

## Leo Strauss

LEO STRAUSS (1899-1973) was a radical thinker. He was radical in the primary and proper sense of the word. It was his radical thinking as manifest in his writings and teaching that made him perhaps the most influential political thinker of the generation of Americans that spanned the mid-point of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> No one, friend or enemy, ever saw Mr. Strauss<sup>2</sup> as a political partisan, but the impact of his thinking fell immediately and primarily on the conservative side of the political spectrum. His scholarship and teaching inspired and deepened other scholars and teachers as well as publicists and political leaders who most often found themselves, and not always because of prior disposition, under the conservative banner.

The sense in which Mr. Strauss was a radical was also the sense in which he was a conservative, this being nearly the most elemental and profound way one could use the term "conservative" in the Western tradition. His own inquiry began, it seems, with a high interest during his student days in Germany in the theological and metaphysical issues posed for an orthodox Jew by modern humanism and rationalism.<sup>3</sup> Although Mr. Strauss came to distinguish himself as an interpreter of the history of political philosophy and a political philosopher, it would be a mistake to conclude that he ever put the most fundamental and ultimate questions entirely aside or behind him. What he did, however, and herein he is the radical conservative, was to find himself compelled to take a fresh, direct and serious look at the ancients; his focus on ancient thinkers and specifically on Socrates in his major writings after 1964 must be noted. The work of Leo Strauss had the effect of drawing political philosophy, and to some degree philosophy itself and the entire academy, back to Socratic foundations.

His Socratic approach included an emphasis on certain questions, the basic moral-political issues, and an acceptance of the ordinary common sense terms in which those human questions arise. Mr. Strauss wrote:

The political philosopher first comes into sight as a good citizen in the best way and

on the highest level. In order to perform his function he has to raise ulterior questions, questions that are never raised in the political arena; but in doing so he does not abandon his fundamental orientation, which is the orientation inherent in political life.<sup>4</sup>

A Socratic spirit of carefulness, fairness and modesty marked his thinking and teaching. The method of Mr. Strauss was primarily that of a kind of dialogue with the greatest minds by painstaking and respectful inquiry into their books. One result of such inquiry was his illuminating and widely known studies of such key political thinkers as Hobbes and Machiavelli.<sup>5</sup> His direct teaching of students took the form of a common inquiry into the primary text, be it Hegel or Plato, before the seminar. And he always treasured the students whose linguistic competence in the original language of the text allowed them to make a special contribution to the effort to understand and then to assess critically the writer under consideration. Mr. Strauss would light up with enthusiasm and appreciation when in some writer whom he might rank rather low in his more comprehensive view there would be found a point of remarkable insight or ingenuity. He was not afraid to leave a seminar with problems that honest inquiry into a text could not resolve. A man who knew Mr. Strauss for a short time near the end of his life rightly observed of him that "he knew how to present two sides of a grand argument in such a way that one could see the strength of the case on each side."<sup>6</sup>

The concern of Mr. Strauss for access to the primary text and his caution about translations and commentaries and summaries was motivated by the need he felt to see all thinkers, but especially ancient thinkers, in their own and their best light.<sup>7</sup> Pervasive contemporary theories of knowledge, namely positivism and historicism, posed formidable obstacles to taking any search for moral and political wisdom seriously. So it was that Leo Strauss structured as he did his most comprehensive and influential work, *Natural Right and History*.<sup>8</sup> He sought there to show the problems in the best spokesmen for positivism and historicism as a prelude to an

effort to examine the thought of leading classical and modern political philosophers. Here and in essays published under the title, *What Is Political Philosophy?* he reopened the conflict of the ancients and moderns by showing the significance of their characteristic differences for moral-political inquiry and ultimately for political life.<sup>9</sup>

Another obstacle to reaching an understanding of great political thinkers was found in the very fact that these thinkers were concerned with matters of manifest importance to their own political societies. Their meaning and intention might not, thought Mr. Strauss, be on the surface. Thus arose the distinction between esoteric and exoteric writing, the use of which in interpretation has been one of the most troubling aspects of the work of Mr. Strauss and his students in the eyes of their critics.<sup>10</sup>

Recently John Gunnell has complained that Mr. Strauss never set forth a general theory of interpretation that presumably would incorporate canons for handling the esoteric dimension of writing.<sup>11</sup> Reading in the light of such a generally applicable theory indeed seems fraught with danger. The point has been well made by one appreciative student of Mr. Strauss:

The remarkable way he combines caution and boldness, counting and imagination, submission and interrogation, simplicity and suspicion, gives the reader no method and no theory of hermeneutics. Instead it gives virtues to imitate. The best that the best theory could do would be to defend already good readers from bad theories.<sup>12</sup>

If Mr. Strauss had a method, it too reflected his common sense and modesty. Herbert Storing once described it well:

Strauss was not a methodologist, but he had a method. He sometimes described it as "content analysis." It is the method of careful reading. Assume that your writer may be telling the truth. Assume that he knows what he is doing. Read with the greatest of care and alertness that you can muster. If your writer falls into a contradiction that you can see, assume that he could see it, and try to figure out his reason

for arguing as he did. Remember (what we all know) that one does not say all one has to say to everyone, that for various reasons one may speak and write at different levels.<sup>13</sup>

The powerful impact of the simple but radical teacher Leo Strauss began to be felt in America late in the 1950's. Mr. Strauss was among the refugees from German Nazism who became a major presence in American intellectual life in the 1940's and 50's. In America he began his teaching on the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in 1939. In 1949, he accepted an appointment at the University of Chicago where until retirement in 1968, he exercised a manifest and direct influence on the education of a generation of political scientists and others. A measure of his influence is found in the fact that in the mid-1950's shortly after *Natural Right and History* appeared and while Mr. Strauss was just completing his work with a first group of students at Chicago, the leading voices in the profession of philosophy in the English speaking world were inclined to conclude that political philosophy as it had been known since the time of Socrates was dead.<sup>14</sup> At the same time the positivism largely responsible for the alleged "death" had given life to the behavioral movement in American political science; the movement was heady with vigorous aspirations for a unified science of human behavior and a consequent technology of social engineering hitherto only glimpsed in the works of science fiction. That today behaviorism in political science has been shaken and chastened and that political philosophy is renewed and respected is due no doubt to many factors in American political and intellectual history of the last quarter century. The work of Leo Strauss stands, without question, as one of the key factors accounting for this turn-around.

The influence of Mr. Strauss was felt, as is often the case with scholars, largely through the writings and teaching of his students, but rarely if ever has a teacher had an impact on this scale and on students of such quality. His direct students (those who studied under him) who themselves have had a significant impact on political science include Walter Berns,

Allan Bloom, Joseph Cropsey, Harry Jaffa and the late Martin Diamond and Herbert Storing. Their students are many and often incisive thinkers and articulate spokesmen. The indirect students of Mr. Strauss (those who have but read him) are often equally as prominent as in the cases of Irving Kristol and Harvey Mansfield, Jr. His students have included leading political officials at all levels of government extending to the highest levels of the United States Government, scholars in fields other than political science, deans and university presidents and writers and editors of excellent reputation.

The students of Mr. Strauss are sometimes called Straussians. It is rarely a term of affection, sometimes a term of description and usually a way of indicating dislike or contempt. What accounts for this? There can be little shame in admitting that the full virtue of Mr. Strauss is rarely approached in his students. He set a high standard personally as well as for political societies. The scope and depth of his learning along with his natural civility, his modesty, his appreciation for the problematic and his continuing openness to and respect for the ultimate questions even as he focused on political issues is not and will not be easily approached by his students. However, his students have faced, probably more often than he did, the front-line pressures of an aggressive positivism and shallow liberal progressivism that so dominated university and public life at mid-century. The abuse cast at the Straussians is, to be sure, not simply the result of their weaknesses.

At least two additional comments should be made about the students of Mr. Strauss. First of all, they are not all political philosophers or primarily students of political philosophy. For political science and its students, the effort of Mr. Strauss cleared away "barriers" to and restored significance to studying American politics, constitutional law, comparative government in the tradition "of articulating and comparing and clarifying the concerns of citizens and politicians."<sup>15</sup> Secondly, not all of those whom Mr. Strauss directed or inspired went in and came out conservatives. George Anastaplo is a case in point. There are lesser known teachers and scholars who learned

from Mr. Strauss and yet find themselves comfortable with the characteristic liberal positions. What is true in every instance I know is not only that they seem better human beings for having encountered the person and thought of Leo Strauss but also that they are more thoughtful liberals and more respectful of the possible intellectual and moral grounds for conservative positions.

Why then has Mr. Strauss had predominantly a conservative impact on American politics? A good place to begin to answer this question is by appreciating his evident and even ebullient love for this his adopted homeland. The United States was for him, as it was for Tocqueville, the "lead society" in the development of liberal democracy. He saw it as a decent and, of course, free regime. It and other decent regimes were enmeshed in and threatened by the "crisis of the West." This crisis was considered in his reflection on the Declaration of Independence at the very beginning of *Natural Right and History*.<sup>16</sup> It was and is, at its core, a crisis of faith in the common standards, "the public orthodoxy," of this and any defensible liberal democracy. That crisis tended to internal chaos and external weakness. Its immediate causes were manifested in moral relativism and in an uncritical embrace of liberty and equality which Mr. Strauss once aptly described as the substitution of the "sovereign individual" for the "conscientious individual."<sup>17</sup> These causes were fed by dominant positivism, historicism and the often shallow democratism of American "intellectuals" and other leaders. Mr. Strauss severely challenged those beliefs.

Students were directed by Mr. Strauss to the American Founding and to America's statesmen as opportunities to be illuminated concerning core standards and prudence in liberal democracy. Mr. Strauss believed that America's standards went deeper in the Western tradition than Locke and argued that "liberal democracy...derives powerful support" from a premodern mode of thought.<sup>18</sup>

Again and again Mr. Strauss made clear that his interest in the ancients was motivated by his concern to engage the root political problems of the present. Classical political philosophy taught high standards, but it also

taught a prudence that kept guard against immodest and thereby dangerous expectations of reform. In the late 1960's and early 1970's there was a considerable awakening in the form of the New Left to the dangers to democracy in apparently "value-free" approaches to knowledge and in certain facets of a commercial republic. These had long been concerns of Mr. Strauss, but he expressed them and advanced them in ways that revealed a much richer understanding of the substantive and procedural requisites of liberal democracy.

There is one posture yet more conservative

than that of returning to ancient ways of thought like that of Socrates. That posture would represent some kind of identification with those slumbering Athenians whom Socrates sought to stir and who finally killed him. That would be a mindless and soulless conservatism. Neither Socrates nor Leo Strauss could tolerate that, yet Socrates found himself able to defend the regime that allowed this to happen but also allowed him much time and freedom to think and to teach.

—WALTER NICGORSKI

<sup>1</sup>For a comprehensive bibliography see Joseph Cropsey, "Leo Strauss: A Bibliography and Memorial, 1899-1973," *Interpretation* 5 (Winter, 1975), 133-147. Items, excluding translations and reprintings of earlier pieces, that appeared after this bibliography are Leo Strauss, "An Unspoken Prologue To A Public Lecture at St. John's," *Interpretation* 7 (September, 1978), 1-3, and the Strauss/Gadamer correspondence which appeared in the special issue of *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. II, 1978) in honor of Leo Strauss. The most self-revealing writing of Mr. Strauss is the little known piece with Jacob Klein, "A Giving of Accounts," *The College* (magazine of St. John's College) 22 (April, 1970), 1-5. <sup>2</sup>Throughout I refer to Leo Strauss as Mr. Strauss according to custom of addressing faculty at the University of Chicago, a custom, I believe, he strongly preferred to other more conventional modes of address. <sup>3</sup>For the essential biographical facts on Mr. Strauss and a bibliography of testimonials occasioned by his death, see Emma Brossard, "Leo Strauss: Philosopher and Teacher, Par Excellence," *The Academic Reviewer* (Fall-Winter, 1974), 1-5. Subsequent to this bibliography, there appeared personal recollections in George Anastaplo, "On Leo Strauss: A Yearzeit Remembrance," *University of Chicago Magazine* (Winter, 1974), 30-38. <sup>4</sup>Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), 81. <sup>5</sup>Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). The study of Hobbes had been first published in 1936 by The Clarendon Press at Oxford. *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958). <sup>6</sup>J. Winfree Smith, "Leo Strauss," *The College* (magazine of St. John's College) 25 (January, 1974), 2. <sup>7</sup>Strauss along with Joseph Cropsey did sponsor and publish a set of interpretations of the key political philosophers. Each piece was written by a scholar of the original writings of the political thinker examined. *History*

*of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972). <sup>8</sup>Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). <sup>9</sup>A good, succinct, overall description of the teaching of Mr. Strauss on political philosophy is found in Eugene F. Miller, "Leo Strauss: The Recovery of Political Philosophy," in *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue, eds. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975), 67-99. <sup>10</sup>Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952). In "A Giving of Accounts" (*op. cit.*, 3), Mr. Strauss indicates that "as I came to see later Lessing had said everything I had found out about the distinction between exoteric and esoteric speech and its grounds." <sup>11</sup>John G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Winthrop, 1979), 73. <sup>12</sup>Michael Platt, "Leo Strauss: Three Quarrels, Three Questions," *The Newsletter* (Politics Department, University of Dallas) 2 (Winter, 1978), 2. <sup>13</sup>Herbert Storing, "The Achievement of Leo Strauss," *National Review* 25 (December 7, 1973), 1349. It is interesting to note that in "A Giving of Accounts" (*op. cit.*, 2), Mr. Strauss says the following about Karl Barth. "The Preface to the first edition of his commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans* is of great importance also to non-theologians: it sets forth the principles of an interpretation that is concerned exclusively with the subject matter as distinguished from historical interpretation." <sup>14</sup>See especially the "Introduction" to Peter Laslett (ed.) *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956). <sup>15</sup>Storing, *op. cit.*, 1352. <sup>16</sup>*Natural Right and History*, *op. cit.*, 1-8. <sup>17</sup>Leo Strauss, "Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time," in *The Post-Behavioral Era*, George J. Graham, Jr. and George W. Carey, eds. (New York: David McKay Co., 1972), 222. <sup>18</sup>Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays By Leo Strauss*, Hilail Gildin, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), 98.