

Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher*.  
Waltham: Brandeis University Press,  
2006. xi + 191 pp.

In the early 1980s, I suggested to a Columbia University professor that Leo Strauss' *Natural Right and History* be included on the reading list for a graduate colloquium in 20th-century U.S. intellectual history. He raised an eyebrow, summarily dismissing the suggestion. I did not imagine at the time that Strauss (1899–1973) would eventually become a subject of major historiographical interest. But he has. Throughout the George W. Bush years, the U.S. intelligentsia engaged in a spirited debate on Strauss' putative influence on the intellectual formation of high-ranking administration officials. At the same time, a young academic generation rediscovered the Weimar era's German-Jewish thinkers and explored their critiques of liberalism. The result was a wave of new publications on Strauss.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on Strauss' intellectual and political development in Weimar Germany, the new works quickly superseded the barren polemics of the 1970s and 1980s regarding the Straussian reading of Machiavelli and the Greeks, as well as the more recent (and disturbing) exchanges regarding the alleged Straussian conspiracy to reshape U.S. national security policy. They have shifted the emphasis from Straussianism to Strauss, from postwar United States to interwar Europe, from the elusive and elliptical old exegete, the Chicago mandarin, to the agitated, struggling, youthful Jewish intellectual. Analyzing the making of Strauss as a philosopher, they have begun drawing a rich and complex portrait of Strauss as a young intellectual. He emerges as no less original or eccentric, no more liberal or likable, than the Strauss we had known, but he is now quintessentially historical, a mastermind shaped by and responding to the exigencies of the time.

Eugene R. Sheppard has gone further than anyone to date in historicizing the young Strauss. If earlier works recovered Strauss' engagement in Weimar debates on philosophy and political theology, Sheppard now relates them to the changing historical contexts. He charts Strauss' intellectual development from Weimar Germany (1921–1932) to his exile in Paris and London (1932–1937) to his New York years at the New School (1938–1948). His focus is on Strauss before Straussianism, before the 1948 appointment at Chicago transformed the beleaguered émigré into a formidable academic authority, and later, even a cult figure. The transitions between the three milieux signaled intellectual shifts from heterodox Zionism and young conservative anti-liberalism to an affirmation of the "medieval Enlightenment," the contemplative life, and the limits of politics; and from there to the championing of "esoteric"

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writing as both quintessential philosophy and as a strategy of avoiding the subversion of liberal democracy. The unifying theme running through Strauss' youthful intellectual life is the critique of modernity—of liberalism, historicism, and relativism. He sought to understand the roots of the modern western predicament by analyzing the formation of the "liberal" project in Hobbes and Spinoza and by exploring medieval and classical alternatives: Maimonides, Plato, Xenophon.

Sheppard goes systematically through Strauss' early writings, highlighting his work on Jacobi, Spinoza, and Maimonides and his discourse on Zionism. He draws attention to Strauss' intellectual associations, including Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt, and also traces Nietzsche's formative influence. Strauss took part in the rebellion of Weimar's young intelligentsia against liberal philosophy, theology, and politics. For young Jews, this entailed rejection of the Enlightenment, emancipation ideology, and Reform Judaism. Following Rosenzweig, Strauss emphasized the centrality of revelation in Judaism, yet at the same time, following Nietzsche, proclaimed his atheism. He pursued relentlessly the antinomies of liberal Jewish philosophy (among others, of his *Doktorvater*, Ernst Cassirer), striving to show the liberal failure to negotiate philosophy and religion. Yet this only deepened Strauss' quandary as a Jewish philosopher. For more than a decade he was a Zionist, but he felt that secular and modern nationalism sat badly with Jewish religion and history, which were predicated on exile and on the Jews being outsiders.

Strauss' intellectual guides outside the Jewish camp were the leading lights of the German rebellion against modernity and liberalism. He was enraptured both by Heidegger (although the latter's intellectual import for Strauss remains unclear) and by Schmitt, whose parsing of liberal democracy he admired. But, as a Jew, he could not follow the anti-liberal orgy to its German nationalist end. Thus, while choosing the worst possible intellectual guides, Strauss' rejection of historicism and relativism put brakes on their excesses. The shining examples of classical political philosophy and the Jewish spirit induced loftier reflections than Schmitt's *Realpolitik* or Heidegger's death anxieties. In a now famous 1932 review, Strauss insisted that, so long as Schmitt refused a discussion of values, his politics remained beholden to the modern liberal worldview.<sup>2</sup>

The Nazis' rise to power and Heidegger's and Schmitt's betrayal, Sheppard intimates, were transformative experiences. Strauss, on a Rockefeller fellowship in Paris, became an overnight exile: he would not return to his *Heimat* (homeland), where he would be considered an *Untermensch*. He defiantly refused *teshuvah* (religious repentance and return): he would not "crawl to the cross of liberalism" and, for a while, continued to identify imperial magnanimity—"to spare the vanquished and crush the arrogant"—with fascism. But this was bravado in the midst of despair. In truth, his position changed. Throughout the 1920s, Strauss had excelled at showing the impossibility of the present, using his razor-sharp intellect to deconstruct any bridge to the past, to unmask as fraudulent any appropriation of tradition. Now he accepted the limits of politics and turned them into the very precondition of philosophy.

Philosophers (that is, atheists) could not speak openly. If they did, they would undermine the political order—not to mention putting themselves at risk. The youth would be bound to misunderstand them, turn to nihilism and revolutionary politics

and, in the end, put philosophy itself in danger. The medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers, Maimonides and Alfarabi, showed the way out of this predicament. Accepting revelation as the origin of the perfect law, they freely reinterpreted “revealed” law philosophically, turning the prophet into a philosopher-king. They envisioned perfection and practiced philosophy for the discerning few without ever putting the political order in danger. Modern philosophy’s fault was dual, and Heidegger and Schmitt were merely its recent embodiment: it relinquished the search for the Good (lowering standards to make realization possible), and it did so openly. It ended in a disaster.

Sheppard is especially acute in showing the convergence of Strauss’ dilemmas as a Jew and as a philosopher. Given the Jews’ predicament of the 1930s, political Zionism seemed more than ever an imperative, yet it provided no solution for the philosopher. Exiled from his *Heimat*, Strauss, like liberal émigrés, began talking about “we, ‘men of science,’” whose intellectual search transcended national affiliation. Unlike the liberals, he identified the seekers and wanderers with the medieval philosophers and not with the Enlightenment’s “republic of letters.” Philosophers lived in a permanent exile, their search for truth putting them at odds with the city or nation. Just as, to Rosenzweig, Jewish homelessness induced a spiritual search, to Strauss, alienation, or exile, became a precondition for philosophy. Strauss discovered how an atheist may remain a loyal Jew: namely, by becoming a philosopher.

But was the philosopher’s exile “Jewish”? In the name of authentic religion, Rosenzweig, Strauss, and their generation rebelled against liberal Judaism and historical theology as disingenuous modern hybrids that ignored both the centrality of revelation and belief and the implications of atheism and heresy. Yet belief and heresy were central to Christian theology in ways they never were to Jewish orthopraxis. There was no obvious Jewish parallel, *pace* Rosenzweig and Strauss, to Barth’s reevaluation of the 19th-century theology that informed their generation. The rebellion of the Weimar Jewish youth was vested in Christian discourse. Historicity exacted vengeance on Strauss. Rejecting historicization in search of universal norms, refusing to admit modern philosophy into Jewish tradition, Strauss was condemned to live the antinomies of revelation and atheism—neither of them obviously Jewish—rather than the comfort of attenuated revelation and historical tradition, the coexistence of religion and philosophy. Would Strauss have taken refuge in the philosopher’s exile had he recognized its predominantly Christian origin?<sup>3</sup>

Strauss’ decade in the predominantly leftist New School, the émigrés’ “university in exile,” witnessed the consolidation of his mature philosophy. He developed a distinctive writing style, corresponding to philosophy’s need to reveal and conceal at the same time, along with a pedagogic program for training youth to enter into conversation with the great philosophers. He also worked on classical, medieval, and early modern philosophy, some of this work being published only in later years. Sheppard’s discussion of Strauss’ works subsequent to “Persecution and the Art of Writing” (1941) is less extensive, as his major concern is to elucidate the political import of esoteric writing. Using Strauss’ correspondence (especially with Karl Löwith), his 1941 lecture on German nihilism, and his 1962 address, “Why We Remain Jews,” Sheppard correctly discerns Strauss’ irritation at his colleagues’ liberal complacency

and his continued ambivalence about democracy. But Sheppard may not appreciate sufficiently Strauss' new commitment to liberal democracy. Strauss' 1941 analysis of National Socialism as a revolt of the closed against the open society and as the vengeance that nihilist youth (bespeaking heroism and a discredited *Kultur*) visited upon civilization is remarkable both for its autobiographical dimension and for its similarities with the theory of a despised liberal protagonist and fellow Central European émigré, the philosopher Karl Popper. Whereas Popper yearned for the open society's triumph, Strauss' affective attachment was to the closed: so-called "open societies" were closed societies in disintegration, he thought. But both believed that the British empire, a bridge between the old and new, represented humanity's best hope.

This was a far cry from Strauss' fascist sympathies during the Weimar years. Although he never expressed regret, Strauss did do *teshuvah* for the rest of his life by educating youth about the imperfectability of politics and the philosopher's responsibility to resist subversion. To be sure, his was not a complete *teshuvah*, and Sheppard rightly suggests that Strauss' esoteric writing, his refusal of open communication, reflected deep mistrust of the liberal public sphere. But it is equally true that, whereas Strauss considered liberal society to be morally inferior to a well-governed aristocratic polis, he also regarded it as the best existing society for philosophers and Jews. Anyone doubting the positive influence of life in the United States on the politics of reactionary émigrés would do well to read the works of the postwar German mandarins—Strauss' teachers—who stayed behind.

Sheppard appropriately ends by quoting from Strauss' introduction to *Natural Right and History* (1950; the Walgreen lectures at Chicago, 1949). Posing as a defender of the Declaration of Independence against historical relativism, of the "self-evident" truth "that all men are created equal" against German philosophy, Strauss proceeds to show how the early modern Natural Right project, which underlay the Declaration, collapses under its own contradictions. This is the embodiment of Strauss' project: philosophy supporting liberal democracy (publicly) while interrogating modernity (surreptitiously). His endorsement of the Declaration is not disingenuous. He may think that Plato's questioning of self-evident democratic truths is on target, yet these have become the foundation of the existing order, political principles that must be avowed just as revelation was by medieval philosophers.

To Strauss, relativism threatens both philosophy and democracy—German nihilism showed as much. In response, he first affirms liberal Natural Right and rejects relativism, then turns the table and interrogates liberal Natural Right. *Natural Right and History* is a multivalent text seeking to persuade on different levels, the introduction written for the beguiled many and the rest of the book for the discerning few. Unsurprisingly, many readers have tired in attempting to negotiate Strauss' subterfuges. There is no need to accept any of his political presuppositions or conclusions in order to recognize that his close readings can be revelatory. Liberals dismissing them off-hand, as my Columbia teacher did, squander a learning opportunity. Sheppard's fascinating trajectory of the philosophical development of the young Strauss should make them rethink their position.

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## Notes

1.aLeora Banitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of a Revelation* (New York: 2006); David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Albany: 2008); Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt & Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: 1995); Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921–1932)*, ed. and trans. Michael Zank (Albany: 2002); Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven: 2007).

2.aLeo Strauss, "Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 67, no. 6 (1932), 732–749; trans. by Harvey Lomax as "Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political," in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. and annotated George Schwab (Chicago: 2007), 99–126.

3.aNathan Tarcov (University of Chicago) (email correspondence, 7 July 2008) takes a exception: "The medieval philosophers through whom Strauss came to understand the philosopher's exile were Jewish and Muslim, not Christian."