Schaefer, David Lewis. "Leo Strauss: Theoretical radical, practical liberal–conservative." *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts*. Ed. Mark Garnett. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 59–66. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350001565.ch-008>>.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Leo Strauss: Theoretical radical, practical liberal–conservative

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[C]onservatives look with greater sympathy than liberals on the particular or particularist and the heterogeneous ... Inasmuch as the universalism in politics is founded on the universalism proceeding from reason, conservatism is frequently characterized by distrust of reason or by trust in tradition, which as such is necessarily ... particular. Conservatism is therefore exposed to criticism that is guided by the notion of the unity of truth. Liberals, on the other hand, especially those who know that their aspirations have their roots in the Western tradition, are not sufficiently concerned with the fact that that tradition is ever more being eroded by the very changes in the direction of One World which they demand or applaud ...

[L]iberals frequently call themselves progressives. Progressivism is indeed a better term than liberalism for the opposite to conservatism. For if conservatism is ... aversion to change or distrust of change, its opposite should be identified with the opposite posture toward change, and not with something substantive like liberty or liberality.

The difficulty of defining the difference between liberalism and conservatism ... is particularly great in the United States, since this country came into being through a revolution ... The opposition between conservatism and liberalism had a clear meaning at the time [in Europe] ... [T]he conservatives stood for 'throne and altar', and the liberals stood for popular sovereignty and the strictly nonpublic (private) character of religion. Yet conservatism in this sense is no longer politically important. The conservatism of our age is identical with what originally was liberalism, more or less modified by changes in the direction of present-day liberalism ... Much of what goes now by the name of conservatism has in the last analysis a common root with present-day liberalism and even with Communism. That this is the case would appear most clearly if one were to go back to the origin of modernity, to the break with the premodern tradition that took place in the seventeenth century, or to the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.¹

I

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was arguably the greatest philosophic thinker of the twentieth century. After receiving a doctorate at the University of Hamburg, he worked at an institute devoted to the study of Jewish thought before leaving Germany for England in 1932 and then for America, where he taught at the New School for Social Research and subsequently (for two decades) in the political science department at the University of Chicago. Strauss's most fundamental insight, arrived at in the 1930s, was his rediscovery of the practice of esoteric writing – that is, the strategy of philosophic writers (including the greatest poets) living in preliberal times of concealing their deepest and most challenging thoughts from superficial readers, for purposes of self-protection, pedagogy and respecting the moral and religious foundations of the societies they inhabited.² The rediscovery of esotericism in turn enabled Strauss to refute the historicist assumption that every thinker is inevitably the prisoner of the dominant presuppositions of his time and place, so that contemporary readers can learn little about the most important issues from even the greatest thinkers of the past. Instead, when wise men appear to take for granted the dominant assumptions or prejudices of their time (e.g., Aristotle's seeming defense of the naturalness of slavery, or Locke's weakly argued attempt to ground his revolutionary

natural-rights doctrine in traditional Christian natural law), a close study of their texts may reveal that this was only window dressing, concealing a continuing, rationally based dialogue about the most fundamental (political, moral and religious) questions in which contemporary readers, whatever their own cultural backgrounds, may still participate. In sum, through his analyses of a wide range of authors – ancient (Plato/Xenophon/Aristophanes/Thucydides/Aristotle), medieval (notably Maimonides and Alfarabi) and modern (from Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza and Rousseau to Nietzsche and Heidegger) – Strauss restored the study of political philosophy as a living enterprise, rather than a merely antiquarian one.

Ironically, however, in view of the revolutionary character of his discoveries, Strauss has been widely depicted as a conservative, both by some sympathetic friends and (in far greater number, given the political predilections of most Western, and especially Anglo-American, academics over the past century) hostile critics. This impression has been deepened by the fact that in recent decades, several prominent individuals influenced by Strauss's teachings have become prominent in the 'neoconservative' movement.³

In this essay I explain why it is inappropriate to label Strauss as a conservative, except in a limited sense – one not incompatible with his having been just as much a liberal, in (what he understood as) the proper sense of that term. Above all, the label misrepresents Strauss as a political partisan, rather than a lover and seeker of wisdom – that is, a philosopher. Although intended to inform a deeper understanding of current political and moral issues, Strauss's writings do not offer a political doctrine. Moreover, since a guiding theme of Strauss's inquiries was the problematic character of modern political philosophy as a whole, in comparison with the thought of the classical political philosophers, he regarded the very dichotomy between liberalism and conservatism, whatever its practical significance, as symptomatic of an unfortunate narrowing of the contemporary intellectual horizon.

II

The above excerpt is taken from Strauss's most extended (albeit brief) treatment of the relation between contemporary liberalism and conservatism in the preface to his 1968 collection of essays *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (abbreviated as *LAM* here).

The first thing to be noted about this quotation is Strauss's observation that partisans of *both* liberalism and conservatism misunderstand the foundations of their doctrines – wrongly viewing them as theoretically fundamental alternatives, whereas the entire liberal-conservative dichotomy arose out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (more precisely, as the legacy of the French Revolution). Viewed in light of the history of the Great

Tradition of Western thought (encompassing the legacies of both Athens and Jerusalem), what self-styled liberals and conservatives have in common at the theoretical level (and even, Strauss suggests, with liberal democracy's greatest post-war antagonist, communism) outweighs what divides them.

The second thing to note is that Strauss nowhere identifies himself with either side of the liberal-conservative divide. Indeed, after noting the limitations of each outlook, he suggests that the very title 'conservatism' suffers by comparison with 'liberalism', since the former (like 'progressivism') signifies a mere contentless attitude, while the latter denotes a 'substantive', generally admired good, 'liberty or liberality', which he adds 'is still used in its premodern sense, especially in the expression "liberal education"'. (Strauss devotes the first two essays in *LAM* to the theme of liberal education.)

Finally, it should be remarked that to the extent the quotation signifies anything of Strauss's own inclination, in view of his lifelong devotion to the pursuit of truth by reliance on unaided reason, it indicates a closer affinity to liberalism than to conservatism, given the liability of the latter to the charge that its attachment to tradition is purchased at the expense of the distrust of reason – and hence (it would appear) of an opposition to philosophy itself. (In his 1947 essay 'On the Intention of Rousseau',⁴ Strauss articulates Rousseau's attempt to balance the claims of rationalism and traditionalism in his *First Discourse* (1750) by restoring the classical understanding of the need for philosophers to restrict the *public* expression of their discoveries.)

III

How, then, did Strauss become known as a conservative? How did his writings particularly attract readers of a conservative orientation, or even move some of them towards what is now regarded as a conservative position?

In the third chapter of his most popularly accessible book, *Natural Right and History* (hereafter *NRH*),⁵ Strauss emphasizes that philosophy, and hence the pursuit of a natural standard of right or justice, could arise only as a consequence of the *doubt* of all established authority: 'The first things and the right way cannot become questionable or the object of a quest, or philosophy cannot emerge, or nature cannot be discovered, if authority as such is not doubted' (84). Unlike their modern, revolutionary counterparts, Strauss observes, '[t]he classical philosophers did full justice to the great truth underlying the identification of the good with the ancestral,' as instanced by the case of Socrates, who 'was a very conservative man as far as the ultimate practical conclusions of his political philosophy were concerned'.⁶ Yet, he adds, the comic playwright Aristophanes 'pointed to the truth [in *The Clouds*] by suggesting that Socrates' fundamental premise [i.e., taking one's bearings by nature rather than customary authority] could induce a son to beat up his own father' (93). In other words, recognizing the incapacity of most human beings to guide themselves properly by reliance

on reason rather than tradition, the classical philosophers made a radical distinction between the *intellectual* freedom that philosophy requires and the *practical* subjection to law, and outward respect for customary moral and religious beliefs, that are the precondition of civilized life.

It is in this connection that Strauss's rediscovery of esoteric writing, and his emphasis on the distinction between classical and modern political philosophy, achieves its greatest significance. Ever since the loss of awareness of that form of writing, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, philosophical 'scholars', along with most readers, had underestimated the radical character of the *thought* of the classical philosophers, recognition of which is essential to appreciating its transhistorical importance (and hence its potential significance for our own lives). In contrast with their ancient counterparts, the modern philosophers whose thought generated the Enlightenment, beginning in the sixteenth century with Machiavelli and Montaigne, envisioned a much more active role for philosophy in transforming or 'rationalizing' popular political, moral and religious beliefs – culminating ultimately, it was hoped, in something like the modern liberal regime (exemplified, at its peak, by the American Constitution), in which the very need for concealment of the truth discovered by reason would have disappeared.

Unfortunately, despite its manifest success in elevating the political and economic lot of ordinary people, as well as providing unparalleled legal freedom of thought and discourse, in much of the Western and 'Westernized' world (including parts of Asia), the liberal project fell short of fulfilling its originators' hopes of 'solving' the human problem. Instead, owing to certain deficiencies in the project itself, that project was modified by what Strauss termed two subsequent 'waves' of modernity, the latter of which culminated in the intellectual crisis that Strauss identifies in the opening pages of *NRH* – the denial of the capacity of reason to provide meaningful standards, grounded in nature, for distinguishing the just and unjust.⁷ Theoretically, the deepest expositor of this crisis, as Strauss portrays it, is Nietzsche.⁸ Nietzsche both identified and radicalized the problem inherent in the liberal project that underlay the historicist rejection of natural right to which Strauss directs our attention in the introduction and opening chapter of *NRH*. In twentieth-century America, that rejection culminated in the thoughtless liberal relativism (even more widespread in our own era) that groundlessly assumes, Strauss points out, that if all so-called 'values' are seen as equally valid (or invalid), then we are obliged to tolerate all moral opinions and 'civilizations' as equally meritorious (rather than impose our views on others) (*NRH* 5–6). In reality, liberal relativism would entail that tolerance has no deeper justification than intolerance. But the original root of the contemporary rejection of natural right was not mere liberal naiveté. Rather, for Strauss, it grew out of a certain *moral* attitude that he articulated in a 1941 lecture, unpublished during his lifetime, on 'German Nihilism'.⁹

As Strauss explained in this lecture, despite the unspeakable evils in which German nihilism culminated in the form of Nazism – just as Rousseau's thought had had the unforeseen effect of generating the horrors of the French Revolution – it originated in a revulsion, among idealistic youth, at the seeming lowness of the aims of modern, Western (English and French) 'civilization': mere comfort and security. In contrast to the liberal goal of an 'open society' in which national differences (and hence the possibility of war) withered away, the partisans of German nihilism believed 'that the root of all moral life is essentially ... the *closed* society' which called for the utmost sacrifices from its members – above all, in war (358 [emphasis added]).

Strauss, needless to say, had nothing but abhorrence for Nazism, just as he despised Communist totalitarianism. But he denied that Western, liberal principles could be defended against the threat of nihilism simply by repeating eighteenth-century formulas like 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' or even 'the rights of man.' Instead, he maintained that our very determination to preserve what is best in modern constitutional democracy requires a rethinking of the grounds of that regime – and an endeavor to consider how it might be *enriched* by reconsideration of the original foundations of natural right in the writings of the classical philosophers.

Of Strauss's own devotion to the preservation of constitutional democracy there can be no reasonable doubt. In response to the Hegelian–Marxist thinker Alexandre Kojève's exaltation of the universal, homogeneous state, Strauss remarked that 'liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age'.¹⁰ In a lecture on 'The Three Waves of Modernity', he observed that even though Nietzsche's powerful 'critique of modern rationalism', out of which 'the theory of liberal democracy as well as of communism' had 'originated ... cannot be dismissed or forgotten ... liberal democracy, in contradistinction to communism and fascism, derives powerful support from ... the premodern thought of our western tradition'.¹¹ Nonetheless, the discovery of 'a solid basis for liberalism', properly understood, which Strauss represented as his aim, would require what he termed 'a very great effort'.¹²

As we have seen, Strauss never identified himself as a partisan of conservatism as *opposed* to liberalism. Nonetheless, in the context of the twentieth-century Anglo-American academy, Strauss's challenge to relativism held great appeal to those who aimed to 'conserve' the Western philosophic, religious, and political traditions (whatever the differences among and within those traditions, which he aimed to illuminate rather than deny). Additionally, as regards specific matters of public policy, as distinguished from fundamental intellectual principles, Strauss typically leaned towards the conservative side of American politics, even though he wrote nothing about domestic issues.¹³ And while not all of his students or those otherwise

influenced by him were conservative, those who were liberals, in present-day parlance, were *moderate* liberals, just as conservatives who understood his thought eschewed extremism (and the notion of a ‘Straussian Marxist’ would be an oxymoron). The chief reason for Strauss’s apparently nonliberal tendency, I suggest, lies in the reinterpretation of liberalism during the past century to mean ‘progressivism’ – reflecting the dogmatic, potentially illiberal denial that there are any fixed limits to the proper scope of government, to the advancement of equality, to the elimination of human conflict or to the perfectibility of human nature.¹⁴ Despite the fundamental differences that Strauss articulated among the classical and medieval political philosophers and the three waves of modern thinkers who succeeded them, it is unlikely that even those who harbored the grandest hopes for human improvement would have subscribed to such naïve and dangerously misleading beliefs. In other words, they were not utopians (Marx and Engels are the obvious exceptions – but in view of Marx’s acknowledgement that his goal was not to ‘interpret’ the world but ‘to *change* it’,¹⁵ neither of them can properly be described as philosophers, as distinguished from ideologues).

While devoting himself to the study of classic texts, Strauss was by no means oblivious to the practical problems of statesmanship in his own time, nor sparing of admiration for its greatest practitioners, such as Churchill. Having articulated the deficiencies of modern liberalism even in its original form (e.g., in his treatment of Locke in *NRH*, chapter 5), Strauss applauded not only its conduciveness to justice towards individuals, but also the opportunity it provided for cultivating the life of the mind. Strauss also called for a return to a genuinely empirical, ‘Aristotelian’ mode of political study that ‘views political things in the perspective of the citizen’ rather than the ostensibly neutral theorist.¹⁶ Inspired by this approach, numerous scholars have undertaken careful, often profound, inquiries into American political thought, constitutional law, and political practice, as well as international relations.

Without in any way encouraging ‘an unmanly contempt for politics’ (*LAM* 22), and hence for partisan activity, Strauss taught all those who were open to learning to see beyond the liberal–conservative dichotomy. Like Socrates, he combined radicalism in thought with a teaching of moderation in practice. Since ‘wisdom cannot be separated from moderation,’ he observed, it requires ‘unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and ... the cause of constitutionalism,’ even as it liberates us from ‘visionary’ political expectations (*LAM* 24). In seeking to enhance the cause of liberal constitutionalism, and at the same time to preserve a serious appreciation and understanding of the philosophic life, Strauss was both a liberal and a conservative in the truest sense.