

A Skeptical Friend of Democracy

By **STEVEN B. SMITH** | March 14, 2007

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Book Review

Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher by *Eugene Sheppard*

THE WORK OF LEO STRAUSS (1899–1973) HAS NEVER LACKED FOR CRITICS, ALTHOUGH UNTIL RECENTLY IT WAS virtually unknown outside the tight world of academia. But as the great Dinah Washington once crooned, "What a difference a day makes." Strauss's influence is felt today from beyond the grave in the political movement known as neoconservatism. Foremost among those mentioned as disciples of Strauss are former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Weekly Standard editor William Kristol.

How did all of this come about? How did an obscure philosopher who spent the greatest portion of his academic life reading and teaching "old books" become the poster child for neoconservative revolution? Thanks to the publication of two new biographies of Strauss we may be nearer to answering these questions.

Daniel Tanguay's "Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography" (Yale, 215 pages, \$30) and Eugene Sheppard's "Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile" (Brandeis, 130 pages, \$24.95) both try to answer the question of how a young German Jew became the political philosopher we know as Leo Strauss. Messrs. Tanguay, a professor of philosophy at the University of Ottawa, and Sheppard, a professor of modern Jewish history at Brandeis, each gives his own account of how Strauss became Strauss. Rather than treating Strauss's mature thought as something that arrived fully formed the way Mozart's music was viewed in the film "Amadeus," each is taken with a concern for Strauss's developmental history and how his distinctive ideas arose out of a confrontation with the intellectual currents of Zionism, existentialism, and political theology that marked his youth.

Mr. Tanguay's study provides a systematic interpretation of the theologico-political problem in Strauss's thought. Originally published in French, this work is brought to life in a highly readable translation by Christopher Nadon. It is likely to remain an indispensable guide to the study of Strauss for a long time to come.

Strauss described himself as "a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of a theologico-political predicament." He meant by this term the situation of German Jews forced to choose

between adherence to an ancient faith and membership in the liberal secular state.

For Strauss's elders, like Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, there was no essential antagonism between Jewish and German identity. But for Strauss, who had "converted" to Zionism as a youth, no such harmony was possible. The German-Jewish dialogue, as his contemporary Gershom Scholem would later remark, was never an authentic conversation between Germans and Jews, but at most a monologue among German Jews on how best to apply for their admission ticket to the modern secular age.

Strauss's first two books, "Spinoza's Critique of Religion" (1930) and "Philosophy and Law" (1935), were scholarly efforts come to terms with the existential situation of German Jewry. However it was not until his serious engagement with the great Jewish and Islamic philosophers of the Middle Ages — Maimonides and Farabi — that Strauss came to see this dilemma not merely as a local problem, but as a human and universal drama. The Medieval Enlightenment, as Strauss called it, was premised on the belief that there is a permanent and irreconcilable chasm between philosophy and the revealed law. This insight represents the "Farabian Turn" — so named after the 10th-century Arabic philosopher — that shaped Strauss's mature thought.

Central to Strauss's understanding of the Medieval Enlightenment was the claim that revelation is the medium of the moral and political life of the community. No community, not even the modern liberal state, can entirely escape theology. Philosophy must therefore pay its respects to religion by concealing its deepest and most disturbing truths by adopting a rhetoric of piety and obedience to the law. The model of this kind of "noble rhetoric" can be found in Plato. It was in Farabi's interpretation of Plato that Strauss first discovered the famous doctrine of the "double truth" to which he gave expression in his famous 1941 essay "Persecution and the Art of Writing."

Like every reader of Strauss, Mr. Tanguay wants to know whether Strauss's recovery of esoteric writing was intended purely as a historical insight or whether he incorporated the techniques of Plato and Farabi into his own writing. "Why did Strauss," Tanguay asks, "who lived all his life in democratic regimes where freedom of expression is guaranteed by law, feel the need to employ an art of writing that is justified in part by fear of persecution?"

Strauss did not live in fear of persecution; he was not a paranoid. But his adoption of this "Farabian" rhetoric was his way of protecting his adopted homeland from the skepticism that is the mark of all true philosophy. Strauss's use of a rhetoric of discretion was his way of showing respect for democracy.

Mr. Sheppard's book is a welcome attempt to place Strauss fully within the Weimar experience. He regards

Strauss as committed to providing a scrupulously honest and unflinching account of the condition of exile (Galut) as the basic and enduring feature of Jewish life and history.

Strauss was born and raised in an observant family in rural Hesse, far from the liberal cosmopolitan world that nurtured contemporaries like Walter Benjamin, Scholem, and Hannah Arendt. Mr. Sheppard regards this background of rural conservatism as decisive in shaping Strauss's earliest responses to the so-called Jewish Question.

Mr. Sheppard treats Strauss as one of the young German conservatives attracted to the doctrines of Heidegger and Carl Schmitt and appalled at the liberal cosmopolitanism of modernity. It was in his review of Schmitt's "Concept of the Political" that Strauss expressed his disdain for the frivolity and complacency that permeated so much of modern civilization. In particular, the inability of the Weimar republic to provide stability and leadership led Strauss to entertain serious reservations about democracy both as a regime and a way of life.

This skepticism about Weimar democracy came to a head in a widely discussed letter to his fellow émigré Karl Löwith written just after Hitler's ascension to power in 1933. "Just because the right-wing-oriented Germany does not tolerate us [the Jews], it does not follow that the principles of the right are therefore to be rejected," he wrote. "To the contrary," he continued, "only on the basis of the principles of the right — fascist, authoritarian, imperial — is it possible in a dignified manner to protest against the repulsive monster," namely Hitler and Nazism.

What are we to make of this "shocking letter" that has received so much recent commentary? It is entirely conceivable that the young Strauss was a conservative authoritarian who saw the renewal of imperial rule where "the subjected are spared and the proud are subdued" as the only practical antidote to Hitler's national socialism. His refusal to kneel before "the cross of liberalism" with its empty appeals to the "unwritten rights of man" is indicative of his awareness of the failure of Weimar to protect the Jews and a proud refusal to accept assimilation as the price for survival.

Mr. Sheppard, like many readers, takes this letter as a smoking gun providing evidence of an imperialist and authoritarian strand in Strauss's thought. Yet there is reason to doubt this judgment. Strauss, the young German conservative, arguably underwent significant changes later on brought about by his experiences in England, Israel, and America.

In his lecture "What is Political Philosophy?," Strauss referred back to the Nazi period that he said made "discredited democracy [Weimar] look again like the golden age." This statement, an oblique allusion to Plato, should be read as a possible self-criticism and rejection of Strauss's own earlier flirtation with "fascist,

authoritarian, imperial" principles.

Strauss's visit to Israel also led him to consider Zionism as part of the modern democratic project. In a letter to the *National Review* he praised the labor Zionists who then ran the country as the equivalent of the American Pilgrim fathers. He also praised the Zionist effort to establish a democratic state in Israel ("an outpost of the West in the East") as the precondition for "that simple dignity of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable."

Finally, in a lecture on "Liberal Education and Responsibility," Strauss wrote, "We are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy precisely because we are friends and allies of democracy." Of course, to be a friend and ally of democracy is not exactly the same thing as being a democrat, but sentiments such as these demonstrate precisely how far Strauss had traveled from his early writings. "Wisdom," he wrote, "requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism." It seems as if the onetime defender of "the principles of the right" had become a kind of liberal after all.

Mr. Sheppard has written a pathbreaking work that brings to light much important information about the first half of Strauss's academic career. The book breaks off in 1949, the year when Strauss left the New School to take a position at the University of Chicago. These would be Strauss's most productive years: He wrote his most important books and saw the creation of a school of "Straussian" political philosophy. Mr. Sheppard's book deals admirably with the young Strauss, but this is not a substitute for an engagement with the work of the mature thinker.

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