

It was Strauss's rediscovery of philosophic esotericism, Melzer argues, that offered a way out of the crisis of modern rationalism, by reopening the possibility that the classical political philosophers, once their works are studied with sufficient care, can help us find means of reconciling the life of reason with the well-being of society as a whole. Indeed, since so-called postmodernism is really only an offshoot of the problematic modern "project," it is Strauss himself, Melzer judges, who is the true "postmodern."

In view of the massive evidence of the past practice of esotericism assembled by Strauss and his students in their analyses of particular philosophic works (some awareness of which, as Melzer indicates, still survives among non-Straussian scholars of the French Enlightenment—as well as, I would add, of Montaigne), the question arises of why these findings have met with such indignant resistance in the scholarly community as a whole. In part, as Melzer observes, the very notion that a serious author would have concealed his opinions runs contrary to the contemporary morality of authenticity or sincerity (even though we are well aware of the practice of secret writing by subjects of dictatorial regimes). In addition, however—although Melzer does not say this—two other factors need to be considered. One is sheer scholarly laziness: it is a lot easier to pigeonhole Plato's or Machiavelli's writings as reflections of what one already "knows" to be the dominant assumptions of their time than to study them with the care Strauss showed to be necessary to understand them. The other is political: just like the inhabitants of Plato's cave, many contemporary academics are overwhelmingly resistant to the possibility that the serious study of philosophic writings of the past would call into question their own partisan assumptions.

It is to be hoped that Melzer's outstanding study will help to awaken some of those self-styled intellectuals, or their students, from their dogmatic slumber.

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Robert Howse: *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014. Pp. xi, 188.)

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Perhaps one could have anticipated as much. A few forceful and intensively thoughtful reactions to the recent spate of often ludicrous efforts to turn Leo Strauss into the secretive godfather of American neoconservative imperialism are proving of immense benefit to those intent upon learning from Strauss. Especially if one conjoins them in critical and reciprocal conversation, these

reexaminations of Strauss's most pivotal teachings have brought genuine advancement in the understanding of Strauss's often perplexing complexities.

Robert Howse, professor of international law at New York University Law School, adds markedly to this advance. Taking his initial cue from recent voices who saw Strauss as having exposed himself as a permanent political reactionary and fascist sympathizer in his obeisance to Carl Schmitt and Friedrich Nietzsche, Howse begins by disavowing such interpretations. This leads Howse into the central claim of his book, namely, that Strauss's "intellectual journey" was driven by "the diagnosis and critique of philosophy's flirtations with political violence" (173). Philosophic celebration of violence had its epitome in modern "German nihilism." As a rejection of all Western philosophy, especially its Enlightenment epoch, its faith in progress, and modern political liberalism, German nihilism erected as antidote a sweeping, philosophically supported warrior ethic narrowly devoted to German nationalism. Ultimately it prepared the ground for the later rise of Nazism. And, Howse reminds us, all of its nineteenth-century German advocates, including Fichte, Hegel, and Nietzsche, invoked Machiavelli as their cardinal reference (90). Hence the centrality of Machiavelli's political philosophy to modern extremist political ideologies, and to the rise of modernity generally. Howse's retracing of Strauss's intellectual journey therefore relies heavily on Strauss's highly complex (and to his critics deceptively obfuscating) reading of Machiavelli and what he judges to be its misconception by modern German philosophy. Indeed, Howse is persuaded that Strauss's extensive study of Machiavelli formed "the peak" of Strauss's most "productive period," and hence is "arguably" even his most important study (11). In conjunction with a chapter on what Strauss called "the political philosophy of Thucydides," Howse successfully shows, I think, Strauss's fundamental conviction that political violence is "corrupting and distorting of thinking itself" (174).

His study is thus focusing on Strauss's careful expositions and critiques of such distortions in his exchanges with contemporaries like Carl Schmitt and Alexandre Kojève, before turning to Strauss's concentration on Machiavelli. Strauss, in Howse's view, finds that Thucydides's insights into the place of violence in war, and in fact the nature of human politics generally, are a necessary corrective to Machiavelli's (143). The corruption of philosophy by its celebration of violence led Strauss to contrast it with its alternative, which he famously sought in ancient Greek, and particularly Socratic, philosophizing. Here philosophy was conceived as a way of life in pursuit of insight into what philosophers regarded as the "permanent problems" of human existence (90). This facet of Strauss's "intellectual journey" is not Howse's main subject, although it necessarily hovers in the background of his entire discussion. And Howse agrees with Strauss that premodern philosophy's most crucial effect upon political life is its justification for political moderation and the virtues sustaining it.

In outline, Howse's main arguments are the following. Strauss first addressed the central issue of the "unholy alliance" between (German) philosophy and its validation of the warrior as the highest human being in his critique of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt, he charged, could not relate war to a higher human end, and thus was unable to escape moral and political relativism. This failure also made any distinction between positive legality and the legitimacy of law impossible. For Howse, Strauss's exchanges with Kojève are noteworthy primarily because they led to Strauss's critique of a Hegelian conception of philosophy as the historical culmination in absolute knowledge. Instead, Strauss began to turn to Socratic philosophy as maintaining the possibility for "critique and resistance" to real politics (21).

In Howse's reading, Machiavelli was for Strauss the origin of the entire modern "temptation" to align philosophy to a praised reliance upon violence. But its application was not primarily political and the doctrine of *raison d'état*. It was instead a "severely moral" rebellion against the Christian God, whose cruelty forced men to "be good against their nature," or the necessity to put their physical survival before their virtues. One inevitable result was the extreme cruelty issuing from religious fanaticism. Machiavelli replaced this teaching with men's guidance by the "primacy of enlightened intelligence" for the benefit of "mankind in general." This "spiritual warfare" justifies men's free use of violence in the conquest of necessity (23). Enabled by his extensive use of transcriptions and recordings of Strauss's seminars and lectures now available, Howse ends his analysis with Strauss's seminar on Grotius. Strauss's main intention was, according to Howse, to show his agreement with Grotius on finding for international law "a middle way between strict morality and sheer Machiavellianism" (161).

Howse's otherwise illuminating arguments are somewhat rattled, I think, by a very audacious but highly problematic assertion. We recall Howse's reference to Strauss's "intellectual journey," from Nietzsche to Socratic philosophizing. But additionally, Howse introduces a "guiding hypothesis" regarding Strauss's "internal spiritual drama" (12). Howse's hypothesis is presented as a "preconceived notion of an author's character" allegedly necessary for gaining access to any complex author. Strauss himself alludes to such a necessity. Howse's guiding hypothesis is Strauss's "need for forgiveness" and "atonement" both before "God and the Jewish people" for his "youthful temptation toward fascist thought," which ultimately led to the later destruction of European Jewry (13). Howse further asserts that Strauss believed himself to need forgiveness for his philosophical writing, as from a Jewish perspective they constituted *apikoros*, or heresy. Hence Strauss's spiritual drama was an example of Jewish *t'shuvah*, repentance and a return from transgression (15, 16).

But Howse does not attempt to substantiate his hypothesis in the course of investigating Strauss's work. Instead, Howse leaves it "up to the reader" to decide whether the hypothesis is a speculative conjecture or is backed by evidence in Strauss's philosophical development (12). Howse does briefly allude

to the vitally important point that Strauss's *t'shuvah* was of a philosophical, not theological, nature (16). If this is indeed *apikoros*, or heresy, how can Strauss's insistence upon philosophizing be reconciled with an alleged personal guilt and need for forgiveness by the Jewish people and their God? Of a different order is Howse's allusion to the possibility that both transgression and repentance are not only Jewish notions, but integral to the human experience as such.

No doubt Howse's hypothesis points to the gravity of the "Jewish question" for Strauss. But its understanding would require, as a start, a thorough analysis of Strauss's pivotal writings on the subject, culminating in probing the relation of reason and revelation and their tense interplay as the inspiring energy at the heart of the West. Such issues and their many ramifications entailed by Strauss's evolving views of Judaism generally are scrutinized, for instance, in exemplary and detailed clarity by Catherine and Michael Zuckert as well as by Steven Smith in their recent works on Strauss.

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Elizabeth Beaumont: *The Civic Constitution: Civic Visions and Struggles in the Path toward Constitutional Democracy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi, 238.)

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To what extent is the United States Constitution an artifact of elite visions of popular sovereignty and individual rights? What role did voices of ordinary women and men play in the American Founding, in the historical evolution of American political thought, and in the various critical "moments" of democratic inclusion that the Declaration's promises and the Constitution's guarantees have generated over time? These and other related questions animate the analysis presented in Elizabeth Beaumont's important and thoughtful new book, *The Civic Constitution: Civic Visions and Struggles in the Path Toward Constitutional Democracy*.

Beaumont provides a rich and fascinating account of how popular participation has informed constitutional development by going beyond "rights claims and legal mobilization" (18–20) and including, instead, boycotts, petition campaigns, parades, the writing of letters, public speeches, acts of civil disobedience, publication of sermons and poetry, newspaper wars, etc. Her focus here is on four pivotal eras of American constitutional development: "the revolutionary path to independence and the formation of state