Book reviews

Paul Edward Gottfried, *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America: A Critical Appraisal* (Cambridge University Press, New York, USA 2012) 194 pp.

Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA 2014) 416 pp.

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LEO STRAUSS AND THE POLITICS OF INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP

When the political philosopher Leo Strauss died in October 1973 his obituary in *The New York Times* noted simply that he had been the teacher of ‘several generations of political scientists,’ primarily during his two decades at the University of Chicago, and had written his dozen or so books primarily for ‘other scholars rather than the general public.’ As a result, he was ‘not widely known outside his field.’ Yet even so monkish an existence was not without its potential for notoriety. Indeed, the obituarist concluded by pointing out that the study of classical political philosophy had ‘undergone a resurgence due in substantial measure to Dr. Strauss’s work.’ Three decades after his death these defining elements of Strauss’s life – a cadre of devoted students, a dedication to an ancient way of thinking about politics, and a series of deeply probing and to some nearly impenetrable studies of the great philosophers – would come together in a most surprising political way. Henceforth this ‘small, unprepossessing’ scholar (as his daughter would remember him in *The New York Times*) was destined to be known by far greater numbers of those ‘outside his field.’

The focus of the nation’s newfound interest in this relatively obscure professor in 2003 was the result of suspicions that swirled around the administration of President George W. Bush generally and around his foreign policy advisors in particular – especially those who were advocates for the war with Iraq. As James Atlas rather snidely wrote in the prominent story on these matters in *The New York Times* that helped to ignite the furor, it turned out the war in Iraq was not simply another military exercise. Rather, it was ‘nothing less than a defense of western civilization – as interpreted by ... Leo Strauss.’

It seems that someone noticed that the Bush administration was teeming with those who had been influenced by Strauss or by the students of Strauss or by the students of the students of Strauss. Whatever their intellectual genealogy, it was clear to some Bush critics that everything that was sinister in their view was being orchestrated

by these so-called Straussians – many of whom were also ideologically committed neo-conservatives. Atlas cleverly dubbed these allegedly embedded influences the ‘Leo-Cons.’ Their agenda was said to be replete with such goals as an enhancement of presidential power, a muscular foreign policy, and ultimately the establishment of a new American empire.

That Strauss himself had never written or lectured on such topics did not seem to matter; the story still proved to have legs. Similar accounts of Strauss and the Straussians and their alleged political intentions and their presumed influence soon appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Weekly Standard*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and *The Economist*. In due course, the exchanges in the press would encourage a battle of the books offering longer accounts of Strauss and the methodology of the school of thought he had spawned. Critical assessments from the left such as Shadia Drury’s earlier *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997) and Anne Norton’s controversial *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (2004) would be engaged and called to account by such Straussian books as Thomas L. Pangle’s *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to his Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (2006), Steven B. Smith’s *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (2006), and Michael and Catherine Zuckert’s first book on Strauss and his followers, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (2006). The deepest questions that emerged from this scholarly tug-of-war came down to these: who was Leo Strauss and what, exactly, had he been up to?

AS ALLAN BLOOM (1974, p. 373) put it in his obituary essay on Strauss in the journal *Political Theory*, ‘[t]he story of a life in which the only real events were thoughts is easily told.’ Indeed. Strauss was born to orthodox Jewish parents in 1899 in the small, rural German town of Kirchhain, in the Prussian province of Hesse-Nassau. His youthful ambitions reached to breeding rabbits and working as a rural postmaster. But he had second thoughts. After an ordinary middle-class education, he studied first at Marburg University, then at Hamburg where, at the age of 22, he took his PhD. A post-doctoral year at Freiburg put him in the company of Edmund Husserl and Husserl’s assistant, a young Martin Heidegger. In 1932 Strauss left Germany courtesy of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, a trip that allowed him to settle first in Paris, then in Cambridge, and finally in New York City in 1938. Until 1949 he taught at the New School for Social Research; he was then personally recruited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, and accepted his invitation to join the political science faculty at the University of Chicago. He remained in Hyde Park until mandatory retirement in 1967. In the years of his so-called retirement, he taught first at Claremont Men’s College in California, and then at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland.

In his youth Strauss at first had been a student fascinated by the works of Nietzsche. Gradually, however, he came to see modernity, and therewith Nietzsche, as posing a crisis – not simply politically or militarily as in the case of the rise of the Nazis, but especially philosophically. Modern political philosophy by way of the pathways of historicism and positivism had reached the conclusion that political philosophy as it had been understood was no longer necessary or possible. As Strauss thought through what he came to see as the three ‘waves’ of modernity – beginning with Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke; continuing with Rousseau and Hegel; and ending with Nietzsche and Heidegger – he turned his philosophic attention to recovering the alternative of classical political philosophy. Over time Strauss’s political philosophy came to be characterized by three dominant strands: opposition to positivism; opposition to

historicism; and dedication to the recovery of Socratic political philosophy, what Strauss taught was the true methodology of political philosophy properly understood.

In his view positivism and historicism threatened political philosophy's 'attempt to know both the nature of things and the right, or the good political order' (Strauss 1959, p. 12). The attack was waged on two fronts. On the one hand positivism insisted that modern scientific thought is the highest and most certain form of knowledge and that there is a fundamental difference and necessary separability between facts and values. Science can only know facts; values are merely opinions. On the other hand, the philosophic knowledge of the good and the true is denied as a possibility by historicism 'because of the essentially historical character of society and human thought' (ibid., p. 26). That is to say, all thinking is historically bound and there can be no notions of the good society or of justice that transcend time and place.

The solution to the political perversions of positivism and historicism – what Strauss routinely decried as the 'crisis of our time' – was the recovery of the ancient way of philosophical discourse that took seriously the idea of the good society, an idea that in turn took seriously the understanding that values were indeed knowable and that Socratic classical philosophy rather than modern science could expose and explain fundamental truths that transcend time and place.

Strauss made clear his sentiments about the limits of historicism and positivism in a famous 'Epilogue' to a collection of *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* that had been assembled and edited by Herbert J. Storing (1962), his former student and then colleague at the University of Chicago. What Strauss had come to see as the 'crisis of liberal democracy' was the result of a new science of politics that denied both values and transcendence. The 'new political science,' he insisted, 'has nothing to say against those who unhesitatingly prefer surrender, that is, the abandonment of liberal democracy, to war' (ibid., p. 327). Then, he went to the heart of the matter:

Only a great fool would call the new political science diabolic; it has no attributes peculiar to fallen angels. It is not even Machiavellian, for Machiavelli's teaching was graceful, subtle, and colorful. Nor is it Neronian. Never the less one may say of it that it fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles and it does not know that Rome burns. (Ibid.)

Strauss's effort to recover ancient political philosophy also led him to what many consider to be his greatest contribution, the need to engage in extremely careful reading of the great works of political philosophy. This was essential given the perceived need among the ancients and the medievals and even the moderns to engage in esoteric writing, what a recent scholar has dubbed finding 'philosophy between the lines' (Meltzer 2014). The keen awareness of the reality of what Strauss described as the history of 'persecution and the art of writing' became a defining characteristic of the Straussians and no small target for their critics. The purpose of taking seriously the art of esoteric writing was to go ever more deeply into the great works of philosophy so that in the end the reader could make every effort to understand the author as the author truly understood himself.

STRAUSS'S PHILOSOPHIC AGENDA, while not widely known beyond his own scholarly circle, was truly controversial within it. While at one level his commitment to turn back modernity's tide of moral relativism seemed both obvious and commonsensical, at another level it was seen to be uncommonly complex. To make one's way through those complicated arguments one could not ask for a better guide than Michael and Catherine Zuckert's *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, a work at

once deep and accessible, learned and eloquent. But for all its many virtues, it is a book that is even more profitable when read in conjunction with the Zuckerts' first book, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. While there are inevitably areas that overlap between the two books, the first work is essential to the removal of the ideological detritus left by the confused and often confusing public debate over Strauss and the neo-conservatives that broke into the public prints in 2003. The Zuckerts' first effort to correct the 'many errors and silly claims' that had engulfed Strauss and his followers makes possible the substantive achievement of the second book; here they explore what might be called simply the true Leo Strauss.

Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy is an often dense and always deeply probing explication of the political thought of Strauss. It takes as its point of departure one of Strauss's most important series of lectures (probably second only to 'Natural Right and History'), later published as a three-part essay on the question 'what is political philosophy?' (Strauss 1953). The first lecture in response to the implicitly Socratic 'what is' question raises the basic issue that the Zuckerts pursue, 'The Problem of Political Philosophy'; the second and third lectures are 'The Classical Solution' and 'The Modern Solutions.' The great virtue of this book is that it seeks to follow Strauss's own cardinal scholarly tenet and thus seeks to understand Strauss as he understood himself. As a result, it begins with a thorough treatment of Strauss's understanding of, and reaction to, both positivism and historicism. That political philosophy properly understood is rendered impossible by those twin evils of modernity, the Zuckerts, having cleared the ground, turn to the essence of what follows – and that is neatly and succinctly captured in one simple statement: 'The theme of Strauss's political philosophy is – political philosophy' (p. 8).

But that theme is not without its curious aspects. As the Zuckerts point out, Strauss does not turn to the substance of political philosophy as much as he turns to the substantive offerings of assembled political philosophers. Instead of delving into the issues surrounding the good or just regime, Strauss usually chooses to explore what the great political philosophers have had to say about those issues. As a result, the longest section of the Zuckerts' book is a collection of accounts of how Strauss read the great philosophers and – as much as possible – a tally of what wisdom was gleaned from those readings. The catalogue includes chapters on Plato, Aristotle, and Locke, with more thematic accounts of 'Strauss and the Philosophers' in the form of essays on 'Strauss's Return to Pre-modern Thought' and 'Strauss on the Coming of Modernity.'

Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy concludes with a section that seeks to situate Strauss and his school of thought in the twentieth century. Here lies a serious and sophisticated effort to understand the political implications of Strauss's thinking and the thinking of his followers. As with *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, this book has a chapter on the Straussians, although this essay is not as thoroughgoing as the earlier one. Still – another argument for taking both Zuckert books into account – taken together, the reader will know far more, and far more accurate details about Strauss's influence on his followers than anything that was to be found in the media wars of 2003. Or, for that matter, anything to be found in Paul Edward Gottfried's *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America: A Critical Appraisal*.

GOTTFRIED SETS OUT to raise an important issue, and that is: what is the relationship between Strauss and the Straussians and those whom the author identifies variously as 'the intellectual right' (p. 3), 'the historically minded right' (p. 4), or simply 'any older right' (p. 169). While most accounts of the Straussians have focused on 'their

critics on the left and their adulators on the right' (p. 69), Gottfried finds it more interesting to explore what he calls the 'anti-Straussian right' (p. 3) to see just how much true or traditional conservatism was there in Strauss and his followers.

The question is fraught with difficulties and ambiguities. After all, Gottfried's less than esoteric personal view is that the 'nexus between neo-conservatives and the Straussians is so tight that it may be impossible to dissociate the two groups in any significant way' (pp. 8–9); yet it is also true, he acknowledges, that 'Strauss's popularity on the American right originated ... decades earlier' than the appearance on the scene of the neo-conservatives (p. 32). At its deepest level, what Gottfried seeks to know is whether or not Strauss's conservatism is 'anchored ... in a conservative vision of the good society' (p. 89) or whether it is only loosely rooted in what he sees as the thin soil of what the neo-conservatives argue are abstract principles and 'universal ideals' (p. 88). The old-line conservatives see the good society as originating from a preference for 'prescribed and historical liberties [over] natural rights, communal attachment [over] American globalism, and concrete identities [over] the ... neo-conservative concept of a propositional, universal America' (p. 88). Most anti-Straussians on the right are 'historically minded' (p. 89). Thus by Gottfried's political standard and by his conservative calculus, Strauss and his followers fall short of being true and trustworthy conservatives.

In sum, the Straussians have been seduced and co-opted and have gravitated toward the 'current conservative movement, which seeks out and publicizes their polemics. Straussians have found a home in this sloganeering environment and ... offer background music for the neo-conservative foreign policy that the GOP is trying to put into operation' (p. 160). That the Straussians are able by their mere presence to 'occasionally raise [the] intellectual horizons' (p. 160) of the neo-conservative-dominated conservative movement is not enough to redeem their contributions. The fact is, the Straussians, in Gottfried's view, have come to 'consider their vocation as scholars to be bound up with [a neo-conservative] cosmic struggle' (p. 168). As a result, 'the vital center of the Straussian movement has shifted toward direct political involvement and ... those who count in that movement are increasingly political players' (p. 171). Indeed, such ambitions 'have animated them as a group all along' (p. 171).

It would seem at first blush that Gottfried's purpose is to elicit a spirited academic conversation between the Straussians and the various incarnations of the 'older right.' But in truth, this slim volume aspires to something lower; it is less a reasonable call for a high-minded debate about the nature and extent of American conservatism than it is the cocky and boisterous swagger of someone seeking to instigate the scholarly equivalent of a barroom brawl. Too long, the author insists, has the battle between the Straussians and the anti-Straussian right been 'deferred.' The time has come for the Straussians' 'most despised critics' (p. 3) to stand their ground in the name of conservatism properly understood.

The greatest weakness of *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America* is its organization – or the lack thereof. To his credit the author confesses in his acknowledgments that a reader (presumably friendly) of an earlier draft of the book warned him about what he saw as the 'Byzantine structure' of the book. It seems he did not take that criticism as much to heart as he should have. The result is a book that largely lacks clarity, concision, and coherence. The narrative is not so much a fully polished logical argument as it is a series of largely undeveloped, and what may be seen by some as often mean-spirited, assertions.

One example must suffice. Late in the book the author proclaims that his criticisms are not meant to 'deny the limited good the Straussians have achieved' (p. 157).

But that is not the whole of the matter. He goes on to indict ‘Straussians’ as an undifferentiated mass ‘exhibit[ing] less [than] attractive behavior traits’ (p.158). He concludes pointedly: ‘Such characteristic traits of theirs as group-think, arrogant and standoffish relations with intellectual opponents, and counter-factual complaining about being professionally isolated are related to a moral stance that may be hard to alter’ (p. 158). Of whom is he speaking? When and where did such behavior occur? Details and concrete examples such as these would go a long way to giving such broad-brush condemnations the weight necessary to make them meaningful criticism and not merely disgruntled carping. The book is filled with other examples. Thus, in the end, one can only say of Gottfried’s *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America* what Gottfried saw fit to say of Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*: the book includes ‘over-generalizations and finger-pointing that detract ... from its instructional value’ (p. 166). And that is a shame.

TO LEARN MORE about Leo Strauss and the school he spawned, one can now visit the website of the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago (<https://le Strausscenter.uchicago.edu>). The Strauss Center is dedicated to making available the previously unpublished lectures and transcripts from most of Strauss’s classes over the nearly twenty years he taught there. There are also digitally remastered recordings of his seminars available. So too is there a link to the opening conference of the Strauss Center featuring prominent students of Strauss discussing his life and intellectual legacy.

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