

POLITICAL THEORY

Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation. By Leora Batnitzky. New York:

Cambridge University Press, 2006. 304p. \$80.00.

DOI: 10.1017/S1537592707070831

— Julie E. Cooper, *Syracuse University*

In recent years, Leo Strauss has achieved a posthumous *success de scandale* as the (purported) philosophical architect of neoconservatism. Strauss's works have been scrutinized by detractors and partisans to determine whether he bears responsibility for the Bush administration's foreign policy. Amidst the clamor, however, more measured assessments are starting to emerge. Today, the most provocative appraisals of his work come from scholars in Jewish studies, as Leora Batnitzky's fascinating book attests. In *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, Batnitzky seeks to establish Strauss's contribution to modern Jewish thought, but her argument for his importance as a Jewish thinker also reframes the vexed question of his legacy for American politics. She offers a nonpolemical, non-Straussian defense of Leo Strauss. In many ways, her portrait of Strauss as a philosophical skeptic and political moderate resonates with that of Steven B. Smith, in *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (2006). However, Batnitzky departs from Smith (and, indeed, from most readers of Strauss) when she hails Strauss as the most ardent philosophical defender of Jewish revelation in the modern period.

Batnitzky arrives at this contrarian position by reading Strauss not through the lens of the Iraq war but within the context of Weimar Jewish intellectuals. When we examine him within his Weimar cohort, Batnitzky argues, Emmanuel Levinas emerges as his natural interlocutor. Although most contemporary readers would figure Strauss and Levinas as fierce antagonists (Strauss a neoconservative patriarch, Levinas a darling of the postmodern Left), Batnitzky insists that they share a philosophical project. Specifically, both aim "to speak with authority about morality" and vindicate conceptions of human nature after the Nazi genocide, and in the wake of Martin Heidegger's pronouncements regarding the end of metaphysics (p. 9). Batnitzky discerns striking formal similarities between the projects of Strauss and Levinas, although she argues that they ultimately disagree on "the status of modern philosophy," which has profound implications for their respective political outlooks (p. 4). Although Batnitzky stresses the importance of interpreting Strauss and Levinas through the Weimar lens, her method is not primarily contextual. Rather, the majority of the book is devoted to deft, intricate analyses of dense philosophical texts. She displays formidable erudition, situating Strauss and Levinas not only with respect to one another but also within the august line of predecessors whom their texts incessantly quote

(e.g., Plato, Maimonides, Spinoza, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig).

Batnitzky's inspired juxtaposition yields surprising results: Strauss emerges as an exemplary skeptic whose insights into the theologico-political predicament "should be the starting point for Jewish political thinking in the late twentieth century," while Levinas is exposed as "philosophically incoherent and politically dangerous" (pp. xxii, 85). Batnitzky arrives at this contrarian verdict by examining their divergent responses to a shared insight: Both recognize that philosophy cannot disprove or discredit the claims of Jewish revelation. The apparent impregnability of revelation leads Strauss to a skeptical insistence on philosophy's limitations. For him, philosophy and revelation cannot refute each other, nor can their claims be harmonized. Rather, politics sustains the productive tension between them, coordinating their competing claims and imposing limits on both. In this sense, Batnitzky argues, Strauss's politics are resolutely anti-utopian. Strauss denies that philosophy *alone* can direct social and political life, and thereby reserves a central role for religion in public life. He is not, as most have argued, an elitist who endorses rule by philosopher-kings who disseminate salutary myths (i.e., religion) to pacify the vulgar. Rather, he offers a philosophically and politically cogent defense of Jewish revelation (his personal atheism notwithstanding).

If Batnitzky celebrates Strauss's philosophical skepticism, she deplores Levinas's philosophical confidence. She offers an idiosyncratic reading of Levinas designed to puncture his (in her view) inflated critical reputation. On Batnitzky's view, he is not a postmodern apostle of Otherness; rather, he is the latest exponent of a dogmatic, modern, and expressly (post-)Christian conception of philosophy. Indeed, Levinas subscribes to the very modern doctrines—such as the existence of a "separate, independent, indeed atheistic self"—that his postmodern champions abhor (p. 29). His fealty to the modern project leads him to an inflated, and problematic, assessment of philosophy's political purchase. Whereas Strauss insists that revelation limits philosophy's purview, Levinas believes that philosophy can "fully articulate the meaning of humanity at large and in this sense direct social and political life," without input from revelation (p. 50). Batnitzky taxes Levinas with a "messianic faith in philosophy," a faith which ensnares its adherents in political pitfalls that (supposedly) elude the skeptical (p. 77).

Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas is a sophisticated, accomplished book that manages to reframe central debates in two fields (Jewish studies and political theory) and yields novel insights into the work of two major theorists. Batnitzky's defense of Strauss is spirited and, for the most part, plausible. However, one begins to suspect that Levinas has been denied a fair shake. The author appears unduly critical of Levinas and unduly credulous when it comes to Strauss. Throughout the book, she tries

to reconstruct “what Strauss might say” when confronted with Levinas’s messianic claims for philosophy (p. 42). Yet she never performs the thought experiment in reverse—she never reconstructs a Levinasian critique of Strauss. Although she reads Levinas against the grain, exposing unwitting implications of his thought, she takes Strauss’s claims at face value, accepting his monolithic and reductionist categories (e.g., Jewish revelation, *the* theologico-political predicament) without hesitation.

This curious refusal to interrogate Strauss leads Batnitzky to inflate his significance for modern Jewish thought and, more importantly, to overlook political liabilities of his skepticism. She repeatedly asserts the (unspecified) political dangers of Levinas’s confidence in philosophy, dangers from which Strauss’s skepticism ostensibly insulates him. But in the one instance where she adduces concrete evidence of Levinas’s political failings—the case of his “fanatical” Zionism—it is unclear whether Straussian skepticism guarantees more palatable results (p. 141). Batnitzky insists that Levinas’s notorious comments about the Palestinians are not, as most have argued, inconsistent with his political theory, but rather represent its logical culmination—for Levinas’s conflation of politics with ethics licenses a religious understanding of the State of Israel: “Zionism became for Levinas not a political solution but a *religious* enterprise” (p. 152). By contrast, Batnitzky trusts that Strauss’s pragmatic political Zionism (which asserts the importance of a Jewish homeland but denies that a Jewish state can solve the Jewish problem in any ultimate sense) proves more hospitable to Palestinians: “Ironically, Strauss’s moderate politics, which seeks the common good and practices moderation, may have greater potential to recognize ‘the other’ than does Levinas’s” (p. 162). But, as Israeli history demonstrates, political moderation need not produce an embrace of the Other—it can just as easily justify “pragmatic” measures (like the security fence) that further disenfranchise the Other. Indeed, throughout the history of Zionism, messianic aspirations and security concerns have coincided to justify expansionist policies that oppress the Other.

When it comes to concrete political questions, it is not clear whether the skeptical Strauss is any less dangerous than the dogmatic Levinas (or the dogmatic Strauss, for that matter).

Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice. By W. James Booth. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006. 264p. \$42.50.

DOI: 10.1017/S1537592707070843

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W. James Booth has written a profound book about memory in relation to identity and justice in politics. On the one hand, he analyzes the central place of memory in the constitution of identity: A sense of continuity over time,

the basis and sign of personal or collective identity, depends on memory. On the other hand, he explores the central place of memory in doing justice: Justice requires “a subject of attribution” who can take responsibility or be held accountable for conduct over time, who also can remember injury and demand redress. But investment in the past and memory of injustice, Booth shows, also run against the grain of core elements in democratic life. Partly, emphasis on the constitutive weight of the past seems in tension with democratic norms deriving identity from will or consent, not inheritance or descent. Partly, any “thick” collective identity, forged by a *particularizing* past, seems in tension with democratic aspirations to universality, and with the globalizing reality of pluralized and hybridized attachment. Moreover, efforts to redress past injustices seem impossible to separate from resentment, binding people to the past and its wounds. Booth’s book is important, then, because it eloquently explores the necessity and value—but also the costs and dangers—of memory and identity in politics, especially around the issue of justice. The book is profound because it evocatively dramatizes tensions it does not resolve.

Booth situates his work between two ideal-typical alternatives. In one, “identity is rooted in some (usually non-political) notion of autochthony and shared traits (ethnicity, culture, language) and territory. Such an identity easily absorbs the long duration of a community’s existence,” but erects “very high barriers to admission, and is typically exclusionary in its conception and practice of belonging.” In contrast to ethnic nationalism or a “thick” identity politics, he depicts a “hyper-liberal belonging in which the only morally relevant form of sharing is a roster of rights, universal in scope and thus available, at least in principle, to every human *as* human.” This view not only finds “blood and soil” types of identity “meaningless and repugnant” but also suspects any “embedded identity markers other than those derived from a table of rights” (p. 55).

In his analysis of what he calls “memory-identity,” Booth thus enters debates about identity politics. In his view, “while the recent period has witnessed a proliferation of memory work and its kindred identity politics, it remains broadly true that modernity, and liberal modernity in particular, is suspicious of the social role of memory” (p. 165). Critics of memory-identity bespeak a liberal modernity whose deep commitment is “to unseat the past, and memory as its bearer,” as “the fountainhead of legitimacy” for the sake of “chosen, elective, or contractual political community” governed “by reasons and not memory or tradition” (p. 169). The problem with substantialized identity is that “the fated, often almost involuntary character of the presence of the past” seems antithetical to freedom, and the “deeply particularizing” character of memory seems to jeopardize aspirations to universality. But by emphasizing willful choice and universality, liberalism devalues attachment to specific places and to concrete rather than