reflect the political vagaries of America’s daily culture wars (Lilla, 2004). Considering that many in neo-conservatives circles had studied with Strauss or some of his best students during the 1960s, the Straussian/neo-conservative convergence was somewhat of a natural affair. Each helped one another overcome their respective weaknesses; Straussians helped reinforcing the neo-conservative project intellectually whereas neo-conservatives provided Straussians with a political and media machine to spread their ideas (Devigne, 1994, pp. 64–65).

Strauss’ influence on neo-conservative thought can be detected at three levels. First, neo-conservatives draw on Strauss’ intellectualization of the crisis of modernity. They maintain that modernism and the cultural revolutions of the 1960s have forever disturbed the consensus on the religious and civic values of the majority culture that for so long had contained class and racial conflicts and made American capitalist democracy possible in the face of such racial and class inequality. Insisting on the responsibility of the liberal intellectual elite for the propagation of an un-patriotic value relativism, they argue that the cultural revolutions and the civic rights movement have turned American democracy into what Allan Bloom described as a ‘Disneyland version of Weimar’ (1987, 147). Besieged by multicultural ideologies, American democracy has become overcrowded with special interest groups and overloaded with inflated democratic and economic expectations that are bound to disappoint and generate widespread nihilism. What is more, neo-conservatives argue that the efforts of group interests to promote themselves through the political system have corrupted the true nature of both the public interest and the national interest by forcing on it the essentially private interests of different cultural associations (see, for example, Bell, 1978; Kristol, 1995; Gerson, 1996).

The restoration and revitalization of this consensus around the values of the majority culture has therefore been a core objective of neo-conservative politics for over three decades (Steinfels, 1979; Dorrien, 1993; Gerson, 1993; Friedman, 2005). Not unlike in Strauss’ critique of the modern ‘city of pigs’ (or Schmitt’s critique of parliamentary democracy for that matter (Schmitt, 1996, pp. 22–25)), the aim of this politicization of values is to keep state and society as differentiated as possible so as to prevent issues of socio-economic and political exclusions from entering the realm of democratic politics. In more practical terms, this has translated into a sustained effort to transform the ‘war on poverty’ launched by the ambitious social programmes of the 1960s into a war on the ‘demoralized’ elements of civil society, which are no longer responsive to the incentives and discipline of the market. To the extent that this cultural politics works as a means to neutralize the political tension between
democracy and capitalism, it has allowed neo-conservatives to enlist the support of large segments of the business class although at the same time allowing it to court the Christian Right and to cultivate a broad popular base among the white working class (Drolet, 2007).

The second line of influence has to do with Strauss’ anthropology of the state of nature and the manner in which the latter pertains to the realm of international relations. Neo-conservatives are deeply ambivalent towards the steering and transformative powers of liberalism and universal reason in international affairs. Like Strauss, they believe that no laws of human construction can do away with the permanent possibility of conflict in social life. For them it is precisely because conflict is often the by-product of the self-interested spirit fostered by liberal modernity that power, fear and the nature of political regimes are much more important than commercial interests and international institutional arrangements in keeping the peace in the international sphere. Echoing Strauss’ ruminations against the juridification of the international system and the advent of a centralized global authority, neo-conservatives deprecate all forms of liberal internationalism that are based on rules of morality derived from a noumenal realm that allegedly transcends the physical world and confer political legitimacy downward from an intangible global constitutional order to the sovereign nation-state. Against such Kantian illusions, they seek to mobilise affirmative cultural and moral values and play them against the universal, abstract processes of international legality and politics. So that neo-conservatism’s zealous enthusiasm for democracy promotion abroad is set in the context of an uncompromising defence and assertion of the universal legitimacy of the American regime over the procedural liberalism of the Charter of the United Nations (see, for example, Kristol and Kagan, 2000; Kaplan and Kristol, 2003; Kagan, 2004; Krauthammer, 2004; Berkwitz, 2005; Fukuyama, 2006, pp. 12–65).

Finally, Strauss’ critique of positivism and modern rationalism has also been an important inspiration for the neo-conservative attack on the two main schools of foreign policy thinking in America – liberal institutionalism and realism. Although these two approaches tend to lead to different policy prescriptions, neo-conservatives maintain that both share the same materialistic and utilitarian outlook that blinds decision makers to the importance of moral and cultural values in political life. When detached from an overarching public philosophy, they argue, the materialistic rationalism that underpins these foreign policy doctrines fosters cynicism, saps the will of the American citizenry and deprives the latter of the patriotism and sense of self-sacrifice necessary to sustain their own policy prescriptions (Kristol, 1983, pp. xiii–xiv; Muravchik, 1992, pp. 19–37; Kristol and Kagan, 2000, pp. 23–24; Williams, 2005). Not unlike in Strauss’s moralization of Schmitt’s existential realism, neo-conservatives maintain that politics ought to be driven by a strong sense of
moral purpose. As Charles Krauthammer put it in the context the context of the war on terror in 2004:

Unless conservatives present ideals to challenge the liberal ideal of a domesticated international community, they will lose the debate. Which is why among American conservatives, another, more idealistic, school has arisen that sees America’s national interest as an expression of values... [and]... sees as the engine of history not the will to power but the will to freedom. The rationality of the enemy is something beyond our control. But the use of our power is within our control. And if that power is used wisely, constrained not by illusions and fictions but only by the limits of our mission – which is to bring a modicum of freedom as an antidote to nihilism – we can prevail. (2004, pp. 10–11, 14)

To the extent that there is a significant parallel between Strauss’ exotericism and neo-conservative discourses, I believe it has less to do with false justifications for war than with the rhetorical instrumentalization of ethnocentric moral universalisms with which neo-conservatives buttress their Hobbesian view of international relations to sublimate class conflicts and generate domestic support for their imperial crusades. From this perspective, the ‘noble lie’ goes well beyond deceptive strategic intelligence. It has been an integral component of the moralizing and anti-pluralist strain of liberalism envisioned by neo-conservative pundits since the 1970s. Neo-conservatives seek to mobilize the nation in their effort to ‘reform’, defend and export a liberalism that, just like Strauss’ ‘Platonic liberalism’, celebrates moral and civic virtues but that is deliberately silent about the social contradictions of the material world. Neo-conservatives attribute causality to cultural trends for the moral decline and political ‘ungovernability’ of American democracy independently of the capitalism-driven process of societal modernization and the blatant political – economic injustice that the latter generates. They propose to re-moralize the American social compact through the militarization of US foreign policy in the name of great emancipatory ideals like freedom and democracy (Kristol and Kagan, 2000). Yet when divested of concrete material content, freedom and democracy become mere ontological veils behind which the individuals concerned factually and phenomenologically experience human existence.

Conclusion

Although not the blood-thirsty conspirator often depicted by some of his most fervent critics, Strauss is definitely responsible for transmitting to his students a
set of philosophical assumptions that has contributed significantly in shaping
the elitist, crisis-driven habitus through which many neo-conservatives have
been interpreting the dilemmas of modern liberal politics since the late 1960s.
One must nevertheless be cautious when reading his epic interpretations of
Western political philosophy through the lens of contemporary American
politics and foreign policy. Strauss enjoyed the solitude of the philosophical life
(perhaps too much) and conducted his investigations for his own purpose. As
one of his most perceptive critics noted, complaints about his Platonic elitism
very often tend to ignore the fact that his intentions and political opinions were
‘at least ambiguous’ (Pippin, 1992, p. 467, note 4). Strauss did condone lying in
politics, and he did advocate an unsavoury style of executive-centred politics
prone towards a rather archaic moralization of politics. But he also emphasized
that true statesmanship is ‘free from all fanaticism because it knows that evil
cannot be eradicated and that one’s expectations from politics must be
moderate’ (Strauss, 1988b, p. 28). Those who wish to inculpate him for the
Bush administration’s dishonest justification of the Iraq War and America’s
post-9/11 crusades against the ‘axis of evil’ tend to conveniently overlook the
ambiguous scepticism that defines his intellectual enterprise. More impor-
tantly, narrow interpretations of the Platonic ‘noble lie’ detract attention from
what seems to be really at stake in the fusion of Straussian Kulturkritik with
neo-conservative post-industrial politics: the transformation of America’s New
Deal liberalism into some sort of post-welfare communitarian capitalism which
tends to transmute the socio-economic basis of conflicts into various forms of
cultural antagonisms. It is perhaps more at that level that our contemporary
neo-conservative politics resonate most disquietingly with the ‘gemeinschaft
capitalism’ of interwar European fascism.

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Notes

1 Various neo-conservatives pundits have also rather disingenuously claimed that neo-
conservatism had little to do with Strauss see, for instance, Kagan (2006) and Wolfowitz
(2003). Some Straussian scholars have also sought to deny, with very little success in my opinion,
that Strauss had anything to do with neo-conservatism and contemporary US politics. See, for
2 Although Strauss figures prominently in the intellectual genealogy of the movement, neo-conservatism draws inspiration from a broad pool of thinkers that ranges from Thucydides, Machiavelli, the Federalists and Tocqueville to other prominent Central European émigrés like Schumpeter, Hayek and Morgenthau who, like Strauss, had a close connection with Carl Schmitt and the radical authoritarian intellectual milieu of Weimar Germany. On the link between Schmitt and Hayek, Schumpeter and Morgenthau see Scheuerman (1999, Chapters 7–9). Koskenniemmi (2001, pp. 415–422) and Söllner (1987) have also provided good analyses of Schmitt’s influence on Morgenthau.

3 For a perceptive analysis of the Weimarian roots of Strauss’ American writings that has influenced my own reading, see Gunnell (1994).

4 As Robert Pippin pointed out, Drury’s characterisation of Strauss as a Nietzschean creator of values is an overstatement, which she can only support by avoiding providing a rigorous analysis of the notion of nature which is so central to Strauss’ entire work (1992, p. 467, note 5).

5 My critique of Strauss’ Platonic liberalism and neo-conservative liberal democracy here draws on Herbert Marcuse’s critique of early 20th century liberalism. See Marcuse (1968 [1937]).

References


