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Essay by Harvey C. Mansfield

# THE LEGACY OF LEO STRAUSS AFTER 50 YEARS

*Why there are Straussians but not Straussism.*



“LEGACY” USED TO MEAN A GIFT TO one’s heirs of something good, often a pot of money. It could be considered both as intended and as received. Lately, it has come to be used sarcastically for the imposition of an evil, for example, the “legacy of slavery” that Harvard University recently confessed, more boastfully than dolefully, proud of its self-accusing virtue. It wanted to forget, among other things, the building of Memorial Hall, completed in 1878 as a tribute to the Harvard men who had fought for the Union in the Civil War, particularly the honored dead, a legacy of antislavery if there ever was one. Clearly, by the vicissitudes of fortune the intent of a legacy can be overridden by its careless heirs eager to show their superiority to the past. In this case, an institution did not live up to the legacy it received.

Coming from Harvard as I do, and wanting to be clever, I think I can find an obscure meaning for “civil war.” The most valuable civil war in the possession of humanity is philosophy, the bloodless battle of thought that in principle never ends. Perhaps I thought of this through the legacy of the scholar of philosophy Leo Strauss more than through Harvard cleverness, which lacks a steady fix on the difference between freedom and slavery. Today’s Harvard believes that, since today is the height of human wisdom, freedom is easily attained once everyone rejects legacies of thought and holds that same self-satisfied belief.

I believe that Leo Strauss, who died 50 years ago in October 1973, was a treasure of inestimable value because he gave a wake-up call to revive the civil war of philosophy, and

in so doing left his legacy to the school of Straussians, whom I will call the “woke.” Let others who use this name beware of being confused with Straussians. But before discussing the legacy as received, let us identify it as given and intended by Strauss himself. Those who knew Strauss while he was alive are now, after a half-century, few. I am one of them and can pass on things I heard him say, but others were closer and more often in his company. These remembrances have been collected and are available online now at the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago, where he taught for two decades after emigrating to America, happy to have found a home base away from Nazi Germany and quite satisfied not to be at Harvard.

His legacy can also be found in his letters, which are both familiar and philosophical;



in transcripts of his courses, always useful to borrow both for their textual insights and for their marvelous summations of the relationships of philosophers; most recently in notebooks that he kept, revealing his own way of reading (see, for example, the newly released *Leo Strauss on Plato's Euthyphro*, edited by Hannes Kerber and Svetozar Minkov); and of course in his books. His books are his real legacy. They are intended for the ages, and therefore they are written for all the ages, not merely for our age or for a mere 50 years. Strauss wrote his books as he read other books—the so-called Great Books, books in what he called “the Great Tradition”—teeming with the same challenging puzzles that he found and solved in his own scholarship.

For he claimed to be a scholar of philosophy, the whole of which he approached through political philosophy, refusing to accept for himself the title of philosopher. I remember once, when I was new to his acquaintance, introducing him as a “philosopher” for a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, which he then began by denying this intended compliment. But he did say that the task of philosophy in his time was to recover philosophy through the history of philosophy—thus, to discover the fact that it had been endangered by adopting a political agenda. That he wrote his own books, if not all at least some, as a philosopher writes—“between the lines,” or esoterically—is a sign that he was not a scholar at the level of today’s scholarship. For example, he checked references like a good scholar but did not assume that faults or discrepancies he found were due solely to accident or sleepiness in the author: he merely extended the current definition of a good scholar, and of a philosopher, by showing that checking references means learning whether apparent mistakes are intended.

### Questions and Discoveries

**T**HE BOOK OF HIS THAT I HAVE STUDIED most is *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), which he wrote, I believe, in such manner as to teach potential students how to read esoterically. I once asked him, playing James Boswell to his Dr. Johnson, what was the favorite of his books, adding that mine was this one. He smiled and said that perhaps for him it was his latest, in which he had learned something new, his latest then being *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966). He didn’t say what the new thing was. He didn’t let fly a crashing retort as Dr. Johnson would have done. This reticence is at work also in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, where it should be understood as a part, and as the style, of his generosity. In

that book he dwelt on Machiavelli’s morality and religion but left his politics unelaborated. This was a hole I attempted to fill with my own work, greatly inferior to his but still perhaps not below average because of his.

To give an example of his generosity while keeping its spirit, I say that I found in the footnotes of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* one that addresses the relation between form and matter and the relationship between Machiavelli’s two chief books, *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. It is a topic much discussed by Machiavelli scholars, who often labor and compete to explain the differences between the books they believe to be profound with useless questions and faulty hypotheses. Strauss cites one apparently inconsiderable fact, reporting the number of times that the words “form” and “matter” are used in Machiavelli’s two texts that, while saying nothing about its consequences, he leaves as an unexploded bomb for some later reader to ignite. The small fact he cites implies a much larger fact about those books that he leaves unsaid. His generosity is to have left work to be done and hints of how to do it so that “discoveries” may be made by present or future apprentices. His legacy allows those who read his books to share in the pleasure and the glory of his discoveries and frees them to be grateful to one who led the way.

With books like *Thoughts on Machiavelli* at one’s disposal, one doesn’t have to have known Strauss personally to be his student. With little or much effort, depending on the quality of one’s intellect, one can achieve a taste of the satisfaction of discovery that must have come to Strauss in the years 1936 to 1938 when he saw for the first time since the 18th century that philosophers write with an amazing exactness enabling them to address two audiences, philosophic and nonphilosophic, with the same words. His legacy is not “a philosophy” but philosophizing, not settled principles but an activity of life. In practice, his legacy contains a spur to acquire it, which is not the difficulty of reading his books, as with learning the vocabulary of Immanuel Kant and G.F.W. Hegel and winding through the dense jungle of a system, but the pleasure of uncovering what is hidden and yet is there to find. I like to repeat the phrase of my late wife Delba Winthrop regarding Aristotle’s texts: “Nothing is so obscure that it is not meant to be found.” The secrets of Strauss’s school are not closed to those lacking the code but open to everybody who can take a hint and then explore it to study large questions such as Machiavelli’s responsibility for modernity.

The consequence is that, lacking a doctrine as their legacy, Straussians disagree. There

surely are Straussians, as most of us don’t mind admitting in private, but Straussism there is not. Straussians disagree because Strauss’s legacy is, I believe, intended to leave unclear what the old man’s intended legacy is in doctrine. Nor is there as yet anyone equal to Strauss to serve as the single authoritative Straussian who might judge among the inferior plural Straussians. So, Strauss’s legacy as given is unresolved and not fully received even by his most devoted followers, to say nothing of those not in his camp. Instead of a doctrine he presents the civil war of philosophers who themselves disagree. His students, or readers—there is no difference—are introduced to the history of political philosophy rather than offered or required to choose a doctrine. One cannot call Straussism a “method” because René Descartes has a patent on that word. He used it to offer a sure guide to thinking that would substitute the undoubted way for the doubtful end. Contrary to Descartes, Straussians won’t use doubt to overcome their doubts for the sake of executing an agenda.

The nature of the legacy helps explain the variety and conflict of Straussians and their embarrassment at lacking doctrine to espouse. But they do have a crisis to face. Readers of his works, Straussians or not, cannot help being aware that they are being asked to join that school, indeed introduced to it by a certain preliminary hazing that questions their current opinions. Such readers are being recruited, but to a school of students. Strauss’s legacy is an active appeal from the crisis of his time, more philosophical than political and to which he made frequent reference, to succeeding generations. His legacy would remain relevant because it raises questions that are permanent. To understand this point, it may be helpful to refresh in our minds what Strauss said.

### Confused Enemies

**S**TRAUSS SET OUT TO DEFEND PHILOSOPHICAL reason against the two enemies he identifies, Science and History. His critique shows them both unable to defend themselves before the bar of reason; they are able to survive and dominate only by contradicting themselves. Science has deprived itself of any scientific argument by which it might be shown that science is a good thing. At its origin, modern science claimed to be an enterprise that would increase human power to the effecting of all things possible and would use this power to come to the relief of man’s estate. Yet now, deprived by its own account of any such justification, it hurdles forward to increase human power regardless of its



lack of a ground that justifies the power. In practice scientists assume that science is good and deserves its license to proceed without justification. Scientists will admit that the atom bomb and climate change are not good consequences of science for man's estate, but the admission gives them headaches because it cannot come from within science itself.

History, the other enemy of sound thinking, also has no meaning in reason that it can discern because all meaning is said to be merely historical, confined to its own time. All history as written by historians today is merely history of our moment, soon to be rendered irrelevant. Historians do not, and could not, live by the logic of this doctrine; they assume that History is good in a nonhistorical sense which as historians they are compelled to deny. They accept popular notions that History has a right and wrong side or an arc from worse to better. Their self-doubt shows in the substitution of the neutral term "change" for the confident term "progress," and in so doing they forget that change always presupposes an underlying something that is unchanged. American history, for example, is the changing or evolving whole of events that happened to an unchanging America.

These two enemies of reason continue to dominate the modern world, their heads seemingly in place, despite the legacy of Strauss's critique. With a close look at their necks one can see a telltale line marking actual decapitation; the heads are merely pasted on their bodies. In this way Strauss has been both successful in reason and unsuccessful in fact. His name is still in bad repute; his work regularly omitted from bibliographies; his arguments held to be not worth stating or refuting; his followers disparaged and maltreated. It is true that access to publication is more open to Straussians than in Strauss's day, but it remains difficult. Strauss and Straussians are better known in the sense that their characteristic modes are better recognized, but rather as a known pest than a worthy opponent.

The reason for Strauss's continued lack of respectability lies in his challenge to the most cherished beliefs of our time, a fact well documented in Arthur Melzer's book *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (2014). The single most tender belief Strauss endangers is perhaps to be seen in so-called "public reason," the talisman of recent public philosophers like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, which says that the reasons one advances to the public cannot differ from the reasons that convince oneself. To distinguish private from public reason is dishonest

and undemocratic elitism that is both cowardly and unjust. This reaction supposes itself to arise in defense of democracy, but it comes with the strong smell of Friedrich Nietzsche's probity (*Redlichkeit*) that issues from its own elite of the authentic.

#### Without Slogans

**T**O THIS DENIAL OF THE WORTH RATHER than the existence of esotericism, Straussians can point to the ordinary experiences of tact and irony, which justify withholding one's private views for good reason. If nonphilosophers can fail to tell the whole truth out loud, why not philosophers, who are more exposed to harm and more thoughtful of consequences? Is not a teacher guilty of ironical expression when asking questions to which he knows the answer? Among political theorists a greater appreciation of

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rhetoric has come on the scene; does not the use of rhetoric require attention to one's audience, thus implying a difference between the reason of the rhetorician and that of the audience he addresses, contrary to public reason? Thomas Hobbes made an attack on rhetoric that was the main feature of his own rhetoric, and despite the revolutionary equality of men in the state of nature that he originated, he found no difficulty in holding himself superior to those he addressed.

These are calm rejoinders Straussians can make to the stalwarts of public reason. Whether they will work may be doubtful, but one must remember that the Straussian insistence on permanent questions will always be from a minority position. The questions would not need to be raised if most people did not take their answers for granted. Philosophy in its questioning is inherently subversive, as we know from Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. Philosophy becomes corrupt, as in the enlightened time of the *philosophes*, when

it gains political power and authority. In our day the title "professor" is respectable enough, provided that it comes with a reputation for being irredeemably impractical. It's good to respect the professor's higher thoughts in his ivory tower so long as this is done without considering them worth the experiment of their application.

Well, then, one can counter that to encounter a Straussian professor is becoming a surprise. Strauss's legacy does not supply the ticket to an academic appointment. As American universities politicize themselves—the new president of Harvard has explicitly declared that the university is no longer an ivory tower but now a functioning part of society—the politics of Straussians becomes more relevant to gaining an academic job. For "functioning part" read "partisan part," so that the "conservative odor" surrounding Straussians that Strauss himself admitted comes to the fore. Straussians are not necessarily but mostly Republicans, and Republicans are not the dominant party in America's politicized universities, where partisan deeds are done without compunction if not generally admitted as such. The ivory tower liberals who were alive in Strauss's day, and from whom I got my appointment ages ago, have been replaced by the New Left of the late '60s, having now taken the name of progressives to signify the difference. Universities resound with the witless protest chanted in their ugly slogans and react with righteous satisfaction in the petty tyranny of woke enforcement.

Straussians do not have slogans and often suffer for it. What they have on their side are the natural superiority of the great books they teach and the natural attraction of great themes and great questions to which they appeal. They do not constitute a Machiavellian conspiracy designed to corrupt the dominant sect and institute a new one. If they have a political fear, it is for the health of the old-fashioned liberalism of Locke, Montesquieu, Madison, and Tocqueville, and, despite their criticisms, are more faithful to that liberalism than it deserves. For themselves, Straussians prefer a civil society on the model of Montesquieu composed of a multitude of fiefdoms with vassals holding a sworn obligation to come to the defense of their lord. This is what P.G. Wodehouse (a Strauss favorite) called the "feudal spirit."

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