

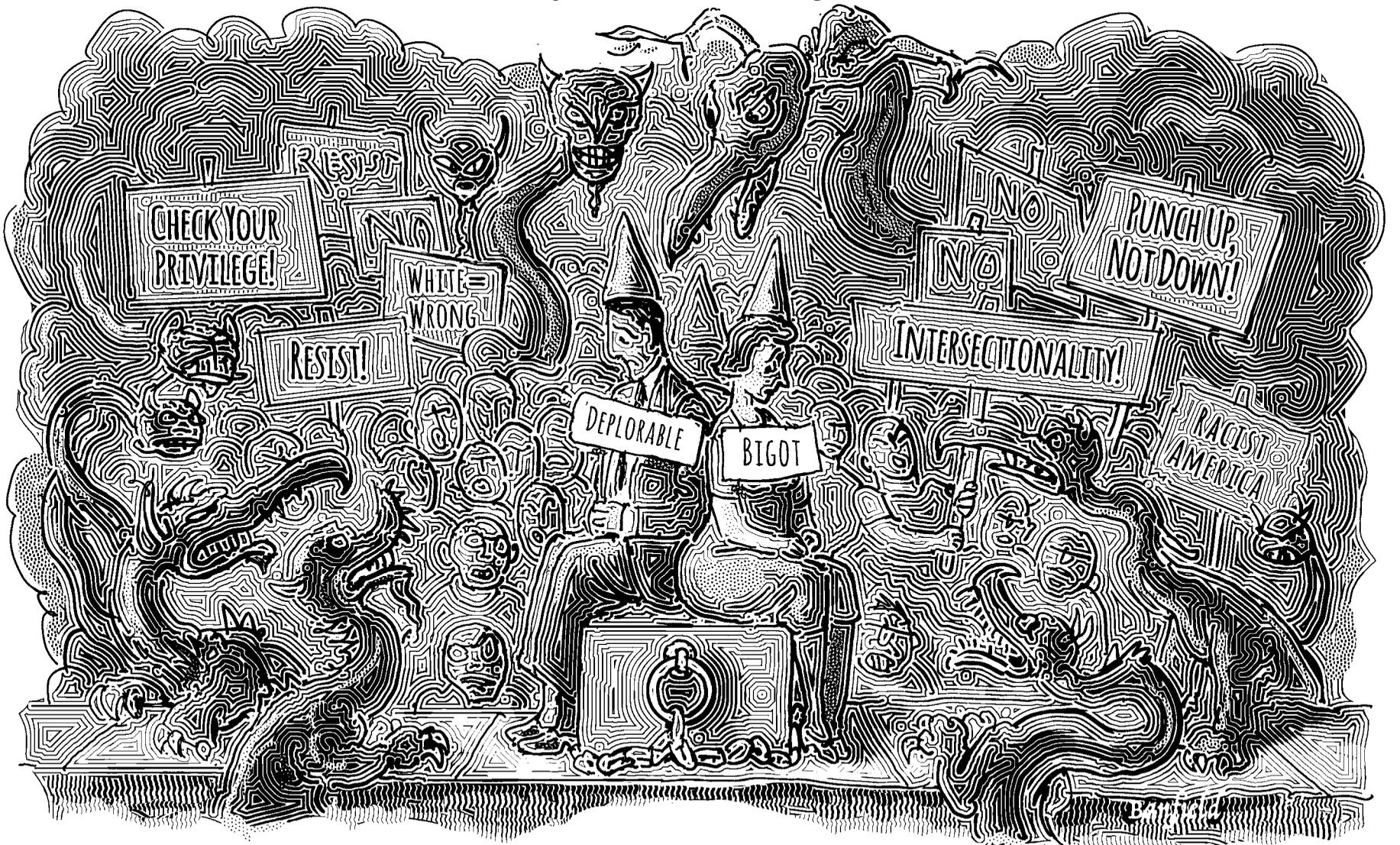
VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2018

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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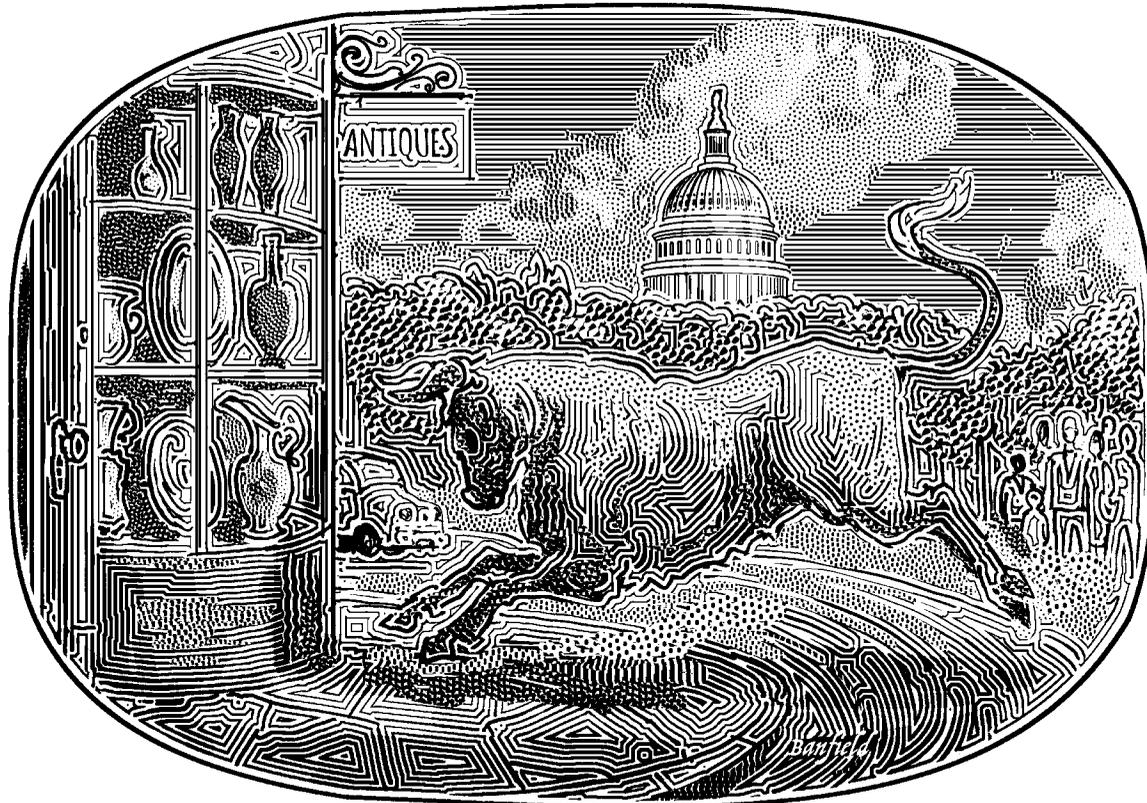
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Book Review by Michael Anton

THINKING BIGLY

Trump and Political Philosophy: Leadership, Statesmanship, and Tyranny, edited by Angel Jaramillo Torres and Marc Benjamin Sable.
Palgrave Macmillan, 328 pages, \$119.99

Trump and Political Philosophy: Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism, and Civic Virtue, edited by Marc Benjamin Sable and Angel Jaramillo Torres.
Palgrave Macmillan, 362 pages, \$119.99



READING THE TWO-VOLUME SET *TRUMP and Political Philosophy*, I was reminded of an oft-cited (in certain circles) remark of Xenophon's Socrates, that he explores books looking for good things, and when he finds any he points them out for others to profit from. It's inevitable that quality will vary in a collection of 35 essays by 37 authors. Also, the sheer scope of the project—to summon and survey nearly all the giants of Western (and some non-Western) political philosophy—suggests an almost comic hubris. Nonetheless, there are many good things, some of which I will point out.

Each volume is organized around a theme. One—subtitled *Leadership, Statesmanship, and Tyranny*—focuses on Donald Trump the man. The other—*Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism, and Civic Virtue*—examines the times, or the conditions that gave rise to Trump. Which is

to say, its contributions are as much or more about Trump's supporters as about Trump himself.

The latter, in my view, is the superior volume: more grounded and concrete, less prone to flights of fancy and armchair psychoanalysis. Political philosophy is unsurprisingly better at explaining political phenomena—in this case Trumpism and its animating reasons and passions—than at getting into the head of any man, even a political one. The discipline is just not well equipped for the task—and especially not when passions about his virtues and (especially) vices run so hot.

Hence the chief weakness of the former volume is the way it draws battle lines clearly and early, on familiar terms. The majority of authors declare Trump a demagogue at the very least and perhaps a proto- (or would-be) tyrant. There is nothing particularly original

about any of that, and one wonders why recourse to political philosophy is even necessary. Un- and badly educated pundits who couldn't identify Hiero I of Syracuse using all three of their lifelines have been saying the same thing for more than three years.

THAT'S NOT TO SAY ONE CAN'T LEARN from these essays, but it is to venture that in many cases one can learn more about other subjects than about Trump. For instance, scholar and blogger Ashok Karra offers a superb analysis of three Xenophonic characters whom, Karra shows, Xenophon intends as exemplars of certain related character defects. Karra makes virtually no effort to show how these defects are directly analogous to Trump, apparently because he believes the matter so self-evident that no demonstration is necessary. In this case, the lack of effort is



welcome because it mostly frees the text of otiose references that would trivialize the clarity of the interpretation.

Karra mercifully confines his anti-Trump invective to the endnotes, but even there it manages to sully his text. It is hard to know what to make of a careful, conscientious interpreter who can say with (apparently) a straight face that “white nationalism, as of this writing a potential majority faction, is an existential threat to the regime as conceived in 1776” on no other evidence than “candidates have called for Confederate symbols to remain on public land in states such as Ohio and Montana, states that were not part of the Confederacy.” Or who not only gushes over Ta-Nehisi Coates but gushingly quotes his most ridiculous, impenetrable sentence (which hardly lacks for stiff competition): “whereas his forebears carried whiteness like an ancestral talisman, Trump cracked the glowing amulet open, releasing its eldritch energies.” Toward the end Karra has some sharp words, which I took to be directed at (us) Straussians, to whom he reissues the very Straussian, though hardly fresh, warning that we always be on guard against dogmatism. It’s amusing, then, to see him embrace reflexively dogmatic writers in support of a reflexively dogmatic condemnation of Trump. Or perhaps that was all esoteric and the real meaning went over my head.

STILL, MOST OF TODAY’S ACADEMIC WORK is, as it were, all Coates, all the time: inflammatory rhetoric in the service of destructive arguments with no underlying seriousness or recourse to superior minds. A detailed look at a thinker of Xenophon’s rank—even marred by all the ancillary detritus—is seven or eight rungs above that. But it would have been better published in a classics or theory journal without any of the forced references to Trump.

An essay by Duquesne University’s Patrick Lee Miller using Plato to condemn Trump makes an unfavorable contrast. Unlike Karra’s piece, Miller’s spends far more time condemning Trump than analyzing his chosen thinker, his observations on whom seem mostly accurate but hardly new. When he stretches them to condemn Trump, they become trite. Just as no Trump critic needs recourse to philosophy to call Trump a tyrant, surely none needs recourse to Protagoras or Gorgias in order to call him a liar. The whole essay feels forced, like two totally disparate undertakings spot-welded together in haste.

Happily, that’s about as bad as it gets for both volumes. Which is not to say that on balance they are favorable to Trump. The editors, Marc Sable, an associate professor

of political science at Bethany College, and Angel Torres, a postdoctoral fellow at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, admit to being “highly skeptical of Trump” but also insist that they saw the necessity of “including viewpoints which defend—or at least explain sympathetically—Trump as a political leader.” They’re true to their word, but note that they don’t promise that the mix will be 50-50—and it’s not. The perspective tips at least two-to-one anti-Trump. Which is still a better shake than the president gets from the rest of academia, or from the mainstream media!

GLADDEN PAPPIN, WHO TEACHES politics at the University of Dallas, picks up an old (or at least not new) theme and gives it a new twist. Others have observed that Trump’s appeal is in part a rebellion against the managerial liberalism diagnosed by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). Pappin, first, traces managerialism itself to Machiavelli’s insistence that a prince must “manage” oppositional popular and elite “humors.” He then shows how Machiavelli’s insights were incorporated into 20th-century business doctrine. But that doctrine, he further shows, assumed that it had done away with the need for its Machiavellian foundation. Not so, says Pappin: 20th-century managerialism worked only as long as it delivered benefits to both humors. For some time before Trump’s election, the popular humor became convinced that managerialism was benefiting only the managers. Trump’s contribution to American politics is to revive managerialism as originally meant, in order to help “vent” the popular humor, and to seek policies that will “satisfy” a people who feel that the system has long been rigged against them.

Pappin is careful not to take a position on whether these popular sentiments have any basis in truth, hence whether Trump’s appeal to them is justified. By contrast, Ken Masugi, a senior fellow at the Claremont Institute, offers perhaps the most ringing defense of Trump in either volume—and, unless I missed something, the only defense of Trump personally. Masugi thoroughly demonstrates a point that should be obvious but that most observers miss, perhaps deliberately: when Trump talks about citizenship, he sounds just like Abraham Lincoln—and like a host of patriots in the American pantheon. Trump is an old-fashioned American civic nationalist whose concept of citizenship is identical to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. It’s a measure of how low we’ve sunk that a color-blind appeal to equal-

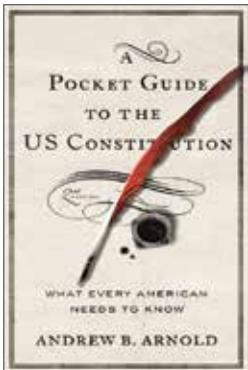
ity before the law is today so easily denounced as “racist”; and that the celebration of King as a secular saint is absolutely mandatory while treating his words as if they mean what they say is absolutely forbidden.

IN THE OTHER ESSAY THAT FOCUSES ON Lincoln, Brandeis English professor John Burt avoids that term “Nazi,” but gets his point across by repeatedly calling Trump a “Schmittian,” as in Carl Schmitt, the Nazi. Trump of course never says anything remotely Nazi-esque but he *does*—like Schmitt—distinguish friend from enemy, both in the international sphere and here at home. This is, apparently, scandalous. Granted, it would be better in a number of respects if the country could swiftly return to mid-20th-century norms of political comity, but whose fault is it that it can’t? Like several other contributors, Burt appears to believe that it’s all Trump’s. Given publication timetables, we can assume he was writing before House Majority Whip Steve Scalise was shot by a deranged leftist gunman; before the Left made a habit of chasing their political enemies from restaurants and other public places; before Maxine Waters urged Democrats, when they see a political figure from the other side, to “create a crowd and...push back on them”; before Eric Holder urged Democrats to “kick them” (i.e., Republicans); before Hillary Clinton admonished the nation that civility could return only when her party was returned to its rightful place in power.

The other link Burt finds between Schmitt and Trump is the politics of “resentment and grievance,” the former as an advocate, the latter a practitioner. Leave aside whether there is any real equivalence between, say, asserting a “grievance” that entitles one to *Lebensraum* all the way to the Urals and being upset about falling wages caused by faulty trade deals and lax immigration enforcement. Isn’t there *some* justification for being upset about the latter?

Masugi references “the slave power,” after an analogy I made on the defunct blog *Journal of American Greatness* between what Lincoln condemned as the bipartisan consensus to protect slavery before the Civil War and what Trump denounces as the “rigged system” of our time. In both cases, as I wrote in the spring of 2016, “a numerically and proportionally small but economically and politically powerful oligarchy managed—for a time, anyway—to steer the nation in the direction of its own interests at the expense of everyone else’s and of the popular will.” I wish Masugi had built out this theme more; the parallels are striking and do much to explain our fraught political situation.

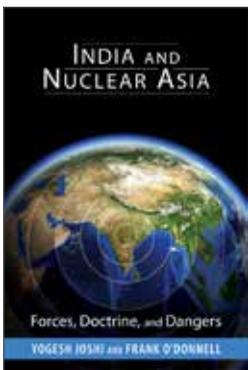
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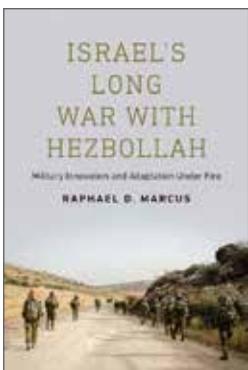
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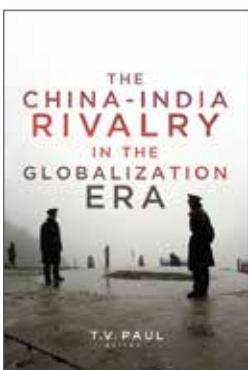
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THE BEST ESSAY IN THE WHOLE COLLECTION—by Carson Holloway of the University of Nebraska, Omaha—also invokes the language of “resentments and grievances” but to explain rather than condemn. He shows how Aristotle could easily have predicted the present moment. Faction is ever present in the political community as such but leads to conflict only when one side—typically either the few or the many—gains the upper hand and presses its advantage. The analysis might not seem strictly apt to the contemporary United States, which lacks a clear-cut “many” comparable to the *demos* of the ancient *polis*. We instead have two popular classes: unmarried and mostly poor blue-state urbanites, and red-state, rustbelt, heartland blue-collar workers, middle managers, and homemakers.

Yet like any ancient city, we have only one ruling class. And unlike the aristocracies of Old Europe, it has chosen to side with the urban mob. Together, these two classes have put the squeeze on what used to be the middle and—as Holloway shows—it’s no wonder that the middle is fed up. Holloway closes with summarizing Aristotle’s advice on how to tamp down faction: both sides—but especially the side with the upper hand—should cool it with the escalation and inflammatory rhetoric. In 2018, there’s a case to be made for each side having the upper hand, or some portion thereof. In 2016, not so much. And the side that had the upper hand then does not seem to be following Aristotle’s advice two years later.

Skipping ahead a couple millennia, Hillsdale’s Kevin Slack sketches the beginnings of a rehabilitation of Thomas Hobbes, which there is neither the time nor space to go into here, but which I hope he continues to explore. Most relevant to this review is the ingenious way Slack applies *Leviathan’s* highly amusing discussion of the “Kingdom of Darkness” to the elite consensus of our time, coupled with his concrete catalogue of elite failure: government incompetence (or indifference) at protecting lives and property; inability to win necessary wars or stop fighting unnecessary ones; the financial crisis; grotesque wealth inequality that undermines republican comity; and ambitious social engineering that degrades everything it touches—above all, the family. A full accounting of these failures would fill volumes but Slack is clear-eyed—in ways that Holloway leaves to the reader to deduce—that 2016 was caused by elite failure more than any other factor.

Perhaps the most surprising essay in either volume is Douglas Kries’s analysis of the

Trump phenomenon through a Thomistic lens. Here are two names that most any commentator would instinctively treat as matter and anti-matter. Yet Kries, who teaches philosophy at Gonzaga University—while far from being a Trump admirer—gives a nuanced defense of Trump’s supporters in Thomistic terms. Its heart is the inherent particularity of politics, which Thomas had to assert against the universalist claims of his church and his faith and which Trump asserts against our elites’ globalist orthodoxy. Kries shows that Aquinas would likely see support for Trump as rational, based both on conditions in the country and a fair appreciation of the president’s strengths as a leader—even if in the end Trump falls short of Thomas’s Aristotelian view of human virtue. One hopes that Kries has tenure.

ANALOGIES OF MODERN AMERICA TO ancient Rome have been done to death, mostly badly, so it’s refreshing to read a good one. Mark Schiffman of Villanova University looks at Plutarch, especially his lives of Roman populists Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, and finds new things to say—which, in one sense, is not hard, because Plutarch is easily the most understudied great thinker of the ancient world. Schiffman entirely resists the temptation, however, to make a rote parallel with our time, i.e., by casting the Republican Trump in the role of a Roman patrician. To the contrary, he sees far more clearly than Trump’s legion of left-wing enemies that the president is, economically speaking, the most liberal president in a generation and the most liberal Republican since Dwight Eisenhower. But his is an older liberalism of fairness and shared citizenship, not of redistribution from workers to clients. Like the Gracchi, Trump sees that the economy of his time is increasingly winner-take-all and that for some of the “losers,” no amount of hard work will get them ahead without fundamental change to the system. This doesn’t mean, Schiffman is careful to note, that Trump’s program will work; only that it answers genuine grievances that won’t go away in response to yet more appeals to “structural change,” inevitability, automation, the knowledge-based economy, and the many other buzz words our ruling class uses to tell the losers to shut up and accept their fate.

A partial answer to the question “what next” can be found in Arthur Milikh’s attempt to link Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” to the deepest currents in American political thought. Looking at *The Federalist*, Milikh, a researcher at the Heritage Foundation, homes in on the founders’ elevation

of commercial acumen over older measures of greatness such as aristocratic and martial virtue. Trump's appeal to greatness is an appeal to American energy, to a rediscovery of our specific excellence, in short to a return to "winning" that has the potential to reunify the American people as it elevates the status of our nation on the world stage.

Milikh ends on a note of skepticism, worrying that Trump confuses means—commercial prosperity—with ends—maintaining republican rule—and elevates the former over the latter. Certainly Trump places great emphasis on economic measures of national success, both domestically and internationally. But in this, he is hardly unlike the vast majority of practical politicians, who do not think in terms of justifying themselves to professors of political philosophy. (A notable exception, of course, being Barack Obama, and look how that turned out.)

Yet Trump's actions suggest that Milikh's concern is misplaced. Bowdoin College's Jean Yarborough channels Alexis de Tocqueville to suggest that the Frenchman's famous worries about "soft despotism" on some level animate Trump's aggressive program of deregulation and his overarching concern to take power from unelected bureaucrats and return it to the people. Trump is, again, not acting from theoretical motivations but from a citizen's concern for the visibly negative effects of overweening government power on his fellow citizens' souls. Much of what Trump gets right, he gets right through instinct and intuition. Intellectuals tend to disdain these traits and to swoon over those (relatively) rare politicians who appear to be more like themselves. This explains a very large part of the intelligentsia's Obamamania and Trump Derangement Syndrome, and I would argue it explains some of the anti-Trump sentiment present in these two volumes.

IT WOULD PERHAPS BE REMISS OF ME NOT to acknowledge that my name is invoked at several points, almost always unfavorably. Allow me to make a few comments here on one of the criticisms.

In 2016, I wrote that core to the debate between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève in their exchange over Strauss's *On Tyranny* (1948) is a disagreement over the desirability of what Kojève termed the "universal and

homogenous state." Their philosophic disagreement, I argued, is mirrored in our time by the political struggle between globalism and nationalism. In that context, I said, it's clear that Strauss's argument supports the latter over the former. Angel Torres writes that this is tantamount to asserting that, were he alive, Strauss would have voted for Trump. But I said no such thing and firmly believe that Strauss deliberately wrote in such a way as to make it impossible to assess accurately how he personally might have come down on this or that contemporary political dilemma.

Voting patterns aside, Torres objects to my assertion that Strauss's argument leads to the conclusion that some form of nationalism—recognition and practical realization of the inherent particularity of politics—is both inevitable (given human nature) and desirable, especially if the alternative is a uniform world state. His basis for objecting is, in essence, to assert Strauss's indifference to politics. In Torres's telling, Strauss's overriding concern was philosophy versus theology.

Depending on how that claim is meant, I do not necessarily dispute that this was Strauss's highest theme. However, Torres's argument demands that Strauss saw religion and politics as no less fundamentally incommensurable than theology and philosophy, whereas it seems to me that Strauss saw religion and politics as sharing far more in common with each other than either does with philosophy—especially in the pre-Christian ancient world, which recognized no distinction between civil and religious law.

Torres further claims that Strauss's apparent defense of nationalism cannot be entirely sincere because of his preference for ancient over modern political practice. It is not entirely clear to me, however, that Strauss does, in the final analysis, prefer ancient to modern practice. That assertion is tantamount to saying that Strauss prefers Sparta to the United States (after all, Strauss's Athenian philosophic heroes assert the superiority of Sparta to their own regime). But the heart of Torres's argument—and a point with which I mostly agree—is that for Strauss, the paramount consideration, the yardstick by which any regime is best measured, is the extent to which it provides freedom of inquiry for genuinely philosophic souls. On this score, surely the

United States—and any modern liberal democracy—is superior to Sparta.

This also, it seems to me, explains the heart of Strauss's rejection of the universal and homogenous state: that its very homogeneity will stifle thought and kill philosophy. Hence, contra Torres, I do not see how a fundamental concern with freedom of thought is reconcilable with a preference for the universal and homogenous state, or with indifference to the outcome of the struggle between homogeneity and genuine diversity. This is to say nothing of other political considerations for, also contra Torres, I do not believe that Strauss was indifferent to the myriad political questions he spent his life illuminating.

THIS DISAGREEMENT, THOUGH, ENCAPSULATES one of the primary strengths and concomitant weakness in *Trump and Political Philosophy*. The essays are at their best when the authors apply the ideas under consideration directly to the questions of our time. They are less convincing, and less interesting, when they speculate on what this or that philosopher "would have" thought or said about some question of our time (needless to say, usually to pass judgment against Trump). Not only is there no way to know the latter, the question itself is irrelevant and uninteresting. It would be fruitful only if we could treat said thinkers as authorities—something anathema to philosophy. This, surely, is not why they bequeathed their ideas to us. We, no less than they, must face squarely both the permanent questions and the circumstances of our time. The work of utilizing the former to illuminate the latter we must carry out for ourselves.

Nevertheless, unlike the vast majority of contemporary academic work, these essays address important subjects, ask many of the right questions, and treat writers and thinkers worthy of serious, sustained attention. Even in disagreement, the substance of the disputes is worth talking about. That's more than can be said for 99% (at least) of contemporary academic work. For this reason alone—but also for many others—these two volumes are welcome.

Michael Anton is a lecturer and research fellow at Hillsdale College, a senior fellow at the Claremont Institute, and a former national security official in the Trump Administration.

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